

Short Research Article

The Particle **كَمْ**: A Key Aspect to Fathom in Translation with Special Reference to the Holy Quran

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Abstract

Cognizant of the deep chasm between the actual semantics of the particle كَمْ and the superficial way it is understood and thus translated, I have decided to devote this study to minutely examine the two types of كَمْ. The paper explores the interrogative and declarative كَمْ along with their characteristic features, meaning and their realizations in translation into English, with a special reference to the Quran. Fresh tides of thought have conquered me to clarify the semantics of كَمْ which often fetters trainee translators and students of translation when they- in vain- try to capture the exact meaning of each of them. It is hoped that this paper helps its readers gain practical mastery of some salient features of the Arabic language. It aims at developing readers' level of linguistic competence.

Keywords

Particle كَمْ, Interrogative كَمْ, declarative كَمْ, translation, semantics, realization

1. Introduction

All translators in general, and those of the Holy Quran in particular need a clear and knowledgeable guide that illustrates the complexities of knotty problems in order to help them understand the subtle nuances which seemingly look “the same” at least at first glance. In English, such a phenomenon is common as when we need to investigate if “to” as a preposition in a certain context is used to mark the infinitive of the verb, or to precede the indirect object of a ditransitive verb, or to indicate such other meanings like “equality”, “comparison”, “the end of a duration of time”, “accompaniment”, etc.

The idea of the present paper flashed through my mind while teaching on the MA programme. My students, stunningly enough, were found out to have misunderstood the actual meaning of كَمْ while working on translating Islamic texts. Translators of the Holy Quran must have the linguistic savvy which enables them to get steered through the intricacies of certain words in the Quran, which might

look alike in the novice translators' eyes.

The point in focus in this paper is to draw a sharp distinction between the particle كَم in the Holy Quran. Although this word has the same phonemic weight in language usage, it carries completely different meanings which are often overlooked unconsciously. Understanding the two types of كَم is imperative because one would distort the intended message of the Quran. The semantics of this word needs to be investigated so as to translate it into its closest functional equivalent. The richness of the Arabic language allows it to have plenty of such words which seemingly look the same, but in fact they are completely different in the semantic content they bear. Bader Eddin (2019) discusses how three of the most widely-read translations of the Holy Quran have wrongly translated the word هَل. It was interesting to spot the difference and list 3 different translations produced by very skilled translators.

It is imperative that the target text word is received by its native speakers with the same impact or mood left on the source text word as read by its native speakers. Any failure to achieve this might bring about what is known as "bad" or "choppy" translation (Shiyab, 2006). Any misunderstanding of the source text definitely brings about inaccurate translation that would leave questions marks hanging in the target text readers' mind. One example to support this idea comes from the 1905 draft of a treaty between Russia and Japan. The draft was written in both French and English. The treaty was rescinded due to the translation of one word. The English word "control" and the French word "controller" were used as synonyms. While the English verb used meant "to dominate", the French one meant "to inspect" (Bryson, 1990).

In the Quran, the seemingly one particle كَم has a remarkably wide chasm in meaning depending on the context in which it arises. The failure to capture the intended semantic message conveyed by كَم breaks with Mason's acceptability and/or readability (Mason, 1982). This involves the degree to which the translated كَم in the Holy Quran is identical to its source text.

2. Method

This paper investigates the types of كَم in the Arabic language, and explores its characteristics. It focuses on how the two types of كَم is not distinguished in usage, and they are often wrongly understood alike. This brings about a distortion of the intended message. The two types of كَم are then to be counted in the Holy Quran and some illustrative examples will be listed to work out their meanings in context. The task of finding the specific Quranic verses in which the word كَم is held up throughout the Holy Quran is laborious because particles and words which are made up of less than 3 letters are not found in the Indexed Dictionary of the Holy Quran Phrases. The paper then will make effort to tabulate how each type of كَم is realized in English as a guide to future translators of the Holy Quran. The Quran is taken as the source of investigation because it is considered the model of Arabic linguistic excellence in terms of rhetoric and eloquence.

3. Discussion and Analysis

Al Mubarrad (1994) says كم is classed into “interrogative” كم and “declarative” كم. Both types are considered a noun because a preposition can be attached to it. Other reasons which support the argument that كم is a noun do exist but the most famous reason is that a preposition can be attached to it (Ibn Aqil).

