Translation versus Transliteration of Religious Terms in Contemporary Islamic Discourse in Western Communities

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Abstract

The significance of the present research stems from the escalating yet unnecessary conflict between Islamic culture on the one hand and western civilization on the other hand. The researchers believe much of the growing and sometimes mutual distrust between the two sides may sometimes at least stem from mere linguistic behaviour. Hence, this research aspires to examine the use of translation versus transliteration of religious Islamic terms in two different types of Islamic discourse in the western countries, viz. the site of Imam Hendi (USA) and the Da'wah Internet site of Australia, as representative of tolerant versus intolerant Islamic discourse. The main objective is to investigate the researchers' hypothesis that the use of translation versus transliteration may be fairly regarded as a linguistic marker of the type of content advocated by the two kinds of Islamic discourse. The scope of the research is confined to Islamic discourse in English, notwithstanding that the author/s in both sites in question are native speakers of English, and, hence, differences in the use of transliteration and/or translation can hardly be attributed to problems with linguistic competence. In this respect, a couple of articles and/or texts have been examined with an eye on the use of such terms as God versus Allaah/Allah, prayer versus Salaah/Salat, alms giving versus Zakaah/Zakat, mosque versus masjid and even Islam (a traditionally accepted transliteration of إسلام) versus Islaam. The researchers mainly depend on semantic analysis of religious terms in translation versus transliteration and, partly, try to make use of a questionnaire to test the impact of both techniques upon the possible addressees. The research ends with a couple of recommendations suggested by the researchers in the light of their discussions of the data and findings of the research.

Keywords: Translation, Transliteration, Religious terms, Contemporary Islamic discourse, Western communities

1. Introduction

1.1 Significance of the Research

The significance of the topic of this research can hardly be overestimated in our age. It is, nowadays, quite common to find articles, speeches and even books that call for the reconsideration of the Islamic religious discourse that is wide spread in Arab countries, often referred to as Wahabi or fundamentalist thought and usually affiliated with the political Islamist trend/s. If this is the case within Muslim societies or, at least, societies that have a majority of Muslims, there is even a more dire need for the refinement of Islamic religious discourse that addresses communities where Muslims are only a minority. Hence, the present research focuses on Islamic discourse in western communities, with two examples under study: texts taken from the website of Imam Yahya Hendi, who is the spiritual leader of the Islamic Society of Frederick on the one hand, and texts that belong to the Islamic Da'wah Centre of Australia on the other hand.

1.2 Objectives & Hypotheses of the Research

The present research is by no means an attempt to issue value judgments on the content of the examples under study from the two types of Islamic religious discourse. Generally speaking, "attention has been almost

exclusively trained on the meaningfulness of religious language in general, logical terms rather than on the linguistic characteristics themselves" (Note 1). This research, however, aspires to underline and identify some semantic markers of each of the two types of religious discourse in question, with particular reference to the use of translated versus transliterated religious terms. In this respect, a couple of articles and/or texts shall be examined with an eye on the use of such terms as God versus Allaah/Allah, prayer versus Salaah/Salat, alms giving versus Zakaah/Zakat, mosque versus Masjid and even Islam (a traditionally accepted transliteration of إسلام) versus Islaam, a new transliterated label used in various texts that appear in the Da'wah website.

The researchers start with a hypothesis that the use of transliteration rather than translation of Islamic religious terms may be more common in the Islamic discourse that adopts an anti-others attitude whereas translated religious terms are probably more favourable in sites that advocate dialogue with the religious other and call for co-existence. They also believe that the use of transliteration rather than translation may participate in creating a negative impact on the non-Muslim western addressee, especially when that addressee is not well-acquainted with Arabic language and Islamic studies. The researchers hope the present research could help explore the issue in question in a rather objective way so as to come up with convenient recommendations that may be useful for both the Muslims as well as the non-Muslims and, hence, contribute to the dialogue among different civilizations and religious faiths.

1.3 Scope of Research

1- Languages involved: Basically English with some references to Arabic as the source culture language.

2- Contemporary Religious Discourse, with particular reference to tolerance versus intolerance and acceptance of other cultures & religious dogmas in contrast with the condemnation of the religious 'other' as infidel. The term tolerance in this research shall be used simply to refer to discourse advocating acceptance of the religious other as such, while intolerance throughout this paper shall be solely used to indicate discourse that adopts a negative attitude to the other. In both cases, thus, the researchers are not judging the two types of discourse under study, but are only using the content of each as an objective criterion for the classification of the two types in question.

3- Time Range: The first decade in the third millennium.

