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## Intra-textuality in Translating Some Problematic Qur'anic Verses

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### Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to solve the problems of translating some ambiguous items in the Qur'anic text by using the notion of intra-textuality. The term intra-textuality is defined and compared with that of inter-textuality. The intra-textuality technique seems quite useful when a ST problematic item has more than one parallel occurrence in a text. It is used to establish some form of discourse-semantic-pragmatic relation between the problematic lexical item and its other parallel occurrence(s) in the macro text. It is applied to four problematic items in the Qu'ranic text, for which not only different translators have produced different rendering for the same item , but even one and the same translator has produced inconsistent renderings in different editions of his translation work, probably as a result of some change in the translator's experiential knowledge or ideologies. Based on such a discourse-oriented perspective, interpretation and translation solutions are suggested for the four cases investigated.

*Key Words:* translation, intra-textuality, inter-textuality, ambiguity, macro-text.

### Intra-textuality in Translating Some Problematic Qur'anic Verses

The term "intra-textuality" on the one hand seems to overlap with "co-text", "linguistic context", and "syntagmatic relations", yet it somehow differs from them in that its domain is not restricted to the immediate or direct collocates of an item within a micro text (a sentence or paragraph).

On the other hand, "intra-textuality" seems to be somehow related to the term "inter-textuality", which was originally coined by Kristeva in the 1960s, and has been widely used in various disciplines (structuralism, post-structuralism, semiotics, feminism, discourse analysis, etc), with the main implication that a text does not have a uniquely independent meaning, but acquires its meaning from its relations with other texts (Allen, 2000).

It is important here to draw some distinction between intra-textuality and intertextuality.

An intra-textual relation is meant to imply some form of discourse-semantic-pragmatic relations between certain items in an author's text or texts, that are here separated from the domain of intertextuality. Intertextuality would accordingly denote relations between completely independent texts (such as between novels, plays, etc.) produced by different authors.

In this paper, intertextuality is used in relation to problematic lexical items that have more than one occurrence in different verses within the different parts of the Qur'anic text (i.e. micro texts in relation to the macro text). One obvious limitation to this approach, however, is when an ambiguous item has only one occurrence in the text.

Translation is not merely an information-processing activity of decoding and encoding, but rather a discourse activity that relates to both interdependent activities of interpreting (of the ST) and producing (of the TT). Hence, ambiguous instances that are encountered in sacred texts lend themselves to various exegesis and interpretations on the part of commentators and translators. In fact, translators (and even the same translator who publishes more than one translation of a text) sometimes produce inconsistent translations for the same ST. This well-known situation is sometimes explicit in the many different translations produced by different translators for one and the same textual material.

The reason behind such diverse TL products of the same ST is the difference(s) in translators' interpretations that are influenced by their previous intertextual experiences, ideologies and values. The variation in the diverse TL products that are produced by the same translator is indicative of a change in the translator's experiential knowledge or member resources (Fairclough, pp 20-21).

In what follows, four problematic lexical instances from the translations of the holy Qur'an into English will be discussed in order to highlight the importance of intra-textuality in overcoming such ambiguous cases and providing more accurate and consistent renderings.

#### 1. Qur'an, Chapter 81, Verse 6 :

(( واذا البحار سجرت ))

The Holy word سَجرت has been given different meanings by different commentators of the Qur'an:

- a. burnt (As-Suyyutī; Makhloof; & Rajih)
- b. flooded (At-Ṭabari)
- c. both senses mentioned : flooded or heated (Al-Baidawī)
- d. both senses mixed into one (Ar-Razi).

Translators too have disagreement: Sale, Rodwell, Bell, and Arberry opt for the meaning of "boiling":

Sale (1734) : when the seas shall boil

Rodwell (1861) : when the seas shall boil

Bell (1934) : When the seas shall be made to boil up.

Arberry (1955) : When the seas shall be set boiling.

Two other translators Kassab, and al-Hayek opt for a meaning related to burning:

Kassab (1994) : when the seas are inflamed.

Al-Hayek (1996) : When the seas are turned into Blazing Fire.

But Palmer and Pickthall render it into "surge up" or "rise" respectively:

Palmer (1880): when the seas shall surge up

Pickthall (1930): When the seas rise.

As for Muhammad Ali's rendering of this word, he produces two inconsistent translations in different editions (besides mistranslating the Arabic word which designates "seas" into "cities"). بحار

Muhammad Ali (1918-ed.): when the cities are set on fire.

Muhammad Ali (1928-ed. & 1951ed.): when the cities are made to swell.

King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex too presents inconsistent renderings in two editions. In the 1989 edition, both boiling and swelling are mixed, but in the 1996 edition two senses (a blazing fire and overflowing) are successively mentioned as possible interpretations:

King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex (1989): When the oceans Boil over with a swell.

