(Un)Translatability of the Qur'ān: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

This article provides a general overview of untranslatability as a key concept in the realm of translation studies and addresses, in elaborate detail, the question of the Qur'ān's untranslatability. It falls into three parts. The first part investigates the notion of untranslatability as dealt with by linguists and translation theorists; the second part surveys the different views proposed by Muslim intellectuals with regard to the question of the Qur'ān's untranslatability; and the third part scrutinises the views, in relation to that question, expressed by a number of leading translators of the Qur'ān into English. The main aim here is to advance our understanding of the notion of untranslatability in general and the untranslatability of the Qur'ān in particular. Another aim is to examine aspects of the untranslatability of the Qur'ān and the possible reasons for these aspects as expressed by both Muslim intellectuals and Qur'ān translators. The article demonstrates that for both Muslim intellectuals and Qur'ān translators there exist three types of untranslatability when it comes to translating the Qur'an. These are linguistic, cultural and theological untranslatability. It also demonstrates that while both the Muslim intellectuals and translators of the Qur'ān agree upon the fact that the Qur'ān-specific linguistic and cultural aspects are untranslatable, they vary in the ways they prioritise them, and, on the part of the translators, the ways in which they deal with them. However, both groups confirm the possibility of rendering the meanings of the Qur'ān into other languages and affirm the inevitability of this process. Moreover, the article argues that the notion of Qur'ān's translatability—rather than untranslatability—needs to be the main concern of stakeholders.

Keywords: The Qur'ān, Untranslatability, Translatability, Qur'ān's untranslatability, Linguistic untranslatability, Cultural untranslatability, Theological untranslatability

1. Introduction

The notion of untranslatability can be clearly understood by juxtaposing it with the notion of translatability. Translatability is generally defined as "the capacity for some kind of meaning to be transferred from one language to another without undergoing radical change" (Pym & Turk, 2001, p. 273). To use Hatim and Munday (2004) words, it is "a relative notion that has to do with the extent to which, despite obvious differences in linguistic structure (grammar, vocabulary, etc.), meaning can still be adequately expressed across languages" (p. 15). Untranslatability, on the other hand, is the opposite of this notion.

The current interest in untranslatability, as a vital notion in the realm of translation studies, has generated a considerable body of literature. It constitutes one of the most debatable issues amongst scholars in such fields as philosophy, linguistics and translation theory. In tackling such a notion from a variety of perspectives, scholars differ as to the possibility/impossibility of conveying a given text from one language into another. They also differ in the way in which they categorise aspects of this notion.

A close look at the literature reveals that scholars have adopted two different approaches to the notion of untranslatability: the monadist approach and the universalist approach (De Pedro, 1999). Scholars (such as Nida, Jakobson, Bausch, Hauge, and Ivir) who adopt the first approach believe that translatability is ensured by the existence of linguistic universals (syntactic and semantic categories), which became the basis for Noam Chomsky's generative transformational grammar. Other scholars who adopt the second approach claim that reality is interpreted in different ways by different linguistic communities; therefore, translatability is jeopardised (De Pedro, 1999). Although this hypothesis was suggested earlier, it has become known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, after Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf "exploited this hypothesis in America, where anthropological study of native American cultures had opened new paths to linguistics" (De Pedro, 1999, p. 547). Sapir affirms that "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. [...] The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached." (Steiner, 1992, p. 91, cited in De Pedro, 1999, p. 547). In the 1930s and 1940s, this hypothesis was developed into "a theory according to which the fact that each linguistic community has its own perception of the world, which differs from those of other linguistic communities, implies the existence of different worlds determined by language" (De Pedro, 1999, pp. 547-548).

In addition, researchers cast light on a third approach to translatability, which emerged in France in the late 1960s vis. Deconstructionists approach, which questions the notion of translation as a transfer of meaning. The initiators of this approach (Andrew Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida) claim that the way in which the translation of a text is perceived is affected by the translation, which involves a "re-writing" of the original text; therefore, "Target texts cease to be considered as subsidiaries of the original, which, in turn, becomes dependent on translation" (De Pedro, 1999, p. 554). Three important concepts have been reconceptualised by this approach: the translation process, the originality, and the authorship of a text. Firstly, the translation process, according to this

approach, is "a validation of the text that is being translated". Secondly, originality "ceases to be a chronological concept (i.e. it is not about which text was produced first) and becomes a qualitative matter (i.e. it refers to the nature of the text which was conceived first)". Thirdly, the issue of authorship "is challenged and translation is seen as a process in which language is constantly modifying the source text" (De Pedro, 1999, p. 554).

From a linguistic perspective, Catford (1965) proposes two types of untranslatability. These are linguistic untranslatability and cultural untranslatability. He considers untranslatability as a translational failure, which occurs when the functionally relevant features of a given text are formal ones and there exists no formal corresponding of these features between the source language and the target language. He exemplified such a type of untranslatability in source language puns where an *ambiguity* is a functionally relevant feature (p. 94).

Catford's conception of linguistic untranslatability is deemed straightforward in comparison with cultural untranslatability, which is more problematic (Bassnett, 2002, p. 39).

Cultural untranslatability occurs when the functionally relevant features of a given text are cultural ones and there exists no cultural correspondence of these features between the source language and the target language. Catford considers this type of untranslatability as "less 'absolute' than linguistic untranslatability" (p. 99), and exemplifies it in the variety of concepts given to the term "bathroom" in three distinct languages: English, Finnish and Japanese. Considering the dynamic nature of language and culture, Bassnett (2002) goes beyond this definition to declare that "[i]n so far as language is the primary modelling system within a culture, cultural untranslatability must be de facto implied in any process of translation" (Bassnett, 2002, p. 41).

Recognising this, it is an undeniable fact that genre plays an important role in the degree of translatability of texts; some genres are more easily translatable than others (De Pedro, 1999). For instance, "a text with an aesthetic function will contain elements which will make its reproduction in a different language difficult, whereas a text with a merely informative function will be easier to translate" (De Pedro, 1999, pp. 552-553). Texts have been categorised according to the degree of their translatability into the following four categories:

- Texts which are exclusively source-language oriented: Relatively untranslatable.

- Texts which are mainly source-language oriented (literary texts, for example): Partially translatable.

- Texts which are both source-language and target-language oriented (as the texts written in a language for specific purposes): Optimum translatability.

- Texts which are mainly or solely target-language oriented (propaganda, for instance): Optimum translatability (De Pedro, 1999, pp. 552-553).

To this end, it is fruitful to say that scholars are of two different standpoints as to translatability/untranslatability of texts from a given source language into any target language. While some of them (e.g., Von Humboldt, Quine, Virginia Woolf, among others) insist that translation is ultimately impossible, others (e.g., Newmark) believe that everything is

translatable and can be translated either directly or indirectly into a target language (Ke, 1999). The latter standpoint seems to be more reasonable than the former one. There is a tendency among the stakeholders to presuppose that most texts are translatable and "absolute untranslatability, whether linguistic or cultural, does not exist" (De Pedro, 1999, pp. 556-557) since absolute "untranslatables" are considered the minority in comparison to the vast majority of "translatables and relative translatables" (Ke, 1999, p. 297). Due to the expansion in the concept of translation, and the many strategies that a translator can resort to when confronted with a linguistic and/or cultural gap between two languages, the debate on translatability *versus* untranslatability has recently become unpopular and lost part of its validity (De Pedro, 1999). This does not mean that perfect translation is attainable; it rather means, "A practical approach to translation must accept that, since not everything that appears in the source text can be reproduced in the target text, an evaluation of potential losses has to be carried out" (De Pedro, 1999, pp. 556-557).

