



Problems of Translating Metonymic Expressions in the Holly Quran

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Abstract:

Translation is inherently a difficult activity. The difference between a Source Language and a Target Language and the variation in their cultures makes the process of translating a real challenge. According to modern Islamic theology, the Qur'an is a revelation very specifically in Arabic, and so it should only be recited in the Arabic language. Translations into other languages are necessarily the work of humans and so, according to Muslims, no longer possess the uniquely sacred character of the Arabic original. Translators always face difficulties in translating the Holly Quran in general, and figurative language in particular. Metonymic expressions are commonly used in Holly Quran. They illustrate the mentality and environment in which the Arab society lives, thus, making it impossible to translate these metonymies into the English language based solely on its literal translation. This paper aims to identify some errors made by translators in translating the Quranic metonymy, and then analyze them in order to discover the extent of equivalence between translation methods and the intended meanings. Comparison and analysis of data were based on three translations. Abdallah Yusuf Ali *Translation of the Meaning of the Glorious Quran into English*, Arthur John Arberry *The Koran Interpreted*, and Al-Hilali and Khan; - *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an*. Three verses from different surahs of the Holly Quran have been selected for analysis and comparison. The study reveals that the selected translators adopted different techniques and procedures to reproduce the real meaning of these expressions. Due to the difficulties and obstacles encountered by the translators when translating metonymic expressions, they failed, in some cases, in reproducing the same image and effect of the original metonymy. In fact, they were unable to convey the exact meaning of the metonymy, and they have not retained the metonymical images in the Target Text.

Key words: *metonymy, translation, Holly Quran*

المستخلص :

تعتبر الترجمة عمئية بالغة التعقيد حيث يشكل الاختلاف بين لغة النص الاصلي و اللغة المنقول إليها بالاضافة الى التباين بين الثقافات تحديا حقيقيا لاتمام عملية الترجمة

ان القران الكريم هو كلام الله الذي انزله على الرسول صلى الله عليه و سلم باللغة العربية. وتعد ترجمة النص القراني الى اي لغة اخرى عمل بشري وبالتالي يفقر الى القدسية. يواجه المترجمون صعوبة في ترجمة النص القراني بصفة عامة, وترجمة الاساليب البيانية الواردة في القران بصفة خاصة. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى رصد بعض الاخطاء الواردة في ترجمة المجاز المرسل في القران الكريم ومن ثم تحليل تلك الاخطاء لمعرفة مدى التطابق بينها و بين المعنى المراد في النص الاصلي. اعتمدت هذه الدراسة , في تحليل و مقارنة الامثلة القرانية المختارة, ثلاث ترجمات الاولى لعبد الله يوسف على و الثانية لارثر جون اربيري والثالثة لمحمد تقي الدين الهلالي ومحمد محسن خان. اوضحت الدراسة ان المترجمين اتبعوا اساليب مختلفة للوصول الى المعنى المراد في التعبيرات المجازية . ونظرا للصعوبات التي واجهها المترجمون في ترجمة تلك التعبيرات المجازية فشل بعضهم في عكس صورة و اثر تلك التعبيرات.



1.Introduction

The word translation is defined by The Oxford Dictionary as ‘ ‘ *A written or spoken rendering of the meaning of a word or text in another language.* ’ ’

Due to its prominence, translation has been viewed differently. Newmark (2001) refers to translation as “*a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/ or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language*”. Catford (1965), defines translation as: “*translation is the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)*”.

Translation is a difficult task, and translation of religious texts is the most difficult type of translation as the translator faces problems due to the sacred nature of such texts. Translating Quranic Arabic language into English poses many interpretational problems. Many English translations have been widely criticized for their inability to capture the intended meaning of Quranic words and expressions. Translation of the Quran means the expression of the meaning of its texts in a language different from the language of the Holy Quran in order to make those unfamiliar with it understand Allah's guidance and observe it.

2.Types of Figure of Speech

According to Cambridge English Dictionary the definition of figure of speech is: *(Of words and phrases) used not with their basic meaning but with a more imaginative meaning, in order to create a special effect.*”

Figurative language is usually used for comparing, identifying or altering one thing with another that has a meaning or connotation familiar to the recipient. In other words, it deals with something by relating it to something else.

