

## THE TRANSLATABILITY OF EUPHEMISM IN THE HOLY QURAN

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### Abstract

The analytical investigation of the translation of euphemistic expressions in the Holy Quran has long been a neglected topic of study where few researches have been conducted. It is therefore the purpose of the present study to examine through analysis and comparison, the incongruities in translating Quranic euphemistic expressions into English in the works of Ali, Hilali and Khan, Pickthal and Arberry. A number of 23 examples of euphemistic expressions were cited from different surahs of the Holy Quran. The collected data were classified according to the mechanisms of lexical euphemism: substitution and deletion, and to the topics that require euphemism. Assessment of the translations depended mainly on the two criteria of meaning and euphemism. The study has revealed that euphemism is an evident phenomenon in the Holy Quran and that the process of translating it into English is generally problematic for reasons such as linguistic and cultural diversity. Finally, the researchers suggested – where necessary – more appropriate translations of these Quranic euphemisms considering the criteria of meaning and euphemism.

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**Keywords:** Euphemism, Holy Quran, Translation, Sociolinguistics, Politeness

### Introduction

It is almost certainly that the location of the word "وليتطف" /waljatalat<sup>f</sup>t<sup>f</sup>af/ in the very middle of the Holy Quran is not a coincidence. The location draws an interesting image of the importance of euphemism and social decency. Just like the word "وليتطف" /waljatalat<sup>f</sup>t<sup>f</sup>af/ is surrounded with thousands of tokens on both sides, individuals can also be surrounded with other society members and win their acceptance by morals and soft language.

As the present study later reveals, the Holy Quran, itself, sets a practical example of morality and felicity. Many harsh topics such as sex, genitals, excretory functions, divorce, disability and death are softened by the substitution of milder expressions in some instances and by the deletion of the expressions in others.

However, due to the diversity of cultures and social norms, translating cultural bound units, such as euphemisms, in the Holy Quran from Arabic to English is in fact problematic. The process of translation even gets more complicated by the variation of both languages, stocks of vocabulary and writing styles. Consequently, a closer look at some translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran shows a degree of disagreement over the techniques by which euphemisms are translated. Concerns of whether to maintain the metaphorical euphemism or to sacrifice it for the sake of conveying direct meanings were considerably unstable. Therefore, the goal of this study is to investigate and analyze the incongruities in translating Quranic euphemisms into English and, where necessary, to suggest new translations for a better rendering of the Holy Quran.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the present study is to examine, by comparison and analysis, the incongruities in translating Quranic euphemisms into English. In addition, the study attempts to reveal answers for the following questions:

- 1- Is euphemism an evident phenomenon in the Holy Quran?
- 2- What mechanisms are used to achieve euphemism in the Holy Quran?
- 3- What are the main euphemized topics in the Holy Quran?
- 4- What causes the incongruities in translating Quranic euphemism into English?

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study stems from the fact that very little research has been conducted on the translatability of euphemistic expressions in the Holy Quran. It is hoped that the investigation of this topic will significantly contribute to the enhancement of the quality and accuracy of the translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran. Furthermore, the study of euphemism in different languages is important for the role it plays in facilitating intercultural communication and international dialogue.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Translating the Holy Quran from Arabic to a language such as English is problematic due to linguistic as well as cultural variations. Both languages allow for different metaphorical styles of writing and possess different connotations of vocabulary. The problem eventually gets more complicated by the different cultures to which each language belongs. Such a cultural difference necessarily dictates different ways of socializing, expressing and

showing solidarity, thus, subsequently assigns each speech community unique taboos, norms and euphemisms. Therefore, it is the task and challenge of a talented translator to transfer cultural bound units such as euphemisms from one language to another with the minimum loss of meaning or sacrifice of euphemism.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study limits itself to the investigation of the incongruities in the translation of Quranic euphemisms in particular. Any other elements or aspects of meaning are beyond the scope of the present research.

### **Methodology**

#### **Data Collection**

Investigated verses were chosen according to the classified topics of euphemism; however, since the main purpose of the current study is to examine the incongruities in translating Quranic euphemisms into English, data were collected from different surahs of the Holy Quran. However, comparison and analysis of data were based on the following four translations of the Holy Quran:

- 1- *The meanings of the Holy Quran*, by Ali;
- 2- *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an* by Al-Hilali and Khan;
- 3- *The Glorious Qur'an with English Translation* by Pickthal; and
- 4- *The Koran Interpreted*, by A.J. Arberry.

The choice of translations was decided according to the variables of religion (muslim vs. non- muslim) and mother tongue (Arabic vs. non- Arabic) of the translators in order to have a representative sample of the various available translations of the Holy Quran.

#### **Data Analysis**

The data of this research are organized in two sections with respect to the mechanisms of achieving euphemism in the Holy Quran (substitution and deletion). Moreover, the analysis of the given data depends mainly on the maintenance or loss of the following two criteria of meaning and euphemism. However; for the sake of achieving the investigation's purposes, the analysis of data within the specified criteria was done in light of the content analysis method which is commonly used in social science research. According to Holsti (1969), content analysis is defined as any technique used for making inferences through identifying specified characteristics of messages objectively and systematically.

Neuendorf (2002: 10) formulated a six-part definition for content analysis as follows:

Content analysis is a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, inter-subjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as

to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented.

Furthermore, there are two types of content analysis; quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The qualitative approach, which is used for the present study, can involve any kind of analysis where communication content such as, speech, written text, interviews, images8...etc, is categorized and classified. Moreover, for each example of euphemism, the researcher provides a brief elaboration on meaning followed by the four translations and the overall assessment, comparison and a suggestion of a more appropriate translation where necessary.

