

A Linguistic Assessment of the Translation of
' Surat al-Fatiha ' into English

Dr. Fida Muhsin Matter al-Mawla

University of Wassit College of Arts Dept. of Translation

Abstract

The present study is a linguistic assessment of the translation of Surat al-Fatiha. The researcher has chosen the translation of Surat al-Fatiha because of its importance to all Muslims around the world. This significance comes from its existence in every prayer Muslims do five times a day. Besides, Muslims opt to recite this holy sura whenever they start doing something whether it is simple or complicated seeking Allah's approval. Non-Arab Muslims as well as non-Muslims have to know the meaning of this significant sura through its translation into English. In fact, many translators managed to translate not only this sura but the whole Glorious Quran centuries ago. However, the present study tackles the translation of four prominent translations, i.e., those of Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1968) [first appeared in 1939], Arthur Arberry (1955), Shakir (2002), and al-Hilali and Khan (2007) [first appeared in 1974]. The study tries to show how different translators have applied translation strategies to arrive at a satisfactory target text in the hope of communicating the message to the largest possible number of receptors. It aims at describing the ways different translators



follow in handling their translation as well as analyzing the lexical, structural, stylistic problems involved in translating Surat al-Fatiha.

1. Preface

Religious translation, especially that of the Glorious Quran, is one of the most complicated and difficult types of translation. This is due to several reasons since religion deals with all aspects of human life, such as divinity, jurisprudence, ethics, history, etc. (Sirriyya, 2009: 14). This kind of texts needs to be tackled with utmost fidelity and care. This opinion is further adhered by Crystal (1987: 384) who says that translators of this type of texts have to satisfy two criteria which are always incompatible for the following reasons: First, the translation must be historically accurate, faithfully representing the meaning of the source, insofar as this can be known, and integrated within the religious tradition of which it is a part. Secondly, it must be acceptable, intelligible, and aesthetically pleasing to the intended users of the translation. Besides, it has to be capable of relating to the current trends in religious thought, social pressures, and language change. Consequently, no translation can ever satisfy the demands of all these factors, and thus, all translations are to some extent controversial.

One should never forget the fact that religious texts have the characteristics of sacredness which is based on faith. If we take the Glorious Qur'an as an example, both the message and the words expressing the message are

sacred. An authoritative translation of Qur'an is not possible since rendering the sacred words of the source text into the target language (henceforth TL) cannot be done without losing their divine value. However, the available translations are explanations, interpretation or conveying the meanings of the Glorious Qur'an (Aziz and Lataiwish, 2000:135). They actually help the non-Arab Muslims and non-Muslims understand the divine message. Nonetheless, those translations cannot replace the original text which every Muslim must say when he practices his religion whether in prayers, reciting the verses of Qur'an, or any other religious activity.

This text, as it is the case with all other Qur'anic texts, shows strong affinity to literary register. There are sound devices, such as assonance and rhyme. Besides, it employs literary style, such as verbosity, terseness and connotation. Assonance is defined, as mentioned in the Dictionary of Literary Terms (1963:12), as:

A species of imperfect rhyme, or a substitute for rhyme, consisting in using the same vowel sound with different consonants and requiring the use of the same vowels in the assonant words from the last accented vowel to the end of the word.

As for lexis, there are some lexical resources used in this sura, such as terseness, verbosity, and repetition.

This sura is peculiar in that in addition to its having a special nature. It addresses the minds together with the hearts of its audience. It evokes aesthetic feelings and has a vocative function. So, intelligibility and acceptability are important factors in the process of translation.

2. Semantic Analysis:

Translating Quranic texts involves many semantic fields. First, denotative and connotative meanings are crucial here. Denotation is the relationship held between the linguistic sign and the non-linguistic entities it refers to (Lyons, 1977: 207). Denotative meaning is also called conceptual, cognitive, propositional, referential, and dictionary meaning. It represents the perceived reality and the central logical truth (Leech: 1974: 13).

