

Debates around the translation of the Qur'an

Between jurisprudence and translation studies

Abstract

Qur'an translation can be tackled from many different angles. In the following chapter, we would like to present it from two complementary perspectives. The first is historical and attempts an overview of the various contextual conditions of Qur'an translation from the earliest times to the most contemporary. Along the way, the broad lines of the main positions between the acceptability of translating the sacred text and its prohibition will be exposed. The second perspective will focus on the translation studies dimension whereby the originality of the sacred text is problematized not only in light of the jurisprudential discourse, but also at that of the representation of the Arabic language as original in relation to all other languages. These two perspectives – the religious interpretations of translating the sacred text and the imaginary of the Arabic language – constitute a brief summary of a centuries-long debate that could shed light on some of the challenges of our time, including the relationship between religion and politics, the Arab (de)centrism and the conditions of another Arab renaissance.

Since the end of its revelation (632 CE), the preservation of the Qur'an quickly gave rise to important concerns as the influence of Islam grew outside of Arabia. While Muslims were already well established by the time of the caliphate of 'Uthman (577 - 656) in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and at the borders of Azerbaijan, divergent manners of reciting the Qur'an had already started appearing. According to Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman¹, new Muslims were reciting it in a manner that was altering its meanings. In response to the solicitation of his companions, the caliph decided to reproduce the Qur'an, which had been compiled and preserved by his predecessors, by making multiple copies available, in order to provide an official reference to be distributed in all the major centers of the Islamic state, still in expansion (von Denffer 2001, 61-62).

Even though the preservation of the rigorous pronunciation of the Qur'an based on the Meccan dialect was guaranteed through its written reproduction, the contact of the Arabic language – for which the Qur'an became the archetype – with other cultures constituted an even greater challenge. How was the Qur'an, which had been revealed in a 'clear Arabic language' (Qur'an 16:103), whose very name means "expression,"² going to withstand transformation as a result of its contact with other languages? Can the sacred text of Islam, whose claimed universality seems contradicted by its linguistic specificity, be translated?

In this chapter, it is proposed to deal with the question of the translation of the Qur'an from two different, yet complementary, angles. The first consists in presenting this question from an historical point of view, from the dawn of Islam until the contemporary era. In this non-exhaustive overview, the aim is to reveal the sociopolitical motives behind the translation of the Qur'an throughout history, as well as the disagreements between its proponents and detractors. This will be accompanied, as relevant, by summarized assessments of some of the representative translations of the Qur'an, based on textual comparison and an analysis of their introductions and prefaces. The second angle will attempt to elaborate on the analysis of the debate and to look at it

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1. One of the companions of Prophet Muhammad, and governor over one of the provinces of Persia under the caliphate of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (579 - 644).
 2. The triconsonantal root *'araba*, which is the base of the name of the language, comes from the verb *'araba*, which means "to formulate", "to express."
 3. see Abu Layleh (2002) 103-140

from a translation studies perspective. In what way does Qur'anic translation offer a particular perspective on the representation of translation in the field of sacred texts? What are the issues at play in translation according to Muslim jurists? And ultimately, how is translation understood between the initial linguistic conservatism of Arab Muslims and the universality of Islam?

A brief history of Qur'anic translation

Qur'anic translation is not a new topic of discussion; in fact, it goes all the way back to the time of its revelation. In order to propagate its universal message, Prophet Muhammad (570 – 632 CE) sent messengers and letters to the kings, leaders and chiefs of other peoples. When messengers were used, they were well acquainted with the language of their recipient, and it was up to them to interpret the content of the letters, which were often punctuated with Qur'anic verses. Islamic history tells us that some of the companions of the Prophet translated parts of the Qur'an in his lifetime. For instance, Salman al-Farisi, born in Persia, would have translated the first chapter of the Qur'an in Persian, while Ja'far ibn Abī Tālib would have translated into Ge'ez, Abyssinia's language, the verses related to the story of Jesus and Mary to the Negus of Ethiopia, when he was sent as ambassador at the beginning of the prophetic mission (Al-Maraghi 1936: 24).

However, the internal debate concerning the translation of the Qur'an became much more serious after the passing away of the Prophet, when large numbers of people unable to speak Arabic embraced Islam. At the time of the death of Muhammad, Islam had spread almost everywhere in the Arabian Peninsula and to some parts of Iraq. Between 632 CE and 660 CE, Islam established itself as the religion all the way to the borders of Persia on the East, all across Turkey to the North, and had reached Libya to the West. Over the next 70 years, this expansion continued, covering Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, parts of Russia, all of North Africa as well as Spain. The expeditious pace of this expansion and its geographical reach were necessarily going to favour the translation of the Qur'an in order to make its meanings accessible to all non-Arab Muslims.

Early and partial translations

The first translations of the Qur'an were therefore made into the languages of the new Muslims, but this did not happen without some resistance. For a Muslim, the Qur'anic language is one of the most miraculous aspects of the book. What fueled the debate around the translation of the Qur'an was, on the one hand, a motivation to translate it to make it accessible, while on the other hand, a resistance stemming from a strict religious position. The questions of whether it is linguistically possible and religiously permissible to translate the Qur'an had practical ramifications for Muslims: can prayers be observed using a translation? These are some of the questions with which jurists, exegetes and theologians had to contend. More conservative thinkers expressed a categorical disapproval of Qur'an translation; at the opposite end, some jurists not only allowed Qur'anic translation in general, but also the recitation of the translation during prayer, as we shall see. Between these two extremes there were many nuanced positions. Of course, all these opinions were of a technical religious nature, based on Islamic theology, as opposed to being of a purely rational and practical nature, but they are worth mentioning because they are still relevant in the contemporary discourse on the topic. The religious dimension of the

debate, however, is not the only one to consider: by looking at extra-religious and extra-linguistic factors, we can identify general tendencies that lead to an increase or a decrease of Qur'anic translation across history, as well as an openness or a reluctance from the religious thinkers on the topics.

