



Open Access

Translating Polysems in the Noble Qur'an: A Comparative Morpho-Semantic Analysis of 21st Century Translation

Aliyu Okuta Ahmad¹

¹ Department of Arabic and French, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria

Abstract: Translating the Noble Qur'an into other languages requires a lot of effort by translators, and one major semantic phenomenon that requires even greater effort to translate is polysemy, due to the multiple meanings involved. Different translators render Qur'anic polysemy differently in an attempt to capture the specific meaning of the polysemous term. A few researches on translating Qur'anic polysemy have been conducted on selected polysemous words about some well-known translations like those of Yusuf Ali, Muhsin Khan & Hilali, J. Arberry, and Emily Assami, Marry Kennedy & Amatullah Bantley etc. This study focuses on the translation of a Qur'anic polysemy of the word "rijs" in four translations of the 21st century. The aim is to examine the selected translations and compare them to determine how each of them succeeds in capturing the specific meaning of the source text, or to what extent each translation attempts to avoid meaning loss in translating the investigated. The comparison is based on the interpretations of three famous commentators; Al-Qurtubi (2006), Ibn Kathir (1997) and At-Tabari (2001). The study applies the Qualitative Comparative Analysis approach in analyzing the four translations. The findings of the study reveal that translating Qur'anic polysemy is a difficult task and that all the selected translators are aware of that fact. It also reveals that in some instances, the translations succeed in conforming to the target meaning of either of the selected interpretations and that in most cases where specific meaning is not determined, the translations resort to the primary meaning of the lexeme under study.

Keywords: Polysemy; Lexeme; Rendition; Morpho-semantic; Qur'an translation

Copyright: *Provided that the author(s) and the source are credited, noncommercial use of the article is allowed, including printing and distribution.*

Processing History:
Processed: 21/04/2023
Accepted: 26/05/2023
Published: 15/06/2023

The Journal's Home Page:
<https://www.tasambo.com>

Corresponding Author:
Aliyu Okuta Ahmad
aliyu.ahmad@kwasu.edu.ng



1.0 Introduction

The Noble Qur'an as a divine revelation for the guidance of humanity is an important linguistic compendium and a major source from which Arab linguists derived morphological, syntactic and semantic rules (Al-Ushayqir, n.d.). Added to this,

it contains important information about human destiny as it affects the individual. It also educates and raises man to the highest moral, intellectual and social level when he strives to comprehend it and applies its teaching to life. A lot of discoveries are also made when one understands the meaning of this divine revelation. Since the revelation and

original text are in Arabic, it became difficult for those who could not read the Arabic text to grasp the guidance therein, hence, the necessity for translating its meaning into other languages to keep on with its universality and fully serve the purpose it is meant to serve; “the month of Ramadan in which was revealed the Qur’an, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion ...” (Q 2:185). However, translating the Arabic text of the Noble Qur’an has always been problematic and therefore, a subject of discussion among scholars.

Many efforts were made by Muslims and non-Muslims alike to translate the meaning of the Noble Qur’an into the English language. The first attempt was from a non-Muslim, Alexander Ross, whose work was published in London in 1649. This translation was from the French version made available by Sieur Du Ryer in 1647, after which many other translations follow. The first Muslim English translation was undertaken by Muhammad Abdul-Hakim and published in 1905 (Shamsi, n.d.). Since then, many other translations into English were published. In the course of translating the Noble Qur’an, the translator is faced with many challenges due to a lot of technicalities, among which is the richness of the Arabic language in vocabulary and grammatical possibilities which can hardly be compared with English, and the polysemous peculiarity of the Arabic language, where the semantic value of a word depends largely on the context. The difficulty confronting the translator is how to find an equivalent for the source text in the target language to avoid loss of meaning. This study, therefore, examines how translators transfer or render morpho-semantic words, such as the polysemous lexeme “*rijs*” in the Noble Qur’an into English.

1.1 Translating the Noble Qur’an into English

Several attempts have been made to render the meaning of the Noble Qur’an into various languages. The very first attempt can be traced to the first century of the Islamic calendar, when Salman the Persian, a companion of the messenger of Allah translated the first chapter (al-Fatihah) into Persian. Since then, many other attempts had been made towards translating the meaning of the Qur’an. According to Al-Jarf (2014), translations of

the Noble Qur’an into one hundred and two (102) languages were already available in 1936. A brief chronology of translations of the Qur’an shows that the first complete translation in Persian was produced between the 10th and 12th centuries, and then the Latin translation in 1143 by Robertus Cetenensis was published in 1543 at Basel, Switzerland. In 1616, the first German translation was produced by Schweigger and was published at Nuremberg. According to sources, the first French translation by Andre du Ryer was published in 1647 in Paris, while in 1776, the first Russian translation was published in St. Petersburg, followed by a second in 1878 by G. S. Sablukov and a third by Krachkovskii in 1963 (Al-Jarf, 2014). At present, the King Fahd Glorious Qur’an Printing Complex (KFGQPC) has published translations of the meaning of the Glorious Qur’an in seventy-seven (77) different languages of Asia, Africa and Europe (King Fahd Glorious Qur’an Printing Complex).

