

The Translation of Euphemisms for Genitals in the Quran

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ABSTRACT: The Quran is looked upon as the holiest and most sacred book in Islam. The issue of its translation continues to generate debate as to whether or not it is translatable. This paper investigates the translation from Arabic into English across three different translations of euphemisms for genitals in the Quran. The study consists of four different euphemisms for genitals within the Holy Quran. The paper aims to establish the degree of accuracy in terms of the meaning of the three translations compared to the source text. It also aims to establish the reasons behind any inaccuracies in these translations, and whether or not any such inaccuracy was a result of the translation approach adopted or a result of an inadequate understanding of the Quranic euphemism. The application of the theoretical framework used in this study was to justify the use of a number of references for the purpose of analysis. The three translations examined in this study are the English translations by Khan and Al-Hilali, Abdel Haleem, and Arberry.

KEYWORDS: Translation, Euphemism, Quran

Introduction

Sacred texts of any religion tend to give guidance to the followers of that religion. Therefore, they play a vital role in the lives of devoted believers. Some followers only have access to the translated version of the sacred text which makes it important for such translations to show a very high level of equivalence. The translation of sacred texts such as the Quran will always pose difficulty for translators. Nonetheless, the idea of translating the Quran has led to many debates as to whether or not the Quran is actually translatable. When we focus on specific linguistic elements of the Quran such as euphemisms and make a comparison between different available translations we find many differences in the approaches, strategies, and techniques used by the translators. According to (Rahimi and Sharagard 2006, 36): "*Euphemisms are words and expressions used to soften or mitigate the reality of the ideas transmitted to an audience*". The use of euphemisms as a linguistic tool in different cultures and languages is evident and common. To investigate euphemisms linguistically, the researcher, according to (Al Barakati 2013) needs to study the linguistic situation which exists or the linguistic features which have resulted in the formation of such euphemisms. Euphemism is a common feature of Quranic discourse. This paper aims to study the translation of four euphemisms for genitals in the Quran, by comparing three English translations.

Understanding euphemisms

A euphemism is an important and common aspect in many languages and cultures. It is used to soften the reality of certain subjects such as sex, death, sickness and other potentially distressing topics. It can also be used to save face and avoid awkwardness regarding some taboos or sensitive subjects that exist in some cultures. (Baker 2011, 245) is

of the opinion that cultures have different rules regarding "polite behaviour". In addition, they have different approaches regarding taboo and sensitive subjects.

According to (Alharbi and Madini 2019, 119) Arabic euphemisms consist of three main elements: "The first one is the euphemistic expression, the second one is the original expression, and the last one is the context of the situation".

Data selection and methods

The three translations selected in this study are the English translations by (Khan and Al-Hilali 2011), (Abdel Haleem 2010) and (Arberry 2008). The samples selected are all euphemisms for genitals as mentioned in the Quran. Several references are used for the purpose of identifying the euphemism and establishing its literal meaning in both the source and target languages, such as the use of Arabic and English dictionaries. References to the purpose of revelation will be used to understand the context of the euphemism. Exegetical references (tafsir) will also be used to fully understand the meaning of the euphemism. Finally, three English translations of the Quran will be analyzed and compared to establish the accuracy of the translation of the selected euphemisms.

Nord's (2005, 42) text analysis approach will be adopted in this study. This approach can be applied by asking a number of questions in order to analyze "Extratextual factors" regarding the translated text. The questions are as follows:

1. Who is the author/sender of the text?
2. What is the sender's aim?
3. When and where was the text written?
4. When and where was the text delivered?
5. What is the purpose of the text?

The use of such a text analysis approach can help in determining the selection and analysis of the samples considered in this paper.

Analysis

Sample 1: Q7: 26

وَرَسُولًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِ آلِ عَادٍ فَاتَيْنَاهُمُ بِهِمُ عَذَابَ

فُؤَادِكُمْ لِلَّذِينَ عَادُوا بِسُوءِ عَمَلِكُمْ

يَلِينًا

Euphemism 1: سوء انكم

Transliteration: sw,atikum

Translation:

Table 1. Euphemism 1

Khan and Al-Hilali (T1)	Abdel Haleem (T2)	Arberry (T3)
O Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your private parts,	Children of Adam, We have given you garments to cover your nakedness	Children of Adam! We have sent down on you a garment to cover <u>your shameful</u> <u>parts</u>

The chapter containing this text was revealed in Makkah. The chapters revealed in Makkah often promise paradise for believers, and warn sinners of the punishment of hellfire (Al Qahtani 2017, 21). Some of the Bedouins used to circumambulate the Sacred House in Makkah completely naked, with their women doing the same but for straps placed around their lower parts according to the book of reasons for revelations by (Alwahdy 1992).

According to the Arabic dictionaries of (Al Qamws Al Muhyt 2014), (mu·jm al m·any 2010) and the exegetical references of (Al Jalalyn 2007) and (ibn Kathyr 2016), the word sw,h is a noun which means a person's private parts.

