

## TRANSLATION PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOUS TEXTS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR THEM

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### ABSTRACT

The main aim of this article is to study the problems of translating religious texts. The article highlights some serious problems of translating Islamic religious texts and suggests possible solutions for them by scholars of linguistics.

**Keywords:** translation problems, Islamic religious texts, solutions for the problem, translation from Uzbek into English.

### INTRODUCTION

Translating religious expressions is a challenging process. It needs many skills and experiences. This is because when the translator translates any text such as art, management, pedagogical text, political text doesn't care about mistakes, in other word, this kind of texts is not explicit the way religious ones do. Religious expressions or texts are so sensitive ones because of being holy. Thus, translator have to be careful to convey the expression in its full meaning. In other hand, the meaning of the expression must carry out the same goal that it occupies in both the source language and target language. However, it is not an easy process. A translator should be aware to understand the meaning of the expression in the source language perfectly in order to keep the sense of expression otherwise he/ she will lose the meaning of the expression. That is, using particular translating strategies may help a translator overcome equivalence problems, culture varieties, languages varieties and many items [1]. Islamic expressions have a special meaning that differs from any other expression. This is because they evoke the language and the heart together. This really sounds as a big obstacle for translator to consider the meaning completely and perfectly. In addition, Arabic and English languages are two different cultures where Islamic expressions are connected mainly with Arabic language and nations' culture so the task of the translator is to produce simple and concise translation that is easily understood by non-Arab Muslims. Also, the task of the translator is to produce the translation of Islamic expressions in their cultural entity since they are connected with the culture and non-

Arab Muslim can not understand the exact meaning without referring to cultural aspects. So, this sounds very problematic for translators and makes them produce misunderstood, confused or wrong meaning translation [2]. The translation process must convey the message of the source text into the target text. This message must include the same semantic feature levels of the original one [3].

In popular belief, to translate, a person only needs reasonable knowledge of a foreign language; long and varied experience; and a few good dictionaries. Traditionally, any good translation requires that 1) It must make sense; 2) It must convey the spirit and manner of the original; 3) It must have a natural and easy form of expression; 4) It must produce a similar response [4].

It's obvious that Uzbek Islamic religious texts are originally rooted from Arabic. There are many problems of translating Islamic religious texts from Arabic into English such as lexical, semantic, structural, grammatical and others whereas translating Uzbek religious texts twice as difficult. Translator face to the same problems while translating from Uzbek into English as while translating Arabic religious texts into English. Because Uzbek religious texts also full of loan word from Arabic and Arabic cultural untranslatable words and concepts. So, the translator should first study the translation problems of Islamic religious texts from Arabic into English in order to study problems of translating Islamic religious texts from Uzbek into English. We study translation problems of Islamic religious texts with examples of in Uzbek.

One of the most serious problems of translating is translation of *cultural collocations*. Baker [5, p. 52] like others relates this problem to the relative variations of the cultural and linguistic collocability between source language and the target language. That is to say, lexemes differ in their collocability from one language to another and what collocates in one language does not necessarily collocate in another. Furthermore, certain patterns of collocations reflect preference of the specific language. Baker gives the example of the verb "drink" whereby, in English it collocates naturally with liquids like "juice and milk", but does not collocate with "soup". Yet, what collocates with "soup" in Uzbek is the verb "drink". It is then "*sho'rvani ichmoq*", but not "*sho'rvani yemoq*".

Bader Dweik [6], in light of the findings of his study, suggests firstly, that translators should be well acquainted with the lexical restrictions, and ambiguous terms not only in the target language but also in the source language. This will eventually lead to a better and more natural rendition of the message. It is also recommended that the

translator of religious texts should be well versed in the two languages and the two cultures (Arabic and English) so as not to miss any fragment or component of the meaning of the collocations existing in religious texts. Finally, translators of religious texts and particularly translators of the Holy Quran should not rely on bilingual dictionaries only, but should consult the views of Moslem scholars so that adequate interpretations would facilitate the process of comprehending the implicit message. We can add to these that Uzbek translators of religious texts should aware of not only two cultures but three cultures of Uzbek, Arabic and English while translating from Uzbek into English. Because translating from Uzbek may probably not make sense without knowing original usage of the words in the original text.

