

TRACING A MODEL FOR EUPHEMISM TRANSLATION, A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

Mohammed Albarakati

King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

maalbarakati@kau.edu.sa

Religious discourse is a finely written and stylistically elevated type of text. It abounds in rhetorical devices, idiomatic expressions and culture-specific vocabulary. While translators strive to render these areas as accurately as they should, euphemistic expressions are sometimes neglected or mistranslated. This paper will investigate how translators have dealt with some Qur'anic euphemistic expressions and uncover what translation procedures and strategies have been applied. A sample of euphemistic expressions collected from the Qur'an and explained; five published translations are then reviewed and analyzed. The sample examination leads to designing a translation model that would explain euphemism translation process.

Keywords: *Qur'an, euphemism, translation, techniques*

Introduction

A common feature found among different religious discourses is that religious scripts legislate people's life matters, and inevitably it would deal with various themes and topics; some of which could be culturally- sensitive or could even be considered taboos. Among these topics is reference to toilet functions, genitals, sexual behaviors, circumcision.etc (Gross 2012). Generally, people find it difficult to speak about these topics directly for they might cause loss of face, or they find talking about them offensive. Not only these, there are also other motives behind using euphemism which can be found in some cultures such as fear of death, killing and similar ill-omened words (Allan and Burridge 1991). The list could get longer and extend for other sociolinguistic motives such as upgrading the denotatum and giving advice in a circumlocutory way or for good omens and optimism (Albarakati 2012).

Sacred texts such as the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an abound in euphemistic use of the language. For example, direct reference to god is substituted with other alternatives such as Adonai in the Torah (Borowitz and Schwartz 2007). Adonai, explain Borowitz and Schwartz (2007: 4) is used as a euphemism to replace the personal name of God (i.e. YHVH) which is profane to mention. Similarly, the Hebrew Bible avoids direct reference to sex, death, what can be considered negative reference to god.

In the Qur'anic case, it is quite noticeable too that it never elaborates on distasteful themes. The Qur'an rather employs linguistic and mainly rhetorical techniques to evade mentioning words which could be culturally sensitive. To mention but a few, I have myself encountered more than sixty instances where the theme of sex is euphemized for. Part of this data covers approximately half of the Qur'an can be retrieved from (Al-Barakati 2013) and the rest will be in a later publication.

To conclude this introduction, we can say that in both the old and new testaments translators use euphemism to translate sensitive expressions found in source texts (Gross 2012). Thus, one would rightly claim that euphemizing is a strategy adopted by translators to produce a culturally-compatible text that would not violate conventions of face-work. However, it is slightly different in the case of the Qur'an since euphemizing is a strategy found throughout the Qur'anic original Arabic text (source text).

Methodology

The sample below are excerpts from the Qur'an in which euphemistic usage is employed. Since euphemisms are often double speaks and could bear both a common literal and a figurative meaning, authentic and widely agreed upon sources are consulted. References include traditional dictionaries which dealt with classical Arabic words and employed a historical approach in defining them, and traditional exegetical works which showed a linguistic interest into the text.

The researcher first offers a brief contextual background on the verse at hand. Some linguistic analysis of the source text then follows. After that verse is firstly rendered literally; a way in which idiomatic use of the language will be ignored and only the most common dictionary meaning is used. Then, the researcher will explore how five translators have dealt with euphemistic text exploring what techniques were applied for the rendering of the source text euphemism.

Analysis

Excerpt 1

Source Text	قالت أنى يكون لى غلام ولم يمسنى بشر	
Literal Translation	She said how would have a boy when I never been touched by a human	Literal Euphemistic Translation
Asad	Said she: "How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me?"	Literal Euphemistic Translation
Hilali and Khan	She said: "How can I have a son, when no man has touched me	Literal Euphemistic Translation
Pickthall	She said: How can I have a son when no mortal hath touched me	Literal Euphemistic Translation
Yousef Ali	She said: "How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me	Literal Euphemistic Translation
Saheeh International	She said, "How can I have a boy while no man has touched me	Literal Euphemistic Translation

The verse tells about Mary when she was told by the archangel Gabriel that she would have a son (i.e. Jesus). She replied in surprise: how would I have a son when I have never been touched by a man! The euphemistic expression found in this verse is: يمسنى I.e. touched me. Mary, according to traditional Arabic exegetes, meant marriage in this euphemism and wanted to emphasize that the only way to have a child is by means of being intimate with a man within a marriage covenant which had never been.

