



The Translation of Culture-Specific Items in Glorious Qur'an

A A Hasan¹ H K Najim²

¹Dept. of Sciences, College of Basic Education / Shirqat, University of Tikrit,

² Dept. of Translation, College of Arts, University of Mosul

Article information

Article history:

Received: 20 December 2024

Revised: 22 January 2025

Accepted: 2 February 2025

Keywords:

metaphor,
Translation,
Culture
-Specific
Items, _
eschatology,
Semantic

Correspondence:

Ahmed Ali Hasan
ahmed.ali06@tu.edu.iq

Abstract

This research examines the techniques employed in translating Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) pertaining to Eschatology in the Holy Qur'an. It identifies the challenges associated with these techniques and proposes solutions for translators. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of accurately conveying the intended meaning of the Qur'anic text and highlights instances of meaning loss when translating certain CSIs. Moreover, the research explains the rationale behind the decisions made during the adaptation of the text for the English language. An eclectic methodology is utilized to achieve the research objectives, combining various text-analysis and translation-oriented approaches. The study concludes that translators of eschatological terms are often subconsciously influenced by their own religious, social, and cultural contexts. It also observes that many translators tend to use general terms instead of lexemes that capture the connotative meanings of eschatological items.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69513/jnfh.v3.i4.a1> ©Authors, 2024, College of Education, Alnoor University.

This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

ترجمة الكلمات ذات المدلولات الثقافية الخاصة في القرآن الكريم

احمد علي حسن و هالة خالد نجم

أقسام العلوم كلية التربية الأساسية / الشرفاء، جامعة تكريت،² قسم الترجمة، كلية الآداب، جامعة الموصل

ملخص البحث

يتناول هذا البحث التقنيات المستخدمة في ترجمة الكلمات ذات المدلولات الثقافية الخاصة بعلم الآخرة في القرآن الكريم. وتحدد التحديات المرتبطة بهذه التقنيات وتقدم حلولاً للمترجمين. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تؤكد الدراسة على أهمية نقل المعنى المقصود من النص القرآني بدقة وتسلط الضوء على حالات فقدان المعنى عند ترجمة بعض الكلمات ذات المدلولات الثقافية الخاصة. وعلاوة على ذلك، يوضح البحث الأساس المنطقي وراء القرارات المتخذة أثناء نقل النص للغة الإنجليزية. حيث يتم استخدام منهجية انتقائية لتحقيق أهداف البحث، تجمع بين تحليل النصوص المختلفة والنهج الموجهة نحو الترجمة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن مترجمي المصطلحات الخاصة بعلم الآخرة غالباً ما يتأثرون دون وعي بسياقاتهم الدينية والاجتماعية والثقافية. كما تلاحظ أن العديد من المترجمين يميلون إلى استخدام المصطلحات العامة بدلاً من المفردات التي تلتقط المعاني الدلالية الخاصة بعلم الآخرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:- علم الدلالة، علم الآخرة، كلمات ذات المدلولات الثقافية.

1.Introduction

According to the Ethnologue Guide of the World's Languages, there are 7,117 officially recognized languages globally. For their respective nations, these languages represent significant social assets, embodying the culture, traditions, concepts, and collective ideologies and perspectives of individuals. Bassnett describes language as "the heart within the body of culture" (13). Furthermore, with the advent of communication and trade among nations, the role of translation became crucial.

As translation began to play a pivotal role in international relations, a critical issue emerged, transforming translators from mere linguistic intermediaries to cultural mediators (Hatim and Mason 223-24). The primary challenge lies in translating elements deeply embedded in the source language's culture into other languages. This challenge is further complicated when translators face the task of translating "terms which deal with the religious aspects of a culture," as these terms present significant difficulties in both analyzing the source vocabulary and finding suitable equivalents in the target language (Larson, 2008:180).

1.1 Problems

The research identifies the challenges associated with implementing translation strategies and demonstrates potential solutions for translators. Additionally, it examines the precision in conveying the intended meaning of the Qur'anic message, highlighting instances of meaning loss when translating specific Culture-Specific Items (CSIs).

1.2. Aims

The research seeks to illustrate the translation of cultural-specific items (CSIs) in selected chapters of the Holy Qur'an. Additionally, it aims to determine whether translators use general terms or lexemes that capture the connotative meanings of eschatological items.

1.3. Scope of the study

The study encompasses data gathered from selected verses across three chapters of the Holy Qur'an.

