

Bridging the Cultural Gap: The Importance of Context in Translating Religious Texts

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Received: 20/03/2024,

Accepted: 15/12/2024,

Published: 31/12/2024

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the complex interplay between meaning, translation, and interpretation, particularly when dealing with religious books such as the Quran. It contends that getting a fully accurate comprehension requires going beyond a literal translation of words. Careful consideration of the surrounding context, historical backdrop, and author's intended message is required. The investigation digs into several approaches to interpretation, including Western hermeneutics, which focuses on historical and cultural knowledge. It also looks at Islamic exegesis ("tafsir"), which focuses on the Quran's rich legacy of interpretation. The article emphasises the necessity of understanding cultural nuances and the ever-changing nature of language in guaranteeing efficient communication. The closing remarks emphasise that understanding these complexity is more than just an intellectual effort. Rather, it holds the key to promoting cross-cultural communication and connection throughout history. Recognising the delicate interplay between meaning, translation, and interpretation allows us to obtain a better grasp of not only sacred writings, but also the wide landscapes of human communication.*

KEYWORDS: Translation, Equivalence, Meaning, Context, Hermeneutics, Exegesis, Interpretation, Quran

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Introduction

The human spirit's yearning for meaning and connection with the transcendent has given rise to a magnificent tapestry of sacred texts across cultures and throughout history. These revered texts, brimming with spiritual wisdom and guidance, hold immense significance for believers. Yet, their true essence often remains veiled, shrouded not only in the mysteries of the divine but also in the inherent challenges of language and its interpretation. This research delves into the intricate relationship between linguistics, translation theory, and the comprehension of sacred texts, with a specific focus on the Quran.

The Quran, the foundational text of Islam, presents unique challenges for translation. The Arabic language, renowned for its eloquence and rich literary heritage, poses difficulties in capturing the full beauty and power of the original text. For instance, consider the concept of "barakah," a multifaceted term encompassing blessing, divine favor, and overflowing abundance. Translating such a nuanced word into another language often requires explanation or loss of some of its depth. Additionally, the Quran employs a significant amount of figurative language and allusions that can be easily lost in translation. Furthermore, the ongoing debate about the "untranslatability" of the Quran underscores the complexities involved in conveying its divine message across languages and cultures.

Understanding the profound meaning of the Quran necessitates a multifaceted approach. Context reigns supreme, demanding an exploration of the social, cultural, and historical milieu in which the Quran was revealed. Just as a solitary word on a page holds little meaning without its surrounding sentence, so too does the Quran require a deep dive into the world it emerged from. This exploration allows us to grasp the nuances of the Arabic language employed, the intended audience, and the underlying beliefs that shaped the message. Armed with this contextual understanding, we can then delve into the complexities of translation. Scholars have grappled with the tension between faithfulness to the original language and effective communication within the target language. This debate underscores the multifaceted nature of Quranic translation, where both the original meaning and the reception within the receiving culture hold significant weight.

1. The Intricacies of Equivalence in Translating Sacred Texts

The act of translating sacred texts goes beyond mere word substitution. Achieving equivalence, the ability to convey the essence of the original message in the target language, presents a complex challenge. Traditionally, the discussion has been framed as a binary opposition: literal translation, prioritizing a word-for-word transfer, versus literary (or free) translation, emphasizing conveying the overall content and style. However, this binary view has been challenged by scholars like Eugene A. Nida, who shifted the focus towards the effects of translation strategies on the target audience. Nida (1964 :159) proposed two key approaches:

Formal Equivalence: This prioritizes a close match to the original text's form and content, aiming for a high degree of accuracy in conveying the grammatical structure, vocabulary, and sentence order.

Dynamic Equivalence: This focuses on creating a similar impact on the target audience as the original had on its audience. Here, meaning takes precedence over form, and adjustments might be necessary to ensure the message resonates with the target culture.

Finding perfect equivalence remains an elusive ideal. Translation inherently involves some information loss, as Ladmiral describes using the term "entropy." Even with dynamic equivalence, adjustments are necessary to achieve the desired effect. For instance, translating "la clientèle" (French for customers, singular) to Arabic might use the plural "الزبائن" (al-zubā'in) to better reflect the intended

meaning for the Arabic audience. This prioritizes the target audience's understanding over a strictly literal rendering.

Nida argues that translators act as mediators, aiming to bridge the gap between a foreign text and its target audience. This necessitates conveying not just the meaning but also the overall form and style of the original text, where feasible. However, achieving a perfect balance between these elements is a continuous negotiation. Translators must grapple with the complexities of language, including the nuances of pragmatics – the study of how language functions in context.

