Translating Irony in the Quranic Texts – A Contrastive Study of Yousif Ali and Pickthall English Translations

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Abstract

The main idea of this paper is that the translation of irony from Arabic into English in Quranic texts might create different translational strategies based on the way Arabic and their English translations reflect the linguistic and cultural distance between both languages.

To tackle this problem, the study ventures into a contrastive analysis with reference to a number of linguistic and non-linguistic devices and concepts. It concentrates on the interpretation and the linguistic realization of irony in both languages.

The study takes the view that ironic devices are the foundation of the structural development of the texts in question. To demonstrate this, the speech act and conversational theories shall be used. The interaction between the ironic devices and the text development constitute a framework for the overall rhetorical meaning of the text. Thus, contrastive analysis and comparative stylistics analysis will be implemented.

A thorough contrastive analysis is made of when translating irony from Arabic into English using two versions of translations; the first translation by Yousif Ali and the second by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall. Similarities and differences between both texts are found. In addition, both Yousif Ali and Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall translations have used different translational strategies in translating the ironical structures. Finally, discrepancies were observed in the lexical form and function.

Key words: semantic, syntax, translational strategies, figure of speech

Introduction

The first problem that arises when studying irony is that of its definition. Nowadays, most critics agree that the old concept of irony as "saying one thing and meaning another" is no longer a comprehensive or accurate description of multifarious and complex techniques that writers use to create irony (Mateo 1995).

On the other hand, irony and, in particular, verbal irony, is not something that can be recognized by a fixed set of linguistic or stylistic features (Mateo 1995). There is no

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recognizable ironic tone or style. Irony depends on context. Just as there are no words or expressions which are humorous *per se* but by reason of their semantic or syntactic use in a context and which, as Walter Nash puts it, will have to be defined "extrinsically" by their contextual linkages and semantic relationships (Mateo 1995).

So, irony depends on context since it springs from the relationship of a word expression or action with the whole text or situation (Mateo 1995).

On Irony in Literature

Irony is a model that has been constantly used in literature. However, the study of irony has not matched its prevalence in literature (Chackhachiro, 1997:8). This stems, at least in the western world, from the fact that irony is taken for granted or, as Muecke (1969: ix) put it, "…to be able to be ironical is perhaps part of the definition of our [Western] civilization…" Another factor may well be that irony is such a highly rhetorical and elusive tool that it is difficult to defense in terms of its interpretation let alone style and language (Chackhachiro, 1997:8).

In his attempts to describe the variable features that affect the quality of irony, Muecke (1982: 52-55), as cited in Chackhachiro, 1997:8, recognizes for ironists "…to break with advantage the rules of art" in order to enhance irony.

Muecke suggests four principles for a successful irony based on his observation that "A rhetorical effective, an aesthetically pleasing, or simply a striking irony owes its success, it would seem, largely to one or more of a small number of principles and factors", (Chackhachiro, 1997:8).

These principles are:

1. The principle of economy, which implies the use of a few signals; it is used in parody, advice and encouragement, the rhetorical question and other ironical tactics.

2. The principles of high contrast (Chackhachiro, 1997:8). This takes place when "…there is a disparity between what might be expected and what actually happened" Muecke (1982:53), or when there is antithesis, semotactic anomalies or internal contradiction.

3. The position of the audience, particularly in the theater where " the quality of the irony depends very much on whether the audience already knows the outcome or true state of affairs or learns of these only when the victim learns" Muecke (1982:54).

On Emotions and Irony – Contrast between Western and Arabic Literary Theorists

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The topic - this factor or principle - relates to the importance of emotions in generating and enhancing both the observer's feeling toward the victim or the topic of the irony and the reader's awareness and appreciation of the irony on an equal footing among "…the areas in which most emotional capital is invested: religion, love, morality politics and history" (Muecke 1982:55).

Studies devoted to irony in English have all tackled the concept from a literary perspective, e.g., Booth (1974), Handwerk (1985), Finaly (1990), Muecke (1969), Muir (1990) as cited in Chackhachiro, 1997:9.

