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Analysis of the Translation of Taboo Expressions in the Translation of the Quran by Muhammad Thalib

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ABSTRACT

In Arabic rhetoric, *kināyah* refers to an expression that conveys both denotative and connotative meanings, distinguishing it from *majāz*, which primarily conveys connotative meaning. The Qur'an frequently employs *kināyah* to address sensitive topics, including taboo expressions related to genital organs and sexual relations. This study aims to analyze the translation of taboo expressions referring to genital organs in Muhammad Thalib's (MT) translation of the Qur'an. Using a descriptive-analytical method and a content analysis approach, this study examines the translation techniques employed to render these expressions. The findings indicate that MT adopts different techniques according to the semantic orientation of the expressions. When Qur'anic taboo expressions are interpreted connotatively, MT tends to employ modulation by shifting the meaning from physical organs to sexual acts to achieve pragmatic clarity and legal explicitness. Conversely, when the expressions are interpreted denotatively, MT predominantly uses literal translation to preserve lexical meaning while maintaining linguistic politeness. These findings demonstrate that translating Qur'anic taboo expressions involves not only linguistic transfer but also rhetorical, pragmatic, and cultural considerations. This study contributes to Qur'anic translation studies by elucidating the relationship between *kināyah*, taboo expressions, and translation techniques in rendering sensitive religious discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is generally understood as the process of transferring meaning from a source language (SL) into a target language (TL). Larson (1984) defines translation as the activity of transferring meaning from the SL into the TL, while Newmark (1988) describes translation as "rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way the author intended the text." Similarly, Brislin (1976) explains that translation involves the transfer of thoughts and ideas across languages, whether written or spoken. These perspectives indicate that translation is not merely linguistic substitution but also the transfer of meaning, culture, and conceptual understanding. In practice, translators frequently encounter linguistic and cultural difficulties, particularly when translating culturally sensitive or taboo expressions.

To address translation problems, translators employ various strategies and techniques. Lorscher (2005) defines translation strategies as procedures used to solve translation problems, whereas Molina and Albir (2002) distinguish translation strategies from translation techniques by arguing that techniques are the observable realization of strategies in translation products. Such challenges become increasingly complex in the translation of sacred texts such as the Qur'an, whose language is characterized by rhetorical sophistication, semantic subtlety, and stylistic beauty. Qur'anic discourse frequently employs figurative language, including *kināyah* (euphemistic or indirect expressions), to convey meanings associated with sensitive issues such as sexuality and genital organs. According to al-Hasyimi (2012), *kināyah* refers to expressions whose literal meaning remains possible while simultaneously implying deeper intended meanings.

In the Qur'an, expressions related to sexual intercourse are often conveyed indirectly through metaphorical and euphemistic language. Terms such as ḥarth (field/tilth) are metaphorically used to represent sexual relations while maintaining linguistic politeness and aesthetic expression. Al Jarimi and Amin (1997) explain that Arabic speakers commonly avoid direct references to sexual matters by replacing them with socially acceptable expressions. Consequently, the phenomenon of *kināyah* in the Qur'an reflects the use of euphemism and linguistic politeness in communicating taboo concepts. Taboo language itself generally refers to socially prohibited or restricted expressions. Hamilton (2001) explains that the term derives from the Polynesian word tapu, while Freud (1950) defines taboo as a form of social prohibition. In linguistic studies, Jay (2009) classifies taboo language into several categories, including obscenity, vulgarity, and sexual references, whereas Wardhaugh (1986) categorizes taboo expressions into intercourse, bodily functions, religion, death, and other sensitive domains.

The discussion of taboo expressions is closely related to pragmatics and linguistic politeness. Yule (2014) argues that politeness functions as awareness of another person's social face, while Cummings (2007) emphasizes that pragmatics concerns meanings conveyed beyond literal linguistic forms. In this regard, Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and Leech's (1993) politeness principle provide important frameworks for understanding euphemistic and indirect language use. Qur'anic discourse itself reflects principles of politeness by presenting sensitive meanings through refined linguistic expressions. Therefore, translating Qur'anic taboo expressions requires not only semantic accuracy but also sensitivity to rhetorical, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions.

Numerous Indonesian translations of the Qur'an have been produced, including the translation published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, The Qur'an and Its Meaning by M. Quraish Shihab, and Al-Qur'anul Karim Tarjamah Tafsiriyah by Muhammad Thalib (MT). Among these works, MT's translation has attracted considerable attention and controversy because of its highly interpretive and explicit translation style. According to Istianah (2016), MT's translation represents a corrective response to the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs' translation, which MT considered problematic. Around 2010, MT introduced his "Tafsiriyah Translation of the Qur'an," which sparked debate among Muslim scholars due to its explicit rendering of several Qur'anic expressions (Ahmadi, 2015). This phenomenon becomes particularly visible in the translation of taboo expressions related to sexual relations and genital organs, where euphemistic Qur'anic expressions are sometimes rendered more directly in the target language.

