



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATING SYNONYMS AND HOMONYMS IN THE HOLY QURAN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO QURANIC TRANSLATIONS BY YUSUF ALI AND AHMED ALI

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## Abstract

The semantic phenomena of synonymy and homonymy are considered a problem in translation since the translators have to choose between more than one equivalents taking into consideration the exact nuances in meaning. Regarding the translation of the Holy Quran, synonymy and homonymy also remains a controversial issue among Arab scholars who did not agree about the existence of these two semantic phenomena in the Holy Quran, therefore, translators most of the time fail in translating synonyms and homonyms in The Holy Quran. This study focused on the problems that faced the two translators Yusuf Ali and Ahmed Ali during their translations of some synonymous and homonymous words in The Holy Quran. The main problem was that the two translators depended on the literal translation method to translate synonymous and homonymous words in many cases. The second problem that this study focused on that the two translators ignored the similarity in pronunciation between Arabic language and English language. It focused on one of the main reasons behind these difficulties, which is the translator's ignorance of the exegeses of The Holy Quran.

**Keywords:** Translation, Synonymy, Homonymy, Equivalence.

## Introduction

Translating the meanings of the Holy Quran is a huge task since the translator should convey the exact meaning of the word or Ayah (verse) to the target language reader to explain the words of God to him. The Holy book of Quran cannot be treated as any other book when it comes to translation or interpretation. As a result, the translators who want to interpret it must be very careful to deal with every word and every Ayah to convey all the intended meaning to the TL reader. The reader of the Holy Quran can feel that every single letter as well as every single word is used very properly. A researcher in the Holy Quran can conclude that no word can be used instead of the other; since every word has special features that make it different in comparing with other synonyms.

Synonymy and homonym are essential linguistic phenomena in semantics. They are of the main issues in linguistics and translation that need further attention because they considered universal phenomena that exist in several languages. Many linguists and semanticists have defined these two notions. Nida and Taber, From a linguistic perspective, (1969) define synonymy in language as 'words which share several (but not all) essential components and thus can be used to substitute for one another in some (but not all) contexts without any appreciable difference of meaning in these contexts' (p. 73). Homonyms, in the same time, is another lexical problem in translation since it refers to two linguistic signs happen to share the same form but differ with regard to meaning, for example: the word *bank* is a homonymous word.

## The Statement of the Problem

This study mainly focuses on the lack of understanding the translation of meanings of some synonym and homonym pairs in the Holy Quran as a comparison between two English translations of Yusuf Ali and Ahmed Ali. The study will also identify that to what extent the difficulty of translating such synonyms and homonyms in the context of Quran leads to make these synonyms and homonyms as lexical gaps for those translators of the Holy Quran. One of the major problems for the translators of the Holy Quran appears when the translator does not care about the historical relation between the word of the source text and the word of the target text. The similarity of pronunciation is related to the historical relation among words in the source and target languages, so the translator's ignorance for this aspect makes him face many problems in translation especially when he translates synonymous and homonymous words in the Holy Quran. The context will play a major role to determine the exact meaning of a certain word to help translators to choose the correct and appropriate meaning of these synonyms words, so the translators should consider such a context when translating synonyms and homonyms in the Quranic text. This study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the differences in meaning between the Quranic synonyms and homonyms depending on the context's role in determining the exact and appropriate meaning.

## The Objectives of the Study

- 1) To identify the difficulties in the translation of some pairs of synonyms and homonyms in the Holy Quran.
- 2) To recognize that how the translation of some pairs of synonyms and homonyms in the Holy Quran becomes as lexical gaps for the two translators
- 3) To show the importance of adopting the contextual approach in translating the meanings of the Holy Quran, and which of these two translations applied such approach in the TL
- 4) To identify the strategies that the two translators use to overcome the difficulty of translating some pairs of synonyms and homonyms in the Quranic context.

## The Questions of the Study

- 1) What are the difficulties that the two translators Yusuf Ali and Ahmed Ali face while translating some pairs of synonyms and homonyms of the Quran into English?
- 2) How does the difficulty of translating these some pairs of synonyms and homonyms make it as lexical gaps for the two translators of the Holy Quran?
- 3) What is the importance of the context in determining the exact meaning of the word to avoid synonymy?
- 4) What are the strategies that the two translators use to overcome the difficulty of translating the meanings of some synonym and homonym pairs in Quran?

