Linguistic and Cultural Voids in Translating Sacred Texts
With Reference to the Holy Quran
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Abstract
Translating a sacred text is considered as a controversial debate among scholars in the past and present. Translating religious texts such as the Quran is considered as a sensitive text that has unique features. Different views have led to different arguments concerning the translatability and untranslatability of the Quran. This research investigates the linguistic and the cultural voids in translating the Quran. It sheds the light on the numerous views concerning the translatability and untranslatability of the Quran. In addition, it highlights the main features that distinguish the Quranic text and discusses the main hinders in translating the religious text.

Key words: sacred, Quran, un/translatability, features, debate.
1. Introduction

The translation of sacred texts has always been a controversial issue. It has raised many debates in the past and present. Translating sensitive texts is considered a challenging task as the translator has to grasp clearly not only the theological aspects but also the linguistic and cultural features. Translation involves far more than the replacement of lexical and grammatical items among languages.

The Purpose of this research is to shed the light on the hindrances that the translator may face when s/he renders the linguistic and the cultural aspects of the sacred text, in specific Quranic texts.

Translation of sacred texts is not widely discussed in Arabic scientific research, still in the margin of translation studies; therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate some voids that the translator may face in translating Quranic context. Linguistic, cultural, and theological voids are to be considered in this research.

The objectives of this research are:
1- To overview and characterise as well as specify the main features of sacred texts.
2- To present the debate among different point of views.
3- To investigate the linguistic and the cultural voids of the sacred texts that may stand as a hinder in the translation process.

The method of descriptive analysis is applied in this research and different examples from the Quran are referred to when necessary.

1.2. Background of the research

1.2.1. Characteristics of sacred texts

Generally, religious texts have their characteristics which distinguish them from other texts. Aziz and Lataiwi (2000: 134) believe that religious texts have “the characteristics of sacredness, which is based on faith. Either the message or the word or both are believed to be holy”.

Religious texts are divided into two types: first, religious texts in which both the message and the words expressing the message are sacred such as the Quran. In the second type, only the message is holy – but the words which convey the message are not, such as the Bible (Aziz and Lataiwi, 2000).

Many scholars argue strongly that translation of sensitive, religious texts may lead to the distortion of divine words. With special reference to the Quran, Al-Faroqui (1986:11), for example, argues that through the translation process, many meanings
of the Quran suffer change, loss or obliteration from consciousness. He believes that “the meanings imbedded in the Arabic Language of the Quran are a precious legacy which no man is at liberty to tamper with or change”. He points out that the translation of God’s words can be problematic for many reasons. Firstly, God’s words are unique in their content and structure. Secondly, no translation can be considered to be completely accurate rendering of the meaning and exact spiritual concepts of God’s words. Finally, the divine language of the Quran cannot be easily replaced by human words (Al-Faroqui 1986, cited in Awad, 2005).

Translating sensitive texts is considered a challenging task. The translator has to grasp clearly not only the implicit theological aspects but also, for example, the linguistic and the cultural aspects. According to Bassnett (1991), translation involves far more than the replacement of lexical and grammatical items between languages. Abdul–Raof (2001) insists that from the perspective of Qur’an discourse, Arabic and English are incongruous languages. He states that Quranic discourse is characterised by a unique linguistic feature which distinguishes it from other languages syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically.

1.2.2. History of Quran translation

Translation, in general, is “as old as human civilization” Baker (2001: 277). In the early days of Islam, translation of the Quran began when the Prophet sent letters and messengers to the rulers of neighboring countries calling on them to embrace Islam. Each of these messengers mastered the language of the country to which he was sent to deliver the message. The letters sent by the Prophet included several verses of the Quran. These letters were interpreted by either the messengers carrying the letters or by men from the entourages of the rulers to whom these letters were sent. It is reported that the letter which was sent by the Prophet to the Byzantine Emperor was written in Arabic and included some verses from the Quran. It is also reported that Heraclius called for an interpreter who read the Prophets’ letter to him in Greek (Binark, 1989 cited in Abou Sheishaa, 2003). Baker (2001) also refers to the same period when the Prophet sent various messages to heads of states, such as the Viceroy of Egypt, asking them to adopt the new religion. According to Baker (2001:317-318) “this kind of exchange between the Prophet and non-Arab rulers could not have taken place without some form of linguistic mediation”.

