

Loss of Meaning in Translation

The Case of the Qur'an Synonymous Terms

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المخلص

انصب اهتمامنا في هذه المقالة على مسألة فقدان المعنى أو - على الأقل - جزءاً منه عندما نقوم بنقل نص من لغة (اللغة المنقول منها) إلى لغة أخرى (اللغة المنقول إليها). ويعود السبب في ذلك إلى الاختلافات اللسانية وغير اللسانية القائمة بين اللغتين. وتزيد عملية الترجمة تعقيداً عندما يتعلق الأمر بالنص القرآني لما يتميز به من أسلوب وخصائص بلاغية وصوتية تجعل منه نصاً من نوع خاص. وتناولنا بالدراسة بعض الكلمات التي تُعد مترادفة، وهي في النص القرآني مختلفة المعنى. وقمنا بمقارنة ترجمتين لبعض الآيات لنبين كيف تفقد بعض الكلمات معناها أو بعض معناها حينما نقوم بترجمتها من اللغة العربية إلى اللغة الانجليزية. ومن الحلول التي قد يتبعها المترجم هو عدم اكتفائه بترجمة كلمة بكلمة مكافئة لها في اللغة الهدف، بل يقوم بإضافة كلمات تفسيرية بين قوسين رغبة منه في الوفاء للنص القرآني. أما من قام باستبدال كلمة من العربية بكلمة في اللغة الانجليزية دون مراعاة لمعانيها الإيحائية، فكانت ترجمته ناقصة وغير وافية. ومهما يكن، فإن ترجمة القرآن أو معاني القرآن لا يمكن القيام بها، ولا يمكن أن ترقى إلى مستوى الأصل.

Introduction

Translation is the means by which people of different societies, using different languages can overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. It is generally defined as “ a process of replacing a text in one language by a text in another language” (House,2013:4). However, the task of a translator is far from being easy. In addition to grammatical dissimilarities, translation has semantic and pragmatic dimensions. For that reason, translation theorists consider that there is not always a one to one correspondence between source text(ST) and target text(TT). In some cases, the translation of a single term poses a problem. It may seem impossible, and even if the translator used his skill to suggest an equivalent, it won't necessarily have the same effect. This paper examines the inevitable loss of meaning when the Qur'an is translated into English. A lot of terms are culture bound or have an associative meaning for which there is no equivalent, or at least a close equivalent. Thus, the translator fails to convey the meanings of the Qur'an in many situations.

1. Translation and Meaning

Translation is not just a linguistic process, it is at the same time “ the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language to another ” (Brislin,1976 :1). Consequently, we need to define the concept of meaning prior to any attempt to understand the process of translation. In fact, meaning is a concept that hardly anyone has been able to define so far. Ogden and Richards (1952 :248) came to the conclusion that it is possible to define meaning in no less than sixteen different ways. Nonetheless, language users can at least agree on a set of aspects which make people’s semantic knowledge. They also discriminate between various types of meaning.

On the one hand, even if people are unable to define every word, they are capable of using vocabulary in meaningful sentences, and understand other people’s sentences. This is possible thanks to what Kreidler (2002 :13) names “implicit knowledge”, and which comprises, according to him, cases of synonymy, paraphrase, semantic feature, antonymy, contradiction, ambiguity, adjacency pairs, entailment, and presupposition. For instance, speakers of English would undoubtedly agree that the sentence : “*The dog scored a goal and won the match*” is anomalous though it is grammatically correct. It could be accepted only if it were part of a children’s film or cartoon. The same thing can be said about Chomsky’s often cited example : “*colourless green ideas sleep furiously*”. People would also easily detect ambiguous sentences such as : “*Flying planes can be dangerous*” which can be interpreted in two different ways :

- (1) Planes which fly can be dangerous.
- (2) Piloting planes can be dangerous.