## The Scope and Limitation of the Study

The study is limited to the analysis of two translations of the Glorious Quran by Yusuf Ali (1934), Ahmed Ali (1984) of six synonyms and homonyms pairs in the Holy Quran to assess their renditions into English.

## The Significance of the Study

This study focuses on one of the important issues in translation, which is the translation of the meanings of the Holy Quran. This study attempts to highlight the translation of synonyms and homonyms in two different Quranic translations. It also takes care of how the translators of the Holy Quran face many difficulties to convey the intended and the exact meaning for the TL reader specially in translating the synonym and

homonym words, which are repeated a lot in the Holy Quran text. Thus, it may provide some contribution in the translation of the meaning of synonym and homonym words in Holy Quran text.

## Literature Review

This part will review the literature related to the topic of the study. It will include the Translations of the Holy Quran synonyms and homonyms and previous studies about synonyms and homonyms in The Holy Quran.

## Translations of the Holy Quran

Translations of the Holy Quran are aimed to express the meanings of Quran. Muslims prefer to call such "translations of the Quran", with "interpretations" or "translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran. It is affirmed by scholars in the field of translation that English translations of the Holy Quran are only a transference of the Quranic meaning and these versions can not replace the original source. One of the facts that translators should be aware of is the intended message of Quranic lexemes, not only the apparent meaning (Hassan, 2003, as cited in Hassan, 2014). Another thing is that the Holy Quran is inimitable because its language is unique (El-Hadary, 2008) which increases the challenge of accurately translating the Holy Quran. Salman (2013) asserts that the translation of the Glorious Quran from Arabic into English is a serious problem since there are linguistic and cultural variations; Arabic and English language have different metaphorical styles of writing and this possesses different connotation of a vocabulary. Thus, the problem becomes more complicated due to the different culture to which each language belongs. The translators of the meanings of the Holy Quran must understand and read carefully the verses before translating, further, they must rely on exegesis, for instance, those written by Al-Tabari, Ibn-kathir, Al-suyuti,.. etc.

## Synonyms and Homonyms

English linguistic scholars provide various definitions of the term 'synonymy'. Jackson (1988) for example, points out that two words are Synonymous if they have the same meaning. Therefore, synonymy needs to be defined in terms of contexts or usage. He further states that two words are said to be synonymous if they are interchangeable in all contexts. Jackson also claims that if the two words are interchangeable in all contexts, this means that the words are strictly synonymous (p.65). Synonyms are words with same/similar meanings. Qadri (2015) mentioned that "a synonym is a word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another word or phrase in the same language". Synonymous words appear different but share the same or almost the same meanings. Synonymy, a lexical relationship term used to refer to the sameness of meaning (Lobner, 2002; Palmer, 1976/1981), has been identified as one of the troubles in translation from Arabic into English.

In addition, Homonymy is defined differently in English, but in general, a word is similar in form with another word either in pronunciation (i.e. homophone) or in spelling (homograph), or both, but differs from it in meaning is said to be homonymous Al-Salihi (2017). According to Löbner (2002: 42), the word homonym comes from the conjunction of the Greek word homo (same) and the suffix onymos (name). Homonymy is one of the main causes of lexical ambiguity. Homonymy defined by the *Online Etymology Dictionary* as "a word pronounced and sometimes spelled exactly the same as another but with differences in meaning."

## Methodology

This research is a comparative study that intends to compare between two English translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran by Yusuf Ali (1934) and Ahmed Ali (1984) to examine the strategies followed in translating some of synonym and homonym words in Quran, and to investigate the meanings of some pairs of Quranic synonyms and homonyms. These translations are particularly selected for several reasons since the first translation is an old translation and the second one is considered a modern translation. The translation of Yusuf Ali has become among the most widely known English translations of the Quran. On the other hand,

Ahmed Ali's work is clear, direct, and elegant – a combination of stylistic virtues seldom found in translations of the Quran. It brings out the original rhythms of the Quranic language and the cadences. It also departs from traditional translations in that it gives more refined and differentiated shades of important concept.