The Arabic literary theorists, on other hand, have not given the same comprehension account to irony as their English counterparts, especially in modern times. Instead, there are many Arab writers who wrote on literary criticism theory of ancients such as al-Jahiz, Ibn al-Muqaffa and Ibn Khaldun, as well as reprints of those literary writers' and linguists' actual writings (Chackhachiro, 1997:9). This lack of modern studies on the topic of irony does not take anything away from the richness and importance of ancient Arab writers, especially Al-Jahiz, (Chackhachiro, 1997:9).

Data Analysis

The data analysis is based on eight verses from the Quran and their English versions by Yousif Ali and Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall

Ayah 1:
(al Haj surat) { كُتِبَ عَلَيْهِ أَنَّهُ مَن تَوَلَّاهُ فَأَنَّهُ يُضِلُّهُ وَيَهْدِيهِ إِلَىٰ عَذَابِ ٱلسَّعِيرِ (٤) }
.

Ali Translation

(4) About the (Evil One) it is decreed that whoever turns to him for friendship, him will he lead astray, <u>and he will guide</u> him to the Penalty of the Fire.

Pickthall Translation

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For him it is decreed that whoso taketh him for friend, he verily will
mislead him and will guide him to the punishment of the Flame.
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It is noticed that both translations offer the exact meaning in the Quran, but, in terms of translation, it is found that both have used different lexical words. Ali's translation used literal translation to the underlined Arabic words وَيَهْدِيه , since a direct translation might not serve the intended meaning. It is noticed that the same translation Picktall also has

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used. Syntactically, both translations have respected the syntactic structure of the Arabic text; therefore, if we look at the above ayah, it is noticed that the word وَيَهْدِيه is preceded by the conjunction ' و ' (and).

Thus, both translators have used the same conjunction in their translations. With regards to Ali's translation, it is noticed that the English version has used the pronoun 'he' with the irony وَيَهْدِيه (and guide); to refer to anyone who follows Satan, who would seduce him and lead him to hell. This is not the case in Pickthall's translation, where he (Pickthall) has not used the pronoun 'he' with the irony وَيَهْدِيه (and guide). Instead, he used the pronoun 'he' at the start of the sentence (he verily will mislead him and will guide him..). Ali's translation has used to repetition to indicate directly and indirectly how bad if someone takes Satan as a companion. Semantically, both translations have translated the meaning of the irony وَيَهْدِيه (and guide) literally to create an acceptable translation.

Ayah 2:

{al-ankabut} (٩٢) أَئِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ ٱلرِّجَالَ وَتَقْطَعُونَ ٱلسَّبِيلَ وَتَأْتُونَ فِى نَادِيكُمُ ٱلْمُنكَرَ ۖ فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوْمِهِ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُواْ ٱئْتِنَا بِعَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ

Ali Translation

(29) Do you indeed approach men, and cut off the highway? and practice wickedness (even) in your councils? But his people gave no answer but this: they said: " Bring us the Wrath of Allah if you tell the truth."

Pickthall Translation

For come ye not in unto males, and cut ye not the road (for travellers), and commit ye not abomination in your meetings? But the answer of his folk was only that they said: Bring Allah's doom upon us if thou art a truth teller!

The irony in both versions is literal and one to one translation. If we look at Ali's translation of the ironical lexical words ٱئْتِنَا بِعَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ , we notice that he uses one to one translation to come up with exact meaning. This is unlike in Picktehell translation where he has translated ٱئْتِنَا بِعَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ into English using literal translation, since, according to him, translating the above ironical structure literally might come up with better equivalence.

Syntactically, both translations adopt different syntactic styles of word order. If we look at Ali's translation to the underlined ironical structure, it is found that the structure has started with the lexical verb 'bring' as a subject of the ironical structure ٱئْتِنَا بِعَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ , then followed by the objective pronoun 'us' referring to unbelievers when they (unbelievers)

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make fun of the prophet Loot; moreover, the noun بِعَذَابٍ (the punishment) is used with definite article referring to Allah's punishment in the hereafter. This is almost similar in Pickthall's translation, where he also started his translation with the verbal sentence 'bring' as a subject of the ironical structure ٱئْتِنَا بِعَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ . But the difference is in the location of the pronoun 'us'. He locates it at the end of the ironical structure; consequently, it is noticed that the name of Allah comes after the verb 'bring,' then the lexical noun 'doom' is indefinite in Picktehell's translation.

