

Some Problems of Translating Past Tense Forms in the Glorious Qur'a:n into English

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Abstract

The present paper aims at (1) studying the past tense forms in the Glorious Qur'a:nic verses, (2) showing how these forms are rendered into English by different translators, (3) finding out if there are any significant differences between a new effective rendering whenever the syntactic structure of these forms do not coincide with their semantic functions.

In an attempt to solve the problems that arise from translating the past tense forms, it is hypothesized that an effective translation can be achieved when a translator is familiar with tense system as well as the uses of past tense in Arabic and English. It is also hypothesized that translators of these forms who adopt communicative translation are more successful than the translators who adopt semantic translation.

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1. The Past Tense

In Arabic, the past tense is defined as that tense which denotes a state or an event that took place at any point before the moment of speaking, e.g.

(وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا) (البقرة: من الآية 31)

((He taught Adam the names of His attributes)) (Khan, 1975:9). Its uses can be summarized as follows:

1. It is used in narration (Nur Al-Dccn, 1984: 55 and Al-Mansouri, 1984:58), e.g.

(وَلَمَّا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُ وَاسْتَوَىٰ آتَيْنَاهُ حُكْمًا وَعِلْمًا وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ) (القصص: 14)

((When he readied full age, and was firmly established (in life), We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge: for thus do We reward those who do good)) (Ali. A. Y., 1993:964)

2. It indicates a remote action if it is used with كان (Abdul-Qadir, 1958:69), e.g.

(وَحَمَلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ ذَاتِ الْأَوَاحِ وَدُسِّرِ) (13) (تَجْرِي بِأَعْيُنِنَا جَزَاءً لِّمَن كَانَ كُفِرَ) (القمر: 13-14)

((But We bore him on an (Ark) made of broad planks and caulked with

palm-fibre: she floats under Our eyes (and care): a recompense to one who had been rejected (with scorn!)) (Ali. A. Y., 1993: 1389)

3. Two actions occur in the past, the first is realized at the same time when the second is located (Nur Al-Deen, 1984:67), e.g.

((...had I said such a thing, thou wouldst indeed have known it. ...))
(Ali. A. Y., 1993:286)

4. It refers to an indefinite past (Hamid Abdul-Qadir, 1958:67), e.g.

(إِذْ قَالَ يُوسُفُ لِأَبِيهِ يَا أَبَتِ إِنِّي رَأَيْتُ أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِي سَاجِدِينَ....) (يوسف4)

((when Joseph said to his father, "father, I saw eleven stars, and the sun and the moon; I saw them bowing down before me.)
(Arberry,1980:254)

5. It expresses a definite past. The reference may be anaphoric or cataphoric, indicating an emphasis (Abdul-Qadir, 1958: 69), e.g.

(وَحَرَّمْنَا عَلَيْهِ الْمَرَاضِعَ مِنْ قَبْلُ...) (القصص: من الآية1)

((And We oidained that he refused suck, at first ...))
(Ali,A.Y., 1993: 963)

(....حَتَّى إِذَا دَرَكَهُ الْغَرَقُ قَالَ آمَنْتُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا الَّذِي آمَنْتُ بِهِ بَنُو إِسْرَائِيلَ وَأَنَا مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ (90) الْآنَ وَقَدْ عَصَيْتَ قَبْلُ وَكُنْتَ مِنَ الْمُفْسِدِينَ) (يونس 90-91)

((...when overwhelmed with the flood, he said: "I believe that there is no god except Him Whom the children of Israel believe in: I am of those who submit (to Allah in Islam)" (It was said to him:) "Ah now! - but a little while before, wast thou in rebellion!- and thou didst mischief (and violence)!)) (AH,A.Y.,I993:503)

6. It is used with particles such as "كلما" to indicate a repeated action in the past (cf. A. Al-Durr, and N. Al-Durr, 1973:16 NurAI-Deen, 1984:59), e.g.

