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TRANSLATION UNIVERSALS AND DEICTIC SHIFTS IN GERMAN QUR'AN TRANSLATIONS

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Abstract: This article investigates the relationship between translation universals and deictic shifts in selected German translations of the Qur'an. Translation universals, such as explicitation, simplification, normalization and explicative restructuring, are frequently observed in translated texts and may influence the way deictic expressions are rendered in the target language. The study focuses on personal, spatial, temporal and discourse deixis in German Qur'an translations and examines how shifts in deictic reference affect meaning, textual coherence and reader interpretation. Special attention is given to cases where translators clarify implicit references, adjust pronoun usage, reorganize demonstrative structures or make contextual meanings more explicit for German-speaking readers.

Key words: translation universals, deictic shifts, German Qur'an translations, deixis, explicitation, simplification, normalization, discourse deixis, religious translation, pragmatic analysis.

Introduction

Translation is not only the transfer of words from one language into another, but also the reconstruction of meaning, reference, communicative intention and discourse structure. This problem becomes especially complex in the translation of sacred texts, where every linguistic element may carry theological, rhetorical and cultural significance. The Qur'an, as a religious and literary text, contains a high number of deictic expressions referring to speaker, addressee, time, place, textual context and divine-human relations. When these units are translated into German, they often undergo various shifts caused by grammatical differences, target-language norms and the translator's interpretive strategy.

The concept of translation universals is important for understanding such changes. Translation universals are recurrent linguistic features that tend to appear in translated texts regardless of the specific languages involved. These include explicitation, simplification, normalization, standardization and interference. In the context of German Qur'an translations, these tendencies can be observed in the treatment of pronouns, demonstratives, temporal markers, address forms and discourse references.

Deictic shifts occur when the original reference point changes during translation. For example, an implicit Arabic pronoun may be made explicit in German, a demonstrative may be replaced by a noun, or a compact temporal expression may be expanded for clarity. Such changes may help the target reader understand the text more easily, but they may also affect the rhetorical density and sacred style of the original discourse.

The aim of this article is to examine how translation universals influence deictic shifts in German Qur'an translations. Unlike purely grammatical studies of deixis, this research considers deictic change as a pragmatic and translational phenomenon. The article focuses on how universal tendencies such as explicitation, simplification and normalization shape the rendering of deictic

units in German. The study also provides examples showing how small linguistic changes may influence the reader's perception of Qur'anic discourse.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on research in corpus-based translation studies, descriptive translation studies and pragmatics. Mona Baker's work is particularly important because she introduced the idea that translated texts may have distinctive linguistic features that can be studied systematically through corpora. According to this approach, translation is not simply a secondary copy of the original, but a text type with its own regularities and tendencies [1]. This idea is useful for the present research because German Qur'an translations may reveal repeated patterns in the handling of deictic expressions.

Gideon Toury's descriptive translation theory also provides an important basis for the study. Toury argues that translations are facts of the target culture and should be analyzed according to the norms that govern the translator's decisions [2]. In the case of German Qur'an translations, this means that deictic shifts cannot be explained only by Arabic grammar. They must also be understood in relation to German linguistic norms, religious readership, academic expectations and the translator's intended audience.

Andrew Chesterman developed the discussion of translation universals by distinguishing different types of universal tendencies. His work shows that universal features should not be treated as absolute rules, but as probabilistic hypotheses that need to be tested in actual translated texts [3]. This is relevant to Qur'an translation because a shift in deixis may be caused by several factors at once: the source text structure, German syntax, religious sensitivity, stylistic preference and reader comprehension.

The collection edited by Anna Mauranen and Pekka Kujamäki raises an important question: whether translation universals truly exist or whether they are dependent on language pairs, genres and historical contexts [4]. This question is central to the present study. Sacred translation may not follow the same tendencies as ordinary literary or technical translation. In Qur'an translation, translators may avoid excessive simplification because the sacred text is expected to preserve solemnity and semantic depth. At the same time, they may use explicitation to make implicit references clearer for German-speaking readers.

Shoshana Blum-Kulka's explicitation hypothesis is also highly relevant. She argues that translation often produces shifts in cohesion and coherence, making certain relations more explicit than in the source text [5]. In German Qur'an translations, this can be observed when Arabic pronouns or demonstratives are replaced by nouns such as "Gott", "der Gesandte", "die Menschen", "die Schrift" or "die Offenbarung". These additions may improve clarity, but they also change the compact structure of the original.

Kinga Klaudy and Krisztina Károly's research on implicitation and explicitation further develops this discussion. Their asymmetry hypothesis suggests that translators often prefer explicitating operations more than implicitating ones [6]. This tendency is important in Qur'an translation because the Arabic text often uses compact references that depend on context. German translators may therefore clarify the referent in order to prevent ambiguity.

Sara Laviosa's corpus-based approach to translation studies provides a methodological model for identifying repeated features in translated texts [7]. Her work is important because it allows researchers to move beyond isolated examples and investigate broader textual tendencies. In the present study, this approach is adapted qualitatively: examples are examined not as isolated grammatical forms, but as signs of broader translation behavior.