The verb مَسَّ is used in the Qur'an to refer euphemistically to sexual relations in marriage (xf. Q. 02:236). Both denotative and connotative baggage of "touching" is neutral. The source text employs part (i.e. touching) for whole (i.e. sexual intercourse) in this euphemism to refer to sexual intercourse. The word touching can also be considered a hyperbole in this case; that is to say if touching by a man which is one of many several acts that would precede a sexual intercourse has never been done, how would I get pregnant. So, if the possibility of making the first step leading to pregnancy is eliminated, the result is impossible to have occurred.

The five translations have translated the euphemism literally and followed the same technique used in the source text. Such a method is called formal equivalence which is, as explained by Nida and Taber (1969) one that focuses attention on the message emanating from both form and content. It is evident that the above translations have utilized a literal translation which imitated the form which is in this case was lexical content of the source choosing a very common denotative meaning of it (i.e. touch for مَسَّ). Nevertheless, it is functionally equivalent as English readers will not find it blunt to read.

Excerpt 2:

Source Text	مَا الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ إِلَّا رَسُولٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ الرُّسُلُ وَأُمُّهُ صِدِّيقَةٌ ۖ كَانَا يَأْكُلَانِ الطَّعَامَ ۗ انظُرْ كَيْفَ نُبَيِّنُ لَهُمُ الْآيَاتِ نَمْ انظُرْ أَنَّى يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾	
Literal Translation of the euphemism	They used to eat food	
Asad	The Christ, son of Mary, was but an apostle: all [other] apostles had passed away before him; and his mother was one who never deviated from the truth; and they both ate food [like other mortals] . Behold how clear We make these messages unto them; and then behold how perverted are their minds!	Literal translation with addition- non euphemistic
Hilali and Khan	<u>They both used to eat food (as any other human being, while Allah does not eat).</u>	Literal translation with addition- non euphemistic
Pickthall	<u>And they both used to eat (earthly) food</u>	Literal translation with addition- non euphemistic
Yousef Ali	<u>They had both to eat their (daily) food</u>	Literal translation with addition- non euphemistic
Saheeh International	<u>They both used to eat food.</u>	Literal translation- non euphemistic

This verse deals with the claim that Jesus was a god and refutes it logically by saying that if Jesus were a god, he would not have to eat food like humans do. The euphemism applies an implicit kinayah (metonymy) which employs the principle of a remote link between eating food and what naturally comes after it i.e. defecation and body effluvia. So, the unuttered meaning is that how would Jesus be a god when he and Mary both eat food and consequently they would defecate like other people do. Therefore, drawing from that humanly imperfect nature, he would not be super-nature but a human messenger from God. The previous wording in our analysis is one way of what one would have been used in order to convey the intended meaning. The unuttered meaning belongs to a sensitive theme in both Arabic and English (Noble 1982) and (Allan and Burrige 2001).

The translations have all followed very closely the source text with some variations in form of additions. The euphemism in the source text is not a conventional one that would easily be recognized by a casual reader, but rather one which requires alertness in order to comprehend the intended meaning. To some it would sound relatively ambiguous and would incite them to further verify the intended meaning from exegetical sources. This euphemizing technique employs using novelty in order to invite the reader to further search for the meaning. Translators have translated the euphemism literally but this time with a functionally non-equivalent translation. A number of them do not seem to have recognized the euphemistic function in the source text and thus concentrated on the main purpose of the utterance i.e. refuting the idea of Jesus immortality, rather on the euphemistic function. So this case is considered a non-recognized euphemism. The rest such as Asad and Hilali and Khan who inserted respectively (like other mortals) and (as any other human being, while Allah does not eat). Pickthall and Yousef Ali follow the same technique adding (earthly) food and (daily) food respectively. They have all concentrated on the theological matter but failed to provide any link to the euphemistic function. Addition, according to Dickins and Hervey (2002:24), is a technique employed when there is something added and not present in the source text. He rightly posits that it is a common feature in Arabic- English translation. However, it is not the case here as addition has not compensated for the missing euphemistic function. Instead, addition has only explained the meaning with more straight forward words.

