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The Translation of Qur'anic Lexical Ambiguity

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ABSTRACT

Lexical items constitute paramount problems in the translation of Quran from Arabic into English. This study deals with only one the semantic problematic areas in Surah AL-An'am (The cutle) in the Quran, namely ambiguity. It explores the translation of Qur'anic ambiguity. The current study focuses on the issue of translating ambiguous word in the Quran, particularly in the Surah AL-An'am. It attempts to analyse and compare six different approaches to to retaining the meaning of the Quran while translating it into English. The translators are Pichthall (1930), Ali (1942), Asad (1980), Khattib (1986), Malik (1997) and Al-Hilali/Khan (1417). Their translations of the Quran have been reprinted worldwide. However, the study does not attempt to evaluate the six translations but rather to investigate the types of lexical problem that they encounter based on the Quran exegesis of Ibn-Kathîr and Al-Tabariari, Al-Jalâlîn and Al-Qurtabi. The findings of the study provide empirical evidence that translators encounter lexical problems when translating Qur'anic discourse. The findings also reveal that translators adopt different approaches in selecting synonyms to render Quranic ambiguous words. The results of this study imply the need for translators to recognize the theme, incidents and circumstances of the verses' revelation. Moreover, it is suggested that translators of the Quran understand implication of word in the target language through the use of heritage dictionaries and books of eloquence and syntax.

Keywords: Qur'anic ambiguity, translation, lexical problems, surah, Qur'anic translators.
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1. The corpus

The corpus is Surah Al-An'am, or the Cattle, which is the sixth chapter of the noble Quran. It was revealed in Makkah during the middle and early days of Islam. It encompasses 165 verses, 3055 words and 12418 letters. It centres on the theme of monotheism, or *tawheed*, revelation resurrection and the hereafter. This study will be carried out based on the reading style by Hafs bin Asim. An analysis of lexical problems of ambiguity in the translation of Surah Al-An'am is made with references to the six translations revealed by Pickthal, Ali, Asad, Khattab, Malik and Al-Hilali/ Khan. The analyses state the verse number, the verse as written in Arabic, and the six translations. The original was written in Arabic

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calligraphy by Uthman Taha in Saudi Arabia. Ambiguous lexical items in the verse are written in bold type. The analysis is carried out through comparing the six translations with the original based on Quran exegesis of the translators: Ibn-Kathîr, Al-Tabariari, Al-Jalâlîn and Al-Qurtabi.

1.1   Marmaduke William Pickthall

Marmaduke William Pickthall was born in 1875 in London, England. He was an outstanding novelist, journalist, Islamic scholar and religious leader. He declared his conversion from Christianity to Islam in 1917 in West London and chose for himself the Muslim name Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall. *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (1930) is the name of Pickhall's English translation of the Quran, which he wrote at the order of the Emir of Hyderabad during his stay in India. It is one of the most well-known and popular translations, but there is no commentary given in the text.

1.2   Abdullah Yusuf Ali

Abdullah Yusuf Ali was born in Bombay in 1872 and died in London in 1953. Ali was a British Indian barrister, an Islamic scholar, and was one of the most influential translators born in the nineteenth century. His translation, *The Holy Qur'an Translation and Commentary* (1983), was widely used in many English-speaking countries. He was Hafiz and could recite the entire Quran from memory; he spoke both Arabic and English fluently. He attained BA and LLB in 1895 and a MA in 1901.

1.3   Muhammad Asad

Muhammad Asad was born on 12 July 1900 and died in 29 February 1992. He was a Jewish- born Austro–Hungarian but converted to Islam in 1926 and chose for himself the Muslim name 'Muhammad Asad'. He is the author of *The Message of the Quran* (1980)—an English translation of the book with rational and logical commentary. He was ambassador to Pakistan, a journalist, a linguist and an Islamic scholar. His publication is considered one of the most influential translations of the twentieth century.

1.4   Mustafa Khattab

Mustafa Khattab is an Egyptian Muslim scholar. He spent over two decades working on Arabic to English translation and is the author of *The Bounteous Quran: Translation of Meaning and Commentary* (1986). He has contributed to the *Encyclopaedia of Muslim American History* (2010) and was among the first people to participate in the translation of Ramadan night prayers live from the Sacred Mosque in Makkah and the Prophet's Mosque in Al-Madinah (2002-2005). He has been a Muslim Adjunct Captain at Brock University, a Canada Fulbright interfaith scholar and an official imam in both Canada and the United States. He obtained a PhD in Islamic studies from Faculty of Language and Translation, Al-Azahar University. He is also the writer of the *Nation of Islam* (2011).