### **Theoretical Background and Review of Related Literature: What is Euphemism?**

Euphemism is a universal linguistic phenomenon. Wardhaugh (1986) proposed that it is also universal that social groups do not use language quite uninhibitedly. An unlimited number of examples can be easily cited from most formal writing styles to most colloquial everyday spoken language. English speakers, for example, would consider words such as “disinformation” and “call of nature” as more acceptable and less offensive than their blunt counterparts “lie” and “urge to urinate or defecate” and will therefore use them more frequently in their communication with other members of the society. Arabic, as well, allows for the same phenomenon to take place within its speech community. The use of the following terms instead of their counterparts exemplifies the situation:

"هداك المرض" /hada:k fiil marad/(that disease) as a reference to (**cancer**)

"الله أخذ وداعته" /alla faxad wda:ftu/(God has taken his deposit) instead of "مات"  
/ma:t/ (someone died)

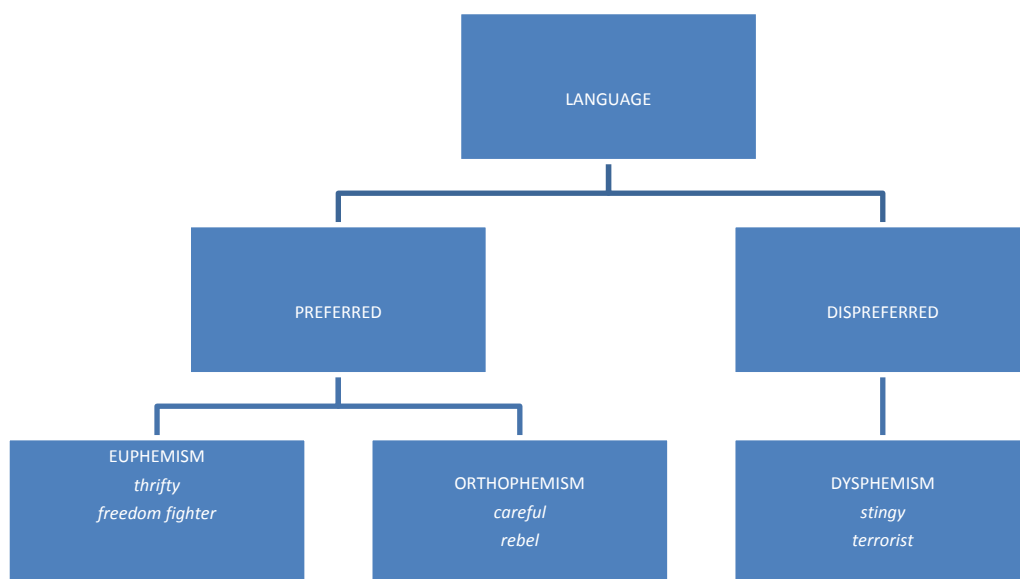
"فلان عينه كريمة" /fla:n fainuhu kari:ma/ (someone has got an honorable eye) instead  
of "فلان أعور" /fla:ʔafwar/ (someone is one-eyed)

The precise opposite of euphemism is dysphemism (also known as cacophemism and malphemism). In their book, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, Allan and Burridge (2006: 234) defined dysphemism as “a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance. They also stated that:

Speakers resort to dysphemism to talk about people and things that frustrate and annoy them that they disapprove of and wish to disparage, humiliate and degrade. Curses, name-calling and any sort of derogatory comment directed towards others in order to insult or to wound them are all examples of dysphemism. Exclamatory swearwords that release frustration or anger are dysphemisms. Like euphemism, dysphemism interacts with style and

has the potential to produce stylistic discord; if someone at a formal dinner party were to publicly announce *I'm off for a piss*, rather than saying *Excuse me for a moment*, the effect would be dysphemistic. (Ibid.)

Orthophemism is another technical term that is closely related to euphemism and dysphemism. According to Allan and Burridge (2006), an *orthophemism* is a term that is neutral, with neither positive connotation (*euphemism*) nor negative ones (*dysphemism*), but is still more preferred than a *dysphemism*.



**Figure 1: Euphemism, Orthophemism and Dysphemism as levels of preference.**

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), who first introduced the most widely approach to the study of politeness, all interacting individuals have an interest in maintaining two types of ‘face’ during interaction: ‘positive face’ and ‘negative face’. Brown and Levinson define ‘positive face’ as the positive and consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for approval. On the other hand, ‘negative face’ is “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction. Euphemism is among the various strategies used to achieve politeness for that it plays a great role in softening communication between people.

On the other hand, Leech (1983) defined politeness through a set of maxims that cooperate in conversational exchange. These maxims include:

- Tact maxim (in directives and commissives): minimize cost to other; (maximize benefit to other).
- Generosity maxim (in directives and commissives): minimize benefit to self; (maximize cost to self).
- Approbation maxim (in expressives and representatives): minimize dispraise of other; (maximize praise of other)
- Modesty maxim (in expressives and representatives): minimize praise of self; (maximize dispraise of self).
- Agreement maxim (in representatives): minimize disagreement between self and other; (maximize agreement between self and other).
- Sympathy maxim (in representatives): minimize antipathy between self and other; (maximize sympathy between self and other).

Taboo and euphemism are closely entwined with the concepts of politeness and face. Whenever a taboo word is necessary to be mentioned, an alternative euphemistic expression is being looked for so as not to damage the positive face of the audience. Huang (2005:46-47) states that avoiding taboos among the reasons why people use euphemism. He also states that other reasons are; expressing politeness, disguising and showing elegance.

Euphemism can be achieved through different strategies of two main sources: Formal Innovation and Semantic Innovation. Allan and Burrige (1991), Warren (1992), Ham (225), Neaman and Silver (1983), and Huang (2005) through their works, gave a detailed account for 25 sub- strategies.

Although universal, euphemism is culture- bound. Every culture is unique with regard to the formation and use of the above cited strategy. In this regard Allan and Burrige (1991: 8) remarked:

Sure, there are cultural differences with respect to the use of euphemism and dysphemism, but they are differences in degree rather than differences in kind. Attitudes to bodily effluvia, body parts, to notion of social status and the like, to death, disease to dangerous animals, and to the supernatural, vary tremendously between cultures; but essentially these same parameters recur in every culture (and subculture) to motivate euphemism and dysphemism.

However, this study limits itself to the euphemism that is manifested in Arabic, in accordance with the Arabic culture and its associated tradition and beliefs; more specifically, euphemisms that are used in the Holy Quran.

