Six English Translations of a Quranic Surah : A Critical Assessment

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1 - Introduction

The present paper is aimed at presenting a critical assessment of six English translations of a short Quranic text, titled <u>Al-Kafirum</u> Surah in an attempt to highlight the inaccuracies , inadequacies and mistranslations involved in rendering the Arabic original into English undertaken by different translators . The assessment draws on the premise that the essence of translation lies in the preservation of meaning across two languages (House, 1977 : 25) - a case which involves, among other things , meeting the demands of "intercultural" as well as "interlingual" transfer (Fraser, 1993 : 328) . As a corollary , unless linguistic and non-linguistic components of the source language text are taken into considerations, a lot of faults and wrong renditions will inveitably result in the target language text , especially when dealing with two genetically distinct languages (as Arabic and English) which manifest a syntactic , semantic , pragmatic and cultural gap . However , translation even becomes highly

difficult when translators are working on a religious text, particularly that of the Glorious Quran due to the grandeur of its diction, unique composition, concinnity, felicity, matchlessness, inimitability and eloquence or its essential _i jaz_ (Bodley, 1946: 20-23 ; Husain, 1977 : 2-4).

Prior to the actual appraisal of the different translations of the Surah, it is deemed necessary first to examine succinctly the problem(s) of Quranic translation and then to explore the salient parameters required for the assessment of a given translated text.

2 - The problem of Quranic Translation

Admittedly, the Glorious Quran is the infallible word of Almighty Allah to the Prophet Mohammad by the Angel Gabriel. In point of fact, up to now, several attempts have been made by Muslims and non-Muslims to render this Sacred Book to other languages including English. Yet, the resulting translations have generally shown a lot of pitfalls and infidelity to the original due to linguistic and non-linguistic factors, which mainly stem from the asymmetrical relationship between the addresser - Almighty Allah and the addresses - His creatures.

Being pitched at a still high rank in its style, the Quran is characterized by some Arabic linguistic pecularities, prominent of which are the stylistic / rhetorical devices (e.g. antithesis alliterations, repetitions, assonance, apposition, rhymes, rhythms, paronomasia, etc) which, among other things, add

more vigorous meanings to its words and concepts in such a way that strike the readership on the one hand , and make it notoriously difficult for translators to faithfully render it into any other language . Describing the Quranic style , Khan writes :

> The Holy Quran has a form which neither depends on alliteration, nor on rhyme ; yet in its sonorous Cadences, it controls the depths of assonance, consonance, and rhyme, intermingled as they are with the phonetic articulation of a typical set of characteristic Arabic vowels and consonants ...

> (Khan, 1987 : 14)

Thus , rendering the form and the content of this inimitable Book in such a way as to achieve textual and functional equivalence in the target language is one of the baffling problems for Quranic translators . Thus , "the integrity of the Quran as 'symphonic' through all its contrasts of style and content (even) renders it untranslatable" (Cragg, 1973:43) .

3 - Criteria for Translation Assessment

In assessing translation quality , translation theorists and critics have set up a variety of criteria where assessment has been often based on a binary or ternary premise . Sager (1983 : 125) , approaching assessment from a binary premise , presents two types : macro-evaluation intended to assess the value of

translation and micro-evaluation intended to improve it . (In As-Safi, 1992 : 36) . In the same vein , assessment can be either content oriented or form/content oriented . The former aims at diagnosing translation errors stemming from inadequate equivalence and imprecise comprehension ; the latter aims at detecting those stemming from formal correspondence and lexical equivalence (Ibid) .

As-Safi (1992:37) , in an endeavour at objectifying the assessment of literary / belletristic translation , which is opined to be inherently subjective , proposes a tri-criterion assessment :

1 - Accuracy which can be judged on two planes :

   a) comprehensive and b) equivalence .

2 - The language of the target text where translation problems can be attributed to three sub-planes :

   a) punctuation and spelling , b) grammatically and acceptability and c) choice of diction , and

3 - Literalness where the translator is supposed to render his translation as vivid and aesthetically effective as the original. Being objective and comprehensive , As-Safi's model is going to be adopted in the assessment of the translated texts in question .