On the other hand, two major types of meaning have been identified. The first represents the agreed-on meaning called denotative, conceptual, or cognitive. Kreidler (2002 :43) explains that hearers or readers often form a mental picture of what the word represents. However, he admits that this idea, which seems to be based on Ogden and Richards’ mentalistic theory, cannot be applied to abstract concepts such as *realize* or *perfect*. In addition, if we consider that *a chair*, for example, refers to that piece of furniture people use to sit on, which mental picture would be represented in the minds of speaker and listeners? Chairs differ in shape, material, and colour . Palmer (1981 : 26) discusses the misleading characteristic of the mentalistic theory according to which there is no direct link between symbol (word) and the referent (object). He points out that the role of semantics is not to find a satisfactory definition to meaning, but rather try to understand how to use words and sentences properly to be understood.

The second type is associative meaning. In fact meanings of words are unstable since they are associated to individual or collective experience. This means that they accept “supplementary values”(Bloomfield 1933 :151). Furthermore, associative meaning can be sub-divided into six distinct, but closely linked types.

- a. Connotative meaning which results from the experience of an individual or a group of people. The term “*Moudjahidines*” which connotes heroes for the Muslims , is most of the time understood as enemies in the non-Muslim world.
- b. Social or stylistic meaning which reflects the social conditions of the users of a language and their relationship. *Daddy / Dad*, which is especially used by children, differs from *father* though they have the same denotative meaning. This type of meaning may also inform us about regional or social background. The term « *massa* » , meaning *Master* in American English, used to indicate the category of slaves.
- c. Affective or emotive meaning which reveals the speaker’s feelings and emotions, and sometimes his point of view. For example, the sentence “ *What man, pig ?*”(Dickens,1994 :120) shows the speaker’s hatred toward the listener.
- d. Reflected meaning which concerns terms characterized by the multiplicity of meaning and thus may create ambiguity. In the example “ *My dear old car* ”, *dear* can be interpreted as *expensive* or *lovely*. Another situation is the case of terms that people may be unwilling to use because they are often linked to taboo or vulgar sense. The word “ *bitch* ” refers to the female dog and may be used as an insult. In the same way, the word “ *intercourse* ” which simply means communication or social and commercial relationships is avoided because it reminds users of its association with sex in the combination (sexual intercourse).
- e. Collocative meaning refers to the meaning a word acquires depending on the words it co-occurs with. We say “ *heavy smoker* ” for someone who smokes a lot , “ *heavy news* ” for a bad news, and “ *heavy schedule* ” for someone who is too busy.
- f. Thematic meaning has to do with the way the speaker organizes the message. Active and passive forms have the same conceptual meaning, but they are different. Consider the following examples :

eg1. Dr Leech gave the inaugural speech.

eg2. The inaugural speech was given by Dr leech.

In the first example, the focus is on *who* gave the inaugural speech, while *what* Dr Leech gave is more important in the second one. At the same time, example (1) suggests that the listener knows who Dr Leech is. Thus, a change in focus leads to a change in meaning.

2. Loss of meaning in translation

The translator is a mediator between two languages which differ at many levels. A language expresses thoughts that are shaped according to a given socio-cultural and ideological background. Consequently, it varies from one society to another, and from one social group to another. This has nourished the calls for 'untranslatability' defined by Catford (1965 : 98) as the impossibility to provide a TL equivalent to the SL one. In contrast, another group of theorists consider translation as a necessity. It does not mean that they don't admit, or at least try to ignore the existence of grammatical, lexical and cultural barriers. But instead of approving the idea of untranslatability, they rather talk about loss of meaning. Their argument is that if differences exist, and must be taken into account, there are also properties shared by all languages which constitute a kind of common heritage. These are cultural primes common to all human beings.

The inevitable loss of meaning is either due to the absence of terms or concepts in the TL which correspond to the ones used in the SL, or to the impossibility for the translator to suggest concepts or terms which represent what Nida (1969 : 12) defines as "*the closest natural equivalent*". That is to say an equivalent causing the same effect and response in order to maintain the loss of meaning in the translation (TL) at a *tolerable minimum*.