During the lifetime of the Prophet, there were no references to direct translations of the Quran. However, it is reported that Selman the Persian, the Prophet’s companion, translated the ‘Fatiha’ (the ‘Opening chapter’) into Persian. Ja’far Abi Talib also trans-
lated certain verses pertaining to the Prophet Jesus and Mary to the king of Abyssinia (Tibawi, 2004). There is also an indication that the whole or part of the Quran was translated. Abu Hanifah, for example, permitted the recital of the Persian translation of the Quran in prayer. The earliest translation of the Quran into Persian was made in 345 AH (After Hijra) (Tibawi, 2004; Abou Sheishaa, 2003). Earlier, a translation into Berber had been made in 127 AH. Additionally, at the end of the seventh century, some fragments of the Quran were found in a Syriac book in the time of Al-Hajjaj Ibin Yusuf.

The first translation of the Quran into western languages was made by the English scholar Robertus Retenensis in the twelfth century; his mediaeval Latin version was completed in 1143 and published four centuries later. A French translation was published in 1783, followed by Kasimirski’s version in 1840 which was also in French. Another Latin version of the Quran was made by Maracci. His translation was completed with Arabic texts (Abdul-Raof, 2001).

The first translation of the Quran into English was made by Alexander Ross in 1649. He called his translation ‘The Alcoran of Mohomet, the Prophet of the Turk’ (Abdel Haleem, 2005). Ross was not a specialist in the Quran or Hadith (the sayings of Prophet Muhammad) and he did not know Arabic, but he based his translation on a French version (Abdel Haleem, 2005). This was the beginning of a long tradition of translations of the Quran into English. Translations were also made by George Sale (1734), Rodwell (1861), Palmer and Richard Bell (1937) and Abdul-Raof (2001).

2. Translatability and untranslatability of the Quran

The translation of the Quran has always been a controversial issue. It has raised many debates in the past and present. Historically, it did not become a serious problem till Muslims came in close contact with non-Arabs particularly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The issue of translating the Quran into other languages always raises pressing questions such as, is the Quran translatable? Can translation of the Quran be a substitute for the original Arabic or just an explanation? Such questions only arose when the Quran was introduced to people who were non-Arabic speakers and who embraced Islam or who sought to know more about it (Abou Sheishaa, 2003a).

There are strong arguments which purport that the Quran is untranslatable. Pickthall (2005:2) acknowledges the question of untranslatability of the Quran. According to his point of view, the Quran is “beyond any translation to render all this richness of expressions in another language”. He also points out that the Quran has “inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which when translated into any other language will ab-

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solutely lose the symphonic effect”.

Tibawi (2004) has a strong view regarding the translation of the Quran. He stresses that any translation is an approximation of the original meaning of the Quran itself. Tibawi supports his argument by referring to the Persian philologist Ibn Qutibah who points out that Arabic is unique and superior as the language of the Quran, which distinguishes it from all other languages of other nations. According to Tibawi (2004)

A translator is able to translate it [the Quran] into Syriac, Ethiopic and Greek, and similarly to translate the Torah and Psalms and all God’s Books into Arabic; the non-Arabs are not as rich as the Arabs in Metaphor (my brackets).

Abdul-Raof (2001:9) also addressed the untranslatability of the Quran by stressing the distinction between the Quran and its translated version and how the translations cannot replace the Quran. According to him “only Quranic Arabic is the Quran and translations are simply interpretations”. He argues that the Quran has a unique linguistic feature which distinguishes it from other languages syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically. He also stresses that the Quran will always be characterized by non-equivalence. Irving (1979:9) agrees that the untranslatability of the Quran is a major issue. He points out that the Quran embodies:

the word of God unchanged, unabridged and uncompromised. It (the Quran) does not contain any element that is a product of a human mind and its arrangement is from God [...]

