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SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC LOSS IN THE TRANSLATION OF QUR'ANIC DEIXIS INTO GERMAN

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Abstract: This article explores the problem of semantic and pragmatic loss in the translation of Qur'anic deixis into German. Deictic expressions in the Qur'an, including personal pronouns, demonstratives, temporal markers, spatial references and discourse-related elements, play an essential role in shaping meaning and guiding the reader's interpretation. However, when these units are translated from Arabic into German, certain shades of meaning, rhetorical force and contextual implications may be reduced, altered or lost. The study focuses on how semantic loss occurs when a deictic unit loses part of its original referential or conceptual meaning, while pragmatic loss appears when the communicative effect, speaker-addressee relationship or rhetorical intention is weakened in the target text. Special attention is given to the challenges of rendering divine address, shifts between singular and plural forms, references to the Hereafter, and demonstrative structures connected with revelation.

Key words: Qur'anic deixis, German translation, semantic loss, pragmatic loss, religious discourse, deictic expressions, translation challenges.

Introduction

The translation of the Qur'an into German is one of the most complex areas of religious translation because the Qur'anic text contains linguistic, semantic, pragmatic, rhetorical and theological layers that cannot always be transferred completely into another language. Among these layers, deixis occupies a particularly important place. Deictic units are expressions whose meaning depends on context: speaker, addressee, time, place and discourse situation. In the Qur'an, deictic elements such as personal pronouns, demonstratives, temporal markers, spatial references and discourse-related expressions are not merely grammatical devices. They help construct the relationship between the Divine speaker, the Prophet, believers, unbelievers, previous nations and future generations.

When Qur'anic deixis is translated into German, different types of loss may occur. Semantic loss appears when part of the original meaning of a deictic expression is reduced, generalized or changed. Pragmatic loss occurs when the communicative force, rhetorical effect, emotional tone or speaker-addressee relationship is weakened in the target text. This does not mean that German translations are unsuccessful. Rather, it shows that sacred discourse contains meanings that are difficult to reproduce fully in another linguistic and cultural system.

For example, Arabic demonstratives such as *hādhā* and *dhālika* may express not only physical distance but also textual emphasis, spiritual value or rhetorical elevation. In German, they are often rendered as *dies*, *dieser*, *das* or *jener*. Although these equivalents are grammatically acceptable, they may not always preserve the full semantic and pragmatic force of the Arabic form. Similarly, the Qur'anic first-person plural may be translated as *Wir*, but the theological sense of divine majesty may not be immediately clear for every German-speaking reader.

Literature Review

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The issue of translation loss has been widely discussed in translation studies, especially in relation to literary and religious texts. Hatim and Mason argue that translation should be analyzed as a discourse process, not only as a transfer of isolated words or sentences [1]. This approach is important for Qur'anic deixis because deictic expressions function within larger discourse patterns. A pronoun, demonstrative or temporal marker may connect one verse with another, indicate the addressee, emphasize divine authority or create rhetorical continuity. If the translator treats such units only grammatically, important discourse functions may be lost.

Gutt's relevance-theoretic approach to translation is also useful for this topic. According to relevance theory, translation involves the communication of intended meaning under conditions of cognitive interpretation [2]. In Qur'an translation, the translator must decide how much contextual information should be left implicit and how much should be made explicit for the target reader. If the translator explains too much, the compactness and rhetorical power of the original may be weakened. If the translator explains too little, the German reader may miss the intended reference. Therefore, semantic and pragmatic loss often occurs between literal preservation and interpretive clarification.

House's model of translation quality assessment emphasizes the importance of comparing source and target texts in terms of function, register, situational context and cultural appropriateness [3]. This is directly connected with Qur'anic deixis because deictic units often carry functional meaning. For instance, a direct divine address may function as warning, mercy, command or moral instruction. If the German translation preserves only the lexical meaning but weakens the communicative function, pragmatic loss occurs.

In Arabic translation studies, Dickins, Hervey and Higgins discuss the difficulty of translating Arabic structures into European languages due to differences in grammar, style, cohesion and rhetorical organization [4]. Their approach is relevant because Qur'anic Arabic frequently uses compact pronouns, ellipsis, repetition, tense shifts and demonstrative structures that do not always have exact German equivalents. As a result, the translator may need to add, omit, restructure or interpret certain elements.

