

# Translation Assessment of the English Renditions of the Verb *Ja'ala* (جعل) in Qurânic Texts

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Received: August 11, 2014

Accepted: August 27, 2014

Online Published: September 16, 2014

doi:10.5430/elr.v3n2p33

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/elr.v3n2p33>

## Abstract

The present paper sets itself to carry out translation assessment of some English published renderings of Qurânic texts involving the verb; جعل *Ja'ala* (to make). The verb in question has a variety of senses that necessitates special focus on the part of translators. This is due to the fact that the co-text plays a significant role in assigning the various senses to the verb under investigation. Accordingly, some Qurânic ayas involving the verb will be chosen and subjected to translation assessment to find out how far accurate renditions have been produced by translators. Inadequate translations will be discussed and alternative ones will be put forward. It is hypothesized that mistranslations of the verb tend to be more than accurate translations. This might be attributable to the various rhetorical senses that this Arabic verb conveys which can be classified as language specifics. The specifics are usually difficult to render across languages.

**Keywords:** Adequacy, Alternative, Assessment, Criticism, Renderings, Specifics

## 1. Introduction

Lexical units in legal texts (religious texts included, definitely) constitute a serious challenge for translators unless they pay due attention to such lexis because they are pregnant with fine meanings. Unlike literary texts, religious texts, according to Reiss (2000), are classified as informative texts where the translator's main focus should be on semantic relationships holding within these texts. The present study is concerned with the assessment of the translations of the Qur'anic texts involving a lexical verb i.e. *Ja'ala* (جعل); *to make* or *to do* to uncover how far these renditions have been accurate or not. The choice of the topic is motivated by the fact that the verb under investigation conveys a variety of semantic and rhetorical senses depending on the linguistic context in which it occurs. In addition, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no previous study has been conducted to assess the translations of the same verb. To fulfil the aims of the study, a grammatical survey from Arabic traditional grammar has been introduced. Then, four published translations have been consulted for carrying out the translation quality assessment (see section 3. below). Reiss's model has been selected for the purpose of translation criticism. Alternative translations have been suggested for those inadequately translated texts i.e. ayas. This inadequacy in translation has been diagnosed on the basis of the assessment made.

## 2. Grammatical treatment of the verb *Ja'ala*(جعل): A brief look

Arab grammarians have introduced various classifications of verbs (e.g. full vs. defective verbs, preponderance verbs, verbs of beginning, verbs of propinquity etc.) where the verb under study was viewed differently. For instance, Aş-Şantamary (1987: 276, Vol. I) underscores that the verb can convey two senses: *to do* or *to make*. If the first sense is intended, it is a monotransitive whereas the second sense turns the verb into a ditransitive. Accordingly, the second sense has three different uses, each expressing a particular meaning: naming, imagining and changing. The following examples illustrate these senses, respectively.

1) *Waja'alu almlâl?kata alzyna hum ' bādu alRahmān unāḥan* (Note 1)/ *az-Zuḳrif:19*

And they make the angels – who are servants of the Beneficent Allah—female. (P. 564) (Note 2)

This Quranic aya highlights the fact that the polytheists named and imagined the angels (who are Allah's servants) as females.

2) *Ij'al al?meer 'āmyan/ Make the prince an ordinary man.* It means to imagine the prince as an ordinary person.

3) Rabbi ij'al hāzā baladan āminan/ The Cow: 126

My Lord, make it a secure town. (P. 50)

The last Quranic aya in example (3) where the verb involved refers to the sense of changing Mekka into a secure area. (Also see al-Rājhy, 1988: 200f)

As-Sāmarrāy (2007: 26, Vol. II) maintains that the verb in question can express the meaning of transforming i.e. to change something from one state to another. In addition, the verb is capable of expressing the sense of guessing and belief. e.g.

4) Waqadimna ila mā 'amilu min 'amalin faja'alnāhu habā'ʾn manturā / al-Furqān: 32

And we will proceed to what they have done of deeds, so we shall render them as scattered floating dust. (P. 422)

5) Ja'ala Basra Baghdad. He believed or guessed Basra to be Baghdad.

