

Itineraries in the Translation History of the Quran: A guide for Translation Students

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3rd International Conference on Itineraries in Translation History.
University of Tartu, Estonia.
June 13-14, 2014

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ABSTRACT

Students at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT) take an Islamic Translation course in which they practice translating different kinds of Islamic texts (genres) including excerpts from the Holy Quran and the Prophet's Sayings. The aims of the present article are to introduce the students to the history of the translation of the Holy Quran. The Quran was translated by Arabists, non-Arab and Arab Muslims. Consequently, English translations vary in style and accuracy. Some translators preferred archaic English words and structures; some used simple modern English; others added commentary. Some translated the meanings of the Quranic verses; others gave a word-for-word translation. There are occasional misinterpretations, mistranslations, and even distortions. Translating the meanings of the Holy Quran has always been challenging for translators, as the Quran has an exoteric and an esoteric meaning. The Quranic style is characterized by "rhyming prose" and its message is conveyed through various literary styles and devices. In addition, a Quranic lexical item may have multiple versatile meanings, making an accurate translation even more difficult to produce as there is no on-to-one correspondence between the Arabic lexical items in the Quran and target language equivalents. The article proposes examples of activities in which translation students can engage in based on the English Quran translations, gives some resources and defines the role of the instructor.

Keywords: *Translation pedagogy, translation students, translation accuracy, translation strategies, mistranslations, Holy Quran, Quran interpretation, Quran translation history, Quran translators.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia prepares translators. The translation program is 10 semesters or 5 years long. In the first 4 semesters (2 years), the students take English language courses (20 hours per semester) such as Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Vocabulary Building and Grammar courses. In semesters 5-9, the students take 18 specialized translation courses in 18 subject fields including an Islamic Translation course (2 hours per week). This course focuses on the different strategies and theories used in translating Islamic genres such as verses from the Holy Quran, Prophet's Hadiths (sayings), and general Islamic topics. It aims to introduce authentic and reliable Islamic recourses to help students deal with Islamic texts. It aims to train students to identify different types of Islamic texts and genres; to analyze the lexical and grammatical features of Islamic texts especially the Holy Quran; to translate different types of Islamic texts taking into consideration different translation theories and resources; to use different translation strategies and procedures in translating Islamic texts; to translate Islamic terms from English into Arabic and Arabic to English accurately; to introduction the history, and resources of Islamic translation; to find the meanings of the Holy Quran in English; to write a term paper in which the students compare two translations for any Islamic text stating and explaining the translation theory followed and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each translation and/or select a translation theory and give extensive examples that illustrate it.

II. AIMS OF STUDY

This study aims to introduce translation students enrolled in Islamic translation courses to the following: (i) The Holy Quran and what the content of the Quran is about; (ii) the stylistic features of the Quran; (iii) the history of Quran Translations, stages in the translation history of the Quran, and hierarchies and hegemonies of the historical translations of the Quran; (iv) who translated the Quran; (v) the different strategies used in translating the Quran; (vi) challenges faced in the English translations of the Quran; (vii) standards and policies that need to be met when translating the Quran from Arabic into other foreign languages; and (viii) to familiarize the students with Quran translation resources.

III. WHAT STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE HOLY QURAN

3.1 About the Holy Quran

The Quran is the holy book of 1.8 billion Muslims living in almost all countries and speaking many languages. The Holy Quran is the miracle of Prophet Muhammad. It is the unchanging Word of Allah. It has remained intact for 1435 years. It is the finest piece of literary Arabic text. It has been and will always be protected by Allah from distortion and alteration. It consists of 604 pages, with 114 Suras (chapters), each of which consisting of a number of verses. Suras vary in length. Muslims learn to read and recite the Quran in Arabic, even if Arabic is not their native language and they cannot communicate in Arabic. When they pray, they have to pray in Arabic and recite some Suras in Arabic.

3.2 Content of the Quran

The Quran is a book of guidance (social, financial, family, marriage, divorce, raising children, inheritance, government, buying and selling; debt; eating; dress code ... etc.); basic beliefs of Islam such as the existence of Allah and the Day of Judgment; ethical and legal issues; general rules and guidelines regarding right and wrong; narratives of the early prophets and historical events that took place during the Prophet's times; in addition to verses referring to natural phenomena.

3.3 Stylistic Features of the Quran

The Quranic message is conveyed with various literary styles and devices. The Suras and verses utilize phonetic and thematic structures that assist the readers in recalling the message of the Quranic discourse. The Holy Quran uses "rhyming prose". Rhyme changes from one set of verses to another, marking a change in the topic of the verses. The Quranic discourse has a nonlinear structure (a web or net) and has no beginning, middle, or end. The way the Quranic discourse is arranged seems to lack of continuity, no chronological or thematic order, and contains some repetition.

