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Linguistic Complexity of Arabic Language: A Semantic Analysis of Antonymous Homonyms in The Holy Qur'ān

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ABSTRACT

Homonymy, is one of the two main sub-divisions of lexical ambiguity that represents the complex nature of form and context of the Qur'anic Arabic which presents a challenge in the translation process. Since Qur'anic discourse abounds with homonymic expressions whose meaning is derived from the context, the translators of the Qur'an should undertake a demanding task decoding the intended meanings. The present paper aims at clarifying some linguistic complexities in some verses of the Qur'ān which may pose difficulty to translators of the holy book most especially those who are not familiar with antonymous homonyms in Arabic language. The reason is that antonymous homonyms are special features of the Qur'anic Arabic language. It may be viewed as one of the stylistic feature of the Qur'an. Therefore, classification of these linguistic complexity is offered and the samples of these classifications from the Holy Qur'ān are mentioned in relation to antonymous homonyms. Samples of translated Qur'an are compared in order to ascertain the qualities of translations and English translation strategies of the stated verses.

Keywords: Linguistic complexity, Ambiguity, Homonymy, Antonymous Homonym, The holy Qur'ān

Background

The first step toward the selection of appropriate equivalents of the source language (SL) text items in the process of translation is the 'decoding' stage (Karimi, 2006). Among the variety of problematic issues that a translator may face in fulfilling the stage of successful decoding are ambiguous lexical items which cover two or more pragmatic interpretations where only one has been intended. "Lexical ambiguity is not a homogeneous phenomenon, it is rather subdivided into two distinct types, namely homonymy and polysemy" (Rasekh, 2012). Homonymy, which is the focus of the present study, is thought to be one of the linguistic phenomena giving rise to misinterpretation of the source text. As far as Qur'anic discourse with its abundant homonymous expressions is concerned, the translator would undoubtedly face obstacles. One of these obstacles is observed in the translation of lexical items of antonymous homonyms.

Translating a text into another language may not be an easy task. Due to the differences and complexities of languages, a comprehensive knowledge of the two languages is difficult to be obtained on the part of the translator. One of the linguistic complexities that makes the translation a tough task is linguistic ambiguity. Ambiguity is an issue that makes problems for the translator. It can both be in the source text itself or it may occur in the translated text. Sometimes, a text is ambiguous. So, the translator cannot get the meaning across and consequently translates that text ambiguously. At times, source

texts may not be ambiguous, but since the translator has got the point mistakenly, s/he produces an ambiguous translation. To produce unambiguous translations, the translators should consider the type of the text they are translating. Because of the existence of different types of texts, there may be different types of translations, each one enjoying its own characteristics; for instance, for literary or religious texts there are literary or religious translations. A literary or religious translator must be fully aware, of literary or religious genres and texts. So, each text should be translated according to its own specifications. Translating religious texts is very delicate and important, since such kinds of texts have to do with people's ideologies and beliefs. That is why the translator of such texts should try to produce as more appropriate translation as possible. As a religious text, the Holy Qur'ān enjoys a complicated text. Since the verses of the Holy Qur'ān are revealed in different situations, apart from translator's linguistic knowledge, s/he should be familiar with the context of situation in which a verse is revealed. As one of the important issues, ambiguity is frequently observed in the Holy Qur'ān. Hence, many of the produced translations of the ambiguous verses suffer some shortcomings. The reasons of such shortcomings are both linguistic differences and complexities of this Holy Book and sometimes the translator's lack of knowledge of context of situation.

Statement Of The Problem

The linguistic approach of the Qur'ān structure is so complex in form and content that Arabs categorize the structure of their language as Qur'ānic Arabic and non-Qur'ānic Arabic (Mustapha, 1998). Due to the significance of this scripture, the proper translation of the content is required. If the translations of the Holy Qur'ān are problematic, it would be difficult to understand the meanings. Therefore, the very aim of its revelation might be disrupted. Because of the linguistic and contextual differences and complexities of the Qur'ānic text, the translations of the Holy Qur'ān, in one way or the other, suffer from different types of deficiencies.

