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Investigating the Quality of the Translations of Quran through Equivalence Theory: A Religious Lexicology of the Word “Roshd”

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ABSTRACT

Translation has a prominent role in science, research, transfer of culture and establishing international communication. For the same reason, the accuracy of the conveyed message is extensively discussed in theory, practice and research on the translation. Yet, religious discourse, due to cultural depth and consequential weight, has a critical role in the discipline. Considering the same issues, the current research was an attempt to employ the theory of equivalence to investigate the quality of four English translations of the word “Roshd” in the holy Quran. To this aimed three verse of the sacred texts were selected in which the word was mentioned. Using Newman’s analytical principles, four different English translations of the selected word underwent comparative translation analysis. The findings showed that Ahmed Ali, Arberry, Pickthail and Qarai (four famous translators of the book) have adopted dynamic or functional strategies of equivalence in their translations. Also, comparing the semantic of the word *Roshd* in famous commentaries on holy Quran with their English renderings showed that these translations suffer from semantic reduction or semantic loss. In addition, the findings showed that in any translation quality assessment model of the sacred text, the linguistic analyses obtained from commentaries on the book must be included. These findings have implications for translators of religious texts, researchers in translation discipline and teachers of English for religious purpose.

Keywords: Arabic, English, Equivalence Theory, Holy Quran, Translation Quality

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1. Introduction

The importance of translation in science, research and communication introduced it as an established discipline from which numerous various theories came on the scene in the past decades from Catford (1965) to Nida and Taber (1982), Newmark (1988) and many recent theorists in twentieth century including Hatim and Mason (1997), House (1997), Pym (2010), Munday (2012) and etc. Many of these models were applicable to the real practice of translation and therefore proposed efficient analytical frameworks for explaining the process of translation, investigated the accuracy and quality of translation and put forward insights into the nature of the translation itself. Among these theories, equivalence has given a due weight to meaning and meaning-making which are fundamental parts of any translation. The concept of equal value can be found in some theoretical underpinnings of translation such as those of Nida and Taber (1982) and Catford (1965). Toury (1995) and Fawcett

(1997) define translation equivalence as establishment of an ideal relationship between the source and target codes of meaning irrespective of the codes themselves. Later, Dickins et.al, (2002) took the same theoretical stance and added that obtaining absolute equivalence at all levels of the translations is far from possible. Previously Nida and Taber (1982) had adopted a similar view and stated that equivalence is similarity in meaning rather than similarity in form because equal value is concerned with semantic and grammatical correspondence rather than form or identity. Accordingly, different approaches toward obtaining equivalence are proposed involving formal equivalence, denotative equivalence, connotative equivalence, text-normative equivalence and pragmatic (communicative) equivalence.

According to Bassnett (1991) the prime motive behind the emergence of these theories and models has been communication and the need for transfer of western wealth of new science but, one



cannot ignore the contribution of the rich treasury of eastern older science, literature, art and culture including Persian poetry and Islamic Arabic knowledge (Newman, 2002). Among Islamic sources, the holy Quran enjoys the most standing position, a source from which poets, philosophers, thinkers, physicians, astronauts are fed and the rituals of millions of Muslims around the word are extracted. Therefore, the book and the concepts within it have a great weight in science, art and jurisprudence but this importance is doubled translation discipline. Many translators have rendered the holy Quran in different languages but little research is conducted on the quality or accuracy of these translations. Considering this weight and research gap, the current research is an attempt to enjoy theoretical foundations of equivalence theory to shed light on the quality of the translation of the concept “رشد”¹, in four famous English translations of the holy Quran including Arberry, Ahmad Ali, Pickthall and Qarai . Thus, this research answers the following question:

Question: To what extent the concept “roshd” conveys an equal meaning in four famous English translations of the holy Quran?

