

The radical

Few translations spark a media firestorm, but Christoph Luxenberg's controversial new interpretation of the Koran did just that. He grants Rebecca Fiederer a rare interview



Rebecca Fiederer has an MA in Translation Studies from Dublin City University. A bilingual German and English speaker, she translates between the two languages, along with Spanish. Based in Dublin, she works as a freelance sub editor and translator.

Eight years ago, a German scholar and professor of ancient Semitic and Arabic languages released a book that would gain mass media attention. With his claim that the language of the early compositions of the Koran was not exclusively Arabic – as has always been assumed by classical commentators – Christoph Luxenberg broke new ground.

Luxenberg proposed a new way of ‘reading’ Islam’s central religious text, by using the Syro-Aramaic language prevalent up to the seventh century for analysis.

In June 2000, the German edition (*Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*) was published, and last year finally saw the release of the English version – *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Verlag Hans Schiler).

His work takes a philological and text-critical approach. While some have been critical of his scholarly method, it is considered a major, but controversial, work.

The book triggered a worldwide debate about the history, linguistic origins and correct interpretation of the Koran and it has received extensive coverage in the mainstream media, unusually for a philological work.

As at least one fifth of the Koran’s content is considered ‘obscure’, Luxenberg’s book examines these ‘dark passages’ – working under the assumption that there is more Aramaic in these passages than

the ‘pure Arabic’ doctrine would care to admit.

By rigorous application of philological method, he claims to shed light on some of these ‘dark passages’. One much-publicised example is the case of the paradise ‘*huris*’ (virgins), which Luxenberg states may be simply mistranslated as ‘grapes’. He also points to the strong kinship between the Koranic text and Christian scripture of its time.

In this interview, Christoph Luxenberg explains why he felt a new type of reading of the Koran was necessary, how he went about it, why he felt it necessary to use a pseudonym and what his views are on the subject of translation.

Please explain the background to your book, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*. Why was a new type of ‘reading’ necessary?

The Koran was the first book to be written in Arabic. If you trace its origin to the years of the prophet’s sermon as indicated by Islamic tradition (the prophet was active in Mecca and Medina from 612 until 632), there is a gap of around 150-190 years until the next book by Ibn Hisham (died 828) was published in classic Arabic.

The prerequisite was provided by linguist Sibawayh (760-796) with his standardised grammar of written Arabic, which is still valid today. Now look at the earliest comprehensive commenting on the Koran (in 30 volumes) by Tabari (died 923), who almost exclusively relied on verbal Islamic tradition, and early Arabic lexicography by al-Khalil ibn Ahmad (died 786), whose primary goal was

to explain the Koran’s language – hard to understand even for Arabs living at the time. It is astonishing how often Koran commentators as well as Arabic lexicographers were perplexed over the meaning of expressions in the Koran. This perplexity is expressed by the recurring sentence: ‘God knows best’. With this expression, the religious Arab accepts the fact that expressions in the Koran that are incomprehensible to humans are attributed to its divine origin and the transcendental character of the Koran’s language.

Meanwhile, in the west, the Koran and its language only began to be critically examined from around the middle of the 19th century. Apart from single loan words – where the derivation was mainly explained as being Aramaic, Hebrew, Ethiopian, Greek, Persian and so on without altering the words’ understanding – it was generally assumed the Koran’s language was an early stage of ‘classic Arabic’. However, the most reputable Western Koran translators

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of the 20th century (Richard Bell, Britain; Régis Blachère, France; Rudi Paret, Germany), all Arabic scholars of the highest order using all available methods of critique, could not explain the Koran’s language any more clearly than traditional Arabic Koran commentators and lexicographers. All these translations, compiled meticulously and scientifically, had one common shortfall: they failed to place the Koran text in its historical-linguistic framework.

My approach starts at this point. As Arabic was not yet a written language, the Koran was developed in a mainly Aramaic environment. Aramaic was the ‘lingua franca’ for around a millennium in the Middle East/western Asia region before Arabic took over. Aramaic also competed in the Roman Empire with Greek in the Near East, until from the

seventh century onwards it was slowly pushed aside by Arabic. During Alexander the Great's reign the Hellenes already called Aramaic 'Syriac', as the language of the Assyrian Empire.

The Arameans in Edessa used this term, and because of an early Bible translation into Syriac this branch of Aramaic became the dominant written language in the Middle East/western Asia region before Arabic. Hence the term 'Syro-Aramaic'. In a historical-linguistic sense, it stands to reason that this was the underlying language around the time of the Koran's origin, especially as educated and Christianised Arabs of the time used Aramaic or Syro-Aramaic (Syriac) as written language.

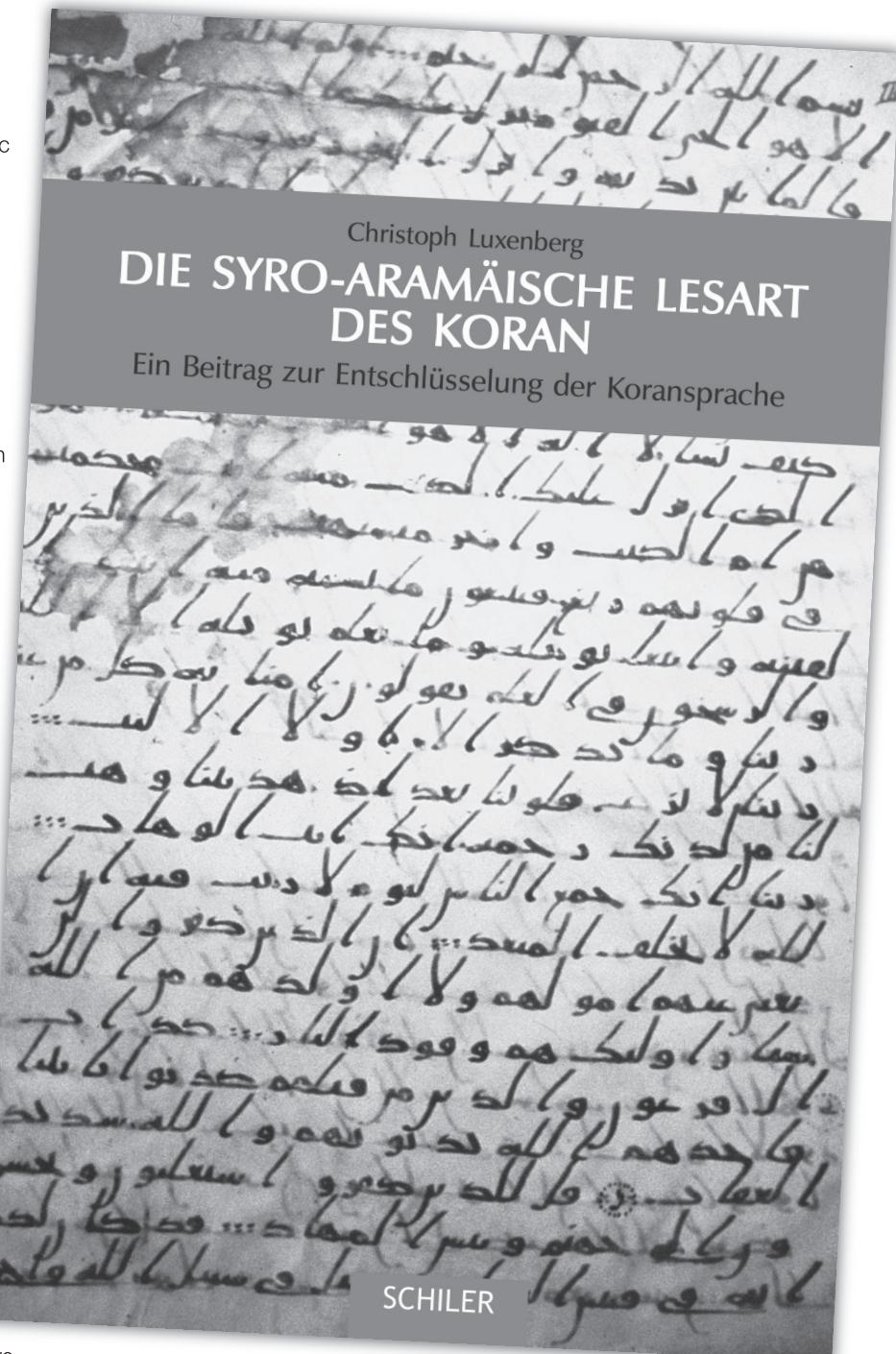
This is why I felt a new type of reading of the Koran was necessary: In both east and west the Koran had only been read via the subsequent 'Arabic', the 'classic Arabic' only normalised around the end of the eighth century, and how it developed from then on.

**What exactly is your method of reading?
How did you proceed?**

My method has so many aspects (of a orthographical, morphological, lexical, phraseological, idiomatic and syntactic nature) that some Arabic scholars have called it a 'milky way'. This is of course an exaggeration. Certain factors have to be constantly considered.

