

Issues of Rendering some Polysemous Quranic Words into English: A Qualitative Study

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المخلص

أحد أوجه الإعجاز في القرآن الكريم وجود عدد كبير من الكلمات التي تتجلى فيها ظاهرة الاشتراك اللفظي. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى إبراز الطرائق التي يستخدمها المترجمون الذين ينحدرون من بيئات ثقافية ولغوية متنوعة للتعامل مع هذه المعضلة اللغوية. يكمن الإشكال في أن على المترجمين القيام بدور المفسر بالإضافة إلى وظيفتهم الأساسية كوسطاء لنقل النص. يمكن القول بشكل عام إن المترجمين لا يتبنوا أسلوباً واحداً للتعامل مع المشترك اللفظي. لكن الاتجاه الغالب بينهم هو اختيار المعنى المشهور طالما أنه يناسب السياق الذي وردت فيه الكلمة. في بعض الحالات يتجه المترجمون إلى اختيار معنى أقل شيوعاً إذا كان المعنى الذي يتبادر أولاً إلى الذهن لا يتلاءم مع فهمهم للنص. فالمعول عليه عندهم في هذه الحالات هو السياق القرآني حسب فهمهم. في هذه الورقة يتناول الباحث كيف أن المترجمين يضيعون على القراء فرصة تذوق جمال الإعجاز اللغوي القرآني. وقد أفاد ملايين المسلمين وغيرهم من ترجماتهم لكتاب الله الذي استعصى على فصحاء العالم ببلاغته وإعجازه. وهذا التقويم يهدف إلى تطوير أساليب عملهم، ويسهم في إرشاد مترجمي المستقبل.



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Abstract

One of the inimitable aspects of the Quran is the presence of a large number of words with polysemic significance. This paper aims to examine the different manoeuvres that translators of the Quran who have their roots in different linguistic and cultural milieux employ to tackle this predicament. Polysemy poses a quandary for translators since they have to take on the role of an exegete in addition to their role as linguistic mediators. Generally speaking, translators of the Quran do not adopt a unified strategy when they encounter words with multiple senses. They tend to adopt the meaning that tallies with the common (or primary) import of these words taking into consideration the relevant linguistic context. Sometimes, they depart from the primary sense of the word that comes to the mind when found in isolation and pick out a meaning that better collocates with the surrounding context. Put differently, it is usually the context that dictates this course of action. In this paper, the author argues that some translators of the Quran inadvertently put their readers at a disadvantage by depriving them of a window of opportunity to be more appreciative of the sublime grandeur of the linguistic miracles of the Quran. The study at hand has revealed that a couple of meanings can coexist and it is incumbent on the translator to make the reader informed about such aspects of the Quran which has made it inimitable in its original form. While millions of people are indebted to many translators of the Quran for their no mean feat considering its unsurpassable eloquence, there is always room for improvement.

Keywords: *inimitability of the Quran, polysemy, Quran translation, translation strategies, vagueness.*

Introduction

It is a forgone conclusion that translation is an uphill task. It is a task that requires adequate proficiency not only in the source language but also in the target language. The task is even more strenuous when translating the words of God. Leading translators and translation experts have pointed to the impossibility of equivalence even at the word level. Such difficulty is compounded in sensitive texts like that of the Muslims' Holy Book.

Many Muslim scholars object to the use of the word 'translate' when describing the process of rendering the meaning of the Quranic text into English. Alternatively, they prefer to use the word 'interpret' as it more aptly describes what translators do. Such interpretations are just "crude approximations" at best. This made Muslim scholars reject the idea of translating the Quran. Shakir explains that regarding "the matter of the lawfulness of translating the Holy Quran into any foreign language, we can have little confidence in the balance of meaning being preserved" (Shakir, 1926 as cited in AbdulRaof, 2004, p. 92).