2.Culture Specific Items

The topic of Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) is widely debated among scholars, who strive to understand its essence, challenges, and solutions. Many researchers define culture through translated texts. Larson notes that "different cultures have different focuses. Some societies are more technical and others less technical," which is reflected in the vocabulary available for discussing specific topics (95). Newmark introduces the term "cultural word" to describe words that the readership is unlikely to understand (A Textbook 96). Baker categorizes concepts unfamiliar in the target culture into "abstract" and "concrete," noting that such

concepts "may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or even a type of food," referring to them as "culture-specific items."

Nord defines "culture" in the context of CSIs, describing it as "a cultural phenomenon that is present in culture X but not present (in the same way) in culture Y". Gambier (2006:159) uses "culture-specific references" to refer to CSIs, indicating that they encompass various aspects of life, including education, politics, history, art, institutions, legal systems, units of measurement, place names, foods and drinks, sports, and national pastimes as experienced in different countries and nations. Maasoum (2011) applies Newmark's model (1988) to analyze CSIs in the Persian translation of "Dubliners," concluding that translators often use "general words" and "borrowing" more than other strategies to address lexical gaps. He argues that these strategies are effective in making translations more authentic and tangible .

In his research, "Translation versus Transliteration of Religious Terms in Contemporary Islamic Discourse in Western Communities," El-Sheikh (2011:146) contends that "the use of transliterated religious terms rather than translations reflects some kind of an exclusive attitude rather than an inclusive one on the part of the language user" . He also posits that transliteration of Islamic terms showcases a high regard for Islamic concepts over their counterparts in other religions. Consequently, El-Sheikh advocates for using "the linguistic features that are characteristic of or associated with tolerant types of Islamic discourse" (Ibid).

The current research explores CSIs related to eschatology in the Holy Qur'an, demonstrating how translators convey both connotative and denotative meanings.

3.Approaches to the Definition of 'Translation'

The concept of 'translation' has been extensively debated among scholars, each offering diverse definitions based on their understanding of the term. Shuttleworth and Cowie (2010:181) assert that "throughout the history of translation research, the phenomenon has been variously delimited by formal descriptions, echoing the frameworks of the scholars proposing them". Likewise, Mayoral (2011:45) notes "there are as many definitions as there are authors who have written on the subject". Bell (2009:34) attributes this variety of definitions to three distinct meanings of the term 'translation': translating (the process), a translation (the product), and translation (the abstract concept encompassing both the process of translating and the product of that process).

4.The Linguistic Approach to Translation

Broadly speaking, the linguistic paradigm perceives translation as a linguistic act in which an equivalent text from another language substitutes a text from the

original language. This substitution process adheres to specific regulations that align with both linguistic systems. The linguistic approach, also known as the structural approach, primarily focuses on issues of meaning, equivalence, and shifts. Prominent figures in this approach include Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), Jakobson (1959), Nida (1964), Catford (1965), and Newmark (1988). However, it was soon recognized that translation is not solely a linguistic act, as it is also influenced by the way language is used within cultural and social contexts.

4.1. The Cultural Approach to Translation

In recent years, translation theorists have shifted their perspective on translation by considering various factors that influence the process (e.g., Hatim and Mason (1990), Lefevere (1992), Venuti (1995), Schäffner (1997), Baker (2010), etc.). Instead of solely seeking lexical and grammatical equivalence, as emphasized in the linguistic approach, they now focus on the translator's role. They investigate elements that impact the translator's decisions, potentially leading to manipulation or compromise of the source text. Lambert and van Gorp (1985) exemplify this change in focus by advocating for an analysis that goes beyond the relationships between authors, texts, readers, and norms in different systems, to include the connections between the authors' and translators' intentions, pragmatics and reception in both source and target systems, distinct literary systems, and sociological aspects such as publishing and distribution (Gentler, 2011: 132).

5. Translation: Procedures

5.1. Distinction between Translation Methods, Strategies, and Techniques

To begin with, it is important to acknowledge the lack of consensus among scholars regarding the terminology (i.e., methods, techniques, and strategies) used during the translation process to effectively convey the intended message. Garcia, (2011:64) notes that "different procedures for the translation are implemented to achieve a partially successful transfer, when these difficulties in translation often become unavoidable". In this context, Hurtado asserts, "We think that translation methods, strategies, and techniques are essentially different categories". Therefore, this section seeks to distinguish between the overlapping terms: Method, Technique, and Strategy.

5.2. Translation Method

According to Hurtado, translation method pertains to the manner in which a specific translation process is executed, guided by the translator's objective, thereby influencing the entire text. Similarly, Newmark asserts that "translation methods relate to whole texts" (Approaches 81), identifying several methods:

- Word-for-word translation: The source language (SL) word order is maintained, and words are translated

individually by their most common meanings, without context.

