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# Near Synonyms in the Glorious Quran: A Semantic Rhetorical Interlingual Perspective

**A Graduate Paper Submitted By**

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## Abstract

The study examines the interlingual transference of near synonyms as a rhetorical device in the Holy Quran. It aims to investigate the adequacy of translating selected near synonyms from the Holy Quran into English to identify the translation strategies adopted by an Arab Muslim translator and non-Arab non-Muslim translator. To achieve this objective, the study collates a corpus consisting of three near synonyms from the Holy Quran and their counterparts in the selected translations in English. The data were hand picked and the Relation by Contrast Approach to synonyms by Murphy (2003) is adopted in the analysis. The findings of the study show that there are differences in meaning between the selected synonymous words. These differences should be preserved in the act translation and these might cause a problem for translators. Also, the study reveals that the cultural and religious backgrounds of the translators have little effects on the translation accuracy. Hence, although, Ghali is an Arab Muslim translator, his translation was not accurate in transferring some of the intended rhetoric which Palmer succeeded in.

## 1.1 Introduction

Translation is normally perceived as the transference of meaning from the source language (SL) to the Target language (TL) by replacing equivalents between the SL and TL. The replacement process does not mean that languages are the same, but it implies that the intended meaning of the source text (ST) can be found in the target text (TT) (pym, 2014). However, this does not indicate that translation is as easy as it might appear at first glance because finding equivalents between two languages is sometimes difficult.

This is true because languages might differ in forms which are used to express different meaning (Bell, 1991). Also, languages mirror the culture of their users and, of course, cultures around the world vary in values, behavior, religion, etc. From this point of view, cultural and linguistic gaps emerge with the difficulty of finding equivalents "with the greatest possible overlap of situation" (Catford, 1965, P, 49) between two variant languages such as Arabic and English.

In addition to cultural and linguistic gaps, Newmark (1965) argues that translators might encounter semantic gaps because the meaning expressed in any language is "a network of relation "(p. 51). Thus, in translating a text, translators should be aware of these relations in both the SL and the TL so as to give accurate translation as possible.

One of the semantic relations is synonymy which generally denotes the sameness or the near sameness in meaning, although sameness of meaning is not absolute because synonymous words can not always be used

substitutionally in all situations (Yule, 2006). In this way, words with closely related meanings are called near synonyms, whereby they share the sameness in their superficial meaning and imply differences in their deep meaning.

The case of near synonyms is one of the concerns for translators, especially when near synonyms are used in a religious text. Translating religious texts is difficult because their words are selected carefully in a way that substituting the words inadequately results in distorting the sacred message. The Holy Quran is one of the religious texts which represents a real challenge for translators to transfer its meaning from Arabic into English.

The use of near synonyms with a rhetorical aim in the Holy Quran causes a difficulty due to the inability of distinguishing the nuances between the synonymous words that results in "misunderstanding the meaning of the Holy Quran" (Hassan, 2014, P. 166) particularly to readers with no knowledge of Arabic.

In light of this, the present study attempts to investigate the adequacy of translating three pairs of Quranic synonymous words from Arabic into English. It examines transference of the implied rhetoric within the selected pairs. Two translators of the Holy Quran are selected depending on their religious and cultural backgrounds; because these variables might have certain bearings on decisions made by translators. The aim is to identify the transition strategies adopted by each translator. For that aim the study consulted Arab Muslim exegeses for interpreting the selected verses.

## 1.2 Literature Review

It is affirmed by scholars in the field of translation that English translations of the Holy Quran are only a transference of the Quranic meaning and these versions can not replace the original source. One of the facts that translators should be aware of is the intended message of Quranic lexemes, not only the apparent meaning (Hassan, 2003, as cited in Hassan, 2014). Another thing is that the Holy Quran is inimitable because its language is unique (El-Hadary, 2008) which increases the challenge of accurately translating the Holy Quran.

Although translating Quranic near synonyms represents a difficulty for translators, in recent years, there has been an increasing amount of scholarly work which investigated the adequacy of translating near synonyms of the Holy Quran.

For instance, Abdullah (2010) used a context-analysis approach to investigate the appropriacy of translating the synonymous words "ghath" and "matar" in five English translations of the Holy Quran, namely, Arberry (1964), Ali (1984), Shakir (1983), Ali (1954), and Pickthall (1999). The findings of the study proved that Ali's (1954) and pickthall's (1999) translations are more appropriate than the other three translations. In spite of the detailed analysis in this study of the selected samples, the impact of the cultural and religious backgrounds on the translators' performance was not part of this study.