### **Translation and the Question of (un)Translatability**

The concept and theory of translation have long been the common interest of many scholars and specialists of the field and have, therefore, received a considerable amount of definition and analysis. The importance of translation studies stems from the significance and prominence of the role of translation in universal and cross cultural communication. The broad term of translation, however, falls in a number of categories. Jakobson's (2000) own classification goes as follows:

- 1) **Intralingual** translation or rewording: the interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
- 2) **Interlingual** translation or translation proper: the interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
- 3) **Intersemiotic** translation or transmutation: the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

Subsequent definitions of translation are limited to the second type mentioned above. Translation can be simply defined as the transformation of a text from one language to another where the original text is referred to as the source text (ST) and the resulting text is referred to as the target text (TT). Deriving from this very simple definition, scholars have designed a number of prolonged definitions and descriptions of the term where the properties of the translated text and the translator himself have won great attention: (Nida 1964, Beloruchev 1980, Popvic 1980, Lilova 1985, Newmark 2001, and Alekseeva 2004.).

Nearly all the definitions viewed translation as a process or a result of a process. However, the idea of (un)translatability stems from the connection between translation and culture. Translation can win another big deal of definition having culture as a main factor. Toury (1978:200), for example, defined translation as an activity that involves not only two languages, but two cultures as well. Snell- Hornby (1988:222) also provided a similar point of view arguing that translation cannot be envisaged between languages, but between cultures, achieving what she called a "cross-cultural transfer".

Bassnett (1991:13) stated that translation must take place within the framework of culture. According to Venuti (1995: 18) translation is "the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target audience." Venuti assumes that translation has the power to build representations of foreign cultures and establish canons for the interpretation of these cultures, and calls for the visibility of the translator and for the preservation of "foreignness", in opposition to "domestication," in the work translated.

On the same theoretical and practical grounds, Karamanian (2001) clearly states that: Translation, involving the transposition of thoughts expressed in one language by one social group into the appropriate expression of another group, entails a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding and en-coding. As cultures are increasingly brought into greater contact with one another, multicultural considerations are brought to bear to an ever-increasing degree. Now, how do all these changes influence us when we are trying to comprehend a text before finally translating it? We are not just dealing with words written in a certain time, space and socio-political situation; most importantly it is the "cultural" aspect of the text that we should take into account. The process of transfer, i.e., re-coding across cultures, should consequently allocate corresponding attributes vis-a-vis the target culture to ensure credibility in the eyes of the target reader [thus, it is of great importance that] translators must be both bilingual and bicultural, if not indeed multicultural.”

Hewson and Martin (1993:25) stated that the function of translation is to develop cross-cultural constructions and at the same time, bridge and underline cultural differences. Hence, they believe that translation is the exploration of an unbridgeable gap and of a tension between cultures.

On the other hand, Lefevere (1992) had a relatively different view as he assumes that when a translator is transferring meaning from one language to another, not all words are “culture bound” to the original culture, some would seem acceptable to the receiving culture and it is the translator duty to make a clear cut distinction between what is acceptable and what is not in order to reach the audience in a best manner.

From the above discussion, however, we can conclude that culture-bound units such as euphemisms, idioms or proverbs, are not impossible to be translated from one language of a specific culture to another language of a completely different one. However, the translator has to pay special attention to the application of the most appropriate technique.

### **Translating Euphemistic Expressions in the Holy Quran**

Literature provides a large number of studies investigating the concept of euphemism. However, studies conducted on the translation of euphemistic expressions in the Holy Quran, which is the topic of this particular study, are few.

One of these few studies is Noghai's (1995). He presupposes that the conventional content of the utterance is deliberately irrelevant to its context when formal equivalences of three intrasentential euphemisms in the Holy Quran are applied. He referred to mono- and



bilingual dictionaries where the conventional content utterance was analyzed and compared to ten English translations of the selected euphemisms. Noghai also referred to sources commenting on the meaning of the context of the Holy Quran but mainly depended on intuition in analyzing the sets of contextual connotations of the utterance and its alternative. Furthermore, he presumes that the cooperative principle is operative while one maxim or two are flouted. The flouting is exploited for a euphemistic purpose because the alternative expression is dysphemistic. Nogha's conclusion was that formal equivalence is applicable to translate intrasentential euphemisms in the Holy Quran into English. He noted that the applicability of the approach to the Quranic style serves to prove false part of the common overgeneralization that the Holy Quran is translatable only in the broadest terms of meaning.

In a similar study, Mohammed (2007) highlighted the errors in the translations of four euphemistic expressions in four different verses of the Holy Quran in Pickthal and Zidan's translations of the meanings of the verses. He found out that the translators were not fully aware of the concept of euphemism and therefore some of their translations sacrificed euphemism to convey the meaning and vice versa. To Mohammad, ignoring euphemism in translation leads to the misunderstanding of the new text and hence he recommended that translators mention euphemism where it appears by using the paraphrasing strategy of translation. By doing so, the meaning would be conveyed straightforwardly.

Not similar to the approach of the study at hand, where a prolonged investigation of the translating examples of euphemism in the Holy Quran are being examined in four different translations and classified in terms of topics and levels of style, Al- Omoush (2011) explored and classified euphemisms in the language of the Holy Quran. His study paid special attention to the etymology and semantics of each euphemistic occurrence and presented an illustration on the reasons and motives behind such a euphemistic language. Al-Omoush stated that euphemisms in the Holy Quran are categorized into:

1. **Moral Decency**; includes topic such as sexual intercourse, adultery, woman, body parts and excretory functions.
2. **Hardships**; includes topics such as sickness, disability, death, the day of judgment, divorce, panic, defeat, hunger and poverty.

Euphemism has also been in the heart of research in the fields of sociology, psychology, etymology, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, translation, and intercultural communication. The below lines provide some examples.

In a sociolinguistic study of gender and language, Lakoff (1975) highlighted the use of euphemism in reference to women in her attempt to provide diagnostic evidence from

language use for one type of inequity between the roles of men and women. She stated that “Speech about women implies an object, whose sexual nature requires euphemism, and whose social roles are derivative and dependent in relation to men.” (p.45). Lakoff (1975) gathered data mainly by introspection; she examined her own speeches, some of her acquaintances’ and also made use of the media. She finally concluded that woman is a concept that needs to be euphemized since it is usually viewed as an unpleasant, embarrassing and sensitive.

Enright (1985) approach to the study of euphemism was by inviting sixteen skillful writers to give prolonged papers on euphemism. He ended up with a collection of essays that include general reflections on euphemism and its history and categories such as sex, death, politics, the language of great Christian texts, and euphemisms used by or with kids, among others.