There are many types of figurative speech. The most common are:

2.1.Personification

Personification is a figure of speech in which a thing, an idea or an animal is given human attributes. In other words, it occurs when inanimate objects are given human characteristics, or when they are made to speak. The non-human objects are portrayed in a way to have the ability to act like human beings. For example, when we say, “*The sky weeps*” we are giving the sky the ability to cry, which is a human quality. Thus, we can say that the sky has been personified in the given sentence.

2.2.Metaphor

Metaphor is ‘*a word or phrase used to describe something else, in a way that is different from its normal use, in order to show that the two things have the same qualities and to make the description more powerful*’, (Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary, 2010, p. 965).

2.3.Simile

Simile is a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two different things by the assistance of certain words often used for comparison. In other words, simile is where two unlike things are compared by using ‘as’ or ‘like.’ Therefore, it is a direct comparison. For example,

(ثُمَّ قَسَتْ قُلُوبُكُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ فَهِيَ كَالْحِجَارَةِ أَوْ أَشَدُّ قَسْوَةً)

(Then your hearts became hardened thereafter and are like stones, or even yet harder;) Sura Al-Bagara (sura no. 2), verse 74.

2.4.Metonymy

Longman Modern English Dictionary describes metonymy as “*a figure of speech characterised by the use of the name of one thing in place of the name of something that it symbolises, e. g. crown for king*”.



Newmark (1988, p. 125) points out that metonymy occurs *'where the name of an object is transferred to take the place of something else with which it is associated'*.

The Qur'an has also used metonymy to convey ideas and concepts. For example: The word *سما* *'sama'* literally sky, was often used in classical Arabic as a metonymy for rain. The Qur'an has also used this metonymy.

{و أرسلنا السماء عليهم مدرارا}

Sura Al-An'am (sura no. 6), verse 6.

(And we poured out on them rain from the sky in abundance)

This device is used in rhetoric in which a thing or concept is not called by its own name, but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept.

This substitution is conditioned by the existence of a contiguity relation between the literal and figurative meanings and the existence of an implicit clue indicating that the literal meaning is not intended. Metonymy in the Holy Quran is not a useless substitution because it usually serves a purpose.

3.Statement of the problem

Translation of metonymic expression is one of most crucial problems in translating the Holy Qur'an. Translations of the Holy Qur'an were discussed and analyzed by different researchers. However, Studies about translating metonymic expression in the Holy Qur'an has not received enough discussion. The aim of this study is to investigate the problems encountered by translators when translating metonymic expressions in the Holy Quran. The interpretation of metonymy is strongly culturally conditioned. The use of metonymy in the Quran, along with other rhetorical usages, is a feature of the Quranic text. Therefore, translators should not ignore its use when attempting to translate the Quranic text.

4.Significance of the study

This study is considered to be of significance because there is not much research in the translation of metonymic expression in the Holy Quran. The study can be of help to translators of the Holy Quran as it is going to shed light on some of the types of difficulties they may encounter. It is hoped that the investigation of this topic will significantly contribute to the enhancement of the quality and accuracy of the translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran. Furthermore the results obtained from the study will be used by other researchers as one of the references to refer to.

5.Objectives of the study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To assess how Quranic metonymies are translated.
- 2) To investigate, analyse, and compare translation of Quranic metonymy based on three translations of the Holy Quran.
- 3) To determine the best strategy for translating Quranic metonymy.

6.Questions of the study

1.Can the translation of the Holy Quran be accurate in terms of conveying the same meaning of the Arabic metonymy, and what are the best strategies for doing so?

2. To what extent do the three translations of the HQ can give the accurate meaning of the Arabic metonymic expression?

3. What are the difficulties encountered by the translators and how do they overcome these problems?

4-Is the translator in any way able to reflect the spirit of the original?

5-Are the alterations, additions and omissions made by the translator logical, optional, acceptable or justified?



7. Limitations of the study

This study limits itself to the investigating, analyzing and comparing the translation of metonymic expressions in three verses from the Holy Quran. Any other elements or aspects of meaning are beyond the scope of the present study.

Three translations are chosen by the researcher. The first translation is by A. Y. Ali, the second one is by Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan & Dr. Muhammad Tagi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, and the third one is by A. J. Arberry.

