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Author (s): **Dr. Abida Bokhari**
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Islamic Studies, Government Islamia Graduate College (W) Cooper Road, Lahore.
Dr. Latif Ahmad
Principal, Govt. Special Education Institute, Kasur.

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The Impact of Polysemy on Qur'ānic Translation: A Comparative Study

Dr. Abida Bokhari

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Islamic Studies, Government
Islamia Graduate College (W) Cooper Road, Lahore.

Email: bokharysyed111@gmail.com

Dr. Latif Ahmad

Principal, Govt. Special Education Institute, Kasur.

Email: lak104@yahoo.com

Abstract

Polysemy, the presence of multiple related meanings within a single word, poses significant challenges for translators, particularly in the context of translating religious texts like the Holy Qur'ān. This study examines the translation of polysemic words in the Qur'ān. It compares six English translations of the Holy Qur'ān, identifying their common pitfalls and the strategies employed to render polysemic terms. Through analyzing selected verses, the research reveals the inadequacies of literal translation approaches in conveying the full spectrum of meanings inherent in polysemic terms.

Keywords: Holy Qur'ān, English translations Polysemy, Translation strategies, Women translators

Translation of Polysemy:

Polysemy refers to a word or phrase with different, but related senses. It has a diversity of meanings, in other words 'several meanings in a single word'. Vocabulary Words enter into meaningful relations with other words around them. Polysemy comes from Neo-Latin polysemia, which comes from polysemous (poly- (many) + sema (sign)) having many meanings or multiple meanings. Senses of the same word are seldom ambiguous in context, the less specific the context, the greater the possibility of ambiguity. David Crystal has defined polysemy as a term used in the semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item, which has a range of different meanings, for example, plain has different meanings as 'clear', 'unadorned', 'obvious' etc.; it also called polysemia.¹ Cruse explains polysemy as a lexeme having several senses.²

¹ David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (6th Edition, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), 373.

² D.A. Cruse, *Lexical Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 80.

Hasan Ghazala mentions, a word that has more than one meaning is called polysemy. In comparison to polysemy, monosemy refers to a word that has one single meaning only. He explains it with examples. For instance, the word 'stage' is polysemous which denotes different meanings as 1) step, 2) a 'platform in the theatre' while 'telephone' is a monosemous word which denotes just one meaning. Several polysemous words have a common meaning each, which is more popular and recognized than other meanings. It is referred to as 'core' or central meaning. For instance, 'sound' has the core meaning of *Ṣawt*. Simultaneously, it has other less common meanings of 'firm', 'solid', 'wise', 'valid', 'narrow channel' etc.³

Polysemy or meaning's multiplicity is regarded to be a common feature of English and Arabic as it occurs in both languages. "The existence of this linguistic phenomenon creates lexical problems in many cases, especially when they are dealt with as monosemous words or even when the translator is indifferent to the linguistic context and the relations that hold among the constituents of a linguistic stretch."⁴

The translators may know only the popular meaning of a polysemic word and are usually used to translate it into TL, irrespective of any of its other possible meanings, it might be possible that they understand it as a monosemic word, having only one meaning. In this way, they may actually make serious mistakes. A big part of the vocabulary of a language is polysemic. The linguist's theoretical problem is how polysemy (one form – several meanings) can be distinguished from homonymy (two lexical elements which happen to have the same phonological form). On the other side, Nida does not consider polysemy to be a key issue for the translator since the different meanings of a single word rarely come into competition, as they not only have relatively well-defined markers that contribute to a distinction between meanings but are so varied that they do not compete with each other for the same semantic domain.⁵

The Concept of Polysemy in Arabic:

Arab linguists refer to the concept of polysemy as *ishtirāk e lafzī*. According to Al-Jurjānī, Polysemic words tend to be unrelated, and there is no clear relation between them.⁶ Imām Suyūfī disagrees that *ishtirāk* is based on the concept of having different meanings in one word. Quite the opposite, he claims that all kinds of *ishtirāk* of one single expression had one general meaning. Therefore, many meanings will be attached to the original meaning of a specific

³ Ghazala, *Translation as problems*, 98.

