Translation of Euphemistic Intimate Expressions in the Holy Quran

ترجمة التعابير الحميمة الملطفة لغويا في القران

Raed A. Albanon

University of Kufa

Faculty of Education

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رائد عبد الحسن البعنون

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Abstract

The study investigates the accuracy and techniques of translating euphemistic sex-related expressions in the Holy Quran by two culturally and linguistically (in terms of native language) distant translators; Yusuf Ali and John Arberry. Using the qualitative method and in light of al-Mizan exegesis, a purposive sampling of euphemized verses are analyzed to assess the translation of euphemisms. Though, with less equivalence and rhetoric, it is indicated that the euphemistic features of the source text were preserved more in Ali's translations than Arberry's. This could be attributed to Ali's Quran-oriented culture and knowledge of Arabic exegeses.

Keywords: *Ali, Arberry, Euphemism, Quran, Translation,*

خلاصة:

تهدف الدراسة الى الوقوف على الستراتيجيات المستخدمة وتقييم الدقة في ترجمة التعابير الحميمة الملطفة لغويا في ايات مختارة من القران على اساس الاختيار القصدي للعينات. وذلك من خلال تفحص ترجمتين وهما ترجمة "جون اربري" و"يوسف علي" باعتبارهما من ثقافتين ولغتي ام مختلفتين. توصل الباحث الى ان "يوسف علي" قد حافظ في ترجمته، الى حد ما، على معنى تلك التعابير في النص الاصلي اكثر من نظيره "اربري". قد يعزى ذلك الى ثقافة الاول ومعرفته باللغة العربية التي تتيح له اطلاع اوسع على التفاسير القرانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التلطيف اللغوي، اربري ، علي، القران، ترجمة

1. Introduction

The translation of the Holy Quran is one of the hardest tasks encountered by translators (Allaithy, 2020). One factor that makes translating the Quran a very hard task is its rhetorical and literary style. According to Arberry (1998), that style is "neither prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both," (p: x). Its rhetorical elements are in line with the cultural uniqueness of the Arabia and its culture-bound expressions. Among these cultural specific and linguistically exclusive utterances are euphemistic expressions. Euphemism is a recurrent linguistic phenomenon in both Ancient and Modern Arabic. It is considered a sign of rhetoric and eloquence; therefore, the Quran is full of euphemistic expressions. In general, euphemism is utilized in the Holy Quran in such topics as, slavery, death, sex, divorce, fornication, etc.

Euphemism is a universal feature of polite societies. The Holy Quran being a universal scripture uses euphemistic expressions to suit all humans with their different ethnic and linguistic varieties. Therefore, it is necessary to look into euphemism in the Quran and examine some of the most appropriate mechanisms to render such expressions into English being a global language.

1. 1 Data and Methodology

Euphemistic verses of intimacy and their translations were selected based on the purposive sampling technique. Two translators were chosen; one is from a Western culture, Arthur J. Arberry (2003), and the other is from an Eastern culture, Yusuf Ali (2001). They are both popular translators of the Holy Quran. The researcher analyzes the two translations of euphemistic verses about different topics related to intimacy expressions and some of its derivations. It is *hypothesized* that the difference in cultures will result in different translations, or in the least, when a translator is from a culture other than Arabic, they will come up with less rhetorically equivalent renderings of euphemistic Quran verses.

The translations of the selected verses are assessed in an analytical-descriptive method. The model proposed by Olimat (2018) is adopted throughout the analysis of the verses under study. The following conceptual framework illustrates that model.

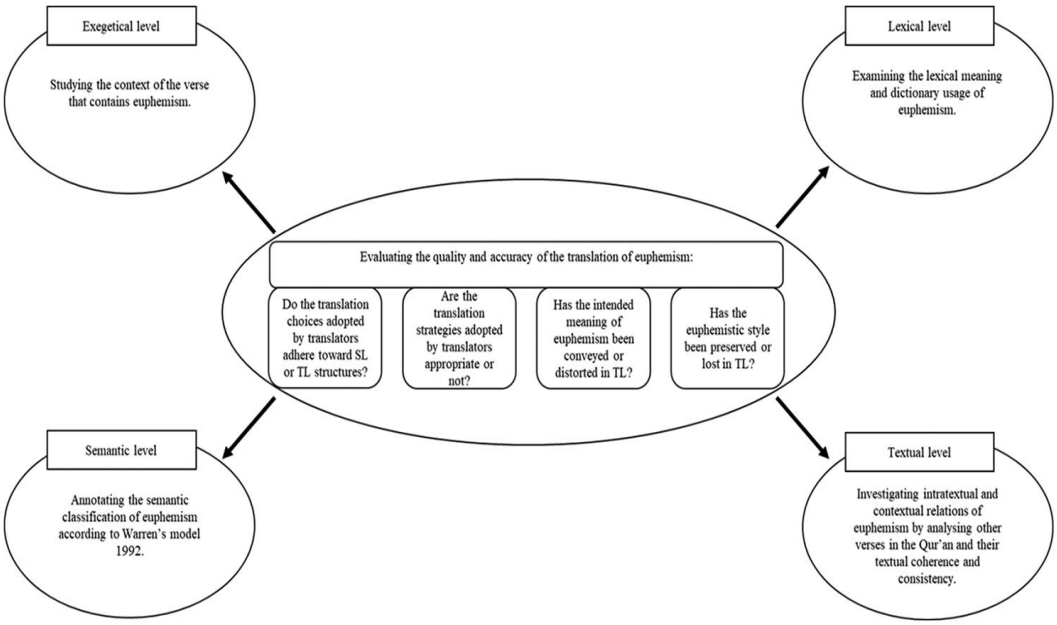

Figure (1): Olimat's model for translating euphemistic Quranic expressions

The inevitable reference to exegeses in this study is to enable the researcher to analyze the translations in question with relevance to the (historical) context of the verse revelation. The exegesis of al-Mizan by al-Tabatabai (1982) is adopted in in this study. Also, reliable dictionaries and rhetorical books are utilized and referred to in evaluating the equivalence and semantic loss in the translations.

1. 2 Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1- What are the challenges that translators encounter in terms of translating sex-related euphemism?

2- What are the techniques used by the translators under study to overcome such challenges?

3- Are there any differences in rendering sex-related euphemisms between the Arabic and English translators?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Euphemism in Arabic and English

In general the notion of euphemism has intensively been looked into; therefore, literature on the topic is abundantly available. However, translating

euphemism in the Holy Quran is not quite available. According to the literature in hand, investigation of euphemism has only been conducted over the past ten years, (Ghaeb, 2016). In the following studies, the source text (ST) is Arabic and the target text (TT) is English.

Al-Husseini (2017) investigated how euphemism works in Arabic and English. He highlighted that there is a certain degree of similarity in euphemistic strategies in the two languages since euphemistic expressions are replacements of taboo words. Yet, these replacements differ from Arabic to English as a consequence of cultural differences.

Al-Qadi (2009) conducted a sociolinguistic oriented comparison of euphemisms in Modern Standard Arabic and English. Notwithstanding, the study is not completely related to euphemism in the Quran, yet it generally sheds light on and draws attention to the key insights of euphemisms in Arabic and English. The two conclusions of the study are:

1- Arabic and English utilize three basic rhetorical devices to perform euphemistic expression; these are: synecdoche, metonymy, and circumlocution.

2- Differences between Arabic and English in terms of euphemism are either qualitative or quantitative. Quantitatively English euphemisms are superior to that of Arabic. English euphemistic expressions exceed in number over Arabic. Qualitatively, Arabic has the upper hand in the degree of politeness in euphemisms. This is due to the fact that Arabic is covert while English is overt in structure.

2.2 Euphemism and Translation (in the Holy Quran)

Shehab et al., (2014) looked into the significance of (social) context in shaping the proper strategy of translating euphemistic expressions. The researchers concluded that the social context disparity between the source and target language could govern rendering a euphemistic source expression by a non-euphemistic expression.

Mohammed (2007) assessed the translational errors of Zaidan and Pickthall; two Quran translators in four Quranic euphemisms in English translations. Because of their significance in the Holy Quran, the researcher evaluates preciseness of translating euphemistic expressions. He observed that the translators tended to preserve the meaning with prioritizing the image of euphemism. Consequently, he concludes

that a translation that compromises any of these two features over the other cannot reflect the style of the Holy Quran, which is a vital component in comprehending the Quran.

Al- Hamad & Salman (2013), investigated euphemism in the translations of Ali, Khan, Hilali, Arberry and Pickthal in 23 samples of euphemistic references in miscellaneous surahs of the Holy Quran. The researchers concluded that euphemism, as a common phenomenon in the Quran, is a problematic process for translators for cultural-specific and linguistic reasons.

Other researchers analyzed specific surahs from the Holy Quran. For instance, Abdel Haleem (2011) examined Quranic euphemisms in terms of marital expressions occurring in al-Baqarah surah. His study was motivated after noticing the misinterpretations of women being addressed in the Quran. He identified that such misinterpretation is a result of euphemistic expressions being taken out of context both culturally and linguistically, and the failure to properly consider the style of the Quran.

Another study on al-Baqarah surah is by Ghaeb (2016) in which he surveyed euphemisms, selecting three translations based on differences of the translators' background. He concluded that the translators used different techniques to render euphemistic expressions. These techniques are: literal translation, indirect translation, and a mixture of both. They also concluded that translators, for the most part, sacrifice euphemism for the sake of conveying direct meanings. To solve such problem, they suggested two strategies to fill in these translation gaps. These strategies are: *Linguistic approximation* and *cultural approximation* where translators render euphemistic meanings of the source text in the closest way possible in the target text.

The current research narrows down the topic to the assessment of translating sex-related euphemistic expressions in the Holy Quran in two translations by two translators with two distant orientations of culture; namely Arberry and Yusuf Ali.

3. Euphemism and Other Related Terms

3. 1 Euphemism: Definitions, Devices and Types (English View)

According to Hudson (2000, p. 261) euphemism is extending regular words and expressions of unkind or embarrassing notions.

Hence, harsh words or expressions are indirectly communicated to moderate their unpleasant impression. Such softened phrases or words are termed "euphemism.". In English, for instance, the euphemistic term for *die* is *pass away* or in Ebonics terms *pass over*.

Allan and Burridge (2006:17) list thirteen tools or devices adopted for realizing euphemism such as idiom, metaphor, circumlocution, acronym and abbreviation, litotes, hyperbole, general for specific, denial, technical jargon, euphemistic dysphemism, synecdoche, metonymy, and associative engineering (using opposites).

In his dictionary, Rawson (1998, p. 492) divides euphemisms into two main types, positive and negative. Positive euphemisms are used to express solidarity and good relation as a means of being polite to the addressee or the referent. One of the most common examples particularly in American English is the expression *African American* for the derogatory *black* or even the worse one *nigger*. Negative euphemisms on the other hand are expressions that speakers use to avoid the loss of face, as in *aurally–challenged* people instead of *deaf*.

In another classification by Rawson in the introduction of his dictionary he labels *conscious* and *unconscious* euphemism. Conscious euphemism is when speakers are aware of the process of using kind words instead of derogatory ones such as the word *sanitation men* instead of *garbage men* (Rawson, 1998, p. 2).

Unconscious euphemism is using kind expressions without knowing the euphemistic etymology and the origin of the word such as *cemetery* for *graveyard*. Cemetery, originally from Greek, means "the sleeping place." (Rawson, 1998, p. 3).

3.2 Dysphemism

It is the exact opposite of euphemism. It is sometimes referred to as *malphemsim* and *cacophemsim*. A definition of dysphemism by Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 234) is "a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance." They establish that dysphemism users tend to speak about individuals or ideas that annoy or irritate them in such a way to criticize, degrade, disparage, or humiliate them. An example from English is the word *nigger* to address African American people.

3.3 Taboo

Taboo words are often intertwined with euphemism. Taboo is "the prohibition of

an action or the use of an object based on ritualistic distinctions of them either as being sacred and consecrated or as being dangerous, unclean, and accursed". (Encyclopedia Britannica: 2009).

Speakers try not to use taboo expressions which is mainly why euphemistic expressions are used. Hence, euphemism has been an interesting topic for translators and researchers. Taboos are not merely associated to language; but to customs and behaviors as well. However, linguistic taboos are more of interest of research to linguists and translators.

4. Euphemism in Arabic

According to al-Rajihi (2018), Arabic speakers often use euphemistic expressions in two situations:

1- Individual situation: In this case, speakers euphemize in specific situations. This case is not seen in ordinary speakers; it is only practiced by witty, quick, and intelligent people. Ancient Arabic scholars and linguists referred to that phenomenon and tried to look into it under what they entitled (evading lying through pun), citing what the Prophet (PBUH) said: (Implicature (pun) is a [justified] exchange for lying) (al-Albani, 1997).

Also, it is narrated that Caliph Mamoon was holding toothpicks in his hand when Hassan bin Sahl asked, "What are these?" "Beautifiers," he replied, instead of toothpicks (al-Thaalibi, 2000, p. 71).

2- Societal Situation: This refers to the linguistic society agreement or the society in general. Language as a social phenomenon subjugate individuals to its rules. In psychological and emotional motives or rhetorical rules such as politeness, intimidation, optimism, pessimism, and other situations, speakers resort to euphemism and pun using polite and courteous utterances (al-Thaalibi, 1972).

In Rawson's (1998) terms, a modern example of positive euphemism from Arabic is the word *مُعين* in lieu of *فرّاش*. A negative euphemistic example is *ذوي الدخل محدود* for *الفقراء*.

5. Euphemism in the Holy Quran

The Holy Quran is the unexampled miracle of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). It is a rhetorical as well as logical and scientific challenge to human beings. It is no surprise then that euphemism, a rhetoric and polite device, is used widely in the Quran.

A deverbal of the term euphemism occurs in the Holy Quran in verse 19 of al-Kahf (Cave) surah.

"**لِيَأْتِكُم بِرِزْقٍ مِّنْهُ وَلْيَتَلَطَّفْ** "

"***Satisfy your hunger therewith; and let him behave with care and courtesy*" *18: 19*** (Ali, 2001)

Yet, it appears as a concept in another verse:

"**وهدوا إلى الطيب من القول**"

"***For thy have been guided (in this life) to the purest of speeches*"** (22: 24). (**A**li: 2001)

Although not always literally, it is clear that euphemism, its derivatives or roots are referred to in the Holy Quran in multiple places.

6. Analysis

6.1 Verses of Sexual Intercourse

The Holy Quran is a Book of Constitution. It comprises, among others, such notions as sexual relationship. It used euphemistic expressions when it refers sexual intercourse or even fornication and adultery.

أُحِلَّ لَكُمْ لَيْلَةَ الصِّيَامِ الرَّفَثُ إِلَىٰ نِسَائِكُمْ ۚ هُنَّ لِبَاسٌ لَّكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لَّهُنَّ" ٢:١٨٧

"***Permitted to you on the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives. They are your garments and ye are their garments*" *2: 187*** *(Ali, 2001)*

"***Permitted to you, upon the night of the Fast, is to go in to your wives; -- they are a vestment for you, and you are a vestment for them*" *2:187*** *(Arberry, 2003)*

According to al-Tabatabai (1982), the word "rafath" is a euphemistic word for *sexual intercourse*. The verse legislates permission for fasting husbands and wives to have intercourse on fasting nights after it had been forbidden in the beginning of enacting the fasting obligation. Also, the second segment of the verse is about the warm relationship between married couples describing it as "garment' or "vestment" in a simile expression since marriage is immune and protection against adultery as garment is used as a cover and precaution against weather inconvenience. Both of the selected translators, Ali and Arberry, translate the second part literally as (garment and vestment), respectively even when the Quranic expression is a metaphor. Al-Tabatabai (1982) establishes that it is a complementary euphemistic expression for the word "*rafath*", which means *sexual intercourse*.

The first euphemistic segment is translated with euphemistic expressions as well by using the verbs "approach to" by Ali and "go in to" by Arberry. However, Ali's choice is more euphemistic, literary and rhetorical. The level of literariness and eloquence of Arberry's translation is not in line with that of the source text. The "go in to" choice does not by any means reflect the formality of the expression "*rafath*."

