An Investigation of some Micro Level Differences in the translation of Quran: A Comparative Study of two English Translations of Surat AL-Fajr (THE DAWN) by Mohsin Khan and Talal Itani at Semantic, Syntactic, and Stylistic levels

By
Dr. Othman A. O. Othman AL-Darraji
Lecturer at University of Benghazi, Department of English, EL-Marj Campus, Libya.

Othmandarraji81@gmail.com
Abstract

The present study is an attempt to perceive how the ‘Dawn Chapter’ was translated into English by two translators namely, Mohsin Khan, and Talal Itani (2009). First, the problems that were faced with those translators were of three categories: the semantic, the stylistic and syntactic translation errors and also, the approaches used by them were described. The researchers followed Chesterman’s translation approach (1997). This technique offers a new aspect for comparative text analysis in the field of translation and linguistics. Three strategies were used to compare the two translations: semantic, syntactic, and stylistic surface features. It was found out that most translation strategies adopted by Mohsin Khan were near to the original text, where he resorted to explain vague words between brackets. Itani, however, committed many semantic, stylistic, and syntactic errors as it will be seen in our analysis of data.

The study concludes that a proper translation for the Dawn Chapter was done by Mohsin Khan because it included elements of explanation, less repetition of words, and high syntactic structure which, of course, produced the semantic, syntactic, and stylistic value of the ST.

Keywords: Quran, Quranic verses, source text, target text, micro level(s).
1. Introduction

Translation is a procedure of substituting a given text in one source language by another target language. The source language (SL) is the language where the text needs translation; and the target language (TL) is the language into which the source text is to be transferred. This substitution varies from translator to translator, according to the translator’s ability of understanding the religious background of the religious texts, i.e., The Noble Quran. What is problematic here is that the sensitivity of the Quranic verses may be too heavy to lug on the shoulders of religious texts translators particularly between two unrelated languages such as Arabic and English. The point, which can be stressed here, is that this problem may be solved if translators digest not only the two languages, but also two lexical, syntactic, and stylistic features of these two languages. Zurkani (cited in Mazin Fawzi Ahmed (61:2006)) supports:

The Quranic text itself is so difficult that the exegesis plays a great role in rendering it. This being the case, translation as a device cannot replace the understanding of meaning especially if we take into account that Allah Almighty has three main aims behind revealing His Book: to be guidance for the humans and the jinn, to be a miracle supporting what Mohammed صلى الله عليه وسلم calls for, and for the Muslims to worship Allah by reciting His Holy Words.

Following Zurkani’s viewpoint regarding the difficulty of translating the Quran, it goes without saying that no one can provide a perfect translation for the Quran since it is the word of Allah, and translators’ actions, as human beings, remain limited as the understanding of the intended meaning of the Quran remains vague to humanity. Translators are required to learn the classic Arabic in order to understand the deep meanings of the Quranic verses.

Consequently, the translation of the Quran imposes very big challenge for them. Many attempts including Mohsin Khan and Talal Itani; have been made in the translation of the Quran. These translations; however, vary in structure and meaning. Structure here means the syntactic and stylistic surface features of the translated versions of the Quran; and meaning is the semantic connotation of the words of Quran where they may fail to produce the intended meaning of a given word in Quran. This, of course, may affect the English reader’s understanding of the Quran. Therefore, this study will be a comparative study between the two translations of the above mentioned translators in order to investigate the strategies used by them in terms of their surface features.
2. Objectives of the Study

The study will have the following objectives: to discover failures that have been made by these translators while translating the Quran; especially ‘The Dawn Chapter’. The study further attempts to promote a better understanding to the native speakers of English, to enable the application of micro level method to the translation of the Quran, to help translators to pick up the correct equivalence in the target language, English. Finally, to make recommendations under each compared translations in order to show translators and the students of translation the strength and weakness of these different translations when applied to the translation of ‘The Dawn Chapter’. In order to realise these objectives, the sample the ‘Dawn Chapter’ will be systematically explored and analysed to offer an improved translation solution, leading to the findings and results of this study.

3. Research Questions

The paper further attempts to answer the following questions: What problems did Mohsin Khan and Talal Itani encounter when translating Surat AL-Fajr, ‘The Dawn Chapter’ verses in terms of their micro level features? What kinds of strategies did they employ to render these verses into English? And to what extent can the micro levels communicate the intended meaning of these verses?

