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The Importation of the Holy Quran into English: Governing Factors in the Translating Process

Abobaker Ali M. Alsaleh Brakhw
Universiti Utara Malaysia

Sharifah Fazliyaton Shaik Ismail
Universiti Utara Malaysia

Abstract
The current paper reviews briefly the literature on the translation of Holy Quran and articulates several factors that influenced the process of translating it. These factors are linguistic, stylistic, and personal. The first two refer to the inimitable style of the Holy Quran and the figurative speech employed in its structure, while personal factors are related to the knowledge and ideology of the translator. This paper seeks to establish a theoretical understanding of the factors that governed and shaped the translations of the Holy Quran to open arenas for future investigation of its translations, specifically the English translations, and provide suggestions to overcome the limitations of the translations.

Keywords: Factors, language, meaning, Quran, translation

Introduction

One of the most noticeable developments of Quranic exegesis in the Muslim world is the upsurge of the translations of the Holy Quran in the twentieth century. In fact, the Index Translationum (http://unesco.org/culture/xtrans/) statistics indicate that the Holy Quran has been translated into more than twenty languages, including major European languages, such as English, French, Germany, Italian, Spanish, Norwegian and Asian languages, for instance, Urdu, Malayalam, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, and Malay. Considering that, Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world with some 1.5 billion Muslims; therefore, the diffusion of Holy Quran in many languages is expected. In spite of the inimitability nature of the Holy Quran, this sacred text has been translated and re-translated for various purposes (Barnes, 2011). Furthermore, Qadhi (1999, p. 348) argues that given the different languages in the world, it has become necessary to translate this sacred text from Arabic into other languages so that more readers can access and benefit from the translation of the Holy Qur'an.

The first translation of the Quran into European languages was carried out by Robert of Ketton, an English medieval theologian who completed the translation of the Holy Quran into Latin in 1143, under the patronage of a French Abbot, Peter the Venerable (Gázquez & Gray, 2007, Elmarsafy, 2009). Robert of Ketton's translation, which is part of Peter the Venerable's Corpus Islamolatinum project, is inundated with discrepancies due to the religious agenda that governed his translation at that time (Gázquez & Gray, 2007, Elmarsafy, 2009). Similarly, when Mark of Toledo produced his translation of the Quran in 1210, he asserted that his translation aimed "to give Christians … the means to fight against the Saracens by impugning their doctrines" (cited in Gázquez & Gray, 2007, p. 88). Such strong struggle against Islam through the distortion of the Holy Quran in translation, however, began to dwindle in the following decades. European scholars who translated the Holy Qur'an in the 18th century onwards began to translate the Quran with the aim of "tracing back the individual Qur'anic utterances of Muhammad to specific historical situations and from these to understand them in their entire liveliness and actuality" (Rudi Paret cited in Leemhuis, 2006, p. 156). Since then, copious translations were produced by both Muslim and non-Muslim Arab and non-Arab translators. Different reasons were suggested for these re-translations. Bausani (1957, p. 76) argued that while the re-translations of the Quran by the non-Muslims were carried out to offer "an originality of approach", the Muslim translators re-translate "to justify modern trends, though remaining attached to the traditional and antiquated idea of the verbal inspiration of the Holy Book." The supremacy of the Quran, the nature of its inimitability, and the peculiar linguistics features contained in the Quran make the task of translating the Quran becomes particularly difficult to be accurately executed. Several linguistic, stylistic and personal factors can be seen at play, in the translating process of the Quran, and this paper attempts to illustrate these factors before providing suggestions that can be considered to benefit future translators of the Quran.

1. Ideology and Knowledge of the Translator

The translator takes centre stage in the process of transmission of message from the source text to the target text. Political and religious agendas of the translator usually govern the production of a translation, in particular, the translation of sacred texts such as the Quran. In his survey, Elmarsafy (2009), for instance, argued that inaccurate translations of the Quran were produced between 12th century and 18th century in Europe to stave off the possibility of unsuspecting Christian readers of the translations from embracing Islam. Marracci's (1698) literal translation of the Quran into Latin, which includes extensive notations and explanations, also disparages

