

Investigating Some Semantic Problems in the Translation of the Holy Quran.

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Introduction

Translation is generally defined as the process of replacing a source language text (SLT) by an equivalent target language text (TLT). It is an integrated process which involves the comprehension, analysis, reformulation, and retextualization of texts by incorporating the contextual, semantic, and sociocultural aspects of SL and TL texts. The translator is not only concerned with rendering the meaning of the SL text but also with preserving equivalence in tone and style, among other things. In short, the translation should be so transparent that one may think of it as being original rather than translation. With this in mind, can the Quran be translated from Arabic into other languages? Translation theorists are of the opinion that this is impossible because no one knows its exact interpretation except Allah. To put it more briskly, the Quranic text itself is so difficult that the exegesis plays a great role in rendering it. This being the case, translation as a device cannot replace the understanding of meaning especially if we take into account that Allah Almighty has three main aims behind revealing His Book : to be guidance

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for the humans and the jinn, to be a miracle supporting what

Mohammed صلى الله عليه وسلم calls for, and for the Muslims to worship Allah by reciting His Holy Words (الزرقاني: 123). This, however, cannot be achieved through translation. As such, it is incontestable that 'translation' in the title above means "interpreting one's message in another language".

Semantic Problems in the Quran

Semantic problems encountered by the translators of the Quran are of two kinds. The first kind is common to all translations. Languages lexicalize things differently (though there are some linguistic universals) and they differ in the cultural and social orientations, among many other things. The second kind, on the other hand, is peculiar to the translation of the Quran itself.

1. Semantic problems in translation:

One may look at problematic texts such as the Divine Text in question to find hosts of examples indicative of semantic problems, among which are the following:

1. Difference of semantic field for two words which seem to be synonymous. This can be manifested in two aspects :
 - a. Semantic extension of a word in one language vs its semantic intension in another.

As an example for this is the word أب as used in the Quran which can stand for الأب (father) and الجد (forefather). The Quran says:

(وَلَا تَنْكِحُوا مَا نَكَحَ آبَاؤُكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ إِلَّا مَا قَدْ سَلَفَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَاحِشَةً وَمَقْتًا وَسَاءَ سَبِيلًا)
(22:4).

In this Quranic verse the lexeme أب is equivalent to (father) in English. Elsewhere in the Quran the same lexeme has the word (forefather) as its translation equivalent in English. The Quran says:

(وَجَاهِدُوا فِي اللَّهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِ هُوَ اجْتَبَاكُمْ وَمَا جَعَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ مِنْ حَرَجٍ مِلَّةَ أَبِيكُمْ
إِبْرَاهِيمَ هُوَ سَمَّاكُمُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ قَبْلُ) (87).

b. Using a word in more than one sense in a particular language.

The word آثار as used in the Quran is a good example. Such a word can be rendered into (effects) in the verse:

(فَانظُرْ إِلَىٰ آثَارِ رَحْمَتِ اللَّهِ كَيْفَ يُحْيِي الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ) (50-30).

into (traces) in:

(كَانُوا هُمْ أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً وَآثَارًا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَأَخَذَهُمُ اللَّهُ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَا كَانَ لَهُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ
مِنْ وَاقٍ) (21-40).

and into (footsteps) in:

(فَلَعَلَّكَ بَاخِعٌ نَفْسَكَ عَلَىٰ آثَارِهِمْ إِنْ لَمْ يُؤْمِنُوا بِهِذَا الْحَدِيثِ أَسَفًا) (8-6).

Also, the word أجور can be rendered into (rewards) in the verse:

(وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ فَيُوَفِّيهِمْ أُجُورَهُمْ وَاللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الظَّالِمِينَ) (3-57)

and into (dowers) in the following verse :

(فَأَتَوْهُنَّ أَجُورَهُنَّ فَرِيضَةً وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِيمَا تَرَاضَيْتُمْ بِهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الْفَرِيضَةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا) (4-24).