In respect of English translations, a great number of translations have been produced and published starting from the nineteenth century. The first attempts were made by non-Muslims/orientalists, such as Alexander Ross, whose translation was from Du Ryer’s French version of the Noble Qur’an and was published in London in 1649. It was followed by George Sale’s translation from a Latin version which was published in 1734. Other English translations that follow are John Medows Rodwell’s translation, published in 1861 and Edward H. Palmer’s translation, published in 1880. During the twentieth century, more translations were published, viz: Richard Bell’s translation, published in 1939, Arthur J. Arberry’s translation, published in 1955 and Nessim Joseph Dawood’s translation, published in 1956. The earliest English translation by a Muslim was produced by Muhammad Abdul Hakim Khan and published in 1905, followed by Abu’l -Fazl’s translation in 1912, Mirza Hairat Dihlawi’s translation, published in Delhi in 1916 and Maulavi Muhammad Ali’s translation which was first published in 1917. In 1929, Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar had his translation of the Qur’an published, and a year later, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, an English Muslim and Arabic scholar had his translation of the Noble Qur’an which was published in 1930, followed by Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation which is

considered the most popular translation, published in 1934 (Shamsi, n.d.).

In the late twentieth century, no fewer than 32 different translations were published. These include Muhammad Asad's English translation and interpretation of the Qur'an titled 'The Message of the Qur'an', published in 1980, Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali's 'The Noble Qur'an', published in 1997, Emily Assami, Marry Kennedy and Amatullah Bantley's translation of the Qur'an into English with the title 'The Qur'an', published by Saheeh International. Similarly in 1999, Abdulhaqq and Aisha Bewley's 'The Noble Qur'an' was published (Kashi, J. 2021).

This present twenty-first century has so far recorded about thirty-eight different works on the translation of the Noble Qur'an, starting from 2000 with the works of Abdul Ghaffur Parekh, Fazlollah Nikayin, Hamid S. Aziz, Serdar Ozturk, Zohurul Hoque and the combined work Timothy Winter, Uthman Hutchinson and Mostafa al-Badawi. In 2001, Hassan Qaribullah and Ahmed Darwish produced 'The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an', followed by the translation of Mohammad Javad Gohari, published in 2002, the translation by Ali Quli Qarai, first published in 2003 and Muhammad Mohar Ali's "A Word for Word Meaning of the Qur'an", also published in 2003. Other published translations include those of Muhammad A. S. AbdelHalem in 2004, Bjan Moeinian in 2005, Adam Esabhai, Ali Unal, Tahere saffarzadeh, and Zafar Ishaq Ansari, all in 2006; and those of Afzal Hoosen Elias, Ahmed Zaki Hammad, Muhammad Taqi Usmani and three other works in 2007, Tarif Khalidi in 2008, Usama K. Dakdok in 2009, Wahiduddin Khan also in 2009, Imtiaz Ahmad in 2010, Nazeer Ahmed in 2011, Arthur J. Droge in 2012, Talal Itani in 2014, Mustafa Khattab in 2015, Shehnaz Shaikh and Kausar Khatri in 2015 and an edited work led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr also in 2015.

Finally, in 2016, 'The Quran; A Complete Revelation' by Sam Gerrans was published, in 2017, Jane McAuliffe's translation was also published, followed by Musharraf Hussain's 'The Majestic Qur'an in 2018, Adil Salahi's 'The Qur'an; A Translation for the 21st Century' and 2020 Gordon D. Nlckel's translation (Kashi, J. 2021).

1.2 Concept of Polysemy

Generally, polysemy is a linguistic term used for words with multiple meanings. It is a semantic phenomenon that requires adequate attention from translators so as not to mistranslate or cause a loss of meaning in the original text. It is also called lexical ambiguity or semantic ambiguity (Abdur-Raof, 2018). According to Bussmann (1996), polysemy as a term was coined in 1897 by Bréal, and it is been spoken about when an expression has two or more definitions though with some common features that are usually derived from a single basic meaning. This definition is not different from that of Crystal (2008) who asserted that polysemy, also called polysemia is a term used in semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item or a word that has a range of different meanings. He also stated that a large percentage of a language's vocabulary is polysemous, and this is not limited to certain languages, but all languages. In his explanation, the line of distinction between this phenomenon and homonymy (two phonologically similar words with different meanings) remains purely a source of theoretical discussion.

Cruse (2006) simply defined the term as a lexical item which has more than one established distinctive sense which must be felt by native speakers of a language. He further explained that for items to be considered polysemous, the multiple senses must be related in some way. These relations involve contrast between the literal and figurative meanings of a word, either metaphorical, metonymic or hyperbolic. Similarly, Yule (2006) defined polysemy as "one form (written or spoken) having multiple meanings that are all related by extension" (p. 107). This assertion by Yule makes it expedient for translators to know and distinguish between related meanings to meet the target meaning from the original text.

