

Celia Fong

### The Quran, Translation, and Controversy

Did you know that Quran has been translated from Arabic into 114 languages (Rana 1)? Did you know that none of these translations are considered the Quran, only translations of the Quran? In any given situation where a text is translated from one language to another, a new, different, text will indubitably be produced. However, this is not to say the meaning or context of the original text is lost. Because of the inherent qualities of translation, the Arabic Quran will always differ from the original text, and invariably be reinterpreted to different ‘versions’ of the Quran. However, this can be said for many texts across the board that have been translated, but are still nominally and contextually considered the original text. Perhaps because the Quran is studied by scholars and worshippers alike, its prophetic meaning is taken to heart while it is simultaneously studied for its historical insights. Although most Arabic speaking Muslims—and most Muslims across the spectrum for that matter—see the Quran as the true Quran only in Arabic, its translations should be embraced with the same connotation as the original version. The Quran is a scripture that strives to perpetuate its relevance and message across languages, cultures, and issues, but most importantly across generations. Although translation implies inherent qualities of alteration, the Quran translated should still hold the same significance as the original Arabic version of the Holy Muslim scripture by virtue of Islam’s fundamental goal to proliferate via the Quran.

The Quran itself is ambiguous in nature and contains many vague pronouns not necessarily tied to any particular person, place, or object. Furthermore, it contains very few details of locations, historical references, or names. As Nickel Gordon, a scholar in Christian-Islam inter relational studies elaborates, the Quran is “text without context” (Nickel 233) and is

open to interpretation even within the Arabic language. The Quran has been studied for thousands of years by grammarians, lexicographical scholars, and theologians. With over 256 million Muslims in the world, only 18% of which are Arabic speakers (Khan 1), it would be unfair to claim that the other 82% practicing Islam are only reading a text considered to be a deviation from the original text. The sheer number of non-Arabic speaking Muslims and possible converts that would not be considered to have access to the 'authentic' denotation of the Quran alienates millions from a religion that seeks to spread its word and relevance to all.

To Muslims, every word in the Quranic text is taken literally, and is the unaltered, verbatim command of God. Any distortion of the original written scripture could be seen as the distortion of God's voice and implied prophetic meaning, warping the connotative implications of the Quranic text, and in turn making it impossible to glean the true, pure, untouched meaning of the Quran. According to Omar Sheikh Al-Shabab, a scholar and published author from King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, the inherent qualities of translation inevitably change the meaning of any given text. He expands on the idea of translative deviation in his article "*The Evolution of Translation Culture: Translating the Holy Quran into French*," "translation is an act of subjective interpretation and thus bound to produce difference, and thus new, independent texts" (Al-Shabab 22). Al-Shabab goes on further to prove his point by relating his claim to the more specific issue of Quranic translation by raising questions such as "How much effort is made by the translator to balance his/her input with the original text or previous translation?" (Al-Shabab 23) or "Do successive translations of the same text show a 'logical' continuum which may reveal predictable patterns?" (Al-Shabab 23). His criticism is totally logical in describing translation culture and the objective study of translation, however what matters most is that the context of the translation is taken into account. For the most part, the Quran, and many

other religious texts, have been translated for the purpose of spreading the religion; any other agenda pinned to the action of translation most likely is stated by the translator. Otherwise, the purpose of translation for the spread of religion should not be frowned upon, if it is one of the fundamental goals of the religion.

