

PROBLEMS OF INTERCULTURAL TRANSLATION

1. Introduction

When one is translating over great distances of time or culture, many of the general problems of translation present themselves with increased urgency, and it becomes imperative to devise specific principles and methods for their solution. It may therefore prove fruitful to discuss and attempt a solution to some of these problems in the perspective of one such translation. The work on translation which forms the background to this article was done at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. The text chosen for translation is an Urdu book on Islam entitled *Âîna-e-kamâlât-e-Islâm* (A Mirror of the Excellences of Islam), first published in India 1892¹. As quotations will bear out, the text is tinged with a strong mysticism that occasionally even makes comprehending the original a difficult task.

In this short article I shall concentrate on three problems for which special solutions will have to be worked out if the translation of the kind of text we are dealing with is to be readable and make sense as a semblance of the original. the problem of dealing with foreign (theological) terminology has been repeatedly discussed in the context of Biblical translation. Still it may be useful to try and distinguish between a set of different approaches. The problem of divergent literary norms has a number of different aspects of which I will discuss only two: the purely technical question of sectioning and re-arranging the text in units with which the target reader can cope, and the highly intricate problem of variance in the conception of rhetorical devices.

2. Terminology

Quite often when translating prose which is neither scientific nor fictional one is faced

¹ This translation was made from the collected works of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Rûhânî Khazâ'în*, second imprint, London, Mubarak Ahmad Saqi, 1984-86, vol. 5 pp. 57-88 & 124-143.

with the problem of translating terms of a semi-technical nature. The terms are used to designate a specific concept in the text, but can hardly be called technical terms since they are not used in a specialised sense, they are not exact, universally recognized definitions. The difficult task here is not only to find or coin terms with similar denotations in the target language, but just as much to explicate the full meaning of a term to the target reader, since a mere literal translation, or the use of an established term in the target language, may well obscure what the original term helped clarify.

The key-phrase in the main chapter of the book chosen for discussion is one such semi-technical term. Though it is variously coined in Urdu (*haqîqat-e-islâm*, *islâm ki haqîqat*, *dîn-e-islâm ki haqîqat* and when repeated *is haqîqat*), it is clearly used for one concept only. The main chapter of the book opens with the following sentence:

It is absolutely necessary before we turn our attention to other points, to establish what *dîn-e-islâm ki haqîqat* (the religion of Islam's reality) is, by what means one can attain to this *haqîqat* (reality), and what the results are of abiding by this *haqîqat* (reality). (p. 57)

When discussing how to render a term like this into a western language, it may be useful to distinguish between seven different approaches to the task.

2.1 *Translation according to context.*

If a word or expression admits of more than one rendering, it may be the least demanding way out for the translator to use varying renderings depending on the context. If he is working hurriedly, he may not even realise that a particular expression is used at various places to denote the same, specific concept. And one word may indeed be used in the original text in more than one meaning²; or it could be used loosely for one such meaning

² According to *A Dictionary of Urdu, classical Hindi and English* the word *haqîqat* may thus be rendered: 'Essence, essential property or quality; truth, reality, fact, true or real nature or state or

only, but without designating a concept of primary significance in the text. From the quotation above, however, the key function of the phrase becomes evident, and it would thus not be acceptable to camouflage its reappearance further into the text by rendering it with different English words at different places in the text. It is also clear from the quotation that none of the dictionary translations would fit in this context.

2.2 *Explanatory translation*

The term could be translated with a longer phrase which explains its meaning. For instance ‘It is first imperative to establish what the fundamental nature of the religion of Islam is...’. In the present case where the term is used repeatedly this solution is not workable as the repetition of a long phrase would become tedious and result in a number of cumbersome sentences. If, on the other hand, such a translation was used only at the first occurrence, the term would not be recognizable later in the text.

2.3 *Letting the text define the term*

This can be done either by transliterating the term rather than translating it (which would totally obscure the introductory passage), or by giving a bogus translation, that is, a translation which does not have a clear meaning in English. Thus ‘the reality of Islam’ could be used in English for *haqîqat-e-islâm*. However, a phrase like ‘what is the reality of Islam’ could be taken to mean ‘in what form does Islam actually exist’³.

Making a bogus translation is often the easiest solution for the translator—and it may even be acceptable, as long as the context makes the meaning clear. In the present case,

circumstances or facts, gist, pith; rightness, sincerity; account, narration, relation, story, state, condition, explanation. p. 479.

³ This is, nevertheless, the solution adopted by Sir Zafrullah Khan in his translation of this excerpt in *The Essence of Islam*: ‘First of all it is necessary to set out what is the reality of Islam, what are the means of arriving at that reality and what are the fruits of following that reality.’ p. 13.

however, the text is in itself very demanding, and the continuous reappearance of a phrase, the meaning of which is not clear, would make the text wholly unintelligible.

