



## Difficulties Encountered in Translating Metaphor in the Holly Quran

Salwa Abdul Majid Faraj<sup>1</sup> & Mahmoud Ali Ahmed<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>.Sudan University of Science and Technology, College of Languages.

### **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 Holly Quran in general, and figurative language in particular. Metaphoric 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 metaphors into the English language based solely on its literal translation. This paper aims to identify some errors made by translators in translating the Quranic metaphor, 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 surah Al-Bagara (surah no.2) 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 metaphoric expressions, they failed, in some cases, in reproducing the same image and effect of the original metaphor. In fact, they were unable to convey the exact meaning of the metaphor, and they have not retained the metaphorical images in the Target Text.

**Key words:** *metaphor, 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 يفترق الى القدسية. يواجه المترجمون صعوبة في ترجمة النص القراني بصفة عامة, وترجمة الاسالنب البيانية الواردة في القران بصفة خاصة. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى رصد بعض الاخطاء الواردة في ترجمة التشبيه البلاغي 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 نقي الدين الهلالي ومحمد محسن خان. اوضحت الدراسة ان المترجمين اتبعوا اسالنب مختلفة للوصول الى المعنى المراد في التشبيهات البلاغية. ونظرا للصعوبات التي واجهها المترجمون في ترجمة التشبيهات البلاغية فشل بعضهم في عكس صورة و اثر تلك التشبيهات.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is inherently a difficult activity. According to Ghazala (1995), "*translation is generally used to refer to all the processes and methods used to convey the meaning of the source language into the target language*". Ghazala's definition focuses on the notion of meaning as an essential element in translation. Translators can face additional problems which make the process even more difficult. In his book '*Translation as problems and solutions*' Ghazala defines translation problems as: "*a translation problem is any difficulty we come across at translating, that invites us to stop translating in order to check, recheck, reconsider or rewrite it, or use a dictionary, or a reference of some kind to help us overcome it and make sense of it. It is anything in the SL which forces us to stop translating.*"

The difference between a Source Language and a Target Language and the variation in their cultures makes the process of translating a real challenge as Ghazala (1995) states: '*problems of translation are caused by grammar, words, style and sound of the Source Language (SL) when translated into the Target language (TL) which has different grammar and sometimes different words, sounds context, readership, grammatical differences, etc.*'

These problems are due to either sound and lexis (word) or grammar and style. According to Ghazala there are four types of problems:

1. Lexical problems
2. Grammatical problems
3. Stylistic problems
4. Phonological problems

Translation of the Qur'an has always been a problematic and difficult issue in Islamic theology. Since Muslims revere the Qur'an as miraculous and inimitable (i'jaz al-Qur'an), they argue that the Qur'an text should not be isolated

from its true form to another language or form, at least not without keeping the Arabic text along with. Furthermore, an Arabic word may have a range of meanings depending on the context making an accurate translation even more difficult.

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. Since these translations necessarily change the meaning, they are often called "interpretations" or "translation[s] of the meanings."

There is agreement among Muslim scholars that it is impossible to translate the original Quran word by word into another language.

This is due to several reasons:

- a- Words of different languages do not express all the shades of meaning of their counterpart, though they may express specific concepts.
- b- The narrowing down of the meaning of the Holy Quran to specific concept in a foreign language would mean missing out other important dimensions.
- c- The presentation of the Holy Quran in different language would therefore result in confusion and misguidance.

Arab world is dominated by Islamic culture and religion, while English speaking world is dominated by Christian culture and religion. This difference in culture has its effect on the language. Larson (1984:180) states that, "*terms which deal with the religious aspects of a culture are usually the most difficult, both in analysis of the source vocabulary and in finding the best receptor language equivalence. The reason in that these words are intangible and many of the*



practices are so automatic that the speakers of the language are not as conscious of the various aspects of meaning involved". Therefore, the translator will encounter much difficulty in translating terms and expressions which are not used or practiced in the TL (target language).

## 2. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Oxford Dictionary defines figurative language as:

*"(of language, words, phrases, etc.) used in a way that is different from the usual meaning, in order to create a particular mental picture"*.