King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex (1996) : When the seas become a blazing Fire or overflow.

One can easily notice the differences among commentators and translators regarding the interpretation and translation of the lexeme

سجرت

The King Fahd Printing Complex too has produced two inconsistent renderings of the same word under discussion in their two editions of 1989 and 1996.

The inconsistency in the two editions of M.Ali (who also inaccurately renders بحار , i.e. 'seas' into "cities") is quite clear.

Intra-textuality is a potential solution through which such ambiguous expressions can be resolved by handling the whole Qur'anic text as one macro-textual discourse unit. Such a macro-textual handling acquires more importance when translating ambiguous cases in a text that is distant in time, since a translator plays both roles of interpreter of the ST, and reproducer of the TT.

The ambiguity of the lexical item "sujjirat" in Chapter 81, Verse 6 can be resolved through intra-textuality when considering another occurrence of the same verb (in the passive form) in Qur'anic Chapter 40, Verse 72 which describes infidels who are doomed to be burnt in fire :

ثم في النار يسجرون

(i.e. then in fire they shall be burnt).

It becomes more logical to say that the denotation of the verb under discussion is at least more related to the sense of burning than to the other suggested meanings ("boiling", or "swelling").

One may accordingly support the translations of Kassab, and Al-Hayek, as more appropriate and consistent with the signification of the Qur'anic term "sujjirat" in the case under discussion.

## 2. Qur'an, Chapter 11, Verse 40 :

(( حتى اذا جاء أمرنا وفار التنور ))

The commentators have suggested some different meanings for this expression in their interpretation of it:

1. the oven boiled/or :gushed forth with water ( Rajih ; As-Suyyuti )
2. water gushed forth (Makhloof)
3. continuous heavy rain (Ibn Kathir)
4. A number of different senses including the above and others (Ar-Razi ; Al-Qurtubi)

Translators too have followed pace in their different renderings of it. Rodwell who uses 'earth' but also mentions 'oven', seems to follow the first interpretation. Palmer, Bell, and Arberry produce rather a literal rendering of the text:

Rodwell: the earth's surface boiled up [or oven, reservoir]

Palmer: the oven boiled [also a reservoir]

Bell: the oven boiled

Arberry: the oven boiled

Sale, Pickthall and Kassab relate the sense of "oven" to water gushing or boiling:

Sale: the oven overflowed [or the earth's low land...]

Pickthall: the oven gushed forth water

Kassab: the oven boiled over with water

M.Ali, the two King Fahd Holy Qur'an editions, and Hayek seem to restrict the reference of the expression under discussion to water implying the great deluge:

Muhammad Ali: water came forth from the valley.

King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex (1996): the oven gushed forth (water like fountains from the earth).

King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex (1989): the fountains of the earth gushed forth

Hayek : the fountains from the earth gushed forth

This image of the deluge of Noah and his companions who are ordered by Allah to build a ship for safety is explicitly repeated in the Qur'an, Chapter 69, and Verse 11:

إنا لما طغى الماء حملناكم في الجارية

It refers to the same context preceding the deluge, and seeking refuge in the ship as levels of water rose: "lammaa ṭaḡha 'l maa'u ". Hence, one may confidently say that the indeterminate meaning of the figurative expression

فار التنور

in Chapter 11, Verse 40 is related to the flood as explicit in Chapter 69, Verse 11, which should therefore be translated accordingly at a superordinate semantico-pragmatic level (instead of the other renderings) into something like :

"when the levels of water rose and overflow".

Such a rendering seems to be more logical and appropriate than the ambiguous and vague renderings of: "the oven boiled", or "the earth's surface boiled up.

3. Qur'an, Chapter 2, Verse 177 :

(( وأتى المال على حبه ))

The referent in حبه is explained as :

1. for love of God
2. despite one's love of wealth
3. out of one's sincere desire to bestow .

As-Siyyuuti, Ibn Kathir, and At-Tabari interpret this expression as referring to one's love of wealth or possessions.

Az-Zamakhshari and Al-Baidawi mention the three options as possible interpretations. Makhloof and Rajih have made no comment on this issue.

Translators have also produced different translations of this instance. Sale, Rodwell, Palmer, Muhammad Ali, Pickthall and al-Haayik adopt the interpretation as referring to God, i.e. "for God's sake":

Sale : "for God's sake".  
 Rodwell : "for God's sake".  
 Palmer : "for the love of God".  
 Muhammad Ali : "out of love for Him".  
 Pickthall : "for love of Him".  
 Haayik : "for the sake of God".

