

A Comparative Analysis of Four Persian-language Quran Versions

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Abstract: *Quran is the heavenly book of Muslims, and perceiving the exact meaning of it, is essential for us. For such an important work, the translators must ponder very deeply on its concepts, and based on them choose the most appropriate theory for translation. There has been always an old discussion among the scholars that what kind of translation_ literal or free (formal or dynamic) _ is more suitable for the religious texts. This study is to differentiate between two kinds of equivalences of Nida's theory, and also to discover which theory has lain behind the different translations of Quran. To meet this purpose, three surahs (Al-Qadr, Al- Fil and Quraysh) of Quran are analyzed based on Nida's theory to find out whether these two orientations of this theory are applicable in real context or not. Moreover, this paper will study which kind of these equivalences (formal or dynamic) can transfer better the message of God.*

It is hoped that this research would be helpful to offer the most complete and perceivable versions of Persian-language Quran, and also the best theory, to render religious texts to the translators' community.

Keywords: *Religious translation, Nida's theory, formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence*

1. Introduction:

In this paper, two basic orientations in translation, generally known as literal and free, are described, with a special reference to Quran translation in Persian language. Many efforts have been done in the same ground on Bible, but unfortunately, there are not a lot of works about the methodology of Quran translation. Therefore, the researcher has chosen Quran instead of Bible because it would be a novel and innovative work; besides, it is more tangible for Persian-language people to perceive.

First, two different types of equivalences are explained, according to the theory of E. A. Nida (formal correspondence vs. functional equivalence). Then, three surahs of Quran from four different translations are compared to each other, and to the original form (Arabic), based on Nida's theory. The names of chosen surahs are "Al-Qadr, Al- Fil and Quraysh". Among these four versions of Quran translations, two of them are biased to be more "formal correspondences", and the two others seem to be more "dynamic equivalences". The purpose of this paper is to study different versions of Quran translations, to recognize based on which theory they are rendered, and to offer the more appropriate way of translation for religious texts, based on Nida's theory.

2. Literature Review

There aren't many efforts about the translation of Quran to Persian in which the exact theory of translation had been mentioned. Therefore, the researcher has considered the history of Bible translation in which the theory of translation and Nida's tendency in religious translation (Bible) are mentioned.

2.1. The History of Bible Translation

According to Wasserman (2001), since 1611 up to the 20th century, the "King James Version (KJV)" of English translation of bible, was known as the best rendering. Its influence on English literature is extraordinary. Meanwhile, some efforts were made to revise the KJV from 1881 to 1901, in Britain through "The English Revised Version" and in America by the means of the "American Standard Version". Although none of these efforts worked out, and people didn't accept these versions to replace KJV.

Before World War II, two other important renderings were done under the names of "The Bible: A New Translation" (1913) by the Scott James Moffat and "The New Testament: An American Translation" (1923) by the American Bible scholar E. J. Goodspeed. Goodspeed also had an important role in translating the "Revised Standard Version (RSV)". This revision of the "American Standard Version" was supported by the "American Standard Bible Committee of the International Council of Religious Education". Later, the "New Revised Standard Version" (NRSV) was published in 1989.

As reported by Wasserman (2001), since 1945, the main attention in translation theory has been given to the production of texts that would be meaningful to particular readers. J.B. Phillips, was one of the scholars who found out that the KJV was too difficult for young people to understand, so that he produced his own version in "Today's English Version" (1966, 1976), which was published in "common language" (an overlap between the literary and the colloquial) to attract the audiences out of the Church. In the same vein, another version of Bible was published with the name of "The Living Bible" (1971), which extremely had focused on the target readers, and had paraphrased the Bible indeed. It was seriously criticized for using slangs and too informal language. Here, there are some examples (based on Tow, 2002):

KJV (verbal rendering) vs. Tailor's "The Living Bible" (free rendering):

- a) 1 Samuel 20:30 "... Thou son of the perverse rebellious woman ..." (KJV)
"You son of a bitch!" (TLB first edition)
- b) 1 Kings 18:27 "... Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing ..." (KJV)
"... Perhaps he is talking to someone or is out sitting on the toilet ..." (TLB)
- c) Job 3:26 "I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came."

(KJV)

“I was not fat and lazy, yet trouble struck me down.” (TLB)

- d) Psalm 34:20 “He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken.” (KJV)
“God even protects him from accidents.” (TLB)

Tow (2002) adds: “Example (d) is a Messianic prophecy of our Lord's crucifixion which Taylor destroys by his ‘dynamic equivalence’.”

After World War II, a lot of attempts have been done to render variety of Bible versions, ranging from the traditional and literal “New American Standard Bible” (1960) to the highly literary and relatively free translation of the “New English Bible” (1970). After that, the “New International Version” (1978) has become very popular, even more than KJV, especially in the USA. Based on Wasserman (2001), this version, which was called an “accurate translation” of the Bible, has been described by Nida (1992) as “a kind of hybrid as far as the theory of translation is concerned”; because it sometimes used the “present-day language”, and sometimes referred to the traditional terminology.