⁴ Essam T. Mohammed, "Polysemy as a Lexical Problem in Translation," *Adab 'l-Rafidayn* 39, no. 55 (2009): 1-2.

⁵ Eugene Albert Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 63.

⁶ Abū Bakr 'Abd 'l-Qāhir ibn 'Abd 'l -Raḥmān Al-Jurjānī, *Asrār 'l-Balāghah* (Istanbul: Al-Ma'ārif Ministry Publishing House, 1954), 365.

term and they will evolve.⁷ According to Al-Munjjid, in all-natural languages, polysemy is a common linguistic phenomenon that is defined as a multiplicity of meaning; a case in which one word has different meanings.⁸

Abdussalam emphasizes that under the concept *al-Ashbāh wa al-Nazāir* or *al-Wūjūh wa al-Nazāir*, the multiplicity of meanings of words in Qur'ānic expressions received appropriate attention from Muslim scholars. In the Qur'ānic sciences, there are many scholars interested in polysemy in the Holy Qur'ān. The Muslim scholars have written books on the collection of the Qur'ānic polysemic words and their meanings, with examples of each meaning from the Qur'ānic verses.⁹

Data Analysis:

Below is an analysis of translations of polysemy of the Holy Qur'ān. The researcher has selected six English translation of the Holy Qur'ān.¹⁰

Example [1]:

فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظَامَ لَحْمًا ثُمَّ أَنْشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا آخَرَ¹¹

AR: “then We clothe the bones with flesh, thereafter We evolve him into another being.” (373)

SA: “so We dressed/clothed the bones (with) flesh/meat, then We originated/developed him (into) another creation,” (237)

UM: “and We covered the bones with flesh; then We developed him into another creation.” (481)

AB “and clothed the bones in flesh; and then brought him into being as another creature.” (324)

TS: “Then we dressed the bones with flesh, Then by [envoying soul into the body] We made a complete creation” (729)

⁷ Jalāl 'l-Dīn Abū 'l-Faḍl 'Abd 'l-Raḥmān al-Suyūfī, *Al-Muzhir fī Ulūm 'l-Lughah* (Cairo: Dār 'l-Iḥyā' Al-kutub 'l-Arabiyyah, 1971), 384.

⁸ Muhammad Nūrūdīn Al-Munjjid, *Al-Ishtirāk 'l-Lafzī fī 'l-Qur'ān 'l-karīm* (Damascus: Dār 'l-Fikr, 1999), 15.

⁹ Abdussalam, A.S., “Qur'ānic Polysemy and Its Creative Nature,” *The Gombak Review* 5 no.1 (2001), 66.

¹⁰ 'Omar, Amatul Raḥmān, and 'Abdul Mannān 'Omar, *The Holy Qur'ān: Arabic Text – English Translation*. Noor Foundation International Inc., 2000.

Ahmed, Samira, and Mohamed Ahmed, *The Koran: Complete Dictionary and Literal Translation*. M., J., & S. Ahmed: 1994.

<http://www.koranlitranslateandtheconspiracy.com/M.%20Ahmed%20Translation.pdf>.

Saheeh International, *The Qur'ān: English Meanings and Notes*. Al-Muntada al-Islami: 2012.

Bewley, Aisha and Abdalhaqq Bewley, *The Noble Qur'an*. London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd, 2016.

Bakhtiar, Laleh, *The Sublime Quran*. Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2012.

¹¹ Al-Qur'ān, Al-Mu'minūn, 23:14.

LB: “Then, We clothed the bones with flesh. Again, We caused another creation to grow.” (322)

All translators except Umm Muhammad render the *Fakasawnā Al-`Izāma* as “clothed the bones”; however another sense “dressed” is also added by Samira. They choose the primary meaning of “*kasawnā*.” All four translators cannot fully convey all situations and the sense of the verse. To comprehend all situations, it is essential to interpret this verse in relation to the earlier verses.

