FOUR ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF AL-KAUTHAR SURA: A CRITIQUE

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Abstract: The main concern of this paper is to present a critical assessment of four English translations of the Quranic Sura AL-Kauthar so as to highlight some points of weakness and inaccuracy manifested in these different translations, and to see if any of which could convey in full the ideas expressed in the Arabic original. The assessment undertaken here is based on the assumption that the essence of translation lies in the preservation of meaning across the two languages (House, 1977: 25). Thus, in order to arrive at good translation, translators should take into account the linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects of the meaning intended. The process of translation becomes more complicated when one deals with a religious text, especially a Quranic text.

1. Introduction: Problems of Quranic Translation

Before embarking on the analysis of different translations of this Sura, two points should be made clear. First, as a literary masterpiece of a surpassing excellence, the Glorious Quran is difficult to render due to the fact that this Book is characterized by so many stylistic and rhetorical features, such as 'alliteration,' 'rhyme,' 'rhythm,' 'repetition,' 'parallelism' etc.—a case which often strikes the readership and makes it rather difficult to translate the Quranic text into English or any other language. Second, the Quranic words and symbols have been interpreted differently by different exegetes—a case which gives rise to markedly various renderings of the same Quranic concept. Thus, in order for translators to figure out precisely the meaning of Quranic words, they should be highly acquainted with exegetical works and commentaries of famous scholars.

As for the assessment of a translated text, there seem to be some criteria on which an assessment of translation quality is based, among which are fidelity, grammatically, acceptability, accuracy and intelligibility of the translated text. A good translation, in Foster's (1985:6) sense, is the one, which fulfills the same purpose in the new language as the original did.

Considering the four English renditions of the Quranic Sura AL-Kauthar (a Meccan Sura) made by Muslim and non-Muslim translators, one can expressly note that these translations reveal points of similarity and discrepancy at all levels (i.e., on the lexical, syntactic and stylistic levels).

2. The Critique

Starting with the title of this Sura, one can see that these four translations display some discrepancies of its rendition. All the translators are, to a greater extend, unfaithful in rendering الكوثر into "Abundance" or "The Abundance" since neither conveys the exact meaning of the original. The word 'abundance,' according to Websters Dictionary (1988), means an "ample quantity of something"—a sort of meaning which does not concide with what the symbol or label الكوثر denotes. In fact, الكوثر refers to a name of a river of fount in the heaven; therefore, it is better to transliterate it into AL-Kauthar and supplement the translation with a footnote, which makes its concept comprehensible to the receptor language reader. However, Y. Ali offers two renditions for الكوثر: one is a transliterated form, the other a translated one—a case which, I think, reflects his inconsistency in opting for the correct choice. He should have stuck to either.

The translators also varied in translating verse البسملة, especially الله and الرحمن الرحيم. The rendition of الله into God by Y. Ali, Arberry and Rodwell seems inaccurate, to a certain degree, in that it often reflects the translators' inclination towards Christian beliefs and traditions. The best equivalent for الله is the transliterated form "Allah" given by Pickthall—a case which shows his full understanding of the meaning of this name and its Islamic connotation. As for the translation of الرحمن الرحيم, the best equivalents for them are given by Y. Ali as 'most gracious,' and 'most merciful' respectively. Both refer to different aspects of Allah's attribute of mercy: Allah is the most who offers grace to His creatures and He is the most who bestows mercy in a bundant measure. Pickthall, on the the other hand, is inaccurare in rendering الرحمن as 'beneficent' since it means the state of being kind. So is Rodwell, who translates it as 'compassionate,' which gives the sense of 'someone's showing compassion.' In fact, the attribute الرحمن is one of the most problematic epithets in translation due to the fact that it conveys a variety of shades of meaning in the Quranic text.

However, the word, which has been translated similarly by all four translators, is رب whose equivalent is "Lord," which is rather limiting since the Arabic word carries with it the root meaning, "caring and sustaining" (Abdel Haleem, 2001: 17). It seems, however, that the translators do not or may not know that رب and الله express the same meaning in Islam i.e., they are near–synonyms; therefore, they should be rendered into الله and nothing else. This inaccuracy in translation is in fact a reflection of the effect of Christian beliefs on some translators. In addition, translators seem to try to imitate each other.