More precisely, Ali (2006) states, "the Quran is only the Quran when it is in Arabic, in its original wording as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad" (p. 19). In general, Muslims believe that the Quran should be read in Arabic because it is the direct and exact word of Allah. However, we can only resort to translation to have a general or rather incomplete idea of the original meaning. Accordingly, it goes without saying that no translator of the Quran has ever claimed that their translation is meant to be a substitute for the original text.

One of the thorniest issues that a translator of the Quran faces is polysemous words that are language-specific, time-specific, or culture-specific. For instance, the translator is faced with the difficult decision of choosing between the different meanings that a given word has. Resorting to the different exegeses of the Quran might sometimes resolve this issue. These works might not, however, provide a one-to-one meaning of the word. They list all possible senses that might be at play.

The multiplicity of senses may vary from language to another and poses some problems to translators. This leaves the translators baffled and their choice of the best equivalent may be influenced by what they know about its widespread meaning. The likely outcome would be a translation which is literal and does not quite represent the intended meaning. Even worse, some translators fail to rely on exegeses in their search for the meaning of the Quranic expression. To be fair, these translators do not refer to the different exegeses of the Holy Quran as they sometimes erroneously assume that consulting any external source is unnecessary. That is, if the meaning is so clear, these translators do not feel the need to rely on any interpretation or dictionary to help them. Sometimes they fail to notice that the word at the time of revelation might have a meaning which sometimes does not bear any relationship to its modern sense.

It is important to note that in the literature they agree that polysemy is a word that has more than one sense (Crystal, 1980; Ullman, 1967). Some stipulated that these senses or meanings should be related (e.g., Hurford, 2007; Yule, 1987), otherwise it is a case of homonymy. It is, however, sometimes impossible to distinguish between polysemy and

homonymy especially when we are dealing with sensitive texts like that of the Quran. Another important concept which is interchangeably used with the above concepts is vagueness. “A word is said to be ‘vague’ when it appears to have one basic sense (monosemy) which is nevertheless flexible enough to allow for minor variations in meaning or use which are not particularly entrenched in the mind of the speaker” (Hurford, 2007, p. 132).

Vague words have one “more inclusive true meaning” that “subsume other meanings” (Tuggy, 1993). Despite the presence of some vague words in the Quran, they are usually treated as polysemous or homonymous. For example, the word الفساد “al-fasad” (i.e. corruption) cited by Abdul-Raof (2013, pp. 89-90) as an example of homonymy is a typical example of vagueness. One of the tests suggested by Hurford (2007) is to see whether native speakers consider the different meanings related or not. In fact, all the senses listed by Abdul-Raof (2013, pp. 89-90) are obviously related. Another approach which fails the test and does not capture the essence of homonymy is Abedelrazq (2014) where almost all the examples she examined in the Glorious Quran are not intuitively cases of homonymy. They are rather typical examples of vagueness because all the senses listed under each item hierarchically belong to one general meaning.

Examples abound which demonstrate the erroneous rendering of some lexical items. For example, the Arabic word قميص ‘qamees’ was always translated as “shirt” in all the famous translations of the Holy Quran. Today, the word "qamees" refers to “a cloth garment usually having a collar, sleeves, a front opening, and a tail long enough to be tucked inside trousers or a skirt” (Merriam Webster Dictionary). This type of clothing in its modern sense may not be common during the time of the actual narrative or the time of revelation. To translate it into ‘shirt’ would impose the modern sense of the word and prevent any other alternatives that could widen the scope to explore the types of clothes common in the relevant place and time.

Also, such influence can be seen in the translation of the word أمة ‘Ummah’. Literally, the word means “nation”. However, when used to describe a person, it means ‘somebody who has all the good attributes’ or ‘a teacher of good virtues’. All the famous exegeses of the Holy Quran give it this meaning when applied to human beings. [c.f Al-Tabari, 1987; Ibn Kathir 1970; Al-Qurtubi, 1973].

