









The Lecture Contains:

-  Introduction
-  The Torah
-  Aid to comprehension
-  Slips in Translation
-  Translation of the Quran
-  Translation as Interpretation
-  Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall
-  Problems in translation

◀ Previous Next ▶

Module 9: Translating Religious

Lecture 31: Translating Scripture

Introduction

The topics we have discussed so far have centred around translation of secular texts. But there has been largescale translation of religious texts across the world. Translation of religious texts is a rather uneven terrain in the history of translation, mainly because the orthodox belief is that the word of God cannot be translated by human hand. The authenticity of the original becomes sacrosanct here, and the assumption that translation is secondary, slavish or derivative is made concrete. This reverence for the original word of God can be seen in religious faiths across the world and cultures, including tribal culture, where God speaks only through the shaman, or the person chosen specifically to become the voice of God. Any other 'translation' would be false and listening to or reading it would be blasphemy.

When it comes to the translation of scripture, the 'original' is sacrosanct as it is the Word of God, and the author is God Himself.

However, this does not mean that the scriptures have not been translated at all. In fact, individual translations and interpretations have helped the growth of religions, especially Christianity. Of all the religious texts to have been translated, the Bible towers above others in terms of sheer magnitude and scope of its translation. The translation of the Bible, as is true of the sacred texts of other religions as well, gains added significance when you consider the impact it had on the evolution and standardization of different languages round the world. So, other than the issues that are raised by the process of translation, scriptural translation needs to be analysed also for its influence on the growth and survival of languages.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Module 9: Translating Religious

Lecture 31: Translating Scripture

The Torah

Let us first take into consideration the oldest of the Semitic religions, which is Judaism. The Torah is the foundational religious text for the Jews, and is also called Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses. It is part of the Christian Old Testament, and is acknowledged by Muslims as well, as a holy book. The language of the Torah is Hebrew, which is not understood by many Jews scattered across the world. Contrary to the suspicion that other religions exhibit towards translation, the Jews believed that the Torah contains divine truths meant to be understood by humans. So the Torah had to be translated and its teachings propagated for the benefit of those who do not understand Hebrew. Michael Alpert observes that the first reference to translation can be found in the Bible itself. It is mentioned that the Jews who returned from exile in Babylon could no longer understand Hebrew and so they read the Torah: “they read from the book of the law of God clearly, made its sense plain and gave instruction in what was read” (Torah translation, *Routledge Encyclopedia*, 269). Alpert interprets this as translation.

According to Alpert, the first translation of the Torah is the Septuagint, a translation done in Egypt in the third century BC for the benefit of Jews who did not know Hebrew. This translation was considered unsatisfactory by many Jews and there came along other translations after this. There were translations into Aramaic which were called targum (targumin means translation in Hebrew). The Torah was read in the synagogue and the Aramaic interpretation given orally by the meturgeman or the interpreter/translator. Alpert points out that it is difficult to separate translation from exegesis in the case of the Torah or the Bible (270). This also applies to the earliest Arabic translation of the Torah by Saadia in the 10th century. Saadia who was a Hebrew scholar himself, explained Hebrew grammar and syntax using parallels from Arabic. His translation is still used by Yemenite Jews.

Translation in the case of scripture, becomes interpretation or exegesis.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Aid to comprehension

The translations of the Torah were seen more as guide books that helped in better understanding the text, and not as the original text itself. The basic Hebrew text is believed to be sacrosanct and not open to emendations of any sort. Alpert notes that the inviolability of the text is “preserved by many rules of copying and checking as well as by the tradition of reading the Pentateuch publicly in Hebrew from a handwritten scroll” (270). This text, meant for public recitation is called the masoretic text and was standardized in the sixth or seventh century. It is considered to be the authentic original for all translations or interpretations.

The translations were seen as interpretations of the original and not as a substitute for the original scriptural text.

This means that the basic text was considered to be divine and singular, while the exegesis or interpretations were human and multiple. In fact, the Torah depended a lot on the interpretations of scholarly people during the Middle Ages, some of whom were Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Nachmanides etc. In fact, these commentaries were the part of later translations that were published in vernacular languages. Commentaries could range from clarifications of the basic text to scholarly studies that analyzed the text in greater detail and revealed hidden truths to the common reader.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Module 9: Translating Religious

Lecture 31: Translating Scripture

Slips in Translation

All this does not imply that the translation from Hebrew was smooth and easy. As is the case with translations of texts from one language to another, equivalence became an issue. Even today there are debates about the way certain words have been translated. For instance, Alpert points out how St. Jerome, the first of the translators of the Bible, translated the Hebrew word ‘*almah*’ as virgin: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Translators today realize that the word only means a young woman who can become a mother. It is obvious from this that the connotation of the verse changes completely if the word is translated as virgin. Mistranslated as it may be, St. Jerome’s translation has, over the centuries, attained a sort of finality.