Khan and Al Hilali (hereafter T1) adopted a literal and euphemistic translation. Their translation managed to convey the intended meaning of the euphemism in the source text. According to (Holder 2007,308), the term ‘private parts’ is a euphemism for the human genitalia. Abdel Haleem (hereafter T2) also attempts a literal euphemistic translation by using the word "nakedness" but he also adds a commentary on a previous verse which mentions "conventionally translated as private parts, but the Arabic does not necessarily have this meaning". Arberry (hereafter T3) uses a literal euphemistic translation, and this translation conveys the exact meaning of the euphemism since, according to (Allan and Burridge 1991, 54), "shameful parts" is a reference for private parts.

All three translations have adopted a formal equivalence approach which, according to (Nida and Taber 1969), is more concerned with the source text and revolves around the message.

Sample 2 Q24:31

وَلَا تُؤْتُوا عَيْنَكُمْ مَّا رَوَوْهُنَّ فَفُجُوهُنَّ

Euphemism 2: فُجُوهُنَّ

Transliteration: furujahuna

Translation:

Table 2. Euphemism 2

Khan and Al-Hilali (T1)	Abdel Haleem (T2)	Arberry (T3)
And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their <u>private parts</u> (from illegal <u>sexual acts</u>) and not to show off their adornment except that which is apparent.	And tell believing women that they should lower their eyes, guard their <u>private parts</u> , and not display their charms beyond what [is acceptable] to reveal.	And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and guard their <u>private parts</u> , and reveal not their adornment.

This Chapter was revealed in Madinah. The Chapters revealed in Madinah are usually more informative and legalistic, outline and relate to Islamic law (Sharia) (Al Qahtani 2017, 21). In this verse the topic of covering and protecting the private parts is mentioned. The noun ‘farj’ is a reference to one’s private parts according to the Arabic dictionaries of (Al Qamws Al Muhyt 2014), (mu·jm al m·any, 2010) and the exegetical references of (Al Jalalyn 2007) and (ibn Kathyr 2016).

T1, T2 and T3 all used a literal euphemistic translation to render the expression from Arabic into English. T1 used the procedure of addition which, according to (Newmark 1988, 92) is usually used with literal translations. Nonetheless, this addition did not result in the loss of meaning of the euphemism since the expression "sexual act" is considered a euphemism (Holder, 2007, 76).

Sample 3 Q24:31

أَطْفَالٌ لَمْ يَحْتَضِرُوا عِلْمَ عِلْمِ

Euphemism 3: 'wraṭi alnisai,

Translation

Table 3. Euphemism 3

Khan and Al-Hilali (T1)	Abdel Haleem (T2)	Arberry (T3)
Or small children who have no sense of <u>feminine sex</u>	Or children who are not yet aware of <u>women's nakedness</u>	Or children who have not yet attained knowledge of <u>women's private parts</u>

This sample is extracted from the same Chapter and verse as sample 2. According to the Arabic dictionaries of (Al Qamws Al Muhyt 2014), (mu·jm al m·any 2010). and the exegetical references Al (Jalalyn 2007) and (ibn Kathyr 2016), the noun 'awrah is a reference to any private parts of the body which a person does not like to reveal. On the other hand, exegetical references make it clear that the noun in this verse is a reference to private parts (Al Jalalyn, 2007; ibn Kathyr 2016).

T1 adopted a literal but non-euphemistic translation as they used a clear reference to feminine sex. T2 uses a literal euphemistic translation as he refrains from mentioning genitalia. T3 also adopts a literal euphemistic translation by choosing the word *private parts* and, according to (Rawson 2002, 192) private parts is a euphemism for genitals. It is worth mentioning that the T1 translation may cause confusion for readers of the target text who have no access to the source text, as the source text does not mention feminine sex at all. Nonetheless, according to several exegetical references, the reference mentioned in this verse is female genital parts only.

Sample 4 Q41:20

ح وَالْمَجْرَاهُ وَالْأَنْفُ وَالْأُذُنُ وَالْجُلُودُ

Euphemism 4: juluduhum

Translation

Table 4. Euphemism 4

Khan and Al-Hilali (T1)	Abdel Haleem (T2)	Arberry (T3)
Their hearing (ears) and their eyes and <u>their skins</u>	Their ears, eyes, and <u>skins</u>	Their hearing, their eyes and <u>their skins</u>

The Chapter was revealed in Makkah. According to the Arabic dictionaries of (Al Qamws Al Muhyt 2014), (mu·jm al m·any 2010) and the exegetical references of (Al Jalalyn 2007) and (ibn Kathyr 2016), the noun 'jild is a reference to the private parts.

T1, T2 and T3 translated the expression using a word-for-word euphemistic translation. Since the euphemistic expression is strictly a reference to private parts, an addition or a footnote is recommended to make the meaning much clearer to the reader. An addition according to (Dickins, Hervey and Higgins, 2002, 24) is "a translation in which something is added to the TT which is not present in the ST".

Conclusions

The main aim of any translated text is to render the intended message of the source text to the target text readers. The translation of the Quran needs to be of a high level of equivalence as any mistranslation can lead to many difficulties on the part of the reader of the target text. Therefore, it is important for translators to try and convey the intended message with a high degree of accuracy. The analysis of four samples of euphemisms for genitals in the Quran reveals that three of the translations have tried to preserve the euphemistic language of the source text by trying to avoid the use of the overt meaning of the expression. Literal translation was the main procedure applied by the translators. There was a level of linguistic consistency between the three translators in using the same expression as a reference for genitals such as "*private parts, nakedness and skins*".

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