



# Challenges in translating words of Almighty God: A thorough examination of its English translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

Shafaque Hyder  
Phd Arabic,  
2019  
Prof Faizan ahmad  
Department of Arabic,  
Aligarh Muslim University,  
Aligarh,India  
hydershafaque09@gmail.com  
9012664018  
Aligarh,Uttar Pradesh,,India

Itrat khan  
Phd English,  
2019  
prof. Sarfaraz Nawaz  
Department of English  
Shibli National PG college  
itratkhan3112@gmail.com  
8279676491  
Azamgarh,Uttar Pradesh,India

## Abstract

This paper aims to analyze textual variations between the Holy Quran and its English Translation by Yusuf Ali. It attempts to highlight lexical, syntactic and semantic problems faced while perusing the translation due to lack of equivalence of some cultural words in the target language or some lexicons which are Quran specific and some polysemous words which are interpreted subjectively. This mis-translation results in partial or complete loss of meaning in target language. It is argued that generic features of the texts affect the translators' decision processes. For the theoretical framework of the literature, literary genres and translation are investigated. The detected items in translated text are examined to unfold the strategies used by the translator in order to solve the problems related to the generic and cultural aspects of the translation. The translator's ability either to domesticate or foreignize the text is unveiled on the basis of Venuti's theory. To serve this purpose Yusuf Ali's English translation of the Quran has been taken.

**Keywords** - Holy Quran, Translation, Untranslatability, Venuti's Theory, Paraphrasing

## Introduction

Desire for knowledge has attracted people from all around the world to understand and learn the culture of others. It is through translation that different religions and cultures are exchanged between different nations. It has been used by the people from ancient times as it was indispensable in order to make others understand one's own culture. To be part of Islam one must have complete understanding of Quran and in order to give 'Dawah' to different communities the Quran was translated in different languages during the period of Prophet Mohammad by his companions. The most effective translation is one where the author conveys the meaning of the source text as it is in the target language. The translator must have command of both languages so that he can justify his work. As Nida (1964:145) says that a translator must have control over the language into which he is translating. "He cannot simply match words from a dictionary" (Nida,1964). Two different languages represent completely different sets of cultural, religious and linguistic background and the same is the case with Arabic and English languages which pose challenges for the translator. There are certain words in Arabic which are culture specific and cannot be translated for example 'Iddat' which means waiting period of 4 months and 10 days for a woman after the death of her husband. Languages map words in different ways; a concept that can be expressed by just one word in English may be expressed by many words in another language. The Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years and it employs many stylistic, linguistic and rhetorical features that result in an effective and sublime style. This use of features challenges the translators of the Holy Quran, especially when translating such literary devices as metaphor, assonance, epithet, irony, repetition, polysemy, metonymy, simile, synonymy and homonymy. Undoubtedly the style of the Quran is unmatched and the translator cannot maintain it regardless of his utmost efforts and faithfulness to the Arabic text.

"The rhetoric and rhythm of the Arabic of the Qur'an are so characteristic, so powerful, so highly emotive that any version whatsoever is bound in the nature of things to be but a poor copy of the glittering splendor of the original" (Arberry 1955, 24).

Since the Quran is a piece which lacks coherent and cohesive writing that makes it difficult for a novice to understand the message of the Quran and if the translator is unable to pen down cohesive meaning of the holy text in the target language; the translation done will go in vain as reader might end up in confusion. There are many lexical hindrance for a translator for instance words like taqwā (piety - تقوى), kufr (disbelief - كافر), shīrk (associating other gods with God - شرك), haq (truth- حق), ma'rūf (charity - معروف), munkar (wrong - منكر), unseen/unknown - غيب), ghaīb (the unseen/unknown - غيب), zakāh (alms giving - زكاة) and tāwbah (repentance) توبة. These words just have approximate meanings in the English language).

Translators also come across many syntactic and semantic problems which can be encountered in verses where there is a shift from the past tense to the imperfect tense to achieve an effect. Al-Salem (2008, 3) argues that some Muslim translators of the Holy Quran have been very careful to adhere to the Quranic text, maintaining its structure and vocabulary as much as the target language systems allow it. She points

out that this attitude emanates from the translators' great respect for the Holy Quran and from their belief that they should not take liberties with the word of God. Yusuf Ali has done a tremendous job in translating the Quran in English language keeping its essence intact to the best of his ability. My attempt in this research is to elaborate and emphasize the hurdle that he faced in translation and where all did he lack to communicate the real meaning of the source text. Since English is a widely read language and is used by people to understand the Quran it should be written so flawlessly that it can be read and understood by even those readers who don't have any knowledge of Arabic. This can be done through footnotes and explaining cultural and linguistic differences either before or after the end of translated text.

After studying Yusuf Ali's translation we try to highlight the linguistic gap between the original text i.e. The Holy Qur'an and his translation using few examples from the verses.

## 1. Transliteration

There are many words from the Qur'an whose English translation is difficult as they lose their essence. So they are used as it is in Arabic language in the translated texts. We can say that they are merely translated. More to the point, the transliterated word becomes a loan word in the translated text. Consider the following examples:

وَيُسْفَوْنَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا كَانَ مِزَاجُهَا زَنْجَبِيلًا

[76:17]

And they will be given to drink there of a Cup (of Wine) mixed with Zanjabil.

The Arabic word "Zanjabil" has a straightforward translation in English as 'Ginger'. He used the term thinking that ginger would be a different one in the Hereafter.

إِنَّ الْأَبْرَارَ يَشْرَبُونَ مِنْ كَأْسٍ كَانَ مِزَاجُهَا كَافُورًا

[76:5]

As to the Righteous, they shall drink of a Cup (of Wine) mixed with Kafur,-

Same is the case with Camphor. Muslims believe that all things will be different in the Hereafter despite being similar (مشتبهها و غير متشابهه)

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا

[2:143]

Thus, have We made of you an Ummat justly balanced,

Literally 'Ummah' should be translated as nation but symbolically it means Muslim Ummah as a whole.