In the Arabic language, polysemy is synonymous with homonymy (mushtarak al-lafthiy) or (shared words), and it is considered as one concept. According to As-Suyuti (n.d), is a lexical item denoting two or more different meanings at an equal level. However, Arabic scholars differ as to the existence of polysemy or homonymy in the Arabic language. While some scholars like Sibawayh, Ibn Faris, As-Sayuti, Ya'qub al

Fayruz'abadi etc. admit that one lexical item can have several real meanings, others like Ibn Dorostowayh and Ibrahim Anees reject it, claiming that it causes ambiguity in determining the intended meaning and that only one of the several meanings is real while others are metaphorical. All meanings are determined through the context.

1.3 Translating Polysemy in the Noble Qur'an

Arab linguists, regardless of their position over the existence or otherwise of polysemy in Arabic language, do agree that certain lexical items in the language did have several different meanings (real or metaphorical) attached to them. It is therefore undisputable that the Noble Qur'an is full of such lexical items that come with different meanings in different verses depending on the contexts. In his book, Mukrim (1996) stressed that a lexical item is originally meant for one single meaning, and from that original meaning, other meanings spring up as a result of semantic development which is gradual and takes some time. He analysed many works written on polysemy or shared meaning in the Qur'an and also cited many examples as analysed by different authors.

In translating polysems or homonyms in the Qur'an, context is the central theme around which the meaning of the lexical item revolves, and the key that unlocks the ambiguity (Mukrim, 1996). On this basis, Abdul-Raof (2018) expressed that context plays a vital role in the clarification of ambiguity and the understanding of the intended meaning, therefore, polysemy is context-sensitive. He cited examples in the Qur'an such as the verb '*anzala*' in surah *al-an'ām*, verse 39, (*anzala lakum min al-an'ām*) which he explained thus: the verb '*anzala*' meaning 'to send down' and its object '*al-an'ām*' meaning 'livestock' should not be understood as the different types of livestock are sent down from the sky. Instead, the sentence is semantically ambiguous and the accurate meaning is that '*al-mā'*' i.e. water/rain is sent down to water the plants which are the food for all types of livestock. Thus, the verb '*anzala*' means 'to produce'. That is, 'He God' produced or created for you the livestock. In a related study, Eassa Ali (2020) compared two translations (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Taqiudin Al-Hilali & Muhammad Muhsin Khan, and Emily Assami,

Marry Kennedy and Amatullah Bantley) in respect of five different polysemous lexemes in the Qur'an 'Ummah' (أمة), 'Azwaj' (أزواج), 'Hameem' (حميم), 'Heen' (حين). The study concludes that polysemy and homonymy are the core problems that confuse as they have multiple meanings and that translators differ in their accuracy in their rendition of Qur'anic polysemy or homonyms due to the selection of English words (p. 48-67).

1.4 Research Methodology

The study adopts the Qualitative Comparative Analysis Method by reviewing the interpretations of the lexical item being studied in the three selected orthodox exegeses of the Noble Qur'an, followed by an investigation of the translation of the selected item in the four selected translations. This is followed by a comparative analysis of the lexical item being examined as translated in the selected translations in the light of selected Qur'anic exegeses. The idea is to find out the extent to which the selected translations of Syed Ahmed (2005) Ahmad (2010), Itani (2012) Khattab (2015), conform to the interpretations of the selected commentators: Ibn Kathir, Al-Qurtubi and At-Tabari.

1.5 Discussion and Findings

The polysemous lexeme "*rijs*" (رجس) occurs ten times in seven surahs of the Noble Qur'an, namely: Al-Ma'idah (1), Al-An'am (2), Al-A'raf (1), At-Taubah (3), Yunus (1), Al-Hajj (1) and Al-Ahzab (1). An investigation into the primary meaning of the lexeme indicates that it denotes anything that has no good in it. In surah At-Taubah (Q 9:125), the lexeme is repeated twice with the same meaning, hence the two appearances are considered one in the analysis. In addition, the translators are labelled serially with numbers such as Ahmed (1), Ahmad (2) Itani (3) and Khattab (4)

Occurrence one:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنَّمَا الْخَمْرُ وَالْمَيْسِرُ وَالْأَنْصَابُ وَالْأَزْلَامُ رِجْسٌ مِنْ عَمَلِ الشَّيْطَانِ فَاجْتَنِبُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ. (المائدة: 90)

"yaaa aiyuhal lazeena aamanooo innamal khamru walmaisiru wal ansaabu wal azlaamu rijsum min 'amalish shaitaani fajtaniboohu la'al lakum tuflihoon". (Al-Ma'idah: 90)

Interpretation:

s/no	Interpreter	Interpretation
1	Al-Qurtubi	Wrath, torment
2	Ibn Kathir	Wrath, sin
3	At-Tabari	Sin, obnoxious

Translation:

1. Vickar Ahmed: "O you who believe! Intoxicants and gambling, stones (for sacrifice or idyllic gestures), and (divination by) arrows, are (all most) *undesirable*- Of Satan's tricks ..."
2. Imtiaz Ahmad: "O you believe! Alcoholic drinks and gambling and animals slaughtered for idols and arrows for seeking luck are *hateful* satanic activities...."
3. Talali Itani: "O you who believe! Intoxicants, gambling, idolatry, and divination are *abominations* of Satan's doing. Avoid them, so that you may prosper.
4. Mustafa Khattab: "O believers! Intoxicants, gambling, idols, and drawing lots for Decisions are all *evil* of Satan's handiwork..."

