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Volume 37, Number 3, septembre 1992

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/001871ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/001871ar>

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Article abstract

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Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ali, S. S. (1992). Misrepresentation of Some Ellipted Structures in the Translation of the Qur'ān (Analytical Study). *Meta*, 37(3), 487–490. <https://doi.org/10.7202/001871ar>

MISREPRESENTATION OF SOME ELLIPTED STRUCTURES IN THE TRANSLATION OF THE QUR'ĀN

(Analytical Study)

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Résumé

L'auteur analyse les vers du Coran à structures elliptiques et leur traduction anglaise ; il montre que des connaissances étymologiques, lexicographiques et sémantiques ainsi que des compétences idiomatiques et grammaticales de la langue arabe sont essentielles pour arriver à une traduction un tant soit peu fidèle du livre sacré.

Qur'ānic texts are full of ellipted structures which are the natural outcome of rhetorical brevity. As in translating poetry, we encounter in the literary prose of the Qur'ān many verses where we are rather misled, as to what is the ellipted complement of a certain predicate, or fail to capture the ellipted object, or adjective of a particular verb or noun which are self-explanatory in Arabic but not so when translated, without compensation or clarification, into English.

The translation of the following verse will serve as an example:

*ʿasā rabbukum an yarhamahum wa'in ʿudtum
ʿudnā, wajaʿalnā jahannama lilkāfirīna
ḥašīrā. (The Children of Israel 8)*

Translated by Pickthall as:

It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you, but if you repeat (the crime), We shall repeat (the punishment) and We have appointed hell for the disbelievers. (Pickthall 1930: 175.)

The conditional phrase “*wa'in ʿudtum ʿudnā*” contains two ellipted prepositional phrases which have been interpreted by Pickthall as “if you repeat (the crime), We shall repeat (the punishment)”; while the ellipted phrases are meaningfully related to what precedes the conditional particle implied by *wa'in*, that is “it may be that your Lord will have mercy on you.” It follows that Pickthall's rendering of the ellipted phrases is contextually incorrect and that semantic conformity necessitates an entirely different interpretation of the verse, thus:

*Wa'in ʿudtum (ilā 'ittāʿati) ʿudnā
(ilā 'lʿawi)*

It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you, but if you revert to (obedience), We shall revert to (forgiveness). And We have appointed hell a dungeon for the disbelievers.

In the following verse from the “Sūrāh of the Troops,” the translator once again misses the implied ellipted noun phrase:

*Fa-aṣābahum sayyi' ātu mā kasabū
wa' l-ladhīna zalāmū min hā' ulā' i
sayyusūbuhum sayyi' ātū mā kasabū
wa mā hum bimūʿjīna. (The Troops: 51)*

But the evil that they earned smote them, and such of these as do wrong, the evils that they earn will smite them, they cannot escape. (Pickthall 1930: 302)

The last word *muʿjizīna* does not mean “escape.” It means “able to frustrate”; consequently, the English verb “frustrate” in this context requires an object which is implied in the Arabic word *muʿjizīna*. Thus, the ellipted object in this context is a noun phrase, *i.e.* our plans. Another translation of this verse that accurately renders the meaning of *muʿjizīna* and compensates in the English version for the ellipted noun phrase is:

Nay, the evil results of their deeds overtook them. And the wrong-doers of this (generation) the evil results of their deeds will soon overtake them (too). And they will never be able to frustrate (our plans). (A.Y. Ali 1975: 1252-1253)

Again in the “Sūrāh of the Pilgrimage,” another distortion of meaning is caused by omission of the ellipted reference:

*Alam tara anna 'l-Lāha saḥḥkhara lakum
māfi 'l' arḍi wa' lfulka tajrī fī 'l-baḥri
bi-'amrihi wa yumsiku 's-samā' a an taqaʿa
ʿalā 'l' arḍi illā bi-idhnihi inna 'l-Lāha
bi 'n-nāsi la-ra' ūfun raḥīm. (The Pilgrimage: 65)*

Hast thou not seen how Allah hath made all that is in the earth subservient un-to you? And the ship runneth upon the sea by His command, and He holdeth back the heaven from falling on the earth unless by His leave, Lo Allah is, for mankind full of pity, Merciful. (Pickthall 1930: 216)

To an English reader the meaning of the phrase “holdeth the sky from falling on the earth” suggests the falling of the sky itself and this phrase implies an ellipted qualified noun which is in this context “rain.” The reference is to days of drought brought about by God whose orders only can send the rain or hold it back in heaven *Imsāku 's-samā' i ʿani 'l-maṭari*. The phrase *illā bi-idhnihi*: “except by his leave,” suggests that it never rains if God wishes it not to. An alternative translation is:

Seest thou not that God has made subject to you all that is on the earth and the ships that sail through the sea by His command? He withholds the sky (rain) from falling on the earth, except by His leave: for God is Most kind and Most merciful to man. (A.Y. Ali 1975: 869)

Syntactic ellipsis occurs in certain structures which allow many interpretations in the same time. This fact can be illustrated in the translations of the following verse from the “Sūrāh of the Cow”:

*Inna 'l-Lāha lā-yastahī an yaḍriba
mathalan mā baʿūdatan famā fawqahā. (The Cow: 26)*

Allah disdainth not to coin the similitude even of a gnat. (Pickthall 1930: 5)

God disdains not to use the similitude of things lowest as well as highest. (A.Y. Ali 1975: 24)

There are four possible interpretations for the phrase *mathalan mā baʿūdatan famā fawqahā*:

- 1) *Mā zā'ida*: “the inserted *mā*”, and *ba^ʿūdātan* is *badal* “permutative” or “substitute” for the word *mathalan* “similitude of”. Thus the verse will read:

Inna 'l-Lāha lā-yastahī an yaḍriba mathalan: (ba^ʿūdātan).

Where *ma* has no syntactic function: *zā'ida* and, therefore, can be omitted while the word *ba^ʿūdātan* is a substitute for *mathalan*. The paraphrase of this interpretation is: God disdains not to coin a similitude, this similitude is of a gnat.

- 2) *Mā* is *nakira*: “indefinite article,” and *ba^ʿūdātan* is *na^ʿt* “qualificative for *mā*.” Thus the word *ba^ʿūdātan* makes clear the vague reference of *mā*. *Mā* according to this interpretation is an equivalent of the indefinite article: “a,” “an.”
- 3) *Mā* is a substitute for an ellipted *bayna*: “between,” while *famā fawqahā* indicates that a comparison will be made between a gnat and whatever is larger than that.
- 4) *Yaḍriba* means “to establish or to coin,” *mā* is *zā'ida*: “the inserted *mā*” which has no syntactic function and the phrase *famā fawqahā* means “and nothing would ever be any larger than a gnat.”²

In the light of these interpretations we notice that Pickthall’s translation has left out the phrase *famā fawqahā* and substituted it by “even of” which only corresponds to the fourth interpretation above and brings another shade of meaning which is normally expressed by the Arabic preposition *ḥattā*, whereas the phrase *famā fawqahā* may mean any one of the other three interpretations. Ali’s translation left out the central object of comparison: *ba^ʿūdātan* and substitutes the whole phrase *ba^ʿūdātan famā fawqahā* by the phrase “lowest as well as highest” which omits a possible semantic comparison strongly suggested by an ellipted *bayna*. An alternative translation is:

Allah disdains not to propound the similitude between merely a gnat and whatever thing greater than a gnat.

Prepositions used for rhetorical brevity when translated into English open up an area of potential ambiguity. The translation of the following verse from the “Sūrāh of the Cow” provides a unique case:

Dhālika 'lkitābu lā-rayba fīhi hudan li-lmuttaqīn. (The Cow: 2)

Rendered by Pickthall as:

This is the Scripture whereof there is no doubt, a guidance unto those who ward off evil. (Pickthall 1930: 4)

And by Ali as:

This is the book in it is a guidance sure, without doubt to those who fear God. (A.Y. Ali 1975: 17)

In the former translation the preposition *fīhi* belongs to what comes before it, that is to *lā-rayba* “no doubt,” while it belongs in the latter translation to what comes after it, that is *hudan* “guidance.” It is my impression that the preposition *fīhi*, in the Arabic version belongs to both: to what comes after it and what precedes it. This structure includes an ellipsis of a connector as well as of a similar preposition. The verse, when reworded with the ellipted elements provided, reads:

This Scripture is verily true, and in it there is a guidance for those who fear God.

Thus, when the ellipted elements are provided in the Arabic original the verse can be reformulated as:

*Dhālika 'lkitābu lā-rayba fīhi (wa fīhi)
Hudan li-lmuttaqīn.*

Ellipsis in the prepositional phrase can also be identified in the translation of the following verse from the “Sūrāh of the Prophets”:

Wanaṣarnāhu mina 'l-qawmi 'l-ladhīna kadhdhabū bi' āyyātina. (The Prophets: 77)

And We delivered him from the people who denied our revelations. (Pickthall 1930: 209)

And We helped him against the people who rejected our signs. (A. Y. Ali 1975: 839)

In comparing these translations we find that each one gives a different interpretation to the prepositional phrase *naṣarnāhu min*. The first rendering changes the meaning of the verb according to the meaning of the preposition, while the second changes the meaning of the preposition according to the meaning of the verb. The fact is that the verb *naṣarnāhu* normally occurs with the preposition *ʿalā* as is the case with the combinations: *ḥaṣala ʿalā* “obtained,” *ḥaththa ʿalā*, “incited,” and *ʿithhara fī* “influenced,” do not occur independently of their accompanying prepositions. So that we may conclude that *min* in the previous verse is used instead of *ʿalā* to be interpreted as an antecedent to an ellipted phrase which is in this context a nominal phrase *i.e.* “the evil,” thus the verse reads:

And We delivered him from (the evil) of the people who denied our revelations.

CONCLUSION

We conclude from the afore-mentioned analysis of certain verses in the Qurʾān that:

1) Both Pickthall’s and Ali’s translations indicate that negligence of etymological evidence, lexicography, and semantics of form class in Arabic, especially prepositions, may lead to misinterpretation of the ellipted structure, and therefore, to mistranslation of the Qurʾānic text.

2) In translating the Qurʾān, the theoretical investigation of linguistic elements, as well as of elements concerning figurative language is of vital importance. That is to say, in order to render a version that is as near accurate as possible, the translator must possess, in addition to the bilingual polysemic competence, two other discriminatory kinds of competence: grammatical and idiomatic.

3) This topic is highly suggestive and open to further investigation and expansion that would probably cover the volume of a book or perhaps a dissertation.

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