

TRANSLATABILITY OF THE AESTHETIC ASPECT OF RHYTHM IN QUR'ANIC VERSES

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ABSTRACT: *This study attempts to understand how the aesthetic aspects of the Qur'an are translated into or accommodated in English. It clarifies slightly challenges in translating the Qur'an, a text believed by Moslems to be the word of God and as such beautiful beyond imagination. To get a feel of its poetic essence, particularly in its rhythmic verses, and the task that lies ahead for translators, three short "surahs" (verses) and seven well-known translations of each were analysed. The theory of equivalence was used to measure. It was found that all surahs showed rhythmic patterns (sound) that are distinctive, even to the untrained eye/ear. Readers who might not understand its meaning can still appreciate its poetry. None of the translations, however, could reproduce these rhythmic patterns that help memorization of the surahs. In summary, the pervasiveness of rhythmic elements is clear and a real challenge awaits the translator of this text.*

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics, Qur'an, Rhythmic Patterns, Poetry, Equivalence

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an is believed by Moslems to be the Word of God, a revelation from God (Hasanuddin Ahmaed 2004). Upon such belief, the very act of translating, i.e. moving the meaning of the word of God into another language would not be achievable. Logically, the exact meaning intended by God being our Creator, could never be attainable by we mere humans. How can one possibly know what God really wants of its creation when we cannot even completely know what is in our own heart and in the heart and mind of another person. The brain, as is often said, scientifically is a black box.

This fear of claiming to understand completely the Qur'an and the message hidden in it is perhaps the most fundamental reason some translators avoid referring to their product (of attempting to transfer the message of the Qur'an into another language) a translation. Some others are a little braver to call it a translation but ensure that their work is backed by a foreword clarifying issues in the translation, i.e. their approach to translating or adding comments on their translation. It is common also to see other works classified as interpretations rather than translations, be they done monolingually within Arabic itself which is the language of the Qur'an or bilingually into another language, for example, into Malay or English.

And while some translation theorists acknowledge this distinction between translation and interpretation as two separate acts, others see interpretation as the furthest end of the continuum of translation approaches. The distinction between translation and interpretation rests on the understanding that when we translate we put into another language what we think is the meaning conveyed by the language of the source text. On the other hand, when we interpret, we attempt to decipher the meaning of the Qur'anic verses. With the latter, the

translator only puts forward a suggestion to the meaning of the Qur'anic verses. In this way, he admits to not being able to state exactly the meaning.

Statement of the problem

What can be derived from the above brief discussion on the translatability of the Qur'an is that the key concept in this translation-interpretation equation is the concept of "meaning". Translating the Qur'an is a real challenge, perhaps not possible to be overcome, because it is the word of God and meaning is elusive. Abdul-Raof (2001) cited in Davoudi-Sharifabad, Tengku Sepora and Kenevisi (2012) indirectly captures the complexity of translating this religious text when he stresses the need for Qur'an exegesis or reference to exegetical exercise or exploration before ambiguities in the Qur'an, especially structural ambiguities, can be disambiguated and the meaning transferred. Abdul-Raof's significant work on Qur'an Translation focuses on the discourse and texture of this text in view of exegesis of the Qur'an. His work is referred to and cited by Davoud—Sharifabad, Tengku Sepora and Kenevisi (2012) for its relevance to meaning and ambiguities. Though meaning is probably the most important consideration in translation particularly of a religious text like the Qur'an, the focus of the present paper is not that of meaning. Consequently, work of exegetists including that of Abdul Raof (2001) though significant and beneficial to the study of Quran is referred to only incidentally here and will not be elaborated.

The question that is of interest and to be investigated here in this paper, however, pertains to the beauty of the language of the Quran, i.e. pertains to the form rather than the content. A cursory analysis of some excerpts of the Quran is conducted to determine if the uniqueness of its language as suggested by the work of Hasanuddin Ahmad (2004) is truly obvious to the untrained eye and if, simply, on the basis of its form the Qur'an will present a challenging translation endeavour.