Other translators like Kassab, Bell, and Arberry opt for the second interpretation (i.e. despite one's love of something which he bestows to others):

Bell : "though they love their wealth"  
 Arberry : "to give out of one's substance, however cherished"  
 Kassab : "give money which is much coveted"

King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex presents two inconsistent renderings in the two editions as the 1989 opts for the first interpretation whereas the 1996 supports the second interpretation:

In the 1989 edition: "for the love of God";  
 In the 1996 edition: "for the love of wealth".

This problem too can be resolved through intra-textuality. In Chapter 3, Verse 86, it is explicitly stated that believers should expend of that which they love and cherish:

"expend of that which ye love".

Taking this intra-textual clue into consideration, one may find it more feasible to translate the referent in *حبه* (Chapter 2, Verse 177, which is the text under discussion) within an intra-textual perspective, into something like:  
 "who expends of his wealth despite his love for it".

One may accordingly support the translations of Bell, Arberry, and Kassab, as more appropriate and consistent with the signification of the Qur'anic instance under discussion.

4. Qur'an, Chapter 57, Verse 19 :

(( والشهداء عند ربهم لهم أجرهم ))

Since this sign in Arabic can be the plural of two homonymous signs:

شاهد (witness) and شهيد (martyr) , it has led to differences on the part of commentators and translators as to its interpretation and translation because of this potential ambiguity. For example, the commentator As-Siyyuuti supports the sense "witness", whereas the Az-Zamakhshari and Ibn Kathiir support the other sense of "martyr".

The translators' renderings too reflect this controversy.

Sale, Rodwell, and Bell support the sense "witness":

Sale: "the witnesses"  
 Rodwell: "the witnesses"  
 Bell: "the witnesses"

Palmer, Pickthall, Arberry, Kassaab, and the King Fahd editions support the other interpretation of "martyr".

Palmer : the martyrs  
 Pickthall : the martyrs  
 Arberry : the martyrs

King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex (1989): the martyrs  
 King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex (1996): the martyrs  
 Kassaab: the martyrs  
 Al-Hayek: the martyr

Muhammad Ali suggests a rendering different from both options:

"the faithful".

The word شاهد, which occurs in many traditions of Prophet Muhammad occurs in many traditions of prophet Muhammad explicitly signifies "martyr". One such tradition quoted by Abi 'l-A'war Saiid bin Zaid bin Amro bin Nufail is:

((من قتل دون ماله فهو شهيد ومن قتل دون دمه فهو شهيد ومن قتل دون دينه فهو شهيد ومن قتل دون أهله فهو شهيد))

i.e. "whoever is killed in defense of his possessions is a martyr, whoever is killed in defense of his life is a martyr, whoever is killed in defense of his religion is a martyr, and whoever is killed in defense of his folk is a martyr").

As for the controversy of its inconsistent senses in the the Qur'anic Chapter 57, Verse 19, one may resort to intra-textuality in order to resolve the problem.

In all the other Qur'anic occurrences of the word under discussion, its sense is explicitly that of "witness". For example:

a. Qur'anic Chapter 2, Verse 33 :

((وادعوا شهداءكم من دون الله ان كنتم صادقين))

i.e. "call your witnesses other than Allah if you were truthful "

b. Qur'anic Chapter 2, Verse 143:

((لتكونوا شهداء على الناس ويكون الله عليكم شهيدا))

i.e. "so as you be witnesses against mankind, and Allah will be the Witness against you "

c. Chapter 3, Verse 98:

(( والله شهيد على ما تفعلون))

i.e. "Allah is the witness as to what you do".

d. Chapter 4, Verse 135:

(( يا أيها الذين آمنوا كونوا قوامين لله شهداء بالقسط))

i.e. "be just witnesses"

These examples may make it clear that the meaning of the word شهداء in its Quranic occurrences is "witnesses", i.e. plural of (martyr) شهيد rather than plural of شاهد ,

It is more logical, consistent, and appropriate then to translate the word "shuhadaa' " in Chapter 57, Verse 19 too as "witnesses" rather than "martyrs".

One may accordingly support the translations of Sale, Rodwell, and Bell of the Qur'anic instance under discussion as more appropriate.

In conclusion, many such problematic and ambiguous cases in the holy Qur'an, with regard to their various interpretations and translations, could be resolved through intra-textuality by handling the complete text as a single macro unit in which an ambiguous item may have one or more Qur'anic occurrence(s) that may be viewed as stylistic Qur'anic variants occurring in parallel structures that constitute a form of paradigmatic patterning fulfilling not only semantico-pragmatic functions but also discursal, rhetorical, aesthetic, and stylistic functions that interact to give the text its unique texture and identity. Intra-textuality then can provide very helpful clues in disambiguating such problematic cases.

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