The Sociolinguistic Status of Islamic English: A Register Approach

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Abstract
This paper investigates the special use of English by Muslim scholars in different fields of enquiry, which has been termed Islamic English by some. The data consists of several pieces of evidence from (i) different kinds of publications in the UK, KSA, Malaysia, and South Africa, (ii) international participant feedback in response to an earlier presentation in a Greek Symposium about the same topic to which this paper is a followup in essence, and (iii) participant observations of Muslims' conversations worldwide. The results indicate that Islamic English is not only real as much as Biblical English is, but it is also a continuum with several varieties ranging from the light to the heavy. It has certain universal features, including lexis, grammar, topic, style, audience, codeswitching, and Arabicity, thus, marking it as a register, variety, or dialect of English which expresses their social and cultural identity. In the conclusion, the paper recommends teaching students Islamic English from the perspective of social and cultural identity.

Key words: Islamic English, discourse analysis, register, language variation, TEFL/TESL/ESP

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1. Introduction

Is Islamic English real? Does it ever exist? Do Muslims use English differently from its mainstream users? One might be sceptical, no wonder. At the 9th Sociolinguistic Symposium of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, held at the University of Aristotles, Greece, 3-5 April 1995, Dr. Paul Tench of the University of Wales at Cardiff, was initially and openly doubtful about it. He said: "Is there such a thing as Islamic English? Can we say that there is Christian English, for example?" I said: "Yes, definitely. There is such a thing as Islamic English and it is real. Also there is such a thing as Christian and Jewish English, for which the the generic term Biblical English was used in Crystal and David's (1969) investigation of style in English, in which one chapter was dedicated to biblical English style. To this Dr Tench agreed with a big, drawnow, resounding "yes".

So what is Islamic English exactly? Islamic English was first used by the late Al-Faruqi (1986), the then Comparative Religion Professor at Temple University, USA, to express (or transliterate more precisely) some 60 unique Islamic concepts and notions of faith such as God and His qualities, worship rituals and customs, and cultural ideals and norms. As it was difficult to find precise and exact equivalents for such terms in English, he suggested they should be used as transliterations in English, for example, Allah instead of God. He defined it as the use of English by Muslims in native English-speaking countries- the USA, UK, Australia, and New Zealand. In short, Al-Faruqi's work is no more than transliteration in essence. As a linguistics professor at International Islamic University Malaysia which openly adopted this model, Jassem (1995) examined the notion from an applied linguistic perspective, offering a detailed linguistic analysis phonetically, morphologically, syntactically, lexically, and discoursally. He concluded that Islamic English was distinguished by one or two features, which were lexis in the main and grammar to a lesser extent, which mark it as a register in Hallidayan terms (for a survey, see Paltridge 2006; Hamilton et al 2003).

A number of studies examined and emphasized the ever-increasing, intimate relationship between English and Islam, regardless of any historical biases and prejudices. Dazdaresvic (2010) examined the close and intimate relationship between Islam and English in the Balkans, particularly Bosnia, at the phonological level. Mahboob (2009) stressed that English in Pakistan is an Islamic language which should be dissociated from any colonial overtones. In Malaysia, Jassem (1993a, 1994b) reported a similar situation earlier. Furthermore, Jassem (1995b, 1996) showed how English became indigenized in Malaysia at the level of lexis, culture, and change. On a much deeper, etymological level, Jassem (2012b, 2013) showed the inextricably close genetic relationship between Arabic, English, German, French, and all Indo-European languages to such an extent that they are all dialects of the same language, which has far-reaching consequences for language learning and teaching and acculturation.