- Literal translation: SL grammatical constructions are converted to their nearest target language (TL) equivalents, with lexical words translated individually, out of context.

- Faithful translation: Aims to reproduce the precise contextual meaning of the original while adhering to TL grammatical structures.

- Semantic translation: Similar to faithful translation, but gives more consideration to the aesthetic value of the SL text.

- Adaptation: The most liberal form of translation, primarily used for plays (comedies) and poetry; themes, characters, and plots are preserved, with SL culture adapted to TL culture and the text rewritten.

- Free translation: Produces the TL text without retaining the style, form, or content of the original.

- Idiomatic translation: Conveys the 'message' of the original, though it may distort nuances of meaning by favoring colloquialisms and idioms absent in the original.

- Communicative translation: Strives to render the precise contextual meaning of the original in a manner that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible to the readership (45-47).

5.3. Translation Strategy

The subsequent step in the translation process, after selecting a method, involves determining the course of action when issues arise. In other words, the translator employs strategies to address problems encountered during translation. This is why (Klings, 2010:18) defines a translation strategy as the "translator's potentially conscious plans for solving concrete translation problems in the framework of a concrete translation task". Consequently, strategies are the procedures—whether conscious or unconscious, verbal or non-verbal—utilized by the translator to resolve issues that surface while executing the translation process with a specific objective (Molina and Hurtado, 2012: 508).

5.4. Translation Technique

Molina and Hurtado, (2010:509) define translation techniques as "procedures to analyse and classify how translation equivalence works". They argue that techniques result from the choices made by a translator, and their validity depends on various factors such as context, the purpose of the translation, and audience expectations. Therefore, a technique can only be meaningfully judged within a specific context. For instance, Nida, (2008:12) uses the term 'techniques of adjustment' to refer to processes aimed at producing correct equivalents.

6. Eschatology

The term 'eschatology' originates from two Greek words: *escheats*, an adjective meaning 'farthest' or

'last,' and logos, a noun meaning 'word' or 'study.' Consequently, "eschatology is the study of what is ultimate or final in God's plan" Grenz, (2009: 16). This theological branch primarily focuses on concepts related to the afterlife and the ultimate fate of the universe. Griffith succinctly defines 'eschatology' as "the study of last things", further categorizing it into:

1. Individual Eschatology: Concerned with each person's journey from physical death to their eternal state, encompassing issues such as death, the immortality of the soul, and the intermediate state of individuals.
2. General Eschatology: Pertains to the future of all humanity, addressing topics such as the resurrection, judgment, and the creation of a new heaven and earth.

Eschatology is extensively discussed in the three Abrahamic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. In Islam, the primary sources of knowledge about eschatology are the Holy Qur'an and the authentic Sunnah. The Qur'an details several major and minor signs preceding the Day of Resurrection, the end of all life, the period between death and resurrection, the events of the Day of Resurrection, the nature of heaven and hell, intercession, and the eternal separation of the righteous and the wicked.

7. Data Analysis

The data for analysis in this research consists of three English translations of the meaning of the Holy Qur'an, each representing different cultures. Verses are chosen based on their relevance to eschatology and the challenges encountered in translating them into English. The researcher compares these three translations and consults over forty other translations of the meaning of the Holy Qur'an.

The first translation examined is by Muḥammad Marmaduke Pickthall, entitled "The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an" (London, 1930). The second translation is by Maulawī Sher 'Alī, titled "The Holy Qur'an" (Islam International Publications Limited, 2021). The third translation is by Talal Itani, titled "Qur'an Arabic English" (Amazon, 2015).

To achieve the objectives of this research, an eclectic methodology is adopted. The analytical framework combines Lexico-Semantic and text-analysis translation-oriented approaches, focusing on analyzing and evaluating the accuracy of the translated texts. Additionally, since the three

translators come from different cultural (British, Pakistani, and Lebanese) and religious backgrounds (converted from Christianity, converted from Judaism, and Muslim by origin), the researcher employs Toury's (Descriptive 65-69) approach to identify the underlying norms in the translational processes. Toury's approach suggests two sources for determining the norms of any translated text: (1) textual and (2) extra-textual norms. Textual norms are identified through Source-Target comparisons, enabling the identification of individual translators' strategies and the subsequent reconstruction of the process by defining the translator's underlying intersubjective ideologies. Another method involves examining explicit normative statements in translation literature.

Discussion

Arabic ST: Verse Number (17:85)

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

English TTs

Pickthall: "They are asking thee concerning the Spirit. Say: The Spirit is by command of my Lord, and of knowledge ye have been vouchsafed but little".

