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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DEICTIC UNITS IN THE GERMAN TRANSLATIONS OF PARET, BUBENHEIM–ELYAS AND KHOURY

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Abstract: This article examines the use and translation of deictic units in the German Qur'an translations of Rudi Paret, Bubenheim–Elyas, and Adel Theodor Khoury. Deixis plays an essential role in religious discourse because it connects linguistic expressions with speaker, addressee, time, place, and textual context. The study focuses on personal, spatial, temporal, and discourse deixis and compares how these elements are rendered in the selected German translations. Special attention is given to the ways in which translators preserve, adapt, or reinterpret deictic references in order to convey the intended meaning of the original text. The analysis shows that each translator applies different strategies depending on linguistic structure, theological interpretation, and target-reader orientation.

Key words: deixis, deictic units, German Qur'an translations, Rudi Paret, Bubenheim–Elyas, Adel Theodor Khoury, religious discourse, translation strategies.

Introduction

Deixis is one of the most important pragmatic phenomena in language because it connects linguistic expressions with the communicative situation in which they are used. Words such as "I", "you", "this", "that", "here", "there", "now" and "then" cannot be fully understood without reference to the speaker, addressee, time, place and discourse context. In religious texts, deictic units have an even more significant function, since they often express the relationship between the Divine speaker, the Prophet, the believers, unbelievers, past communities and future generations.

The Qur'an is a text in which deixis performs not only grammatical and semantic functions, but also theological, rhetorical and communicative functions. Personal pronouns may indicate divine authority, direct address, warning, mercy or command. Spatial deixis may refer not only to physical location but also to spiritual distance, nearness to God, the Hereafter or the worldly life. Temporal deixis may connect past events with present moral lessons and future accountability. Therefore, the translation of deictic units in the Qur'an is a complex process that requires linguistic precision, contextual awareness and interpretive responsibility.

The present article focuses on the comparative study of deictic units in three German translations of the Qur'an: Rudi Paret's translation, the translation by Frank Bubenheim and Nadeem Elyas, and Adel Theodor Khoury's translation. These translations differ in style, target audience and interpretive orientation. Paret's version is generally associated with an academic and

philological approach. Bubenheim–Elyas often aims to preserve the religious and formal structure of the Arabic source text. Khoury's translation tends to combine readability with explanatory clarity. These differences make the selected translations valuable for comparative pragmatic analysis.

Literature Review

The theoretical basis of deixis was significantly developed by Karl Bühler, who introduced the concept of the deictic field. According to this view, deictic expressions are organized around a central point of orientation, usually the speaker, the time of speech and the place of speech [1]. This idea is especially useful for the study of religious texts because the deictic center in sacred discourse is not always simple. In Qur'anic discourse, the speaker may be understood as God, the addressee may be the Prophet, humankind, believers or a specific group, and the temporal frame may shift between the past, present, future and eschatological time.

Stephen Levinson later developed the pragmatic classification of deixis and distinguished several major types: person deixis, place deixis, time deixis, discourse deixis and social deixis [2]. This classification is useful for analyzing Qur'anic translations because different types of deixis often overlap. For example, a personal pronoun may also carry social and theological meaning. The pronoun "We" in Qur'anic discourse may not simply indicate plurality; it may express divine majesty, authority and solemnity. Therefore, its translation into German requires more than a mechanical grammatical equivalent.

Charles Fillmore also contributed to deixis studies by emphasizing the importance of context in determining the meaning of deictic expressions [3]. His approach is important for translation studies because translators must reconstruct the communicative situation of the source text and then create an equivalent or functionally acceptable structure in the target language. In Qur'anic translation, this means that the translator must consider who speaks, to whom the speech is addressed, what situation is referred to and what rhetorical effect is intended.

In translation studies, deixis is closely connected with the problem of equivalence. Eugene Nida's theory of formal and dynamic equivalence is relevant here because some translators may preserve the formal structure of the source text, while others may adapt the expression to make the meaning clearer for the target reader [4]. In the case of German Qur'an translations, Paret, Bubenheim–Elyas and Khoury demonstrate different degrees of formal preservation and contextual adaptation.