Other studies were concerned with the pedagoical aspects of Islamic English. Hussein (1996) tried to utilize the notion from an ESP perspective in a Malaysian setting. Jassem (2004) showed how Islamic ideals, which were derived from Quranic translation, can be incorporated into English language learning and teaching.
Now what is the exact status of Islamic English? Is it a register (ESP) or variety (dialect)? To answer this question properly, one needs to clarify the differences between such terms. A dialect (variety) is more general such as British English is a dialect and so are American English and Australian English. A register is a narrower, specialised variety of language, with every field having its own unique register such as business English register, legal English register, medical English register, literary English register, and so on. It may also be called ESP, genre, or style. A register can be distinguished by five criteria: topic, lexis, grammar, style, and audience (Jassem 1995). The topic, theme or subject-matter may be any topic such as economics, business, literature, cooking, carpentry, textiles, and so on. The lexis is defined by the topic itself where an economic text requires economic lexis and vocabulary, for instance. The grammar is linked to the topics in the sense that some tend to favour certain types and tenses of verbs, adjectives, nouns and so on like the passive voice in scientific and technical English. The style may be enumerative, descriptive, argumentative, illustrative and so on according to the nature of the topic at hand. Finally, the audience is essential, where every variety or discourse targets a particular group of listeners, learners who compose its audience. Any text meeting these conditions can qualify to be termed register. The main uses of register were in the field of English for Special Purposes (ESP). In the light of the above, it seems that Islamic English is both a register and dialect, depending on context.

This paper is a follow-up to Jassem (1995), which provides additional conclusive textual evidence on the existence of Islamic English. It contends that Muslim speakers of English, whether native speakers or foreigners, use English in an intimately special and colourfully rich way. The remainder of this paper consists of four sections: methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 The Data

The data has been collected from homes, shops, grocery stores, bookshops, mosques, and universities in Malaysia, the U.K., and KSA over a long period of time, extending from as far back as January 1994 until now. It was exclusively derived from written materials of various forms, which included (i) translations and interpretations of the meanings of the Holy Quran, (ii) the sayings (hadiths) of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him (cf. Jassem 2012b)), (iii) contemporary writings in English by Muslims from around the globe in the form of books, pamphlets, newsletters, and administrative letters, and (iv) participant observations of Muslims' discourse or conversations.

2.2 The Analysis

The theoretical framework to be used in data analysis is broadly sociolinguistic or variationist (e.g., Labov 1994, 2001, 2010; Jassem 1993b, 1994b). More precisely, it utilizes the register approach introduced above, an integral component of the wider discourse analysis (Paltridge 2006; Hamilton et al 2003; Jassem 1995), a branch of sociolinguistics (Herk 2012; Fasold 1986, 1990; Holmes 1992).

Due to space limitations, the analysis will be confined to a few written texts: (i) a UK/KSA Holy Quran translation, (ii) a South African English text, and (iii) a Malaysian
English text. It will, furthermore, be qualitative rather than quantitative in the sense that the data will be analysed and described at all relevant levels of linguistic analysis without using statistical measurements.

3. The Results
The results below are meant to provide conclusive evidence on the existence and reality of Isalmic English as a register and variety of English.

3.1 Evidence from A Translation of the Holy Quran
There are many translations of the Holy Quran, all of which share certain stylistic and linguistic features (Jassem 2001a-b, 2015). Some of these translations bear close linguistic or stylistic similarities to Biblical English, which is grounded in 16th-18th century English, especially the language or works of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton, John Donne, John Dryden, and so on, in which the same stylistic devices were used such as the old, obsolete forms of pronouns and verb endings. The following example is taken from Ali’s (1989) renowned translation of the Holy Quran.

Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth." They said: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?- Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?" He said: "I know what ye know not." (Holy Quran II (The Cow): 30)

Stylistically speaking, Ali’s translation has a really Biblical English language and style in particular. This is not strange as the translator himself was a literary scholar of English, who deliberately imitated and modelled his work on the translations of the Bible into English in which archaic English is used as manifested in lexical choice (e.g., behold), pronominal (e.g., thou, thy) and syntactic usage (e.g., wilt, know not). The style is archaically majestic, poetic, and grand but the usage is certainly obsolete which relates to the distant past and not the immediate present. There are differences, of course, which pertain to the content and message of the Quran and the Bible, especially in the idea of Divine Unity or absolute Oneness or Monotheism in Islam. As theological matters fall beyond the scope of linguistic analysis, they can be skipped here altogether.

Therefore, the above Quranic translation style can be easily termed Biblical English, which compares very well with 16th century Shakespearian style, where the same linguistic and stylistic devices were used. The following example from one of Shakespeare’s summer love sonnets illustrates that:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

No, thou art more beautiful. (Underlines mine.)