(... كُلَّمَا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا الْمِحْرَابَ وَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا رِزْقًا....)(آل عمران: من الآية 40)

((..... whenever Zachariah entered her chamber, he found some provision with her...)) (Khan, 1 975:52)

7. It may refer to a single situation in the past (Aziz, 1998:25), e.g.

(وَاخْتَارَ مُوسَى قَوْمَهُ سَبْعِينَ رَجُلًا لِمِيقَاتِنَا....) (الأعراف: من الآية 155)

((Moses chose seventy men of his people for Our meeting))
(Khan, 1975:157)

8. It expresses a timeless action in the following cases:

A. When it is used with "كان الله" (Abdul - Qadir, 1958:71), e.g.

(....وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا) (الأحزاب: من الآية)

((... Allah is Most forgiving Every Merciful)) (Khan, 1975:4 10)

B. When it is attributed to Allah عز وجل and denotes a universal phenomenon that develops continuously (Nur AI-Dcen, 1984: 55), e.g.

(مَثَلُهُمْ كَمَثَلِ الَّذِي اسْتَوْقَدَ نَارًا فَلَمَّا أَضَاءَتْ مَا حَوْلَهُ ذَهَبَ اللَّهُ بِنُورِهِمْ وَتَرَكَهُمْ فِي ظُلُمَاتٍ لَا يُبْصِرُونَ) (البقرة: 17)

((Their similitude is that of a man who kindled a fire; when it lighted all around him, Allah took away their light and left them in utter darkness. So they could not see)) (Ali, A.Y., 1993:20)

(إِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ يُخَادِعُونَ اللَّهَ وَهُوَ خَادِعُهُمْ وَإِذَا قَامُوا إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ قَامُوا كُسَالَى) (النساء: من الآية 142)

((...The hypocrites seek to deceive Allah and He will chastise them for their attempt at deception. When they stand in prayer they are slack)) (Khan, 1975:94)

- C. It expresses an action or state as a series of many anterior events
(Nur Al-Deen, 1984:62); e.g.

(صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ) (الفاتحة: من الآية)

((... The path of those on whom thou hast bestowed thy favours
(Khan, 1975:5)

2. Text Analysis:

Regarding the distribution of the date, 12 different Qur'ainic verses will be analysed in terms of semantic function, syntactic structure and translation method.

SLTEXT (1):

(وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ كَانَ اللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ مُحِيطًا) (النساء: 126)

TLTEXT:

1. And to Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth; and Allah encompasses all things (Ali, S., 1955:91).
2. to Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth; and Allah encompasses all things (Khan, 1975:91)
3. All that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth is God's: and God encompasseth all things! (Rodwell, 1978: 424)

4. To God belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth, and God encompasses everything (Arberry, 1980: 119)
5. Unto Allah belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Allah ever surroundeth all things (Pickthall, 1982:97)
6. But to Allah belongs all things in the heavens and on earth: and He it is that encompasseth all things (Ali, A., 1993:225)

TEXT ANALYSIS:

Semantic Function		it is a timeless action / fact						
Title		Syntactic Structure						
		Arabic (ST)	English (TL)					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Tense	Past	/						
	Present		/	/	/	/	/	/
Aspect	Perfective							
	Progressive							
Time	Future							
Type of Translation	Semantic							
	Communicative		/	/	/	/	/	/

THE PROPOSED RENDERING:

And to Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth, and Allah encompasses every thing.

STEXT (2):

(أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ)
(إبراهيم 24)

TL TEXT:

1. Dost thou not see how Allah sets forth the similitude of a good word?
It is like a good tree, whose root is firm and whose branches reach into heaven (Ali, S., 1955:240)
2. Dost thou not see how Allah sets forth the case of a good word, which is like a good tree whose root is firm and every one of whose branches reaches into heavens (Khan, 1975:240)
3. Seest thou not to what God liketh a good word? To a good tree: its root firmly fixed, and its branches ...in the heaven (Rodwell, 1978:228)
4. Hast thou not seen how God has struck a similitude? A good word is as a good tree its roots are firm, its branches are in heaven (Arbeny, 1980:277)

5. Seest thou not Allah coineth a similitude: A goodly saying as a goodly tree, its root set firm, its branches reaching into heaven.
(Pickthall, 1982:258)
6. Seest thou not how Allah sets forth a parable? A goodly word like a goodly tree whose root is firmly firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the heavens (Ali, A., 1993:610)

TEXT ANALYSIS:

Semantic Function		it is a timeless action / fact						
Title		Syntactic Structure						
		Arabic (س)	English (TL)					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Tense	Past	/						
	Present		/	/	/	/	/	/
Aspect	Perfective					/		
	Progressive							
Time	Future							
Type of Translation	Semantic							
	Communicative		/	/	/	/	/	/

THE PROPOSED BENDERING:

Do not you see how Allah sets forth a parable a goodly word like a goodly tree whose root is firmly Fixed, and its branches (reach) to the heaven.