This verse and the previous verses tell about the stages of the creation of humans. Imām Al-Ṭabarī states that “after Almighty God created the bones he covers it by the flesh.”¹² If translators translate this verse that after creating bones ‘Allāh clothed them with flesh’, then this translation does not give a proper sense for TL readers. This literal translation strategy is opted to bring the verse closer to the ST, but this does not serve the aim of communicating translation.

In this verse, “kasawnā” does not intend its primary meaning “clothes,” but it refers to its polysemic meaning “cover or hide” something. So, only Umm Muhammad implies this polysemic meaning; she renders the expression as ‘covered the bones’ which properly conveys the sense of expression.

Example [2]:

¹³ وَثِيَابَكَ فَطَيِّرْ

AR: “And purify your clothes and your heart.” (672)

SA: “And your clothes/garments, so purify/clean” (444)

UM: “And your clothing purify” (856)

AB: “Purify your clothes” (584)

TS: “and keep your garments clean from any kind of stains;” (1312)

LB: “and purify your garments” (565)

*The words of this verse are very comprehensive, which are full of meaning. The word “*thīyāb*” has a primary meaning “clothes,” but it has four other polysemic meanings. It is also said that this means, do not let the garments that you wear be from unlawful earnings. Maulāna Maudūdī mentions another meaning that maintains your clothes free of moral evils: your clothing must be neat but it shall be without vanity, pride, display, pomp, and show.¹⁴*

According to al-Ṭabarī interpretation, the meaning of the verse is to clean yourself and purify your heart from sins. It does not refer to the garments in particular, but part of purity is to clean the clothes.¹⁵ Ibn ‘Abbās Also reported

¹² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jami' al-Bayān*, 5:353.

¹³ Al-Qur’ān, Al-Muddaththir, 74:4.

¹⁴ Maudūdī, *The Meaning of the Qur’an*, 6:121.

¹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr Ṭabarī*, 7:400.

that “it is also said this means: purify your heart from betrayal, treachery and exasperation; i.e. be pure of heart”¹⁶

Sa'īd bin Jubayr said that “this means to purify your heart and your intentions.” Muhammad bin Ka'b Al-Qurazi and Al-Hasan Al-Baṣrī both said, “and beautify your character.”¹⁷ Maulāna Maudūdī mentions also that in Arabic, when it is said: so and so is clean in his clothes, it means he is morally good and pure; contrarily, when it is said: he is dirty in his clothes, it means he is unreliable, dishonest and fraudulent in his dealings.¹⁸

All women translators select the primary meaning of the item as “cloths” or “garments.” Their literal choice is not accurate, because they do not convey the entire intended meaning of the phrase. The reader comprehends from their translations that just clothes should be clean, which is not intended in the original text. On the other hand, Amatul Raḥmān translates the verse properly as “purify your clothes and your heart” which seems to be intelligible for the TL reader. However, it will be more appropriate and comprehensive if she explains in footnotes or within brackets that purify your heart from sins and stains. So, in this example, only Amatul Raḥmān succeeds in conveying the fully intended meaning.

Example [3]:

وَلِبَاسُ التَّقْوَىٰ ذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ¹⁹

AR: “Yet the raiment that guards against evils, that is the best (of robes).

(158-159)

SA: “and the fear and obedience (of God's) cover/dress, that (is) better”(97)

UM: “But the clothing of righteousness – that is best.” (204)

AB: “but the garment of taqwa – that is best!” (138)

TS: “but the garment of piety is the best;” (316)

LB: “but the garment of God-consciousness, that *is* better.” (1)

Almighty Allāh has mentions that Indeed He has sent down a garment which covers the shame and provides protection and adornment to the people, and the righteous deeds are the best, this is the context of the verse. The word “*libās*” is a polysemic word that refers to a different sense in this verse from its primary meaning “garments or cloths.” According to al- Ṭabarī, it denotes righteous deeds or faith which the best for all Muslims.²⁰ Ibn Abās refers to modesty and

¹⁶ Al-Fīrūzābādī, Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb, *Tanwīr 'l-Miqbās min Tafṣīr Ibn 'Abbās*, trans. Mokrane Guezou (Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 706.