The verb وأنحر is another word which has been assigned various renditions: one is "sacrifice," the other is "slay the victims" given by Rodwell. The former is more accurate than the latter because Rodwell's use of victims distorts the image of the mode of slaughter practiced by Muslims. It is the slaughter of animals, which has a deep spiritual meaning, as it is a symbol of self-sacrifice. However, to make the meaning of the verb "sacrifice" more intelligible to the reader, the translator should have supplemented his/her translation with a footnote which explains the exact meaning of this Islamic ritual and its concern with the slaughter of animals.

As for the word شانئك, equivalents have been given—"hater" and "insulter." I think that the former is more accurate than the latter in that the word شأنئك refers to a person's indulgence of hatred against the Prophet Mohammed; the word "insulter" does not convey the meaning intended in this context since "to insult," according to Oxford student's dictionary (1990), is "to speak in a way that hurts or is intended to hurt a person's feeling."

The last word, which shows some disagreement among translators in its rendition, is الأبتر which is rendered as "cut off" by both Y. Ali and Arberry; "posterity" by Pickthall; and "be childless" by Rodwell. It seems that the last of these renditions is the most accurate one as it means a person without sons or children. Here, the infidels used to taunt the Prophet with the fact that he had no son or heir and therefore none would uphold after Him.

Furthermore, particles such as إن, which occurs in the first and third verses of the Sura, and فـ in the second verse are given different counterparts i.e., "so" and "therefore" for the latter, and "Lo," "surely," "truly" and "verily" for the former—a case which does not impair the meaning of the original. However, Pickthall's use of "Lo!" is unjustifiable; and Rodwell's use of two different words (i.e., "truly" and "verily") reflects his inconsistency in opting for the correct equivalent. Thus, Arberry's rendition is the most appropriate.

As far as the syntactic features of the translated text go, one can detect different uses of personal pronouns, relative pronouns, and verb forms or tenses. The translators seem inconsistent in using personal pronouns to the extent that they sometimes use old pronouns in one verse while suing modern pronouns in another. They should have stuck to the use of modern forms since the translated text is supposed to be read and understood by people who are not mostly acquainted with the language of Old English.

The use of the suitable relative pronoun is another point of controversy among the translators. Arberry's use of "that" is more accurate than Y. Ali's use of "who," or Rodwell's use of "whose" since "that" can be used with both animate and inanimate nouns. And since the context here refers to those people who hate the Prophet or to His enemies, it is more suitable to use "that" in lieu of "who" as an indicator of despising them.

As for the use of tenses in this Sura, it is obvious that all the translators are faithful in using the present perfect tense (have + pp.) in the first verse to stand for اعطيناك. This use indicates that Allah granted or gave His Prophet الكوثر and He is still giving Him that—a signal or an indicator of an action, beginning in the past, and still continuing at the present time. However, the translators vary in using the appropriate tense in the last verse i.e., "is" used by both Pickthal and Arberry; "will" by Y. Ali; and "shall" by Rodwell. It seems that the use of "shall" is the most fidel because it emphasizes the filfullment of a promise made by Allah to His Prophet that those who hate him will certainly be deprived of having sons.

Form a stylistic viewpoint, one can observe that the only device employed by Y. Ali but not the others is the so-called "inversion" which occurs in the first verse. The reason behind using this stylistic features is to put much emphasis or focus on the addressee (i.e., the Prophet), and to reinforce textual unity and coherence. In other words, inversion maintains that Almighty Allah has fulfilled His promise by having granted the river الكوثر to His Prophet and not to anyone else. Thus, Y. Ali's rendition runs as follows: "To thee have we granted the Fount." However, it is difficult for all the respective translators to maintain the musicality of the whole Sura since they can easily translate the content of the words but not their forms.

Finally, it can also be noted that translators vary in using punctuation marks to separate one verse from another. Y. Ali is, to a greater extent, fidel in using a full stop at the end of each verse since each verse forms a complete idea with a full meaning. The other translators are not so accurate and consistent in this respect in that they use both semicolons and full stops to close the first verse and the other verses respectively.

3. Conclusion

In the light of above assessment of the four English renditions of AL-Kauthar Sura, it has been revealed that

1. All the translators have not succeeded in rendering the inner meaning of this Sura faithfully; each rendition has its merits and demerits, and each can convey only a shade of the true, rich meaning of the Arabic original.
2. The inaccuracies manifested in some of the translations discussed are due to the translator's lack of linguistic knowledge of the Arabic language in general and that of the Glorious Quran in particular, where the words are well-chosen and rigorously placed.
3. To arrive at a good translation, translators should take into account the linguistic and non-linguistic factors since some words are culture-bound and have peculiar connotations.
4. Any translation of the Quran is no more than an approximation of the meaning of the Quran, but not the Quran itself.

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