

Beauty in the Wealth of Literary Quranic Eloquence

ABSTRACT

This paper is essentially a discussion of the language and literary aspects of the English language translations of the meaning of the Quran in relation to the original Arabic text. It also seeks to establish the suitability of the English language translations of the meaning of the Quran as literary texts in the teaching of imagery, especially at Islamic institutions. A closer look at the presence of figurative language and literary devices embedded in the description of each Quranic image was done. The translators of the original as revealed in Arabic in striving to capture every element of descriptive meaning of the Quranic images have managed leave their readers in awe.

BACKGROUND

This paper seeks to explain the language and literary aspects of the English language translations of the meaning of the Quran in relation to the original text as revealed in Arabic.

The word “literature” is a broad term. Literature can be said to be “showing” human experience. It uses images to convey the very quality of lived experience. The Quran is a book that appeals to the understanding through our imagination. It appeals also to our emotions, reasons and intellect. The writers of the English language translations of the meaning of the Quran strive to produce as close an approximation of the Quran as possible.

Literature reveals and exploits literary devices such as metaphors, similes, symbols, etc. These literary devices are the very essence of poetry. These literary devices are found in abundance in the Quran and they are also apparent in the translations of the meaning of the Quran in other languages although it is realized by all translators, scholars and authors that no one has yet been able to convey or translate the exact meaning of the Quran.

LEARNING THE BASIC MESSAGE OF THE QURAN

*(Here is) a Book which
We have sent down
Unto thee, full of blessings,
That they may meditate
On its Signs, and that
Men of understanding may
Receive admonition.
(Verse 29 of Surah Sad)*

For Muslims, the above verse from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's English language translation of the meaning of the Quran communicates a vital message: that the Quran is to be read, understood, reflected upon and used by them to gain enlightenment about all aspects of life and all branches of knowledge. Thus, it is important for Muslim students to have many opportunities to read and study the Quran along with their regular academic coursework. If this is not possible in the language of the Quran, which is Arabic, then these opportunities should be made available through the translations of the meaning of the Quran in other languages.

The majority of Muslims in the world are non-Arabic speakers which indeed makes it a necessity to deal with the Quran through the translations of the meaning of the Quran in various languages. Translations of the meaning of the Quran are of great importance in this ongoing process of Islamic education due to the following two reasons:

- 1) They enable the message of Islam to be presented to and be shared with non-Muslims.
- 2) They point out to Muslims who are non-Arabic speakers the revealed guidance which explains what Allah has ordained human beings to observe. Muslims have to be reminded of their duties and obligations towards Allah.

The English language, especially, as the world's major international language would make a good medium for understanding Quranic teaching and thereby helping Muslims spread peace and harmony internationally through their practice of and commitment to Islam.

According to Abul A'la Mawdudi in *Towards Understanding Islam*, the Quran provides and assures continued guidance for those who seek Allah's help. Besides this, the Quran contains warnings for human beings because it depicts human follies of the past. Thus, Muslims can apply this guidance for all time to come and in all situations that they encounter in their daily lives. Mawdudi makes it explicit when he describes the Quran as "having embodied a framework for the conduct of the whole of human life" (Mawdudi, 1980:11).

Muslim educationists feel this correct and precious guidance should be made known to all Muslims, especially young Muslim adults, and that the spread of this knowledge can be accomplished through various means.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE QURAN AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TRANSLATIONS OF THE MEANING OF THE QURAN

Since the Quran was revealed in Arabic, it is necessary and of interest for a Muslim to look at the Arabic language of the Quran in more detail. At the time of revelation, the Arabs were astounded by the unmatched clarity and accuracy of the meaning and expression in the Quran.