El- Farran (2006) in his article suggests that there is nothing to fear about translating the Quran as the original scripture of the Quran exists. In his opinion, the translation of the Quran cannot be considered as the true Quran and it is better to call it a mere interpretation of the Quran. He states that “the translator is expected to commit mistakes whether he had a good intention or not as the Quran has specifications to follow”. He supports his view with a verse from the Quran ‘And no one knows its interpretation other than God’ (the Quran, لله و ما يعلم تأويله الا الله, Q3:7)

Toury (1980:89) opposes the idea of translatability. He says “no translation is entirely ‘acceptable’ or entirely ‘adequate’”. Asad (1980: viii) claims that rendering the Quran does not and could not ‘do justice’ to the Quran and its meaning. Robinson (1996) believes that Quranic translation is not very consistent and that Quranic translators often translate an Arabic word or phrase in a variety of different ways, which raises the question of how possible it is to translate the divine word and how the context in which the word is used.
This research takes the view that everything is translatable; however, loss of meaning is inevitable. Most Muslim scholars consider translations of the Quran to be mere explanations and interpretations; for example, Murata and Chittick (1995) believe that the translation of the Quran is simply an interpretation and explanation. It is not the original Quranic text. They further add that the Quran has been translated many times into English. Each translation represents the translator’s understanding of the Quran and none of them is the original Quran. They suggest that many modern and traditional scholars strongly regret the translating of the Quran for fear of any distortions that may appear in it.

According to Chesterman (2000:21-22) “God’s word remained God’s word, regardless of the language it was expressed in”. He adds that “if you believe that you have a mission to spread this word, you quickly find yourself in a quandary. The word is holy; how then can it be changed?”.

Apart from the aforementioned works, there are other moderate translations that are not always seen as reliable religious texts. Any translator brings to his work the beliefs, inferences and doctrines that are the substance of personal biases and theological learning. Hence, the only criterion for judgment is the source text. It should be borne in mind that translations, no matter how accurate, always have flaws. Thus, it can be seen that all translators entitle their work with various titles rather than just ‘the Quran’. These Quranic titles reflect their particular statuses as companion texts, rather than substitutions for the original. For example, The Meaning of the Quran, The Quran Interpreted, and The Noble Quran: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English (Sabry, 2007; Delisle and Woodsworth, 1995; Abdul-Raof, 2005).

Despite the fact that there is opposition to the translation of the Quran, there are many advocates who are willing to permit the translation of the Quran. These scholars believe that the Quran is God’s message. Since the Quran was sent down to the Prophet Muhammad for the benefit of Arabs and non-Arabs alike, they believe that translation is an aid for both non-Arab Muslims and non-Muslims. Afsar (2000:4) argues the case as follows:

“At particular periods in history, there has also emerged a general consensus amongst Muslim scholars that it would be in the best interests of Islam to convey the message to those who have little or no knowledge of Arabic in the language with which they are best acquainted. Many Muslim scholars believe that God’s Message (The Quran) was sent down to the Prophet Muhammad for all nations so the translation of the Quran is considered to be assistance for those whose mother tongue is not Arabic and who seek an understanding of the meaning of the Quran”.

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The Muslim scholar, Abu Hanifah (81 A.H.) started a new and more serious controversy by allowing the recitation of the Quran in Persian in prayer whether the believer knew Arabic or not. His followers, Abu Yusuf and Ash-Shaibani supported his opinion but they only gave permission to recite the translated Quran in prayer only for people who did not know Arabic (Tibawi, 2004:3). However, his opinion was strongly rejected in the Islamic world and the consensus has since been that the Quran is to be read during prayers in its original Arabic form by Arabs and non-Arabs alike (Abdul-Raof 2001, cited in Abdelwali, 2007).

One of the Islamic scholars who have permitted the translation of the Quran is Sheikh Muhammad Al-Maraghi. He states that arabizing non–Arab Muslims is a good aspiration and every Muslim wishes that Arabic were the tongue of the whole Muslim world so that all Muslims could read and understand the Arabic text of the Quran. However, he emphasizes that until this wish is fulfilled, it is better that the meaning of the Quran be translated to non-Arab Muslims so that they can comprehend and reflect upon it (Abou Sheishaa, 2003b).