Accordingly, most of Bible translators tended to the target reader renderings. As Ryken (2002) states: “for the last three decades, dynamic equivalent translations have had the world of English Bible translation”. Although he is severely against the “dynamic translation”, he cited Ray Van Leeuwen: “if you read a Bible translated in the last half-century, you probably read a Bible influenced by Nida.”

2.2. Nida's Theory: formal correspondence vs. functional equivalence

It was Eugene A. Nida (1964), who first differentiated between “formal equivalence” (correspondence) and “dynamic (functional) equivalence”. According to Wasserman (2001), Nida was the first one in the twentieth century who considered the reader, by supporting “functional equivalence”. He especially has influenced translation studies, through his works on religious translation, and particularly on Bible translation.

It is necessary to note that “formal correspondence” and “functional equivalence” are only two theoretical poles of translating, and in practice, there is actually an overlap between them. Although it is true that the Bible or Quran translators do not apply any of these different approaches as absolute techniques, they are aware of them, and their works are guided by a general orientation, which is mentioned at the preface of the version; thus, the resulting translation is biased towards either the literal or the free translation pole. (Wasserman, 2001)

2.2.1. Formal Equivalence

According to Nida (1964:159):

Formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content. [...] A gloss translation of this type is designed to permit the reader to identify himself as fully as possible with a person in the source-language context, and to understand as much as he can of the customs, manner of thought, and means of expression.

Therefore, it can be perceived that by means of the formal equivalence the target reader goes to a foreign text through a literal translation, which needs to be included some notes of cultural information to ensure the understanding of the reader.

However, later Nida makes some changes in the definition of formal correspondence. Based on his first definition, which is cited above, he considers the message in two aspects of *form and content*, but in the following lines, it is related *only to form*, not to content.

Formal correspondence [=equivalence]: quality of a translation in which the features of the form of the source text have been mechanically reproduced in the receptor language. Typically, formal correspondence distorts the grammatical and stylistic patterns of the receptor language, and hence distorts the message, so as to cause the receptor to misunderstand or to labor unduly hard (Nida, 1969: 201).

In this definition, Nida with the help of Taber differentiate between the *message* and the *form*, and insist that a translator's duty should be to try to preserve the message, not the form of the original. Actually, they mean trying to preserve the form will change the original message, so that would cause misunderstanding.

2.2.2. Dynamic Equivalence

In contrast to "formal equivalence", Nida (1964:159) defines "dynamic equivalence" as:

A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture; it does not insist that he understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context in order to comprehend the message.

According to Wasserman (2001), later Nida and Taber (1969) develop this definition to the following:

Dynamic (functional) equivalence: quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the RESPONSE of the RECEPTOR is essentially like that of the original receptors. Frequently, the form of the original text is changed; but as long as the change follows the rules of back transformation in the source language, of contextual

consistency in the transfer, and of transformation in the receptor language, the message is preserved and the translation is faithful.

In this type of translation, the language should be such fluent that the target readers feel like they are the original receptors. Therefore, it is obvious that in this kind of translation, the emphasis is on the *message*, and the form must be changed based on the target language.

To sum up, it should be noted that although Nida admits that “formal equivalence” method may be useful in some cases for a limited group of readers, he clearly gives priority to the method of “dynamic equivalence”.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

The method of this paper is comparative. It means that four different versions of Quran are compared to recognize that they are more source-language oriented (Arabic) or target-language oriented (Persian).

3.2. Material

As it is mentioned before, three surahs of Quran from four different translations will be compared on the basis of Nida's theory. The names of surahs are “Al-Qadr, Al- Fil and Quraysh”. The researcher has chosen them based on her interest, also because the first surah (Al-Qadr) is a mystical one, and it is more literary; but the two others are parables, so that the translators are freer to render them. Therefore, they can be proper choices to be studied based on Nida's theory.

The translations are chosen from the most acceptable and famous translators, who are:

- 1) Najafi Araghi and kazem samedani (1958)
- 2) Abol Fotuh Razi (1954)
- 3) Makarem Shirazi (2001)
- 4) Elahi Ghomsheiee (2002)

The first two versions sound to be more “formal” and the last two ones are more “dynamic”. All of them are translated from the Arabic version of the Holy Quran to Persian.

3.3. Procedures

Since it is too time consuming to analyze all of the surahs of Quran, here three surahs are chosen to be compared. To recognize the translation theory of surahs, first they will be studied word by word; then the concept of the sentences and verses will be compared, and at last, the content of the whole surah will be considered. After that, based on Nida's theory they will be classified as

"dynamic" or "formal" equivalences. However, it should be pointed out that "formal correspondence" and "functional equivalence" are merely two theoretical poles of translating, and in practice, there is an overlap between them.

