

**LOSS OF MEANING IN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE HOLY QUR'AN:
COMPARING PICKTHALL WITH THE TRANSLATIONS OF YUSUF ALI, ASAD, AND
PEACHY & AL-JOHANI**

Mohammed Ahmed Albarakati¹ and Mohammad Saleem²

¹Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, KSA

²Department of English, King Abdulaziz University, Rabigh, KSA

ABSTRACT: *Translation between languages is always challenging. The message communicated in the SL has to be interpreted by the translator and transferred into the TL in such a way that the receiver of the message understands the meaning intended in the SL. Such challenges are more complicated when cultural contexts of the two languages differ and often result in loss of meaning at various levels. The over-, under-, or mistranslation is prevalent in the translations of the Holy Qur'an due to various factors such as the lack of equivalence of some words, differences in the syntactic structures, and translation approach. This study aims at investigating the loss of meaning at different levels in some translations of the Qur'an. It will present a comparative analysis of translations with respect to this problem. How translators fail to convey the intended meaning as identified in Qur'anic exegeses. This paper presents, comparatively, an analysis and assessment of M. Pickthall's "The Meaning of Glorious Koran" (1930) with three other translations of the holy Qur'an in English; viz. Yusuf Ali's The Noble Qur'an (1934), Muhammad Asad's The Message of the Qur'an (1980), and Peachy and Al-Johani's The Qur'an: The Final Book of God (2012). This study pinpoints how the renderings, done variedly by different translators of the Qur'an, have become a problematic issue, and highlights the inadequacies in delivering the proper meaning of a word or phrase.*

KEYWORDS: Loss of Meaning, English Translations, Holy Qur'an, Yusuf Ali, Asad, Peachy, Al-Johani

INTRODUCTION: ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE NOBLE QUR'AN

Muslim scholars working in the field of 'Qura'nic studies' have been very active for many centuries, but it was during the 19th and early 20th centuries that they took to English translation of the Qur'an. Many scholars produced works on the Qur'an from different contexts and perspectives, its translations, interpretations and explanations. In the 20th century it took as a trend and many translators published their English renderings of the Qur'an. According to Binark and Eren (1986) only four new, complete translations in English existed before the 1900s, and by 1980s, there were sixty-one more, mostly in English (p. xii). Mainly, more intelligible, simple, and lucid translations appeared during the 2000s.

A few examples of translations in English produced from 1980s to 2000s include the works of Muhammad Asad (1980); Muhammad Shakir (1987); Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan (1996); and Abdal Haqq Bewley and Aisha Bewley (1999). While, works produced from 2000s include those of Majid Fakhry (2002); Tarif Khalidi (2002); Thomas Cleary (2004); M. A. S. Haleem (2004 & 05); Laleh Bakhtiar (2007); Niyazi Kahveci (2007); Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (2013), Dr Peachy and Dr Al-Johani (2012), and Prof Abdur Raheem Kidwai (2013), and the list goes on.

SCOPE, METHODOLOGY, FRAMEWORK

This paper provides a brief introduction to the trend of translating the Qur'an into English and briefly introduces Pickthall's translation. It provides examples of some verses by comparing Pickthall's rendering of the selected words with three other translations (Ali, Y., 1977; Asad, 1980; and Peachy & Al-Johani, 2012). The aim is two-fold: (i) to pinpoint how this vocabulary is variedly rendered into English by different translators of the Qur'an, and identifying the main problems involved in translating it; and (ii) to draw comparisons among the selected translations. A comparison of many debatable, contentious, and considerably variedly translated verses is provided to demonstrate the differences as well as the similarities that exist between Pickthall's translation and other three translations. Also, it reveals the shortcomings of Pickthall's use of wording for these Arabic words. And in the next section some selected verses of surah Yusuf (surah 12) are compared with Yusuf Ali's and Peachy and al-Johani's works, again to show the similarity as well as difference in rendering some selected Arabic words and phrases. It is followed by concluding remarks.

