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INVESTIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS TRANSLATION BETWEEN ENGLISH  
AND FRENCH LANGUAGES  
(A Case Study with Surah OF Al-Kahf)

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ABSTRACT

This research article aims at identifying and describing, mainly, the challenges of religious translation between English and French through the translation of the Holy Quran in the selected verses of Surah of Al-Kahf. Two editions of the Holy Quran were used in this article: The Noble Quran – English Translation of the meanings and commentary – King Fahad Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran, Madinah K.S.A. By Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan. Le Noble Coran et la traduction en langue française de ses sens-Complexe Roi Fahd pour l'impression du Noble Coran. Al- Madinah Al- Munawwarah – Royaume d' Arabie Saoudite. The Qualitative method used lead to conclusions about the quality of the translations. Features of translations were compared, some were better than others; some have preserved more of the formal features of the original. Some were both formally and semantically freer. Taken all together, the analyses provided a rich picture of the translation both in the interpretive range and its complex formal patterns. Finally, the outcomes obtained have revealed that the challenges of religious translation between both languages are owing to linguistic and cultural differences emerged in English and French languages.

**Keywords:** Religious Translation, English, French, Bilingual Translators, Surah Al-kahf.

Introduction

Translation is considered as a project for transferring meaning from one language to another. It is a form of interlingual communication that involves a source language and a target language. Furthermore, translation is an art which requires appropriate knowledge of both source and target languages. In general, translating from Arabic to other languages such as European languages will need a systematic study of the differences between these languages as well as of their societies since there are certain terms that are culturally bound. There are actually many differences between Arab and European which include, among others cultural, historical and linguistic. On the other hand, and in accordance with my experience as a translator for many years, the researcher noticed that there are many problems encountering translators of the religious corpuses discourses in general and in the translation of the meanings of the Holy Quran in particular. So, the present research intends to explore these problems which are basically linguistic and partially cultural.

### Objectives of the Study

To pinpoint the challenges of religious translation between English and French in translating Surah of Al-Kahf is the main objective of this research article, besides to seek for the following:

- To investigate the difficulties in translating the Holy Quran into English.
- To investigate the difficulties in translating the Holy Quran into French.
- To find out the discrepancies when translating Surah Al-Kahf into English and French as a case study.

### Statement of the Problem

This article intends to investigate the problems encountering translators in translating Surah Al-Kahf as a case study. It will reveal the discrepancies between the English version and the French Translations, comparing the aspects of the two languages.

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. Are there any difficulties that face translators in translating Surah Al-Kahf into English and French?
2. What are the aspects of the English and French languages that are different?

**Hypothesis One:** There are difficulties that face translators in translating Surah Al-Kahf from English into French.

**Hypothesis Two:** These difficulties are due to different aspects related to both languages English and French one.

### Literature Review

Muslim scholars identify the Holy Quran as the literal word of God revealed to His messenger Muhammad by means of the Angel Gabriel in order to lead people out of the darkness of ignorance and polytheism to the light of guidance and monotheism. Moreover, Muslim scholars believe that the Quran was revealed in Arabic for instruction and challenge, and it was transmitted down to us from generation to generation, and established between the two covers of the Mushaf. Denffer (1989: 17) identifies the Quran as "The Word of God (Allah), sent down upon the last prophet Mohammed, through the Angel Gabriel, in its precise meaning and precise wording, transmitted to us by numerous persons, both verbally and in writing. It is inimitable and unique, protected by Alla from any corruption" (quoted in Al-Sahli 1996: 43). Hasanuddin (1996) identifies the Quran as "A collection of messages received by Prophet Muhammad (S) direct from Allah; which he delivered under divine direction, to those around him and through them to the entire humanity. The Book is guidance from Allah for the mankind. It contains revelations received by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) from Allah during a period of about 23 years".

The issue of the translation of the Quran started when the Quran was introduced to people whose mother tongue was not Arabic and when people who were not acquainted with Arabic accepted Islam. Ever since many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars discussed this subject carefully. They were concerned to establish whether the Quran is translatable from a linguistic point of view or not. Those who have tried to translate the Quran from its Arabic original have found it impossible to express the same wealth of ideas with a limited number of words in the new language. Indeed, some writers, recognizing this extreme difficulty, have refrained from calling their works the "translation of the Quran." Those scholars such as Pickthall, Irving and Arberry, after their deep experience of translation, have stressed the fact that the translation of the Quran is impossible.