Although, it is very difficult to overcome all the translation problems, but at least, translators should be acquainted with some lexical complexity such as antonymous homonyms that this paper attempts to discuss. As evident, the Holy Qur'ān is revealed in the Arabic language, and there are many people all over the world who are not familiar with this language, so the proper translation of the Holy Qur'ān is obligatory. One of the most confusing Qur'ānic issues is the existence of ambiguous words or sentences. For the reader of this divine book to understand the meanings of the Holy Qur'ān and especially the meanings of ambiguous verses, the translator of the Holy Qur'ān has to determine the ambiguity and then disambiguate these meanings.

Methodologies

The study benefited from a variety of research works in the field of general linguistics and Arabic linguistics precisely. Works of Ibn Al-anbariy, a renowned Arab linguist, *kitab Al Ad-Daaad*, prominent work of Ibn Manzoor, *Lisaan al-Arab* were particularly of immense contribution to the background of this study. To establish the problems antonymous homonyms pose to translators of the Qur'an, several translations of the meanings of the Qur'an were consulted. Prominent amongst them were translations of the meaning of the Qur'an by Mamarduke Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Asad, and Malik. Other sources of information used for the current study include different exegesis of the Qur'an as well as internet sources and scholarly articles in reputable academic journals. Derivative methods was also used, where necessary, to determine the roots of the verbs used to ascertain their authenticity using Ibn Manzoor's *Lisaaan al-Arab*. Verses of

the Qur'an were used as evidences to support the various instances of antonymous homonyms cited.

Findings

The findings of this study are as follows:

- 1- Scholars of Arabic linguistics have different opinions on the occurrence of antonymous homonyms in Arabic language in general and in the noble Qur'an in particular.
- 2- The existence of this linguistic complexity have posed a lot of challenges to translators of the meaning of the Qur'an especially to English due to the absence of such linguistic complexity in English language.
- 3- This study affirms the existence of antonymous homonyms in the noble Qur'an as a linguistic complexity of Arabic language and a special feature of the Qur'an.
- 4- The noble Qur'an is the source for the preservation of Arabic linguistics.
- 5- Many of the translated versions of the lexical complexities of the Qur'an suffer from one form of shortcoming or another especially antonymous homonyms.

Homonymy In Arabic Language

Definitions of homonymy. Homonymy in Arabic language is known either as *الوجوه والنظائر* or *المتجانس اللفظي* or *المتشابه اللفظي* or *المشترك اللفظي* in the holy Qur'an (Al-Dhamin 1990). In philology, scholars such as Al-Salih (1968), Al-Khuli (2001), and Mansur (2009), defined homonymy as a word or phrase that has one articulation (or form) and more than one meaning. For example, the word *سن* has one articulation whether it means age or tooth; and *دقيق* which means flour, precise, and thin. An instance of homonymy from the holy Qur'an is:

- "فلا رفث ولا فسوق ولا جدال في الحج" whereby the word *رفث* may mean to have sexual relationship or to say obscene words. Therefore various translations emerge in respect to this word as follows:
- "...while on pilgrimage, abstain from lewd speech, from all wicked conduct, and from quarrelling..." (2:197, Asad, 2002).
- "...abstain from husband-wife relationship, obscene language, and wrangling during Hajj..." (2:197, Malik, 1990).
- "...there is (to be) no lewdness nor abuse nor angry conversation on the pilgrimage..." (2:197, Pickthall, 2002).
- "...let there be no obscenity nor wickedness nor wrangling in the Hajj..." (2:197, Yusuf A, 2002).