Partial translations of the Qur'an appeared quite early. For instance, a Syriac translation would have been completed in the 7th century, in Berber in 738 CE, in "Indian" (probably Sindhi) in 883 CE, and in Persian in 956 CE (see Binark & Halit 1986; Mingana 1925; Hamidullah 1995; Qarra'i 1999).

Translations by non-Muslims

Already with the Syriac translations, we find an understandable tendency from non-Muslims to translate the Qur'an for polemical reasons, Islam being the new and fast-spreading religion. To counter this expansion and protect one's own religion against it, there was a need not only to study Islam through secondary sources, but through its own sacred text. It is, however, in medieval Europe that this interest was developed at a much larger scale. In this spirit, we encounter the Latin translation of Robert of Ketton (1143 AD), the Italian translation of Andrea Arrivabene from Ketton's Latin (1547 AD), and André du Ryer's French translation (published in 1647 AD). Given that it was a religious fervour that triggered these translation projects, it is legitimate to wonder about the reliability of such translations.

In his article 'Tafsir and Translation,' Burman explains that while Ketton's Latin translation of 1143 became the standard version accessible to European readers until the eighteenth century, it was also heavily criticized since the fifteenth century to the point of being considered the worst Latin translation of the Qur'an, given the licentious liberties taken by the translator in misleading the reader and reordering the text (1998: 705-706).

A similar assessment is provided by others, including André Chouraqui, translator of the Scriptures of all three monotheistic religions. He considers Ketton's translation extremely polemical and done with the sole purpose of being used as a tool of ideological war, therefore completely betraying the original: 'From the sonority of the Qur'an, from its throbbing rhythms, and from the poetic splendour of the original, there remains almost nothing.' (Chouraqui 1990; our translation).

As for the translation of Du Ryer, edited five times in five years and then translated into English, German and Dutch, it carried the same traits as that of Ketton's. In the Preface to his own translation, George Sale says of it that it is 'far from being a just translation, there being mistakes in every page, besides frequent transpositions, omissions, and additions, faults unpardonable in a work of this nature.' (Sale 1882: 7)

The first English translation of the Qur'an, completed by Alexander Ross in 1649, is in fact a translation from Du Ryer's French translation. The fact that the translator did not know Arabic and that even his understanding of French was not that of a specialist, already gives an idea of the quality of his translation. While the subtitle refers to the Qur'an as 'Turkish vanities' (Ross 1649), the Admonition of the next few pages further reveals the intentions behind the translation and announces its tone:

[...] so viewing thine enemies in their full body, thou mayst the better prepare to encounter, and I hope overcome them. [...] Such as it is, I present it to thee, having taken the pains only to translate it out of *French*, not doubting, though it hath been a poyson, that hath infected a very great, but Most unsound part of the Universe, it may prove an Antidote, to confirm in thee the health of Christianity. (*ibid.*, A1-A4)

Despite the presence of other translations, such as that of Marc of Toledo (completed in 1211), it was those highly criticized translations that became the foundation and the reference for the Western translations of the Qur'an, especially between the 16th and 18th centuries, because they were in line with the general positioning and attitudes of the time towards Islam.

From the 18th century onward, most of the Qur'anic translations were done directly from Arabic. This is the case, for instance, of the translations of George Sale (published in 1734), the French translation of Claude-Étienne Savary (1786), and F. E. Boysen's German translation (1773). And although these translations were remarkably more reliable than previous attempts, they still suffered from major problems.

To mention only one example, George Sale does not dissimulate his intentions or his attitude. While his is often cited as being one of the more "impartial" (to use Sale's own term) and less fanatical translations in tone, on the first page of his preface he begins by saying that, while the Qur'an is a 'manifest forgery,' Muhammad's law was still met with an 'unexampled reception' adding that 'they are greatly deceived who imagine it to have been propagated by the sword alone.' And since those who have attempted to refute it have done such a disservice to Christianity, his translation was to provide to the Protestants the tool to finally overthrow it. In short, his aim was 'to enable us to effectually [...] expose the imposture.' (Sale 1882, 3-4) After making these intentions clear, Sale then proceeds in formulating rules to facilitate the conversion of Muslims, further revealing the functional purpose of his translation.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Qur'an was translated into many other European languages, and a number of orientalist undertook to translate the Qur'an as an academic project, for their self-edification. Among the important translations of this period are those of E. H. Palmer (1880), Richard Bell (1937-1939), and A. J. Arberry (1953), the latter still being among the best translations done by a non-Muslim.

In the 19th century, missionaries started translating the Qur'an, but this time, into oriental languages and dialects. Godfrey Dale translated it into Swahili (1924), Michael Samuel Cole into Yoruba (1906), William Goldsack into Bengali (1908), and A. Shah Masihi into Hindi (1915). In this period, followers of certain sects, the Ahmadis for examples, also proceeded with their own translations, which were based on their respective theological beliefs and interpretations. While the intentions of the missionaries translating the Qur'an were usually clearly announced, other translations started appearing which were presented as being more neutral and reliable, when they were in fact considered as unreliable. Many of the translations of the orientalist fall in this category. Muslims found them appalling because they seemed to treat the Qur'an as nothing more than an ancient work of literature, without any respect for its sanctity or sacredness for Muslims, who view its ordering and language as part of its sacredness.