Arberry (1957) in his introduction to his work of translating the Quran "The Koran Interpreted" stresses the fact that the eloquent and rhetoric language of the Quran cannot be rendered into any other language. He literally agrees with Pickthall (1930) who states that:

*"The Qur'an cannot be translated. That is the belief of old-fashioned Sheikhs and the view of the present writer. The Book here is rendered almost literary, and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the Glorious Qur'an, the inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy".*

Arberry concludes from his long experience of translation that the Quran is unarguably untranslatable.

Irving (1985: 27) states that:

"The Qur'an could be considered untranslatable because each time one returns to the Arabic text, he finds new meanings and fresh ways of interpreting."

He argues that it is impossible to find any language which is able to find equivalent expressions and meanings to the lofty language of the Quran. Concerning the meaning, Irving (1985: 30) claims that any translation made by a translator will be affected by the translator's thoughts. This means that God's word is manipulated and this must be prevented. Therefore, the only solution to the issue of conveying the meaning of the Quran is to interpret it into foreign languages.

Tibawi (1962) is one of those eminent Muslim scholars who strictly oppose any attempt to translate the Quran into other languages. He argues that Arabic is a very rich language; its vocabulary is concise and full of metaphor and no language can rival it in this sense. He states "It is unanimous that it is virtually impossible to translate Arabic into any language, still less to translate the Arabic of the Quran." Tibawi supports his thought by referring to the philologist Ibn Qutaibah (835), who asserts that the Arabic language is unique among languages and superior to the languages of all other nations, precisely because of the characteristics which distinguish the language of the Quran. He adds that Ibn Qutaibah states that "no translator is able to put it into any (other) language, in a manner similar to the translation of the Gospel from Syriac into Ethiopic and Greek, and similar also to the translation of the Torah and Psalms and all God's Books into Arabic, for (the languages of) the non-Arabs are not as rich as that of the Arabs in metaphor". Moreover, Tibawi, in his argument, depends on Al-Ghazali's (1072) verdict that bans the translation of the Quran.

Abdul-Raof (2001), a recent Muslim Quran translation scholar, supports Tibawi in his argument. He stresses the untranslatability of the Quran for numerous reasons. He states that Quranic discourse involves linguistic scenery characterized by a rainbow of syntactic, semantic, rhetorical and cultural features that are distinct from other types of Arabic discourse. He asserts that most of these features are alien to the linguistic norms of other languages. He gives shifting as an example. Abdul-Raof says that some verses of the Quran shift from the third person to second person and then to the first person. They also shift from plural to singular within a given person or make use of rhetorical questions. He gives the following verse as an example.

"And those who believe in Allah and work righteousness, He will admit to Gardens beneath which Rivers flow, to dwell therein for ever: Allah has indeed granted for them a most excellent Provision."  
(65: 11)

Abdul-Raof believes that a translation of these kinds of verses will confuse the translator and the reader alike because other languages do not accept these kinds of shifts. Therefore, identical style to that of the language of the Quran will not be achieved in the translation.

According to Muslim belief, the Quran was revealed universally to all nations around the globe and across time. As a result, Islam spread from Arab countries into the neighbouring regions where Arabic was not spoken. Therefore, Muslims felt that it was necessary to translate the meaning of the Quran for the benefit of those newly converted who did not understand Arabic in order to let them understand their religion. Salman Alfarisi was the first translator, rendering the first chapter into Farsi when new Persian converts asked him to translate some of the Quranic verses. This is permissible since the Prophet Muhammad did not reject it (Abou Sheishaa 2001).