The style and language that one uses in one's daily life often changes according to whom one addresses. However, the language of the Quran uses the same language and the same style or expression when directed to anyone whether educated or illiterate. Muhammad Asad talks about the Arabic language of the Quran in the foreword section of his book, *The Message of the Quran*:

*If, on occasion, I have found myself
constrained to differ from the interpretations
offered by the latter, let the reader remember
that the very uniqueness of the Quran
consists in the fact that the more our
worldly knowledge and historical experience
increase, the more meanings, hitherto
unsuspected, revealed themselves in its pages
(Asad,1980:p.vii).*

Asad refers to the prominent Arab philologists and classical commentators when he mentions "the latter" in the above quotation. Nevertheless, he goes on to say that without the work of these Arab philologists and classical commentators of past centuries, no modern translations of the meaning of the Quran (including his own) would have been done successfully.

Asad also mentions some linguistic considerations of the Quran. He specifically mentions two terms-"al-quran" and "surah" which do not need to be changed or translated in any way since neither of these two terms has ever been used in Arabic to denote anything but the title and sections or chapters respectively. Otherwise, Asad claims to have endeavoured to transfer every Quranic concept to appropriate English expressions, sometimes finding it necessary to use "whole sentences to convey the meaning of a single Arabic word" (Asad, 1980: p. vi).

Abul A'la Mawdudi agrees with the above point when he mentions that the literature of the Quran is so rich and powerful that explanation of the most subtle aspect of the Divine knowledge or revelation is made possible (Mawdudi,1980:42).

Any surah (chapters from the Quran) proves to contain a rich variety of linguistic features which indicate that it can be an alternative source besides Western sources to be used as literary texts in the literature and language classroom. A stylistics analysis is one approach of analysing a literary text using literary descriptions. Thus, an illustrated example of a stylistics analysis when using the English translated version of the Quran by Abdullah Yusuf Ali as a literary text is as follows:

Verses 41, 42 and 43 of the seventy-seventh surah, Al-Mursalat, a Meccan surah, extracted from *The Holy Quran-the English translated version of the Quran by Abdullah Yusuf Ali*.

SECTION 2

41. *As to the Righteous
They shall be amidst
(Cool) shades and springs
(Of water).*

Analysis: Verses forty-one to forty-three are descriptions of Paradise. Verse forty-one begins Section 2 of this surah. “They” refer to the believers or righteous and as opposed to the disbelievers, “they” shall be rewarded with “cool shades and springs of water”. This is in contrast to the triple shades of smoke for the sinners which neither give coolness or protection from the Blazing Fire.

42. *And (they shall have)
Fruits, - all they desire.*

Analysis: Verse forty-two begins with the conjunction “and” to continue the description of the reward for the believers. The believers will be rewarded with an abundance of fruits.

43. *“Eat and drink ye
To your heart’s content :
For that ye worked
(Righteousness).*

Analysis: Verse forty-three is Allah’s speech telling “Ye” the believers to eat the fruits mentioned in verse forty-two and drink the water from the springs mentioned in verse forty-one. The idiom “to your heart’s content” in line two suggests all that one desires. The conjunction “For” is used followed by the work of righteousness being the reason for the reward mentioned in verses forty-one to forty-three. Verses forty-one to forty-three are in the future tense. The fruits of righteousness are contentment in this life and the supreme bliss in the next life.

An illustrated example of a stylistics analysis when using the English translated version of the Quran by Muhammad Asad as a literary text is as follows:

Verses 5 and 6 of the sixty-first surah, As-Saff, a Medinan surah, extracted from The Message of the Quran-the English translated version of the Quran by Muhammad Asad.

*(5) Now when Moses spoke to his people, [it was this same truth that he had in mind:]
“O my people! Why do you cause me grief, the while you know that I am an apostle of
God sent unto you?”*

Analysis: The fifth verse of this surah carries two paragraphs. The first paragraph of this verse further illustrates the moral necessity in the reference to Prophet Moses. The children of Israel caused Prophet Moses grief when their actions are contrary to their assertions of faith. The words, [it was this same truth that he had in mind] provides coherence in that it helps to link and explain this fifth verse in relation to the previous verses. The conjunction “while” is used. However, there is a linguistic deviation when “the” definite article appears before “while” - “the while...”. “The” does not normally appear before a conjunction. This verse relates about Prophet Moses in the form of speech. Prophet Moses asked his people a question. The first paragraph of this verse is in the past tense. The question is put across to the children of Israel by Prophet Moses in other words, "By admitting that I speak in the name of God, you (the children of Israel) must not act contrary to this assertion."