Most Arabic Muslims agree that the Arabic text of the Quran is the exclusive version of the Quran. This belief, however, could stem from a bitter history with the first few translations of the Quran by European Crusaders. Al-Shabab claims that translation will always result in inadequacy and uses examples from the 16th century French-translated L'Alcoran as evidence. He explains that the first translations were by European Crusaders and Christian Orientalists, not Muslims (Al-Shabab 25). The need to translate the Quran to English arose when non-Arabic speaking people had embraced Islam, but also in rebuttal to the European-translated version of the Quran which included often hostile commentary on the part of the Europeans. According to Abdul-Raheem Kidwai, an established author of *Translating the Untranslatable: A Survey of English Translations of the Quran*, and retired member of the Indian parliament, "the early English translations of the Quran by Muslims stemmed mainly from the pious enthusiasm on their part to refute the allegations leveled by the Christian missionaries against Islam in general and the Quran in particular" (Kidwai 1). It can be concluded that the main reason Muslims translated the Quran to English at all was to provide a 'faithful' Quranic translation and an authentic summary of Islam for Europeans. Rather, the Quran was eventually translated by Muslims not to spread the Quran's message in other languages, but to correct fallacies that had been made in other translated versions.

The consensus of most scholars and worshippers with similar mindsets to Al-Shabab's is that deviations from the original text can be charged with many different agendas. That is to say

that many of the translations that occur are subjective to the world-views of the those translating them, and thus the meaning gleaned from the original text becomes malleable as the translator shapes the essence of the what is conveyed. These claims, however, are not mutually exclusive for translators that do not hail from conservative or strict-practicing backgrounds. According to Johanna Pink, a scholar of Islamic Studies from Brown University, most translations of the Quran that occurred later were actually by ‘professional male exegesis translators, usually holding a faculty position in Islamic Ideology’ (Pink 4). These translators sought to provide religious guidance through their interpretations rather than apply the Quran’s relevance to contemporary events. Thus arguments that contend that appointed translators of the Muslim religion do not hold an agenda or assert that their translations are any less subjectively informed hold no weight.

Another facet of interpretative and translative appropriation is ‘Tafsir’ or the studying and interpretation of the Quran (Saleh 284). Such practices are common in the exegesis of many religious texts, however translation could technically be considered a form of Tafsir. This is especially true for those who do not speak the Arabic language but seek to analyze and acquiesce the meaning of the original Prophet’s message. In modern times, exegetical writers try to make a conscious effort to relate the Quran to issues in the modern world, thus lining up its meanings with science and reason (for example, explaining ‘miracles’). The exegesis of the Quran can also be seen through modernist, scientific, sociopolitical, literary-historical, thematic, and feminist lenses, not just pure translation from one language to the next (Saeed 7561). Through these lenses, the context of translation could seem tampered with. However, if translation is seen as a method of Tafsir, and Tafsir is interpretation of the Quran, its applicability to a wide range of contemporary issues does, in fact, diffuse its relevance to more individuals across the cultures.

Moreover, according to Nickel, one can tell by the use of certain literary devices in the Quran that it was passed down by oral tradition. Before the advent of written history, the Quran was the verbatim command of God passed down by word of mouth. Just like a game of telephone, or any instance in which a story is passed along by many people—and especially over long spans of time—the version that ended up being recorded most likely varied from the moment God spoke unto Mohammad anyway. Therefore, even the Arabic text itself most likely contains discrepancies and distortions in memory, meaning the original Arabic texts, the original words spoken to Mohammad, and translation of the Quran, all most likely differ slightly. If variations even within the realm of Arabic Quranic translation occur, translation across languages should not be a concern.

Conclusively, translations of the Arabic Quran should be considered the Quran and not ‘the Quran translated’ for a variety of reasons. Not only are claims against the validity and agenda of a given translator invalid as translators within the Arabic language subjectively interpret, but the Quran itself is an ambiguous and open to interpretation in nature, as it seeks to apply its relevance to a broad spectrum of people. Because of Islam’s fundamental goal to spread, like most religions, it cannot do so without the act of translation. Non-Arabic speakers should be able to access the text and be able to consider it the ‘original word of God’. Most importantly, in today’s modern society, with the proliferation of connectivity and shared ideas, translation will happen regardless. If the profusion of information continues to spread at as rapid a rate as it currently does, the Quran, if considered its true form in any language, will be able to spread just as it aims to do. Essentially, considering translations of the Quran to be as significant as the Quran itself will not detriment, but only serve as means to accomplish a goal of Islam and spread the word of the Prophet Mohammad.

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