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STUDYING TRANSLATIONS OF THE ARABIC PHRASE "BISMILLAH" INTO ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The Arabic prepositional phrase "Bismillah" in Islamic culture is of great significance since it is recommended to start every activity after saying it. Hence, English translators must try to convey its meaning effectively and as it is intended. In the present paper, after a short introduction on the importance of this phrase to Muslims and its intended meaning, different English renderings presented so far are juxtaposed and then the meaning of the most frequent pattern, i.e. "In the name of" is reviewed according to the definitions given in ten online dictionaries. As it seen, in spite of the frequent use of "In the name of" for the Arabic phrase, it is suggested to use "With the name of" since it will be closer to the meaning intended considering the definitions cited and also the ellipsis words implied in this prepositional phrase.

**Key words:** Translation, Bismillah, In the name of.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of the Arabic prepositional phrase *Bismillah* in Islamic world and to the Muslims cannot be denied since it is the phrase which is used in Shahadah, attestation to faith by believers, is at the beginning of all the Holy Qur'an's chapters (Surahs) except for the ninth (Tauba), and of course should be uttered by each Muslimin the very beginning of whatever activity which is going to be done so that they would show their faith in God and admit that nothing can be fulfilled without mentioning the name of God and remembering Him. Even, it is quoted from the prophet Muhammad that "any work not begun with it will remain incomplete or ephemeral" (Ricci. 2014.117).

The full phrase, *Bismillahir-Rahman ir-Rahim*, can be analyzed literally as "bi" a preposition meaning *by, with, through, by means of or in*, "ism" meaning *name*, "Allah" which is the most dignified and glorious

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name of the unique and only God among Muslims, and “Rahman” and “Rahim” which are among others names of God used here as modifiers of Allah meaning *compassionate* and *merciful* respectively. However, this phrase is usually reduced to *Bismillah* in informal situations before starting to do everything such as eating, working and even sleeping (Sahib. 2010). Considering the different contexts in which this phrase is used and since it is said at the beginning of activities as mentioned above, utterers intend that “I start doing the activity with the name of Allah” or something close to it in which the first elements, i.e. *I start doing the activity* are ellipsis words and implied based on the context in which the activity is going to be performed.

Due to the significance of this phrase and its status in Islamic culture, this study aims at studying its different translations so far presented in English language and their efficiency to convey the exact intended usage among Muslims, and since the translation of the key content words in this phrase, i.e. “Allah”, “Rahman” and “Rahim” has been the subject of study in different researches such as (Bakir. 2010 or Ashrafi&SeyyedAlangi. 2011), in the present paper, some of the different translations ever done of the first part of the phrase, namely *bism* are compared. In order to do it, first, 17 of the equivalents given by some famous translators for this phrase are juxtaposed and ordered alphabetically and then, the most frequent one(s) will be analyzed in details using some mostly used English online dictionaries to see if they could express the intended meaning in the source language effectively.

#### **English translations of *Bismillah***

In this part, 17 of the different renderings of this phrase in English language are listed in an alphabetical order in terms of the first names of the translators:

Abdullah Yusuf Ali (2001): *In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful*

Alexander Ross (1649): *In the Name of God, gracious and merciful*

Arthur John Arberry (1996): *In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*

Edward. H. Palmer (2004): *In the name of the merciful and compassionate God*

George Sale (1882): *In the Name of the Most Merciful God*

Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar (1973): *(We commence) with the name of God. The most Merciful ( to begin with ), The most Merciful (to the end)*

Hashim Amir Ali (1974): *In the Name of Allah the Rahman the Rahim*

John M. Rodwell (2005): *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

Laleh Bakhtiar (2007): *In the Name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate*

Marmaduke Pickthall (2001): *In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful*

Maulana Muhammad Ali (2011): *In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful*

Mohammad Abdul Hakim Khan (1905): *By the name of Allah, the All-providing and the most Merciful God*

Muhammad Asad (1980): *In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Dispenser of Grace*

Muhammad Zafrulla Khan (1970): *In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Ever Merciful*

Tahere Saffarzadeh (2006): *In the Name of Allah The Merciful Beneficent*

Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan (1999): *In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful*

Thomas. B. Irving (1985): *In the name of God, the Mercy-giving, the Merciful*

As it is seen in the 17 translations above, the words “In the name of ...” are used 15 times; so, this pattern can be considered as the most frequent of all. Now, this combination of words which makes an idiom in English is studied through definitions given in 10 online dictionaries using relevant examples:

In *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries* online (2015), the phrase *in the name of somebody/something* or *somebody’s/something’s name* is defined as:

1. For somebody; showing that something officially belongs to somebody: We reserved two tickets in the name of Brown. /The car is registered in my name.
2. Using the authority of somebody/something; as a representative of somebody/something: I arrest you in the name of the law.

3. Used to give a reason or an excuse for doing something, often when what you are doing is wrong:  
Crimes committed in the name of religion.