3.1 Types of كم

As mentioned above, كم is categorized into two types: interrogative and declarative. The thorny problem which comes up in understanding and thus translating كم is that both types are viewed alike. They both are understood as “interrogative”, probably because the particle كم is still used in Arabic vernacular as an interrogative particle while the declarative كم is expressed in vernacular Arabic in different expressions. An attempt will be made to bridge the chasm between the two types of كم in meaning and translation. Both types of كم share some syntactic characteristics: They both are nominals as mentioned above, and ambiguous in that they themselves refer to no nouns in particular. They both are marked by permanent indeclinability or invariability حالة البناء الدائم. On the other hand, they differ in that the interrogative كم requires an answer as opposed to declarative كم. The statement associated with declarative كم is subject to belief or disbelief as it expresses a statement whereas the interrogative كم has no room for belief or disbelief. Below is an in-depth analysis of both types along with further characteristics.

3.2 Interrogative كم

It is an interrogative particle used to ask about the number of something in terms of entity and quantity (Hasan 2018). Unless followed by a certain noun in Arabic, it remains ambiguous. It is only the noun that follows it that makes it meaningful. This noun is referred to as التمييز, the distinctive noun. One example is كم رواية قرأت؟. Here, it is noticed that the noun following كم is what makes the interrogative particle meaningful.

One of its characteristics in Arabic is that it always occupies the initial position in the statement with the exception that if it is preceded by a preposition like بكم دينار تبرعت؟. Another characteristic of interrogative كم is that it is used to inquire about an already-completed action or not. Some supporting examples are كم كتاباً قرأت؟ and كم كتاباً ستقرأ؟. In other words, it is used to refer to the past and present or future as opposed to declarative كم as shall be shown below. The interrogative كم is always followed by a distinctive -mostly singular- noun in the accusative case. Despite the Kufa grammarians' argument that the distinct noun could be plural, this remains very rare, and consequently not counted on. That distinctive noun could be in the genitive case حالة الجر if كم is preceded by a preposition as إلى كم مدرس تحتاج المدرسة؟.

The last interesting characteristic of interrogative كم is the possibility of omitting the distinctive noun that follows it IF it is recoverably understood with no confusion arising in the reader's mind. For instance, in a context of situation where the participants are talking about the number of the students at a certain university, one participant can say كم في كلية الهندسة؟. This is recoverably understood as asking

about the number of ‘students’ as the distinctive noun which is omitted here. We can call it an instance of elliptical interrogative كم.

In English, interrogative كم is usually realized in the form of “how” followed by “many” and a “plural noun” if the noun asked about is a count noun. One example is “how many chairs are there in the room?”, literally for كم كرسيًا في الغرفة؟ in Arabic. It is noticed that the distinctive noun following كم is a count plural noun. In other cases where the noun following “how” is a non-count noun, “how” is followed by “much”, rather than “many” as in count nouns. One example is “how much rice did you give the beggar?”. If the unit of measurement is known when talking about a non-count noun, then a partitive is used with “how many”. One example is “how many kiols of sugar did you buy”? or “how many pieces of advice did you give to your students”? In this sense, “how” acts as an interrogative adverb of degree, and thus can modify “adverbs, adjectives and determiners” (Leech & Svartvik, 2013). We have recourse to “how” in all cases where interrogative كم is used, but care must be exercised regarding the word which follows “how”, depending on the thing inquired about in the context.

Despite Al Siyouti’s (1974) mistaken claim that the Quran does not mention interrogative كم, the interrogative كم has been used three times. These examples from the Holy Quran are tabulated below:

Table 1. Illustrative Examples of Interrogative كم from the Quran along with Their Realization in Translation into English

The interrogative كم-including Quranic verse	Its realization in Arabic	Remarks
“... قَالَ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ قَالُوا لَبِثْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ (2:259) ”....	“... how long you had slept ...” “ ...how much you had slept ...”	- The distinct noun which could probably be “time” is omitted as the context of situation makes it quite clear that “time” is in question. - It is important to be aware of the word order of the indirect question in translation.
“(18:19) “... قَالَ قَائِلٌ مِّنْهُمْ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ	“...how long you had stayed ...”	
“...قَالَ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ عَدَدَ سِنِينَ...” (23:112)	“...how long you had stayed ...”	The distinct noun عدد is delayed here, as opposed to its usual position immediately after the interrogative كم