Excerpts 3:

Source Text	لو أردنا أن نتخذَ لهواً لاتخذنَّه من لدنا إن كنا فاعلين (١٧)	
Literal Translation of the euphemism	If we wanted to take fun , we would have taken it from ourselves. Indeed we would do.	
Asad	[for,] had We willed to indulge in a pastime , We would indeed have produced it from within Ourselves - if such had been Our will at all!	Literal translation- non euphemistic
Hilali and Khan	Had We intended to take a pastime (i.e. a wife or a son, etc.) , We could surely have taken it from Us, if We were going to do (that).	Literal translation with addition- non euphemistic
Pickthal	If We had wished to find a pastime , We could have found it in Our presence - if We ever did.	Literal translation- non euphemistic
Yousef Ali	If it had been Our wish to take (just) a pastime , We should surely have taken it from the things nearest to Us, if We would do (such a thing)!	Literal translation with addition- non euphemistic
Saheeh International	Had We intended to take a diversion , We could have taken it from [what is] with Us - if [indeed] We were to do so.	Literal translation- non euphemistic

In classical dictionaries, the word لهو mainly refers to any means of fun and amusement such as drums, and musical instruments. However, in lesser instances it is found to refer to women, or sons in the traditional Arabic of Yemen. In lisan Alarab and Sihah, it could also mean sexual intercourse, and marriage. Exegetes unanimously agree that the meaning of the verse is not the denotative meaning of the word لهو i.e. indulgence in general. They have agreed that the intended meaning is getting a wife. For the latter is not worded, it makes it a typical euphemism employing kinayah technique (i.e. metonymy).

Four translators have rendered the word لهو with the word pastime while one translator used the word diversion. The target text words pastime and diversion are neutral words and their semantic baggage is completely void from any reference to women, sex, or any sensitive issue. The most common denotative meaning was chosen by the which made some ambiguity in the translation except in Hilali and Khan's translation who made some effort adding "(i.e. a wife or a son, etc.)"; an exegetical type of translation: one which adds details not given in the source text (Dickins: 9).

Conclusion:

Translation process involves two major phases: 1- comprehension of the message in the source language and 2- reproducing the message in the target language. The diagram shows that translators can miss the euphemistic meaning in the first phase. When this happens, translators tend to provide a semantic rendering of the text; a translation which renders the meaning without conveying the euphemistic function produced by the formal structure of the SL. However, it is possible that a translator could have followed an exegetical opinion that had not identified the euphemistic function in first place. When translators decide to translate the euphemism, they choose a technique by which the euphemistic function could get conveyed.

Three verses were analyzed in this paper and analysis showed that literal translation was used by translators in all instances. However, while literal translation worked in the first verse and could convey the euphemistic function, it did not produce a euphemistic translation in the other two. It is believed that when SL and TL words share similar meaning senses, literal translation can be a functional choice to adopt.

References:

- Albarakati, M. (2012). Translation of Sex-Related Qur'anic Euphemisms. *Translating the Rhetorics of the Holy Quran between Source Identity and Target Culture*, 1(1), 418-442
- Al-Barakati, M. (2013). *Translation of the Sex-related Qur'ānic Euphemism Into English*. Leeds: University of Leeds, School of Modern Languages.
- Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (2001). *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used As Shield and Weapon*. Replica Books.
- Borowitz, E., & Schwartz, F. (2007). *A Touch of the Sacred: A Theologian's Informal Guide to Jewish Belief* (1st ed.). Jewish Lights.
- Dickins, J., & Hervey, S. (2002). *Thinking Arabic translation: A course in translation method : Arabic to English*. London: Routledge.
- Gross, C. (2012). Embarrassed by the Bible: What's a Translator to Do? *The Bible Translator*, 87-94.
- Khan, G., & Bolozky, S. (2013). *Encyclopedia of the Hebrew language and linguistics*. Brill Academic.
- Nida, E., & Taber, C. (1969). *The theory and practice of translation*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Noble, V. (1982). *Speak softly: Euphemisms and such*. Sheffield, South Yorkshire: Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield.