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Artificial Intelligence and Religious Translation:
Prospects and Pitfalls

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ABSTRACT

The rapid Advances in digital and technological revolution has led to the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (hereafter AI) as an effective tool to disseminate knowledge at all levels, more specifically the religious. However, there are concerns about this tool as it can be challenging or promising in religious translation. Based on Reed's (2021) proposition that there is an interconnectedness between AI and religion, this paper contributes to the existing literature on these two domains. It aims to examine the differences between AI and human translation, focusing on the prospects and pitfalls of the former. To achieve this goal, five Hadiths from the Arabic version of Riyadh-us-Saliheen have been selected as the data of this paper. They have been already translated by Muhammad Amin and Abu Usamah Al-Arabi bin Razduq. The findings revealed that despite the promising performance of AI, there are still concerns related to translation ineligibility and infidelity.

الذكاء الاصطناعي والترجمة الدينية: الآفاق والمخاطر

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المستخلص:

لقد أدى التقدم السريع في الثورة الرقمية والتكنولوجية إلى ظهور الذكاء الاصطناعي (المشار إليه فيما بعد بالذكاء الاصطناعي) كأداة فعالة لنشر المعرفة على جميع المستويات، وبشكل أكثر تحديداً الدينية. ومع ذلك، هناك مخاوف بشأن هذه الأداة لأنها يمكن أن تكون صعبة أو واعدة في الترجمة الدينية. واستناداً إلى اقتراح ريد (2021) بوجود ترابط بين الذكاء الاصطناعي والدين، تساهم هذه الورقة في الأدبيات الموجودة في هذين المجالين. وتهدف إلى دراسة الاختلافات بين الذكاء الاصطناعي والترجمة البشرية، مع التركيز على آفاق ومخاطر الأول. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، تم اختيار خمسة أحاديث من النسخة العربية من رياض الصالحين كبيانات لهذه الورقة. وقد ترجمها بالفعل محمد أمين وأبو أسامة العربي بن رزوق. وكشفت النتائج أنه على الرغم من الأداء الواعد للذكاء الاصطناعي، لا تزال هناك مخاوف تتعلق بعدم أهلية الترجمة والكفر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكاء الاصطناعي، الإخلاص، الترجمة الدينية

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has led to vast changes in different domains, including translation studies. Translation, therefore, has taken the role of communication trigger with various nations as foreign knowledge became accessible to people with a multitude of horizons that could otherwise not have the chance. Moreover, translation has experienced a vital change, significantly caused by the development the AI-based translation tools. As a result, translation turned into a “healthy, booming, and extremely profitable sector of economy” Bonthron (as cited in Maier, 2014, p. 149). This new digitized situation necessitated the use of AI to cope with the acceleration of knowledge and information spread.

Simply defined, AI is a broad field of computer sciences that uses very complex systems to perform tasks which demand human intelligence (Reed, 2021). In translation, it involves translating a source text (henceforth ST) into a target text (henceforth TT) online. This exercise employs different approaches and criteria to perform its task accurately. It is created in order to “remove the language barriers that hinder scientific communication and international understanding” (Berner, 2005, p.5). As a result, this tool has been used by translators to have some help in their work to the extent that it has become “a true alternative and an integral part of the (computer-assisted) translation process for many translation companies, as well as a true performance enhancer for big projects” (Vargas, Vargas, Ramírez and Ramírez, 2011, p.50).

Combining AI and translation is deemed a fruitful practice because it has “profoundly expanded and diversified the spectrum of translatable content, reshaping the very notion of what constitutes a translatable object” (Sun, Liu & Moratto, 2025, p. 2). It is important to note that the research area of this paper is inspired by a translation of a religious text which did not make any sense to the researcher herself. It has a number of translation errors in terms of semantic accuracy of the final output. Taking this issue into account, this paper seeks to demonstrate that error analysis can reveal great differences between human and AI translations. Such comparisons reveal that they can be a valid and reliable means in determining how different error types affect the semantic content of the ST. This means AI’s quality in religious translation is controversial when compared to human output despite being a significant translation tool.

Accordingly, the present paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a difference in quality between human translation and AI translation?
2. Is the TT semantically accurate and faithful?

To gauge semantic accuracy in the selected religious texts, translation quality is assessed according to the following criteria:

1. Intelligibility which measures whether meaning is adequately rendered or not.
2. Fidelity, which measures whether the texts were honest to SL or not.

2. Conceptual Framework

This paper is of a qualitative nature with no statistical data. Rather, it relies on online translation of the selected data. Texts were randomly chosen to assess their quality. The reason behind choosing religious texts is the fact that religion has a central role in representing the cultural identity of peoples. Moreover, religion offers rules and advice regarding right and wrong, and teaches about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. The religious language, therefore, is laden with senses that demands the utmost attention from translators in order not to change its meaning. Consequently, such texts may subject to the target readers' interpretations which may differ from the original given the complexity of their language. This fact is emphasized by Larson (as cited in Gearon and Kuusisto, 2025, p. 191) who stresses that

[R]eligious aspects of a culture are usually the most difficult, both in analysis of the source vocabulary and in finding the best receptor language equivalence. The reason in that these words are intangible and many of the practices are so automatic that the speakers of the language are not as conscious of the various aspects of meaning involved.

Before going through presenting new terms, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the term 'AI'. The issue of definition is very significant as it determines the course of the research and constructs its foundations. AI is a confusing term with no commonly accepted definition (Nilsson, 2009). Thus, it has been employed by researchers

with various meanings. This issue has drawn attention of scholars from inside and outside the field as AI has become a global subject.

Historically speaking, the systematic study of intelligence started in psychology, and there has been a huge literature on this topic. Piaget sees intelligence as “the most highly developed form of mental adaptation” (Piaget, 1960). However, Gottfredson (1997, p.13) presented an authentic definition of intelligence which is widely accepted by scholars as, “the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly, and learn from experience.” As for the study of AI, it is possible to say that after the invention of the computer in the 1940s, people soon realized that its capability is not limited to numerical calculation, and that it can be used to carry out many intellectual tasks that are usually considered as demanding human intelligence. Computers were called “giant electronic brains” which are designed to perform complex tasks, such as planning, vision, reasoning, language processing, etc.

Many scholars have presented different definitions of AI. “AI is concerned with methods of achieving goals in situations in which the information available has a certain complex character. The methods that have to be used are related to the problem presented by the situation and are similar whether the problem solver is human, a Martian, or a computer program”

Many scholars have presented different definitions of AI. One of the basic definitions of AI is presented by (McCarthy, 1988, p. 297):

AI is concerned with methods of achieving goals in situations in which the information available has a certain complex character. The methods that have to be used are related to the problem presented by the situation and are similar whether the problem solver is human, a Martian, or a computer program.

It is also defined DeCanio (2016) as the system which is designed to make a computer function like a human mind. Wang, Liu and Dougherty (2018, p. 80) propose the following definition of AI:

1. A computer system which acts just like a human mind.
2. A computer system which is designed to solve problems the human mind was unable to solve before.

3. A computer system which has cognitive functions similar to that of the human.

As For Gill, R. and Singh, J., (2025, p. 407), AI is a branch of computer sciences which uses automated systems similar, in one way or another, to the human mind, despite the fact that a computer can never be identical with a human given the complexity of the latter's brain. This generalization of the term depends on the similarities and differences between the human mind and the computer mind.

In translation, AI can be broadly defined as the process of using a computer tool to transfer a text from one language into another. AI's product is a text which is expected to have a quality as high as a text translated by a human translator. Like translation done by humans, AI does not simply involve substituting words in one language for another, but the application of complex linguistic knowledge and a profound understanding of the context. Translation scholars, such as Hutchins (2001, p. 5), argues that "computer-based translation systems are not rivals to human translators, but they are aids to enable them to increase productivity in technical translation." As for Vargas et al. (2011, p. 14), they argue that it is a type of translation technology, "has been and is still seen by some professional translators as a threat to their status."

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

With the aim of assessing how AI performs a translation task, a manual method of assessment will be adopted, taking intelligibility (semantic accuracy) and fidelity as the two objective criteria for assessing MT quality. Despite the fact that the research is of a somehow subjective nature, this character "does not invalidate the objective part of the assessment" (House, 2001, p. 256).

Being an advocate of the fact that machines cannot translate like humans, the researcher in the present paper, will adopt the manual evaluation technique because "a computer has no real choice in what it will do next. Its next action is an unavoidable consequence of the machine language it is executing and the values of data presented to it...Without agency, information is meaningless. So a computer that is to handle language like a human must first be given agency." (Melby, 1995, p. 15). Accordingly, in this paper, the AI output will be assessed manually; from two different perspectives. The first one pertains to the

degree of faithfulness to the target text and target language norms, showing the aspects of fidelity. The second is concerned with the degree of faithfulness to the source text content, showing the aspects of accuracy.

To achieve this goal, Waddington's (2001) three-step model will be adopted. In this model, Waddington (2001, p.313) classifies errors into the following three categories:

1. Unintelligible rendition which has a bad effect on the comprehension of the SL text. Such rendition may include nonsense, omission, addition, loss of meaning etc.;
2. Unintelligible rendition which has a bad effect on the TL formulation. Such rendition includes spelling, syntactic errors, lexical errors, text, and style;
3. Unintelligible rendition which has a bad effect on the SL main function or secondary functions.

As the paper is of a qualitative nature. The data have been selected in order to know whether AI achieves intelligibility and fidelity. Five Hadiths taken from the Arabic version of Riyadh-us-Saliheen by Abu Zakariya An-Nawawi (d. 676 AH). They are translated into English by Muhammad Amin and Abu Usamah Al-Arabi bin Razduq (2012). Hadiths have been purposely selected for this paper due to the linguistic complexities of their Classical Arabic, their cultural and religious peculiarity, and their rhetorical and metaphorical load that make their translation from Arabic to English a real challenge. As for the AI tool, As for AI, Deeple; developed by AI as an intelligent application, is selected to provide the AI translation.

4. Data Analysis

In order to analyze the research data, the SL text and its AI output are presented in this section. Errors are spotted for each text separately. The researcher is supposed to be a sensitive observer who examines the translated texts as faithfully as possible.

Text 1:

من خاف أدلجَ ومن أدلجَ بلغ المنزلَ ألا إن سلعةَ اللهِ غاليةً ألا إن سلعةَ اللهِ الجنةُ

AI-Translation

Whoever feared, fled, and whoever fled reached home, but the reward of Allah is great, for the reward of Allah is Paradise.

Amin and Bin Razduq's (2012) Translation:

He who is afraid of the pillage of the enemy, sets out in the early part of the night; and he who sets out early, reaches his destination. Be on your guard that the commodity of Allah is precious. Verily the commodity of Allah is Jannah (H410).

This Hadith means that whoever fears Allah, should hasten to obey and worship Him. Rather, he should hasten to do so because he may die before doing the duties. In this text, AI does not recognize the meaning of Hadith and fails to capture the religious nuances. Therefore, the TL output lacks intelligibility and sense to the reader. By comparing Amin and Bin Razduq's (2012) Translation to AI's, it is possible to highlight the semantic errors in AI's translation that may affect the quality of the TT; leading to intelligibility and fidelity of the SL.

Text 2:

"نَضَرَ اللهُ عَبْدًا سَمِعَ مَقَالَتِي فَحَفَظَهَا وَوَعَاَهَا وَأَدَاَهَا، فَرَبَّ حَامِلٍ فَقَّهِ غَيْرَ فَقَّيْهِ، وَرَبَّ حَامِلٍ فَقَّهِ إِلَى مَنْ هُوَ أَفْقَهُ مِنْهُ."

AI-Translation:

May God bless the servant who heard my words, memorized them, understood them, and acted upon them. For there are those who possess knowledge but are not scholars, and there are those who possess knowledge but are less knowledgeable than others.

Amin and Bin Razduq's (2012) Translation:

May Allah cause to flourish a slave (of His) who hears my words and understands them, then he conveys them from me. There are those who have knowledge but no understanding, and there may be those who convey knowledge to those who may have more understanding of it than they do. (Vol. 1, Book 1, Hadith 236)

When comparing this professional translation to AI's, it is evident that AI deviates from human translation in many aspects, semantically and syntactically in a way that leaves the quality of translation very poor and erroneous; lacking both intelligibility in the TL and fidelity to the SL.

Text 3:

أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ (ص) رَأَى عَلَى عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ أَثَرَ صُفْرَةٍ فَقَالَ "مَا هَذَا؟"، قَالَ تَزَوَّجْتُ امْرَأَةً عَلَى وَزْنِ نَوَاةٍ مِنْ ذَهَبٍ. فَقَالَ "بَارَكَ اللَّهُ لَكَ أَوْلِمَ وَلَوْ بِشَاةٍ".

AI-Translated:

The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) saw a yellow mark on Abd al-Rahman and said, "What is this?" He replied, "I married a woman for the weight of a gold coin." He said, "May Allah bless you. Celebrate, even if it is with a sheep."

Amin and Bin Razduq's (2012) Translation:

The Messenger of Allah saw traces of yellow perfume on 'Abdur-Rahman and said: 'What is this?' He said: 'I married a woman for a Nawah (five Dirhams) of gold.' He said: 'May Allah bless you. Give a Walimah (wedding feast) even if it is with one sheep.'" (Vol. 4, Book 26, Hadith 3374)

When comparing the human translation with AI's translation, it is evident that AI does not recognize the meaning of Hadith and translate it literally. The semantic content is almost totally distorted and the quality of the TT is badly affected. AI fails in identifying the function behind this peculiar blend of words in this religious text, which have certain semantic purpose, both intelligibility and fidelity are not attained.

