A Study of Translations of Euphemisms in the Glorious Qur'an

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Abstract

This study aims at examining the process of translating euphemisms in the Glorious Qur'an. The study is limited to the use of euphemisms in the Qur'anic translations. It highlights the importance of the translator's role in recording the meanings of the euphemisms accurately. The study is based on the works of the translators and stresses the need for a careful and precise translation of the Qur'anic texts. The study concludes that there is a need for more research in this field to improve the quality of the Qur'anic translations.
Abstract

This paper sheds light on the translations of some euphemistic expressions used in the Glorious Qur'an. It aims at investigating how some translators of the Glorious Qur’an deal with the euphemistic expressions. This has its significance in achieving a better understanding on the part of the Glorious Qur’an translator and subsequently on the part of English readers where euphemism is concerned. Among the aims of this study is investigating how far the translators are accurate in rendering euphemism based upon the context and the interpretive meaning. This study hypothesizes that euphemism is a rhetorical aesthetic device, which has not been given due attention by the Glorious Qur’an translators. It is hoped that the study will be able to highlight two important ideas: firstly, that the translators have to be aware of euphemistic expressions in translation and secondly, that translators have to translate them accurately as they mean in the source text.

- Definition of Translation:

Some translators view translation as a matter of equivalence between SL (Source Language) and TL (Target Language). Nida (1964: 165-6), for instance, distinguishes two types of equivalence: formal and dynamic. The former is mainly source oriented. It focuses on the similarity of form between the SL text and the T.L. text as well as on the content. Thus, it enables the TL reader to understand as much as possible the original text, whereas the latter is based on the equivalence of response. It is mainly receptor directed. It aims at reproducing an equivalent effect on the receiver as that experienced by the SL one. It tries to establish a similar relationship and effect
between the SL message and TL receiver. According to Catford (1965: 27), equivalence is an empirical phenomenon which can be discovered by comparing the SL text (SLT) and TL text (TLT). Translation equivalence has been tackled differently by many linguists and scholars.

Newmark (1988:7) confirms that “translation is a craft consisting in the attempting to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language”. Furthermore, Bassnette (1991:4) maintains that: “some of the 9th century’s legacy is evident in the preoccupation of scholars with finding a suitable term for describing translation”. She finds out that translation has been described by various scholars as a craft, an art, or a science. She adds that the science “reduces the process to a mechanical job and belittles the creative process involved, while craft relegates translation to a less academic occupation”.

Aziz and Lataiwish (2000: 102) state that “for the religious texts both form and content may be of equal importance. The message expressed by a religious text is based on faith in addition to the information contained in the message, and the way this information is conveyed”.

Translation is the transfer of meaning from a language (S.L.) to another language (T.L.). The most important idea is that translators have to be honest in relaying the meaning especially from one culture to another. It is taken for granted that while translating, many problems emerge. The good translator is the one who attempts to overcome these problems producing a good translation. A good translation according to Roger (1991: 11) is: “that in which the merit of the original
work is so completely transfused into another language, as to be as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it to be as those who speak the language of the original work.” This definition is really related to our topic under discussion in the sense that the effect of the translated euphemistic expressions on those who are not aware of the culture of the Muslims is different from the effect of the original on Muslims and this is the idea that this paper going to prove.

- **Euphemism in English**

  Hudson (2000:261) defines euphemism as “the extension of ordinary words and phrases which express unpleasant or embarrassing ideas”. The indirectness of form is felt to diminish the unpleasantness of the meaning. Kahn (2001:243) states that:

  “except perhaps for bureaucrats and politicians, scientists are unparalleled in their ingenious use of euphemisms to shield themselves from accountability and moral responsibility for their actions. Modern linguists have even created a word for it, double speak, the obfuscation of language in order to deny or shift responsibility”

  According to Stockwell (2002: 30) “euphemism can be seen not so much as a lexical replacement by a dissimilar word as a replacement by a closely associated word (a metonymy rather than a metaphor); the rest room, is not a metaphor; rather it conveys slightly different, more pleasant associations than other possibilities.”

