

“Herbs or Stars.” A Brief Survey of some Translations of the Glorious Qur’an: The Case of Surat Ar-Rahman

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ABSTRACT: *Writers from different countries, different religions and even different linguistic backgrounds have tried to understand the meaning of the Qur’an, then to translate it in different languages. Thus, this study is based on three translations of Surat Ar-Rahman written respectively by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Y), Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (P), and Muhammad Habib Shakir (S). The researcher has combined and twinned them to their transliterated equivalent verse. The translations are from the source language (Classical Arabic) to the target language (English). Obviously, there will be no syntactic or morphological analysis of these translations. It would apparently be a too great task for the author of this paper, since any Surah of the Qur’an would need centuries to explain all that unique, dignified figurative language enhanced with several anaphors. This paper, compared to others, is at an embryonic stage. The researcher will consider just some differences in the three translations which have puzzled her for years. Hence, she arrives to the conclusion that due to the richness and the Grandeur of the pragmatic meaning of the Glorious Qur’an, further research is needed to highlight some of the religious, cultural and linguistic differences between Languages.*

KEYWORDS: Arabic/English, Qur’an/Surat, semantic/pragmatic meaning, source/target language, translation

RÉSUMÉ : *Des écrivains de différents pays, de différentes religions et même de différents horizons linguistiques ont essayé de comprendre le sens du Coran, puis de le traduire dans différentes langues. Ainsi, cette étude est basée sur trois traductions de la sourate Ar-Rahman écrites respectivement par Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Y), Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (P) et Muhammad Habib Shakir (S). Le chercheur les a combinés et jumelés à leur vers équivalent translittéré. Les traductions sont de la langue source (arabe classique) vers la langue cible (anglais). Evidemment, il n’y aura pas d’analyse syntaxique ou morphologique de ces traductions. Ce serait apparemment une tâche trop grande pour l’auteur*

de cet article, car toute sourate du Coran aurait besoin de siècles pour expliquer tout ce langage figuratif unique et digne rehaussé de plusieurs anaphores. Cet article, comparé à d'autres, est à un stade embryonnaire. Le chercheur ne prendra en compte que quelques différences dans les trois traductions qui l'intriguent depuis des années. Par conséquent, elle arrive à la conclusion qu'en raison de la richesse et de la grandeur de la signification pragmatique du Glorieux Coran, des recherches supplémentaires sont plus que nécessaires pour mettre en évidence certaines des différences religieuses, culturelles et linguistiques entre les langues.

MOTS-CLÉS : arabe / anglais, Coran / sourate, signification sémantique / pragmatique, langue source / cible, traduction

Introduction

It is an interesting feature of language that the meaning of a word depends on more than what it refers to. Words carry associations which often come from our sense of what they mean in the contexts in which they are habitually used (Labov, 1970, p.283). Phrases can recall particular registers e.g. 'supply and demand;' it may also be the case that certain words can be defined as belonging only to a context of poetry.

How can we render all the weight of the metaphors and anaphors, of the alliterations and onomatopoeias expressed so elegantly in the verses of the Qur'an or even in Arabic Poetry like Al-Mu3alaqat? Who can render the very essence of this Glorious Speech of God? Besides, who can translate the letters of the two first verses of Surat Ash-Shura (Council, Consultation) "Ha-Mim (42.01) 'Ain. Sin. Qaf.'"(42.02), or "Alif, Lam, Meem"(02.01) at the opening of Surat Al-Baqarah (The Cow)? Put apart that they also appear at the beginning of Surat Al-Ankaboot (the Spider; 29.01), Surat Al-room (The Romans, The Byzantines; 030.01) Surat Luqman (Luqman; 31.01) and 'finally' in Surat As-Sajda (The Prostration, Worship, Adoration; 32.01). These Divine Holy utterances still remain a mystery, far beyond any human intelligence, known only by Allah, The Beneficent.