8. Methodology of the study

This study is a theoretical study. It uses a qualitative descriptive method to describe some of the problems encountered by translators when translating metonymic expression in the Holy Quran. Investigated verses will be chosen from different surahs of the Holy Quran. The metonymic expressions will be identified and highlighted on red colour font to make it easier for the reader to recognize. The translated verses will be compared taking in consideration the original meaning of the metonymy, the suitable words and expressions used in translating the metaphoric expressions, and the strong rhetorical effect in the translated verses.

Comparison and analysis of data were based on the following three translations of the Holy Quran:

- 1- *The meanings of the Holy Quran*, by Ali;
- 2- *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an* by Al-Hilali and Khan; and;
- 3- *The Koran Interpreted*, by A.J. Arberry;

9. Discussion

Example 1

وَحَمَلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ ذَاتِ أَلْجِ وَدُسْرٍ
(54:13)

Transliteration

Wa Ḥamalnāhu `Alá Dhāti 'Alwāḥin Wa
Dusurin

Translations:

Ali: But We bore him on an [Ark] made of broad planks and caulked with palmfibre

Arberry: And We bore him upon a well-planked vessel well-caulked running before Our eyes -- a recompense for him denied.

Hilali and Khan: And We carried him on a (ship) made of planks and nails,

Context

In this verse Allah talks about bearing Prophet Noah, when the world was covered by a flood, on a ship made of planks and nails.

So for example in the following verse when describing the story of Prophet Noah (peace be upon him), the Arabic word for ark or ship is not in the verse but is implied by Allah's mention of planks and nails:

“And We carried him on a (ship) made of planks and nails”

2. *Surah al-Qamar (The Moon) 54: 13.*

Evaluation

In his rendering Ali uses additional description of the ship. The original text states that the ship is made of planks and nails. The words used by Ali to describe the ship are defined by Cambridge English Dictionary as follows: **caluk** “to fill the gaps around the edge of something, for example a bath or shower, with a special substance”, **board** “a thin flat piece of cut wood or other hard material often used for particular purpose” and **Planks** “a long, thin, flat piece of timber, used especially in building and flooring”

Meriam Webster Dictionary defines **palm fiber** as “the split leaves of a palm used for thatching, weaving, or rope making”

Ali also uses the word **Ark** which is defined by Cambridge English Dictionary as “Also Noah's ark (in the Bible) a large wooden ship built by Noah in order to save his family and a male and



female of every type of animal when the world was covered by a flood.

Arberry, on the same way, uses additional description of the ship.

Hilali and Khan on the other hand make literal rendering of **ذَاتُ أَوْجٍ وَدُسْرٍ**

(*Dhāti 'Alwāhin Wa Dusurin*). However, they add (*ship*) and thus succeed in conveying the intended meaning without adding additional description.

Example 2

وَأْتُوا بِالْحَقِّ أَمْوَالَهُمْ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا الْخَبِيثَ بِالطَّيِّبِ وَلَا تَأْكُلُوا
أَمْوَالَهُمْ إِلَى أَمْوَالِكُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ حُوبًا كَبِيرًا
(4:2)

Transliteration

Wa 'Ātū Al-Yatāmá 'Amwālahum Wa Lā Tatabaddalū Al-Khabītha Biṭ-Ṭayyibi Wa Lā Ta'kulū 'Amwālahum 'Ilā 'Amwālikum Innahu Kāna Ḥūbāan Kabīrāan

Translations:

Ali: To orphans restore their property [When they reach their age], nor substitute [your] worthless things for [their] good ones; and devour not their substance [by mixing it up] with your won. For this is indeed a great sin.

Arberry: Give the orphans their property, and do not exchange the corrupt for the good; and devour not their property with your property; surely that is a great crime.

Hilali and Khan: And give unto orphans their property and do not exchange (your) bad things for (their) good ones; and devour not their substance (by adding it) to your substance. Surely, this is a great sin.

Context

In this verse, Allah addresses guardians of orphans commanding them to give the orphans

their property when they have grown up (AtTabariy, 2001, vol. 4, p. 284).

Evaluation

The intended meaning of the word (اليتامى) *Al-Yatāmá* is the orphans who were young at the time of their parent's death, but they are mature now. According to commentaries and by convention, guardians should wait until orphans have become adults before giving them their property. . Since the direct meaning of the verse contradicts this fact, it is likely that the recipient of this discourse will understand that the people who should be given their property are no longer orphans but were so in the past. Thus, in this verse, an entity (grownups who were orphans) is referred to by a word that indicates its past status (orphans).