Pragmatics equips translators to bridge the gap between literal words and the intended message. For example, a simple command like "أفرغ القمامة!" "take out the trash" might not capture a mother's frustration if her son keeps neglecting his chores. She might use a question like "متى ستفرغ القمامة بالله عليك؟" "when are you going to take out the trash?" to express both the order and her annoyance. Translators must consider these pragmatic nuances, such as tone, implied meaning, and cultural references, to effectively convey the message in the target language, even if the sentence structure changes.

While the debate between literal and free translation has been influential, Hatim and Mason (1990:181) argue for a more nuanced approach, emphasizing "relative equivalence." This acknowledges that achieving a perfect replica of the source text is impractical. The goal becomes approximating the target text to the meaning of the source text to the greatest extent possible, while acknowledging the inherent limitations of translation.

Similarly, Hatim (1990:76-78) suggests that equivalence should be achieved at the level of the "illocutionary force" of the utterance, rather than solely at the level of its propositional content. The illocutionary force refers to the intended action or effect of the speaker's utterance, such as an order or a request. For example, the Quranic verse "ألا تقاتلون قوما نكثوا أيمانهم" "Do you not fight a people who broke their oaths?" (Quran 9:13) uses an interrogative form, but the illocutionary force is a command to "fight them." Identifying the intended effect is crucial for achieving equivalence in translation.

The discussion of translation is incomplete without considering the translator and the reader. Translators navigate a spectrum of priorities:

- **Author-oriented translation:** Prioritizes the author's intentions and faithfulness to the source text.
- **Text-oriented translation:** Focuses on the nature of the text itself, considering its genre, style, and register.
- **Reader-oriented translation:** Prioritizes the reader's understanding and cultural context.

The chosen approach depends on the translator's judgment and the specific text. For instance, legal documents often require a text-oriented approach to ensure accuracy and precision. Conversely, translating a literary work might involve a more reader-oriented approach to capture the style and emotional impact of the original. Ultimately, translation involves a balancing act between these interests, aiming for a product that is both faithful to the original and accessible to the target audience.

While achieving perfect equivalence in translating sacred texts remains an elusive ideal, a nuanced approach that considers the target audience, pragmatic context, and illocutionary force can bridge the gap between languages and deliver the essence of the original message.

2. The Importance of Meaning and Context in Translation

Effective translation goes beyond a simple word-for-word conversion. As Peter Newmark asks, what truly constitutes translation? It's not just about transferring the intended meaning from one language to another, but capturing the author's purpose and message within its specific context (Newmark, 1982).

Meaning forms the foundation of language and bridges communication across cultures (Lederer & Seleskovitch, 1987:33). Translators strive to accurately convey the original text's meaning, yet this seemingly straightforward task presents a significant challenge (Catford, 1965:64).

Effective translation requires more than simply finding equivalent terms. Translators must be aware of the various layers of meaning embedded within a text, a concept referred to as "pluralité des sens" (multiple meanings) by Baylon and Fabre (1979:113). Many argue that focusing solely on linguistic equivalence, as seen in comparative linguistics approaches, neglects the broader context (Vinay & Darbelnet, Catford). Durieux (2010) emphasizes the limitations of this approach, arguing that effective translation necessitates a "complete separation from the language" itself. Language serves as a tool to convey a message, and the translator's priority should be understanding that message within its context. Ultimately, context plays a crucial role in defining the intended meaning (Ricoeur, 2004).

Consider the French expression "Il a un cousin au front," which literally translates to "He has a cousin on the front lines." Without context, this sentence could be misinterpreted as referring to a mosquito on someone's forehead! Lederer and Seleskovitch (2001:32) highlight how meaning is strongly dependent on context. A sentence's true meaning becomes clear only when placed within a discourse.

The importance of context has been recognized for centuries. Early Arabic linguists discussed "situational context," which considers the specific situation where language is used. This context helps determine a word's meaning and the speaker's intent. Understanding context is paramount for accurate interpretation.

Linguist Hassan (1999:33) offers "المقام" (al-maqam) as the best Arabic equivalent for the modern concept of "context of situation." He explains that unlike a rigid frame, "al-maqam" refers to the dynamic social situation where the speaker, listener, the spoken words, and everything else related to the conversation all come together.