The rationale behind the selection of these scholars is that they represent translations made by Muslims (Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, Asad, Peachy & Al-Johani), native Arabic speakers (al-Johani) and non-native Arabic speakers (Pickthall, Y. Ali, Asad and Peachy). Moreover, their translations represent three different eras: 1930s (Pickthall; Yusuf Ali), 1980s (Asad) and quite new translations (Peachy & Al-Johani). The steps followed in carrying out the analysis are: (1) building a corpus of data which includes selected verses/words, (2) identifying the English equivalents of these words/verses in the selected translations, and (3) evaluating the translations for a comparative insight, and to draw further conclusions.

DISCUSSION

A Brief Overview of M. Pickthall's *"The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an"*

M. Pickthall (1875-1936), the first modern British Muslim to make a translation of the Qur'an in English, was a novelist, journalist, and educator who converted to Islam in 1917 (Kidwai, 1987; Mohammed, 2005, 2013). He traveled to the East, studied the Orient, and acquired fluency in Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu. In 1920, he toured India, became a journalist and edited newspapers championing the Muslim cause. While in Hyderabad, Pickthall took a two-year sabbatical to complete his translation. In this task, he received help from several quarters, notably from Mustafa al-Maraghi, the then-rector of Al-Azhar and the *nizam* of Hyderabad to whom he dedicated his work. An Anglican clergyman's son, Pickthall was aware of the Christian missionaries' translations of the Qur'an and various problems in them and therefore he sought to remedy the defects since "*some of the translations include commentation (commentary?) offensive to Muslims, and almost all employ a style of language which Muslims at once recognize as unworthy*" (Pickthall, 1992, p. vii).

It is true that while Pickthall's work, especially bearing the title *The meaning of the Glorious Koran*, is a good example of the attempt signalling that any translation is an interpretation, not God's word itself. It was widely read in the first half of the twentieth century and, therefore, bears historical significance, yet its current demand has declined owing to its archaic prose and lack of annotation. Thus, new versions of the translation, modified and revised, with different translation approaches have appeared: the first to appear was by Arafat K. El-Ashi in 1996, and the most recent by the collective efforts of William Peachy and al-Johani. In his "Translator's Foreword", Pickthall reveals in clear terms the aim of his effort:

The aim of this work is to present to English readers what Muslims the world over hold to be the meaning of the words of the Qur'an and the nature of that Book, in not unworthy language and concisely, with a view to the requirements of English-speaking Muslims. It may reasonably be claimed that no Holy Scripture can be fairly presented by one who disbelievers its inspiration and its message;... . The Quran cannot be translated. That is the belief of old-fashioned Sheykhs and the view of the present writer....[No translation can] take the place of the Qur'an in Arabic nor is it [i.e., the present translation] meant to do so.

Although Pickthall's work has been both appreciated as well as criticised (Al-Jabari, 2008; Emara, 2013; Halimah, 2014; Hannouna, 2010; Kidwai, 1992; Mansuri, 2013; Shellabear, 1931), it will suffice here to quote the viewpoints of some scholars. For example, Maryam Jameelah (2009) in her "*How I Discovered the Holy Quran?*" writes about Pickthall's translation in these words:

As soon as I opened that book, it proved a revelation! The powerful eloquence literally swept me off my feet. I then realized why George Sale's translation was most unfair. From then on, I refused to read his or any other renderings of Holy Quran by non- Muslims. After reading Pickthall's rendition, I discovered other translations in English by Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Lahori and Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi. ... However, Pickthall's rendition remained my favourite and to this day, I have never found any other translations in English that can equal it. *The sweep of eloquence, the virility and dignity of the language is unsurpassed in any other translation. Most other translations commit the mistake of using the word "God" but Pickthall retains "Allah" throughout.* This makes the message of Islam strike the Western reader as more authentic and effective. (*Italics mine*) (Internet archive, p. 5)

Similarly, for Prof Kidwai (1992), holding the distinction of bringing out a first-rate rendering of the Qur'an in English, Pickthall "keeps scrupulously close to the original in elegant, though now somewhat archaic, English. However, although it is one of the most widely used English translations, it provides scant explanatory notes and background information. This obviously restricts its usefulness for an uninitiated reader of the Qur'an".

