

The Problems of Translating Religious Texts: A Study on Senior EFL Learners of King Khalid University

Abdulkhaleq Qassim Ahmed Hassan

Department of English, College of Science and Arts

King Khalid University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

E-mail: abqaseem@kku.edu.sa

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Abstract

Undergraduate English majors take three translation courses to learn the principles and techniques of translating Arabic texts into English and vice versa. It has been observed that students translate general subjects at some ease, but they undergo various syntactic and semantic obstacles when translating religious texts, as these texts contain unique applications of Arabic language and various layers of meaning. To investigate these hurdles of translating religious texts, an empirical study was conducted on one hundred male students of the four-year Bachelor of English program, at the College of Science and Arts, King Khalid University. The study aims at locating, analyzing and understanding the nature of the problems students may encounter, examining the reasons behind their fear of translating and framing out a list of recommendations for the learners as well as for teachers. It is expected that the outcomes of the research will enable learners to overcome the syntactic and semantic ambiguities of translation courses. Moreover, the study will help course teachers to apply effective methods, techniques and materials to make the courses more enjoyable and motivating to learners.

Keywords: Translation, Religious, Ambiguity, Syntactic, Semantic

1. Introduction

Translation is defined in *The Online Cambridge Dictionary* as “the activity or process of changing words of one language into the words in another language that have the same meaning”.

Bassnett (1954: 2), on the other hand, believes that translation is not just changing of words from one language to another, but it is rather a complex process that entails taking into consideration both the structure and the meaning. She points out that translators should ensure that the surface meaning of the two languages, the source language and the target language, will be approximately similar and the structures of the source language will be preserved as accurately as possible.

Similarly, Catford (1965:1) indicates that in translation the input (the source text) undergoes an operation or a process which in turn results in the output (the target text, or the meaning in another language).

Moreover, Nida (1964: 12) believes that translation is “the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. With a slightly different view, Newmark (2001: 7) considers translation as “a craft” that comprises the attempts to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language.

Brislin (1976:1) however, went further when he points out that translation is more than changing or transferring the surface meaning from one language to another, but it includes something deep like transferring of thoughts and ideas. To quote him:

The general term referring to the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language (source) to another (target), whether the languages are in written or oral form; whether the languages have established orthographies or do not have such standardization or whether one or both languages is based on signs, as with sign languages of the deaf.

Equally, Hatem and Mason (1990) defined translation as “the transfer of meaning from one language to another. Like Newmark, Nida (1964) believes that the spirit of the text is as correspondingly important as the words and structures included in the text.

According to Foster (1958), translation is a mental activity in which linguistic entities are changed from one language to their equivalents into another language. Ghazala (1995), on the other hand, asserts that translation includes both the processes and the methods used by translators to convey the meaning. He assumes that for an accurate and appropriate translation, translators should fully understand the surface and the deep meaning of the source text before proceeding with translation where failing to do so will lead to distorted types of translated texts. He also believes that all language aspects such as meaning, grammar, style and sounds are very much related to each other in the process of translation and that should be observed by every translator when doing the translation task.

Apart from definitions of translation, some scholars such as Jakobson (2000), Ghazala (2008) have classified translation into different types. Jakobson (2000: 114), for example, distinguishes three different types of translation:

(a) Intra-lingual translation or rewording: an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language.

(b) Inter-lingual translation or translation proper: an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.

(c) Inter-semiotic translation or transmutation: an interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems.

Furthermore, Ghazala (2008:3-4) in his book titled *Translation as problems and Solutions* listed the following translation methods that had been identified by some prominent scholars:

1. Literal vs. free translation (Newmark 1981 & 1988)
2. Semantic vs. communicative translation (Newmark, op. cit.)
3. Formal correspondence vs. textual equivalence (Catford, 1965)
4. Formal equivalence vs. dynamic translation (Nida, 1964, Nida & Taber, 1969)
5. Non-pragmatic vs. pragmatic translation (Bell, 1991; Hatim & Mason, 1990 & 1997, Baker, 1998; Snell-Hornby, 1988; and others).
6. Non-creative vs. creative translation (Beylard-Ozeroff and others, 1998).
7. Non-idiomatic vs. idiomatic translation (Newmark, 1988).

