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Features of Translating Religious Texts

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to explore the different features of religious translation in an attempt to provide translators with an objective model to use in this domain. Following the linguistic approach to translation, I propose a model of translation, starting from simple structures into more sophisticated structures focusing on phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax, and semantics, in an attempt to circumvent the peculiarities of the source text and translated text.

1. Introduction

Translation of religious texts has been a key element in disseminating the divine message throughout history. It was employed also for teaching converts the basics of religion and for mirroring the beauty of faith and morality around the globe. As a powerful instrument for missionary purposes, it should be as accurate and precise as possible and must be in accord with sound belief. To do this, translators must understand the original source text (ST) and transfer it faithfully, accurately, and integrally into the receptor language (RL), without adding or omitting a single part of the original content. Dickins, Hervey, and Higgins (2002:178) argue, "The subject matter of religious texts implies the existence of a spiritual world that is not fictive, but has its own external realities and truths. The author is understood not to be free to create the world that animates the subject matter, but to be merely instrumental in exploring it."

In this article we are going to discuss the basic features of translating religious texts to provide students and those who lack experience in this field with some tips to consider when working on such texts. We will follow the common linguistic categories of phonology, morphology, syntax, lexis, and semantics. To put it in David Crystal's words,

> Religious belief fosters a language variety in which all aspects of structure are implicated…. There is a unique *phonological identity* in such genres as spoken prayers, sermons, chants, and litanies, including the unusual case of unison chants. *Graphological identity* is found in liturgical leaflets, catechisms, biblical texts, and many other religious publications. There is a strong *grammatical identity* in invocations, prayers, and other ritual forms, both public and private. An obvious *lexical identity* pervades formal articles of faith and scriptural texts, with the lexicon of doctrine informing the whole religious expressions. And there is a highly distinctive *discourse identity*. (1995:371)

All in all, the translation must be as typical and natural as possible to reflect the tone and style of the ST as if the translated text (TT) were originally written to the receptor audience.

2. Phonic Aspects of Religious Texts

One of the distinctive features of religious texts is the use of sound devices to make the content easy to recite, memorize and quote. The translator should do his/her best to retain such devices (alliteration, assonance and rhyme scheme) in the TT.

The use of the same consonant at the beginning of each stressed syllable is called alliteration. In this context, if the same vowels are repeated it is called assonance. Islamic sermons and supplications are replete with sound devices that make the utterances appealing to one's ear. Human brains are more likely to remember sound devices like rhyme, alliteration, assonance, etc. The ease of pronouncing the phrase influences how long that phrase will last in people's mind. Therefore this is an effective device in religious texts. However,

we should avoid employing these features excessively because giving much weight to phonic features may be at the expense of other important features of the text.

Another register where the phonic features are distinctively used is invocations, where euphonious sounds are used to make the utterances pleasing, beautiful and harmonious. This is a characteristic feature of the language that is used orally in Christian services, prayers and litanies, and Islamic invocations.

3. Archaic Morphological Features of Religious Texts

There are a number of archaic morphological forms used in some English-language Bibles. For instance, the archaic suffixes *-th* or *-eth* replace the third person suffix *-s*. Also the suffix *-(e)st* is added to form the present second-person singular of regular verbs and *-en* is added to form a plural. Interestingly, forms like *seemeth, showeth, shouldst, brethren,* etc. are frequently used in current religious language. Crystal and Davy (1969) note that the suffix *-th* is one of the long established forms of the religious register. Note the example from the Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible translation of Job 34:

> [16] If then thou hast understanding, hear what is said, and hearken to the voice of my words. [17] Can he be healed that loveth not judgment? and how dost thou so far condemn him that is just? [18] Who saith to the king: Thou art an apostate: who calleth rulers ungodly? [19] Who accepteth not the persons of princes: nor hath regarded the tyrant, when he contended against the poor man: for all are the work of his hands. [20] They shall suddenly die, and the people shall be troubled at midnight, and they shall pass, and take away the violent without hand.