He is of the opinion that one of the distinctive features of Pickthall's translation, perhaps one of the most popular and widely circulated translations by an English Muslim, is its "faithfulness to the original". Being a native speaker grounded well in the nuances of English language, Pickthall's translations, no doubt, "surpasses other translations in its elegance of style and diction", however, a common reader finds it difficult to grasp the meaning for his use of the Biblical English. The absence of short explanatory notes is a serious defect in this work (Kidwai, 1987, pp. 11-12). Moreover, for Abu Farrakh (1982, p. 106), Pickthall's effort was a literal translation which excelled in its clarity and faithfulness.

Pickthall followed certain techniques and strategies in his translation. These techniques and strategies may be summarized as: i) preparation of a foreword in which Pickthall comments on the meanings of the holy Qur'an, its inimitability, and the difficulties encountered by him; ii) placing only few notes; iii) keeping Arabic text and English rendering in parallel columns, while short commentaries as footnotes in the translations; iv) using archaic biblical language; v) preserving the functional aspects of the cohesive device in the target language; and vi) good economy in respect of the number of words he used. Moreover, keeping aside the shortcomings, Pickthall shows good linguistic competence in both Arabic and English and sound knowledge of Arabic syntax and rhetoric in order to appreciate the

complex linguistic and rhetorical patterns of Qur'anic structure (Mansuri 2013, p. 59). In the words of Bobzin, "Pickthall's translation, which contains exceedingly few annotations, had enormous success among Muslims and continues to be reprinted even today (for example, in Istanbul, 1996)" (Bobzin 2001, p. 343). Thus, resulting in a stable, informative, effective, impressive, and unique translation—although no one can claim to any accurate and authentic translation, nor has anyone claimed.

Pickthall's rendering of the Qur'an is appreciable as he tried his best to be as close to the original style of the Qur'an as possible except that he used some archaic lexis and some coloring of Biblical style, even then he admitted certain weaknesses of translating the Qur'an and these very shortcomings are the difficulties of the Qura'nic translation.

A Comparison of some Debatable and Contentious Verses: Pickthall vs. Others

The table below presents a comparison of some selected verses, which, in some ways, are debatable, contentious, and variedly translated verses. It clearly shows the differences as well as the similarities that exist between Pickthall's translation and other three translations (Yusuf Ali (1977), Asad (1980), and Peachy and Al-Johani (2012), the first two being the most famous and most widely read translations of the Qur'an in English; and third one being the modified/revised version of Pickthall's work. This also shows that there are both serious as well as minor differences between Pickthall's and other three translations of these debatable and crucial phrases/words. The verses selected are related to *Shura* (2:233; 3:159; 42:38); *Khalifah* (2:30); *fasad fi al-Ard* (2:30); *Ulil Amr* (4:59); *Qawamun* (4:34); *Libas* (2:187); *Jihad* (9:20); *Mi'raj /Asra* (17:1); Prophet 'Isa's crucifixion (4:157-8); *Makr* (3:54); *Zul/Dhu'l-Qarnayn and Yajuj and Majuj* (18:94), etc. For a comparison, of these contentious verses and their varied translations by Pickthall and other translators, see Table 1. The similarities and differences in the use of words/phrases for such terms is highlighted in bold.

Table 1: A comparison of some verses: Pickthall vs. Yusuf Ali, Asad, and Peachy & al-Johani

Some Selected verses from *Surah Yusuf* (Joseph): A Comparison

The translations of the following four verses of *Surah Yusuf* (12: 1, 3, 7, 111) by Pickthall Yusuf Ali,