Evidently, there are a many problems in the MT output, when compared to the good quality translation by the human translator. This example of bad MT rendition is significant because it done without any consideration to meaning relations. One can confirm that MT mechanically translate by replacing an isolated word in the SL by its counterpart in the TL, without knowing what it is doing and without taking the context into consideration. Besides, MT does not recognize the fact that words have multiple meanings. Consequently, replacement of isolated words in the SL by their counterparts in the TL resulted in unacceptable renditions.

Text 4:

إِيَّاكُمْ وَالْذُّخُولَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ . فَقَالَ رَجُلٌ مِنَ الْأَنْصَارِ : يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ! أَفَرَأَيْتَ الْحَمُو ؟ قَالَ : الْحَمُو : الْمَوْتُ

AI - Translation:

Do not enter upon women. A man from the Ansar said, "O Messenger of Allah, what about the in-law?" He said, "The in-law is death."

Amin and Bin Razduq's (2012) Translation:

"Avoid going in where women are." A man said, "Messenger of God, tell me about the relatives of a woman's husband," to which he replied, "The relatives of a woman's husband are death." (Book 13, Hadith 23)

If we look also at the translation of AI, it is clear that it follows the literal method of translation that ruins the semantic load of the ST. Once more, human translation seems to be more adequate as it preserves meaning.

Text 5:

يَا أَنْجَشَةُ، رَوِّيكِ سَوْفًا بِالْقَوَارِيرِ

AI - Translation:

Hey, Anjasha, take it easy with the bottles.

Amin and Bin Razduq's (2012) Translation:

O Anjasha! Drive the camels slowly, as they are carrying glass vessels!" (Vol. 8, Book 73, Hadith 170)

In this Hadith, the Prophet (PBUH) metaphorically instructs the camel driver, Anjasha, to slow down because the camels were carrying women. The metaphor of fragile "glass vessels" reflects the Prophet's compassion and care for women. It shows his great teachings to treat women gently and protect them just like fragile objects. As far as translation is concerned, both renditions do not transfer meaning adequately. For Tisgam (2025), translation can be described as a decision-making process which implies a rational choice of strategies. However, this text demonstrates that the literal strategy is not rational.

5. Discussion

After collecting the required data for this research, the ideal human translations were compared with AI translations in order to assess their semantic accuracy and fidelity to the SL. Error analysis was applied by the researcher. Some errors are related to the theme of this research than others, so only required errors will be taken for analysis. The results of the error analysis show that, when compared to human translators, the errors of AI are misleading. AI was unable to detect ambiguity or nuances in which a word (or a sentence) have more than one meaning; for example, **أَوَّلِمَ**.

Despite being a necessary tool for both translation, AI cannot be adopted blindly as it may affects semantic accuracy or fidelity and cause

a translation errors. It has shown a clear deviation from the system of rules or norms that determines “what rightly appears to be linguistically equivalent may very frequently qualify as “translationally” nonequivalent.’ (Neubert & Shreve, 1992, p.5). It also affects the way in which the ST is understood and how it is conveyed to the TL.

On the other hand, the analysis has shown that AI lacks some knowledge about significant historical events which are inseparable from Islamic culture. This shortage has led to generating inappropriate translation which might not be understood by the target readership.

6. Conclusion

In this paper there is an important assertion that the religious language is laden with senses that demands the utmost attention from translators in order not to change its meaning. This is due to the fact that religion offers rules and advice regarding right and wrong, and teaches about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

Despite the significant role played by AI in translation, the researcher finds the following problems, listed by Berner (2003, p. 7), compatible with the main proposition of the present research:

- “1. No authentic AI system can produce good quality output without getting a human help either before or after translation processes.
2. AI doesn’t pay attention to cultural issues.
3. AI doesn’t feel recognize “ambiguity, syntactic irregularity, multiple word meanings and the influence of context, subtlety, irony and humor in addition to the ability to handle complex syntax, semantics and idiomatic expressions across languages.”

The findings of the present research confirm that although AI facilitate the work of human translator, translators must be careful of its limitations. It cannot be adopted to tackle specialized translations since it is unable select the correct semantic equivalence for a given context, not to mention the syntactic errors of its literal translation. Moreover, despite a small sample of translations is used in this research, it gives a clear idea about the quality of AI translation. They demonstrate that AI produced unintelligible and infidel outputs.

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