1.1 Religious Text Translation

Religious text translation is considered as one of the most difficult of its kind. It differs greatly from the other types of translation and because of that, it demands intensive care, rigorous research, deep linguistic knowledge and adequate precision. Williams & Chesterman (2002:12) comment on the nature of research questions for translating religious texts:

Major research questions concerning religious texts have to do with the enormous temporal and cultural gap between the societies for which these texts were written and the societies for which they have been translated. The tension between treating religious texts such as the Bible as a sacred text in which every word is holy (which requires a word for- word translation) and using it as a missionizing text (which requires a target-culture-centered approach).

Additionally, Al-Harashsheh (2013:108) explains why religious texts translation is considered difficult and problematic and why people are wary of translating them:

Religious translation is one of the most problematic types of translation because it deals with special texts that have their own holiness. These texts are highly sacred and sensitive, as they are God's words. Therefore, a great difficulty lies in translating them into a Target Language (TL).

According to Nida (1964), finding the exact or the appropriate lexical item with the same cultural aspect is not an easy task but rather a crucial problem in religious translation. He points out that translators should decide which cultural aspects have to get the priority in their translation: whether those of the source language, those of the target language, or a combination of the two. In his *Translation of the Bible*, Nida (1964) suggests that the

priorities should be given to the cultural aspects of the target text when focusing on the semantic as well as the pragmatic nature of the meaning. For him, the functional nature implied in the meaning of words is more important than any the other aspects. Once again, Nida and Taber (1969/1982) assert that cultural translation is a type of translation in which the content of the message is changed to match or to be, to some extent, similar to the receptor culture.

Some scholars who worked on Islamic religious translation such as Ghazala (1995), Elwa (2014) and others have classified religious lexical items into different categories. Ghazala (1995), for example, classified them into three categories as follows: (1) new items that did not exist in the Arabic language before the advent of Islam such as Qur'an and martyrdom, (2) familiar Arabic item that Islam gave it new implications such as Salah (prayer), and Hajj (pilgrimage); and (3) items that are already known and used in the Arabic language e.g. 'K'aba' (the house of God in Mecca).

Elwa (2014), like Ghazala, classified these religious terms into three categories, however, he used different labels: (a) unfamiliar terms which are used only in Islamic context; (b) familiar terms which are used only in non-Islamic contexts and (c) familiar terms which are also used in non-Islamic contexts but do not obviously look so.

Abdul-Raof (2001) in his book *Quran Translation Discourse* tried to explain the translation problems that might occur when translation the Holy Quran. He provides good explanations of its unique linguistic and rhetorical features. He provides valuable suggestions to those interested in translating it. According to him, being fluent in Arabic does not guarantee appropriateness of translating the Quranic texts. To quote him:

The Qur'an translator does not only need a sound linguistic competence in both Arabic and English but also advanced knowledge in Arabic syntax and rhetoric in order to appreciate the complex linguistic and rhetorical patterns of the Qur'anic structures. Most importantly, he/she needs to compare and refer to major Qur'an exegeses in order to derive and provide the accurate underlying meaning of a given Qur'anic expression, a simple particle or even a preposition. Abdul-Raof (2001:2)

1.2 Research Problem and Significance

Students of Bachelor of English program at King Khalid University study three translation courses in three different levels throughout the program. It has been observed that the learners exhibit admirable progress in translating general subjects, but they encounter problematic obstacles when translating Islamic texts into English due to the uniqueness of some Arabic expressions used in the Islamic texts as well as the diverse layers of inherent meaning. This study will explore linguistic, psychological and cultural reasons for students' incompetence in translating Islamic texts. Moreover, the research will lay down effective methods and techniques for teaching translation courses to the speakers of Arabic language.