¹⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafṣīr Ibn Kathīr*, 29:165.

¹⁸ Maudūdī, *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, 6:121.

¹⁹ Al-Qur'ān, Al-A'rāf, 7:26.

²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafṣīr al-Ṭabarī*, 3:420-421.

righteous deeds.²¹ Lane also gives it a sense of righteous conduct or faith.²² Ibn ‘Abbās and ‘Urwah ibn Zubair also report that hence it means right conduct, good deed, and fear of Allah.

Muftī Muhammad Shafī writes that the sense is that how human beings’ visible physical garments serves the purpose of covering the body’s cover-worthy parts, protecting against warm and cold weather, and providing beauty and embellishment, very likewise, there is a spiritual dress, that of right and becoming conduct, good deed, and fear of Allah. This “*libās*” or *Taqwa*’s clothing disguises human weaknesses and moral deficiencies. It brings one out of instant hardships and ultimate losses. So it is the best dress you can wear.²³

All six translations refer to some kind of clothes to convey the word “*libās*” in the verse. Amatul Raḥmān renders the word as “raiment that guards against evils.” Bewley conveys as “garment of taqwa” and Bakhtiar translates as “garment of God-consciousness,” Umm Muhammad renders as “clothing of righteousness,” and Samira conveys as “fear and obedience (of God's) cover/dress.”

The words “raiment,” “garment,” and “dress” refer to clothes that show all translators use literal translation. This literal translation is not suitable to convey the polysemic sense of the word; the target reader may misunderstand the context of the verse. Mr. Abobaker Ali suggests an appropriate translation according to Abdussalam’s viewpoint, which may convey the polysemic sense, is “but the righteousness deeds, that is the best.”²⁴

Example [4]:

فَأَذَاقَهَا اللَّهُ لِيَاسِ الْجُوعِ وَالْخَوْفِ بِمَا كَانُوا يَصْنَعُونَ²⁵

AR: “So Allāh made (the citizens of) it taste a pall of hunger and fear (which covered it like a garment -the conditions of famine and war prevailed there) because of what its citizens had wrought.” (298)

SA: “so God made it taste/experience the starvation's/hunger's cover/dress/mixture and the fear/fright, because (of) what they were making/producing/manufacturing.” (188)

UM: “So Allāh made it taste the envelopment of hunger and fear for what they had been doing.” (382)

AB: “Allah made it wear the robes of hunger and fear for what it did.”(261)

TS: “And Allāh [due to their being ingratitude] made them experience and taste hunger and fear;” (582)

²¹ Al-Fīrūzābādī, *Baṣā'ir Dhawī 'l-Tamyz*, 4:417.

²² Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 1968), 7: 2648.

²³ Shafī, *Ma'ārif 'l-Qur'ān*, 3:557.

²⁴ Abobaker Ali et al, “Transferring Polysemic,” 41.

²⁵ Al-Qur'ān, Al-Naḥl, 16:112.

LB: “so God caused it to experience extreme hunger and fear because of what they had been crafting.” (259-260)

In the context of the verse, Allāh sets forth the parable of the people of a city who were safe and content, and the sustenance of whom was abundant from every quarter. But then the city's people showed ingratitude for Allah's bounties, so Allāh afflicted them with hunger and fear in retribution for their evil deeds.

The word libās in this verse does not refer to its core meaning. It has a polysemic sense. Edward Lane has explained that it means “So God made her to taste the utmost degree of hunger and fear.”

Amatul Raḥmān renders it as “pall of hunger” Oxford Learner Dictionary refers “pall” to a cloth spread over a coffin. Umm Muhammad translates it as “envelopment of hunger.” *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines “envelop” to enclose or enfold completely with or as if with a covering. Samira presents it literally as “cover/dress/mixture.” Bewley renders the item also in literal form as “wear the robe of hunger.” However, Bakhtiar reflects the original and conveys the message appropriately to the target reader as they render “God caused it to experience extreme hunger.”