2. The Qur'ān's (Un)Ttranslatability

A great deal of literature has been devoted to the question of the untranslatability of the Qur'ān. Scholars in fields such as Islamic studies, theology, and linguistics have accounted for this essential issue from a variety of perspectives. Muslim theologians, from the middle of the eighth century CE until the present, have debated this issue from the perspective of legitimacy of translating the Qur'ān into other languages. What follows presents the major contributions to the debate of the Qur'ān and its untranslatability made by Muslim intellectuals, followed by the major contributions made by a number of translators of the Qur'ān into English. It is worth mentioning that, due to space and time constraints, the question of the legitimacy of translating the Qur'ān, albeit so pertinent to the issue of its untranslatability, will not be covered in this article. This question merits a separate study.

3.1 The Qur'ān's (Un)Ttranslatability as Seen by Muslim intellectuals

In an article entitled *Translating the Qur'an* Fazlur Rahman (1988) asserts that the inspired language of the Qur'ān "can never be completely satisfactorily translated into another language" (p. 24). He puts forward two reasons for difficulties in adequately translating the Qur'ān into other languages. The first reason is "the style and expression of the Qur'an", while the second one is the very nature of the Scripture. He writes:

> [T]he fact that the Qur'an is not really a single 'book' because nobody ever 'wrote' it: it is an assembly of all the passages revealed or communicated to Muhammad by the Agency of Revelation, which the Qur'an calls Gabriel and 'The Trusted Spirit' or 'The Holy Spirit'. This agency, according to the Qur'an itself, emanates from the 'Preserved table', the Book on High, and 'descended upon your heart' (2:97). Clearly, the divine messages broke through the consciousness of the Prophet from an agency whose source is God (p. 24).

Furthermore, Fazlur Rahman (1988) claims that modern western scholars who have attempted to translate the Qur'ān into their languages "unanimously agree on the untranslatability of The Book" (p. 24). Substantiating such a claim by referring to two titles

of translations of the Qur'ān, namely *The Koran Interpreted* and *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* conducted by Arthur John Arberry and Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall respectively, inferring from the wording of these titles that they are "intended to convey to the reader the idea that an adequate translation of the Qur'an is impossible" (p. 24).

In his book *'Ulum al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an*, von Denffer (1983) initiates his input as to the Qur'ān's untranslatability by making the point that translating the Qur'ān means expressing the meanings of it in a language other than Arabic in order to help those who are not familiar with the Arabic language to know about the Qur'ān and "understand Allah's guidance and will" (p. 143). Von Denffer (1983) goes on to indicate that "[t]here is agreement among Muslim intellectuals that it is impossible to transfer the original Qur'an word by word in an identical fashion into another language" (p. 143). He puts forward the following three reasons for such impossibility:

- Words of different languages do not express all the shades of meanings of their counterparts, though they may express specific concepts.

- The narrowing down of the meaning of the Qur'an to specific concepts in a foreign language would mean missing out other important dimensions.

- The presentation of the Qur'an in a different language would therefore result in confusion and misguidance (p. 143).

Therefore, a word-by-word Qur'ān translation, according to von Denffer (1983), would not be sufficient. Further, based on the comments of "good translators" who would aim at determining the meaning of a Qur'ānic passage first, and then translating it into the other language, he emphasises that "translations of the Qur'an are actually expressions of meanings of the Qur'an in other languages" (p. 144).

In his endeavour to elaborate on the limitations of the Qur'ān translations, von Denffer (1983) indicates that since the Qur'ān, as "the word of Allah", has been revealed in the Arabic language all the translations of it into other languages would not be "the word of Allah". Another limitation von Denffer (1983) highlights is the loss of "the concept of the uniqueness and inimitability of the Qur'an (*I'jaz al-Qur'an*)", which is linked by scholars to the Qur'ān expression in the Arabic language (p. 145). The last limitation is inadequacy of the translation to express all the meanings of the Qur'ān in languages other than Arabic due to the distinctive shades of meanings words carry in different languages (p. 145).

Additionally, von Denffer (1983) underlines the importance and benefits of translating the meanings of the Qur'ān. Given the fact that the majority of Muslims are non-native speakers of Arabic, translating the Qur'ān into their mother tongue would help them to be familiar with its meanings. Hence translating the Qur'ān is considered an effective *da'wa* (missionary invitation) to both Muslims and non-Muslims. It, firstly, "present[s] the message of Islam to non-Muslims and invite[s] them to ponder over the Qur'an", and secondly, "point[s] out to Muslims the revealed guidance and will of Allah to be observed by them" (pp. 145-146).

In an article entitled *Translating the Untranslatable: A Survey of English Translations of the*

Quran, Kidwai (1987) makes the point that the act of translating the Arabic text of the Qur'ān into other languages can be viewed as a natural part of the exegetical effort conducted by the Muslims, but the emotional motives behind such an act has always been "looked upon with suspicion".

Along these lines, in his book *Bibliography of the Translations of the Meanings of the Glorious Qur'an into English 1649-2002: A Critical Study*, Kidwai (2007) remarks on the growing body of literature devoted to the "twin issues of the Quran translation and translatability" (p. xx). He indicates that there have been two main issues in this regard. The first issue has something to do with "the debate on the desirability of a translation of the Quran", while the second issue "is related to the specific linguistic and socio-cultural problems in translating the Quran into English in particular" (p. xx).

The major contribution to the debate of the Qur'ān and its untranslatability has been made by Hussein Abdul-Raof (2001) in his valuable work *Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis*, where he outlines, exemplifies and substantiates the question of the Qur'ān's untranslatability by providing Qur'ānic examples at linguistic, rhetorical, micro and macro-levels. In his endeavour to give an answer to the fundamental question *what makes the Qur'ān an untranslatable text* Abdul-Raof (2001) ably provides a comprehensive analysis of the limits of Qur'ānic translatability by explaining the linguistic and rhetorical limitations that shackle the Qur'ān translator. He tackles this issue from all its possible perspectives, including:

> [S]tyle, stylistic mechanism of stress, word order, cultural voids, problems of literal translation, syntactic and semantic ambiguity problems, emotive Qur'anic expressions, disagreement among Qur'an translators, different exegetical analyses, morphological patterns, semantico-syntactic interrelation, semantic functions of conjunctives, semantico-stylistic effects, prosodic and acoustic features, and most importantly the shackles imposed by the thorny problem of linguistic and rhetorical Qur'an-specific texture (p. 1).

Furthermore, Abdul-Raof (2001) indicates that the translation of the Qur'ān is not, and should not be considered as, the replacement of the original Arabic version of the Qur'an as "we cannot produce a Latin Qur'an no matter how accurate or professional the translator attempts to be" (p. 1). This is, according to him, due to two distinct reasons. The first one is the Qur'ān-bound expressions and structures, which "cannot be reproduced in an equivalent manner to the original in terms of structure, mystical effect on the reader, and intentionality of source text". Thus, any Qur'ān translation will inevitably come out with its inaccuracies and skewing of sensitive Qur'anic information as a by-product. The second reason is the divine nature of the Qur'ān be it the word of God, which "cannot be reproduced by the word of man" (p. 1).

