

The Loss in the Translation of The Qur'anic Text

SERIR Ilhem
Université de Tlemcen

Abstract

It is agreed upon the fact that translation is not an easy task; what if the translated text is religious? And what if the matter is about The Qur'an, i.e., the supreme word of Allah where the Arabic language is nicer, greater and persuasively perfect. That is why considering the translation of The Qur'anic Text as difficult is not surprising, to my view, because such operation of transfer from Arabic to English or French is a real battleground for many reasons like the differences between Arabic, English and French; and for the cultural, stylistic and linguistic challenges that The Book of Allah represents. Accordingly, this paper targets at exposing those distortions and missing that are ostensibly noticed in the translated version focusing, in the meanwhile on the following issues:

- The Qur'an is not linear, not chronological, and not strictly direct
- The Qur'an is not only a record of peoples' events in older times
- The Qur'an is not a simple narrative with a beginning, climax and denouement
- The Qur'an is a specific linguistic phenomenon
- The Verses are many and each of them contains a rhythm, rhyme and significance

Translated versions hardly ever succeed to be based on accurate meaning of the original, let alone the success to preserve the musical effect since The Qur'an is, in essence, poetic in nature. It is true, then, that translating The Qur'an is, indeed, the translation of the invisible in the sense that finding the equivalents requires qualities from the translator with a good effective linguistic exegetical background.

Arabic as Sacred language in The Qur'an: Allah's Wisdom

Not because of being Muslim that one may be subjective in being fascinated by the language of The Qur'an, but the magic of language in the Book of Allah is beyond any expectation. Least of all, Surat el Fath (the Victory) Ayat 29 which contains in its few lines all the letters of Arabic language¹. More to the point, Allah the Almighty declares Arabic as the chosen sacred language for his book in many verses when he says:

- (An-Nahl, Ayat 103): We know very well what they say about you, O Muhammad: "A certain man teaches him." But the man they allude to speak a foreign language while

¹. For Allah the Almighty says: Muhammad, the Rasool of Allah, and those with him are strong against the unbelievers and compassionate to each other among themselves. When you see them, you will find them making Rakuh (bowing down) and Sajud (prostrate in prayers), and craving for the blessings from Allah and His good pleasure. They have mark of Sajud (prostration) on their foreheads, the traces of their prostration. This is their similitude in the Taurat (Torah); and their similitude in the Injeel (Gospel): they are like the seed which puts forth its sprout, then strengthens it, then becomes thick and stands firmly on its stem, delighting the sowers of the seed, so that through them He may enrage the unbelievers. Yet to those of them who will believe and do good deeds, Allah has promised forgiveness and a great reward. Transliterated: muh.ammad rasol 'allaah wa- 'alladhena maca -hu ashiddaa' calaa al- kuffaar ruh.amaa' bayna -hum taraa -hum rukkaa(an) sujjad(an) yabtaghon fad.l(an) min 'allaah wa- rid.waan(an) semaa -hum fe wujoh -him min 'athar as- sujud dhaalika mathal -hum fe at-tawraah wa- mathal -hum fe al- 'injeel ka- zarc akhraja shat.' -hu fa- 'aazara - hu fa- istaghlaz.a fa- istawaa calaa soq -hi yucjib az- zurraac li- yaghez. bi- him al- kuffaar wacada 'allaah 'alladhena 'aamano wa- camilo as.- s.aalih.aat min -hum maghfirah wa- 'ajr(an) caz.em(an)

this (The The Qur'an) is in eloquent Arabic. Transliterated
 wa- la- qad naclam 'anna - hum yaqolon 'inna-maa
 yucallim -hu bashar lisaan 'alladhe yulh.idon 'ilay - hi acjamey
 wa- haadhaa lisaan carabey muben

(Ash-shura 7): Thus have We revealed to you this The Qur'an in Arabic, so that you may warn the residents of the Mother City (Makkah) and its suburbs, and forewarn them of the Day of assembly about which there is no doubt: when some will go to paradise and others to the blazing fire. transliterated wa- ka-dhaalika awh.aynaa 'ilay -ka qur'aan(an) carabey(an) li- tundhir 'umm al- quraa wa- man h.awla -haa wa- tundhir yawm al-jamc laa rayb fe -hi fareq fe al- jannah wa- fareq fe as- sacer

(Az-Zukhruf 3): we have revealed this The Qur'an in the Arabic language so that you may understand its meanings. Transliterated: 'in(na) -naa jacalnaa -hu qur'aan(an) carabey(an) lacalla -kum tacqilon

