

Selected Qur'anic English Translation of Near-Synonyms as a Modal: Challenges and its Solutions

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Abstract: Synonymy is one of the core issues in linguistics in general and in translation studies in particular that need further attention of translation scholars and linguists. Translating the Holy Qur'an presents a multifaceted challenge for translators. They must strive to convey the intended semantic message of the meanings of the Holy while finding accurate lexical equivalents in the target language. Obviously, the inherent divinity of the Holy Qur'an presents a significant hurdle for translators. Achieving a perfect translation of its meaning is considered impossible for any human. This is because the full depth and wisdom of the Holy Qur'an are said to be boundless, like a vast ocean with no shore. Consequently, the role of translators becomes one of striving for accuracy, faithfully conveying the intended meaning to the best of their ability. This study aims at examining complicated nature of synonyms in the Holy Qur'an in an attempt to investigate its problematic nature in relation to translation procedure. Special emphasis was paid to the translation of near synonyms in the Holy Qur'an as translator is expected to achieve a high level of accuracy while rendering the exact meanings of the synonymous items in the Holy Qur'an. This study identifies the complexities of translating Qur'anic synonymous items into English, focusing on how these near-synonyms pose a challenge for translators. This study ends in some findings which proved that that certain words in the Qur'an can't be perfectly translated into other languages. This is because languages have different sets of words and phrases. Translators might not find exact equivalents that capture the full meaning and context of synonymous in the Qur'an.

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Introduction

It is undeniable fact that every language has its own structure, style and semantic ties among its words. Synonymy is one of the basic types of relationship existing among the words. It is also considered as one of the most major lexical phenomena that affect the structure of lexicons in various languages but less attention was given to it by scholars in the field of linguistics, semantics and lexicography. However, it is one of the basic issues not only in linguistics but it has become a significant issue in the field of translation studies as well that need further attention especially during translation process of synonymies from one language to another language. It is observed that various Arabic linguists including Fairouzabady, Faiyoumy discussed the phenomenon of synonymy. Sibawayh one of the famous Arabic linguists who addressed semantic ties among words.

Synonymy which is considered a significant linguistic phenomenon means the sameness or the near sameness. Near-Synonyms in general and in the religious text like the text of Holy Qur'an is one of the basic concerns for translators because translating the religious text which contains near synonymies is difficult and challenging task keeping in view that the process of substituting the words in source text inadequately and imperfectly results in distorting and misinterpreting the intended sacred message to the reader of the target text. The translator of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an faces a big challenge while translating Near-Synonyms due to his failure of differentiating the nuances and distinctions among the synonymous words. Due to this, misunderstanding the meanings of the Holy Qur'an to the readers especially those who have not having enough knowledge of Arabic language, and the intended divine message of Allah Almighty is not conveyed to them adequately and accurately.

Controversy over the Concept of Synonymy

Many Scholars have expressed their points of views about the concept of synonymy, its types and translation which is considered a big challenge for translators especially during the translation of sensitive texts like the text of the Holy Qur'an which needs extensive attention for achieving accuracy and faithfulness to convey the divine message of Allah Almighty to the readers of the Holy Qur'an. There are two points of view of scholars on the concept of synonymy as some scholars have flexible point of view by supporting the concept of synonymy. So on this, they have created lists of various synonyms but on the other hand, some scholars have strict point of view as they reject the existence of synonymy as they consider that it is irrational to have two or more words in a language with one reference, but at the same time there are

some scholars including Palmer, Larson, and Cruse who assume a compromise stance by maintaining that the phenomenon of synonymy are present in language but at the same time they indicate that there are no absolute synonyms in languages. Cruse mentioned that absolute synonyms do not exist at all, and even if we accept that the synonymies are there then they are rare and unusual completely ⁽¹⁾. Clark mentioned that language functions for eliminating absolute synonyms by adding that an absolute synonym either fall into disuse or takes on a new shade of meaning ⁽²⁾.

To sum up, it is said that Near -Synonymy may differ referring to any feature of their meanings like stylistic or expressive and structural dissimilarity. So it is observed in such situation that efforts are made by scholars to focus on the analysis of dissimilarities, differences and variations among synonymies. In addition to that it is worth noting that synonymies are not being alike but they contain a lot of variable and adoptable aspects among them. So on this adopting the opinion of Near -Synonyms is more suitable keeping in view that it highlights the variations and dissimilarities among synonymous lexical items.

Concept of Synonymy

A variety of definitions to the concept of lexical synonymy have been introduced by various scholars in the field of semantics as they emphasized the idea of meaning similarity between lexical units rather than meaning identity. Viewpoints of some scholars on the concept of lexical synonymy are presented in this regard as Stephan Ullman said that it is nearly a maxim that indicates that a complete synonymy occurs rarely and infrequently. ⁽³⁾ David Crystal states that lexical and etymological substances which have the same meanings are synonyms. ⁽⁴⁾ Nida and Taber have stated that synonymies are words which share different indispensable modules and thus can be used for another in some contexts without any considerable variances of meaning. ⁽⁵⁾ Lyons has defined Near- Synonymy by focusing on propositional meaning.

1- Clark, Eve V. 'Conventionality and contrast: pragmatic principles with lexical consequences'. In Adrienne Lehrer and Eva Fedder Kittay (eds.), *Frames, Fields, and Contrasts: New Essays in Semantic and Lexical Organization*, 171-188. Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992. 172.

2- Cruse, D. Alan. *Lexical Semantics*, Cambridge: CUP. 1986. 291.

3- Ullmann, Stephan, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962.

4- Crystal, David 2008. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 6th edition. Oxford: Blackwell 2008:470.

5- Nida, E. and Taber C. *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1969, 73.

Newmark also discussed that there are two aspects of synonymy as first is identified as grammatical synonymy and second is deliberated as lexical synonymy ⁽⁶⁾. Löbner (2002:46) also indicates that Synonymy is categorized total synonymy in the strict sense, comprises all meaning including descriptive, social and expressive meanings ⁽⁷⁾

It is observed from the above mentioned points of view of various scholars that there are two stances on the concept of synonymy i.e. flexible and strict. As flexible point of view, it is said that synonymy exists in language and on other hand strict point of view rejects the presence of synonymy. It is also perceived that there are two types of aspects of synonymy i.e. grammatical synonymy and lexical synonymy. On this, it is believed that translator should be very accurate and perfect while finding out the right and correct choice in translation to maintain accuracy and faithfulness in a very extensive form for transferring the message of the writer of the source text to the reader of the target text. It is crystal clear that accuracy in adopting the correct choices during rendering the text of the Holy Qur'an is even more indispensable for maintaining the fidelity and faithfulness which is the essential part of the translating process for a divine text like the Holy Qur'an.

Near-Synonyms in the Holy Qur'an

It is undeniable fact that the Holy Qur'an is incomparable and unique divine book due to its content and high degree of accuracy in expressing its meanings as it contains linguistic, literary and rhetorical beauty, attractiveness and perfection in terms of choice of words in sentences, grammatical structures and rhetorical expressions. A number of lexical items exist in the Holy Qur'an and various scholars have mentioned their opinions about the existence of synonyms or near synonyms in the Holy Qur'an as some scholars accept the notion that synonyms exists in the Holy Qur'an, but on the other hand some scholars and linguists reject the concept of synonyms completely.

Aisha Abdul-Rahaman Bin Ashati expressed her point of view that analyzing the words in the Holy Qur'an are closely related in meaning indicates that there are no synonyms in the Holy Qur'an and it is one of its miracles. ⁽⁸⁾ Muhammad Nur al-Din Al-Munajid also mentioned that there are no absolute synonyms in the Holy Qur'an adding that each lexical item in the Holy Qur'an is selected exactly and accurately for

⁶⁻ Newmark, Peter, *Approaches to Translation*, Oxford: Pergamon, 1981, 101-102.

⁷⁻ Löbner, Sebastian, *Understanding Semantics*, London: Hodder Education. 2002, 46.

⁸⁻ Bin Ashati', Aisha Abdul-Rahaman, *Al tafsir al Bayani li al-Qur'an al-Karim (Rhetorical Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an)*. Cairo: Dar al Ma'arif, 1966, 14.

transferring a certain meanings which are different from other relevant lexical items. ⁽⁹⁾ Muhammad Mahmoud Ghali has pointed out differences among Near- Synonyms lexical items in the Holy Qur'an by mentioning that though some scholars render some words having the same meaning but the context of these words indicate differences and variations existing among them.⁽¹⁰⁾

Research Questions

This study aims at answering the questions for instance: How do the etymological adoptions and selections of the Qur'anic translated Near-Synonyms into English differ among the selected translations of the Holy Qur'an? Is it possible for translator to preserve consistency and uniformity during their translation procedure of Near-Synonymy? and, To what extent do translators consider the context when translating near synonyms in the Qur'anic text?

Literature Review

Al-Azzam (2005) examined the challenges of translating synonyms in religious texts. He analyzed examples from the Hadith and Qur'an, focusing on three English translations of the Qur'an and one translation of Hadith. Al-Azzam's research highlighted the difficulties translators face in conveying the precise meaning of Islamic terms related to religious practices. His findings point to the challenges and difficulties of capturing the nuances of Qur'anic near-synonyms in English translation.⁽¹¹⁾

Abdellah (2010) took a closer look at translating near-synonyms in the Qur'an. He developed a model that analyzes context and applied it to the words "Matar" and "Ghayth," which both refer to rain in Arabic. Interestingly, his study found that some translations captured the subtle differences between these synonyms better than others.⁽¹²⁾

Issa (2011) further explored the complexities of synonym translation between Arabic and English. His analysis focused on two key areas: First, Context-dependent synonyms in the Qur'an: Here, he examined how synonyms change meaning based on the surrounding text

⁹⁻ Al-Munajjid, Muhammad Nur al-Din, *Al-Taraduf fi al-Qur'an bayn al-Nazaria wa al-Tatbiq* (Synonyms in the Holy Quran between Theory and Application). Beirut: Dar Al-Fikr, 2007, 109.

¹⁰⁻ Ghali, Muhammad Mahmoud, *Al-Mutradifat fi al-Qur'an al-Majid*. (Synonyms in the Ever Glorious Quran). Cairo: Publishing House for Universities, 1997, 5.

¹¹⁻ Al-Azzam, B. H. S. *Certain Terms Relating to Islamic Observances: Their Meanings, With Reference to Three Translations of the Qur'an and a Translation of Hadith*. Unpublished Phd Thesis: Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. 2005.

¹²⁻ Abdellah, A.. *Translations of Near-Synonyms in the Qur'an: A Context-Based Analysis*. MA Thesis, 2010.

in the Qur'an. Second, Synonyms in argumentative texts: Here, he investigated into how synonyms function differently within argumentative text type. His research identified shortcomings in existing translations, where Qur'anic synonyms with distinct meanings were rendered identically in English, failing to convey the precise nuances of the original text. ⁽¹³⁾

Analysis of Some Selected Synonyms in the Holy Qur'an

Some examples of Qur'anic synonymous pairs translated into English are presented for carrying out analytical study. The detail of these synonymous pairs is as under:

Example1:

قَالَ إِنَّمَا أَشْكُوا بِنِيِّ وَحُرُنِي إِلَى اللَّهِ وَأَعْلَمُ مِنَ اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ⁽¹⁴⁾

Ghali, s Translation:

He said, Surely, I complain of **my anguish** and **my grief** to Almighty Allah. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Palmer, s Translation:

Said he, I only complain of **my emotion** and **my grief** to God. ⁽¹⁶⁾

Analysis:

Keeping in view the context of this verse, it is known that this verse is about the complaint extended by the prophet Yaqub (Peace Be Upon Him) to Allah Almighty about his sadness as he used two words (بث) (Bathth) and (حزن) (Huzn) to express the meaning of sadness, but these words are not indistinguishable in their meaning as Al-Sabouni, Al-Zamkhshary, Al-Mahali and Al-Sayuti mentioned that the word (بث) in this verse indicates to the extreme sadness which cannot be borne or hidden by someone, while the word (حزن) is sadness or unhappiness that is less in its effects while comparing with the word (بث) ⁽¹⁷⁾, and Abu Hilal al-'Askari differentiated between (حزن) and (بث) by saying that:

13- Issa, H. Textuality-mediated Synonymy in English/ Arabic Translation. Unpublished MA thesis: American University of Sharjah. 2011.

14- Al-Qur'an 12: 86, Glorious Qur'an, Cairo: Publishing House for Universities, 1997), 5.

15- Ghali, M. M, Towards Understanding the Ever-Glorious Quran. Cairo, 2003.

16- Palmer, Edward. The Quran. Retrieved from <https://quran.archive.org/explorer/edward-palmer>. (Accessed on: 12/02/2023)

17. Al-Zamakhshari, Abu al-Qasim Mahmud ibn 'Umar, Al-Kashshaf 'an Haqa'iq Ghawamiḍ Al-Tanzil", Bayrūt: Dār Al-'Arabī, 1986., Al-Sābūnī, Muhammad 'Alī, Safwat Al-Tafāsīr ,Al-Qāhirah: Dār Al-Sābūnī lil-Tibā'ah wa Al-Nashr wa Al-Tawzī'. Al-Mahallī; Jalāl Al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Ahmad wa Jalāl Al-Dīn Al-Suyūṭī, Tafsīr Al-Jalālayn Al-Qāhirah: Dār Al-Hadīth.

البث: ما أبداه الإنسان، والحزن: ما أخفاه، لأن الحزن مستكن في القلب، والبث ما بث وأظهر⁽¹⁸⁾

Al-Bathth (البث) is what a person shows, and Al-huzn (الحزن) is what he conceals, because sadness resides in the heart, and Al-Bathth is what is shown and revealed.

Pondering over the translation of the above mentioned verse which contains the word (بث) and (حزن), it is identified that both English translators Ghali and Palmer differentiated between both words: (بث) and (حزن) during their translation process as Ghali has translated the word (بثي) as “My anguish” , as Palmer has translated the word (بثي) as “My emotions”, but the translation which is carried out by Ghali for the word (بث) as “My anguish” is more appropriate and communicative translation to the source text as compare to the translation carried out by Palmer as “my motions” which does not reflect the intended meaning of the source text and it is unable to transfer the intended message of the divine text to the reader of the target text. In English dictionaries like Cambridge Dictionary, Merriam Webster and Collins English Dictionary, linguists have differentiated between the words “Anguish” and “Emotion” as “Anguish” means extreme unhappiness caused by physical or mental suffering, and “ Emotion” means a strong feelings in general.⁽¹⁹⁾ On this, it is perceived that the translation of (بثي) carried out Ghali as “My Anguish” is very close to the source text.

Example2:

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ فَلَبِثَ فِيهِمْ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ إِلَّا خَمْسِينَ عَامًا فَأَخَذَهُمُ الطُّوفَانُ وَهُمْ ظَالِمُونَ⁽²⁰⁾

Pickthall, s Translation:

And verily we sent Noah (as Our messenger) unto his folk, and he continued with them for **a thousand years save fifty years**; and the flood engulfed them, for they were wrong-doers.⁽²¹⁾

Al-Hilali& Khan, s Translation:

And indeed We sent Nuh (Noah) to his people, and he stayed among them **a thousand years less fifty years** [inviting them to believe in the Oneness of Allah (Monotheism), and discard the false gods and other

¹⁸ - Al-'Askari, Abu al-Hilal, al-Furūq al-Lughawiyah (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-'Ilm wa-al-Thaqāfah lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1991.17.

¹⁹- Cambridge Dictionary, Merriam Webster, Collin English Dictionary (Online)

²⁰- Al-Qur'an 29: 14.

²¹- Pickthall, M. M. Holy Quran: English translation. Begum Aisha Bawary Wakf, 1930.

deities], and the Deluge overtook them while they were Zalimun (wrongdoers, polytheists, disbelievers, etc.).⁽²²⁾

Analysis:

By thinking over the translation of English translators Pickthall and Al-Hilali & Khan, it is observed that both translators have used a near synonyms English word "Year" against two Arabic words (سنة) and (عام) and they did not differentiate between these two Arabic words while translating process and they repeated the word "Year" twice following to the particular words of the original Qur'anic text: (سنة) and (عام) by making their efforts to convey the intended meanings of these two words to the English readers of the target text but it could not happen due to the loss of intended meaning of the divine text of the Holy Quran as it is noted that these two words do not have the same meanings as perceived through English translation carried out by Pickkthall and Al-Hilali & Khan. It is worth noting that some Qur'anic interpreters including Al Qurṭubī, Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr⁽²³⁾ did not mention any clear variance between two words during rendering process. However, some Arabic linguists including Az-Zubaidi, Al Aṣfah nī and Al-Suhaili⁽²⁴⁾ have mentioned the difference between these two words: (سنة) and (عام) as Iman Raghīb Al Aṣfah nī said:

يتم استخدام السنة للحول الذي فيه الشدة والجذب ولذا يعبر عن الجذب بالسنة، والعام ما فيه الرخاء والخصب⁽²⁵⁾

Sanah (سنة) is used for the year in which there is hardship and drought, and for this reason the drought is expressed with Sanah, and the Aam (عام) is used for the year that includes prosperity and fertility.