Connotative meaning, on the other hand, is the emotional or affective addition to the denotative meaning of a sign. Actually, it is "the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it *refers to*" (ibid: 14). Leech (ibid: 14-15) further adds that connotative meaning changes from age to age and from society to society since it is peripheral , unstable and open-ended compared with the denotative meaning. Moreover, connotative meaning consists of certain features derived primarily from the practical contexts including people who habitually use such expressions and the circumstances in which such words frequently occur. This kind of meaning is so important for the acceptance of any text. Translators are obliged to pay special attention to these crucial features of meaning (Waard and Nida, 1986: 146-147).



In the semantic analysis of a text, one can never neglect context which is another important semantic factor. Newmark (1988: 193) believes that the process of translating words should never be away from their certain linguistic, referential, cultural and personal context. He (ibid: 194) further adds that a common mistake in translation is to ignore context. Besides, a not uncommon mistake is to make context the excuse for inaccurate translation. Nida (1964: 243-245) mentions four steps for the semantic analysis in the process of translation. The first two steps are concerned with the analysis of the lexico-grammatical features of immediate unit and discourse context which represent the analysis of register. The third step represents analyzing the communicative context, which refers to the circumstances involved in communicating the message such as time, place, performer, audience, intent, and recorded response. The fourth step represents the analysis of cultural context.

3. Approaches to Religious Translation

There are many approaches used in translation; however, the ones tackled here are those popular in translating the Glorious Qur'an and more precisely, in translating Surat al-Fatiha.

3.1. Explanatory Translation

In this approach the translator gives some explanations in a longer phrase to the meaning of the source language (henceforth SL) term. This is usually done when the term is introduced for the first time. If the same term is repeated in the text, the explanatory phrase should not be repeated. This is because repeating the long phrase is not



commendable since it will be tedious and result in a number of cumbersome sentences (Lomholt, 1991:29).

3.2. Explanation in a Footnote

This is another approach of translating religious texts where translators resort to when the term requires lengthy explanation. This strategy is very popular in translating religious texts, especially the Glorious Qur'an. This approach is particularly helpful when a term is used to represent referential as well as lexical gaps in the TL for which transliteration alone may be opaque and not understood to the target text (henceforth TT) reader. Thus, the translator adds some explanations in the form of footnotes. However, this is done because the term is introduced for the first time (Sirriyya: 2009: 67).

3. Transference

It is, as Newmark (1988:81) mentions, what we call transliteration, transcription and loan word. It is the process of transferring an SL word to a TL text as a translation procedure. It is related to the conversion of different alphabets, e.g., Arabic into English. The word becomes a 'loan word'. He further postulates that when the translator has to decide whether or not to transfer an unfamiliar word in the TL, which in principle should be an SL cultural word whose referent is peculiar to the SL culture, then he usually complements it with a second translation procedure. Catford(1965: 66) highlights that in transliteration, SL graphological units are replaced by TL graphological units. However, these are not translation equivalents

since they are not selected on the basis of relationship to the same graphic substance.

3.4. Translation Couplets and Triplets

Couplets and triplets combine two or three translation procedures respectively for dealing with a single problem. They are particularly common for cultural word if the transference is combined with functional or cultural equivalent (Newmark: 1988: 91).

4. Original Text and the Four Analyzed Translations

سورة الفاتحة

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ (1)

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ (2) الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمِ (3) مَلِكٌ يَوْمَ الدِّينِ (4) إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ (5)

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ (6)

صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ (7)

The chosen translations to be analyzed:

First: By Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1968) *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary.*

Sura I. Fatiḥ a, or the Opening Chapter. ^{no.}

1- In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. ^{no.}

2- Praise be to God,



The Cherisher and sustainer^{no.} of the Worlds;

3- Most Gracious, Most Merciful;

4- Master of the Day of Judgment.

5- Thee do we worship,^{no.}

And Thine aid we seek.