Surah: Verse	Asad	Peachy and al-Johani	Yusuf Ali	Pickthall
2:233 (تَشَاوُرْ / <i>Tashawwur</i>)	"by mutual consent and counsel "	"by mutual consent and (after) consultation "	"by mutual consent and after due consultation "	"by mutual consent and (after) consultation "
3:159 (شَاوِرْهُمْ / <i>Shawirhum</i>)	"and take counsel with them in all matters of public concern"	"and consult with them on matters"	"and consult them in the affair"	"and consult with them upon the conduct of affairs"
42:38 (شُورَى / <i>Shura</i>)	"they decide their matters by consultation "	"whose business is by consultation among them"	"who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation "	"and whose affairs are a matter of counsel "
4:34 (قَوَامُونَ / وَاصْرِبُوهُنَّ / <i>Qawamun;</i> <i>Wazribuhuna</i>)	"men shall take full care of women "; "then beat them "	"men are in charge of women "; and " beat them "	"men are the protectors and maintainers of women"; "(and last) beat them (lightly)"	"men are in charge of women "; and " scourge them "

and Peachy and al-Johani 2012 show that there is a lot of difference among translators in using the proper English words while translating. Every translator, no doubt, tries utmost to use the best possible, most apt words, but it does result in a multiplicity of renditions and translations. For example: "*Kitab al-Mubeen*" in 12:1 is translated as "maketh plain" (Pickthall, 1992); "perspicuous Book" (Yusuf Ali,

2:30 خَلِيفَةً يُقْسِدُ فِيهَا / (Khalifah/Ufsidu fi al-Ard)	“I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it”; “such as will spread corruption thereon and shed blood ”	“I am placing a viceroy on the earth”; “one who does evil and sheds blood ”	“I will create a vicegerent on earth”; “one who will make mischief therein and shed blood ”	“Lo! I am about to place a viceroy in the earth”; “one who will act corruptly therein”
4:59 الْأَمْرُ وَأُولِي Amr)	Pay heed unto “those from among you who have been entrusted with authority ”	“and those of you who are in authority ”	“and those charged with authority among you”	“and those of you who are in authority ”
8:30 وَيَمْكُرُونَ وَيَمْكُرُ اللَّهُ (Makr)	They [always] schemed : but God brought their scheming to nought—for God is above all schemers ”	“they plot , and God plots , and God is the Best of Plotters ”	They plot and plan , and Allah too plans ; but the best of planners is Allah”	“they plot , but Allah (also) plotteth ; and Allah is the best of plotters ”
9:20 وَهَاجَرُوا وَجَاهَدُوا hajaru wa jihadu)	“Those who believe, and who have forsaken the domain of evil and have striven hard ”	“those who believe, and have left their homes and struggled ”	“those who believe, and suffer exile and strive with might and main”	“those who believe, and have left their homes and striven ”
17:1 أَسْرَى / Asra; or Mi'raj)	“Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night”	“Glorified be He Who carried His servant by night”	“Glory (to God) who did take His Servant for a journey by night”	“Glorified be He Who carried His servant by night”
2:187 لِبَاسٍ / Libas)	“They are as a garment for you, and you are as a garment for them”	“They are clothing for you and you are clothing for them”	“They are your garments and ye are their garments”	“They are raiment for you and ye raiment for them”
3:54 مَكْرٍ / Makr)	“And the unbelievers schemed [against Jesus]; but God brought their scheming to nought”	“ plotted (to kill Jesus), and God plotted ”	“and(the unbelievers) plotted and planned , and God too planned ”	“ schemed , and Allah Schemed (against them)”
4:157-58 قَتَلُوهُ / رَفَعَهُ بَشِيرَةً / Qatalu; Salabu; Shubia; Rafa'ahu)	“they did not slay him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been so]; “God exalted him unto Himself”	“They did not kill him or crucify him, but it appeared so to them”; “No! God raised him up to Himself”	“ killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them”; “Nay God raised up unto Himself”	“ slew him not nor crucified , but it appeared so unto them”; “But Allah took him up unto Himself”
18:94 ذَا الْقَرْنَيْنِ يَأْجُوجَ وَمَاجُوجَ / (Zul/Dhu'l- Qarnayn; Yajuj and Majuj)	“O thou Two-Horned One! Behold, Gog and Magog are spoiling this land”	“ ‘Dhu'l-Qarneyn, Gog and Magog are doing mischief in the land”	“O Zul-qarnain! the Gog and Magog (people) do great mischief on earth”	“O Dhu al-Qarnayn! Lo! Gog and Magog are spoiling the land”
24:30 يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ فَرُوجَهُنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ yaghzuzna; min absarihim wa	“to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity ”	“and tell the believing women to lower their eyes and guard their privates ”	“lower their gaze and guard their modesty ”	“and tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest ”