The term "*rijs*" in this verse is interpreted by Al-Qurtubi as (wrath, torment), and by Ibn Kathir as (wrath: based on ibn Abbas's interpretation, sin: based on Sa'id bn Jubair's commentary) and by At-Tabari, interpreted it as (sin, obnoxious).

In translating the term, it is observed that 1's selection of the word (undesirable), 2's selection of the word (hateful), 3's use of the word (abomination) and 4's use of the word (evil) did not exactly meet with the term (رجس) *rijs* in any of the three interpretations from the exegeses. The words (undesirable, hateful, abomination and evil) tend to go the same way to mean something bad, which is in line with the primary meaning of the term. It is therefore clear that the translators, instead of using the specific target, tend to apply the primary denotation of the term under examination.

Occurrence two:

... وَمَنْ يُرِدْ أَنْ يُضِلَّهُ يَجْعَلْ صَدْرَهُ ضَيِّقًا حَرَجًا كَأَنَّمَا يَصَّعَّدُ فِي السَّمَاءِ كَذَلِكَ يَجْعَلُ اللَّهُ الرِّجْسَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ. (الأنعام: 125)

wa mai yurid ai yudillaho yaj'al sadrahoo daiyiqan harajan ka annamaa yassa' 'adu fis samaaa'; kazaalika yaj'alul laahur rijsa 'alal lazeena la yu'minoon. (Al-An'am: 125)

Interpretation:

s/n	Interpreter	Interpretation
1	Al-Qurtubi	Curse, devil, obnoxious, anything bad
2	Ibn Kathir	Devil, torment, anything bad
3	At-Tabari	Devil, anything bad, torment, impurity

Translation:

1. Vickar Ahmed: "... Those whom He wills to leave wandering- He makes his breast (heart) narrow and tight as if he had to climb up to the sky (through his own heart): Thus does Allah (place) the *penalty* on those who refuse to believe.
2. Imtiaz Ahmad: "... and whomever Allah wills to lead astray, He makes his breast more and more closed and constricted as if he climbing up to the sky, in this way, Allah covers the disbelievers with the *impurity* (or His wrath). (Hence, they are unable to accept Islamic belief)."
3. Talali Itani: "... and whomever He desires to misguide, He makes his heart narrow, constricted, as though he were climbing up the sky. God thus lays *defilement* upon those who do not believe."
4. Mustafa Khattab: "But whoever He wills to leave astray, He makes their chest tight and constricted as if they were climbing up into the sky. This is how Allah *dooms* those who disbelieve.

In this verse, the lexeme (رجس) *rijs* is interpreted by Al-Qurtubi as (curse, devil, obnoxious, anything bad), and by Ibn Kathir as (devil, based on Ibn Abbas's view, torment, based on Ibn Zaid's interpretation and anything bad, based on Mujahid's interpretation) and At-Tabari also interpreted it as (devil, torment, anything bad,

impure). This indicates that all three commentators are almost in the same direction in their interpretations of the term.

A view on the selected translations of the lexeme as it occurs in this verse, reveals that:

1's rendition of the term as (a penalty) placed on those that disbelieve meets the target of Ibn Kathir and At-Tabari as (torment), being the consequence of their disbelief. It can also be said that his translation also meets with one of the interpretations (curse) of Al-Qurtubi, bearing in mind that the Arabic word (لعنة) means imprecation or ban from the mercy of Allah, which invariably attracts penalty and torment.

2's translation of the term (impurity) only meets with one of Al-Qurtubi's interpretations (obnoxious) as anything impure. It also meets one of the targets of At-Tabari (impurity), while the second meaning (wrath) only conforms to the primary meaning of the term (anything bad) as one of the interpretations by all the commentators.

3's translation of the term as (defilement) also conforms to one of the interpretations of At-Tabari as (impurity) and by extension to Al-Qurtubi's (obnoxious).

4's translation of the term as (dooms) to mean (يجعل الله الرجس) meets (by extension) with one of the interpretations of Ibn Kathir and At-Tabari as (torment) and Al-Qurtubi as (curse).

In conclusion, it is observed that none of the selected translations made mention of (devil) which is common in all three interpretations. The explanation from the commentators for (the devil) is that Allah places the devil upon those who disbelieve, who in turn continues to mislead them, so are unable to follow the right path. With this, it can be said that none of the translations has faithfully met the specific meaning of the term in this verse.