There are numerous examples of translations that Muslims considered distorting the Qur'an because of the liberties taken by the translators, and which were viewed as being ideologically motivated. The translation of Niseem J. Dawood (*The Koran*, 1956) took many liberties with the original, contained many inaccuracies, and rearranged the Qur'anic text somewhat chronologically and from the shortest to the longest chapters in its first edition. The translation of Aharon Ben Shemesh (*The Noble Qur'an*, 1971) contains many clearly polemical modifications, and its main purpose is to demonstrate that the text is derived from the Old Testament, which is in itself a recurrent theme often found in polemically slanted works on the Qur'an, including

reviews of translations (e.g. Mohammed 2005)³. The translation of Rashad Khalifa (*Qur'an: The Final Scripture*, 1981), based on much mathematical and computer analysis of the text especially around the number 19, never gained much credence in the Islamic world or in academic circles, most likely because the translator made claims that the archangel Gabriel had told him that he was a messenger himself, that a few verses of the Qur'an were apocryphal, and the translation in many instances seems to be biased for the purpose of promoting his own teachings. Thomas Cleary's translation (*The Qur'an*, 2004) uses uneven English in style and register, ranging from the most poetic to the simply conversational almost randomly.

Muslims were increasingly aware of the activities of orientalist and missionaries, and it is in reaction to these, as well as to these sectarian Islamic translations, that some Muslims began translating the Qur'an themselves with the aim of producing a translation that is representative of "mainstream" Islam.

Collectively, these translations gave the impression to Muslims that translators were allowing themselves to question the authenticity of their holy book, reorder its chapters and verses, and criticize its grammar and terminology. Furthermore, Muslims who belonged to minority sects that are sometimes not recognized by the majority ones as belonging to Islam, proceeded with their own translations, oftentimes to justify their respective divergence and beliefs. In reaction to these attempts, sometimes viewed as direct attacks against their religion, some Muslims began translating the Qur'an themselves with the aim of producing a translation that is representative of "mainstream" Islam, as can be seen from the prefaces and introductions of these translations.

Translations by Muslims

Three English translations, completed by Muslims wanting to defend the Qur'an against the translations of the missionaries, appeared between 1905 and 1912⁴. The apologetic intentions of these translators were openly stated. Between 1930 and 1960, more mature, professional and scholarly translations were published. In fact, two translations of this period are still the most well-known today. The first is that of Pickthall (published in 1939 in London) and the second belongs to A. Yusuf 'Ali (completed between 1934 and 1937). Although Pickthall's language is archaic and he provides very few annotations, while Yusuf Ali's is heavily annotated, both of these works are highly respected translations by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and they have become a reference to subsequent translation attempts. Another reliable translation completed at the same time is that of Abdul Majid Daryabadi (in Lahore 1941 to 1957), but it is nowhere near the popularity of Pickthall's and Yusuf Ali's. Since 1960, numerous English translations of the Qur'an have appeared, but none of them presenting any elements that truly stand out as substantially novel. Muhammad Asad's translation (1980), which, although of a high linguistic consistency and readability, diverges at times from the interpretations that are generally accepted by Muslim exegetes towards more allegorical and Mu'tazilite (or rationalizing) biases. There is, however, good merit in the substantial commentary accompanying the original text, in addition to its translation and transliteration. There are also a few other recent translations that are reliable and which offer a high level of readability, such as those of Sarwar (1981) and Irving (1985), but

4. Abul Hakim Khan (Patiala 1905); Dehlawi Mirza Hairat (Delhi 1912) and Mirza Abul Fadl (Allahabad 1912)

they provide no explanatory notes⁵. And there is of course the translation commissioned and published by Saudi Arabia, which is the most common one in use in the world today as a result of its free distribution, and which promotes a Salafist and literal interpretation of the Qur'an, reflecting the country's official religion of Islam as understood by the followers of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792).⁶

Three recent works do stand out in terms of the accuracy of their rendering of the meanings, and their non-sectarian interpretations. In order of publication, these are Ali Quli Qara'i's *The Qur'an: With a phrase-by-phrase English translation* (2003); Muhammad A. S. Abdel Haleem's *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (2004); and *The Study Qur'an* (2015), which was prepared by a team of scholars led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The latter attempts to position itself as the main translation for academics and scholars and provides a substantial amount of exegetical commentary from beginning to end, displaying references to a broad selection of commentaries from the main Islamic schools of thought. This, however, may give the impression that these interpretations carry equal weight in the Islamic world, when in reality there is almost a consensus on only one of the interpretations, for example. Finally, it is difficult to miss what seems to be a contradiction between the numerous interpretations and references throughout the work in favour of pluralism, and the fact that it has wilfully excluded 'modernistic or fundamentalist interpretations that have appeared in parts of the Islamic world during the past two centuries' (Nasr 2015: xl), hence favouring "traditional Islamic" scholarship.

*French Translations*⁷

On the French side, translation by Muslims and non-Muslims also abound. Kasimirski's translation is interesting in that it remained the only French translation for a long time after its publication in 1840. Régis Blachère reorganized the content of the Qur'an in his translation (1850) according to what he considered to be the order of revelation, and also added numerous notes. The translation of Denise Masson (1967) has the merit of trying to be as useful to the believing Muslim as to the curious non-Muslim. In December 1990, André Chouraqui's translation saw the light of day. This translation was completed by adopting the method used by the exegetes of the Torah, who derive multiple meanings of the word by permuting the letters of its tri-consonantal root. The method aroused a bit of controversy, because it often ends up making choices that are surprising to anyone who understands Arabic. For instance, he translates the word *rahman*, usually translated by merciful or clement, into *matriciant*, which he derives from the notion of matrix. In 1991, the translation of the Islamic Studies scholar Jacques Berque was published. He concentrated his efforts in trying to reproduce a part of the rhythm, style and poetics that are found in the original Arabic.

