

On the Problems of Translating Sacred Texts

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1. Introduction.

It should not take much effort to bring home to anyone that translation aims at equivalence. But this statement is far from being a straightforward one. It is not the aim of the present author to delve into the middle of the issue. Rather I will accept Nida and Taber's (1982, 1) assertion that there has been a shift in focus from the form of the message to the response of the receptor. Nida (2001, 10) insists that "no translator should begin to work without first knowing who is the intended audience" stressing thus the importance of the receptor. So the main criterion to evaluate a translation is to see how much it is faithful in carrying the message to the target audience. In other words, a successful translation is one that creates on the target audience an effect similar to that intended by the source language (SL) author on the SL audience. This similarity of effect was termed "dynamic" equivalence (Nida 1964) to be later called "functional" equivalence (de Waard and Nida 1986, 7). This change in terminology, however, is not intended to mean any change in focus (Kirk 2005, 91). Facing the translator's attempt at any kind of equivalence is the problem of cultural and linguistic distance between the target language (TL) and the SL. The farther the two languages are from each other, the more difficult the translator's job.⁽¹⁾ In the case of a religious text, the job is further complicated by the historical distance between the time the text was initiated and the time the translator embarks on his/her job among other things. For

religious texts in the sense intended in this paper are ancient texts (cf. Long 2005, 3) enjoying the privilege of sanctity. Their translation is an ongoing activity through the ages. The contemporary SL audience is historically removed, but the TL audience is twice removed, so to speak: once because of history and another time because of translation. The translation is aimed at an audience with a different language and culture and at a different time in history.

Nevertheless, religious translating has “not stopped and should not give way to difficulties,” to use Shakir’s words (2007, 103). It has been going on ever since religions started spreading outside their original localities. Nida and Taber (1982, vii) report that Bible translating began in the third century B.C. and has involved 1393 languages by the end of 1968. Ali (1999, XIX-XX) surveys the history of translating the Holy Qur’ān citing a number of European and non-European languages into which it was translated. A Latin translation, he reports, was made about 1145 a.d. about 500 years after the inception of Islam. The activity continues with vigor, the difficulties of translating notwithstanding. The major difficulties facing this activity include holiness, the passage of time and the dispute over authoritativeness

2. The sacred text

One major problem facing the translation of religious texts pertains to the very definition of the sacred text. For “sacred” means that the entity assigned this description is beyond human reach and can only be revered and idolized by the followers of the creed that holds it in awe. A sacred text is one ascribed to a supernatural entity: one either authored by such entity or revealed to an apostle or a messenger from such an entity. This feature of the religious text decorates it with a halo that can be detected in assertions of the type exemplified

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in Abdalati (1981, 193) who writes, “it is beyond human imagination to produce anything like it.” The reasons he gives for this excellence include the fact that it “is the Word of God revealed to Muhammad through the Holy Spirit Gabriel.” Ali (1999, XVI) concurs: “No human language can possibly be adequate for the expression of the highest spiritual thought,” i.e. the Holy Qur’ān. Even a Western scholar, Gib (quoted in Shakir 2007, 103) finds that “no man has ever played on that deep-toned instrument with such power, such boldness, and such range of emotional effects.” Shakir (2007) who calls for “[a] systematic study of coherence in Qur’anic texts [...] in accordance with the principles of discourse analysis”(p.16) finds himself (e.g. on p. 103) unable to resist quoting, and seemingly approving of, such statements as Khalifah’s comments that “the Arabic of the Qur’an is by turns striking, soaring, vivid, terrible, tender, and breath-taking,” comments that cannot be sustained in standard linguistics theory as descriptions of a language system.⁽²⁾

This sacred character of the religious text leads to a straightforward argument along the following lines: since the SL text under consideration is infallible and the TL text is made by a human and, hence, imperfect like any achievement of a mortal, then the two are not equivalent: one is human and the other super-human. Therefore, “The Qur’an, for example, is considered untranslatable from the original Arabic,” to use Long’s (2005, 1) words, and it is probably why many translations of the Holy Qur’ān announce themselves as “translations of the *meaning* of the Holy Qur’ān” rather than translations of the Qur’ān as such. This way seems to represent to these translators a way out of claiming to possess divine qualities if they call their work a translation of the Qur’ān which can be seen as a new version of it, a claim that could amount to blasphemy from a religious perspective.

Another manifestation of this avoidance of being accused of contradicting the standing tradition is for some students of translation when dealing with religious issues to shed off the responsibility of having their own interpretation of the holy text and base their studies on traditional commentaries. Sawalha (2008), for example, in checking whether certain translations have correctly rendered preposing and postposing in the Holy Qur'ān does not attempt to interpret the significance of this phenomenon in the SL text on his own to see whether the translators have kept the import of the message. Rather, he trusts the traditional commentators with the task of interpretation and checks whether the translators have kept the word order of the SL text in their translations (pp. 7-9). Even such renowned a translator as Ali (1999) finds himself in need of consulting traditional commentators, whose *Tafsīrs* he gives in a long list (pp. XVII-XVIII).