This concept of "situation" goes beyond simply referring to context. It encompasses the various aspects surrounding a communication event, including the physical and social environment, the participants involved, their relationship, and the purpose of communication. This broader concept explains the existence of numerous Arabic terms for "situation," such as "communication situation" (مقام الاتصال (Maqam al-Ittisal)), "discourse situation" (مقام الخطاب (Maqam al-Khitab)), and "contextual situation" (المقام السياقي (Al-Maqam al-Siyaci)). These terms highlight the different nuances captured by "situation" compared to the simpler concept of "context."

Understanding the "al-maqam" is essential for translating sacred texts like the Quran. For instance, a seemingly simple command might carry a deeper meaning or emotional weight depending on the historical context of its revelation. Recognizing the intended audience and the social situation surrounding the verse can help translators decide between a literal translation or a dynamic equivalence approach that aims to convey the same impact on the target audience.

The impact of context on meaning becomes clear when we examine everyday expressions. Take the Arabic phrase "يا سلام" (ya salam) for instance. Its literal translation is "O peace." However, the true meaning can vary greatly depending on the situation. "Ya salam" could express appreciation, disbelief, sarcasm, or even anger. Discerning the intended meaning relies solely on understanding the context in which it's used, including the speaker's tone, body language, and the surrounding situation (Hassan, 1999:33).

Understanding context, particularly the concept of "al-maqam" in Arabic, is crucial for effective translation. By considering the situational and social context, translators can move beyond literal meaning and capture the author's intended message. This approach ensures an accurate and meaningful translation that resonates with the target audience.

Another compelling example of how context influences meaning is the Arabic phrase "السلام عليكم" "as-salamu alaykum" (peace be upon you). While its literal translation suggests a greeting, the intended meaning can vary significantly depending on the situation. The word itself can even be used to express anger. Imagine a lengthy debate where neither person budges. Frustrated with the lack of progress, you might turn away, make a gesture of dismissal, and utter "as-salamu alaykum" with a tone that conveys irritation rather than peace.

This example emphasises the need of examining the larger context, or "maqam," when interpreting language. The functional or dictionary meaning alone would not convey the whole intent of the remark. By delving deeper into topics such as deixis (words that rely on context for meaning) and nonverbal communication (gestures and facial expressions), we can improve our ability to accurately interpret utterances and gain a more comprehensive understanding of how language works in everyday interactions.

Arab grammarians were remarkably ahead of their time in recognizing the significance of "maqam" (context) for understanding meaning. This concept, along with "maqaal" (speech), predates modern linguistics by nearly a millennium. The concept of "maqam" finds echoes in the works of ancient Greek thinkers like Plato, who in his "Phaedrus," emphasized the importance of considering the context of a speech for effective communication. Similarly, Aristotle's "Poetics" delves into the topic of context in speech.

The Arabic phrases "لكل مقام مقال" (li-kulli maqāmin maqālan) which translates to "For every situation, there is a speech" and "لكل كلمة مع صاحبها مقام" (li-kulli kalimah ma'a sāhibatiha maqām) meaning "Every word has its own context" highlight the universality of context in understanding meaning. This principle applies to all languages, not just Arabic. In the realm of Arabic rhetoric, the concept of "maqam" emphasizes the importance of context in understanding meaning. This becomes clear when we examine Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib's response to the Kharijite slogan "لا حكم إلا لله" ("There is no judgment but God's"). He countered with the powerful phrase "كلمة حق أريد بها باطل" ("A true word intended for falsehood"). His response suggests that people might have been swayed by the literal meaning of the slogan, missing the underlying motive. The Kharijites, he argued, were using a religious statement – undeniably true on the surface – to advance a political agenda. This historical example underscores why context is crucial. We must go beyond the surface meaning of words to grasp the true intent and avoid manipulation.

The concept of "maqam" in Arabic rhetoric represents a significant contribution to the field of meaning analysis. It emphasizes the importance of context in accurately understanding the intended meaning of communication. As the passage argues, it's not enough to focus solely on the meaning of the words ("المقال" - al-maqal). Rather, the meaning of the context ("المقام" - al-maqam) must be considered as well. For instance, when the Jews in Medina heard the verse that says, "مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَفْرِضُ اللَّهُ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا" "Who will give Allah a loan (qardan hasanan)?" (Quran 2:245), they took a literal interpretation, suggesting that God is poor. However, Abu al-Dardah, who understood the context ("المقام") correctly, interpreted it as God's generosity, asking for a metaphorical loan of good deeds from what He has already bestowed upon humanity (Hassan,1999 :338).