German translations of the Qur'an occupy an important place in European Islamic and Oriental studies. Each translation reflects not only linguistic choices, but also scholarly, religious

and cultural perspectives. Rudi Paret's translation is widely known for its academic character and philological precision [5]. His translation often attempts to represent the structure and semantic complexity of the Arabic original in a scholarly German style. This makes it useful for academic readers, but in some cases the wording may appear less fluent for general readers.

The translation by Frank Bubenheim and Nadeem Elyas represents a different orientation. It is more closely connected with a religious readership and often aims to preserve the sacred tone and formal features of the source text [6]. In the translation of deictic units, this approach may lead to a more literal rendering of pronouns, demonstratives and address forms. Such a method can help preserve the connection with the Arabic original, but it may sometimes require additional explanation for readers unfamiliar with Qur'anic discourse.

Adel Theodor Khoury's translation is notable for its attention to interreligious and explanatory clarity [7]. Khoury often seeks to make the Qur'anic message accessible to German-speaking readers by using a clear and readable style. In terms of deixis, this may result in a more interpretive translation strategy, where certain references are made clearer through lexical or syntactic adjustment. This can support comprehension, but it may also move the target text slightly away from the compactness of the Arabic original.

Thus, the literature and translation background show that the study of deictic units in these three translations is not merely a grammatical comparison. It is a study of how translators mediate between Arabic sacred discourse and German linguistic-cultural reception. The same deictic unit may be translated differently depending on whether the translator prioritizes formal accuracy, theological preservation or reader-oriented clarity.

Research Methodology

The methodology of the study is based on comparative, descriptive and pragmatic analysis. The main object of the research is the use of deictic units in selected Qur'anic passages and their rendering in the German translations of Paret, Bubenheim–Elyas and Khoury. The study focuses on four main categories of deixis: personal deixis, spatial deixis, temporal deixis and discourse deixis.

The comparative method is used to identify similarities and differences among the three translations. The descriptive method helps explain how each translator renders a particular deictic element. The pragmatic method is applied to determine how the meaning of deictic units depends on context, speaker-addressee relations and textual function. In addition, elements of semantic analysis are used to examine how the meaning of a deictic unit changes when translated from Arabic into German.

The research procedure includes several stages. First, deictic units are identified in selected Qur'anic examples. Second, their German equivalents are compared in the three translations. Third, the translation strategy is classified as literal preservation, contextual clarification, explicitation, omission, grammatical transformation or interpretive rendering. Fourth, the pragmatic effect of each translation choice is evaluated.

The examples used in the analysis are presented in simplified form in order to demonstrate the linguistic phenomenon clearly. The focus is not on theological interpretation, but on the linguistic and pragmatic function of deictic units in translation.

Analysis and Results

The analysis shows that the three German translations use different strategies in rendering deictic units. The most frequent differences are observed in personal deixis, demonstrative deixis and discourse deixis.

1. Personal deixis

Personal deixis includes pronouns and forms of address that identify the speaker and the addressee. In Qur'anic discourse, personal deixis is central because it reflects the communicative relationship between God, the Prophet, believers and other groups.

For example, the divine first-person plural is often rendered in German as "Wir". This form appears in all three translations because German allows the use of "wir" as a formal equivalent of the Arabic majestic plural. However, the effect of this pronoun may differ depending on the surrounding style.

Example: Arabic source meaning: "We sent down..."

Paret: "Wir haben ... hinabgesandt"

Bubenheim–Elyas: "Wir haben ... hinabgesandt"

Khoury: "Wir haben ... herabgesandt"

In this case, all three translations preserve the personal deictic structure. However, the verbs "hinabgesandt" and "herabgesandt" create slightly different stylistic effects. "Hinabgesandt" sounds more formal and directional, while "herabgesandt" may sound more accessible and natural in modern German. Bubenheim–Elyas tends to preserve the solemn religious tone, while Paret's choice often reflects philological precision. Khoury's version may sound smoother for general readers.