By utilizing the Qur'ān translation as a vehicle to examine the extent to which the translation theory is applicable, and to examine the human capacity to interpret the meanings of the word of God to other nations of different tongues, Abdul-Raof (2001) emphasizes the fact that "the beauty of the Qur'an-specific language and style surpasses man's faculty to reproduce the

Qur'an in a translated form" (p. 2). He, however, confirms the possibility of producing a "crude approximation of the language, meanings and style of the Qur'an" for the purpose of enabling the non-speakers of Arabic to appreciate the meaning of the Qur'ān. Abdul-Raof (2001) substantiates such a thesis by the reluctance of Qur'ān translators to claim that their translations are typical or the equivalent of the Qur'ān (p. 2).

By the notion of 'crude approximation' Abdul-Raof (2001) means "a pragmatic translation of the surface meanings of the Qur'an and the provision of linguistic and rhetorical patterns suitable for the target language" (p. 2). This notion which is, to use his words, "the most we can hope for" (p. 13), has been proposed by him as a strategy for communicative purposes and a practical solution to Qur'ān translation problems. This is due to two main reasons:

> [Firstly], the gap between translation theory and practice remains unbridged and what applies as a solution to one language cannot apply to another. Secondly, there is, I believe, no possible theoretical or practical solution to Qur'an translation problems for Qur'anic expressions as well as linguistic/rhetorical features remain Qur'an-specific; to force them into a target language is to deform and sacrifice the linguistic architecture of the source text; the flow of sound is sacrificed to meaning while in the Qur'an sound and meaning are closely interrelated (p. 2).

What is important, according to Abdul-Raof (2001), is to frequently inform the target language readers that what they are reading is merely a 'crude approximation' of the Qur'ān produced to assist them in reading and understanding the Qur'ān but not a substitution of it (pp. 2-3). Hence he finds justifiable the objection of Muslim intellectuals—both traditional and modern—to call the translated version of the Qur'ān as 'Qur'ān'. It is rather a "translation of the meanings of the Qur'an" (p. 13).

In his attempt to account for the main Qur'ān-specific linguistic and stylistic aspects that defy translation and constitute the grounds for the Qur'ān's untranslatability, Abdul-Raof (2001) tackles the topic from six distinct, but rather interrelated, perspectives. These are form, word order, the use of transliteration, the special syntactic structures, Qur'ānic particles, and Qur'ānic style.

Under *form* he outlines, exemplifies, and substantiates the semantically, syntactically, and stylistically motivated morphological forms of Qur'ānic discourse, which place a limitation on Qur'ān translation. Drawing on the traditional exegetical works of al-Zamakhshari and al-Qurtubi, Abdul-Raof (2001) cites a number of interesting examples as cases of untranslatability of such forms. One of which is the word *khawwānan* in the verse *inna Allāh lā yuḥibbu man kāna khawwānan athīma* (Q 4:107). This word has, in this context, both "a special emotive signification" and a "rhetorical value of hyperbole". These subtle characteristics make this word far distinct from the Arabic word *kha'inan*, which is non-hyperbolic and lacks those special connotation and rhetorical value. All Qur'ān translators, according to Abdul-Raof (2001), have "diluted and betrayed" the meaning and form of the word *khawwānan* by providing the meaning of the word *kha'inan* (traitor) as an equivalent to it (p. 42).

As far as the *word order* (or *al-nazm*— the special arrangement of words) is concerned, Abdul-Raof (2001) highlights the semantic and rhetorical role played by *al-nazm* in order to achieve a number of communicative goals, and addresses the loss of these communicative goals in translation due to inevitable semantic, syntactic and stylistic voids. Hence, modification of the original marked word order, i.e. foregrounding and backgrounding of lexical items to meet the other languages' semantic, syntactic and stylistic requirements, constitute another limitation on Qur'ān translation. To illustrate this limitation, Abdul-Raof (2001) provides several examples one of which is the translation given to the verse *Wa-ja'alū al-malā'ikata al-ladhīna hum 'ibādu al-raḥmāni ināthan* (Q 43:19), where the word *ināthan* (females) is backgrounded. The Qur'ān translators are of two types as to preserving or modifying the original word order of this verse. Some of them, like Arberry and Yusuf Ali, have opted for modifying the word order to accommodate the requirement of the target language (English). They rendered the verse as "And they make into females angels who themselves serve God", whereas other translators preserved the source text word order and provided a "source-text oriented translation" (p. 46).

Moreover, following Dagut (1978), Abdul-Raof (2001) indicates that *the use of transliteration* by Qur'ān translators results from "a recognition of the untranslatability of cultural voids". He presents the religious concept *al-'Umra* as an example. The Qur'ān translators are of four types as to dealing with this concept they are: 1) to transliterate it as *'Umra* without a marginal note (Bell and Turner); 2) to transliterate it with extended commentary (Yusuf Ali); 3) to give a 'non-equivalent' single word (visitation) without a marginal note (Arberry); and 4) to give a periphrastic description of its semantic features (pious visit) followed by a footnote explaining the source text meaning (Asad) (p. 47).

Another type of untranslatability addressed by Abdul-Raof (2001) is *the special syntactic structures* of the Qur'ān which are not commonly encountered in any type of Arabic, classical or modern. He gives the translation of the following verse as an example:

Wa-l-khayla wa-l-bighāla wa-l-ḥamīra l-itarkabūhā (Q 16:8), which has been rendered by Asad and Yusuf Ali as "And (He has created) horses, mules, and donkeys, for you to ride and use for show". This Qur'ānic structure is a marked syntactic structure in which both the subject and the verb are missing while the objects (horses, mules, and donkeys) are foregrounded (clefted). In their attempt to show the target language reader that the subject and the verb of this sentence are missing, the translators inserted the phrase "He has created" as additional "within-the-text" exegetical information (p. 48).

Likewise, *semantico-syntactic interrelation* poses another type of the Qur'ān's untranslatability according to Abdul-Raof (2001). It is the case in which "the meaning of the Qur'anic structure is signalled through syntactic elements like prepositions". One of the examples Abdul-Raof (2001) gives to illustrate such an issue is the following verse:

Innamā al-ṣadaqātu li-l-fuqarā'i wa-l-masākīni wa-l-'āmilīna 'alayhā wa-l-mu'allafati qulūbuhum wa-fī al-riqābi wa-l-ghārimīna wa-fī sabīli Allāhi wa-ibni al-sabīli, which is translated by Yusuf Ali as: "Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer the (funds); for those whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to Truth); for

those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of God; and for the wayfarer" (Q 9:60).

This verse discusses the two categories of people who are eligible for alms (charity). What concerns us here is the usage of prepositions. Two prepositions are employed in this structure; they are *li* (for) and *fī* (in). The first preposition is used for the first category of people while the second one is for the second category of people. Such a change in preposition usage is not unjustifiable; it is, rather, "meaning oriented". Such a usage signifies that the people from the second category are more eligible for charity; this is derived from the associative meaning of the preposition *fī* which refers to "the 'bowl' in which charity money is dropped and that this 'bowl' is deeper, i.e., a reference to those people's desperate financial needs" (p. 49).