In his study of the Qur'an, Hasanuddin Ahmad (2004) highlights its distinctive style in the first chapter of his book. In its elucidation, he begins with the characteristic of repetition and a comparison between Qur'an and poetry. The comparison gives attention first and foremost to the feature of rhyme and rhythm, before moving on to concepts of narratives, digression (*iltefat*), presentation in various forms (*tasreef*), ellipsis (*hazaf*), brevity (*ijaz*), and so on (2004:13-21). Only in his second chapter does he devote attention to figures of speech in Qur'an. Though analysis of Hasanuddin Ahmad's book solely does not suggest conclusively that style, rhyme and rhythm are important features of Qur'an that should be given attention in translation his work does suggest that these aesthetic features can aggravate the problem of translating the Quran. Research should be done to discover if these features can be retained along with the meaning or need to be compromised to retain meaning. If there is difficulty retaining or reproducing both, then more conclusions can be reached about the translatability of Qur'an.

The next section presents some more literature on the Qur'an and its translation as well as the translation of religious texts, and poetry or similar literary works. It highlights Nida's theory of equivalent effect, formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence in addition to the issues of translation difficulty and untranslatability.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The work of Eugene Nida (1964) towards a science of translating and which studies the translation of the Bible made its mark in Nida's propagation of the theory of equivalent effect and equivalence and his idea of achieving formal equivalence or dynamic equivalence. It is referred to here for two main reasons: the first, because his reference to the translation of another major religious text, the Bible. Second, because like the Qur'an it is meant to be read by all humans, irrespective of race, age, time, etc. As such the question of how these texts can be accessed, read, understood and abided by each and everyone who subscribes to the religion must be taken into consideration by religious leaders and translators. The concepts of formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence become immediately pertinent in the translation of such texts. These concepts serve the present study as the criteria for the analysis of the translations. Formal equivalence pays attention to the message conveyed through the form and content. It measures, for example, correspondence by determining if poetry has been translated into poetry in the target language, if prose or sentence has been retained as prose or sentence, and if the form a concept is explained is reproduced in the target language. Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, measures whether the effect of the translation on the target receptor is the same or is a "natural close equivalent" as the effect on the source receptors. In the case of the Qur'an, the effect involves knowing the effect on native Arabic speakers, and such speakers at the time the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) and at such place. This would be an impossible attempt by anyone or a translator, and is certainly not what this study will even endeavour to do. The concept of dynamic equivalence here is similar in meaning to the concept of communicative translation as put forth by Newmark (1980, 1988). These concepts measure how the receptors receive, understand and react to the message. It is difficult to measure. All these concepts of equivalent effect, natural closest equivalent, formal, dynamic and communicative equivalences and methods are highlighted here to enable the comparison of translations to be described in more clear tones later and within certain qualifications and constraints.

Besides being categorized as a religious text, the Qur'an is discussed in this paper in relation to the category of poetry because of its extremely aesthetic significance. According to Lefevere, (1992:70) what has been the distinguishing feature of Western poetry for over fifteen hundred years is rhyme and meter. Owing to different reasons, both are difficult to translate. Translating rhyme presents difficulty particularly if the vowel and consonant systems are different in the other language, and with meters, it is the case of transposing difficulty. In his book on translating literature, Lefevere (1992: 71) highlights rhyme's part in a poem as marking "a completion, and a rounding of the line", and further marking "the development of the poem as a whole." He adds that the illocutionary power of the poem is increased by the sound effect of rhymes coming in succession one after another. Lefevere (1992:72) suggests that a translator would do more service to his target audience if his translation of a rhymed and metered poem is unrhymed and unmetered but reads well. This is preferred to the production of rhymed and metered translation that distances the reader from the original poem. In a way, he is stressing that producing the correct message behind it is more important than capturing the aesthetic aspect (1992:72). Lefevere (1992:73) puts forth the idea that the Arabic *qasidah* is a poetry that is hard to translate because it is a canonized genre comprising a monorhyme scheme characterized by a strict metrical pattern which ends with a rhyme sound that is the same throughout. Because of the difficulty to translate, this canonized literature he said is a great culture that cannot be made known to the West. In short, Lefevere's theory on this kind of poetry translation can be said to throw some

light on the translation of the Qur'an with its unique rhythmic patterns. The argument here would run as follows. If the rhythmic feature of the *qasidah* already presents a problem to translate, presumably the difficulty of translating rhyme in the Qur'an (a revelation from God and not a human creation in the form of poetry) would be magnified. The act of translating the latter would logically be insurmountable.

Hasanuddin Ahmad (2004:19) in his study of the Quran also made this comparison between Arabic poetry and the Quran, making a distinction between Quran as the "quintessential book of wisdom" and, accordingly is "the antithesis of poetry". Hasanuddin (2004:20) suggests that Arabic poetry which employs often and aggressively rhetorical devices and figures of speech helps a reader to appreciate and grasp the stylistic features of the Quran. He, however, claims that "rigid metrical connection of rhymed metre and identical word endings" is not a feature of the Quran. The Quran portrays a distinctive unique style that resembles neither poetry nor prose. It is characterised by a "grandiose verbal cadence" and *ayaat* endings which are rhythmic and that can make the hearer experience a state of ecstasy (Hasanuddin 2004:21). The rhythmic *ayaat* when read aloud becomes very hypnotic and "charms the ear" (17).

The above detailing of the features of poetry and the aesthetic beauty of the Qur'an is given from an academic and linguistic perspective. The analysis of the translation, however, should also pay attention to the ease of reading the Qur'an. A big percentage of the followers of Islam are not speakers of the Arabic. Some are taught from young to read the Arabic script and the Qur'an without knowing what it is saying. Children are taught to memorise some verses of the Qur'an, and some have become what are known as "hafiz" because they have the whole Qur'an memorized. It is no easy ordeal, but could this wonderful achievement have been made a little bit easier because of the rhythmic aesthetic features of the Qur'an. It is not the intention of this research to determine if the rhythmic patterns of the Qur'an help the readers to memorise, but it is the interest here to see what happens to these patterns in translation.

The argument in this paper rests on a simple logic. If one would like to translate this divine text from Arabic into another language, and do justice to it, then he/she would undoubtedly be confronted with the problem of replicating these rhythmic endings which are not regulated or structured as in poetry. In addition to the abundance of rhetorical features and figures of speech encapsulating wisdom, a translator of the Quran who wants to come as close, if at all possible, to the Quran will be challenged to translate the rhythmic endings. How a translator of this text would be challenged is investigated through a simple study which is primarily descriptive in nature. This analysis may provide also some defense for Lefevere's suggestion about transposing difficulty by avoiding to retain rhymes and meters but prioritizing a translation that reads well.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this paper, analysis is conducted on only three short chapters of the Qur'an (from the Juz Amma, the last juz of the Qur'an): Surah Al-Fil (The Elephant) Chapter (105); Surah I-kawthar (A River in Paradise) Chapter (108); and Surah Al-Falaq (The Daybreak) Chapter (113). Each chapter (the term employed in the Qur'anic Arabic Corpus) selected comprises between three to six verses only. Each chapter is analysed to determine

the presence of repetitive words and words in rhythmic constructions. The small number of chapters selected is justified for this modest study because seven translations of each chapter are analysed. Because a good number of translations are employed, the analysis will provide credible and valid comparisons to be made.

Then seven translations of each chapter are analysed and compared to determine if rhyme and rhythm are reproduced in the translations. As meaning is not the focus of this study, the meanings captured by the translators will be given attention only in so far as they affect the rhythmic pattern. The data for analysis, i.e. the chapters, verses and their translations, are extracted from **The Qur'anic Arabic Corpus*, an open source project carried out from 2009-2011 under the GNU public license headed by and copyrighted to Kais Dukes and carried out under University of Leeds. This Corpus compiles the translations of seven well-known translators of the Qur'an: Sahih International, Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, Shakir, Mohamed Sarwar, Mohsin Khan and Arberry.

Analysis and findings

Surah Al-Fil (The Elephant) reproduced below comprises 5 ayaat / lines / verses. All the first four lines end in words that have the ending (ل + ي) with the words: *alfil ... tadliil...abaabiil...sijjil*. Only the last and fifth line has an ending that does not rhyme. When these verses are compared with their translations, it is found that none of the seven translations show such a rhymed construction. It can be concluded that meaning is the priority in all translations. Not much attempt is made to produce any of this aesthetics of Surah Al-Fil. The translation of *alfil* as “elephant” has been consistent across all translations analysed while the other seemingly more consistent usage is with the words “clay”, “astray” and “flock”. Some attempt might have been done by Yusuf Ali and Arberry to capture the rhythmic construction by using the words astray and clay. Mohsin, however, has preferred to translate with *Sijjil* rather than clay, and so by doing this has presumably tried to be more faithful to the original and meaning instead of to the sound. Sahih International manages to produce some rhyme by using the word “misguidance” rather than “astray” to match the word “elephant” in the preceding verse. Another interesting observation is with the length of the translations. While the length of all other translations of the first verse is relatively the same, the translation of Mohsin Khan is almost triple the length.

In short, the beauty of the rhyme in Surah Al-Fil seems not easily reproduced and may be almost impossible to reproduce without compromising on meaning and faithfulness. For Muslims who are not native speakers of Arabic, memorization of the Surah may be manageable because of the rhythmic endings.

Surah Al-Fil

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ ۝١

أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضَلُّلٍ ۝٢

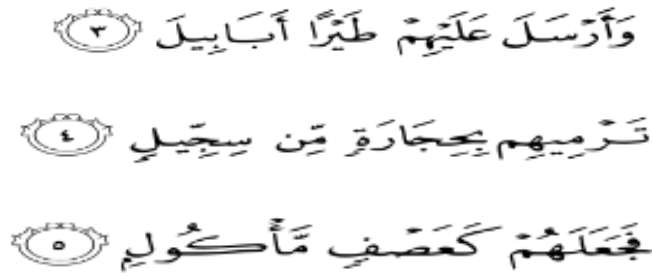


Table 1. Chapter (105) sūrat l-fil (The Elephant)

Verse No.	Sahih International (SI)	Pickthall (Pk)	Yusuf Ali (YA)	Shakir: (Sh.)	Muhammad Sarwar (MS)	Mohsin Khan (MK)	Arberry (Ar)
1	SI: Have you not considered, [O Muhammad], how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?	Pk: Hast thou not seen how thy Lord dealt with the owners of the Elephant?	YA: Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the Companions of the Elephant?	Sh.: Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the possessors of the elephant?	MS: Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephant?	Mohsin Khan: Have you (O Muhammad (Peace be upon him) not seen how your Lord dealt with the Owners of the Elephant? [The elephant army which came from Yemen under the command of Abrahah Al-Ashram intending to destroy the Ka'bah at Makkah].	Ar.: Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with the Men of the Elephant?
2	SI: Did He not make their plan into misguidance?	Pk: Did He not bring their stratagem to naught,	YA: Did He not make their treacherous plan go astray?	Sh.: Did He not cause their war to end in confusion,	MS: Did He not cause their evil plots to fail	MK: Did He not make their plot go astray?	Ar.: Did He not make their guile to go astray?

3	SI: And He sent against them birds in flocks,	Pk: And send against them swarms of flying creatures,	YA: And He sent against them Flights of Birds,	Sh.: And send down (to prey) upon them birds in flocks,	MS: by sending against them flocks of swallows	MK: And sent against them birds, in flocks,	Ar.: And He loosed upon them birds in flights,
4	SI: Striking them with stones of hard clay,	Pk.: Which pelted them with stones of baked clay,	YA: Striking them with stones of baked clay.	Sh.: Casting against them stones of baked clay,	MS.: which showered them with small pebbles of clay	MK: Striking them with stones of Sijjil.	Ar.: hurling against them stones of baked clay
5	SI: And He made them like eaten straw.	Pk: And made them like green crops devoured (by cattle)?	YA: Then did He make them like an empty field of stalks and straw, (of which the corn) has been eaten up.	Sh.: So He rendered them like straw eaten up?	MS: to turn them into (something) like the left-over grass grazed by cattle.	MK: And made them like an empty field of stalks (of which the corn has been eaten up by cattle).	Ar.: and He made them like green blades devoured.