Among the French translations completed by Muslims, there are two that are much more commonly used. The important scholar Muhammad Hamidullah published a French translation in 1959 which received the approval of the religious authorities and the respect of Muslims in general. Similarly, Hamza Boubakeur, president of the Great Mosque of Paris, published his own translation in 1990, which was 25 years in the making. More recently, A. Penot (2004) has given

5. For a brief bibliographical chronology of some English translations, see Kidwai 1998.

6. Translated by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, this translation has been approved by the Saudi government, which distributes millions of copies of it every year across the world through its embassies. This strong presence is mostly due to the enormous means of dissemination.

7. See A. Neuve-Eglise (2006).

himself the mandate of ‘making the Qur’an accessible to all without ever betraying the original’ (Penot 2004: x-xi). Many francophone Muslims seem to hold in high esteem the translation of M. Chiadmi (2004), which most likely gained its popularity as a result of its high degree of readability. Also of note are the efforts of Y. ‘Alawi (Christian Bonaud) and J. Hadidi, who have provided a shi’ite translation in which they describe their methodology and choices in detailed commentary. Their translation (see Chodkiewicz 2002) is still partial, since only one volume of their project has been published (in 2000). The volume in question, more than 600 pages long, provides the annotated translation of only the first two *suras*, or chapters of the Qur’an.⁸ (See also: Fouchécour 2002)

To Translate, or not to translate, the Qur’an

Going back to the tendencies of the religious leaders to encourage or discourage the translation of the Qur’an, their decision rests in part on factors that rely purely on *fiqh*, or Islamic law.. But the historical, social, and political factors should be explored for a better and more nuanced understanding of the positions of these religious leaders, who also take these factors in consideration in coming up with their verdicts. Certain historical periods can clearly be identified as having provided conditions that are conducive to the production of more Qur’anic translations. The translations of Ketton (1143) and Abraham of Toledo (1264) for example, were completed during the Andalusian period, while the *shu‘ubiyya*⁹ movement favoured the translation of the Qur’an especially towards Persian. At other points in history, Muslim scholars prohibited the translation of the Qur’an. Swinging from one end of the spectrum to the other usually happens over long periods, but many significant changes took place during the last century, and it is worth exploring this period specifically, even briefly.

Before the decline of the Ottoman Empire¹⁰, a reformist current had developed within the intellectuals and scholars of Islam. To a certain extent, this was due to Muslim academics who were studying abroad and came back to their native lands with what might be generally described as a ‘modernist agenda’; this took the form of cultural, religious and political reforms (through what was known at the time as the *Tanzimat* of the Ottoman Empire) (see Hussain 2011, Yavuz & Esposito 2003, Palmer 1995). It is therefore not at all surprising to learn that there was very little resistance to the translation of the Qur’an during this period, which can be correlated with a spike in the number of published translations of the Qur’an.

With the fall of the Ottoman empire, the abolition of the political system of caliphate in Turkey, and the establishment of committees to translate the Qur’an into Turkish using the Latin alphabet, the majority of Muslim thinkers reassessed their previous position. All these steps suddenly looked like they were part of a larger imperialist plot to get rid of an insurmountable obstacle to the British expansion, namely, the Ottoman caliphate which symbolised the unity of Muslims. Specifically, the translation of the Qur’an into Turkish by the missionaries was seen by Muslims as a sociopolitical means of pressure (Wilson 2014).

Already in 1908, the Arabic journal *al-Manar* published the fatwa of Muhammad Rashid

8. This amounts to about 1/12 of the Qur’an.

9. Social and cultural movement started by non-Arab Muslims demanding an equal status and equal rights to those of the Arab origin. It contributed to the fall of Umayyads and enabled the Abbasids to take advantage of the circumstances and seize political power. For political and strategic reasons, the Abbasids encouraged non-Arabs to display their non-Arab roots with pride.

10. See for instance ‘Ottoman Empire’ in the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (2001-2004).

Rida which, after reconfirming the impossibility of translating the Qur'an, proceeds to prohibit the translation of its meanings even for those for whom Arabic is incomprehensible in the sense of considering it theologically equivalent to the original Arabic (Rida 1326/1908). He suggests, rather, to provide the translation of a simplified commentary of the Qur'an and to disseminate it among non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, thus allowing them to understand what they're reading¹¹ while avoiding to further endanger the unity of Muslims (Abou Sheishaa 2001). In 1925, the scholars at the head of al-Azhar University in Cairo prohibited the ownership and circulation of an English translation of the Qur'an and ordered its border services to burn all copies (see Nur Ichwan 2001, Weigers 1995). Not only did this divide the Muslim masses, but also scholars. On the one side were those who not only prohibited translating the Qur'an but even possessing a translation, while on the other, voices were advocating a duty to translate to counter the efforts of the missionaries and their hostile translations, as well as to make accessible the true teachings of Islam. In 1936, the debate was animated anew when the Council of al-Azhar wanted to produce and publish a translation of the meanings of the Qur'an in partnership with Egypt's Ministry of Education. This time, the question was sent to the highest religious authorities in Egypt, and their answer was unequivocal: translating the meanings of the Qur'an is permissible. And since then, numerous translations of the Qur'an have either been published or approved by al-Azhar, including those of Ahamed (1999), Fakhry (2004), Hammad (2008), Ghali (1997) and Khattab (2015).

Ahamed's translation was published in at least eight editions until 2013, with numerous revisions brought to every edition, including the title, which was appeared as *The Glorious Qur'an* (1999), *English Translation of the Message of the Qur'an* (2007) and *Interpretation of the Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (2008). Hammad's translation is a meticulous academic work where the text still flows very well in an English that is neither colloquial nor formal. By opposition, Ghali's translation is at times difficult to follow for readers who do not have access to the Arabic or who do not have the Islamic context required for the verse in question, but it has clearly been identified by some studies as being one of the most precise in rendering the meaning (see Sadiq 2010). Khattab's translation, highly readable and very well researched, provides a paragraph of context for every chapter, as well as a heading for every verse, which has the benefit of providing selected context, but the danger of misdirecting the reader in limiting their interpretation to that context. The simplicity of the language adopted by Ahamed and Fakhry (see Rippin 2004) loses nuances that are not missed by other translations, such as Haleem's, Nasr's and Khattab's. The approval and publication of multiple translations of the Qur'an by al-Azhar, one of the most prestigious Islamic universities in the world, has taken away most of the vigour of the previous debate about the translation of the Qur'an, and when it does come up, it is mostly from a theoretical perspective (see Mahmassani 1961, 66-70).