Similarly, the semantically-oriented *Qur'ānic particles* cause a translation limitation due to the fact that the associative meanings of such particles are usually lost as a result of the differences between the source language and the target language.

The particles *idhā* (if) and *in* (if) are taken by Abdul-Raof (2001) as a case in point. Following the medieval linguist and Qur'ān exegete al-Suyuti (d. 1505 CE), Abdul-Raof (2001) indicates that the first particle "occurs in the Qur'an when we have actions repeated frequently and for a variety of reasons", whereas the second particle "occurs when we have actions that do not take place frequently" (p. 52). He gives the following example:

> *idhā qumtum ilā al-ṣalāti fa-ighsilū ... wa-in kuntum junuban fa-l-ṭahharū*, which was translated by Yusuf Ali as: "When you prepare for prayer, wash ... If ye are in a state of ceremonial impurity, bathe your whole body" (Qur'ān 5:6).

The first particle is used to signify the frequency of the action of ablution, which precedes each of the five daily prayers. The second particle, however, is employed to denote an action of *al-junūb* (a state of ceremonial impurity) that is quite less frequent (p. 52).

The last important aspect of the Qur'ān's untranslatability occurs when tackling the *Qur'ānic style*, which is "another victim of translation". Abdul-Raof (2001) illustrates this issue by focusing on the phenomenon of double stress, which is relinquished in translation, as in: *Inna hādhā la-huwa al-qaṣaṣu al-ḥaqq*, which is translated by Yusuf Ali as: "This is the true account" (Qur'ān 3:62). Two stylistic particles are employed "for a communicative purpose of stress" in this structure, they are (*inna*) and (*la*). These particles have been ignored in the translation given above for the reason that they are not part of English stylistic norms (p. 54).

Regarding the competence that ought to be acquired by a given translator who intends to embark on translating the Qur'ān, Abdul-Raof (2001) makes the point that the sound linguistic competence of such a translator in the Arabic and English languages is not enough; he or she has to have, in addition to that, an "advanced knowledge in Arabic syntax and rhetoric in order to appreciate the complex linguistic and rhetorical patterns of Qur'anic structures". Additionally, and most importantly, in order for them to derive and deliver the precise underlying meaning of not only the Qur'ānic expressions but also particles and prepositions, the translators ought to compare and refer to main Qur'ān exegeses (p. 2).

Abdul-Raof (2001) concludes that the "Qur'anic discourse is inimitable and cannot be

reproduced into a target language" (p.3).

Similarly, in a book chapter entitled *Cultural Aspects in Qur'an Translation*, Abdul-Raof (2005) refers to the opinion of Muslim intellectuals who believe that "the Qur'an is untranslatable since it is a linguistic miracle with transcendental meanings that cannot be captured fully by human faculty. This is why we find titles like *The Meanings of the Qur'an* or *The Message of the Qur'an*, but *The Qur'an* is not used as a title for translated text" (p. 162). Drawing on Bassnett & Lefevere (1998), Abdul-Raof (2005) further elaborates that for these scholars the Latin version of the Qur'ān can never be considered as a replacement of the original Qur'an for translation, according to them, is "a traducement, a betrayal, an inferior copy of a prioritised original" (p. 162).

By the same token, Abdul-Raof (2005) points out that since the Qur'ān was revealed in the pre-Islamic Arabian context, which is completely distinct from other cultures outside the Arabian Peninsula, it is impossible to domesticate the "Qur'an-specific cultural expressions as well as Qur'an-specific linguistic patterns" by the linguistic norms of target languages (p. 162).

Moreover, Abdul-Raof (2001) asserts that the notion of untranslatability discussed by him is "much more complicated than the simplistic notion of untranslatability referred to by Tancock (1958:32). Tancock's untranslatability may arise if a translator insists upon rendering the verb by a verb, and an adjective by an adjective, and so on" (p. 40).

In their attempt to examine strategies applied by two translators of the Qur'ān (Arberry and Pickthall) when tackling the phenomenon of pun in the Qur'ān, Dastjerdi and Jamshidian (2011) investigate the question of untranslatability of such a phenomenon in the Qur'ān. They arrive at the conclusion that, although the translators under investigation have been well-informed about the puns used in the Qur'ān, much of the aesthetic value of the Qur'ānic puns is lost in their translations. Interestingly, they maintain that "[o]ne of the most important factors in making the Quran untranslatable is its use of the untranslatable in its text. That is what makes the Quran unique. In some cases, two or three puns are mixed in such an elegant way that no translator can reproduce them in the target language" (p. 141). They conclude that "the results obtained from the present study established the notion of untranslatability of puns in the two English translations of the Quran." (p. 141).

In his book The Qur'an: An Introduction, Saeed (2008), elaborates on Muslim discourse in the translation of the Qur'ān. He cites a number of fatwas (Islamic opinions given by qualified scholars) in support of the traditional view that the Qur'ān cannot be literally translated in that the translation constitutes an equivalent to the Qur'ān itself. This is neither possible nor permissible. Hence, Muslim intellectuals refer to a "translation of the meanings of the Qur'an" (p. 139). Further, Saeed (2008) highlights the reasons provided by Muslim intellectuals for their viewpoint. These are of two types: theological and linguistic. The theological reason they propose is that "the Qur'an is the Word of God and, hence, has a unique style that cannot be matched, even in Arabic. They argue that if a piece of writing like the Qur'an cannot be imitated in Arabic, it follows that it can never be replicated in an entirely different language" (p. 126). Their linguistic argument, on the other hand, includes a

number of reasons ranging from "the richness of the Arabic language" to "the existence of certain untranslatable terms" to "the fact that a translation can never be completely exact or neutral" (p. 139).

In his article "'Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad: Two Approaches to the English Translation of the Qur'an", Iqbal (2000) affirms that all those who embarked upon the task of translating the Qur'ān have admitted the enormity of such a task and arrived at the conclusion that the text with which they dealt was untranslatable. Nevertheless, the Qur'ān has been translated into almost all living languages. According to Iqbal, the existing Qur'ān translations have echoed the translators' understanding of the Qur'ān, their intellectual and spiritual make-up, their linguistic and ideological limitations, and, to a great extent, their social, economic and political backgrounds (Iqbal, 2000).

To conclude thus far, the Muslim intellectuals are of the opinion that the Qur'ān is untranslatable into other languages. The main perspective from which they have approached the topic was the issue of inimitability/miraculousness of the Qur'ān (i'jāz al-qur'ān). They, however, ascribe the Qur'an untranslatability to a number of facts, which include, but are not limited to, the uniqueness of the style of the Qur'ān, the inevitable linguistic gaps among languages due to syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic specificities, the inevitable cultural voids, the linguistic and rhetorical Qur'ān-specific texture, and the semantically, syntactically, and stylistically motivated Qur'ān-bound morphological forms. The Muslim intellectuals, on the other hand, assert that translating the meanings of the Qur'ān is possible and preferable. It is considered an effective da'wa (missionary invitation) to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Yet, a word-for-word Qur'ān translation is neither sufficient, nor possible.