Occurrence three:

قُلْ لَا أَجِدُ فِي مَا أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ مُحَرَّمًا عَلَى طَاعِمٍ يَطْعَمُهُ إِلَّا أَنْ يَكُونَ مَيْتَةً أَوْ دَمًا
مَسْفُوحًا أَوْ لَحْمَ خِنْزِيرٍ فَإِنَّهُ رَجْسٌ أَوْ فِسْقًا أُهِلَّ لِغَيْرِ اللَّهِ بِهِ فَمَنْ اضْطُرَّ غَيْرَ بَاغٍ
وَلَا عَادٍ فَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ (الأنعام: 145)

Qul laaa ajidu fee maaa oohiya ilaiya muharraman
'alaa taa'iminy yat'amuhooo illaaa ai yakoona
maitatan aw damam masfoohan aw

lahmakhinzeerin fa innahoo rijsun aw fisqan
uhilla lighairil laahi bih; famanid turra ghaira baa
ghinw wa laa 'aadin fa inna Rabbaka Ghafoorur
Raheem (Al-An'am: 145)

Interpretation:

s/no	Interpreter	interpretation
1	Al-Qurtubi	-----
2	Ibn Kathir	-----
3	At-Tabari	Impure, Obnoxious

Translation:

1. Vickar Ahmed: "Say: "I do not find in the message that it was revealed to me any (meat) forbidden to be eaten by one who wishes to eat it, unless it is a dead meat, or blood poured forth, or the flesh of swine—Because it is **disgusting** (an abomination) or, what is impious, (meat) ..."
2. Imtiaz Ahmad: "Say: According to the revelations sent to me, I don't find any of them unlawful to be eaten by one who wishes to eat it, unless it is a dead animal, or blood which can flow, or the flesh of swine, since it is indeed, **impure** (or impious), and the meat of an animal which is sacrificed for others than Allah ..."
3. Talali Itani: "Say, "In what was revealed to me, I find nothing forbidden to a consumer who eats it, except carrion, or spilt blood, or the flesh of swine—because it is **impure**— or a sinful offering dedicated to other than God."
4. Mustafa Khattab: "Say, O Prophet: 'I do not find in what has been revealed to me anything forbidden to eat except carrion, running blood, swine—**which is impure**—or a sinful offering ..."

The lexeme under investigation, as it occurred in the above verse, has not been interpreted by Al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir; only At-Tabari has interpreted it as (impure and obnoxious).

In translating the term in the verse, 1 renders it (obnoxious) to meet with one of the interpretations by At-Tabari, which by extension, also meets with the other interpretation (impure). The other three translators (2, 3 and 4) render the term the same way (2, as impure, 3, as impure and

4, as 'which is impure'), conforming faithfully to the target meaning of the lexeme in the verse.

Occurrence four:

قَالَ قَدْ وَقَعَ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ رِجْسٌ وَغَضَبٌ أَتُجَادِلُونَنِي فِي أَسْمَاءٍ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَا أَنْتُمْ وَآبَاؤُكُمْ (الأعراف: 71)

"Qaala qad waqa'a alaikum mir Rabbikum rijsunw wa ghadab, atujaadiloonanee fee asmaaa'in sammaitumoohaaa antum wa aabaaa'ukum" (Al-A'raf: 71)

Interpretation:

s/no	Interpreter	Interpretation
1	Al-Qurtubi	Punishment
2	Ibn Kathir	Wrath
3	At-Tabari	Punishment

Translation:

1. Vickar Ahmad: "He said: **Punishment** and anger have already come to you from your Lord: do you (still) argue with me over names which you have made up ..."
2. Imtiaz Ahmad: "Hud said: The **torment** and wrath of your creator are about to fall on you. Do you quarrel with me over the (superficial) names which you and your forefathers have coined ..."
3. Talali Itani: "He said, "**Condemnation** and wrath have befallen you from your Lord. Are you arguing with me over names, which you and your ancestors invented ..."
4. Mustafa Khattab: "He said, 'You will certainly be subjected to your Lord's **torment** and wrath. Do you dispute with me regarding the so-called gods which you and your forefathers have made up'

Based on the context of the verse, the lexeme is interpreted by Al-Qurtubi to mean (punishment). In the case of Ibn Kathir, he interpreted it as (wrath). Similarly, At-Tabari interpreted it as (punishment).

As far as the translation is concerned, 1, 2 and 4's rendition of the term (punishment/torment) conforms to the interpretations of Al-Qurtubi and At-Tabari as (punishment) but did not directly meet with the interpretation of Ibn Kathir (wrath),

which is equally not a direct interpretation of the investigated term, because the term is followed close by (غضب), which means (wrath). However, moving forward, the word (wrath) could mean dispensing of torment, indirectly closing the gap in Ibn Kathir's interpretation.

The translation by 3 (condemnation) does not conform directly to (punishment/torment) because condemnation does not mean punishment and does not necessarily leads to it.

