

## **A Word on Translating a Holy Message**

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The intent of translating a holy<sup>(1)</sup> text is to permit to non native speakers, regardless of their religious beliefs, to understand the sacred document itself and the message it conveys. The articulation of this intent raises problematic issues relevant not only to translation approaches but also to the structural variations that both source and target languages may exhibit.

One of the challenging issues relevant to translating Qur'an, beyond the classical crucial issues that translation involves, concerns structural peculiarities that Arabic may show. Therefore, a reliable translated version is the one that can be accurately structured in a way faithful to all peculiarities that Arabic structure can involve in terms of interpretation.

In this respect, Arabic exhibits structures as well as morpho-syntactic categories that, in addition to their grammatical function, fulfill a semantic one. Thus, translation entails not only detecting the exact meaning conveyed by such peculiar syntactic structures and categories, but also choosing appropriate structures within the target language that can delineate exactly the same semantic interpretation, which can be problematic.

In this paper, I attempt to discuss the peculiarity of certain Arabic structural and grammatical devices that serve a semantic function, and question the way this crucial issue is dealt with practically in three main English translated versions of Qur'an. Thus, this investigation deals mainly with Yusuf

Ali's translation, *The Holy Qur'an* translated by M.A.S Abdel haleem, and *the English translated version of Quran* by Rashad Khalifa.

In this regard, three main crucial syntactic issues are discussed in this paper. The first issue concerns constructions that involve Determiner Phrase (DP henceforth) preposing<sup>(2)</sup> and their semantic interpretation. The second one concerns Case morpheme that can denote a semantic function beyond its grammatical property. The third issue that the paper discusses is on pronoun duplication as well as resumption and their impact on the interpretation of constructions in which they appear.

### DP-preposing

In Arabic, DP-preposing is classified as Focus Fronting or Topicalisation on the basis of the structural differences displayed in constructions that involve preposing. Unlike focus phrases, Topicalized phrases must be definite in all contexts, and appear in initial position, in the sense that they intercept wh-movement as well as focus fronting as the ungrammaticality of the following examples show respectively.

1. \*man zaydun ra?athu  
who zayd-nom saw-3SF+cl-3SM  
“\*Zayd, who saw him?”
2. \*alkita:ba zaydun ?aataytuhu  
the-book+acc zayd+nom I-gave+cl-3SM  
“\*The book zayd, I gave him.”

As it noticeable from examples (1) and (2) the topicalized element zaydun blocks the raising of the wh-word man (who) and the focus DP alkita:ba (the book).

Another prominent and significant difference concerns Case that the preposed elements bear, which is morphologically expressed. Thus, topicalized DPs bear nominative Case whereas focus DPs bear accusative one. Accordingly, what is more relevant is the semantic function shared between the two structural devices focus and topic fronting despite the distinctive properties relevant to Case. This semantic function is to attribute an emphatic value to the preposed constituent.

Notice that English exhibits a similar structural device, namely topicalization that serves the same general semantic function. Yet, the lack of a morphological realization of Case in English has an impact on conveying the exact meaning, especially that Case morpheme itself, in Arabic, serves a semantic function as will be discussed subsequently.

According to old Arab grammarians' analysis, since the preposed constituent serves as a definite and precise reference, it has no syntactic position within the construction, except when it appears in embedded contexts<sup>(3)</sup> as in verse 49 from Surat Al-Qamar. Thus, only elements that serve a grammatical function can have a syntactic relevance, As Ibn Hicham<sup>(4)</sup> stated.

Regardless of the crucial syntactic position of preposed elements within old grammarians' analysis, what is definite is that the stylistic device is strictly relevant to semantic interpretation<sup>(5)</sup>. Therefore, the device entails careful consideration given its peculiar property. Let's consider verse 44 from Surat Ar-rum and how it is translated by Yusuf Ali and Abdel haleem respectively, as shown below.

44. Those who reject faith will suffer from that rejection: and these who work righteousness will spread their couch (of repose) for themselves (in heaven).

44. Those who rejected the truth will bear the burden of that rejection, and those who did good deeds will have made good provision for themselves.

If we consider the two translated English versions we can notice that no importance is given to the device of preposing, though it has a direct impact on meaning. Notice that in the two versions the structure used can by no means denote a meaning of emphasis. Thus, emphasizing the meaning that only those who did (good deeds) or (righteous work) will be rewarded exclusively and vice versa as interpreted by Azzamakshari<sup>(6)</sup> is not considered in the translated versions.

In this regard, in verse (7) from Surat Arr-ahman Yusuf Ali uses topicalization whereby the constituent assama: ? a (the sky) receives special emphasis. In verse (10) from the same Surat, however, this device is ignored and instead another stylistic device is used which denotes a different semantic interpretation not delineated by the original text. Notice that in English a construction like It is He stresses He the maker not what is made (earth). Consider the translated verses below.

