

Translation of Arabic Islamic Terminology into Tamil: Challenges and Possible Solutions

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Abstract:

This study sheds light on challenges faced by the Tamil translators of Arabic-Islamic terminology. It is based on the question: What may such challenges be and what solutions may be suggested in Tamil translation? The researcher hypothesizes that many of the challenges identified in this study with regard to translating Arabic-Islamic terminology might be common between Arabic and many other languages. The study mostly depends on descriptive method and secondary data such as books, research articles, lectures and online information. Differences among languages in word-formation processes, lack of equivalents and transliteration issues were the important findings of the study. While summarizing the ways the Arabic-Islamic terminology are handled by the translators of other languages, the study recommends for the project of a comprehensive dictionary for Arabic-Islamic terminology in Tamil as a tangible solution to this problem.

Key words: Translation, Arabic-Islamic terminology, Tamil language, challenges

Introduction:

There are various types of problems based on the fields of translation such as science, literature, religion, economics, technology... etc. This study would focus on the problems of religious translation, especially the translation of Arabic-Islamic terminology into Tamil language. Though the problems addressed here in terms of translating Arabic-Islamic terminology are between Arabic language and Tamil language, many of them might be common between Arabic and many other languages. To the best knowledge of the researcher, no separate study has dealt exclusively with the problems of translating Arabic-Islamic terminology into Tamil.

The study is intended to answer the following questions: What are the aspects of the problems of translating the Arabic-Islamic terminology and what are the possible solutions to such problems?

Arabic Language and Tamil Language:

It is obvious that every language is unique in its sounds, vocabulary and surface and deep structure. Arabic language and Tamil language belong to two different language families. Arabic belongs to the Semitic branch of the Afro-asiatic family which is originating in Middle East and spoken in a wide arc stretching across Western Asia, North Africa, and the Horn of

Africa. It is mainly spoken in 21 countries by 183 million people as their mother tongue (Jubair 2014). Tamil -on the other hand- is a Dravidian language predominantly spoken in India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Both languages are known to be of the longest-surviving classical languages in the world. Therefore, the linguistic and cultural variations between the two are natural. Certain syntax and semantic features of Arabic language -for instance- do not exist not only in Tamil language but also in many languages of the world.

Terminology Standards:

Basically, a concept is an abstraction of the properties of the mental representation of an object from a specialized domain. When organizing, referring to, or communicating something about concepts, specialists give them labels or designations in the language – that is, terms. These terms play a crucial role in communication involving technical concepts, especially in contexts where there is need to avoid ambiguity or confusion. Grammatically, terms can be simple (single words) or complex (multiple expressions). (Olohan 2016, 27)

Terminology standards and guidelines suggested by terminologists and international organizations (e.g., ISO and UNESCO) stress two essential qualities in technical terms: to be morphologically concise and semantically precise. According to terminologists, this means short words and phrases. However, due to differences in word-formation processes, the length of terms varies from one language to another. Typologically and structurally different languages such as Arabic and Tamil have more differences than similarities in the word formation used to create lexical items.

In terminology translation, equivalents in the target language are usually preferred to be as concise as possible and able to maintain existing morphological and semantic relationship between the translated terms and other morphologically and semantically related source language terms. By reflecting lexical, morphological and semantic characteristics, the target language terms can be used appropriately by target language specialists in their research and communication processes. Thus, these terms become part of the terminological system of their special language. (Giaber 2017)

Challenges of Arabic-Islamic Terminology Translation into Tamil:

One of the basic problems in the process of translation between a language pair -in general- is the word matching. It is a big challenge to find in a language a word that is identical to a word in another language. The complete matching would be possible only if the two languages are identical in the classification, in the cultural and social backgrounds, in metaphorical usages, and even in fantasies and perceptions. It is obvious that this can never be achieved even among the languages of the same family. Translation of terminology is not exceptional in this sense.

We may find many definitions for the word 'terminology'; but all these definitions are not enough to handle the challenges faced by translators of Arabic-Islamic terminology. Because, Arabic as a derivational language relies on the combination of radical consonantal roots, which represent lexical meaning, with morphological patterns, which represent functional meaning to create words. Thus, different morphological patterns can denote different grammatical or functional concepts such as active participle, action, process or product of the action, place of the action, intensity of the action, instrument, state or condition, or reciprocity. (ஞாயளஞ்சை 2008)

Conversely, many of the concepts in Tamil language are represented in one of the following methods: Classical Tamil words, spoken Tamil usages, borrowing from other languages,

forming new words, direct translation of the words and transliteration. When creating foreign terms, Tamil terminologists take in to account the suitability, simplicity, acceptability, purity, integrity and Versatile approach of the words as well. (Pandiyan 2017)

In Arabic-Islamic texts we find two types of terminology: One is the terminology used in the sacred texts, namely the Holy Quran and the Prophetic Traditions; and the other is the terminology used by particular religious schools such as schools of theology (Aqeeda), jurisprudence (Fiqh), Quranic exegesis (Tafseer), Sufism and so on. Sometimes, we find the terminology of some schools -such as Sufism- to be highly symbolic and controversial. Also, we may note that many religious schools use their own codes and symbols to refer to some specific meanings of their own schools such as the letter خ to refer to Bukhari البخاري in Hadith terminology. There may be instances where some schools may use a term for one meaning and some other schools may use the same to refer to another meaning, such as the term الشيخان (*the two Sheikhs*) that denotes to Abu bakr and Omer among the companions of Prophet Muhanned (PBUH) in the Prophetic history, to Bukhari and Muslim in the Hadith narration, to Ibnu Abi Zeyd Al-Qayrawani and Al-Qabisi in Maliki School, and to Rafi'i and Navavi in Shafi'i school, for instance. (Masoud 2012)

Gazala (2013) argues that the readers of the translation of Islamic terminology are three categories: Arab Muslims, Non-Arab Muslims and Non-Arab non-Muslims. The translators must take care of these three categories; because the difference of the cultural context of a term may lead to difference of its translation as well. For instance, when we say in Arabic صلى محمد (Muhammed prayed his prayer and John prayed his prayer), prayer of Muhammad denotes all his movements and recitations of Islamic prayer while the prayer of John -who is a Christian- denotes his supplication only. This is what we mean by cultural context. And also, it's a common rule in translation to observe the objectives of the translation, kinds of the source texts, and the categories of target groups.

It is true that some of the cultural terms are clear; but many other terms are not so clear that the translators stand confused in dealing with them since there are no parallel words in the target language. In addition, there are some Arabic terms which other languages don't have any corresponding words to them at all. For instance, we read in the Holy Quran the following verse:

((مَا جَعَلَ اللَّهُ مِنْ بَحِيرَةٍ وَلَا سَائِبَةٍ وَلَا وَصِيلَةٍ وَلَا حَامٍ وَلَكِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يَفْتَرُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ وَأَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ)) (5:103)

The verse describes certain wrong practices prevailed in Arabic tribes in pre-Islamic era, which were opposed by Islam and eliminated permanently. When we look into some available Tamil translations of the verse, we can observe the problem apparently as follows:

- பஹீரா (காது கிழிக்கப்பட்ட பெண் ஓட்டகம்), ஸாயிபா (சுயேச்சையாக மேய விடப்படும் பெண் ஓட்டகம்) வஸீலா (இரட்டைக் குட்டிகளை ஈன்றதற்காக சில நிலைகளில் விக் கிரகங்களுக்கு நேர்ந்து விடப்பட்ட ஆடுகள்) ஹாமி (வேலையெதுவும் வாங்கப்படாமல் சுயேச்சையாகத் திரியும்படி விடப்படும் ஆண் ஓட்டகம்) என்பவை (போன்ற சடங்குகளை) அல்லாஹ் ஏற்படுத்தவில்லை - ஆனால் கா.பிரகள்தாம் அல்லாஹ்வின் மீது பொய்யாகக் கற்பனை செய்து கூறுகின்றனர் மேலும் அவர்களில் பெரும்பாலோர் நல்லறிவு பெறாதவர்களாகவே இருக்கின்றனர். (Jan n.d.)

- பஹீரா, ஸாயிபா, வஸீலா, ஹாம் (போன்ற) இவைகளெல்லாம் அல்லாஹ் ஏற்படுத்தியவைகளல்ல. எனினும், நிராகரிப்பவர்கள்தான் (இவைகள் அல்லாஹ் ஏற்படுத்தியவைகள் என) அல்லாஹ்வின் மீது பொய்யான கற்பனை செய்து (து கூறு) கின்றனர். அவர்களில் பலர் (உண்மையை) விளங்காதவர்களாகவே இருக்கின்றனர் (Baqawi 2005)
- ‘பஹீரா’, ஸாயிபா, வஸீலா, ஹாம் என்பனவற்றையெல்லாம் அல்லாஹ் ஏற்படுத்தவில்லை. ஆயினும் நிராகரிப்போர்தான் அல்லாஹ்வின் மீது பொய்களைப் புனைந்து கூறுகின்றனர். மேலும், அவர்களில் பெரும்பாலோர் (இத்தகைய மூட நம்பிக்கைகளை ஏற்றுக்கொள்ளும் அளவுக்கு) அறிவற்றவர்களாய் இருக்கின்றனர். (Qutbudeen & Abdul Rauf n.d.)
- பஹீரா (காது கிழிக்கப்பட்ட பெண் ஓட்டகம்) ஸாயிபா (சுதந்திரமாக மேயவிடப்படும் பெண் ஓட்டகம்) வஸீலா (இரட்டைக் குட்டிகளை ஈன்றதால் விக்ரகங்களுக்கு நேர்ந்துவிடப்பட்ட ஆடுகள்), ஹாம் (வேலைக்கு பயன்படுத்தப்படாது வீணடிக்கப்பட்ட ஆண் ஓட்டகம் முதலிய) இவைகளெல்லாம், அல்லாஹ் ஏற்படுத்தியவைகளல்ல, எனினும், நிராகரிப்போர் தாம் (இவைகள் அல்லாஹ் ஏற்படுத்தியவைகளென) அல்லாஹ்வின் மீது, பொய்யைக் கற்பனை செய்து (து கூறு)கின்றனர், மேலும், அவர்களில் அதிகமானோர் அறியமாட்டார்கள். (King Fahd Complex n.d.)

It is obvious that while some of the above translations give the terms as they are in Arabic, some other translations try to give interpretations within brackets.

With this backdrop, we identify the following challenges with regard to the translation of Islamic terminology into Tamil:

- Difficulty in finding suitable single words in Tamil for the terms, such as:
 الرّكاة / النّسك / الطّاعوت / الفرقان / الصّبغة / الرّزق / سدرة المنتهى / التّكبير / الإقامة / الاستقامة / الرّكوع / السّجود / السّعي / أمّي / ذمّي ...
- Lacking finite corresponding Tamil terms for a number of Arabic terms in Islamic sciences, such as:
 سد الذرائع / المصالح المرسلّة / الاستحسان / المتواتر / الصحيح / العزيز / الغريب / قطعي الثبوت / قطعي الدلالة / ظني الثبوت / ظني الدلالة / أهل الرّأي / أهل الحديث ...
- Lacking an agreed upon approach in dealing with the key terms of Islamic faith, such as:
 الله / النّبي / المملّك / البرزخ / العرش ...
- Problems of distinguishing between identical Arabic terms with differences in their connotations, such as:
 الوحي والإلهام / القضاء والقدر / الولاء والبراء / الحج والعمرة ...
- Absence of consistency in transliterating a number of Arabic names into Tamil, such as:
 عبد الرحمن / عبد الرحيم / أبو الدرداء / أبو ذر الغفاري ...
- Lack of a uniformity in writing the following Arabic sounds in Tamil:
 / ث / ح / خ / ذ / ز / ص / ض / ط / ظ / غ / ق /

Suggested Solutions:

In order to conclude to a solid ground in solving the problems of translating Islamic Terminology into Tamil, it may be useful for translators to summarize the ways the Islamic terminology are handled by the translators of many other languages (Saeed 2013) as follows:

1. Writing the terms in Arabic or in transliteration without giving any translation or explanation. . (الحج - ھجّ - Haj)
2. Writing the terms in Arabic or in transliteration and giving the corresponding words in the target language between the brackets, inverted commas or as a foot note. (e.g. الحج - புனித யாத்திரை - Pilgrimage)
3. Writing the Arabic terms and giving a brief explanation or a general idea about the meaning of words like: ... بحيرة وسائبة ووصيلة وحام
4. Combining two or more of the methods said above.
5. The King Fahd Complex for printing the Holy Quran suggests that there should be a uniformity in the translation of the frequent words of the Holy Quran as long as their meanings did not differ according to context to context; and the Islamic terms that are difficult to translate should be kept in the Arabic form and explained in a separate list at the end. Also, it recommends to avoid the use of the terms related to other religions in the translation of Islamic terms, and to write the proper nouns with their Arabic pronunciation while mentioning their corresponding names (if any) in the target language as footnotes or between the brackets. [For example: Ibrahim (Abraham), Yusuf (Joseph), Sulaiman (Solomon)....]

Conclusion:

Among a number of problems in Arabic to Tamil translation, only the challenges of translating Arabic-Islamic terminology into Tamil are focused here. Obviously, the challenges are multi-dimensional. Differences in word-formation processes, lack of equivalents, transliteration issues are the main issues of the Tamil translation of Arabic-Islamic terminology.

In the light the of above discussion, we recommend to the stakeholders of the field to train able and interested people in the field of translation; to initiate a project of comprehensive dictionary for Arabic-Islamic terminology in Tamil language; and to encourage more researches in this very field of study.

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