Translatability of some Islamic Religious Expressions from Arabic into English

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TRANSLATABILITY OF SOME ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS FROM ARABIC INTO ENGLISH

BY

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DEDICATION
TO My PARENTS, HUSSEIN & AMNEH
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abstract

This study aimed at showing the translatability of some Islamic religious expressions from Arabic into English and focusing on the major problems that translators encounter within the translation process.

The data of this study were collected from books and interpretations of the Holy Quran that are relevant to this study. As for the sample of this research, it consists of fourteen M. A students at Yarmouk University who were asked to translate fifty Islamic religious expressions from Arabic into English.

Some previous studies dealing with this study were reviewed; it was found that many studies were conducted in this field especially in translation from Arabic into English.

The study presents a classification for the cultural and linguistic problems that the translator face in religious translation from Arabic into English; each problematic area was dealt with separately with the provision of examples.

At the end of this study, suggestions and recommendations were put forward showing that, despite the different applicable procedures, rendering religious expressions into the target language is hard to achieve because of the linguistic and cultural differences.
Notes

In order to facilitate the pronunciation of Arabic words appearing in the original texts, the following transliteration system has been used (El-Shiyab 1990).

**Arabic Consonants**

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**Arabic Vowels**

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**Short Vowels**

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The glottal stop /ʔ/ is omitted from initial position.
The repetition of the same consonant as in [akkada] ‘affirmed’ indicates a geminated letter.
INTRODUCTION

TRANSLATABILITY OF SOME ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS FROM ARABIC INTO ENGLISH

Introduction

The rationale behind this study is to investigate the problems arising from the translation of Arabic religious terms into English. The investigation can be made first through identifying these problems, and then analyzing them in order to find solutions for them.

It is to be noted that translation from Arabic into English involves some difficulties resulting from the remoteness of the two languages. Many Arabic religious terms and expressions have no equivalence in English. Therefore, translating them into English will sometimes be misleading.

Furthermore, translating religious terms has not received a great deal of attention as other areas of study, i.e. translation of metaphor, proverbial expressions, translation of culture, etc. It is hoped, therefore, that this study paves the way for those who are interested in the translation of religious terminology.

It should be pointed out that, when translating religious terms into English, the problems lie in finding the exact meanings in the target language. They also lie in the fact that both Arabic and English have different grammatical systems; each also has its own religious terminology. The category of religious terminology in each language constitutes a self-contained religious area in which a religious term in one language may have a meaning that is different from the meaning of the same term in another language. The lack of congruency between the two different religious expressions adds to the problems encountering the translator. Therefore, the
question always arises: Is it always within the translator’s capability to find similar counterparts of the two languages? And to what extent are the methods applicable?

Discussing religious terminology leads to the discussion of culture. And because culture plays a significant role in forming religion and its entailed expressions, one feels obliged to highlight the different views about culture. Taylor (1985) sheds light on the meaning of culture. He maintains that culture entails knowledge, laws, customs, beliefs and other capabilities and habits that are acquired by man or men as member(s) of a society. Thus, culture makes up the rules and customs that distinguish one society from another. Therefore, language can distinguish between one society and another. It is perhaps the area where language differences are most noticeable.

As Arabic enjoys a wide scope of religious terms, one of the limitations of this study is that it is restricted to selected problematic expressions. These expressions will be presented and analyzed for the purpose of finding cultural, religious and/or linguistic equivalence. If this ‘equivalence’ is not found in the language of the target culture, the translator may run into difficulties, especially if he is not trained and experienced enough and is not of a good religious and cultural competence and background. In this case, and even in the case of being competent and bicultural, the translator is to opt for different procedures such as approximation, transliteration, footnoting, and paraphrasing.

**Statement of the Problem**

Translating Arabic legal terms into English is a stimulating challenge. It requires an accurate comprehension and a full understanding of the original text taking into consideration that such an issue is to be
translated into a different and disparate linguistic and cultural environment. When that happens, the translator can give an approximate meaning in both the source and the target languages. The process of approximation does not always suffice us for bridging the cultural gaps between one language and another; and this is due to the following reasons:

1. Cultures may widely be different. This means that every nation has its own culture which differs from other cultures in beliefs, traditions, rules, and language. One important criterion when translating cultural terms is that the translator should be bicultural (El-Shiab 1995). He should be aware of the cultural norms and conventions of each culture.

2. While biculturalism is extremely important, the possession of good linguistic and pragmatic knowledge in both languages will also be highly recommended. In this respect, language is a core element of cultures by which components of its own nature are expressed and shown to others.

3. Translating religious terms requires that the translator should have good knowledge and experience of religious terminology. In other words, the translator should be well-trained in religion or possess good knowledge of religious understanding.

Based on the above, it can be noted that culture, language and religion are in binary relationships. One cannot comprehend any of these without recourse to the others. Therefore, understanding religious expressions entails understanding language and culture.

Furthermore, having good knowledge of culture, language and religion is the only guarantee for a good translation of religious terms. Otherwise, the rendition of religious terms will not be efficient but most likely distorted. To this effect, language should be looked at as an integral part of culture, and the Arabic/English translator should have knowledge of the religious cultures of both source and target language, if he/she is to avoid pitfalls.
Purpose of the Study

The fact that there are problems in translating religious terms and expressions makes it necessary for linguists and translation practitioners to identify, explain, and analyze these problems; they should also look for possible and appropriate solutions. While this study attempts to give solutions to some of the problems referred to above, its main purpose will be as follows:

1. To investigate the problems arising from the translatability of some Arabic religious terms into English and to familiarize the (TL) readers with such terms.

2. To show that although cultures are different, they have something in common. Each culture has its religious deeds and rites that are similar to other cultures. However, the way these rites and deeds are performed and done is different.

3. To emphasize that translations of the Qur'anic expressions and Hadiths are not always sufficient to give the full meaning of the original text. Sometimes, the researcher finds it necessary to provide his own translations for the purpose of guidance, exposition and illumination.

Methodology

This study utilizes a test in which fourteen M.A. translation students at Yarmouk University are asked to translate some religious expressions and terms from Arabic, the source language, into English, the target language. Special attention is paid to cultural and linguistic problems that translators face in such a study.

The main problems are highlighted and then examined. Then, they are classified into cultural, linguistic and lexical. The researcher also consults some translation studies conducted in this area as theses, periodicals, the
Holy Qur'an interpretations and Hadiths. Translations of the Qur'an, for instance, are of great help for the researcher as they are conducted by specialists and well educated people in the two cultures. Reference is made to the notion of equivalence, approximation of cultural gaps, and other related issues such as ambiguity, multitude of meanings, cultural contradictions, etc.

Population and Sampling

The subjects of this study are chosen as students of translation in the English Department at Yarmouk University. The researcher believes that they are well acquainted with religious terminology. They are also expected to have better understanding of religious beliefs. In addition, students should also know better the applicable procedures in such translations; they should also know how the cultural gaps and linguistic problems can be dealt with.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researcher uses a test to collect the data required for the purpose of this study. The test consists of sentences in which Islamic religious expressions are underlined. The students are asked to give the meanings of these Arabic religious expressions in English. From the answers provided, the researcher highlights the main problems and classifies them into categories. After that, the problems are analyzed and then discussed. Based on the analysis, possible solutions will be suggested and further procedural applications will be recommended.