- **Euphemism in Arabic**
Euphemism is defined by many Arab linguists as substituting a pleasant term for an offensive one; in other words, it means stating an unpleasant matter in pleasant expressions. This is done to avoid embarrassment or threat of face among interlocutors through their interaction. Simply, euphemism is a polite and more pleasant word or phrase used to avoid something that may be shocking or embarrassing.

Latinos use direct un-euphemized words to signify sexual organs and things that should not be mentioned directly, whereas Arabs do their best in using the most polite euphemistic words to signify foul things (Abdulwahid, 1983: 55).

Arabs express the actions which are done secretly and which offend people by using utterances that do not signify them. So, they can avoid uttering them, in a way that keep their esteem. Euphemism, occurs in speech or writing, the avoiding of an unpleasant or indirect word or expression by the use of one which is less direct, and which calls up a less disagreeable image in the mind. Thus "he died" is substituted by "he fell asleep," or "he is gathered to his fathers" (Alomari, 1985:5).

Euphemism has many Arabic equivalents; for instance Bishr (1992: 196) uses (حَمْسِيَةُ التَّعْبِيرُ) (nice expression), whereas Hussamaldeen (1985:17) calls it (تَحْمِيْلُ النَّفْظِ) (euphemizing expression), (الْتَطْفِيفِ) (Euphemizing) by Omar (1982: 240) and (لَطِفِ التَّعْبِيرِ) (kind expression) by Alkhuli (1999: 88).

- Translation of the Glorious Qur’a’n
Sacredness of the Glorious Qur’an and its miraculous nature make it so difficult and problematic to translate into other languages. It is problematic because it puts the translators, whatever their cultures are, in a crucial and controversial situation, particularly when they feel the absence of the miraculous nature and the inimitable style in their translations after comparing the SLT with the TLT. So, since translating religious texts requires an additional consideration, the translators should be very careful in selecting the appropriate equivalents in rendering the Glorious Qur’an into other languages.

Qara’i (1994:1) says: “Despite the enormous amount of effort that has been made during the past centuries and notwithstanding the numerous translations that have appeared in many languages of the world and the new ones that continue to appear almost every year, an error free translation of the Glorious Qur’an in any language still remains an unfulfilled dream”. Khalifa (1997:1) argues that comparing any translation with the original Arabic is like comparing a thumbnail sketch with the natural view of a splendid landscape rich in color, light and shade, and sonorous in melody. Scanty knowledge of classical Arabic would deprive anyone from appreciating the different shades of meaning rendered by the occasionally slightly different declensions of Arabic words.

Ali (2005:1) seems to be in agreement with Qara’i since he confirms that “A translation of a revealed book cannot be the word of Allah because in the process of translation the word of Allah is transformed into the word of man. It is, therefore, agreed by Muslim scholars that any translation of the Glorious Qur’an into another language should accurately convey the meaning of the original Arabic text while preserving its original form.”
Qur’an is not the word of Allah and does not qualify to be called the Glorious Qur’an”. Elmasry (2005: 4) remarks that the translation of the Glorious Qur’an into English is relatively new and difficult. Many factors contribute further to the difficulty of its translation. These include the fact that the Glorious Qur’an is not a textbook, divided into Suras by topics. It uses Arabic and Islamic terminology throughout, the rhythm of the Qur’anic language, the varieties of topics in one Sura, even one Ayah.

- Data Analysis

The data (Ayahs) have been collected from the Glorious Qur’an. Five Ayahs which have clear euphemistic expressions are analyzed. The study clarifies which translation ignores euphemism and which does not. It shows who translates euphemistic expressions faithfully and who sacrifices euphemisms at the expense of meaning.

In our analysis of the data concerned, we adopt Al-Esfahani’s “Mofradat Alfaz al-Qoran” and Ibn Kathir's interpretation to investigate how far the translators were careful in rendering euphemistic expressions in the Glorious Qur'an. Three translations by different translators. The translators are Abdullah Yousif Ali (1989), Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan (1996), Marmaduke Pikthhal (1999) will be considered. The Ayahs chosen are as follows:
1- Permitted you, on the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives. They are your garment and ye are their garments...