Commentators on the Quran have long been aware of the difference between the apparent meaning of the text and its deeper meaning. This understanding led them to distinguish between the literal meaning ("ma'nā maqālī") and the contextual meaning ("ma'nā maqāmī") (Khalil,1996 :155)

While understanding "maqam" is essential for accurate interpretation, applying this concept to Quran translation presents unique challenges. Translators must navigate the delicate balance between conveying the literal meaning of the Arabic text and capturing the intended meaning for a target audience unfamiliar with the original context. Here are some key considerations for translators working with the Quran:

- **Historical and Cultural Context:** Understanding the historical and cultural context in which the Quran was revealed is crucial for interpreting the "maqam" of each verse. This includes knowledge of the social, political, and religious landscape of early Arabia.

- **Authorial Intent:** Determining the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) purpose and goals in conveying specific messages can provide valuable insights into the intended meaning of the verses.

- **Target Audience:** Translators must consider the cultural background and knowledge of the target audience to ensure the translated message resonates and is accurately understood.

- **Faithful Representation:** Despite the challenges, translators strive to deliver a translation that remains faithful to the original Arabic text while effectively conveying the intended meaning within the new context.

Understanding the Arabic concept of "maqam" sheds light on the multifaceted nature of meaning in language. By recognizing the influence of context, we gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of communication and the challenges of translation, particularly for sacred texts like the Quran. Translating the Quran necessitates careful consideration of the "maqam" of each verse to ensure an accurate and meaningful representation of the divine message for a new audience

While Arabic scholars were at the forefront of exploring "maqam," Western scholarship has also made significant contributions to the understanding of context. According to Dales (1993) the elements that constitute context include:

- The intentions of the speakers
- The expectations of both the speaker and the listener
- The contribution of the participants to the topic at hand
- Their shared linguistic knowledge
- The social norms of the situation
- The personalities and roles of the speaker and listener

There is some overlap between these elements and the context theory proposed by the English scholar Firth. Firth's theory emphasizes that any analysis of language should be based on the "context of the situation". This means considering all the elements, circumstances, and conditions surrounding the speech event, including:

- The personality and cultural background of the speaker and listener, as well as any witnesses to the speech (if present) and their roles
- Social and environmental factors relevant to language and communication at the time of the speech
- The effect of the speech on the participants, such as persuasion, emotional response (pain, amusement, etc.), or any other impact (khalil,1996. 157-158).

In essence, Dales and Firth emphasise the importance of the environment around a speech event in understanding the meaning provided by the language used. This is consistent with the prior discussion about the role of the speaker, listener, their relationship, and the surrounding social context in generating meaning.

Graham's perspective on meaning and translation highlights the inherent challenges. While translation can be a valuable tool, it cannot always perfectly capture meaning due to inherent limitations between languages. Even the most skilled translations require interpretation, and there can be inevitable losses due to the varying expressive capabilities of languages. This underscores the importance of interpretation in the translation process and the potential for discrepancies. These insights are valuable for anyone involved with translation, whether a professional translator, researcher, or simply someone interested in the connection between language and meaning.

Modern linguistics, particularly the field of pragmatics (or speech act theory), has transformed how we view communication. This field, drawing from various disciplines like philosophy and psychology, goes beyond simply understanding sentence structure. Instead, it emphasizes communication as a process of interpretation based on shared rules.

Pragmatics focuses on what the speaker intends to convey and the meaning derived from the context, which the listener must interpret. The listener accomplishes this by drawing inferences from the speaker's words, relying on these shared rules of communication to grasp the speaker's true meaning and underlying thoughts. One important tool for understanding context within pragmatics is the concept of a "speech act" or "speech event" (Galisson et Coste, 1976: 401). This approach provides an alternative perspective on the relationship between language and pragmatics, focusing on the act of communication itself and the speaker's intent within a specific context. Understanding the "how" and "why" behind communication is crucial for accurate translation. J. Mounin (1976) argues that it's these underlying reasons and shared cultural understanding that make translation a complex task

According to scholars like Newmark (1982), there's often a conflict between the literal meaning of words (referential meaning) and the intended message conveyed in context (communicative meaning). This clash becomes apparent when translating French expressions like "il fait froid." Should it be translated directly as "the weather is cold," or should it reflect the speaker's intent, like "I'm cold" or "I'm freezing"? The best translation hinges on the context.

For example, imagine someone says "il fait froid" in response to a friend's invitation for a walk in Algiers during winter with a temperature of 5 degrees Celsius. In this scenario, the speaker is likely rejecting the invitation due to the cold. Here, the translation might be "It's too cold to go out" to capture the intended message.

