TRANSLATING AUTOANTONYMY IN THE QUR’AN

ALADDIN AL-KHARABSHEH

Department of English, The Hashemite University, Zarqa 13133, Jordan, P.O. Box 330186, Phone: 00962-0776579197 E-mail: ala74@hu.edu.jo

Abstract: This study sets out to examine autoantonymy in translation as an under-researched linguistic phenomenon. Given the dearth of serious work on autoantonymy in English–Arabic translation studies, this paper explores the difficulties associated with translating Arabic autoantonymy into English, based on selected examples drawn from the Qur’an. With reference to a host of authoritative Qur’anic exegeses and three Qur’anic translations, it has been possible to provide a solid linguistic-translational groundwork, allowing for semantic verification of the autoantonymous aspects of the selected examples, and for a fine-grained analysis that reveals how much a translated autoantonymous construction differs from its source language counterpart. In this study, it is argued that sorting out the ubiquitous, inverse duplicity of meaning depends on certain contextual, linguistic-scriptural and social-cultural factors. The study also shows that the conceptual complexity of autoantonymy evidently manifests itself in the difficulties that translators have finding a suitable translation. The thrust of the analysis is to stress that the Qur’anic-specific autoantonyms do not lend themselves to easy, simple and straightforward rendering. It also provides further evidence for the claim that total lexical equivalence between Arabic and English, especially in Qur’anic discourse, cannot be always achieved, which may, consequently, confuse and shackle translators.

Keywords: autoantonymy, duplicity of meaning, lexical disambiguation, lexical equivalence, Qur’anic translation, scriptural context

1. INTRODUCTION

To achieve precision in cross-lingual transfer of a semantically complex lexical construction is bound to present an uphill translation task. Autoantonymy, a concept of semantic description, has been generally used to refer to a phenomenon in language whereby a lexical item tends to express two opposite
meanings (or senses) simultaneously. The translation of autoantonymous lexical items can be said to be notoriously difficult for linguistically and culturally remote languages such as Arabic and English. It is taken for granted that any two translation equivalents, in a pair of languages, should stand in a lexical semantic relation. However, since the conceptual space is not segmented identically for all languages, these corresponding equivalents may often stand in other relations to each other [for a full conceptualist account of the intersection of semantics and cognition see, for example, Fillmore’s (1982) frame semantics, Fauconnier’s (1985) mental space theory, Langacker’s (1987, 1990, 1991, 1999) cognitive grammar, Talmy’s (1985, 2000a, 2000b) cognitive semantics, Lakoff’s idealized cognitive model (1987) and Hsiao’s (2003) Semantics and Cognition]. The de facto conceptual differences relevant to autoantonymy in English and Arabic seem to conspire to create a vicious circle.

This means that the construction of a semantic network and establishing correspondences between autoantonymous lexical items may well face inhibitive translation challenges. The rich semantic information that an autoantonymous lexical item embodies can be transported through accurate translation if the conceptual relations are defined monolingually and bilingually.

However, it is well known that translation involves more than semantic and linguistic correspondences. Social and cultural factors also play a role in the choice of translation equivalents. Therefore, the aim of this paper is not only to see how such lexical semantic information is transferable between these two languages, but also to establish when or how these semantically non-identical expressions (translational idiosyncrasies) arise, and what types of difficulty are encountered in translating them into another language. The translation of autoantonymy depends on the degree of semantic congruence between the source language lexical entry and the target language lexical entry. Indeed, autoantonymy can be regarded as a case where non-identical semantic relation is expected to occur. Thus, in order to have a better grip on autoantonymous expressions, translators should study them monolingually and then bilingually.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

In this paper, we will concentrate on the problematics of translating Qur’anic autoantonymous lexical items. The motivation for focusing on this phenomenon comes partly from the fact that it has been relatively neglected by English–Arabic translation scholars, and partly from the fact that it tends to display non-transitive relations by definition, and thus, may not allow simple and straightforward rendering. A review of related literature revealed that autoantonymy is under-explored from a translational point of view. Therefore, an existing academic gap seems to cast a shadow upon English–Arabic
translation studies. Some available scholarly treatments, however, have tackled autoantonymy from a purely lexical standpoint (e.g. Deane 1988; Hale 1971); some from a purely semantic point of view (e.g. Blank 1999; Fellbaum 1998); and some from a pure computational linguistics perspective (e.g. Hirst 1987; Sussna 1993, 1997; Weeds 2003).

To achieve the objectives of this study, three official translations have been selected. These are: Ali’s (1983) *The Holy Qur’an: Translation and Commentary*; Irving’s (1992) *The Noble Qur’an* and Pickthall’s (2002) *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an: Explanatory Translation*. Though each of these translations aspires to achieve optimal resemblance with the original, not every translation seems to have managed to render the autoantonymous lexical items successfully. This should not be understood to mean that translators are incompetent; rather, it suggests that they may have come under the influence of certain textual-contextual considerations, or, alternatively, may have sensed a semantic hegemony in one of the two meanings, which prompted them to sacrifice the less foregrounded meaning. The study uses six exegeses as reference points for the identification of autoantonymous meaning. These are: Al-Sha’rawi’s (1991) *Tafseer Al-Sha’rawi*, Al-Razi’s (1995) *Tafseer Al-Fakhr Al-Razi*, Ibn Kathir’s (1997) *Tafseer Al-Qur’an Al-Kareem*, Al-Sabuni’s (2001) *Safwat Al-Tafaseer*, Al-Qurtubi’s (2003) *Al-Jami’ li Ahkaam Al-Qur’an* and Al-Zamakhshari’s (2005) *Al-Kashshaf*.