Homonymy is a controversial subject among Arab linguists. In one hand, linguist, such as Ibn Dorstoya, denied the existence of this linguistic phenomenon as he claimed that only one of its meanings is real while the others are metaphorical. For instance, the word *وجد* has several meanings like to find, anger, to love, etc. They declared that "One may think this word has several meanings but actually all these meaning are related to one thing." On the other hand, scholars, like Al Kheleel bin Ahmed, Sibawayh, Abu Zeid, and ibn Al Anbariy affirm to its existence in Arabic language to the extent that scholars like Ibn al Anbariy wrote a complete book –*Kitab Al Ad-Daad* on the subject matter.

Types of homonyms. Although, the subject matter of this paper is to discuss and clarify the existence of linguistic complexity in the Qur'an with special reference to antonymous Homonym, but it is worthwhile to mention some kinds of Homonyms in Arabic language in general. The following types of Homonyms exist:

1. Homonymic words that have two meanings. For example, قدم (foot: part of body) or (unit of length). Another example is لسان (tongue: organ of body) and (language) (Al-Khuli, 2001).
2. Homonymic words that have multiple meanings. For instance words such as فصول (chapters; of a book), (seasons; of a year), (semesters; in school), (acts; of a play), etc. Another example is the word عين (eye; of a needle), (eye; of man), (fountainhead), (spy), etc. (Al Khuli 2001). The word صدی has the meanings (echo), (extreme thirst), (to preserve money), etc. (Ibn Jinni, 2008). Another word is بأس (dread), (bravery), (torture), (power), (battle) (Waffi, 1957; Atlas, 2007). A well-known example that has more than thirty meanings is the word حوب which may mean sin, sister, daughter, need, sadness, haughtiness, heart softness (Ahmed & Areej, 2010; Ya'koob, 1999).
3. Homonymic words that have a relation in meaning. For instance, in Arabic, the word يد may mean (Hand; part of body and power) and the word نراع has the meanings (arm: part of the body and unit of measurement. This kind is actually known as polysemy in English (Ahmed & Areej, 2010; Al Khuli 2001; Umer 1982).
4. Homonymic words that have no relation in meaning. The word قرن may mean the horns of an animal or a hundred years. The word وجد which has no relation between its meanings that are to detest someone or to know. Another example is قال (to say from يقول) and (to fire somebody from يقبل) (Al Khuli 2001).
5. A unique kind of homonymy in which the pronunciation is the same while the writing is different, i.e., homophone, is found in Arabic. Examples of this type are يحيى (to live) يحيى (name of a person) another example is:

رأيت الناس قد ذهبوا، إلى من عنده ذهبٌ
رأيت الناس قد مالوا، إلى من عنده مالٌ

Here ذهبوا means 'went' and ذهبٌ is 'gold'; مالوا means 'incline' and مالٌ means 'money' (Nasir Al-Deen, 2010).

6. Homonyms created because of shift in application or register
Sometimes, the meaning of a particular word depends on the context or specialization area it is used. In Arabic, for instance, a word like عملية (operation) may mean surgical operation, action, practicability, agency, process, procedure, execution, or maneuver. The word جدار (wall) has different meanings such as wall, counter scrub, firewall, dike, pier (Ahmed & Areej, 2010; Umar, 1982; Waffi, 1957).
- 7- Homonyms that have identical present and past participle
The present and past participle that have the rhythm (افتعل) in Arabic for words such as مُخْتَارٌ, مُعْتَادٌ, مُعْتَدٌ, مُسْتَنٌ and the rhythm (انفعَلَ) in words like مُنْحَلٌ are identical in enunciation and writing (Ahmed & Areej, 2010; ibn Jinni, 2008).
- 8- Homonyms that have the same singular and plural forms
Examples of these homonyms are فُلُكٌ and دِلاصٌ (as in درع دِلاصٌ and أدرع دِلاصٌ) (Ibn Jinni 2008)

Antonymous homonyms. It is important to differentiate between antonym and antonymous homonym. Antonym occurs between two lexical items with opposite meanings. Whereas, antonymous homonyms occurs with a lexical item with two opposite meanings. It is therefore, a kind of antonyms in Arabic language. For example يبيع (to sell) and يشتري (to buy); سهل (easy) and صعب (difficult), are antonyms. While antonymous homonym occurs with the same lexical item with two reverse meanings as mentioned above. (Al-Dhamin, 1990).