On the other hand, if the same phrase is uttered by a friend during a gathering with a temperature of 10 degrees Celsius, they might simply be requesting permission to put on their coat due to a slight chill. In this context, the translation could be "I'm a bit chilly" to reflect the speaker's desire.

Newmark (1982) argues that meaning is determined by the speaker's intention, whether direct or indirect, based on the context of use. He states that the translator must go beyond the text, to the underlying text, to what the author means, not what he says ". He adds that the closest solution to the original is the best pragmatic solution," meaning the best solution that takes into account the communicative intent of the speaker.

However, some scholars argue that the translator should not interpret the author's intention. They believe understanding the meaning is the responsibility of the receiver, regardless of their profession (politician, scientist, etc.). They argue translator interpretation can introduce confusion. Instead, the translator should focus on conveying the text's meaning for the receiver to find the same meaning as the translator did in the original text. This approach preserves all possible interpretations for the final receiver (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 2001).

Seleskovitch and Lederer further emphasize that "talking about meaning is never talking about intention" and that "meaning should not be confused with motives or intentions." They argue that translators who act as interpreters or hermeneuticists overstep their boundaries. These scholars emphasize the centrality of context in understanding meaning. Their classic example of "il ya un courant d'air" ("there is a draft") perfectly illustrates this point. Focusing solely on the literal meaning could lead a translator to suggest "close the window," but that might not be the speaker's intention. Understanding the situation surrounding the utterance – body language, room temperature, and overall atmosphere – is crucial for accurate interpretation.

They further underscore this point with a compelling story: during a conference, a speaker used a projector with the French phrase "Lumière s'il vous plait" ("Light please"). The technician, lacking context, turned on the lights each time. Later, the speaker repeated the phrase, but this time to turn the lights off. The same words conveyed opposite meanings due to the evolving context.

These examples highlight how pragmatics, the study of language use in context, plays a vital role in translation. Translators go beyond the literal meaning of words to capture the speaker's intended message, considering the surrounding context and the cultural nuances that shape communication.

To explore the connection between what something means and the speaker's intention, a book titled "La communication efficace, de l'intention aux moyens d'expression" ("Effective Communication, from Intention to Means of Expression") by Arcand and Bourbeau (1998 :39-40) provides some helpful examples.

The distinction between direct and indirect speech is explained. In direct speech, the speaker conveys their meaning straightforwardly, and the wording itself unveils their intention. For instance, the command "Put this disk back in its place!" clearly communicates the speaker's desire for the listener to take action.

Indirect speech, however, involves the speaker saying something that implies a different meaning. Questions, for example, can be used indirectly. Asking "Whose is this disk that is lying on the table?" isn't necessarily a request for information about ownership. It might be a subtle way of asking the listener to put the disk away. Here, understanding the context is crucial to grasping the speaker's true intention.

Speakers and listeners have two main approaches when it comes to conveying and interpreting meaning:

Direct speech acts: These clearly express the speaker's intention without requiring much mental effort for the listener to understand.

Indirect speech acts: These require the listener to go beyond the literal words and consider the situation to understand the speaker's hidden meaning through interpretation.

In essence, the relationship between meaning and intention is complex. Direct speech is usually easier to understand, while indirect speech might require the listener to consider the context to grasp the speaker's true purpose. Clear and concise communication is key to avoiding misunderstandings, and speakers should be mindful that their words can be interpreted in different ways.

Examples illustrate the complex link between what something signifies and the intention. A simple statement like "A floppy disk is fragile" can actually imply "Handle the floppy disk with care" (Arcand & Bourbeau, 1998 :40). Similarly, the seemingly straightforward question "May I say a word?" can have various hidden meanings depending on the context, such as a desire to speak, a suggestion that someone is talking too much, or a polite way of taking a turn (Arcand & Bourbeau, *ibid* :40). This highlights how a single speech act can convey multiple intentions within a specific situation.

Arab scholars have long recognized the importance of intention in communication. Al-Zarkashi, for instance, emphasizes that meaning arises from intention (Al-Shahri, N.M: 195). Similarly, Grice's theory focuses on the speaker's intended meaning as conveyed through language, following the principle of cooperation (Al-Shahri, 2004: 196-197).

However, pinpointing the exact distinction between meaning and intention can be challenging. Philosopher Graham acknowledges the difficulty in drawing a clear line between the two concepts (Al-Shahri, 2004: 12-13). Similarly, Seleskovitch argues that the focus should be on the meaning conveyed through speech ("sens de la parole") rather than just the literal meaning of the language itself ("signification linguistique") (Lederer & Seleskovitch, 2001: 32).