1.5   Muhamad Farooq Malik

Muhamad Farooq -i- Azam Malik is a Pakistani scholar of Islamic studies. He began his translation of the Quran in 1963 in in New York where he resides and published *Al-Quran: The Guidance for Mankind,* his translation in contemporary American English, in 2015. It is a unique English translation, as it includes the biography of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), his Islamic mission and his place in human history. His translation includes no footnotes and references. At the outset of each surah, his discusses its period of revision, major themes, and divine laws. He was elected as treasure of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston (ISGH), and he also served as the dean of the Institute of Islamic Knowledge.

1.6   Muhammad Taqi-ud- Din Al-Hilali

Muhammad Taqi-ud- Din Al-Hilali was born in Morocco in 1893 and died in 1987. He worked as a professor of Islamic faith and teachings at the Islamic University in Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah. Al-Hilali and Khan wrote the *Noble Quran: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary*. It is a popular translation and was published by King Fahad Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an in Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah, Saudi Arabia. Their translation was based on the exegeses of Ibn-Kathîr and Al-Tabari. It was a globally circulated translation, and includes interpretations, commentaries, and references.

1.7   Muhammad Muhsin Khan

Muhammad Muhsin Khan was born in 1926 in Qasur, in Pakistan. He was a doctor and Islamic scholar. He obtained a degree in medicine and surgery from the University of Punjab, Lahore. He worked in the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia for about 15 years. He also worked as a doctor at the Islamic University in Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah, S.A. The *Noble Quran: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* was written by Muhammad Khan and Muhammad Al-Hilali. It is regarded as one the most influential translation in the modern era and is widely available. He is also a co-author with Muhammad Al- Hilali of the renowned *Al Hadith of the Book Sahih Al- Bukhari and the Book Al-Lulu Wal Marjan.*

2.0   Data collection

2.1   Procedures

The following research procedures were carried out:

1. Located typical problems of ambiguities in Surah AL-An'am in the original Arabic Quran.
2. Found examples of Qur'anic lexical ambiguities in the translations of the meanings of Surah AL-An'am.
3. Analysed these examples semantically and made a comparison between the selected translations of Pickthal, Ali, Asad, Khattab, Malik and Al-Hilali/ Khan with respect to lexis based on the exegesis of the following:
   a. *Tafsîr AL-Qura'an,* by Ibn-Kathîr (1998)
   b. *Tafsîr AL-Qura'an,* by Al-Tabariari (1987)
   c. *Tafsîr AL-Imânain,* by Al-Jalâlîn (1312H)
   d. *Tafsîr AL-Qurtabi,* by Al-Qurtubi (671H)

4. Illustrated the different approaches adopted by the six selected translators in rendering Qur'anic lexical ambiguity.
5. Assessed the accuracy of translation on the basis of the aforementioned exegeses.

2.2 Material

The research material consists of the following:

1. The verses of Surah AL-An'am, chapter 6.
2. Four Quran exegesis of Ibn-Kathîr, Al-Tabariari, Al-Jalâlîn, and Al-Qurtabi
3. Six English translations of the meanings of Qur'an. They obtained from these Divin texts:
   a. *The Meaning of the Glories Qur'an* by Pickthall (1930)
   b. *The Holy Quran Translation and Commentary* by Yusuf Ali (1983)
   c. *The Message of Quran* by Asad (1980)
   d. *The Bounteous Quran: Translation of Meaning and Commentary* by Khatib (1986).
   e. *English Translation of the Meaning of Al-Qur'an: The Guidance for Mankind* by Malik (1997).
   f. *Noble Quran: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* by Al-Hilâli/Khân (1417 AH).
4. Researched sources concerning the Arabic language, Qur'anic discourse and eloquence.

3.0   Definition of ambiguity

Leech defines 'ambiguity' in linguistics when there is 'more than one cognitive meaning for the same piece of language' (1969, p.205). Stated differently, ambiguity occurs when a word, phrase, or sentence has more than one possible interpretation or meaning. For Richards and Schmidt, there are two types of lexical ambiguity: a word can have several meanings, and two or more words can sound the same but have different meanings (2002, p.24).