According to Aziz and Lataiwish (2000:135-136), translations of the Quran are very useful in that they help the believers to understand the divine message. Denffer (2008:1) in his essay makes the following comment:

“Understanding the Quran in order to take guidance from it does not depend upon direct knowledge of the Arabic language, because there are many Arabic speaking people who do not understand the message of the Quran. However, to understand the language of the Quran is a prerequisite to fully grasping its meanings. Hence many Muslims have learned this language. Others, who have not done so, make use of translations, which for them is an indirect means of knowing the language, as in the translations the meaning of the Quran has been rendered into their mother tongues so that they may familiarize themselves with the message from Allah”.

The former Moroccan Minister of Education, Muhammad bin Al-Hassan disagrees with those who would prevent the translation of the Quran. According to him, Islam does not force nations who have embraced Islam to speak Arabic. Indeed, these nations still speak their mother languages. He also strongly points out that neither the Quran nor the Prophet Mohammad’s sayings prevent rendering the Quran into other tongues. However, it is his view that translations of the Quran must not be considered as the Quran per se and must be translated under accurate scientific conditions (Thaker, 2008). Meanwhile, Sabry (2007) refers to the importance of Quranic translations. She believes that Quranic translations represent the primary source of information for Mus-
lims who do not speak Arabic, and for non-Muslims who are curious to know more about Islam.

Cleary (1993: VIII) also states that:

“for non-Muslims, one special advantage in reading the Quran is that it provides an authentic point of reference from which to examine the biased stereotypes of Islam to which Westerners are habitually exposed. Primary information is essential to distinguish between opinion or fact in a reasonable manner. This exercise may also enable the thinking individual to understand the inherently defective nature of prejudice itself”.

According to a survey of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Istanbul, the number of translations is more than one thousand. This is an indication that, despite the opposition, many translations have been undertaken and are still ongoing (Ihsanoglu no date cited in Asfar, 2000).

3. Linguistic and cultural voids

Generally, there is a consensus among most translators of the Quran that limits of translatability of the Quran may be due to the nature of the semantic and rhetorical features of the Quran. Therefore, translators of the Quran themselves such as Ali (1983), Arberry (1996), and others state that they faced many obstacles during the translating process. Ali (1983: viii), for example, points out:

*The classical Arabic has a vocabulary in which the meaning of each root-word is so comprehensive that it is difficult to interpret it in a modern analytical language word for word, or by the use of the same word in all places where the original word occurs in the text.*

Accordingly, the limits of translatability of the Quran, for many scholars, may stem from the complex nature of its linguistic idiosyncrasies and prototypical features. The language of the Quran is seen by Abdul-Roaf (2004: 92-95) as “a rainbow of syntactic, semantic, rhetorical, phonetic and cultural features that are distinct from other types of Arabic discourse”.

3.1. Linguistic voids

Many Quran translation scholars argue that the untranslatability of the Quran is due to numerous reasons. Most of them underline that the Quranic discourse involves linguistic scenery characterized by syntactic, semantic, rhetorical and cultural aspects that are distinctive and different form other types Arabic discourse.

Shifting from third person to second person and then to first person is one of the Quran features in some verses of the Quran. Consider the following verse,
And those who believed in Allah and work righteousness, He will admit to gardens beneath which rivers flow, to dwell therein for ever. Allah has indeed granted for them a most excellent provision.

This kind of verses will confuse not only the reader but also the translator alike, because English language cannot accept these kinds of linguistic shift. Therefore, identical style to that of the language of the Quran will not be achieved in translation, and even if happens the meaning of the original verse will lose its essence.

At the syntactic level, for example, category shifts constitute a translation of non-equivalence. Shifting occurs when a Source language which belongs to a grammatical class adopts a different grammatical class in the Target language as in the following verse taken from (Q30: verse 42) shows the linguistic void,

Most of them worshipped others besides God. (Ali 1983)

It can been seen the source noun (مشركين) has been changed in the target language to a verb plus a complement (worshipped others besides God) for more fluency and naturalness in the target language.