Another controversy has been around the name of God that is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. The name of God in the Pentateuch is conveyed through the Tetragrammaton or four letters Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh. This was not pronounced as it was written (it was actually pronounced as Adonai), and it passed into the Septuagint as Kyrios, to Latin as Dominus and to English as Lord. Much later when the Hebrew vocal text came into circulation, nobody knew the actual pronunciation and it was mistakenly assumed to be pronounced as Yahovah and written as Jehovah. Thus the name of God came to be finalized as Jehovah in the Old Testament. Alpert argues that this is a misunderstanding of the basic text, a muddling that occurred due to incorrect translation somewhere down the line (272).

Besides this, there are difficulties encountered in translation of names. In the original Hebrew, each name has a meaning which is lost in translation to English or other languages. Take the case of the name Jacob. He was named Ya’aqov from the Hebrew *aqeb* meaning heel, as he was born holding the heel of his twin brother Esau. Ya’aqov becomes Jacob in translation, thereby ridding the name of all reference to the heel which in Hebrew connotes somebody who overtakes another insidiously. The name then gains added significance when considered in the context of Jacob’s story and how he deceived his father into giving him the blessings that should have gone to Esau the firstborn.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Translation of the Quran

This reveals the pitfalls of translation, an aspect that you have to be doubly careful about when translating texts that are considered to be divine revelations.

This also explains why most religions are extremely reluctant, if not prohibitory, about translation of scriptural texts. The Quran which is the sacred text of Islam, is similarly considered to be outside the pale of translation. According to Hassan Mustapha, “The importance attached to the Quran stems from the belief that it contains, verbatim, the Word of God, as revealed piecemeal to Muhammad by the

Angel Gabriel between 610 and 632 AD. It is therefore considered inimitable, and this has important implications for both the legitimacy and the (authorized) methods of translating it” (“Quran Translation”, 200). The traditional belief is that it is wrong to translate the Quran. It has a language that is specific to it; the Arabic of the Quran is different from the Arabic that is used by native speakers. So whoever wishes to read the Holy Book is supposed to master the language in which it is written. The text cannot, or should not be rendered into a language to cater to the target readership.

In the case of the Quran, the belief is that the believer/reader should go to the source text in the source language and not through a translation that is meant to cater to the target language reader.

The Quran was originally meant to be recited and was composed in rhyming prose. The canonical text was written down under the direction of the third Caliph Uthman ibn Affan in the 7th century. This was sent to various cities with the express orders that all other unauthorized versions be destroyed. Hassan Mustapha notes that “there are seven legitimate readings (*ahruf*) in circulation, which differ mainly in the manner in which the verses are recited orally and the interplay between the recited and written forms” (200). Besides the written language, a lot of importance is given to the way in which the verses are recited for which it is imperative to have a good grasp of pronunciation and intonation of the spoken language.

◀ Previous Next ▶

Translation as Interpretation

Despite the traditional opposition to the Quran being translated, there have been scholars who believed that translation cannot be completely done away with. One such was Abu Hanifa, the Iraqi scholar of the 9th century. He was of the view that the text could be translated, provided the Arabic original is also provided along with the translation. He also felt that non-Arabic speakers could express the meaning in their own language while they recite the Quranic verses. However, the stricture that a non-believer cannot translate the Holy Quran still holds.

There has been a lot of debate about the translatability of the Quran.

As is the case with the Torah, translation of the Quran also implies explanation of the meaning and significance of the verses. Interpretation can very often be dictated by personal beliefs and ideology, and perhaps this explains the importance given to the translator's faith in the translation of the Quran. Somebody who does not share the beliefs embedded in the text might knowingly or unknowingly distort the message of the book. Hence it is not a surprise that non-believers are asked to keep away from it.