The debate over the translation of the Qur'an: between inimitability and universality

Despite the legal nature of the discussions around the translation of the Qur'an, and beyond the simple statement of its permissibility, these discussions are in fact rarely limited to the legal arguments and often include nuanced considerations such as the specificity of Arabic as a

11. This is not to use Arabic and the Arab ethnicity in general as an intermediary and conduit for all knowledge, but rather, to rally all Muslims around the unique reference of the original text, which happens to be in Arabic.

language, Qur'anic rhetoric and its inimitability, and even unsupported opinions about the practice of translation, its nature, and its objectives. Presenting an overview of such issues and the very detailed discussions and commentaries they have engendered would require an independent and more voluminous work. This section will therefore be limited to an abridged selection of the most relevant questions raised.

Representations of the Arabic language

Regardless of the orientation of the argumentation, all discussions surrounding the translation of the Qur'an recognize the very particular status of Qur'anic Arabic. Muslim scholars are almost unanimous in this regard: 'There is not the least doubt about the fact that the Qur'an that is not in Arabic is not the Qur'an.' (Al-Maraghi 1936, in Al-Razzaq, our translation). In other words, when it is not in Arabic, the sacredness of the book is compromised. In fact, one of the main legal arguments cited against the possibility of reciting a translation of the Qur'an during the ritual prayer consists in saying: Muslims have been ordered to recite the Qur'an during the prayer, and since a translation of the Qur'an is not the Qur'an, it may not be recited in lieu of the Qur'an. This argument, however, cannot be extended to the rest of the Islamic ritual prayer, during which the uttered statements come from the prophetic tradition, and not the Qur'anic text (Kuwaiti Ministry 2004, vol. 27, 73).

Some of the loudest voices in praising the Arabic language unapologetically are of those who oppose Qur'anic translation. For many of them, the evidence for the superiority of Arabic rests in the argument that God chose Arabic as the language in which to reveal His last message to humanity (see Qusi 2016, Umar 2015). Others have even gone as far as stating that Arabic will be the language spoken in heaven (Al-Tūfī cited in Suleiman 2003, 44), but this is based on an apocryphal narration from Prophet Muhammad, and therefore rejected by Islamic scholars (Al-Albani 1992, 293).¹² However, many others also argue that this value does not only come from this divine privilege, but also from an intrinsic superiority in its lexicon, syntax, structure, and expressive power in general (*Ibid.* and Al-Safi, 1992: 37-53). Further evidence for this argument is often drawn directly from pre-Islamic poetry (*al-shi'ir al-jāhilī*) which was considered the ultimate benchmark at the time to assess any linguistic performance (Omran, 1988). Moreover, Arabic language historical references like Al-Jāhiz (1998) posited that the Quran had such a powerful rhetorical quality that any attempt at translating it would amount to translating poetry and desecrating it (see Kilito, 2008: 21-37).

This view of Qur'anic Arabic constitutes a clear argument against the possibility of translating the Qur'an. On one hand, through the prism of rhetoric, it is described as having a very high capacity for concentrating meanings because of its extremely concise manners of expression:

[Arabic is] the language of people whose mental images, flowing without effort from association to association, succeed one another in rapid progression and often vault elliptically over intermediate – as it were, “self-understood” – sequences of thought towards the idea which they aim to conceive or express. This ellipticism (called *ijāz* by the Arab philologists) is an integral characteristic of the Arabic idiom and, therefore, of the language of the Qur'ān – so much so that it is impossible to understand its method and inner purport without being able to reproduce within oneself, instinctively, something of the same quality of elliptical, associative thought (Asad 2003, ix)

Asad is referring to the elliptic quality of the Arabic idiom and its extensions in the readers' thought as the features of a text that—if as described—cannot possibly be matched by any alternative language. Here, the interesting part of Asad's comment is the notion that the movement and conciseness of the language seems to be reflected in the very nature of the Qur'anic thought. An interpretation that necessarily leads to the strong belief among Muslims about the inimitability of the Qur'an. In this regard, Asad is in full agreement with Arab linguists and philosophers of language throughout the ages. And yet, the ellipticism mentioned by Asad constitutes but one of the many distinctive traits of Arabic, some of the others being its descriptive and illustrative power, its precise and rich vocabulary, and its roots and derivations (see Qusi 2016 Umar 2015, *Id.*). Oliver Leaman's concise statement on the Qur'an that 'it imitates nothing and no one nor can it be imitated' (2006: 404) best summarizes this position.

On the other hand, Arabic holds a very specific status because Muslims believe that, in its Qur'anic form at least, it is the "word of God," and that it can therefore only have but one form, that in which it was revealed. The form is considered constitutive of the meaning. The language of the Qur'an can therefore not be translated, even if the aim of that translation is limited to the meanings (Al-Safi 1992, 110-118). This extreme position makes the Qur'an inimitable not only in form, but also in content.

To these critics of Qur'anic translation, translation of the meaning is associated with its exegesis, which is itself prohibited. While we may think that translating exegesis should not be problematic because it is clearly not the Qur'an, it seems that its translation, according to them, is still not justified for numerous reasons, such as the lack of explicit prophetic traditions encouraging or accepting it, as well as the additional distance it creates between the divine enunciation and its interpretation or exegesis in Arabic (Al-Safi 199: 119-131). The fundamental issue in this position against the translation and exegesis of the Qur'an can be summarized as the total rejection of anything that increases the distance with the Qur'anic Arabic enunciation presented as being that of God. Essentially, the value of Qur'anic Arabic rests in being the verbal incarnation of the divine word.