(Fusilat 3): a Book whose verses are well explained, a The Qur'an in the Arabic language for people who understand. Transliterated: kitaab fus.s.ilat 'aayaat -hu qur'aan(an) carabey(an) li- qawm yaclamon

(Ar-Ra'd 37): With these instructions, we have revealed this commandment in the Arabic language. Now, if you follow their vain desires after real knowledge has come to you, there will be none to save you or protect you against the wrath of Allah. Transliterated: wa- ka- dhaalika anzalnaa -hu h.ukm(an) carabey(an) wa- la- 'in ittabacta ahwaa' -hum bacda maa jaa'a -ka min al- cilm maa la- -ka min 'allaah min waley wa- laa waaqi(n)

(Yusuf 2): We have revealed this The Qur'an in the Arabic language so that you (Arabs) may understand. Transliterated: 'in(na) -naa anzalnaa -hu qur'aan(an) carabey(an) lacalla -kum tacqilon.

The Qur'an is Arabic because the messenger Muhammad peace be upon him was an Arab, the community to whom the message was sent is Arabic: the inhabitants of Mecca and the surroundings. But because the book of Allah was sent to the whole people in order to find refuge and peace in a lightened society knowing Arabic is a prerequisite to grasp fully its meanings. Even though, there are many communities ignorant to Arabic and are Muslims or like to convert to Islam; in this case only translations of The Qur'an can help them know best their duties and rights in Islam.

The Qur'an is Fluent: A Challenge

God challenges the Arabs of the times to find or create a caliber to The Qur'an at the level of eloquence and literary prowess. Those Arabs thought themselves the best speakers and it was a miracle to find a better user of Arabic than them, so God sends the best words from the mouth of an illiterate to the language to believe indeed that The Qur'an cannot be said from a human being but purely divine.

Every Muslim is proud of belonging to the religion of the true God who sets its constitution in Arabic and articulates its eloquence in The Qur'an. The Arabic tribes to whom the message of God had first been sent were the best fluent speakers and God challenged them through the Language of The Qur'an that still the human being stands unable to

complete its interpretation and linguistic analysis as perfectly as the book of Allah deserves because these are the saint words of Allah through which he invites the whole humanity to adopt the strict path and bow to laws of life since he the almighty distinguishes us from animals and things and prefers us to worship him with all the senses day and night. The Creator in this creation characterized members of the human beings differently from other creatures by speech; this is why he allowed us to exchange knowledge and development through what God orders.

On the basis of this I infer that the translation of The Qur'an is not a simple linguistic operation transferring data from a source language to the target. It is complex in the way of historical, religious and unnatural facts transcending the world that we can perceive and touch. Moreover the saint The Qur'an stands identical and unchanged since its revelation and its translation seems unfaithful because it is only an approximation to the original meaning since the translator is a human and the original speaker is God.

The issue one confronts in the translation of The Qur'an is that no faithful interpretation can be given even if the intention of the translator is good and this is not strange because the Almighty Allah presupposes it as clarified in the following verses: ((And no one knows its interpretation other than GOD)) The noble Quran, Chapter 3, Verse 7
((For each revealed thing (in the Quran) there is a time for its fulfillment and you will come to know (when that time comes).)) The noble The Qur'an, Chapter 6, Verse 67

This is why Muslim scholars believe that any translation cannot be more than an approximate interpretation, intended only as a tool for the study and understanding of the original Arabic text because The Qur'an stresses its Arabic nature².

The Qur'an is not linear

Non-temporal and non-linear are considered as signs of fragmentariness opposing coherence when found in any text. Yet, the miracle of The Qur'anic text is that these two features could join coherence easily and mark it as an outstanding linguistic feature. It is false to translate The Qur'an on the basis that it is linear, a book holding knowledge and wisdom requires a scientific methodology, a confirmation and continuation of God's system to a variety of holy books: Torah, gospel, then The Qur'an; Richard Bell in Watt depicts The Qur'anic style as disjointed "only seldom do we find in it evidence of sustained unified composition at any great length...some of the narratives, too, in The Qur'an, especially accounts of Moses and of Abraham, run to considerable length; but they tend to fall into separate incidents instead of being recounted straightforwardly... the distinctness of the separate pieces, however, is more obvious than their unity"³. A good translation to The Qur'an can prove treasure of God's words and the prophet Muhammad -Peace be upon him- "A bold and beautiful translation that serves as a timely reminder to all believers that The Qur'an is not a static scripture, but a living, breathing, ever-evolving text whose sacred words are as

² . Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Awesome News* (Hiawatha, Iowa: Cedar Graphics, 1997), p. xi.

