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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGING ARABIC "WAW" IN TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

English translations of the Qura'an show that translators are blind to the subtle differences that Qura'anic connective particles can make within their respective contexts. A thorough understanding of the functions that such particles trigger is so crucial for rendering, not only the Qur'anic terminology accurately, but also grasping the true message conveyed. Since dealing with all particles lies beyond the scope of the study, this paper will only focus on the challenge that the most frequently encountered connective may cause to translators, namely, the particle waw, often translated into English as and. This paper therefore intends to demonstrate that failing to render the Qur'anic particle waw accurately into English within their respective contexts can certainly distort the true Qur'anic message. This will be followed by a discussion of the possible strategies for a better Qur'anic translation.

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INTRODUCTION

Arabic is a paratactic language. Its syntax at times includes phrases and clauses juxtaposed without the use of coordinating or subordinating conjunctions, leaving it up to the reader to establish connections and figure a meaning. In his introduction to the noble Qur'an, Irving (1992) points out that long subordinating and coordinating sentences pose a challenge for the translator in common paratactic sentence and must be treated judiciously. Even when *waw* is explicit, the reader may still be unable to impose a meaning. Qur'anic particles, as cohesive and rhetorical devices, pose a challenge in many cases for even professional translators, which challenge may only be resolved in relation to the context and familiarity with the background of each particular verse. This necessarily entails that a translator should have not only the feel of both languages he is working with, but also be a competent religious scholar, chiefly in the Qur'anic studies since the accurate rendering of a connective particle can also help avoid distorting the message in its respective context. In other words, grasping the meaning of a Qur'anic particle is crucial for the accurate rendering of the Qur'anic terminology, and even provides an insight for resolving the ambiguity of the verse in its historical context. Nevertheless, It must be pointed out that the Qur'anic conjunctions as rhetorical and cohesive devices are not ornamental elements such that they can be dispensed with. Tzortziz (2010) regards such devices as parcel of the meaning of the Qur'an and part of its linguistic make-up. It follows that no Qur'anic linguistic particle is insignificant or redundant, and thus translators must be cautious enough to see the semantic cohesion of such particles in their contexts and their communicative effect before rendering them into the target language.

English and Arabic particles in comparison

The normal means of coordinating sentences and other elements in Arabic is by means of conjunction. The particle *waw* is the most frequently used conjunction in Arabic since it often recurs in other contexts shared by other connectives. This particle has many uses analogous to English 'and', but it differs in that it regularly functions as a textual connective and a sentence connective. For this reason, Dijk (1977) argues that 'conjunction' is only "one category of the many logical relations signaled by a variety of linguistic forms belonging to different syntactic categories" (p.14). He prefers to use this particle as a connective rather than a conjunction. The pattern in which this particle used in Arabic does not correspond to that in English. According to Holes (2004), "the pattern in English is a combination of syndetic and asyndetic linkage, which are stylistically and grammatically required" (p.267).

That is, the English '*and*' is compensated for by commas setting off all items in a series, whereas Arabic is far more syndetic since English 'commas' are compensated for by *waw* in Arabic. Normally there seems to be no English correspondent for *waw* when it occurs at the beginning of a sentence and thus poses no translation problem at all. Yet it is more of a translation problem when it comes to Qur'anic verses for it exerts a high demand on the translator to be sensitive to the theologian, cultural, and historical connotations of the verses. Let us consider these two verses: *Galu innama anta min al-musah-Harin, ma anta illa basharun mithluna* (26:153-154): *They said: "Thou art only one of those bewitched! Thou art no more than a mortal like us"* As can be seen in this case, there is no conjunctive particle linking the two verses together. Whereas the conjunction clearly connects the parallel verses that recur once again in the same chapter (26:185-186) *Galu innama anta*

mina al-musah-Harin wama anta illa basharun mithluna: They said: Thou art only one of those bewitched! "Thou art no more than a mortal like us" Ali (1970) and Arberry (1980) have rendered these verses the same, translating *Musah-Harin* as bewitched in both instances, as if the connective *waw* has no impact on the meaning in the second instance. However, the word *Musah-Harin* primarily means those who are bewitched, or those who breathe, eat, and drink. These two meanings are the most recognized ones among Muslim scholars. To distinguish between the two senses, the context should help make the difference between these verses clear because of the presence of the connective particle *waw*.