In a similar fashion, Al-Omari (2009) in analyzing Prophet Muhammed's speeches starts with the conviction that they are perfect. Although she claims to follow De Beaugrande and Dressler in their analysis of textuality (p.51), one gets the impression from her thesis that all she really does is take the discourse features of the Prophet's speeches as examples of ideally successful discourse strategies from which users of the language and linguists (especially discourse analysts) should learn and which should set standards. I. e., the speeches were treated as sacred, infallible and not open to human critical reasoning. Reason should be based on them. A translator in his role as a discourse analyst is not free to criticize.

The discussion of holiness so far should not be taken to apply only to the Holy Qur'ān. The case of the Bible is not much different. In discussing Bible translations, Nida and

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Taber (1982, 3) report that there is a tendency “to place the source languages on a theological pedestal and to bow down before them in blind submission.” Hebrew, one of what are considered to be Biblical languages, “is regarded as a special esoteric tongue” and Greek, another Biblical language, “is a ‘mystery’ or ‘the finest instrument of human thought ever designed by man.’ ” This kind of reverence given to individual languages giving them superiority over other languages is rejected by Nida and Taber since they see “Greek and Hebrew [as] just ‘languages’ with all the excellencies and liabilities that every language tends to have” (ibid, 6). In other words, the holy text is given some kind of immunity against emulation through raising its source language above human standards and ability. Therefore, translating the Bible has always been approached with utmost caution so much so that it took a Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Liturgy to allow the use of vernacular (i.e. non-Latin) languages and with strict limitations. Approval of and confirmation of the translation by the Apostolic See was required. Such approval is based on scrutiny by “all the Bishops involved” before being put into use in the liturgy. (Article 36.4 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* available at <http://www.adoremus.org>)

3. The role of diachrony

The type of text considered in this paper is one of antiquity. The holy scriptures, speeches of Prophet Muhammad, other traditions (*hadith*) of the Prophet, sayings ascribed to other messengers of God, etc. -- all are by now old texts that have been studied and treated as sources of wisdom and codes of ethics and behavior for several centuries. Over this time expanse languages naturally change. One of the difficulties of interpreting the Holy Qur’ān that faced Ali in his translation was the fact that “Arabic words in the Text have acquired other meanings than those which were understood by

the Prophet and his Companions.”(Ali 1999, XVI). This is probably why Mohammed (2005) believes that

[e]ven for native Arabic speakers, the Qur’an is a difficult document. Its archaic language and verse structure are difficult hurdles to cross. Translation only accentuates the complexity. (p. 65)

Ali (1999, XVI) continues to assert that this kind of situation is not peculiar to Arabic. “All living languages undergo such transformations.” Benjamin (as reported in Long 2005, 3) asserts that in the case of religious texts, “the original undergoes a change.”

Nida and Taber (1982, 7) present a similar problem with the languages of the Bible. “Our problem today,” they write, “is that many of the cultural contexts of Bible times which provided meanings for those words [current at the time the Bible was written] no longer exist and therefore we often cannot determine just what a word means.” Place names as well as names of historical characters present a special problem since many of these names have changed over the years and the modern reader of the text expects to be able to recognize the place in the world as s/he knows it and the historical character as identified in books of history. Where the historical facts contradict the religious text, the ordinary receptor of the text has a serious problem. A related problem occurs with the identity of the place where a religious martyr or saint is buried. It is often the case that the inhabitants of a town or village assume that the tomb of a certain ‘saint’ is that tomb they know in their locality. The problem though is that inhabitants of another place have the same saint entombed in their neighborhood. One possible explanation for this kind of dispute could be sought in the tendency by many to mythologize much of their lore, especially those aspects that are wrapped with sanctity. It is those aspects that are expected

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to be beyond human nature and they can therefore be held in terms of the supernatural. Here comes the possibility for legends to creep in. It is also here where legends can creep into personal and place names, and the distinction between original and foreign is lost.

What is a translator to do when faced with these problems of language change? Should one stick to older interpretations where they are available and stick to the more or less literal translation? Or should one calibrate one's interpretations in view of whatever evidence of change available to him/her taking into consideration the role of context? Ali (1999, XVI-XVII) divides the translation task in this regard into two cases: where matters of judgment are concerned Ali suggests that "the closer we come to our own circumstances and experiences, the better." But in matters of report, in cases of reporting what actually happened "the closer we go back to contemporary [-with-the-time-of-revelation] authority, the better." So in the case of place names mentioned above, Ali seems to opt for keeping a name as it is in the original text even if there is evidence that the name has changed because this is not a matter of judgment.

