A Comparative Study Of Martin Luther's Bible Translation And Arberry's Qur'an Translation

Alzghoul, Musa A.[1] , **Alazzam, Tahani S.**[2] , **Allababneh, Abdelkarim**[3]

[1]Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Jordan.
[2]Independent Researcher, Amman, Jordan.
[3]Middle East University, Amman, Jordan.

Abstract

A large number of translators have translated the Qur'an from Arabic into English. However, most of their translations fall short of carrying out the mission successfully. Most of these translations favor the rigid style and archaic vocabulary to preserve the rhythm of the source text. The main argument of this study is that Arthur Arberry's translation of the Qur'an, The Koran Interpreted, is comparable to Luther's translation
of the Bible in the sense that both of them target the reader of the translating language. Unlike other translators of the Qur'an, Arberry avoided the archaic language, verse structure, the rhythms of the original in favor of producing a target language text that reflects the meaning of the Qur'an in simple and direct English which makes it readable for all kinds of readers. The First Section of this paper is an introduction to the translation of sacred texts in general. The Second Section discusses Martin Luther's Bible translation, within a short historical overview the Bible translation, and his views of the Qur'an and why he was interested in translating the Qur'an. The Third Section surveys the Qur'an translations and explains how political or sectarian affiliations may affect the interpretation of the Qur'an. This leads the study to the conclusion that the best Qur'an translation so far, according to assessments by some critics, is Arberry's translation. Section Four is a discussion of Aberry's translation and a comparison of his translation methodology with that of Luther. This section also includes some examples from other studies that exemplify how Arberry's translation is readable by all because it is done with the aim of being accessible by all English language readers.

Keywords: translation, comparative study, Quran translation, bible translation, and scripture translation

1. Introduction

Unlike the Bible translation, the Quran translation has always been the subject of objections by Muslim scholars and authorities alike. However, both of these sacred texts i.e. the Bible and the Quran, have been translated for different purposes and reasons including religious, subversive, and celebratory purposes among others. Among the most compelling reasons to study the translation of sacred texts these days is the work of post-colonial critics who study the effects of translation on the sacred texts in the ex-colonized cultures (Long, 2005). New immigrants and the effects they have on the host cultures is another reason to translate the sacred texts to introduce the new religious

thoughts to the hosting cultures. However, these sacred texts do not simply yield themselves to translation. One reason is that target language vocabulary available to translate these sacred texts is already loaded with referents from the indigenous culture (Al-Ghalith & Shalabi, 2021).).

The events at Babel, according to Derrida (1985) in his article Des Tour de Babel, led to confusion with regard to the act and process of translation. While God made people speak different languages, translators act against God's will when they try to bridge the gap that God Created. Another confusion arises from the plurality of languages of God's word and the different possible interpretations. Derrida suggests that God resisted the imposition of a single language. This, according to Derrida, forces the plurality of interpretations and forces the confrontation between different languages and different sacred texts to see a complete world picture. In the same article, Derrida challenges Walter Benjamin's idea that he introduces in his article 'The Task of the Translator' which indicates that the translation of sacred texts is not necessarily about communication with the reader.

For George Steiner, translation is seen as 'implicit in the most rudimentary of communication' (1998: 496). He investigates translation as a process of interpreting and understanding on the basis of complex linguistic interpreting. Steiner's understanding of the events at Babel does not support the idea of the translatability of the sacred texts because he speaks of the plurality of interpretations. Steiner reflects on what he calls the 'internationalization' of English in the sense that English is used as an international lingua franca but dislocated from its cultural base. The same kind of dislocation, he indicates, happens to sacred texts when they are translated because their original language is removed from its original context.

Eugene Nida (1964) introduces an approach to holy text translation that offers a 'dynamic equivalence' as an alternative for the old word-for-word paradigm of faithfulness to the source text. This dynamic equivalence, which later came to be called functional equivalence, gave translators of holy texts different possibilities in light of the cultural difference. In the case of the Bible translation, the position of the text made functional equivalence a step too far for theologians to comment on the translation of sacred texts.

2. Martin Luther and The Translation of the Bible and the Qur'an

Martin Luther (1483-1546) whose most notable achievement is the translation of the German Bible is 'regarded as the father of the German literary language' (Robinson, 1997:84). According to Robinson, German schools still teach Luther's principles of translation especially those mentioned in his 'Circular Letter' in which he described how he decided on the use of certain target language features. The following paragraphs will shed some light on the history of the Bible translation before Luther.