yahfuzna furujuna)				
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1977); “revelation clear in itself” (Asad, 1980) and as “clear Book” (Peachy & al-Johani, 2012). The predominant meaning of “*Mubîn*” is “Explaining clearly; Clear; Beyond doubt; Obvious”; and *Mubînun* means “Clear; Open to see; Self expressive; Severing” (Omar, 2010, pp. 70, 71). For Yusuf Ali, *mubin* means “one that explains or makes things clear” (footnote 1629, p. 550), whereas Asad notes that ‘the participial adjective *mubin* may denote an attribute of the noun it qualifies (“clear”, “manifest”, “obvious”, etc.) as well as its function (“making clear” or “manifesting”, i.e., the truth), either of which meanings is dictated by its context’ (footnote 2, p. 336).

In 12:3, “*Ahsan al-Qasas*” is translated as “the best of narratives”; “the most beautiful of stories”; “the measure”/“the best explanation”; and “the best of stories”, respectively by Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, Asad, and Peachy & al-Johani. In 12:3, *Ghâfilun* (from the word *ghafil*, meaning to be heedless, neglectful, inattentive, unmindful, or careless) means “One who is heedless”; and it has been translated by Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, Asad, and Peachy & al-Johani, respectively, as “the heedless”; “those who knew it not”; “those who are unaware”; and as “did not know”. Similarly, in the phrase “*Aayat li’l-Saaliyeen*” (12:7), *Saaliyeen* is rendered as “the inquiring” by Pickthall; Yusuf Ali renders it as “seekers (after Truth)”; and it has been translated as “who search [after truth]”/ “those who inquire” by Asad (1980), and as “those who ask” by Peachy & al-Johani (2012). The dictionary meaning of the word *Saa’la* is to ask, interrogate, question, or enquire, and of *Sâ’ilun* “One who asks”. Similarly, *Sâ’ilun* means questioner; or who ask (for help); and *Sâ’ilina*, stands for the questioners; or solicitor (Omar 2010, p. 242).

In the same way, in 12:111, the phrase ‘*Ulil Albab*’ is rendered, respectively by Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, and Peachy & al-Johani as “men of understanding”, “men endowed with understanding”, and “men of reason”. As per dictionary meaning, *Lubb* (pl. *Albâbun/ Al-Albâb*) means among others, mind, intelligence, and quintessence (Omar 2010, p. 506). The term ‘*Ulil Albab*’ also occurs in 2:269; and almost all of them translate it same there, too, except Yusuf Ali, who renders it simply as “men of understanding”. For a comparison, see the Table 2 below.