While the phrases "sens" and "signification" may appear to be equivalent (Lederer, 2006:182), linguists distinguish between both, emphasising the distinction between language as a system and its actual use in speech. This is consistent with Saussure's translation philosophy, which emphasises spoken language ("parole") rather than underlying linguistic structure ("langue") (Khumri, 2007: 213). Ultimately, the "situational meaning" intended by the speaker or listener takes precedence over the strictly objective meaning of the language itself. This knowledge of meaning's complexities enables translators to prioritise capturing the genuine purpose of a speech or statement in their translations.

While the terms "sens" and "signification" might seem synonymous in French (Lederer, 2006:182), linguists distinguish between them, highlighting the difference between language as a system ("langue") and the actual use of language in speech ("parole") (Galisson & Coste, 1976: 500). This aligns with Saussure's concept of translation focusing on spoken language ("parole") rather than just the underlying language structure ("langue") (Khumri, 2007: 213).

Ultimately, the "situational meaning" intended by the speaker or listener holds greater weight than the purely objective meaning of the language itself. This understanding of meaning's complexity allows translators to prioritize conveying the true purpose of the speech or statement in their translations.

3. Exegesis vs. Hermeneutics: Frameworks for Interpreting and Translating Sacred Texts

Interpretation and translation are deeply intertwined. Both aim to bridge the gap between a text and its audience. Interpreters, like hermeneuticists, delve into the meaning behind words, often seeking the author's original intent ("vouloir dire" in French).

This emphasis on understanding resonates with both Western hermeneutics and Islamic exegesis (tafsir). Tafsir approaches like "tafsir bil-ma'thur" prioritize objective understanding using historical and linguistic evidence. Conversely, "tafsir bi al-ra'y" allows for more subjective interpretation.

It's important to note that these categories are not absolute. Both approaches can involve literal understanding in certain contexts, and neither is completely free from subjectivity or objectivity.

The Mu'tazilah, known for their emphasis on reason and logic, embraced a more open approach to understanding and interpretation. The Salafis, while not explicitly acknowledging it, seemed to believe in achieving objective understanding through consensus (majority rule).

The vast array of Quran interpretations, from al-Zamakhshari to Ibn Kathir, highlights the inherent challenges of translation. Since any translation necessitates human interpretation, the translator's choices and background inevitably influence the final product. This becomes even more complex when considering the Quran's divine nature and the limitations of human understanding. Even methods like "interpretive translation," aiming to clarify meaning, can introduce layers of interpretation, potentially leading the reader further from the original Arabic text.

Nasser (2007 :30) emphasizes the inherent link between interpretation and translation. In text translation, the use of philology highlights the challenge of preserving meaning across languages due to potential semantic differences. As a result, the focus of interpretation shifts towards achieving equivalence or parity in meaning between the source and target texts.

Western hermeneutics posits a fundamental connection between interpretation and translation. This perspective views all interpretation as an effort to grasp the intended meaning behind someone else's words. Building on this idea, Gadamer argues that translation itself is a form of "hermeneutical dialogue" (Eco, *ibid*: 291).

In his book "Philosophie herméneutique," Gadamer (1996:85) characterizes hermeneutics as an activity largely driven by a specific kind of art. This art encompasses various practices, including proclamation, translation, explanation, and interpretation.

Gadamer further elaborates on the historical roots of hermeneutics by tracing its origins to theology (*Ibid*: 87). Here, hermeneutics is understood as the art of accurately interpreting the Holy Scriptures, encompassing both the Old and New Testaments.

Theological hermeneutics is a longstanding practice concerned with understanding the "sacred books," primarily the Old and New Testaments. Its roots lie in the ancient endeavor to unlock the meaning of religious texts (like the Torah) that were bound by the limitations of language. Over time, hermeneutics evolved into a set of principles and criteria that guide exegetes (interpreters) in deciphering these religious texts. In essence, interpretation becomes the process of decoding this language, revealing the underlying meaning beyond the written word. It can also be understood as the act of analyzing the spoken word ("speech") preserved in these scriptures.

Interpretation, also known as exegesis, delves into the meaning of historical documents, including religious, legal, and literary works, particularly sacred texts. This process involves internal investigation, examining the text itself. From this perspective, analyzing a text involves two crucial aspects: the objective element, which refers to the shared language ("langue") that allows for understanding. The subjective element focuses on the author's perspective, expressed through their unique use of language or "parole." These elements work together to inform each other, leading to a deeper understanding of the text.