Moreover, scholars in the realm of Qur'ānic studies agree on the fact that only the original Arabic version of the Qur'ān is considered the Word of God, which is a unique and miraculously inimitable (mu'jiz) text. And since the Qur'ān is a linguistic miracle, only a crude approximation of its language, meanings, and style is possible. That is, translations, no matter how accurate they are, must not be thought of as substitutions of the original Arabic version.

They also agree on the fact that reproducing the attractiveness and beauty of the Qur'ān-specific rhetoric is beyond man's faculty. Thus, a great deal of Qur'ān-specific properties are lost in translation, and hence, inaccuracy and skewing are by-products of the available translations.

Finally, one can safely assume that for Muslim intellectuals there exist three types of untranslatability when it comes to translating the Qur'ān: linguistic, cultural and theological. While the first and the second types, as explored by Catford (1965), are inevitable and pertinent to translating any genre of text, the last type is exclusive to the Arabic Qur'ān and driven by the Muslims' profound belief in the Qur'ān as the Word of God which cannot be reproduced by the words of man.

3.2 The Qur'ān's (Un)Ttranslatability as Seen by its English Translators

In this section we will scrutinize a number of introductory materials written by a number of

prominent translators of the Qur'ān into English in an attempt to explore their attitudes towards the issue of untranslatability of the Muslims' scripture, aspects and possible reasons for this issue as elaborated by them and the mechanisms they utilised to deal with it.

In his translation *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: Text and Explanatory Translation* (first published in 1930), Pickthall (1971) stresses the orthodox view and makes it clear in his Foreword that "the Qur'an cannot be translated" (p. i) and, like many Muslim translators of the Qur'ān, he makes no claim that what has been produced was an equivalent of the original Qur'ān.

> The Qur'an cannot be translated. This is the belief of old-fashioned Sheykhs and the view of the present writer. The book is here rendered almost literally and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the Glorious Qur'an, that inimitable symphony, the very sound of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only the attempt to present the meaning of the Qur'an – and peradventure something of the charm – in English. It can never take the place of the Qur'an in Arabic, nor it is meant to do so (p. i).

Pickthall stops short of providing details as to why "the Qur'an cannot be translated". Likewise, he does not elaborate on what kind of difficulties encountered by him in the course of undertaking the translation. However, he refers to his manner to face the difficulties; he writes "when difficulties were encountered the translator had recourse to perhaps the greatest living authority on the subject" (p. i). In addition, he lists the exegetical works, and the books of the Prophet Muhammad's biography that he consulted, alongside modern scholars who provided him with advice and helped him in clarifying the "old meanings of Arabic words not to be found in dictionaries" (p. i).

In his endeavour to be as close as possible to the source text, Pickthall adheres to literal translation that accommodates the mainstream opinions of traditional commentators. When deviation from these opinions is inevitable, he resorts to using footnotes. He states that "[e]very care has thus been taken to avoid unwarrantable renderings. On the one or two occasions where there is departure from traditional interpretation, the traditional rendering will be found in a footnote" (p. i).

In his translation *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (first published in 1934), Yusuf Ali (1991), from the very beginning, describes his work as an "English interpretation" of the Qur'ān, in which he avoids a word-for-word rendering and opts to give a translation which reflects both the broad and specific meanings of the Arabic original as much as possible (p. xii). He believes that such Qur'ānic features as its rhythm, music and exalted tone should be reflected in the translation albeit faintly. He writes "[i]t may be but a faint reflection, but such beauty and power as my pen can command shall be brought to its service" (p. xii). In so doing, Yusuf Ali gives a running commentary at the beginning of each *surah* with the aim of preparing the atmosphere and introducing the subject matter in general to the reader. For the short *surahs* he provides one or two paragraphs of rhythmic commentaries.

In spite of his statement that "[in] choosing an English word for an Arabic word a translator

necessarily exercises his own judgement and may be unconsciously expressing a point of view, but that is inevitable" (p. xii), Yusuf Ali affirms that he airs no views of his own, but follows the received commentators, and in case a discrepancy occurs among them he relies upon his own judgement and chooses what seems to be "the most reasonable opinion from all points of view" (p. xii).

In addition to his method of providing running commentaries, Yusuf Ali makes use of footnotes when the spirit of the original text is used and the literal translation is not provided, he writes,

> I have explained the literal meaning in the notes [… which] I have them as short as possible constantly with the object I have in view, *vis*, to give to the English reader, scholar as well as general reader, a fairly complete but concise view of what I understand to be the meaning of the Text (1991, pp. xii-xiii).

In addition to the above-mentioned reason, Yusuf Ali utilises the footnotes to elaborate on the questions of law for which the Qur'ān provides mere general principles, and to state the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) for some verses when this is necessary to understand them. He believes that "such notes are so important for a full understanding of the Text. In many cases the Arabic words and phrases are so pregnant of meaning that a translator would be in despair unless he were allowed to explain all that he understands by them" (p. xx). Most importantly, Yusuf Ali lists five points as the main causes from which difficulties in interpretation of the Qur'an arise, being: 1) the phenomenon of semantic shift or transformation words undergo not only in Arabic but also in all living languages. The meaning of the Qur'ānic words is not similar to that meaning which was understood by the Prophet and his contemporaries. To overcome such a difficulty, Yusuf Ali suggests accepting the conclusions of the early commentators and philologists who "went into these matters with a very comprehensive grasp" (p. xvi). Should divergence arise among them, "we must use our judgment and historic sense in adopting the interpretation of that authority which appeals to us most. We must not devise new verbal meanings" (p. xvi); 2) the development the Arabic language has experienced led later commentators to abandon the interpretations of earlier ones without providing enough reason. In exercising his own selective judgment, Yusuf Ali follows the rule of preferring the earlier to the later interpretation; however, "where a later writer has reviewed the earlier interpretations and given good reasons for his own view, he has an advantage which we must freely concede to him" (p. xvi); 3) the polysemy of some Arabic words, which makes the meaning of each root word "so comprehensive that it is difficult to interpret it in a modern analytical language word for word, or by the use of the same word in all places where the original word occurs in the Text" (p. xvi). Yusuf Ali refers to the failure of the European translators in this regard; nonetheless, he indicates that "[n]o human language can possibly be adequate for the expression of the highest spiritual thought. Such thought must be expressed symbolically in terse and comprehensive words, out of which people will perceive just as much light and colour as their spiritual eyes are capable of perceiving" (p. xvi); 4) contrary to the previous point, there are special words by which the Qur'ān differentiates between things and ideas of a certain kind. Such words have no readily accurate equivalents in English, hence general words are given to render them. For example:

the words *raḥmān* and *raḥīm* (Most Merciful), and the words ʿ*afa*, *ṣafaḥa*, and *ghafara* (to forgive) where the English words used as equivalents provide a very limited idea of these attributions of Allah (p. xvi); and 6) in comparison to Allah's eternal purpose and perfectness of His plan, the human's intelligence is limited and subject to be grown and declined according to their power and experience. Therefore, the differences in interpretation between one people and another or one age and another are enormous. Hence, Yusuf Ali believes in "progressive interpretation, in the need for understanding and explaining spiritual matters from different angles" (pp. xvi-xvii).

In his translation *The Message of the Qur'ān*, Asad (1980) makes it clear that the Qur'ān is "unique and untranslatable" (p. v). The main reason for its untranslatability, according to him, is the exceptional organic interconnection between its meaning and its linguistic presentation, as they "form one unbreakable whole" (p. v). This interconnection, Asad elaborates, is manifested in:

> The position of individual words in a sentence; the rhythm and sound of its phrases and their syntactic construction, the manner in which a metaphor flows almost imperceptibly into a pragmatic statement, the use of acoustic stress not merely in the service of rhetoric but as a means of alluding to unspoken but clearly implied ideas" (p. v).

Therefore, Asad declares that "I do not claim to have 'translated' the Qur'an in the sense in which, say, Plato or Shakespeare can be translated" (p. v). He goes beyond that to say that none of the translators (Muslims or non-Muslims) "has so far brought the Qur'an nearer to the hearts or minds of people raised in a different religious and psychological climate and revealed something, however little, of its real depth and wisdom" (p. ii). Asad, however, believes that the impossibility of reproducing the Qur'ān as such in any other language does not mean that it is impossible to render its message to people who do not know Arabic at all (p. v). The possibility of translating the Qur'ān, according to him, is subject to the following points that translators have to take into consideration:

i. [They] must be guided throughout by the linguistic usage prevalent at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, and must always bear in mind that some of its expressions— especially [those] relate to abstract concepts—have in the course of time undergone a subtle change in the popular mind and should not, therefore, be translated in accordance with the sense given to them by post-classical usage (p. v).

ii. [They] must take fully into account [...] the *ījāz* of the Qur'an: that inimitable ellipticism which often deliberately omits intermediate thought-clauses in order to express the final stage of an idea as pithily and concisely as is possible within the limitations of a human language (p. vi).

iii. [They] must beware of rendering, in each and every case, the religious terms used in the Qur'an in the sense which they have acquired after Islam had become "institutionalized" into a definite set of laws, tenets and practices (p. vi).

Thus, Asad makes no claim that he has "reproduced anything of the indescribable rhythm and rhetoric of the Qur'ān. No one who has truly experienced its majestic beauty could ever be

presumptuous enough to make such a claim or even to embark upon such an attempt" (p. vii). He further admits that he is fully aware that his translation "does not and could not really "do justice" to the Qur'ān and the layers upon layers of its meaning" (p. vii).

In his translation *The Koran Interpreted*, Arberry (1955) likewise believes that the Qur'ān is untranslatable. By labeling his work as *The Koran Interpreted*, he accepts the above-mentioned orthodox Muslim view and admits that the Qur'ān cannot be translated. He makes this point clear in the preface to his translation in which he writes: "In choosing to call the present work *The Koran Interpreted* I have conceded the relevancy of the orthodox Muslim view, of which Pickthall, for one, was so conscious, that the Koran is untranslatable" (p. 24, vol. 1). Arberry, however, attributes the untranslatability of the Qur'ān particularly to the rhythm and rhetoric features of the Qur'ānic Arabic, which are "so characteristic, so powerful, so highly emotive, that any version whatsoever is bound in the nature of things to be but a poor copy of the glittering splendour of the original" (pp. 24-25, vol. 1). For Arberry, imitating the rhetorical and rhythmical pattern of the Qur'ān was the main reason for conducting the translation, he writes:

> My chief reason for offering this new version of a book which has been 'translated' many times already is that in no previous rendering has a serious attempt been made to imitate, however imperfectly, those rhetorical and rhythmical patterns which are the glory and the sublimity of the Koran. I am breaking new ground here (p. 25 vol. 1).

Therefore, Arberry disregards the accepted fact that the Surahs of the Qur'ān are "in many instances of a composite character, holding embedded in them fragments received by Muhammad at widely differing dates". Consequently, he deals with each Surah "as an artistic whole, its often incongruous arts constituting a rich and admirable pattern" (p. 25, vol. 1).

Elaborating on the features of Qur'ānic Arabic and its stylistic beauties such as its "sublimity and excellencies of sound and eloquence, rhetoric and metaphor, assonance and alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhyme, ellipse and parallelism. Its cadences and sprung rhythm, pauses and stops, imply eloquent speech and duration" (p. 7). Ahmed Ali (1984), in his translation *The Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, admits that some of these "stylistic beauties are untranslatable and can only be suggested" (p. 7). Therefore, he adopts the "form of metrical lines" in his translation to account for accent "sprung rhythm and tonal structure the sonority and rhythmic patterns of the Qur'ānic language" (p. 7). In addition, in his attempt to demonstrate the celebrating affect of the Qur'ānic rhyme, which as he puts it "cannot be used in English without disastrous consequences" (p. 7), Ahmed Ali constantly employs "assonance, alliteration and internal rhyme" (p. 7). While fully aware of the complexity of the derivational mechanism of the Arabic language where words are "derived from the same root branch off into different sets of meanings" (p. 7), Ahmed Ali indicates that capturing the particular shade of meaning "can be fixed only with reference to the context and regard to instances of their similar use elsewhere in the Book, as well as the logic and wider world view of the Qur'an" (p. 7). Furthermore, Ahmed Ali justifies the employment of the brackets in his translation by arguing that they "have been used mainly to give elucidations, differentiated or implied and extended meanings of words, or to fill elliptical gaps" (p. 8). He

also indicates that he appends notes to his translation to elaborate on such issues as the truths presented by the Qur'ān and "have come to be recognized with advance of knowledge in our age as conforming to the laws of causation and effect which science itself is trying to understand" (p. 8).

In his translation *The Qur'an: A New Interpretation*, Turner (1997) perceives the issue of the Qur'ān's untranslatability from the perspective of its very miraculous nature, that is, its inimitability (*iʻjāz*). He indicates that translation is a form of imitation, and asserts that "[t]he question of whether or not one should attempt a translation of the Quran should perhaps be seen in the context of the rather more complex issue of translatability in general, of whether or not translation— any translation— is possible at all" (p. x). Drawing on the theoreticians' and critics' opinion that "all translation is ultimately impossible", Turner points out that "[t]he notion of untranslatability operates on two distinct levels— the aesthetico-linguistic and the religio-philosophical— but at the heart of both arguments lies the question of fidelity, of faithfulness to the text— and, by extension in the case of religious scripture, faithfulness to God himself" (p. x). The fidelity, and the translatability, according to Turner is out of question since the source and target texts "are, not and can never be, equal". He attributes this to four reasons being: 1) semantic differences between the source and target languages; 2) phonetic differences between the source and target languages; 3) discrepancies in literary traditions; and 4) discrepancies in cultural mindsets.

Since, based on the above-mentioned reasons, everything is untranslatable, Turner poses the following question: What do we (translators) do? In an attempt to answer this question, he declares that "[w]e do what countless literary law-breakers before us have done: we accept this most unholy of principles and then we dive in and translate, accepting the truth that perfection, immutability and absolutes may pertain to mathematics, but only mythically to the arts, to most human experience, and to everything else in the cosmos— but not at all to literature and literary translation" (p. x).