2. Literature Review

Although contradictory in establishing the nature, definition or application of equivalence, reviewing the literature on translation studies shows that a bulk of research is conducted on the concept. Critically evaluating these theories, Panou (2013) concluded that the usefulness or not of the concept of equivalence to the translation process varies according to the stance of the translators concerned on what they regard are the virtues of equivalence itself. He also argued that most of translation theories are based on a binary distinctions between translation types where Nida and Taber single out formal from dynamic equivalence, Newmark tells the difference between semantic and communicative translation, Catford diagnoses formal correspondence different from textual equivalence while House in her model distinguishes overt and covert translation and Pym natural and directional equivalence.

Delving into Nida’s equivalence theory, Bednarova and Zakutna (2018) investigated terminological equivalence in

translation of philosophical text. To this aim, some extracts from a philosophical text with a special focus on philosophical terminology was compared with their published Slovak, German and Czech translations. The comparative analysis showed that the form and function of philosophical discourse is interconnected to such a degree that the form even constitutes a part of the text’s function. This study used different translation as criterion for evaluating quality through comparison but in the context of the present research, the form and function of the word “Roshd” is compared against an already established usage, semantic and function in famous commentaries on holy Quran which brings about a more robust conclusion.

Considering the fact that Arabic and English suffer from a relatively huge cultural distance, it can be claimed that the distance affects the way some cultural-specific and religious items are translated into English. The word “roshd” which has religious and jurisprudential semantic load is not an exception. Abdi (2019) has conducted a research on accuracy of translation of cultural-specific items and concluded that strategy in translation does not affect the quality of translation of these items but the level of education does.

Investigating the Quality of Arabic translations to English, Almutairi (2018) conducted a study and explored the efficacy of two translation quality assessment models on media translations of presidential speeches. To this aim he selected four presidential speeches and analyzed them through the adopted approaches. The findings showed that the seven standards in the adopted model do not cover all the elements of the source text language (Arabic). He concluded that for a proper analysis, the adopted model must be modified considering the characteristics of the source text. This sheds light on the fact that translation competency is not enough for a quality translation and even famous translators stand in the need of familiarity with in-depth aspects of the source language culture, ideology and local knowledge.

In the same line of research Aladwan (2011) conducted a study and investigated the quality of two English translations of an Arabic text (Naguib Mahfouz’s Midaq Alley). To this aim, he adopted a descriptive, evaluative and comparative approach to explore a valid criterion for proper evaluation of literary translation through which assessing the translation of

¹ Arabic: Roshd

the selected novel for this research was possible. Also the research aimed at measuring the shifts which occurred between English translations of the novel compared with the Arabic text. The finding of this study on the basis of the adopted model was that, both English translations of the Arabic novel suffered from translation quality problems in the areas of linguistics, pragmatics, cultural and text-specific features.

In one more study on the quality of English-Arabic translation, Ali Deeb (2005) conducted a study and arrived at taxonomy of problems in English to Arabic translations. The results of this study which was an empirical one was that translation problems found in English to Arabic translation corpus consists of four levels including supra, main, sub and sub-sub categories. In the supra category the problems encompass source text comprehension, target text production and inadequacies in the process of transfer while the main category includes micro-language problems, macro-text level problems and deficiencies in adopted techniques and strategies. However, the problems in sub-category covered a very larger area including grammar, vocabulary, spelling, rhetorical and stylistic devices, cohesion, register and style, background knowledge and culture, word order, fixed expressions, spelling slips, irony, omission and additions. This research was similar to El-Haddad (1999) who made an attempt to explore problems of literary translation from English into Arabic, aiming at investigating those aspects of culture and style in the "Old Man and the Sea" and its two Arabic translations.

And finally, in a research on the holy Quran, Tabrizi and Mahmud (2013), conducted a comparative analysis of famous translations of the book to explore the coherence issues among them from discourse structure point of view. The findings of the study showed that there are several different translations of Quran, which differ in structure and word domain. In these translations, the order of sentences, phrases, and words is different, not only with each other but also with the Arabic holy Quran, which affects computational text analyzing.

