On the Impacts of Global Coherence on Translation Comprehension of the Holy Quran: A Case Study of a PhD-ESP Learners

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Abstract

Despite the huge bulk of research conducted on translation quality assessment, the literature on the translation of the Holy Quran is in its infancy. Since jurists, commentators, and Quranic interpreters analyze individual Quranic verses as a whole discourse and in relation to other verses and Surahs, it is deemed necessary for translators to follow the same procedure and consider the wholeness of the text in their translation of individual verses. Coherence is among linguistic properties that contribute to the wholeness of the Quran as a unique discourse. A literature review shows that coherence has a direct effect on the quality of translations. Thus, this research intended to investigate the effect of coherence on the translation quality of some famous translations of the Holy Quran from an instructional viewpoint. To this aim, a mixed-methods study was employed in which the effect of coherence on reading comprehension of 12 Ph.D. candidates enrolled in an ESP course was studied. In the qualitative phase, utilizing linguistic markers, samples of coherent translations were extracted from the 30th chapter of the Quran. Then, two reading comprehension tests were developed from the coherent samples and the corpus without coherent markers. In the next step, these tests were administered to participants. The data were analyzed through a t-test. Findings showed that coherent translations enjoy post-posed/pre-posed concessive, sense continuity, backgrounding, explicitation, and addition as coherence markers. Also, quantitative findings showed a significant difference between the tests taken by the participants at two different times (t (11) = 4.204 and p = 0.001) proving the meaningful effect of coherence on translation comprehension.

Keywords: Coherence, the Holy Quran, Translation, Linguistic Analysis, Mixed Method

Introduction

According to Brigaglia (2005, p. 424), considering the inimitable style of the Holy Quran and the fear for meaning deviation in the Quran, one of the earliest translations of the holy text into other languages raised the opposition of Quranic scholars, though later translations of the Holy Quran such as Sales' translation attracted the interest of readers and scholars. Then, to capture the original sense of the Holy Quran, different scholars adopted different views. These views include Elimam`s view (2009, pp.282-295) that underscored stylistic affinity, Ahmed`s view (2004, p.199) that emphasized the consideration for an ongoing process of the translation and avoiding literal translation, and Abdulraof`s view (2005, p.172) that underlined the issues of cultural interference and message distortion. For instance, Abdulrauf's view indicates that Arberry's translation of the 9th verse of the surah Joseph which is translated into "that your father's face may be free for you", has not been able to convey the real metaphorical meaning of the text.

Abdelwali (2007, p.10) adds that the Quran enjoys a specific discourse feature. Thus, it is difficult or even impossible to render it to

other languages. Also, Al-Jabbari (2008, p.24) adds that literal, lexical, and interpretative translation of the Holy Quran lags behind adequacy for translation of this divine text. Underscoring the use of Tafsir (commentary) in Quranic translation, Al-Shahab (2012, p.12) states that a text gain benefits from the previous text and other texts, emphasizing the importance of global coherence in translation.

Though evaluating the quality of translation has been a formidable challenge for practitioners, many linguistic and non-linguistic approaches and tools are suggested for this purpose which encompasses different areas of the process such as meaning transfer, agreement of grammatical rules and conventions, consistency of terminologies used, consideration for contextual and cultural factors, etc. Yet, among linguistic factors that exert influence on intelligibility and comprehension of any written and spoken discourse, coherence has a critical position. However, this issue is not extensively exploited in the translation discipline. Furthermore, a review of the literature on translation studies conducted on the translation of holy texts, especially the Holy Quran, shows that research in this area is in its infancy. Therefore, the current research is an attempt to shed light on the effect of coherence on comprehension of translated Quranic texts from a linguistic and instructional point of view.

According to Halliday and Hassan (1976, pp.4-6), spoken or written discourses are not a random selection or an arbitrary collection of information and therefore enjoy a logical organization that helps the readers or hearers to comprehend them. This statement might imply coherence, yet, Engebresten (2000, p.5) believes that as far as linguistics is concerned, coherence is perceived as the totality of the mechanisms which state coherence correspondence to the system of explicit and implicit connective elements of immanent entity of the text. From the traditional point of view, all issues related to the coherence of the text reside in the text itself and therefore, the properties of the text including reference, theme, conjunctions, etc.

In the same line of thinking, Van Dijk (1995, p.389) believed that textual features are necessary but not sufficient condition for coherence and a text needs unity too. Carrel (1982, p.477) and Brown and Yule (1983,

p.223) also belonged to this school of thought and adopted their positions concerning different concepts and notions of coherence. In a pragmatic view, however, coherence does not necessarily reside inside the text but, according to Crystal (2008, p.85), it resides in principles that underlie the functional correctness and the identity of the text which encompasses factors such as the language users' knowledge of the world, their inferences and assumption, and especially how they communicate. Accordingly, Yule (1996, pp.84-85) believes that coherence includes those known or expected relationships in human experience which are used to connect the meaning of utterances implicitly or explicitly.

