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**The Translation of Words Involving  
Mushakala in the Holy Quran:  
A Descriptive Study**

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## The Translation of Words Involving Mushakala in the Holy Quran: A Descriptive Study

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**ABSTRACT:** This study attempts to investigate the strategies utilized by translators of the Quran to translate ‘Mushakala’, a rhetorical phenomenon used in Arabic in which a previously mentioned word in close proximity is repeated but with a different sense. This lexical device is common in Quranic usage and has the function of attracting the attention of readers/listeners. It also produces “stunning melodious harmony to arouse the awareness and catch the attention of good-taste-listeners” (Albajjari, 2022: 221). However, its presence in other languages, such as English, is inconspicuous. This puts an extra burden on the translator to find a way to find a near equivalent that can reflect the beauty of the source text. This study suggests that Quran translators either choose the easier option of giving a literal (or semantic) rendition or opt for a more communicative approach which is not bound by the source text words and seeks to convey the “ message of the original in a form which conforms to the linguistic, cultural and pragmatic conventions of TL rather than mirroring the actual words” of the Arabic text (Shuttleworth and Cowie 1997: 22).

**Keywords:** Communicative Translation, Literal Translation, Mushakala, Quran Translation, Semantic Translation.

ترجمة الفاظ المشاكلة في القرآن الكريم الى اللغة الإنجليزية: دراسة وصفية

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ملخص: هذه الدراسة تستهدف تقصي الطرق التي تستخدم من قبل مترجمي القرآن لترجمة المشاكلة وهي ظاهرة بلاغية تستخدم في اللغة العربية وتُعرف بانها تكرار كلمة سبق ذكرها في نفس السياق، ولكن بمعنى مختلف والهدف من هذه الأداة اللغوية هو جذب انتباه القارئ أو السامع والذي بدوره يعطي للنص نغماً موسيقياً رائعاً يجذب اهتمام المستمع المتذوق للفنون الإبداعية. لكن وجودها في لغات أخرى مثل الإنجليزية غير ظاهر وهذا ما يجعل المترجم في حرج البحث عن طريقة لإيجاد المقابل الذي يعكس جمال اللغة المنقول منها. هذه الدراسة تشير إلى أن مترجمي القرآن إما أن يختاروا الخيار الأسهل وذلك من خلال الترجمة الحرفية أو يختاروا ترجمة تواصلية لا تلتزم بالنص الأصلي وتحاول أن توصل الرسالة بشكل يتفق مع المفاهيم والاعتبارات الثقافية والدلالية للغة المترجم بها بدلا من مقابلة الحرفية للنص العربي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة التواصلية، الترجمة الحرفية، المشاكلة، ترجمة القرآن، الترجمة الدلالية.

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## Introduction

According to Akbar (1978:3), almost all translations of the Quran contain literal renderings of some linguistic items, which have made them unintelligible to the target audience. Abdul-Raof (2001) and many other researchers point out the fact that these translations are “simply interpretations”. He adds that these translations are characterized by the overuse of complex and rare combinations of words which indicates that they are source-language-oriented. This adherence to the source language style has sometimes changed the intended meaning. It is essential to mention here that trying to stick to the source language style and texture is difficult to maintain because there is no “perfect match between languages” (Nida and Taber, 1969: 5). One area which exemplifies the mismatch between Arabic and English is what can be termed ‘Mushakala’. Literally, the word means “resemblance” (Ibn Manzour: 1994). In rhetorical analysis, it is defined as “referring to something using a term that is not used for it in normal speech” (Alsakaki 1987: 179). The context plays a central role in elucidating the intended meaning. The often-cited example for this phenomenon in classical Arabic is the following verse:

قالوا اقترح شيئاً نجد لك طبخه      قلت اطبخوا لي جبة وقميصاً

(they asked me to suggest something they can cook, and I told them to cook (sic) a gown and an undergarment), (Alqazweeny 2003: 269). We know that garments are sewn or woven but not “cooked”. So, clearly, “cook” was used for a rhetorical purpose.

Mushakala does not seem to exist in English and therefore, when translated, it does not produce the same effect as it does in Arabic. Put differently, this figure of speech (and many more) are untranslatable. This is one of the reasons why researchers agree that no translation can replace the original Quran [cf. Abdul-Raof (2001) and Wasel (2012)].

Having explained the nature of this phenomenon in Arabic, several questions arise here. First, : (1) What challenges do translators of the Qur'an face when rendering words involving Mushakala?

(2) What factors influence the selection made by these translators of the meaning to be

rendered into the target language? (3) How effective are linguistic, contextual and cultural analysis of words involving Mushakala in the Qur'an in determining the intended meaning/s opted for translation?

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## Literature Review

Mushakala as a rhetorical device is often discussed in great detail in books that deal with rhetorical criticism. In these books, scholars define, classify and evaluate Mushakala. The data they analyze is usually drawn from Quran, Hadith (prophetic sayings) and early classical Arabic poets and writers. But the pivotal work on which subsequent writers rely is Alsakaki (1987). Alqazweeny (2003) elaborated and explained in great detail Mushakala using Alsakaki model as a starting point.

In addition, due to the presence of a large number of instances that involve Mushakala in the Quran, we find that many books that address the rhetoric and features of the discourse and textures of the Quran dwell on this phenomenon in great detail. Particularly influential is Alzarkshi (1989), whose discussion of Mushakala provides the basis for subsequent studies, especially that of Alsyyuti. A dedicated study on Mushakala in the Quran is Seriri's (2008) Masters thesis. She begins with discussing Mushakala from a rhetorical point of view, and then applies the principles laid out in the introduction to the data she collected from the Quran. The final section of her study dwells on the linguistic, ethical and artistic significance of Mushakala in the Quran. Alulaiwi (2008) provides a critical analysis of mushakala, arguing that some lexical items cited as involving mushakala are polysemous.

Abdulrahman (2019) discusses the translations of verses involving Mushakala. He argues for a communicative approach which can, at best, capture the true meaning of words that make use of this figure of speech. The communicative method is defined by Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997: 22) as in which "the translator is permitted greater freedom to interpret ST (source text) and will consequently

smooth over irregularities of style, remove ambiguities". Moreover, Abdulrahman (2019:13) has established conclusively that "having a good background knowledge about the nature and function of Mushākala is crucial for those interested in the translation of the Glorious Qur'an".

Since Mushakals involves repetition, it is related to the issue of translating repetition from Arabic into English. So, although Mushakala is not touched upon, recurrence, especially in close proximity, is analyzed in great detail. For example, Dickins et al. (2002) discuss the translation of repetition from Arabic into English. Within the framework they propose, Mushakala can fall under what they describe as the "rhetorical function" of repetition. Elewa (2011) analyses the problems in translating repetition, arguing that "Unlike English, Arabic allows word class derived from the same root to appear in the same sentence". Repetition in Quran

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translation studies has been discussed by the likes of Abdu Raof (2001). He mainly focuses on repetition in Quranic discourse, which occurs either intra-sententially or inter-sententially. This lexical repetition, he states, is “ a cohesive device that can accomplish a communicative and rhetorical effect” (ibid:81). Despite this emphasis on repetition in translation studies, Abdulla (2001) argues that repetition in Arabic - to-English translation has not been adequately investigated.

### **Methodology**

If this study is to yield fruitful results, a representative sample of words involving Mushakala should be selected. A number of yardsticks have to be observed to pick representative instances. We shall consider Luc van Doorslaer’s view on representation (1995), which distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative aspects of representativeness. Hermans (1999: 70) summarizes van Doorslaer’s (1995) model of judicious selection;

the quantitative aspect strikes a balance between economy and credibility: the sample should be large enough to be credible in light of the purpose of the exercise, but small enough to permit appropriate depth. The qualitative aspect is a matter of interpretation and judgment (Hermans 1999: 70).

Since ‘literal translation’ plays a huge role in our analysis, it should be clearly defined. This view is based on Dickins et al. (2017: 14, 294) of ‘literal translation proper’ that “the denotative meaning of words is taken as if straight from the dictionary (i.e., out of context), but TL grammar is respected.” This denotative meaning is referred to as ‘primary meaning’ or in layman’s terms the first meaning that comes to mind when the word is encountered in isolation. So, in our analysis, we tend to equate the literal sense with the basic or common sense. Another term that will be significant in our study is the concept of ‘semantic translation’ proposed and defined by Newmark as the one in which the “translator attempts, within the bare syntactic and semantic constraints of the TL (target language), to reproduce the precise contextual meaning of the author” (1981/1988:22). In other words, it is not an out of context translation nor it is an unbounded or a free communicative translation.

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## Analysis

Let us now analyze the translation of some Quranic verses involving Mushakala:

{المنافقون والمنافقات بعضهم من بعض يأمرون بالمنكر وينهون عن المعروف ويقبضون  
أيديهم نسوا الله فنسيهم إن المنافقين هم الفاسقون}

[Quran 9: 67]

**Sahih International:** The hypocrite men and hypocrite women are of one another. They enjoin what is wrong and forbid what is right and close their hands. They have *forgotten* Allah, so He has *forgotten* them [accordingly]. Indeed, the hypocrites - it is they who are the defiantly disobedient.