2- It is made lawful for you to have sexual relations with your wives on the night of As-Saum (the fasts). They are Libas (i.e. body cover, or screen, or Sakan, i.e. enjoy the pleasure of living with them, for you and they are the same for them.

Hilali & Khan (1996)

3- It is made lawful for you to go unto your wives on the night of the fast. They are raiment for you and ye are raiment for them...

Pikthal (1999)

Discussion:

According to Al-Esfahani (1997: 359) ٱلْجِلْدُ (al-jald) is a word that has an implied meaning used to refer to sexual intercourse. It is a metonym for sexual intercourse. Allah says: ٱلْجِلْدُ (al-jald) (Al-Baqara: 197) (...So whosoever intends to perform Hajj therein (by assuming Ihram), then he should not have sexual relations (with his wife), nor commit sin ...). This Ayah prohibits sexual intercourse during Hajj. Considering the above translations, it can be noted that Ali and Pikthal rendered ٱلْجِلْدُ into "to approach" and "to go unto"; they did not translate the intended and the interpretive meanings of ٱلْجِلْدُ for Hilali and Khan, they ignored the euphemistic expression ٱلْجِلْدُ which is used to reduce the direct meaning of sexual intercourse and mentioned...
only the interpretive meaning of ❰ (have sexual relations). All the translators failed to transfer the euphemistic nature of ❰ . To solve this problem they should have used the euphemism plus a paraphrase or an annotation.

**SL Text:** (2)

**TL Texts** (*Al-Baqara, Ayah 223*):

1- Your wives are as a tilth unto you; so approach your tilth when or how ye will; but do some good act for your souls beforehand and fear God....


2- Your wives are a tilth for you, so go to your tilth, when or how you will, and send (good deeds, or ask Allah to bestow upon you pious offspring) for your own selves beforehand...

Hilali & Khan (1996)

3- Your women are a tilth for you (to cultivate) go to your tilth as ye will, and send (good deeds) before you for your souls, and fear Allah...

Pikthal (1999)

**Discussion:**

Ibn `Abbas commented, that tilth means the place of pregnancy."Allah then says: (...so go to your tilth, when or how you will,) meaning, wherever you wish from the front or from...
behind, as long as sex takes place in one anatomical area (the female sexual organ), as the authentic Hadiths have indicated. According to Al-Esfahani (1997: 226) ۹ is tillage. In this Ayah, ۹ is used as a metonym likening women to tillage (cultivation). That is, inside women the process of reproduction of human beings is completed in the same way the earth has crops for the survival of humans. All the three translators rendered ۹ literally into tilth, which means cultivating land or the reforming of a soil especially in relation to its suitability for crop growth. In the SL ۹ is used as metonym, but the question is, will the English reader realize the metonym as the Arab reader? So, those who are from cultures other than Islam will misunderstand the Ayah.

SL Text: (3)

TL Texts (An-Nisaa, Ayah 43-44):

1- …or ye have been in contact with women…

2- …or you have been in contact with women (by sexual relations) and you find no water, perform Tayammum …

Hilali & Khan (1996)
3- … And if ye be ill, or on a journey, or one of you cometh from the closet, or ye have touched women,…
Discussion:

(being in contact with women) refers to sexual intercourse. Allah says (if you are ill, or on a journey, or one of you comes from the toilet, or from touching women, referring to sexual intercourse. For instance, Allah said in another Ayah: ... (And if you divorce them before you have touched them, (have sex with them) (Al-Baqara:237). According to Al-Esfahani (1997: 747), means to be in touch or in contact with. is a metonym for sexual intercourse. One can note that both Ali and Pikthal's translations did not transfer the interpretive and intended meaning of . Hilali and Khan, succeeded in translating the interpretive meaning by using parenthesized interpretation, but they failed in using one euphemistic expression to refer to and keeping its euphemistic nature. Sex in Arabic is dealt with in the Glorious Qur'an in a very euphemistic and decent manner. "or touch women" "or you have been in contact with women" (by sexual relations).