Despite these definitions and views, Blum-Kulka (2002, p.299) states that the coherence of the text is not a stable phenomenon, and therefore processes like translation might change or destroy the coherence of the text. To verify this assertion, Naoum (2011, pp.33-35) conducted a study and found that translation of a text from Arabic to English affects its coherence to a great extent. This study has concluded that a coherent-oriented approach toward translation promotes the intelligibility of translation by readers of the target text. AL-Azzawi (2004, pp.1-2) had already carried out research and explained that identifying coherence markers, especially those of global coherence which are beyond textual properties, has a great effect on the success of the translator. Later Zheng (2009, p.53) investigated the importance of coherence in translation and concluded that a successful and accurate translation is one that preserves the continuity of senses through combining concepts and relations into a network of knowledge space that is shaped around main topics in the target discourse.

More specifically Farghal (2012, pp.13-15) studied shifts of coherence in Quranic translations from both textual and reader`s point of view and found that due to cultural distance between Arabic and English languages and referential gaps, Quranic translators mostly fail to convey coherence ties and markers. Besides, Tabrizi and Mahmud (2013, p.3), studied selected English translations of the Holy Quran and its Arabic text from a discourse structure perspective and found differed structure and word domain between source and target languages. In the

same line of research Alamadari and Suzani (2016, p.25), studied the effect of explicitation on translation coherence of Quranic verses and reported that employing explicitation procedure in transferring meaning from source language to target language removes ambiguity from the translated verses and promotes coherence of the text. Fraghal (2017, pp.13-15) delved into the issues of textuality and cohesion and coherence in Arabic to English translations and concluded that various text-related features between two languages have greatly affected both cohesion and coherence of transitions from Arabic into English.

Taking these issues into account and considering the solution-based gap in the literature concerning Quranic translation accuracy and comprehensibility, the current research has adopted a new approach to shed light on the coherence of translation from an instructional angle and therefore, investigates the effect of coherence on comprehension of the English translation of Quranic verses from the viewpoint of English learners registered in an ESP (English for Specific Purpose) course. To this aim, the following research question is formulated:

Does coherence of English translations of Quranic verses affect comprehension of ESP learners?

Method

To answer the question posed, a mixed-method design was employed by the researcher which included both qualitative and quantitative phases. In the qualitative phase, through conducting discourse analysis, some Quranic verses with coherence clues were identified among famous English translations of the holy texts. In the quantitative phase, however, through adopting a quasi-experimental design, the effect of coherence in translation on comprehension of ESP learners was measured. For the quantitative phase, 12 Ph.D. students of theology and Quranic sciences registered in the ESP course were selected from two universities in the city of Qom through convenient sampling.

In the first round of the research, all Surahs in the 30th chapter of the Holy Quran as well as their English translations (Pickthail, Qaraei, Arberry, Moeiniani), were scrutinized through discourse analysis for global coherence clues. Then, some selected Quranic verses with global coherence clues were identified. Their

counterparts which lacked coherence clues were also identified in these translations. Then, two comprehension exams including Quranic verses with and without coherence clues were developed by the researchers. These two tests were administered to participants on two different occasions. The obtained scores were entered into SPSS (version 23) and analyzed through a paired-sample (dependent) *t*-test. The results of both qualitative and quantitative phases are presented below.

Results and Discussion

In the first round of the research, the 30th chapter of the Holy Quran was investigated and some verses with global coherence were identified. Some examples are presented in the following tables:

Table 1: Chapter 30th, Surah No, 106 (Quraysh), Verse 1 (لِإيلافِ قُرَيشٍ)

Translator	Quranic verse	Coherence	Explanation
Arberry	For the composing of Koraish	✘	
Qaraei	[In gratitude] for solidarity among the Quraysh,	Post-Posed Concessive	Chronological and Spatial Development by Footnoting*
Pickthail	For the taming of Quraysh.	✘	
Moeinian	For the protection of the tribe of Quraish.	✘	

That is, the team spirit and concord amongst clans of the tribe of Quraysh, who conducted the trade caravans between Yemen and Syria in summer and winter

Table 2: Chapter 30th, Surah No, 102 (Al-Takathur), Verse 5 (كَلَّا لَو تَعلَمونَ عِلمَ اليَقينِ)

Translator	Quranic verse	Coherence	Explanation
Arberry	No indeed; did you know with the knowledge of certainty	✘	
Qaraei	No indeed! Were you to know with certain knowledge,	✘	
Pickthail	Nay, would that ye knew (now) with a sure knowledge!	✘	
Moeinian	If you knew it before*	Sense Continuity	Cause and Effect Development through Addition

(you would not have devoted all your time to

work, work and work to pile up wealth.)