Literature Review

Both semantics and pragmatics are concerned with meaning, but whereas semantics studies meaning as a property of language, pragmatics considers meaning in terms of language use. The former is rule-governed, and is conceived of as a theory that deals with the meaning

aspect of language as a system. It characterizes and explains the systematic relations between words and between sentences, and is thus able to predict. Pragmatics, on the other hand, treats meaning not at an abstract level of the system but at the concrete level of use. It deals with meaning in terms of speaker's intention, hearer's interpretation, context and performance or action.

The term 'pragmatics' is taken in its current sense by Bar-Hillel (1968). Thus, pragmatics concerns itself not only with the interpretation of indexical expressions but with the essential dependence of communication in natural languages on speaker and hearer, on linguistic context and extra-linguistic context. It also deals with the availability of background knowledge, on readiness to obtain this background knowledge and on the good will of the participants in a communication act.

For example, the use of English always varies according to a number of factors, and has to be appropriate to the occasion, the audience and the topic. As stated by Freeborn (2006) in speaking or writing English we have to make choices from our vocabulary, or store of words, sometimes called lexis, so that we are said to make lexical choices and also from grammar and pronunciation in speech; by grammar is meant the form that words take i.e. word-structure or morphology, and how words are ordered into sentences, sometimes called syntax, so that they make meaning.

Linguists have come to the general conclusion that the physical environment, or context, is perhaps more easily recognized as having a powerful impact on how referring expressions are to be interpreted. The physical context of a speech community, perhaps even the conventions of those who live in the same house, may be crucial to the interpretation of speech. As Chomsky (1965) points out: "part of the difficulty with the theory of meaning is that meaning tends to be used as a catch-all term to include every aspect of language that we know very little about." (p.103).

Consequently, Lehrer (1974, p.33) stressed this fact when he devised certain tests which were meant essentially to measure semantic similarity and others to determine the degree of semantic difference. The tests made use of native speakers' intention, and the results showed that

judgements were not stable for meanings which were very different or very similar, i.e. for words with meanings occupying both ends of a continuum on sense relations. The unclear cases fall in-between these extremes. Lehrer (1974, p. 36) used "the scaling method to determine which meanings are more similar" and thus, conversely, less different, and vice versa, but this method is far from being decisive.

The reason is that there is variability not only for different speakers, but for the same speaker at different times. This implies an element of arbitrariness will be present when deciding on the distance between two or more meanings. And this is exactly what happens to these three translations of the Holy Qur'an. Moreover, the non-linguistic context can be taken to refer to the more immediate context of situation as well as the broader context of culture. The expression 'context of situation' is always associated with the name of J. R. Firth (1957 & 2013) who regarded meaning as an essentially social phenomenon and, thus, as something that cannot be dissociated from the social context in which the utterance is embedded. Therefore, he draws attention to the context-dependent nature of meaning. Firth (1957) is known for his famous quotation: "you shall know a word by the company it keeps." (p.11)

Yet, communication as defined by James Carrey (quoted in Murray, 2005, p.4) is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced maintained, repaired and transformed. Reality is brought into existence and produced by communication – by in short, the construction, apprehension and utilization of symbolic forms. Reality, while not a mere function of symbolic forms, is produced by some systems - or by humans who produce such systems - that focus its existence in specific terms. This definition implies that communication is a process of 'making' reality where significant symbols are formed and understood.

To understand in Gadamer's sense (quoted in Dostal, 2002, p.41), is to articulate a meaning, (a thing, an event) into words, words that are always mine, but at the same time those of what I strive to understand. The application that is at the core of every understanding process thus grounds in language. It has been called by Dostal (2002, p.42) "implicit understanding", which conceals the view of the other in our form of life and culture.

For Crystal (1985) semantics is the study of linguistic meaning. He discusses under the heading of 'reference' the fact that we think of words as relating 'things' in the world. However, semanticists do not agree with this. They use the term 'sense' rather than 'reference.' On this concern, Crystal (1985) explains that 'the focus of the modern subject (of semantics) is on the way people relate words to each other within the framework of their language.'

