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Is the Qur'an Translatable?

Some Methodological Issues

Discussing the topic of the Qur'an's translation is a very difficult task. On the one hand, the Qur'an is not a normal literary text; and, on the other, Muslims do not accept the translation in another human language of the direct speech of God who spoke in Arabic. Actually, it is well known that Muslims never speak of *translation*, but of rendering the approximate meanings of the text. In this paper I will focus only on some of the methodological problems connected to this issue.

In the verses 1-2 of the sura of Joseph (Q.12) we read: *These are the signs of a clear Scripture. We revealed an Arabic Qur'an so that maybe you comprehend (tilka ayyâtu'l-kitâbi'l-mubîni inna anzalnahu qur'ânan 'arabiyyan la'allakum ta'qîluna)* [1]. Now, if the Qur'an is written in Arabic to be comprehended by Arabs, it is obvious that it can be readily understood. But Islam is a universal religion and its message has been conveyed also to the non-Arabs. Revelation is for all creatures, but God spoke in Arabic. How is it possible then to convey to all human beings, who speak many languages, the meaning of a message originally expressed in one particular language, Arabic?

The problem of the Qur'an's inimitability (*i'jâz*) is crucial here [2]. The Arabic term pointing to inimitability is not Qur'anic and classical exegetes had to support inimitability resorting to the so-called *Challenge Verses* (Q.2:23-24; 10:38; 11:13; 17:88; 52:33-34) where Muhammad was commanded by God to ask his Meccan detractors to produce *suras* like those of the Qur'an. As they were not able to do so, the Qur'an's perfection was established. Classical Muslim religious literature emphasized strongly the *literary inimitability* of the Holy Book. Starting with al-Jahiz to 'Abd al-Jabbar, for most exegetes the *i'jâz al-Qur'an* rests on its linguistic purity (*fasâha*) and eloquence (*balâgha*) and Abu Bakr al-Baqillani has been probably the standard supporter of this view. At least two other thinkers argued differently,

however. The Mu'tazilite al-Nazzam contended that the Qur'an is inimitable for its *content* and not for its form, because the linguistic qualities of the Qur'an were not superior to ordinary human abilities *in spite of God's saying so*. On his side, 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani argued that the overall composition of the Qur'an, its meanings as well its wording, were the real miracle of inimitability; it was not only the structural composition of words and phrases that points to inimitability, but also the content and meanings.

Actually, inimitability could be placed either only on the formal level of the impossibility of the *literary* reproduction of the text or on the more substantial level of the content. As to the literary *i'jâz*, it is obvious that any kind of translation is impossible. For, if the text is inimitable in Arabic, it cannot be inimitable in other languages, like Italian. It could succeed as a beautiful text, an elegant and fascinating text with highly rhetorical effectiveness, but not inimitable. If we look at the content, we have to deal with the difficulty of distinguishing between the *zâhir* and the *bâtin*, namely between the outer/exoteric and the inner/esoteric meaning. Does the inimitability of the Qur'an pertain to the outer/exoteric or the inner/esoteric meaning? If we deal especially with the content, we are forced to agree that inimitability is limited to the inner meaning, not to the external meaning.

We have to discuss this topic further. First, the linguistic-literary inimitability of the Arabic Qur'an pertains to the outer/exoteric level of meaning alone. The Arabic language displays images, concepts, ideas and tells stories which are unchangeable and unaltered in their outer/exoteric meaning. In this case, *tafsîr* can be exclusively historical or literary and heavily dependent on *hadîth* and *sunna*. As Nasr Abu Zayd put it: *efforts to reopen the meaning of the Qur'an and addressing modern issues [must be done] by seeking to establish a new Qur'anic exegesis without the usual heavy reliance on tradition in the classical commentaries of the Qur'an. Put differently, the criticism of the sunna was basically one result of Muslim thinkers being involved in Qur'anic exegesis in somewhat different way. The strong demand for a new approach to the Qur'an that would open*

its meaning to new, challenging circumstances, made it essential to distance modern Qur'anic exegesis from the traditional type heavily loaded with hadith quotations [3]. Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, one of the most distinguished Qur'anic commentators *bi'l-tafsîr bi'l-ma'thûr*, that is the commentary by prophetic traditions, argued that all the Qur'anic verses are clear and that ambiguous or obscure verses do not exist, because the Arab language is able to express them clearly. As a consequence, transferring the Qur'an from Arabic to Italian does not seem unreasonable. From the point of view of outer/exoteric meaning the Qur'an says in Italian the same things said in Arabic. The verse prescribing the possibility of marrying four wives if the husband is able to be equitable with them all (Q.4:3) has the same meaning in Arabic or in Italian. Thus, translation seems acceptable without particular problems. Al-Shahrastani pointed out that the *accomplished* dimension of the text, namely its literal dimension, is *ontologically* determined and closed, so to speak [4]: the text is a *thing*, or better a *mushaf*, a *volume* defined in its form, length and contents; hence the meaning cannot be lost in translation. It goes without saying that the *accomplished* and outer dimension is scarcely meaningful from the point of view of axiology, theology or philosophy: it is meaningful from the point of view of narration or normativity alone.

As for the inner/esoteric level, if we assume that it is inimitable because no one except God is allowed to express the best, the deepest and the soundest utterances, the question becomes more complicated. Al-Shahrastani pointed out that the *inchoate* dimension of the text, namely that the text is *in movement*, remains unintelligible if human beings do not own the appropriate keys for disclosing the hidden meaning. The first key is linguistic however: we need to know Arabic. The second key is hermeneutical, but we have to understand of what sort of hermeneutics is at issue here. Al-Shahrastani, who was a crypto-Ismaili, maintained directly that the only viable hermeneutical key is the interpretation of the *imams*. In any case, it is clear that, if the literary-linguistic structure of Arabic conceals a hidden meaning, any kind of translation would make useless other linguistic keys so that no

linguistic key would be suitable for opening the door of the hidden meaning. We would be unable to grasp the hidden meaning without Arabic. Moreover, whoever is not Shii or Ismaili is not bound by the *imam's* interpretation. The text will continue to be closed in both cases.

The issue is how to keep alive the exegetical interpretation of a text originally written in Arabic and whose content (as opposed to form) is inimitable without resorting to Arabic which is deemed to be the only vehicle able to grasp the inner meaning of the message. The shift from the literal level to the symbolic, semiotic or metaphorical levels seems to me unavoidable. I am not proficient in semiotics and I cannot speak about that. From the point of view of symbols and metaphors, though, which kind of reliance can we bestow upon a translation in a language other than Arabic? How can we be sure that an Italian translation respects the *true, inner* meaning of the text we are interpreting metaphorically? But other more serious problems arise. To which extent does the metaphor or the symbol contain precisely the cognitive value about which it is metaphorical or symbolic? Put differently: does the metaphor say really the same things of that which it is a metaphor? Which is *really* the meaning of the text? We are facing the previous dilemma: if the *true* meaning of the text is the literal meaning, it can be understood *exclusively* in the language in which it is written: in our case, in Arabic, and this conclusion prevents any kind of translation. On the other hand, the text would be merely obvious, superficial, unable to address modern issues.

