TRANSLATION (3)

ISSUES IN ISLAMIC TRANSLATION

قضايا في الترجمة الاسلامية

Dr. Adel-Fattah Adel

QURANIC TRANSLATION: AN OVERVIEW

THE ISSUE OF TRANSLATION

- Translation of the Qur'an has always been a **problematic** and difficult issue in Islamic theology.
- Muslims revere the Qur'an as **miraculous** and **inimitable** (*i'jaz al-Qur'an*).
- The Qur'anic text cannot be reproduced in another language or form.

THE ISSUE OF TRANSLATION

- Furthermore, an **Arabic word**, like a Hebrew or Aramaic word, may have **a range of meanings depending on the context** - a feature present in all Semitic languages, when compared to the moderately analytic English, Latin, and Romance languages - making an accurate translation even more difficult.

THE ISSUE OF TRANSLATION

- The Qur'an is **a revelation very specifically in Arabic**, and so it should only be recited in the Arabic language.
- Translations into other languages are necessarily **the work of humans** and so no longer possess the uniquely sacred character of the Arabic original.

THE ISSUE OF TRANSLATION

- Since these translations necessarily subtly change the meaning, they are often called "**interpretations**" or "**translation[s**] of the meanings" (with "meanings" being ambiguous between the meanings of the various passages and the multiple possible meanings with which each word taken in isolation can be associated, and with the latter connotation amounting to an acknowledgement that the so-called translation is but one possible interpretation and is not claimed to be the full equivalent of the original).
- For instance, Pickthall called his translation *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* rather than simply *The Koran*.

THE ISSUE OF TRANSLATION

- The task of translation is **not an easy one**; some native Arab-speakers will confirm that some Qur'anic passages are difficult to understand even in the original Arabic.
- A part of this is the innate difficulty of any translation; in Arabic, as in other languages, a single word can have a variety of meanings.
- There is always an element of **human judgement** involved in understanding and translating a text. This factor is made more complex by the fact that the usage of words has changed a great deal between classical and modern Arabic.
- As a result, even Qur'anic verses which seem perfectly clear to native speakers accustomed to modern vocabulary and usage may not represent the original meaning of the verse.

HISTORY OF QURANIC TRANSLATION

- The first translation of the Qur'an was performed by **Salman the Persian**, who translated Surah al-Fatihah into the Persian language.
- The second known translation was into **Greek** and was used by Nicetas Byzantius, a scholar from Constantinople, in his 'Refutation of Quran' written between 855 and 870. However, we know nothing about who and for what purpose had made this translation. It is however very probable that it was a complete translation.
- The first fully attested complete translations of the Quran were done between the 10th and 12th centuries in **Persian language**.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- The earliest known translation of the Qur'an in any European language was the Latin works by **Robert of Ketton** in c. 1143.
- As Latin was the language of the church it never sought to question what would now be regarded as blatant inaccuracies in this translation which remained the only one until In 1649 the first English language translation was done by **Alexander Ross**, chaplain to King Charles I, who translated from a French work *L'Alcoran de Mahomet* by du Ryer.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- In 1734, **George Sale** produced the first translation of the Qur'an direct from Arabic into English but reflecting his missionary stance.
- Since then, there have been English translations by the clergyman **John Rodwell** in 1861, and **E.H. Palmer** in 1880, both showing in their works a number of mistakes of mistranslation and misinterpretation, which brings into question their primary aim. Followed by **Richard Bell** in 1937 and **Arthur John Arberry** in the 1950s.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- *The Qur'an* (1910) by Dr. Mirza Abul Fazl Arabic Text and English Translation Arranged Chronologically.
- Mirza Abul Fazl (1865–1956) was a native of East Bengal (now Bangladesh), later moved to Allahabad, India. He was the first Muslim to present a translation of the Qur'an into English along with the original Arabic text.
- Among the contemporary Muslim scholars Dr. Mirza Abul Fazl was a pioneer who took interest in the study of the chronological order of the Qur'an and drew the attention of Muslim scholars to its importance.