Figurative language (or non-literal), refers to words exaggerate or alter the literal meaning to convey an intended meaning or to achieve a high impression by affecting the senses and feelings of the recipient. In other words, it is the use of words, phrases or sentences in a manner where the literal meaning of the words is not true or does not make sense, but "implies a non-literal meaning which does make sense of that could be true".

### 2.1. Types of Figurative Language

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

#### 2.1.1. 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 unalike 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.

#### 2.1.2. Metonymy

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'*.

Metonymy 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. 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"

*(وَحَمَلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ ثَاتِ أَلْوَاحٍ وَدُسُرٍ)*

**Qammar (sura no.54) verse 13.**

#### 2.1.3. Metaphor

According to Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary, 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'*.

Ghazala defines metaphor as *"an expression of language which is meant to be used and understood in an indirect non-literal way"*

Metaphor means borrowing. It is a figure of speech in which a word loses its literal meaning and borrows a new one. In other words a metaphor means the use of a word in a figurative sense in such a manner that the relationship of resemblance between the real and the figurative meaning is maintained, but the resemblance is not stated. For example,

*فَجَعَلْنَاهَا نَكَالًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهَا وَمَا خَلْفَهَا وَمَوْعِظَةً لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ)*

(So We made it an example to their own time and to their posterity)

Sura Albagara (sura no. 2), verse 66

## 3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the most crucial problems in translation is the problem of translating metaphoric



expression in the Holy Qur'an. Translations of the Holy Qur'an were discussed and analyzed by different researchers. However, Studies about translating metaphoric 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 metaphorical expressions in the Holy Quran. The interpretation of metaphors is strongly culturally conditioned. Whilst the central problem of translation is the overall choice of a translation method for a text, the most important particular problem is the translation of metaphors. The use of metaphor 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**

The significance of this study stems from the fact that very little research has been conducted on the translatability of metaphorical expressions in the Holy Quran. 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 investigate the challenges of translating metaphors of the Quran. In addition, the study highlights the root causes which may be deemed to be a source of misunderstanding Quran metaphors. The study also aims to find out to what extent metaphors of the Quran can maintain their sense in today's context. The study also aims to investigate what I believe is one of the major problems in the field of translation between Arabic and English in general and the translation of the meanings of

the Holy Quran in particular. This is the problem of translating metaphor (al-majaaz)

#### **6. QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY**

The current study is set to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do the three translations of the HQ can give the accurate meaning of the Arabic metaphoric expression?
2. What are the difficulties encountered by the translators and how do they overcome these problems?
- 3-Is the translator in any way able to reflect the spirit of the original?
- 4-Are the alterations, additions and omissions made by the translator logical, optional, acceptable or justified?
- 5-Are there any errors and of what kind?

#### **7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study limits itself to the investigating, analyzing and comparing the translation of metaphoric expressions in three verses from surah Al-Bagara. 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 metaphoric expression in the Holy Quran. Investigated verses will be chosen from surah Al-Bagara. The metaphoric 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 metaphor, 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:

(ثُمَّ قَسَتْ قُلُوبُكُمْ مِّنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ فَهِيَ كَالْحِجَارَةِ أَوْ أَشَدَّ قَسْوَةً وَإِنَّ مِنَ الْحِجَارَةِ لَمَا يَتَفَجَّرُ مِنْهُ الْأَنْهَارُ وَإِنَّ مِنْهَا لَمَا يَشَقَّقُ فَيَخْرُجُ مِنْهُ الْمَاءُ وَإِنَّ مِنْهَا لَمَا يَهْبِطُ مِنْ خَشْيَةِ اللَّهِ وَمَا اللَّهُ بِغَافِلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ)

Sura Al-Bagara (sura no. 2), verse 74.

### Transliteration

Thumma Qasat Qulūbukum Min Ba`di Dhālīka Fahiya Kāl<sup>h</sup>ijārati 'Aw 'Ashaddu Qaswatan Wa 'Inna Mina Al-Hijārati Lamā Yatafajjaru Minhu Al-'Anhāru Wa 'Inna Minhā Lamā Yashaqqaqu Fayakhruju Minhu Al-Mā'u Wa 'Inna Minhā Lamā Yahbiṭu Min Khashyati Allāhi Wa Mā Allāhu Bighāfilin `Ammā Ta`malūna

### Translations

Ali: (Thenceforth were your hearts hardened: They became like a rock and even worse in hardness. For among rocks there are some from which rivers gush forth; others there are which when split asunder send forth water; and others which **sink** for fear of Allah. And Allah is not unmindful of what you do).

