

The Translation of the Coran: Some major problems

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Introduction:

One of the most sensible approaches towards the study of language is the study of meaning and perception. All linguistic units ranging from sounds, words, to sentences represent the basic elements in the realization of meaning. In addition to the major role displayed by some properties of human language that have largely contributed to the elaboration of meaning in language, one of these is “discreteness”; ‘a feature that involves the use of particular signal for a specific number of situations’ (Ennaji: 1992, 22). It stresses the point that the constitution of meaning begins with the first elementary linguistic unit that is the sound. Thus, the combination of sounds in a language is not random; it should be a logical combination that contributes to the shaping of meaningful words.

Larger than a mere sound combination, word combination stands on logical grammatical structures that shape up sentences with providing grammatical functions for each word in the sentence, the correlation would help distinguish actors from actions and word modifiers. And so, sentences are logically connected to give paragraphs and texts.

It is then important to have a sentence carrying meaning, the major concern of researchers in this respect would depart from queering about what is (x) in asking for the

meaning of the sentence; however, it is evident that sentences may carry a specific meaning in respect to a given context. In this case, researchers would move to another query; thee one in which they would ask what is meant by (x).

Hence, researchers about the first question would deal with the study of meaning as a concern of semantics, however; meaning in the second question would be a major concern of pragmatics.

This paper has an attempt to provide a modest reflection upon meaning in the translation of The “Coran” from Arabic to European languages. It would shed light on the impact of translation on meaning, dealing in the same token with the importance of context in meaning translation, and the major difficulties that might hamper this translation.

The study would approach a set of verses from different *Surates* in the Coran taking the dominating religious aspect of the context, and considering the different sub-contexts existing between the lines of verses in relation to different prophetic stories, natural events, social guidance, and many others.

The translation of the Coran is one of the most complicated ‘if possible’ translations. The language of the Coran delivered in Classical Arabic is the one of Almighty Allah. It shows to be the most beautiful use of this language that is rich of extraordinary literary images and lexical variations. It is a unique use of language that best writers in the world have failed reaching such a high extreme of exception and expertise.

Between the words of the Coran, readers would in any way develop a nice feeling of weakness, of dependence, and of

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conviction simply discovered as an outcome of wonderful discursive texts that combine all the sciences that have been just ‘recently’ approached and developed by the best researchers throughout the world.

This sacred book have largely proved that the analysis of the language of the Coran in the aim of grasping its ‘true’ meaning can only efficiently apply to the very innermost use of this source language, that is Classical Arabic, to show how physiology, psychology, sociology, history, phonetics, phonology, etc. work in collaboration.

Then in talking about a ‘translation’ of the Coran, many questions emerge, like whether we can talk about a translation or simply about an interpretation of the Coran in a different language to mean /tfaʃi:r/. Then if it is possible to translate, what kind of translation would be the most appropriate for the translation of Allah’s words that are unique and that nobody can write like?. Another important question would look for the main reason behind translating Allah words, Why to translate the Coran?

To provide modest answers to these questions, this paper will lay emphasis on different verses of different Surates and try to describe the major problems of translation of this Sacred Text that is the Coran.

Considerable Problems in the Translation of the Coran:

When dealing with the Coran, the first impression a reader might have is the amazing lexical variation and the richness of the Arabic vocabulary that accounts for all the unusual (in daily speech), expressive words that achieve specific and occasional functions in relation to the given context.

Consider the verse n° 3 from Al Fajr Sourate, In the name of Allah: /waʃʃæfɛ i wa lwatri/. The two words would mean two Sacred Days in Muslims life; the Day of ‘Nahr’ and the Day of ‘Arafat’, respectively.

Notice in this verse Allah specific choice, He does not define both Days in a rather clear way using directly their names, but opts for two names that an Arabic dictionary defines as two numbers, /ʃʃæfɛ/ means two, while /lwatr/ means one.

This specific choice of words cannot always permit a fully appropriate translation since each language has a definite set of words and equivalents within the same language that differ from the lexical semantic constitution of other languages.

Another most prominent problem in the translation of the Coran is the recitation or /ttarti:l/. Read the Coran in a rhythmic way has got an amazing impact on the discursive coherence and on the meaning of the Text.

The ‘ttarti:l’ is a science that is known to give each letter its value and its function whereby the sound will obey to an acoustic phonetic parallelism that helps describe the quality of the sound and its impact on word meaning. It tempts at responding to and reinforcing what has already been stated in the Coran, In the Name of Allah:”wa rattili lqur?æ:na tarti:len/, its subject are Coranic words, its main objective is the prevention from slips of the tongue while reading the Coran so as not to commit misleading mistakes. Then the Coran is a Book to read not to write.