There are cases when translators overlook polysemic words. For example, the word ضحك ‘dhahek’ usually carries the meaning of “laugh”. In Arabic dictionaries, we can see that the word can mean “menstruate”. Although this is not the common meaning, in some contexts the word can have this sense as in the context of the following verse:

Example One

Source Surah: Chapter Hud (11): Verse 71

Source Text in Arabic: (هود: 71) ﴿وَأَمْرًا أَنَّهُ قَائِمَةٌ فَضَحَكَتْ فَبَشَّرْنَاهَا بِإِسْحَاقَ وَمِنْ وَرَاءِ إِسْحَاقَ يَعْقُوبَ﴾

Target Text:

Pickthall (1969): And his wife, standing by laughed when We gave her good tidings (of the birth) of Isaac, and, after Isaac, of Jacob.

Yusuf Ali (1983): And his wife was standing (there), and she laughed: But we gave her glad tidings of Isaac, and after him, of Jacob.

Khan and Al-Hilali (1996): And his wife was standing (there), and she laughed (either, because the Messengers did not eat their food or for being glad for the destruction of the people of Lout (Lot). But We gave her glad tidings of Ishaque (Isaac), and after him, of Yaqoob (Jacob).

Khatab (2015): And his wife was standing by, so she laughed, then We gave her good news of 'the birth of' Isaac, and, after him, Jacob.

Abraham's wife was barren and she was given the good news of a new baby. Most translators make no mention of this meaning even though it can fit in this context. It seems that translators do not refer to the different exegeses unless a need arises or they do not feel compelled to mention these secondary meanings perhaps in order not to confuse the reader. Even Khan and Al-Hilali's (1996) translation which relies heavily on exegetical details do not make any mention of the possible second meaning. Why deprive the readers of the extra layers of meaning especially Muslim readers who are keen on gaining deep knowledge of their sacred book? This can also be said as a rebuttal to the argument that adding further details will impact adversely the flow of the translation.

Another apt example is the translation of the word **جمال** 'jamal' in the following verse:

Example Two

Source Surah: Chapter Ala'raf (the heights) (7): Verse (40)

Source Text in Arabic:

(الاعراف: 40) ﴿ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا عَنْهَا لَا نُفْتَحُ لَهُمْ أَبْوَابَ السَّمَاءِ وَلَا يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ حَتَّىٰ يَلِجَ الْجَمَلُ فِي سَمِّ الْخِيَاطِ ﴾

Target Text:

Pickthall (1969): Lo! they who deny Our revelations and scorn them, for them the gates of heaven will nor be opened not will they enter the Garden until the camel goeth through the needle's eye.

Yusuf Ali (1983): To those who reject Our signs and treat them with arrogance, no opening will there

be of the gates of heaven, nor will they enter the garden, until the camel can pass through the eye of the needle:

Khan and Al-Hilali (1996): Verily, those who belie Our Ayat (proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations, etc.) and treat them with arrogance, for them the gates of heaven will not be opened, and they will not enter Paradise until the camel goes through the eye of the needle (which is impossible).

Khatab (2015): Surely those who receive our revelations with denial and arrogance, the gates of heaven will not be opened for them, nor will they enter Paradise until a camel passes through the eye of a needle.

Although the common meaning for “jamal” is (camel), there are some commentators who suggest that in this context, “jamal” means ‘thick rope’. However, famous translators gloss over this suggestion apart from Asad (1980) who opted for the less common meaning “thick rope” and explained in a footnote that in this context it was more appropriate to translate camel as “twisted rope” and he cited some of the commentators who support his claim. Also, he traced the origin of the word ‘jamal’ and its various derivatives which he thought they lend support to his claim. Interestingly, to corroborate his point, he referred to the Bible which has the same parable and the word “rope” is used.