Occurrence five:

سَيَحْلِفُونَ بِاللّٰهِ لَكُمْ إِذَا انْقَلَبْتُمْ إِلَيْهِمْ لِنُغْضُوا عَنْهُمْ فَأَعْرِضُوا عَنْهُمْ إِنَّهُمْ رِجْسٌ وَمَا وَاهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ (التوبة: 95)

"Sa yahlifoona billaahi lakum izanqalabtum ilaihim litu'ridoo 'anhum fa a'ridoo 'anhum innahum rijsunw wa maawaahum jahannamu jazaaa 'ambimaa kaanoo yaksiboon" (At-Taubah: 95)

Interpretation:

s/no	Interpreter	Interpretation
1	Al-Qurtubi	Abominable action
2	Ibn Kathir	Malicious, impure
3	At-Tabari	Impure

Translation:

1. Vickar Ahmed: "When you return to them (the hypocrites), they will swear to you by Allah, that you may leave them alone. So leave them alone: Surely, they are **intensely disliked** (by Him), and their living place is Hell..."
2. Imtiaz Ahmad: "When you return to the hypocrites, they will swear by Allah to you so that you leave them alone. So do leave them in their condition since they are **impure** and their abode is Hell ..."
3. Talali Itani: "They will swear to you by God, when you return to them, that you may leave them alone. So leave them alone. They are **a disgrace**, and their destiny is Hell; a reward for what they used to earn".
4. Mustafa Khattab: "When you return, they will swear to you by Allah so that you may leave them alone. So leave them alone – they are

truly *evil*. Hell will be their home as a reward for what they have committed.

The interpretations of the term under review as can be seen in the verse is that Al-Qurtubi interpreted it as that (their actions are abominable), but Ibn Kathir and At-Tabari both interpreted it as (impure) referring to the disbelievers themselves, though Ibn Kathir added a second (malicious), which almost mean the same.

In terms of the translation, 1 rendered the term to mean (intensely disliked) by Allah. And this does not meet directly with any of the three interpretations. According to 2, the term is rendered to mean that the disbelievers are impure as against the interpretation of Al-Qurtubi which points to their actions as impure and abominable. However, 2's rendition conforms with the interpretations of both Ibn Kathir and At-Tabari.

3 and 4's rendition of the term (disgrace) and (evil) respectively does not meet with any of the interpretations and does not faithfully conform to the target meaning. However, the words (disgrace) and (evil) fall under the primary meaning of the investigated term, thereby avoiding total loss of the target meaning.

Occurrence six:

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ رِجْسًا إِلَى رِجْسِهِمْ وَمَاتُوا وَهُمْ كَافِرُونَ (التوبة: 125)

Wa ammal lazeena fee quloobihim maradun fazaadat hum rijsan ilaarijsihim wa maatoo wa hum kaafiroon (At-Taubah: 125)

Interpretation:

s/no	Interpreter	Interpretation
1	Al-Qurtubi	Doubt, disbelief
2	Ibn Kathir	Doubt
3	At-Tabari	Doubt, hypocrisy

Translation:

1. Vickar Ahmed: "But those in whose hearts is a sickness- It will (only) add *doubt* to their *doubt*, and they will die in a state of unbelief."

2. Imtiaz Ahmad: "And as for those who have the disease (of hypocrisy) in their hearts, then this (chapter) added more *impurity* to their *existing impurities* and they died as disbelievers".

3. Talali Itani: "But as for those in whose hearts is sickness, it adds *disgrace* to their *disgrace*, and they die as unbelievers".

4. Mustafa Khattab: "But as for those with sickness in their hearts, it has increased them only in *wickedness* upon their *wickedness*, and they die as disbelievers."

Interpreting the lexeme *rijs* in the above verse, Al-Qurtubi explained it as (doubt, disbelief), Ibn Kathir interpreted it as (doubt) and At-Tabari also as (doubt, hypocrisy).

In the translation, 1 translated the term to mean (doubt) as unanimously interpreted by the selected exegeses and thereby meeting faithfully with the target meaning. 2, 3 and 4's rendition of the term (impurity), (disgrace) and (wickedness) respectively, does not meet with any of the interpretations mentioned above. However, all three translations of the term by the translators are covered under the primary meaning (anything bad) to avoid a complete loss of meaning.

Occurrence seven:

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَفْسٍ أَنْ تُؤْمِنَ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَيَجْعَلُ الرَّجْسَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ (100)

"Wa maa kaana linafsin an tu'mina illaa bi iznil laah; wa yaj'alur rijsa 'alal lazeena laa ya'qiloon" (Yunus: 100)

Interpretation:

s/no	Interpreter	Interpretation
1	Al-Qurtubi	Torment
2	Ibn Kathir	Insanity, aberration
3	At-Tabari	Torment and wrath

Translation:

1. Vickar Ahmed: "No soul can believe, except by the Will of Allah, and He will place (basic) *doubt* on those who will not understand".

2. Imtiaz Ahmad: "And no person can believe except with Allah's permission. And Allah

throws *filth* (of disbelief) on those who have no sense.”

3. Talali Itani: “No soul can believe except by God’s leave, and He lays *disgrace* upon those who refuse to understand.”
4. Mustafa Khattab: “It is not for any soul to believe except by Allah’s leave, and He will bring His *wrath* upon those who are unmindful.”