The translation of the Bible is central to the Christian religion (Sanneh, 1990). It is important for the spread of Christianity to convey important concepts of faith in many different languages to a multitude of cultures. Otherwise, Christianity would never have spread beyond Palestine (Naude, 2010: 288). According to Naude (2010), the developmental history of the Bible translation can be divided into four eras. The first one is from about 200 BCE to the fourth century CE. At this stage, the Bible was translated within the Jewish setting in Alexandria and Western Asia into Greek (Septuagint) and Aramaic. The second era extended from the fourth century CD to about 1500 in a Catholic setting in Palestine and other centers of the Roman Empire. The Bible at this stage was translated into Latin (Jerome's Vulgate). This era witnessed the Christianising of the Hebrew source text which led to new meaning and nuances read into the Hebrew and Greek Septuagint in words and phrases. The third era extended from about 1500 to about 1960 in Protestant setting. The target languages included English, German, French, Dutch, etc. The

centers of activity were Protestant trade communities that were developing at the expense of the old Catholic ones. Translation during at this stage was characterized by adherence to the word-for-word paradigm and to the old-fashioned vocabulary and style.

The nature of the products of the translation was transference as much as possible of the forms and structure of the source text. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German during this era in 1534. However, Luther's translation was banned so he revised the translation slightly and republished it without his name. This translation achieved great popularity (Robinson, 1997). The fourth era in the Bible translation is the current era where a significant change in the philosophy of the Bible translation is witnessed. This includes an unprecedented effort in the United States and Britain to cooperate and translate the Bible 'interconfessionally'. The main focus of the Bible translation at this stage is to make the meaning intended in the source text plain to all readers.

Eugene Nida (1964) was among those who played an important role in the development in the theory and practice of the Bible translation at this stage. Translation for Nida (Nida and Taber 1969) is reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source text in terms of meaning. A translation is dynamic equivalent when the message of the source text has been transported into the receptor language in such a way that the response of the receptor is essentially that of the original receptor.

Although the purpose was different, Martin Luther expressed his interest in translating the Qur'an. Luther wrote two prefaces to Qur'an translations in (1530 and 1543). The examination of the two essays that Luther wrote on Islam and the Qur'an reveals that his aim was not completely polemical or apologetic. Luther criticized Islam the same way he criticized those with whom he disagreed like the pope, the Jews, or other Protestant reformers. His writing about Islam aimed to convince Christians to reform. He writes about Islam with regard to

his own faith (Henrich and Boyce, 1996). He maintains that his incentive to study the Qur'an or Islam was in order to expose its anti-Christian beliefs. He mentions in his essay, On War Against the Turk, that he has not read the Qur'an yet and that he will translate it when he has the time so that "everyone may see what a foul and shameful book it is" (Henrich and Boyce, 1996).

The first essay on the Turks, On War Against the Turks, was written in 1529 when the Germans expected that the Turks might conquer their lands. His criticism at the beginning was directed to those who were willing to 'let the Turks come in order to civilize the Germans'. He states that the Turk:

Lays waste to the Christian faith and our dear Lord Jesus Christ.
For although some praise the Turk's government because he allows
everyone to believe what he will so long as he remains the temporal
lord, yet this reputation is not true, for he does not allow Christians
to come together in public, and no one can openly confess Christ or
preach or teach against Mohammed. What kind of freedom of belief is
it when no one is allowed to preach or confess Christ, and yet our
salvation depends on that confession? (Henrich and Boyce, 1996:175)

Nobody knows the sources that Luther got his ideas about Islam from because it was forbidden to teach against Muhammad at the time. Luther blamed other scholars for not bringing in information about the Islam and the Qur'an to Germans and announces his plans to translate the Qur'an. He makes it clear that his only motivation is to show how "worthless" it is (Henrich and Boyce, 1996). Luther understands that there are some common elements between the faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, he does not write more than a few short lines about it. Luther's attacks against Muslims are repeated throughout his essays.

3. The Qur'an Translation

The need to translate the Qur'an appeared after Islam spread outside Arabia. However, Muslim scholars and authorities did not encourage translating the Qur'an. Instead, they encouraged new converts to learn Arabic so that they can read the Qur'an in its original language i.e. Arabic (Raof, 2001). Some Muslim scholars and authorities even condemned some early attempts to translate the Qur'an. Unlike the Bible, there are no authorized translations of the Qur'an into the major Muslim languages like Persian or Turkish equivalent to the Luther or other authorized translations of the Bible. The Qur'an has, however, been translated into most world major languages including European, Asian, and African languages. It is worth mentioning that the Christian missionaries have been the most active non-Muslim translators of the Qur'an with the aim of debunking Islam and aiding the conversion of Muslims to Christianity (Mohammed, 2005). Robertus Ketenensis was the first to translate the Qur'an into a European language namely Latin in 1143 which was first printed in 1543 in Basel (Holes, 2000: 142). Alexander Ross's translation of the Qur'an was the first into English. Ross's was a retranslation of an earlier French translation and thus was at a third remove from the original language (Holes, 2000: 142).