Arberry: (Then your hearts became hardened thereafter and are like stones, or even yet harder; for there are stones from which rivers come gushing, and others split, so that water issues from them, and others **crash down** in the fear of God. And God is not heedless of the things you do.

Hilali and Khan: (Then, after that, your hearts were hardened and became as stones or even worse in hardness. And indeed, there are stones out of which rivers gush forth, and indeed, there are of them (stones) which split asunder so that water flows from them, and indeed, there are of them (stones) which **fall down** for fear of Allah. And Allah is not unaware of what you do.

### Context:

In this verse the hardness of the hearts of the Children of Israel, by which Allah described them, was their denial of having killed the murdered man whom Allah had revived (the story of the cow). Some stones crash down i.e, tumble down from the tops of mountains to the earth and “to” the feet of the mountains- out of fear and dread of God. (At-Tabary 2000, p 399)

### Evaluation:

The three translators use different words to express the intended meaning of the verb (يهبط) *Yahbiṭu*. Ali uses the word (sink) which is according to the Free Dictionary has the following meanings:

- a. To go below the surface of water or another liquid.
- b. To descend to the bottom of a body of water or other liquid.

Ali’s choice of the word is unacceptable and out of context since it does not match the situation of stones falling down from the tops of mountains.

Arberry uses the word (crash down) which means “to fall or cause to fall with force, breaking in pieces with a loud noise as of solid objects *smashing*” (English Definition Dictionary). Arberry’s choice of the word crash down is unsuitable since this word has connotation with strong action and loud voice which does not match the situation of hearts feeling fear and dread of Allah.



Hilali and Khan choose to use the word (fall down) which is according to The Free Dictionary means (“to drop or come down freely under the influence of gravity). This choice is more suitable than the previous ones, since it conveys the intended meaning of hearts feeling fear and dread.

### Example 2

وقالوا قلوبنا غلف بل لعنهم الله بكفرهم فقليلًا ما يؤمنون (

Sura Albagara (sura no. 2), verse 88

Transliteration

Wa Qālū Qulūbunā Ghulfun Bal La`anahumu Allāhu Bikufrihim Faqalilāan Mā Yu'uminūna

Translations:

Ali: (They say, "Our hearts are the **wrappings** [which preserve Allah's Word: we need no more]."

Arberry: (And they say, 'Our hearts are **uncircumcised.**'

Hilali and Khan: (And they say, "Our hearts are **wrapped** (i.e. do not hear or understand Allah's Word)."

Context

In this verse Allah talks about the Children of Israel after taking the compact with them, and raising the Mount over them. They have been asked to take forcefully what Allah has given them. However, they reply “*we hear and rebel*”. They give description of their hearts as veiled and covered. Ibn Abbas’s interpretation “*our hearts are in shelter, under cover, enveloped*”. Qatada’s interpretation “*our hearts are “ghulfun” i.e. they do not understand*”. (At-Tabari 2000, p 442).

Evaluation:

According to the interpretation of Ibn Abbas and Qatada cited above the word غلف is used to mean that their hearts are covered, nothing of the prophet’s words will reach these hearts.

Ali and Hilali and Khan use the words “*wrappings*” and “*wrapped*”, which have the

same root, to render the word غلف “ghulfun” . The definition of (**wrapped**) according to Free dictionary is: “*To arrange or fold (something) about as cover or protection*”.

The Free Dictionary defines (**wrappings**) as “*a garment to be wrapped or folded about a person, especially an outer garment such as a robe,*”

They render the metaphor literally, and therefore succeed in reproducing the rhetorical impact. It is an acceptable choice since the reader could easily understand the intended meaning.