**Pickthall:** The hypocrites, both men and women, proceed one from another. They enjoin the wrong, and they forbid the right, and they withhold their hands (from spending for the cause of Allah). They *forget* Allah, so He hath *forgotten* them. Lo! the hypocrites, they are the transgressors.

**Yusuf Ali:** The Hypocrites, men and women, (have an understanding) with each other: They enjoin evil, and forbid what is just, and are close with their hands. They have *forgotten* Allah; so He hath *forgotten* them. Verily the Hypocrites are rebellious and perverse.

**Khatab:** The hypocrites, both men and women, are all alike: they encourage what is evil, forbid what is good, and withhold 'what is in' their hands. They *neglected* Allah, so He *neglected* them. Surely the hypocrites are the rebellious.

**Al-Hilali and Khan:** The hypocrites, men and women, are from one another, they enjoin (on the people) Al-Munkar (i.e. disbelief and polytheism of all kinds and all that Islam has forbidden), and forbid (people) from Al-Ma'ruf (i.e. Islamic Monotheism and all that Islam orders one to do), and they close their hands [from giving (spending in Allah's Cause) alms, etc.]. They have *forgotten* Allah, so He has *forgotten* them. Verily, the hypocrites are the Fasiqun (rebellious, disobedient to Allah)

**Arberry:** The hypocrites, the men and the women, are as one another; they bid to dishonour, and forbid honour; they keep their hands shut; they have *forgotten* God, and He has *forgotten* them.

the hypocrites -- they are the ungodly.

All translators above translate the two mentions of the word “نسى nasa” (literally ‘forget’) with the same word in both instances. The second mention of the word does not carry the same as the first. Forgetfulness does not befit God’s sublime majesty as God Himself explicitly stated in another verse. Muslims firmly believe that attributing this trait to God contradicts the belief that He is all-knowing. Khattab has toned down this sense by opting for a metaphorical meaning (ie “neglect”) So what does the second mention of the word indicate? The different exegeses of the Quran agree that it means “leave or forsake” ( cf al-Ṭabarī 2001 and al-Qurṭubī 1964 ). Alzarkshy ( 1989) noted that early Arabs used to name the reward or punishment for an action with the same word it used with the action itself.

Another interesting example is the following verse.

( وَجَزَاءُ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِّثْلُهَا فَمَنْ عَفَا وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَجْرُهُ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الظَّالِمِينَ )

[Quran 42: 40]

**Sahih International:** And the retribution for *an evil act* is an *evil one* like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation - his reward is [due] from Allah. Indeed, He does not like wrongdoers.

**Pickthall:** The guerdon of an *ill-deed* is *an ill* the like thereof. But whosoever pardoneth and amendeth, his wage is the affair of Allah. Lo! He loveth not wrongdoers.

**Yusuf Ali:** The recompense for *an injury* is an *injury* equal thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah: for (Allah) loveth not those who do wrong.

**Khattab:** The reward of an *evil deed* is *its equivalent*. But whoever pardons and seeks reconciliation, then their reward is with Allah. He certainly does not like the wrongdoers.

**Al-Hilali and Khan:** The recompense for *an evil* is *an evil like* thereof, but whoever forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah. Verily, He likes not the Zalimun (oppressors, polytheists, and wrong-doers, etc.).

**Arberry:** and the recompense of *evil* is *evil* the like of it; but whoso pardons and puts things right, his wage falls upon God; surely He loves not the evildoers.

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we can see that the word “sayya” (literally “evil action”) has been translated literally as “evil” in most of these translations even though the punishment for an evil action is not “evil”. We can notice that Khattab gives attention to the context and distinguishes between the first and second mention of the word ‘evil’. So he gives it a semantic rendering, which makes clear the intended meaning which is that the reward for an evil action is proportionate to the harm itself. The above translators seem to overlook the significance of the repetition of the word, and the target audience might be baffled at referring to the recompense of an evil action as “evil”. In other words, their literal translations have concealed the significance of Mushakala.

Another example is the following :

{الشَّهْرُ الْحَرَامُ بِالشَّهْرِ الْحَرَامِ وَالْحُرُمَاتِ قِصَاصٌ ۚ فَمَنْ اعْتَدَى عَلَيْكُمْ فَاعْتَدُوا عَلَيْهِ بِمِثْلِ مَا  
اعْتَدَى عَلَيْكُمْ ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الْمُتَّقِينَ }

[Quran 2: 194]

**Sahih International:** [Fighting in] the sacred month is for [aggression committed in] the sacred month, and for [all] violations is legal retribution. So whoever has assaulted you, then assault him in the same way that he has assaulted you. And fear Allah and know that Allah is with those who fear Him.