4 - The Critique

Examining the six English translations , where each translated verse is assessed (pages 5-6) . reveals some

discrepancies among themselves and varying degrees of proximity of the original text . Such discrepancies are reflected on the lexical , syntactic , semantic , and stylistic level .

The Arabic Text

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

قُلْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ النَّاسِ(١) مَلِكِ النَّــاسِ(٢)

إِلَهِ النَّــاسِ(٣) مِــنْ شَــرِّ الْوَسْــواسِ

الْخَنَّاسِ(٤) الَّذِي يُوَسْوِسُ فِي صُــدُورِ

النَّاسِ(٥) مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ وَالنَّاسِ(٦)

The English Translations

1 - Rodwell, J

UNBELIEVERS

In the Name of God. the Compassionate, the Merciful
Say: O ye UNBELIEVERS !
I worship not that which ye worship ,
And ye do not worship that which I worship,
I shall never worship that which ye worship,
Neither will ye worship that which I worship,
To you be your religion: to me my religion.

2 - Pickthall M.

THE DISBELIEVERS

In the Name of Allah. the Beneficent, the Merciful
1 . Say: O disbeliever's !

2 . I worship not which
ye worship ,

3 . Nor worship ye that which

I worship.

4 . And I shall not worship

that which you worship,

5 . Nor will ye worship that

which I worship

6 . Unto you your religion , and

unto me my religion .

3 - Ali M.M.

Al-Kafirun : THE DISBELIEVERS

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

1 . Say: O disbeliever's

2 . I serve not that which you serve.

3 . Nor do you serve Him whom I serve,

4 . Nor do you serve Him I serve,

5 . For you is your recompense and for me my

recompense .

4 - Ali A.Y.

Kafirun or those whose reject Faith

In the Name of God. Most Gracious, Most Merciful

1 . Say : O ye

That reject faith !

2 . I worship not that

which ye worship,

3 . Nor will ye worship

That which I worship.

4 . And I will not worship

That which ye have been

wont to worship

5 . Nor will ye worship

That which I worship.

6 . To you be your way,
   And to me mine.

5 - Arberry A.J.

THE UNBELIEVERS

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Say: ' O unbelievers,

I serve not what you serve and you are
not serving what I serve, nor am I
serving what you have served, neither
are you serving what I serve. To you
your religion, and to me my religion !

6 - Dawood N.J.

Unbelievers

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Say : "unbelievers, I do not serve what you worship.
nor do you serve what I worship, I shall never
serve what you worship : nor will you serve
what I worship. You have your religion, and I
have mine".

5 - The Theme

The central theme of this six-verse Meccan Surah is the
distinct recognition of the Divine unity. The Surah was revealed
at a time when the idolaters had asked the Prophet Mohammad
to make a sort of compromise in matters of religion . It takes its
name Al-Kafirun , from a word mentioned in verse I .

6 - The Title

The title of the Surah has been also assigned different
renditions. Rodwell. Arberry and Dawood unfaithfully render

Al-Kafirun a "unbelievers" - as an equivalent which designates those persons who do not believe in God" . Pickthall and M. Ali on the other hand render it as "disbelievers" - which also seems infidel to the original idea in that the verb "disbelieve" , gives the meaning of "one's rejection of faith-" a meaning which has different connotation in Islamic doctrine let alone the verb according to Oxford Student's Dictionary is rarely used as an opposite for "believe" . Such imprecise equivalent emerge as the result of the translators' bad choice of diction (As-Safi, 1992 : 43) . As a corollary, the best equivalent for Al-Kafirun is "infidels" since it refers to "persons who do not believe in the true religion of Islam" a word which communicates the spirit of the original. However, two optional equivalents are given by M. Ali and Y. Ali in rendering Al-Kafirun one is translated as "disbelievers" , and "those who reject Faith" , the other is transliterated as "Al-Kafirun" and Kafirun"-a case which reflects their inconsistency in opting for the appropriate word as conspicuously seen from Y. Ali's use of the coordinator " . In addition to his mistransliteration of the same word i.e. using Kafirun for Al-Kafirun , Y. Ali is inconsistent in using two relative pronouns : "who reject Faith" in the opening verse and "that reject Faith" in the first verse despite the fact that both allude to the same antecedent .