Religious English language, unlike religious Arabic language, tends to use archaic words to historically link to its established beliefs throughout the course of time and to ensure consistency and continuity. To this end some archaic words are used that can be traced back to the Old and Middle English, such as the following:

thou, thee, thy, thine, ye, art, wilt

vouchsafe, thrice, behold, whence, henceforth, thence

The same style was followed by some Muslim translators of the Qur'an, trying to make their translation sound like "scripture" to an English-speaking audience. Today many contemporary readers find this style odd and outdated. Therefore we should avoid archaic forms and choose to translate religious texts with morphological forms that are similar to modern usage.

4. Lexical Aspects of Religious Translation

Religious translation is characterized by its use of specialized lexical items. Notice, for instance, that the occurrence of distinctively theological words such as "Islam," "belief," "statement of faith," "alms-giving," "pilgrimage," "paradise," "hell," "death," or names and attributes of God such as "Allah," "Almighty," "the Merciful," as well as names of religious figures like "Prophet Muhammad," "Prophet Abraham," are frequently used in religious language.

Religious lexical items are classified into seven categories in the Christian context (Crystal 1964:154–155):

1. Vocabulary requiring explicit historical elucidation, usually with considerable emotional overtones, depending on the intensity of the user's belief, e.g., 'Calvary' [a hill outside ancient Jerusalem where Jesus was said to be crucified], 'Bethlehem', 'the Passion' [in Christianity: The sufferings of Jesus in the period following the Last Supper and including the Crucifixion], 'crucifix', 'martyr' 'disciple', 'Our Lady', 'the Jews' (in the context of the Passion), 'the Apostles', etc.
2. Vocabulary again requiring explicit historical elucidation, but with no definable emotional overtones, e.g., 'centurion', 'synagogue', 'cubit' [a linear measure], 'a talent' [a variable unit of weight and money used in ancient Rome and the Middle East], etc.… They will also, of course, occur in nonreligious discussion of the subjects involved (in archaeology, history, etc.).
3. Vocabulary of personal qualities and activities with no explicit correlation with the past, but which needs to be interpreted in the light of Christ's own usage and example: 'pity', 'mercy', 'charity',

'love', 'purity', 'prayer', 'contrition', etc. Also the frequent 'adore', 'glorify', 'praise', etc., and the morphologically foreign words 'Amen' and 'Alleluia'….

4. Vocabulary referring to commonly-used, specifically-religious concepts (other than the above) which can be given a Catholic definition; any historical basis is normally subordinate to their doctrinal definition. Again, fullness of meaning depends on the intensity of the user's convictions, e.g., 'heaven', 'hell', 'heresy', [*bid'ah'*], 'the creed', ['*aqeedah*'], 'the sacraments', 'the saints', 'purgatory', 'the Faith', 'sacrilege' 'commandment', 'damnation', 'salvation', 'the trinity', etc.
5. Technical terms: 'collect' , [a brief formal prayer that is used in various Western liturgies before the epistle and varies with the day] 'sermon', 'cardinal' 'cruet', [a small vessel for holy water], 'amice' [a liturgical vestment consisting of an oblong piece of white linen worn around the neck and shoulders and partly under the alb], 'missal', 'Asperges', etc.
6. Theological terms: any of (3) and (4) when used in this context, usually with precise definition. Also, e.g., 'consubstantial', 'only-begotten' [only, unrepeated], 'transubstantiation'.
7. Vocabulary that occurs frequently in liturgical language, but which could be used in certain other styles or registers, e.g., 'trespasses' (as a noun), 'deliverance', 'transgression', 'the multitude', 'partake', 'admonish', 'lest', 'deign', 'bondage'; and many formulae, e.g., 'have mercy on us', 'forgive sins', 'to come nigh', 'exact vengeance'. In such cases, one needs to assess possible inter-relationships between registers which could influence acceptability.