2. Taboo and euphemistic words:

Some words are better not to be *expressed plainly* but compensated for by less plain words. Put differently, some taboo words are to be expressed by using euphemistic words. By way of example, the word 'pregnant' is replaced by some euphemistic words such as 'expectant mother' and 'mother to be'. Being unaware, some translators render a word into another word without taking into account the degree of euphemism between them. In the Quran euphemism can be obviously seen in the following verses where the Arabic word 'جماع' 'sexual intercourse' is replaced by more euphemistic expressions:

(قَالَتْ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي غُلَامٌ وَلَمْ يَمْسَسْنِي بَشَرٌ وَلَمْ أَكُ بَغِيًّا) (20-10).
 (وَالَّذِينَ يُظَاهِرُونَ مِنْ نِسَائِهِمْ ثُمَّ يَعُودُونَ لِمَا قَالُوا فَتَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَتَمَاسَا ذَلِكَ تَوْعَظُونَ بِهِ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ) (3-58).
 (وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ مَرْضَى أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ أَوْ جَاءَ أَحَدٌ مِنْكُمْ مِنَ الْغَائِطِ أَوْ لَامَسْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَلَمْ تَجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا صَعِيدًا طَيِّبًا) (6-5).
 (نِسَاؤُكُمْ حَرْثٌ لَكُمْ فَأَثُوا حَرْثَكُمْ أَنَّى شِئْتُمْ وَقَدِّمُوا لِأَنفُسِكُمْ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّكُمْ مُلَاقُوهُ وَبَشِّرِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ) (2-223).

(فَاعْتَزِلُوا النِّسَاءَ فِي الْمَحِيضِ وَلَا تَقْرُبُوهُنَّ حَتَّى يَطْهُرْنَ فَإِذَا تَطَهَّرْنَ فَأْتُوهُنَّ مِنْ حَيْثُ أَمَرَكُمُ اللَّهُ) (4-222).

(ثُمَّ أَتَمُّوا الصِّيَامَ إِلَى اللَّيْلِ وَلَا تُبَاشِرُوهُنَّ وَأَنْتُمْ عَاكِفُونَ فِي الْمَسَاجِدِ (187).
(الْحَجُّ أَشْهُرٌ مَعْلُومَاتٌ فَمَنْ فَرَضَ فِيهِنَّ الْحَجَّ فَلَا رَفَثَ وَلَا فُسُوقَ وَلَا جِدَالَ فِي الْحَجِّ)
(2-197).

3. *Difference of Lexicalization:*

As mentioned earlier, languages differ in lexicalizing things around us. Some languages lexicalize certain things which other languages do not. This would lead to the existence of "lexical gap", that is, the presence of words in one language for which other languages do not have equivalents. For instance, the following Arabic words have no exact equivalents in English:

السيوط، والعم، والخال، والأسمر، والأشهب، والأكل، والعشرة، والخلافة،
والإمامة، والزكاة، والظهار، والقارعة، والماعون، والمؤودة، والعشار، والواقعة،
والحاقة، والحطمة.... الخ

On the other hand, Arabic does not have exact equivalents for the following English words : attitude, aspect, ideology, senate, dictatorship, democracy, fascism, boyfriend ... etc.

4. *Metaphor:*

A metaphor is the application of a word to a usage to which, in original import, it cannot be put (White, 1996: 9). More often than not it is used to include any use of a word or a sentence to convey something other than its literal meaning. Such a meaning is regarded as metaphorical

according to the modern tendency of the usage of the term and to an early traditional definition (Cooper, 1986: 12-13).

Languages use different metaphors to express various ideas. Hence metaphor is considered to be one of the semantic problems encountered by the translator since once he/she renders the metaphorical expression verbatim, he/she would go too far beyond the intended meaning.

Arabic bristles with metaphors and so is the Holy Quran. In his book الزركشي az-Zarkashi (p.259) البرهان في علوم القرآن lists twenty six types of single metaphor in the Quran. Once the metaphorical expression passes into common use, it becomes an idiom or a proverb and in both cases it cannot be translated literally. For instance, the Quranic verse (9:26) وقري عينا is not to be rendered into "cool your eye" for the intended meaning of the verse is "comfort yourself and be glad".