It is crucial to point out that a study by Al-Kharabsheh and Al-Azzam (2008), entitled “Translating the Invisible in the Qur’an” acts here as a springboard for the present one; interest in autoantonymy grew out of that study. However, despite the fact that both studies deal with lexical items that connote oppositeness or contradiction, each addresses a different linguistic phenomenon. In investigating the translation of the *invisible* in the Qur’an, Al-Kharabsheh and Al-Azzam explain that the *invisible* stands for any *semantically-invisible* lexical item (2008: 2) that, ostensively, has a visible meaning, normally mistaken to be the intended meaning, and at the same time it also has another, *invisible* meaning that acts as the intended meaning. This invisible meaning is bound to go unnoticed and unrecognized in the act of translation. The authors emphasize that the difficulty associated with this type of lexical item is that it is purposefully designed to escape attention and thus the reader cannot draw inferences. As a result, translators and readers often rule out such interpretations. On the other hand, an autoantonymous lexical item, the main focus of the present study, tends to possess two opposite senses that are familiar to translators and readers, and require no extra effort to identify. In other words, neither of the two meanings is invisible and difficult to pin down. This is the main difference that sets the two linguistic phenomena apart.

*Across Languages and Cultures* 9 (1) (2008)
3. POLYSEMANTIC VARIATION IN ENGLISH

Polysemy can be regarded as the central lexical mechanism in the organization of the lexical system (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Michaelis 1994). Polysemy arises as a consequence of semantic change, and there can be various semantic relations between the old sense and the new one derived from this older sense (Blank 1999: 12). To understand lexical polysemy, Blank (1999) suggests a typology of semantic change based entirely on associations between concepts or concepts and linguistic signs. According to such a typology, autoantonymy is classified as a facet of polysemy. Prior to discussing autoantonymy, however, it will be useful to have a look at the concept of antonymy.

The term antonymy was coined in the nineteenth century to describe oppositeness of meaning. Antonymy is a semantic relation that is found in all word classes (cf. Fellbaum 1995). However, antonymy does not really refer to the maximum degree of difference in meaning between two concepts. Rather, the words in an antonymous pair must be similar in all respects but one (Willners 2001: 17; Lyons 1977). Indeed, the term antonymy is used loosely to signify different types of opposites. Egan (1968), for example, distinguishes seven different types of antonymy (e.g. contradictory terms, contrary terms, reverse terms, etc.). In the same vein, Cruse (2000: 169, 1986: 204) follows Lyons in his definition of antonymy. He lists five different types of antonyms (e.g. polar antonyms, equipollent antonyms, etc.). For more information on antonymy, see Lundbladh (1988), Rusiecki (1985), Bierwisch and Lang (1987); Jones (1998) Charles and Miller (1989) and Deese (1965).

4. AUTOANTONYMY IN ENGLISH

Autoantonymy can be said to represent a subset of ambiguous words, which carry pairs of senses that are antonyms. While antonymy is a semantic relation between words, autoantonymy is a semantic relation between concepts (meanings or senses) enshrined in the same word (cf. Fellbaum 1998: 8; Miller et al. 1990: 4; Morris and Hirst 1991; Jarmasz and Szpakowicz 2003). This phenomenon is known by a variety of terms; notably, contronym, antagononym, Janus word (after the two-headed Roman god), self-antonym, antiphrasis, enantiosemny, antilogy, enantiodromia and antonymous polysemy (e.g. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1998). Most of these morpho-semantic labels are quite opaque to the modern English ear, and, therefore, the term autoantonym was chosen.

Autoantonymy represents an inventory of form-meaning-function complexes in which words are distinguished from grammatical constructions only with regard to their internal complexity. Wikipedia, the free online
encyclopedia, provides the following definition: an auto-antonym or contronym, sometimes spelled contranym (occasionally called antagonym, Janus word or self-antonym), is a word with a homonym, which is also an antonym. It is a word (of multiple meanings) that is defined as the reverse of one of its other meanings. Other contranyms result from polysemy, where a single word acquires different, and ultimately opposite, senses.

Autoantonymy is associative binding of two different lexemes displaying opposite semantic contents. These two semantic contents are embedded in the same linguistic sign. In other terms, autoantonymy is the semantic state in which a word has two opposite meanings at the same time, giving it a curious “Humpty-Dumpty” quality. To exemplify this phenomenon, let us have a look at a few examples, gleaned from the Internet (mostly from “fun with words”; “wordplay” and “thinks words”).

The autoantonymous lexical item sanction means a punitive action (as a noun) and to endorse (as a verb). Let is another example which means to allow, but formerly meant to prevent. The latter meaning survives in the idioms “without let or hindrance” and in “a let ball”. Likewise, other examples that hold two opposite meanings simultaneously are fast, which means steady, not moving, and at high speed; buckle: to hold together / to break apart; cleft: to adhere together / to cut apart; dust: to remove dust / to sprinkle with dust; screen to conceal from view / to display (a film, etc.); hold: to carry out / to delay; plug: to fill a hole / to create a hole; trim: to remove excess / to add decorations; dress: to add a covering / to remove a covering, and so on and so forth.

5. AUTOANTONYMY IN ARABIC

The Arabic term for autoantonymy is al-ad′daaḍ. Autoantonymy in Arabic comes under the umbrella term ishtiraak (i.e. polysemy), where a single word displays different shades of meaning. As in the case with English, what distinguishes al-ad′daaḍ from other linguistic phenomena is that the same word connotes two completely opposite meanings (cf. Ibn Sallam et al. 1996: 12). For example, the word nahil ناهل can simultaneously mean thirsty and quenched. Similarly, the word jaww جون can mean both black and white. Ibn Sallam et al. (ibid.) maintains that autoantonymy is a stranger to the Arabic linguistic system, and this opinion gave rise to a controversy over whether or not it is of Arabic origins. Sallam gives a list of the main factors that contributed to the emergence of this phenomenon. These include the existence of a variety of local dialects, semantic change, the loose semantics of the original lexical item, phonetic change, psycho-social motivations (such as optimism, irony and ridicule), the availability of various morphological patterns, blending, semantic extension, arbitrariness, and the rule of “semantic
oneness and auto-oppositeness’ (Ibn Sallam et al. 1996: 12). In the view of Al-Sajestani (1991: 75), autoantonymy operates at the micro level, where a lexical item tends to signify two senses opposite to each other. Like Ibn Sallam et al. (1996), Al-Sajestani lists seven factors that can account for the emergence of autoantonymy in Arabic, for instance morphological similarity between two lexical forms which exhibit different senses, as in ﻓﺰع fazi’a which means panic-stricken but in ﻓﺰع ﻋﻦ ﻓﺰع fazi’a ‘an galbeh, it means to get rid of panic. Likewise, Qutrub (1984: 70) classifies Arab ic lexis into three main types: the first covers the type of lexical item that has one sense; the second involves two lexical items with the same meaning; and, the third is concerned with one lexical item with two opposite meanings (i.e. autoantonymy). He provides plenty of striking examples from the Qur’an and Arabic poetry, supported by extensive commentaries. Having a similar view, Al-Anbari (1960: 1–13) presents a commendable account of autoantonymy. In comparison to other scholarly treatments, Al-Anbari’s exceptional work is exhaustive, as it explicates 357 remarkable examples, most of which have been drawn from the Qur’an.

