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Translating the Meaning of Polysemy Terms in the Holy Qur'an: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the translatability of the meaning of polysemous terms in the Holy Quran. The Descriptive Analytical Method is employed since it suits such type of studies. The translation of Abdullah Yousif Ali (1989) is chosen. Some problems of translating the meaning of these terms are presented and the strategies to solve such problems are employed in order to reach a close meaning(s) to polysemous terms of the Holy Quran. Findings of the study revealed that though there are real difficulties in conveying the actual meaning, these strategies can render a close meaningful translation to these polysemous terms.

Keywords: Polysemy, Synonyms, Strategies, Equivalent.

Introduction

Polysemy is a natural phenomenon that is common in natural languages. The problems of translation the meanings of polysemous religious terms are dealt with in this study as well as strategies to solve these problems were implemented. According to Tylor (1995, p.99) polysemy means that the association of two or more related senses with a single linguistic form. Lobste (2002, p.45) believes that polysemy plays a major role in the historical development of a word meaning. The translation of Abdullah Yousif Ali (1989) was chosen to reflect these different polysemous meanings of these terms as presented in different context from Quranic verses. In this study, the definition of polysemy, study question, limitation of the study, methodology, problems and strategies employed in translating the meaning of the polysemous terms in the Holy Quran were presented and discussed.

Research Questions

1. To what extent can we translate the intended meaning of the polysemous terms in the Holy Qur'an?
2. What are the problems of translating the meaning of the religious terms?
3. What are the strategies of translating the meaning of religious terms?

Limitations of the Study

The current study is limited to investigating the translatability of the polysemous religious terms taken from the Holy Qur'an. These terms are chosen from common terms in religious context on the translation of the holly verses are based on A. Yousif Ali translation (1989).

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Definition of Polysemy

Polysemy or (Polysemia) comes from Greek language which means ‘many’ and semia which refers to semantic (Blank 1999). Arab linguists referred to the concept of polysemy as “Ishtigaag lafzi”. For Al-Jurjani (1954, p.365) polysemous words tend to be unrelated and no clear relation among them to be realized. As-Suyuti (1971, p.384) argued that polysemy would enrich the language and make it more capable of representing the physical world among us. According to Al-Munjid (1999, p.15) polysemy is one of linguistic phenomenon in all languages. He defines polysemy as multiplicity of meaning; a case in which one word has different meanings.

Crystal 1998 refers to it as lexical item that has multiple meanings (Al-Munjid 1999 p.15). Al-Nisaaburi offered 540 entries of polysemic words in the Holy Qur’an (Abdulsalalaam, (2008, p.27).

Finch (2002, p.173) defined it as a lexeme that has more than one single meaning. This means that a polysemous term is the term that has more than one meaning. Arab linguists Polysemy can be defined as a single word that has multiple meanings; each of these words has to be learnt and differentiated separately in an actual context to be understood.

Methodology

The study employs the Descriptive Analytical Method which suits such types of studies. The polysemous term is chosen, written in Arabic and transcribed in English with the necessary comments and explanations. Data were chosen from common popular terms used mainly in daily Muslim practice and from family life. The verses of the Holy Qur’an were taken from the translation of Ali, Yousif A., 1989.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Religious texts have the features of sacredness, which are based on faith: either the message or the word or both are believed to be holy. The SL sacred items cannot be rendered into the TL without losing their Divine value (Aziz & Lataiwish, 2000 p. 111). Many scholars are reluctant to approve the translation of The Holy Qur’an because they see what it is not translatable since there is no actual equivalent to its sacred texts. The researcher uses the term “Translating the Meaning of The Holy Qur’an”, since it is suitable to give the meaning as close as possible, when someone tries to translate a Holy text. There are other features of the sacred texts which make it difficult to be translated. There are other features of the religious/sacred text which make it difficult to give the actual translated intended meaning to the target language. Some examples of these features include: The phonic aspects of the sacred text, its archaic morphological features, its formal vs. informal aspects, the parallel structure of the sacred text, the structural (grammatical) forms, and the phrase repetition of the holy texts. On the other hand, polysemy poses several challenges and problems in the course of translation. These problems are more challenging when translators translate the meanings of the polysemous religious text of The Holy Qur’an.

The following examples illustrate the phenomenon of polysemy in Arabic:

1- ‘a?taa : Has at least six different meanings: approach, grant, commit lewdness, come, bring, practice lusts. All these meanings can be best understood as used in the following Holy verses:

A. Approach: نَسَأُوْكُمْ حَزْتُ لَكُمْ فَآتُوا حَزْتُكُمْ اَللّٰهُمَّ وَفَدِمُوْا لِاَنْفُسِكُمْ ۚ وَآتُوا اللّٰهَ وَاعْلَمُوْا اَنَّكُمْ مُّلاَقُوْهُ ۗ

وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَهُمْ أَجْرٌ كَثِيرٌ (سورة البقرة: 223) (Cow:223). (وَيَسِّرْهُ لَكُمْ وَيَسِّرْ لَكُمْ). (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 Allah. And know that ye are to meet Him (in the Hereafter), and give (these) good tidings to those who believe).