Nida and Taber (1982, 7) seem to prefer reinterpreting the words in a text in modern terms because "the words of the Bible were all current" when the Bible was written and their translation must also be current *for today's audience*. This understanding of their position is consonant with their emphasis on receptor's reaction in translation referred to above.

4. The authority of the clergy

In addition to the problems of divinity and diachronic language change, translating religious texts faces the problem

of authoritativeness. Who is and who is not authorized to interpret and hence to translate? Stine (reported in Long 2005, 5) puts it this way: “Holy texts have the complication of institutional claims: the hierarchical structure supporting each religion expects to control the translation of its central text(s).” Prunč (2007, 39) seems to assert that in all translation “the power to control texts and to attribute meaning to them is either decreed in an authoritarian manner or agreed upon democratically.” However, he later (p. 50) sounds very critical of “God’s powerful representatives on earth [who] postulate that they alone owned the truth and check the production of anti-truths.”

In the context of translating the Holy Qur’ān, it is observed that the Muslim community has generally been against accepting any translation, ⁽³⁾ (cf. Kidwai 1978) which delayed this activity till about ten centuries after the advent of Islam. Moreover, “[t]he first translations to English were not undertaken by Muslims but by Christians who sought to debunk Islam.” (Mohammed, 2005: 2) “The Muslim need for translating the Qur’an into English arose mainly out of the desire to combat the missionary effort” whose goal was “the production of a - usually erroneous and confounding - European version [...]” (Kidwai 1978)

Once translations were produced, the issue of their acceptability was mainly an affair of the orthodoxy. Recently, the Saudi endorsement of a translation (e.g. Ali’s [first published in 1934]) would sustain it; and make it available to a wide audience. However, lack of this support deprives the rejected version of the chance to survive. For example, Saudies banned Asad’s translation and “the ban has in effect made [it] both expensive and difficult to obtain” (Mohammed 2005, 62). Another case is that of Ahmad ‘Ali’s translation

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that was not endorsed in Saudi Arabia, which makes Mohammed (p. 62) expect “[f]uture editions [to be] unlikely.”

In addition to whether a translation is favored in Saudi Arabia or not there are versions described by some as ‘sectarian translations’ (e.g. Mohammed, 63; Kidwai 1978, 6). These are mainly Shi’ite efforts meant to foster the Shi’ite version of Islam as opposed to the more widely spread Sunni doctrine. The Shi’ites have their ‘official’ version including their special annotations and interpretation appended to the translation of the Text proper with their own sectarian bias opposing many of the Sunni teachings.

It is clear then that there is dispute over the question of which interpretation, and hence which translation, is the legitimate one. In the case of both the Qur’ān and the Bible, the traditional authorities have always attempted to monopolize the right to interpreting and, consequently, translating the religious text. In the case of the Bible the clergy insist on their right to be the sole authority, so much so that “[p]rofessional exegetes were appointed whose task was to disseminate the truth in the name of God,” as Prunč (2007, 50) puts it. The Vatican Council’s Constitution referred to above is a case in point. “Translation from the Latin text into the mother tongue intended for use in the Liturgy must be approved by the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority mentioned above” (Article 36.3). These authorities are specified (in Article 22.2 of the same document, the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*) as “various kinds of competent territorial bodies of bishops legitimately established.” That is, only the highest religious bodies are authorized to translate or approve translations of the holy texts.⁽⁴⁾

This authority was challenged in “An Open Letter on Translation” by Martin Luther in 1530 in which he declares

that a “right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing Christian, trained, educated, and experienced heart” is the requirement of a qualified translator; being a clergyman is *not* a requirement. In fact, he expresses his indignation with the clergy to the extent of using very vulgar words in describing them. More significantly, he insists on expressing himself in his German the way he understands the original Greek not the way the established religious authorities decree.⁽⁵⁾ He is aware that every language has its genius and that one should not force the means of expression of one language on another. (Cf. Nida and Taber [1982, 4] who believe that “To communicate effectively one must respect the genius of each language.”)

5. Conclusion.

The issues discussed so far pertain to the special difficulties facing the actual process of translating a holy text due to the very definition of the sacred text, its antiquity, and the dispute over the authority of interpreting it: who is in charge?

On the question of holiness, which causes “translations of holy texts [to be] often received with misgiving”, to use Long’s (2005, 8) words, the present author is of the belief that the religious text is first and foremost addressed to humans using their tongue. Like other human activities, and in order for the religious text to carry out its task, it has to be in the kind of medium familiar to its receptors. It has to show both the assets and the liabilities of human language. Otherwise it runs the risk of being alien to the human audience it is addressed to. Rendering this kind of text in any human language can be possible and successful at the hands of good translators with the aid of any source, be it a clergyman, a linguist, a historian or a student of any field of knowledge. This is reminiscent of the Muslim teaching

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requiring a believer to look for wisdom wherever the search may lead.