Muslims in his translation. In fact, Marracci's translatorial aim was to refute the doctrines of Islam (Al-Shabab, 2012). A different stance was taken by George Sale, who opted to be more faithful in his translation of the Quran into modern English. Sale's translation (1736), perceived to be a "classical" translation of the text which is considered as "a remarkably accurate guide to the literal meaning of the text" (Barnes, 2011, p. 47). It was also Sale's neutral stance that ensures the endurance of his translation until the present day. Most of the English translators succeeding Sale, however, did not "mask [their] skepticism towards Islam" in their translations (Hayes, 2004, p, 249), One of the early English translations of the Quran addressed in its preface that the translation was produced "for the satisfaction of all that desire to look into the Turkish varieties" (quoted in Hayes, 2004, p. 249). The above discussion, partly serves to show that the translator, whether consciously or unconsciously, is greatly influenced by his ideology in his translation.

On the importance of ideology as one of the underlying elements in the translation process, Lane-Mercier (1997) contends that as an ethical practice, translation

> Produces not only semantic meaning, but also aesthetic, ideological and political meaning. Such meaning is indicative, amongst other things, of the translator's position within the socio-ideological stratifications of his or her cultural context, of the values, beliefs, images and attitudes circulating within this context, of the translator's interpretation of the source text as well as of his or her aesthetic, ideological and political agenda, and of the interpretive possibilities made available to the target-text readers through the translator's strategies and decision. (Lane-Mercier, 1997, p. 44)

Hatim and Munday (2004), on the other hand, describe ideology as "a body of ideas that reflects the beliefs and interests of an individual, a group of individuals, societal institution, etc., and that ultimately finds expression in language" (p. 342). In the case of the Holy Quran, the translator's ideology, values, and beliefs naturally influence his or her approach to the work. Brigaglia (2005, p. 426) suggests that the religious ideology of the translator is bound to influence the translation of the Quran; when translators adhere to religious beliefs or doctrines foreign to locally established orthodoxy, their work is likely to suffer from intellectual conflict (see also Elmarsafy, 2012). Elimam (2009, p. 35) who drew on Rippin's (1992) examination of Bell's (1939) translation of the Quran as an example of biased translation asserts that Bell's translation was greatly influenced by both his own views of the Quran, as well as a prevalent trend in the academia—namely, the historical approach. When Bell found two verses with related meaning in close proximity, he considered one of them to be a "substitution" (Elimam 2009, p. 36) for the other and reformulated the intent of the relevant passage to fit it into a different historical situation. Bell had his own preconceived ideas about Islam, which were expressed in his translation and were not based on the text. For example, his translation divides the text into passages rather than verses, as in the Quran, because he reflected an ideological climate in which history was believed to provide an explanation for textual phenomena.

The translator's level of knowledge also leaves its impacts on the translation of the Quran. It is a constant struggle for the translator to take extreme care for exactitude in his translation since the Quran is enriched with all the superior peculiarities of its source language, Arabic. In addition to that, the Holy Quran encompasses many stories, names, and historical

events that require detailed understanding and mastery of the translators. The wealth of meaning contained in the Quran, which is derived from numerous cultural and religious terms and names, can be translated only by sound knowledge of the history, culture, and geography of the Arab regions as well as the science of the Holy Quran.

2. Inimitable Style of the Quran

As discussed earlier, the Quran is known for its unique style which cannot be described or emulated by any of the known literary forms. Ahmed (2004, p. 144) observes that Muslim scholars are convinced that the unparalleled beauty of the Quranic language is one of the features that makes it unique. According to Elimam (2009), some scholars have argued that the Quran is unique because, in addition to its eloquence, it does not follow existing Arabic patterns of speech. He further observes that "the Quran, being neither prose nor verse, is a literary genre of its own that is of the highest eloquence and of matchless stylistic perfection" (Elimam, 2009, p. 33). Al-Salem (2008, p.81) points out that the difficulty of translating the Holy Quran arises from the miraculous nature of the Quran, attested by all the harmonies that can be found in the verses—namely, the harmony of sound, images, and feelings evoked consecutively as the reader segues from one verse to another. In fact, the poetic effects that overwhelm the Quran cannot be reproduced in any translation (Rahman, 1988). The other aspect of the Holy Quran that makes it difficult to translate is the density of associative meanings inherent in many of the words, which makes it impossible to find equivalents for such words in other languages. Allah in His Glorious Book said:

(قُلْ لَئِنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَى أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا) [الإسراء/88]