Maulawī: "AND THEY will ask thee about [the nature of] divine inspiration. Say: "This inspiration [comes] at my Sustainer's behest; and [you cannot understand its nature, O men, since] you have been granted very little of [real] knowledge".

Talal: "And they ask you about the Spirit. Say, "The Spirit is of the Command of my Lord; and in no way have you been brought of knowledge except a little"

Analysis and Discussion

Given that "one does not translate languages, one translates cultures" (Casagrande, 338), and considering Bassnett's argument that language is "the heart within the body of culture" (13) and Holmes' emphasis on the importance of considering language, literary tradition, and socio-cultural context in translation (qt. in Dukate 43), the researcher investigates Arabic dictionaries to understand the essence of the lexical item الروح (lit. "the spirit") and the rationale behind its use instead of النفس (lit. "the soul").

Furthermore, the researcher analyzes the three translations under investigation to determine whether the translators convey both the denotative and connotative meanings of الروح. This approach aligns

with Toury's (Descriptive 65-69) extra-textual method, which involves examining explicit normative statements in translation literature.

Firstly, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of selecting specific lexical items during translation, as this process is not random but governed by conscious decisions and criteria. Translators choose language and lexical items that best convey their understanding of the source text. In the context of the Holy Qur'an, Gharib (12-18) argues that many scholars (including Al-Qurtubī, Ibn Kathīr, Ibn-Atṭīyah, Aṭ-ṭabarī, Az-Zamakhsharī, Az-Zarkashī, Al-'Iṣfahānī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Al-Arābī, Ath-Thaālibī, and Ibn Al-Anbārī) believe that there are no synonyms in the Qur'anic verses.

According to this view, each lexeme in the Holy Qur'an has precise connotations that distinguish it from other seemingly synonymous lexemes. Therefore, translators should avoid using synonyms when a direct rendering is possible. Newmark supports this by stating that "a synonym is only appropriate where literal translation is not possible and because the word is not important enough for componential analysis" (A Textbook 84).

In examining the translations by Pickthall, Maulawī, and Talal, the researcher finds that they render الروح as Spirit, divine inspiration, and Spirit, respectively. The lexeme روح is an example of CSIs related to eschatology. Griffith (11) classifies it under Individual Eschatology, and Newmark (A Textbook 103) categorizes it under Concepts. AlFayrūzabādī (679) describes this lexeme as referring to "that which brings life to bodies."

Since Lexical Semantics focuses on the meaning of words, the researcher examines the connotations of the translated terms (Spirit, inspiration, soul, human being, and self) to understand the afterlife implications of روح and نفس. Oxford Living Dictionaries Online (LEXICO), produced by Oxford University Press, provides the following relevant definitions:

- Spirit

1. The non-physical part of a person which is the seat of emotions and character; the soul. *'We seek a harmony between body and spirit'*.

1.1. The non-physical part of a person is regarded as their true self and as capable of surviving physical death or separation. *'A year after he left, his spirit is still present'*.
1.2. n resent'.

1.3. The on-physical part of a person manifested as an apparition after their death; a ghost. *'A priest performed a rite of exorcism and the wandering spirit was ousted'*.

1.4. A supernatural being. *'Shrines to nature spirits'*.

1.4. (the Spirit) The Holy Spirit. *'They do not see the cross, and so they do not see the kingdom of God and new life in the Spirit'*.

- Inspiration

1. [mass noun] The process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative. *'Helen had one of her flashes of inspiration'*.

1.1. Divine influence, especially that supposed to have led to the writing of the Bible.

'In 1782 he published his History of the Corruptions of Christianity, in which he rejected the Trinity, predestination and the divine inspiration of the Bible'.

According to Toury's (Descriptive 65-69) approach to identifying the underlying norms in any translated text, one effective method is to examine explicit normative statements in translation literature. Therefore, the researcher investigates how scholars differentiate between the lexemes روح (rūḥ, "spirit") and نفس (nafs, "soul"). Ibn Abī El-izz (383) and Ibn Al-Qayyim (55) assert that the terms nafs and rūḥ are sometimes used to refer to the same entity and at other times to distinct entities. They believe that nafs often refers to the soul when it is connected to the body, but when separated from the body, it is referred to as rūḥ. Consequently, the term روح is frequently associated with eschatological contexts.