Friedrich Schleiermacher is credited with pioneering a major shift in hermeneutical tradition. He significantly broadened the scope of hermeneutics by extending its application beyond the realm of theology to encompass philosophical, legal, historical, and literary texts. Furthermore, he challenged the established interpretive methods of Catholicism and Kabbalah. Schleiermacher advocated for a departure from traditional approaches to sacred texts, proposing instead the application of secular methods of interpretation.

Schleiermacher's hermeneutical approach is rooted in the concept of "primacy of misunderstanding." This principle acknowledges that encountering misunderstandings is more likely than achieving perfect comprehension, especially when dealing with older texts that may have become obscure or confusing over time. Recognizing this inherent challenge, Schleiermacher emphasizes the need to establish a systematic or artistic approach to interpretation in order to minimize misunderstandings and enhance understanding.

Schleiermacher emphasizes the importance of overcoming the historical and cultural distance between the interpreter and the text (Nasser, 2007). To achieve this objective understanding, he proposes a seemingly paradoxical method. He suggests that the interpreter, regardless of the historical gap, should attempt to transcend their own perspective and context. This involves a two-fold process: first, identifying with the author and attempting to reconstruct their experience from the text itself. However, Schleiermacher acknowledges the inherent difficulty of achieving complete objectivity. Despite this, he considers this process a crucial foundation for attaining accurate knowledge.

Schleiermacher posits that the art of interpretation hinges on two fundamental aspects: the objective element (linguistic) and the subjective element (psychological). These sides, further characterized by historical context and predictive qualities, combine to form the essential principles and unique approach of interpretation.

In the context of ancient Greek religion, the "hermeneute" served a dual role as both an interpreter and a translator. This concept resonates with Gadamer's perspective, which emphasizes that all translations are inherently interpretive acts. He argues that achieving understanding and engaging in interpretation are ultimately synonymous endeavors. (Vattimo, 2002, 716); (Eco, *ibid*: 292–293)

The profound link between understanding and translation is further emphasized by the title of a chapter in George Steiner's influential work, "After Babel." Titled "Comprendre c'est traduire" (French for "To understand is to translate"), it captures the essence of Steiner's argument. This concept resonates with Paul Ricoeur, who, in his book "Sur la traduction" (French for "On Translation"), acknowledges the central role of this idea in Steiner's work: "I agree here with the statement that governs the whole of George Steiner's book *After Babel* (Ricoeur, 2004: 44).

As the translator of Lederer and Seleskovitch's "Interpréter pour traduire" (translated as "Interpretation as a Path to Translation"), Faiza Al Qassim sheds light on a key aspect of the title. Highlighting a distinction between the intended meaning and a common misconception, she explains that the French term "interpréter" doesn't directly translate to "interpretation" in the English sense.

In Arabic, "interpretation" often signifies conveying the literal meaning, such as clarifying an ambiguous term. However, within the context of meaning-making, the term takes on a meaning closer to "understanding" or "comprehension" in English. Here, it refers to uncovering the deeper, implied meaning rather than simply the surface level.

To emphasize the importance of grasping this deeper meaning before translating, the translator opts to translate "interpréter" as "understanding" or "comprehension" throughout the book. In some cases, however, "interpretation" might be a suitable choice.

This distinction between Arabic and English interpretations doesn't necessarily contradict Steiner's claim, as understanding the author's intent can be considered a preliminary step towards translation.

The translator further clarifies this point by explaining the "theory of meaning/interpretative theory of translation" (*Théorie du sens-théorie interprétative de la traduction*). This theory, as Al Qassim explains,

emphasizes grasping the author's intended meaning ("vouloir dire" in French) and conveying it effectively to the recipient of the translated text (Lederer and Seleskovitch, *ibid*: 267).

M. Lederer, in her book "Translation Today, the Interpretive Model," delves into the concept of "vouloir dire" (Lederer, 2006:184). She describes it as a pre-verbal state of consciousness that ultimately leads to the expression of words. The speaker or writer holds the responsibility for shaping the meaning that the listener or reader will grasp. Unlike pure thought, "vouloir dire" becomes objectively understandable through the specific verbal meanings and their connection to cognitive elements.

This perspective suggests that understanding meaning leans more towards objectivity than subjectivity. Seleskovitch reinforces this notion by stating that meaning itself is distinct from the author's motives or intentions (Lederer and Seleskovitch, *ibid*, 250). He argues that both translators and interpreters, when they delve too deeply (becoming 'exegetes' and 'hermeneutes' respectively), can overstep the boundaries of their core tasks.