3.4 Levels of meaning in the Holy Quran

The Quranic discourse is characterized by surface meaning and an underlying meaning, i.e., an exoteric and an esoteric meaning. For example, the image of the celestial spheres in the Quran has several depths, enclosed within each other. There are seven esoteric meanings (7 levels of hidden depths). The underlying meaning of the Quran does not eradicate nor invalidate its surface meaning. It is similar to the soul that gives life to the body.

3.4 Chronology of Quran Translations

The Holy Quran has been translated into more than 100 European, Asian, and African languages. In 1936, translations of the Quran into 102 languages were available. Currently, there are about 62 English translations of the Holy Quran. According to the King Fahd

Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran, the Holy Quran has been translated into the following languages¹:

- **39 Asian Languages:** Uabek, Bahasa Indonesia, Urdu, Azeri, Malayalam, Brahism, Uyghur, Iranon, Awariah, Burmese, Bengali, Belushi, Pashto, Tagalog, Turkish, Tamil, Sindhi, Russian, Duria, Telugu, Farsi, Hebrew, Tajik, Chinese, Kurdish, Kyrgyz, Qazaq, Vietnamese, Korean, Kannada, Koshur, Kurdish (Kurmanji), Mandar, Bahasa Melayu, Lezgi Chal, Japanese, Hindi, Nepali.
- **15 European Languages:** Spanish, Ukrainian, Albanian, German, English, Italian, Portuguese, Bosnian, Swedish, French, Hungarian, Romany, Greek, Dutch, Macedonian,
- **19 African languages:** Oromo, Nko, Tamazight in Latin script, Tamazight In Arabic script, Diola, Mandinka, Dagbani, Yorùbá, Hausa, Malagasy, Fulfulde, Afar, Fulfulde in Latin script, Fulfulde in Arabic script, Lingala, Zulu, Kiswahili, Nyanja, Soomaali, Basaa.

Historically, the translation of the meanings of the Holy Quran went through 5 Stages:

- *Stage 1:* The Quran was translated from Arabic into Persian.
- *Stage 2:* The Quran was translated from Arabic into Latin.
- *Stage 3:* The Quran was translated from Latin into other European languages.
- *Stage 4:* The Quran was directly translated from Arabic into European languages by non-Muslim Orientalists (Arabists).
- *Stage 5:* The Quran was translated from Arabic into European languages by Muslims.

The following is a brief chronology of the translation of the Holy Quran:

- The first translation of the Quran was produced in Persian in the 7th century, and the first complete translation of the Holy Quran in Persian was produced between the 10th and 12th centuries.
- In 1143, Robert of Ketton's produced the first translation of the Quran in Latin for Peter the Venerable.
- In 884, a translation of the Quran was completed in Alwar (Sindh, India now Pakistan) by the orders of Abdullah bin Umar bin Abdul Aziz upon the request of the Hindu Raja Mehruk.
- In 1649, Alexander Ross offered the first English translation based on the French translation of L'Alcoran de Mahomet which was completed in 1647 by Andre du Ryer.
- Between 1937-1939, the British Arabist Richard Bell published an English translation of the Qur'an, and in 1953 he published an *Introduction to the Qur'an* which was revised in by W. Montgomery Watt in 1970. Both works have influenced Quranic studies in the West.
- In 1955, Arthur John Arberry published his first English translation of the Holy Quran.

3.5 Who Translated the Quran?

The Holy Quran has been translated by individuals such as non-Muslims Orientalists (Arabists), non-Arab Muslims and 18 translations by Arab Muslims. It has also been translated by King Fahad Complex for Printing the Holy Quran in Madinah, Al-Azhar in

¹ <https://qurancomplex.gov.sa/kfgqpc-quran-translate/>

Cairo, other organizations such as the General Authority for Taking Care of The Printing and Publishing of The Noble Qur'an, The Sunnah and Their Sciences² in Kuwait, and others.

3.6 Strategies Used in Translating the Quran

English translations of the Holy Quran vary in style and accuracy. Some translators of the Quran preferred using archaic English words and structures. For example, Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall used "ye" (plural you) and "thou" (singular you) instead of modern "you". Some translators used simple modern English, some added commentary, some translated the meanings of the verses, others gave a word-for-word translation.