And so, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth: for God does not bestow His guidance upon iniquitous folk.

Analysis: The above is the second paragraph of the fifth verse. The conjunction “And” links the first and second paragraphs. The pronoun “they” refers to the children of Israel from the preceding paragraph.

And so, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth:

Analysis: There is repetition and parallelism in the word “swerve” in these lines. The one in the first line is in the past tense and in the second line, the word “swerve” is in the present tense. Where meaning is concerned, "swerve" means to turn away. There is parallelism in meanings of “from the right way” and “from the truth”. These are viewed as equivalents.

And so, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth: for God does not bestow His guidance upon iniquitous folk.

Analysis: The conjunction “for” provides a cohesive link to explain why “God let their hearts swerve from the truth.” This second paragraph of verse five tells us that persistence in wrong actions is bound to react on man's beliefs as well.

(6) And [this happened, too,] when Jesus the son of Mary, said: “O children of Israel! Behold, I am an apostle of God unto you, [sent] to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Torah, and to give [you] the glad tiding of an apostle who shall come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad.”

Analysis: Verse six has two paragraphs. The first paragraph contains the speech of Prophet Jesus to the children of Israel. Prophet Jesus’ speech carries several points:

- i) That Prophet Jesus is an apostle of God
- ii) that Prophet Jesus was sent to confirm the truth in the Torah which was revealed to Prophet Moses and
- iii) that another apostle shall come after Prophet Jesus whose name was Ahmad which is another name for Prophet Muhammad.

But when he [whose coming Jesus had foretold] came unto them with all evidence of the truth, they said: “This [alleged message of his] is [nothing but] spellbinding eloquence!”

Analysis: The first paragraph of verse six begins with the conjunction “and”. The second paragraph of verse six begins with the conjunction “but”. The first paragraph contains the speech of Prophet Jesus and the second paragraph contains the speech of the children of Israel. The children of Israel considered Prophet Jesus’ message as “[nothing but] spellbinding eloquence! They did not believe Prophet Jesus. The tense of these paragraphs is the future tense because this message is a message that Prophet Jesus had predicted and foretold to the children of Israel.

In the website, www.DeenResearchCenter.org, there are packages of translations by many different translators for the Quranviewer Program software available for download:

Quranviewer Translations 1 have 3 translators’ work: Asad, Bewley and Daryabadi.

<http://deenresearchusa-com.web26.winsvr.net/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=HizXyffig0s%3d&tabid=58&mid=436&language=nl-NL>

Quranviewer Translations 2 have 3 translators’ work: Hilali Khan, Pickthall and Sarwar.

<http://deenresearchusa-com.web26.winsvr.net/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=crxtNCslf%2b8%3d&tabid=58&mid=436&language=nl-NL>

Quranviewer Translations 3 have 2 translators’ work: Munthaqab and Qaribullah.

<http://deenresearchusa-com.web26.winsvr.net/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=YXMQGP6YvfU%3d&tabid=58&mid=436&language=nl-NL>

The authors of the English language translations of the meaning of the Quran try to capture this special feature of the Quran- the exact expressions and meaning in the Arabic language. Although not entirely possible, as mentioned by all translators, with extra reading and guidance, a reader will be able to understand most, if not all, of what is being said in the Quran.