7. And the firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the balance.

10. It is He who has spread out the earth for (his) creatures.

Accordingly, in Abdel Haleem's translated version the stylistic device is totally ignored from this perspective as shown below in his translation, though English can sometimes

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afford more or less equivalent devices. This means that the focus of these translated versions is mainly on the initial semantic level of verses; thus, the levels of semantic interpretation denoted by stylistic devices or crucially denoted, in certain constructions, by morpho-syntactic categories are not generally considered.

7. He has raised up the sky.

10. He sat down the earth for His creatures.

Unlike preposing constructions, for passive ones in which emphasis is on the DP occupying a structural subject position, and since the device is allowed in both languages no problem arises out of translating passive constructions as in verses 18 and 19 from Surat Al-ghashiya. Consider the following translation by Yusuf Ali.

18. How the heavens are lifted, how the mountains are raised high.

19. And at the mountains, how they are fixed firm?

Notice in verse (7) from Surat Arr-ahman that assama:ʔa (the sky) takes a nominative Case marker in another reading as stated in Azzmakshshri<sup>(7)</sup> as assama:ʔu. This device cannot be neutral since Case morpheme in Classical Arabic can denote a semantic interpretation despite the grammatical property that is endowed with. Relevantly, another problematic issue arises concerning Case morpheme.

### **Case Morpheme**

Arabic displays a phonological spell out of Case which is a pure grammatical feature<sup>(8)</sup>. In most linguistic investigations of Arabic constructions that involve preposing, Case morpheme was dealt with only from the perspective of

accounting for the theoretical concepts that motivate the movement of the preposed DP<sup>(9)</sup>.

In this regard, Case morpheme is crucially pertinent to DP preposing in Qur'an verses. In verse 46 of Surat Al-kahf, for example, the accusative Case morpheme /a/ that appears in al-banuna (children) conveys a meaning of specificity. In the English version translated by R. Khalifa, for example, the verse is translated as follows:

46. Money and children are the joys of life, but the righteous works provide an eternal recompense from your lord, and a far better hope.

Notice that in English Case is not morphologically realized, therefore, we cannot rely only on the stylistic structural device used in the original text; namely preposing. Instead it seems worthy to have recourse to a lexical device to convey the exact meaning, which is totally ignored in Yusuf Ali's translated version also as shown below.

46. Wealth and children are the attractions of this worldly life, but lasting good works have a better reward with your lord and give better grants for hope.

It should be noted, in this respect, that Case morphology as a used device to serve a semantic function is not peculiar to preposing constructions. Classical Arabic involves constructions where the DP object bears a nominative Case mark to draw the attention of the addressee to the DP object, as observed by Assuyutti<sup>(10)</sup> and Azzamakshari<sup>(11)</sup>, like in the following example:

3. xaraqa lmismara thawbu.  
**drilled+3SM the nail+acc the cloth+nom**  
**“The nail drilled the cloth”**

Classical Arabic exhibits also facts where the subject in its in situ position can bear an accusative mark in order to express disdain as stated in Almubarrid<sup>(12)</sup>, as example (4) below instantiates.

4. ja:ʔa Zaydan.  
came+3SM zayd+acc  
“Zayd came.”

Although the device is archaic, in verse (37) of Surat Albaqara Azzamakhshari<sup>(13)</sup> noticed that *kalmia:tin* (words) is also read as *kalmia:tun* bearing a nominative Case. He observed, in this regard, that the first reading can be interpreted as *Adam received words*, whereas in the second reading the verse can be interpreted as *words reached Adam* and became *part of him*. Notice that on the basis of the second reading, we cannot catch the meaning only through the consideration of Case morpheme. This means that *kalmia:t* does not refer to mere words. In Yusuf Ali's version we read *words of inspiration*, in Abdel haleem's *some words*, and in khalifa's version *words*. Consider the three versions below.

37. Then learnt Adam from his lord *words of inspiration*, and his lord turned towards him; for he is oft-returning, most merciful.

37. Then Adam received *some words* from his lord and he accepted his repentance. He is the ever relenting, the most merciful.

37. Then Adam received from his lord *words*, whereby He redeemed him. He is the Redeemer, Most Merciful.

It should be noted that what Zamakhshari<sup>(14)</sup> advanced can be plausible interpretations of both readings on the basis of *l-hadith*. What can be more relevantly deduced is the idea that Case morpheme is not a mere grammatical neutral device

devoid of any semantic function. Thus, what remains challenging for translators, in this regard, is not only opting for a reliable interpretation, but also conveying it accurately in the target text.

### **Pronoun Duplication**

Another relevant issue that Arabic displays concerns pronoun duplication. In verse (37) of Surat Albaqara we notice that the pronoun *hu* is duplicated by the pronoun *huwa* (him) referring to the same entity. Notice that this device appears in various verses in similar semantic contexts. Consider verses 12 and 14 from Surat *Ta-ha*.

Azzamakhshari<sup>(15)</sup> advanced, in this regard, that such structures denote a specific exact meaning by virtue of which no other plausible interpretation is allowed. Thus, the duplicated pronoun attributes not only an emphatic value to the original one but also a strict specific interpretation.