The term 'word' is used for any inflected variant, for instance 'open', 'opens', 'opened', 'opening' are different forms of the same lexeme. One of the sense relations among lexemes is the syntagmatic/paradigmatic relations. A syntagmatic relationship is the way lexemes are related in a horizontal line, whereas a paradigmatic one is the way words can substitute for each other in the same sentence context.

According to the philosopher Austin (1962), pragmatics is the study of 'how to do things with words' or of the meaning of language in context; undoubtedly, context does contribute to make sense. A statement must be valid in a context in which speech acts are uttered (see also Searle, 1975). Most of the time, the pragmatic meaning is present in the three different translations of Surah Ar-Rahman of this paper. But what about the semantic meaning? Which is the right one?

Analysis of some verses of Surat Ar-Rahman

According to Catford (1974), to translate is to "substitute the text material of one language (SL) by the equivalent text material of another language (TL)." (p.1). He defines translation as an operation performed on languages: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another. Yet, the two languages have no spatial, temporal or social relationship between them. As Catford points out (1974:20), translation is always in a given direction, i.e. from a source language into a target language. Following this linguist, one may define translation as the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language. Furthermore, Mounin (1967) asserts that in theory translation is impossible, "but in practice fairly possible."

In fact, when we consider (55.06): "And the herbs and the trees" or "The stars and the trees." One may notice the ambiguity felt at this point by Pickthall for the word 'alnnajmu' because this word has two meanings in Arabic: herbs and stars. In the researcher's understanding, Logic would dictate that "herbs and trees" would sound more appropriate for Waalnnajmu waalshshajaru , since every God's creation is reckoned symmetrically. Furthermore, the overtones of the words, used in any language are not just those of the direct meaning and the focus should be on the most important.

Looking at sentences and understanding the message they convey, in other words, 'making sense' of a written text, does not normally involve saying the word we read or understanding its separate meaning, not even 'silently inside our heads', as so elegantly expressed by Duff (2018). The whole of the idiomatic expressions not to mention the proverbs are part not only of a certain culture but of a certain language as well.

Then in (55.04), three semantic translations are given respectively by Yusuf Ali, Pickthall and Shakir: "speech (and intelligence) / utterance/ the mode of expression." Most of the time, the translator is confronted to all the social and cultural differences between the source language and the target language. These divergences appear in the extra linguistic elements as well as the natural and social phenomena such as the translator's background, his life style, his religion and his traditions. "Cognitive stylistics looks at texts as discourses composed of acts of communication. How can we apply this to translation as an act of cognitive stylistic interpretation?" (Ghazala, 2018, p.7)

In (55.07), (55.08), (55.09), the Balance is mentioned. The pragmatic meaning is the equilibrium of the whole Creation, the entire Universe and its Divine computed cycle. One may interpret this as the balance which serves to keep the social relationship between different communities of speakers.

Without knowing the context, the identity of the speaker or the speaker's intent, it is difficult to infer the meaning with certainty. Another ambiguous verse for the translators is, "55.05" the three words are not synonyms since they mean different realities." This is an example of lexical ambiguity, as the fragments "follow courses (exactly) computed"

(Y), "are made punctual" (P), and" follow a reckoning" (S), can never have the same semantic meaning.

Yet, the general idea is the same thanks to our understanding of Allah, the Powerful Speaker, and the pragmatically no more ambiguous context. Besides, in 55|14| *Khalaqa al-insana min salsalin kaalfakhkhari*, the three translations differ semantically and the meaning may change from one translation to the other since 'pottery' is an inanimate object while 'the potter's' is a person. (Y): He created man from sounding clay like unto pottery / (P): He created man of clay like the potter's/ (S): He created man from dry clay like earthen vessels. Meaning is determined by the context and the speaker's intent. Linguists define a sentence as an abstract entity i.e. a string of words. As soon as we consider the non-linguistic context, it becomes a speech act.

Furthermore, no other repetition of "Fabi-ayyi ala-i rabbikuma tukaththibani," in any other target language would render the same effect on both readers and listeners of this Surah. If anyone thinks the opposite, just listen, for example, to Abdul Basat Mohammed Abdul Samad's Tajwid of Surat Al-Baqara and be warned. In fact, the researcher can feel his voice reverberating deep in her chest. Undoubtedly, the incredible voice alone heals the soul.