The interpretation of the term *rijs* in the verse by the three commentators, as shown above, reveals that Al-Qurtubi interpreted it as (torment), Ibn Kathir as (insanity, aberration) and At-Tabari as (torment and wrath).

In the translation, 1 rendered the term to mean doubt, and this does not meet with any of the interpretations by the selected exegeses. 2 translated it as (filth) followed by an additional phrase in brackets (of disbelief), but yet does not conform to any of the selected interpretations. Similarly, 3’s rendition of the term to mean (disgrace) does not meet with any of the three interpretations, while 4’s rendition of the term to mean (wrath) succeeded in capturing one of the two interpretations of At-Tabari.

A critical observation of the rendition of the term reveals that 1, 2, and 3 did not succeed in meeting with the interpretations of the term (torment) by Al-Qurtubi, (insanity and aberration) by Ibn Kathir and (torment, wrath) by At-Tabari. The translations are only covered by the primary meaning of the term as previously mentioned.

Occurrence eight:

... وَأُحِلَّتْ لَكُمْ الْأَنْعَامُ إِلَّا مَا يُنْتَلَى عَلَيْكُمْ فَاجْتَنِبُوا الرِّجْسَ مِنَ الْأَوْثَانِ وَاجْتَنِبُوا قَوْلَ الزُّورِ (الحج: 30)

“... wa uhillat lakumul ‘anaama illaa maa yutlaa ‘alaykum fajtaniboora rijsa minal ‘authaani wajtaniboo qawlaz zoor (Al-Hajj: 30)

Interpretation:

s/no	Interpreter	Interpretation
1	Al-Qurtubi	Filthy thing
2	Ibn Kathir	Idols
3	At-Tabari	Worshipping of idols

Translation:

1. Vickar Ahmed: “... Lawful to you (for food during pilgrimage) are cattle, except those mentioned to you before): But avoid all the (intensely) *hateful things* about idols, and avoid the word that is not true.
2. Imtiaz Ahmad: “... And the cattle are lawful for you except those mentioned earlier (in Surah Al-Maidah-3). Hence save yourselves from the *dirt* of idols (i.e. worshipping idol is a dirty and mean thing) and save yourselves from false statements.”
3. Talali Itani: All Livestock are permitted to you, except what is recited to you. So stay away from the *abomination* of idols, and stay away from perjury.
4. Mustafa Khattab: “... The meat of cattle has been made lawful for you, except what has 'already' been recited to you. So shun the *impurity* of idolatry, and shun words of falsehood.

The three selected commentators on the Qur’an differ in their interpretation of the lexeme under investigation. Al-Qurtubi interpreted it as (a filthy thing), Ibn Kathir interpreted it as (idols) and At-Tabari interpreted it as (worshipping idols).

The selected translators equally differ in their selection of words in translating the lexeme even as most of them meet with its target meaning in the verse. For instance, 1 rendered it to mean (hateful things) about the idols, and one of the hateful things about them is worshipping them, and by this, he has succeeded in capturing the target meaning according to At-Tabari. 2 in his rendition of the term used the word (dirt) of the idols, followed by an explanatory sentence (a worshipping idol is a dirty and mean thing). By this explanation, 2 has also captured the target meaning as interpreted by At-Tabari, as well as the interpretation of Al-Qurtubi (filthy thing). According to 3, the lexeme is rendered to mean (abomination) of idols, and this means something regarded with disgust and hatred, and the worshipping of idols is hateful and abominable. His translation has by extension met with the interpretation of Al-Qurtubi and At-Tabari. 4, in his translation of the term used the word (impurity) of the idols, which does not conform to

any of the interpretations of the selected exegeses, and by this, he missed the target meaning based on the interpretations. However, his choice of the word is covered by the primary meaning as (anything bad).

It is observed that Ibn Kathir's interpretation of the term (idols) is not captured by any of the four selected translations.

Occurrence nine:

وَقَرَنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُمْ وَلَا تَرْجُحَنَّ الْجَاهِلِيَّةُ الْأُولَى وَأَقِمْنَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتِينَ الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِعْنَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا (الأحزاب: 33)

Wa qarna fee bu yoo tikunna wa laa tabarrajna tabarrujal Jaahiliyyatil oolaa wa aqimnas Salaata wa aateenaz Zakaata wa ati'nal laaha wa Rasoolah; innamaa yureedul laahu liyuzhiba 'ankumur **rijsa** Ahlal Bayti wa yutahhirakum tatheeraa" (Al-Ahzab: 33)

Interpretation:

s/no	interpreter	
1	Al-Qurtubi	-----
2	Ibn Kathir	-----
3	At-Tabari	Evil, abomination

Translation:

1. Vickar Ahmed: "... and establish regular Prayer, and give regular Charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger (Muhammad). And Allah only wants to remove *all bad* from you, you, members of the Family (of the Prophet), and to make you pure and pristine (totally cleansed).
2. Imtiaz Ahmad: "And stay in your houses. (But if you have to go out of home out of necessity) don't make a dazzling display (of your ornamentation) like the time of ignorance, and perform *Salat* and pay the poor due and obey Allah and His messenger. Indeed, Allah wishes to remove even (*the minor*) *sins* of the members of the family of Prophet Muhammad and keep them fully purified."
3. Talali Itani: "And settle in your homes; and do not display yourselves, as in the former days of ignorance. And perform the prayer, give

regular charity, and obey God and His Messenger. God desires to remove *all impurity* from you, O People of the Household, and to purify you thoroughly."