2. Literature Review

The sacred religious texts are in high demand throughout the world as the believers of these religions need them in their lives as sources of spirituality-providing. Thus, the texts receive pressing needs to be translated into other languages. In Christianity, the sacred book is the Bible which consists of the Old Testaments and the New Testament. Whereas, in Judaism, the Talmud and Torah are the holy books. In Islam, on the other hand, there are two holy texts—the Quran and Sunnah (i.e. Hadiths) of prophet Mohammed (PBUH). For the Quran, both the text and the message are sacred as the whole text was revealed to prophet Mohammad (PBUH) from Allah (SWT), whereas, for Hadith, only the message, which is the collection of words, instructions and life-style of prophet Mohammad (PBUH), is sacred.

Hence, Hundreds of academicians, researchers and scholars over the centuries have dedicated their laborious research on translating the religious texts, whether Hebrew, Christian or Islamic, into other languages by keeping the original meaning unharmed. Due to the uniqueness of every language and the culture gaps, translators encounter many obstacles when translating from one language into another. The translators even find it more difficult when they translate religious texts because of the sensitivity of these texts and sometimes because of the absence of the equivalence. So, the researchers in their studies tried to pinpoint the sources of the problems.

As this study is concerned with Arabic to English and English to Arabic texts translation, only those studies done on them will be reviewed here in this section.

Ali et al (2012) made a study to identify the linguistic difficulties in translating religious texts, mainly, from the Holy Quran. The results of the study showed that the figures of speech and the rhetorical features that are used in the Noble Quran constitute an obstacle in translating the Quran into English. The study also reported some lexical problems such as lack of equivalence for some religious items where translators resort to transliteration instead of transferring the meaning into the target language. Other Quranic features that pose difficulties for translators include metaphor, ellipsis, metonymy and polysemy.

Similarly, Dweik and Abu Helwah (2014) made a study to find out the linguistic as well as the cultural problems that the Jordanian graduate students encounter when translating religious texts from Arabic into English. The results of the study showed that there were various linguistic and cultural problems. It was found that students have structural, stylistic and lexical difficulties. Some other translation problems were related to cultural terms in which students failed to capture the differences between the culture of the source language and the culture of the target language. The study concludes by locating the following causes of the difficulties: (1) the differences between the source and target language systems; (2) lack of awareness of the importance of the context in translation; (3) students' ignorance of cultural equivalences; (4) adopting improper translation methods; and (5) misusing dictionaries and other research tools, like Google translation.

Mehawesh & Sadeq (2014), also, did a study to identify the challenges involved in translating Islamic religious expressions used in Naguib Mahfouz's Arabic-English translated novel *The*

Beginning and the End. The study revealed that for a proper translation of Islamic religious expressions, the translators should know the cultural setting of these expressions in order to be able to choose the correct equivalence that captures the religious image intended by the original text. The researchers conclude that a competent translator should be culturally competent in both languages, the source language and the target language.

Furthermore, Khammyseh (2015) conducted a research study on MA students of the Department of Translation at Al-Yarmouk University in Jordan to find out the problems that they face when translating Islamic expressions from Arabic into English. The finding of this study showed that most of that translation problems were related the cultural gaps between English and Arabic. The lack of equivalent expressions resulted in an inappropriate and unacceptable translation. In addition to this, problems related to the differences between the structures of English and Arabic, i.e. grammatical and syntactical problems, were reported.

Additionally, Agliz (2015) carried out a study with an attempt to locate the difficulties and challenges that Arab translators encounter when translating Quranic texts as well as Hadiths of the prophet (PBUH) into English. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concludes that grammatical structures, paragraphing and redundancy are the most important key elements that should be taken into consideration for accurate and appropriate translation.