- With the increasing population of English-speaking Muslims around the start of the 20th century, three Muslim translations of the Qur'an into English made their first appearance.
- The first was the Ahmadi Maulana Muhammad Ali's 1917 translation which is composed from an Ahmadiya perspective, with some small parts being rejected as unorthodox interpretation by vast majority of Muslims.
- This was followed in 1930 by the English convert to Islam Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's translation, which is literal and therefore regarded as the most accurate.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- Soon thereafter in 1934, Abdullah Yusuf Ali (from Bohra community) published his translation, featuring copious explanatory annotation - over 6000 notes, generally being around 95% of the text on a given page, to supplement the main text of the translation.
- This translation has gone through over 30 printings by several different publishing houses, and is one of the most popular amongst English-speaking Muslims, along the Pickthall and Saudi-sponsored Hilali-Khan translations.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- With few new English translations over the 1950–1980 period, these three Muslim translations were to flourish and cement reputations that were to ensure their survival into the 21st century, finding favour among readers often in newly revised updated editions. Orientalist Arthur Arberry's translation c. 1955 and native Iraqi Jew N.J. Dawood's unorthodox translation c. 1956 were to be the only major works to appear in the post-war period. AJ Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted* remains the scholarly standard for English translations, and is widely used by academics.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- Dr. Syed Abdul Latif's translation published in 1967, regarded highly by some (he was a professor of English at Osmania University, Hyderabad), was nevertheless short-lived due to criticism of his foregoing accuracy for the price of fluency.
- *The Message of the Qur'an: Presented in Perspective* (1974) was published by Dr. Hashim Amir Ali. He translated the Qur'an into English and arranged it according to chronological order. Dr. Hashim Amir-Ali (1903-c. 1987) was a native of Salar Jung, Hyderabad, Deccan. In 1938 he came under the influence of Dr. Mirza Abul Fazl Allahabadi, and took a deep interest in the study of the Qur'an and was aware of the significance of the chronological order of the passages contained in it.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- A Jewish convert to Islam, **Muhammad Asad's** monumental work *The Message of The Qur'an* made its appearance for the first time in 1980.
- Professor Ahmed Ali's: *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* (Akrash Publishing, Karachi, 1984, Reprinted by Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987; Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1988, with 9th reprinting 2001), brought new light to the translations of the Qur'an with Dr. Fazlur Rehman of the University of Chicago saying: "It brings out the original rhythms of the Qur'anic language and the cadences. It also departs from traditional translations in that it gives more refined and differentiated shades of important concepts". According to Dr. F. E. Peters of New York University: "Ahmed Ali's work is clear, direct, and elegant – a combination of stylistic virtues almost never found in translations of the Qur'an. His is the best I have read".

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- At the cusp of the 1980s, the 1974 Oil Embargo, the Iranian Revolution, the Nation of Islam and a new wave of cold-war generated Muslim immigrants to Europe and North America brought Islam squarely into the public limelight for the first time in Western Europe and North America.
- This resulted in a wave of translations as Western publishers tried to capitalize on the new demand for English translations of the Qur'an. Oxford University Press and Penguin Books were all to release editions at this time, as did indeed the Saudi Government, which came out with its own re-tooled version of the original Yusuf Ali translation.
- Canadian Muslim Professor **T.B. Irving's** 'modern English' translation (1985) was a major Muslim effort during that time.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- The arrival of the 1990s ushered in the phenomenon of an extensive English-speaking Muslim population well-settled in Western Europe and North America.
- As a result, several major Muslim translations emerged to meet the ensuing demand. In 1991 appeared an English translation under the title: *The Clarion Call Of The Eternal Qur-aan*, by **Muhammad Khalilur Rahman** (b. 1906-1988), Dhaka, Bangladesh. He was the eldest son of Shamsul Ulama Moulana Muhammad Ishaque of Burwan, former lecturer of Dhaka University.
- In 1996 the Saudi government financed a new translation "**the Hilali-Khan Qur'an**" which was distributed free world wide by the Saudi government as it was in line with their particular interpretation .

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QURAN

- In 2007 appeared the English translation of **Laleh Bakhtiar** under the title of *The Sublime Quran*. Her translation of the Qur'an was the first ever by an American woman.
- In 2012, the Quran was translated into everyday English by **Talal Itani**. This translation is clear and easy to read. Published by ClearQuran.
- A rhymed verse edition of the entire Qur'an rendered in English by Thomas McElwain in 2010 includes rhymed commentary under the hardback title *The Beloved and I, Volume Five*, and the paperback title *The Beloved and I: Contemplations on the Qur'an*.

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quran_translations