ENGLISH AS AN ISLAMIC LANGUAGE
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The "mosque," the English rendition of the Arabic *masjid*, is commonly defined as "a building used for public worship by Muslims" (Merriam Webster); "a Muslim place of worship" (Oxford English Dictionary); or "a building in which Muslims worship" (Macmillan). In each of these renditions, the word *masjid* is translated and explained in terms familiar to the English reader. In other cases, ostensible English equivalents are offered directly: thus *īmān* becomes "belief"; *kufr*, "disbelief"; *ṣalāt*, "prayer"; and so on. All these cases of word-to-word translation presume that the semantic fields of each paired keyword are proximate. In the case of the *masjid*/mosque pair, however, no pre-existing word could be found in English, and hence even the translated word needs explanation ("a Muslim place of worship").

For most contexts, the underlying presumptions sustaining these renditions (an equivalence model of translation, an originary unity of languages, parallel histories of language) do hold. As soon as one begins asking critical questions, however, the entire edifice starts to crumble. The case of the *masjid* is instructive. A "place of worship" was traditionally understood to be a place consecrated to the worship of God, an inviolable place with its own etiquettes and indeed a legal code of conduct. While this may still be true in certain parts of the world, the general category "place of worship" today includes spaces ranging from urban yoga meditation centers to new-age temples, some of them having nothing to do with God. Thus the specific content of the definition of "mosque" is vitiated through generalization.

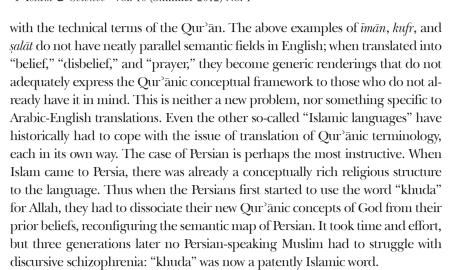The problems of Arabic-English translation only intensify when dealing

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with the technical terms of the Qurʾān. The above examples of *īmān*, *kufr*, and *ṣalāt* do not have neatly parallel semantic fields in English; when translated into "belief," "disbelief," and "prayer," they become generic renderings that do not adequately express the Qurʾānic conceptual framework to those who do not already have it in mind. This is neither a new problem, nor something specific to Arabic-English translations. Even the other so-called "Islamic languages" have historically had to cope with the issue of translation of Qurʾānic terminology, each in its own way. The case of Persian is perhaps the most instructive. When Islam came to Persia, there was already a conceptually rich religious structure to the language. Thus when the Persians first started to use the word "khuda" for Allah, they had to dissociate their new Qurʾānic concepts of God from their prior beliefs, reconfiguring the semantic map of Persian. It took time and effort, but three generations later no Persian-speaking Muslim had to struggle with discursive schizophrenia: "khuda" was now a patently Islamic word.

This metamorphosis of the Persian language had precedent in Arabic itself: the Qurʾān declares that God Himself chose clear Arabic (*ʿarabiyyun mubīn*) as the language of His final revelation to humanity, and it consecrated the language by dissociating pagan concepts from its vocabulary. The Islamic tradition thus regards the Qurʾānic intervention in the history of Arabic language as conferring upon things their essential reality according to Divine Knowledge, their objective existence in creation, and their legal value among human beings. The Qurʾān made full use of the resources of the Arabic language but transformed the language of the pagan Arabs as it reclaimed primordial truths in their own language. Allah was not, now, one deity among others, but the one and only. Moreover, as Toshihiko Izutsu has convincingly argued, if we compare the Qurʾānic vocabulary with pre-Islamic Arabic, we immediately notice that there is "one supreme focus-word, *Allāh*, which presides not only over one particular semantic field within the vocabulary, but over the entire vocabulary comprising all the semantic fields, that is, all the smaller conceptual systems that fall under it."

Given the unsurpassable hiatus between the Divine language of the Qurʾān and conventional human discourse, it remains impossible to adopt an equivalence model of translation for rendering the Qurʾān in any language. The same applies, to a lesser extent, when rendering isolated Qurʾānic terms. If translations of such terms are not to lose their richness in the process, they must simultaneously transform the semantic structures of the receiving language—as was successfully done in the case of languages such as Persian and Old Malay after Islam came to the regions where these languages were spoken. In other cases, new languages developed with already built-in Islamic semantic structures based on Arabic and even Persian, as was the case with Urdu.

What, then, are the prospects for English as an Islamic language? Or are Islam and Muslims forever to remain "foreigners" in this global language? According to a recent survey, 375 million human beings speak English as their first language, an equal number as their second language, and about 750 million as a foreign language. This massive number (1.5 billion) of English speakers of course includes Muslims as well as non-Muslims. English is the official language of several Muslim countries and is unofficially the preferred language of the educated elite in others. In addition, the presence of large number of Muslims outside their traditional lands has led to a flowering of Islamic literature in English as well as other European languages.
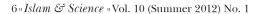
These emerging realities of the twenty-first century have historical roots, and one way of evaluating the use of English for Islamic literature is by surveying English translations of the Qurʾān. The earliest known translation of the Qurʾān into English is *The Alcoran of Mahomet* (1649) by Alexander Ross, who translated it from the French translation *L'Alcoran de Mahomet* (1647) by Sieur du Ryer. It was, however, George Sale's 1734 translation, *Koran, commonly called the Alcoran of Mohammed*, which was to remain the most widely available English translation over the next 200 years (it is still in print!), although it was followed by John Rodwell's *The Koran* (1861) and Palmer's two-volume translation (1880). Beginning in the twentieth century, however, Qurʾān translations saw a major change in that Muslims themselves started to produce the majority of English renderings of the Divine text. This is not surprising, given the larger context of the twentieth century politics, large-scale migrations, and cross-civilizational currents. The need to present Islamic texts in English is, however, not limited to the translations of the Qurʾān; it covers the entire spectrum of Islamic sciences. It is this need that calls for a concerted effort to develop English as an "Islamic language," suitable to render key Islamic concepts into English without having to use excessive italicization, transliteration, or explanatory notes.

One way to do this is through a massive infusion of Arabic terms into English. This is how other languages were made "Islamic" and how English has already started to become a suitable language for Islamic texts: Hajj, Ramadan, and Jihad, for instance, no longer need italicization, even though not all who read these words understand their correct meaning in the full sense. The same needs to be done with other key terms that cannot be translated—so that one might simply write "zakat," for instance, initially accompanied by explanatory comments if necessary, but without resorting to awkward renditions that are ultimately inadequate. This effort can be popularized through various media and web-based tools. It may take two or three generations to accomplish the task, but every journey becomes shorter with the first step and the first steps toward this task have already been taken.

A fuller understanding of the Islamic terms thus introduced into the English language will be realized in time, as more people inquire into the original meanings of these terms and as misreadings give way to Muslims representing themselves in English. The need now is to establish a provisional list of key Islamic terms to be incorporated, initiating a process of creating an "Islamic English" suitable for the growing needs of Muslims and non-Muslims for Islamic texts in the English language. And Allah knows best.

waʾLlāh al-mustaʿān, wa mā tawfīqī illā biʾLlāh.

Wuddistān
12 Shaʿbān 1433/3 July 2012