The inimitability of the Qur'an

In spite of this line of thinking which places the Qur'an in a position of benefit from the inherent qualities of the Arabic language, for a majority of authors, the legal value assigned to the Arabic language stems from the Qur'an itself, its divine origin, and its inimitable or insuperable (*mu'jiz*) character (Al-Rummanani 1998; Berque 1995). The notion of inimitability (*I'jaz*) of the Qur'an is necessary to understand the difficulty surrounding any debate about Qur'anic translation to the extent that it touches on the mimetic or imitative character of translation, i.e. the longstanding issue of whether to translate literally in order to imitate the rhetoric and sacred qualities of the text. What some have referred to as the "theory of inimitability of the Qur'an" (see Nur Ichwan *op. cit.* 145) is the uncontested result of the challenge put forward by the Qur'an itself to the Arabs of the 7th century, as well as humanity in general, to elaborate something equivalent to it.¹³

However, if inimitability only concerns the formal aspect of the Qur'an, as is the opinion of the defenders of Qur'anic translation who now form the majority of scholars, translation becomes possible so long as it is limited to the meanings. So, a semantic translation would be

12.

disinterested in phonology, rhythm, prosody¹⁴, concerning itself only with what has been called the second objective of Qur'anic revelation (according to Al-Nadawi 1997, 13), namely, the *hidāya* or “guidance” of humanity (Qur'an 2:185), or, in the more neutral terms of traditional translation theory, the “message” (Nida and Taber 1982; Jakobson 1960).

That being the case, even if the translation of the Qur'an cannot transfer its formal inimitability, this impossibility ‘does not suppose that for the transfer of its meaning, since the latter does not invalidate the argument of the formal inimitability of Arabic nor does it change it. Translation does not, in any way, diminish the value of the argument’ (Al-Maraghi, 1936: 17; our translation). In addition to its revolutionary role in the history of Arabic since its compilation in the 7th century (al-Azami 2003, al-Khui 1998), transforming it from an oral culture to one of reciting a written text, the translational function grants it a second historical presence, since every translation becomes the witness of an era and allows us to understand how the ST is interpreted during that era. Although it is not imitable, not only does the Qur'an lend itself to translation, but it calls for it, in the sense of a Derridean reading of Benjamin: ‘But he wants first to return to the authority of what he still calls ‘the original,’ not insofar as it produces its receiver or its translators, but insofar as it requires, mandates, demands, or commands them in establishing the law.’ (Derrida 1985, 181) Like any great texts of world literature and other sacred texts, the Qur'an compels its retranslation over and over again throughout the ages.

While it is possible that defending Qur'anic translation may be seen as part of the necessity to support its proselytic function, or as a response to some competing orientalist translations (attempting to cast an unfavourable representation of Islam), the fact remains that it constitutes the expression of a new challenge for the Muslims living in the era of globalization and information; the challenge of the democratization of reading, of interpreting and of understanding through translation. More than at any other time, and in light of the local and international developments from the Iranian Islamic Revolution onwards, the translation of the sacred text remains a call, a challenge that must be met by Muslims facing the questions of their time. The Qur'anic challenge will not only be intended to those who do not believe in the message, but to those who already claim it for themselves beyond the borders of the Arab and even what is known as the Muslim world.

Translated Qur'an during prayer

While there are some contemporary works that severely criticize the translation of the Qur'an as a ‘religious innovation’ (*bid'ah*) and ‘an attack against the divine word [...], a devious mischief [...] subjecting the Holy Qur'an to change its actual state’ (Al-Safi *op. cit.* 26), referring back to early Islamic law reveals that scholars of the first centuries of Islam were tolerant of the translatability of the Qur'an. In order to defend the licit nature of translating the Qur'an, its proponents systematically refer to the legal verdict (*fatwa*) of the Hanafi school, according to which the ritual prayer – during which the Qur'an must be recited in twelve of the seventeen daily cycles – can be performed in a translated language. Abu Hanīfa would have based his argument on the fact that, Salman, the companion of Prophet Muhammad, would have translated the first chapter of the Qur'an to his fellow Persians at their request, which would have allowed them to recite it in translation until their tongue gets used to the Arabic pronunciation (Kuwait

13. On the challenge of the inimitability of the Qur'an, see the following verses in the Qur'an : 2,23 ; 10,38 ; 11,13 ; 17,88, 52,34 etc.

Ministry 2004 *Ibid.*).¹⁵ While this Hanafi line of thinking is more aligned with the realities of pluralist societies, it was rejected by others, who hold that the “Arabicness” of the verses is part of what makes them Qur’anic (Al-Maraghi 1936: 25; our translation)

It is remarkable that the pragmatism of the Hanafite jurists – as well as their awareness of the hierarchy between the different religious duties – led them to declare that reciting the Qur’an in translation in prayer is preferable to abandoning the most important Islamic ritual. But this concession is a very significant one, as it became the preferred argument brought forth by the defenders of the permissibility of translating the Qur’an.

For example, this is the case of the study published by Muhammad Mustapha al-Maraghi (1936) on the issue of translating the Quran from a legal standpoint, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire that took place in the 1920s, as well as the establishment of the controversial policies of nationalization of Atatürk: reciting translation in Turkish during the daily prayers and publishing a translation of the Qur’an only written in Latin alphabet, without the co-presence of the Arabic text (Al-Neifer 2006). In his study, Al-Maraghi relied on the traditional position of the Hanafi school to develop a line of argumentation in the frame of the three other Sunni schools of Islamic law (Maleki¹⁶, Hanbali¹⁷, and Shafi’i¹⁸).