4- Data: 6 texts, 3 representing anti-other/intolerant discourse versus 3 others representing the dialogue advocating/tolerant one.

1.4 Method of Research

The research is basically a contrastive study of the semantic/pragmatic effect of the use of translated versus transliterated Islamic terms on the non-Muslim addressee in Western communities in the two types of discourse in question; with a basically two-pronged approach that adopts a small scale corpus analysis and manual analysis of individual texts rather than a full discourse analysis of a large body of data. (Note 2)

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 According to Wittgenstein, the limits of my language mean the limits of my world. (Note 3) Language does indeed help shape my world or at least my consciousness of the world of external reality. The way we use language, whether in speech or writing, reflects not only our knowledge of the world, but also our attitude to it. When one kisses a photograph of a person he likes/loves, this action, intended to express a loving attitude, is not based on the false belief that the person in the photograph will feel the kiss or return it, nor is it based on any other belief. Neither is the kiss just a substitute for a particular phrase, like "I love you." Like the kiss, the use of a particular type of religious language rather than another does express an attitude, but it is not just the expression of an attitude in the sense that several other forms of expression might do just as well. There might be no substitute that would do. (Note 4)

In the case of religious language, the significance of linguistic variations is even more effective and could at times be rather striking. According to Keane (1997, p. 47), in religious discourse, "the sources of words, as well as the identity, agency, authority, and even the very presence of participants in an interaction, can be especially problematic." Religious language is profoundly implicated with underlying pre-conceptions about the human subject and divine beings as well. (Note 5)

Semantic differences between cognitive synonyms and/or pseudo-synonyms may display much deeper differences among the concepts underlined. While most linguists and semanticists assert the rarity if not even impossibility of absolute synonymy, there is hardly any doubt that partial synonymy does exist (Cruse, 1986). Words like God and Allaah, Prayer and Salaah, Alms-giving and Zakaah, Fasting and Syam may be fairly regarded as cognitive synonyms. These lexical items that refer to the same referent but differ in respect of their evaluative/connotative meaning are regarded as cognitive synonyms (Cruse, 1986). In fact, cognitive synonyms

share "the propositional or semantic content" to the effect that one cannot deny one word while affirming the other (Ishrateh, M. 2006). (Note 6) It is these evaluative/connotative differences that are the focus of attention in the present research, with particular reference to both the addressor as well as the potential addressees of the discourse in question. As far as the addressor is concerned, the criterion adopted by the researchers shall be the semantic content of the discourse under study, i.e. whether the given discourse advocates dialogue and co-existence with the religious other or advocates conflict with that other as such and dismiss him/her as infidel and a potential adversary. As for the addressees, in addition to analysis of the possible effects of translation versus transliteration of the religious terms in question through tracing the historical origins of such terms on the non-Muslim western reader/s, and an attempt has been made to explore their effect by means a questionnaire sent by email to as well as distributed among a random specimen of informants who are of various educational degrees and of various ages but they all share three important factors: they are native speakers of English, unfamiliar with Arabic language and non-Muslims. A copy of the questionnaire is attached in Appendix 2.

An old Persian proverb says, "A bad wound heals, but a bad word doesn't" (Ali, 1969). In other words, a cruel tongue can always do more harm than a sharp sword. It may be even fair to claim that this popular wise saying rings true across all times and across different cultures (Cohn and Sims, 2010). The use one particular religious term than another may reflect a serious difference in the attitude towards the other, and may even mark a hostile stance. The difference between referring to the followers of other religious cults or faiths as non-believers or infidels is not simply a matter of a choice between different synonyms. Similarly, the choice between God and Allah could also indicate a much deeper difference in convictions of the language user than a mere stylistic difference.

In our case, however, language is used either to bridge the gap between different religions or to create a gap that does not necessarily exist between them if not simply widen one that is already there.

3. Findings, Discussion & Analysis

3.1 A comparative/contrastive semantic study of the two types of contemporary Islamic discourse under study has been conducted by the researchers with particular reference to the use of translation versus transliteration of Islamic religious terms.

     A.   On the one hand, Imam Yahya Hendi is an American citizen and an Islamic scholar who calls for dialogue and cooperation among different faiths. A representative sample of his articles has been semantically analyzed with an eye on the use of translated versus transliterated Islamic terms.

     B.   On the other hand, a sample of articles/texts published on the site of the Islamic Da'wah Centre of Australia has also been studied by the researchers with particular reference to the use of transliterated versus translated religious terms.