Most of the Qur'an translators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not have enough background in Islam. They were also goaded by the urge to respond to Christian polemic and their works do not reflect any intellectual depth. Among these are George Sale, John Rodwell (1808-1900), Edward Palmer (1840-1882), and Sir William Muir (1819-1905. Sale's translation is an important one because it included a detailed analysis of the previous translations. Moreover, Sale's translation remained the standard reference for all English readers until almost the end of the nineteenth century. Although Sale implied that his translation was based on the Arabic text, some have claimed that he used an earlier Latin translation. Because Sale did not use verse numbers, footnotes, or explanations in his work, it is extremely difficult to comprehend (Mohammed, 2005).

As a response to the Qur'an translation by Christian missionaries, Indian Muslims were the first Muslims to translate the Qur'an into English according to Abdur Rahim Kidwai (cited in Mohammed, 2005), professor of English at Aligarh University, India. All these translations were undertaken at a time of British colonial period and missionary activity. Kidwai mentioned the works of Mohammad Abdul Hakim Khan (Patiala, 1905), Mirza Hairat Dehlawi (Delhi, 1912), and Mirza Abu'l Fazl (Allahabad, 1912). Dehlawi was motivated consciously by a desire to give "a complete and exhaustive reply to the manifold criticisms of the Koran by various Christian authors such as Drs. Sale, Rodwell, Palmer, and Sir W. Muir."

The Qur'an translation continued during the twentieth century. New English translations appeared successively. These translations were varied in terms of ranging from mediocre to reservedly commendable (Naude, 2010). Western university presses have undertaken publication of renditions: Princeton has published Ahmed 'Ali's rendition, and Oxford University Press has published the work of M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem. However, most of these translations are politically, sectarian, or religiously biased. This, as will be shown in the following section, is one of the reasons that make Arberry's Qur'an translation "the best around" (Mohammed, 2005).

4. The Qur'an Translation By Arthur Arberry

Arthur Arberry (1905-69) was a 'bona fide' scholar of Arabic and Islam. After he graduated from Cambridge University, he stayed for years in the Middle East to perfect his Arabic language skills. He also worked as a professor of classics at Cairo University in 1946. He worked as a professor of Persian at the University of London and finally he moved to Cambridge as a professor of Arabic until his death in 1969 (Oxford Islamic Studies Online). Arberry's translation of the

Qur'an, The Koran Interpreted, was first published in 1955 and continued to be an important translation over the decades. The title that Arberry used, The Koran Interpreted, confirmed the point of view of some Muslim scholars that that the Qu'ran cannot be translated, but it can only be interpreted.

These days Arberry's translation is considered 'as one of the most authoritative, faithful, fluid, and readable interpretations of the Qur'an, recommended by academics and general readers alike' (Mohammed, 2005). Arberry rendered the Qur'an into English verse accessible to all. This translation is continuously referred to because of its 'language, literary quality, and its even-handed approach, making it valuable not only for those new to the Qur'an, but also for bilingual Muslims, non-Arabic-speaking students of the Qur'an, and a wide range of other readers' (Mohammed, 2005). It is this aspect of Arberry translation that is comparable to Luther's translation of the Bible where he sought to translate the Bible into a language that would appeal to all and that would be readable by all. In this regard, Robinson states that Luther's most important contribution to translation theory is his 'reader orientation method. His 'standard principle' is that a translation must be made out of good target language words, idioms, syntactic structures. Robinson adds that Luther, in translation, 'socializes' the language. What he internalizes is language as what people like him (members of the same class) say to each other in real life speech situations (Robinson, 1997:84). Arberry described a similar method in his introduction to his Qur'an translation. He explained that he "considered the opinions of the learned commentators, and when (as not infrequently) they have differed, I have been eclectic in deciding between alternative explanations. I have tried to compose clear and unmannered English," (Arberry, 1955: vii).

In his article 'Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an' (2005), Khalil

Mohammed explains how Arberry's Qur'an translation is considered by many as one of the best non-sectarian translations, and that it has withstood the test of time to become one of the standard Qur'an translations for users at all levels. He describes Arberry's translation by stating that:

The translation is without prejudice and is probably the best around. The Arberry version has earned the admiration of intellectuals worldwide, and having been reprinted several times, remains the reference of choice for most academics. It seems destined to maintain that position for the foreseeable future.

Mohammed reaches this conclusion after assessing the Qur'an translations since the beginning of Islam. He assesses translations by Muslim and non-Muslim translators, translations by Orthodox Muslim translators, translations by sectarian translators, and translations funded and endorsed by the government of Saudi Arabia carried out for political purposes, and translations done by autonomous non-biased translators like the translation by Arberry.