The researcher will use the qualitative approach in conducting this study by making a comparison between the translation of some pairs of synonyms and homonyms in the Holy Quran of the two translators Yusuf Ali and Ahmed Ali. The study will also adapt an observation to collect data from these two translations of the Holy Quran. In analyzing the data, the researcher will follow the deductive approach to answer all the questions of the study. The accuracy of translation in the analysis process is reliant on the two following exegeses by Al-Tabari and Al-Suyuti.

To achieve the goals of the study, the researcher selected many examples of synonyms and homonymy from different verses in Glorious Quran. He drew on two exegeses of the Glorious Quran: Al-Tabari, Al-Suyuti and to examine the interpretations of the synonymous and the homonymous terms in the selected verses. After that, he paralleled the interpretations of these words with the corresponding translated English versions in the two selected translations. Furthermore, he attempted to determine precise translations of the synonymous and homonymous words and whether the translators missed or captured the correct meaning/meanings of these words, as given in the exegeses.

Analyzing the Quran pairs of synonyms and homonyms will be based on Baker's strategies for such non-equivalence. The researcher will follow some procedures starting with presenting the verse where one of the synonyms or homonyms occurs in Arabic, underlining them. Then I will transliterate the verse into English using the transliteration scheme and I will show the translation of the verse into English. After that, I will present the two different translations of Ahmed Ali's and Yusuf Ali's of the same verses focusing on how the synonym and homonym words are translated. Finally, I will compare the appropriacy of these two translations by explaining the best translation for synonym and homonym words through giving my opinion about these two translations by choosing the best and the close translation that convey the whole meaning of the synonym or homonym words to the TL reader.

## Research Design

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach; specifically the content analysis type of the qualitative research. This approach requires written language that the researcher examines, to identify the losses in meaning and the causes behind them. Besides this, this research does not depend on quantities or numbers.

## Data Analysis

In this part, I will analyse the collected data about the examples of synonyms and homonyms and their translations by the two translators. I will give different pairs of words where the two translators sometimes gave each pair the same translation and they sometimes gave them different translation without taking into consideration the shadows and connotations of each word separately, as I will explain it in this part.

- *Al-Bahr / Al-Yam (sea) أَلْبَحْرُ / أَلْيَمٌ*

| SOURCE TEXT   | YUSUF ALI'S TRANSLATION   | AHMED ALI'S TRANSLATION  |
|---|---|--|
| <p>قال ﷻ وَجَوَزْنَا بِبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ الْبَحْرَ فَأَتَوْا عَلَى قَوْمٍ يَعْكُفُونَ عَلَى أَصْنَامٍ لَهُمْ قَالُوا يَا مُوسَى اجْعَلْ لَنَا إِلَهًا كَمَا لَهُمْ آلِهَةٌ قَالَ إِنَّكُمْ قَوْمٌ تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿١٣٨﴾</p> <p>الاعراف 138</p> | <p>We took the children of Israel (with safety) across <b>the sea</b>. They came upon a people devoted entirely to some idols they had. They said: O Moses fashion for us a god like unto the gods they have. He said: surly ye are a people without knowledge.</p> <p>AL ARAF(138)</p> | <p>When we bought the children of Israel across <b>the sea</b>, and they came to people who were devoted to their idols, they said: " O Moses, make us also a god like theirs. " You are ignorant", he replied. <i>Al-A'raf</i>(138)</p> |
| <p>قال ﷻ فَأَخَذْنَاهُ وَجُودَهُ فَنَبَذْنَاهُمْ فِي الْيَمِّ فَاَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾</p> <p>الفصص 40</p>  | <p>So we seized him and his hosts, and we flung them into <b>the sea</b>: now behold what was the end of those who did wrong. <i>ALQ ASAS</i>(40)</p>   | <p>So we seized him and his hords and threw them into <b>the sea</b>. Behold then haw was the end of the wicked.</p> <p>Al-Qasas(40)</p>   |