Firstly, there are the problems with early Arabic scripture, which was so defective it can be described as a kind of 'shorthand'. This scripture consisted of 15 characters, which were meant to indicate the 28 consonants of today's Arabic alphabet. More specifically: of

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these 15 characters, only six were unambiguous, while nine characters were supposed to represent the remaining 22 consonants. The early Koran hand writings were carried out with this inadequate writing system; these can still be viewed today. To remedy this deficiency, Arabic philologists later developed a point system called 'diacritical points', to determine the 28 consonants of the Arabic alphabet. Furthermore, there were the alphabet's missing short vowels (a, u, i), which are also usually omitted in modern Arabic writing,

and which a native Arabic speaker can figure out relatively easily. Therefore these constitute the smallest problem. When defining the points which are supposed to distinguish the consonants from each other, Arabic Koran commentators made some considerable reading mistakes, as they read the Koran according to their established 'Arabic' understanding. This is how the Koran's many 'dark passages' came about, passages which Koran commentators from East and West could not understand. To 'decode'

these obscure points I take the following step-by-step approach:

- First of all I look at the different explanations that Arabic commentators provided about 'dark passages' in the comprehensive Koran commentary by Tabari. In some instances, one of the commentators has correctly 'guessed' the meaning in line with the context. In such instances, using philological arguments, I explain why their guess is right.

- If this is not the case, I consult the encyclopaedic Arabic dictionary *Lisân al-'Arab* from the 13th century. At times the *Lisân* offers an appropriate meaning correctly, mostly from the Aramaic period.

- If this search fails to deliver results, I try to achieve a meaningful 'Arabic' reading by changing the diacritical points.

- If this is impossible, the next step is to achieve a meaningful 'Aramaic' reading by changing the points.

- If the 'obscure' Arabic expression still makes no sense in the context of the Koran, the last step is to try to 'crack' the meaning by back-translating into Syro-Aramaic and using the semantics of the lexically corresponding Aramaic expression.

This is the step that occurs most. It is difficult for Arabic scholars, as it requires proficiency not only in Arabic, but also in Aramaic. Therefore, there should be synchronous reading of the Koran. If this does not happen, an appropriate understanding of the Koran's language is impossible.

How would you describe the reactions to your book after the German and now the English versions were released?

The surprise effect among expert circles was to be expected. However, you have to differentiate between Arabic and Islamic scholars and Semitists. The latter were (and are) enthusiastic, the former sceptical. Scepticism here is a euphemism for incompetence, as a reputable expert (Patricia Crone, Princeton) remarked during an Orientalism conference: 'The trouble with Luxenberg is that there are very few people who are able to review his work.'

Up until now, there have not been too many reactions to the English version of my book. This is mainly

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because the English edition was released by my publisher in Berlin, and is not very well known in the English-speaking world. This could, however, change.

Did you expect so much attention from the mass media? How do you handle it?

I expected some, but not how it turned out after the effects of 9/11. Some have accused me of being an accomplice in the American anti-Islamic campaign in the 'clash of civilisations'. My explanation of the presumed '*huris*' or 'heavenly virgins', the cause for young people blowing themselves up, in Syro-Aramaic is 'white grapes'; this was picked up by the media and created a worldwide furore. This accusation is contradicted by the fact that my book had already been published in July 2000 in Berlin.

How I handle it: in a relaxed manner, especially as it affects my pseudonym rather than my person. What I am trying to say is that the focus here is not the person but the subject matter.

Why did you find it necessary to use a pseudonym?

From a scientific and linguistic point of view, a pseudonym cannot be justified. It would not even have occurred to me, had a Muslim friend not warned me not to be naive and regard all Muslims as intellectuals. He warned me not to underestimate Islamic fundamentalists and their unpredictable reactions. They would not necessarily wait for a fatwa, but could act on their own incentive. The pseudonym can therefore be described as a 'prophylactic' precaution.

Can you briefly describe your personal background? Why the interest in translating the Koran?

As a Semitist (with the focus on Arabic and Aramaic), the Koran for me

is primarily a rich source in a Semitic and linguistic sense. For me, the fact that the analysis of this language has uncovered a considerable amount of misunderstandings and misreading of the Koran's language comes second.

Are you currently working on any other projects about religious texts?

For centuries, generations have studied the Koran, without being able to contribute to a better understanding of its language. You can imagine that the Koran is more than a life's work. By now I have made many more discoveries in the Koran, which are awaiting publication. I will need some more time for that. If only marginally, my work also touches on biblical misunderstandings. These also exist – but not to such an extent as in the Koran, by far.

What is your view regarding 'the translation of religious texts' and generally on the role of the translator?

Generally speaking, only someone involved with translation will be aware of the difficulties associated with it. The challenges of translating religious texts are more serious, as they can affect the faith and intimate beliefs of many people. These translations can also be the focus of religious and theological controversy, as was the case with the Christian doctrine of the 'Trinity', for example. This was translated into Latin as 'person', from the Greek 'prosopon'; this is better understood in Christian Aramaic as 'aspect', therefore: 'three aspects' of one and the same God = of the 'Triune God'.

The Islamic controversy against Christianity turned this concept into simply 'three Gods'; an idea already misinterpreted in the Koran. The translator has the very important responsibility of conveying the appropriate idea from the source language to the target language. This often requires an excellent command of both languages with all their nuances. Translators with such a command are hard to find. Therefore it is right to describe translation as an 'art'. In a cultural and historical-linguistic sense, the problems with translation are well known through the enculturation phenomena.