B. Grant: (سورة البقرة: 269) (يُؤْتِي الْحِكْمَةَ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَمَنْ يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا) He granteth wisdom to whom He pleaseth; and he to whom wisdom is granted receiveth indeed a benefit overflowing; but none will grasp the Message but men of understanding).

C. Commit lewdness: (فَأَمْسِكُوهُمْ) (النساء) Al-Nisaa (Women) If any of your women are guilty of lewdness, Take the evidence of four (Reliable) witnesses from amongst you against them; and if they testify, confine them to houses until death do claim them, or Allah ordain for them some (other) way.

D. Come: (يَا حَسْرَةَ عَلَى الْعِبَادِ مَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِّن رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ) (Ah! (Alas for (My) Servants! There comes not a messenger to them but they mock him!)).

E. Bring: (أَتُونِي زُبَرَ الْحَدِيدِ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا سَاوَىٰ بَيْنَ الصَّدَفَيْنِ قَالَ انْفُخُوا حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَعَلَهُ نَارًا قَالَ آتُونِي) الكهف 96 "Bring me blocks of iron." At length, when he had filled up the space between the two-steep mountain-sides, He said, "Blow (with your bellows)" Then, when he had made it (red) as fire, he said: "Bring me, that I may pour over it, molten lead").

F. Practice lust: (الاعراف) (81) "For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds").

2- Al-mass has at least the following different meanings: touch, consummation of marriage, befall, madness:

A. Touch: (الواقعة:79) (Alwaagia:79) Which none shall touch but those who are clean).

B. Consummation of marriage: (قوله تعالى (لَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ إِنْ طَلَقْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ مَا لَمْ تَمْسُوهُنَّ أَوْ تَفْرِضُوا لَهُنَّ فَرِيضَةً وَمَتَّعُوهُنَّ عَلَىٰ الْمُوسِعِ قَدَرَهُ وَعَلَىٰ الْمُقْتِرِ قَدَرَهُ مَتَاعًا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ حَقًّا عَلَىٰ الْمُحْسِنِينَ) (There is no blame on you if ye divorce women before consummation or the fixation of their dower; but bestow on them (A suitable gift), the wealthy according to his means, and the poor according to his means;- A gift of a reasonable amount is due from those who wish to do the right thing (236: Cow)).

C. Befall: (إن تَمَسَّكُمْ حَسَنَةٌ تَسُوهُمْ وَإِنْ تُصِبْكُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ يَفْرَحُوا بِهَا وَإِنْ تُصِبرُوا وَتَتَّقُوا لَا يُضْرِكُمْ كَيْدُهُمْ شَيْئًا إِنَّ آَلَ عِمْرَانَ) (if aught that is good befalls you, it grieves them; but if some misfortune overtakes you, they rejoice at it. But if ye are constant and do right, not the least harm will their cunning do to you; for Allah Compasseth round about all that they do).

D. Madness: (الَّذِينَ يَأْكُلُونَ الرِّبَا لَا يَقُومُونَ إِلَّا كَمَا يَقُومُ الَّذِي يَتَخَبَّطُهُ الشَّيْطَانُ مِنَ الْمَسِّ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا إِنَّمَا الْبَيْعُ مِثْلُ الرِّبَا وَأَحَلَّ اللَّهُ الْبَيْعَ وَحَرَّمَ الرِّبَا فَمَنْ جَاءَهُ مَوْعِظَةٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِ فَانْتَهَىٰ فَلَهُ مَا سَلَفَ وَأَمْرُهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَمَنْ عَادَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ) (Those who devour usury will not stand except as stand one whom the Evil one by his touch Hath driven to madness. That is because they say: "Trade is like usury," but Allah hath permitted trade and forbidden usury. Those who after receiving direction from their Lord, desist, shall be pardoned for the past; their case is for Allah (to judge); but those who repeat (The offence) are companions of the Fire: They will abide therein (forever)).

Problems of Translating the Meanings of Qur'anic Terms:

The following are some problems when translating the meaning of the Qur'anic terms:

1. No adequate lexical equivalent as well as the cultural equivalent:

If we take the term “wuduu” الوضوء, and “tayamum”. we find that the English equivalent is “ablution” and seculsion. In Merriam Dictionary “ablution is defined as “The act or action of bathing, and or the washing of one’s body or part of it”. Both definitions do not convey the real meaning of “wuduu”. Wuduu’ is actually an Islamic procedure for purification and it is a preparation for ding prayer(s) and it is a type of worshiping. And this the case with “tayamum”.