Al-Barghouti (2004) regards this as a bizarre phenomenon. He provides many examples such as the word saleem which means ‘a person who is cured’ as well as ‘a person who has just been bit by a snake’; baseer: ‘one with great sight and insight’, and also ‘blind’; mawla: ‘master’ and ‘slave’; wala: ‘to follow’ or ‘to lead’; and umma: ‘the entity that is followed’ or ‘the entity that follows and is guided’. Al-Barghouti (2004) points out that this phenomenon is usually attributed to the Bedouin origins of the language – the desert is said to impose unity, homogeneity, and therefore equality on all creatures. Sand is everywhere, and in the end everything turns into sand, the contradictory extremes of life seem to be essentially the same.

However, Al-Barghouti believes that this is a traditional explanation, which, like many other traditional explanations, do not help much. Instead, he proposes that a sense of continuity and unity of the universe might have been present in the desert communities of Bedouin Arabs, which rules out the possibility of having a sense of meaninglessness there. He exemplifies this from the 12th and 13th centuries, the period at which the preservation of the language became an obsession: 70 names for the concept ‘dog’ were recorded; and ‘love’ had 77 names. Pointing out this wealth of words and meanings, Al-Barghouti (2004) stresses that the existence of words that mean one thing and its opposite cannot be explained by desert born nihilism and lack of imagination.
6. THE (UN)TRANSLATABILITY OF THE QUR’AN

Qur’anic discourse is characterized by prototypical, linguistic, rhetorical, textual and phonetic features (Abdul-Raof 2001: 68; cf. also Afsaruddin 2002). Owing to the sophisticated nature of the Qur’anic discourse, achieving equivalence in Qur’an translation does seem to be “unobtainable in most vital parts of Qur’anic discourse” (Abdul-Raof ibid: xiii, cf. also Abdul-Raof 1999: 45; Al-Baqillani 1985: 48; Al-Jurjani 1981: 40–41; Al-Bundaq 1983: 49). Such unique discursive features of the Qur’an may well baffle translators. In this connection, Abdul-Raof (ibid: xiv) expresses the opinion that “translation does considerable injustice to the source text, the Qur’an, the Word of God.” In considering the Qur’an’s limits of translatability, Abdul-Raof (ibid: 2–3) argues that a translation of the Qur’an cannot be a substitution; it will necessarily be just a crude approximation, a mere aid which enables the target language reader to read and understand it. Obviously, this untranslatability can be attributed to the Qur’an-specific subtleties, which cannot be captured by translation into another language, no matter how resourceful and inventive the translator may be (cf. also Al-Ghazālī 1932: 13; Al-Shāfi‘ī 1961: 88–109). Indeed, in the microscope of Abdul-Raof (ibid: 180), “the translator is a text abuser,” and Qur’an translators ought to bear in mind the fact that “no matter how literal our diction is, the thrilling Qur’anic rhythms and acoustics that touch the very core of the source text reader’s heart cannot be induced in the target text” (see also Ibn Qutaiba 1954: 16 and Abdelali 2004).

Lack of total equivalence can also appear at the micro level, i.e. the word level (for a fuller discussion of this aspect see Baker 1992: 10–45). Accordingly, for Abdul-Raof (ibid: 7), a translator who aspires to achieve total lexical and/or textual equivalence is like someone “chasing a mirage: total equivalence at any level of language is impossible, relative equivalence at any level is possible.” More specifically, he goes on to say that language and culture-bound linguistic and rhetorical features are simply ‘inimitable’ and ‘unproduceable’ in other languages to a satisfactory level that can create an equivalent mystical effect on the target audience similar to that on source language readers. These Qur’anic intricacies have no equivalents in the target language and they represent unique examples of linguistic and cultural untranslatability (Abdul-Raof ibid: 12).

This state of affairs may be explained by the fact that Qur’an translations remain interpretations (for more details on the variant readings of the Qur’an cf. also Bobzin 1985; Shereef and Hawting 1993), and, therefore, the Qur’an will always be characterized by non-equivalence due to the universal linguistic fact that languages differ from each other syntactically, semantically and pragmatically. These linguistic differences lead to cases of untranslatability and/or poor translatability, i.e. these lead to approximate translation where
skewing of information is evident on a textual/textural, semantic, pragmatic or rhetorical levels (Abdul-Raof ibid: 68).

In discussing Qur’anic textural features, Abdul-Raof (ibid: 106, 109–111) emphasizes that these intricate textural components, which allow ‘interfertilization’ between syntax and rhetoric, are the bedrock of the Qur’an, and constitute the raison d’être for cases of untranslatability or inimitability of Qur’anic discourse. For him, translating Qur’anic texture does not always require the translator to keep intact the linguistic and/or rhetorical features of the source text that constitute the texture of the source text; target text linguistic/rhetorical constituents of texture must be employed. In other words, target language texture should be governed by target language linguistic and rhetorical norms of texture in order to achieve acceptability by purposeful communicative interaction with and response from the target language reader, similar to that generated by the source language text in its audience (Abdul-Raof ibid: 110).

As a corollary to all of this, Qur’anic translation, like many other types of translation, abounds with semantic losses at all conceivable levels (Abdul-Raof ibid: 110; see also Dickins et al. 2002: 25; Barnwell 1983: 20). Therefore, the focus has been on compensatory translation strategies such as exegesis which is a sort of “running commentary on the product that reveals something of its dynamic unfolding as a process” (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 11, quoted in Abdul-Raof, ibid: 110). Paratextual annotations and footnotes are also essential in enriching the target text and enlightening the readership who is denied access to Muslim exegetical literature. As far as penetrating the Qur’anic text is concerned, Abdul-Raof (ibid: 139) puts it neatly: “the fog of language can be illuminated through footnotes that can be used in Qur’an translation as demisting devices [italics as original]. Abdul-Raof (ibid: 140) argues that these footnotes or commentaries should be based on Qur’an exegesis.