In the first instance, people are speaking to prophet Salih and there is no *waw* linking the two verses together. The omission of *wa* suggests that the two ideas implied by the two verses are of equal weight in the sense that prophet Salih is nothing more than a mortal who breathes, eats, and drinks just like his people. Put differently, the verse *Thou art nothing more than a mortal like us* is an emphatic explanation of the preceding verse where *musah-Harin* is supposed to mean 'those who breathe, eat, and drink, which points to the fact that Salih's people see nothing distinct in him to believe he is Messenger from God. He is actually an ordinary man who, like his people, has lungs, eats and drinks. In the second instance, people are speaking to Prophet Shu'ayb, and the two verses are set off by the connective particle *waw*. This indicates that the two verses are not equally significant. That is, the verse after the connective *waw* suggests that *musah-Harin* refers to those who are bewitched, not those who breathe, eat, and drink. This is not to say that *Shu'ayb's* people deny that their prophet is a mortal, who breathes, eats, and drinks, but that the presence of the connective device that separates the two verses implies that the prophet is different from the ordinary people only in being bewitched. The explicit *waw* in the second instance implies that what follows this connection seems to be in contrast with what precedes it. What accounts for this understanding is the fact that Prophets Salih and Su'ayb appeared in different times. *Shu'ayb* appeared in Madaa'in about the same time as Prophet Moses. It is during this time that witchcraft became a widespread phenomenon in Egypt in the time of Pharos, whereas Prophet *Salih* was one of the prophets of the early Arabia, where witchcraft was uncommon. Thus, this shows that the miracle of the Qur'an was not only in the concise use of language, but also in its historical accuracy. The key to all these connotations is the explicitly stated *waw*.

The assigning of one meaning to *musa-Harin* in both cases by Ali and Arberry is an indication that they are blind to the subtle differences that the connective device *wa* could make in these contexts; devices are not used arbitrary; they serve specific purposes. In a similar vein, Pickthall (1980) has failed to see the point that *waw* could make when added to his translated text, albeit not explicit in the original text. To illustrate this, let us consider this verse concerning disbelievers: *wasiqa al-lathina kafarou ila jahannama zumara hatta itha ja'uha futihat abwabuha waqala lahum khazanatuha* (Zummer:71): "And those who disbelieve are driven unto hell in troops till, when they reach it and the gates thereof are opened, and the warders thereof say unto them". Obviously, there is no *waw* in the verse separating *ja'uha* and *futihat*. Put differently, there is no pause between coming to hell and entering it. Yet Pickthall uses 'and' assuming that *waw* is implicit in the Arabic text and its

addition makes no difference in meaning. It is true that this particle is insignificant when it begins a sentence in Arabic and hence has no correspondent in English, but when it comes to Qur'anic texts, one has to ponder them with keen, watchful eyes. The omission of *waw* is not only to create conciseness in language and thus achieves brevity and eloquent discourse. Rather, it seems to suggest that the gates of Hell will be opened at the arrival of the disbelievers, as if waiting for them in ambush to snatch them and hasten on their chastisement. This meaning would be clear when linking this verse to this verse *yawma yuda'uana ila annar da'a* (Tur: 13).

Pickthall renders it as follows

"The day when they are thrust with (a disdainful) thrust, into the fire of Hell. This shows that if context is not helpful in clarifying the subtle meaning, one has to seek it elsewhere in the Qur'an since Qur'anic verses tend to highlight each other. To elucidate this point further, let us consider this verse in the same chapter: *wasiqa allathina ittaqau rabbahum ila aljannati zumara hatta itha ja'uaha wafutihat abwabuha waqala lahum khazanatuha* (Zummar:73). Again, Pickthall renders this as follows: "And those who keep their duty to their Lord are driven unto the Garden in troops till, when they reach it, and the gates thereof are opened, and the warders thereof say unto them".

It is obvious that there is a pause, represented by *waw*, between coming to heaven and entering it. According to Ibn Atiyya cited in al-Ansari (1987), this pause is to give a choice of which gate to enter through. He also maintains that *waw* in this instance is used as opposed to the first instance because heaven has eight gates and Arabs traditionally used this particle when the number conjoined is over seven. Whereas the hell has only seven gates and thus *waw* was missing when the discourse concerned disbelievers. The image of the believers being led gently to Paradise requires that the gates thereof are already opened as a way of honoring them as opposed to the humiliating manner in which disbelievers will be led to the Fire of Hell. This difference in the way disbelievers and believers will be treated on the day of resurrection is signaled by the omission of *waw* in the first instance and its presence in the second. This meaning would be clear when this verse is linked with *jannatu adnen mufattahatun lahum alabwab* (sad: 50), "Paradise (everlasting Gardens) whose doors will be open for them. That means certain ambiguity in a verse can be resolved by relating with other verses.