Asad’s lengthy explanation sheds light on the difficulty that some translators face when they encounter such polysemic words. It is important to mention here that I am referring to the different meanings of the word “jamal” as being polysemous in the broader sense of the term polysemy. Although Khan and Al-Hilali (1996) list all the possible senses of the word آيات “proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations, etc.” they fail to do the same with the word ‘jamal’ which suggests inconsistency in the way they treat polysemous items. Al-Qurtubi (1973) pointed out to the different etymological sources of the two meanings. We might, therefore, argue that this word should alternatively be regarded as a case involving homonymy which makes the mention of the two senses even more worthwhile.

The issue that needs to be investigated first is whether some translators of the Quran are aware of the huge presence of words with multiple meanings. Also, translators do not seem to agree on a single strategy for the translation of words with more than one sense but which strategy takes more precedence and whether the translator’s religious and linguistic background comes into play when they are faced with such choices.

Generally speaking, I would like to examine challenges that face the translators of the Quran when rendering polysemous words. To do this, I will explore the different translations of some polysemous words in the Quran and compare the chosen senses linguistically, historically and culturally. This could help us spot the most common approach in translating such items, i.e. whether translations of the Quran adopt the primary/ general sense of the word or the specific one that tone down or up a given sense of the word, such as figurative usage, specialised sense (belonging to a certain genre), technical sense and transferred sense (Zgusta, 1971).

Here are the two main research questions of this paper:

- (1) What are the challenges that translators of the Quran encounter when they render polysemic words?
- (2) What are the common strategies that translators of the Quran adopt to transfer words with multiple senses?

Literature Review

Polysemy has been explored in linguistics and translation studies. Some linguists like Ullman looked at it as a source of ambiguity. Here, ambiguity appears in cases where an item has “more than one cognitive meaning for the same piece of language” (Leech, 1969, p. 205). In this sense, many researchers find this phenomenon to be a unique feature that characterises the Quran and must be considered in translation. For instance, Alzeini (2009) noted, “One of

the most outstanding linguistic unique features, which tend to make the Quran ‘untranslatable’ is its extensive usage of ambiguity” (p. 33). She therefore pursued the translation of some ambiguous (i.e., polysemous) words in the Quran, particularly a list of representative ambiguities from the Chapter of The Heifer.

By contrast, Ibn Durustwayh denied the existence of polysemy in the Quran on the basis that it would lead to ambiguity that contradicts the clear message of the Quran and the logical usage of the Arabic language itself. (Al-Suyuti, 1986). However Classical Arabic dictionaries like *Lisan Al'Arab* list several senses under many lexical items, acknowledging the existence of this phenomenon.

Abdul-Raof (2013) discusses at length the issue of literal translation in the translation of the Quran which, he argues, can be seen in the translation of polysemic words. He uses the word “literal” to refer to what we can call ‘the common meaning’. He gives many examples where translators chose a sense of the polysemic word which is not in line with the context in which the word was mentioned. Hassan (2013) proposes a contextual approach where both linguistics and culture interrelate in analysing the translation of polysemy and culture-specific expressions in the Qur’ān. He examined the challenges of translating the language of the Quran, particularly polysemy and culture-specific expressions based on a source text analysis rather than doing a comparison of translations. He argues that some words in the Quran have acquired new senses and one area in which future research can be conducted is whether translators have been successful in explaining the semantic development of these words.

Having examined a number of studies on polysemy in the Quran, we can notice that there is a conspicuous vagueness in the way they identify polysemy. For example, many researchers assume that a vague concept which subsumes other concepts is an example of polysemy. For example, the word ‘fitnah’ (trial or temptation) is polysemous just because it includes several forms of trial. Literally, in Arabic the word means ‘test’. This test can be used to assess the degree of truth or authenticity of one’s belief or steadfastness. In this way, the different forms of tests, tribulations, trials or ordeals inflicted upon a person are forms of ‘fitnah’ and multiple senses that are relatable by extension yet they can be easily distinguished. This can be likened to the vague word ‘bread’ which is in English is an umbrella term for the different types of bread (e.g., loaf, pitta, naan etc.).