Another study was made by Hassan (2016) titled *Islamic Religious Terms in English Translation vs Transliteration* in which he tried to compare translation and transliteration of Islamic terms into English. The findings of the study showed that translation of Islamic terms is only possible when words in both languages, the source language and the target language, are cross-culturally equivalent and have the same referents and the same connotations.

AbuSa'aleek (2016), also, carried out a study to examine the adequacy and acceptability of four machine translation systems (World lingo, Babylon translation, Google Translate, Bing translator) in translating the Islamic texts. The findings of the study revealed that Google Translate System is the most adequate and acceptable among the other three systems in translating the Islamic texts. The Islamic texts produced by Google Translate were accurate, suitable, and well-formed syntactically, terminologically and semantically though it is not one hundred percent correct, but still it is much better than the texts produced by the other translation programs/systems.

In line with the above studies, Khosravi & Pourmohammadi (2016) did a study to investigate the extent to which the translator's religious ideology is reflected in his translation when translating religious texts. The data were taken from four translated verses (Ayat) from the Holy Quran that were translated by four translators of different religious backgrounds, that is, Muslim, Christian and Jewish. The study was based on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings of this study showed that it is difficult to conclude that there is relationship between translator's religious ideology and his/her translation of Quran.

3. Methodology

The methods that were used to the achieve the goals of this study which include subjects that were involved, the data collection and data analysis are given below.

3.1 Participants

The subjects of the present study were one hundred level-eight (last semester of the 4-year bachelor program) male students who were studying English as a foreign language at the Department of English, College of Sciences and Arts, King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia. They are all native speakers of Arabic. They had already completed two translation courses—Translation I, in level six, and Translation II, in level seven, for 4 credit hours with total number of 60 hours, i.e. 30 hours per semester for each course. In Translation I, they studied theories, methods and techniques of translation in general while in Translation II they practiced translating texts of general subjects. In the eighth semester, they took Translation III, which is formed of Islamic text translation. Arabic was the mother tongue of all the participants, and they shared the same cultural as well academic background.

3.2 Data Collection

The data for this study were collected in four stages over a period of four months, i.e. one academic semester. The students were given enough time to do the translation. The students, also, were permitted to use print dictionaries but not online texts translation. For the accuracy of the results, the length of the texts was almost the same.

3.3 Data Analysis and Discussion

The data after being collected they were tallied and analyzed. Microsoft Excel 2016 and SPSS v.23 programs were used to analyze and interpret the data collected in the four stages.

The tables below show the distributions of all errors and mistakes found in student scripts.

Stage 1: In the first stage, the students were supplied with a piece of Islamic text in Arabic and were asked to translate that into English.

Table 1. Types and number of errors made in stage 1

Problems in the stage 1	Number	Percentage
Lexical errors	872	38.4
Morphological errors	694	30.6
Syntactical errors	704	31
Total	2270	100

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the errors found in stage 1

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
S1 Lexical Errors1	100	1.00	22.00	8.72	5.17
S1 Morphological Errors1	100	.00	17.00	6.94	4.3
S1 Syntactical Errors1	100	.00	22.00	7.04	4.9
Valid N (list wise)	100				

In the first stage, the total number of mistakes/errors (Note 1) was 2270, which include lexical or wrong choice of words, morphological as well as syntactical of mistakes/errors. The highest percentage was in the lexical errors with nearly 38 percent of the total number of

errors followed by syntactical errors with 31 percent whereas morphological errors came third with 30.6 percent. It is worth noting here that more emphasis was given to understanding the lexical errors or the wrong choice of words as they lead to deviation of meaning. The other two types of errors, i.e. syntactical and morphological though serious, but to some extent, they do not lead to meaning deviation. Mistakes, on the other hand, were not that serious as they were due to carelessness of the students as some of these were not repeated in the next stages. These morphological and syntactical mistakes and errors include wrong usage of definite and indefinite articles, tense and word order. The biggest problem for students was handling lexical items. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for stage one. It shows that all students who participated in the study encountered difficulties with word choice or lexical errors. The maximum number of lexical errors that a single student made in his translation task was 22 and the same number was of syntactical errors. The averages of lexical, syntactical and morphological errors that every student made were almost 9, 7 and 7 respectively.