As a textual basis for German Qur'an translation, Hartmut Bobzin's modern German rendering of the Qur'an is significant because it represents a contemporary scholarly attempt to transfer the Arabic Qur'anic text into readable and philologically careful German [8]. Bobzin's translation is especially useful for examining how modern German handles sacred deixis without fully abandoning the rhetorical tone of the original.

Research Methodology

This study applies a qualitative descriptive methodology. The main research object is the relationship between translation universals and deictic shifts in German Qur'an translations. The analysis focuses on selected examples of personal deixis, spatial deixis, temporal deixis and discourse deixis. The examples are presented in analytical form to demonstrate the linguistic phenomenon clearly.

The research uses the following methods. First, the descriptive method is applied to explain how deictic units function in the source discourse and how they are rendered in German. Second, comparative analysis is used to identify differences between the expected literal rendering and the actual translated form. Third, pragmatic analysis is used to determine how deictic shifts affect meaning, reference and reader interpretation. Fourth, translation-universal analysis is applied to classify the shifts according to explicitation, simplification, normalization and standardization.

The study does not aim to judge whether one translation is absolutely correct or incorrect. Instead, it examines the mechanisms behind translation decisions. In sacred text translation, the translator works under several pressures: fidelity to the source text, readability in the target language, theological accuracy and stylistic appropriateness. Therefore, deictic shifts should be studied as meaningful translation choices rather than accidental deviations.

The analysis follows four stages. First, the deictic unit is identified. Second, its function in the source context is explained. Third, the German rendering is examined. Fourth, the shift is classified according to a translation universal. This procedure allows the study to show how universal tendencies operate in specific linguistic examples.

Analysis and Results

The analysis shows that deictic shifts in German Qur'an translations are strongly connected with translation universals. The most frequent tendencies are explicitation, simplification and normalization.

Personal deixis refers to pronouns and person markers such as "I", "We", "you", "he" and "they". In Arabic Qur'anic discourse, pronouns often rely on context. The referent may be clear to readers familiar with the text, but less clear to target readers. German translators often make such references more explicit.

For example, an Arabic structure may contain a pronoun meaning "He guided them". In German, the translator may render it as "Gott leitete sie" instead of simply "Er leitete sie". Here, the pronoun "He" is replaced by the noun "Gott". This is a clear example of explicitation. The referent is made more visible for the reader.

This shift has both advantages and consequences. On the one hand, it prevents misunderstanding. On the other hand, it reduces the compactness and rhetorical continuity of the original. The Arabic text may create a smooth flow of reference through pronouns, while the German version interrupts this flow by repeating the noun.

Example: Source meaning: "He grants mercy to whom He wills."

More literal German form: "Er erweist Barmherzigkeit, wem Er will."

Explicitated German form: "Gott erweist Barmherzigkeit, wem Er will."

In this example, explicitation clarifies the divine referent. The shift reflects Blum-Kulka's idea that translation often strengthens cohesion by making implicit relations explicit [5].

Simplification occurs when a complex source-text structure is made less dense in the target language. The Qur'an often contains sequences of pronouns and demonstratives referring to different groups or events. In German, long chains of reference may sound difficult or ambiguous. Therefore, translators may simplify them.

Example:

Source meaning: "They denied it when it came to them, although they had known it before."

Possible German rendering: "Sie leugneten die Botschaft, als sie zu ihnen kam, obwohl sie sie zuvor erkannt hatten."

In the German version, the pronoun "it" may be replaced by "die Botschaft" or "die Offenbarung". This is both explicitation and simplification. The deictic reference becomes clearer, and the sentence becomes easier to process.

However, simplification may also reduce interpretive openness. The Arabic pronoun may refer not only to a message, but also to revelation, truth or divine command. When the translator chooses one noun, the semantic field becomes narrower. Thus, simplification improves readability but may limit the range of meaning.

Normalization means adapting the translation to common target-language patterns. In German, demonstratives such as "dies", "dieser", "jene", "das" and "solche" have specific stylistic values. Qur'anic Arabic often uses demonstratives with strong rhetorical effect. German translators may normalize these forms according to German usage.

Example:

Source meaning: "This is a reminder."

Formal German rendering: "Dies ist eine Ermahnung."

Normalized German rendering: "Das ist eine Mahnung."

The difference between "dies" and "das" is not only grammatical. "Dies" sounds more formal, solemn and text-bound. "Das" sounds more natural and common in modern German. If the translator chooses "das", the sentence becomes more accessible, but the solemn deictic force may be weakened.

Another example can be seen in expressions referring to "those people" or "such ones". German may render them as "jene", "diese", "solche Menschen" or "sie". Each option changes the distance between the speaker and the referent. "Jene" creates distance; "diese" creates textual closeness; "solche Menschen" adds interpretive categorization.

Example: Source meaning: "Those are the successful."

German option 1: "Jene sind die Erfolgreichen."

German option 2: "Das sind diejenigen, die Erfolg haben."

German option 3: "Solche Menschen sind erfolgreich."

The first version preserves demonstrative distance. The second normalizes the sentence into natural German. The third interprets the group morally and socially. This shows that demonstrative deixis is highly sensitive to normalization.