The word *أَلْبَحْرُ* *Al-bahr* is mentioned in the Holy Quran 20 times, but the word *أَلْيَمٌ* *Al-yam* is mentioned in the Holy Quran only seven times. In these verses, the pair synonymous words *Al-bahr* and *Al-yam* co-occurred, sharing the general meaning of the wide large water; however, they have some semantic differences. According to the interpretation of Al-Tabari, the word *أَلْيَمٌ* means *أَلْبَحْرُ* since he interpreted it in *أَغْرَقْنَاهُمْ فِي الْيَمِّ* into *أَغْرَقْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَحْرِ* but this word *أَلْيَمٌ* uses to refer to *the sea* in the context of punishment or fear, whereas the word *أَلْبَحْرُ* is used in the context of safe. In this first verse, the word *أَلْبَحْرُ* referred to the context of the safety, but the other one *أَلْيَمٌ* refers to the context of the punishment.

When we look to the translations of the two translators for the two words in the examples above, we notice that the two translators Yusuf Ali and Ahmed Ali translated these two synonymous words literally by the same way using the words *the sea* as an equivalent for these two words. While in Arabic, there is a difference between *AL-bahr* and *Al-Yam* since *AL-bahr* is used for the safe or the secure situation, but the word *AL-Yam* is used in the situation of fear or punishment. The two translators did not differentiate between these two synonyms words in translation because they did not take the concept of the verse in consideration.

In the first verse, the context refers to the safe situation, so the God used the word *AL-Bahr* to fit the context of safety in this verse. The two translators translated the word *AL-Bahr* using the word *the sea* as an equivalent for this word. On the other hand, the two translators translated the word *AL-Yam* in the second verse using the same equivalent of the word *AL-Bahr* which is *the sea*. The two translators did not differentiate between these two synonyms words in translation because they did not take the concept of the verse in consideration. In fact, the translation of the word *AL-Bahr* was acceptable, but the translation of the word *AL-Yam* was not acceptable because the two translators didn't care about the context of the verses since the word *AL-Yam* is better to transliterate it into its letters *AL-Yam* and then translate it into *the sea* because transliterate such word shows the difference between these two synonymous.

Depending on upon Baker's non- equivalence at word level and taking into consideration some common strategies, we can say that the word *AL-Yam* *اليم* has no equivalent in the target language, so the translator should use transliteration with the close equivalent for such words to be close to the source text. The accurate translation for the word *اليم* is *AL-Yum البحر*.



- *Monthereen / Monthareen*

| SOURCE TEXT   | YUSUF ALI'S TRANSLATION   | AHMED ALI'S TRANSLATION   |
|---|---|---|
| <p>قال ﴿ وَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا فِيهِمْ مُنذِرِينَ ﴾<br/>                     الصافات72</p>           | <p>But We sent aforetime, among them, (messengers) to admonish them-<br/>                     AL SAFFAT72</p> | <p>And We had sent admonishers to them. As-Saffat72</p>           |
| <p>قال ﴿ فَأَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُنذِرِينَ ﴾<br/>                     الصافات73</p> | <p>Then see what was the End of those who were admonished (but heeded not)-</p>                               | <p>. Look, then how was the end of those who had been warned,</p> |

The word *Monthereen* مُنذِرِينَ is mentioned three times in the Holy Quran in this form, but it is mentioned in other forms as *الْمُنذِرِينَ* (two times), *مُنذِر* ( five times), *النَّذْر* (four times), *النذير* (two times), *لِيُنذِر* (four times) and *لَتُنذِر* (five times). The other word *AL-Monthareen* الْمُنذِرِينَ is mentioned five times in the Holy Quran. In the two Glorious verses above, the homonymic expression lies in the two words *Monthereen* مُنذِرِينَ and *AL-Monthareen* الْمُنذِرِينَ since they are similar words in pronunciation but they differ in their meaning. AL-Tabari and AL-Suyuti interpreted the word *Monthereen* as the messengers who scare and warn people from the punishment of Allah and this is a literal translation for this word. The two translators translated the word *Monthereen* in the first verse literally. The first translator Yusuf Ali selected the equivalent *messengers* for the word *Monthereen*, whereas Ahmed Ali translated the same word *Monthereen* as *admonishers*. The two translators render the word مُنذِرِينَ as *messengers* and *admonishers*. These two translations agree with the two exegeses, so the two translations are correct. Thus, the better translation for the first Arabic word *Monthereen* seems to be the one given by Yusuf Ali who used the equivalent *messengers* for it which refers to Prophets who Allah sent them to warn people. The other translation by Ahmed Ali used another equivalent which is *admonishers* which means the person who warn people either a Prophet or not. The most accurate translation for the word *Monthereen* should be *Messengers of God* that clarifies who is Monthereen.