Several previous studies have examined taboo expressions and euphemisms from sociolinguistic and cultural perspectives. Rosikh (2014) investigated euphemisms and taboo expressions in Arabic, while Nur (2017) analyzed taboo expressions in song lyrics using Jay's theory. Humaeni (2015) examined taboo practices within the sociocultural life of Bantenese women, whereas Sutarsih et al. (2024) explored taboo language in women's hate speech on social media. Solihat (2025) further analyzed taboo expressions in the Umar film series from a cultural perspective. However, these studies do not specifically examine the translation of Qur'anic taboo expressions related to genital organs, particularly in Muhammad Thalib's translation. Previous studies have largely focused on sociocultural and pragmatic dimensions without exploring the intersection between Qur'anic rhetoric, translation techniques, and pragmatic implications in sacred text translation.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze taboo expressions related to genital organs in Muhammad Thalib's translation of the Qur'an. Specifically, this study investigates the translation techniques employed in rendering Qur'anic *kināyah* and examines the pragmatic and stylistic implications of these translations. Through this study, the researcher seeks to contribute to the fields of Qur'anic translation studies, pragmatics, and Arabic rhetoric by providing a deeper understanding of the translation of sensitive religious expressions.

2. METHODS

This research will employ a descriptive analytical method with a content analysis model. This method was chosen based on the specificity of the problem being examined regarding the translation of taboo verses in the Quran. This approach and method are considered relevant because this research focuses on translation results. This research seeks to describe specific data as they are. A researcher's descriptive method can group data into several aspects, according to their interests, encompassing six angles: objective, approach, discipline, location or subject, theme, and paradigm.

The problem examined in this research is the taboo verses regarding genital organs in the translated Quran. The data source is based on the consideration that the MT translation of the Quran is a translation product that has sparked controversy among scholars. It is also a response to the currently circulating translation by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which contains numerous errors and has been widely published. Furthermore, the MT translation

was chosen based on the consideration that it is a free translation (Al Farisi, 2016). Based on this, the researcher will analyze the translation.

This research is limited to verses of the Qur'an that potentially contain taboo expressions regarding genital organs. For comparison, Tafsir Al-Mishbah and Tafsir Al-Munīr were chosen. The selection of Tafsir Al-Mishbah was based on the consideration that the interpretation compiled by the leading Indonesian exegete, Muhammad Quraish Shihab, in Tafsir Al-Mishbah provides a distinctive aroma; its language is straightforward and logical, making it easy to understand for all groups (Taufikurrahman, 2019). Meanwhile, Tafsir Al-Munīr was chosen because the interpretation compiled by Wahbah al-Zuhayli is an interpretation that offers a straightforward writing system. In addition, Tafsir Al-Munīr also presents sentences that are easy to understand while maintaining consistency and systematic presentation of problems. The scope of the discussion theme is in accordance with the abilities and capabilities of the authors' knowledge. The discussion begins with a central theme, analyzing verses into clauses and phrases considered important in the linguistic orientation of i'rāb, balāgah, and mufrādat lugawiyyah. It also explores various linguistic aspects of the Qur'an (Has, 2014).

As is known, the data sources in this study are all taboo expressions regarding genital organs and their translations contained in the MT translation. For greater clarity, the researcher outlines the steps to be taken in this study, namely: (1) examining Qur'anic verses that potentially contain taboo expressions regarding intercourse; (2) examining the translation of these taboo verses in the MT translation; (3) comparing the translation of these taboo verses with the explanations contained in the Tafsir Al-Mishbah and Tafsir Al-Munīr; (4) describing the techniques used in translating taboo expressions; and (5) analyzing in depth the translation process carried out by the MT when translating taboo verses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

This section presents the findings of the analysis of taboo expressions related to genital organs in Muhammad Thalib's (MT) translation of the Qur'an. The findings reveal two dominant translation patterns. First, taboo expressions are translated connotatively through modulation techniques. Second, taboo expressions are translated denotatively through literal translation techniques. These findings indicate that MT applies different translation approaches depending on the communicative and legal purposes of the verse. The data analysis identified two Qur'anic verses containing taboo expressions related to genital organs. The translation techniques and meaning types are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Translation Techniques and Meaning Types

Name Of Surah	Translation Techniques	Denotative	Connotative
Al-Mu'minun Verse 5	Modulation		√
An-Nur Verse 31	Literally	√	

The first finding appears in Surah Al-Mu'minun verse 5. The phrase مهجورفا, which denotatively refers to "genitals" or "private parts," is translated by MT as "sexual relations." This translation demonstrates the use of the modulation technique because the translator changes the semantic perspective from a physical organ to the sexual act associated with it. The finding also shows that MT interprets the expression connotatively rather than literally. According to MT, the translation aims to create clarity and avoid ambiguity in legal interpretation, particularly regarding verses related to sexual conduct.