Paraphrasing or translation without footnoting, however, can be seen as somehow sterile, owing to literal translation. The reason why Abdul-Raof (ibid: 140) discards paraphrasing is because it “labors its way through an accumulation of loosely defined detail, vacillating between a cumbersome ‘too much’ and a tormenting ‘too little’ (Schleiermacher 1813: 40).” On the other hand, the translator resorts to footnotes “as a concession to communicative requirements” (Hatim and Mason 1990: 18). Footnotes can be employed as translation enhancers, which have a paramount significance to the communicative process of translation.

Across Languages and Cultures 9 (1) (2008)
7. AUTOANTONYMY DISAMBIGUATION

Much attention has been given to lexical disambiguation by foreign/second language learners and translators alike (for a thorough account of sense disambiguation see Wu and Palmer 1994; Leacock and Chodorow 1998; Patwardhan et al. 2003; McCarthy et al. 2004). In the present context, “ambiguity” has taken on a special meaning that derives from the claim by Katz and Fodor (1963: 174) that semantics, like syntax, should be restricted to sentences. Many sentences are indeed ambiguous when viewed in a contextual vacuum. More to the point, as Katz and Fodor emphasized, most words, when taken in isolation, are ambiguous in just this sense; they convey different meanings when used in different linguistic settings. According to some other scholars, lexical disambiguation can be achieved by determining semantic relatedness (Kozima and Ito 1997; Dagan et al. 1999; Dagan 2000), or its inverse, semantic distance (cf. Lee et al. 1993; Resnik 1995; Huang et al. 2002; Morris and Hirst 2004). Thus, lexical disambiguation is the process that reduces this putative ambiguity, i.e. it is supposed to result in the selection of the most appropriate sense dictated by context.

Autoantonymy interacts with “contextual variation” (Blank 1999: 15). Hence, since felicity of the translation equivalence in religious discourse is especially important, translators have to pinpoint where contextual variation of one sense ends, and where the semantic range of another sense starts. Semantically, contextual variation can only mean that in “a given utterance the contextual meaning of a word is recognized as an actualization of a lexicalized sense of this word, although not all defining features are applicable to this context” (Blank 1999: 16; cf. also Frawley 1992). It can be said then that words normally occur in concrete stretches of discourse, i.e. in “coherent texts” (Halliday and Hasan 1976), and not in their more abstract and somewhat idealized dictionary definition. In this way, in everyday linguistic communication true ambiguity is remarkably rare. Accordingly, the immediate linguistic context and the broad scriptural context of the autoantonymous lexical item will be used as an enhancer to sort out which sense should be communicated to the target language. This, however, cannot prevent semantic loss, as one of the two meanings is normally sacrificed, without even supplying the target language readership with a footnote to alert them to this Qur’anic linguistic phenomenon.

8. DISCUSSION

For the purpose of organizing this part, the selected, illustrative examples from the Qur’an are provided first, then, followed by three Qur’anic translations: 1.

1. And the night as it dissipates (1696).
2. And night as it draws on (586).
3. And the close of night (626).

In its immediate linguistic-Qur’anic discourse, the Arabic lexical item ‘as’as ‘to drive away’ or ‘disperse’ clearly presages opposite meanings, i.e. to fall (for night) or to come/arrive (Al-Qurtubi 2003, Vol. 19: 238; Al-Razi 1995, Vol. 16: 73). In order to decide on the most appropriate meaning that suits a certain situation, readers should understand, appreciate, and make the subtle distinctions between words that appear to be interchangeably used. In the verses considered for the study, leaving out or favoring one of the contrasting meanings over the other does not affect the semantic smoothness; rather, it gives the text more eloquence and ability to simultaneously convey more than one meaning. Translators of the Qur’anic text ought to be aware of the most intended meaning, since the autoantonymous items allow several different translations.

Ali (1983: 1696), Irving (1992: 586), and Pickthall (2002: 626), respectively, rendered the autoantonymous lexical item ‘as’as as ‘dissipate’, ‘draws’ and ‘the close of night’, opting for the more dominant meaning. They have all managed to identify the more frequent and probably dominant meaning, ignoring its opposite ‘come forth’. This preference may have been based on consulting Qur’anic exegesis, such as Ibn Kathir (1997, Vol. 1: 215), who has given this meaning and not its antonym.

Presumably, the immediate context normally provides some clues as to which meaning is intended. The subsequent verse ﺗﻨﻔﺲ إذا واﻟﻠﻴﻞ, which Ali (1983: 1696) translates as “and the dawn as it breathes away the darkness” has a logical temporal sequence, connoting day and night phases; i.e. the break of dawn comes after the dissipation of night, and can justify the translators’ choice of targeting ‘dissipate’, for example, and not ‘come forth’. The broader Qur’anic context, which may lead to an analogous meaning, may provide adequate guidance to the intended meaning. For example, the verses 74 /33+34 أﺳﻔﺮ إذا واﻟﺼﺒﺢ أدبﺮ إذا واﻟﻠﻴﻞ, which Ali (1983: 1645) translated as “and by the night as it retreateth, and by the dawn as it shineth forth”, expresses the same function conveyed in the afore-quoted verse, in terms of day and night rotation.

1. And by the ocean, filled with swell (1433)
2. And the swollen sea (523)
3. And the burning sea (521)
The passive participle of the root *s-j-r* in Arabic, simultaneously ‘to fill’ or ‘evacuate’, is *masjur* (Al-Qurtubi 2003, Vol. 17: 61; Al-Razi 1995, Vol. 14: 240; Ibn Kathir 1997, Vol. 4: 215). The fact that it is autoantonymous, i.e., holding two opposite meanings at the same time, can give rise to many translation options, especially to those who are only aware of the most common meaning. Maintaining the two contrasting meanings that can have the same equilibrium does not affect the flow of the text, and thus, whichever meaning is understood it will not prevent the reader from understanding the verse.