Farghal (1995) investigated the nature of euphemism in Arabic. His study showed that speakers of Arabic employ four major devices for euphemizing: figurative expressions, circumlocutions, remodelings, and antonyms. He argued that there is close interaction between the Politeness Principle (Leech 1983) and the Cooperative Principle's maxims of conversation (Grice 1975). Furthermore, Farghal argued that Arabic euphemisms flout one or more of the maxims of conversation. Thus, giving rise to Particularized Conversational Implicatures. Consequently, floutings are shown to play an important role in lexical choices in addition to their well-established roles in structural and choices discourse.

Other studies have been conducted on the translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran. Among the first attempts to investigate the problem of the translation of the Quran was a study conducted by Eltayeb (1985). The purpose of her study was to investigate the claim that it is impermissible to translate the Holy Quran. The study also aimed at studying the theoretical aspects involved in the translation of the Holy Quran. Eltayeb made a clear distinction between untranslatable Quranic features such as the reading process and the reader’s contribution to the meaning, and other translatable features such as meaning and semantics. Moreover, the study highlighted a theoretical framework for a comprehensive translation of the Holy Quran.

Muhaidat’s (1996) study was on the translation into English specific Quranic verses that include Irony. The researcher shed light on the problems of translating Quranic irony and the translators' strategies they use. The study suggested effective methods to overcome the difficulties of translating such expressions.

Abu Mahfouz's (2006) study highlighted the importance of translation loss that may result from translating language bound concepts such as deixis in the Holy Quran. Abu Mahfouz made a distinction between different types of deictics; social deixis, time deixis, place deixis, person deixis, demonstratives and the definite article.

However, the researchers of the present study follows in the footsteps of these researchers in an attempt to explore the concept of euphemism in the Holy Quran and provide an analytical view of the incongruities in the process and procedure of its translation.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

This part is an analytical investigation of the incongruities in the translation of some Quranic euphemisms through the examination of four different translations. Moreover, the analysis of these Quranic euphemistic occurrences has led the researcher to come up with the following classification:

#### **Lexical euphemism**

This type of euphemism is widely expressed in the Holy Quran and is achieved by either substitution, or deletion. Furthermore, euphemized Quranic expressions fall in topics such as; sexual intercourse, genitals, woman, excretory functions, sicknesses, divorce and death.

#### **Substitution**

Substitution is the act of putting one thing or person in the place of another. As for euphemism; it is the replacement of a harsh lexicon with another that causes less offense. The Holy Quran, indeed, is a rich source from which many examples can be cited for this type of euphemism.

#### **Sexual Intercourse**

Verses that describe and regulate the sexual relationship between spouses in the Holy Quran are many. Apparently, the language of these verses has been given a special divine attention so as not to harm the public modesty of the recipients. Cover terms and metaphors are widely used and it is the talented translator's challenge and responsibility to maintain as much as possible of both the euphemism and the meaning. In the list below, the researcher attempts to illustrate the euphemized Quranic sexual expressions and investigate the strategies and problems of translating them into English:

##### **A. لَامَسْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ /la:mastumunnisa:ʔa/**

1. "يا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَقْرَبُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَنْتُمْ سُكَارَى حَتَّى تَعْلَمُوا مَا تَقُولُونَ وَلَا جُنُبًا إِلَّا عَابِرِي سَبِيلٍ حَتَّى تَغْتَسِلُوا وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ مَرْضَى أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ أَوْ جَاءَ أَحَدٌ مِّنْكُمْ مِنَ الْغَائِطِ أَوْ لَامَسْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَلَمْ تَجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا صَعِيدًا طَيِّبًا فَامْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِكُمْ وَأَيْدِيكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَفُورًا غَفُورًا"

(An-Nisa':43)

In this context, "لامستم" /la:mastumu/ which means “touched” is a neatly euphemized expression for “sexual intercourse” through the implication of the part-for-whole euphemism strategy defined by Allan and Burridge 1991. Sex entails touching and the substitution of the term has finely achieved euphemism. The following lines investigate whether euphemism and meaning were lost in translation.

**Translations:**

“O ye who believe! Approach not prayers with a mind befogged, until ye can understand all that ye say,- nor in a state of ceremonial impurity (Except when travelling on the road), until after washing your whole body. If ye are ill, or on a journey, or one of you cometh from offices of nature, or ye have been in **contact with women**, and ye find no water, then take for yourselves clean sand or earth, and rub therewith your faces and hands. For Allah doth blot out sins and forgive again and again.” (Ali).

“O you who believe! Approach not *As-Salat* (the prayer) when you are in a drunken state until you know (the meaning) of what you utter, nor when you are in a state of *Janaba*, (i.e. in a state of sexual impurity and have not yet taken a bath) except when travelling on the road (without enough water, or just passing through a mosque), till you wash your whole body. And if you are ill, or on a journey, or one of you comes after answering the call of nature, or you have been **in contact with women (by sexual relations)** and you find no water, perform *Tayammum* with clean earth and rub therewith your faces and hands (*Tayammum*) . Truly, Allah is Ever Oft-Pardoning, Oft-Forgiving. “(Hilali and Khan)

“O ye who believe! Draw not near unto prayer when ye are drunken, till ye know that which ye utter, nor when ye are polluted, save when journeying upon the road, till ye have bathed. And if ye be ill, or on a journey, or one of you cometh from the closet, or ye have **touched women**, and ye find not water, then go to high clean soil and rub your faces and your hands (therewith). Lo! Allah is Benign, Forgiving.” (Pickthal)

“O believers, draw not near to prayer when you are drunken until you know what you are saying, or defiled -- unless you are traversing a way -- until you have washed yourselves; but if you are sick, or on a journey, or if any of you comes from the privy, or you have **touched women**, and you can find no water, then have recourse to wholesome dust and wipe your faces and your hands; God is All-pardoning, All-forgiving.” (Arberry).

The four translations illustrate two different trends. Both Pickthal and Arberry agreed that “**touched women**” is the equivalent for “لامستم النساء” /la:mastumunnisa:ʔa/. However, Ali, Hilali and Khan translated it as “**have been in contact with women**”.