6- Show^{no.} us the straight way,

7- The way of those on whom

Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace,

Those whose (portion)

Is not wrath,^{no.}

And who go not astray.^{no.}

Second: By Arthur Arberry (1955) *The Koran Interpreted*. New York: MacMillan.

The Opening

1- In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

2- Praise be to God, the Lord of all Being,

3- The All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate

4- The Master of the Day of Doom

5- Thee only we serve, to Thee alone we pray for succor,

6- Guide us in the straight path,

7- The path of those whom Thou hast blessed,

Not of those against whom Thou art wrathful

Nor of those who are astray.



Third: By M.H. Shakir (2002) *Holy Qur'an*. Qum: Ansariyan

THE OPENING (FATEHAH)

- 1- In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
- 2- All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.
- 3- The Beneficent, the Merciful.
- 4- Master of the Day of Judgment.
- 5- Thee do we serve and Thee do we beseech for help.
- 6- Keep us on the right path.
- 7- The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed favor. Not (the path) of those upon whom Thy wrath is brought down, nor of those who go astray.

Fourth: By Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali (2007) *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an*. Riyadh: Darussalam

Sūrat Al-Fatihah (The Opening) I

- 1- In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.
- 2- All praise and thanks are Allah's, the Lord ^(no.) of the '*Alamī n* (mankind, jinn and all that exists).^(no.)
- 3- The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.



- 4- The Only Owner (and the Only Ruling Judge) of the Day of Recompense (i.e. the Day of Resurrection).
- 5- You (Alone) we worship, and You (Alone) we ask for help (for each and everything).
- 6- Guide us to the straight Way.^(no.)
- 7- The way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace^(no.) not (the way) of those who earned Your Anger^(no.), nor of those who went astray.^(no.)(no.)^(no.)

5. Analysis and Assessment

1. We begin with the translation of the Title or name of the sura. The source text (henceforth ST) is سورة الفاتحة and the name reveals so many things in the SL, the opening, the start, the beginning of something significant, etc. The four translators have it as:

-Ali :Sura I Fatiha, or 'the Opening Chapter'. He uses translation triplets approach. He also adds some explanation in the form of a footnote where he explains the importance of this sura to all Muslims.

-Arberry, on the other hand, has it as: The Opening.

-Shakir renders it as 'THE OPENING' (FATEHA).

- Khan and al-Hilali put it as: Surat Al-Fatihah (The Opening) I.

All translators seem well aware of the meaning of the name and its importance, so they keep a transliteration to its name and add an equivalent, which is 'the Opening' except Arberry who puts it with only the lexical equivalent. Moreover, Ali together with Khan and al-Hilali are not satisfy with their couplets, but they provide number (I)



to draw their readers' attention that this sura is number one in the Glorious Qur'an. There are also some diversity in the spelling and the type of letters as well as the order of their offered names. Obviously, there is a kind of verbosity in their translations (except that of Arberry).

2. As for the first ayah: *بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم*, all translators have somehow different rendering to this extremely significant ayah since every sura, except "al-Tawba", begins with it. Actually, it is intrinsic in Muslims' life because we use to say it on so many occasions, not only in reciting the Glorious Qur'an. It is considered to be a part of Surat al-Fatiha and not only a preface as it is the case with other suras.

The word "الله" is rendered as "Allah" by way of transliteration or transference. It seems that most Muslim translators prefer that way of rendering although some of them, viz., Abdullah Y. Ali, renders it as "God". However, in his latest copies all the renderings of this holy name was changed into "Allah". This seems to happen after being revised by The Presidency of Islamic Researchers, Ifta, Call and Guidance in Saudi Arabia. The merit of the first choice, viz., "Allah", satisfies what is called the aesthetic function and has a psychological appeal for Muslims who know the Qur'an. Moreover, unlike "god", the word "Allah" is not subject to plurality question in the minds of non-Muslims, particularly of the Western World, regarding the Deity worshipped by Muslims. Thus, the translated text flows naturally (Sirriyya, 2009: 54-55).