Considering the three translations of the above verse, it is found that *masjur* has been interpreted differently. Ali paraphrased it as ‘filled with swell’ (Al-Sabuni, Vol. 3: 348), figuring out a third meaning, which has nothing to do with the autoantonymous ones. This translation does not make any reference to the water with which the sea is filled, and is thus inadequate due to this fact in the first place, and to the lack of reference to the two contrasting meanings, ‘emptied’ and ‘filled’ in the second place. Therefore, the readers of this translation, especially those who do not fully understand the text and its various semantic features, cannot have access to all the compressed meanings of the lexical item in question. Ali could have translated it by alluding to other scriptural contexts as in verse 6/81 *وَاذَا البحار سُجِرَت* which he (1983: 1694) translates as “when the oceans boil over with swell”.

‘Swollen sea’ in Irving’s translation suffers from the same defects, even though it relays one of the two meanings. This translation does not show that the sea is filled with water, and so it does not contain a reference to the more common meaning. Moreover, the translation is not augmented with paratextual material to illustrate that the lexical item at hand is autoantonymous, and consequently is semantically opposite to itself. Failing to convey the meaning with these values not only does not yield the total meaning of the original text, but also misguides the reader, who will only partially understand the text.

Pickthall gave ‘burning’ as a rendition of *masjur*, which is a synonym of ‘swollen’ in Irving’s translation. ‘Burning’, in his translation, or more precisely ‘boiling’, is one of the various meanings that *masjur* connotes (cf. Al-Zamakhshari 2005: 1182) in the exegesis of the verse 6/81 *وَاذَا البحار سُجِرَت* which Ali (1983: 1694) translates as “when the oceans boil over with a swell”. Though the translator managed to render one of the meanings into the target language, he did not seem to refer to the existing autoantonymy in *masjur*, ‘filled’ and ‘emptied’, let alone explain the unusual aspect of the lexical item, which appears to be designed to express such an irregularity.

1. So the (garden) became, by the morning, like a dark and desolate spot, (whose fruit had been gathered) (1588)

*Across Languages and Cultures* 9 (1) (2008)
2. And one morning it lay as if it had been already harvested (565)
3. Thus it became as if plucked (or black as if burnt) (585)

What makes the instance *Sareem* somehow translation-resistant is the fact that it concurrently expresses two opposite meanings, the broad daylight and the sheer darkness of the night (al-Qurtubi 2003, Vol. 18: 242; al-Razi 1995, Vol. 15: 89). One of the two senses it entails is more obscure or archaic than the other, which increases the chance for misinterpretation. The philological and scriptural breadth of the word should be considered in translation if the translator is to grasp as much of the meaning as possible. In the translations concerned, *Sareem* was rendered interpretively, because a one-element target language counterpart may not stand on its own to convey all the connotations. Ali descriptively rendered *Sareem* as ‘like a dark and desolate spot’, mulling over the night at which the garden was burnt and devastated. The translation here seems to deliver one meaning that focuses on the darkness and despondency the garden has sunk into, i.e. the black ashy landmark of the garden. However, *Sareem* can also refer to the clean and fully harvested appearance of the garden (cf. Al-Zamakhshari 2005: 1130), and is therefore antonymous to itself. The garden is portrayed as fully dry stubble that winds can easily scatter and drive away (cf. Al-Sabuni 2001, Vol. 3: 408), which, as a result, conveys the white and clean image of the garden.

The sentence ‘lay as if it had been already harvested’ in Irving’s translation reflects the other side of the meaning that was overlooked by Ali. Irving seems to claim, on the basis of scriptural interpretation (cf. Al-Zamakhshari ibid.) that the garden was not burnt, but destroyed and overwhelmed by a terrible wind that blew down the fruits and caused a collective destruction to the trees, changing the entire place beyond recognition. Preferring one of the meanings does not lessen the importance of the one that is not conveyed, so the target language version is deprived of an important piece of information conveyed by autoantonymy in the source language text. This translation, therefore, shows the white and clean appearance of the garden as if it had never flourished before.

In order to level out the two equal meanings in translation, Pickthall made reference to the two opposite senses contained by *Sareem*. Mention is made of the clean appearance of the garden, suggesting that the crop or fruit has been plucked, and allusion is made to the coal-blackness of the garden in the bracketed phrase ‘black as if burnt’, which is a clear indication of the double meaning of the lexical item. Surprisingly and confusingly enough, the autoantonymous lexical item may have forced the translator to preserve the two senses of the word, although at the cost of increasing the number of words needed.
1. And pray in small watches of the morning: (it would be) an additional prayer (or spiritual profit), for thee: soon thy Lord will raise thee to a station of praise and Glory (717).

2. At night, wake up and pray during it(s reading) as an extra bonus for yourself; perhaps your Lord will raise you once again to a praiseworthy standing (920).

3. And some part of the night awake for it, a spiritual profit for you. It may be that your Lord will raise you to a praised estate (258).

Extremely cultural and exclusively confined to Islam, *tahajjud*, ‘to stay up late’ or ‘to sleep’ (Al-Qurtubi 2003, Vol. 10: 307; Al-Razi 1995, Vol. 11: 31; Al-Sha’rawi 1991, Vol. 14: 8701), is observed in the last few hours of the night before dawn. The semantics of this lexical item offers some translation problems, especially if its autoantonymy is not taken into account. The reason that the three translations relay *tahajjud* in a paraphrasing fashion is the lack of a lexicalized target language equivalent. In addition, *tahajjud* means ‘to wake up after some sleep to observe the prayer’ and not the observance itself.

In rendering *tahajjud* into English, Ali directly refers to the observance of the prayer, and not the wakening in the last part of the night to observe the prayer. More importantly, the fact that this example is autoantonymous (cf. also al-Sabuni 2001, Vol. 2: 160) is not reflected in the translation. Autoantonymy is not very common in most languages, and cannot be simply and effortlessly rendered by translators and perceived by readers. Apparently, the translator did not transmit either ‘wakening’, the more dominant meaning, or ‘sleeping’, the less dominant and less frequently used one. His translation can still be justified because the *tahajjud*, though frequently used, came to be commonly understood as ‘the prayer’ or ‘the invocation’, and not to ‘wake up in the last part of the night’, or its antonym, ‘to sleep’, which is even less frequent. Full rendering of autoantonymy cannot always be guaranteed, not because the translator lacks competence, but because of the complexity of meaning, which cannot be precisely conveyed in the target language.