One can readily notice the huge similarities between Shakespeare’s style and Ali’s translation, where the same forms of pronouns and verbs are used; again all relate to matters of language and style.

3.2 Evidence from Islamic Writings
Contemporary Islamic writings vary, covering all areas of knowledge and intellectual pursuit ranging from religion and shariah (Islamic law) to philosophy, economics and politics, literature, science, engineering, and medicine. The language and style of these
writings vary: some are in standard English with little or no difference from international standard English norms; some are markedly different in relying on Arabic and Islamic expressions. Four examples are given below: one from South African English, one from Malaysian English, one from Saudi English, and one from Palestinian American English.

3.2.1 A South African English Example

South African English is considered a native variety of English despite interference from local languages. Muslim users there employ it in their own specific ways, especially when talking about Islam. Here is an example about ritual washing for prayer.

Text 2 (South African English)

There are 13 Sunnats in Wudhu.

If a SUNNAT is left out, the wudhu is complete but the full sawaab of wudhu is not gained.

1. Niyyat (intention)
2. Reciting of BISMILLAH
3. Washing of the hands thrice upto the wrists
4. Brushing the teeth by Miswak
5. Gargling three times
6. Passing water into the nostrils thrice
7. Khilal, ie to pass wet fingers into the beard
8. Khilal of the fingers and toes
9. Washing each part three times
10. Masah of the whole head once
11. Masah of both the ears once
12. Wudhu done systematically
13. Washing of each part one after the other without pause, so no part dries up before the wudhu is completed.

(Desai 1987: 44) (Italics mine for highlighting.)

The above text, written by a South African Muslim, uses modern standard English. However, it departs from it in the usage of Islamic or Arabic lexis: i.e., words used by Muslims to describe the set of activities involved in ritual washing for prayer purposes. The head word, which is almost in every single case Islamic or Arabic, is sometimes given an explanation in plain English. The total number of Islamic words in the text is 15, two of which occur more than once (ie, wudhu = 5; sunnat = 2). This is done to suit and best describe Islamic ideals, concepts and practices for which no adequate English equivalents can be found. Moreover, the phrase Bismillah (short for In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) is a discoursal feature with which every Muslim begins any activity of his to ask for barakah or blessing. Finally, citations in Arabic and Urdu were included also, which have been deliberately cut out from the above text. This is actually what makes this English Islamic.

3.2.3 A Malaysian English Example

Malaysian English is being indigenized or nativized (Jasem 1993a, 1994a). As Malaysia is proud of Islam, Arabic, and English at the same time, there is a strong tendency to
present Islam in English. Abundant literature in Islamic English is available everywhere especially in those sectors concerned with Islamic affairs such as the Prime Minister's Department for Islamic Affairs. Here is an example.

**Text 3 (Malaysian English)**

*Bismillahi r-Rahmani r-Raheem* (in Arabic script)

Islam and Al-Khamr

**Introduction**

The wisdom behind all the teachings, rules and the *ahkam* of the *shari'ah* aims at the promotion of the well-being and protection of five categories. Three of these categories relevant to our theme are: *al'aql* the human mind, *albadan* the human body, and *walmal* the sources of wealth which *Allah ta'ala* has made abundant for the sustenance of all mankind. The other two categories are: religion and descent. Everything should be done to promote the welfare of these categories and to protect them against harm. (Noor 1986: 1)

What are those specific features that make the above text Islamic English? There are two discourse features which are *Basmalah* (see below) and *Allah ta'ala* - a respect term of address for "God on high", similar to *Hallelujah* with *Halle* being *All(a/e)h* 'God' in reverse (for detail, see Jassem 2012b). The text includes the usage of Islamic vocabulary for intoxicants (*al-khamr* 'the-wine') and matters of belief. The total number of words is 13, some of which are given in Arabic script also except for *Bismillahi* 'in the name of God' which is in Arabic script only. The text, moreover, has a peculiarly Islamic tone and spirit about the little goods and huge evils of intoxicants; no other culture denigrates *alcohol* 'al-khamr' as much as Islam does, in fact, because it is a slow, sweet, sleepy, creepy, snoozy, silent killer and burner of the soul, mind, body, honour, and money. To live long, healthy, and peacefully as much as possible, intoxicants are to be avoided out of one's own free will - i.e., without coercion, of course.