4.0   The study

{وَلَهُ مَا سَكَنَ فِي اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ ۚ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ} الانعام: 13

Transliteration: Walahu ma *sakana* fee allayli waalnnahari wahuwa
alssameeAAu alAAaleemu

The verse refers to Allah and His creation. The verb 'سكن' or '*sakana*', is ambiguous. The ambiguity results stems from the fact that the verb can have different meanings. It may denote in Arabic 'to live, to dwell'. It may also mean 'to exist and yield', and 'to surrender'. 'Everything in the universe yields and surrenders to the will of Allah' is interpreted by exegetes as 'And to Him belongs whatsoever exists in the night and the day, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing' (Ibn-Kathîr, 1998, p.255). The verse is rendered by the different translators as follows:

 Pickthall: Unto Him belongeth whatsoever *resteth* in the night and the
day. He is the Hearer, the Knower.

Ali: To Him belongeth all that *dwelleth* (or lurketh) in the
night and the day. For He is the One Who heareth and
knoweth all things.

Asad: although His is all that *dwells* in the night and the day, and
He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing.

Khattab: To Him belongs whatever *exists* in the day and night.
And He is the All-Hearing, All-Knowing.

Malik: To Him belongs all that *takes rest* in the night and in the
day. He is the Hearer, the Knower.

Al-Hilali/Khan: And to Him belongs whatsoever *exists* in the night and
the day, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.

Asad and Ali adopt the first meaning 'to dwell' as an equivalent. However, the others do not have the same approach. Their translation misleads the reader. As for the translator Asad, he does not seem to understand the verse itself, so the translation has turned out to be inaccurate. He superficially interprets the significance of the verse. He does not grasp the interpretative meaning of the keyword 'سكن' The translator Yusuf Ali also does not understand the verse properly, except that he uses classic English to retain the sacredness of the written material. But the translators Khattab, Malik and Alhilali/Khan fully comprehend the significance of the verse, although they employ modern English in translation. They disambiguate the verb and render a meaning based on an interpretation different from that used by Asad and Yusuf Ali. Moreover, the translator Pickthall translates semi-accurately. He does not have to add 'resteth', as it has transliteration sense; this impedes the full comprehension of the verse.

{الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا إِيمَانَهُم بِظُلْمٍ أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمُ الْأَمْنُ وَهُم مُّهْتَدُونَ} الانعام:82

Transliteration: Allatheena amanoo walam *yalbisoo* eemanahum bithulmin olaika
lahumu alamnu wahum muhtadoona

The verse tackles the qualities of the good believers. The word 'يلبسوا' is the ambiguous lexeme in this verse. It has two meanings in Arabic. The first meaning refers to the process of wearing clothes, whereas the second meaning means 'to mix and confuse'. The verse is interpreted by exegetes as 'Those who believer in Allah follow His prophet and do not mix their belief with injustice will have security and peace and they are well guided to the right path' (Al-Tabariari, 1987, p.138). The verse is rendered as follows by the translators.

Pickthall: Those who believe and *obscure* not their belief by wrong doing, theirs is
safety; and they are rightly guided.

Ali: It is those who *believe and confuse* not their beliefs with wrong that are (truly) in security for they are on (right) guidance

Asad: Those who have attained to faith, and who have not *obscured* their faith by wrongdoing—it is they who shall be secure, since it is they who have found the right path!"

Khattab: It is 'only' those who are faithful and do not *tarnish* their faith with falsehood who are guaranteed security and are 'rightly' guided.

Malik: As a matter of fact those who believe and do not *taint* their faith with wrongdoings will feel more secure and will be better guided.

Al-Hilali/Khan: It is those *who believe* (in the Oneness of Allah and worship non but Him Alone) and c*onfuse* not their belief with Zulm (wrong i.e. by worshipping others besides Allah), for them (only) there is security and they are the guided.

The translators attempt to reproduce the ambiguity by providing various translations. Only Ali and AL-Hilali/Khan hint at the ambiguity. Asad and Pickthall give other meanings and select 'obscure' as the equivalent. They adopt the meaning that the believers have not obscured their faith or belief by wrong doing. However, faith does not get obscured or become difficult to understand; instead, it gets shaken and mixed. Khattab and Malik disambiguate the verb and render the meaning by denoting the believers as those who do not tarnish or taint their faith with falsehood or wrong doing. They claim that faith gets spoiled and becomes less bright. The translations of Asad, Pickthal, Khattab and Malik mislead the reader. Unlike them, though, Ali and Al-Hilali/Khan correctly render the meaning. Their translations conform to the interpretation by the exegetes.