SL Text: (4)

TL Texts (An-Nisaa, Ayah 21):
1- And how could ye take it when ye have *gone in unto each other*, and they have taken from you a solemn…


2- And how could you take it (back) while you have *gone in unto each other*, and they have taken from you a firm and strong covenant?

Hilali & Khan (1996)

3- How can ye take it (back) after one of you hath *gone in unto the other*, and they have taken a strong pledge from you?

Pikthal (1999)

**Discussion:**
This Ayah means that a Muslim should not take back the dowry from the woman with whom he had intercourse. Ibn `Abbas, Mujahid, As-Suddi and several others said that this means sexual intercourse. According to Al-Esfahani (1997: 639), *لا عهد عمل* is to be alone with a woman to have sexual intercourse. One can notice that all the three translators rendered *لا عهد عمل* literally into *gone in unto the other*, which has nothing to do with the intended and interpretive meanings of *لا عهد عمل* in the SL text. Unfortunately, they failed to be faithful to the SL text.

**SL Text:** (5)

**TL Texts (Yusuf, Ayah 26):**
1- He said: "It was she that sought to seduce me from my (true) self…


2- He [Yusuf (Joseph)] said: "It was she that sought to seduce me;" …

Hilali & Khan (1996)

3- (Joseph) said: She it was who asked of me an evil act. And in witness of her own folk testified: If his shirt is torn from before, then she speaketh truth and he is of the liars.

Pikthal (1999)

**Discussion:**

He (Yusuf) said: "It was she that sought to seduce me;" and a witness of her household bore witness (saying): "If it be that his shirt is torn from the front, then her tale is true and he is a liar!"). According to Al-Esfahani (1997: 371), means am attempt of a women to seduce a man into sin. This euphemism refers to seducing. Simply, the meaning which is meant by the Ayah is to seduce and the euphemism expressed is . In the Ayah, there may be a substitution of a pleasant term (عِمَّا،) for an offensive one (أُفْتَتَي). That is Islamic rules and cultural conventions prohibit the deliberate use of Arabic obscene expressions. Ali and Hilali and Khan, in translating  into English, conveyed the intended meaning (seduce) and ignored
the euphemistic expression (ask for an evil act). They sacrificed the euphemistic expression at the expense of meaning. Pickthall conveyed the euphemistic expression, but ignored the intended meaning. He sacrificed the meaning at the expense of the euphemistic expression. So, those who are from different contexts rather than Islam will misunderstand the Ayah. To overcome the errors of translating euphemism, translators should firstly translate euphemism as it means and then make a paraphrase for the intended meaning.

- **Conclusion:**

This study emphasizes that translators have to attaché importance to euphemistic expressions while translating, otherwise they will delude the target receivers especially those of cultures different from that of Muslims. Ignoring euphemisms means misunderstanding the context in which the text is produced. The best translations are those which mention the euphemism followed by a paraphrase to make it easy for the target receivers to understand what is intended to be relayed to their language.

Euphemism in the Ayahs of the Glorious Qur’an is one of the Qur’anic inimitable techniques and one of the most beautiful aspects of rhetoric and rhythm of the Arabic language. The results of this study support the fact that the Qur’anic language is a unique one; no other language can achieve its miraculous nature whether in form or content. There is no ideal translation in all its aspects among the translations tackled.

Sacredness of the Glorious Qura’n and its inimitable language make it so difficult and problematic to translate into
other languages. It is problematic because it puts the translators whatever their cultures are in a crucial situation, particularly when they feel the absence of the miraculous nature and the inimitable style in their translations after comparing the SLT with the TL. So, since translating religious texts requires an additional consideration; the translators should be very careful in selecting the appropriate equivalents in rendering the Glorious Qur’an into other languages. This study proved that euphemism is one of the rhetorical devices that constitute a stumbling block in the face of the translators of the Glorious Qur’an. So, there are many English translations which fail to give the functional equivalence of certain euphemistic expressions in the Glorious Qur'an. It is a happy coincidence where the translator finds an equivalent for the euphemistic expression. If there is no equivalent the translator resorts to explication, paraphrasing and annotation to get across the meaning of the original text.

References
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