3. The (un) translatability of the Qur'an

It is admitted that the Qur'an, the word of Allah, cannot be imitated. In many occasions, Allah challenged mankind and the Jinn to produce any Ayah or Surah like the ones revealed to prophet Mohammed (PBUH). HE says for example:

"وإن كنتم في ريب مما نزلنا على عبدنا فاتوا بسورة من مثله وادعوا شهداءكم من دون الله إن كنتم صادقين" (البقرة: 23)

HE also says:

"قل لئن اجتمعت الإنس والجن على أن يأتوا بمثل هذا القرآن لا يأتوا بمثله ولو كان بعضهم لبعض ظهيرا" (الإسراء: 88)

Translation of the above Ayahs by Abdullah Yusuf Ali:

And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Surah likethereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers [If there are any] besides Allah, if your [doubts] are true

Say: "If the whole of mankind and Jinns were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support.

These Ayahs are said to be a proof of the uniqueness of the sacred Book as a literary masterpiece viewed from a linguistic scope, and thus trying to imitate or transfer it into another language is doomed to failure. In fact what is meant by Quran translation is just an attempt to transfer the explanations of its meanings, known in Arabic as Tafseer, into another language. Muslim scholars hold two main different attitudes toward Qur'an translation. Some of them maintain its impossibility and justify their point of view by the Quran itself considering its divine origin. Firstly, they highlight the fact that the Surahs(chapters) were sent down in times when the Arabic language had reached its peak. At that time, poets and writers were able to produce literary masterpieces such as the great pre-Islamic odes (Al Mualakat). However, they were declared incompetent to provide texts of equal stylistic and aesthetic quality. Secondly, they focus on the idea that it was sent down, by Allah's Will, in Arabic and should be learnt or recited in this language. This point of view is most of the time justified by the Surah of Yusuf, Ayah 2:

"إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ" (سورة يوسف، آية 2)

Translation by Yusuf Ali:

We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an, in order that ye may learn wisdom

Some other scholars even believe that the translation of the Qur'an is illegitimate. Thus, it is not permissible to recite it or to pray in a language other than Arabic(IbnHazzam, unknown date: 254) . They support the idea that the original Holy text and the translation can never be equal. They consider that the meanings of the source text (the Qur'an) and the target text (the translation) may overlap, but never fully coincide. This situation is understandable if we consider that ST and TT are not equal for semantic, syntactic, rhetoric and phonic reasons, which results in an inevitable loss of meaning. The latter is also due to a lack of precision on the part of the translator because of his ignorance and inability to describe situations specific to the Arabs' environment and culture. It can also result from his negligence, or his lack of linguistic knowledge. They also maintain that the Qur'an itself signals any semantic or syntactic change as an instance of falsification. This is the case of the Ayah 46 of the Surah of Nisaa :

"يَحَرِّفُونَ الْكَلِمَ عَنْ مَوَاضِعِهِ" (النساء، آية 46)

Translation by Yusuf Ali:

"...there are those who displace words from their [Right] places ..."

4. Translating synonyms in the Qur'an

The Qur'an is said to abound in close in meaning terms. However, despite the sameness in meaning that may exist between many terms, linguists and

commentators of the Qur'an are divided into two parties. The first defends the existence of synonymy while the second reject it believing that any single word conveys a distinctive meaning which cannot be substituted by another. Thus dealing with those 'supposed' synonyms in translation is another challenge for translators.

4.1 Synonymy

Synonymy is generally defined as “*sameness in meaning*”. However, this can be misleading, and has always created disagreement among linguists. Bloomfield (1933 :145) supposes that whenever two terms are phonemically different, this entails that they are different in meaning. Other linguists, such as Lyons (1995: 60) hold a less categorical point of view. They discriminate between *absolute/ total synonymy* and *near / partial synonymy*. The first takes place when there is total correspondence between the central and the peripheral or minor semantic traits of two terms. It also means that they are interchangeable in all situations(Cruse,1986 :268). The second type concerns two given words that are so close in meaning that non-specialists cannot detect any difference between them. But despite of all their similarities they are not interchangeable in all situations. Kill and murder, for instance, may be defined as “perfect synonyms” , but we say kill a sheep whereas murder a sheep is impossible. In this respect, Crystal (1995 : 164) underlines at least four ways in which synonyms may differ.