‘At night, wake up and pray during it’ in Irving’s translation, though re-articulating the meaning of *tahajjud*, does not point to the other meaning, which again is not implied in the one-word target language counterpart. The complexity of the source language text is what determines the size of the problem in the target language, which cannot offer an equivalent that incorporates the two opposite senses. Opting for one of the meanings of the source language item and ignoring the other can be justified by the context, on the one hand, and by scriptural considerations and interpretations on the other (cf. Al-Zamakhshari 2005: 606; Ibn Kathir 1997, Vol. 3: 53).
Since there is no direct equivalent in the target language for tahajjud, Pickthall rendered it using the same strategy that Irving adopted. ‘And some part of the night awake for it’ in his translation yields the intended meaning. It is unnecessary to preserve the other meaning in the translation. However, it should not be totally marginalized, and a footnote could be provided as supplementary information.

١٠/١٣
اﻟﺮّﻋﺪ
(ﺑﺎﻟﻨّﻬﺎرُ وﺳﺎرب
ﺑﺎﻟﻠﻴﻞ
ﻣﺴﺘﺨﻒٍ هﻮ
وﻣﻦ
ﺑﻪ
ﺟﻬﺮ
وﻣﻦ
اﻟﻘﻮل
أﺳّرّ
ﻣﻦ
مﻨﻜﻢ
ﺳﻮاء
سواء منكم من أمر القول ومن جهر به ومن هو مستخف بالليل وساري بالنهار) الزداد.

1. It is the same (to Him) whether any of you conceal his speech or declare it openly; whether he lie hid by night or walk forth freely by day (605).
2. It is all the same for you whether one of you is secretive about what he says or speaks out about it, and whether one keeps to himself at night and struts around by day (250).
3. Alike of you is he who hides the saying and he who noises it abroad, he who lurks in the night and he who goes freely in the daytime (128).

This verse consists of two parabled parts, where similitude is made between one’s concealing and declaring his/her speech, and one’s hiding at night and wandering openly in the broad daylight (Al-Qurtubi 2003, Vol. 9: 290, Al-Razi 1995, Vol. 10: 24). Adequate understanding of the first ‘hemistich’ of the verse leads to a full understanding of the second one. What creates translation problems in the rendition of cases such as sarib in the verse in question is the two conflicting meanings it incorporates, a feature that the target language equivalent does not convey. ‘Walk forth’ in Ali’s translation partially delivers the meaning, as one’s ‘appearance’ after ‘hiding’ ‘is not necessarily conditioned by one’s ‘walking forward’.

The translator could have sought help from another piece of Qur’anic discourse which fulfils a similar function, such as verse ٦١/١٨
ففتح سبيله في البحر
ففتح سبيله في البحر
ففتح سبيله في البحر
ففتح سبيله في البحر
which he (1983: 747) translates as “but when they reached the junction, they forgot (about) their fish, which took its course through the sea (straight) as in tunnel”. Leaving the other (opposite) meaning unconveyed is not a translation error, as the meaning that is being rendered is more comprehensive.

Not different from ‘walk forth’ is ‘strut’ in Irving’s translation. Again, the more dominant meaning is relayed in the translation, based contextually on the two interpretations of the verse, i.e. concealing and declaring the speech. Hence, it should be pointed out that languages do show sharp differences in certain semantic fields, and that is where translation mismatches arise.

of the translation: it cannot be preserved by using a one-component target language lexical item. The translator has achieved the required success in stimulating the intended meaning, taking advantage of the context in figuring it out, and has left the less expected meaning as covert. Justification for highlighting one of the two meanings springs from the functions it serves in the given situation.

32:24

1. Marry those among you who are single, or the virtuous ones among your slaves, male or female. (905)
2. Marry any single persons among you, as well as your honorable servants and maids. (354)
3. And marry such of you as solitary and the pious of your slaves and maidservants. (327)

For reasons related to piousness, commandment is made in the verse to keep marriage between Muslims who are not enjoying this social status. Due to differences between the Islamic culture, originally scripted in Arabic, and other cultures in terms of social relations, such as the dowry system, marriage, polygamy, and divorce, lexical items expressing these relations are found to present some translation problems that are not easily resolved.

In the verse above, ‘ayama is autoantonymous, simultaneously embracing two opposite meanings. The contextually more prominent meaning, ‘single’ (Al-Razi 1995, Vol. 12: 214; Al-Sabuni 2001, Vol. 2: 316), and not its opposite ‘married’ (Al-Qurtubi 2003, Vol. 12: 240) is given in Ali’s translation as an equivalent for ‘ayama. Still, this translation suffers from the limitation that ‘single’ could also mean anyone who is alone, either male or female, whether unmarried or married, but divorced. On this basis, ‘single’ in this translation does not fulfill the same semantic function as does ‘ayama in the source text. This, of course, cannot be attributed to the translator’s ineptitude, but rather to the linguistic differences existing between the two languages. The translation does not make clear that ‘ayama applies to all women, whether virgins or women of experience, such as widows or women separated from previous husbands by divorce (cf. also Ibn Kathir 1997, Vol. 3: 269). It should also be noted that the term ‘ayama is not exclusive to any of the two sexes, and that is why Ali footnoted the translation of the verse with a reference to the two sexes, male and female.

Irving’s translation is not too far away from Ali’s as he rendered ‘ayama as ‘single persons’, referring in that to any individual who is not in the state of marriage. The translation, however, still suffers from the same deficiencies, as it does not indicate whether the individuals concerned are married, divorced, widowed or still virgins. The fact that ‘ayama holds two states and sex
oppositions, ‘virgin’ and ‘married’, ‘male’ and ‘female’ appear to pose serious translation problems, since the target language does not provide a one-element lexicalized expression that corresponds to the given source language lexical item. Consequently, ‘single persons’ cannot impart the whole meaning of ‘ayama in the verse under investigation, due to its inability to retain simultaneously and with the same power, the two opposite meanings.