Out of this context, the Arabic root *لَمَسَ* /lamasa/is closer in meaning to “**touched**”, that necessarily implies a genuine and physical contact, than it is to “**contacted**” where the type of contact taking place could be verbal, visual, physical...etc. Moreover, the verse restricts the meaning to a situation in which a man and a woman would have bodily touch. This specific meaning was lost in the phrase “**have been in contact with**” but achieved in its counterpart “**touched**”.

However, Hilai and Khan were aware of the meaning loss “**in contact with**” caused and saved it with the additional clarification (by sexual relation) by which euphemism was sacrificed. The previous verse is another occurrence of *لَامَسْتُمْ* /la:mastumu/ as a euphemized reference to sexual intercourse. Three out of the four translations were consistent. Only Pickthal made it different from the first occurrence as he translated:

“O ye who believe! When ye rise up for prayer, wash you faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and lightly rub your heads and (wash) your feet up to the ankles. And if ye are unclean, purify yourselves. And if ye are sick or on a journey, or one of you cometh from the closet, or ye have had **contact with women**, and ye find not water, then go to clean, high ground and rub your faces and your hands with some of it. Allah would not place a burden on you, but He would purify you and would perfect His grace upon you, that ye may give thanks.” (Pickthal)

For the two occurrences of *لَامَسْتُمْ* /la:mastumu/ the researcher, recommends both to be translated as “**touched**” for the reasons explained above.

*E. فَإِذَا تَطَهَّرْنَ فَأْتُوهُنَّ* /faʔiðā: taʔahharna faʔtu:hunna/

1. "وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْمَحِيضِ قُلْ هُوَ أَدْنَىٰ فَاعْتَزِلُوا النِّسَاءَ فِي الْمَحِيضِ وَلَا تَقْرَبُوهُنَّ حَتَّىٰ يَطْهَرْنَ فَإِذَا تَطَهَّرْنَ

*فَأْتُوهُنَّ مِنْ حَيْثُ أَمَرَكُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ وَيُحِبُّ الْمُتَطَهِّرِينَ*

(Al-Baqarah: 222)

This verse is, indeed, a rich example of euphemism. In their two occurrences, references to sex were replaced by two different metaphors, by which a high level of euphemism was achieved. The second occurrence "فَأْتُوهُنَّ" /faʔtu:hunna/ is an imperative derived from the root "أتى" /ʔata:/ which generally means “came”. However, the use of the very general imperative "فَأْتُوهُنَّ" /faʔtu:hunna/ would fail to deliver the intended meaning, that is a permission of sexual intercourse, and a claim that euphemism has been given far more weight than meaning would be valid, if not accompanied by the earlier antecedent "لا تقربوهن" /taqrabu:hunna/. The former is a prohibition of sex in a certain condition (menstruation).

Consequently, the expiration of the condition is an end of the restriction and "فأتوهن" /faʔtu:hunna/ is clearly understood as “have sex with them”.

### Translations

“They ask thee concerning women's courses. Say: They are a hurt and a pollution: So keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, ye may approach them in any manner, time, or place ordained for you by Allah. For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean.” (Ali)

“They ask you concerning menstruation. Say: that is an *Adha* (a harmful thing for a husband to have a sexual intercourse with his wife while she is having her menses), therefore keep away from women during menses and go not unto them till they have purified (from menses and have taken a bath). And when they have purified themselves, then **go in unto them** as Allah has ordained for you (go in unto them in any manner as long as it is in their vagina). Truly, Allah loves those who turn unto Him in repentance and loves those who purify themselves (by taking a bath and cleaning and washing thoroughly their private parts, bodies, for their prayers, etc.)” (Hilali and Khan)

“They question thee (O Muhammad) concerning menstruation. Say: It is an illness, so let women alone at such times and go not in unto them till they are cleansed. And when they have purified themselves, then **go in unto them** as Allah hath enjoined upon you. Truly Allah loveth those who turn unto Him, and loveth those who have a care for cleanness.” (Pickthal)

“They will question thee concerning the monthly course. Say: 'It is hurt; so go apart from women during the monthly course, and do not approach them till they are clean. When they have cleansed themselves, then **come unto them** as God has commanded you.' Truly, God loves those who repent, and He loves those who cleanse themselves.” (Arberry)

A claim that synonymy does not exist in any natural language has long been believed by some lexicographers who argue that each word has its own and unique meaning. Similarly, some Qura'anists also believe that “there is no such thing as synonymy in the Qur'an. Each letter and word has its own fixed meaning which no other word can express as accurately, irrespective of their seeming similarity” (The Islamic Bulletin 1994).

Consequently; as a result of these claims, translations of Ali, Mohammad and Khan, and Pickthal are said to be inaccurate. Both "تقربوهن" /taqrabu:hunna/ and "فأتوهن" /faʔtu:hunna/ were translated in the very same manner supposing that they are identical synonyms while in fact they are not.

Only Arberry was cautious about the absence of synonymy and made a distinction between the two expressions. "فأتوهن" /faʔtu:hunna/ was re-coded by Arberry as “**come unto them**” which is seen as the most appropriate out of the four translations although euphemism was not violated in any.

### Genitals

In the Holy Quran, embarrassing body parts such as genitals prove lexical euphemism at its highest. Since genitals have a crucial concern of one’s everyday life; (i.e. sexual intercourse, purification and chastity) their inclusion in the Holy Quran, that regulates most of a Muslim’s daily behavior, was by no means escapable. However, being greatly influenced by the culture and virtues of Arabs in whose language the scripture was uttered and where a direct reference to genitals is considered as impolite, rude and indecent, the Holy Quran showed a high level of politeness and refinement through the use of various euphemized expressions as the following examples illustrate:

A. جُلُودُهُمْ /dʒulu:duhum/

1. "حَتَّىٰ إِذَا مَا جَاؤُوهَا شَهِدَ عَلَيْهِمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَأَبْصَارُهُمْ وَجُلُودُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ"

### (Fussilat: 20)

Some credited interpreters of the Holy Quran such as Al-Tabari and Al- Qurtubi inferred that the word "جلودهم"/dʒulu:duhum/ (their skins) is a covert reference to human genitals. The resulting metaphor sets a good example of euphemism since the harsh association of “genitals” has been minimized if not totally removed by the substitution. The verse was translated as follows:

“At length, when they reach the (Fire), their hearing, their sight, and **their skins** will bear witness against them, as to (all) their deeds” (Ali)

“Till, when they reach it (Hell-fire), their hearing (ears) and their eyes, and **their skins** will testify against them as to what they used to do” (Hilali and Khan)

“Till, when they reach it, their ears and their eyes and **theirskins** testify against them as to what they used to do” (Pickthal)

“Till when they are come to it, their hearing, their eyes and **their skins** bear witness against them concerning what they have been doing” (Arberry)

Such a complete consensus is, in fact, a fine proof that “their skins” makes a good possible translation of the term under investigation. Both languages’ stocks of vocabulary seem to have interchangeable equivalents and hence any vagueness in meaning is attributed to original Arabic metaphor and not to any loss caused by the process of translation.