In another verse of intercourse,

"وَإِن كُنتُم مَّرْضَىٰ أَوْ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ أَوْ جَاءَ أَحَدٌ مِّنكُم مِّنَ الْغَائِطِ أَوْ لَامَسْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَلَمْ تَجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا صَعِيدًا طَيِّبًا " ٤:٤٣

"If ye are ill, or on a journey, or one of you cometh from offices of nature, or ye have been in contact with women, and ye find no water, then take for yourselves clean sand or earth"4:43(Ali, 2001)

"But if you are sick, or on a journey, or if any of you comes from the privy, or you have touched women, and you can find no water, then have recourse to wholesome dust" 4:43 (Arberry, 2003)

The Arabic verb *lamasa* literally means "to touch". However, according to al-Tabatabaei (1982) the Holy Quran used it euphemistically to mean "to have sexual intercourse with". Hence, Ali's translation, "in contact with women", is noticed to be more consistent and is more equivalent to the Arabic expression than Arberry's. Although the verb *touch* in English could have a connotation of sex-driven surface contact, usually illegally, no dictionary lists *sexual intercourse* as one of its meanings.

6.2 Verses of Fornication

Although fornication is forbidden and disapproved, it is expressed in a very polite and indirect manner in the Holy Quran.

"يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِذَا جَاءَكَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتُ يُبَايِعْنَكَ عَلَىٰ أَن لَّا يُشْرِكْنَ بِاللَّهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَسْرِقْنَ وَلَا يَزْنِينَ وَلَا يَقْتُلْنَ أَوْلَادَهُنَّ وَلَا يَأْتِينَ بِبُهْتَانٍ يَفْتَرِينَهُ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِنَّ وَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ وَلَا يَعْصِينَكَ فِي مَعْرُوفٍ ۙ فَبَايِعْهُنَّ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُنَّ اللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ" ٦٠:١٢

"O Prophet! When believing women come to thee to take the oath of fealty to thee, that they will not associate in worship any other thing whatever with Allah, that they will not steal, that they will not commit adultery (or fornication), that they will not kill their children, that they will not utter slander, intentionally forging falsehood, and that they will not disobey thee in any just matter,- then do thou receive their fealty, and pray to Allah for the forgiveness (of their sins):

***for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful*" 12:60 (Ali: 2001)**

***O Prophet, when believing women come to thee, swearing fealty to thee upon the terms that they will not associate with God anything, and will not steal, neither commit adultery, nor slay their children, nor bring a calumny they forge between their hands and their feet, nor disobey thee in aught honourable, ask God's forgiveness for them; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate*" 12:60 (Arberry, 2003)**

In this verse, the Holy Quran instructs the Prophet to accept women's allegiance under given conditions among which is abstention from adultery. The Holy Quran uses a highly euphemistic and indirect expression to denote illegal sexual intercourse. The linguistic context indicates that the exact term is *adultery* rather than *fornication*; i,e., the women in question are married as indicated by the previous segment "not to slay their children". Hence, the euphemistic expression "bring calumny" or "utter slander" should refer to the resulting child of that fornication as indicated by al-Mizan exegesis. Both translators failed to fully convey the image with its splendid rhetoricity. The literal translation of the expression is "not to come with falsehood between their hands and legs." In fact, the image here extends to refer to an illegitimate child that could result from adultery. Arberry, however, translates the idiomatic euphemism word by word; therefore, the English expression looks ambiguous. The word بهتان is a polysemic word that could mean *forgery* (of words, etc.) or a less common meaning, which is the choice meant in this verse according to al-*Mizan* exegesis. In Ali's translation, the translator opts for the first more common meaning, the fact that makes the verse sounds ambiguous in meaning. Moreover, the second segment in the context (between their hands and legs) enhances the second meaning. None of the translators could render the whole meaning and connotations of the euphemistic expression introduced by the Holy Quran. The Arabic idiom expresses the words *adultery* and *bastard* in one euphemistic expression.

In such cases, literal translation with footnotes is a more effective means for translating such expressions.

"وَاللَّاتِي يَأْتِينَ الْفَاحِشَةَ مِن نِّسَائِكُمْ" ٤:١٥

"***If any of your women are guilty of lewdness***" **4:15** (Ali, 2001)

***"Such of your women as commit indecency"* 4:15** (Arberry, 2003)

In the above instance of translation, Ali's translation is observed to be less euphemistic than Arberry's. The degree of politeness in *indecency* is higher than it is in *lewdness*. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines "lewdness" as "crude and offensive sex," while it describes "indecency" as "not conforming with generally accepted standards of behavior and propriety, especially in relation to sexual matters." Hence, Ali's translation is closest in the degree of euphemism to the original Arabic word فاحشة (*fahisha)*.