The Quran has its specific syntactic and lexical items. Word order and the selection of specific lexical items are decided upon semantically. The style and syntax are peculiar to Arabic. Foregrounding performs a special communicative function in the Qur'an resulting in conveying the desired 'communicative goal' (Abdelwali,2007). Style and meaning are linked in the sense that style contributes to creating the meaning (Adab, 1996). Most Qur'an translators are 'text-centered' and try to remain 'loyal' to the source text. This type of translation hinders the flow of the target language text. In contrast to this kind of translations, Abdelwali uses the following example from Arberry's translation of the Quran for translations that are faithful to the source text

and at the same time read smoothly in the target:

Verily I am God; there is no God but I; therefore serve me (Arberry 1980:340)

Andrew Rippin (2004), in his comparison between two English translations of the Quran, states that the translators of these translations claim to "update" the English used. He uses Arberry's translation as a measure against which to judge the accuracy of the two other translations: (Qur'an 9/31)

> "they take their rabbis, their monks and Christ, the son of Mary, as lords beside God,"
>
> Fakhry: "they take their rabbis and monks as lords besides Allah, as well as the Messiah, son of Mary."
>
> Arberry: "they have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God, and the Messiah, Mary's son."

Arberry (quoted in Rippin, 2004) maintains that his intention of this version is "to go further than previous works in accuracy, clarity, flow, and currency of language. Accessibility for all those who speak English is the goal." The similarity of the method and intention between the work of Arberry and that of Luther in light of the previous quote from Arberry and the following one from Robinson about Luther is obvious: Luther states that it is the language that he translated into i.e. German that governs which words or structures are to be used in the translation when he says "I wanted to speak German not Latin or Greek, since German was the language I was translating into (Robinson, 1997: 86). Luther wanted his German language to be read and understood by all Germans young or old whether educated or not. This is evident in his description of depicting the language spoken

by the public when he talks about "going out and asking the mother in her house, the children in the street, the ordinary man at the market" in his Circular Letter.

Unlike most Qur'an translations into English that are source-language oriented and that are marked by adherence to source the text syntax and archaic language, Arberry's Qur'an translation is a target-reader-oriented one that aims at being easily read and understood by all English language readers. This translation will continue to be the translation of choice for all as long as no other autonomous non-biased translations are produced; translations that are done with target language reader in mind.

References

1. Al-Ghalith, Asad & Shalabi, Ahmad. (2021). Umm Zakiyyah's "If I Should Speak" and Updike's "Terrorist". The International Journal of Literary Humanities. 19. 23-33. 10.18848/2327-7912/CGP/v19i01/23-33.

2. Abdelwali, M. (2007) 'The Loss in the Translation of the Qur'an' In Translation Journal, Volume 11, No. 2. April 2007

3. Adab, B.j (1996) Annotated Texts for Translation: English: English-French, Clevedon: Multicultural Matters

4. Andrew Rippin. "Review of Fakhry, Majid, An Interpretation of the Qur'an: English Translation

5. of the Meanings and Haleem, M. A. S. Abdel, The Qur'an: A New Translation." H-

6. Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews. December, 2004. **URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10080

7. Arberry, A.J (1980) The Koran Interpreted. Oxford: Oxford University Press

8. Derrida, J. (1985) "Des Tours de Babel". In J. Graham (ed. And trans) Difference in Translation. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

9. George Sale, The Koran Commonly Called the Al-Koran of Mohammed (New York: W. L. Allison Co, 1880), p. x.

10. Henrich, S and Boyce, J. L. (1996) "Martin Luther—Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: Preface to the Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum (1530), and Preface to

11. Bibliander's Edition of the Qur'an" (1543) Word & World, Volume XVI, Number 2, Spring 1996

12. http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/16-2_islam/16-2_boyce-henrich.pdf [last accessed 14/12/2014]

13. Holes, C. (2000) 'The Koran' In The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation, France, P. (ed.), 141 -145. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

14. Long, L. (2005) Translation and Religion, Holy Untranslatable? Multilingual Matters, UTP, 2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA.

15. Mohammed, K. (2005) "Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an", Middle East Quarterly, Spring 2005. [last accessed Dec. 14, 2014]

16. Naude, J. (2010) 'Religious Translation'. In Handbook of Translation Studies (ed.) Gambier, Y and Doorslaer. John Benjamins.

17. Nida, E. (1964) Towards a Science of Translating. Leiden: Brill.

18. Nida, E.A. and Taber, C.R. (1969) The Theory and Practice of Translation. Leiden: United Bible Societies and Brill.

19. Oxford Islamic Studies Online. http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/Public/book_tki.html [Last accessed 12/15/2014]

20. Raof, A. (2001) Qur'an Translation (Culture & Civilization in the Middle East)

21. Robinson, D. (1997) Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche. Saint Jerome Publishing.

22. Sanneh, O. L. (1990) Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture. New York: Maryknoll.

23. Skakir. M (1962) "On the Translation of the Koran into Foreign Languages". Muslim world 16,161-165

24. Steiner, G. (1998) After Babel. London: Oxford University Press.