> Say'If the whole of the mankind and Jinns were to gather together to produce the like of this Quran, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support'. *(Yusuf Ali, 2000, Sūrah Al-īsrā 17: 88)*

Moreover, Al-Misned (2001) demonstrates that "the quality of the Quran cannot be said to consist only of words, letters and the construction of sentences with rhymes, because all these were within the capabilities of the Arabs" (p. 48). He adds that the quality of the Quran could only be the result of the combination of words conveying ideas in a way unknown before the Quran. The Quran translators, such as Abdel Haleem (2004), Yusuf Ali (2000), and Arberry (1964), and scholars such as Rahman (1988) and Leemhuis (2006), acknowledge that the style of the Quran cannot be imitated. Therefore, translation is a daunting task for translators, who find it laborious to reproduce the same style and it is a challenge for them to match the beauty of the Quran in their translations.

3. Approaches and Methods Employed in Translation

Initially, when the Quran was made available in other languages through the medium of translation, this practice "had encountered a broad resistance with some exceptions, inside the traditional scholarly milieu" (Brigaglia, 2005, p. 424). The resistance is due not only to the inimitability nature of the Quran but also the concern that the fact the translations might distort the consecrated meaning inherent in the Quran. In fact, when George Sale's English translation was first made available to the English readers in 1734; his translation began to spark interest in

how the translation was produced. Sale's translation of the Quran, perceived to be the first English translation, has often been praised for its clarity and use of a simple structure and accessible language (Al-Shabab, 2012 and Elmarsafy, 2009). Hayes (2004), for instance, applauded Sale's translation as "a landmark of scholarship, and his translation would remain the standard English version into the twentieth century" (p. 251). Scholars, such as Abdul Raof (2005) and Rahman (1998) maintain the incapability of human mind to render the word of God. Rahman (1988) points out two underlying reasons that impede the translation of the Quran. He states that:

> The first is the style and expression of the Qur'an. The second is the fact that the Qur'an is not really a single "book" because nobody "wrote" it: it is an assembly of all the passages revealed or communicated to Muhammad by the Agency of Revelation, which the Qur'an calls Gabriel and "The Trusted Spirit" or "The Holy Spirit." (Rahman, 1988, p. 24)

To capture the sense implied in the Quran, Elimam (2009) suggests that the "translators of the Quran generally attempt to remain as close as possible to the text in order to reflect some features of the Quranic style in their work" (p. 24). Most of the translators and scholars who have translated the Holy Quran concede that literal translation is impossible. Ahmed (2004, p. 199) reports that Irving, in the introduction of his translation, maintains that literal translation is impossible, because interpretation in another language is an ongoing process, especially with a document that must be used constantly. Abdul Raof (2005, p. 172) also disapproves of the literal translation of the Quranic cultural expressions as such an approach "leads to cultural interference that distorts the message underpinning the source language text". Consider the following example:

(اقْتُلُوا يُوسُفَ أَوِ اطْرَحُوهُ أَرْضًا يَخْلُ لَكُمْ وَجْهُ أَبِيكُمْ وَتَكُونُوا مِنْ بَعْدِهِ قَوْمًا صَالِحِينَ) (سورة يوسف:9)

> Arberry's translation (1964, 226): 'Kill you Joseph, or cast him forth into some land, ***that your father's face may be free for you***, and thereafter you may be a righteous people'. (Surah Joseph: 9)

Arberry translated this verse literally yet the underlined phrase in the verse (**يَخْلُ لَكُمْ وَجْهُ أَبِيكُمْ**) has a metaphorical meaning that the literal translation does not convey to the target reader. He translated the phrase as "that your father's face may be free for you", which does not make sense to the target reader. The intended meaning of the phrase is "the intention or care of your father will be turned to you alone", which is not conveyed by the literal translation. Abdelwali (2007) notes that:

> Most Quran translations into English are source-language oriented. They are marked by dogged adherence to source syntax and the use of archaic language. The Quranic discourse enjoys very specific and unique features that are semantically oriented and Quran-bound and cannot be reproduced in an equivalent fashion in terms of structure, mystical effect on reader. (Abdelwali, 2007, p. 10)

Furthermore, Al-Jabari (2008, p. 24) explains that, when the translator adopts a literal approach to translating the Holy Quran, some problems arise at the word level as well as in terms of idioms, word order, metaphors, and style. He asserts that translators of the Quran have agreed that translating the Quran is impossible primarily for linguistic and cultural reasons. He also emphasizes that translating some linguistic patterns leads to the incomprehensibility of a large number of verses because the meaning carried by a word in one language is not necessarily the same as that carried by the same word in other languages. Al-Ubayd (2002) identifies three different methods often mobilized by the translators in rendering the Holy Quran into another language: literal, lexical, and interpretative.