We are not in a position to argue that these types are ‘senses’ of the word ‘bread’ by the sheer fact that it subsumes several manifestations. رحمة (mercy), مطر (rain), رجس (filth) are other vague words that are often cited in the literature. These general words are contextually based for their interpretation. For instance, رجس (filth) on one occasion can refer to spiritual ‘filth’ such as idol-worshipping, and in other contexts it can refer to physical torment or punishments. These interpretations are driven by the context and as such do not represent genuine cases of polysemy.

There are many studies that have tackled the issue of polysemic words but from a completely different perspective. For example, Kembaren et al. (2024) compared the translation of polysemous words from Arabic into Batak Angkola, Indonesian, and English. So the scope of comparison in the aforementioned study is not made between different English versions of the same instance of polysemy. Another example is Kalakattawi, F. A. (2005) which focuses on a single case of ‘vaguenss’ (i.e., the word ‘فتنة’) which has been misidentified as a case of

'polysemy'. Also, her analysis is limited to a single word (i.e., *فتنة*) which does not constitute a representative sample according to rigorous academic standards. Polysemy which poses a real challenge for the Quran translators is when we encounter a word that has multiple discernible senses each of which is well documented by exegetical authorities. The translator will either choose one sense over all other possible senses or combine all the possible senses. The presence of words that have multiple senses all of which are viable in a particular context is one of the inimitable hallmarks of the Holy Quran. Therefore, it is incumbent on the translator of the Quran to deliver these senses so a prospective reader of the Quran can really appreciate the grandeur of the Quran unparalleled style.

In this paper, I propose a more systematic method for analysing polysemy by looking at the different senses of a given polysemous word as listed in Arabic reliable sources of Tafseer 'exegesis of the Quran' as well as the classical Arabic dictionaries. Then I will have a look at the different translations of the Quran to spot which sense was toned up or down.

Research Methodology

The proposed study is going to be descriptive in nature. Descriptive translation studies as defined by Holmes (1988) "describe the phenomenon of translating and translation as they manifest themselves in the world of our experience" (p. 187). Toury (1995) redefined such studies to include "carefully performed studies into well-defined corpuses or set of problems" (p. 1). In the proposed study, this model will be used which looks upon the process of translation as one of the decision-making processes in which the translator has always to choose between "a number of alternatives" (p. 1), stated Levy (1967).

Descriptive studies also pay a special attention to the notion of norms which are in the descriptive literature perceived as Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997) illustrated "reflections of the translation practice which typifies the translations produced by a certain translator" (p. 113). The present study will be restricted to a list of selected polysemes frequently used by Arab scholars of Islamic studies when discussing words of multiple senses in the Quran. A valuable source is "Almufradaat fi Ghareeb Alquran" by Alragheb Al-Asfahani 'A dictionary of uncommon words in the Holy Quran'. However, the list of items derived from Al-asfhani will be examined first in common usage and the exegetical sources to capture all possible meanings of each item in the Arabic language in general before moving to the Quran.

Then the translation of these lexical items in the famous translations will be investigated. The famous translations are the ones that have acquired popularity not only among researchers but also among different sections of readers. If this study is to bear fruit, a representative sample of polysemic words should be selected. To investigate whether these words represent genuine cases of polysemy, we can rely on the intuition of Arabic native speakers to identify the common meanings of these polysemic items. This list will compare the common meaning today and the common meaning at the time of the revelation of the Glorious Quran. This common meaning can be identified using authentic texts produced during the early centuries of Islam. The output will then be examined and subjected to the test put forward by Hurford (2007) to extract the polysemous words.

Findings

It is relatively easy to find words with multiple senses even when we look at chapters that are often recited by Muslims such as الفلق (Alfalaq). The first polysemic word we encounter in this chapter is the eponymous word الفلق which according to famous exegetes [e.g., Altabari, 1978; Al-Qurtubi, 1973] has many meanings such as ‘daybreak’, ‘a prison in hell’, ‘hell’ and ‘creations’.