6 -1 The Verses

Rendering the first verse, all the translators save Dawood use the vocative O as an equivalent for the Arabic particle Ya whose function is to seek the attention of the addressees, namely the infidels who reject Islam, to whom the Prophet's speech is exclusively directed. This conative function is intensified by adding the second pronoun ye (you) to be stylistically more effective let alone adds a sort of aesthetic value to the whole verse as some translators have done. Yet, using the old and obsolete ye is unjustifiable and reflects the translators' tendency to imitate the grammatical usage of the 17th century language. Thus, "ye" is to be replaced by the standard English "you". However, M. Ali's use of both forms is unreasonable and indicates inconsistency.

As for the second verse, the translators vary in rendering the verb A bud, along with its variants Ta budun Abid, and Abadtum, where two variants of which preceded by the negative particle La and followed by the relative pronoun Ma recurs in verses (2,3,4 and 5). Such a repetition or structural parallelism, which enhances textural cohesion, is in fact one of the stylistic features of Quranic elegance whose aim is to remind the reader, as he reads through, of the important information it carries, mainly the insistence of the prophet of Islam on the repudiation of the infidels' gods and on the pure worship of

Almighty Allah , the One . The verb __A bud is mistakenly translated by M. Ali, Arberry and Dawood as "serve" since this verb, as defined by Webster's Dictionary , is to perform the duties of a post or to act as a server at mass . This implies that Arberry has been influenced by Christian beliefs and those translators who come after him have imitated his incorrect rendering. The most appropriate equivalent for the verb is "worship" as given by Rodwell , Pickthall, and Y. Ali on the premise that "to worship" means to give one's praise , reverence and admiration to Almighty Allah in prayer including humble submissiveness and obedience (Lane, 1980, 1934) and the person who obeys Him in this way is called __Abd "true worshipper" - a rendition which assumes a religious overtone for Muslims . However, Dawood is deemed ostensibly inconsistent when using interchangeably two different verbs "worship/serve" for where he should have opted for either of which and stuck to it throughout his translation - a case which adversely affects the stylistic cohesion and musicality of the overall verse .

Another point of discrepancy in translation relates to the negative particle La and the relative pronoun Ma . The former is rendered as "nor" , "not" or "neither" , but what makes them more stylistically striking is the initial position such particles occupy before the subject . This emphatic position manifested in verses (3,5 and sometimes 4) , and used adequately by some translators triggers subject - verb inversion and contributes to

textual cohesion which in turn has its emotive effect on the part of the readership . On the other hand , what renders these three verses stylistically more effective is the repetitive use of the coordinator wa "and" - a cohesive mark which , in Menacere's (1992 : 29-33) terms, has a pragmatic and communicative effect. It is a marker of continuation which requires the translator to understand its implications in discourse and the way of transferring it in the target language whether by omitting or retaining it. Since Arabic tends to favor repetition of what English may leave implicit , and since starting a sentence with and is often deemed as a bad style in English . (Ibid) . the best way to do here is to omit it and to start with the negative particle as M. Ali and Dawood have done .

Related to the same verses is the use of verb tense of A bud together with its variants which also reflects discrepancy among the translators. However, the use of the present simple in one verse and the future in another by some translators is in most cases justified since the former tense can be used to express future time in English . But Y. Ali's use of the present perfect accompanied by the addition of "wont" in verse 4 is deemed infidel since this violates the semantic and structural parallelism of the verse and runs in counter to the intention of the addresser . Similarly , Arberry's use of the present continuous along with the present perfect and the simple present is absolutely unjustifiable and reflects his inconsistency

especially when rendering the word __Abidun__ in verses (3 and 4) into "are serving" because it does not refer to the notion of worship at a particular instant but it refers to the worship at all times .

On the other hand . the translators vary in the use of the modal auxiliaries "will"."shall" to express pure future time intermingled with others nuances of meaning like volition , determination intention , promise etc. Although both modals are usually used with the first person to express different shades of meaning , the use of "will" by some translators is more appropriate than that of "shall" since the former normally denotes a trace of strong determination rather than pure futurity , i.e. , the addressers' determination which means that the act of worship should be totally devoted to Almighty Allah and nt to anyone else against the infidels' determination of worshipping idiots . In this connection . Wekker (1976 : 45) affirms that pure futurity in case of "will" being used with the first person is rather rate in English and unlike "shall" , it is often used to express a wide range of volitional meanings .

