The Strategies of Rendering Referential Gaps in Different Translations of the Holy Quran

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my beloved parents who taught me sacrifice, love and loyalty.
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Abstract

The present study tackles a problematic area in translating the Holy Quran, namely complete or partial referential gaps. A referential gap is a gap in the field of reference, i.e. the term present in the Source Language (ST) is completely or partially missing in the Target Language (TT). The main objective of this study is to compare four translations of certain Quranic verses which involve referential gaps. The researcher examines the strategies adopted by the translators to overcome these gaps. The researcher handles this cultural phenomenon against two scales: the most suitable translation strategy to employ, and the best type of equivalence to adopt. The study concludes that Arab translators are more competent in rendering Quran than non-Arab translators, due to their linguistic and cultural competence. Non-Arab translators fail to overcome the gap due to a number of reasons: remoteness of the two cultures and employing the wrong translation strategy.

This situation leads to forming misconceptions and a breakdown in communication.
The Strategies of Rendering Referential Gaps in Different Translations of the Holy Quran

Chapter One

1. Introduction
Translation is one way of bringing two cultures into contact with each other.

Since cultures differ, this contact necessarily involves an integration of elements of one culture into another. The translator projects the source culture onto the target culture and finds that, while there are areas where the two neatly match there are also those where they do not match. This means that there are elements in the source culture that are absent from the target culture, and the linguistic expressions for them in the source language (SL) are ‘gaps’ (Ivir 1977), or ‘voids’ (Dagut 1978) in the target language (TL).

Catford (1965:1) defines translation as “an operation performed on languages: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another.” This substitution must cover the semantic and grammatical dimensions as far as possible. Translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions. This statement implies that translators are permanently faced with the problem of how to treat the cultural aspects implicit in a source text (ST) and of finding
the most appropriate technique of successfully conveying these aspects in
the target language (TL). These problems may vary in scope depending on
the cultural and linguistic gap of the two (or more) languages concerned
(Nida 1964:130).

Arabic and English are different linguistically and culturally. Arabic is full
of Islamic lexical items. Such lexical items implies that they are restricted to
Arabic and Islamic culture difficult to translate because they are religious
expressions. They are unshared with other religions such as Christianity.
Due to this cultural gap between Arabic and English, such lexical items do
not give themselves to easy rendition to English, because of their association
with the Arabic and Islamic culture.

This study discusses the problem of referential gaps as a barrier in
translating unmatched culture elements from Arabic into English. A
referential gap is a gap in the field of reference, i.e., a term present in the SL
is completely or partially missing in the TL. The study derives its evidence
from certain selected translations, by highly reputed translators, of some
verses of the Quran. These translations give rise to a host of problems due to
the existence of partial and/or complete referential gaps, which may impede
the desired communication. For the purposes of analysis of the data, the
researcher has adopted a method of categorizing the strategies of translating
the verses. This linguistic / cultural phenomenon is handled against two scales: the best type of equivalence to adopt: formal, functional, or ideational – and the most suitable translation strategy to employ i.e., borrowing, definition, literal translation, substitution, lexical creation, omission, addition, or other possible combination.

Since language reflects the interests, ideas, customs, and other cultural aspects of a community, the lexical item of a language manifests the culturally important areas whether religious, aesthetic and social ones among many others. This implies that translation between languages of different cultures is more difficult than carrying out translation between languages that are culturally related. The Quran has been translated into many languages including English. Its translation is an extremely difficult endeavor, because each translator must consult his or her opinion and aesthetic sense in trying to replicate shades of meaning in another language. This inevitably changes the original text. Thus a translation is often referred to as an “interpretation,” and is not considered a real Quran.

Alexander Ross offered the first English version in (1649). In (1734), George Sale produced the first scholarly translation of the Quran into English; another was produced by J. M. Rod well in (1876), and yet another by E.H, Palmer (1880), another was produced by Mawlai Muhammad Ali
(1917) and yet another by Richard Bell in (1937) and another by Arthur John Arberry in (1980). All these translators were non-Muslims. There have been numerous translations by Muslims; the most popular of these are the translations by Muhammad Muhsin Khan (1995), Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1983), Marmaduke Pickthall (1936), Al-Hilali and Khan (2002), and Abdel Haleem (2004).

The four translation are compared in an attempt to check the validity of these strategies, and attempts to show if the difference in culture is reflected in the translation of religious expressions. In addition, the treatment of translation equivalence occupies a major part of this study, so as to find out when and how a particular type of equivalence need to be used.

1-1 Statement of the Problem

By surveying a number of translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran by Pickthall(1980), Arberry(1980),Al Hilali & Khan(2002), and Abdel Haleem(2004), it could be said that the interpretations of many Quranic verses involving referential gaps sound neither natural nor informative. In other words, the communicative meaning is sacrificed at the expense of the sentence meaning.
By comparing four translations of certain Quranic verses taken from well-known Arab and non-Arab translators, Pickthall (1980), Arberry (1980), Al Hilali and Khan (2002), and Abdel Haleem (2004), it is found that some renditions of non-Arab translators suffer a loss of informativity or expressivity and ambiguity. The main interest is to figure out the translators strategies in rendering the Quranic verses, and to see which of them conveyed the intended meaning as explicated in the verses, and if the difference in culture is reflected in the translation of religious expressions.

Consider the following examples:

إن الصفا والمروة من شعائر الله فمن حج البيت أو اعتتمر فلا جناح عليه أن بطوَّف بهما
ومن تطوع خيرا فإن الله شاكر عليم.

البقرة (158:1)

1- Safa and Marwa are among the rites of God, so for those who make major or minor Pilgrimage to the House it is no offence to circulate between the two. Anyone who does good of his own accord will be rewarded, for God rewards good deeds, and knows everything.

(Abdel Haleem 2004).

2- Safa and Marwa are among the waymarks of God; so whosoever makes the Pilgrimage to the House or the Visitation it is no fault in him to
circumambulate them; and whose volunteers good, God is All-grateful, All-knowing.

(Arberry1980).

It can be clearly seen that Arberry opted for the English approximate counterpart pilgrimage. Abdel Haleem also opted for the English approximate counterpart pilgrimage, in order to achieve a greater communicative function and present a clear concept of that term to the target reader. Abdel Haleem had in the footnote some elucidating remarks about what the word “House” refers to, and about the difference between performing the rite in the season and other times. Furthermore, he added the words minor and major to differentiate between Umra and Hajj.

Thus, Abdel Haleem in such a case has blended three strategies (addition, substitution, explanation in a footnote) together as one independent compact strategy thereby thrived in achieving ideational equivalence. Accordingly, the target reader is expected, to a large extent, to have a good idea and a clear concept.

1-2 Assumptions.

In the light of the above—mentioned problem, the following assumptions are proposed: