

International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



Problems Encountered in Translating Conversational Implicatures in the Holy Qur'ān into English

[PP: 39-47]

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the problems that translators of the Holy Qur'ān encounter when translating utterances containing conversational implicatures (henceforth Qur'ānic implicatures), where what is meant goes well beyond what is said into English. The study is based on utterances singled out from the Holy Qur'ān which have been analyzed with reference to three well-known translations of the Qur'ān. The translations provide an empirical basis for the discussion of the problems while translating Qur'ānic utterances into English. In addition, some well-known exegetes (tafsīr) have been consulted to facilitate the process of analyzing the conversational implicatures in their Qur'ānic context and clarify the intended meaning. Two important and interrelated issues have been discussed. These are: how the utterances, containing conversational implicatures, have been translated and how they should (or can) be translated in accordance with the interpretation. More often than not, translators of the Holy Qur'ān fail to construe some conversational implicatures; therefore some strategies have been suggested by the researcher.

Keywords: utterance, implicature, conversational implicature, exegetes, strategy, holy Qur'ān

ARTICLE INFO

The paper received on: **04/06/2015** , Reviewed on: **18/07/2015**, Accepted after revisions on: **09/08/2015**

Suggested Citation:

Al Ananzeh, M. S. (2015). Problems Encountered in Translating Conversational Implicatures in the Holy Qur'ān into English. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 3(3), 39-47. Retrieved From [Http://www.eltjournal.org](http://www.eltjournal.org)



1. Introduction

Translators usually encounter different types of problems. Some of these problems are attributed to culture; some to vocabulary, structure and idiom; others to metaphor and various figures of speech. Sometimes translations from Arabic into English and vice versa involve problems resulting from the difficulty of interpreting utterances containing implicature. This difficulty stems from the fact that it belongs to what is conveyed by an utterance, rather than what is literally said; there is often something between the lines. This might explain why Leech (1983) points out that “interpreting an utterance is ultimately a matter of guess work, or hypothesis formation.” (p. 81). The translator is required to find out what is implicated, so as to convey the meaning of the original text in the most appropriate and acceptable form in the TL.

Unlike many other topics in pragmatics, implicature does not have an extended history in Western culture. The key ideas were proposed by Grice (1967, 1975) where he discusses two kinds of implicature: conventional implicature and conversational implicature. The latter will be targeted in this paper since it constitutes a challenge for the translators of the Holy Qur’ān. This sort is associated with Grice’s notion of the Cooperative Principle (CP): “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk-exchange in which you are engaged” Grice (1967, p.7). Under this principle come the following maxims:

Quantity: Don’t provide more or less information than is required for the current purpose of the exchange.

Quality: Speak the truth.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: Be clear.

Thus, when we engage in a conversation with others, we assume that the interlocutors comply with the CP and, underlyingly, with its maxims. Now let us see what happens to the maxims in the course of an exchange. Consider this example (Grice, 1975):

A: Smith doesn’t seem to have a girl these days.

B: He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.

It is assumed that the CP is at work. So B’s remark is relevant to what A said. B implicates that Smith has a girlfriend in New York. What happens when a maxim is violated? Downes (1984) argues that we do a rescue operation by way of an implicature. We rescue the maxim by reasoning out the “point” of violation. We say he was being relevant after all. We just have to work somewhat harder to discover what the speaker intended to convey in flouting or violating the maxim.

What makes us resort to implicature? It should be emphasized that in some cases, speaking directly is troublesome to the speaker and so s/he resorts to implicature to avoid troubles. S/He provides information that is not part of his/her sentence meaning. Implicature also helps us to say a lot in a few words. Keenan (1973) states that without implicature it would take us a long time indeed to say anything at all. For these reasons, Pratt (1977) argues that implicature is used a great deal by writers of literature and also by politicians, press agents, advertisers and other speakers interested in multiple meanings. Moreover, Levinson (1983) states that the notion of implicature provides some explicit account of how it is possible to mean more than what is literally expressed by the conventional sense of the linguistic expressions uttered.