**3.2.4 A Saudi/Pakistani English Example**

Al-Hilali and Khan (1999) did a joint translation of the Holy Quran, while working in KSA as expatriates, the former a Tunisian German-educated Islamist and the latter a Pakistani/Afghani medical doctor. In literary and linguistic terms, it is the radical opposite of Ali's translation above. It is prosaic, literal, and awkward. A full account and critical evaluation is given in Jassem (2014).

**3.2.5 An American English Example**

Arab American scholars from all persuasions and religious backgrounds use English to introduce and disseminate Islamic and Arabic culture and heritage in their different fields of specialization in American institutions of higher learning. Some of them are literary masters and geniuses indeed such as Ismail R. Al-Faruqi and Edward Saeed. Al-Faruqi was such an ideal example, who wrote in very beautiful and captivating English tens of books about almost all aspects of Islam and Arabic culture. In fact, it is thanks to him that the term Islamic English was first introduced into the literature (see above). Although he called for the use of about sixty Islamic and Arabic terms in discussing Islamic matters, he did not always abide by that in his own writings. His books and writings are in plain and beautiful English in the main, e.g., his book *Islam* (1984).
3.2.6 Participant Observations in the UK, Malaysia, & KSA

In their everyday conversations, English-speaking Muslims spice up their language with characteristically Islamic expressions and phrases in all corners of the globe. These include personal names, greeting and farewell terms and forms, invocations, prayers, and so on. An example is the greeting *assalamu alaikum* 'peace to you' when meeting people and *bismillah* 'in God's (Hallelujah's) name' upon starting any action for the sake of blessing and facilitation. A fuller investigation into this area is badly needed in the future.

4. Discussion

A careful examination of the above and similar other texts shows that Muslims use English differently and variably. Therefore, Islamic English is not homogeneous but rather heterogeneous; it is a dialectal continuum with many varieties or registers, ranging from the light to the heavy. Some are more Islamic than others; some are really indistinguishable from standard English. Light Islamic English uses a few Islamic and Arabic terms; heavy Islamic English employs more and more of such terms with hardly a line without such an occurrence; intermediate Islamic English every now and then. In every case, the criterion is the audience. A wider audience requires the light end of the continuum; a limited audience the heavier end. The writer or speaker is the judge and arbiter in this respect who knows their audience best and, consequently, adapt their speeches or writings, and design their styles to suit.

As a register or variety, Islamic English may be characterised by the following set of linguistic and discourse criteria. As to the linguistic criteria, they relate to:

1. lexis where Islamic Arabic vocabulary is employed in all walks of life and enquiry, some of which have become part and parcel of standard English usage and dictionaries such as *Allah*, *Muhammad*, *Quran*, *shariah*, *fiqh*, *fatwa*, *hajj*, *jihad*, etc. Usually these words are given their English equivalents as well as their Arabic spelling or transliteration such as *Iman* 'faith' and

2. grammar where standard English syntax is usually used. This means that standard Islamic English is the norm.

concerning the discourse criteria, they pertain to:

3. topic, which is often Islamic in essence;

4. style, which differs according to text type; it may be descriptive, enumerative, argumentative, and so on;

5. discourse features, which may include such expressions as *basmallah* 'saying in the name of Allah 'Halle of Hallelujah in reverse' or God', *doa* 'supplication', and *salam* 'welcome (via reordering and turning /sl/ into /kl/); greeting, peace' (Jassem 2012b);

6. audience, where Islamic English is addressed to or targets English-speaking Muslims in the main;

7. heavy reliance on the primary and secondary sources of Islamic heritage. The former refer to the *Quran* (the Holy Book of Islam, God’s Words revealed to Prophet Muhammad [peace and blessings be upon him] through the Archangel Gabriel) and the *Sunnah* (sayings and acts of the Prophet Muhammad [peace and blessings be upon
him) whilst the latter refer to the works of Muslim scholars in all walks of life. Such sources are often quoted in text;

8. codeswitching or codemixing where the writer mixes English and Arabic in the same situation, paragraph, or sentence; and

9. incorporating Arabic text where words, phrases, and even passages are included in their original Arabic script. These are often followed by transliterations, translations and interpretations.