Example [5]:

يا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لِمَ تَلْبِسُونَ الْحَقَّ بِالْبَاطِلِ وَتَكْتُمُونَ الْحَقَّ وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ²⁶

AR: “O people of the Scripture! Why do you confound the truth with falsehood and conceal the truth and that (too) deliberately?” (60)

SA: “You The Book's people, why do you confuse/mix/cover/dress the correct/truth with the falsehood and you hide/conceal the correct/truth and you are knowing?” (38)

UM: “O People of the Scripture, why do you mix [i.e., confuse] the truth with falsehood and conceal the truth while you know [it]?” (76)

AB: “People of the Book! why do you mix truth with falsehood and knowingly conceal the truth?” (51)

TS: “O People of the Book! why do you dress up the Truth [regarding the Prophethood of Mohammad, S.A.] while you know it?” (124)

LB: “O People of the Book! Why confuse you The Truth with falsehood, and keep back The Truth while you know?” (53)

This sūrah reveals the true, undeclared objective of the Jewish and Christian controversy over Abraham as well as other problems. Their goal was always to mislead and distract the Muslims and sow doubts about Islam in their hearts. The Holy Qur'ān attacks such detractors here: “People of the Book! why do you reject Allah's Signs when you yourselves are there as witnesses? People of the Book! why do you mix truth with falsehood and knowingly conceal the truth?”

²⁶ Al-Qur'ān, Āli 'Imrān, 3:71.

According to al-Zayn,²⁷ al-Fairauzabādī,²⁸ the word *Talbisūn* in the verse has not referred to the primary meaning ‘cloth or wear’ but has a polysemic sense which refers to mix something with other. Al-Ṭabarī also points out that “*Talbisūn*” here suggests mix and mingles between truth and falsehood.²⁹

Amatul Raḥmān renders it as “confound.” She does not choose the accurate word to express the polysemic sense of the “*Talbisūn*.” According to *Oxford Dictionary*, confound refers “to confuse and surprise”³⁰ and *Merriam Webster Dictionary* the word ‘confound’ means “to throw (a person) into confusion,” it also means “to fail to discern differences between mix up.”³¹ So, both dictionaries suggest that the word “confound” means that someone is confused from things which already mixed.

The meaning of “*Talbisūn*” in the source text differs from the context of the word “confound” in English. Because, the meaning of confounding implies that the person is facing very confused and mixed things, so he has no ability to mix those things. While the word *Talbisūn* implies that the individual mixes the things deliberately. Samira, according to her translation strategy, provides its all possible original and polysemic senses as “confuse/mix/cover/dress.” Saffarzadeh also renders it literally. Umm Muhammad and Bewley appropriately convey the polysemic sense of “*Talbisūn*” by rendering it as “mix.”

Table Translation of Selected Polysemic words

S. N	Lexical Items	AR	SA	UM	AB	TS	LB	Suggested translation
1	<i>Yāksū</i>	cloth	dress/cloth	Cover	Cloth	dresse d	Cloth	cover
	<i>Thiyāb</i>	cloth and heart	cloth/garment	Cloth	Cloth	Garment	Garment	Heart
2	<i>Libās</i>	Raiment	cover/dress	Cloth	garment	Garment	Garment	righteous deeds
3	<i>Libās</i>	Pall	starvation's/hunger's cover/dress/mixture	Envelope	Robes	experience	Extreme	extreme
4	<i>Libās</i>	Confound	Confuse/mix/cover/dress	Mix	Mix	Dress up	Confuse	mix

This analysis of polysemy in Quranic translation reveals various strategies used by female translators and highlights the challenges they face. The primary issue revolves

²⁷ Al-Zayn, *Mu 'jam Tafṣīr*, 459.

²⁸ Al-Fairauzabādī, *Baṣā'ir Dhaw 'l-Tamyīz*, 4: 418.

²⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jamī' al-Bayān*, 2:274.

³⁰ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, s.v. “Confound.”