Conceptualizations of translation

Despite this considerable and well-referenced legal corpus that should have settled the case of the translatability of the Qur’an, the debates of the modern era remain current, where some still strive to prove the illicit nature of Qur’anic translation (despite the growing demand) and others attempt a theorization of translation which renders the translated text as an ordinary literary work. Indeed, by laying emphasis on the inseparability of the content and form of the Qur’an, the arguments for its translatability are considerably scaled down. If the only function of the Qur’an is to have the same (but now anachronistic) effect that it had on the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula living in the 7th Century, which means affecting them as deeply by its high degree of eloquence as by the core of its message (the reminder of the unicity of God and the entire ethics that can be derived from it), this function is almost impossible to reproduce. This would mean that the sacred text would have no relevance except during the time of its revelation and that its linguistic specificity has priority over its claim to universalism.

If Skopos theory were to be applied to Qur’an translation, that is, considering the purpose and the reception context of the translation – which can incidentally be completely different from those of the original – the translations of the Qur’an throughout history would in every instance have a function that is entirely different from that of the initial double function of the Qur’an.

Proponents of Qur’anic translation have developed an alternative approach in which they speak less of formal inimitability¹⁹, and lay more emphasis on the inimitability of the content²⁰.

14. Elements that Meschonic considers essential parts of literary works and to which traditional translation does not grant much space, with a willingness to sacrifice them entirely for the sake of faithfulness. (See Meschonic 1999, 82-96).

15. See Al-Sarkhasi in his *Kitâb al-mabsûr* [The Book of the Unfolded] cited by Al-Maraghi (1936, 24).

¹⁶ The Maleki school of jurisprudence founded in Madinah in the 8th century by Malek ibn Anas (711-795).

¹⁷ The Hanbali school of jurisprudence founded in Baghdad in the 9th century by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855).

¹⁸ The Shafi’i school of jurisprudence founded in Baghdad and then in Cairo in the 8th and 9th centuries by Imam Al-Shafi’i (767-820).

1. Since the beginning of 19th Century, there is a new form of inimitability that has imposed itself; the numerical I’jaz which, by reliance on simple mathematic formulas, allows to demonstrate a numerical

In this sense, since the function of translation has changed, the transfer of the different levels of the meaning of the Qur'an takes a central value. Opponents of Qur'anic translation contend that such an understanding of translation (separation of form from content) is no longer tenable in the light of contemporary translation theory. The inseparability of form and content, they argue, is what makes the Qur'anic text fundamentally different from the literary text. However, when looking at modern western literary studies (theory, history, critique, etc.) as well as all the intersecting disciplines, we notice that the status of the literary text reaches such unattainable heights that it becomes sacrosanct. As a matter of fact, whether one considers Romantic authors as prophets (Gusdorf 1983; Benchou 1988) or even how the legal status of authorship has come to be from the 1701 Statute of Ann to the launch of international copyright laws in the 19th century (Basalamah 2009), literary texts and their authors have symbolized the new gods and their sacred books.

With the emergence of copyright in France and England during the 18th century, we understand that it is by the elevation of the status of the author that such a change in value took place. More recently, through structuralism and especially post-structuralism, and with the call in literary theory for 'the death of the author' (Barthes 1977), the autonomous nature of the literary text becomes radicalized. As a result of this development, no 'sacredness' is recognized except in the literality of the text and some in contemporary translation theory considered literality or rhythm (the respect of the forms and the semiotics of the source text) one of its key themes (see Berman 1998; Meschonic 1999). In this perspective, if the sacred text no longer holds a separate status, that it belongs to the large family of literary texts, its translation will be consequently assessed according to this necessary and intimate interdependence between the multiple levels of its content and its form. Hence all of the translational ethics inherited from the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and the German romantic translators²¹ manifests itself by its respect of the form of the source text.

This being the case, translating the sacred text (the Qur'anic text at least) according to these same requirements would substantially reduce it. Because, however unique Arabic is and the

- distribution of words and letters in the Qur'an that does not seem to be ordinary in its design and balance.
2. Muslim exegetes and Arab linguists are unanimous today that the reception, the listening, and the utterance of Arabic today no longer has the ability to produce the same effects and experiences to its speakers that it did during the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. To the Arabs who lived at the same time as Muhammad, the most profound existential experience took place through the intermediary of language. Poetry was the most important element of life, that which was the most true, and the most sacred. That is why those who listened to only a few Quranic verses would be convinced that it is the speech of God and accept Islam immediately, because according to them, this rhythm, style, word and sound combination, these images, this eloquence... can simply not be put together by a human being. However, this almost mystical ability of spiritually savouring language has been lost for a long time now. This means that that which Muslims refer to as the miraculous aspect of the Quranic language can no longer represent the most important dimension of the Qur'an's inimitability. This is not to say that they no longer recognize it, as can be witnessed from the consistent output of all sorts of thematic and linguistic studies by Qur'an scholars. But emergent fields, such as scientific analysis are more popular nowadays: the manner in which the Qur'an talks about the various elements of the natural order and its organization, is done with such scientific rigour and truth that it can only have the Creator himself as the source of the text. It is clear that this new approach can lead to wanting to prove the opposite of what many scholars have claimed, and want to make of the Qur'an a book of science. It is noteworthy that the Muslim personality of the year in 2006 was none other than Zaghoul al-Najjar, an Egyptian Islamic preacher who specializes in the best-selling topic of the scientific inimitability of the Qur'an.
 3. One of the most famous representatives of this movement is the poet Hölderlin (1770-1843). See A. Berman (1992).

subtlety and finesse of Qur’anic language, what translation will be in a position to retain is out of proportion with what non-Arab speakers are entitled to demand from a message which is supposed to speak to humanity while claiming universalism (Qur’an 21:107; 25:1; 87:38²²). Would the question then be to wonder if the translated Qur’an maintains the divine word revealed to Mohammed? Or rather, ask the historicized question of whether it is a right for humanity to receive the divine message in the diversity of the surviving languages after Babel?