Temporal deixis refers to expressions of time such as "today", "then", "before", "after", "on that day" and "now". In Qur'anic discourse, temporal deixis often connects worldly time with eschatological time. German translators frequently standardize these expressions by using established religious formulas.

Example: Source meaning: "On that Day, every soul will know what it has done."

German rendering: "An jenem Tag wird jede Seele wissen, was sie getan hat."

The phrase “an jenem Tag” is a standardized German expression for eschatological reference. It preserves the seriousness of the original and marks a future divine event. Here, standardization does not weaken the meaning. Rather, it helps produce a stable religious register in German.

Another temporal example is the use of “today”. In sacred discourse, “today” may refer to a decisive moment of divine declaration, not merely to ordinary time.

Example:

Source meaning: “Today the truth has become clear.”

German rendering: “Heute ist die Wahrheit deutlich geworden.”

The temporal deictic marker “heute” is preserved because it carries rhetorical immediacy. If it were replaced by a neutral expression such as “zu dieser Zeit”, the force of the original would become weaker.

The result shows that temporal deixis is often less radically shifted than personal or discourse deixis. This is because German has direct and stable equivalents for many temporal markers.

Discourse deixis refers to expressions that point to parts of the text itself, such as “this Book”, “these verses”, “this revelation” or “that which was sent down”. In Qur’an translation, discourse deixis is particularly important because the text often refers to itself as revelation.

Example:

Source meaning: “This is a Book in which there is guidance.”

German option 1: “Dies ist ein Buch, in dem Rechtleitung ist.”

German option 2: “Dies ist die Schrift, die Rechtleitung enthält.”

German option 3: “Dieses Buch enthält Führung für die Menschen.”

The first version is closer to the source structure. The second version uses “die Schrift”, which gives the text a more scriptural tone. The third version restructures the sentence and makes the meaning clearer for readers. This is explicative restructuring: the deictic unit remains, but the sentence is reorganized.

The shift affects the reader’s interpretation. “Dies ist ein Buch” sounds like a direct textual pointing. “Die Schrift” gives the expression religious authority. “Dieses Buch enthält Führung” turns the deictic declaration into an explanatory statement. Thus, discourse deixis is one of the most sensitive areas in Qur’an translation.

Although translation universals usually describe general tendencies of translated texts, interference shows the influence of the source language on the target text. In German Qur’an translations, interference may appear when the translator preserves Arabic word order or repeated pronoun structures.

Example:Source meaning: “And He is the Hearing, the Knowing.”

German rendering close to source: “Und Er ist der Hörende, der Wissende.”

More natural German rendering: “Er hört alles und weiß alles.”

The first version preserves the nominal structure and divine attributes. The second version normalizes the meaning into common German verbal expression. The choice depends on the translator’s strategy. A more literal translator may preserve the sacred formula, while a reader-oriented translator may prefer the natural German sentence.

This example shows that interference is not always a weakness. In sacred translation, controlled interference may preserve the religious style of the original. Therefore, translation universals must be applied carefully to Qur’an translation. What appears unusual in German may be intentionally preserved for theological and stylistic reasons.

The study reveals several important results. First, explicitation is the most common tendency in the translation of deictic units. It appears when pronouns are replaced by nouns, when

demonstratives are clarified, or when discourse references are expanded. Second, simplification occurs when long chains of reference are reduced or reorganized. Third, normalization appears when translators adapt Arabic rhetorical structures to natural German syntax. Fourth, standardization is especially visible in temporal and eschatological expressions such as “an jenem Tag”. Fifth, interference may be deliberately maintained in order to preserve the sacred tone of the original.

The findings show that deictic shifts are not random. They are connected with broader translation tendencies. However, sacred text translation also has special features. Translators cannot freely simplify or normalize every structure because the sacred status of the text requires careful preservation of rhetorical and theological meaning.

Conclusion

The study of translation universals and deictic shifts in German Qur’an translations shows that deixis is a central element of sacred discourse. Personal, spatial, temporal and discourse deictic units help organize the relationship between the speaker, the addressee, the text and the religious message. When these units are translated into German, they often undergo shifts caused by explicitation, simplification, normalization, standardization and interference.

Explicitation helps clarify implicit references, especially in personal and discourse deixis. Simplification makes complex structures easier for German-speaking readers. Normalization adapts the translated text to German stylistic norms. Standardization creates stable religious expressions, especially in references to the Day of Judgment and divine speech. Interference, however, may preserve the solemnity and sacred character of the original.

The analysis demonstrates that translation universals are useful for studying Qur’an translation, but they must be applied with caution. Sacred texts do not function like ordinary texts. Their linguistic form is closely connected with theological meaning, rhetorical power and spiritual reception. Therefore, a deictic shift in Qur’an translation is not merely a grammatical change; it is a pragmatic and interpretive decision.

Future research may apply corpus-based methods to compare several German Qur’an translations quantitatively. Such research could examine the frequency of pronoun explicitation, demonstrative replacement, temporal standardization and discourse restructuring. This would make it possible to identify broader patterns in the translation of sacred deixis across different German translations.

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