## Woman

Contrary to the common misconception, woman occupies a very special status in Arab societies. She is not only equal to men in rights of education, work, freedom of expression, political participation and social life; besides, she wins the advantage of physical and emotional protection as well as the financial support of men in her family. Moreover, Arabs have long expressed their respect and appreciation of women through the use of some honorifics instead of calling their actual names. The use of "كريمته" /kari:matihi/ (his dignified) to refer to one's daughter sets a good example. Having much of the Arabic ethics and decency adopted, the Holy Quran shows similar respect and esteem for woman. The following instance clarifies the assumption.

أهلك/ahlīka/

Reference to wife as family "أهل" /ahl/ is a common phenomenon in Arabic societies. The Holy Quran used this reference in a number of verses as well. Below is an example.

1. "وَإِذْ غَدَوْتَ مِنْ أَهْلِكَ تُبَوِّئُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ مَقَاعِدَ لِلْقِتَالِ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ"

### (Ale-Imran: 121)

Al Imam Al Tabarani, in his interpretation of the Holy Quran, stated that this verse describes Prophet Mohammad (peace and blessings be upon him) upon his departure from His wife's (Aisha) home. Subsequently, the word "أهلك" /ahlīka/ (your family) can only refer to Aisha and acts as a euphemized replacement of the explicit mentioning of her name or of the word "wife".

### Translations

"Remember that morning Thou didst leave **Thy household** (early) to post the faithful at their stations for battle: And Allah heareth and knoweth all things" (Ali)

"And (remember) when you (Muhammad) left **your household** in the morning to post the believers at their stations for the battle (of Uhud). And Allah is All-Hearer, All-Knower" (Hilali and Khan)

"And when thou settedst forth at daybreak from **thy housefolk** to assign to the believers their positions for the battle, Allah was Hearer, Knower" (Pickthal)

"When thou wentest forth at dawn from **thy people** to lodge the believers in their pitches for the battle -- God is All-hearing, All-knowing" (Arberry) Household, housefolk and people are all general expressions for family that could but not necessarily include the wife. This leads us to conclude that euphemism was not lost in any of the above translations.

### Excretory Functions

In almost everywhere in the world, people are embarrassed and reluctant to talk about human excretory functions due to an apparent association of these functions with weakness,



nastiness and imperfection. Consequently, it is of no surprise to find that excretory functions related terms in the Holy Quran are carefully euphemized.

### Sicknesses and Disabilities

Created with a passion for health, power and strength, man has always regarded different health issues such as sicknesses and disabilities as a sensitive area where the use of euphemism is preferred. Therefore, doctors often use a range of euphemistic expressions as a means to facilitate communication in the consultation and treatment of their patients. Similarly; Arabs have long used euphemism to mitigate the negative impact a word indicating a certain sickness leaves on patients themselves as well as other people from the audience. A blind "أعمى" /ʔaʕma:/ for instance was called with the ultimate antonym "بصير" /basʕi:r/ (sighted) not only to achieve euphemism but also to express a hope for recovery. The Holy Quran came with respect to this and shows incidents where certain sicknesses such as blindness, muteness and vitiligo are carefully euphemized.

#### A. Blindness

1. "وَوَلَّىٰ عَنْهُمْ وَقَالَ يَا أَسْقَىٰ عَلَىٰ يُونُسَ وَأَبْيَضَّتْ عَيْنَاهُ مِنَ الْحُزْنِ فَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ"

(Yusuf: 84)

Based on the fact that the black part of the eye is the one responsible for vision, the Holy Quran sets a very interesting metaphor for mentioning blindness. The metaphor was translated as follows:

“And he turned away from them, and said: "How great is my grief for Joseph!" **And his eyes became white** with sorrow, and he fell into silent melancholy” (Ali)

“And he turned away from them and said: "Alas, my grief for Yusuf (Joseph)!" **And he lost his sight** because of the sorrow that he was suppressing” (Hilali and Khan)

“And he turned away from them and said: Alas, my grief for Joseph! **And his eyes were whitened** with the sorrow that he was suppressing” (Pickthal)

“And he turned away from them, and said, 'Ah, woe is me for Joseph!' **And his eyes turned white** because of the sorrow that he choked within him” (Arberry)

An indirect euphemized reference to the loss of sight that is associated with darkness and black was made through the colorful metaphor translated above. It is only Hilali and Khan’s translation that destroyed the euphemism intended by reverting to the original uneuphemized meaning while all other translations preserved euphemism and delivered meaning.

#### B. الغشاظ /ʔalya:ʕitʕi/

”يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَقْرَبُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَنْتُمْ سُكَارَى حَتَّى تَعْلَمُوا مَا تَقُولُونَ وَلَا جُنُبًا إِلَّا عَابِرِي سَبِيلٍ حَتَّى تَغْتَسِلُوا وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ مَرْضَى أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ أَوْ جَاءَ أَحَدٌ مِنْكُم مِّنَ الْغَائِطِ أَوْ لَامَسْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَلَمْ تَجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا صَعِيدًا طَيِّبًا فَامْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِكُمْ وَأَيْدِيكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَفُورًا غَفُورًا“

(An-Nisa': 43)

According to Arabic lexicography, "الغائط" /ʔalɣa:ʔit/ is originally used in reference to a distant, big and low land or desert. Arabs in the past used such places for the purposes of defecation where they felt secure and away from other people's sight. Motivated by the propensity of politeness and the need for social acceptance, the word became a recognized metaphor for the process of defecation and other human excretory functions by which a high level of euphemism was achieved as the above verse proves.