Surah:Verse	Dictionary/ Lexical Meaning	Pickthall	Yusuf Ali	Asad	Peachy & al- Johani
12:1/ الْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ (<i>alkitabi almubinu</i>)	<i>Mubin</i> = Explaining clearly; Clear; Beyond doubt; Obvious	“These are the Verses of the Scripture that maketh plain ”	These are the Symbols (or Verses) of the perspicuous Book	“These are Messages of a revelation clear in itself ”	These are the Verses of the clear Book
12:3/ أَحْسَنَ الْقَصَصِ الْغَافِلِينَ (<i>ahsana alqasasi; alghafileena</i>)	<i>Ghafala</i> =To be heedless, neglectful; <i>Ghâfilun</i> = One who is heedless,	“We narrate unto thee (Muhammad) the best of narratives in that We have inspired in thee this Qur’an, though aforetime thou wast of the heedless.	“the most beautiful of stories ”; “those who knew it not ”	“In the measure that We reveal this Qur'an unto thee, [O Prophet]” (or “ with the best explanation ”); “those who are unaware [of what revelation is]”	“the best of stories ”; “ did not know ”
12:7/ آيَاتٍ لِّلسَّائِلِينَ (<i>ayatun lilssaileena</i>)	<i>Sâ'ilun</i> : One who asks”; questioner	Verily in Joseph and his brethren are signs (of Allah’s sovereignty) for the inquiring ”	“ signs (or symbols) for seekers (after Truth) ”	“ messages for all who search [after truth] ” (or “those who inquire ”)	“ lessons for those who ask ”
12:111/ عِزَّةٍ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ (<i>Aaibratun liolee alalbabi</i>)	<i>Lubb/Albab</i> = mind; intelligence; quintessence	“Assuredly in their stories is a lesson for men of understanding. It is not a discourse connected but a confirmation of what went before it”	There is, in their stories, instruction for men endued with understanding. It is not a tale invented, but a confirmation of what went before it”	Indeed, in the stories of these men there is a lesson for those who are endowed with insight.	“In their stories is a lesson for men of reason. It is no story which has been invented, but it is a confirmation of what was before it”

Table 2: A Comparison of varied translations of some verses of *Surah Yusuf*: Pickthall vs. Yusuf Ali and Peachy & al-Johani

CONCLUSION

The examples we have analyzed in this paper bring out very clearly the multiple difficulties scholars and translators face while translating the Qur’an. It usually happens while rendering some of the difficult words, or the words which have a variety of meanings in the target language. The present study is, therefore, yet another proof of the impossibility of a perfect translation of the Qur’an, or for that matter, any text, irrespective of great skills of the translators. Linguistic knowledge alone does not suffice to accurately decipher a text and interpret in another language. The meaning is also inherent in extra-linguistic elements, e.g., culture, context, etc. which is almost impossible to transfer holistically or with perfect accuracy. All such factors lead to loss of meaning in translation (Anandakumar, 2015). Religious scriptures pose the most difficult problems in translation because of the richness of the texts, both form and meaning, their sensitivity, and their various possible interpretations. Concerning the difficulties associated with translating the Qur’an, Daryabadi (2002) observes that the difficulty of the translation

increases "when one has to render into English with any degree of accuracy and precision, a work so rich in meaning, so pithy in expression, so vigorous in style and so subtle in its implication as the Holy Qur'an". It is impossible to adequately and accurately transfer the style and meaning of the lexically and syntactically rich Qur'anic Arabic into another language. The Qur'an, being "the untranslatable" (Kidwai, 1987), cannot be literally translated, the major reason being that Arabic words and sentences quite often have multiple literal meaning, and are, more often than not, used figuratively, metaphorically, and symbolically. In addition, several Arabic constructions are such that they contain subtle shades of meanings which fail to convey equivalent expressions in another language. Therefore, any translation of the holy Qur'an is bound to result in the loss of some meaning. It is safe to say that 'translating The Qur'an into any language cannot be without loss of some of its denotations, connotations, impressions and indications' (Jumeh, 2006) because 'not all nuances can go over in all their subtlety to the target language' (Cragg, 1988).

From the above discussion, the comparison reveals that the Qur'an as a central text poses various problems for translators to cope with. Readers of translations get the meaning as understood and produced in the target language. The meaning intended by the source text may be lost at the level of understanding, likely by non-Arabic native English translators, as well as at the level of rendering, more often by non-English native Arab translators. It has been said that some Arab native translators are more successful in conveying the intended meaning of the Qur'anic text and, on the other hand English native translators have produced more stylistically acceptable sentences than the non-English translators (Al-Sahli; 421). Thus, it can be recommended that, in order to minimize any loss of meaning, translations of the Qur'an be done by a committee of native English and native Arab scholars and linguists, grammarians and rhetoricians of both Arabic and English.

This study also lays bare the inadequacy of the study of lexical items out of their context. In order to get to the intended meaning of the text being translated, lexical items must be contextualized. In other words, it is of utmost importance to work out what the words mean in a particular situation and cultural context.

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