- a. They may belong to two different dialects such as *autumn* used in most parts of Britain and *fall* used in America and some northern parts of Britain.
- b. They can show a stylistic difference or be comprised in another register. *Pass away* is used for a person of a certain rank in the society or well-known whereas *die* is neutral, and *pop off* colloquial. We also say *salt* in everyday use, but Sodium Chloride is technical. Around a table you say : Pass me the salt and not pass me the sodium chloride, which would seem strange.
- c. Words may carry evaluative or connotative meanings. *Skinny* is pejorative, *thin* neutral, and *slender* is flattering. In the same way *politician* is neutral and refers to someone who practices politics whereas statesman carries a value judgment. It also means someone who practice politics, but who is considered wise, experienced, and respected.
- d. Two terms close in meaning may be collocationally restricted. We say *hard* exercise or *difficult* exercise, but only *hard* chair is possible. This idea is confirmed by Pearson(1998 : 168) for whom “ true synonymy is in fact extremely rare if words are examined in terms of the company which they keep

There is also the case of “ loose sense of synonymy ”(Palmer,1981 : 62) used by dictionary makers to explain words. Let us consider the terms *adult, ripe, perfect, and due*. They are suggested as synonyms to the term *mature*. Firstly, each of these words has its own set of synonyms which go further from the

meaning of the original term *mature*. Secondly, we notice that, here again, we are in front of a situation of collocational restriction. We say, for example: an adult person, a ripe fruit/ crop, a perfect idea, and a due date.

In Arabic, contemporary scholars hold similar opinions. But in the past rhetoricians and linguists' views diverged. Some considered synonymy as a natural linguistic phenomenon and tried to define it and explain why it occurs. They collected and classified terms like Al Rumani (1987) who wrote a book entitled *Synonyms and Close in Meaning Terms* (الألفاظ المترادفة والمتقاربة المعنى). Others, however, rejected any possibility of synonymy in Arabic. Their opinion coincides with that of Bloomfield. They simply consider that differences in spelling and sound justify the difference in meaning. Al Askari(1977) investigated in the so-called synonyms and tried to prove the non-existence of sameness in meaning due to the nuances occurring between terms. He argued that *Al Saif*(sword) and the multitude of its other names such as *Al Faysal* and *Al Muhanad* do not, in fact, refer to the same physical reality. He points out that *Al Saif* is the name of the weapon , but the other names are adjectives which indicate, the colour, the material, the shape, the function, or the origin.

4.2 Synonymy in the Qur'an

The lexical relation of synonymy has been examined by different Arab scholars, especially those interested in the Qur'an and its related disciplines, or those concerned with its interpretation (tafsir). Some of them claim that one word is sufficient to refer to a situation, and that using a second term holding the same meaning is needless. They add that every single word is distinct in meaning from another, which means that substitution is impossible. Another argument is that most of the so-called synonyms are just a word and its different adjective (s) such as (سيف) and (صارم) (sword and sharp). Thus a sword meant for decoration is not necessarily sharp, and can't be called (صارم). Others defend another point of view though they admit the existence of nuances between what they consider as synonymous terms. They state that the Glorious Qur'an abounds in synonyms for many reasons. Not only are they a means of eloquence, but they are also used to confirm previous ideas, and in many occasions to provide assonance, which reinforces the rhetoric of the text.

4.3 Translation and mistranslation of Qur'an synonymous terms

It is obvious that the transfer of Qur'an terms, which are supposed to be synonyms, into English is a complicated task. This is mainly due to the subtle differences which characterize these terms. Besides, the translation becomes more difficult if the translator is a non-Arab who lacks sufficient semantic knowledge in Arabic. In this case, he will never be able to suggest the closest natural equivalent.

Synonyms are used in the Qur'an in two different ways. They are used in the same Ayah joined by the coordinator [و], which is replaced in some cases by the coordinators [ثم] or [أو]. They are also used in those repeated Ayahs which describe the same event or tell the same story in different Surahs. Thus, we find a term in the first and its supposed synonym in the second. The following examples shed more light on what has been explained so far.

4.3.1 Case of synonymous terms used in the same Ayah

The words (نصب) and (لغوب) meaning lassitude are considered synonymous terms in Arabic dictionaries. They are mentioned in Fatir, Surah 35:

"... لا يمسنا فيها نصب ولا لغوب "

According to Arab rhetoricians and commentators, especially those opposed to synonymy in the Qur'an, the use of the coordinator [و] indicates that the two terms are different in meaning. They insist on the fact that the difference cannot be neglected even if it is a mere semantic nuance.