What is more, although the verb *seeqa* (to be driven) is used with both believers and disbelievers in these parallel verses, the context should lead the translator to think that believers will be escorted rather than driven to heaven. One can derive these connotations because of the presence of *waw*. The failure of some translators to see through the verse-loaded connotations, one would speculate, would be the reliance of the translator only on a limited number of Arabic sources, which might be superficial in the rendering of the Qur'anic verses. That is, they only give simple explanations without illuminating the nuances of the language. For example, Al-Tabrasi (1986) failed to make any distinction between the aforementioned parallel verses. As an alternative, one would recommend the most renowned and authoritative exegeses of the Qur'an by the most outstanding Muslim scholar Ibn Kathir, who almost commented

on every single verse of the entire Qur'an in relation to their historical contexts.

The Diacritical Impact of "waw" on meaning

At another level, this rhetorical device as a coordinating conjunction may indicate a sequence of actions, and provide somehow a close connection between elements of the sentence just like the connective *fa*, usually meaning English "and", "then", and "so". Yet the use of *waw* as a rhetorical device is not only essential to enhancing the communicative goal and rhetoric, but always provides evidence for accurate and intended meaning. This device may recur several times within the same verse and conjoin several elements coupled with more than one principle or antecedent. Figuring the association of elements to their corresponding principles or antecedents in a verse is a necessary step prior to the rendering of that verse into the target language. Such association may entail the translator here to be conversant in the target language grammar, the functions of Arabic diacritic marks in particular. To illustrate this, let us consider this verse, *ya ayyuha allathina aamanu itha qumtum ila as-Salati faghsilu wujahakum wa aydiyakum ila almarafiq wamsahu biru'usikum wa arjulakum ila al ka'bayn* (al maa'ida 6). Arberry has rendered this verse as follows: "O believers, when you stand up to pray, wash your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads, and your feet up to the ankles". This verse shows that a person who stands up to pray must perform the ritual ablution before prayers: some organs require washing, others wiping. Seemingly, there appears to be no problem with rendering the Arabic *waw* into English 'and'; however, a closer look into Arberry's translation shows that wiping "feet" *Arjul* is immediately coupled with "heads" *ru'us*, and this is not the intended meaning.

Perhaps, Arberry has failed to notice that the three organs *faces*, *hands*, and *feet* have one grammatical case: they are all in the subjunctive mood, with *fatha* appearing above the ending letters of these words. The Arabic diacritic *fatha* is a small mark sounding like English 'a' always placed above the ending letter of a word when it is in the accusative position. Since *faces*, *hands*, and *feet* share the same grammatical position, they must be coupled with one principle or antecedent, namely the verb "wash". In other words, these organs require washing. The organ that is not in the accusative position in the verse is *heads*, simply because it is prefixed with a preposition *bi*. As a rule, a word that is prefixed with a preposition in Arabic is usually marked with *kasra* appearing below the ending letter of it. The Arabic diacritic *kasra* is a small mark that sounds like English 'i'. Since *arjul* "feet" immediately follows *ru'us* "heads" in the sequence and is prefixed with *waw*, one might presuppose that *arjul* too should be marked with *kasra* because it is coupled with a noun whose ending letter is marked with *kasra*. But a more scrutinized look at the source text reveals that this is not the case; the noun *arjul* is marked with *fatha* rather than *kasra* above its ending letter, which points to the fact that it is coupled with the other two nouns that require washing rather wiping. Arberry's rendering of this verse shows that the word *feet* is coupled with *heads*, which is inaccurate because the coupling of these two words with the coordinating conjunction implies that these necessarily entail wiping. To disambiguate this misunderstanding, he only needed to insert the verb *wash* right before the noun *feet* prefixed with *waw*. Thus the accurate

translation reads "O believers, when you stand up to pray wash your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads, and wash your feet up to the ankles". This kind of grammatical analysis helps the translator to recover from a scrutiny of the text any ellipted element that is essential for the complete rendering of the message. This again asserts the importance of the grammatical analysis in recovering the ellipted word of the structure that is omitted but is recoverable from a scrutiny of the context. Without the interposition of *wash* just before *feet*, the translation remains inaccurate because the reader will assume that the coordinating conjunction *waw* occurring before *feet* immediately couples *feet* with *heads*, which means that both organs require wiping. The reason the noun *arjul* is not immediately coupled with *faces* and *hands* is that it comes fourth in the sequence the ritual ablution is performed according to the canonical laws of Islam.

