

1.3 English Translations of The Qur'an

Main Topics Covered

- **Learning the Arabic Language** (0:00 to 2:00)
- **History of English Translations** (2:00 to 4:20)
- **Yusuf Ali Translation** (4:20 to 4:50)
- **Muhamad Asad Translation** (4:50 to 5:30)
- **Prof. Abdel Haleem & Dr. Mostafa Khattab Translations** (5:30 to 7:05)
- **Translators' Faith & Accuracy of Translations** (7:05 to 7:50)
- **The Unique Language of The Quran** (7:50 to 9:00)
- **Parallel Meanings in The Quran** (9:00 to 10:00)

This time, we are going to discuss the translations of the Quran in this introductory module on the Quran.

Before we talk about the translation from Arabic to English or other languages, let's talk about the Arabic language. Let me recommend for brothers and sisters who are not Arabic-speakers or readers to actually learn the Arabic language. The Arabic language is easy to learn. It's a very systematic and rich language and it takes a lot of life to comprehend its vocab and so on...

Most Arabs don't comprehend much of its vocab. But actually, it is a systematic language and if you learn it through the Quran, this would be very important and very facilitated.

It is much more important to learn Arabic language than any other language. We learn a language. Personally, decades ago when I immigrated to the west, I didn't know English. But then I learned English and I learned to speak that language, and eventually communicate to you now in that language.

Yes, it's not like my mother tongue, which is Arabic language. But Arabic is possible to learn until you become more excellent in Arabic more than the Arabs. I've seen brothers and sisters from India, from America, from Europe, from Africa... who actually know Arabic more than people who are born with an Arabic mother tongue.

Arabic is a language, it's not a race. That is also very important.

English Mistranslations of the Quran

English translations have a history in the Latin translations. And the Latin translations actually have a sad history of mistranslation. The first translation is Le Venerable in the twelfth century, then Bebliander in the sixteenth century were actually distorted translations.

Unfortunately, we know that because Bebliander was what Martin Luther had learned when he was searching and discussing different religions. And he rejected some basic premises of

the church, which is the priest being between you and God, and the doctrine of non-marriage for priests and a number of things that are actually very close to Islam.

Unfortunately, because he read Bebliander's translation. And now we know that 75% of the translation is not Quran at all, it has nothing to do with what Bebliander is talking about. And 25% of it, which actually is a translation of something in the Quran in Latin is actually distorted too. So we know how disastrous this translation is.

Yet, unfortunately that's what Martin Luther and other people in Europe and other parts of the world who read Latin had learned about Islam, because they did not access the Arabic language.

Arabic language until centuries ago, when the Islamic civilization started to decline, was the lingua franca of science and literature and so on. But unfortunately, not everybody had access to the language, especially with the politics of the time.

If you read the politics of Martin Luther and the Ottoman empire at the time and how they interacted, you realize that having a good translation of the Quran is very important for people of knowledge and people of sound minds to actually understand what the Quran is talking about, if they don't have access to the Arabic language.

Modern Translations of The Quran

Today we have many English translations, the most popular is Yusuf Ali. I would not recommend Yusuf Ali as a translation, because he is literal in many ways. And Arabic is much richer than the English he presents. But I would recommend it in terms of a footnotes, because the footnotes are extensive, and they give a lot of tafsir of different scholars.

When I refer to English translations of Quran, I refer to Muhammad Assad. I modify some of it in my own writings and scholarship. For example, I translate his old English into new English, because old English sometimes is not accessible for the English reader, and I differ with some of the words.

But Muhammad Assad is European but has practiced the Arabic language in its origin in the desert of Arabia until he perfected it really. You see from the translation that his Arabic is very strong.

You also could refer to easier translations and more accessible like Prof. Muhammad Abdel Haleem from University of London, or Dr. Mustafa Khattab from Toronto.

Compare Translations

I would recommend to compare different translations because sometimes the language (English) is actually loaded with meanings. For example, when you say, "*Ar-Rabbaniyyin*" (the Lordish, or God's servants), we translate it as rabbis, which is not exactly an accurate translation.

Even though in the Hebrew language the rabbis means the Lordish, but as a Quranic concept is actually a quite different concept because it is not a class of scholars, it is not somebody with a particular dress or particular certificate. It is somebody with a particular heart and a particular behavior connected to Allah (SWT).

Also, we have to be careful with the translation depending, unfortunately, on the faith of the translator. If a translator is a non-believer, you will find biases in the way they translate the Quran. If you know the Arabic language, you could judge that they assume that it is Muhammad (peace be upon him) who was writing this. Or they assume that the Arabic terms are actually the English terms or the Latin terms or the terms we know from the biblical studies, so they corrupt some of the Arabic words intentionally or non intentionally.

So, the best approach, perhaps, after learning Arabic, is to compare different translations and try to see the meaning where it goes.

Unique Arabic

Know that there is a difference between the Quran and the tafsir. The Arabic of the Quran is a very different kind of language and a very different kind of message. There is a difference even between the Arabic of the Quran and the Arabic of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

If you read the hadith: “Deeds are according to intentions”, or “Islam is based on five pillars...” Even the most confirmed hadiths, in which we know that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had said and you compare the beauty of the language of Prophet Muhammad with the language of the Quran; that is a very different Arabic that we should know that is at the highest level of expression.

It’s a language that has a number of features that we’re going to talk about, one of which is the parallel meanings. It’s a language where you could actually speak in a sentence and you mean more than one thing at the same time.

That is a feature that any translation will never bring, because when you say in Arabic a word that could mean a number of meanings and you mean all of them because they fit in different contexts, a translation would have to pick one of the meanings and make the translation. That is a feature that is deeply rooted in the Arabic language and keeps the script open to different understandings and new meanings as we learn more about the universe and as the time and place change.

We ask Allah to forgive us and guide us. We ask Allah to help us through the journey with the Quran.