### Translations

“O ye who believe! Approach not prayers with a mind befogged, until ye can understand all that ye say,- nor in a state of ceremonial impurity (Except when travelling on the road), until after washing your whole body. If ye are ill, or on a journey, **or one of you cometh from offices of nature**, or ye have been in contact with women, and ye find no water, then take for yourselves clean sand or earth, and rub therewith your faces and hands. For Allah doth blot out sins and forgive again and again.” (Ali)

“O you who believe! Approach not *As-Salat* (the prayer) when you are in a drunken state until you know (the meaning) of what you utter, nor when you are in a state of *Janaba*, (i.e. in a state of sexual impurity and have not yet taken a bath) except when travelling on the road (without enough water, or just passing through a mosque), till you wash your whole body. And if you are ill, or on a journey, **or one of you comes after answering the call of nature**, or you have been in contact with women (by sexual relations) and you find no water, perform *Tayammum* with clean earth and rub therewith your faces and hands (*Tayammum*) . Truly, Allah is Ever Oft-Pardoning, Oft-Forgiving” (Hilali and Khan)

“O ye who believe! Draw not near unto prayer when ye are drunken, till ye know that which ye utter, nor when ye are polluted, save when journeying upon the road, till ye have bathed. And if ye be ill, or on a journey, **or one of you cometh from the closet**, or ye have touched women, and ye find not water, then go to high clean soil and rub your faces and your hands (therewith). Lo! Allah is Benign, Forgiving.” (Pickthal)

“O believers, draw not near to prayer when you are drunken until you know what you are saying, or defiled -- unless you are traversing a way -- until you have washed yourselves; but if you are sick, or on a journey, **or if any of you comes from the privy**, or you have

touched women, and you can find no water, then have recourse to wholesome dust and wipe your faces and your hands; God is All-pardoning, All-forgiving.” (Arberry)

A well-formed and accurate literal translation of this term seems to be a hard task to accomplish; a natural result when culture and tradition are involved. It is only Arabic that allows for such an association between a word such as "الغانط" /ʔalya:ʔitʕ/ which means a distant and low land, and human excretory functions since this scene has only been witnessed by Arabs on daily basis. The association is very tight that even the substitution of the word with an Arabic synonym such as "الوادي" /ʔalwa:di:/ (The valley) would also cause a loss in meaning. In such a case, where no exact equivalent is ever available, a translator might evade through a rendering that achieves the most important aspects of the original text which are, according to the present investigation, meaning and euphemism.

Having said this, it becomes apparent that both Pickthal and Arberry failed to meet the criterion just designed. Words such as “**closet**” and “**privy**” are direct names for places where an excretory function usually takes place, ones that cause no confusion in meaning but obviously a sacrifice of euphemism. Although the word "الغانط" /ʔalya:ʔitʕ/ has long been associated with defecation and by time became a direct name of the place where excretory functions take place, euphemism still exists as the word originally derivates by undergoing euphemism. Despite the fact that Ali saved euphemism, his translation is not yet seen as a good one. His use of “**the offices of nature**” sounds odd and incomprehensible, since it has never been socially or linguistically approved as a metaphor of defecation or urination. It is only Hilali and Khan’s translation that perfectly met the criterion. The euphemism of the Arabic text was transmitted into English through the use of real English euphemized expression for excretory function “**call of nature**” where meaning was not affected or harmed.

### **Divorce**

That divorce is tough is a matter of fact; everybody agrees on the devastating aftermaths it causes on both individual and social levels. The following lines explain how divorce was euphemized in some occurrences in the Holy Quran.

A. تسريح /tarsi:h/

“الطَّلَاقُ مَرَّتَانٍ فَإِمْسَاكَ بِمَعْرُوفٍ أَوْ تَسْرِيحٍ بِإِحْسَانٍ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَكُمْ أَنْ تَأْخُذُوا مِمَّا آتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ شَيْئًا إِلَّا أَنْ يَخَافَا أَلَّا يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ اللَّهِ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ اللَّهِ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِمَا فِيمَا افْتَدَتْ بِهِ تِلْكَ حُدُودُ اللَّهِ فَلَا تَعْتَدُوهَا وَمَنْ يَتَعَدَّ حُدُودَ اللَّهِ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ”

(Al-Baqarah: 229)

Captured as an act of release "تسريح"/tarsi:h/, divorce was euphemized in the Holy Quran moving from a dull undesired word "طلاق" /t'ala:q/ to one that is more lively and promising of hope and freedom.

### **Translations**

“A divorce is only permissible twice: after that, the parties should either hold Together on equitable terms, or **separate** with kindness. It is not lawful for you, (Men), to take back any of your gifts (from your wives), except when both parties fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by Allah. If ye (judges) do indeed fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by Allah, there is no blame on either of them if she give something for her freedom. These are the limits ordained by Allah. So do not transgress them if any do transgress the limits ordained by Allah, such persons wrong (Themselves as well as others)” (Ali)

“The divorce is twice, after that, either you retain her on reasonable terms or **release** her with kindness. And it is not lawful for you (men) to take back (from your wives) any of your *Mahr* (bridal money given by the husband to his wife at the time of marriage) which you have given them, except when both parties fear that they would be unable to keep the limits ordained by Allah (e.g. to deal with each other on a fair basis). Then if you fear that they would not be able to keep the limits ordained by Allah, then there is no sin on either of them if she gives back (the *Mahr* or a part of it) for her *Al-Khul'* (divorce). These are the limits ordained by Allah, so do not transgress them. And whoever transgresses the limits ordained by Allah, then such are the *Zalimun* (wrong-doers, etc.)” (Hilali and Khan)

“Divorce must be pronounced twice and then (a woman) must be retained in honour or **released** in kindness. And it is not lawful for you that ye take from women aught of that which ye have given them; except (in the case) when both fear that they may not be able to keep within the limits (imposed by) Allah. And if ye fear that they may not be able to keep the limits of Allah, in that case it is no sin for either of them if the woman ransom herself. These are the limits (imposed by) Allah. Transgress them not. For whoso transgresseth Allah's limits: such are wrong-doers.” (Pickthal)

“Divorce is twice; then honourable retention or **setting free** kindly. It is not lawful for you to take of what you have given them unless the couple fear they may not maintain God's bounds; if you fear they may not maintain God's bounds, it is no fault in them for her to redeem herself. Those are God's bounds; do not transgress them. Whosoever transgresses the bounds of God -- those are the evildoers” (Arberry)

Both “**release**” and “**set free**” are possible equivalents by which euphemism was not violated. However; although “**separate**” is softer than “**divorce**” in that it causes less harm to the hearer, it (separate) does not imply the level of euphemism that is achieved in the other two words and hence, Ali is seen as the least successful in the translation of this verse.