As far as the translation of the Qur'ān is concerned, Turner affirms the orthodox view and indicates that the translation of the Qur'ān "should not detract from the fact that the general consensus among Muslim intellectuals – including those who have attempted translations of the Quran into other languages – is that the Quran is ultimately untranslatable" (p. xiii). Accepting the fact that the Qur'ān is untranslatable, he elaborates, does not mean that it should never be translated. It rather means that when reading a translation of the Qur'ān one must bear in mind "what is lost in translation is the Quran itself" (p. xiii). Turner attributes the Qur'ān's untranslatability to a complete divergence between the language of the Qur'an (Arabic) and any other language. Such a divergence is manifested in the syntax and structure of the Qur'ānic Arabic, its unique nuances and metaphorical uses of words, its "excellences of sound and eloquence, of rhetoric and metaphor, of assonance and alliteration, of onomatopoeia and rhyme, of ellipsis and parallelism so sublime that all attempts to replicate its verses in tongues other than Arabic cannot but take on the form of well-intentioned parody" (p. xiii).

He goes beyond that to declare that "[w]hen one considers the complexities involved in

translating a work such as the Quran, one often wonders whether it might not be easier for the whole English-speaking world to learn Arabic in order to read the Quran than for one translator to bring the Quran to the whole of the English-speaking world" (p. xiii).

Turner labels his translation as *The Qur'an: A New Interpretation* and admits that it is "not a straightforward translation". It is rather an 'exegetically-led' reading based on Muhammad Baqir Behbudi's work *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* (*The Meanings of the Qur'an*). In other words, it is "a combination of translation and exegesis – *tafsīr* – in which the verses of the Holy Book have been 'opened out' to reveal some of the layers of meaning expounded by the Prophet and transmitted through the ages by the Prophet's family and companions" (p. xvi). And this combination of translation and exegesis is what makes this translation different from the other English translations of the Qur'ān.

In his translation *The Qur'an: English Translation and Parallel Arabic Text*, Abdel Haleem (2010) stresses the orthodox notion that only the Arabic text of the Qur'ān is recognised as 'the Qur'ān' and no translation can substitute for it. He further concedes that any translation of the Qur'ān "is no more than an interpretation or form of exegesis to attempt to explain, in the target language, what the Arabic says […and] Like any human endeavour, all translations are open to improvement"." (p. vx). Acknowledging the extreme difficulty with translating the Qur'ān, Abdel Haleem elaborates on the methodology he employed in his translation "to enhance accuracy and clarity of meaning" (p. xxviii). Elements of his methodology can be seen as practical mechanisms put forward by him to overcome some of the above-mentioned aspects of linguistic and cultural untranslatability of the Qur'ān. Abdel Haleem addresses eight points to account for his methodology. They are intertextuality, context, identifying aspects of meaning, Arabic structure and idiom, pronouns, classical usage, paragraphing and punctuation, and footnotes and explanatory introductions (pp. xxviii-xxxiii).

By *Intertextuality* (*tafsīr al-Qur'an bi-l-Qur'an*) Abdel Haleem means using parts of the Qur'ān to understand the other parts of it. He utilizes this technique in the footnotes of his translation in his attempt to explain the meaning of "ambiguous passages of the Qur'an" (p. xxviii).

However, *Context*, according to Abdel Haleem, is "crucial in interpreting the meaning of any discourse, Qur'anic or otherwise" (p. xxviii). Not taking the context into consideration may result in an erroneous translation. To illustrate such an issue, he compares his translation of the Qur'ānic passage (Q. 9: 40) with a translation of the same passage given by Dawood who, due to neglecting the context in which this verse occurs, mistakenly takes the subject of the verb routed/brought down to be the Prophet Muhammad rather than God (p. xxix).

Another mechanism used by Abdel Haleem is *Identifying Aspects of Meaning* by which he means tackling the Qur'ānic terms, which are frequently used with different meanings in different contexts. He argues against the idea of employing one word in translating a given key term for the sake of consistency. He maintains that "[i]t is important for the translator to recognize when it is appropriate to be consistent in the translation of a repeated term, and when to reflect the context" (p. xxix).

Concerning the *Arabic Structure and Idiom*, Abdel Haleem makes the point that unnecessarily close adherence to the original Arabic structure and idioms should be avoided, as literal translation of them, owing to the fact that the Qur'ān-specific style typically sounds odd and meaningless in English (p. xxx).

The other mechanism employed by Abdel Haleem has something to do with *Pronouns*. The pronouns in the Qur'ān sometimes shift in the same verse in a Qur'ān-specific phenomenon referred to in Arabic as *iltifāt*. Not identifying the proper reference of a given pronoun may cause an ambiguity and distortion of meaning. It is quite common to see in the Qur'ān a shift from one personal pronoun or one tense of a verb to another. Since Arabic differentiates between 'you' singular and 'you' plural, and modern English allows 'you' to signify both singular and plural, Abdel Haleem opts for inserting the word 'Prophet' in his translation "where it is clear that it is he who is being addressed, to make the passages as clear in English as they are in Arabic" (p. xxxi).

Another mechanism Abdel Haleem employs is pertinent to *Classical Usage* of some Qur'ānic terms. He confirms the importance of identifying the original meanings of these terms as used at the Prophet's time, and, on the other hand, avoiding using their new meanings as used in modern Arabic. To solve this problem, Abdel Haleem draws on classical Arabic dictionaries such as the *Lisān al-'Arab* by Ibn Mandhur, *Al-Qamūs al-Muḥīṭ* by al-Fayruzabadi, and *Al-Mu'jam al-Wasīṭ* by the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo (p. xxxi).

Moreover, Abdel Haleem finds that the discrepancies between Arabic and English regarding how to apply *Paragraphing and Punctuation* is one of the problematic aspects that needs to be addressed so as to "clarify the meaning and structure of thoughts and to meet the expectation of modern readers" (p. xxxii). Therefore, he divides his target text into paragraphs and marks the beginning of each verse with its number. In so doing, Abdel Haleem diverges from the Arabic conventions and the traditional Qur'ānic manner where verses numbers are added at the end and each Surah is presented in one continuous paragraph no matter how many pages it may take. He believes that such a method would be "extremely important for the referencing and cross-referencing which contributes so much to understanding the meaning of the text" (p. xxxii).

Abdel Haleem also diverges from the Arabic conventions in terms of *punctuation*. While there is a Qur'ān-specific system of marking pauses, he employs commas, full stops, colons, semicolons, question marks, dashes, quotation marks, etc. which are not employed in the Qur'ān. Abdel Haleem justifies this method by claiming that it helps in clarity and solves stylistic difficulties (p. xxxiii).