On the other hand, the second word *AL-Monthareen* in the second verse is interpreted by AL-Tabari and AL-Suyuti as the unbelievers whose punish by torment. The first translator Yusuf Ali translated it into *those who were admonished (but heeded not)* and the second translator Ahmed Ali translated it into *those who had been warned*. The two translators knew the difference between these two homonymous words when they follow the exegeses to translate these words, so their translation is an acceptable translation.

Thus, according to the exegeses of AL-Tabari and AL-Suyuti we need to add the word unbelievers to the translation of this word *AL-Monthareen* to explain that that *AL-Monthareen* are the unbelievers people who disbelieve in God. The most accurate translation for the second Arabic word *AL-Monthareen* will be "*those unbelievers who had been warned*".

Depending on Baker's non- equivalence at word level and taking into consideration some common strategies, we can say that the word *AL-Monthareen* lacks a specific term (hyponym) in the target language, the two translators Yusuf Ali and Ahmed Ali used the pragmatic equivalence since they rendered it by paraphrasing using recreation of the intended meanings in the SL to overcome this issue.

**Discussion and Results**

The results of this study showed some difficulties in translating some aspects of lexical items of synonymy and homonymy as it explained in the following points.

- 1) The translations of the two translators mostly did not give enough care of the differences between the synonymous words and the homonymous words in the Holy Quran, since they gave the same translation

for most of these words without taking in consideration the context of the verse in specific or the general context of the Sura. This led to give vague translation for such of these lexical items of synonymous and homonymous

- 2) The two translators did not care about the close relationship in similar pronunciation of some words produced by the historical relations between some Arabic and English words, specially the synonymous and homonymous words that may help them to choose the perfect equivalent for such of these words.
- 3) Transliteration strategy is very important to translate the synonymy and homonymy in The Holy Quran since it clarifies the difference between such similar words.
- 4) Some synonymous and homonymous words needs at least to transliterate it in your translation to show the little difference between them, especially if there is only one equivalent for it in the target text such as the synonymous words (البحر/اليم).
- 5) The two translators in some cases ignored the exegeses of The Holy Quran since some translations of synonymous and homonymous words need more attention to the exegeses and the interpretations of The Holy Quran that help the translator to translate such words correctly.
- 6) The difficulty of translating synonyms and homonyms in the context of The Holy Quran leads to make these synonyms and homonyms as lexical gaps for the two translators of the Holy Quran.

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## مقالة بحثية

### مشكلات ترجمة الترادف والتجانس في القرآن الكريم دراسة مقارنة لترجمتي يوسف علي وأحمد علي لمعاني القرآن الكريم

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## المُلخَص

ركزت هذه الرسالة على دراسة معضلة ترجمة المترادفات والمتجانسات في ترجمتين من ترجمات القرآن الكريم بواسطة يوسف علي وأحمد علي. وأوضحت الدراسة المشكلات التي واجهها كلا المترجمين عند ترجمتهم لبعض الكلمات المترادفة والمتجانسة في القرآن الكريم حيث اعتمدا أسلوب الترجمة الحرفية كثيراً. ومن أسباب هذه المشكلات في معظم الحالات تجاهل تفسيرات العلماء المسلمين للقرآن الكريم. كما وضحت الدراسة أن مترجمي معاني القرآن الكريم يتجاهلون العلاقة بين تقارب نطق الكلمات في اللغة الأصل وهي العربية واللغة التي يترجمون إليها وهي الانجليزية وخصوصاً إذا ما كانت هذه الكلمات مترادفة أو متجانسة وهو ما يؤدي في معظم الحالات الى اختيار مقابل بعيد الى حد ما من الكلمة في اللغة المصدر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة، الترادف، التجانس، المقابل.

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