Religious lexical items can be classified into three categories in the Islamic context:

1. Islamic terms which are totally unfamiliar to the lay translator, because they are only used in Islamic contexts: *altaqiyyah* 'dissimulation', *aldhihar* 'claiming one`s wife is sexually impermissible like an unmarriageable woman', and *alkhul'* 'divorce for payment by the wife'.
2. Islamic terms which are familiar to the lay translator because they are only used in non-Islamic contexts, but which look as if they are being used in some Islamically specialized way in the ST, e.g., *alwala'* 'allegiance to Muslims', and *alfat-h* 'liberation'.
3. Islamic terms which are familiar to the translator because they are also used in non-religious contexts, but which do not obviously look as if they are being used in some Islamically specialized way in the ST: *almukatabah* 'liberation by virtue of an agreement with a slave', *alhajb* 'exclusion of some relatives from inheritance'.

The lexical problems in 1 and 2 can be easily sorted out by searching specialized dictionaries or references, but type 3 may be overlooked by translators because they also occur in non-Islamic discourse.

5. Formal vs. Informal Aspects of Religious Translations

Arabic religious discourse is, by definition, formal because it is based on sacred scriptures and is mainly delivered in the Classical style. Arabic is the oldest language still used for communication and culture in the Arab world. Although Arabic diversified into many varieties throughout history: Classical Arabic (CA), Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and colloquial Arabic—which differs from country to country—Classical Arabic is still employed today almost universally as a written and spoken language, especially in formal situations such as in religious discourse, universities, textbooks, lectures (whether religious or academic), in mass-media and for personal writing such as in letters and autobiographies.

In English, formal language (rather than everyday speech) is also used in religious language. This formality extends to other forms of discourse such as in talking or writing to people in authority, and lecturing or writing papers or books. The more important the situation and addressees the more formal the discourse, and nothing is more important in the lives of Muslims than talking to, and about, Allah.

It is noteworthy to mention that what is formal in Arabic could be informal in English and vice versa. Let us consider the following example: "People will be resurrected **naked** on the Day of Judgment" (Narrated by al-Bukhaari, 6527).

Here the word "naked" is not formal in English. A synonym like "unclothed" would be more appropriate in the religious register of the English language.

More examples:

fun = delight

get up = arise

bad = negative

kid = child

6. Parallel Structures in Religious Translation

Parallel structures are widely used in religious language. By parallel structure we mean the use of two adjacent synonyms to make the utterance more intense and impactful. This phenomenon, also called "quasi-synonymy" or "doublets," uses word pairs that are syntactically equal and semantically related. This lexical device is customarily used in situations where the speaker's fluency is needed for convincing the addressees, especially in religious contexts. The speaker, therefore, combines terms which share semantic properties for stylistic reasons. The following examples are borrowed from Larson (1984:156):

spots and blemishes

holy and righteous

strangers and foreigners

7. Phrase Repetition in Religious Translation

In religious language, phrases may be repeated to give a cohesive function, among other things. This may color the text and give it momentum, rhythm and emphasis. Let us have a look at this quotation from the famous speech by Martin Luther King, Jr.:

> I have a dream today!
>
> I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."
>
> This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.
>
> *With this faith*, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. *With this faith*, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. *With this faith*, **we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.** [All emphases mine.]

Notice that the italicized phrase, *with this faith*, is repeated several times to add emphasis to what King is saying, and strengthen his point. The bolded section contains another type of parallel structure, where the same grammatical structure is repeated in five adjacent phrases.

8. Strategies for Translating Religion-specific Terms

We are going to adopt the same procedures proposed by Newmark (1988:81–93) regarding the translation of culture-specific items:

8.1. Transference

A strategy when a SL word is transferred into the RL text in its original form (transcription/transliteration). Examples are *jihad*, *logos.*

8.2. Naturalization

This procedure adapts a SL item first to the normal pronunciation of the RL, then to its normal morphology, for example *kharijites,* from Arabic *kharij* 'dissent'.

