

Translating the Word of God

The Muslim Reader

*Magazine of the Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore
Volume Number 17 January - March 1999*

Many writers have argued it is impossible to translate the Qur'an accurately. Translations are, of course, very useful for those who do not speak Arabic. However, they always fall short of the power and precision of the original, for several reasons. In this article, I would like to highlight some of these reasons, by looking at translations of Suratul ikhlas, the 112th chapter, which all Muslims are familiar with. I shall quote from the work of four Muslim translators:

- Abdullah Yusuf Ali (AYA);
- Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (MMP);
- Muhammad Asad (MA); and
- Thomas B Irving (TBI).

Qul huw Allahu ahad

Allah

Should the word *Allah* be translated into English as 'God'? Clearly, that is the closest English word, but, like most English words, it carries overtones (often Christian ones) which are not applicable to Allah. If you can buy a statue of a god and put it in a cabinet, then you are not talking about Allah. If you can talk about gods, then you are not talking about Allah. If you can talk about goddesses, then you are not talking about Allah. For this reason, AYA and MMP leave the word Allah untranslated.

He

Is Allah masculine? Grammatically speaking, the word Allah is masculine in Arabic, and is usually translated by the masculine He in English. These are the limitations of the grammar of the two languages. To use He does not of course mean to imply that Allah is biologically male. Similarly the plural We is often used in the Qur'an. This does not imply that Allah is plural, any more than Queen Victoria's famous expression 'We are not amused' implied that she was plural.

Ahad

Ahad is the Arabic word for the number 'one'. Thus MMP has 'Say: He is Allah, the One!' However, this may strike English (especially British) readers as comical, as the phrase you are a one is 'used to tell someone that they are being rude, foolish, etc' (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). AYA uses 'One and Only'. Again, this may have unwanted overtones for English speakers as the phrase the one and only is used informally 'to emphasize that someone is very famous' (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). TBI uses 'Unique'.

Capital letters

All four translators use initial capital letters for nouns and adjective referring to Allah, such as One. This is a convention in English, although it does not correspond to anything in Arabic, which does not have capital letters.

Say

This surah, like many other surahs and ayahs in the Qur'an, begins with the word *qul*. This is easily translated as 'Say'. However, it leaves the reader (especially the non-Muslim reader) wondering who is being commanded to say. Some translators make this clear by including O Muhammad in bracket, although this is not in the original.

Allahus samad

Samad

This word illustrates very well the dilemma of trying to translate Arabic words into English in a one-to-one fashion. Arabic words are often rich in overtones and allusions, which makes them difficult to translate concisely without extensive paraphrase. Imran Hosein in *Islam and Buddhism in the Modern World* gives three alternative translations for this ayat:

- Allah is He on Whom all depend, but Who is himself independent.
- Allah is the only Necessary Being. All else is contingent.
- Allah alone exist. All else subsists.

I remember attending a religious class (in the UK) where we spent half an hour debating how to translate this one word into English. The teacher, a Pakistani hafiz, seemed to understand well the overtones of the word and explained them patiently to us. Unfortunately, he then turned to me and asked me what the best English word was as a translation. We finally agreed that 'self sufficient' was probably the closest, but that it still lacked much of the meaning of the original Arabic.

Lam yalid wa lam yulad

AYA translates this as 'He begetteth not, nor is He begotten'. Grammatically this is accurate, as the original Arabic is the active and passive forms of a verb (as in I see and I am seen). However, it is very old-fashioned.

Beget

Beget is an accurate translation for this verb. However, this word is probably not in English dictionary; if it is, it is marked as archaic or very formal. It is certainly not a common everyday word in modern English. TBI uses the verb father. 'He has not fathered anyone nor was he fathered'. This is a far more up-to-date verb. To convey the meaning in everyday modern English, we might say 'He is nobody's father, and nobody's son' or, sex-neutrally, 'Allah is nobody's parent, and nobody's child'.

-th

The -th verb ending has been archaic in English for a couple of centuries. Using it adds an 'olde worlde' charm to the translation, but does not make it accessible to modern speakers, especially non-native speakers, of English.

Grammatical word order

Similarly the archaic word order He begetteth not (making a negative by simply adding not after the verb, found in AYA, MMP and MA) has been replaced in modern English by He does not beget (putting not before the verb and adding the auxiliary verb do where appropriate, as in TBI). Again, the archaic word order makes the translation less readable to modern readers.

Wa lam yaku(n) lahu kufuwan ahad

This is the easiest of the four ayats to translate, and there is little difference, apart from archaic elements discussed above, between the four versions, eg 'And there is nothing comparable to HIM!' (TBI).

Punctuation

AYA and MA have no exclamation marks. MMP puts an exclamation mark at the end of the 1st and 4th. This does not correspond to anything in the original Arabic, which has nothing corresponding to an exclamation mark. However, it does try to convey the exclamatory nature of the message here.

I have tried to explain some of the dilemmas facing translators. The original Qur'an (including the meaning of the original Qur'an) is in Arabic. Translations are useful for non-Arabic speakers, but they can never convey the whole message and flavor of the original.