(1) Literal translation involves translating each word into its equivalent in the target language while maintaining the same word order. Al-Salem (2008, 88) reports that, according to Ibn-'uthaymīn's fatwa, this method is prohibited because, in order to translate the Quran literally, certain conditions need to be met. The two languages have to share similar word order as well as one-to-one correspondence between their lexical items.
(2) Lexical translation involves replacing the source language words with target language items that convey the same meaning, while changing the order according to the word order rules of the target language. This method is followed in most translations of the Quran, especially those produced by Muslim translators.
(3) Interpretative translation can be carried out in two ways. The first is to translate directly from the Quran. The translator is not committed to replace every Arabic word with its equivalent in the target language. The translator should have knowledge of both interpretation and translation techniques. The second option is to translate the Arabic commentaries of the Quran. When using this option, the translator needs to be good at translation, but not necessarily knowledgeable in terms of Quranic interpretation.

Another approach to the Quranic translations posited by Elimam (2009) is interlinear translation, which can be helpful for non-Arabic-speaking readers who wish to understand the meaning of the words of the Quran. Serving as dictionaries, interlinear translations provide the meaning of each the Quranic word or phrase on alternate lines. Quli (2002, p. 17) highlights another version of the linear approach, which he refers to as 'phrase-by-phrase' or 'mirror-paraphrasing'. He insists that this approach offers some of the advantages of interlinear translation to English-speaking readers of the Quran. In this approach, the translation of the Quran develops phrase by phrase, with each phrase appearing opposite the corresponding Arabic phrase and attempting to mirror its semantic import.

Interestingly, most translators of the Holy Quran do not declare or acknowledge the approach or method they utilized. Many translations of the Holy Quran display the use of lexical translation or literal translation to maintain the original style of the source text. Adopting a specific method or approach in translating the Holy Quran will reflect on the translation and influence the ways in which the intended meaning of the Quranic verse is rendered.

4. The Choice of Commentaries (*Tafsīr*) of the Holy Quran

Al-Shahab (2012) posits that "a text makes use of previous texts and of others' texts" (p.1) and such dependency on other texts is more apparent where translation is concerned. Translators not only have to rely on references such as dictionaries, glossaries, and encyclopedias, they also have

to seek at times personal communication to confirm their understanding of the source text. In the process of the translation of the Quran, the translator has to depend on several interpretations to ensure that their translation is faithful to the Holy Quran. Interpretations or commentaries on the Holy Quran vary in terms of the source and the method of interpretation used. All the translations of the Holy Quran are affected by the interpretation methods used to interpret the verses. Ahmed (2004, p. 171) explains that *tafsīr* helps to elucidate the meanings, injunctions, and topics of the Quran while achieving the divine intention. The word *tafsīr* is illustrated by Saeed (2006, p. 57) as the most commonly used word for interpretation in Arabic, including interpretation of the Quran. According to Ahmed (2004, p. 172) the science of *tafsīr* aims at using knowledge and understanding concerning the Quran to explain its meanings, extract its legal ruling, and grasp its underlying rationale. Von Denffer (1989), Ahmed (2004), and Saeed (2006) identify three kinds of *tafsīr* or interpretations of the Quran:

5.1 Tafsīr bī al-rīwāya (Interpretation by Transmission)

Interpretation by transmission means that all explanations of the Quran can be traced back through a chain of transmission to a sound source—that is, the Quran itself, the explanation of the Prophet, and the explanation by Companions of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) (Von Denffer, 1989, p. 101). According to Saeed (2004), this kind of interpretation is known in Arabic as *tafsīr bī al-rīwāyah* or *tafsīr bī al-maāthūr* (i.e., interpretation based on the tradition or text), which means that the interpretation of the Quran should be guided by the Quran, the Prophet, and the earliest Muslims. That being so, the interpretation is expected to reflect the original sources of Islam as much as possible. Von Denffer (1989) asserts that the interpretation of the Quran by the Quran is the highest source of *tafsīr*. Many of the questions that might emerge from a certain passage of the Quran have their explanation in other parts of the very same book; therefore there is often no need to turn to any sources other than the word of Allah, which in itself contains *tafsīr*. Saeed (2006, p. 42) clarifies that, when the source is a reported saying of the Prophet or a Companion or Successor, the narration (*rīwāyah*) should have a sound basis—that is, a sound and complete chain of narrators (*īsnād*) whose narrations are truthful and reliable.