Other nine pairs of Quranic near synonyms were randomly selected by Al-Musawi (2015) for assessing the accuracy of five translations of the Holy Quran, namely, Ali (1934), Arberry (2003), Hilali & Khan (1996), Picktall (1996), and Shaker (2003). Al-Musawi used an equivalence-based

model of translation for his data analysis. The findings of this study showed that overtranslation is unavoidable in rendering religious texts.

Another study by Abdul-Ghafour, Awal, Zainudin and Aladdin (2017) used Relation by Contrast Approach as a framework for studying Quranic near synonyms. The findings of their study revealed that both translators Irving (2002) and Arberry (2003) misunderstood some Quranic words and their translations of the selected words were inaccurate.

A keen reading of the surveyed studies shows that although there is much literature following on the interlingual transference of near synonyms of Holy Quran, yet, up-to-date the near synonyms: al-atha:b / al-rijz, al-bathth / al-huzn, and al-julu:s / al-qu'u:d were little investigated in the field of semantics from a rhetorical interlingual perspective. Hence this study attempts to identify translation strategies adopted by an Arab Muslim translator and non-Arab non-Muslim translator so as to determine the successful translation that preserves the intended rhetoric of near synonyms in the Holy Quran when rendered into English.

## 2. Translation of Religious Texts.

Encyclopedia Britannica defines the word (religion) as relation between humans and what they believe in to be sacred, divine, or spiritual. On the other hand, the word (text) is defined as coherent syntactic units that are structured for rhetorical purposes (Werlich, 1976; Hatim & Mason, 1990).

In this respect, religious texts are the structured writings which include the beliefs of a religion and those texts are a guidance for the believers of the religion.

In the field of translation, translating a religious text is difficult because these texts present principles of religious beliefs which might be misunderstood in an inadequate translation. Also, religious texts mirror specific cultures and cultures vary around the world as previously mentioned. Thus, translation strategies for a religious text can be some of the strategies for cultural-specific items as proposed by Newmark (1988) and summarized by Elewa (2014).

1. Transference: it is the use of the original form of a word in the TT.
2. Naturalization: it is adopting the pronunciation of a word from the ST then putting a morphological form for the word in the TT.
3. Cultural equivalence: it is the use of an equivalent cultural word from TT with the same connotation of the ST word.
4. Functional equivalence: it is generalizing the ST word by finding a TT word with the same function.
5. Descriptive equivalence: it is using phrases in TT to explain the ST word.
6. Synonymy: it is using near equivalent form TT to translate a ST word.
7. Modulation: it is reproducing the ST message by the translator because of the difference in perspective between the ST and the TT.
8. Componential analysis: it is analyzing the meaning of a ST word then translating units of meaning to TT.

## 2.1 Rhetorics in English and Arabic

One of the definitions of rhetorics in English is given by Aristotle (n.d) as means of persuasion. Also, Conlely (1990) defines it as the art of discourse in which the addresser persuades, motivates, or informs the addressee. On the other hand, many Arab scholars defines Rhetorics such as Al-Aaskari (1992) and Al-Damashqi (1996). For example, Al-Aaskari (1992) defines it as communicating the meaning to the soul in the best way, while Al-Damashqi (1996) defines it as a match between the speech or the writing and the state of the addressee with fluency in vocabulary and sentences.

## 2.2 Near Synonyms as a Rhetorical Device

Synonyms are part of the Arabic rhetorics which refer to the preference of word on another for achieving semantic purposes which cannot be achieved by the abandoned word (Al-Damashqi, 1996). In addition, it is known that Arabic synonyms are not identical; they just share sameness in meaning with differences that can be distinguished depending on the context of the synonymous word (Bo-Sharib, 2016).

## 3. Methodology

This section is devoted to clarify the approach of this study, data collection and data analysis.

### 3.1 Data and Approach of the Study

The study is qualitative in nature as it attempts to investigate the translation behavior of an Arab Muslim translator (Ghali,2003) and non-Arab non-Muslim translator (Palmer, n.d) when rendering selected near synonyms from the Holy Quran into English. The aim is to examine

whether the linguistic and cultural /religious backgrounds of the translator have any effect on the accuracy of the translation.