3. Methodology

According to Dickins et al (2002), any definition of equivalence in translation is either descriptive or prescriptive. Since obtaining equal value depends completely on the skills and ability of the translator in

performing the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic processing of the textual input of the source text for transfer of the source language text into the target language, the current research has adopted a descriptive approach to analyze the quality of translation using Newmark's principles (1988). These principles a framework for text analysis which can be employed in translation tasks which has some steps including a) understanding the intention of the text, b) the intention of the translator, c) understanding the style of the source text, d) understanding readership and e) understanding attitude, connotations and denotations. On the basis of such an analytical framework, we can judge the quality of translation as falling into one of the aforesaid categories of formal equivalence, denotative equivalence, connotative equivalence, text-normative equivalence and pragmatic (communicative) equivalence or unacceptable. In other words, these principles help the researcher to recognize and comprehend the source text, the norm, the type of text, the register, the style, the intention of the text and its readership in terms of its purpose, textual themes and subject matter.

3.1 Data Collection and Procedure

To fulfill the aims of the current study, a corpus of Quranic verses in which the word "رشد" was mentioned were collected and then analyzed through the adopted framework. Arriving at the meaning of the word in source text in each context, the researcher compared its equal value in English translations of the verses in the target language. Then, a descriptive analysis of comparisons was mentioned and judgments on quality of translations were explained.

4. Results and Discussion

The word "رشد" and its derivations are used in 19 verses of the holy Quran but in the present research the first three Quranic verses in which the word itself (not its derivations) is used are selected for further analysis. These verses include the 256th verse of Surah al-Baqarah, 146th verse of Surah al-Aa'raaf and the 51st verse of Surah al-Anbya.

Table 1: Comparative translation analysis of Quranic verses



al-Baqarah	256	كَذَّبُوا الرَّسُولَ مِنْ عَنِ الْقَوْمِ	Equivalence Type	Translation Error
Translation	Arberry	<i>Rectitude</i> has become clear from error	Functional	Semantic Loss
	Ahmed Ali	Distinct is the way of <i>guidance</i> now from error	Dynamic	Semantic Reduction
	Qarai	<i>Rectitude</i> has become distinct from error	Functional	Semantic Loss
	Pickthall	The <i>right direction</i> is henceforth distinct from error	Dynamic	Semantic Reduction
Al-Aa'raaf	146	وَلَنْ نَزُولَا عَلَيْهِمُ الرِّسَالُ لَّا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ	Equivalence Type	Translation Error
Translation	Arberry	and though they see the way of <i>rectitude</i> they will not take it for a way	Functional	Semantic Loss
	Ahmed Ali	and if they see the path of <i>rectitude</i> , will not take it to be a way	Functional	Semantic Loss
	Qarai	and if they see the way of <i>rectitude</i> they will not take it as [their] way	Functional	Semantic Loss
	Pickthall	and if they see the way of <i>righteousness</i> choose it nor for (their) way	Functional	Semantic Loss
al-Anbya	51	وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ رِشْدَهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ	Equivalence Type	Translation Error
Translation	Arberry	We gave Abraham aforetime his <i>rectitude</i>	Functional	Semantic Loss
	Ahmed Ali	We had earlier given Abraham <i>true direction</i>	Dynamic	Semantic Reduction
	Qarai	Certainly We had given Abraham his <i>rectitude</i> before	Functional	Semantic Loss
	Pickthall	And We verily gave Abraham of old his <i>proper course</i>	Dynamic	Semantic Reduction

As it can be seen the table above, considering the nature of the Quranic discourse, these four translator have adopted equivalence strategies (types) other than formal equivalence including dynamic equivalence and functional equivalence. According to Nida and Taber (1982), in dynamic equivalence the relationship between the receptor and message in source language is similar to that in the target language. Some of these translators (Ahmed Ali and Pickthall in the first and third verse) have tried to establish such a relationship in their translations. However, such equivalence should meet three different standards involving pointing toward the source language message, naturalness (considering the features of the receptor language) and closeness (striving toward highest degree of approximation).