Analysis of the surah I-kawthar below reveals similar findings. The chapter comprises 3 verses, each ends with (- ار) –ar. The endings are the words *alkausar*, *wanhar*, *abtar*. It can be observed that none of the translations/interpretations end with words that are rhythmic in nature from one verse to another. For example, Sahih International gives: ‘al-Kawthar’, ‘sacrifice [to Him alone]’ and ‘the one cut off’. Pickthall’s verses end with ‘Abundance’, ‘sacrifice’, and ‘without posterity’ while Arberry’s translation is almost a combination of Sahih International’s and Pickthall’s with endings of ‘abundance’, ‘sacrifice’ and ‘the one cut off’. The other four translations, likewise, are along the same lines, with Mohsin Khan’s being a little longer with explanations. No rhythmic pattern that reveals attention to aesthetics and that can help memorization can be noted in the translations.

Surah I-kawthar

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

إِنَّا أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَىكَ الْكَوْثَرَ ۝١

فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَأَنْحَرِ ۝٢

إِنَّكَ شَانِعُكَ هُوَ الْأَبْتَرُ ۝٣

Table 2.Chapter (108) sūrat I-kawthar (A River in Paradise)

Verse	Sahih International (SI)	Pickthall (Pk)	Yusuf Ali (YA)	Shakir:	Muhammad Sarwar (MS)	Mohsin Khan (MK)	Arberry (Ar)
1	SI: Indeed, We have granted you, [O Muhammad], al-Kawthar.	Pk: Lo! We have given thee Abundance;	YA: To thee have We granted the Fount (of Abundance).	Sh: Surely We have given you Kausar,	MS: (Muhammad), We have granted you abundant virtue.	MK: Verily, We have granted you (O Muhammad (Peace be upon him)) Al-Kauthar (a river in Paradise);	Ar: Surely We have given thee abundance;
2	SI: So pray to your Lord and sacrifice [to Him alone].	Pk: So pray unto thy Lord, and sacrifice.	YA: Therefore to thy Lord turn in Prayer and Sacrifice.	Sh: Therefore pray to your Lord and make a sacrifice.	MS: So worship your Lord and make sacrificial offerings.	Mohsin Khan: Therefore turn in prayer to your Lord and sacrifice (to Him only).	Ar: so pray unto thy Lord and sacrifice.
3	SI: Indeed, your enemy is the one cut off.	Pk: Lo! it is thy insulter (and not thou) who	YA: For he who hateth thee, he will be cut off	Sh: Surely your enemy is the one who shall be without	MS: Whoever hates you will himself remain childless.	MK: For he who makes you angry (O Muhammad (Peace be upon him)), - he will	Ar: Surely he that hates thee, he is the one cut off.

		is without posterity.	(from Future Hope).	posterity,		be cut off (from every good thing in this world and in the Hereafter).	
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In the chapter Surah Al-Falaq last analysed in this modest study again a similar pattern or lack of pattern rather is found in the translations. This surah comprises 5 verses which end with (*bil-falaq*), (*kholaq*), (*waqab*), (*uqod*), and (*hasad*), all endings which to the untrained eye or ear in Arabic are to a certain extent rhythmic (regardless of the meaning of the endings). There is high likelihood that the surah can be more easily memorized with such endings; its poetic nature facilitates this. Reference to the translations in the table below will show that none of the translations show close equivalent to the Qur'anic verse in terms of the rhythmic pattern or endings. Let's take Yusuf Ali's translation as an example; the endings comprise 'Dawn', 'created things', 'it overspreads', 'practise secret arts', and 'practises envy'. Shakir ends his verses with 'dawn', 'has created', 'it comes', 'who blow on knots' and 'envious when he envies'. Likewise, all the other translations show non-rhythmic endings.