Let us to look at the problem from another perspective. Q.3:7 argues that *those in whose hearts is swerving, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension and desiring its interpretation* (Arberry), and so they go astray. If it is true what we have said till now, namely that the translation of the Qur'an in other languages does not change the literal meaning (although inimitability gets lost), no danger of going astray or *kufr* is incumbent, although the danger of a deep misunderstanding of the inner meaning of the text is almost inescapable. If we restrict ourselves to the literal meaning, the Qur'an becomes an overwhelmingly normative and juridical text which

imposes *hudûd* penalties, like cutting the thieves' hands, and regards polygamy or slavery as lawful in any epoch or circumstances. But the normative verses of the Qur'an are (relatively) very few. How are we able to perfectly understand the universal Qur'anic message and through it address urgent contemporary issues if the symbolic-metaphorical *translation* of the text is so difficult and we are bound by the original Arabic outer expression? If we are not able to understand the theological or philosophical or mystical meaning of the Qur'an in a language other than Arabic, are we doomed to be silent? Averroes worked out the difficulty by the distinction of three different languages of people: rhetorical for the masses, dialectical for the theologians and demonstrative for the élite class of the philosophers. Thus, Paradise is literally a garden (*janna*) for the masses, but is metaphorically the intellectual and blissful vision of God for the philosophers - provided that *the rules of Arab language are respected* [5]. Averroes' solution is unsatisfying. Starting from his premises, how is it possible to make consistent two very opposed propositions like *the world is created* (the Qur'anic view) and *the world is eternal* (the philosophical view), that is to make consistent the literal utterances (that support the creation of the universe) and the metaphorical or symbolic interpretations (and thus concluding that the universe is eternal)?

The *impasse* is serious and I do not have the final solution. Maybe we could try to move the issue on the ethical-political level. As Hasan Hanafi put it:

The conflict of interpretation is essentially a socio-political conflict, not a theoretical one. Theory indeed is only an epistemological cover up. Each interpretation expresses the socio-political commitment of the interpreter. Interpretation is an ideological weapon used by different socio-political powers to maintain or to change the status quo, to maintain by the conservatives and to change by the revolutionaries. [6]

I am very far from reaching a definite answer, however. I should like to quote from Nasr Abu Zayd who seems to me moving along the

same path as Hasan Hanafi:

Modern scholars of the Qur'an share the concept of the Qur'an as text despite the different interpretative strategies they employ in exploring its meaning. Dealing with the Qur'an as only a text enhances the possibilities of interpretation and re-interpretation but allows as well the ideological manipulations not only of the meaning but also of the structure, following the pattern of the polemic interpretations of the theologians. I was one of the propagators of the textuality of the Qur'an under the influence of the literary approach initiated by the modern and still appreciated literary approach. I recently started to realize how dealing with the Qur'an solely as a text reduces its status and ignores the fact that it is still functioning as a discourse in everyday life ... Without re-thinking the Qur'an, without re-invoking its living status as a discourse, no democratic and open hermeneutics can be achieved. But why should hermeneutics be democratic and open? Because it is about the meaning of life. If we are serious about freeing religious thought from power manipulations, whether political, social or religious in order to empower the community of believers to formulate meaning, we need to construct open democratic hermeneutics. [7]

The Qur'an as a simple *text* is scarcely translatable; the Qur'an as *discourse(s)* is translatable in order to be made available in different civilizational and political circumstances.

In any case, we cannot do without Arabic, especially if, as Fazlur Rahman contended, *revelation [is] a unique form of cognition in the form of idea-words that are part of a creative divine act* [8]. He stated clearly that

There is a vast literature in Islam known as i'jâz al-Qur'an setting out the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'an. This doctrine takes its rise from the Qur'an itself for the Qur'an

profeers itself as the unique miracle of Muhammad. No other revealed Book is described in the Qur'an as a miracle in this way except the Qur'an itself; it follows that not all the embodiments of revelations are miracles, even though the event of revelation itself is a kind of miracle. The Qur'an emphatically challenges its opponents to bring forth one sura like those of the Qur'an (Q.2:23), and to call upon anyone except God to achieve this (Q.10:38; cfr. Q.11:13, which is probably earlier). There is a consensus among those who know Arabic well, and who appreciate the genius of the language, that in the beauty of its language and the style and power of its expression the Qur'an is a superb document. The linguistic nuances simply defy translation. Although all inspired language is untranslatable, this is even more the case with the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is very much conscious it is an Arabic Qur'an and, the question of ideas and doctrines apart, it appears certain that the claim of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an is connected with its linguistic style and expression. Unfortunately, non Arab Muslims do not realize this enough; while they correctly assume that the Qur'an is a Book of guidance and hence may be understood in any language, they yet not only deprive themselves of the real taste and appreciation for the Qur'anic expression but - since even a full understanding of the meaning depends upon the linguistic nuances - also cannot do full justice to the content of the Qur'an. It is extremely desirable and important that as many as possible of the non Arab educated and thinking Muslims equipe themselves with the language of the Qur'an. [9]

The same is argued by Toshihiko Izutsu:

There are a variety of ways in which one gets to know the meaning of a foreign word. The simplest and commonest - but unfortunately the last reliable - is by being told an equivalent

word in one's language: the German word Gatte for example means the same as English husband. In this way, the Arabic kufr might be explained as meaning the same as misbeliever, zâlim as evil-doer, dhanb as sin, and so on. There can be no question that there is a recognizably some sort of semantic equivalence in each case; on the other hand, anyone acquainted with the Arabic language will have to admit that these apparently nearest equivalents are far from being able to do justice to the original words. A zâlim, for example, is not exactly an evil-doer; between kâfir and misbeliever there is a difference too important to be ignored ...

The Arabic word kâfir, to begin with, is an independent unit of structure which cannot be further analyzed into component elements. Whichever English equivalent we may choose clearly consists of two parts: an element implying a negative (mis-, dis-, un-) and another element representing what may be called the material side of the meaning. This material part is, in each case, believer. That is to say that the semantic categories of the English equivalents of kâfir are all based on the fundamental concept of belief. There is, to be sure, no denying that the semantic category of the Arabic word kâfir itself contains an important element of belief. But it must be remembered, this is not the only basic semantic constituent of the word, nor is it the original one. An examination of pre-Islamic literature discloses that the real core of its semantic structure was by no means un-belief, but rather ingratitude or unthankfulness. The word kâfir was originally the contrary of shâkir, one who is thankful ... Kâfir is a man who does not, would not show any sign of gratitude in his conduct [towards God]. [10]

Again, understanding the Qur'an cannot do without Arabic. The hermeneutical issue remains alive for non-Arabs, however. On the whole, the translation of the Qur'an is both a semantic task and an effort of reconstructing the contextual meaning along with its symbolic

interpretation. A great deal more of work needs to be carried out on this topic.

Note

- [1] This Qur'anic statement deserves scrutiny. See my book M. Campanini, *Il profeta Giuseppe. Monoteismo e storia nel Corano*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2007, second part where the *sûra* is translated, note n. 4, 7 and 9: *L'arabicità del Corano ha due aspetti: si tratta in primo luogo di sottolineare come la rivelazione sia stata veicolata in una lingua chiara (cfr. anche Q.16, al-Naml, 103: Questa è lingua araba chiara), accessibile a tutti (Q.20, Tâhâ, 113: Abbiamo fatto scendere un Corano arabo). La chiarezza della lingua ha a che fare, evidentemente, con la sua interpretazione. D'altro canto, il Corano è monito ai mondi (dhikr li'l-'âlamîna in Q.38, Sâd, 87), ha cioè un carattere universale e non specificamente arabo. Per quanto riguarda l'interpretazione, al-Tabarî afferma: Libro chiaro [intende] che: Questi versetti del Libro sono chiari per chi lo recita e medita su di esso, riguardo a [ciò che vi si prescrive] di lecito o di illecito e interdetto, e a tutte le specie di significati che esso contiene. Dio Eccelso, infatti, sia lode a Lui!, lo ha definito chiaro e non ha fatto distinzione, riguardo alla sua chiarificazione, tra la parte e l'intero. [L'espressione in esame] si riferisce all'intero [Corano], poiché tutto il suo contenuto è chiaro. Al-Tabarî, di fatto, rifiuta in generale l'idea che il Corano contenga versetti solidi (muhkamât), cioè immediatamente comprensibili ed evidenti, e versetti ambigui (mutashâbihât), la cui interpretazione, come afferma il versetto Q.3, Âl 'Imrân, 7, è riservata solo a Dio. Per al-Tabarî, i versetti sono tutti solidi. La distinzione tra versetti chiari e ambigui è tuttavia di altissima importanza nella esegesi coranica e nella teologia. Cfr. L. Kinberg, Muhkamât and Mutashâbihât (Koran 3:7): Implication of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis, in "Arabica", 35 (1988), pp. 143-172; e M. Campanini, The Qur'an. The Basics, trad. di O. Leaman, Routledge, London and New York 2007. Ed ecco come commenta il celebre al-Baydâwî questi primi versetti del capitolo: Con Libro si intende qui la stessa sûra, per cui il senso è: Questi versetti costituiscono i versetti della sûra che indicano chiaramente la inimitabilità (i'jâz), ovvero ciò il cui significato è chiaro, ovvero ciò che rende chiaro (bayyana) a ciascuno che riflette su ciò che proviene da Dio, ovvero ciò che spiega agli ebrei quello su cui hanno interrogato ... Con Corano arabo intende questa parte dell'intera rivelazione. Qur'an è in origine un nome comune che si applica tanto all'intero quanto alla parte, anche se poi è stato per lo più usato per indicare l'intero. Acciocché forse voi comprendiate, è la ragione per cui Dio ha rivelato il libro sotto questa forma (araba). Il significato è: Noi [Dio] abbiamo fatto scendere su di te [Muhammad] qualcosa composto nella tua propria lingua o che può*

essere recitato nella tua propria lingua, affinché tu sia in grado di comprenderlo e di coglierne i significati; oppure, affinché tu possa esercitare il tuo intelletto e scoprire che il racconto, proferito dalla bocca di un uomo che non avrebbe potuto [in precedenza] produrne uno simile, è un autentico miracolo (*mu'jiz*) che può essere solo frutto di una rivelazione (*cit. in H. Gatje, The Qur'an and its Exegesis, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1976, p. 53*).

- [2] See the entries devoted to *i'jâz* (inimitability) in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edition, Brill, Leiden 1960; J. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Brill, Leiden 2001-2006; O. Leaman (ed.), *The Qur'an. An Encyclopaedia*, Routledge, London 2006.
- [3] N. Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought. A Historical Critical Analysis*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006, p. 27.
- [4] See T. Mayer, *Shahrastânî on the Arcana of the Qur'an: a Preliminary Evaluation*, in "Journal of Qur'anic Studies", 7 (2005), 2, pp. 61-100.
- [5] *The meaning of allegorical interpretation is: extension of the significance of an expression from real to metaphorical significance, without forsaking therein the standard metaphorical practices of the Arabs* (G. Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, Luzac, London 1976, p. 50; Italian translation: Averroè, *Il Trattato decisivo*, edited by M. Campanini, Bur Rizzoli, Milano 2006(2), p. 61).
- [6] H. Hanafi, *Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an*, in *Islam in the Modern World*, Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, Cairo 1995, vol. I, p. 407-428 (already published in S. Wild (ed.), *The Qur'an as Text*, Brill, Leiden 1996).
- [7] N. Abu Zayd, *Re-thinking the Qur'an. Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*, first published by Humanistic University Press, Leiden 2004; now in "Islamochristiana", 30 (2004), pp. 25-45.
- [8] E. Moosa, *Introduction to F. Rahman, Revival and Reform in Islam*, Oneworld, Oxford 2003, p. 14.
- [9] F. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Bibliotheca Islamica, Minneapolis 1989, pp. 104-105.
- [10] T. Izutsu, *Ethico-religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, Islamic Book Trust, Kuala Lumpur 2004, pp. 25-27.