Ayah 3:

{lukman} (٧) وَإِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِ ءَايَٰتُنَا وَلَّىٰ مُسْتَكْبِرًا كَأَن لَّمْ يَسْمَعْهَا كَأَنَّ فِى أُذُنَيْهِ وَقْرًا ۖ فَبَشِّرْهُ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ
.

Ali Translation

(7) When Our Signs are rehearsed to such a one, he turns in both his ears: <u>announce to him</u> a grievous Penalty.

Pickthall Translation

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And when Our revelations are recited unto him he turneth away in pride
as if he heard them not, as if there were a deafness in his ears. So
give him tidings of a painful doom.
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The irony in both versions has translated literally. If we look at Ali's translation to the ironical lexical word فَبَشِّرْهُ ۞ (then give good news him), we noticed that he has used literal translation strategy to come up with exact or better meaning. The same strategy Pickthall has used when translated the ironical lexical word فَبَشِّرْهُ ۞ (then give good news him) ۞into English uses literal translation, since this translation might come up with better equivalence. Syntactically, both translations adopt different syntactic structures.

If we look at Ali's translation to the underlined ironical structure, it is found that the structure has started with the lexical verb 'then give good news him' as a complement verbal phrase, then followed by the objective pronoun 'him' referring to the unbelievers when they (unbelievers) ignored Allah's warnings. This is unlike Pickthall's translation, where he also started his translation with the conjunction 'so' an indication for the consequence of the events. Furthermore, the verbal sentence 'give' as a reference of the ironical structure فَبَشِّرْهُ۞ (then give good news him) followed by the objective pronoun 'him' referring to unbelievers when they (unbelievers) ignored Allah's warnings. In both translations, the difference is in the style of writing the beginning of the ironical structural phrase. The first starts directly with the verb, while the second starts with the conjunction 'so,'consequently, followed by the verb.

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<u>Ayah 4:</u>
وَهُمْ يَصْطَرِخُونَ فِيهَا رَبَّنَا أَخْرِجْنَا نَعْمَلْ صَالِحًا غَيْرَ الَّذِي كُنَّا نَعْمَلُ أَوَلَمْ نُعَمِّرْكُم مَّا يَتَذَكَّرُ فِيهِ مَن تَذَكَّرَ وَجَاءكُمُ النَّذِيرُ فَذُوقُوا فَمَا لِلظَّالِمِينَ مِن نَّصِيرٍ

{Fatir}

Ali Translation

(37) Therein will they cry aloud (for assistance): "Our Lord! Bring us out: we shall work righteousness, not the (deeds) we used to do!"- "Did We give you long enough life so that he would, should receive admonition? And (moreover) the warner came to you. <u>So taste you</u> (the fruits of your deeds): for the wrong-doers there is no helper.

Pickthall Translation

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And they cry for help there, (saying): Our Lord! Release us; we will do
right, not (the wrong) that we used to do. Did not We grant you a life
long enough for him who reflected to reflect therein? And the warner
came unto you. Now taste (the flavour of your deeds), for evil-doers
have no helper.
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The irony in both versions has translated literally. If we look at Ali's translation to the ironical lexical words فَذُوقُوا ۞ (then taste you), we noticed that he has used literal translation strategy to come up with exact or better meaning. The same strategy Pickthall has used when translated the ironical lexical words فَذُوقُوا ۞ (then taste you), ۝into English uses literal translation, since according to him, translated the above ironical structure might come up with better equivalence . In addition, both paraphrases between two brackets to the Arabic ironical word فَذُوقُوا ۞ (then taste you) in both versions is different. If we look at Ali's paraphrases, we noticed that he paraphrases the ironical word فَذُوقُوا (then taste you) into the fruits of your deeds. While in Pickthall's translation, he paraphrases it as the flavour of your deeds.