     C.   In a two page article titled "A Call for Dialogue" by Imam Yahya Hendi, for example, the word GOD occurs 3 times out of 635 words used, and it is employed by the writer to indicate the one and only God that Muslims, Christians and Jews worship. The transliterated word Allah and/or Allaah is not used at all by Imam Hendi. Quite to the opposite, in an 8 page article that appears on the site of the Islamic Da'wah Centre of Australia under the title of Aqidah, the word God occurs only one time out of 4252 words, whereas the transliterated Islamic counterpart Allah is used 24 times. The use of one rather than the other of the terms in question reflects an attitude towards the "other" as such. The use of the term God indicates and coincides with an attitude characterized by the acceptance of other faiths, while the use of the transliterated Islamic term Allah and/or Allaah underlines some kind of rejection of the other faiths as it seems to dismiss them as not devoted to the worship of the One and Only deity known in Arabic as Allah (الله).

In 3 articles/texts presented on the site of Imam Hendi, the total words used were 2639 all in all, including grammatical and functional words as well. The word God occurred 21 times, while the word "allah" only occurred once, not as a free morpheme or a separate lexical item but only as a suffix in the transliterated lexical item *Inshallah* as corresponding *to b'ezarat Hashem* in Hebrew. Interestingly, it was not Imam Hendi in person who used it; it was the Israeli Yehezkel Landau (Note 7) who used it in an attempt at underlining what is common between Islam and Judaism, rather than identifying Islamic concepts as different from the concepts of other religions, with particular reference to Islam and Christianity, as well as defining Muslims as strangers in western community, which is usually the case with most addressors who resort to transliterated Islamic terms, at least according to the hypotheses postulated by the researchers carrying out the present research. On the other hand, the texts published on the site of Da'wah Centre contain a total of 2690 words, with the word *Allaah* occurring 42 times, while the word God is totally unused in the all the 3 texts under study. The words alms and prayer were mentioned 1 and 5 times respectively in the texts extracted from Imam Hendi's site respectively while Zakaah and Salaah occurred 29 and 7 times. The use of the translated terms was exclusive to the site of

Imam Hendi whereas the transliterated counterparts were solely used by Da'wah Centre. Finally, the word mosque was used only once in the extracts under study from Imam Hendi's site while the Da'wah Centre texts resorted to the use of the transliterated term Masjid one time, though the commonly accepted translation Mosque also occurred 3 times.

The use of religious terms that refer to certain rituals or cults that are common to different faiths such as praying, fasting, alms giving or pilgrimage can be done in two ways. The first is to use a more general term that, thus, underline the common factor that combines rather than separates the religions in question. Jews, Christians and Muslims pray to God. The way they do it, and the method they adopt in praying certainly differ, yet the end of that ritual is one and the same. Praying to god is an intimate act of communication with Him. The means used, i.e. the physical movements, the shape of the body and the actual words used may vary, but the end is the same. Fasting and pilgrimage are other cases in point. The period of the fast, the foods and actions the believers are supposed to avoid while fasting may well differ, as certainly does the destination of the pilgrimage, but the end is more or less the same. The use of the translations of religious terms rather than their transliterated versions is not simply a formal choice. It indicates the interest is in what unites rather than divides different religions and their followers. To opt for the transliterated versions implies the intention of focusing on what divides these religions. It is one way of standing out and through the use of a particular religious jargon underlining the culture/religion specific aspect versus the more general one. The argument that the transliterated term maintains the privacy of each religion and is not meant to antagonize the followers of other faiths may be fairly refuted as follows. Even within the same religion, the believers who belong to different sects perform their religious rituals in different ways; Karite Jews pray in a way quite different from Rabbinates. In fact their prayers in more than one way look more similar to that of the Muslims rather than to their fellow Jews among the Rabbinates. The same may be said of the difference in dealing with the Holy Communion between the Catholics on one hand and the Protestants on the other hand. Yet that was never a good reason for any of them to use another linguistic term to label their different religious performance.

On another level, we also have the contrast between the use of transliteration versus translation with regard to a concrete concept, viz. Masjid versus Mosque on one end, and on the other end of the extreme there is the contrast between the two terms used to denote an abstract concept represented in Allaah versus God.

The use of Masjid is already indicative of an insistence on alienating the addressor as well as the addressee in a western community. The traditionally accepted translation of the Arabic item مسجد into Mosque goes back to the middle ages and has no negative connotations whatsoever, and, at the very same time it is specific enough as its use is confined to: "a building used for public worship by Muslims" (Note 8) (Merriam-Webster's 11ᵗʰ Collegiate Dictionary, 2004). Furthermore, the use of the transliterated item Masjid may be based on a common misconception that the English Mosque is derived from Mosquito and denotes the living abode of this type of insect! (See the commonly forwarded email in Appendix 1).