3.3 Declarative كم

It is a particle that is used to give information rather than posing questions. It is called “a particle of multitude”. It denotes quantity or amount (Leech & Svartvik, 2013). The most salient feature of this type of كم is that it is followed by a noun in the genitive case حالة الجر. One example is كم صالح بفساد آخر . حالة الجر. One example is كم صالح بفساد آخر , literally for “Many a righteous man has got corrupt by others’ corruption”. It shares with its interrogative counterpart that it is meaningless in itself until it is followed by a noun or verb. One more example is كم ذكي قد عاش وهو فقير وغبي يصفو عليه الثراء , literally for ‘Many a bright man lived in poverty while others stupid lived fabulously rich’. Abu Tammam is famously quoted as saying كم منزل في الأرض يألفه الفتى, وحنينه أبدأ لأول منزل.

Since the declarative كم is used to inform others of the multitude of a thing of action, it is logically used to refer to the past, unlike the interrogative كم which can refer to both the past or present or future. It usually occupies the initial position in the statement unless preceded by a preposition as in إلى كم عمل. نافع بادرت. The distinctive noun following the declarative كم is singular or plural in the genitive case though it is preferred to be a singular noun (Hasan, 2018; Babity, 2004). Because the declarative كم is always associated with the past, it is followed by a verb in the past like كم عز أقوام بعز لغات , as said by the Egyptian poet Hafez Ibrahim. Here, the meaning is that “many a nation took pride by virtue of the pride of their languages”.

Using the quantifier multal “many” in contrast to paucal “few” (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973) is one good choice to express declarative كم in informal or non-literary contexts. It serves as an adjective followed by the distinctive noun expressed in Arabic by التمييز. The quantifier ‘many’ can function as a determiner and a pronoun (when followed by “of” (Leech & Svartvik, 2013).

In the Holy Quran, the declarative كم is mentioned thirteen times. It is worth mentioning that the translation of the declarative كم is more consistent in that the same form can be used every time an instance of declarative كم is ensured. Because the declarative كم is used mostly in formal written literary contexts, I would go for an option which goes in line with the same register and degree of formality, i.e., “many a”. “Many a...” is a fixed expression which simply means “many” or “a plentiful supply of something”. However, it is used in an unusual way, at least to non-native speakers of English. It is followed by a singular noun and a singular verb. One example is “The jitters I had got before the exam gave me many a sleepless night”. Another is “many a hurdle is surmounted by determination”. In case the noun in question is non-count, then the quantifier “much” is used instead. “many a” is originally derived from “Many”, but here has an extra potentiality of acting as a pre-determiner with singular count nouns preceded by “a(n)” (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973).

Below is a tabulation of some instances of the declarative كم in the Holy Quran, and how they can be realized in translation into Arabic.

Table 2. Illustrative Examples of Declarative كم from the Quran along with Their Realization in Translation into English

The declarative كم-including Quranic verse	Its realization in Arabic	Remarks
(17:17) وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِنَ الْقُرُونِ مِنْ بَعْدِ نُوحٍ	We destroyed many a generation...	Though an extraposition as a rhetorical device can be used, I prefer to follow the target language word order to be more comprehensible for English native speakers.
(2:249) كَمْ مِنْ فِئَةٍ قَلِيلَةٍ غَلَبَتْ فِئَةً كَثِيرَةً	Many a small group defeated ...	
(24:26) كَمْ تَرَكُوا مِنْ جَنَّاتٍ وَغُيُونَ	They left many a garden and a water spring	
(43:6) وَكَمْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ نَبِيِّ فِي الْأَوَّلِينَ	We sent many a prophet ...	

4. Conclusion

Often perceived as an uncharted territory, certain salient features in Arabic in general and in the Holy Quran in particular have received less attention and thorough examination than other down-to-earth issues. Translators often try to steer clear of analyzing such features due to complexity at the various levels of language. This paper placed emphasis on exploring the types of كم, and has made a sharp distinction between them. With a matchless semantic propensity of the Arabic syntax, many trainee translators fail to capture the nuances of meanings, carried by the different types of كم. This paper has expended hard efforts to systematically explore the semantics of كم in Arabic and how its different types can be realized in translation into English. Some excellent examples have been cited from the Holy Quran, and from Arabic literature as an aid to illustrate the issue. It is hoped that this paper would be instrumental for future students of translation and researchers to plumb the depths of related issues and come out with new key findings in this field.

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