4. The Contribution of the study

The study will also have the following contributions: It will help translators to resolve the problems faced by Mohsin and Talal involved in rendering Arabic Quranic verses into English particularly at the surface features. Besides, it is this study’s purpose to demonstrate the difference between their translations in order to clarify to the translators the mistakes they made in order to contribute to render the Quran into English in the best way. The study is also designed to: contribute to the discourse analysis of Quran by giving a comparative study and analysis of the chosen two translations. It is also important to reduce the semantic, syntactic, and stylistic ambiguity of the Quran, mainly when they are read by Western readers. Last but not least, to promote the application of comparative study analysis to the theory of translation.

5. Review of the related literature

Many scholars highlighted some strategies and Quranic translation history in rendering the noble Quranic verses into English. Nassimi (2008:38-39) stresses that the sensitivity and the aesthetic nature of the Quran make it hard for the human translators to render them satisfactorily into another language because they could not maintain the miraculous nature of the Qur'an in the translation process. In this regard he claims:
the beauty and miraculous nature of the Qur’an is completely lost, as the very Words of Allah are replaced by human substitutions. The perfect choice of wordings, the syntax of the verse, the powerful rhythm of the passages, and the manners of eloquence displayed by the Arabic all are impacted and destroyed. All Qur’an scholars confirm that much is lost when the Qur’an is encountered in translation. For example, Akbar41 observes that no translation, however good it may be, can ever take the place of the original Qur’an, which is its Arabic text; for it is impossible to reproduce its matchless and enchanting style, highly emotive and fiery language, and forceful rhetoric. For him, it is difficult to transfer accurately into English every shade of meaning that is contained in the Arabic word of the Qur’an.

Pickthall (cited in Sadiq: 2010: 5) also confessed that Qur’an cannot be translated by human beings. Translators could not provide the same aesthetic wordings of Allah while they render them into their languages. Rather, they just attempt to give the surface meanings of the Quran. In this respect, he argues, “It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Qur’ân—and peradventure something of its charm in English. It can never take the place of the Qur’ân in Arabic, nor is it meant to do so”. Arthur J. Arberry 1955, a professor in a British university translated a book entitled, ‘The Quran Interpreted’. After the translation he claims that the Quran being a great work should not be rendered into any other language. Therefore, he resorted to explain the Quran into the target text rather than translating it. (Al–hilali and khan 1997). Yaqub (2014: 229) on his side argues that the translator of the Quran must be Arabic native speaker and has knowledge of the Arabic culture and tradition in order to render it appropriately. In this prospect he adds, “The art of translating the Quran, however, requires in addition to the above qualities, that the translator must be a native speaker of Arabic, or acquire its nativity, as well as a Muslim who acquired deep knowledge of Islamic history, culture and tradition.”

6. Problems at micro levels

6.1 Syntactic problems

According to Luraghi and Parodi (2008:1), syntax can be seen of as: “The architecture of sentences or the principles governing the way in which words and constructions are combined to form sentences”. syntactic difficulties can produce significant problems in the process of rendering between Arabic and English because the linguistic structures of these two languages are fully different from each other and the components of a sentence in the Arabic language often differ very significantly from the elements which
are in the English one in terms of sentence structure, clauses, prepositions, gender, numbers, etc. Darwish (2010:66) gives an example of the impact of these differences: “In a language such as Arabic, cohesion is generally achieved syntactically, using clear grammatical cohesive devices. English, on the other hand, relies typically on semantic relations to accomplish cohesion”. Darwish (ibid.:66) further notes that this has specific implications for the translator: “To achieve optimality in translation, the translator must learn to apply a variety of techniques in the translation process that take into account these differences” (Othman 2013).

6.2 Semantic problems

According to Newmark (1988a: 39): “Semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original”. One of the semantic problems that constitute translation problems is synonyms. Nilsen (1975:141) claims that strictly speaking, there are two kinds of synonymy: “One kind is transformational, which results from grammatical changes in the sentence. The other kind is lexical, which results from a use of different words”. In addition, Ghazala (1995) differentiates between two types of synonymy. Firstly, an absolute synonym, means that verbal items are completely equal in meaning. The second type, near or close synonyms, are words that are related to one another in meaning. Bell (1991:6) in his claim about synonymy maintains that absolute synonymy does not exist, even between words and expressions in the same language. Positively synonymy between source text and target text words can frequently be problematic to attain. Kussmaul (1995:56) follows the significance for translators of indicating lexical items: “To pick out the meaning of a polysemous word which fits into context is certainly the first step to a good translation. The next step would be finding an adequate equivalent”. As the above arguments reveals, choosing the accurate semantic equivalent according to context plays a vital role in postulating a appropriate equivalent for a word. However many translators may still struggle to produce an suitable equivalent word according to its context.