As for the term God, the dispute is more serious still. To start with, the Arabic word الله is by no means confined to Islam or the Koran. It is used in the Arabic version of the Torah of the Jews as well as the Gospels of Christians. In the Book of Geneses we are told that في البدء خلق الله السماوات والأرض and in John's Gospel we are told that في البدء كان الكلمة والكلمة كان عند الله. These are but two examples among many other. Why should the word then be transliterated rather than simply translated as God?

This gives rise to the question: when should we resort to transliteration? Transliteration is a useful technique in the case of proper nouns, or if there is a particular concept in the source language culture which is missing in the culture of the target language (See Catford, Nida, Newmark, and فوزي عطية). If we are to translate the word "God" into the Thai language, for example, we shall have to rely upon transliteration as the only possible means available. This is because the Thai culture is devoid of the concept of God per se. The transliteration is always supplied with a footnote explaining the new concept which is finally transferred into the target language with the passage of time (Catford, 1965).

But in the case of translating "الله" into English there is hardly any need for transliteration. The concept of "الله" is neither lacking in the target language culture in our case, nor even fundamentally different. The word "الله" is better translated, rather than transliterated into "God", in the same way the German word "Gott" is to be translated into its English equivalent "God". After all, the definition of the word "Allah" in most English dictionaries is that it is "the name of God among Muslims" (See Oxford Advanced Learner' Dictionary of Current English for instance). In other words, it is not the name of the Muslim god but the name of God. It is neither a pagan deity such as Ra of ancient Egypt or Zeus of Greece.

The word is not a proper noun in the ordinary sense of the word; it is only a symbol, a linguistic device used in Arabic to denote that Supreme Being known in Arabic as Allah, in French as Dieu, and in English as God.

Sometimes the transliteration of Allah is even used by fanatic translators who regard Islam as a pagan religion, implying that Allah is not God capital "G" but only the god of Muslims.

Even in J. Penrice's *A Dictionary of the Koran*, first published in 1873, the word "الله" is defined as follows: "الله God, The God, The only God;" (P.8). On the other hand, a contemporary western view on the translation of such Islamic religious terms is expressed by Geoffrey Parrinder, a reader in the comparative study of religion in the University of London, who states that: "for English-speaking people to insist on using only the word Allah can be quite misleading. The thin English pronunciation makes it most unintelligible to an Arabic-speaking Muslim. But also the sentimental associations of Allah in the European's mind, and the notion that he is speaking about another God, are most deceptive. There are differences between the Muslim and the Christian apprehensions of God, but it would be fatal to any chance of understanding to doubt that one and the same God is the reality in both ('Our God and your God is One')" (See Geoffrey Parrinder, 1965-pp.13-14). Parrinder, then, supports his point by noting the usual translation of Biblical figures in the English translations of the Koran in accordance with their familiar English form and not in transliteration. He remarks that "Similarly, 'Isa is rendered as Jesus, Maryam as Marry, Injil as Gospel, and Nasara as Christians" (--------, p.14).

Thus, the researchers believe that the translation of "الله" into God has a much more positive effect on the non-Muslim non-native speaker of Arabic in western communities than its transliteration into Allaah or even Allah.

3.2

A. The questionnaire contains 20 items/quotations that are in fact 10 different religious statements, with each of them expressed in two different ways; once through the use of transliterated terms, and another via the use of either translations of Islamic religious terms or at least the use of traditionally accepted transliterations such as Islam for example and not Islaam. There are only 16 original statements and or quotes. The researchers have made a point of producing another version of the other 2 to make the number 20 all in all for the facilitation of statistical analysis. The members of each pair were deliberately put away from each other in order not to impose it on the informants/specimen members to contrast them with each other. Out of the 20 emails sent, via 3 different forums/sites, only 10 were answered. As for the distribution of the questionnaire among the other specimen, it was done at the beginning of the session when this paper was presented in the JICOT Second International Conference at Petra University, Jordan (30 Nov.-2 Dec. 2010). Unfortunately again, only 10 out of 20 members of the specimen cared to give their responses to the questionnaire. In fact, two more have done so, but their responses had to be discarded by the researchers since one of them was a Muslim American and the other a non-Muslim but well acquainted with classical Arabic.