SL TEXT (3)

(وَكُلَّ إِنْسَانٍ أَلْزَمْنَاهُ طَائِرَهُ فِي عُنُقِهِ وَنُخْرِجُ لَهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ كِتَابًا يَلْقَاهُ مَنْشُورًا) (الإسراء: ١٣١)

TLTEXT:

1. And every man's work have We fastened to his neck
(All, S., 1955:265)
2. Every person's doings have We fastened firmly to his neck....
(Khan, 1975:265)
3. and every man's fate have we fastened about his neck
(Rodwell, 1978:166)
4. And every man We have fastened to him his bird of omen upon his neck.. (Arberry, 1980:303)
5. And *every* man's augury have We fastened to his own neck
(Pickthall, 1982:286)
6. Every man's fate We have fastened on his own neck
(Ali, A., 1993:677)

TEXT ANALYSIS:

Semantic Function		State leading up to the present						
Title		Syntactic Structure						
		Arabic (ST)	English (TL)					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Tense	Past	/						
	Present		/	/	/	/	/	/
Aspect	Perfective		/	/	/	/	/	/
	Progressive							
Time	Future							
Type of Translation	Semantic							
	Communicative		/	/	/	/	/	/

THE PROPOSED BENERING:

And every man's fate We have fastened on his own neck.

SL TEXT (4):

(وَإِخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذُّلِّ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ وَقُلْ رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا) (24) اراء:

TL TEXT:

1. And lower to them the wing of humility out of tenderness. And say
'My Lord, have mercy on them even as they nourished me in my
childhood'(Ali, S., 1955:266)
2. Be humbly tender with them and pray: Lord, have mercy on them, even
as they nurtured me when I was little (Khan, 1975:266)
3. and defer humbly to them out of tenderness; and say,'Lord, have
compassion on them both, even as they reached me when I was
little¹. (Rodwell, 1978:167)
4. and lower to them the wing of humbleness out of mercy and say, 'My
Lord; have mercy upon them, as they raised we up when I was little
(Arberry, 1980:305)
5. And lower unto them the wing of submission through mercy, and say:
My Lord! Have mercy on them both as they did care for me when I
was little (Pickthall, 1982:287)
6. And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility and say: 'My
Lord! bestow on them Thy Mercy even as they cherished me in
childhood (All, A., 1993:681)

TEXT ANALYSIS:

Semantic Function		An action took place in the past/fact in the past						
Title		Syntactic Structure						
		Arabic (ST)	English (TL)					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Tense	Past	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
	Present							
Aspect	Perfective							
	Progressive							
Time	Future							
Type of Translation	Semantic		/	/	/	/	/	/
	Communicative							

THE PROPOSED BENDERING:

And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy and say "My Lord! Bestow on them Your mercy even as they cherished me in childhood.

SL TEXT (5):

(الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ الْكِتَابَ وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ عِوَجًا) (الكهف:4)

TL TEXT:

1. All praise belongs to Allah Who has sent down the Book of His servant and has not put therein any crookedness (All, S., 1955:276)
2. All praise belongs to Allah who has sent down the Book to His servant (Khan, 1975:276)
3. Praise be to God, who hath sent clown the Book to his servant, and hath not made it tortuous (Rodwell, 1978:180)
4. Praise belongs to God who has sent down upon His servant the Book and has not assigned unto Book and has not assigned unto it any crookedness (Arberry, 1980:316)
5. Praise be to Allah Who hath revealed the scripture unto His slave, and hath not placed therein any crookedness (Pickthall, 1982:299)
6. Praise be to Allah, Who hath sent to His servznt the Book, and hath allowed therein no crookedness (Ali, A., 1993:707)

TEXT ANALYSIS:

Semantic Function		An action took place in the past						
Title		Syntactic Structure						
		Arabic (عَرَبِيّ)	English (TL)					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Tense	Past	/						
	Present		/	/	/	/	/	/
Aspect	Perfective		/	/	/	/	/	/
	Progressive							
Time	Future							
Type of Translation	Semantic							
	Communicative		/	/	/	/	/	/

THE PROPOSED RENDERING:

Praise be to Allah who has sent down the Book (Qur'a:n) to his servant and has not put (herein any crookedness.