It is observed from the above mentioned difference that according to Arab linguists, both words are not the same words as the word (سنة) is used for the year that includes hardship and drought and the word (عام) is used for the year that includes prosperity. This difference is confirmed by the Qur'anic verses as Allah Almighty said:

قَالَ تَزْرَعُونَ سَبْعَ سِنِينَ دَأْبًا فَمَا حَصَدْتُمْ فَذُرْوَةٌ فِي سُنْبُلَةٍ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِمَّا تَأْكُلُونَ⁽²⁶⁾

22- Arberry, A. J. The Koran interpreted: A translation. New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

23- Qurṭubī, *Al jāmi li aḥkām al Qur'ān*, (Beirut: D r al Kutub al rabiyyah, 1997); Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-Azīm*, (London: MSA Publication Limited, 2009); Ṭabarī M. B. J., *Tafsīr al Ṭabarī*, (Beirut: Mu assasat al Ris lah, 2000

24- Az-Zubaidi, M. *Taj-ul-Uroos min Jawahir-il-Qaamoos* (Kuwait: Dar-ul-Jail, 1972); Al-Suhaili, A. A. *Al-Rawd Al-Anef*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi Publisher, 2000.

25- Al Aṣfahānī . I. Q, *Mufradat Alfaz alQur'an* (Dubai: Dar Al Qalam Publishing and Distribution, 2009.

26- Al-Qur'an 12: 47.

(Joseph) said: "For seven years shall ye diligently sow as is your wont: and the harvests that ye reap, ye shall leave them in the ear,- except a little, of which ye shall eat. (27)

In this verse the word (سنين) is plural of the word (سنة) which referred to the hardship in a certain context that people will go through during the seven years of drought, and there is another Qur'anic verse in which context refers that the word (عام) was used for the year which includes Prosperity of abundant water and crops for the people as Allah Almighty said:

تُمْرُ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ عَامٌ فِيهِ يُغَاثُ النَّاسُ وَفِيهِ يُخْصَرُونَ (28)

Then will come after that (period) a year in which the people will have abundant water, and in which they will press (wine and oil) (29)

To sum up, it is said that the word (سنة) and (عام) were rendered by English translators as "Year" without mentioning the difference between both as some Arab linguists have mentioned it. On this, it is observed that the intended meanings of these both words of the Holy Qur'an were not transferred with their rhetorical and linguistic feature to the reader of the target text of English language. The basic reason of not achieving the equivalence between source Arabic words and target English words is non-existence of appropriate of equivalents of these Arabic words with their variation in English language.

Findings and Recommendations

1. It is proved that translating synonymies of any language is a big challenge for a translator especially for a translator who intends to render a religious text like the divine text of the Holy Qur'an due to the variations of source and target language at various levels.
2. It is known that the translators of near synonymies have to perform in the context of revealing the depth of the meanings of the Qur'anic synonymies during translation process.
3. It is proved through the above discussion on the rendering of the Qur'anic near synonymies that a translator of the Qur'anic verses which contain Qur'anic near synonymies must do a deep and thorough investigation while dealing with the meanings of the synonymies in the Holy Qur'an.

27- Yusuf, Abdullah (Online) <https://isubqo.com/thafseer/english/abdullah-yusuf-ali/sura/yousuf/30?search=> (Accessed on: 24/05/2023)

28- Yusuf, Abdullah (Online) <https://isubqo.com/thafseer/english/abdullah-yusuf-ali/sura/yousuf/30?search=> (Accessed on: 03/01/2023)

29- Ibid.

4. It is also proved that translation of the near synonymies in the Holy Qur'an needs more attention and efforts to reveal the deep meanings and convey them to the readers accurately and faithfully without making any stylistic, rhetorical and cultural loss and distortion in the divine message of the Holy Qur'an during translation process.
5. It is identified here that finding an adequate equivalent in the target text during rendering process of near synonymies of the Holy Qur'an is not an easy task due the variations at various levels including lexical, stylistic, morphological, rhetorical and semantic level.
6. It is elucidated that the challenges of the rendering of the Qur'anic synonymous pairs may be resolved provided that the translators of the Holy Qur'an must have deep knowledge on all aspects of both source and target language at various levels including linguistic, cultural and semantic level.
7. It is perceived that translating near synonymies in the Holy Qur'an is an area in which religious translators have to be very careful during rendering process so that they will be able to transmit the divine message of Allah Almighty to the readers of the target text with an adequate form, content and context.
8. It is recommended that a translator of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an should reproduce adequate equivalent words both in form and content during the process of translating Qur'anic synonyms to overcome the phenomenon of synonymies.
9. It is suggested that extensive efforts should be put in to enhance the research area of translating the near synonymies in the Holy Qur'an keeping in view that such type of research will contribute to convey the divine message of the Holy Qur'an to the human being faithfully and accurately without losing any linguistic, cultural, rhetorical and stylistic features of source text of the Holy Qur'an.
10. Special emphasis should be paid to the translation of near synonyms in the Holy Qur'an as translator is expected to achieve a high level of accuracy while rendering the exact meanings of the synonymous items in the Holy Qur'an.

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