Ibn Kathir(1990 : 341), the often cited commentator, explains that believers will enjoy a high rank in Paradise where they will leave in peace and will not feel any physical nor mental lassitude. In his translation, Yusuf Ali chose the terms **toil** for (نصب) and **weariness** for (لغوب). They are translated as follows:

"... no toil nor sense of weariness shall touch us there in "

It seems that he tried to transmit the idea of the comfortable life promised by Allah to the believers who will be rewarded an everlasting life with no fatigue due to hard work, and no stress . At the same time, he preserved the repetition which is a rhetoric device to confirm and reinforce the idea (s).

4.3.2 Case of synonymous terms used in different Ayahs

In many cases, the translator uses the same English item as an equivalent to one or more lexical items in the Qur'an. However, when we refer to commentators, or examine the context in which the so-called synonyms are used, we realize the semantic nuances.

The terms (غيث) and (مطر) are used in different Ayahs and are seemingly synonymous according to Arabic dictionaries which provide the same definition, showing no difference. But there are clear differences in meaning between these two terms in the Qur'an.

In the Surah of Shura (الشورى), Ayah28, Allah says:

" وهو الذي ينزل الغيث من بعد ما قنطوا وينشر رحمته وهو الولي الحميد "

The term (الغيث) derives from the verb (يغيث) meaning to succor . Allah provided the believers with water from the clouds. He relieved their pains and their suffering caused by a long period of drought as water was a reward for their prayers.

In another Surah, Al A'raf (الأعراف), Ayah 84 Allah reports the destiny of the people of the prophet Lot, those of them who disobeyed him and committed sins never seen before. Allah sent on them a rain of stones to punish them.

"وَأَمْطَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ مَطَرًا فَانْظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُجْرِمِينَ" الأعراف، آية 84

We conclude that the terms (غيث) and (مطر), though considered similar in meaning, are in fact used differently in the Qur'an . (غيث) appears in contexts of assistance, in situations where believers are rewarded for their obedience whereas (مطر) is used in contexts which describe punishment following disobedience.

Let's now compare with translations :

Surah of Shura (الشورى), Ayah 28

Yusuf Ali translation

« HE is the one that sends down **rain** [even] after [men] have given up all hope ... »

Arbery translation

« And it is HE who sends down **rain** after they have despaired ... »

Surah of Al A'raf (الأعراف), Ayah 84

Yusuf Ali translation

« And we rained down on them **a shower** [of brimstone]... »

Arbery translation

« And we rained down upon them **a rain** ... »

In the translation of the Surah of Shura, both translators have used the term **rain** for (غيث). Though we may consider that rain has a neutral meaning since it does not show whether it was a grace or an indignation, the context makes the idea clear : rain was sent as a reward to give back hope.

In Arabic, the meaning of the Ayah derives from the word (غيث) itself which comprises the meaning of help and relief. This idea is also reinforced by the context.

Loss of meaning is clear in the second example . In his translation of the Surah of Al A'raf, Yusuf Ali substituted the term **shower** to rain. It seems that he got aware of the difference in meaning between the terms (غيث) and (مطر). In addition , he added the term [brimstone] which he has certainly deduced

from the Arabic interpretation (tafsir) to render the idea of punishment. Arbery chose another way since he kept the term rain without an additional explanation. For this reason, he failed to convey the meaning of the Arabic text.

Conclusion

Translators face many difficulties to transfer meanings from one language into another. Even opponents to untranslatability cannot pretend that translation is always possible. A lot of terms are culture bound, or express an associative meaning specific to the source text. In the case of the translation of the Qur'an, loss of meaning is inevitable. For instance, the supposed synonyms have different meanings. The only solution to avoid the loss of meaning when translating them would be to add additional explanations/comments between brackets to produce the same effect on the reader of the target text.

The objective of Qur'an translation has never been the production of an identical text. It is rather considered as a mediator between the original text and the non Arab speakers. Its role is to explain to them the principles of Islam in their language.

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