5.2 Tafsīr bī alrāy (Interpretation by Reason)

This kind of *tafsīr* is based on the use of knowledge and reason. The process of applying knowledge and reason is termed *ījtīḥad* (Ahmed, 2004). *Tafsīr bī alrāy* does not mean "interpretation by mere opinion" (Von Denffer 1989, p. 106), but deriving an opinion through *ījtīḥad* based on sound sources. According to Ahmed (2004) and Von Denffer (1989), two kinds of *tafsīr bī alrāy* exist:

(a) *Tafsīr maḥmūd* (praiseworthy) agrees with the sources of *tafsīr*, the rules of *sharī'ā* (religious law), and Arabic language.
(b) *Tafsīr maẓmūm* (blameworthy) is done without proper knowledge of the sources of *tafsīr*, *sharī'ā* (religious law), or Arabic language; it is therefore based on mere opinion and must be rejected.

A person who practises *tafsīr bī alrāy* must have sound knowledge in various fields of *'ūlūm al-qūrān* (science of the Quran) and Arabic language. The majority of Islamic scholars believe that *tafsīr bī alrāy* is permissible under this condition because it is done by *ījtīḥad* based on sound sources (Von Denffer 1989, p.107).

5.3 Tafsīr bī al-īshāra (Interpretation by Sign)

Tafsīr bī al-īshāra means the interpretation of the Quran is beyond its outer meanings and the people practising it concern themselves with meanings attached to verses of the Quran, which are not visible to anyone but those whose hearts have been opened by Allah (ibid). This kind of *tafsīr* is practiced by *Sūfīs* (Islamic group). The belief of the *Sūfī* commentators is that the verses of the Quran, apart from having obvious surface meanings, also have deep meanings discernible only by those who are inspired. According to them, harmony between the normal understanding of the Quranic verses and their hidden meaning is possible (Ahmed 2004, p. 178). Obviously, many interpretations of or commentaries on the Quran have been produced. The differences among them can be observed in both the various traditions within Islam (such as *Sunnī*, *Shī'ī*, or *Sufī*) and the different periods of history. The issue of *tafsīr* or interpretation of the Quran is crucial for the translator because the way in which verses are translated will be influenced by the meaning conveyed by the interpretation.

5. Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that translation of the Holy Quran is rife with obstacles that undoubtedly require the translator to use specific tools or apparatuses to arrive at an acceptable translation. In the process of translation, the target text is not only produced in a new environment but it also assumes new roles and is given new functions (Tymoczko, 2007). Similarly, in the translation of the Quran, the text is transmitted through a new linguistic surrounding and in a new cultural setting. Authentic interpretation that is supported by the translator's ideology goes hand in hand in refashioning the source text in the service of target readers of the translation. The Quran translator must rely both on his great learning and familiarity with Islam, mobilize the translators' apparatus well, and seek guidance from the commentaries before he can embark on his translation journey. Only then will the translator be able to produce a translation that manifested all the subtleties, peculiarities and nuances of the original Arabic text. It is interesting to investigate further how the Quran translators shift the original meanings through the use of lengthy footnotes or commentaries, as well as through translating strategies such as paraphrase, explicitation or substitution. The factors delineated earlier also need to be examined further to see how they impact on the translations and its readers.

About the Authors:

Mr. Abobaker Ali M Alsaleh Brakhw obtained his BA in English language from Garyounis University in Libya in 1997 and he received his Master degree in Interpreting and translation studies in 2006 from Academy of Graduate Studies in Benghazi – Libya. Currently, Mr Brakhw is doing his PhD in University Utara Malaysia in the field of translation the Holy Quran.

Dr. Sharifah Fazliyaton Shaik Ismail is presently Senior Lecturer at the School of Education and Modern Language Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia. She teaches courses on translation, linguistics and literature. Her areas of specialization are translation and intercultural studies, children's literature and gender studies.

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