Names of Allah are usually translated by translation couplet strategy, viz., transliteration and translation proper strategies. In fact, Names of Allah are



proper names carrying denotative and connotative meanings. As such, it is preferable to transliterate them first and then trying to give an appropriate equivalent. Names of Allah are loaded with lots of meanings since they give the attributes of Allah besides their being proper names. Actually, transliteration alone may never communicate the message of these names.

The rendering of it as follows:

-Ali: In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

-Arberry: In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

-Shakir: In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

-Khan and al-Hilali: In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

Ali's translation of this ayah has the word 'God' as an equivalent to الله; however in later version of the same book it has been changed into the transliterated form 'Allah', as mentioned above. Muslim scholars and translation theorists find it more appropriate to have this divine word as we pronounce it. Some of those scholars, like Jassem and Jassem (2014), think that only Christian and Jewish translators use the word 'God' instead of 'Allah'. However, A. Yusuf Ali is Muslim and he was perhaps the most prominent Muslim translator to translate the Glorious Qur'an into English and he used the word 'God'. The researcher believes that in the last century when translation flourished due to the development of printing and publishing, the trend was to look for any close equivalent in the TL in order to make the translation more acceptable and accessible.



Nowadays the case is different since Muslims are so enthusiastic to let the world know the peculiarities of their religion. Consequently, they prefer to use some specific words that are Islam-oriented or cultural items as they are in Arabic by using transliteration, like Assalamu-alaykum, Jihad, Eid, Imam, etc. Thus, we find it more convenient to have the word 'Allah' whenever it appears and not only in Basmala.

As for الرحمن الرحيم , they are derived from the same root, i.e., رحم (v.) and the noun is رحمة. Translators are fluctuating among four equivalent, viz. Merciful, Gracious, Compassionate, and Beneficent. All of them have almost the same meaning which is related to 'mercy' but in different degrees. No one can ever tell which of them are closer in meaning to the first or the second. One can decide for الرحيم as one of the aforementioned items; but not for الرحمن which is Allah's specific characteristic in usage. We can say: رجلٌ رحيم but not رجلٌ رحمن . Besides, the annexation of the definite article ال makes them more specific and very close to proper nouns. Ali uses 'Most' as a superlative sign' whereas Arberry and Shakir put 'the' instead. Yet, Khan and al-Hilali use both, the definite article along with 'most' to make it more compatible to the English superlative.

None of the above translators give further explanation to this ayah except Ali who adds some notices about using the English superlative degree as an equivalent to the intensive Arabic structure. However, it is preferable to treat those two attributes of Allah as



proper names since they are among other Allah's Most Beautiful Names أسماء الله الحسنى. It is more appropriate to have them transliterated and put a footnote to explain their meanings. Actually, it is not only those two words that need transliteration, but the whole ayah as Bismillah-irr-hahman irr-ahim. We, as Muslims, need this ayah to be pronounced and said as it is in the Glorious Qur'an and in Arabic in general.

3- الحمد لله رب العالمين. All translators use the word 'praise' which is the right equivalent to the original item. However, Khan and al-Hillai over translate it by adding 'thanks' which seems to be redundant here. It is a sign of verbosity. As for رب العالمين, Ali uses 'The Cherisher and Sustainer^(no.) of the Worlds'. He is the only translator who used the words 'cherisher and sustainer' and he explains why in the footnote. He argues that رب is best translated as 'Lord' which means 'cherisher and sustainer'. The word العالمين is rendered as 'Worlds' and he explains in a footnote that 'worlds' comprise the world of humans, the world of angels, and the divine world of reality.

