

Introduction

God says in Q17:88, “If the humankind and the jinn worked together to produce something like this Qur’an, they would produce nothing like it even if they helped each other” (translation by Hassanein, 2017, p.138). This verse suggests that nothing similar to the Quran, in Arabic or otherwise can be produced by humankind. Thus, proposing the Quranic message to be inseparable from its revelatory language, Arabic.

In this reaction paper, I will be evaluating Dr Soroush’s view regarding the accidental nature of Arabic in Islam.

Analysis

According to Soroush (2009, p.63), religious traits are comprised of two elements: essentials and accidentals. Accidentals are those traits which can be replaced by other than what it is, whereas essentials are irreplicable (ibid). He further states that any religion is a religion by its virtue of the essentials, as opposed to its accidentals (ibid). Therefore, Muslims need to believe in and be devoted to the essentials (ibid).

Soroush believes Arabic to be the first accidental of Islam (ibid). Had the Prophet been born elsewhere, he would have spoken their language (ibid, p.70) in place of Arabic. Nevertheless, Arabic placed its constraints and characteristics on the revelation and has retained a stronghold on Islamic discourse (ibid).

Arabic may be considered a necessary trait during the Prophet’s life, being the vehicle for propagating the Quran to its initial audience, the Arabs. However, with the growth of non-

Arabic speaking Muslims, the question arises, can Quranic translations substitute the Arabic whilst simultaneously interacting and engaging with them, ensuring a full religious experience? For, in Soroush's view, religion is an experience which is engaging, interactive, relevant, and meaningful to the age of the addressee (ibid, p.22-23).

While the number of Quranic translations continues to increase, Quranic translatability remains to be debated among Muslim scholars, supporters and adversaries (Hassanein, 2017, pp.137-138). According to Rahbar (d.2013), when the claim of the Quran being untranslatable is made, there are two possible meanings (Othman, 2024, p.317). Firstly, it is a sin to translate the Quran, and secondly, no translation will ever be able to do justice to the Arabic (ibid). The first meaning is linked with the creed of Quranic inimitability, though Muslim scholars have differed regarding the precise meaning of this (ibid).

The latter meaning implies that, whilst it is theologically permissible to translate the Quran, it is impossible to perfectly translate it, a point which appears to overshadow all discussions related to the translatability of the Quran (Othman, 2024, p.317). The reasons listed for the untranslatable nature of the Quran include, although not limited to, the broad usage of metaphorical language, the unavailability of lexical replacements in the language it is being translated into, etc (ibid). It is for this reason Soroush (2009, p.89) advocates for a cultural translation of accidentals, such as translating from one culture to another.

What may further complicate the issue of translatability are the different methods of translation. Newmark (d.2011) has theorised eight methods of translation (Aqad et al., 2019, p.246). This includes word-for-word, literal, faithful, semantic, adapted, free, idiomatic, and

communicative translations (ibid). Some methods, such as the literal translation method, are usually not suitable for Quranic translation as they may cause drastic loss in the Quran's rhetorical and pragmatic features, aside from the loss of meaning (ibid, p.254). However, Soroush (2009, p.89) believes this can be overcome by adopting a cultural translation. He views a "mechanical transfer" (ibid, p.64) of an essence from one culture to another, the translation from one language to another, in this case, would be unsuccessful and unwise. Rather, in an attempt to avoid misunderstanding, it (the essence/translation) must be clothed in the dress of the new culture (ibid). For example, the statement "taking coal to Newcastle" (ibid) would not relay anything to the average Persian speaker unless it is culturally translated as "taking cumin to Kerman" for it to be meaningful and vice-versa.

An example of Quranic translatability limitations can be found in Q112:2. This verse contains the word *as-Samad*, for which implies God being perfect in might, strength, knowledge, and the constant state of others needing Him whilst He does not need them (Khalaf & Yusoff, 2012, p.78-79). Translators have used words such as 'eternal' and 'absolute' in their translations whilst acknowledging the limitations of such translations, whilst being unable to identify a one-word translation for it (ibid, p.79). In such an example, the translator would need to use footnotes to provide an explanatory translation for the word.

Furthermore, the discussion of Quranic translation can be traced back to early Islam, when non-Arabs were accepting Islam and it could not be expected of them to complete the ritual prayers in Arabic (Suleiman, 2013, p.63). It appears that Abu Hanifah (d.767), the founder of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, gave absolute permission (although, not all Hanafi jurists agreed with this) for the recitation of the Quran in the prayers in a foreign language (ibid).

Meaning, that a person, irrelevant of their competency in Arabic, may recite the translation of the Quran in the ritual prayers. The absolute permission would imply that “the form of the revelation in Arabic is detachable from its content, wherein the miraculous nature of the Qur’an lies” (ibid). It seems that Abu Hanifah was indicating that the translation of the content of the Quran produces a type of Quran, albeit superiority remains in the Arabic Quran (ibid). In other words, the content/message of the Quran can be separated from the Arabic. This further suggests that Abu Hanifah viewed the Arabic language to be accidental, much like Soroush, and that one may remain devoted to the religious essentials without it.

The majority of the Sunni jurists rejected the usage of Quranic translation in the prayers, to the point where Al-Shafi’ (d.204) would allow those who did not know the Quran in Arabic to pray without reciting it (ibid). It seems al-Shafi is obligating the learning of Arabic. This view would imply the Arabisation of non-Arab Muslims. Non-Arab Muslims would be required to forgo their own culture to be able to have a meaningful religious experience.

For al-Shafi’, the form-content duality is a fundamental aspect of the Quranic challenge to the Arabs to produce a single chapter resembling it (ibid, p.64), proposing the essential nature of Arabic. Hence, the duality lies at the very core of the inimitability of the Quran, the denial of which would be equal to denying its inimitability and miraculous nature (ibid). As such, if the translation were to be treated the same as the original, the Quranic inimitability would be breached, and its challenge would be pointless (ibid). Al-Shafi’s position would suggest that Arab Muslims are in a more favourable position than non-Arab Muslims. Although they may not understand the entire Quran, they will be expected to have a better understanding of it

than their non-Arab counterpart. Thus, giving them, what seems to be an unfair advantage in attaining a meaningful religious experience, particularly when it comes to the ritual prayers.

Conclusion

The issue of Quranic translatability is heavily linked to the notion of its message being universal, whilst simultaneously it being the verbatim speech of God, revealed in Arabic to be preached to an Arabic-speaking community (ibid, p.62). As for Soroush (2007), he believes that God revealed the formless content of revelation to the Prophet. It was then the Prophet's task to articulate the revelation in the language that he knew, in the styles, images, and knowledge he possessed (ibid). Therefore, it does not appear that Soroush subscribes to the Quran being the verbatim speech of God, making his theory of the accidental nature of Arabic to be plausible which can be substituted by a translation, allowing non-Arab Muslims to enjoy a meaningful religious experience without the need for learning Arabic.

However, for Muslims who do not subscribe to Soroush's view, whilst hypothetically considering Arabic to be accidental may be conceivable, it would not reflect in the practical lived reality. It cannot be expected of non-Arab Sunni Muslims, who do not understand Arabic, to have the same meaningful religious experience without the Arabic language as advocated by al-Shafi' (Suleiman, 2013, p.65). This is not to suggest that they will not enjoy any element of religious experience to the essentials via translations.

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