Sybawyah (2007: 156f, Vol. I) confirms that meaning of the verb which is context-based determines whether the verb is followed by one object or two objects. The sense of creation keeps the verb as a monotransitive (e.g. Ja'ala al-Ameer mundahiṣan. He made the prince astonished) while the sense of becoming or turning changes the verb into a ditransitive (e.g. Ja'altu aṭ-ṭiin kazaḥan. I turned the clay into pottery).

From a morphological perspective, Arab morphologists include the verb Ja'ala (جعل) within the classification of the trilateral verbs (those consisting of three radicals). Such verbs constitute the largest category of verbs in Arabic where one can form a large number of the derivatives of the trilaterals by attaching one radical, two radicals or three radicals to the base. Definitely, these newly derived verb forms have different meanings from those of the base forms because it is roughly generally held in Arabic morphology that expansion in word building leads to new senses or semantic extension (Şlāş, al-Farṭusi, and Hussein, 1989:60, 80, 89).

### 3. Translation Quality Assessment: Reiss's Model

Much has been theorized about translation assessment or evaluation. Scholars have designed a variety of models for assessing translations of various text-types. They are famous for their dichotomies: Nida (1964) formal vs. dynamic equivalence, Catford (1965) formal correspondence vs. textual equivalence, House (1979) overt vs. covert translation, Newmark (1981) semantic vs. communicative translation, Reiss's potential vs. optimal translation etc. The latter will be applied to the translations of the above ayas because optimal equivalence takes into consideration the impact of linguistic context on the meaning of the lexical units when contextualized. In addition, the great concern given (by Reiss) to the influence of co-text on creating semantic and lexical equivalence between the source text and the target text has made the model more suitable to apply here. Potential translation, on the other hand, is concerned with introducing translation equivalents in isolation from the influence of the co-text. In this regard, Reiss (2000: 49) states that translation is basically possible because "there are parallels between languages on the level of langue (language as system). The act of translating involves choosing the optimal equivalent from among the potential equivalents on the level of parole (language as actually spoken)".

Reiss (ibid: 51) adds that every act of translating involves first recognizing the potential equivalents, and then selecting from among them the one best adapted to the particular context, also considering how well each element in the translation unit fits the overall context. ( e.g. the word operation has several potential equivalents in Arabic: عملية تجارية, عملية جراحية, عملية عسكرية, عملية حاسوبية, military operation, surgical operation, computer operation, business operation). The selection of one of these translation equivalents depends on the linguistic context that a word appears in.

Munday (2012; 114) states that Reiss lists a series of intralinguistic and extralinguistic criteria by which the adequacy of a target text may be assessed. The linguistic components comprise: semantic equivalence, lexical equivalence and grammatical and stylistic features. The extralinguistic determinants, on the other hand, consist of situation, subject field, time, place (characteristics of country and culture), receiver, sender and affective implications (humour, irony, emotion, etc.).

Initially, Reiss sought to establish a correlation between text type and translation method, arguing for the need to preserve the predominant function of the text in translation. Therefore, the translator's main focus is on semantic relationships as far as informative texts (religious texts included) are concerned. Connotative meanings and aesthetic values of informative texts occupy a secondary concern for translators of religious texts (Hatim & Munday, 2004: 181).

In brief, the text type plays an important role in choosing the suitable translation method that the translator is going to apply in translating a given text. Special attention is given to the translation of religious texts which are regarded as part of legal texts in that they are typically translated by applying word-for-word translation.

#### 4. Translation assessment of the Qur'anic texts involving the verb

The present section is devoted to the discussion of Arab scholars' and theologians' treatment of the verb under investigation. This is because great concern is given to the lexis in the Quran due to the fact that the lexical units (e.g. main verbs, nouns etc.) have important impact on the provisions that Muslims should abide by. Accordingly, the verb as found in Qur'anic texts has a variety of senses. Each sense will be introduced hand in hand with its published translations: four published translations of the Quran will be consulted for this purpose. They are translated by Ali, A. Yusuf (1934), al-Hilāli and Khān (1996), Pickthall, M. (1996) and Shaker (2004).