THE LITERARY ASPECTS OF THE QURAN AND THE ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE MEANING OF THE QURAN

According to Ahmad von Denffer, the particular style used in the Quran is said to be like saj' or rhymed prose which is "a literary form with some emphasis on rhythm and rhyme, but distinct from poetry" (Von Denffer, 1985:74). Von Denffer furnishes his readers with an example of saj': a passage in the Quran- Surah Al-Ikhlās. He describes this passage as having irregular rhythm and having rhyme ending with the syllable ad (Von Denffer, 1985:75):

*Qul huwallahuahad
Allahhussamad
Lamyalid was lam
Yu lad
Wa lam yakullahu
Kufuwan ahad*

Mohamed Khalifa explains that literary authorities at Al-Azhar University in Cairo have pointed out the ways in which the Quranic style is unmatched, some of which are the following:

- 1)The rhythms of the syllables are more sustained than in prose and less patterned than poetry. The pauses come neither in prose form nor in the manner of poetry but with a harmonious and melodic flow.
- 2)The sentences are constructed in an elegant manner which uses the smallest number of words, without sounding too brief, to express ideas of utmost richness.
- 3)The conciseness of expressions attains such a striking clarity that the least learned Arabic-speaking person can understand the Quran without difficulty. At the same time, there is such a profundity, flexibility, inspiration and radiance in the Quran that it serves as the basis for the principles and the rules of Islamic sciences and the arts, for theology, and for the judicial schools. Thus, it is almost impossible to express the ideas of the text by only one interpretation, either in Arabic or in any other language, even with the greatest care (Khalifa,1983:24).

Al-Sha'rawi mentions a miraculous feature of a literary aspect of the Quran – its use of both metrical composition and prose, in such exquisite harmony that the shift from one style to the other is barely perceptible. This intermingling of metrical and non-metrical composition is present throughout the whole of the Quran (Al-Sha'rawi,1980:31). Thus, it is clear that the literary style of the Quran is not poetry per se, but a unique literary style.

Muhammad Asad explains the need for the use of imagery in the Quran.

This being so, it is not enough for man to be told, "If you behave righteously in this world, you will attain to happiness in the happiness in

the life to come”, or alternatively, “If you do wrong in this world, you will suffer for it in the hereafter”. Such statements would be far too general and abstract to appeal to man’s imagination and, thus, to influence his behaviour. What is needed is a more direct appeal to the intellect, resulting in a kind of “visualization” of the consequences of one’s conscious acts and omissions: and such an appeal can be effectively produced by means of metaphors, allegories and parables, each of them stressing, on the one hand, the absolute dissimilarity of all that man will experience after resurrection from whatever he did or could experience in this world; and, on the other hand, establishing means of comparison between these two categories of experience (Asad, 1980:990).

The Quran contains an abundance of imagery. Imagery as a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra-sensory experience. Many Quranic images are conveyed literally. These constitute descriptive imagery whereby they clarify or give a vivid picture of something. Then, there are images which are conveyed by figurative language, such as in metaphors similes, symbols, etc. These images when projected, appeal to one’s senses. A Quranic image, like other images, may be visual (pertaining to the eye), olfactory (smell), tactile (touch), auditory (hearing), or gustatory (taste). As mentioned above, there are images which are conveyed through the use of figurative language usually using these three literary devices—metaphors, similes and symbols. As readers of the Quran, whether in Arabic or in any other language, one needs to identify and be able to interpret figurative language so as to achieve understanding and be able to extract the deepest meaning of the message of the Quran.

In the case of Descriptive Imagery where images are conveyed literally, giving the reader a more vivid and described picture, the direct alternative of Descriptive Quranic Imagery can be illustrated by the following example extracted from XXXVIII Surah Sad, verse 57 from Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s English language translation of the meaning of the Quran: Verse 57, line 4 & 5 : *A boiling fluid, and a fluid*

Dark, murky, intensely cold.

What type of imagery? Descriptive imagery.

A vivid description is given about a torturous drink in Hell.

Senses : visual, tactile, gustatory.