Translating *religious expressions*, particularly in a fictional literary text, is a stimulating challenge that needs an accurate decoding and awareness of the basic function of these religious expressions. In dealing with this type of translation, the translator has to translate precisely, since otherwise misunderstanding, loss of emphasis and a cultural gap between the two languages might occur. Anyone who attempts to investigate the problems of translating religious expressions from Arabic into English may encounter difficulties due to the dearth of references. Indeed, it was not easy to find sufficient references about the translation of Arabic religious expressions into English. A few studies have tackled this sensitive issue. Ugwueye & Ezenwa-Ohaeto [7] point out that "Religious or sacred language is vested with a solemnity and dignity that ordinary languages lack". They also add that religious language is a dead language, because it uses and transfers the same phraseologies, vocabulary and beliefs from one generation to another. Keane [8, p. 49] states that, "Religious language is deeply implicated with underlying assumptions about the human subject, divine beings and the ways their capacities and agencies differ." It is also associated with basically assumptions about human matters and divine beings; it is also problematic, because it interacts with invisible being. Thus, religious language is characterized by inertia, as it has the same and unchangeable terms and concepts. Moreover, the attempt of generating new terms or concepts is risky, because of the severe criticism from the part of religious scholars. This is why a translator of religious texts has to be careful in the process of word selection. According to Nida [9] religious texts may be understand in two different ways: First, texts that discuss historical or present-day religious beliefs of a community. Second, texts that are crucial in giving rise to a believing community. Nida [9] adds that the translators must view the meaning of a text from the interpretive position of the believing community that has

accepted the authenticity of the text and has taken seriously the meaning of the text for their own beliefs and practices.

Lexical gaps are more frequent in religious texts than other texts-types. This is because religious texts have got long cultural heritage behind them. To put it simply, "A source text is usually composed originally for a situation in the source culture; hence its status as 'source text', and hence the role of the translator in the process of intercultural communication" [10, p. 222]. Thus, language is a part of culture.

There are many words in each language for which there is no "full equivalent" in the target language. One of the most difficult problems a translator face is how to find *lexical equivalents* for the areas and aspects which are not known in the receptor culture i.e. there is not a corresponding word or phrase in the receptor language easily available for the translation. A translator has to consider not only the two languages but also the two cultures, since there will be some concepts in the source language, which do not have lexical equivalents in the target language. This may be due to difference of geography, customs, beliefs, worldview, and various other factors [11, p. 163]. Even if close equivalents are found, they can rarely reveal and convey exactly the same messages. Discussing religious expressions leads to the discussion of culture. Religious expressions are usually a hard task to be translated. Larson [12, p. 180] says that, "terms which deal with the religious aspects of a culture are usually the most difficult, both in analysis of the source vocabulary and in finding the best receptor language equivalence. The reason in that these words are intangible and many of the practices are so automatic that the speakers of the language are not as conscious of the various aspects of meaning involved". Therefore, the translator will encounter much difficulty in translating expressions which are not used or practiced in the target language.

One of the problems that arises when translating Islamic religious items is the rich implications included in it that make the equivalent even if it is available in the target language *unable to convey the same message*. Religious expressions are culture-specific par excellence. They fall into the category of non-equivalence. The dictionary equivalents of these terms and expressions may be considered within the framework of Nida's approximation in translation where equivalents are given only to approximate the meaning in *general terms* and not the details because the content of these terms is highly different from the content of their equivalents. Ghazala [13] suggested using six types of equivalents to translate Islamic Terms and expressions: *functional equivalent, explanatory equivalent, cultural equivalent, religious equivalent, referential*

*equivalent, and connotative equivalent.* Similarly, the words “*halol*” (*halal*) and “*harom*” (*haraam*) have literal equivalents in English as “*Permissible*” and “*forbidden*”. However, these equivalents do not convey the extra levels of social and religious meanings the Islamic religious terms denote. The words “*halal*” and “*haraam*” in the Islamic culture refer to a wide number of practices and customs that are permitted (or not permitted) under Islamic law. In addition, they refer to specific Islamic laws governing food and drinks. Translating these words by giving their dictionary equivalents is yet again not sufficient. Another examples are the words “*tahorat*” and “*etikof*”. We instantly think of the lexical English equivalents, *ablution* and *seclusion*. By checking their definitions in dictionaries, we will find out that these words are used to refer to rituals or acts that contradict with their original meaning in Arabic. The word, “*ablution*” for example is defined in Merriam Webster Dictionary as:

1. the washing of one's body or part of it
2. the act or action of bathing

Both previous meanings fail to convey the implied meaning in the word “*tahorat*” which is used to refer to the Islamic procedure for washing parts of the body using water, typically in preparation for obligatory prayers (*namoz*), but also before handling and reading the Qur’an.

The same issue applies to the word *seclusion* which is defined in the same dictionary as:

1. the act of placing or keeping someone away from other people: the act of secluding someone
2. the state of being away from other people: a secluded state or condition

Whereas in Islam the word “*etikof*” is used to refer to an Islamic practice consisting of a period of retreat in a mosque for a certain number of days in accordance with the believer's own wish. It is most common during the month of Ramadan, especially the last ten days. These word are translated into English as “*Wuduu*” (washing the hands, rinsing the mouse, sniffing water and rinsing the nostrils, washing the face, washing the arms up to the elbow, wiping the head with wet hands and washing the feet. All of these, with the exception of wiping the head, are done three times, starting with right hand side first) and “*I’tikaaf*” (retreat in mosque, staying ina mosque for devotions, and going out only for necessary things).

When translating a word like “*Infaq*” (“*infaq*” in English) which is one of the main pillars of the Islamic economic system

and of Islam itself as a religion/faith and a way of life. Literally, Infaq is the Arabic word for spending.

However, it implies other meanings related to the purpose as well as the intention of spending which is not included in the word “spending”. In addition to Infaq, there are few other terms that are used along with their derivatives in the Qur’an and the Hadiths to indicate the same connotation of meaning with emphasis on different shades of giving. Sadaqa is giving out of a truthful heart and normally used for charitable giving, „Ata“ is handing out, It’am is giving food and etc.

Depending on the context where these words are used, it is recommended to translate them as loan words followed by a short explanation and illustrating examples to convey their specific meaning. Gerding-Salas [14] points out that the main goal of translation is to serve as a cross culture bilingual communication vehicle among people. But, in many cases, the source-language word may express an expression that is unknown in the target culture. In this case, one should note the difference between the culture-specific term and the culture-specific concept. The former refers to a concrete meaning, but the latter refers to an abstract meaning. Furthermore, the culture-specific concept refers to a religious belief, a social custom or even a type of food. Hervey and Higgins [15, p. 28] state that translating, as a process, involves not just two languages, but a transfer from one culture to another. The following terms are specific to Arabic language and culture. They are not known in the English culture and language. These expressions represent a difficult task for the translator. It is not possible to find equivalent terms. It is preferable to transliterate these terms giving footnotes to paraphrase their meaning. The translator may render them into close meanings, but it means unfaithfulness in translation. Nida and Taber [16, p. 199] point out that cultural translation is a kind of translation in which the content of the message is changed to conform to the receptor culture in some way. In the same vein, Newmark [17] points out that the only problem is the degree to which the cultural expression is to be explained in the translation. Based on the above, it can be noted that culture, language and religion are in binary relationships. One cannot comprehend any of these without recourse to the others. Therefore, understanding religious expressions entails understanding language and culture. Furthermore, having good knowledge of culture, language and religion is the only guarantee for a good translation of religious expressions. Otherwise the translation of religious terms will not be effective and most likely distorted.