The acoustic phonetic properties of each letter and sound are described in relation to phonological combinations

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that recommend logical rhythmic tones that are typically dependent on the morphology, the phonology and the syntax of the Text.

Some rules that shape up the recitation of the Coran lay on the lengthened three letters in Arabic: /al wæ:w assæ:kina/ preceded with an /u/ /addamma/, /aljæ:ʔ Assa:kina/ preceded with an /i/ /kasra/, and /alʔalif assa:kina/ preceded with an /a, æ/ to mean /al fatha/ like in the word /nu:hi:ha:/. Notice that within these three letters lengths, scholars distinguish nine ‘sub-lengths’: /tabi:ε i/ (natural), /bædæl/(an alternative), /εawad/ (that comes on behalf of another sound), /sila/ (relation) (a kind of length where the /h/ sound of a personal pronoun/huwa, hija,etc / is not lengthened unless it is preceded and followed with either a rounded, open,or spread vowel sound(/biha haraka/), like in the example: /innahu hu~wa/. /hu/ in this example is lengthened because its position obeys to the basic rules of /sila/ stated before.

Another sub-kind related to length is /muttasil/ (related), a phonological feature that advances that the combination of the lengthened letter and the glottal /ʔ / that is /alhamza/ /ε / in Arabic, all in one word, should be uttered with five degree- length /wuju:ben/, like in the word /ʔu:l[æ~:ʔ]ika/ (those).

In the sixth position the /munfasil/ (separated) is a situation where a lengthened letter in the final position of a word is followed with a glottal /ʔ/or /ε /in the initial position of the next word like in / bim [æ~: ?] unzila /, with five degree-length /jawæ:zen/.

Notice that each kind has got a precise function for a proper use of Allah words. Each pronunciation gives a particular image of each sound, each morpheme, hence each

word, and words will by the end contribute to the realization of contextual meanings.

However, the main objective Allah traces when advocating length in reading is to spend a good moment of time reading the word where length is indicated, and let him feel the importance and the value of that word.

Furthermore, when dealing with the Coran, a reader would simply be impressed by the variety of linguistic tools that makes it a typical genre of writing.

Going by the difference between languages, the Coran exhibits the richness of the Arabic language in the attempt of describing and dealing with concepts in a detailed, accurate way that gives semantic rights to each minuscule units constituting the language, hence the Coranic Text.

Compare in the following examples the expressions: /inna **lla:ha** lati:fun xabi:r/, and /wa **llahu** æli:mun hæki:m/. To translate both expressions to any language is not an easy task, since the word /inna/, is used to stress, as opposed to other languages like French and English for instance in which emphasis is expressed with intonation, i.e. by stressing the word itself, the idea that Allah is effectively and inevitably good and He is in the know of everything.

Inspite of best endeavours to translate the Coran, it might not be possible to translate some words and linguistic forms that distinguish the literature, the vocabulary, the meaning, the grammar, the sound articulation of the Coran from the ones of other languages, and sometimes from the ones of the same language (Arabic) used by its original speakers.

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When Allah used the word /al qa:riɛa/ in Al qa: ri ɛa/ Surate, he would have meant the Judgment Day according to Muslim scholars interpretations. However, the word /al qiyama/ is often the word that stands for the Judgment Day. Hence, on the one hand, this word choice determines the specific function of each word selected for use in a given situation or context. On the other hand, it might be inadmissible for translators to confine their translations to general interpretations to provide a general translation of a word.

Moreover, it would not be in most of the time evident to translate with a word having exactly the same meaning unless the translator would not provide an interpretation or a definition. In the same token, the word /eidda/ (In the Islamic religion, the time of bereavement allotted for a widowed woman when her husband dies).

This word is therefore typical to the Islamic religion, and its equivalent is culturally and religiously not logically and linguistically maintained in the language of a target non-Muslim community.

Another lexical problem of language choice lies on the word /læ?in/ in the /Zuxruf/ Surate on verse number (9), In the name of Allah:/" **wælæ?in** sæ?æltæhum mæn xalaqa ssæmæ:wæ:ti wa l?arda læj æqu:lu:na xalaqahunna lææzi:zu læli:m?/.

Notice in the example the use of the word /**wælæ?in** / that wants to mean "if" in English, and the word is used to express condition. In this context again, an important query about this typical word choice that would have the meaning of /iða:/ in Arabic, is nevertheless expressed with a synonym that should carry a slight difference in meaning.