8.3. Cultural equivalent

A SL item is translated by an equivalent RL item while maintaining the same connotations, for example heaven, hell.

8.4. Functional equivalent

This procedure requires the use of a religion-neutral item. It involves neutralization or generalization of the SL word. For example, *alhudoud.* This word literally means 'limits' or 'boundaries' but it usually refers to the Islamically-established penalties or punishment for committing specific crimes or felonies: intoxication, theft, highway robbery, adultery/fornication, false accusation of adultery/fornication, and apostasy. Punishment for other crimes or felonies is called *ta'zeer*. This religious distinction between both terms may be discarded to give its functional equivalent in English: 'penalties'.

8.5. Descriptive equivalent

In this procedure the translator paraphrases the religious item. For example, the Arabic word *alkhul'* needs to be explained by a phrase because it has no exact equivalent in the RL. We could say 'divorce initiated by the wife', 'release for payment by the wife', 'redemptive divorce', 'divorce by redemption', or 'abdicative divorce'.

8.6. Synonym

To use a synonym is to use a near RL equivalent to an SL word in a context where a precise equivalent may or may not exist. This procedure is used for a SL word where there is no clear one-to-one equivalent, and the word in question is not the most important component of the sentence. For example *alwdou'* in Arabic refers to washing of one's limbs and face with water before prayers. The English word "ablution" refers to any type of ritual washing such as in baptism and foot-washing, but in Islam it refers to a certain type of ritual purification. Yet we can use that word as a near synonym to give a close equivalent.

8.7. Through-translation

Through-translation is also called a calque or loan-translation. It is a literal translation of a phrase or compound from another language. Some examples in English are "worldview," from German *Weltanschauung*, and "blue-blood," from Spanish *sangre azul*.

8.8. Modulation

This term, according to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995:36), refers to a variation of the form of the message through a change in the point of view. It occurs when the translator reproduces the message of the original text in conformity with the current norms of the RL, since the SL and the RL may appear with different perspectives. Vinay and Darbelnet counted eleven types of modulation. Among them are included negated contrary, abstract for concrete, cause for effect, means for result, a part for the whole, and geographical change.

An example of modulation is *kafir* = non-Muslims (negated contrary). The word *kafir* is translated as "non-Muslim" because the lexical synonyms "infidel," "unbeliever," etc. have negative connotations and are used with some apprehension by the receptor audience.

8.9. Recognized translation

A recognized translation is a generally-recognized or officially-sanctioned translation of any important term.

8.10. Compensation

"This is said to occur when loss of meaning, sound-effect, metaphor or pragmatic effect in one part of a sentence is compensated in another part, or in a contiguous sentence" (Newmark 1988:90). It is to compensate for the loss of meaning in the TT. An example is *hajj* = pilgrimage to Makkah.

8.11. Componential analysis

This is the splitting up of a lexical unit into its sense components. Semanticists tend to explain the word meaning through decomposing the word into its minimal parts. Then they piece together such meaning units to give the overall meaning of a word or a phrase (Cruse 2000, Griffiths 2006). In order to apply this strategy is important for the translator to see the degree of overlap or difference between the SL and RL terms and then identify the gaps in vocabulary in either language, when s/he fails to find a one-to-one correspondence.

8.12. Paraphrase

In this procedure the meaning of a religion-specific term is explained in more detail, longer than what we do with descriptive equivalent. But the translator should be careful lest s/he were to break one of Paul Grices' (1975) conversational maxims, the Maxim of Quantity: Don't say too much or too little.

8.13. Notes, additions, glosses

Such techniques can be employed to add extra information about a religion-specific word/expression in the translated text. Translators often use transliteration when they fail to find an equivalent. This conversion of SL alphabets into the RL text can be employed when the translator fails to find a partial or full equivalent of a given SL term and any attempt to translate such words into a close counterpart in the RL will be inadequate. However, it is inappropriate to leave such transliterated terms without giving a plausible explanation to the reader. Therefore, we can do one of the following procedures:

1. Add a glossary at the end of the book.
2. Use footnotes or endnotes.
3. Insert a partial or full explanation either parenthesized or free in the text, next to the italicized term.