One can picture tasting this drink and feeling its high degree of heat and coldness alternately burning and freezing one into extreme discomfort.

In the case of Figurative Imagery where images are conveyed through figurative language usually using the three literary devices-simile, metaphor or symbol-the direct alternative of Figurative Quranic Imagery can be explained by some illustrated examples below.

Figurative Quranic Imagery using the literary device simile where a simile is created when two unlike things are compared with the use of “like” or “as”, can be illustrated by the following example extracted from XVIII Surah Al-Kahf (The Cave), verse 29 from Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s English language translation of the meaning of the Quran:

Verse 29, lines 3-6: *Whose (smoke and flames),*

Like the walls and roof

Of a tent, will hem

Them in

What type of imagery? Figurative imagery using a literary device: simile.

Because of the word "like", the phrase is a simile.

Senses: visual, tactile, olfactory.

Through this simile, the smoke and flames of the fire of Hell are visualized as an enclosed tent. One can picture, smell and feel the suffocating heat of the smoke and flames.

Figurative Quranic Imagery using the literary device metaphor where a metaphor is created when two unlike things are shown in what way the two things are similar without the use of “like” or “as”, can be illustrated by the following example extracted from XVIII Surah Al-Kahf (The Cave), verse 29 from Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s English language translation of the meaning of the Quran:

Verse 29, lines 11-12: *How uncomfortable a couch*

To recline on!

What type of imagery? Figurative imagery using a literary device: metaphor.

This is hardly a couch; it is indeed a torture chamber for sinners.

Senses: visual.

The image metaphorically compares the scorching premises or ground to an extremely uncomfortable couch; the reader can imagine the sinner lying on this burning seat.

Figurative Quranic Imagery using the literary device symbol where a symbol is a sign or object accepted as recalling, typifying or representing a thing, quality or idea or when something means more than what it is, can be illustrated by the following example extracted from XXXVIII Surah Sad, verse 50 from Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s English language translation of the meaning of the Quran:

Verse 50, line 1 : *Gardens of Eternity*

What type of imagery? Figurative imagery using a literary device: symbol.

"Gardens of Eternity" are the beautiful gardens which will be in unchanging existence forever for the righteous to enjoy in Heaven. The term also symbolizes the supreme or sublime Beauty of Heaven in a spiritual sense.

Senses : visual.

The image gives one a beautiful (mental) picture of gardens that are always in bloom while symbolizing that timeless heavenly world one can only truly know after life.

USING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

There are alternative ways to retrieve relevant information if one were to access or look into some useful websites.

1. English Index Categorization Alphabetical List of Topics in the Quran:

http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/quran/quran_index.html

2. Quranic Recitation with Translation in English:

On this website, if you scroll to the bottom, you will see a section for “Recitations with translations”. They have very comprehensive collection.

<http://quranicaudio.com/>

If you want to have more control, for example be able to listen from anywhere in the surah by selecting verse by verse, go to the site, launch quran explorer and in the translation drop down (on the right side) select the “Eng-Pictall-Audio”.

<http://quranexplorer.com/>

Like the previous one, this one lets you select the surah and the verse but what's different here is that it will only play the english translation and not the arabic one with it. Go to options and select “Ibrahim Walk” as the recitation.

<http://lightuponlight.com/QuranReader/>

3. Word for Word Quran Translation:

Non pdf version. Lets you play the audio as well as click on each word and hear its pronunciation. Also lets you navigate so you can jump to any verse of any specified surah.

<http://www.allahsquran.com/learn/#>

(New) You can listen to the word by word translation from Uztazah Farhat Hashmi course. The best thing is that you can now listen to the word by word translation of a single verse or verses.

http://www.alhudapk.com/tqaudio_db/default.asp

4. Read the Quran with Translation:

This website has shaheeh international translation which I consider to be the best one available. It also lets you search the quran as well as play the audio by selecting the verse.