Hilali and Khan and Arberry fail in rendering the intended meaning.

Ali succeeds in rendering the intended meaning when he uses parentheses [*When they reach their age*]

Example 3

وَدَخَلَهُ السِّجْنَ فَتَيَانٌ قَالَ أَحَدُهُمَا إِنِّي أَرَانِي أَعْصِرُ خَمْرًا
وَقَالَ الْآخَرُ إِنِّي أَرَانِي أَحْمِلُ فَوْقَ رَأْسِي خُبْرًا تَأْكُلُ الطَّيْرُ مِنْهُ
نَبْنُنًا يَتَأَوَّى إِلَيْهِ مِنَّا نَرَاكَ مِنَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ
(12:36)

Transliteration

Wa Dakhala Ma`ahu As-Sijna Fatayāni Qāla 'Aḥaduhumā 'Innī 'Arānī 'A'ṣiru Khamrāan Wa Qāla Al-'Ākharu 'Innī 'Arānī 'Aḥmilu Fawqa Ra'sī Khubzāan Ta'kulu Aṭ-Ṭayru Minhu Nabbi'nā Bitawīlihi 'Innā Narāka Mina Al-Muhsinīna

Translations:

Ali: Now with him there came into the prison two young men. Said one of them: "I see myself [in a dream] pressing wine." said the other: "I see myself [in a dream] carrying bread on my head, and birds are eating, thereof." "Tell us"



[they said] "The truth and meaning thereof: for we see thou art one that doth good [to all]."

Arberry: Said one of them, 'I dreamed that I was pressing grapes.

Hilali and Khan: And there entered with him two young men in the prison. One of them said: "Verily, I saw myself (in a dream) pressing wine." The other said: "Verily, I saw myself (in a dream) carrying bread on my head and birds were eating thereof." (They said): "Inform us of the interpretation of this. Verily, we think you are one of the *Muhsinun* (doers of good - see V.2:112)."

Context

As Prophet Joseph – peace be upon him – was in jail, he told two young men that he interpreted dreams, so they asked him to interpret theirs. One of the young men said that he saw himself pressing grapes to make wine. Joseph told him that he would stay in prison for three days, then he would be released, and serve wine to his master (At-Tabariy, 2001, vol. 12, pp. 256-257).

Evaluation

Since wine cannot be pressed, the recipient is likely to understand that what is being pressed is fruit rather than wine.

The phrase *خمرأ أعصر* / (I press wine) indicates two consecutive actions: the pressing of grapes expressed by the verb *أعصر* ([I] press) and the making of wine expressed by the noun *خمر* (wine). Any translation which does not convey these two actions is considered inaccurate and lacking in meaning. This is the case with the translation of Arberry, who render only the first action and ignore the second. The translations tell that the speaker was pressing grapes in his dream, but do not mention the purpose for which he was doing that. Hilali and Khan and Ali render only the second action and ignore the first

.meaning as "*pressing wine*" and thus there is loss.

The correct translation, which all translators fail to convey, should be "*pressing grapes to make wine*"

10. Findings and conclusion

According to this study, and from the previous analysis relating to translating metonymic expressions of the Holy Quran into English, it has been noticed that the translators adopted different techniques and procedures to reproduce the real meaning of these expressions.

Although there are common strategies for translating Quranic metonymy, these strategies did not prove to be efficient in retaining the metonymical image. Due to the difficulties and obstacles encountered by the translators when translating the Holy Quran in general, and metonymic expressions in particular, they failed, in some cases, in reproducing the same image and effect of the original metonymy. In fact, they were unable to convey the exact meaning of the metonymy, and they have not retained the metonymical images in the Target Text.

The comparative analysis of the metonymic expressions in this study reveals that translating metonymy of the Holy Qur'an is not an easy task and it raises many challenges for the translators. This is due to the different difficulties that arise from translating the religious texts on the one hand, and the multiple problems of translating the metonymic expressions on the other hand.

The process of translating metonymy, in general, and the metonymy of the Holy Qur'an in particular, requires a translator who is fully competent with both the Arabic and English rhetoric. S/he should have an adequate knowledge and experience of certain subjects that related to the Islamic religion. This is in addition to the well knowledge of both cultures in order to render the same effect and meaning



of the source language metonymy successfully to the target readers.

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