Confusion over the two connectives "waw" and "fa"

Although the particle *waw* functions syntactically in a similar way to the connective *fa* when used as a conjunction, it can be confused with the connective *fa*, which serves other functions in different contexts. Let us consider this verse: *summon bukmun umyun fahum la yarji'un* (Cow, 18). Pickthal translates this verse into English as "deaf, dumb and blind, and they return not". It is obvious that *fa*, which is prefixed to the pronoun *hum* (they) in the source text, is rendered as *waw* 'and' in the target text. This actually distorts the intended message because *fa* here is a causative particle, not a conjunction in the sense that what occurs before the particle is a cause in the achievement of what comes after it. That is the states of deaf, dumb and blind is what makes them unable to return to the worldly life. The rendering of 'and', meaning *waw*, as *fa*, does not convey that message. Arberry's misunderstanding of *waw* recurs in other Qur'anic contexts. Let us consider this verse: *Ulaa'ika al-Lathina ishtarau al-d-Dalalata bil-huda fama rabihat tijaaratuhum wama kanuu muhtadin: "Those are they that brought error at the price of guidance, and their commerce has not profited them"*. Again, his treatment of *fa* as *waw* in this context distorts the meaning since *fa* functions as a causative particle in the sense that their commerce was profitless because they have purchased error for guidance. It follows that the translator has failed to see that the Arabic *waw*, meaning 'in addition', does not convey the causative sense that *fa* holds right in this context, despite the fact that they function alike in some respects. Any English connector indicating the sense of causativeness may be a good equivalent for the Arabic causative *fa*. So an accurate translation of the verse may read: "Those are they that brought error at the price of guidance, so their commerce has not profited them".

Strategies for a better rendering of the Qur'an

As a rule, a translator must have an excellent command of the two languages he is working with to render the translation as accurate as possible. When it comes to the translation of the Qur'an, the translator needs to put extra effort in the rendering of the Qur'an because of the unique grammatical and linguistic properties that make the Qur'an inimitable and even moving to most eloquent Arabs. As discursive tools, Qur'anic connectives are capable of revealing many shades of meaning if closely read in their theologian, cultural, and historical contexts. This means that a Qur'anic translator should put the verse in

question into its historical context and frame it with reference to other parallel verses on the same topic in the same chapter or elsewhere in the Qu'an. This act of relating one verse with another may help disambiguate senses that, for example, a given 'connective' device may hold. In a similar vein, the translator has to get engaged in exegesis to render the complete message of the Qur'anic text. He may want to recourse to the most renowned and authoritative exegeses of the Qur'an to grasp the implications that implicit or explicit linguistic devices may have in identical verses. One would recommend, for example, At-Tabari and Ibn Kathir whose commentaries on almost every single verse of the entire Qur'an are linked with history. Such commentaries involve illustrations of how linguistic devices are capable of multiple connotations in their respective contexts. Tracing down such commentaries dispersed in Ibn Kathir's several volumes might seem an onerous task for the translator given that parallel verses on the same subject do not often occur in one area or chapter, and this actually exerts a high demand on the translator to study other relevant verses dispersed throughout the Qur'an. Without reading commentaries on the other relevant verses, one would have an incomplete understanding. The recourse to such commentaries may ensure better understanding of the subtle differences between relevant parallel verses and hence more accurate rendition of the Qur'an. To sum up: An accurate rendering of Qur'anic connectives as rhetorical grammatical and linguistic devices require the translator to be quite familiar with the nuances of Arabic, exegeses of the Qur'an and the circumstances surrounding its revelations.

This kind of knowledge helps put parallel verses into their historical, cultural, and theologian contexts, which will in turn illuminate the linguistic differences that might otherwise remain invisible. It is also important that the translator be aware of the fact that the accurate rendering of the particle actually alludes to unspoken but clearly implied ideas that only those absorbed with the nuances of Arabic phraseology can derive.

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