Another important example is the second-person address. In Qur'anic discourse, the addressee may be the Prophet, humankind, believers or a specific group. German requires the translator to decide whether the context should remain implicit or be clarified.

Example: Arabic source meaning: “You do not know...”

Possible German rendering: “Du weißt nicht...” / “Ihr wisst nicht...”

If the Arabic form addresses one person, German “du” is appropriate. If the context refers to a group, “ihr” is used. The difficulty arises when the Qur’anic discourse shifts from individual prophetic address to collective human address. Bubenheim–Elyas often preserves the grammatical directness of the Arabic text, whereas Khoury may sometimes make the addressee clearer through context. Paret, because of his academic style, may maintain structural closeness even when the reference requires careful reading.

Personal deixis is generally preserved in all three translations, but the degree of contextual clarification differs. Bubenheim–Elyas tends toward formal preservation, Paret toward scholarly precision, and Khoury toward communicative clarity.

2. Spatial deixis

Spatial deixis refers to location and distance. Words such as “here”, “there”, “this”, “that”, “near” and “far” may indicate physical, symbolic or spiritual location. In Qur’anic discourse, spatial deixis often has metaphorical meaning. For example, “this world” and “the Hereafter” are not merely spatial categories; they represent different existential and moral dimensions.

Example: Arabic source meaning: “this worldly life”

Paret: “das diesseitige Leben”

Bubenheim–Elyas: “das diesseitige Leben”

Khoury: “das Leben in dieser Welt”

The phrase “das diesseitige Leben” is compact and formal. It preserves the contrast between this world and the Hereafter. Bubenheim–Elyas often uses this type of religiously established German expression. Paret also prefers such precise terminology. Khoury’s “das Leben in dieser Welt” is more explanatory and easier for a general reader. Here, the deictic element “this” is not translated only as “dieser”; it is integrated into a broader expression that clarifies the meaning.

Another spatial example concerns demonstratives such as “this” and “that”. Demonstratives in Qur’anic discourse may point to a text, a sign, a group of people or a moral reality.

Example:

Arabic source meaning: “This is a clear sign.”

Possible German renderings: “Dies ist ein klares Zeichen.” / “Das ist ein deutliches Zeichen.”

The difference between “dies” and “das” is important. “Dies” sounds more formal and textually marked, while “das” is more common in contemporary German. Paret may prefer formal

demonstratives, Bubenheim–Elyas may preserve a structure close to the Arabic, and Khoury may use the more natural form depending on readability.

Spatial deixis is often translated through established German religious or philosophical vocabulary. Khoury tends to explicate spatial references more often, while Paret and Bubenheim–Elyas more frequently preserve compact formal equivalents.

3. Temporal deixis

Temporal deixis refers to time. In the Qur'an, temporal references may point to the past, present, future, the Day of Judgment or timeless divine truth. German translators must choose tense, adverbial expressions and temporal markers carefully.

Example:

Arabic source meaning: "On that Day..."

Paret: "an jenem Tag"

Bubenheim–Elyas: "an jenem Tag"

Khoury: "an jenem Tag"

In this example, all three translators commonly use "an jenem Tag", which preserves the solemn eschatological reference. The demonstrative "jenem" creates distance and seriousness. It does not refer to an ordinary day, but to a specific future event known from the religious context. This shows that temporal deixis in sacred texts is often connected with theological meaning.

Another example is the use of "now" or "today". In religious discourse, "today" may refer to the immediate moment of speech or to a decisive moment in salvation history.

Example: Arabic source meaning: "Today I have completed..."

Possible German rendering: "Heute habe Ich ... vollendet."

Here, "heute" is a temporal deictic unit. It marks a specific moment, but the meaning extends beyond chronological time. It becomes a marker of religious completion and authority. In translation, preserving "heute" is important because replacing it with a general phrase would weaken the rhetorical force of the original.