Consider for instance the following use of the word /alyurfata/ (the chamber), in the following verse taken from Al furqa:n Surate, verse number (75): / ?u:læ:ʔika yu zawna lyurfata bima: sabaru:/.

In this verse, Allah wants to give an image about the best and the highest degree of Paradise using this word that is, in most of the time, perceived to be that square building inside the house, that is the room. In this situation, translators would be in need of providing a definition of the word *yurfā*, that is not the room or the chamber, thus a word to word translation may not function for a lack of word equivalence.

Most of the language of the Coran is not ‘naturally’ or ordinarily used in a way that any translator could translate it into a target language. The way it is used gives strong evidence of the mysterious unique power of Allah that can easily guide readers of the Coran into a world that makes them feel they are weak and whatever be the degree of their abilities and possibilities to do and invent things in life, they would mindlessly admit their limited, even at some extent great and supported with intellectual rigour, knowledge and capacities.

In some Surates in the Coran, Allah initiated the first verses with a phonological combination that remains vague and not understood by the group of Muslim scholars that have done their level best for the interpretation of the Coran. According to them, even our Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) ignored the meaning of these words (or abbreviations), the main reason being to serve as a proof that the Coran, as some people may perceive it, is not a prophetic product, and it cannot be a human word.

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Examples of these words are the following:

/hæ:ʔ mi:m/ → (The Zuxruf and Fussilat Surates).
/ælif læ:m mi:m/ → (Luqman and Al baqara)
/ælif læ:m ra:/ → (Hu:d)

And we still have many examples of such kind. The main problem translators may face when dealing with these words is that they ignore whether these are words that might have definitions, or they are abbreviations of groups of words. Then, if they are words, what should be then their equivalents? Or if they are abbreviations what words do these letters stand for? Notice that even a transliteration is not possible in both cases, because words differ as languages do.

So many are the difficulties to translate the Coran, the paper tempted at approaching some lexical, phonetic and acoustic problems, however; these difficulties would also lie on the number of metaphors that Allah uses as symbols standing for particular things in respect to context and situation.

Consider the following metaphorical use of the expression /ʔummi lkitæ:b/ in the verse number four of /Zuxruf/ Surate: /Inna: jæælnæ:hu qurʔæ:nen earabiyyan læællækum tææ qilu:n/wa innahu fi: ʔummi lkitæ:bi lædæjna: læælijjun hæki:m/.

According to Muslim scholars, what is meant by? ummi lkitæ:bi, (the Mother of the Book) is /llawh lmaħfu:ð / (the origin of the Coran).

Although it might not be logical to have a “mother of a book”, but the expression has got a definite meaning that does not relate to a masculine reference that could give the expression “father of the book”, but just tends to refer to the origin of the Coran, that is from where it is “born”.

Conclusion:

To sum up this paper, it is noteworthy dissecting the aforementioned examples in the aim of deducing a common conclusion that might relate to the reality of the translation of the Coran.

One of the main conclusions stands on the reason for which translators would give a translated Coran in a foreign language for Muslim and non-Muslim populations. Any translation would aim at expressing original ideas in a source language in another target language to make the text or the version understood using a corresponding translation that considers whole and particular contexts, in addition to cultural traits that relate to both target and source language communities and it the same for the translation of the Sacred Book.

However, the difference with the translation of the Coran lies on the fact that the source language drafter is not human; it is a mysterious power that has created the World. It is mysterious as it has shown impossible for humans to do the same as it has done, hence to write in a same perfect way giving each linguistic unit a precise value and a reason for its presence in the Text.

One noticeable thing that this paper has modestly demonstrated is that before dealing with the Coran, translators should have a clear knowledge about prehistorical and pre-Islamic events, to mean life and miracles that Allah used to guide his human creatures. Thus, it is of major importance to know accurately about our Prophet Mohammed's life and all the other prophets (Peace Be Upon Them) and the religious Books Allah sent to them.

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Moreover, aiming at translating the Coran, translators will find themselves in a necessary need of interpretations. Notice that interpretations sometimes vary from one group of scholars to another, therefore, translators, and with regard to the mysterious language of the Coran, will not translate but interpret trying to give an approximate meaning that may or may not fit the true meaning of verses and Surates. As Allah puts in Al ėimran Surate: In the Name of Allah.../wa mæ: jæɛlæmu tæ? wi:læhu ?illa lla:h/ (only Allah knows its (true) Interpretation)(meaning the Coran).

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