*B. فارقوهن/fa:riq:hunna/*

*“فَإِذَا بَلَغْنَ أَجَلَهُنَّ فَأَمْسِكُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ أَوْ فَارِقُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ وَأَشْهِدُوا ذُوَيْ عَدْلِ مِّنكُمْ وَأَقِيمُوا الشَّهَادَةَ لِلَّهِ ذَلِكَ يُوعَظُ بِهِ مَنْ كَانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَمَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مَخْرَجًا”*

**(At-Talaaq: 2)**

Divorce includes parting from one another, hence some Quranic interpreters such as Al Qurtubi and Al Baghawi noted that “فارقوهن” /fa:riq:hunna/ (part from them), is an indirect command of divorce. Such indirectness in enunciating divorce has contributed to the production of a highly euphemized text where much of the negative impact of the original word has been eliminated.

### **Translations**

“Thus when they fulfil their term appointed, either take them back on equitable terms or **part with them** on equitable terms; and take for witness two persons from among you, endowed with justice, and establish the evidence (as) before Allah. Such is the admonition given to him who believes in Allah and the Last Day. And for those who fear Allah, He (ever) prepares a way out” (Ali)

“Then when they are about to fulfil their term appointed, either take them back in a good manner or **part with them** in a good manner. And take for witness two just persons from among you (Muslims). And establish the witness for Allah. That will be an admonition given to him who believes in Allah and the Last Day. And whosoever fears Allah and keeps his duty to Him, He will make a way for him to get out (from every difficulty)” (Hilali and Khan)

“Then, when they have reached their term, take them **back** in kindness or **part from them** in kindness, and call to witness two just men among you, and keep your testimony upright for Allah. Whoso believeth in Allah and the Last Day is exhorted to act thus. And whosoever keepeth his duty to Allah, Allah will appoint a way out for him”. (Pickthal)

“Then, when they have reached their term, retain them honourably, or **part from them** honourably. And call in to witness two men of equity from among yourselves; and perform the witnessing to God Himself. By this then is admonished whosoever believes in

God and the Last Day. And whosoever fears God, He will appoint for him a way out, and He will provide for him from whence he never reckoned". (Arberry)

Due to the clarity of this Quranic use of euphemism and the availability of a suitable linguistic equivalent, all translators, as the lines above show, have agreed on one matching counterpart where neither euphemism nor meaning were affected.

### Summary and Conclusions

Based on the analysis and comparison of the works of Ali, Hilali and Khan, Pickthal and Arberry, this study has investigated the incongruities in translating Quranic euphemisms into English. It was found out that euphemism is an evident phenomenon in the Holy Quran and is achieved through the implementation of the following lexical mechanisms:

#### 1) Substitution:

The study has revealed that the Holy Quran tends to commonly euphemize topics such as sexual intercourse, genitals, woman, excretory functions, sicknesses, divorce and death by replacing words relating to these topics with others having less degree of directness and causing less embarrassment. Many examples have been cited for this type of euphemism as the following table shows:

**Table 3: Substituted euphemized expressions in the Holy Quran.**

Topic	Replacement
Sexual intercourse	لامستم النساء، باثروهن، لا تقربوهن، مودة، فأتوهن، أفضى بعضكم إلى بعض
Genitals	جلودهم، السوءة، قرار مكين، عورات النساء،
Woman	أهلك
Excretory functions	الغائط، يأكلان الطعام
Sicknesses	ابيضت عيناه، أبكم، من غير سوء
Divorce	تسريح، فارقوهن
Death	اليقين، قضى نحبه، ومنكم من يتوفى

Furthermore, the meanings and indications of the euphemized expressions above have been thoroughly discussed in chapter three.

**1) Cultural differences:** Woman, for instance, in eastern Arab societies occupies a special status that differs from other western non- Arab societies and therefore, euphemism becomes a must to the earlier but stays an option to the latter.

**2) The variation of writing styles and stocks of vocabulary:** A word such as "باثروهن" /ba:ʃiru:hunna/ sets a good example. As already explained in chapter three, the translation of this word is problematic because there is no available English counterpart that denotes dermal unification with special reference to sex.

Considering all the findings just summarized and the prolonged analysis and comparison of chapter three, it is concluded that, except of few occurrences, Quranic

euphemistic expressions were not accurately translated into English. It was demonstrated how translators often sacrifice euphemism for the sake of conveying direct meanings.

Therefore, the researchers have attempted to fill this gap by suggesting more appropriate translations – where necessary – with special attention to meaning, euphemism as well as cultural equivalence. Suggested translations depended mainly on the following techniques of approximation:

- 1) **Linguistic approximation:** This technique was implemented when no specific lexical equivalence was found. The Arabic unique word was translated to a word of closest meaning thus does not harm euphemism. For example, the imperative verb "باشروهن" /ba:ʃiru:hunna/ indicates sex since it is derived from a noun that literally means “a dermal unification”. No English counterpart is available and hence it was approximated to “touch” as a word of closest meaning.
- 2) **Cultural approximation:** This technique of cultural approximation was used instead of literal translation when a cultural equivalent is available. “Pass away” for "يتوفى" /jutawaffa:/ and “the call of nature” for "الغائط" /ʔalya:ʔitʕ/ are some examples.

### **Recommendations**

Since the translation of euphemism in the Holy Quran has not yet received considerable research attention, it is believed that further studies are needed to enrich and complement the current investigation. Therefore, the researchers recommend other researchers to conduct studies that explore more euphemized topics in the Holy Quran; find other lexical mechanisms of achieving euphemism in the Holy Quran; and investigate stylistic Quranic euphemism, techniques and translatability.

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