The last procedure could be more practical because it provides the reader with the meaning in the shortest way possible avoiding the need to turn over the page or even look below.

9. Syntactic Features of Religious Translation

Syntactic features are also important to consider in translation as they may differ from other registers in the following aspects:

9.1. Capitalization

Capitalization in translated religious texts is widely used for honorific or otherwise theologically significant reasons.

9.2. Vocatives

The vocative case is extensively used in religious texts, particularly when invoking Allah or admonishing people. It is an expression of direct address. Vocatives, in general, "express attitude, politeness, formality, status, intimacy, or a role relationship, and most of them mark the speaker," characterizing him or her to the addressee (Zwicky, 1974).

We should bear in mind that the word "O" can be used as an equivalent of the Arabic vocative article, but we should not confuse it with the interjection "Oh": "O God…," "O you who believe…" In Modern English, they use vocative without "O." Also we can find the vocative case expressed with an adjective plus noun: "Dear God,...," "Eternal God,…."

9.3. Imperatives

The imperative is another syntactic feature that colours the religious language. This is widely used for giving instructions, advice and sermons as a form of "a direct address language" (Leech, 1966:34). The language of direct address is an appropriate vehicle for effective communication where the speaker seems to be holding a conversation with the addressee. The use of an imperative may signal a command if the spe4aker is older or has a higher position than the addressee. Between two equal parties, it may denote exhortation or an entreaty. From an inferior to a superior, it is a supplication (Greene 1867:96).

There are several types of the imperative mood in the religious context:

1. Imperative plus subject, such as "Do thou go…," "Go thou…" or "Do we sit."
2. Imperative plus vocative, which is more frequently used in Islamic texts than the first type, such as "Grant O Lord…" or "Pray, brethren…."
3. Imperative plus third person pronoun introduced by "let," which does not function as a main verb in this context but is rather an imperative auxiliary (Greenbaum 1996:50), e.g., "Let him now speak."
4. Imperative addressing God. In religious discourse we often find direct address to God in the form of a supplication. Here the imperative mode is not used in its literal sense. Greene (1867:96) argues that once an inferior addresses a superior, this is called a supplication. However, supplication is exclusively used to address God alone. A supplication may or may not use the name of God as a vocative in conjunction with "O." Examples are "Bless, O Lord our God, this year for us;" "Make clean hearts within us."
5. Negated imperative. Generally, second person imperatives are negated simply by using "do not" or its contracted form "don't" before the verb, as in "Do not talk with him." For a more polite style, the "not" can be used in conjunction with "let," as in "Don't let me think about it" or "Let me not go astray." In Arabic, the negated imperative expresses the meaning of advice and prohibition. In English, Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985:831) note that "first person imperatives… are generaly negated by the insertion of 'not' after the pronoun following 'let'," as in "Let me not ever, God, escape from Thee." They point out (ibid.) that "third person imperatives with 'let' are negated by 'not' after 'let' or (more informally) by an initial 'don't'," as in "Let not anyone feel himself that he can get away with it." The following are examples of negated imperative in different English translations of the same prayer from the Bible:

   And **mayest thou not** lead us into temptation… (Young's Literal Translation)

   And **lead us not** into temptation… (King James Version, English Standard Version)

   And **bring us not** into temptation… (American Standard Version)

   And **do not lead us** into temptation… (New American Standard Bible)

9.4. Subjunctives

The subjunctive mood is a verb form that expresses a potential action or a possibility—an opinion, an emotion, or a wish. It is used when we have doubt, fear, hope, obligation, etc. The subjunctive may be past or present: "If I were you, I would have done it;" "I insist that he reconsider my decision."