Furthermore, it can be observed that although verse (3 and 5) are formally and semantically identical , Rodwell and Arberry offer two different renditions : one sentence with normal word order ; the other with inverted word order - a case which is stylistically a disadvantage and aesthetically ineffective .

As for the translation of the relative pronoun Ma plus __budin__ or __Abadtum__ , all the translators are in fact faithful in using "that" which (albeit less so in using what) because it alludes to the idiots as a source of infidels' worship , an antecedent which is grammatically an inanimate noun . The same equivalents , however , are assigned to Ma plus __A bud__ in verses (3 and 5) - a wrong rendition which mostly stems from the translator's confusion and uncertainty of reference of pronoun in the original text , and which causes a sort of ambiguity and perplexity to translators (Ilyas, 1989 : 99) . As a corollary , the best equivalent for this relative pronoun is "whom" preceded by Him as it is given by M. Ali since the former implicity refers to Almighty Allah, "the Eternal" as being the only source of worship i.e. , it grammatically has a personal reference .

As for verse (6) , two points can be made . The first concerns the personal pronouns __Li__ and __Lakum__ which are rendered faithfully by all the translators as either "to you / me" or "for you /me" , except Pickthall who renders them as unto you/me , which do not have convey the same aesthetically pleasing impact on the target reader as the first previous two do. The second relates to the word __Din__ which is erroneously rendered by M. Ali as "recompense" since this word , as defined by Webster's Dictionary , means a return for something done-a rendition which reflects his confusion between Din "religion"

and Dayn "debt" -two different Arabic words and his lack of awareness of the content in which the word is sued . Y. Ali's rendition of the same word as "way" is infidel because it refers to any way or sect within the same religion while the is nothing common between the infidels' religion i.e. , polytheism and the believers' religion, i.e. monotheism . The case being so, the translator should have an adequate vocabulary of the target language so as to make perspicacious choices among words. (As-Safi, 1992:42) . Thus , the best rendition for this word is "religion" as given by Rodwell , Pickthall , and Dawood for it refers to the religion of Islam . However, all the translators save Rodwell maintain textual coherence by using the coordinator "and" for wa since they are dealing with one interrelated verse where "and" implies coordination , and continuation and relates two simultaneous ideas .

Being dissatisfied with these six translations in the light of the assessment made above , the researcher proposes the following rendition :

The Infidels

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most
Merciful
Say : O infidels
I worship not that which you worship,
Nor do you worship Him Whom I worship,
Nor will I worship that which you worship,
Nor do you worship Him whom I worship.
To you is your religion and to me is mine

7 - Concluding Remarks

In the light of the previous analysis it can be concluded
that :

1 - Each version of the six English translations of the Quranic
text has its merits and demerits . However, a side from
some draw-backs , Arberry's translation seems to be the
most faithful to the original text , where the rendition is
deemed elegant, fidel, expressive and intelligible - features
which distinguish it from other previously mentioned
renditions . Arberry endeavors to interpret Quranic words
in a way that they may be acceptable to the readership in
Western countries without hurting the susceptibilities of
the Muslims .

2 - The incorrect or imprecise renderings of some lexical
items result either (a) from the translator's incertitude
about the different shades of meaning (denotative ,

connotative , etc.) these items acquire in the Arabic language , (b) from the translator's intellectual and emotional approach toward the Quran in such a way that be may opt for a certain lexical item , albeit imprecise to be in line with his religious beliefs or (c) from his limited knowledge of the structure of Arabic , in particular that of the Quran whose vocabulary is laden with a lot of ambiguities .

3 - In order to arrive at an optimal translation , the translator has to achieve a lexical , syntactic , semantic , pragmatic and textual equivalence of the Quranic text in the target language . And this requires the translator to be well versed in the structure and culture of the Arabic language along with a full understanding of the religion of Islam including Quranic commentaries which make him communicate the inner meaning and spirit of the original , otherwise , a translator would inevitably yield something different from what is intended in the original where translation problems (errors / losses) may result .

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