Syntactically, both translations resulted in different syntactic structures. If we look at Ali's translation to the underlined ironical structure, it is found that the structure has started with the conjunction 'so', which is an indication for the consequences of events, then followed by the verb فَذُوقُوا reflecting similar lexical irony as in the Arabic text. In addition, the verb فَذُوقُوا is an order action set already by Allah to the unbelievers in the doomsday. This is unlike Pickthall's translation, where he also starts his translation with the adverb of time 'now' an indication for the consequence of the events. Then the verbal sentence 'taste' as a verb order of the ironical structure فَذُوقُوا (then taste you) to the unbelievers when they (unbelievers) ignored Allah's warnings.

<u>Ayah 5:</u>

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{al- Safat} (۳۲) مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ فَٱهْدُوهُمْ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطِ ٱلْجَحِيمِ

Ali Translation

(23) Besides Allah, and <u>lead them</u> to the Way to the (fierce) Fire!

Pickthall Translation

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Instead of Allah, and lead them to the path to hell;
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Literal Translation

The irony in both versions has translated literally. If we look at Ali's translation to the ironical lexical words فَٱهْدُوهُمْ (then guide them), we notice that he has used literal translation strategy to come up with exact or better meaning. The same strategy Pickthall has used when he translated the ironical lexical words فَٱهْدُوهُمْ (then guide them) into English uses literal translation , since according to him, translated the above ironical structure might come up with better equivalence.

Syntactically, both translations led into different syntactic structures. If we look at Ali's translation to the underlined ironical structure, it is found that the structure has started with the conjunction 'and', which is an indication for the consequences of events. Then, followed by the verb lead' reflecting similar meaning as in the Arabic text. In addition, the verb فَٱهْدُوهُمْ (then guide them) is an order action set already by Allah to the unbelievers in the doomsday. This is similar to Pickthall's translation, where he also starts his translation with the conjunction 'and' an indication for the consequence of the events. Then, the verbal sentence 'lead' as a verb order of the ironical structure فَٱهْدُوهُمْ <u>(then guide them)</u> to the unbelievers when they (unbelievers) ignored Allah's warnings.

<u>Ayah 6:</u>

{ al-Zumur } (٦١) ذَٰلِكَ يُخَوِّفُ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦ عِبَادَهُۥ ۚ يَٰعِبَادِ فَٱتَّقُونِ لَهُم مِّن فَوْقِهِمْ ظُلَلٌ مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِ وَمِن تَحْتِهِمْ ظُلَلٌ ۚ

Ali Translation

(16) They shall have <u>Layers of Fire above them</u>, and <u>Layers (of Fire) below them</u>: with this does Allah warn off His Servants: "O My Servants! Then fear you Me ! "

Pickthall Translation

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They have an awning of fire above them and beneath them a dais (of
fire). With this doth Allah appal His bondmen. O My bondmen, therefore
fear Me!
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The irony in both versions has translated literally. If we look at Ali's translation to the ironic ظُلَلٌ (shadows), we noticed that he has used literal translation strategy to make the meaning clearer and acceptable. The same strategy has been adopted by Pickthall when he translated the ironical lexical word☺ into English using literal translation, since according to him, the above ironical structure might come up with better equivalence, when translated literally.

Both translations have used different lexical words which are different for the original meaning. For Ali's translation, he has used the word 'layers' to reflect similar meaning to ظُلَلٌ (shadows). While Pickthall's translation has used 'a wing' to reflect similar meaning to ظُلَلٌ (shadows).

In addition, Ali's translation has used the word 'layers' twice for the ironical word ظُلَلٌ (shadows).This is unlike Pickthall's translation where he used the lexical word 'a wing' and 'beneath' to translate the ironical word ظُلَلٌ (shadows). Syntactically, both translations led into different syntactic structures. If we look at Ali's translation to the underlined ironical structure, it is found that the structure has started with the plural lexical word 'layers'. This is unlike Pickthall's translation where he used a singular word 'a wing' and a formal preposition 'beneath' .

Ayah 7:

{al-dukhan} (٩٤) ذُقْ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْكَرِيمُ

Ali Translation

(49) Taste you (this)! Truly were you mighty, full of honor!