6.3 Verses of Sodomy

The Holy Quran relates the story of Lot's people for several morals among which is sodomy; the male homosexual practice:

"أتأتون الذكران من العالمين" ٢٦:١٦٥

"Of all the creatures in the world, will ye approach males" ٢٦:١٦٥ (Ali, 2001)

"What, do you come to male beings" ٢٦:١٦٥ (Arberry, 2003)

The verb تأتون (*ta'toon*) means "to come" when it is used intransitively. However, in this verse, it is used transitively to imply the meaning of *to have sexual intercourse with* (al-Tabatabaei, 1982). Ali uses the verb "approach" to match the level of euphemism in the verse. Although "approach" could reflect sexual gesture or movement, no dictionary lists *sexual intercourse* as one of its meanings.

Arberry translates the verb in question into "come to" which is very distant in meaning from to *have sexual intercourse with*. The Holy Quran uses this euphemistic idiom while observing the fact that an Arab listener would understand what it means because idioms should stem from the culture itself. Therefore, Arberry's translation for this euphemistic idiom was less equivalent than Ali's.

Another similar Quranic context with the verb تأتون (*ta'toon*) is seen in another surah on the same story of Prophet Lot:

"أتأتون الفاحشة ماسبقكم بها احد من العالمين"(٧:٨٠)

"Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? 7: 80 (Ali, 2001)

'What, do you commit such indecency as never any being in all the world committed before you? 7: 80 (Arberry, 2003)

Both translators select the verb "to commit" as a translation for the underlined verb. Compared to the previous verse, the verb is translated differently since it collocates with a different object. This is related to Fillmore's (1968) Case Theory

where words carry different meanings in different cases or different collocations.

تأتون الفاحشة

Commit indecency

تأتون الرجال

Approach males

Hence, the meaning and consequently translation of a verb changes following the object. In the case above, it is not necessary to find a single translation for the single verb *تأتون* "to come" because in translation, it is the meaning that matters rather than the form. Thus, a single verb could carry different meanings (polysemous verbs). Yet, it is sometimes possible to find a single equivalent translation for a single polysemous form. In the aforementioned instance, the verb *practise* could collocate with *indecency* and *sexual intercourse*.

7. Conclusion

Euphemism poses a real challenge for translators in general, and translators of the Holy Quran in particular. Euphemisms are basically idiomatic culture-bound expressions intended to lessen the harshness of impression these words or expressions leave. Such expression combines the difficulty of translation of idioms and culture-bound terms.

The two selected translators have ranged in their accuracy of equivalently rendering the selected sex-related verses. In general, Ali's translations are closer, yet not parallel to the original expressions. This is obviously due to his Quran-oriented cultural background and better knowledge of Arabic. According to the researcher's perspective, the literal translation in general obscures the elevated euphemistic expressions of the Holy Quran. In fact, the Quranic verses in general with its prosodic and rhetoric become greyer when translated literally. In some cases, especially in religious texts, literal translation is only recommended when enhanced by footnotes or parentheses to render more accurate euphemistic expressions. Therefore, Ali sometimes has used parentheses as a replacement for a euphemistic idiom, whereas Arberry has used them as a complementary (optional) explanation of euphemistic idiom. In general, the translators under study have used literal, parenthesized, euphemistic, and non-euphemistic translation to translate euphemisms in the Holy Quran.

The source text and target text cross-cultural awareness and linguistic knowledge are essential requirements for

translators to render more equivalent translations. Such requirements can be found in the Quranic exegeses. Also, translators should be familiar with metaphor, metonymy, simile, and other rhetorical devices in both the target and source languages. Such devices are inevitable elements in forming euphemistic expressions.

Euphemism is an essential rhetorical device in the Holy Quran. The classical standard Arabic of the Holy Quran makes it hard even for Arabic translators to translate effectively. Hence, besides reliable exegeses, rhetorical books, knowledge of Arabic proverbs and idioms can give insight to translators of Quranic euphemisms.

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