*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* online (2015) defines *in somebody's name/in the name of somebody* as:

1. If something is in someone's name, it officially belongs to them or is for them to use: The house is in my husband's name. /I've booked a table in the name of Steinmann.
2. Formal as someone else's official representative: I claim this land in the name of the King!

And phrases like *in the name of religion/freedom/science etc.* mean:

Using religion, freedom etc. as the reason why something is done, used especially when you disapprove of what someone is doing: Cruel experiments on animals carried out in the name of science. / The things people do in the name of love.

In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* online (2015) the idiom *in the name of* means:

1. By authority of: Open in the name of the law.
2. For the reason of; using the excuse of: Called for reforms in the name of progress.

*The free dictionary by Farlex* online (2015) defines this as:

1. By the authority of: Open up in the name of the law!
2. For the reason of; using as a reason: Grisly experiments performed in the name of science.
3. On behalf of: She made a donation in her daughter's name.
4. Under the designation of: They burned witches at the stake in the name of piety.
5. Under the possession or ownership of: The certificate of ownership was rightfully in my name.
6. In one's own name. On one's own behalf: Mary signed the check for John in her own name.

And for *in God's or heaven's name* or *in the name of God or heaven*:

With appeal to: In the name of God, stop that noise! / What in heaven's name are you doing?

*Cambridge Dictionaries Online* (2015) defines the phrase *In the name of sb. (ALSO in sb.'s name)* as:

For someone or belonging to someone: I'm here to pick up my tickets, I reserved them by phone yesterday in the name of Tremin. / The house is in my wife's name.

In *McMillan Dictionary* online (2015) it means:

1. Representing someone or something: They said they came in the name of peace.
2. Using the authority given by someone or something: She claimed to be acting in the name of the heirs to the estate.

According to *Collins Dictionary* online (2015) *In the name of* is defined as:

1. For the sake of
2. By the sanction or authority of

Examples include: But no one has ever given so much as Laura in the name of friendship. / The last thing he needed was an uncontrollable ten-year-old reeking havoc in their camp in the name of the Overlord. / These were appalling terrible things to do to a child in the name of science.

*Dictionary.com* online (2015) defines *in the name of* as:

1. With appeal to: In the name of mercy, stop that screaming!
2. By the authority of: Open, in the name of the law!
3. On behalf of: to purchase something in the name of another.
4. Under the name or possession of: money deposited in the name of a son.
5. Under the designation or excuse of: murder in the name of justice.

*In the name of someone or something* in *Chambers Dictionary* online (2015) means:

1. By their or its authority.
2. On behalf of them or it.
3. For the sake of them or it; using them or it as justification: were tortured in the name of religion.

And according to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* online (2015) *in the name of* can be defined as:

1. By the authority of: Open up in the name of the law!

2. 2.For the reason of; using as a reason: Grisly experiments performed in the name of science.

#### Discussion

As it is observed in the definitions and examples given in the online dictionaries cited above, the phrase "in the name of" which has been mostly used in English translations of the Arabic phrase "bism" may have different meanings none of which exactly equals what is intended by Muslims when uttered at the beginning of activities to mean something close to "(I start doing it) with/ using/ mentioning the name of ...". Instead, a meaning near to "By the authority of" is among the definitions more or less observed in most of the dictionaries cited though it is far from the intended meaning. For example, using this phrase at the beginning of a sentence before everything else in a sentence like "In the name of law, I open the door" could have a completely different meaning from when a Muslim says the phrase *bismillah* before opening a door. This can be justified according to an ideological and cultural difference between Islamic and non-Islamic societies and the importance of mentioning God's name in the very beginning of all activities to express faith in and remembrance of Him in Islamic view. Hence, considering the various English definitions given and the intended meaning in the source language, this phrase as it exists in English language seems to be an inappropriate equivalent even though most translators have used it.

As it was seen in one of the different renderings mentioned (Khan, 1905), the phrase "by the name of" has been used. Although this could be acceptable if the ellipsis words in this phrase (*I start doing it*) were considered, again it is also not suggested because of the existence of the same combination of words as an English idiom meaning *known as* or *having the name of* in examples such as "a man by the name of John Smith".

Considering these facts, Ghulam Sarwar's translation (1973) as "*(We commence) with the name of God*" seems the best one in terms of conveying the semantic features included in the source text since in addition to bringing the implied part in parentheses, the preposition "with" used here indicates simultaneous happening or immediate succession of the activity to be done after uttering the phrase. So, using the prepositional phrase *with the name of* is preferable to *in the name of* based on the contexts in which the phrase *bismillah* is used and also the definitions cited for *in the name of* from different online dictionaries. It seems that this conclusion supports the Cultural Turn notion and its applicability in translation studies to the effect that translating linguistic forms and structures will be ineffective, if not impossible, unless the cultural aspect inherited in the source text is considered. As it is seen in English language, there may be an idiom literary meaning something close to the phrase *bismillah*, but contextually and in practice, this could not convey the meaning implied in the original text due to cultural considerations and probably lack of or at least a less importance given in English to start each activity with explicitly remembering and reciting the name of God.

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