3.4. Data Analysis

In this paper, two kinds of evaluations will be applied: qualitative and quantitative. At first, the words and verses will be compared qualitatively to find out whether they are more "dynamic or formal equivalences" to Persian language. Then, to be more concrete, the total number of the words in each translation will be shown in a 'Table' to indicate whether the translators were faithful to the source text (formal correspondence), or they felt free in rendering, and the translations are longer than the source text (dynamic equivalence).

4. Results

As it mentioned before, the three surahs were analyzed word by word; however, to save the time, only two of the comparisons are submitted here- from "Al-Fil" surah- to show the process of analysis:

1. As'hab-e fil (Arabic)

- a) As'hab-e fil (= the companions of elephant)
- b) Yaran-e fil (= the comrades of elephant)
- c) Fil savaran (lashkare Abrahah ke baraye nabudiye Ka'bah aamade budand) (= the elephant riders- Abrahah's army who came to destroy Ka'bah)
- d) Sepah-e fil savar-e Abrahah (=Abrahah's army of elephant riders)

- ❖ [Abrahah was the chief of the army of Habashah (a city) who was with an army of elephant riders in the way of Ka'bah to destroy it. If the reader doesn't have any information about the story of "the companions of elephant", cannot understand the message of the first two translations. However, in the last two renderings, enough information is added to ensure the understanding of the reader.]

2. Tarmihem (Arabic)

- a) Mi'andakht ishan ra (= throw to them)
- b) Mi'andakht anha ra (= throw to them)
- c) Aanan ra hadaf gharar midad (= targeted them)
- d) Aanha ra sang-baran kardand (= stoned them)

- ❖ [The first and second translations are correct from the aspect of meaning, but they are translated based on the structure of Arabic language, not Persian (Formal equivalence), therefore they are not pronounced fluently and perceived easily in Persian. However, in the third and fourth translation, not only the message is conveyed better, but also the word order is based on the Persian language structure (Dynamic equivalence).]

Accordingly, it seems that in the first two translations more “formal correspondences” are used, since they are faithful to the structure and the word order of the source language, however, they didn’t transfer the literary form of the surahs. On the other hand, the last two translations are the ones that are more “dynamic”. They are based on the structure of the target language, also have more information for better understanding of the readers.

To show this being “dynamic” or “formal” more objectively, the number of words, in the original language (Arabic) and the translations, are indicated in the following table:

Table1. The number of words in surahs

Surahs	Total number of words in the “Source Language”	Number of words in the 1 st translation	Number of words in the 2 nd translation	Number of words in the 3 rd translation	Number of words in the 4 th translation
Al-Qadr	33	48	48	51	72
Al-Fil	23	41	44	56	57
Quraysh	20	39	34	65	41

As it is shown, the numbers of words in the surah of “Al-Qadr” among the first three renderings are almost equal, because it is a mystical and literary surah and the translators have to be more faithful to the words. Still in the fourth translation, it seems to be added further information, and it is obviously a dynamic translation. In other two surahs (Al-Fil and Quraysh), the numbers of the words in the third and the fourth translations are much more than the first and the second ones; because these surahs are fables, so that more background information is needed to be given to the readers. However, surprisingly, the numbers of words in the fourth translation for the surah of “Quraysh” are not much more than the first two ones.

Therefore, this table likewise shows that the first two translations have more “formal equivalences”, and the last two ones have more “dynamic equivalences”.

To sum up, the results show that the last two translations are more perceivable for the target readers, especially for the young people. It is because of their style of writing, which is not only in a common language and understandable for them, but also respectful to the word of God.

Therefore, as Wasserman (2001) cited Carson (1985:200), neither too literal nor too periphrastic translations are the good ones.

5. Conclusion

This research studied four versions of Quran _ based on Nida's theory_ to find out which one conveys the message of Allah in the best way. The reason of choosing Nida's theory is that he was the first one who distinguished between “formal equivalence” (correspondence) and “dynamic (functional) equivalence”. He influenced translation studies through his works on the discipline of religious texts, and especially Bible translation.

In this paper, the Nida's theory of equivalences (formal correspondence vs. functional equivalence) was described, and based on it three surahs of Quran (Al-Qadr, Al- Fil and Quraysh) from four different translations were compared. The results indicated that the first two translations aimed to preserve the formal features of the source text; whereas the second two versions had different word orders, and more additions to express the meaning of the Arabic text in a way that would be acceptable by the Persians. This observation was also confirmed in *Table 1*, which measures the literalness of the translations. It is clear that all the translators have broken the rhythmic word order of the source text, but the first two ones are more faithful to the structure of the source text(formal correspondence), and the last two ones are more interested in the response of the readers (functional equivalence).

According to Nida (1969): “the idiomatic translation should be given priority, to enrich target language and bridge the gaps between our modern world and the Biblical (or Quranic) one”. In the same vein, based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that using a target based language, while preserving the message and style (as much as possible), seems to be the best way of transferring the message of Allah.

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