2.4 *Explanation in a footnote*

A term which is new to the target language may be best explained in a footnote, especially if a long and complicated explanation is required. This may be useful whether the term is transliterated or translated in the main body of the text.

2.5 *Using an established translation*

This option does not exist in the present case and is often best avoided when translating between cultures, as both the connotations and the denotations of such translations may be wrong. As an example it may be mentioned that the sufi term *ma'rifat* is often rendered as *gnosis*. The Greek word, however, implies intuitive knowledge. Spencer Trimingham has given a more precise description of the Islamic term when he explains it in contradistinction to the Greek term as a more conscious *perception of God* (Trimingham, 1971 : 147).

2.6 *Translation according to a definition in the text*

In the present case, the term is actually defined in the text, albeit rather casually in a subordinate clause some four pages into the chapter, where we read, 'The devotion of one's life to the cause of God, which is *haqîqat-e-islâm*, has two aspects...'. *haqîqat-e-islâm* thus means the realization of Islam in the life of the individual, and it can be translated 'the realization (in practice) of Islam'.

In accordance with this, I propose the introductory passage translated thus:

It is absolutely necessary before we turn our attention to other matters, to

establish three points; firstly what is implied by the realization in practice of Islam, secondly by what means can one attain to this realization, and lastly what are the results of doing so... (p. 57)

2.7 *Use of established target language expressions*

For the sake of completeness a seventh possibility (and pitfall) in the translation of terms should be mentioned: the use of established target language expressions. Thus the text under discussion uses the Urdu phrase *na'e sire us ko paidâ kiyâ geyâ*, which could be translated 'he has been born again'. But as the expression 'born again' has quite clear connotations in the Christian culture—connotations which are decidedly different from what is intended in this context—it is here necessary to make another choice of words; and so the passage in question could read:

In this final station man feels as if he had been cleansed in the purest waters, freed from every particle of selfishness, and then been born anew. (p. 71)

3. **Length and structure of sentences**

Although the text under discussion bears evidence of western influence in layout, lexicon and contents⁴, the principles governing the arrangement rest solidly in the tradition of Perso-Islamic prose. Though there is regular indentation of paragraphs in some section of the book, one may read on for many pages in other parts of the book without being given the respite of a single new paragraph. Similarly a few words (from 2 to more than 50) are written in the margin on most pages in the first part of the book, serving as section headings, whereas there are other hundreds of pages with no such aid to the reader. Most baffling to the target reader are footnotes the length of a full chapter (running on for as much as 140 pages). The

⁴ Cf. English borrowing such as *necarî*: naturalist, materialist.

target reader may easily be helped over a problem like this if overlong footnotes are arranged as separate chapters. Also the main body of the book can be arranged in chapters, and lengthy chunks of text could be divided into paragraphs.

The biggest obstacle to the reader, however, remains the length of sentences. To a large extent this problem is merely a stylistic feature which is characteristic of Islamic literatures because the word *wa* (and, or) was regularly used in classical Arabic to separate (and at the same time join together) main clauses. When the Urdu word for ‘and’ occurs between main clauses it may simply be replaced by a full stop in translation. Occasionally an ‘And’ may be retained alongside the punctuation. Likewise a number of other conjunctions can be supplemented with a full stop; thus the word *nîz* may be rendered ‘Moreover’, and the word *ya’ni*, which signifies that the sentence before and after the conjunction express the same point, may be rendered with a colon or with a full stop and a phrase like ‘In other words, or ‘That is to say’. For instance:

The last part of the verse means that Allah gives rightful rewards to those whose purity of faith and conduct is based on this love for God and whose good deeds spring from this innate zeal; they do not fear nor do they grieve. That is to say, they have attained salvation. (p. 58)

3.1 *Rearranging phrases*

The purely mechanical changes illustrated thus far reflect simple technical differences between the languages and do not represent semantic changes. A greater challenge is posed to the translator by long sentences full of repetitious detail. Omitting a part of such a sentence would amount to making semantic changes—however insignificant these may be. Hence it is necessary to work out principles for the retention of all the elements in such sentences. The only way to make a sentence of this kind readable in English—without eliminating elements of it—is to place all syntactically important phrases early in the sentence, and leave lengthy specification till the end. This has been done in the following passage

(which still does not make easy reading in spite of the fact that it is only the second half of a long sentence in the original Urdu):

A person claiming to be a Muslim should prove that just as a person's limbs are subordinate to him, everything pertaining to him is subordinate to almighty God, including his hands and feet and heart and mind, his reason and his understanding, his anger and his compassion, his meekness and his knowledge, all his physical and spiritual faculties, his honour and his property, his comfort and his delight, and whatever pertains to him from the top of his head to the soles of his feet, whether manifest or hidden, together with his motives, his fears, and his passions. (p. 59)

For comparison the exceedingly cumbersome original structure is reproduced below:

A person claiming to be a Muslim should prove that his hands and feet and heart and mind, his reason and his understanding, his anger and his compassion, his meekness and his knowledge, all his physical and spiritual faculties, his honour and his property, his comfort and his delight, and whatever pertains to him from the top of his head to the soles of his feet, whether manifest or hidden, together with his motives, his fears, and his passions are subordinate to almighty God, in the same way as a person's limbs are subordinate to him.