Considering the semantic components of the word *roshd* in different Quranic contexts explained by famous exegetes such as Tabatabaei (1996) in al-Mizzan commentary on holy Quran, this word convey a meaning which is further on than semantic boundaries of *guidance* and *right direction* in the first verse or *true direction* or *proper course* in the 3rd verse. In other words, *Roshd* is an endless state of spiritual growth, evolution and nearness to God for which *guidance* or stepping into the *right direction* is only a preliminary move and a prerequisite. So, these translations violate the principle of closeness in equivalence and therefore suffer from semantic reduction because these translated words only cover a part of the more general concept of *Roshd*. Such a conclusion is strongly supported by

Safaei (2005) who states that finding guidance and stepping into the right path are only the primary stage for *Roshd* since *Roshd* is a dynamic state of evolution and gradual closeness to God for which no termination is imagined.

However, in the rest of the verses, as it is depicted in table 1, the translators have adopted a more functional approach toward translation where they have tried to employ a more meaning-based angle of look and reflect the divine thought expressed in Arabic language. In this approach, the translations suffer from greater semantic deficiencies since the *rectitude* is replaced for *Roshd* in these English translations. *Rectitude* and *righteousness* is only one manifestation of *Roshd* rather than the *Roshd* itself. In the first and the second verse, however, this deficiency is compensated for by co-texts “*error*” in the first verse and “*other way*” in the second verse. In other words, the co-existence of these words modifies and adds in the message conveyed by *rectitude* since *Roshd* or movement toward perfection and closeness to God stands in sharp contrast with *error* (Tabatabaei, 1996).

These findings are in line with Berdom (2007) who investigated the quality of Arabic to English translations of the poetic genre where he found that particular strategies and techniques have been employed in rendering the source text contents which produce as closely as possible proper renditions, emphasizing the concept of either formal or dynamic equivalence. However, these findings are different with the present study in two ways; first, the translators of Quran did not used formal equivalence in their strategies and secondly, considering the in-depth analysis of Quranic exegetes, the renderings are not too much close to the source text.

These findings also supports the findings of Almutairi (2018) who had concluded that for applying translation quality assessment models to Arabic to English translations, the specific features of source and target texts must be used to modify the adopted models because models cannot be used in a one-size-fit-all approach for all text types. Thus, taking into account the semantic load of Quranic concept, incorporating analyses from famous Quranic commentaries into translations assessment models deems necessary.

As a translator of the bible holy texts, Nida adopted a more dynamic approach

toward translation of culturally-loaded texts, trying to produce the same impact of the bible on the audiences of his translation where he states that dynamic equivalence in translation goes beyond correct communication of information (Panou, 2013). However, even adopting this wide angle of look in translation does not guarantee the accuracy of translation. In addition, even dynamic equivalence is not free from criticism. Broeck (1978) believes that it is not possible to measure the equivalent effect in translation because different texts exert different effect or elicit different response in two different cultures in different periods of time. In sum, it can be stated that competence in translation and adopting proper translation strategies does ensure the translation quality. In order to arrive at an accurate translation, familiarity with subtle details of target and source languages, cultures and resources are critically required.

5. Conclusion

Due to the importance of translation in literature and on top of that the translation of weighty texts for science and culture, the current research was an attempt to investigate to what extent the concept “رشد” conveys an equal meaning in four famous English translations of the holy Quran? The findings showed that four investigated translations used dynamic and functional equivalence strategies for conveying meaning of the selected word. However, both these strategies suffer from serious deficiencies in translation which are semantic reduction and semantic loss respectively. It is recommended that for developing or adopting any translation quality assessment model for English translations of Quran, the semantic knowledge obtained from different commentaries on holy Quran must be used. These findings have implications for translators of religious texts, researchers in translation discipline and teachers of English for religious purpose.

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