Contemporary Challenges

In the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, when the Arab and Muslim worlds are facing one of their most critical moments, there are some questions that are more or less directly tied to the issues surrounding the translation of the Quran. As a matter of fact, one of the most important issues is that of the divide between politics and religion in increasingly secularised Arab/Muslim societies, let alone in the Western ones with large Arab and/or Muslim populations. Reading Habermas’ *Between Naturalism and Religion* (2008), one can get a sense of the deep gap that Western cultural history has developed (and exported) that even within one language/society, religious and secular people do not necessarily understand each other anymore.

Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community to a generally accessible language. . . . The truth contents of religious contributions can enter into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision-making only when the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e. in the political public sphere itself. (Habermas, 2008: 131).

In that sense and within this kind of context, translating the Quran becomes an essential part of the translation of religion in the public sphere, even within the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Spring when the split between the “Islamists” and the “Seculars” is growing more than ever. How do the politics of the believer and that of the secular²³ articulate themselves in the minds of each other? Is there a way they can find a middle-ground through the re-interpretation of the Qur’an and its translation into the political realities of today’s world?

The other question confronting Arabic speakers, and more specifically among Muslims, is the Arab-centric representation of the idealistic Muslim. As a matter of fact, it is widely spread among Arabs—and even among a large portion of non-Arab Muslims—that being an Arabic-speaking Muslim is necessarily better than being a non-Arabic-speaking Muslim (hence the recourse to translation), a prevalent belief which goes against the very clear injunction of the Prophet: ‘O people! Indeed, your Lord is one and your father (Adam) is one. Indeed, there is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, nor of a non-Arab over an Arab, nor of a white over a black, nor a black over a white, except by piety. Have I conveyed the message?’ (Ibn Hanbal, 1993, no. 22978). Although such a state of affairs would be hardly admitted by those concerned, many settings of mixed ethnic and linguistic origins would have it expressed by the frustrations of peripheral Muslims, e.g. Black Africans, East-Asians, and other minority groups, who often

4. Our translation, as well as for the next **Quranic** passages.

5. Knowing that they are, of course, not mutually exclusive despite the political opposition.

suffer from this typical discrimination. As a natural development of this Arab-centrism, the last few decades have witnessed a vast movement where Arabic-centered Islamic literature has been largely overcome by a growing production of non-Arabic works and translations from Arabic into other languages, mainly Western (Lepeska, July 22, 2011). Against all odds, this means that the Muslim world is decentering Arabic speaking Muslims and Qur'an translations are increasingly being made in the languages of the ever-growing non-Arabic speaking Muslims, i.e. over 80% of the World's Muslim population (Cooper, 2013).

Paradoxically though, a third question arises as a corollary to the former: if on the one hand the reception of the Islamic sacred scripture is still too centered around the Arabic language despite the expansion of the non-Arabic "peripheries", why is the Arabic language on the other hand far from being—nowadays and for the last few centuries—able to be a vehicle of knowledge and science? In response to this apparent contradiction, some would argue that Islamic traditional languages such as Arabic are "inadequate" for the development of science (Hoodbhoy, 2007: 53), while others on the contrary are 'convinced that we cannot but teach science in the national language, that is in the language that people use in their daily lives, the living language of society' (Rashed, 2004: xxvii). As a consequence to the latter stance, it could be extrapolated that the very revival of Muslim contribution to knowledge has to go in the opposite direction of the diffusion and understanding of the Qur'anic message, that is to say producing original scholarship in Arabic and translating the Qur'an in all possible languages of the world.

All in all, it appears that correlation of the translation of the Qur'an to the status of the Arabic language is relevant to and sheds light on the rethinking of the contemporary situation of the Arab/Muslim worlds. As probably never before, the defense of the Arabic language is equally determinant to an Arab/Muslim Renaissance as the translation of its most valuable literature to other languages.

Conclusion

Everything in the religious Islamic message seems to indicate that it is favourable to Qur'anic translation. For instance, at the level of law, we already mentioned that partial translations of the Qur'an took place during the life of Mohammed himself without any objections from him, which is considered a sign of lawfulness in Islamic jurisprudence.

But what matters most today, is to consider the position of the supreme Islamic authority on the question. All Muslims are in agreement that Islam is a universal religion, and that, since the time of its revelation, it will remain valid independently of time and space. This is what the Qur'an says in many of its verses: 'Say: 'Oh humans! I am the messenger of Allah to you all [...]' (Qur'an 7:158; see also 4:79; 21:107; 34:28, etc.). The universal message of Islam and the sum of its teachings were communicated to humanity through the Qur'an: 'And We have sent down the Book to you, making everything clear, and as a guidance, and a mercy, and good tidings to those who submit' (Qur'an 16:89). This message has been transmitted to humanity in Arabic. However, if this message remains in Arabic, it will evidently not be useful as a "guidance" and to "make everything clear" to all of humanity, since the majority of the peoples of the world do not speak Arabic.

In itself, and from a purely religious point of view, Qur'anic translation is not prohibited as the text testifies in its own terms. However, as demonstrated in this chapter, some of the factors

that are considered in addition to the legal dimension may challenge this argument. On one hand, there are important historical legacies and cultural events that are worth studying in depth, from the angle of translation, as sources and instruments of influence and pressure.²⁴ On the other hand, we saw that the legal and linguistic challenges facing the translator who is working on the Qur'anic text are often the result of the diverse conceptions of translation.

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6. To study instances where translation can be used as a tool of sociopolitical pressure, the research would be well served with the methodological means offered by postcolonial approaches, especially in translation theory.

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