³¹ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “Confound.”

around conveying the multiple meanings of polysemic words, which often leads to literal translations that may not fully capture the intended sense of the original text. Let's explore the strategies used by the female translators:

Strategies Employed by Female Translators

1. **Literal Translation:**

- This strategy involves translating the word as closely as possible to its primary meaning in the source language.
- Examples:
 - In the translation of "فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظَامَ لَحْمًا" (We clothed the bones with flesh), most translators rendered "kasawnā" as "clothed" which is the literal meaning.
 - "ثِيَابَكَ فَطَيَّرَ" (purify your clothes) was translated literally as "clothes" or "garments" by most translators.

2. **Contextual Interpretation:**

- Translators sometimes attempt to convey a sense of the word that fits better within the context of the verse.
- Example:
 - Umm Muhammad translated "فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظَامَ لَحْمًا" as "covered the bones with flesh," which better fits the context compared to the literal "clothed."

3. **Addition of Interpretative Elements:**

- This involves adding explanatory notes or brackets to clarify the intended meaning of a polysemic word.
- Example:
 - Amatul Rahmān translated "وَتِيَابَكَ فَطَيَّرَ" as "purify your clothes and your heart," adding the interpretive element of heart purification.

4. **Avoidance of Literal Translation for Complex Terms:**

- For words with significant religious or cultural context, translators sometimes avoid direct translation to prevent misunderstanding.
- Example:
 - The word "لِبَاسُ التَّقْوَىٰ" (the garment of piety) was translated by Amatul Rahmān as "raiment that guards against evils," avoiding the direct term "garment."

5. **Combination of Meanings:**

- In some instances, translators like Samira attempted to incorporate multiple possible meanings, offering a range of interpretations (e.g., "cover/dress/mixture" for "لِبَاسِ الْجُوعِ").

Findings:

1. **Literal Translation Predominance:** The analysis indicates that the majority of the translators predominantly employed a literal translation strategy. This approach often fails to capture the nuanced meanings of polysemic words.
2. **Contextual Misinterpretation:** Translators frequently did not account for the specific context in which polysemic words were used, leading to translations that did not fully convey the intended meaning of the original text.

3. **Insufficient Knowledge of Qur'ānic Science:** The study suggests that the translators may lack a deep understanding of the science of the Holy Qur'ān and the various interpretations that elucidate the polysemic meanings of words.
4. **Inconsistent Translation Quality:** There was significant variation in how effectively different translators conveyed the meanings of polysemic words, with some translations being more accurate and contextually appropriate than others.

Conclusion:

The translation of polysemic words in the Holy Qur'ān remains a complex issue, inadequately addressed by literal translation strategies. Translators often miss the multiple senses of polysemic words, leading to potential misunderstandings of the text. A deeper engagement with the science of the Qur'ān and its interpretations is essential for producing more accurate and meaningful translations.

Recommendations

1. **Adopt Contextual Translation Approaches:** Translators should prioritize understanding the context of the polysemic word within the verse and the surrounding verses. This would help in selecting the most appropriate meaning among the multiple possible meanings.
2. **Adoption of Dynamic Equivalence:** Instead of a strictly literal approach, translators might benefit from using dynamic equivalence, focusing on conveying the thought or meaning behind the text rather than a word-for-word translation.
3. **Enhance Knowledge of Qur'ānic Sciences:** Translators should deepen their understanding of Qur'ānic sciences and interpretations to better grasp the multifaceted meanings of polysemic words.
4. **Use Comprehensive Translation Strategies:** A combination of translation methods, including footnotes and explanatory brackets, can help convey the full spectrum of meanings.
5. **Collaborate with Scholars:** Translators should collaborate with scholars of the Qur'ān to ensure a more nuanced understanding and accurate representation of the text's meanings.
6. **Training in Polysemy and Translation Theory:** Translators should receive specific training in dealing with polysemic words and phrases. This would include learning about various strategies to tackle polysemy, such as disambiguation, contextual analysis, and consulting authoritative sources.
7. **Further Research:** Continued research into effective translation strategies for polysemic words in religious texts is recommended to improve translation quality and fidelity.

By incorporating these strategies and recommendations, female translators can improve the accuracy and clarity of their translations of polysemic words, thereby enhancing the reader's comprehension and appreciation of the Qur'anic text.