Temporal deixis is usually preserved literally when it refers to eschatological or decisive religious time. The three translations show a high degree of similarity in this category because German has direct equivalents for many Qur'anic temporal markers.

4. Discourse deixis

Discourse deixis refers to parts of the text itself. Expressions such as "this Book", "these verses", "that is" or "this" may refer to previous or following discourse. In Qur'anic translation,

discourse deixis is very important because the text frequently refers to its own revelation, signs and message.

Example: Arabic source meaning: “This is the Book...”

Paret: “Dies ist das Buch...”

Bubenheim–Elyas: “Dies ist das Buch...”

Khoury: “Dies ist das Buch...”

The phrase “Dies ist das Buch” preserves the discourse-deictic function of the original. The word “Dies” points not to a physical object only, but to the revealed text as a whole. The translator must therefore preserve the demonstrative force of the expression. If it were translated too freely, the self-referential power of the Qur’anic statement would be weakened.

Another example is the reference to “these signs” or “these verses”. German translations may use “diese Zeichen”, “diese Verse” or “diese Offenbarungen”. Each option has a different semantic effect. “Zeichen” emphasizes sign and evidence; “Verse” emphasizes textual units; “Offenbarungen” emphasizes revelation.

Example: Arabic source meaning: “These are the signs...”

Possible German renderings: “Dies sind die Zeichen...” / “Dies sind die

Verse...” / “Dies sind die Offenbarungen...”

Paret may choose a term that reflects philological context. Bubenheim–Elyas often preserves traditional religious terminology. Khoury may choose a form that makes the meaning clearer for readers who are less familiar with Qur’anic terminology.

Discourse deixis shows the greatest interpretive variation because demonstratives may refer to textual, theological and rhetorical elements at the same time. Translation choices in this category strongly affect how the reader understands the structure and self-reference of the Qur’anic text.

The comparative analysis reveals several important findings. First, the three translations often preserve basic deictic structures because German provides direct equivalents for many Arabic pronouns, demonstratives and temporal markers. Second, differences appear when the deictic unit has theological, rhetorical or discourse-related meaning. Third, Paret’s translation is generally more academic and philologically oriented. Fourth, Bubenheim–Elyas tends to preserve the formal and religious tone of the source text. Fifth, Khoury often prioritizes readability and contextual clarity.

The study also shows that the translation of deixis is not a minor grammatical issue. Deictic units guide the reader through the communicative structure of the sacred text. They indicate who

speaks, who is addressed, what is being referred to, when an event is located and how different parts of the text are connected. Therefore, the translator's treatment of deixis directly influences the interpretation of the Qur'anic message in German.

Conclusion

The comparative study of deictic units in the German translations of Paret, Bubenheim–Elyas and Khoury demonstrates that deixis plays a central role in the transmission of Qur'anic meaning. Personal, spatial, temporal and discourse deictic units are not merely grammatical elements; they are key components of religious communication.

Paret's translation is characterized by philological accuracy and academic style. It often preserves the structure of the source text and is suitable for scholarly analysis. Bubenheim–Elyas generally maintains a more literal and religiously oriented translation strategy, preserving the solemn tone and formal features of Qur'anic discourse. Khoury's translation is more reader-oriented and often seeks to provide contextual clarity and smoother German expression.

The results indicate that the most stable category is temporal deixis, especially in eschatological expressions such as "an jenem Tag". The most variable category is discourse deixis, because expressions such as "this Book", "these signs" or "this" may refer to textual, theological and rhetorical realities simultaneously. Personal deixis is also highly important because it reflects the relationship between the Divine speaker, the Prophet and the audience.

Thus, the study confirms that the translation of deictic units requires not only linguistic competence but also pragmatic, cultural and theological sensitivity. A translator must understand the function of each deictic expression within the broader discourse of the Qur'an. Future research may expand this analysis by comparing German translations with English, Russian or Uzbek translations in order to identify broader patterns in the translation of Qur'anic deixis.

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