The above – mentioned translators' names are, respectively, abbreviated as follows: Ali, Hi. – Kh., Pick. and Sh. The choice of these translations is based on the fact that the translators are of various religious and linguistic backgrounds (Muslim native Arabic speakers, an orientalist, a Persian)

Translation assessment will be carried out of the renditions produced. Reiss's (2000) model (potential vs. optimal equivalence distinction) will be applied to pass judgements on the translation quality of the renditions. Due to space limits, one Qur'anic aya expressing one meaning of the verb will be selected for discussion and assessment. In case inadequate translations are diagnosed, alternative ones will be put forward by the researcher. This is because, as (Reiss, 2000: 15) remarks, "Constructive translation criticism must also offer satisfactory alternative translations, substantiated with convincing evidence".

To resume the discussion of the verb's senses as found in Qur'anic ayas, Abid (2007: 6-11) has summed them up as follows:

- Naming. This is noticed in many Qur'anic ayas. e.g.

6) Wakāzālika ja'alnākum ummtan wasāta (The Cow: 143)

Ali (P. 22) Thus have made of you an *Ummat* justly balanced.

Hi-Kh. (P. 29) Thus we made you a just nation.

Pick. (P. 22) Thus we have appointed you a middle nation.

Sh. (P. 53) And thus we have made you a medium (just) nation.

Once one has a look at the above-quoted translations of the aya, one can easily recognize that Pick.'s rendition is the most adequate because it expresses the accurate sense of naming that the verb conveys in this linguistic context. Therefore, others' translations involve potential equivalents while his is optimal (see section 2. above).

- Creation

Az-Zrkaşy (2004:74f) draws a distinction between two senses which can be expressed by the same verb: creation and making. The former sense indicates creation out of nothingness while the latter could involve transforming something already found and could be changed from one state to another (see section 1. above). e.g.

7) Waja'lna al-layl waalnnahār ayatayn. Al-Isrā/ 12

Ali (P. 276) We have made the Night and the Day as two (of our) signs.

Hi-Kh. (P. 369) And we have appointed the night and the day as two Ayāt (signs etc.)

Pick. (P. 283) And we appoint the night and the day two portents.

Sh. (P. 336) And we have made the night and the day two signs.

According to the sense intended in this aya, all the renditions have proved inaccurate because the translators either introduced the verb "make or appoint" to be an equivalent to the verb in the original. This does not hold true owing to the fact that the meaning intended is not accurately rendered to the target text. Therefore, it is more accurate to translate the text as: And We have created the Night and the Day as two signs.

- Transformation

This sense of the verb is the most frequently recurrent in the Quran in that Az-Zrkaşy (ibid) maintains that the verb can refer to two types of transformation: materialistic and spiritual.

8) WaAllah ja'ala lakum al-Ard̄ bisāṭan. Nuh: 19 (materialistic transformation)

Ali (P. 565) And Allah has made the earth for you as a carpet.

Hi-Kh. (P. 793) And Allāh has made for you the earth a wide expanse.

Pick. (P. 571) And Allah hath made the earth a wide expanse for you.

Sh. (P. 660) And Allah has made for you the earth a wide expanse.

When one has a look at the above-quoted translations, one can easily distinguish that apart from Ali's potential translation, all the renderings have attained optimal equivalence in that they have been sound (Note 3) in conveying the intended meaning of the verb as found in the original.

9) Falamma ja'a ?mrūnā ja'alnā 'āliahā safilahā. Hud: 82 (mental transformation)

Ali (P. 225) When our decree issued, we turned (the cities) upside down.

Hi-Kh. (P. 297) So when our commandment came, we turned (the towns of Sodom in Palestine) upside down.

Pick. (P. 231) So when our commandment came to pass, we overthrew (that township).

Sh. (P. 280) When our decree came to pass, we turned them upside down.