{ لَهُمْ دَارُ السَّلَامِ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ ۖ وَهُوَ وَلِيُّهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ} الانعام: 127

Transliteration: Lahum daru alssalami AAinda rabbihim wahuwa *waliyyuhum* bima kanoo yaAAmaloona.

The verse refers to how Allah rewards the righteous—the good believers—by giving them paradise, the home of peace, helping them in their lives and protecting them from misfortune and evil. The rewards are the result of their good deeds. The noun 'ولي', or '*wali*', in this verse is ambiguous. The ambiguity results from the fact that this form of the noun could be derived from the following three alternative participles, which denote different meanings. It may mean 'be near', 'guardian', 'protector', 'friend', and 'helper'. Thus, the verse has four interpretations. Both Pickthall and Ali translate the word 'ولي' into 'friend' or 'protecting Friend', respectively, which mean in Arabic 'صديق محامي'/'صديق'. Additionally, Asad and Khattab translate the word 'ولي' into 'be near' and 'guardian' respectively. Their translations are listed below:

Pickthall: For them is the abode of peace with their Lord. He will be their Protecting *Friend* because of what they used to do.

Ali: For them will be a Home of Peace in the presence of their Lord: He will be their *Friend* because they practiced (righteousness).

Asad: Theirs shall be an abode of peace with their Sustainer; and He shall *be near unto* them in result of what they have been doing.

Khattab: They will have the Home of Peace with their Lord, Who
will be their *Guardian* because of what they used to do.

Malik: For them there will be a home of peace with their Rabb. He
will be their *protector* because of their good deeds.

Al-Hilali/Khan: For them will be the home of peace (paradise) with their
Lord. And He will be their *Wali* (helper and protector)
because of what they used to do.

None of the translations, except Al-Hilali/Khan's, hint at the ambiguity of the noun correctly. Their translation shows this ambiguity by means of supplementary information provided in a commentary as '*wali*' ('helper' and 'protector'), which is acceptable because the authors do not miscommunicate the meaning. The transcribers describe the ambiguous word '*Wali*' with human qualities, whereas the other four translations suffer from a lack of lexicalization between Arabic and English. None of their translations can be thought of as equal to the original.

5.   Concluding remarks and policy implication

The analysis and discussion above reveals that all of translators of the selected six translations tend to adopt different approach in translation. A comprehensive translation of various words is presented in the following table. The results of this study indicate that translators adopt different approaches in their translation of Qur'anic verses. They render some ambiguous words differently, as there are slight and delicate differences in their translations.

Qur'anic Translators	Translations of Qur'anic Lexical Items		
	سكن (verse 13)	يلبسوا (verse 82)	وليهم (verse 127)
1. Pickthall	resteth	obscure	protecting friend
2. Ali	dwelled	believe and confuse	friend
3. Asad	dwells	obscured	be Near unto
4. Khattab	exists	tarnish	guardian
5. Malik	takes	taint	protector
6. Al-Hilali/Khan	exists	believe (…) and confuse	*wali* (helper and protector)

By analysing the examples of various English translations in this study, we recognize that translators of the Quran adopt different approaches in selecting synonyms to render Qur'anic ambiguous words. The approaches used by different Quran translators invite different interpretations and different translations of Qur'anic lexical items. Such various approaches sometimes create inconsistencies in rendering a given word, and it also gives rise to misinterpretations of the Qur'anic text. The results of this study suggested that effective rendering of ambiguous words into the target language requires the recognition of the themes, knowledge concerning the incidents and circumstances of the verses' revelation, as well as familiarity with the context and background of each particular verse. It additionally requires that translators use contextual footnotes and commentaries. Hence, to render Qur'anic verses accurately, a translator should refer to major Qur'anic exegeses who provide detailed explanations about each Qur'anic verse with respect to its theme and circumstances. Moreover, translators of the Quran should be capable of understanding the underlying implication of word in the target language through the use of heritage dictionaries and books of eloquence and syntax.

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