6.3 Stylistic problems

Ghazala (1995:201) strains the implication of style in translation as follows: “Style [needs] special attention and is regarded as a part and parcel of meaning: if we attend to it, we attend to meaning in full, but if we ignore it, we ignore one part of meaning”.

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Arabic language style can be affected by inspiration from English to Arabic. This inspiration can be divided into two kinds. First, is collected of direct calques in which one understands discoveries constituent by component translation into the TL of phrases and idioms from the SL. Secondly, is distributional changes, and because constructions like to those of English are preferred by the translator, this results in an general change of style. This is caused by a weighty volume of literal translation, when the translator selects from the existing structures in Arabic those constructions that are similar to the original. Thus the inexpert translator has a propensity to render verbs into verbs, and nouns into nouns which can cause an increase in the ratio of verbs and nouns.

The most important issue can be posed here in our research is ‘repetition’. It plays a vital role at a number of language levels, and is one of the important features of much Arabic rhetorical discourse. Dickins et al. (2002:112) accomplish: “As with lexical item repetition, it will be seen that English tends to go for variation in phrases, while Arabic frequently prefers repetition”. Though, since repetition is much less welcome in the English language, this aspect of style can cause translation problems for translators when they attempt to render Quran verses from Arabic into English.

The translators’ responsibility is to take accountability for creating a translation that sounds natural and easy for the target readers without mistreating the rules of style as Muhawi (2004: 80) underlines:

“For the translator the assumption of responsibility to an audience therefore connotes the production of a text that reads comfortably and sounds ‘natural’ without either violating the norms [...] as generally recognised within the target community or destroying the features that endow the original text with its particular quality.”

Mutawi’s point has much wider implications and translators should retain the stylistic features which would be predictable by Arabic or English readers as suitable (Othman 2013).

Having analysed some scholars’ viewpoints regarding semantic, syntactic, and stylistic problems, let us now discuss briefly some micro level problems that may encounter translators during the translation of Quran process. In terms of semantic problems, the translators of the Quran sometimes fail to produce the exact translation equivalence of
the origin. This may be because of that the Quran includes some aesthetic nature that may not be comprehended by them. According to Mazin's (2006) point of view, the semantic problems that translators of the Quran face may fall into two categories the first category is known to all translations. Languages lexicalize things inversely, and they vary in the cultural and social locations, among many other things. Secondly, on the other hand, is strange to the translation of the Quran itself. In addition, semantic problems that occur in the translation of the Quran can be resulted from the lack of equivalence. These terms have no direct counterpart in English, compelling the translator to convey them in a communicative manner. The following are some examples of these Islamic terms: taqwā (piety - تقوى ), kafr (disbelief – أفقر ), shīrk (associating other gods with God – شirk), haq (truth- حق ), ma'rūf (charity – معروف ), munkar (wrong – منكر ), ghaib (the unseen/unknown – غيب), zakāh (alms giving – زكاة), and tāwbah (repentance – توبة). The English translations of these terms only give approximate meanings. They do not convey the full semantic and liturgical scope of the Quranic terms Elimam, Cited in Ali, A. et al (2012). In terms of syntactic problems, the most complex problem regarding syntactic translation problems involves the usage of tenses. English has a large range of verbal tenses, while in Arabic there are two main aspects of a verb: complete or incomplete action. Arabic does not express the time of an action in exactly the same way that English does Arabic tenses are best regarded as altered aspects of observing an event in terms of an opposition between a stated fact (complete) and an event that is continuing or in preparation (incomplete). English has many tenses to express the past (simple past, present perfect, past perfect, and past perfect continuous) whereas Arabic has only the past simple tense to express all actions which occurred in the past. The fact that English has more syntactic categories for tenses than Arabic means that a degree of arrangement is required in order to match up the very formalised tense and feature structure strange to the respective languages. This divergence between the two languages can pose substantial challenges (Othman 2013). This will affect the translation process while rendering the Noble Quran into English, and we will see how the two translators deal with such linguistic disparities. Stylistic problems also cause a serious challenge for the translators of the Noble Quran. This problem can appear in ‘repetition’. In Arabic, repetition plays a vigorous part at the linguistic levels. It is an important feature in Arabic language and the Quran has a lot of repetition to assure something. Dickins et al. (2002:112) conclude: “As with lexical item repetition, it will be seen that English tends to go for variation in phrases, while Arabic frequently prefers repetition”. English, on the other hand, does not welcome repetition and advised to be avoided. Therefore, this kind may cause problems while rendering the noble Quran from Arabic into English as we are going to see in our analysis of data.