**Pickthall:** The forbidden month for the forbidden month, and forbidden things in retaliation. And one who attacketh you, attack him in like manner as he attacked you. Observe your duty to Allah, and know that Allah is with those who ward off (evil)

**Yusuf Ali:** The prohibited month for the prohibited month,- and so for all things prohibited,- there is the law of equality. If then any one transgresses the prohibition against you, Transgress ye likewise against him. But fear Allah, and know that Allah is with those who restrain themselves.

**Khattab:** ‘There will be retaliation in’ a sacred month for ‘an offence in’ a sacred month, and all violations will bring about retaliation. So, if anyone attacks you, retaliate in the same manner. ‘But’ be mindful of Allah, and know that Allah is with those mindful ‘of Him’.

**Al-Hilali and Khan:** The sacred month is for the sacred month, and for the prohibited things, there is the Law of Equality (Qisas). Then whoever transgresses the prohibition against you, you transgress likewise against him. And fear Allah, and know that Allah is with Al-Muttaqun (the pious - see V.2:2) .



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**Arberry:** The holy month for the holy month; holy things demand retaliation. Whoso commits aggression against you, do you commit aggression against him like as he has committed against you, and fear you God, and know that God is with the godfearing.

The majority of the Quran's exegetes believe that launching a counteroffensive is not a form of aggression (cf Ibn Kaṭīr 1419AH and al-Qurṭubī 1964). The only translator who complies with this interpretation is Khattab. Khattab's communicative translation has succeeded in imparting the intended meaning. The other translators who have favored literal or exact correspondence between the Arabic expression and the English ones and have used words like "aggression, attack, transgress." According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word "transgress" means "to violate a command or law or to go beyond a limit". So the sense of 'retribution' or 'retaliation' is absent in many translations. We can conclude that translators who are oblivious to the use of *mushakala* in this verse were ill-advised in their choice of lexical items to translate the aforementioned rhetorical expression.

A further illustration of this phenomenon can be seen in the following example:

(ومكروا ومكر الله والله خير الماكرين)

[Quran 3: 54]

**Sahih International:** And the disbelievers *planned*, but Allah *planned*. And Allah is the best of *planners*.

**Pickthall:** And they (the disbelievers) *schemed*, and Allah *schemed* (against them): and Allah is the best of *schemers*.

**Yusuf Ali:** And (the unbelievers) *plotted and planned*, and Allah too *planned*, and the best of *planners* is Allah.

**Khattab:** And the disbelievers *made a plan* 'against Jesus', but Allah also *planned*— and Allah is the best of *planners*.

**Al-Hilali and Khan:** And they (disbelievers) *plotted* [to kill 'Iesa (Jesus) ], and Allah *planned* too. And Allah is the Best of the *planners*.

**Arberry:** And they *devised*, and God *devised*, and God is the best of *devisers*.

This verse has been discussed in Abdul-Raof ( 2001: 161 ) and Alulaiwi (2008: 537). They argue that ( 'makar', literally 'to plot') is a contronym which has two

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contradictory meanings with the positive meaning being “to plan” and the negative and primary sense being “hatch a plot” hence the contextually motivated semantic translation by Yusuf Ali and Al-Hilali and Khan. Others believe that it involves Mushakala. That is, when attributed to God, the word means “impose a penalty” as a consequence of their “plotting”. None of the above translators seems to concur with this view. While we can quickly notice that all exegeses agree that God can be described as “plotting”, as Muslims believe that ‘God has all the attributes of perfection and nothing of the qualities associated with weakness or imperfection’. On account of this, we can observe that none of the above translators, apart from Pickthal (who is known for his literal renditions), has made use of ‘plot’ or its synonym ‘scheme’. It is worth mentioning that none of the above translators has resorted to communicative translation. They have all remained faithful to the SL texture for fear of distorting the SL message, but this superficial faithfulness has disguised the rhetorical significance of Mushakala.

## **Conclusion**

Having looked at a few examples of the phenomenon of Mushakala, We can see a figure of speech and a rhetorical device which can be added to AbdulRaof’s list of rhetorical features which are “translation-resistant” (AbdulRaof 2001:105). Literal translation seems to be the first port of call when translators encounter Mushakala. Semantic translation, where the context dictates the intended meaning, is resorted to when a literal rendition would deviate from the Islamic creed in regarding God with the utmost reverence. Communicative translation, which might surpass other techniques in verbalizing Mushakala, is rarely used since it is not shackled by the constraints of form. It is interesting to note that Khattab’s translation, which is the most recent of the above translations, has at times made an effective use of communicative translation to deal with Mushakala. This can indicate that he has turned the unfortunate choices of many of his predecessors to his advantage. Last, the inconsistency of the above translators in settling on the best strategy to tackle Mushakala is quite unavailing. In a nutshell, favoring exact correspondence between SL and TL at the expense of conveying the spirit of the SL might yield inefficacious results.

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