The second finding is identified in Surah An-Nur verse 31. In this verse, the phrase نهجورف is translated literally as "their genitals" or "their private parts." Unlike the previous verse, MT maintains the denotative meaning of the expression through literal translation. The findings also indicate the use of linguistic amplification through the addition of explanatory elements in the translation. MT explained that this translation strategy was intended to maintain politeness while preserving semantic clarity in the target language.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that MT employs both connotative and denotative translation patterns in translating Qur'anic taboo expressions. The use of modulation in Surah Al-Mu'minun verse 5 reflects an interpretive tendency that prioritizes legal clarity, whereas the literal translation in Surah An-Nur verse 31 reflects an effort to preserve lexical meaning while maintaining linguistic politeness.

3.2 Discussion

The findings indicate that the translation of taboo expressions in MT's Qur'an translation cannot be separated from the concepts of *kināyah*, euphemism, pragmatics, and translation techniques. In Arabic rhetoric, *kināyah* functions as an indirect expression whose intended meaning extends beyond the literal sense (al-Hasyimi, 2012). The Qur'an frequently employs euphemistic expressions to communicate sensitive topics related to sexuality and genital organs. This linguistic strategy reflects politeness and rhetorical aesthetics in Qur'anic discourse.

In Surah Al-Mu'minun verse 5, the phrase مهجورفا is translated as "sexual relations," although its denotative meaning refers to "genitals" or "private parts." This finding demonstrates the application of the modulation technique proposed by Molina and Albir (2002), in which translators alter semantic perspectives or categories to achieve communicative equivalence. MT shifts the meaning from a physical organ to the sexual act associated with it. Pragmatically, this translation reflects an explicative strategy intended to avoid ambiguity in legal interpretation. MT emphasized that legal language should be explicit and straightforward, particularly in verses concerning Islamic law. Consequently, the translation prioritizes clarity in the target language over lexical preservation.

From a pragmatic perspective, the translation also relates to the principle of relevance proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995). The expression "sexual relations"

provides a more direct contextual interpretation for Indonesian readers than the literal expression "genitals." This strategy facilitates comprehension of the legal implications of the verse. At the same time, the translation demonstrates a shift from euphemistic Qur'anic rhetoric into a more explicit target-language expression. This finding supports Mahfouz's (2011) argument that translating the Qur'an into other languages may result in the loss of stylistic harmony and rhetorical subtlety inherent in the source text.

In contrast, Surah An-Nur verse 31 demonstrates a different translation pattern. The phrase فروجهن is translated literally as "their genitals" or "their private parts." This finding reflects the use of literal translation techniques, which preserve the lexical meaning of the source text. Unlike the previous verse, MT maintains the denotative meaning while simultaneously attempting to preserve politeness through euphemistic wording in the target language. The translator also employs linguistic amplification by adding explanatory elements to facilitate contextual understanding. The differences between the two findings indicate that MT does not apply a single translation strategy consistently when translating Qur'anic taboo expressions. Instead, translation choices depend on contextual, pragmatic, and legal considerations. In verses emphasizing legal commands, MT tends to employ more explicit and interpretive translations to ensure clarity. However, in other contexts, the translator preserves denotative meaning while maintaining linguistic politeness. These findings demonstrate that the translation of Qur'anic taboo expressions involves negotiation between semantic accuracy, rhetorical aesthetics, legal interpretation, and target-language readability.

The findings of this study differ from previous studies that primarily focused on taboo expressions from sociolinguistic and cultural perspectives. Rosikh (2014), Nur (2017), Humaeni (2015), Sutarsih et al. (2024), and Solihat (2025) examined taboo language in social, cultural, and media contexts, whereas this study specifically investigates taboo expressions within Qur'anic translation. Therefore, this study contributes to Qur'anic translation studies by highlighting how euphemistic and sensitive religious expressions are transformed through translation techniques and pragmatic considerations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that taboo expressions related to genital organs in Muhammad Thalib's (MT) translation of the Qur'an are translated through different linguistic and pragmatic approaches. The findings show that two Qur'anic verses containing taboo expressions were identified, namely Surah Al-Mu'minun verse 5 and Surah An-Nur verse 31. Based on Molina and Albir's translation theory, the study found that MT primarily employs modulation and literal translation techniques in translating taboo expressions associated with *kināyah*. When taboo expressions are interpreted connotatively, MT tends to apply modulation techniques by shifting the semantic perspective from physical organs to sexual acts, whereas denotative expressions are translated literally to preserve lexical meaning.

These findings indicate that MT prioritizes pragmatic clarity and legal interpretation while simultaneously negotiating semantic accuracy, linguistic politeness, and target-language readability. The study further demonstrates that the translation of Qur'anic taboo expressions involves not only linguistic transfer but also rhetorical, pragmatic, and cultural considerations, particularly in preserving the stylistic and aesthetic dimensions of the Qur'an. However, this study is limited to taboo expressions related to genital organs in two Qur'anic verses and focuses exclusively on Muhammad Thalib's translation without broader comparison with other Indonesian Qur'an translations or reader reception studies. Therefore, future research is recommended to investigate wider categories of taboo expressions in the Qur'an, including those related to death, bodily functions, religion, animals, and social stigma, as well as to conduct comparative and reception-based studies in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the translation of sensitive religious expressions.

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