### **Translation of the Meaning of the Holy Quran**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the need to translate the meaning of the Quran was debated seriously amongst Muslim scholars. Most of them called for the translation of the meaning of the Quran for several important reasons. These are:

- As Al-Maraghi (1936) states, the need to translate the Quran become pressing after it was noticed that many translations of the Quran were done by non-Muslims, whether missionaries or Orient lists and contained many mistakes, which in turn led to a misunderstanding of the meanings of the Quran. Al-Maraghi called for the making of a translation containing precise and adequate meanings of the Quran which would counteract the corrupt translations.
- Abou Sheishaa (2001) mentions that some sectarian movements within Islam or renegade groups outside the fold of Islam, such as the Qadianis, were active in translating the Quran into European languages to

proclaim their ideological uniqueness. He believes that these sectarian translations present a great danger of distorting the Quran. Therefore, he invited Muslim scholars to counter this danger by producing faithful translations in these European languages.

- It is necessary to spread the Islamic faith, as a universal message. Muslim scholars and preachers invited translations of the meaning of the Quran to be carried out into all tongues in order to give non-Muslims the opportunity to read and digest the Quran. By doing this, the translations of the meaning of the Quran would change or remove the corrupt thoughts which cultural conflict imperialism had introduced into the minds of Westerners.
- To give non-Arab Muslims the opportunity to understand the meaning of the Quran in their languages.

On account of its global importance, the Holy Quran has been translated into most of the major world languages. The first rendering into a western language was into Latin in 1143 and was done by an English scholar named Robertus Renensis. This version was published in 1543 in Basle in Switzerland. Later on, some Western translators rendered the Quran into their own languages by means of the Latin version. Unfortunately, these translations are full of mistakes and mistranslations due to the fact that they were translated from a non-Arabic text and for other reasons. English was the most important language among these languages. The first translation of the Quran into English was done by Alexander Ross in 1649, but this version was very weak because it was translated from the Latin version. In 1743 a translation of the Quran into English direct from Arabic was done by George Sale. This translation remained in extensive use by English readers for about 150 years.

It is a bright fact that the translation of a given corpus (texts, topics, terminology) is surely capable to introduce a new culture potentially independent from the source culture and the target culture as many scholars in the West did study and are still studying the relationship between translation and the culture of the SL (source language) and TL (Target Language).

Given that the translation is an act of interpretation, as previously mentioned, that necessarily produces and results in inadequacy. The results show that social situations may or may not uphold a translation as "standard" or "ideal", but by its nature, the translation being the linguistic expression of the translators remains to be creative, risky and forward-looking.

This part which represents a survey and an attempt to examine the existing translations of the Holy Quran is based on eight translations of the Holy Quran into French, starting with Du Ryer's translation (1647) and ending with King Fahd Society translation (1990).

### **Materials and Methods**

In this article, the researcher used a qualitative method. The goal of qualitative research is to describe the quality of the translation of Surah – Al-Kahf in English and French. Qualitative research can lead to conclusions about the quality of the translations. Features of translations will be compared, some are better than others; some have preserved more of the formal features of the original. Some are both formally and semantically freer. Taken all together the analyses provide a rich picture of the translation both in the interpretive range and its complex formal patterns. As a method, the researcher will analyze data that involve the textual comparison of a translation with its original: a translation comparison into different languages, namely, into English and French languages. Such topics can't deal with every possible aspect of the text, the focus on particular aspects.

"You might take a particular aspect of the source text such as a partial at the stylistic or syntactic feature. And examine the corresponding section", William (2002:58).

In order to engage in religious translation criticism, you will need in-depth knowledge of one or more of the source languages.

Major research questions concerning religious texts have to do with:

The enormous temporal and cultural gap for which these texts were written and the societies for which they have been translated. The tension between treating religious texts such as the holy Quran as a sacred. Text in which every word is holy.

"A different approach would be to compare different translations of particular sacred texts (e.g. the Quran) into one language. It would be important to focus on a particular aspect", Lewis (1881:183).

### Instrument

References to the two Quran Books that are used in this research are:

- 1- The Noble Quran – English Translation of the meanings and commentary – King Fahad Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran, Madinah K.S.A. By Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan.
- 2- Le Noble Coran et la traduction en langue française de ses sens-Complexe Roi Fahd pour l'impression du Noble Coran. Al- Madinah Al- Munawwarah – Royaume d' Arabie Saoudite.

### Procedure

The comparative style employed in this article has made it a natural consequence that it could display a number of differences mainly linguistic that exist between the two languages in question, English and French when translating the Holy Quran and specifically in the translation of Surah Al-Kahf, which is the case study of this research.