The Holy Qur’ān is known to have high rhetorical standards among Arabic texts. As translation of figurative language is

problematic and requires additional consideration to be respected, it has become important to shed light on the way in which implicature is translated in the Holy Qur'ān. Translators might commit mistakes while translating implicature from Arabic into English and vice versa. This problem stems from the difference between the literal sentence meaning and conveyed meaning. The translator, then, needs to distinguish literal from conveyed meaning depending on context. Ibn Qutaybah (1900) believes that the Qur'ān is untranslatable on the grounds that its language has all the highly expressive powers of Arabic aspects that other languages lack. He suggests that the translator must look for the hidden meaning a verse might convey, because in literal translation the meaning intended is not rendered. (p. 21) The meanings of a Qur'ānic verse cannot be easily determined, because the textual material of the Qur'ānic verse is marked with many ambiguities. It is noticed that translators of the Holy Qur'ān sometimes fail to give the intended meaning; particularly in areas where implicature is concerned. Consider the example below:

"أَلَا إِنَّهُمْ يَنْتُونُ صُدُورَهُمْ لِيَسْتَخْفُوا مِنْهُ" / هود 5

A verse like this flouts the quality maxim (to speak the truth). The literal or said meaning does not come through at all. Translating such a metaphor which gives rise to implicature literally would distort the meaning like the version suggested by Arberry "Behold they fold up their hearts, that they lie hid from Him." Pickthall also translates it as "Lo, now they fold up their breasts that they may hide (their thoughts) from Him." These versions are literal and therefore, they do not convey the implicated meaning.

Based on the above, the current study aimed to identify the problematic areas in the translated utterances with a view to determining what makes one translation

better than the other, or what brings one translation closer to the original utterance than the other. Two important and interrelated issues have been discussed. These are: how the utterances containing conversational implicatures have been translated and how they should (or can) be translated in accordance with the interpretation.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, it appears that nobody has yet studied the translatability of conversational implicature in the Holy Qur'ān. Therefore, this study aims at filling an important gap by investigating the translatability of implicature in the Qur'ān. It will hopefully provide a basis for a better and more adequate translation of the Qur'ān into English. In spite of the fact that there is a massive literature review on the language of the Qur'ān and the translations of its meaning, very few studies tackled the translation of implicature in the Qur'ān. For instance, Mu'aqqat (1997) studied the importance of conveying the implicated meaning and nuances of meaning in translating synonyms. He was interested in ideational equivalence, but used different terms.

2. Literature Review

A number of studies tackled specific problems related to the translation of the Holy Qur'ān. Ali (2006) tackled the problem of translating repetitions in the Qur'ān. He argued that each repeated word in the Qur'ān serves a particular purpose which may be totally defeated, and, perhaps, the whole message will be distorted if the translator fails to render the repetition in the same way. Eweida (2006) discussed the realization of time metaphor and their cultural implications in the Qur'ān and in some translations of its meanings. The theoretical framework followed by the Eweida is based on Lakoff & Johnson (1980), Kovecses (2002; 2006).



Abdelwali (2007) studied the loss in translation of some existing English versions of the Qur'ān. He showed that the translation aims particularly at the communication of the message without considering the idiosyncrasies and prototypical features of the Qur'ānic discourse. The versatility of the Qur'ān lexemes and styles were not captured in most of the English versions of the Qur'ān. His aim, therefore, was to highlight the challenges that Qur'ān translators face at the lexical, structural, stylistic and rhetorical levels. He also suggested ways of enhancing the field of Qur'ān translation with a view to reproducing adequate translation both in form and content.

Mahmoud (2008) tackled the issue of how cultural and pragmatylistic factors influence translating *sūrat al-Nās* into English. The study is based on four different translations. It attempted to pinpoint the relationship between pragmatic coherence and stylistic variations at the level of the ST and how they influence the translation. The study also stressed the need for Qur'ānic knowledge to avoid the obstacles in translating sacred texts.

3. Methodology

Since this study is concerned with the translatability of conversational implicature in the Qur'ān into English, three translations of the Holy Qur'ān are selected and certain verses are critically analyzed. These are the translations done by A. Yusuf Ali, Arthur J. Arberry, and Murmaduke Pickthall. The source text of the study is the Holy Quran. A representative sample of Qur'ānic implicatures is singled out on the basis of established classification which derives from Grice (1975). The bulk of these implicatures comes about by overly flouting one or more of the maxims, in order to exploit for communication purposes. The analysis of conversational implicature follows the Gricean maxims, i.e. Relation, Quantity,

Quality and Manner maxims. Examples are classified according to the strategies used by Brown (1987). These strategies invite conversational implicatures via violating one or more of the maxims.