4. Mustafa Khattab: "Settle in your homes, and do not display yourselves as women did in the days of 'pre-Islamic' ignorance. Establish prayer, pay alms-tax, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah only intends to keep *'the causes of evil* away from you and purify you completely, O members of the 'Prophet's' family!"

The interpretation of the lexeme (رجس) *rijs* by the three interpreters shows that both Al-Qurtubi nor Ibn Khathir has not interpreted it. Only At-Tabari interpreted it as (an evil, abomination).

In the translation, 1 translated the term as (all bad), which conforms to one of available the interpretations of At-Tabari (evil), and by this, he captured the target meaning of the interpreter. As for 2, the choice of (sin), preceded by the phrase 'even (the minor)' has captured the target meaning in At-Tabari's interpretation as (evil, abomination) since sin is an evil and abominable act. 3, in his translation used (all impurity) as the meaning of the term (*rijs*) to conform to At-Tabari's (abomination), which means filthy, shameful, etc. 4 rendered the term as (the causes of evil), thus by extension, conform to the second word (abomination) which can cause evil. It is therefore meeting with the target meaning indirectly.

1.6 Conclusion

This research has studied polysemy in translating the Noble Qur'anic with a view that problems are encountered by translators vis--vis the choice of words that closely render the specific meaning of polysemous terms in the Qur'an because of multiple meanings of such terms. The research investigated the lexeme '*rijs*' in the Qur'an as having multiple meanings going by the contextual perception of its occurrence in the different verses of the revelation. At the end of the investigation, it was observed that translators differ in their accuracy in the translation of the Qur'an and even in other literary translations. The findings have shown that the translators, who have been aware of the difficulty in translating polysemy sometimes rely on the primary meaning of a term to cover up and avoid loss of meaning. The

findings have equally shown all the selected translators have in some instances resorted to using the primary meaning of the term.

References

1. Abdul-Raof, H. (2018). *New Horizons in Qur'anic Linguistics*. Routledge.
2. Ahmad, I. (2010). *The Easy Qur'an*. Tawheed Center of Farmington Hills.
3. Ahmed, V. S. (2005). *English Translation of the Meaning of the Quran*. Book of Signs Foundation.
4. Al-Jarf, R. (2014). "Itineraries in the Translation History of the Quran: A guide for Translation Students". *3rd International Conference on Itineraries of Translation History*, University of Tartu, Estonia.
5. Al-Qurtubi, M.A. (2006). *Al-Jami'u li Ahkam al-Qur'an*. Mu'assasah ar-Risalah.
6. Al-Ushayqir, M. A. (n.d.). *Athar al-Qur'an fii al-Lughat al-Arabiyyah*. Almerja. <https://almerja.com/reading.php?idm=14379>
7. As-Suyuti, (n.d). *Al-Muzhir fii 'Ulumi al-Lughah wa anwa'uhah*. Al-Maktabah al-'Asriyyah.
8. Bussmann, H. (2006). *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. Routledge.
9. Cruse, A. (2006). *A Glossary of Semantics*. Edinburgh University Press.
10. Crystal, D. (2008). *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (6th ed.). Blackwell Publishing.
11. Ibn Kathir, H. (1996). *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Adhim*. Dar al-Fikr.
12. Itani, T. (2012). *Qur'an, English Translation*. The Clear Quran.
13. Kashi, J. (2021). "Translations of the Quran". *Quran Archive*. <https://quran-archive.org/translations-of-the-Quran>
14. King Fahd Glorious Qur'an Printing Complex. (n.d.). Translations of the Meanings of the Qur'an. *Qur'an Complex*. <https://qurancomplex.gov.sa/en/kfgqpc-quran-translate/>
15. Khattab, M. (2015). *The Clear Quran*. Book of Signs Foundation.
16. Eassa, A. M. Ali. (2020). "Lexico-Semantic Issues in Translating Homonymy and Polysemy: A Comparative Study based on the Noble Quran". *QURANICA, International Journal of Quranic Research*. Vol. 12(1), 45-68.
17. Mukrim, A.S. (1996). *Al-Mushtarak al-Lafdhi fii al-Haq al-Qur'ani*. Mu'assasah ar-Risalah.
18. Shamsi, N. "The Holy Quran, Some Basic Fact". *Al-Islam.org*, www.al-islam.org/holy-Quran-some-basic-facts-nasir-shamsi/translations-Quran
19. Yule, G. (2006). *The Study of Language* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Download other Articles in the Same Volume:

<https://www.tasambo.com/search/label/Volume2%282%29-2023a>

<https://www.tasambo.com/search/label/Volume2%282%29-2023b>