3.2 *Forming independent sentences*

Some sentences in the original text are lengthy because the parataxis so characteristic of Urdu allows of longer and looser structures than one would find in English. The following conditional clause thus starts with a 'When', and after nearly a page (describing this 'when' in clauses strung together by 'and') it sums up: 'when all this happens, then...'. This

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construction would be unreadable in English, and it is therefore necessary to make a separate sentence of the first part of the structure. This sentence may then be subdivided into a series of independent sentences. The original structure of the sentence under discussion was:

When state A is fully consolidated—which is characterised by 1-9—then one should rejoice for this is equivalent to state B.

In the following extract this has been split into two parts, the first of which admits of further division into separate clauses:

When state A is fully consolidated, 1-9 will happen. When this happens, one should rejoice for this is equivalent to state B.

The translation of this sentence will then read as follows:

When this state of subsistence in God is fully established, and it has penetrated every fibre of the spiritual wayfarer and become part of his being, then a light is seen descending from heaven which removes every barrier and fosters a new, sweet and delightful love. The heart feels the same contentment and delight as when meeting and embracing a dearly loved friend after a long separation. While standing or sitting, asleep or awake, the blessed, delightful, and auspicious words of God begin to descend like a cool and fragrant breeze from a rose-garden which begins to blow in the morning, bringing intoxication and delight. Man is so drawn towards God that he cannot live without dwelling in love and adoring contemplation of Him. He is not merely ready to sacrifice property, life, honour, children and all that he possesses—it has already been sacrificed in his heart of hearts. He is drawn by such an overwhelming attraction that he does not comprehend what is happening. An effulgence

spreads within as profusely as if the sun had risen. He witnesses rivers of sincerity, love and gratitude flowing with great force within him. Every moment he feels as if God has descended on his heart. When one experiences this state with all its characteristics, one should rejoice and give thanks to the True Beloved for this is the final station, which has been called meeting with God. (pp. 70f)

4. Rhetorical devices

When translating across a cultural gap, seemingly small and innocent rhetorical devices may take on great significance. For instance figures of speech, such as understatement or exaggeration, may have a diametrically opposite effect on the target reader than they had on the original reader. Certain phrases which are conventional and therefore inconspicuous in the original (e.g., *‘âjiz* ‘this humble person’), may well stand out in a translation as ingratiating (the English word ‘I’ instead being a better equivalent).

As even the approach to this problem is determined by the aim of the translation, it is not possible to make a simple formula for its solution: if the text is to be appreciated as an exotic piece of writing, a direct translation is what is called for⁵, if it is to be seen as a historical document, one may try to find target language equivalents for the original expressions; but if the text is held to have enduring relevance or to contain a universal message (cf. Biblical texts), the translator is faced with the dilemmas of dynamic translation.

Probably the most distracting rhetorical feature in the book chosen for translation is the frequent direct and indirect appeals to the reader’s ‘sound judgement’. Most frequent are references to *‘aql-e-salîm* (e.g. ‘the sound mind will conclude that...). Modern readers are so used to being trusted to draw their own conclusions that such appeals are likely to land them in contrariness, whereas to the original reader phrases of this kind simply served as appeals to unbiased reasoning. The most radical approach to the problem would be to omit

⁵ In such a case a phrase like ‘May I be sacrificed for you’ may well serve as a standard greeting in the translation.

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all such appeals. This can be defended, as their main purpose in the original text was to show that the writer considered his exposition to be based on reason, not merely on scriptural authority, a premise which is today normally taken for granted if nothing is said to the contrary. Another, less drastic approach would be to de-personalize the appeals: instead of 'if you think about this, it will become clear to you that...' one may choose 'on reflection, it becomes clear that...', and instead of using 'the sound mind' for '*aql-e-salîm*' one may choose the more abstract and general word 'reason'.

Also the tone in polemics may change radically. Thus the book under discussion was a relatively amicable piece of writing in its original context, but in a contemporary western translation it may easily read as a malevolent and hostile attack on all people belonging to other religions.

Though it may be difficult to suggest approaches to this set of problems, a discussion of these problems is urgently required amongst translators as the need for intercultural understanding continues to grow. The intricacy of the whole issue should only make it a more interesting challenge.

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