Moreover, Ibn Mandhūr mentions that Ibn Abās differentiates between two types of nafs: one related to mind and consciousness, and the other related to life and existence (3/171). Similarly, Ibn Al-Anbārī states that some scholars assert that Al-Rūḥ is "responsible for bringing life to human beings," whereas Al-nafs is "responsible for mind and reasoning." Thus, when someone sleeps, Allah takes their soul, not their spirit, which is only taken at death (2/386). Based on this distinction, the lexeme روح is used in afterlife contexts to denote the supernatural identity that causes death when removed from the body. The term نفس, on the other hand, is sometimes used synonymously with روح and other times to denote consciousness and reasoning rather than life. In analyzing the translations by Pickthall, Maulawī, and Talal, the researcher finds that Pickthall and Talal translate الروح using the Literal

Translation strategy, as proposed by (Vinay and Darbelnet, 2011:33), rendering it as "the Spirit." This approach aligns with Venuti's (The Translator's 20) Foreignisation strategy, where translators use the English equivalent of the source lexeme without adding their interpretation, thus making the translators visible. Conversely, MaulawI translates الروح using the Transposition strategy, as proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet (36), rendering it as "divine inspiration." He also employs the Omission strategy, as defined by Baker (In Other 42), by omitting the definite article ال. Additionally, MaulawI makes a Unit-shift, as defined by Catford (86), converting the noun الروح into the adjectival phrase "divine inspiration." Before employing Transposition, MaulawI adds a note on the nature of the term in square brackets, using the strategies of Addition (Bassnett 38), Explication (Klaudy, Explication 80), and Using Notes (Newmark, Approaches 91).

In the second segment of the verse, MaulawI removes the phrase "the nature of" and the adjective "divine," replacing the definite article "the" with the deictic reference "this," which does not exist in the source text. Thus, he translates الروح in its second occurrence as "This inspiration." By intervening in the translation process and incorporating his knowledge, MaulawI's approach is considered a Conscious Ideology, as defined by (Munday and Cunico, 2008:144). Finally, MaulawI uses the strategy of Domestication, according to Venuti's definition, including his interpretation in the target text and thus becoming invisible.

Conclusion

The research concludes that translators often struggle to maintain a balance between the original message of the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) culture when translating Culture-Specific Items (CSIs). This difficulty is frequently attributed to the linguistic gap between Arabic and English, as well as the eloquence of the Qur'anic text. As a result, translators may overlook certain connotations of eschatological items to convey the general meaning intended by the ST. To address these challenges, the researcher suggests adopting Newmark's strategy of Couplets (91), which involves combining two different procedures to tackle a single problem. Consequently, the strategies of Cultural Equivalent and Addition can be employed to compensate for meaning loss caused by the cultural gap between languages.

References

1. Al-Fayrūzabādī, Majd Ad-Dīn. *Al-Qāmūs Al-Muḥīṭ*. Beirut: AlResalah Publishers, 2005. Print.
2. Al-ʿIṣfahānī, Al-Ḥusayn. *Mufradāt Alfādh Al-Qurʿan*. Damascus: Dār Al-qalam, 2005. Print.
3. Al-Qurṭubī, Abū ʿ, Abdullāh. *Al-Jāmiʿ, Liaḥkām Al-Qurʿān*. 20 vols. Beirut: Dār Al-kitāb Al-ʿArabī, 1997. Print.
4. Baalabaki, Munir and Ramzi Baalabaki. *Al-Mawrid Al-Hadeeth: A Modern English-Arabic Dictionary*. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, 2008. Print.
5. Baker, Mona. *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
6. Bassnett, Susan. *Translation Studies*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
7. Bell, Roger. *Translation and Translating: Theory and Practice*. London: Longman, 1991. Print.
8. Casagrande, J. B. "The Ends of Translation". *International Journal of American Linguistics* 20.4 (1954): 335-340. Print.
9. Catford, John. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965. Print.
10. Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.
11. Dukate, Aiga. "Manipulation as a Specific Phenomenon in Translation and Interpreting." Doctoral Diss. University of Latvia, 2007. Web.
12. El-Shiekh, Ahmad. "Translation versus Transliteration of Religious Terms in Contemporary Islamic Discourse in Western Communities." *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 2.1 (2011): 141-147. Print.
13. Gambier, Yves. *Doubts and Directions in Translation Studies*. The Netherlands: John Benjamins, 2004. Print.
14. Gentzler, Edwin C. *Contemporary Translation Theories*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.
15. Talal, Muḥammad. *Towards Understanding the Ever-Glorious Qurʿan*. Egypt: Dār An-Nashr Lil-Jāmiʿāt, 2008. Print.
16. Gharib, Osman. "Synonym in the Qurʿan" *Al-Nur for Cultural and Intellectual Studies* 12 (2015): 7-45. Web.
17. Grenz, Stanley. 1992. *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options*. Illinois: Inter Varsity Press.