Among the challenges that face the translator of Islamic religious items is the *absence of the equivalence* in the target

language. Linguistically this usually causes the problems of *cultural gap* or sometimes are called *lacunae*, *semantic void* or *semantic hole*. Words such as “*idda*” (*iddah*) has no equivalent in the English as there is no such cases in their religion or beliefs. The word refers to the period a woman must observe after the death of her spouse or after a divorce, during which she may not marry another man. Its purpose is to ensure that the male parent of any offspring produced after the cessation of a *nikah* (marriage) would be known. The length of *iddah* varies according to a number of circumstances. There is such definition in the Dictionary of Islamic words and Expressions [18, p. 77] to the word *iddah*:

*a waiting period; A period after which a divorced woman or a widow may marry again. There are types of iddah: Iddah at-talaaq and Iddah al-wafaah.*

It is a very rich item that implies a lot of meanings in Islam. However, it triggers the outbreak of unexpected problems. Another example is represented in the word “*tayammum*” which literally means an “aim” or “purpose”. In Islamic Law, it refers to “*Aiming for or seeking soil to wipe one's face and hands with the intention of purification and preparing oneself to pray, and so on*”. This act of ritual cleansing is proven by the Quran, Sunnah (prophetic tradition) and Ijmaa' (consensus of Muslim scholars).

Words, phrases that are culturally bound to a certain culture have been the main concern of translators who deal with cultural, literary or religious texts since such items or expressions are heavily and exclusively grounded in one culture. The translator, then, is faced with the problem of translating such untranslatable items. He always found himself puzzled and hesitated to use a strategy rather than the other till he eventually decides on the right selection. Long debate has been held over the use of a certain strategy; paraphrasing, transliteration, literal translation, functional or dynamic equivalence, footnoting, glossary, effective borrowing, or any other strategy that the translator finds it more convenient.

Through reviewing literature for the translation of cultural items, it was clearly obvious that there are different procedures suggested by different theorists. For example, Vladimir Ivir [19] has proposed the following seven procedures: *definition, literal translation, substitution, lexical creation, omission, addition, borrowing*. Hervey & Higgins [15] have suggested using *cultural transplantation, cultural borrowing, communicative translation, calque, and exoticism*. Newmark [20] proposed using *transference, naturalization, cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, descriptive equivalent,*

*synonymy, through translation, shift or transposition, modulation, recognized translation, translation label, compensation, componential analysis, reduction and expansion, and paraphrase.*

A combination of different strategies mentioned in different classifications and proposed by different scholar could be used to overcome the previously mentioned problems.

Montasser Mohamed Abdelwahab Mahmoud [21] suggests detailed display of the suggested strategies that the translator of Islamic religious items could apply and use when dealing with Islamic religious items.

### **1) Transcription/Transference/Transliteration**

It is called transference because it is a representation of speech sounds in phonetic symbols, i.e. rendering source language sounds into target language form (letter). It is the transference of the Source Language word into the Target language alphabet exactly as pronounced. It is also called transliteration because the translator transcribes the source language characters or sounds in the target language.

“Transliteration,” - essentially means converting word(s) in one language to word(s) in another language by means of their close approximation in sound. This is usually done because it’s more intuitive or easier; and because meaningful corresponding word(s) simply do not exist in the target language (as is oftentimes the case with names and places). In other words, this strategy is also called transcription as it refers to the conversion of source language letters into the letters of the target language. Perhaps this strategy is the easiest, most common and most frequent to be used among all strategies of translating religious as well as cultural terms. For example, the word “*Allah*” is the standard word for “*God*”. This Arabic word has been adopted into English, so it has become English.

### **2) Transcription with little illustration**

According to Montasser Mohamed Abdelwahab Mahmoud this is one of the best strategies that the translator can use to overcome the problem of translating Islamic religious items. It seems to be among the best strategies ever used as it preserves the original item in the source language as it in addition to a short explanation that make the target reader able to get the meaning implied in such an item. It keeps the transcription of the item and helps spread it among the people of the target language. This can be touched in the translation of words such as the following;

*hajj (pilgrimage to Makkah)*

*Ijlaal (glorification associated with love)*



*Al-Birr (virtuous deeds)*

### 3) Transcription with paraphrasing

Some Islamic items are compressed in meaning such that a long target language paraphrase is sometimes required to give even a rough denotative equivalent of the source language term. The translator finds himself unable to convey the message included in a certain specific item by using the strategy of transcription or the strategy of transcription with a little explanation. Therefore, he finds no option except using this strategy which he finds helpful to him in conveying the message.