Stage 2: The second stage started a month after the first stage. Here, the students were given four short chapters of the Holy Quran, in Arabic, and were instructed to translate them into English.

Table 3. Types and number of errors made in stage 1

Problems in the stage 2	Number	Percentage
Lexical errors	1131	40.9
Morphological errors	715	25.8
Syntactical errors	920	33.3
	2766	100

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the errors found in stage 2

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
S2 Lexical Errors	100	3.00	23.00	11.31	5.36
S2 Morph Errors	100	.00	16.00	7.15	3.56
S2 Syntactical Errors	100	1.00	17.00	9.20	4.45
Valid N (list wise)	100				

In the second stage, the number of mistakes/errors jumped up to 2766 from 2270 (see tables 3 and 4) because of the complexity of translating verses of the Holy Quran. In this stage, unlike the first stage in which students translated a general Islamic text from Arabic to English, they translated four short chapters (Suras) of the Holy Quran mainly from Section no 30 (*Juz 'a Amma*). The chapters they translated were: Sura (chapter):104 “*Al-Humaza*” (the Gossipmonger/Traducer), Sura (chapter): 102 “*Al Takathor*” (Rivalry/competition), Sura: 100 “*Al Adiyat*” (the Courser/the Charger) and Sura: 113 “*Al Falaq*” (Dawn/Daybreak) (see appendix 1). The lexical errors, with 41 percent, topped among all kinds of errors, whereas the lowest number of errors was of morphological nature with a parentage of 26. The number lexical errors each participant made span between 3 and 23. Regarding the morphological

error some students made no errors whereas the maximum number of these errors a single paper committed was 16. The average of lexical, morphological and syntactical errors for all students was 11, 7 and 9 respectively.

Stage 3: The third stage was conducted a month after the second stage. Here, the students were given an Islamic text in English and were asked to translate to Arabic.

Table 5. Types and number of errors made in stage 3

Problems in the stage 2	Number	Percentage
Lexical errors	480	35.8
Morphological errors	368	27.4
Syntactical errors	493	36.8
	1341	100

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the errors found in stage 3

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
S3 Lexical Errors	100	.00	12.00	4.8	2.96
S3 Morph Errors	100	.00	11.00	3.68	2.748
S3 Syntactical Errors	100	.00	14.00	4.93	3.666
Valid N (list wise)	100				

Stage three witnessed a sharp decline in the number of errors in students' scripts, as it is clear in tables 5 and 6. The number of errors dropped to 1341 from above 2000 in stage one. The least number of errors students committed were of morphological nature, i.e. 27 percent. The lexical and syntactical errors were almost the same with a slight increase in the syntactical ones which indicates that students find it more comfortable to translate from English to Arabic than from Arabic to English. Some students' scripts were free of any errors as shown in table 6 above. The average number of errors found were five lexical, four morphological and five syntactical.

Stage 4: In the fourth and last stage, students received a translation task that contained three Hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH): one was in English that they were asked to translate into Arabic, while the other two were in Arabic and the participants were asked to translate them into English.