However, although other translators devote most of the introductory materials of their translations to account for the overall features of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'ān, they provide some profound insights as to the question of the Qur'an's untranslatability. Dawood (2003), for instance, in his translation *The Koran* (first published in 1956), indicates that the Qur'ān, is "not only one of the most influential books of prophetic literature but also a literary masterpiece in its own right" (p. 3). Such a masterpiece, according to him, contains many ambiguous statements which, "if not recognized as

altogether obscure, lend themselves to more than one interpretation" (p. 4). Criticising other translators who opt for "the rigidly literal rendering of Arabic idioms", Dawood believes that the ambiguities caused by such idioms have to be tackled by utilising "explanatory footnotes in order to avoid turning the text into interpretation rather than a translation" (p. 4). Along these lines Irving (1992) in his translation *The Noble Qur'an: The First American Translation and Commentary* (first published in 1985), points out that the Qur'ān is "literally untranslatable" because it is a living document that "each time one returns to it, he finds new meanings and fresh ways of interpreting it; the messages are endless for it is a living Book" (p. xxxiii). Thus, he declares that "[t]his in fact is not a translation but a version, a modest tafsir [exegesis] for the English-speaking Muslim who has not been able to rely on Arabic" (p. xxxviiii). Similarly, in his translation *The Bounteous Koran: A Translation of Meaning and Commentary*, Khatib (1984) indicates that any translation of the Qur'ān is a mere translation of a particular meaning, which is far from revealing, or reflecting its true spirit or beauty. For him, the original text includes two kinds of words. The first kind is the words which are apparent; and second kind is the words which are "figurative and are meant to be left to the imagination of man throughout the ages" (p. v). Khatib lists the following as the main difficulties he encountered when rendering the Qur'ān into English:

1. The omissions, additions, and figurative words that are part of the beauty, eloquence, sequence, and rhythmic pattern of the Book.

2. The commitment to an extreme precision in translating letter by letter and word by word while maintaining the exact sequence and construction of the Arabic verse.

3. Finding English words that precisely match the Arabic meaning (p. v).

In his attempt to counteract these difficulties, Khatib utilised footnotes to provide commentaries "intended to make it easier for the reader to understand the true meaning of the text, and is a reference to the difference between the Islamic laws and the pre-Islamic norms and patterns of social behaviour" (p. v). Such commentaries, he elaborates, were drawn from classic and modern books and studies on Islam (p. v). In the same way, Zidan and Zidan (2000), in their Translation of the Glorious Qur'ān, acknowledge that expressing the "GOD's Message" as He has done is a task beyond human faculty. Consequently, translation of the Qur'ān "can never achieve the perfection and degree of expression of the Arabic text in which it was revealed" (p. 6). Therefore, they notify the reader that their work is "only a translation of the meaning of the Qur'an, not a version, as there are no versions of the Qur'an" (p. 6). Likewise, Bakhtiar (2012), in her translation The Sublime Quran, admits that neither her translation nor any other translation can be compared with the original Arabic version of the Qur'ān in terms of beauty and style. Furthermore, she confirms the fact that only the Arabic version of the Qur'an is deemed to be the "eternal Word of God", and any translation of that version is no more than an interpretation of the original not the original itself (p. xxv).

To conclude this section, the translators of the Qur'ān assert the orthodox view that the Qur'an is untranslatable due to its linguistic, cultural and (for Muslims) theological idiosyncrasies, which are also emphasised by the previously mentioned Muslim intellectuals.

However, contrary to those scholars who limit themselves to theorising the linguistic, cultural and theological aspects of the Qur'ān's untranslatability, the Qur'an translators, having themselves been involved in tackling the difficulties caused by such aspects, talk of practical mechanisms they utilized in their endeavour to provide as close linguistically and culturally appropriate rendering of the Qur'ān as possible.

Describing their works as "English interpretation" of the Qur'ān, the translators elaborate on the following thorny issues: 1) Words with old meanings that could not be found in dictionaries; 2) The semantic shift or transformation words undergo, which makes the meaning of Arabic words found also in the Qur'ān dissimilar to the meaning which was understood by the Prophet Muhammad and his contemporaries; 3) The polysemy of some Arabic words; 4) Words which have no readily accurate equivalent in English; 5) Stylistic beauties; 6) The organic interconnection between the Qur'ān's meaning and its linguistic presentation; and 7) The Qur'ān is a living document:; hence, new meanings and fresh ways of interpreting it can be found each time one returns to it.

The translators consider the following as practical mechanisms to deal with the above-mentioned difficulties: 1) Resorting to traditional exegetical works, and books of the Prophet Muhammad's biography; 2) Resorting to contemporary scholars and living authorities on the subject for clarification; 3) Adhering to literal translation that accommodates the opinions of the majority of traditional commentators; 4) Making use of footnotes to provide literal translation when the spirit of the original text is targeted in the body of the translation; 5) Making use of footnotes or appended notes to elaborate on such issues as the occasion of the revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl) of some verses, and the questions of law; 6) Accepting the conclusions of the early commentators and philologists. Should divergence arise among them, translators have to use their own judgment and historic sense in adopting the interpretation of that authority which appeals to them most; 7) Translators must not devise new verbal meanings; 8) Providing a general word when rendering the Qur'ānic terms which have no readily accurate equivalent in English; 9) Dealing with each Qur'ānic Surah as an artistic whole; 10) Using a poetic language and metrical lines to imitate the Qur'ānic style and give the English reader a flavour of its stylistic beauties; 11) Taking into account the Qur'ānic context and the usage of a given word in different instances is crucial in capturing the particular shade of meaning of that particular word; 12) Using within-the-text parenthetical glosses as a means to provide implied and extended meanings of words, or to fill elliptical gaps; 13) Taking the phenomenon of ījāz (inimitable ellipticism) of the Qur'ān into consideration; 14) Avoiding word-by-word translation; 15) Some of them (e.g., Yusuf Ali; Arberry; and Ahmed Ali) believe that such Qur'ānic features as its rhythm, music and exalted tone should also be reflected in the translation.

4. Conclusion

Untranslatability, at its very core, is the impossibility of conveying the meaning of words and structures from one language to another. The apparent untranslatability of the Qur'ān has been the focus of this article, which deals with aspects of this issue from two distinct perspectives: (1) the untranslatability of the Qur'ān as understood by Muslim intellectuals

and (2) the untranslatability of the Qur'ān as seen by its translators into English. This article demonstrates that while both the scholars and the translators of the Qur'ān agree upon the fact that the Qur'ān-bound linguistic and cultural aspects are untranslatable, they vary in the ways they prioritise them, and, on the part of the translators, the ways in which they deal with them. Nonetheless, they both affirm the possibility of rendering the meanings of the Qur'ān into other languages and confirm the necessity and nobility of such a task as part of *da'wa* (missionary invitation) to Islam. Given this, the present researcher believes that the notion of the Qur'ān's translatability, rather than untranslatability, needs to be the main concern of stakeholders. Translatability seems to be more plausible than untranslatability, since absolute "untranslatables" are considered the minority in comparison to the vast majority of "translatables and relative translatables" (Ke, 1999, p. 297). Having said that, and given the fact that there is no such thing as 'absolute equivalence' in reality, the process of translating from a given source language into a target language inevitably involves a certain amount of loss. The quality and/or quantity of this loss varies according to a number of crucial variables. They include, but are not limited to, linguistic and cultural divergences between the two languages, the purpose of the translation, and the genre of the text at hand. When it comes to translating sacred scriptures in general and the Qur'ān in particular, due to their spiritual, historical, theological, and linguistic status, such a loss becomes more significant and questions both the legitimacy of translating these scriptures and the translatability of them. At the end of the day, it is translators' responsibility to reach, within their human faculty, the compromised "crude approximation" and to find appropriate ways to compensate for these losses by resorting to practical strategies such as those mentioned in this article.

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