In this case, homonyms have two antonymous meanings. Thus, such words create great problems in communication in Arabic and by extension translation. Consider the following examples of antonymous homonyms in Arabic (Al Khuli 2001):

جون = black, white
 صريم = day, night
 بسل = forbidden, lawful
 سليم = uninjured, stung
 أبيض = white, black
 بصير = blind, sighted
 وراء = front, rear
 حلق = fly, sink
 وثب = jump, sit
 طاعم = to feed, to be fed (Al-Salih 1968)

Antonymous Homonyms in the Qur'an

We have defined antonymous homonym before as a lexical item with reverse meaning. Here are some verses of the Holy Qur'an that contain such lexical items as a form of illustration.

1- أسر conceal/ revealing

Among the words used as justification by Ibn al-Anbar, Abi Ubaidah, al-Asna'ani etc. from the noble Qur'an is the word "أسر" denotes two meanings i.e. "conceal" and "revealing"

It came in such verse as in the first meaning, "conceal":

(وَأَسْرُوا النَّجْوَى الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا)

"...The wrongdoers conceal their private counsels (saying)..." (21: 3). It also means "reveal" in the verse:

(وَأَسْرُوا النَّدَامَةَ لَمَّا رَأَوْا الْعَذَابَ...)

"...they would declare (reveal) (their) repentance (regret) when they see the Penalty" (10: 54).

The above verses show reverse meanings of the same word. Al-Manjid is, however, of the opinion that the word does not mean "revealing" in the second verse because some scholars are of opposing view of the usage of this word in such context. But celebrated Arab linguist such as Ibn Manzoor mentioned the word "أسر" in *Lisanul Arab* with two opposing meanings. He said; "أسر شيء" means to "conceal" or "reveal" it, and it is therefore, antonymous.

2- أردى = to destroy / to assist

Ibn al-Anbar regarded the word “أردى” as an antonymous word in the noble Qur’an wherein it was used as “destruction or to perish” and “assistant”. The first meaning could be found in the verse

“His riches will not save him when he perishes" (92: 11). وَمَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُ مَالُهُ إِذَا تَرَدَّى

While the second meaning could be found in the verse

“And my brother Harun- he is more eloquent in speech than I; so send him with me as a helper to confirm me...” (28: 34). وَأَجِي هَارُونَ هُوَ أَفْصَحُ مِنِّي لِسَانًا فَأَرْسِلْهُ مَعِيَ رِدْءًا يُصَدِّقُنِي

The word was used with its reverse meanings in the verses mentioned above, but scholars like al-Manjid opposed the assertion that the above mentioned words have different roots. Al-Manjid is of the opinion that أردت (to assist) is from أردت while أردى (to destroy) is from أريدت. However, Ibn Al-anbariy came up with a proof to affirm that the words have the same root but could be recited in different ways. He gave an example where the word قرأ can be recited with the glottal "hamza" and قرأ by way of tilting known as إمالة in Arabic language.

3- عسى (maybe/ certainly)

The word “عسى”, in the Qur’an connotes doubt and assurance. For example

كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِتَالُ وَهُوَ كُرْهٌ لَّكُمْ وَعَسَىٰ أَن تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَعَسَىٰ أَن تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَّكُمْ

"Warfare is ordained for you, though it is hateful unto you; but it may happen that ye hate a thing which is good for you, and it may happen that ye love a thing which is bad for you..." (2: 216).