Table 3 : Chapter 30th, Surah No, 98 (Al-Bayyinah), Verse 2 (رَسولٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ يَتلو صُحُفًا مُطَهَّرَةً)

Translator	Quranic verse	Coherence	Explanation
Arberry	a Messenger from God, reciting pages purified	✗	
Qaraei	an apostle from Allah reciting impeccable scriptures	✗	
Pickthail	A messenger from Allah, reading purified pages	✗	
Moeinian	(*)…. its authentic pages are being recited by Mohammad, a messenger of God.	Foregrounding	Definition Development through Addition

* This clear proof is Qur'an which …..

Then, considering the corpus obtained, one reading comprehension test encapsulating global coherence and one test without manifest global coherence ties were developed by the researcher and administered to the participants. Afterward, the obtained data were entered into SPSS and analyzed through a dependent-samples *t*-test to investigate whether coherence-loaded translations affect comprehension or not. The results are presented in the following tables.

Table 4 : Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Er- Mean
Pair 1	Coherent	16.50	12	1.508	.435
	Non_Coherent	14.17	12	1.992	.575

As it is shown in this table, there is a difference between the mean scores of the group performing on two different tests administered on two different occasions. Despite that, the statistical significance of this difference can be determined through conducting a *t*-test the results of which are presented below:

Table 5: Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Coherent - Non_Coherent	2.333	1.923	0.555	1.112	3.555	4.204	11	.001

As it is shown, a *t*-test was conducted (*t* (11) = 4.204 and *p* = 0.001) which suggests a statistically meaningful difference between the performance of the group on two different conditions, implying that the coherent translation affects the reading comprehension of ESP learners to a significant extent. These findings underline the critical importance of linguistic properties for the accuracy of the translation. The results of this study support Khoshnoudi (2019, p.19) which reported that some famous translations of the Holy Quran suffer from semantic loss or reduction due to lack of cohesion, coherence, and other linguistic properties and therefore, suggested that due to the semantic load of Quranic concepts, incorporating analyses from famous Quranic commentaries or other contextual clues might help accuracy and intelligibility of the translation. In the same line of research,

Gazar and Tajari (2020, p.120) concluded that linguistic properties are necessary for translation and comprehension of Quranic texts, yet, a Quranic interpreter stands in the need of further resources for comprehension of the divine text, such as commentaries developed by the exegetes. Furthermore, the current study submits further proofs on Farghal (2012, 13-15) concluding that coherence shifts in Quranic translation bring about textual mismatches which seriously affect the potential of the meaning of the Quran and how it is understood by the readers. This study adds that some mismatches might reside in the cultural distance between the source and target languages that result in coherence shifts but some of these mismatches have their roots in inaccurate decisions on the part of the translator. Farghal (2017, Ibid) had also investigated the mismatch between Arabic to

English translation from a purely linguistic point of view and provided evidence from coherence and cohesion and suggested that in this discipline translators are required to understand the source language text in terms of content and textualization before considering their matching structures in the target language. Besides, these findings are in harmony with Alamdari and Suzani (2016, p.25) who had discussed that using explicitation in transferring meaning from source language to target language can help the reader to recognize the context better because it serves as a linguistic property that promotes coherence of the translation. They added that using explicitation as a translation strategy strengthened the coherence of interpretations but there were few cases in which extra information distracted the reader from the translation. However, in the case of the Quranic discourse which enjoys semantically loaded words and structures, explicitation always helps the reader of the target text to unfold the messages. In sum, according to Hu (1999), in translation, in addition to structural, semantic, and rhetorical considerations that are external and observable, cultural and social conditions that are internal and unobservable must be considered as well. Accordingly, coherence is a viable linguistic property that possibly can fill the gap between languages.

Conclusion and Implications

Advocating Hu (1999, pp.39-41) who stated that translation, compared with other areas in linguistics, enjoys most from coherence- since coherence has a critical contribution to translation quality, accuracy, and intelligibility – the current research was an attempt to investigate the effect of coherence on translation comprehension. This aim was fulfilled through a mixed qualitative-quantitative research design and findings showed that those Quranic translations which are more coherent are comprehended more by ESP learners. These findings have implications for Quranic translators, ESP students, curriculum developers, Quranic exegetes, and researchers in the field of applied and interdisciplinary linguistics. Further research is required to delve into a greater corpus of Quranic texts and their translations.

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