Abdul-Raof's work on Qur'an translation is significant because it examines Qur'anic discourse as a unique combination of semantic, syntactic, phonetic, pragmatic and rhetorical features [5]. His view supports the idea that the Qur'an cannot be reduced to lexical meaning alone. In the translation of deixis, this means that a word such as "this", "that", "We", "you" or "there" may perform several functions simultaneously. Translating only one function may lead to the loss of others.

Al-Azab and Al-Misned specifically discuss pragmatic losses in Qur'an translation and show that such losses may occur in relation to genre, texture, word order, ellipsis, gender and tense [6]. Their argument can be extended to deixis because deictic units are also context-sensitive and pragmatically loaded. For example, the loss of gender marking in translation may affect the interpretation of address, while the loss of tense force may weaken the certainty or immediacy of Qur'anic discourse.

Neuwirth's study of the Qur'an within the broader context of late antiquity is useful because it highlights the Qur'an as a text deeply connected with communicative, historical and rhetorical situations [7]. This perspective is relevant to deixis because Qur'anic references often point not only to immediate linguistic context but also to historical communities, prophetic discourse, eschatological scenes and shared religious knowledge. In German translation, some of these contextual layers may become less visible.

Research Methodology

The study applies a qualitative descriptive method. The main object of analysis is the semantic and pragmatic loss that occurs when Qur'anic deictic units are translated into German. The research

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focuses on four major categories: personal deixis, demonstrative deixis, temporal deixis and discourse deixis.

The method consists of several stages. First, selected deictic forms are identified according to their function in Qur'anic discourse. Second, their possible German equivalents are examined. Third, the type of loss is classified as semantic loss, pragmatic loss or combined semantic-pragmatic loss. Fourth, the effect of the loss on reader interpretation is discussed.

The examples in this article are presented in simplified analytical form. They are not intended as a full exegetical commentary, but as linguistic illustrations. The examples are based on recurrent translation problems such as divine address, demonstrative reference, temporal certainty, spatial-symbolic meaning and discourse self-reference.

The study uses the following analytical categories:

1. **Semantic loss** — reduction or narrowing of original meaning.
2. **Pragmatic loss** — weakening of communicative effect, rhetorical force or speaker-addressee relation.
3. **Referential loss** — uncertainty or change in the referent of a deictic expression.
4. **Cultural-pragmatic loss** — loss caused by different religious and cultural backgrounds of Arabic and German readers.
5. **Compensatory strategy** — the translator's attempt to reduce loss through explanation, lexical addition or syntactic restructuring.

Analysis and Results

Personal deixis includes pronouns and address forms. In Qur'anic discourse, personal deixis is highly significant because it marks the relationship between God, the Prophet, believers, unbelievers and humanity in general. One of the most important examples is the divine first-person plural.

Example:

Arabic deictic meaning: "We created..."

Possible German rendering: "Wir erschufen..." or "Wir haben ... erschaffen."

At the grammatical level, the German pronoun *Wir* corresponds to the Arabic plural form. However, the semantic and theological function is not identical for every target reader. In Qur'anic Arabic, the divine plural may express majesty, power and authority. In German, *wir* may be interpreted as ordinary plurality unless the reader understands the religious convention. Therefore, the lexical equivalent is present, but the semantic depth may be partially lost.

A possible compensatory strategy is explanatory translation or footnoting. For example, the translator may keep *Wir* in the main text and explain in a note that the form expresses divine majesty. This reduces semantic loss without changing the sacred style of the main text.

Another problem appears in second-person address. Arabic can shift between singular and plural address with strong rhetorical effect. German also distinguishes *du* and *ihr*, but the pragmatic force may differ.

Example:

Arabic meaning: "You will return to your Lord."

German singular: "Du wirst zu deinem Herrn zurückkehren."

German plural: "Ihr werdet zu eurem Herrn zurückkehren."

If the original address is directed to the Prophet but also carries a broader message for all believers, the German translator must choose between singular and plural. A singular form may preserve the immediate address but limit the universal implication. A plural form may make the message more general but weaken the prophetic address. This creates a semantic-pragmatic loss because one form cannot fully preserve both layers.

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Demonstrative deixis includes words equivalent to "this", "that", "these" and "those". In Qur'anic discourse, demonstratives often perform rhetorical and evaluative functions. They may point to revelation, people, signs, punishment, mercy or the Hereafter.

Example:

Arabic deictic meaning: "This is the Book..."

Possible German rendering: "Dies ist das Buch..." or "Das ist die Schrift..."