Arberry renders الحمد لله just as Ali does; but he continues as 'the Lord of all Being' instead of 'Lord of the Worlds' which almost carries the same meaning. Skakir, on the other hand has it as 'All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds'. Fianally, Khan and al-Hilali keep the word 'Alamin' transliterated and they put some explanation between brackets, as well as adding some further words in a footnote. Actually they use triplets (see 3.4 above) in order to



make their rendering understood by their readers. Their notes are almost the same as that of Ali.

4- الرحمن الرحيم . Most translators have it as it is in Basmala except Arberry who adds 'All' to those two attributes of Allah, viz., The All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate.

5- مالك يوم الدين . Ali and Shakir have the same translation as: 'Master of the Day of Judgment'; whereas Arberry uses 'Day of Doom'. Khan and al-Hilali render it with some explanation between brackets in order to cover all aspects of meaning. Their translation seems to be too long and tedious. It is better to use footnotes instead of mentioning more than one equivalent for some words since all of them have almost the same meaning.

6- إياك نعبد وإياك نستعين . This ST structure is peculiar since it is used in Arabic to denote emphasis (Thatcher, 1942: 287). For emphasizing the object rather than any other part of the sentence and to be correspondent with the ST structure, the translators seem to be well aware of this fact. Consequently, all of them manage to put emphasis on the object, i.e., the pronoun 'you' or 'thee'. This aspect of grammar is called 'fronting'. It is applied in order to achieve marked theme by moving into initial position an item which is otherwise unusual there. Such a fronted item is frequently an entire sentence element. The reason for fronting is to echo thematically what has been contextually given. It is as if the thematic element is the first thing that strikes the speaker (Quirk et al, 1985: 1377). In the same vein, Swan (1995:207) argues that "it is possible to begin an affirmative clause



with the object or complement, in order to make this the topic or give it more importance".

Ali , Arberry and Shakir use the archaic and old form of the pronouns 'you' and 'your' that are 'thee' and 'thine' respectively. They are imitating the Biblical style. Ali's translation is complicated in its structure: 'Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek'. Arberry's rendition is rather odd since he uses the word 'serve' for 'worship', and 'succor' for 'help': 'Thee alone we serve, to Thee alone we pray for succor'. Shakir , in the same vein, tries to take from both Ali and Arberry. The result is: 'Thee do we serve and Thee do we beseech for help'. Once again Khan and al-Hilali produce a fine translation but with explanations and brackets as usual for , obviously, they like verbosity. They put it as: 'You (Alone) we worship, and You (Alone) we ask for help (for each and everything)'. If we get rid of the brackets especially the last one, the translation may be more appropriate. Besides, Arberry and Khan and al-Hilali express the concept of uniqueness related to the fronted pronoun by adding the words 'only' and 'alone' respectively.

7- إهدنا الصراط المستقيم . The four translators uses some close verbs to the original إهدنا , viz., keep us, guide us, and show us. The verbs 'keep' and 'guide' need a preposition; whereas 'show' ,used by Ali, doesn't need a preposition. Their choice of 'straight' as an equivalent to المستقيم seems inaccurate since the contextual meaning here differs from the denotative one. Shakir is well aware of this, so he renders the whole ayah in a simple and comprehensible way: Keep us on the right path.

8- صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ . Every translator has his own way of rendering this ayah. Ali has it as:

The way of those on whom
Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace,
Those whose (portion)
Is not wrath,^(no)
And who go not astray.^(no.)

Arberry, on the other hand, renders it as:

The path of those whom Thou hast blessed,
Not of those against whom Thou art wrathful
Nor of those who are astray.

Shakir's translation appears as :

The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed favor.
Not (the path) of those upon whom Thy wrath is brought down,
nor of those who go astray.