Surah Al-Falaq

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

قُلْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ الْفَلَقِ ۝١

مِنْ شَرِّ مَا خَلَقَ ۝٢

وَمِنْ شَرِّ غَاسِقٍ إِذَا وَقَبَ ۝٣

وَمِنْ شَرِّ النَّفَّاثَاتِ فِي الْعُقَدِ ۝٤

وَمِنْ شَرِّ حَاسِدٍ إِذَا حَسَدَ ۝٥

Table 3. Chapter (113) sūrat l-falaq (The Daybreak)

Verse	Sahih International (SI)	Pickthall (Pk)	Yusuf Ali (YA)	Shakir (Sh.)	Muhammad Sarwar (MS)	Mohsin Khan (MK)	Arberry (Ar)
1	SI: Say, "I seek refuge in the Lord of daybreak	Pk: Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak	YA: Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of the Dawn	Sh: Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of the dawn,	MS: (Muhammad), say, "I seek protection from the Lord of the Dawn	MK: Say: "I seek refuge with (Allah) the Lord of the daybreak,	Ar: Say: 'I take refuge with the Lord of the Daybreak
2	SI: From the evil of that which He created	Pk: From the evil of that which He created;	YA: From the mischief of created things;	Sh: From the evil of what He has created,	MS: against the evil of whatever He has created.	MK: "From the evil of what He has created;	Ar: from the evil of what He has created,
3	SI: And from the evil of darkness when it settles	Pk: From the evil of the darkness when it is intense,	YA: From the mischief of Darkness as it overspreads;	Sh: And from the evil of the utterly dark night when it comes,	MS: I seek His protection against the evil of the invading darkness,	MK: "And from the evil of the darkening (night) as it comes with its darkness; (or the moon as it sets or goes away).	Ar: from the evil of darkness when it gathers,
4	SI: And from the evil of the blowers in knots	Pk: And from the evil of malignant witchcraft,	YA: From the mischief of those who practise secret arts;	Sh: And from the evil of those who blow on knots,	MS: from the evil of those who practice witchcraft.	MK: And from the evil of the witchcrafts when they blow in the knots,	Ar: from the evil of the women who blow on knots,

5	SI: And from the evil of an envier when he envies."	Pk: And from the evil of the envier when he envieth.	YA: And from the mischief of the envious one as he practises envy.	Sh:: And from the evil of the envious when he envies	MS: and from the evil of the envious ones.	MK: "And from the evil of the envier when he envies."	Ar: from the evil of an envier when he envies.'
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CONCLUSION

Analysis of three short *surahs* (chapters) of the Qur'an consistently displays the rhythmic essence of the language of the Qur'an. As the aim of the present study is to determine if this aesthetic quality of the Qur'an can be reproduced, analyses of seven translations by known translators and translator agency are conducted. No doubt a simple analysis of the translation is not going to reveal the translator's preference for a certain method as opposed to another, the problems the translator faces in translating such a text, or even his personal values, or other factors. Nevertheless, it is not wrong to assume that a translator would strive to retain both the form and meaning of the source text if this can at all be done, and also to strive to achieve equivalent effect or a natural closest equivalent to the source text without risking mistranslation of meaning of the text. And it is on this assumption that the study and analysis is done.

Comparison basically is done on two levels: the first between the verses in the *surah* itself, i.e. the translator's own effort at reproducing the form or style of the source text; and the second level is a comparison between the seven translators/translations. The latter is not carried out to criticise a translation or compare the quality of the translations or the meaning of the translations but merely to determine if the aesthetic beauty, the rhythmic pattern of the *surahs* are able to be reproduced and to gauge the extent of its reproduction.

No such reproduction is found in any translation of the *surahs* and in any translator's work. The endings of all verses and all *surahs* display no rhyming pattern like the patterns in the *surahs*. Presumably, attention is focussed on the meaning of the *surahs*. The translations are in a way parallel to Lefevere's suggestion of being of more service to the target audience by being faithful to the message than retaining the beauty.

From the above, a conclusion can be reached that the beauty and elegance of the language of the Qur'an is a major, if not an insurmountable challenge to translators of the Qur'an. This challenge or difficulty is clearly evident in the translation of only three short *surahs*. The challenge of translating the whole Qur'an from the perspective of the rhyming feature and rhythmic and aesthetic essence accordingly becomes basically unimaginable. Still, it would be interesting, thought provoking and humbling for a researcher to extend this modest study to the other parts of the Qur'an and improve on the methodology to gain better insights into the translation of the Qur'an.

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