...But soon when Allah gives you victory or a decision according to His will..." (5: 52). (فَعَسَىٰ اللَّهُ أَن يَأْتِيَ بِالْفَتْحِ أَوْ أَمْرٍ مِّنْ عِنْدِهِ)

The word represents an expression of doubt in the former while it connotes certainty in the later. It was the view of Ibn Manzoor (1990), that when the mention of "عسى" in the Qur’an is from Allah the Most High, it connotes “certainty” but for the creatures it signifies “doubt”.

4- الظن (to suspect, not sure/ to be sure, certain)

The word “ظن” is antonymous. It could be used to express doubt and certainty at the same time. Ibn al-Anbar therefore, viewed it as indicating two opposing meanings. First, it denotes “doubt” and second it denotes “certainty”. He supported the second meaning with the verse:

(وَأَنَّا ظَنَنَّا أَن لَّن نُّعْجِزَ اللَّهَ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَن نُّعْجِزَهُ هَرَبًا)

“And we think that we cannot escape (the punishment of) Allah in the earth, nor can we escape Him by flight” (72: 12). Which means we knew it (ibn Al-Anbariy, N.D), although with some degree of doubt. Thus, al-Tawzi, in his narration from Ibn Muthanna supported the first meaning i.e. “doubt”

Whereas "certainty" is expressed with the same lexical item as follows:

(إِنِّي ظَنَنْتُ أَنِّي مُلَاقٍ حِسَابِيَّةٍ)

"Surely I did believe that I should have to meet my reckoning" (69: 20) (Pickthall, 2002). in the same way, the second meaning "Surely" came in another verse

(وَضَاقَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ أَنفُسُهُمْ وَظَنُّوا أَنْ لَا مَلْجَأَ مِنَ اللَّهِ إِلَّا إِلَيْهِ)

"and their souls had become [utterly] constricted - they came to know with certainty that there is no refuge from God other than [a return] unto Him;" (9: 18) (Asad).

Ibn Sayyidah (458-398H) also pointed out another verse in which ظن connotes "certainty"

(الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُمْ مُلَاقُوا رَبِّهِمْ وَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ)

"...those who know with certainty that they shall meet their Sustainer and that unto Him they shall return" that is, they know because doubt about the accountability before Allah is an act of disbelief". (2: 46).

5- قسط (Justice or fairness/ oppression, injustice, disbelief)

The word "قسط" is among the lexical items use antonymously in the holy Qur'an. It was used to express "justice" in some places as well as "oppression or disbelief" in some others.

The evidence for the later meaning can be found in verses like:

(وَأَمَّا الْقَاسِطُونَ فَكَانُوا لِجَهَنَّمَ حَطَبًا)

"And as for those who are unjust, (disbelievers who deviated from the right path) they are firewood for hell" (71: 15) (Pickthall, 2002) that is, those who transgress.

The second contradictory meaning of the word is found in verses such as:

(وَإِنْ حَكَمْتَ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِالْقِسْطِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ)

"...If thou judge, judge in equity between them; for Allah loveth those who judge in equity". (5: 42). Another verse in the same regard is:

(فَإِنْ فَاءَتْ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَهُمَا بِالْعَدْلِ وَأَقْسِطُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ)

"...Then, if they return, make peace between them with justice and be fair; for Allah loves those who are fair and just". (49: 9).

However, scholars such as Al-Manjid (1999) differs in his view about the meaning of this lexical item whether it refers to the root قسط or أفسط because of its connotation in the Qur'an "مقسطين" which was derived from "أقسط". But Ibn Manzoor (1990) pointed out that "المقسط" (The Just) is one the beautiful names of Allah i.e. "The Just". Thus, he stated in "Lisan al-Arab": "قسط" (just) is in the beautiful names of Allah. "المقسط" The Just; where it is said: A just (person); when he is fair, and doing justice. It also means when he is wrong/unfair". Thus, it appears like Al-Manjid is oblivion of the fact that an addition in the verb form or derivative is an addition to the original meaning and does not change anything in the meaning of the original the word. Therefore, "قسط" is an example of antonymous homonyms.