قَالَتْ أَمْرَأْتُ الْعَزِيزِ

[12:51]

Said the "Aziz"s wife:

"Aziz" was generally used as a title for a specific court position but here it is used as a name.

## 2. Grammatical Inconsistency

Words of different languages do not express all the shades of meanings of their counterparts though they may express specific concepts. Therefore narrowing down the meaning of the Qur'an to specific concepts in a foreign language would mean missing out other important dimensions. Thus the presentation of the Qur'an in different languages often results in confusion and misguidance unless and until thoroughly explained.

وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فَإِذَا هُم مِّنَ الْأَجْدَاثِ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَنسِلُونَ

[36:51]

The trumpet shall be sounded, when behold! from the sepulchers (men) will rush forth to their Lord!

In this verse, past tense is used for the trumpet to be blown in the future. It signifies that the Day of Judgment is nearer to the nearest in a way that it has already happened. This is the rhetoric of the Qur'an which beautifies the verse and conveys a very deep meaning.

وَقَالَ الرَّسُولُ يُرَبِّ إِنِّي قَوْمِي اتَّخَذُوا هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ مَهْجُورًا

[25:30]

Then the Messenger will say: "O my Lord! Truly my people took this Qur'an for just foolish nonsense."

Same is the case with the word 'قال' (past) is used for the future when in Qiyamah the Prophet SAW will say the same.

## 3. Different English Translations

Issues of translation can arise from the fact that the word in the original text is a name and has a meaning as well. When the translator tries to translate a word that is a name in the original text the result is a different name of which the source language speaker is unknown.

For example:

تَبَّتْ يَدَا أَبِي لَهَبٍ وَتَبَّ

[111:1]

Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he!

The translator portrayed the name of an infamous person in Islamic history and literature "Abu Lahab" as "The Father of Flame". Although the literary meaning is correct, translating the name in such a manner is incorrect.

إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ

[108:1]

To thee have We granted the Fount (of Abundance).

Generally speaking names or proper nouns should not be translated but sometimes they do have meanings. In this verse (108:1), the translator rendered the term "al-Kausar" into "abundance" but it signifies the name of a river of Paradise.

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ الْفُرْقَانَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ لِيَكُونَ لِلْعَالَمِينَ نَذِيرًا

[25:1]

Blessed is He who sent down the criterion to His servant, that it may be an admonition to all creatures;-

Here the term "الفرقان" is translated as 'criterion' whereas it literally means 'the one who differentiates'.

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِذَا جَاءَكَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتُ يُبَايِعْنَكَ عَلَى أَنْ لَا يُشْرِكْنَ بِاللَّهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَسْرِقْنَ وَلَا يَزْنِينَ وَلَا يَقْتُلْنَ أَوْلَادَهُنَّ وَلَا يَأْتِينَ بِبُهْتَانٍ يَفْتَرِينَهُ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِنَّ وَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ وَلَا يَعَصِيَنَّكَ فِي مَعْرُوفٍ فَبَايِعْهُنَّ وَأَسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُنَّ اللَّهُ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

[60:12]

O Prophet! When believing women come to thee to take the oath of fealty to thee, that they will not associate in worship any other thing whatever with Allah, that they will not steal, that they will not commit adultery (or fornication), that they will not kill their children, that they will not utter slander, intentionally forging falsehood, and that they will not disobey thee in any just matter,- then do thou receive their fealty, and pray to Allah for the forgiveness (of their sins): for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful

In this verse the terms "بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِنَّ وَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ" is not literally translated rather it has been explained to portray its essence.

#### 4. Metaphorical Terms

اَوْتَرَى الْأَرْضَ هَامِدَةً فَإِذَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا الْمَاءَ اهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ وَأَنْبَتَتْ مِنْ  
كُلِّ زَوْجٍ بَهِيجٍ  
[22:5]

Thou seest the earth barren and lifeless, but when We pour down rain on it, it is stirred (to life), it swells, and it puts forth every kind of beautiful growth (in pairs).

The shaking of the Earth after a long silence is compared to the living thing that calms down after moving. Here Allah SWT exemplifies the Earth after it rains with the same.

To show how the Earth stirs and swells after it rains; paraphrasing and symbolism is used as literal translation was unable to convey its desired meaning.

اَقْتُلُوا يُوسُفَ أَوْ اطْرَحُوهُ أَرْضًا يَخْلُ لَكُمْ وَجْهَ أَبِيكُمْ وَتَكُونُوا مِنْ بَعْدِهِ قَوْمًا صَالِحِينَ  
[12.9]

Slay ye Joseph or cast him out to some (unknown) land, that so the favor of your father may be given to you alone: (there will be time enough) for you to be righteous after that!

The verse اَقْتُلُوا يُوسُفَ أَوْ اطْرَحُوهُ أَرْضًا يَخْلُ لَكُمْ وَجْهَ أَبِيكُمْ literally translates to 'your father's face may be free for you. The literal translation doesn't clarify the meaning so different words are used to convey the meaning.

#### Conclusion

The linguistic and rhetorical features of the Qur'an continue to pose a challenge to translators who try to convey the intended meaning of the verses as there is no unified technique for the process. Therefore, the issue of untranslatability arises. One must be an expert of both the languages i.e. the original language as well as the translated language so as to perfect the translation. Qur'an is a miracle text of Allah SWT that no other language in this entire World is good enough for a flawless translation. One or the other issues are left to tackle with even if the bench of experts come together for the process of translation.

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