B. The results were interestingly similar in both specimens. 3 of the responses in each specimen concentrated on the content/message of the quote or statement. The actual lexical items used did not seem to matter to them. Thus, 13 and 17 were both rejected by 2 (one in each specimen) and so were also 11 and 18 as well as 6 and 7 by 2 of each specimen. The third response that seemed to concentrate on the content rather than the actual lexemes considered all the 20 quotes/statements equally positive in nature. As there is no prior relation between the researchers on one hand and the email informants on the other hand no attempt was made to investigate the reason/s for the choice of these two quotes as having a negative effect. With regard to the informants attending the conference, the major researcher has made a point of asking the informant the reason why and the answer was that the informant in question thought the 6 quotes (13 & 17 + 11 & 18 + 6 & 7) comprising two statements, represented some kind of a totalitarian dogmatic attitude! Most probably such an impression may stem from a rather agnostic stance, but there was no way to make sure of this point in particular, nor would it have made much difference to the findings of the research in general. It is worth mentioning in this respect that informants were not even necessarily required to list down their names/identities, let alone their religious beliefs.

C. Out of the other 7 email responses 2 regarded 14 and 16 (Indicating Mohamed is a God-sent messenger) as neutral, 1, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 15 (involving transliterations of religious terms) as negative whilst all the others as positive. All the other 6 responses unanimously regarded the 10 transliteration quotes as negative and the other 10 as positive. Thus we have a percentage of 60 supporting the hypotheses of the research. The results are almost identical in the case of the conference informants; 7 out of 10 regarded the quotes involving the use of translated religious terms as either positive or at least neutral while considering the other 10 that resort to transliteration rather than translation as negative, with a %70 percent supporting the hypothesis that the use of transliteration may produce a negative effect on the western addressee who is neither a Muslim nor well acquainted withy classical Arabic.

D. The statistical results are clearly supportive though may not be decisively confirmative of the research hypotheses. It should be remembered, however, that the questionnaire was only an additional research tool rather than the basic one.

4. Conclusions & Recommendations

Based on the above mentioned findings, analysis and discussion of the data, the researchers would like to make the following point and, consequently, suggest a couple of recommendations:

4.1 Conclusions

Even though the statistical evidence are not decisive with regard to the negative/positive effect of the use of transliteration upon the addressees, , the researchers maintain it is fair to conclude that the use of transliterated religious terms rather than translations reflects some kind of an exclusive attitude rather than an inclusive one on part of the language user. In other words, it originates from as well as displays a high estimation of the transliterated Islamic concepts at the expense of their counterparts in other religions. Such an exclusive attitude may have been consciously adopted by some authors or simply unconsciously practiced by others. The result, however, remains more or less the same; the use of transliterated rather than translated Islamic religious terms may be fairly regarded as a linguistic marker of Islamic discourse that explicitly advocates the hatred of the religious other. The opposite may not necessarily be equally true, though. The use of translation rather than transliteration does not entail the presence of a positive attitude towards the religious other, but, at least in accordance with the data under study in the present research, this seems to be quite the case.

4.2 Recommendations

1- In the light of the previous discussion and conclusion, the researchers highly recommend the use of the linguistic features that are characteristic of or associated with tolerant types of Islamic discourse. As this research indicates that the use of translations of Islamic religious terms is a case in point, it turns out to be the better option for Muslims writing in English about Islamic religious concepts to resort to translation rather than transliteration.

2- It is strongly recommended that Islamic institutions that are responsible for addressing western communities, with particular reference to English speaking ones, make it a point to adopt the lexical features characteristic of the Islamic discourse that advocates reconciliation with and acceptance of other cultures and/or religious faiths. The negligible use of lexemes that have grown to be associated with extremism and rejection of the "other" per se is enough on its own to arouse suspicions and reservations on part of the English speaking addressee, even though the content as such may be quite friendly.

Finally, the present research is but one step on a long road that should aim at updating both the content and the language of contemporary Islamic discourse not only in western communities but throughout the entire world.

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Notes

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Note 4. Ibid

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Note 7. YEHEZKEL LANDAU is co-director of the Open House Center for Jewish-Arab Coexistence in Ramle, Israel, and Faculty Associate in Interfaith Relations at Hartford Seminary. Imam YAHYA HENDI is Muslim Chaplain at Georgetown University, spokesperson for the Islamic Jurisprudence Council of North America, and director of the Peace Office of the Muslim American Society.

Note 8. Main Entry: mosque, Pronunciation:*m*sk, Function: noun, Etymology: earlier mosquee, from Middle French, from Old Italian moschea, from Old Spanish mezquita, from Arabic masjid temple, from sajada to prostrate oneself, worship, Date: 1717, a building used for public worship by Muslims.