On the other hand, ‘solitary’ in Pickthall’s translation does not preserve the semantic flow of the text, since it is associated with isolation, loneliness and desolation that one may experience, and not with one’s state of marriage. The translation here does not show the marital status expressed by ‘ayama in the source text and, as a result, does not reflect sex. The complexity of this example seems to have put the translator to a difficult test. Rendering ‘ayama as ‘solitary’ does not seem to fulfil the expectations of competent readers of the source language text. Still, any loss of meaning can be compensated for in footnotes and co-text translation, which of course leads to another problem, i.e. altering text size.

What makes the Arabic lexical item farid translationally problematic is the fact that it contains a pair of two opposite senses: ‘old’ (Al-Qurtubi 2003, Vol. 1: 448), and ‘young’ (Al-Sha’rawi 1991, Vol. 1: 292–3). These two senses cannot be retained in a one-word target language counterpart, irrespective of any linguistic and translation procedures that may be applied. The case being so and with such constraints, translators sought help from the context in determining the more likely or more acceptable meaning. This makes it unavoidable for one of the meanings to be ignored at the expense of the other.

As far as the translations are concerned, farid is ‘trained’ into the target language differently, owing to the two semantic contents it embraces. ‘Too old’ in Ali’s translation is a booming choice driven by the context, followed by bikr, ‘young’ in the source language text. The suggestion in Ali’s translation that the cow’s age is excessive (‘too’ old) is problematic, because this is unlikely to be meant in the source text. This is clear in ‘awan, which indicates that the age of the cow is between the two conditions or two ‘age regions’. Moreover, the inclusion of ‘heifer’ in this translation contradicts the age he suggests, since a

Across Languages and Cultures 9 (1) (2008)
heifer is a cow that is still young and might not have mated yet (cf. also Al-Sabuni 2001, Vol. 1: 57).

Irving’s choice, on the other hand, is not much different from Ali’s. He renders farid as ‘worn out’. This translation also refers to an excessive degree of age, which is again not in agreement with the source text. The cow’s age is in-between, and this does not allow a bias toward any of the two senses, while Irving’s ‘worn out’ is clearly biased. Apparently, the translator was not able to use the context, which, in one way or another, might have helped him to figure out that the cow should be neither old nor young. As the combination of the meaning ‘old’ and ‘young’ in one lexical item in the word farid is peculiar to Arabic, it cannot be adequately rendered in the target language.

In order to avoid bias for any of the two ages, Pickthall carefully rendered farid as ‘neither old nor immature’. This translation sounds contextually-driven and the translator seems to have consulted the broader context of the same chapter, where the heifer appears to be young and untrained to till the soil. This is clear in verse 71 of the chapter which Ali (1983: 36) translates as “He says: a heifer not trained to till the soil or water the fields”. A young heifer is more likely to be untrained than an old one, and this confirms the idea that farid is autoantonymous. Hence, capturing and conveying one of the two senses does not imply that the translator can safely turn a blind eye to the other one.

The underlined word umma is autoantonymous as it may be interpreted as one man (Al-Qurtubi 2003, Vol. 10: 197), or one nation (Al-Sha’rawi 1991, Vol. 13: 8271), or even the two meanings combined (Al-Razi 1995, Vol. 10: 137), and thus, it can present a translation problem if due consideration is not given to the context in which it appears. The case becomes more complicated when we realize that the two meanings stand in opposite relation to each other. Given such a semantic peculiarity, umma is rendered in various ways in the target language. Ali used the word ‘model’ to render umma, in an attempt to foreground the fact that here we are given a unique example of obedience to God. This example was embodied in the person of Abraham (cf. Al-Zamakhsahri 2005: 587). However, the preservation of the meaning of
individuality in *umma* breeds confusion, as it is always associated with ‘oneness’, and is not expected to go beyond this level to mean ‘many’.

Abraham was a sincere man of faith and this is the reason why he had a large number of followers – indeed, his followers constituted a nation of believers (Ibn Kathir 1997, Vol. 2: 543). Irving, understanding the verse as such, rendered *umma* as ‘community’, which is opposite to the meaning in Ali’s translation. This translation lacks the reference to the other, rarely used or understood meaning, ‘individual’. This discrepancy, however, should not be ascribed to the translator’s incompetence, but to the fact that the target language lacks a lexical item that can simultaneously hold the two opposite meanings. Moreover, preserving even one of the two meanings is in itself a success, while the other meaning can be given in a footnote, which should not be regarded as unnecessary material.

Perhaps Pickthall (2002) figured out the meaning of *umma* in the same way as Irving did, and as a result, translated it as ‘nation’. Again, this is not a mistranslation, since at least one of the meanings is conveyed, though at the expense of the other. The co-existence of the two opposite meanings is peculiar to the source language text and cannot be preserved in its entirety in the target language version. The conceptual complexity of this example on one hand, and the non-correspondence of the target language lexicon on the other hand, may have forced the translator to opt for the more relevant meaning ‘nation’.

(والمطلقات تترتبين بأنفسهم ثلاثة قروء) البقرة 228:2

1. Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods (89–90).
2. Divorced women should wait [alone] by themselves for three menstrual periods (36).
3. Women who are divorced shall wait, keeping themselves apart, three (monthly) courses (33).

In Islam, divorcing a woman is bound with establishing the fact whether or not the woman is pregnant. In the verse under discussion, the waiting period is exclusive to married women, and is confined to three monthly periods. This gives a chance for a possible reconciliation on one hand, and to ascertain pregnancy on the other. Menstruation or the monthly bleeding, and cleanliness are two simultaneous meanings of *quru’* the plural of *qar’* in the verse at hand (cf. Al-Qurtubi: Vol. 3, 114; Al-Sha’rawi: Vol. 2, 984; Al-Razi: Vol. 3, 95; Ibn Kathir: Vol. 1, 236–7), a semantic equilibrium that can mislead translators who may not be cognizant with the two meanings.