Table 7. Types and number of errors made in stage 4

Problems in the stage 2	Number	Percentage
Lexical errors	484	37.5
Morphological errors	352	27.2
Syntactical errors	456	35.3
	1292	100

Table 8. Descriptive statistics of the errors found in stage 4

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
S4 Lexical Errors	100	.00	12.00	4.84	2.8
S4 Morph Errors	100	.00	8.00	3.52	2.2
S4 Syntactical Errors	100	.00	12.00	4.56	2.9
Valid N (list wise)					100

Tables 7 and 8 provide statistical descriptions of the results of the fourth stage. The tables show a decrease in the number of errors compared to stages number one and two. The highest percentage was in the lexical errors with nearly 38 and the lowest was in the morphological with 27. Like the Quranic texts translation, students, also, have difficulties in translating the Hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH) in which wrong choices of words may lead to confusion or misunderstanding of the message the Prophet (PBUH) which he wanted to convey to people. In this stage, students were given three Hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH), as was stated above, one of them was in English and the other two were in Arabic. Like in the third stage, in this stage, some students did not make any error. The maximum numbers of lexical errors that a single student made was 12 and the overall average of this type of errors was nearly 5. The highest number of syntactical errors that a single student committed was similar to that of lexical errors, i.e. 12. However, the maximum number of errors of morphological nature that a single student made was just eight and with an average of 3.5.

4. Conclusion

This study aims at finding out the nature of the translation difficulties that students encounter when they translate religious texts. The findings showed that the number of errors students make in translating religious texts depends much on the nature of the subjects of the texts. Three different texts were used, some chapters (Sura) from the Holy Quran, some Hadiths of the prophet and general religious texts. Lexical errors were found in almost every student's translation task. Although students received intensive instruction and feedback on how to overcome each problem whether syntactical, morphological or lexical after every stage, the problems persisted till the fourth stage. The students find it more difficult when they translate verses (Ayat) or chapters (Sura) from the Holy Quran from Arabic into English than when they translate from English to Arabic because of many reasons. First, the language used in the Quran is the Classical which is different from the dialectical or even the Standard Arabic they use in their daily life. Second, the lack of religious vocabulary due to the inappropriate methods used in their vocabulary building which lacks religious terms. Although most of the morphological errors and even the syntactical errors found in the students translated tasks did not affect the meanings of the texts as most of them were related to using or omitting articles, using wrong tenses etc., but the most serious problems were lexical or semantic as they render the meanings of the translated texts misunderstood. The Hadiths of the prophet were also found to be the second most problems causing for students especially the lexical ones. The least number of errors the were found when translating general Islamic texts.

5. Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, certain suggestions and recommendations can be framed here:

- The teachers are recommended to help their students to use appropriate vocabulary building techniques.
- Before giving students any translation task from the Holy Quran or from the Hadiths, ask them to find as many synonyms as possible for every Quranic Arabic word that is not used their daily life.
- The teachers can start their translation class by providing students with some grammatical rules that are involved in the translation task.
- The teachers are recommended to instruct their students not to translate any Arabic item into English unless they read the whole text to understand the meaning from the context. For example, the word “NASIHA” means “advice” outside of the context, but when it is used in Hadith it means “sincerity” and this can only be understood when reading the whole text.

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Note

Note 1. Both mistakes and errors are used. When the deviation is systematic and repeated in the student's pieces of writing for many times, it is called error and when it is not systematic and not repeated in most of the student's pieces of writing it is considered as a mistake which are not as serious as the errors.

Appendix

Examples from Students' Papers

"Distract you of being many until you visit the grave. No you will know then you will know. No you will know certainly. You will see the hell then you will see it the eye of certain and then you will be asked about the Naeem"

"Owe to every winker pointer who gathered money and count it. He thinks his money will make him immortal. No he will be thrown into the breakable. Do you know what is breakable? Hell of Allah almoqadah which sees on the hearts. It is closed on them. In vertical lying down."

"By Aladiyat Dabha, falmuriyatat qadah, attacking in the morning, excited nq'a'a. in the middle the gathered. Man to his lord is ingrateful. He will be witness. He loves good to much. Does he know if scatted in the graves and happened what is in chests. Then their god is wise."

"Say I take refuge in god of men. King of men. Lord of men. From evil of whisper leaver. Who whisper in the chests of men. From jin and men"

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