Consider the following translations.

Example Three

Source Surah: Chapter Alfalaq (the daybreak) (113): Verse (1)

Source Text in Arabic: ﴿الْفَلَقِ﴾ (1:الفلق)

Target Text:

“Pickthall (1969): daybreak

Yusuf Ali (1983): Dawn

Khan and Al-Hilali (1996): daybreak

Khatab (2015): daybreak”

All the above translators pick up one sense of the Arabic word الفلق (i.e., daybreak) to the exclusion of other possible senses. There might be some legitimate excuses for such exclusion. This is the sense usually chosen by modern exegetes of the Quran. Perhaps more importantly, this is the sense which resonates with the intuition of speakers of modern standard Arabic. Also, it has been suggested that earlier translators of the Quran influence subsequent translators (cf. El-Magazy, 2004, p.78). In other words, modern translators of the Quran do not see any compelling reason to alter their translations. Finally, they might presume that adding any alternative interpretation might confound the readers.

The above example does not represent a case which every translator faces but there are words which pose some issues even for native speakers of Arabic reading the Holy Quran, let alone translators. For example, the word “Dhan” in classical Arabic can mean (believe) or (think/guess) as in the translation of the following verses:

Example Four

Source Surah: Chapter Albaqara (the heifer) (2): Verses (45-46)

Source Text in Arabic: ﴿وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ إِنَّهَا لَكَبِيرَةٌ إِلَّا عَلَى الْخَاشِعِينَ﴾ (45) الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُمْ مُلَاقُوا رَبِّهِمْ وَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ﴾ (35-46:البقرة)

Target Text:

Pickthall (1969): Seek help in patience and prayer; and truly it is hard save for the humble-minded;

Who know that they will have to meet their Lord, and that unto Him they are returning

Yusuf Ali (1983): Nay, seek (Allah's) help with patient perseverance and prayer: It is indeed hard, except to those who bring a lowly spirit, who bear in mind the certainty that they are to meet their Lord, and that they are to return to Him

Khan and Al-Hilali (1996): And seek help in patience and As-Salat (the prayer) and truly it is extremely heavy and hard except for Al-Khashioon (i.e., the true believers in Allah - those who obey Allah with full submission, fear much from His Punishment, and believe in His Promise (Paradise, etc.) and in His Warnings (Hell, etc.); (They are those) who are certain that they are going to meet their Lord, and that unto Him they are going to return.

Khatab (2015): And seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, it is a burden except for the humble; those who are certain that they will meet their Lord and to Him they will return.

Example Five

Source Surah: Chapter Albaqara (the heifer) (2): Verse (78)

Source Text in Arabic: ﴿ وَمِنْهُمْ أُمِّيُونَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا أَمَانِيَّ وَإِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ ﴾ (البقرة:78)

Target Text:

Pickthall (1969): Among them are unlettered folk who know the Scripture not except from hearsay. They but guess.

Yusuf Ali (1983): And there are among them unlettered people, who know not the Book, but they trust upon false desires and they but guess.

Khan and Al-Hilali (1996): And there are among them (Jews) unlettered people, who know not the Book, but they trust upon false desires and they but guess.

Khatab (2015): And among them are the illiterate who know nothing about the Scripture except lies, and 'so' they 'wishfully' speculate.

Sometimes the word is translated as 'certainty' and other times as 'doubt', i.e., a polyseme of two contradicting senses. Some Quran exegetes, like Mujahid, claim that whenever ظن 'zhanna' is used in the Quran it refers to certainty, though he interprets the very word in some Quranic verses as 'doubt'. This controversy could be sorted out by analysing the context and the primary senses vis-a-vis the specific ones. The above example demonstrates that translators are aware of the multiple senses of the Arabic word ظن and that they give different renditions on the basis of its respective context. Consider the following interesting example.