3.7 Quran Translation Quality

English translations of the Quran, in particular, vary in style and accuracy of meaning. Translation of the Quran from Arabic has always been challenging to translators, as the Quran possesses an exoteric and an esoteric meaning. The Quranic message is conveyed with various literary styles and devices. There are occasional misinterpretations, mistranslations and even distortions in the translation of the Quranic text from Arabic. The Quranic discourse cannot be reproduced nor paralleled in any other language, whether in meaning or in form. Quranic lexical items have multiple meanings depending on the context in which they are used, making an accurate translation even more difficult. There is no on-to-one correspondence between the lexical items in Arabic and other foreign languages. It is not possible for human translators to produce a translation that matches the Quran in form and meaning. No human discourse can match the Quran in content and form. In addition, some translations have ideological errors, others add what is not in the original Quranic text. For example, there were distortions in translating the verse “الذي يجدونه الذين يتبعون الرسول النبي الأمي” “التوراة والانجيل مكتوبا عندهم في”. The Prophets' qualities and descriptions such as being illiterate have been distorted and mistranslated by the different translators as in the following excerpts:

أ- في الترجمة المجرية، ترجمت الآية: ﴿الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ

الْأُمِّيَّ﴾ [الأعراف: ١٥٧] إلى: A KiK Kovetik

الذين akuldottet a Pogang Provetat ومعناها: الذين

يتبعون الرسول النبي المشرك.

ب- ترجم بلاشير ﴿النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ﴾ بـ: Prophet des

Gentils وتعني: (نبي غير اليهود): (نبي الوثنية).

ت- ترجم دينيس ماسون ﴿النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ﴾ بـ: Infideles

Prophet des وتعني: نبي الكفرة.

ث- ترجم جاك بيرك ﴿النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ﴾ بـ: Le Prophet

maternel وتعني النبي الأمومي (من الأمومة)

² www.qsa.gov.kw

ج- ترجم هيننج ﴿ النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ ﴾ : dem Prophet der

Heiden ومعناها: نبي الوثنيين، ثم يعلق في الحاشية، قائلاً:

"هذا يعني عدم اختصاصه بالديانات الكتابية، يقصد محمداً".

ح- ترجم رودى بارت "النبي الأمي" : dem heidnischen

Prophet وتعني: نبي الوثنيين.

Other weaknesses are: Translating the words, not the meaning; ignoring the Arabic context; rearranging the Suras (chapters); lexical errors; syntactic errors; having insufficient knowledge about Islam; using free translation; and not knowing the special features of the Quranic style.

3.8 Translation Standards

To reduce misinterpretations, mistranslations and distortions of meaning, Islamic organizations such as Al-Azhar, the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, King Fahad Complex for Printing the Holy Quran and Quran scholars and others have set some guidelines and policies for selecting Quran translators, and for evaluating, approving, and publishing their translations. The following is a summary of those standards:

- A translator of the Quran should be a native speaker of Arabic.
- The translator should be proficient in both Arabic and English grammar, philology, lexicology, semantics, and rhetoric.
- The translator should be specialized in the principles of Islam, Quranic sciences, Shariaa Law (explications, reasons and events behind verse and Sura revelation, denotative and connotative meanings of lexical items of the Quran).
- The translation should be based on accredited Arabic explications of the Quran. Translators should follow the unified Quran explication issued by the King Fahad Complex for Printing the Holy Quran which serves as a basis for translators wishing to translate the Quran into other languages.
- The translator should give an introduction about the Quran, its content and about each Sura, whether it was revealed in Makkah or Madinah, and the translation strategy that will be followed.
- The translator should give the lexical and rhetorical meanings of Quranic words.
- The translator should not add scientific theories such as the scientific explanations of 'lighting and thunder' and he should not add what astronomers think of the sky and the stars, and should not use scientific technical terms.
- If some verses need some clarification, the translator can add it in a footnote.
- The translator should refer to the story/occasion behind a verse اسباب النزول to help understand it.
- The translator should give the meaning of the whole verse or verses as a unit when those verses share one theme, then give the lexical meaning of the whole verse, and why it was revealed.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATION PEDAGOGY

Different kinds of activities can be given to the students in the Islamic translation courses. The students may compare and contrast two English translations of the same Sura or set of verses from the Holy Quran by non-Muslim, non-Arab Muslim and/or Arab Muslim translators, identify weaknesses and errors in each; give examples of lexical, syntactic and semantic translation errors. Other translation activities may focus on specific linguistic

aspects of the Quran such as translating Quranic collocations and binomials, verb tenses, pronouns, particles, negation, prepositions, polysemous words, problems of accuracy and equivalence, and effect of translators' background knowledge on the translation accuracy of Quranic verses. The students can write term papers about theories of translation, translation strategies followed in a particular translator of the Quran giving specific examples and difficulties encountered in translating the Quran by non-Muslim Arabists, non-Arab Muslim translators and Arab Muslim translators. Cultural and linguistic differences between English and Arabic that affect the translation of the Holy Quran, the subtlety of the Quranic terms, competencies, and role of the translator of the Quranic texts can be also a subject of investigation by the students.

The students should practice searching for a particular Quran translator or a specific English Quran translation, and for articles about translation issues such as standards and weaknesses of translations of the Quran.

The students can work on the activities individually, in pairs or small groups of three or four. They can post and discuss their assignment in an online discussion forum, Facebook page or a Learning Management system (LMS) such as Blackboard. The instructor serves as a facilitator. She guides the students and provides feedback.

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