Seleskovitch further argues that the translator's function is essentially the same as that of a reader (Lederer and Seleskovitch, *ibid*: 198). From this perspective, translation becomes an act of reading, where the recipient actively participates in constructing the intended meaning, echoing the ideas of reception theory. Proponents of this theory believe that the initial understanding, or "first reading," lays the groundwork for subsequent interpretations of the translation. This allows the reader to gradually uncover the "deep structure" of the discourse, rather than having the intended meaning presented directly. In essence, it empowers the reader to decipher the author's "vouloir dire," the underlying message they aimed to convey.

The discussion of "vouloir dire" and the reader's role in meaning-making naturally leads us to the question of an ideal translation. Islamic hermeneutics offer a distinct perspective on interpretation compared to Western traditions. Unlike Western approaches that often prioritize the author's original intent, Muslims believe the Quran is the literal word of God, revealed to Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel. This divine origin imbues the text with absolute authority and truth. Consequently, interpretation in Islamic hermeneutics prioritizes uncovering the intended meaning of Allah, rather than solely focusing on the historical context or authorial intent.

Islamic scholars place great importance on the chain of transmission (isnad) that connects the interpretation to the Prophet himself. Reliable transmission ensures the accuracy and authenticity of the interpretation. This emphasis on lineage stands in contrast to Western hermeneutics, where individual reasoning and historical analysis play a more prominent role.

The Quran is believed to encompass various literary styles and genres. Some passages convey literal meaning (zahir), while others contain deeper allegorical or symbolic meanings (batin). Islamic hermeneutics involve recognizing these different genres and interpreting them accordingly. Unlike Western approaches that might prioritize a single, consistent meaning, Islamic scholars delve into the multifaceted nature of the text, acknowledging the potential for both literal and figurative interpretations.

While revelation holds primary importance, reason and logic (aql) are also crucial tools for interpretation. Islamic scholars employ logical reasoning to analyze the text, ensuring interpretations do not contradict established principles of Islamic theology and law. This balances the emphasis on divine revelation with the need for rational understanding.

There are various schools of thought within Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) that have developed distinct approaches to Quranic interpretation. These schools consider factors like context, precedent (hadith), and legal reasoning when interpreting the Quran's application to specific situations. This allows for a degree of flexibility and adaptation within the framework of core principles.

Islamic hermeneutics offer a unique and multifaceted approach to interpreting sacred texts. By emphasizing the divine origin of the Quran, the importance of transmission, and the recognition of multiple layers of meaning, Islamic scholars strive to understand the true message conveyed by God. This approach

complements and sometimes contrasts with Western hermeneutics, highlighting the diverse ways religious texts are interpreted and understood across different traditions.

Conclusions

Our investigation has revealed the complex interplay between meaning, translation, and interpretation. It's a symphony in which understanding is dependent not just on the notes themselves, but also on the cultural context and the interpreter's skillful execution. Scholars remind us that translation is more than just a decoder ring; it is a subtle art form dealing with the limits of a new score. This emphasizes the importance of context, the "maqam" of the Arabic world, and encourages us to go beyond surface comprehension for truly effective cross-cultural communication.

Pragmatics takes over as the conductor, methodically analyzing the "why" underlying the phrases. Translators bridge the language gap by taking into account cultural variations and the ever-changing nature of language. They capture the substance of the speaker's message. This is especially important when translating religious writings, because the interplay of meaning and intention becomes a sacred concerto in itself.

The sections on interpretation and translation have revealed a fundamental link. The first step of interpretation is often to unravel the meaning behind the notes, taking into account both objective components (common language) and subjective elements (the author's point of view). Western hermeneutics, with its theological roots, focuses on interpreting the composer's original intended meaning. We encountered the idea of overcoming the historical and cultural gap between interpreter and text.

Furthermore, reception theory emphasizes that the reader plays an important role in building meaning from the translated score.

The issue of original intent and the reader's role inevitably leads to the subject of the ideal translation. Islamic hermeneutics provides a distinct perspective, a distinctive counterpoint to this symphony of meaning. Unlike Western approaches, which frequently prioritize the composer's original intent, Islamic scholars have long recognized many kinds of Quranic interpretation, such as "tafsir bil-ma'thur" (reliance on known narrations) and "tafsir bi al-ra'y" (interpretation based on reason and logic). Exploring these distinct traditions might reveal important insights into how Islamic scholars perceive this sacred score.

In short, grasping the complexity of meaning, translation, interpretation, and hermeneutics prepares us to navigate the wide landscapes of cross-cultural communication. It is more than just an academic pursuit; it is the key to unlocking the possibility for profound understanding and connection across cultures and over time.

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