The German phrase *Dies ist das Buch* preserves the direct demonstrative structure. However, it may sound formal and slightly distant in modern German. The phrase *Das ist die Schrift* may sound more natural or religiously marked, but it changes the deictic relation. "Book" becomes "Scripture", and the direct pointing function is transformed into a more interpretive expression.

The loss here is pragmatic. The original demonstrative creates a powerful act of textual presentation: the discourse points to itself as divine revelation. If German translation normalizes or explains the structure too much, the immediacy of the original may be weakened.

Another example is the Arabic contrast between near and far demonstratives.

Arabic deictic contrast: "this" versus "that"

German possibilities: *dies*, *dieser*, *das*, *jener*

German has demonstratives, but their stylistic use differs from Arabic. The form *jener* can sound archaic or literary. If the translator avoids it and uses *das*, the translation becomes more natural but loses the sense of distance or elevation. If the translator uses *jener*, the text may preserve distance but sound unnatural for some modern readers. This shows that pragmatic loss may occur even when a formal equivalent exists.

Temporal deixis refers to time expressions such as "today", "then", "before", "after", "now" and "on that Day". In Qur'anic discourse, temporal deixis often refers to eschatological events. These are not ordinary future events, but certain divine realities.

Example:

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

German rendering: "An jenem Tag..."

The German expression *an jenem Tag* is a strong equivalent and preserves much of the solemn tone. However, the full pragmatic force depends on the reader's religious knowledge. In Qur'anic discourse, "that Day" usually points to the Day of Judgment, accountability and divine justice. A German reader unfamiliar with Qur'anic style may understand it only as a general future day. Therefore, semantic reference is partly preserved, but pragmatic and theological force may be reduced.

Another temporal issue appears when Arabic uses past tense to describe future eschatological events. This rhetorical use expresses certainty: the event is so certain that it is described as if it has already occurred.

Example:

Arabic rhetorical meaning: "The command has come..."

Possible German literal rendering: "Der Befehl ist gekommen..."

Possible interpretive rendering: "Der Befehl wird gewiss kommen..."

If the translator uses past tense, German readers may think the event already happened. If the translator uses future tense, the certainty and rhetorical intensity of the Arabic past form may be weakened. Therefore, one grammatical choice leads to semantic clarity but pragmatic loss, while the other preserves rhetorical form but may create misunderstanding.

Spatial deixis refers to location and distance. In Qur'anic discourse, spatial references often carry symbolic or spiritual meaning. Words indicating nearness, distance, above, below, here and there may refer not only to physical location but also to moral and spiritual states.

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Example:

Arabic meaning: “near” in relation to divine mercy or divine knowledge

German rendering: “nahe” or “in der Nähe”

The German word *nahe* can express physical or emotional closeness. However, in Qur’anic discourse, nearness to God may indicate spiritual closeness, divine awareness or mercy. If the translation does not provide sufficient context, the symbolic dimension may be weakened.

Another example is the contrast between *dunyā* and *ākhirah*. Although these are not always simple spatial deictic terms, they function deictically by contrasting the immediate world with the afterlife.

Arabic conceptual contrast: “this worldly life” versus “the Hereafter”

German rendering: “das diesseitige Leben” versus “das Jenseits”

The German terms are strong and established, but they may not fully preserve the Qur’anic evaluative contrast. In Arabic, *dunyā* is associated with nearness, lower worldly existence and temporariness. The German *diesseitiges Leben* expresses “this-side life”, but the moral and spiritual evaluation may not be fully felt by every reader. This is a semantic-cultural loss.

Discourse deixis points to parts of the text itself. Expressions such as “this revelation”, “these signs”, “this reminder” or “that which was sent down” are central to Qur’anic self-reference.

Example:

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

German possibilities: “Dies sind die Zeichen...” / “Dies sind die Verse...” / “Dies sind die Offenbarungen...”

Each German choice preserves one aspect and loses another. *Zeichen* emphasizes divine signs or proofs. *Verse* emphasizes textual units. *Offenbarungen* emphasizes revelation. If the Arabic term has all these possible associations, one German word cannot reproduce the full semantic range. This is semantic loss caused by lexical narrowing.

There is also pragmatic loss. When the Qur’an refers to its own units as signs, the expression invites the reader not only to read but also to reflect, believe and respond. If the German translation uses a purely textual term such as *Verse*, the spiritual and evidential function may become weaker. If it uses *Zeichen*, the textual dimension may become less explicit. Thus, discourse deixis is one of the most difficult areas in Qur’anic translation.