³ . Watt, W. M. (1970). *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*. Edinburgh.

applicable today as when they were first uttered by the Prophet Muhammad fourteen centuries ago."⁴

The Qur'an is not a Classical Plot

The Qur'an is not limited to a specific context as most stories are with a beginning, climax and denouement simply because the speaker is God and not an ordinary man. Indeed The Qur'an is different text destructing systems of spacio-temporal context of language. Revelations can never be linguistically confined to a static time, place, speaker and addressee.

The Qur'an is an eternal message exceptional and beyond the exact logic of science "the logic of revelation is not the logic of schoolmen...there is no 'before' or 'after' in the prophetic message, when that message is true; everlasting truth is not held within the confines of time and space, but every moment reveals itself wholly and completely" (1955)⁵. The Qur'an, then, cannot be restricted to any earthbound chronology.

Rhyme and Rhythm

The Qur'an was originally and firstly a sound before being written. It so long existed as a sound that it is often compared to an epic poem and a musical symphony with repeated verses including many elements whose structure include diction, phonology, rhetoric, consonance, composition, morphology, syntax, architecture, rhythm, style, tone, voice, tonality, imagery, symbolism, allegory, genre, point of view,

⁴. Reza Aslan, CBS News Consultant; Author, No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam.

⁵. Arberry, A.J. (1955). The Koran Interpreted. New York

intertextuality, intratextual resonance and many other techniques and literary devices. Zammit comments that in spite of the excellence of many pre-Islamic poems: el Kasaid, "The Qur'an is definitely on a level of its own as the most eminent written manifestation of the Arabic language"⁶

More specifically, The Qur'an uses various phonetic devices setting the text in an exceptional harmonious tone. "There is a quality to the sound of the The Qur'an which anyone familiar with it in Arabic can recognize... The Qur'anic commentators have discussed the power and beauty of this sound... is one of the key aspects of the science of analyzing *ijaz al-The Qur'an* (the inimitability of the The Qur'an)"⁷. Therefore The Qur'an is a linguistic document of great importance. Rhythm and rhyme are put to mean psychological effect. "briefly, the rhetoric and rhythm of the Arabic of the Koran are so characteristic, so powerful, so highly emotive, that any version what so ever is bound in the nature of things to be put a poor copy of the glittering splendor of the original."⁸ Neither forerunner nor successor can be found to replace the musical effect of The Qur'an.

The Difficulty of Translation

The Qur'an is a unique style and an independent genre in its own right. Naturally, when it comes to translation the matter seems really challenging. Not only should one know Arabic

⁶. Zammit, M. 2002. *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'anic Arabic*. Brill Academic Publishers

⁷. Sells, M. 1999. "Approaching the Qur'an: the only Revelations". White Cloud Press

⁸. Arberry, A.J. 1964. *The Koran Interpreted*. OUP

very well but he has to have equal level in the translated language. This is not a piece of poem for translation this is a miracle to be said differently in another language; “a miracle of purity of style, of wisdom and of truth. It is the one miracle claimed by Muhammad, his standing miracle, and a miracle indeed it is”⁹. When The Qur’anic discourse is characterized by features purely belonging to Arabic language it is difficult to transfer to the target language when everything is different; the translation to a European linguistic system would be awkward, chaotic and jarring. “To an ear accustomed only to the European system the effect is as chaotic and jarring, or as wearisome and monotonous, as the mountains and deserts of the Arab land its birth-place. Thus it seems to the writer that the difficulties of translating so typical a work as the Koran into another tongue for the effective appreciation of peoples having essentially different concepts of musical cadence, are insuperable, and can only end in failure. In translating a work which has claimed for it a supernatural origin, the text should be scrupulously adhered to, and the utmost endeavor made to obviate additions or change of reading, and where these appear necessary they should be notified”¹⁰

The holy The Qur’an cannot easily be replicated in another language because translating a miracle is basically a loss. But we have to endeavor in the translation of The Qur’an so that

⁹. Bosworth, S. R. 2004. Muhammed and Muhammadanism. Kessinger Publishing

¹⁰. Rankin, D.J. Rhyme and Rhythm in the Koran. 2010. opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article. accessed in June 2012

the message of God can reach non- Arab Muslims, as Wild lectures it “It cannot be translated, but it must be translated,”¹¹

There is undoubtedly an original stylistic dignity so powerful that it is inimitable and unmistakable which renders The Qur'an impossible for translation but primordially imposed to be translated.

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¹¹. Wild's lecture—titled “The Qur'an Today: Why Translate the Untranslatable?”—was the final installment of the three-part Fall 2010 H.A.R. Gibb Arabic & Islamic Studies Lectures series.