The study is based on utterances singled out from the Holy Qur'ān which have been analyzed with reference to three well-known translations of the Qur'ān. The translations provide an empirical basis for the discussion of the problems while translating Qur'ānic utterances into English. In addition, some well-known exegetes (*tafsīr*) have been consulted to facilitate the process of analyzing the conversational implicatures in their Qur'ānic context and clarify the intended meaning. The three translated versions are compared to determine to what extent the translations reflect the implicated meaning.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This section deals with some major problems that translators may encounter when they embark on translating Qur'ānic utterances containing implicatures into English. In order to carry out the analysis as well as the discussion appropriately, a framework of analysis is provided. The framework features three categories generating conversational implicature and these are: metaphor, irony and euphemism.

4.1. Metaphor

One of the major problems that hinders appropriate rendering of the Qur'ānic utterances into English is metaphor. It gives rise to conversational implicature by violating the Quality Maxim (to speak the truth). This category represents a clear case of the difference between what is said and what is implicated. Brown (1987) says that "metaphors are literally false" (p. 222). Moreover, Duff (1981) writes, "metaphor, like idiom, has a meaning that cannot be directly equated with the cumulative meaning

of the words in the expression" (p.89). For these reasons, translators of the Holy Qur'an find it difficult to render utterances containing metaphor.

In what follows, some Qur'anic metaphors that give rise to conversational implicature and may hinder accurate translation of the Holy Quran will be discussed. Observe (1) below:

"بل نقذف بالحق على الباطل فيدمغُهُ" / الأنبياء 18 /

Obviously, the implicature in the above utterance is triggered off by the use of the verb "يدمغُهُ" as it violates the Quality Maxim. It is mainly used when bashing somebody in the head. This image is taken here to show how the truth usually prevails over falsehood and finishes it off. The meaning conveyed by the verb "يدمغُهُ" cannot be transferred into English by translating this verse literally. For example, Ali fails to convey the intended meaning in this version, "... we hurls the truth against falsehood, and it knocks out its brain..." (Ali, p. 825). This can also be said of Pickthall's version, "... it doth break its head..." (Pickthall, p. 483). As can be seen these two translators render this metaphor literally; they overlook the pragmatic sense captured by the verb "يدمغُهُ". By contrast, Arberry, (p. 618) provides an acceptable version, "nay, but we hurl the truth against falsehood and it prevails over it, and behold, falsehood vanishes a way". Apparently, he takes into account the intended meaning in the metaphor and so he avoids presenting an inaccurate translation.

To shed more light on this category, let us consider (2) below:

"سنسمه على الخُرطوم" / القلم 16 / (2)

Using the metaphoric word "الخُرطوم" in this utterance gives rise to conversational implicature via violating the Quality Maxim. The word "الخُرطوم" is basically used when we talk about pigs, but it is used in this verse to talk about a person with the result that it implicates a certain meaning. If it had not

been for another meaning, the word "الأنف" could have been used. The threatening of branding him on the snout implicates contempt and humiliation where his nose is considered a pig's snout (Qutub, vol.8 p. 232). More often than not, some translators render such a verse literally and so they fail to convey the intended meaning. In his rendering of (2) above, Pickthall for instance, seems to be unaware of the meaning implicated in the original word "الخُرطوم". He renders it as, "We shall brand him on the nose." Ali renders it as, "soon shall we brand (the beast) on the snout!" He renders "الخُرطوم" as "snout" and therefore, implicates that the person intended is compared to the beast. Arberry renders it as "We shall brand him upon the muzzle". Although he presents an acceptable translation, as 'muzzle' is used for animals rather than humans, he still does not convey the intended meaning completely. The word 'muzzle' refers to the nose and mouth of any animal, whereas "الخُرطوم" in this utterance refers to a certain kind of animals, i.e., the pig. Qutub (ibid) mentions that "one meaning of "الخُرطوم" is the extremity of the wild pig's nose." Hence, because of the bad attributes we attach to the pigs in particular, we should preserve this image in the original metaphor, that is, likening the person to the pig. Therefore, a suggested version would be, "We shall brand (the pig) on the snout."