Pickthall Translation

`(Saying): Taste! Lo!` thou wast forsooth the mighty, the noble!

It is noticed that both translations have managed to transfer the intended meaning of the ironical structure from Arabic text into English. But in terms of the process of translation, it is found that both have used similar main verbs such as 'taste' to translate the lexical word ذُقْ, (taste), but with clear differences to the surface structure of both translations.

Ali's translation used literal translation and overtranslation to the underlined Arabic ذُقْ, (taste), since a direct translation might not serve the intended meaning. It is noticed that Pickthall has used overtranslation to the ironical structure ذُقْ, (taste). The translation in Pickthall has implied by using two external lexical words such as 'saying' and ' Lo' in order to respect the intended meaning of the Arabic ironical structure .

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Syntactically, both translations have respected the syntactic structure of the Arabic text. If we look at the above ayah, it is noticed that the word ذُقْ, (taste), is an order and obligatory verb used to punish the unbelievers in the doomsday.

Both Ali and Pickthall's translations have adopted different word order when translated the irony in the above ayat into English. ☺ In Ali's translation, it is noticed that the English version is started with the irony in the main verb 'taste' then followed by the pronoun 'you' . This is not the case in Pickthall's translation, where he (Pickthall) has not used the pronoun 'you' with the irony ذُقْ, (taste). Instead, he has started with two continuous verbs. The first verb is 'saying' which is present continuous tense, while the second, is the simple present verb such as 'taste' then followed two exclamation marks ' ! ' to the lexical word 'taste' and ' Lo ' .

Ayah 8:

{ al- murselat } (٠٣) ٱنطَلِقُوٓاْ إِلَىٰ ظِلٍّ ذِى ثَلَٰثِ شُعَبٍ

Ali Translation

(30) Depart you to <u>a Shadow (of smoke ascending)</u> in three columns

Pickthall Translation

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Depart unto the shadow falling threefold,
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The irony in both versions has translated literally. If we look at Ali's translation to the ironic ظَلَّلٌ (shadow), we notice that he has used literal translation strategy to make the meaning clearer and acceptable. The same strategy was adopted by Picktehell when he translated the ironical lexical word☺ into English using literal translation, since, according to him, translating the above ironical structure might come up with better equivalence.

Both translations have used different lexical words which have similar original meaning. For Ali's translation, he has used the word 'a shadow' with overtranslation such as <u>a Shadow (of smoke ascending)</u> between two brackets to clarify the meaning in the original text, while Pickthall's translation has used 'the shadow' to reflect similar meaning to ظَلَّلٌ (shadow).

Syntactically, both translations led into different syntactic structure. If we look at Ali's translation to the underlined ironical structure ظِلٍّ (shadow), it is noticed that the structure has started with the indefinite article 'a', to make the place of shadow unidentified, since it could be many shadows in the hell to punish the unbelievers. The unbelievers might

run to any shadow, thinking that these can help them from the punishment . This is unlike Pickthall's translation where he used the definite article 'the' to the ironical structure ظِلٍّ (the shadow).

Conclusion

This study aimed at finding the main translational strategies when translating irony in Qur'anic texts into English. The attempt has proved that the translation of irony is as elusive as the concept itself; it has also emphasized, once more, the impossible task of suggesting a perspective approach to translation based on the features of any number of texts.

The analysis of eight Qur'anic verses was then followed by a contrastive analysis. This was meant to point out the similarities and differences with a focus on the latter, which I believe, is the crux of any translation study.

The analysis has also proved the necessity of the linguistic approach to translating irony from Arabic into English. Arabic and English texts have shown some similar rhetorical, grammatical and lexical use of devices, text strategies and rhetorical meaning. However, the difference was most clear at the level of textual realization. This was reflected in the discrepancy in the functions and number of devices in both languages. These restrictions are imposed by each language's repertoire and culture.

Thus, the cases at hand have shown that the meaning of the irony in both translations has translated either by literal translation or paraphrase strategies. Thus, the task of finding strategies for translation equivalence becomes a matter of finding equivalent surface realizations that reflect equivalent function. In other words, each language has a preference of usage, but both prove to have common features.

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