The transformation that the verb expresses is attributed to the lexical sense resulting from the co-text that the verb shows. Hi-Kh.'s translation is the most appropriate one due to the fact that it refers, in a very explicit manner, to what is turned upside down i.e. the towns of Sodom

- Making something out of something.

Waja'ala lakum min Aj-Jibālii aknānā. An-Nahl: 81

Ali (P. 269) Of the hills, He made some for you as shelter.

Hi-Kh. (P. 358) Allāh has made you for you places of refuge in the mountains.

Pick. (P. 276) Allah hath given you places of refuge in the mountains.

Sh. (P. 329) He has given you in the mountains places of retreat.

With reference to the sense of the verb in the above Qur'anic aya, the translations cited proved inaccurate to convey the meaning concerned. This is owing to the fact that the translators used the verb "give" as an equivalent to the verb in the original which should be rendered as "made". However, Hi-Kh.'s translation seems to be sound because it reflects the sense of making places of shelter out of mountains. Accordingly, the optimal equivalence (see section .2 above) was accurately chosen by both translators i.e. Hi-Kh.

- Making something ready at one's disposal

Waman yataqy Allah yj'al lahu maḥrajā. Divorce: 2

Ali (P. 551) Those who fear Allah, he (ever) prepares a way out.

Hi-Kh. (P. 770) And whosoever fears Allāh and keeps his duty to Him, he will make a way for him to get out (from every difficulty).

Pick. (P. 558) And whosoever keepth his duty to Allah, Allah will appoint a way out for him.

Sh. (P. 644) And whoever is careful of (his duty to) Allah, he will make for him an outlet.

The meaning that the verb expresses is "to make something ready and easily accessible to use". Therefore, Hi-Kh.'s translation stands for the optimal equivalence which has taken into consideration the contextual meaning in a more explicit manner than others' translations which have met the criteria of potential translation (see section 2. above).

- Believing

Waja'alu lillAllah ṣurakā? Aj-jinn. al-An'ām/ 100

Ali (P. 142) Yet, they make the Jinns equals with Allah.

Hi-Kh. (P. 186) Yet, they join the jinn as partners in worship with Allāh.

Pick. (P. 140) Yet they ascribe as partners unto Him the jinn.

Sh. (P. 184) And they make the jinn associates with Allah.

From a contextual perspective, the verb is used here for conveying the sense of belief in that the pagans at the advent of Islam believed that Allan and Jinns should be worshipped on equal footing. This is, as pagans believe, because Allan and Jinns are partners in running the universe. As for the translations produced, they all proved failures in

reflecting the same sense intended in the original. This is attributed to the reason that they have not referred to the concept of belief that the verb under study pinpoints to. Accordingly, the alternative translation runs as follows: And they believed the Jinns to be partners in worship with Allah.

- Imposition

Wamāja'al al-qublata allatii kunta 'alyhā. The Cow: 143

Ali (P. 22) And we appointed the Qibla to which thou wast used.

Hi-Kh. (P. 29) And we made the *Qibla* (prayer direction towards Jerusalem) which you used to face.

Pick. (P. 22) And we appointed the *qiblah* which ye formerly observed.

Sh. (P. 53) And we did not make that which you have to be the qiblah

The meaning of the verb in the above ayah is "to impose the prayer direction on Muslims to abide by" (Abid, 2007: 9). Therefore, the translations above have not referred to the concept of imposition. The alternative translation is; we imposed the Qiblah (prayer direction towards Jerusalem) which you used to direct your face to.

- Replacement

Wataj'aluna rizqakum innakum tukażzibun. al-Wāqī'a:82

Ali (P. 530) And have ye made it your livelihood that ye should declare it false?

Hi-Kh. (P. 735) And instead (of thanking Allāh) for the provision He gives you, you deny (Him by disbelief)!

Pick. (P. 537) And ye make denial thereof your livelihood.

Sh. (620) And to give (it) the lie you make your means of subsistence.

The verb in this context means that instead of thanking Allah for his bestows, the pagans and polytheists express their ingratitude by denying such bestows. As to the translations, Hi-Kh.'s is the most adequate due to the fact that it precisely conveys the exact meaning that the verb under investigation conveys i.e. replacing Allah's bestows by denial of such blessings.