Attention should be drawn here to the fact that context may not always be helpful, as in the Qur’anic discourse having two meanings may be concurrently
acceptable without the pre-eminence of one over the other. In other words, the two meanings are equally taken into account linguistically and exegetically-scripturally, as the above exegeses show. Furthermore, the two readings of the verse can have the same power in terms of smoothness and flow, as menstruation and cleanliness follow one another successively, and going through one entails waiting for the next. As far as the translations are involved, the three translators rendered *quru’* as ‘menstrual periods’, ‘monthly courses’ and ‘monthly periods’. These translations seem to depend on the fact that the type of women concerned here are connubial and the monthly period is so crucial in confirming pregnancy. Unlike other commentators, Al-Zamakhshari (2005: 132), in particular, talked solely about ‘menstruation,’ without mentioning the second meaning whatsoever. Such a commentary could have prompted the three translators to highlight this meaning and exclude its opposite (i.e. cleanliness).

The imperative form *surr* and its Arabic root *s-r-r* is autoantonymous; it has two meanings that are semantically inverse. Such a case offers translation difficulties, especially if context is not studied carefully. The issue becomes more complicated if the lexical item under study possesses two opposite meanings that enjoy the same semantic weight and power, where leaving one out will unavoidably be at the expense of the other.

The two clashing meanings are ‘bring together’ and ‘divide’ (cf. Al-Qurtubi, Vol. 3, 301; Al-Razi, Vol. 4, 45–46; Ibn Kathir Vol. 1, 277). Both meanings are scripturally equal in the Qur’anic discourse, where favouring one is an inevitable bias against the other. This can be a source of confusion as the translator must decide which meaning to keep and which to discard, and this does not seem to be an easy task at all. Determining the precise meaning of the word *surr* in the above verse may be scripture-based (see e.g. Al-Zamakhshari 2005: 149).

Irving (1992: 44) rendered *surr* as ‘train’, a translation that does not convey any of the two agreed-upon opposite meanings mentioned above. This may be attributed to the fact that Abraham was asked to embrace the birds to him before cutting them into portions, which might have been taken as ‘training’ the birds by bringing them close to him. Likewise, Ali (1983: 106) provides ‘tame them to turn to you,’ which constitutes a blatant deviation from

1. “Take four birds; tame them to turn to you Ali” (106).
2. “Take four kinds of birds and train them to [follow] you” (44).
3. (His Lord) said: “Take four of the birds and cause them to incline unto you, then place a part of them on each hill, then call them, they will come to you in haste” (39).
what has been unanimously agreed upon by exegetes. In contrast, Pickthall (2002: 39) picks out the first sense (i.e. bring together) and approximates it through ‘cause them to come unto you.’ This specific example shows clearly that the broad scriptural context came into play in making translation choices.

( قال سأوي إلى جبل يعصمني من الماء، قال لا عاصم اليوم من أمر الله إلا من رحم) هود 43:11

1. Noah said: “This day nothing can save, from the Command of Allah, any but those on whom He hath mercy” (525).
2. He said: “Nothing is safe today from God’s command except for someone who has been shown mercy” (226).
3. He said: “I shall betake me to some mountain that will save me from water.”
   (Noah) said: “This day there is none that saves from the commandment of Allah save him on whom He has had mercy” (196).

The Arabic lexical item ‘asem in the verse above, representing the morphological pattern fa’il, designates an agent or doer of action. This applies to ordinary situations, where the meaning of a word is straightforward and does not semantically curve to turn against itself. In Qur’anic discourse, the case is different. The picture in the verse portrays the terrible end of the people of Noah’s time when land and mountain peaks were entirely submerged by the deluge. The son of Noah refused to embark on the Ark to save himself from the Command of Allah, but rather, decided to betake himself to some mountain for protection. Hence, exchanging the two meanings ‘asem and ma’soum, ‘saver’ and ‘saved’, respectively, in the verse does not cause any problem, because the semantics of the text flows smoothly.

Despite the fact that the two opposite meanings are equally important, exegeses gave prominence to one of them (i.e. ma’soum), and marginalized the other (i.e. ‘asem). This could be ascribed to the fact that there seems to be preference for this particular meaning not only among commentators of the Qur’an (cf. Al-Qurtubi Vol. 9, 39; Al-Razi Vol. 9, 241; Ibn Kathir Vol. 2, 406; Al-Zamakhshari 2005: 585), but also among ordinary readers. As far as the translations are concerned, Irving (1992: 226) rendered ‘asem as ‘nothing is safe’ in which an indication of ma’soum ‘saved’ is strongly induced. Such a rendition reveals that the translator had given the text a thorough reading, exploiting the linguistic-scriptural context and the relevant Qur’anic commentaries as indicated above. Unlike this rendition, Pickthall (2002: 196) and Ali (1983: 525), respectively, rendered ‘asem as ‘none that saves’ and ‘nothing can save,’ which are related to the other sense, ‘saver’, and demonstrate the autoantonymous nature of this item.
8. CONCLUSION

The preceding pages have attempted to investigate the difficulties and problems arising from the translation of a selected set of autoantonymous lexical items in Qur’anic discourse. As the study has shown, such lexical items do not often have parallels in the target language, i.e. English. Such discrepancies have been shown to create severe constraints on translation, the magnitude of which may go unnoticed if the text is not read very thoroughly. While a plethora of explanatory variables can be theoretically and practically invoked to account for the translation practices of autoantonymy, this study only scratches the surface.

The present analysis lays great stress on context, which has been found to play a major role in determining and disambiguating meaning, and in leading translators to an agreement on a certain meaning. In addition, the study has demonstrated that the broader context (i.e. the scriptural context) can virtually be considered an ancillary factor in identifying the intended meaning and ‘dumping’ the other. The frequency and currency of a certain meaning have proved to play a key role in giving prominence to such a meaning, and consequently, preserving it in translation, putting an end thereby to the intricacy arising from the autoantonymous nature of the expression in question.

Finally, this study should be extended by considering more than three translations and by involving translations into other languages. The study of autoantonymy in translation should also be deepened by taking on board the task of unearthing the normative principles underlying Qur’an translators’ practices, and the sort of translation strategies that should be mobilized to deal with autoantonymy, to save translators from profitless theorization in this area.

References


Across Languages and Cultures 9 (1) (2008)

Across Languages and Cultures 9 (1) (2008)


**Internet References**


http://thinks.com/words/autoantonyms.htm

---

*Across Languages and Cultures* 9 (1) (2008)