<http://quranonline.net>

These websites have good look and feel and simulate a real reading experience such as the ability to “flip” the pages and zoom. The last one has color coded tajweed as well as madina mushaf.

<http://flashquran.com>

<http://quranflash.com>

This one claims to have verified the actual verses and has the right harakahs (diacritics) and symbols. It also lets you search by root words and play the audio.

<http://www.tanzil.info/>

This one has translation in many languages.

<http://quran.nu>

This one has translation in many languages and recitations from various reciters, especially in Urdu.

<http://quranexplorer.com/>

5. Word for Word Quran translation

http://www.studyquran.co.uk/Quran_ArabicEnglish_WordforWord_Translation.html

Quran in PDF are ideal for offline use i.e. without internet connection.

6. Entire Quran in Arabic without translation

http://www.quranpda.com/Quran_Arabic_InPak_PDF.zip

7. Quran with English Translation

http://www.quranpda.com/Quran_Arabic_Eng_PDF.zip

You can read the Quran in many languages all at once side by side. This website also has shaheeh international translation. The website is very simple and easy to use.

<http://quran.com/>

Quran translation from the printing press in Medina. You can read the translation in English, Urdu and in other languages.

<http://www.qurancomplex.com/Quran/Targama/Targama.asp?>

For the purpose of comparative studies by different translators, the website below is the best I have come across so far. Not only in the way each verse is dealt with by each translator or group of translators but also after the translation of each verse, a thorough endnote presentation capturing the essence of the surah by each translator is laid out. This website is especially useful for researchers and students in the field of translations and comparative literary studies.

<http://www.quranix.net/#?RTQ=1&TMG=1&MA=1&RK=1&SH=1&TE=1&A=1&L=en&NA=10&S=1>

For language and linguistic studies, the websites below are amazing. A linguistic resource showing the theoretical aspects of linguistics: Arabic grammar, semantics, pragmatics, lexicology, phonology, morphology and syntax of each word in the Quran, the descriptive aspects of linguistics: comparative linguistics, etymology, phonetics and sociolinguistics of words and phrases in the Quran, and the applied linguistics aspects: language and vocabulary development, psycholinguistics and stylistics of the words and phrases in the Quran. At the end of each surah, there is an audio Quran recitation of the surah by the recitor, Saad AlGhamadi.

<http://corpus.quran.com/wordbyword.jsp>

<http://deenresearchusa.com.web26.winsvr.net/LinkClick.aspx?link=http%3a%2f%2ftextinmotion.org%2fchapters.php&tabid=58&mid=436&language=nl-NL>

<http://www.ghazali.org/arabic/WrightArabicGrammarVol1.pdf>

<http://www.ghazali.org/arabic/WrightArabicGrammarVol2.pdf>

<http://www.ghazali.org/books/haywood-65.pdf>

For the meaning of verses in the Quran, the websites below provide a clear translation in presentation, interpretation and explanation of the message of the Quran for easier understanding.

<http://deenresearchusa-com.web26.winsvr.net/LinkClick.aspx?link=http%3a%2f%2fourbeacon.com%2fwp-content%2fuploads%2fadmin2%2f2007%2f08%2fqxp-iv.pdf&tabid=58&mid=693&language=nl-NL>

<http://deenresearchusa-com.web26.winsvr.net/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=JichdZQGEuE%3d&tabid=58&mid=590&language=nl-NL>

<http://ourbeacon.com/wp-content/uploads/admin2/2007/08/qxp-iv.pdf>

CONCLUSION

The discussion in this paper of the language and literary aspects of the English language translations of the meaning of the Quran in relation to the original Arabic text (the Quran) leads readers to envision the suitability of using the English language translations of the meaning of the Quran as literary texts in the teaching of literature, specifically figurative language and literary devices. In the academic setting, especially at Islamic institutions, the introduction of the use of the English language translations of the meaning of the Quran as literary texts into the English language curriculum, would be a sure way of incorporating Islam to a larger extent.

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