### Data Analysis

#### English Translation

Therefore **we covered up their sens, oh hearing** (causing them to go in deep sleep) in the cave for a number of years. (11)

#### French Translation

**Nous avons assourdi** leurs oreilles, dans la caverne, des années durant.

The meaning given in English is to cover their ears, while in French is to make them deaf. So the linguistic aspect difference here is semantic order or nature. In the same verse, the phrase is translated into English clearly and directly as a number of years. In French it is given expresses the idea of long duration. This type of discrepancy tends to be rather stylistic.

#### English Translation

**Then we raised them up** (from their sleep) that we might test which of the two parties was best at calculating the time period that they had tarried. (12)

#### French Translation

**Puis nous les avons réveillés** a fin de reconnaître lequel des deux partis [se disputant à leur sujet] a le mieux évalué la durée de leur séjour.

The above expression is translated into English to raise up (from their sleep). The French translation has chosen the word: réveiller which literally means to wake up. So the difference here is again semantic.

#### English Translation

"We narrate unto you (O Muhammad) their story with truth: Truly, they were young men who believed in their Lord (Allah), and **we increased them in guidance**". (13)

#### French Translation

Nous le donnons ici la vérité sur leur histoire: ce sont de jeunes gens qui ont cru à leur Seigneur et dont **Nous avons renforcé la foi**. (13)

The English translation here is clear and literal using the sentence [we increased them in guidance]. The French give other terms [Nous avons renforcé la foi]. Renforcer: literally means to reinforce to enhance. For: mean faith. So the problem here is semantic.

### Results

Thus, the trial of this study to identify the difficulties in the translation of the Holy Quran has resulted in the following aspects expressed otherwise as problems:

- Semantic problems
- Syntactic problems
- Cultural problems
- Lexical problems

Another important aspect that appears in this study resulting from the collected data and also from the questionnaire is the grammatical aspect. As it is well-known, that syntax is the system of grammatical rules and sentence structure, so syntactic problems have all to do with grammatical problems and complexities facing translators of the Holy Quran and particularly those of Surah Al-Kahf. The syntactic features are very important

to consider in translating Islamic texts in general and the Holy Quran in particular due to its delicate content and teachings for Muslims. Generally speaking, most English tenses do not exist in Arabic grammar and the same is valid for French. For example, English sentences are verbal in the sense that they should include the main verb each, whereas in Arabic, they are either verbal or nominal. Likewise, some modal auxiliaries have no grammatical equivalent.

Transliteration has proved to be a good solution for this problem and has appeared to be more utilized by English than by French which in itself largely clarifies the notion of the difference between the two languages.

### Discussion

In this research article, the analysis of the collected data depends on the stories as samples that were narrated in some ayahs of Surah Al-Kahf, the four known stories:

The first one is the story of the young men who escaped from their village by fear of being persecuted for their belief in Allah and their refuge in the cave from where came the name of the Surah. The second one is the story of the two men who possessed two neighbouring gardens. The third one is the story of Prophet Moses (Musa) and (Khidr), Allah's righteous slave. The Fourth story is that of Dhul-Qarnain.

Those parts selected from Surah Al-Kahf by comprehensive linguistic analysis manifesting the problems and difficulties arising in the translation of the Holy Quran in a comparison between English and French. The linguistic aspects which the researcher is going to explore are solely those that occur in the selected parts of Surah Al-Kahf. The data presentation will consist of (The selected verses of Surah Al-Kahf and their translation in English and French).

### Conclusion

The researcher in this study assumed that there are problems emerge from the translation of the Holy Quran into English and French. The researcher compares the translation of Surah Al-Kahf into English and French, the researcher used contrastive analysis as metrology in order to show the differences between the three languages when translating Surah Al-Kahf. Also, to increase the validity of the research, the researcher utilized a close-ended questionnaire to investigate the opinions of English-French translators about the discrepancies between the two languages and the original language of the Holy Quran. In accordance with the findings, the researcher provided recommendations for recovery. The researcher also gave suggestions for further research related to the field of study in general and to the title of the study.

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