### 3.2 Data collection

The data were hand picked by reading the Holy Quran and considering other studies which handled the translation of Quranic near synonyms but have not focused on the selected pairs, namely, al-atha:b / al-rijz, , al-julu:s / al-qu'u:d, and al-bathth / al-huzn. The first and the second pairs were selected because one of the synonymous words is a polysemous word, namely al-rijz and al-qu'u:d that can be interpreted into more than one meaning and this might be confusing. As for the third pair, it was selected because one of the words intensifies the meaning of the other word that might be misunderstood as the same meaning for both words.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of data is based on the Relation by Contrast-Synonymy Approach by Murphy (2003). In this approach, the focus is on the minimal differences between the synonymous words rather than focusing on the similarities.

The following steps were followed in data analysis: firstly, the Quranic verses and their counterparts in English are presented, whereby the words under discussion are underlined. Secondly, the selected verses are interpreted according to Arab Muslim exegeses namely, Al-Mhali and Al-Sayuti (2003), Al-Zamkhshary (1986), Al-Sabouni (1997), and Al-Shaya (1993). Thirdly, the nuances between the synonymous words in each pair are discussed based on the interpretations. Finally, the accuracy of each translation is determined according to the nuances and meaning of the

words in Arabic and English. Also, the effect of the cultural and religious backgrounds of the translators on the translation is discussed. For affirming the meaning of Arabic words and their counterparts in English, the study makes use of both dictionaries of Contemporary Arabic Language (<http://www.almaany.com>) and (Cambridge Online Dictionary (<https://dictionary.Cambridge.org>)).

#### 4. Discussion and Results

The section is devoted to present the interpretation of each selected word in order to show the nuances between the synonymous words and discuss their translation issues.

##### 4.1 Al-atha:b العذاب /Al-rijz الرجز

The word (al-atha:b) is mentioned in the Holy Quran 371times and in all verses it gives the same meaning. On the other hand, the word (al-rijz) is mentioned 9 times and it gives three related meanings depending on context.

( وَعَلَىٰ أَبْصَارِهِمْ غِشَاوَةٌ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ) (البقرة:٧)

- on their be-holdings (i.e. eyesights) is an envelopments. And for them is a tremendous torment (Ghali).
- and on their eyes is dimness, and for them is grievous woe (Palmer).

This verse is interpreted by Al-Mahali; Al-Sayuti (2003) as: for the disbelievers their will be an endless and great torment. Also, Al-Zamkhshary (1986) maintains that any enormous pain mentioned in the Holy Quran is torment (عذاب). Thus he considered that the torment mentioned in this verse will be great and only Almighty Allah knows its dimensions. Al-Sabouni (1997) just like Al-Mahali and Al-Sayuti (2003) describes the torment (عذاب) mentioned in this verse as being endless.

A. (فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِجْزًا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ) (الاعراف: ١٦٢)

A. ● So we sent (down) upon them a chastisement from the heaven.  
(Ghali)

- and we sent down upon them a plague from heaven. (Palmer)

B. (وَيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْزَ الشَّيْطَانِ) (الانفال: ١١)

B. ● And to put away from you the chastisement of Ash-Shaytant. (Ghali)

- and to take away from you the plague of Satan. (Palmer)

C. (وَالرُّجْزَ فَاهْجُرْ) (المدثر: ٥)

C. ● And so defilement forsake! (Ghali)

- And abomination Shun! (Palmer)

The word (al-rijz) in verse (A) is polysemous. The focus here is on the meaning which is interpreted by Al-Mahali; Al-Sayuti (2003) as plague which is torment for Moses's people who changed Allah's word. The same interpretation is found in Al-Zamkhshary (1986) and Al-Sabouni (1997). On the other hand, the same scholars interpreted the word (al-rijz) as a devilish insinuation in verse (B). While the same word in verse (C) is interpreted by Al-Mahali; Al-Sayuti (2003) and Al-Sabouni (1997) as a name of an idol. Al-Zamkhshary (1986) adds that Almighty Allah orders the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to keep on being away from the torment which results from worshipping idols.

### **Nuances between Al-athab and Al-rijz**

The interpretations of both Quranic words reveals that there are differences in the contextual meaning of the synonymous words (al-athab /al-rijz). (Al-athab) refers to torment of any type while (al-rijz) is a polysemous word which has three meanings:

- A. Torment because of plague.
- B. Torment because of devilish insinuation.
- C. Torment because of worshipping idols.

Thus, (al-atha:b) is a general reference to the torment, but (al-rijz) specifies the type of torment depending on the context in which the word (al-rijz) is used. Thus, the rhetoric of using each word will be distorted if they are interchangeably used.