English has a number of formulaic subjunctive expressions that are still regularly used, such as "Far *be* it from me," "God *bless* you!," "If *need* be...," "Long live the King," "God save the Queen," and "God forbid." The translator can make use of these fixed subjunctive expressions to render similar phrases in another language that express wishes and supplications, e.g., "Praise be to Allah," "May Allah have mercy on him," "May his soul rest in peace," "Peace be with you," and "Let His great name be blessed."

9.5. Compounds consisting of noun + adjective

Adjectives are always placed before nouns in English, but in some contexts we may find some nouns are post-modified, as they are in Arabic. This could be an inherent feature from Latin, the language of religion for many centuries. Let us consider the following examples: "Allah Almighty," "life eternal," "Cardinal General."

9.6. Gender

A casual observation of the frequency of feminine and masculine forms in Arabic may reveal that there is a lack of proportional occurrence of both forms in modern religious context (Elewa, 2011) though the Arabic language mostly provides a feminine form for every noun. The feminine forms in English are so limited and the modern neutral language (that addresses both sexes) is often not employed in religious services because in religion people try to follow the same concepts and usage of their ancestors. David Crystal (1985) notes,

> It was noticed that religious language was as sexist as any other variety,—in fact, it was said to be more so, on account of the reliance on a male-dominated tradition rooted in the patriarchal biblical societies of biblical times. The evidence for this view rests mainly on the repeated reference to *mankind*, *father*, *Lord Jesus saving all men*, and the many other masculine terms which have been devised to express the personal basis of the relationship between God and humanity. Nor is it simply of single words: whole systems of metaphorical expression have been created, For instance, the metaphor of God as king is part of a network of words, such as *mighty*, *strong*, *judge*, *condemn*, *heavenly throne*,…which by association "spread" the implication of maleness throughout the language.

Today, English speaking people tend to use the plural form because English plural pronouns are neutral, or replace masculine words with words that address both sexes, such as "humanity" for "mankind," "labor power" for "manpower," "spokesperson" for "spokesman." However, the transition from the singular to the plural, or the use of neutral words may cause some theological problems and affect the original sense of words.

10. Semantic Features of Religious Translation

The translator should strive to transfer the intended meanings of the ST integrally into the TT. Sometimes translators find a number of ST words or expressions with no direct equivalents in the RL because the semantic relationships that hold between words or expressions may differ from one language to another, as in the cases of connotation, super-ordinate/hyponymy, idioms.

In translating sacred texts, translators have little freedom to use the techniques proposed for non-equivalence. Otherwise every translator would give his/her own interpretation of the ST, infused with his sectarian and theological orientation. Translators should, therefore, allow the signs and images of the source text to be interpreted by the reader on his/her own.

Other types of religious texts like sermons and theological works should be content-oriented or reader-oriented rather than form-oriented. The main aim is to provide the RL readers/hearers with an equivalent meaning as the original message using natural word order, combinations and connotations of the RL. Crystal (1964:151) notes, "Liturgical language needs to strike a balance between ostentatious intellectualism and a racy colloquialism. It must be both dignified and intelligible. It has to be formally characterized as God's, and not confusable with any other style, for a substantial overlap would only lead to profanity and carelessness in worship."

11. Conclusion

The transfer of religious texts from one language to another involves, among other things, the scientific study of language, including phonology, morphology, lexis, and semantics. In this article we have discussed the basic features of translating religious texts following this linguistic paradigm in an attempt to circumvent the peculiarities of the ST. Most of the translators of religious texts are not native speakers of the receptor language, so they may find some difficulties in determining the intricacies and ambiguities of the receptor language structures and senses.

In doing so, we break down the text into its smallest linguistic form levels to make the task a bit easier and pave the way for a gradual and more methodical process for producing religious translation. We start from the lowest level in the linguistic hierarchy, the individual units of sound. Then we move up the linguistic cline to deal with words, phrases, sentences, and discourse. Hence, the translator may become more proficient in approximating the SL patterns of thought and style to the RL audience. Accordingly, we can help him/her produce a translation that reflects the real image of religion.

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