It is worth mentioning that some of these features are more salient than others. Lexis is perhaps the most noticeable and is a common thread running through all other features. In light of the above, lexis and topic alone make Islamic English a register just like business English is a register with its own vocabulary and theme; however, it is a variety by means of all the criteria combined. Whatever the classification maybe, Islamic English is a linguistic reality, indeed. Furthermore, one does not have to be a Muslim to write in Islamic English; any specialist in the Islamic and Arabic field is one by default, computationally speaking.

The above description has interesting implications for language learning and teaching in ESL, EFL, and ESP contexts. In fact, some scholars and institutions tried to integrate Islamic English as a carrier of their social and cultural identity into their ESL, EFL, and ESP curricula, especially at tertiary institutions (see Jassem 1993a: Ch. 7; Hussein 1996). According to them, there is a need for Muslims to adapt and enrich English, their new language of international communication, by using Islamic expressions and concepts because Islam is part and parcel of students’ culture around which all their lives revolve. It should not be surprising, therefore, to encourage teachers and students alike to use it and develop it further. This enables them to talk and communicate more freely and copiously in English about topics and concepts they hold dear to their hearts and know more about.

Peirce (1995) termed this cultural or social identity, which should be drawn upon in second/foreign language learning and teaching and communication. In learning a new language, one should not be afraid or shy to talk about his own identity or those things that he knows and identifies with such as one's name, background, history, culture, likes and dislikes, hobbies, aspirations, ideals, models, and so on. Things you do not identify with, ignore and know nothing or very little about such as cartoon characters, social and political histories, foreign habits and ways of life lead to minimal communication on the part of EFL/ESL learners. More often one feels humiliated and disadvantaged for lack of knowledge and inability to contribute something of significance to communications and interactions in such situations. Talking about one's identity certainly saves face, enriches dialogue, and reaps rewards- i.e., higher marks in exams and greater esteem in people's eyes. People like to be different; it is in their nature; it is instinctive; they were born so.

Therefore, materials writers and textbook authors for Muslim students need to consider the very important role that cultural and social identity plays in one's life and organize their textbooks in a manner that mirrors it (see Jassem 2004). Hussein (1996: 323-330) provided a modest attempt in this direction, offering useful suggestions from an ESP perspective; however, much work still needs to be done. Actually, many commercial
British and American English language teaching textbooks have started to do just that, a feat really commendable.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The above survey has provided conclusive evidence from various countries and various sources of literature on the reality of Islamic English which indicates that there are certain universals governing the usage of Islamic concepts/terms in English by Muslim scholars. The main arguments of this paper can be summed up as follows:

I. Islamic English is old, real, and heterogeneous. It has different varieties and/or registers ranged along a continuum or scale from light to heavy. Sometimes it is synonymous with Biblical English as in Ali’s translation; in some cases it is indistinguishable from standard English as in Faruqi’s works; in some cases, it is heavy especially when the target audience is Muslim in the main as in the South African, Malaysian, and KSA examples; it is light or nil when the target audience is the wider humanity as in Faruqi’s case again. In short, it is an old reality that has been in practice since probably the first Muslims spoke and wrote in English, expressing their socio-cultural identity as a means of indigenizing the language.

II. As a register, Islamic English is distinguished by certain linguistic and social features, including a) lexis, b) grammar, c) topic, d) style, e) discourse features, f) codeswitching, and g) audience. The first five features mark it as a register; altogether as a sociolinguistic variety, a dialect.

III. Future research is needed into all theoretical and practical aspects of using Islamic English as a carrier and embodiment of social and cultural identity. Areas such as the methodology of teaching students how to handle this variety in their writing and speaking come to the fore; examining their attitudes are equally important. Also the methodology for research into Islamic English needs to be refined.

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