In the English versions under study we notice that no stylistic device is used to denote the meaning of the original verse. Let's consider Yusuf Ali's and Abdel haleem's translations.

14. Verily, I am Allah. There is no god but I: so serve thou Me (only), and establish regular prayer for celebrating my praise.

14. I am God; there is no god but Me. So worship Me and Keep up the prayer so that you remember Me.

Notice that the structure used *I am God / I am Allah* can have an emphatic value only via intonation; otherwise the structure remains a mere statement. Moreover, the interpretation advanced for the verse is based mainly on a stylistic device that Arabic involves. This entails having

recourse to a lexical or wording device since English lacks a similar structure that can denote exactly the same meaning especially that in a written translated version intonation is unreliable.

In the same line of analysis, resumptive pronouns seem crucial for Focus constructions. Notice that Arabic affords two alternatives; one that involves resumptive pronouns related to Focus phrases whereas the other displays no resumption, as can be shown in verse 95 from Surat An-nisa:?(<sup>16</sup>). It should be noted that we cannot stipulate on that basis only that resumption is optional in Focus constructions. Notice that in addition to the similarity between resumptive pronouns and pronouns in terms of referentiality the former can be duplicated as the following example illustrates.

5. raʔaytuḥu huwa la: gayrahu  
see+1PS+cl-3PS him not other+cl-3SM  
“I saw him (not another)”

Notice that the device of duplication in (5) denotes a specific and definite interpretation. Moreover, in wh-constructions resumptive pronouns are means of giving a specific semantic interpretation to wh-words as instantiation (6) below shows.

6. man raʔaytuḥum  
who saw+cl1PS+cl-3PM  
“Who did I see?”

Thus, it seems that resumptive pronouns have a semantic rather than a syntactic function in Focus construction. On that basis we can suggest that the presence of a resumptive pronoun in Focus constructions may fulfill a

semantic function similar to pronoun duplication; that is, it attributes to the focus element it is related to a specific and definite emphatic value.

It is needless to say, in this regard, that the semantic function of this device is not taken into account in the translated verses that involve focus constructions displaying resumption, at least for the three translated versions under study. Let's reconsider verse 7 from Surat Ar-rahman as translated by Yusuf Ali.

7. And the firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the balance.

All in all, one main pertinent observation we can make on the basis of this investigation concerns the strategy adopted in the three English translated versions of Quran. In fact, it seems that translators have been more concerned with translating the initial (not to say superficial) meaning of verses accurately but failing to consider all levels of interpretation. This means that the strategy adopted should be reconsidered to take into account the underlying messages within in the original text.

In this paper, I have presented three main crucial syntactic issues that Arabic exhibits and argued that they remain problematic for an accurate translation that should be faithful to all semantic interpretations that the holy text may involve. It is also suggested, in this regard, that when the target language fails to afford equivalent structural or syntactic devices whereby translators can maintain the message conveyed by the source text, recourse to a lexical or wording strategy is entailed.

Accordingly, it seems worth noting that in order to handle the challenging issues imposed by structural differences between languages in various respects lexical, syntactic and stylistic; translators should rethink approaches of interpreting the original text to fresh new devices of a translation faithful to the exact meanings delineated in the holy document.

### Notes

1. The term *holy* is claimed to be problematic in terms of reference. In this paper Holy text refers to a message from Allah to humanity.
2. It should be mentioned that the consideration of Arabic constructions, in this paper, is based mainly on old Arab grammarians' analysis for relevance to interpretation, though some terminology of generative grammar approach is used.
3. Embedded contexts refer to syntactic positions preceded by functional elements like? inna as in verse 49 from Surat Al-Qamar : "إنا كل شيء خلقناه بقدر"

4. ابن هشام، المغني اللبيب، ج2، تحقيق محمد محي الدين عبد الحميد، مكتبة محمد علي صبيح، ص ص 339-402.
5. عباس حسن، النحو الوافي، ج2، دار المعارف، القاهرة، 1980، ص134.
6. الزمخشري، الكشاف، ج3، طبعة دار الفكر، بيروت، 1968، ص225.
7. الزمخشري، ج4، ص44.
8. Case belongs to grammatical/ formal features which are not relevant to semantic interpretation at the level of Logical Form. (Cf. Chomsky (1995) among others).
9. CF. Fassi Fehri (1993), Akkal (1992) for an analysis based on Principles & Parameters approach and Amine (2002) from a Minimalist Program perspective.

10. السيوطي، همع الهوامع، ج2، تحقيق عبد العال سالم مكرم، دار البحوث العلمية، الكويت، 1979، ص5.
11. الزمخشري، ج1، ص274.
12. المبرد، كتاب المقتضب، تحقيق محمد عبد الخالق عزيمة، منشورات المجلس الأعلى للشؤون الإسلامية، مصر.
13. الزمخشري، ج1، ص247.
14. المصدر نفسه
15. الزمخشري، ج2، ص53.
16. "وكلا وعد الله الحسنى"

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