Example Six

Source Surah: Chapter Altaubah (the repentance) (9): Verse (103)

Source Text in Arabic: ﴿ وَصَلِّ عَلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ صَلَاتَكَ سَكَنٌ لَهُمْ ﴾ (التوبة: 103)

Target Text:

Pickthall (1969): and pray for them. Lo! thy prayer is an assuagement for them

Yusuf Ali (1983): and pray on their behalf. Verily thy prayers are a source of security for them

Khan and Al-Hilali (1996): and invoke Allah for them. Verily! Your invocations are a source of security for them

Khattab (2015): and pray for them—surely your prayer is a source of comfort for them

Like its English counterpart, الصلاة (prayer) has a couple of meanings. However, in Arabic it has another less common sense of ‘asking for forgiveness’. The above context does not allow for the most common meaning (i.e. a form of worship to activate a rapport with the almighty God). Alternatively, they resorted to the sense of ‘invocation’ which happens to be the second most common meaning. So translators when faced with a meaning which is not congruent with their perception of the verse they opt for secondary senses. This example shows that generally speaking translators abide by the exegetical interpretations yet they are actively involved in the decision-making process when they encounter a quandary such as the aforementioned instance.

Now Let us have a very telling example:

Example Seven

Source Surah: Chapter Almursalat (the emissaries) (77): Verse (33)

Source Text in Arabic: ﴿ كَأَنَّهُ جِمَالَتٌ صَفْرٌ ﴾ (المرسلات: 33)

Target Text:

Pickthall (1969): (Or) as it might be camels of bright yellow hue

Yusuf Ali (1983): As if there were (a string of) yellow camels (marching swiftly).

Khan and Al-Hilali (1996): As if they were Jimalatun Sufr (yellow camels or bundles of ropes)."

Khattab (2015): and ‘as dark’ as black camels.”

In this example the sparks that hellfire throws up is likened to camels or bundles of ropes subject to the interpretation that the translator chooses. The only translators above who have given expression to both senses are Khan and Al-Hilali (1996) who took extra care to stick closely to the statements given by exegetes however long this might render their interpretation or may break the flow of their translation. Khan and Al-Hilali’s use of transliteration in the above example does draw the attention of readers to the subtle nature of these Arabic lexemes.

Elimam (2017, p. 63) finds that many Muslims are passionate about committing Arabic words to memory and Khan and Al-Hilali’s employment of transliteration serves this purpose. In the same vein, Alturki (2021, p. 211) reveals that “apart from their gratuitous (at least for some readers) use of transliteration, Al-Hilali and Khan effectively mirror the polysemous nature of the divine designations. Their adherence to exegetic fidelity pays off here”. This generalization should not apply across the board as they have settled on one sense of the word صفر despite the inkling of most exegetes to give it the sense of ‘black’ or ‘yellow pigmentation’.

Although Pickthall (1969) sets out to stick to a literal translation, in the above instance he picks a sense (i.e. yellow hue) which totally rests on the exegetes’ interpretation of the Arabic word. Also, Ali adopts a literal translation which is not in line with the sense given in the

different exegetical sources. It seems that Ali does not resort to secondary senses unless the context perfectly allows such a concession. Khattab (2015) is the only translator who has let go of the common meaning to accommodate the secondary sense as stated by many exegetes.

Discussion

The first issue that catches the attention of any investigator of the translation of polysemy in the Quran is the misidentification of the phenomenon. First, they do not agree on a single definition for polysemy which has led to confusion whether certain instances constitute cases of polysemy or not. In the present paper, we have tried to adopt a unified definition for polysemy which takes into account all the probable cases of polysemy. Second, some researchers fail to spot certain instances of multiple senses due to the subtle and vague nature of some senses. Researchers have to strike a balance between vagueness and ambiguity. It is hoped that all the examples we have covered reveal multiple meanings that are clearly discernible to any serious researcher.