4.2. Irony

Irony is another way of generating conversational implicature by violating the Quality Maxim, that is, saying the opposite of what is meant, a speaker can indirectly convey his intended meaning. Larson (1984) calls this term "skewing between the meaning and the grammatical forms." (p. 242). In irony, she adds, an affirmative statement may be made when a negative statement is meant. Therefore, rendering verses containing ironic sense literally might



result in a strange or even an unacceptable translation. How can we realize that a certain utterance is ironic? More often than not, Newmark (1991) says “irony is indicated by tone, and in texts can only be detected when it is in contradiction with its context or with common sense.” (p. 174). Below are some illustrative examples where irony, which gives rise to conversational implicature, is troublesome to the translations of the Holy Quran:

"ذُقْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْكَرِيمُ" / الدخان 49 / (3)

This verse is ironic since the intended meaning is the opposite of what is said. With respect to the context, the utterance implicates that the addressee is not mighty and not noble, either. In this case, a direct literal translation which reads, “Taste; surely thou art the mighty, the noble” Arberry (1980, p. 481), cannot be taken to convey an irony similar to that in the original utterance. He has no indication of the implicated irony in the verse. Newmark (1991) proposes that literal translation can work in such cases, provided that the relevant words have straight one-to-one TL equivalents, and the SL and TL readerships have similar cultural and educational background. However, where there is a cultural gap, he adds, it may be advisable, in persuasive texts, to add a comment phrase such as “ironically understood,” “figuratively speaking” so to say, or to use inverted commas or an exclamation point – in all cases to alert the readership. This is manifested in the following versions of (3) above:

- “(saying): Taste! Lo! Thou wast forsooth the mighty, the noble!” (Pickthall, 1969, p. 540).

- “Taste thou (this)! Truly wast thou mighty, full of honour!” (Ali, 1946, p.1352). As can be observed, Pickthall and Ali have succeeded in transferring the irony into English to the effect that they could draw the

reader’s attention to the meaning implicated in the utterance; both of them have used the exclamation point to alert the readership. In addition, they have used the verb “wast” which refers to the addressee’s past time when he was mighty and noble, but now he is not.

We have seen in example (3) above that the translator has to refer to the total context to find out the irony and so that he can convey the intended meaning. But sometimes a translator can recognize the irony from the utterance itself; a certain word could be in contradiction with the other words within an utterance according to common sense. For example, in the verse:

"بَشِّرِ الْمُنَافِقِينَ بِأَنَّ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا" (4)
/النساء 138/

The word "بَشِّرِ" is in contradiction with the words that follow in the utterance, since we all know that this word signals good news and admirable things, but in this utterance, it goes with penalty and torture. Such an utterance, then, is clearly ironic, since the word "بَشِّرِ" is used instead of its opposite "أَنْذِرِ" (Qurub vol. 2 p. 138). As long as the exact opposite of the word is meant, a translator cannot provide a literal translation of this utterance; he should present the implicated meaning in his translation. Indeed, Ali has succeeded in transferring this utterance into English as, “To the Hypocrites give the glad tidings that there is for them (But) a grievous penalty.” Although he renders "بَشِّرِ" literally as “glad tidings,” he deliberately alerts the reader to grasp the intended meaning by using the parenthetical conjunct word ‘but’ which signals a contrast. Thus, he has rendered the utterance appropriately into English and at the same time kept the ironic sense by using the expression “give the glad tidings” and the conjunction “but.” By contrast, Pickthall renders the verse as, “Bear unto the

hypocrites the tidings that for them there is a painful doom....” (Pickthall, 1969, p. 94). His ignorance of the pragmatic sense in the verse hinders the appropriate translation. It is true that he presents a reasonable meaning of the utterance, but his translation neither conveys the sense of warning in the original, nor does it capture the irony implicated in the utterance. As a result, we can say that Ali’s translation is the most plausible, as it captures the intended meaning and transfers it into the receptor language while preserving the ironic sense.

4.3 Euphemisms

Euphemisms are another problematic area that the translators of the Holy Qur’an encounter. These euphemisms give rise to conversational implicature by violating Quantity Maxim. They are mainly used to avoid the mention of taboo terms. Larson (1984) maintains that “euphemism is used to avoid an offensive expression or one that is socially unacceptable, or one that is unpleasant” (p. 116).