### **Translation Issues**

As previously shown, there are differences in the meaning of the two synonymous words (al-atha:b / al-rijz) makes using them interchangeably distort the Quranic rhetoric which is intended in each word. Ghali seems to distinguish between (al-atha:b / al-rijz) because he used different words to render them. He rendered (al-atha:b) accurately in the selected verse, but the rendition of (al-rijz) in all the selected verses (A, B, C) was inaccurate and missed the shades of meaning. On the other hand, Palmer's rendition of (al-atha:b / al-rijz B, C) did not reflect the shades of meaning intended in the ST. Yet, palmer rendered (al-rijz A) accurately.

In this way, the cultural and religious backgrounds did not play an effective role in Ghali's and Palmer's translation of the two words (al-atha:b / al-rijz). As mentioned above, Ghali missed the meaning of (al-rijz) which is translated accurately by Palmer in verse (A). The following definitions determine the meaning of the Arabic words and their counterparts in the selected English versions of the Holy Quran.

Al-atha:b : physical or psychological pain which is hard to be borne.

Torment: great mental suffering and unhappiness, or great physical pain.

Woe : extreme sadness.

Al-rijz : torment and punishment.

- In verse (A) torment because of plague.

Chastisement: chastise: to criticize someone severely.

Plague: to cause worry pain or difficulty to someone; or it is a name of disease.

- In verse (B) the same English words of verse (A) are used to render (al-rizj) in verse (B) while the intended meaning in the ST is devilish insinuation.

- In verse (C) torment because of worshipping idols.

Defilement: defile: to spoil the beauty.

Abomination: something disgusting.

## 4.2 Al-bathth / الحزن / البث

The word (al-bathth) as a synonymous word for (al-huzn) is mentioned only in the next verse in the Holy Quran.

(قَالَ إِنَّمَا أَشْكُو بَثِّي وَحُزْنِي إِلَى اللَّهِ) (يوسف: ٨٦)

- He said, "Surely I complain of my anguish and my grief to Almighty Allah". (Ghali)
- Said he, I only complain of my emotion and my grief to God. (Palmer)

In this verse, the prophet Jacob tells that he only complains to Almighty Allah of his sadness. The two words (al-bathth / al-huzn) are used in this verse to express the meaning of sadness, but these words are not identical in their meaning. According to Al-Zamkhshary (1986), Al-Sabouni (1997), Al-Mahali and Al-Sayuti(2003) the word (bathth بث) in this verse refers to extreme sadness which can not be borne or hidden, that, people tend to tell others about it, while the word (huzn حزن) is sadness or unhappiness that is less in its effects compared with the word (bathth بث).

## Nuances between Al-bathth and Al-huzn

It is obvious from the interpretations of the selected verse that the words (al-bathth / al-huzn) shared the intended meaning of sadness, but they are not identical in meaning. The minimal difference between the two words makes it difficult to use only one of them to express the intended meaning of sadness in two levels; the first is normal sadness (حزن) while the second is extreme sadness (البيث).

## Translation Issues

Both Ghali and Palmer distinguished the difference between the two words (al-bathth and al-huzn) in their translations, but it is Ghali's translation of the word (al-bath) the closer translation to the ST. Ghali used the word (anguish) to translate (al-bathth) while Palmer used (emotion) which doesn't reflect the intended meaning of the ST. On the other hand, both translators rendered the word (al-huzn) accurately using (grief). Again as in the first synonymous pair, the cultural and religious background of translators did not affect the translation of (al-bathth and al-huzn). Ghali's translation which is closer to the ST did not reflect all shades of meaning of the word (al-bathth). The definition of Arabic words and their counterparts in English:

Bathth (بيث): the extremest sadness or illness that cannot be endured so people talk about it to others.

Anguish: extreme unhappiness caused by physical or mental suffering.

Emotion: a strong feeling such as love or anger, or strong feeling in general.

huzn (حزن): against happiness, a state of inner grief and melancholy.

grief: very great sadness, especially at the death of someone.

#### 4.3 Al-julu:s الجلوس/ Al-qu'u:d القعود

The word (al-julu:s) is mentioned only once in the Holy Quran as a plural noun (المجالس) while the word (al-qu'u:d) is mentioned 31 times with different forms and this section is devoted to discuss the plural noun of the word (al-qu'u:d) which is mentioned 3 times in the Holy Quran.

(يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ تَفَسَّحُوا فِي الْمَجَالِسِ فَافْسَحُوا) (المجادلة: ١١)

- O you who have believed when it is said to you "make room for yourselves in the assemblies" then make room (Ghali).
- O yei who believed I when it is said to you "make room in your assemblies "then make room (Plamer).

In the verse under consideration, an order to all Muslims that they must make place for one another in their assemblies with the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (Al-Mahali; Al-Sayuti, 2003). Al-Sabouni (1997) adds that this order increases harmony and love between Muslims. Asserting the previous interpretations, Al-Zamkhshary (1986) states that the word (المجالس) refers to the prophet's assemblies where Muslims used to gather in to listen their prophet.

A. (وإِذْ يَرْفَعُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ الْقَوَاعِدَ مِنَ الْبَيْتِ وَإِسْمَاعِيلُ) (البقرة: ١٢٧)

- A. ● And so Ibrahim raised up the foundations of the home and Shuayb (with him) (Ghali).
- And when Abraham raised up the foundations of the House with Ishmael (Palmer).

B. (وَ الْقَوَاعِدُ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ اللَّاتِي لَا يَرْجُونَ نِكَاحًا) (النور: ٦٥)

- B. ● And women sitting (advanced in years) who do not hope being married (Ghali).
- And those women who have stopped (child-bearing), who do not have for a match (Palmer).

The word (al-qu'u:d) as a plural noun (القواعد) is mentioned with two related meanings in the Holy Quran. Verse (A) tells the story of rebuilding the Kabaa by the prophet Abraham and Ismael. The two prophets built over the foundations which already existed before them (Al-Sayuti, (2003); Al-Sabouni (1997). Al-Zamkhshary (1986) asserts that raising the foundation means to build over it.

On the other hand, verse (B) denotes the right which is given to idle women, who are old in age, stopped child-bearing and not willing to get marriage, to take off their clothes within their houses without revealing their adornments (Al-Mahali, Al-Sayuti, 2003 ; Al-Sabouni, 1997; Al-Zamkhshary, (1986). The word (القواعد) in verse (B) refers to women who sit at home for a long period of time because of old age, while the same word in verse (A) refers to the foundations of the Kabaa.

### **Nuances between Al-julu:s and Al-qu'u:d**

Both of the words under consideration share the meaning of sitting in general, but there are subtle differences between them. Al-shaya (1993). States that the word (الجلوس) indicates sitting for a short time or a change from a low state to a high state. While the word (القعود) indicates stability in sitting referring to a long period of time or a change from high to low state. Thus, the Quranic rhetoric can be understood for the selected (المجالس) in verse (A) to mean sitting for a short time with the prophet, while the word (القواعد) is selected in the other two verses to mean foundations in verse (A) and to mean idle women, who sit for a long time in verse (B).

### **Translation Issues**

According to the contextual analysis the two synonymous words and the definitions of each word, it seems that both translators, Ghali and Palmer, succeeded in rendering (المجالس) into assemblies and (القواعد) in

verse (A) into (foundations). As for verse (B), although the two translation used more than one word to render the word (القواعد) but their rendition did not reflect all shades of meaning of the ST. Ghali did not mention the stop of child-bearing and Palmer did not mention sitting. Thus, in this pair (Al-julu:s / Al-qu'u:d) also, cultural and religious background of the translators did not effect their translations. The definitions of the Arabic words and their counterparts in English:

المجالس : It is a plural noun from the word (يجلس) that means to sit for a short time.

assemblies: plural of assembly: a group of people especially one gathered regularly for a particular purpose.

القواعد : it is plural noun from the word (يقعد) which has three meanings :sitting for a long time, change from high to low, or the foundation or rule of something.

foundation: the structure below the surface of the ground which supports a building.

## Conclusions

The study concludes that there are minimal differences in meaning between the selected Quranic synonymous pairs; and using them interchangeably distort the Quranic rhetoric. As for the cultural and religious backgrounds of the translators, these have little effects on the translation behavior when rendering Quranic near synonyms. As revealed in the previous section, Ghali as an Arab Muslim translator missed some shades of meaning of the Quranic near synonyms which are accurately translated by non-Arab non-Muslim translator, Palmer (n.d).

The inaccuracy of Ghali's translation might be caused by lack of proficiency in the English language. On the other hand, Palmer's inaccuracy in translating some of the selected samples might be due to not consulting enough exegetical works. In addition, Ghali's strategy in translating the Holy Quran was a "differentiation between

synonyms"(Ghali, 2003, p.5). While Palmer's strategy was literal translation (Palmer, n.d).

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