According to Dictionary.com, circumcise means “*to remove the prepuce of (a male), especially as a religious rite*”. Arberry’s choice of the word “*uncircumcised*” is literal and completely out of context. He uses the literal meaning of the Arabic word أغلف “*aghlaf*”, so his translation is completely distorted. It would be difficult for the reader to understand the intended meaning, and to get the rhetorical impact.

### Example 3

وَاشْرَبُوا فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الْعِجْلَ بِكُفْرِهِمْ (

Sura Albagara (sura no. 2), verse 93

Transliteration

Wa 'Ushribū Fī Qulūbihimu Al-'Ijla Bikufrihim

Translations:

Ali: (And they had to **drink into their hearts [of the taint] of the calf** because of their Faithlessness.

Arberry: (and they were made to **drink the Calf in their hearts** for their unbelief.

Hilali and Khan: (And **their hearts absorbed (the worship of) the calf** because of their disbelief.

Context

At-Tabari records a disagreement among the interpreters about the phrase “*and they were made to drink the Calf into their hearts*”. One opinion was that it meant that they were given water to drink in which filings of gold from the



Calf were suspended, but he rejects this on the grounds that Arabs do not speak of water being drunk “into the heart”. Instead, he prefers the opinion which interprets the locution as a metaphor for becoming possessed by the love of something to the point at which it “takes over one’s heart”, which fully expressed would be “to be made to drink love of the Calf into their hearts”. This conforms to the usage of the Arabs and the word “*hubb*” (love) is omitted because it is readily understood. (At-Tabari 2000, p 455)

Evaluation:

Since Calf cannot be drunk, the recipient is likely to understand that what is being drunk is love of the Calf rather than Calf.

All translators render the metaphor literally. Ali and Arberry use the expression “*drink into their hearts*”, which is unacceptable. The reader is likely to find it difficult to understand the image of a calf being drunk.

Hilali and Khan choose to use “*absorb*” which according to Oxford Dictionary means “*to take in or soak up (energy or a liquid or other substance) by chemical or physical action typically gradually*”. This is also literal translation, since Calf cannot be absorbed.

It seems that none of the translators were able to convey the right meaning of the metaphor.

#### 10. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

According to this study, and from the previous analysis relating to translating metaphoric expressions of the Holly 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 metaphor, these strategies did not prove to be efficient in retaining the metaphorical image. So, the only way to retain the metaphorical image is to produce it literally

in the target language and then add a simile of the same metaphor to the translation.

Due to the difficulties and obstacles encountered by the translators when translating Holly Quran in general, and metaphoric expressions in particular, they failed, in some cases, in reproducing the same image and effect of the original metaphor. In fact, they were unable to convey the exact meaning of the metaphor, and they have not retained the metaphorical images in the Target Text.

The comparative analysis of the metaphoric expressions in this study reveals that translating metaphor 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 metaphoric expressions on the other hand.

The process of translating metaphor in general, and the metaphor 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 metaphor successfully to the target readers.

#### References

1. AI-Hilali, M.T. and Khan, M.M. (1993) “*Interpretation of the meaning of the Nobel Quran*”. Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam.
2. Ali, A.Y. (1983) “*The Holy Quran: Text, Translation, and Commentary*”. Maryland. Amana Corp.
3. Arberry, J. A. (1996) “*The Quran Interpreted*”: translation with an Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



**Sudan University of Science and Technology**  
**Deanship of Scientific Research**  
**Journal of Linguistic and Literay Studies**



4. Al-tabari, M. J. “*The Commentary on the Qur’an*”, (vol,1) with an introduction and notes by J. Cooper. Oxford university press Oxford advanced learner's dictionary (2001) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5. Dictionary.com (online)

6. English Definition Dictionary (online)

7. Ghazala, H. (1995) “*Translation as Problems and Solutions*”. ELGA Publication. Valeta, Malta.

8. Larson, M.L.(1984) “*Meaning-Based Translation*”: *A Guide to Cross*

9. *Language Equivalence*. Lanham and New York. University Press of America, Inc.

10. Newmark, P. (1988) “*A Textbook of Translation*”. London and New

11. York: Prentice Hall International. UK.

12. Oxford advanced learner's dictionary (2001) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

13. Oxford Dictionary (online)

14. The Free Dictionary (online)