- Donation or giving

Qāla rabbi ?j' l lī aya. Maryam: 10

Ali (P. 299) (Zakariya) said : "O my Lord! Give me a sign"

Hi-Kh. (P. 402) (Zakariyyā) said: "My Lord! Appoint for me a sign"

Pick. (P. 305) He said: My Lord! Appoint for me some token.

Sh. (P. 361) He said: My Lord ! Give me a sign.

Az-Zamḡsary (2002:633) emphasizes that the sense of the verb in this linguistic context is that Zachariah asks his Lord to "give him evidence or sign so that his fellow-citizens would trust his sayings and believe his message". As for the translations of the aya, Ali's and Sh.'s renditions are the most sound due to the fact that they have achieved accurate lexical equivalence between the original and the target text when they have chosen the verb "give" which expresses the exact sense of the verb in the source text.

## 5. Discussion of Results

In introducing the results of the translation assessment conducted above, one can recognize that the translators of the Qur'anic texts involving the verb under study have mainly relied on the literal meaning of the texts. This has been in evidence owing to the fact they have generally failed to produce accurate renditions of the meanings of the verb being translated. Deep theological knowledge about the various senses of the ayas containing the verb seems to be absent from the Qur'anic text translators' minds. Moreover, the texts translated have remained lacking any comments or notes to convey the accurate rhetorical meanings of the verb. It is sometimes obligatory for translators to resort to overtranslation in dealing with religious texts so that accurate translations are produced. This has been evident in introducing alternative translations in the present study. Hi-Kh's translations of the ayas selected have ranked first as far as lexical and rhetorical accuracy of their translation are concerned. This is attributed to the fact that the translation assessment conducted above has shown that Hi-Kh's translations are more adequate than the other three translations chosen for assessment in the present study. This can be attributed to their linguistic background (native speakers of Arabic) and they are specialists in Islamic religion. Being specialists in the field has enabled them to be aware of the impact of Qur'anic lexis in the interpretation of the texts to take out provisions for Muslims to follow.

As for Arab grammarians, they hold a unanimous agreement over the verb's variety of rhetorical and semantic senses resulting from the influence of the co-texts in which the verb has appeared.

## 6. Conclusions

On the basis of the translation assessment carried out in section 3 above, several conclusions have been drawn. First of all, knowledge in depth about the key lexical items in the Qur'anic texts is a non-negotiable prerequisite to produce accurate translations. Second, it is sometimes unavoidable to resort to paraphrase-translation in conveying the exact sense or meaning of the Qur'anic ayas. This has been in evidence in introducing alternative translations for those ayas (involving the verb under study) which have been inaccurately translated. Third, translators in the main have failed to give adequate renditions to the verb Ja'ala (جعل) as found in the ayas whose translations have been assessed (twenty five translations out of thirty have been inadequate; i.e. only five translations have proved accurate). Therefore, this has validated the hypothesis of the present paper. Fourth, the impact of co-text has been in particular very evident in assigning the various senses to the verb in the Qur'anic texts.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Prof Dr. Abid A. Latiifa (Arabic Dept. College of Arts of al-Mustansiriya University/ Iraq) for the advice she has presented to the researcher.

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## Notes

Note 1. Transliteration symbols: a ا: b ب: t ت: t ث: j ج: ḥ ح: ḵ خ: d د: z ذ: r ر: z ز: s س: ş ش: f ف: ص: d' ض: ط: ḍ: ḍ: ḡ غ: f ف: q ق: k ك: l ل: m م: n ن: h ه: w و: y ي: أ:؟

Note 2. The translations of all Quranic texts in the theoretical part of the paper will be taken from Shaker's (2003) Translation of the Holy Qur'an. Qum: Ansariyan Publications. In documenting them, reference will be made only to page number in the body of the present paper.

Note 3. Sound translation, accurate translation and adequate translation are three terms alternatively used in the present paper.