It is interesting to note that many researchers have failed to spot the contentious points that pertain to polysemy. The reliance on intuition when it comes to picking up the most appropriate sense for a given lexeme does not always pay off. Even the context does not often solve the quandary that encounters the translators. Quite repeatedly, we come across words with a number of senses that can coexist. Cherry-picking one meaning and excluding any other viable meaning can deprive the reader of an important insight into the overall denotation of the Quranic text. The inclination of translators to avoid overwhelming the readers with so-called superfluous details comes at the expense of being less faithful to the original text.

By faithfulness we mean that the target text “evokes in a receptor essentially the same response as that displayed by the receptors of the original message” (Nida & Taber, 1969, 1982, p. 201). Selecting just one sense does not evoke in the target reader the feeling that the Quran in its inimitable eloquence is capable of imparting multiple senses each of which is as justifiable and as admissible as all the other senses. We have seen how in previous studies the only focus of most researchers is the inaccurate rendition of vague or ambiguous words which constitutes a major obstacle for translators. However, another equally cumbersome matter of contention is the amalgamation of different interpretations that caters for the needs of different sections of readership. As we have analyzed this stumbling block does not seem to occupy the minds of researchers and translators alike.

This seemingly inevitable loss of meaning can be resolved by resorting to compensation. Among the many types of compensation is the *compensation by splitting* which is resorted to if there is no target language item that subsumes the range of different meanings that the source language lexeme has (Dickins et al., 2002). A fitting example is the word الفجر which we have already cited. Since English does not have a lexical item that can encompass all the senses that Arabic can carry, a translator can split the word into different layers of meanings conjoined together (i.e., dawn, hell and creation). Any translation technique that is not applied consistently and systematically will only aggravate the situation and will render the translator powerless whenever he is torn between two or more equally congruent alternatives.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We can easily notice the quandary that translators of the Quran need to tackle when they engage in the rendition of the words of God. Perhaps they are not aware that they take the role of an exegete in elucidating the Quran by making an active choice from among a number of alternative interpretations. This puts an extra burden on the translators to have strong grounding not only in Arabic but also in the different fields associated with the exegetical annotation of the Quran. Translators need to be aware that they need to decide which meaning is intended when faced with polysemous words. One way to remedy the situation is to add a bracketed explanation or footnotes where the target readership is alerted to the existence of alternative denotations of the polysemic words.

To assume that readers do not hanker for ancillary details is incompatible with the undertaking of the translator of the Quran who has to be faithful to the target especially with texts of the highest magnitude. Having stated that, we find some scholars who make a distinction between an interpretation and a translation. For example, Al-Zurqānī (1943, vol. 2, pp. 114-117) argues that a translation of the Quran has to be succinct so that it is faithful to the origin while an interpretation can encompass supplementary material.

I hope this study is going to be a significant contribution to the area of Quranic translation. I also hope that it is going to be of benefit to both researchers and future translators of the Holy Quran. Based on the findings of this study, future translators should do their best to encompass all admissible interpretations of the Quran in which the context does not conclusively establish which sense is intended. This will increase the accuracy of the translation and render it more reflective of the Arabic text. In this way, prospective readers will better appreciate the linguistic richness of the Quran.

Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that this paper is an attempt to shed light on the best practices and strategies in overcoming some linguistic sensitivities when transferring the word of God into English. It is quite discernible that adopting a communicative approach to Quran translation which prioritizes natural language over literal faithfulness will make the Arabic Quran shine through the target text. More specifically, we can see that proponents of the communicative approach such as Khattab (2015) demonstrate superior performance due to their emancipation from the close adherence to the literal rendition of Arabic structures. Adopting this strategy can help in maintaining the original message integrity which is a hallmark of accurate and respectful translation.

Finally, translating the word of God is a highly sensitive matter. The function of the translator is trying his best to examine the context in which the word of God is mentioned and carefully choose the target language equivalent(s) as God intends it to be understood. I hope my study is going to be instrumental in achieving this objective.

Bio

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