2. Absence of equivalent in the target language:

Examples: Iddah العدة, Infaag, انفاق (to give waiting for the reward of Allah), birr بر Khishyah خشية, wajal, وجل tagwah تقوى.

“Iddah, for example, refers to a certain period (duration) where the spouse must wait (for four months and ten days) after the death of her husband, and “Iddah” also refers to a period or a duration the divorced wife has wait and not to get married to another husband until she completed three periods of purification (About three months). This period is called Iddah (Three Goroo’). It is clear that the term “Iddah” has no equivalent in the target language(s).

3. The equivalent inability to convey the exact meaning, even if it is available in the target language:

The best example is the term الصوم "fasting".

Fasting in England (for Christians) has a limited meaning. For Muslims, fasting has If we try to give an equivalent to the religious term, this narrows its real meaning. For example, if we translate the word الصيام “Siyaam” as “fasting”, it will not convey the real meaning of it. “Siyaam” in Islam includes several meanings such as:

One of the main pillars of Islam,

Fasting from eating and drinking from done to sunset,

Not to say something bad or behave bad,

Not to talk about something (as the case of Mother Mary after Prophet Jesus birth),

No sexual intercourse during fasting,

(All of the above and more).

Strategies of Translating the Meaning of the Qur'anic Term:

1. The transference of the source language term into the target language:

For example, we write الله as “Allah”, and this is different from translating it as “God”.

2. Transcribing the term with illustration or the addition of an explanation:

In this strategy, the original term is preserved, and an explanation is added. The term حج, for example, is transcribed as “Hajj” and we add that it is a ritual, a pilgrimage to Mecca during a certain time to certain Holy places with certain dress and a certain ritual. Other terms include اجلال “Ijlaal”, (to glorify Almighty Allah) بر “Bir”, (to respect i.e. parents), all of which do not

3. **Transcription with paraphrasing:**

Paraphrasing is sometimes required to give even a rough denotative meaning of the source language term. The translator finds some difficulty in trying to convey the actual meaning to the target language, then he uses the strategy of transcription with little explanation.

For example, خشية "Khashyah". This term is associated with respect, glorification, fear, and love to Almighty Allah (SW). It doesn't mean (خوف) "fear" only.

4. **Conveying the general sense of the meaning of the term:**

In this strategy, the translator ignores the cultural charge of the source text term, because he/she feels that there is no suitable cultural equivalent in the target language. The term is translated in its general sense with its cultural implications. For example, the word براق "Buraag" does not exist in the English Language. This term is associated with Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) ascension to Heaven. You cannot translate Buraag as an "animal", but you better add a "sense" to your translation, like saying "A special unnatural creature with a special speed.". in this way, the translation will be close to the actual intended meaning of the target language.

5- **Literal translation of the religious term:**

This strategy refers to one-to-one correspondence, or a word-for-word translation.

If we try to give an equivalent to the religious term, this narrows its real meaning. For example, if we translate the word Hajj (الحج) as "Pilgrimage", this does not convey the actual meaning of the word hajj in Islam. Hajj in Islam is a special worshipping with special rituals (sayings and actions) at a specified time in (Zul-Hijjah) in a certain place (Mekkah) with a certain clothes (Ihraam - إحرام) and certain conditions.

6- **To explain the religious term in a single way with its culture specific (classifier):**

With this strategy, we must decide the term category. When translating, for example, the meaning of the term رمضان "Ramadan", we decide on its category, whether it is a name given to a man or a month. If it refers to a month, then it is better to be translated as: "The Holy month of fasting of Muslims". This way, the meaning will be close enough in the target language.

7. **Using footnotes:**

To explain the religious term by adding footnotes. For example, the term باب الريان "Baab Ar-Rayaan" is a door in Paradise "Jannah", only for the who used to fast during their lives.

Conclusion

The profound rich semantic and rhetorical linguistic features of the Holy Qur'an continue to be a real challenge to translators who try to convey the intended meaning of the polysemous terms of the Holy Qur'an. Special strategies are to be employed to solve the problems resulting from different polysemous meanings of these terms. When translating religious terms, the translators must be highly qualified in Arabic language and in the target language, knowledge in Islamic culture, knowledge of interpretation (Tafseer), jurisprudence, and Islamic history to be able to convey the meaning of the Islamic religious terms as close as possible. This study is beneficial to researchers and students working in the field of religious translation. Further studies are recommended in the area of religious translation, especially when translating the meaning of

polysemous terms of the Holy Qur'an.

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