As to the problem of language change over time and its relation to the ability to understand an old text, what can be done here is to appeal to the common human experience and remember that what is now an old text was once a modern one. As such, it was reasonably clear to its audience since it was addressed to them for the purpose of relaying a message. If we are to convey the same message to our present time audience, inasmuch as the time gap allows, we have to render the text in the language of today and the mother tongue of the intended audience. We have to be sensitive to any changes in idiom and culture. Historical records should be of help in reconstructing the context in which the original text was deployed and affecting the necessary adaptations of the new text to the new situation so that the receptor of the new text can receive the same message both in its semantic import and its pragmatic function. Translators of any type of text have experienced this type of dilemma if trying to cross the borders of language and culture. The translator of the religious text has the further complication of crossing the border of time.

The authority question puts one on a collision course with interest groups of one type or other. The present author sides with Luther (quoted above) giving the authority to no one profession. The Holy Qur'ān repeatedly dares believers—all believers not any distinguished elite—to make use of one of the blessings God has bestowed on mankind—reason. One's sincere judgment of what is right and what is wrong combined with the sincere search for the truth when in doubt of one's own judgment are one's safeguard in the face of sinning against oneself and one's fellow humans, the main message of the religious text.

A final note echoes the optimistic remark of Nida and Taber (1982, 4) that “[a]nything that can said in one language can be said in another” and Nida’s (2001, 58) remark that “[i]f translators really understand what a text means, they can usually render it in ordinary language, [...]”. Both quotations assure the skeptic of the possibility of translating even though many have repeatedly advocated the impossibility of translation. In fact, there is sense in describing both positions on translation as legitimate. On the one hand, if by translation one means perfect match between SL and TL texts, or that the translation *is* the original, then translation is impossible. If, however, one accepts as a faithful translation one that conveys the same message as the original, then some new TL text can do the job, especially when one remembers the similarities of human experience to a considerable degree. In fact, interpreting a text in its original form is open to different possibilities, but this has never impeded the text’s carrying out its function. On the contrary, the “diversity has helped rather than impeded understanding,” as Augustine is reported to have said (quoted in Long 2005, 3). Based on the different interpretations, different translations may be produced and eventually one of these gets accepted and “achieves the status of the original,” to use Long’s (2005, 14) words.

The holiness of a holy text is ascribed by some to “how people use it, the status they give it and the significance it has for them” (Long 2005, 14). So any difficulty of translating due to holiness is not due to any intrinsic feature(s) of the text. Rather, it is “context rather than content makes the holy untranslatable” (Shackle 2005, 20). In other words, the problem here is one of reception and acceptability. In today’s world “the necessity to understand how other cultures work in order to live peacefully together makes [alternative holy texts] required reading and their sympathetic translation crucial.”

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More generally, one should hope with Sofer (2004, XI) that [t]ransmitting meaning from one language to another brings people together, helps them to share each other,s culture, benefit from each other,s experience, and makes them aware of how much they all have in common.

Notes:

(1) °Ali (1999, XVII) promises that in translating the Holy Qur’ān he will “use such language as is current among the people to whom we speak.” Nevertheless, he acknowledges the near-impossibility of this job since he ascribes to Classical Arabic, the language of the Qur’ān, qualities that are “difficult to interpret [...] in a modern analytic language.”(p.XVI)

(2) Shakir (2007, 101) also gives an example of a word whose difficult pronunciation reflects the difficulty the character in a Qur’ānic narrative faces: “the free air passage of the first part of the verb [=yaṣṣa^{cc}adu] ‘yaṣṣ...’is obstructed and tightly impeded by the geminated voiced pharyngeal ‘^{cc}a’ that one needs to pick up one’s breath once he articulates it.” So this sound image is a parallel to the inability of the non-believer to ascend to the sky, making the sound form reflect the semantic content. What this ‘obstruction’ or ‘impedance’ is is not clear. It looks more like looking for a miraculous feature to attach to the divine text so it appears like nothing humans can produce.

(3) Muslim prayers can only be performed in Arabic regardless of the tongue of the individual or the extent of his/her knowledge of the language.

(4) The authority the clergy try to hold on to is illustrated in the interesting reaction reported by Nida and Taber (1982, 101) of the members of a committee who was entrusted with

the translation of the Bible. When they were asked to adopt “some translations which were in perfectly clear, understandable language [...],” their reaction was, “ ‘But if all the laymen can understand the Bible, what will the preachers have to do?’”

(5) Prunč (2007, 50) reports that “Jan Hus, Etienne Dolet and William Tyndale who transgressed these confines, paid for it with their lives. Martin Luther would have suffered the same fate if he had not successfully claimed for himself the status of an exegete and won the support of the Imperial ruler.”

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