When he juxtaposes the two versions of Milton's "Eulogy on a Friend Drowned in the Irish Channel", Ghazala (2019) puts a clear line of demarcation between the poetic translation and the poetical one. The latter shows "no concern with prosody and aesthetics" (p.12). "A poem with no rhyme and rhythm in particular would be considered in effect poor" (p.5). He suggests that the best translator should have a good command of both languages (English and Arabic). What one can understand as a balanced bilingual. Besides, the translator should also understand religious and cultural differences between both texts: the source and the target one.

Furthermore, one may wonder about 'some' (if not all) translations of the Glorious Qur'an in other languages. Whatever these adaptations are, they will unquestionably become no more sacred. On this matter, Al-Zubaidi (2018) stressed the fact that the Malay people felt the need to

learn Classical Arabic for the purpose of reciting and pronouncing properly the Holy Qur'an. Arabic is still going hand in hand with Bahasa Melayu, although "Arabic is a Central Semitic language" and Bahasa Melayu is belonging to "the Malayo-Polyne-sian language." (Al-Zubaidi, 2018). Yet, each of both languages excels in fulfilling its primary function. Moreover, Arabic serves also as an Islamic identifier for the Muslim Malay people.

Conclusion

It has been proved that each language is unique in its gender, even languages belonging to the same Proto-Family. Consequently, the researcher can only stand up, speechless and prostrate in front of the incommensurable Divine Power, the Unique One capable of such varieties and diversities in the Huge, Dignified Universe. God is also without comment the Unique One to elegantly express such overthrowing metaphors in a so beautiful and eloquent language, full of anaphors.

Readers have to feel free to opt for the most faithful translation of Surah Al-Rahman stated in this paper. It goes without saying, that even when we qualify a translation as being 'faithful', there still remains a great deal of ambiguity. Faithfulness at which level? Semantics or pragmatics or prosody (or all the three together), put apart all those twenty levels of "the specialty of poetry" mentioned in Ghazala's (2019, p. 4).

On the other hand, the researcher believes strongly that the works of all translators had served successfully to the understanding of the Holy Qur'an by Arabs and non-Arab Muslims as well as by other people from monotheist religions and of other beliefs. Their contribution is phenomenal. Perhaps we should agree on one unique translation; this would certainly be a utopia since it would call for a kind of conformity. Yet, human beings' minds and thoughts are at the same time identical and so different.

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Appendix

The verses from Surah Ar-Rahman (The Beneficent) mentioned in the text:
"Bismi Allahi Ar-Rahmani Ar-Rahimi".

55|4 | 'allamahu albayana

Y: He has taught him speech (and intelligence).

P: He hath taught him utterance.

S: Taught him the mode of expression.

55|5| Alshshamsu waalqamaru bihusbanin

Y: The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed;

P: The sun and the moon are made punctual.

S: The sun and the moon follow a reckoning.

55|6| Waalnnajmu waalshshajaru yasjudani

Y: And the herbs and the trees - both (alike) prostrate in adoration.

P: The stars and the trees prostrate.

S: And the herbs and the trees do prostrate (to Him).

55|7| Waalssamaa rafa'aha wawada'a almeezana

Y: And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance (of Justice),

P: And the sky He hath uplifted; and He hath set the measure,

S: And the heaven, He raised it high, and He made the balance

55|8| Alla tatghaw fee almeezani

Y: In order that ye may not transgress (due) balance.

P: That ye exceed not the measure,

S: That you may not be inordinate in respect of the measure.

55|9| Waaqeemoo alwazna bialqisti wala tukhsiroo almeezana

Y: So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance.

P: But observe the measure strictly, nor fall short thereof.

S: And keep up the balance with equity and do not make the measure deficient.

55|14| Khalaqa al-insana min salsalin kaalfakhkhari

Y: He created man from sounding clay like unto pottery,

P: He created man of clay like the potter's,

S: He created man from dry clay like earthen vessels