Morphologically, for example, the language of the Quran has “semantic subtleties that can only be accounted for through the paraphrasing of the semantic void”. Consider the following example,

It is He who sent down to you (step by step) (نزّل) in truth, the Book (the Quran), confirming what went before it, and He sent down (in one go) (أنزل) the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus).

(Translated by Abdul Roaf (2004) with some amendments).

The expression ‘نزّل’ ‘nazzala’ in the above verse creates a semantic void as it refers to the piecemeal revelation of the Quran which took twenty-three years. In contrast, the expression ‘نزل’ ‘anzala’ signifies the revelation of the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus which were revealed in one exposition.
3.2. Cultural voids

The complex nature of the Quran also relates to an area where intercultural equivalence does not exist. Cultural gaps create untranslatability which arises when a situational feature is functionally relevant to the source text; however, it may be fully absent from the target text in which the target culture is rooted (Catford, 1965; Bahameed, 2007). The Quran abounds with a number of lexical items which are considered culturally specific.

When you look at them, their exteriors please you; and when they speak, you listen to their words. They are as worthless as hollow pieces of timber propped up, unable to stand on their own (Q63:4) (Translated by Ali, 1983).

The expression ‘خشب مسندة’ in the above verse refers to ‘hypocrites’. Culturally, Arabs used to put unneeded and useless planks of wood against the wall at the back of their houses. The expression refers to ‘hypocrites’ who are useless and worthless in the community (Abdul Raof, 2004).

3.3. Theological voids

A number of theological expressions and their translations, according to Abdul-Raof (2005:166) such as ‘hajj’, ‘God’ and ‘paradise’ convey “distinct messages to different non-Muslim TL readers whose faith provides different theological meanings to these same words”.

The expression ‘حج’ ‘hajj’ or ‘pilgrimage’ is a shared item in both languages although in each one it conveys a different notion. For Muslims, ‘hajj’ or ‘pilgrimage’ is the annual pilgrimage to ‘Mecca’. It is considered the fifth pillar of Islam. It is also a religious obligation that should be carried out at least once in a lifetime by every Muslim who can afford to do so. However, for Christianity, the concept of pilgrimage is an entirely different concept in terms of place and ceremonial performance. Christian pilgrimage was first made to sites connected with the birth, life, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Pilgrimages were, and are, also made to Rome and other sites associated with the apostles, saints and Christian martyrs, as well as to places where there have been apparitions of the Virgin Mary.

The Quran also abounds with a number of items which are believed to be Quran-specific. An expression such as ‘عدة’ ‘iddah’ (a prescribed period in which a woman who has been divorced by her husband has to wait three months whilst a woman whose husband has passed away has to wait four months and ten days before they can get
married) is a lexical gap. A lexical gap can be defined as an expression related to a particular language and does not exist in another language.

Meanwhile, the Quran contains a range of rhetorical features. According to many scholars, rhetorical features of the Quran may impose some limitations on the translator of the Quran. Many expressions in the Quran have metaphorical meaning which extends beyond their lexical meaning. The expressions ‘blind’ and ‘seeing’, for example, in (Q35:19) ‘Wama yastawee al-aAma waalbaaeeru’ have metaphorical meaning. The expression ‘blind’ which refers literally to someone who cannot see is metaphorically an image depicting a disbeliever who cannot ‘see’ the faith, while the expression ‘seeing’ presents the image of the believer who follows the path of faith.

To some extent, languages have their own specificity, and, as Bassnett (1991: 29) states “sameness cannot even exist between two TL versions of the same text, let alone between the SL and the TL version”. Therefore, the language of the Quran creates different semantic, lexical, and cultural gaps in translation.

**Conclusion**

It can be concluded that translating the sacred texts was and still in the focus of many scholars and translators. However, it is not just a matter of being up to date; it goes back to the earliest of times. Translation of the Quran in specific has passed through different periods of time, each of which has the same aim, which is to convey the content of the Quran. It can also be concluded that limitations in translating the Quran may stem from the nature of the linguistic and semantic and cultural features of the Quran. Therefore, translating the Quran can be a challenging task but for many views, translating is possible.

**References**