Al-Jurjani الجرجاني (1960: 33) divides metaphors into مفيدة (meaningful) and غير مفيد (non-meaningful). A non-meaningful metaphor represents an expansion in a language, as is the case with specific words that denote anatomy of humans and animals. Such a type of metaphor, according to him, can be translated by assigning equivalent meaning to it in other languages. Meaningful metaphor is the real metaphorical expression that needs to be given creative features, something that disappears if its equivalent meaning is given.

II. Lexical problems in the Quran :

1. The word الله (Allah)

There is a sort of disagreement among the translators, Muslims and non-Muslims, as to the appropriate translation of the word الله i.e., whether to use transliteration or render it into 'God'. Among the translators who opt for the word 'God' are A.Y. Ali, M. Pickthal, M. Asad, Rodwell, Sale, Palmer, Arberry, and Bell, whereas those who use

the word الله are Hilali and Khan, and King Fahd Holy Quran printing complex (The Holy Qur-an, English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary).

2. The Beautiful Names of Allah:

No unanimous agreement has been reached by the translators as regards the translation of the Beautiful Names of Allah, a case which demonstrates the insurmountable difficulty of assimilating their meanings. Stephen Straight (1979) remarks that "the most important factor contributing to the success of the translator is the translator's knowledge. Flaws or gaps in knowledge of the cultural context of the author of the original will keep the translator from understanding it" (quoted in Rose, 1981: 41). For instance, the name السلام 'as-Salaam' has been rendered into the following:

The Translator	The Rendering
Asad	The one with whom all salvation rests
Sale	The Giver of Peace
Palmer	The Peace Giver
Rodwell	The Peaceful
Bell	The Perfect
Pickthall	Peace ;
A.Y. Ali	The source of peace (and perfection)
Hilali and Khan	One free from all defects.

3. The letters which begin some verses:

These letters (totalling fourteen) begin twenty nine verses. Exegetists and translators have made every effort to interpret them but to no avail. All they have suggested is a matter of opinion and guessing. However, most translators have used transliteration to convey them into the other language (TL). For example, the letters **ألم** are rendered into (Alif, Lam. Mim) or (A. L. M.). Here we suggest to add a comment in brackets such as (These letters are one of the miracles of the Quran and none but Allah knows their meanings).

4. Quranic terms :

Such terms as **الحج، الزكاة، الصلاة** have been mentioned in the Quran and so they have to be explained for the TL receiver in order to be acquainted with their true denotations and connotations. For instance, the English word 'prayer' does not convey adequately what the Quranic word **الصلاة** 'as-salaat' signifies, and so are 'charity' or 'charity

obligatory' and زكاة 'zakat'. The limitations imposed on translatability are usually due to the absence in the TL of a situational feature functionally relevant for the SL (Catford, 1965: 99).

Conclusion:

Through examining some semantic problems in the Holy Quran it is obvious that the limitations on the translatability of the Quran are incurred by the fact that some Quranic expressions and words do not have counterparts in the target culture. Such limitations hinge on a number of the linguistic system. However, this does not mean that they are impossible to translate; rather they have no adequate equivalents in the other languages, English is a case in point. When the Quranic word is so pregnant with meanings that translation fails to do it justice, a translator may use more than one word in the TL for it. As for the Quranic terms, a translator may explain them in the TL and introduce a glossary for them at the beginning of the translation.

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ملخص

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يعالج هذا البحث عدداً من مشكلات الدلالة في القرآن التي تشكل تحدياً للمترجمين، فقد تبين أن تحديدات ترجمة القرآن تكمن في عدد من التعبيرات القرآنية التي تفتقد إلى نظائرها في ثقافة اللغة المترجم إليها. وتعزى هذه التحديدات إلى عدد من العوامل، بما معرفة المترجم بالسياق الثقافي، والنظام اللغوي للغة المترجم إليها.

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