In fact, the Holy Qur’an is a sacred book which uses euphemisms rather than taboos. Therefore, in translating utterances containing euphemisms, we should take into account that the equivalent words should express politeness as the original. To illustrate this point and see how some translators might distort the meaning of Qur’anic verses by failing to transfer euphemisms, let us consider the example in (5) below:

(5) / 20 / مريم / "ولم يمسسني بشرٌ ولم أكنْ بغيًّا"

As can be noticed here, Mary was wondering how she could get a baby, since she was not married and nor she was adulteress. Since this utterance relates to the area of sex, it should be rendered euphemistically to avoid unpleasant translation. It is of a great importance, then, to choose equivalent utterance compatible with the sanctity of the Qur’anic utterance.

Some translators of the Holy Qur’an, it should be noted, opt to vulgar words and so they distort the sanctity of the text. For instance, the utterance (5) above is translated by Pickthall as, “... seeing a man hath not touched me, and I am not “harlot” (Pickthall, 1969, p. 298). He renders the word "بغيا" as “harlot” which does not suit the sanctity of the text. The translator, therefore, should be aware of the implications of such euphemisms in order to be able to provide a polite translation. This can be observed in Ali’s translation of the verse above, “... no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste!” The word "بغيا" here is translated as “unchaste” which, I think, captures the intended meaning in the original and retains the sanctity of the text. The same can be said of Arberrery’s translation because he uses “unchaste” as an equivalent to "بغيا".

Although some of the translators above have succeeded in rendering the word "بغيا" into English, all of them have translated the word "يمسسنني" as “touched” which is ambiguous in English. A euphemistic expression such as “sleep with” can solve this ambiguity. A complete version, then, to (5) above would be, “... no man has slept with me, and I am not unchaste”. Consequently, it should be emphasized that the translator of the Holy Qur’an should take into account the Islamic human spirit and the sanctity of the text when translating utterances containing euphemisms.

Sometimes, euphemisms in the Holy Qur’an are misleading to the translators who render them literally with the result that they miss an essential part of the intended meaning. Consider (6) below:

(6) / 43 / النساء / "أو لامستم النساء"

We are concerned here with the euphemistic word "لامستم" which refers to sexual contact between man and woman. Qutub (vol.2, p.386) clarifies the euphemism in the utterance above, saying that the



utterance "أو لامستم النساء" expresses the intercourse between man and woman. Expressing this action by means of touching is more delicate and decent. Anyway, he maintains, it is an example given by Allah to people, when talking about such affairs, because it is not necessary to express them directly.

Therefore, "لامستم" in this utterance above does not only mean touching women, as rendered by many translators of the Holy Qur'an, like Pickthall and Arberry who have approached the word literally by using the equivalent "touched" for "لامستم". Ali has also done the same as he renders (6) above as, "... or you have been in contact with women". We notice that the translators above rendered the euphemistic word "لامستم" by a comparable euphemism in the receptor language. The equivalent euphemisms, which they have used, namely, "touched" and "in contact with", may be confusing to the reader in the receptor language. This confusion can be solved by using explanatory word in their versions, such as "sexually". A suggested version, therefore, to (6) above can be, "... or you have been in (sexual) contact with women".

To sum up, when translating euphemisms, the translator should be aware of the spirit of such words in order to find a suitable equivalent in the TL. In this regard, Larson (1984, p. 116) writes, "euphemisms will often need to be translated by a comparable euphemism in the receptor language". The translator should "recognize the euphemistic nature of the SL expression and then translates it with an appropriate and acceptable expression of the receptor language whether euphemistic or direct".

5. Conclusion

It should be noted that implicatures are literally false and so rendering them literally can distort the original. In most cases, the

translators of the Holy Qur'an choose one corresponding English word to render words bearing implicatures. But in this way, they fail to convey the same wealth of ideas implicated in the original. The translator should be aware of the implications of the verses. Therefore, he should consult one of the well-known interpretations of the Holy Qur'an so as to capture the intended meaning. After investigating the various categories of implicatures and looking for ways of translating them into English, the following strategies and findings have emerged:

1. Some metaphors, such as "يثنون صدورهم", can be translated by being "converted into sense".
2. Ironic utterances can be translated by using the exclamation point and also by enclosing the ironic term within inverted commas.
3. In translating euphemisms, the translator should be aware of the spirit of such words in order to find a suitable equivalent in the TL.

These findings and strategies, it should be noted, do not mean that the resultant version can capture all the implications intended by the Holy Qur'an. The research is only meant to provide a more practical way for handling Qur'anic implicature in translation.

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