SL TEXT(6):

(الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى) (طه:5)

TL TEXT:

1. He is the Gracious God Who has settled Himself on the Throne (Ali, S., 1955:298)
2. The Gracious One Who has settled Himself on the Throne (Khan, 1975:298)
3. The God of Mercy sitteth on his throne (Rodwell, 1978:94)
4. All-compassionate sat Himself upon the Throne (Arbcrry, 1980:339)
5. The Beneficent is established on the Throne (Pickthall, 1982:325)
6. (Allah) Most Gracious is firmly established on the throne (of authority) (Ali, A., 1993:765)

TEXT ANALYSIS:

Semantic Function		State leading up to the present						
Title		Syntactic Structure						
		Arabic (عز)	English (TL)					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Tense	Past	/			/	/		
	Present		/	/			/	/
Aspect	Perfective		/	/				
	Progressive							
Time	Future							
Type of Translation	Semantic					/		
	Communicative		/	/	/		/	/

THE PROPOSED RENDERING

(Allah) Most Gracious has settled Himself on the throne.

SL TEXT(7):

(وَإِذَا مَرَضْتُ فَهُوَ يَشْفِينِ) (الشعر 80)

TL TEXT:

1. And when I am ill, it is He Who restores me to health
(Ali, S., 1955: 360)
2. and when I fall ill, it He who restores me to health (Khan, 1975:360)
3. and when I am sick, he healeth me (Rodwell, 1978:106)
4. and whenever I am sick, heals *me* (Arbeiry, 1980:68)
5. And when I sicken, then lie healeth me (Pickthall, 1982:393)
6. And when I am ill, il is He who cures me (All, A., 1993:918)

TEXT ANALYSIS:

Semantic Function	Repeated
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Title		Syntactic Structure						
		Arabic (ST)	English (TL)					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Tense	Past	/						
	Present		/	/	/	/	/	/
Aspect	Perfective							
	Progressive							
Time	Future							
Type of Translation	Semantic							
	Communicative		/	/	/	/	/	/

THE PROPOSED RENDERING:

And when I am sick, it is He who cares me.

SL TEXT (8):

(وَالنَّجْمُ إِذَا هَوَىٰ) (النجم:1)

TL TEXT:

1. By the stemless plant when it falls (All, S., 1955:530)
2. We cite the Pleidas as evidence, when it will draw close (Khan, 1975:530)
3. By the star when it setteth (Rodwell, 1978:69)

4. By the star when it plunges (Arberry, 1980:244)
5. By the star when it setteth (Picklhall, 1982:585)
6. By the star when it goes down (Ali, A., 1993:1377)

TEXT ANALYSIS:

Semantic Function		General fact						
Title		Syntactic Structure						
		Arabic (ST)	English (TL)					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Tense	Past	/						
	Present		/		/	/	/	/
Aspect	Perfective							
	Progressive							
Time	Future							
Type of Translation	Semantic			/				
	Communicative		/	/	/	/	/	/

THE PROPOSED RENDERING:

By the star when it goes down.

(يَا مَعْشَرَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنسِ إِنِ اسْتَطَعْتُمْ أَنْ تَنْفُذُوا مِنْ أَقْطَارِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ فَانْفُذُوا لَا تَنْفُذُونَ إِلَّا بِسُلْطَانٍ) (الرحمن:33)

TLTEXT:

1. O company of Jinn and men! If you have power to go beyond the confines of the heavens and the earth, then do go. But you cannot go save with authority (Ali, S., 1955:532)
2. O company of jinn and men, if you have the capacity to penetrate beyond the confines of the heavens and the earth by all means do so; but you cannot do so except with authority (Khan, 1975:532)
3. O company of djinn and men, if ye can overpass the bounds of the heavens and the earth, then overpass them. But our leave only shall ye over pass Ihcn (Rodwell, 1978:75)
4. O tribe of jinn and of men, if you are able to pass through the confines of heaven and earth, pass through thou! You shall not pass through except with an authority (Arberry, 1980:252)
5. O company of jinn and men, if ye have power to penetrate (all) regions of the heavens and the earth, then penetrate (them)! Ye will never penetrate them same with (Our) sanction (Pickthall, 1982:596)

6. O ye assembly of jinns and men! If it be ye can pass beyond the zones of the heavens and the earth, pass ye! Not without authority shall ye be able to pass (Ali, A., 1993:1401)

TEXT ANALYSIS:

Semantic Function		Reference to Futurity						
Title		Syntactic Structure						
		Arabic (ST)	English (TL)					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Tense	Past	/						
	Present		/	/	/	/	/	/
Aspect	Perfective							
	Progressive							
Time	Future							
Type of Translation	Semantic							
	Communicative		/	/	/	/	/	/

THE PROPOSED RENDERING:

O you assembly of jinns and men! If you can pass beyond the zones of the heavens and the earth, pass you! Not without authority shall you be able to pass.

3. Findings and Conclusions:

As it has been already mentioned in this research, past tense forms were investigated in (12) Glorious Qur'amic Verses taken from different Surahs with their six renderings by different well-known translators of different nationalities. The specified Verses which have past tense forms with their renderings were analysed in terms of semantic function (based on the interpretation of the Glorious Qur'ain by different Arab and Muslim scholars), syntactic structure, and type of translation. The past tense form in each Verse was compared with its six English rendering in order to see how these forms are realized in the TL.

The main findings and conclusions arrived at in the present study are as follows:

1. All translators used both semantic and communicative translations with varying percentages.
2. The findings show that (16.5%) percent of the data under discussion has been translated semantically, i.e., in terms of finding equivalence. While (83.5%) percent of the data has been translated communicatively, i.e., in terms of transference of meaning. Obviously, the percentage of communicative translation is higher than that of semantic one. This is due to the fact that all translators have depended on the contextual effect.

3. The problems that were faced by the translators when translating past tense forms into English are due to the fact that past tense in Arabic and English exhibits numerous differences in terms of meaning and use.
4. Other problems arose in the process of translation due to the fact that tenses in Arabic are used both relatively and absolutely, whereas in English they are used absolutely.
5. The findings show that there are some areas of differences between the uses of tense in Arabic and English. These differences resulted in different realizations on the part of the translators.
6. Our findings confirm the claim that the Glorious Qur'a:n cannot be translated in terms of equivalence, but its meanings can be transferred into other languages.
7. Translating the Glorious Qur'a:nic Verses without knowing their semantic function results in some translational problems such as grammatical, lexical, etc.
8. Ambiguity might arise from the possibility of having a lexicon or a syntactic structure which is liable to be interpreted in more than one way.

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ملخص

بعض مشكلات ترجمة الصيغ الزمنية الماضية

في القرآن الكريم إلى الإنكليزية

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يهدف هذا البحث إلى (1) دراسة الصيغ الزمنية الماضية في القرآن الكريم
(2) بيان كيفية ترجمة هذه الصيغ إلى الإنكليزية من قبل مترجمين من ثقافات مختلفة
(3) إيجاد أوجه التباين بين تحقيقات هذه الصيغ في اللغة الهدف (4) اقتراح بعض
الترجمات الفاعلة عند عدم تطابق الصيغ التركيبية للترجمات المعطاة مع وظائفها الدلالية.

وفي محاولة لحل مشكلات ترجمة هذه الصيغ تفترض الدراسة ما يلي:

- (1) يمكن إعطاء ترجمة فاعلة تفسيرية عندما يكون المترجم ملماً بنظام الصيغ الزمنية واستعمالاتها في اللغتين العربية والإنكليزية فضلاً عن امتلاكه معرفة عميقة عن التفاسير القرآنية (2) المترجمون الذين يستخدمون الترجمة التواصلية في ترجمة الصيغ قيد البحث يكونون أكثر توفيقاً من المترجمين الذين يستخدمون الترجمة الدلالية.

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