7. Methodology and Data Corpus:

The data of this study is a selection of some verses from the Chapter ‘The Dawn’.in order to compare them with two different translations. These two different translations were accomplished by Mohsin Khan (Available online at: http://www.noorehidayat.org); and Talal Itani (2009). In reality, Khan’s translation is more accurate and elegant than Itani’s. Khan’s translation is based on strong semantic meaning, which sometimes, is followed by a brief explanation between brackets in order to clarify the meaning of some vague words to the native speakers of English.
Itani, on the other hand, has expressed some weakness in terms of syntactic, semantic, and style as we are going to see in our analysis of the data. This research is conducted following Chesterman’s comparative translation approach (1997), where this method provides a new dimension for comparative text analysis in the field of both translation and linguistics. Three strategies will be used to compare the two translations: semantic, syntactic, and stylistic surface features.

7.1 Data Analysis:

A number of different translation strategies were used by the two translators, and this causes many different errors. One of the errors made by Talal is repetition. As it is known, repetition is preferable in Arabic language to provide assurance toward something; whereas in English it is not welcomed and advised to be avoided because it represents redundancy. Othman (2013: 204), “repetition in Arabic serves a number of purposes. It is used to contribute to the aesthetic qualities of a text and can serve as a rhetorical device. It is often incorporated into text as a means of asserting an opinion which forms part of an argument”. A clear example of this claim can be observed in verse number (1) of the Dawn Chapter, a translation provided by Itani

(والفجر وليال عشر)

In this verse, repetition is used as a stylistic device to stress the communication of the verse and is integral to it. However, a correspondingly repetitive structure is best avoided in the English translation since it gives it an inelegance and unnaturalness not present in the ST. However; Itani resorted to turn a blind eye on this. Typically, he opted to render the ST literally as:

By the daybreak.  
. And ten nights.  
. And the even and the odd.  
. And the night as it recedes. (p. 90).

By this translation, Itani tended to construct a target language sentence which followed the stylistic pattern of the Arabic original, therefore creating a form which seems dull and repetitious and has none of the literary flavour of the original text.

Translating this verse according to the rules of English discourse and dodging Arabic formal features can help significantly to carry the same effect as in the Arabic version. Mohsin found a solution which successfully rendered the meaning without repetition:
By the dawn; by the ten nights (i.e. the first ten days of the month of Dhul-Heejjah), (p. 1023)

In this situation evading the repetition of ‘and’ and substituting it with semi colon gives a much more reasonable upshot to the native reader of English.

Another issue can be posed here is, ‘semantic translation problems’. According to Abdul-Raof, (2004:93): “A semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the TL allow, the exact contextual meaning of the SL message”. Semantics, according to Saeed (2003:3), “is the study of meaning communicated through language”. An interesting point to note here is that Itani rendered some verses without taking into account if the intended meaning was communicated to native speakers of English or not. This seems to be caused by the fact that he resorted to a bilingual dictionary. In general terms, Itani’s performance in translation from Arabic, into English is low in accuracy. Consider the following verse:

ان رُکِی لیالیاً 

Itani rendered the Arabic, لیالیاً, as ‘lookout’. When translating the word Itani was confused as to which word to choose from his dictionary, which provided a series of possible English equivalents for لیالیاً. The approach adopted here was to use this as tool to carry the meaning of the Arabic term as it was too challenging to determine which was correct given the relatively limited English vocabulary. However, the appropriate choice was made by Khan, who rendered لیالیاً to ‘is ever watchful’ rather than the English word ‘lookout’ which can be applied to ‘imperative sentence’ or making orders in some way, but is rarely used in predicative sentences. This demonstrates the need for making use of context for the purposes of control. It is also worth noting here that some Quranic Arabic words often establish a foundation of misunderstanding for the Quran translators. Consequently, when a translator sees an Arabic used very rarely, he may resort to picking its meaning from the first word that appears in a bilingual dictionary. Let us take the following verse as an example:

فاَکْثروا فِیها الفساد 

The Arabic word, فِیها الفساد, has been translated into English by Itani as ‘spread’ and as ‘corruption’ whereas, Khan rendered فِیها الفساد into English as, ‘made’; and فِیها الفساد as, ‘mischief’. However, ‘mischief’ is clear which has impacted on the overall meaning. Nevertheless, Itani’s translation i.e ‘corruption’ could be used as a translation for فِیها الفساد because the corruption term is widely used by native English speakers. As noted previously translators should not depend entirely on bilingual dictionaries to translate, but need to take into account the target readership, as we have seen in Itani’s translation. In addition, the meaning that it is not preferable to use the term ‘spread’, which is Itan’s translation, as an equivalent to ‘فِیها الفساد’. A more
preferable translation for the term would be the translation of Khan, who render it as, ‘made therein much’. Therefore, the verse can thus be translated into English as:

**And made therein much corruption**

Consequently, neither of these translations made by them is clear which has impacted on the overall meaning. As noted previously and we can advise translators should not depend completely on bilingual dictionaries to translate, but need to take into account the target readership.