Finally, Khan and al-Hilali produce the following rendition:

The way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace^(no.) not (the way) of those who earned Your Anger^(no.), nor of those who went astray.^{(no.) (no.) (no.)}

Once again we notice the use of the archaic pronouns in the translation of Ali, Arberry and Shakir. Moreover all translators keep the active voice of the ST in the first part of the ayah by using different equivalents. Nevertheless, the other passive part, i.e., 'passive participle' اسم المفعول (See



Thatcher, 1942: 90) is rendered in different ways. Ali, for instance, negates it by putting 'not' after the verbs 'is'. He also negates 'go' by putting 'not' before it. His way of translating this ayah is peculiar in attaching all three groups of people together and differentiates between the former and the latter two kinds by negating their wrong doings. 'Wrath' and 'going astray' are done by them and by their choice. He puts it as if those who earn Allah's Grace are those whom Allah is not Angry at and those who do not stray. In this, he is very close to the intended meaning of the ayah and at the same time his translation is different from the others. In his footnote, he talks about Allah's Grace as opposite to wrath and anger.

Arberry's rendition has some archaic pronouns (as mentioned above) as well as archaic auxiliaries, like 'hast' for 'has' and 'art' for 'are'. The difference between it and that of Ali is obvious. Arberry, along with Shakir and Khan and al-Hilali, talks about three groups of people; the last two of which are different from the former. The negative form for the three translations is achieved by 'not' and 'nor'. It gives the reader an implication of having three groups of people and each one is different from the other. This is actually the case with the first group; but may be not with the other two. One might read the exegeses to find the difference.

By a cursory look at the vocabularies used by the four versions, we have found the word 'wrath' as a noun is used by Ali and Shakir; while Arberry uses the adjective form 'wrathful' and Khan and al-Hilali use 'anger'. Besides, Ali and Shakir as well as Khan and al-Hilali use 'astray' as an adverb; whereas Arberry uses it as an adjective. Moreover, Khan and al-Hilali use the past form of 'go' where there isn't any indication in the ST of

the past. Ali and Khan and al-Hilali choose the item 'way', while Aberry and Shakir choose 'path'. The words 'way' and 'astray' are in assonance which adds an aesthetic value to the translation.

An important thing must be said regarding Khan and al-Hilali's translation which is the most circulated version of the Glorious Quran nowadays since it is endorsed by the Islamic authorities in Saudi Arabia and many other Islamic countries. In their footnotes of this ayah, they explain that 'those who earned Your Anger' are the Jews, and 'those who went astray' are the Christians. Of course this is mentioned by many Muslim exegetes. However, all the other translators do not mention that in their translation of this ayah. The researcher does not want to discuss matters of faith or theology since this is a linguistic study. However, the translation of the Glorious Qur'an is not intended for non-Arab Muslims only but also to non-Muslims, among whom are Jews and Christians. Consequently, when such readers come across that harsh criticism just from the very beginning of Qur'an and in the most commonly read sura, this may cause a negative reaction.

It is said that the overriding purpose of any translation should be to achieve 'equivalent effect', i.e., to produce the same effect on the readership of the translation as is obtained on the readership of the original. It is sometimes called the dynamic equivalent (Newmark, 1988: 48). However, in Qur'anic translation, equivalent effect is not only desirable; but it is essential. Actually it is the criterion by which the effectiveness, and therefore the value, of the translation is to be assessed.



Conclusions

The present study has arrived at the following conclusions:

- 1- Translating Qu'ranic texts is a hard job since it has to deal with many factors, such as culture, audience, faith, response, eloquence, etc.
- 2- The translation of surat al-Fatiha is peculiar in that it is so important for recurrence on so many occasions.
- 3- No translation can be valued as better than the others for each rendering has its own peculiarities.
- 4- None of the four translators manage to create an equivalent aesthetic effect as the original especially in terms of sound devices like rhyme, rhythm, assonance, etc.
- 5- Having so many explanatory footnotes and other kinds of explanation make the translation long and comprehensive. This might be a positive and a negative thing simultaneously.
- 6- Transliteration seems to be a good way to render some items, such as 'Allah', especially those Islam-specific words.
- 7- Translation strategies implied in translating 'Surat al-Fatiha' are all necessary, to some extent, in making the TL intelligible to the audience.



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