Arabic Qur’anic discourse often uses ellipsis and implicit reference. The reader must infer the referent from context. German usually requires more explicit syntactic structure. Therefore, translators may add nouns or explanations.

Example:

Arabic meaning with implicit reference: “Then He guided.”

German explicit rendering: “Dann leitete Gott sie recht.”

The addition of *Gott* and *sie* may be necessary for clarity. However, the compactness and rhetorical rhythm of the original are reduced. The semantic meaning becomes clearer, but the pragmatic effect of brevity and solemnity may be lost. This type of loss is difficult to avoid. If the translator keeps the sentence too compact, the German text may become unclear. If the translator expands it, the sacred rhythm and rhetorical compression may be weakened.

Divine address is one of the most sensitive areas of Qur’anic deixis. The Qur’an frequently uses direct address to the Prophet, believers, unbelievers or humankind. In German, the translator must choose forms that reflect respect, directness, distance and universality.

Example:

Arabic meaning: “O people...”

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German rendering: “O ihr Menschen...” or “Ihr Menschen...”

The phrase *O ihr Menschen* preserves the solemn vocative style, but it may sound archaic in modern German. The phrase *Ihr Menschen* sounds more natural, but it may lose the elevated rhetorical tone of the original. Thus, the translator faces a choice between stylistic preservation and communicative naturalness.

Another example is the address to believers:

Arabic meaning: “O you who believe...”

German rendering: “O die ihr glaubt...” or “Ihr Gläubigen...”

The first form is closer to the Arabic structure and preserves the rhetorical call. The second form is more natural in German but changes the structure into a nominal group. The pragmatic effect of direct divine calling becomes weaker. This is not merely stylistic loss; it affects the reader’s perception of the relationship between divine speech and human response.

Results

The analysis shows that semantic and pragmatic loss in the translation of Qur’anic deixis into German occurs in several repeated patterns.

First, personal pronouns may preserve grammatical meaning but lose theological implication. The divine *We* can be translated as *Wir*, yet the sense of majesty may require explanatory support.

Second, demonstratives may lose rhetorical immediacy. Arabic demonstratives often point to revelation, divine signs or moral realities with strong emphasis, while German equivalents may sound either too formal or too ordinary.

Third, temporal deixis may lose eschatological certainty. Arabic tense and time expressions sometimes carry rhetorical meanings that German tense systems cannot fully reproduce.

Fourth, spatial deixis may lose symbolic and spiritual associations. Words related to nearness, distance, this world and the Hereafter often contain conceptual layers beyond physical location.

Fifth, discourse deixis may lose textual and theological plurality. Words referring to signs, verses or revelation may require one German lexical choice, while the Arabic term may carry several meanings simultaneously.

Sixth, pragmatic loss often results from necessary clarification. German translations may add nouns, pronouns or explanatory structures to avoid ambiguity, but this may weaken brevity, rhythm and rhetorical force.

Therefore, the translation of Qur’anic deixis into German requires a balance between accuracy, readability, sacred style and contextual explanation. Complete equivalence is rarely possible, but careful translation strategies can reduce the degree of loss.

Conclusion

Semantic and pragmatic loss in the translation of Qur’anic deixis into German is an unavoidable but manageable phenomenon. Deictic units in the Qur’an are deeply connected with context, divine address, discourse structure, rhetorical emphasis and theological meaning. When these units are translated into German, some aspects of meaning may be reduced because Arabic and German differ in grammar, style, religious register and cultural background.

The study shows that semantic loss occurs when the original range of meaning is narrowed, generalized or replaced by a less complex equivalent. Pragmatic loss occurs when the communicative effect of the original is weakened, especially in divine address, demonstrative reference, eschatological time and discourse self-reference. These losses do not necessarily indicate translator failure. Rather, they reflect the difficulty of transferring sacred discourse from one linguistic system into another.

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The most effective way to reduce loss is to combine formal accuracy with contextual clarification. Translators may preserve key deictic forms in the main text while using footnotes, commentary or careful lexical choices to explain their deeper meaning. In this way, the German reader can receive both the linguistic structure and the interpretive depth of the Qur'anic message.

Future research may compare several German Qur'an translations in detail and examine how each translation handles specific categories of deixis, such as divine pronouns, demonstratives of revelation, vocative address and eschatological temporal markers. Such studies can contribute to both translation theory and Qur'anic pragmatics.

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