Another example of Itani’s inability in finding a target word because of his lack of understanding of the source language word. This can be found in his disappointment to offer a suitable translation of the words ‘مثفر عذاب’ in the verse:

**فسصب عليهم ربكم عذاب**

He resorted to using semantic term ’punishment’ which is inaccurate though capturing something of the sense of the ST. From his translation of ‘مثفر عذاب’, it seemed that he did not know this Arabic word. Translating ‘مثفر عذاب’ into English as ‘a severe torment’ is more acceptable. Therefore, an appropriate literal rendering of this verse rendered by Khan would be as follows:

**So your lord poured on them different kinds of severe torment**

Having discussed some linguistic and translation difference between Itani’s and Khan’s translations in terms of stylistic and semantic features, let us now discover some problems faced by the two translators in terms of syntactic problems. This part deals with errors that occur at the level of grammar. Analysis showed that translators experience main problems with some English syntactic rules, and hence fail to form some constructions properly. The focus here will be on tenses. it was discovered that both of them were still confused when translating tenses from Arabic into English, and similarly faced problems with translation of comparisons. They faced problems in their usage of tenses and perfect tenses structures. Through our analysis of Itani’s translations, it was found that he found it very hard to distinguish between tenses in a verse as it is shown in the following separate verses:

**المن تر كيف فعل ربك بعيد**
In the example of Itani was confused with the sentence structure, where he provided a translation and put the tenses into present perfect as follows:

**Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with Aad?**

Whereas Khan resorted to use the simple past as a solution to render this verse successfully into English as:

**Did you (O Mohammed (Peace be Upon Him)) not see (thought) how your Lord dealt with Ad (people)?**

It is unclear in this case if the usage of the present perfect or the simple past, both of which might have been possible in terms of syntax.

In the final example, the two translators appear to have attempted to use the singular past, ‘**was**’ as in Itani’s, ‘**The like of which was never created in the land**’; and the plural past, ‘**were**’ as in Khan’s,

‘**The like of which were not created in the land**’

Tense wise, this is perhaps understandable to use Khan’s tense, i.e plural past form ‘**were**’ because the Arabic verse reference to ‘**ذات العمال**’ which refers to plural. Consequently, Khan’s usage of the plural form would be more appropriate than Itani’s since the ‘**were**’ refers to ‘**more than one pillar**’. Hence the translation would be as follows:

**-The like of which were not created in the land?**

It is also worth to mention here that Itani’s translation is not correct exactly because he may use the singular past, ‘**was**’ in order not to refer to ‘**pillars**’, rather refers to the name ‘**Erum**’, which is a name of a city. Khan, on the other hand, used the plural past, ‘**were**’ in order to refer to the plural, ‘**pillars**’. This is of course a holy sacred verse and no one could guess the meanings of it because it is the word of Allah. For that reason, it is recommended that the translators of the Quran should pay much more attention on the
grammatical, semantic, and syntactic aspects of the verses in order to communicate their intended meaning to the English target readers accurately; and to keep the sacred value of these verses. Especially Islam these days face challenges from many different parts of the world because of extremists who attempt to provide a black face of Islam.

8. Conclusion

This study is an attempt to discover the micro level errors as related in the two different translations of Mohsin Khan, and Talal Itani in rendering a communicative translation to the native speakers of English. Translation is a very difficult procedure. The translator who is concerned with rendering the meaning will discover that the target language is completely different from the original text such as English and Arabic. Arabic language can accept a degree of repetition of some words in order to assure something; whereas English does not welcome repetition and considers it as dull and redundant. It has been deduced through our analysis of the data that Khan has avoided some repetitive words in his translation of the Dawn Chapter. In addition, he resorted to explain vague words sometimes to the target readers, English. It is also discovered that Itani did not take into account the context and seems that he randomly chose the meaning of the source text word from Arabic-English dictionary. This, of course, has led to a bad translation. In terms of syntactic level, both translators offer good job and there was a controversial issue regarding syntactic translation. This is because, there are more than one noun in a verse and in the next verse a verb to be, ‘was’ will appear so a translator will not know whether this verb to be refers to the singular noun in order to render it as , ‘was’ or refers to the plural one so the translation would be, ‘were’. This sensitivity and vagueness of the Quran cause a very big challenge for AL-Quran translators, where, only Allah knows the intended meanings of these verses.
References