Despite the barriers surrounding it, translations of the Quran have taken place. Hassan Mustapha notes that the first translations were done during the reign of the Abbasids (8th – 12th centuries in what is present day Iraq). These were done by the first Persians who converted to Islam. However, there was an early translation which was by a non-believer – the Latin translation commissioned in 1143 by Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny to repudiate the tenets of Islam. There were other translations like these, with the specific aim of undermining Islamic religious beliefs. In the Middle Ages in which the Crusades witnessed the most bitter and protracted of battles between Christians and Muslims, translation became another weapon to fight the infidel with. Since then, there have been numerous translations of the Quran, but Mustapha is of the view that “there is, by implication, no universally recognized single translation, or edition in translation, of the Quran” (201).

◀ Previous Next ▶

Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall

An important name in the account of Quran translations is that of the Englishman Mohammed Marmaduke William Pickthall (1875 – 1936). He was an Englishman who converted to Islam in 1917, and openly championed the Turkish cause when England was pursuing a virulently anti-Turk policy. He was a supporter of the Ottoman Empire and was widely travelled in the Middle East. He served for a brief while in India also, under the Nizam of Hyderabad where in 1930 he completed his project of the translation of the Quran. This



volume *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* is considered to be a sensitive and scholarly translation. The fact that he got the approval of the Rector of al-Azhar which was considered to be the centre for Islamic studies in Cairo, testifies to the validity of Pickthall's translation. It should also be noted that he had to stress that his translation was more of an interpretation (as the title of the books shows) than translation to get their approval. The al-Azhar is even today considered to be the final authority regarding Quran translations. Regarding Pickthall's translation A. R. Kidwai says: "It keeps scrupulously close to the original in elegant, though now somewhat archaic, English. However, although it is one of the most widely used English translations, it provides scant explanatory notes and background information ("http://www.islam101.com/quran/transAnalysis.htm"). In Kidwai's opinion, Pickthall's translation does not help the uninitiated reader of the Quran. However it is true that Pickthall remains one of the best Western English translators, a fine example of a person translating from a foreign ideology and culture.

Problems in translation

It has already been mentioned that there were divergent views on the translatability of the Quran. Mustapha notes that a medieval scholar Imam Shatby expressed the view that the basic text has too many specifically ‘Arabic’ terms that cannot be translated adequately. However, he felt that there can be no objections to the translation of interpretations of the Quran, a view that is even today backed by respectable bodies of Islamic learning like al-Azhar of Egypt. In fact, the years between 1925 and 1936 witnessed turbulent debates regarding this in Egypt, when the view that it should not be translated gained currency. During this time, Kamal Atatürk the leader of Turkey decided to commission a translation of Quran into Turkish which was interpreted as an attempt to distance his people from the original language and culture of the Muslims. In fact, debates surrounding this prompted the al-Azhar to decide that translations could be allowed only if they are interpretations intended to explain the meaning to people who are not familiar with the Arabic language.

The style and format of Quran translations are also very important, because there is a 1936 fatwa that stipulates that the translation has to be printed along with the original. So, many of the translations have the original text on the left and the translation on the other side. The language of the original is thus never lost sight of even in translation. In some cases at least this has a major influence on the local language. Take the case of Malayalam, for instance. The influence of Arabic on Malayalam the local language of Kerala, has given rise to a curious hybrid language called Arabimalayalam. Children who are taught the Quran in Arabic, do not manage to master the written script of Malayalam. However, their spoken language continues to be Malayalam. This results in a piquant situation where they are unable to write in the language they speak. The way out was a hybrid script – Malayalam in Arabic script, giving birth to a new language called Arabimalayalam. The language also has its own literature including one which dates back to the 17th century – Muhyideenmala of 1607. It is also the language of the rich repertory of Mappilappattu, which are songs peculiar to the Muslims of Malabar.

Arabimalayalam is a fine and rare example of how the language of scriptures can penetrate local culture and language, and create a new entity that draws from both cultures. This shows how translations of scriptures can transcend the boundaries of faith and mingle closely with the language and culture of different regions.

Assignments

1. Trace the history of the translation of the Torah.
2. Translatability of texts assume an added significance when it comes to sacred books – Discuss this in light of the translation history of the Torah and Quran.

References:

Alpert, Michael. "Torah Translation", *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. Ed. Mona Baker. London: Routledge, 1998. 2001 ed: 269 – 273.

Arabi Malayalam, "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabi_Malayalam"

Kidwai, A. R. "A Survey of English Translations of the Quran". "<http://www.islam101.com/quran/transAnalysis.htm>"

Mustapha, Hassan. "Quran Translation", *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. Ed. Mona Baker. London: Routledge, 1998. 2001 ed: 200 – 204

 **Previous** **Next** 