*Khayr (good deed or thing)*

*Makruuh (reprehensible, hateful)*

### 4) General Sense

It is a kind of strategy that ignores the cultural charge of a source text item, may be because there is no cultural equivalent in the Target Language. The item is translated into its general sense with its cultural implications. The translator can resort to this strategy when he fails to find an equivalent. He gives a more general alternative that implies some of the cultural features of the item. This strategy avoids direct translation as it could be ambiguous, misleading and strange. For example, the word “*Buraq*” is not available in English language. It is associated with the prophet’s ascension to the heavens. It is translated as “animal” based on the description given by the prophet. However, the word, “animal” which is a general term refers to the whole class of animals. However, the researcher thinks it would be better if we add more sense to the translation. He thinks, it could be translated into “speedy horse-like creature” which

matches the description given by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), when he was asked about it. The same strategy can be used when translating a word like “*Dabb*” into English. It cannot be translated literally because this kind of animal is not known in the foreign culture. It can be translated using the general sense of the word into “spiny-tailed lizard” or “a fat-tailed lizard” to be more specific, it can be translated into “*dabb lizard*” which combines the general sense of the original word as well as the name given to this lizard.

### 4) Literal Translation of Meaning

Although a number of linguists confirm that it is rare or even impossible to find an absolute synonymy, there is hardly any doubt that partial synonymy does exist [22]. It cannot be denied that cognitive as well as pseudo synonyms are actually used in the field of translation. Even if these lexical religious items differ in respect of their connotative

meaning but they are actually used in each language to refer to the same referent and they have been accepted by a large number of translators and classified as accepted standard translation. The most important point that should be highlighted here is the apparent gap between theory and practice.

This strategy refers to one-to-one structural and conceptual correspondence: word-for word translation. This strategy considers the word as a unit of translation under the assumption that there is a structural correspondence between a pair of languages. This strategy is easily applied, for it is the literal translation of the individual words of a term or an expression. For each word in the Source Language there is a corresponding word in the Target Language - a kind of interlingual synonymy. The problem with such strategy is the difficulty of being understood by Target Language readers. It is not quite favourable to be used in translation unless there is an urgent necessity to do that. It is rather an escape to translators than a reliable solid strategy for it is based in the Source Language, not in the Target Language culture. Much care is highly needed when giving literal translation of any religious item since the use of a certain particular religious item rather than another may cause a serious difference in the attitude towards the other, and may even mark a hostile stance as ElShiekh and Saleh [23] stated in their research. This strategy can be used in translating a large number of Islamic religious items that cannot be considered culture-specific or cultural-bound items as they have actually counterpart equivalents in the target language. This issue applies to the translation of *Asmaa Allah* into *Allah's names*, *dhikr* into *rememberance*, *Rahman* into *mercy*, *Salam* into *peace*, and so on.

### 5) Classifier

It is one of the most important and best translation strategies for its practicality and applicability. It cannot be used alone but it is always included in the couplet or the triplet strategy. It is used to explain the culture-specific item in simple general way through demonstrating its type, class or category. The use of a classifier replaces long boring footnotes or paraphrase. In translating Ramadan, we have to decide on its category, is it a name given to a man or to a month or an animal. It is better to be translated using this strategy into "*the month of Ramadan*". The same strategy can be followed in "*ahl alkahf*" into "*the People of the cave*".

### 6) Footnotes

It implies giving long details about a strange or a vague culture-specific item. They may occupy various places within the text. The footnote can be given down at the bottom of the page. They must be typically sufficient and approach the precise denotative and connotative

meaning implied in the translated item. There are some Islamic religious items that need to be fully explained so that the target reader could understand the meaning. Transcription, classifier, or paraphrasing are not effective in dealing with this type of items so it is recommended to use a footnote. Words such as “Ijtihad” and “Ahl al-Hadith” can be translated as follows:

*Ijtihad* is a technical term of Islamic Law that describes the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources, the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

*Ahl al-Hadith* refers to the group of scholars in Islam who pay relatively greater importance to “traditions” than to other sources of Islamic doctrine such as *qiyas*, and tend to interpret the traditions more literally and rigorously.

## CONCLUSION

Translators usually encounter the problems such as lexical gap, cultural gap, semantic gap, inability to convey the same message in target language because of rich implication of religious items, untranslatability and so on. There are possible solutions for these problems of translating and translators should study these problems and be aware of these solutions in order to translate in a good way.

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