6- أفرط (omission or to neglect / commission, excessive or extravagant)

The word “أفرط” can be seen as antonymous according to the context in which it was used the Qur'an. For instance:

(لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّ لَهُمُ النَّارَ وَأَنَّهُمْ مُفْرَطُونَ)

"Assuredly theirs will be the Fire, and they will be abandoned (neglected". (16: 42)
(مَا فَرَطْنَا فِي الْكِتَابِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ)

"...We have neglected nothing in the Book (of Our decrees)..."(6: 38).

The opposing meaning of the same item can be seen in:

(وَلَا تُطِعْ مَنْ أَغْفَلْنَا قَلْبَهُ عَن ذِكْرِنَا وَاتَّبَعَ هَوَاهُ وَكَانَ أَمْرُهُ فُرُطًا)

"...nor obey the one whose heart We have permitted to neglect Our remembrance, who follows his own desires and goes to extremes in the conduct of his affairs"(18: 28). (Malik, 2002)

From the verses above, it could be deduced that the word فرط or أفرط was used antonymously to mean neglect or excesses.

7- اشترى (to buy/ to sell)

The word “اشترى” is a form of antonymous homonym which could be ambiguous in terms of translation, especially, of the holy Qur'an because it was used interchangeably. It means either "to buy or purchase" or "to sell"

For instance:

(أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ اشْتَرُوا الضَّلَالَةَ بِالْهُدَىٰ فَمَا رَبِحَت تِّجَارَتُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا مُهْتَدِينَ)

"These are they who purchase error at the price of guidance, so their commerce doth not prosper, neither are they guided". (2: 16).

On the other hand it means "to sell" in:

(وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَنْ يَشْرِي نَفْسَهُ ابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ رَءُوفٌ بِالْعِبَادِ)

"And of mankind is he who would sell himself, seeking the pleasure of Allah; and Allah hath compassion on (His) bondmen" (2: 207). In addition, the same lexical item was used in the popular Qur'anic story of Prophet Yusuf when he was sold by his siblings:

(وَشَرَوْهُ بِثَمَنٍ بَخْسٍ دَرَاهِمَ مَعْدُودَةٍ وَكَانُوا فِيهِ مِنَ الزَّاهِدِينَ)

"The (Brethren) sold him for a miserable price for a few dirhams counted out: in such low estimation did they hold him" (12: 20).

Scholars of Qur'anic exegesis are of the view that both اشترى and شرى are from the same root, although different in their derived forms. Hence, it is antonymously used in the expression of the Qur'an to mean "buy" or "sell" especially when it is used with the conjunction "بـ" as above.

8- رَاغ (to turn upon/ turn away)

The term "راغ" was also used interchangeably and antonomously in the Qur'anic expression to mean either "to turn to" or "to turn away from".

(فَرَاغَ عَلَيْهِمْ ضَرْبًا بِالْيَمِينِ)

"Then did he turn upon them striking (them) with the right hand" (37: 93) here it means he approached them.

Meanwhile;

(فَرَاغَ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهِ فَجَاءَ بِعِجَلٍ سَمِينٍ)

"He went quietly to his family, brought a roasted calf" it means he turned away and returned to his family.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many linguistic complexity cases in the holy Qur'an which could be difficult for people who are not familiar with traditional Arabic linguistics or the Qur'anic Arabic language. One of such cases has been the bane of discussion of this paper with regard to their various interpretations and translations. This complexity could be resolved by handling the complete text or verse as a single macro unit in which an ambiguous or complex lexical item may be viewed as stylistic feature of the Qur'an occurring in parallel structures that constitute a form of paradigmatic patterning fulfilling not only semantico-pragmatic functions but also discoursal, aesthetic, rhetorical, and stylistic functions that interact to give the text its unique texture and identity. The knowledge of antonymous homonyms can provide helpful clues in disambiguating such cases.

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