
The Translation of Sacred Texts: A Comparative Analysis of English-Arabic Practices (Theory and Practice)

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ABSTRACT: Translating sacred texts is far more complicated than transferring words from one language into another. When the source and target languages also belong to different cultural and religious traditions, the task becomes even more demanding. This paper examines the theoretical and practical difficulties involved in translating sacred texts between English and Arabic, focusing particularly on the Quran and the Bible. It draws on translation theory, linguistic analysis, and religious studies to consider how translators deal with doctrinal meaning, cultural context, rhetorical form, and linguistic nuance. The discussion also addresses the ethical and ideological pressures that can influence translation decisions. Although no translation can reproduce every feature of a sacred original, a careful combination of linguistic fidelity, contextual explanation, and sensitivity to religious meaning can provide readers with a more reliable representation of the source text.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sacred texts occupy a distinctive position within the cultures and religious traditions that preserve them. They provide religious guidance and moral instruction, but they also influence language, literature, social values, and collective memory. Translating these texts from Arabic into English, or from English into Arabic, therefore involves much more than finding appropriate equivalents for individual words. The translator must also consider theological meaning, historical context, rhetorical style, and the emotional or spiritual significance attached to the original.

The problem becomes particularly clear when examining the Quran and the Bible. Both have generated extensive translation traditions, yet the two scriptures present different linguistic and theological challenges. The Quran is regarded in Islam as the revealed word of God in Arabic, while the Bible consists of texts written in several historical languages and transmitted through a long textual and translation history. These differences inevitably affect how translators approach questions of accuracy, interpretation, and readability.

This study examines the theoretical principles and practical methods used in English-Arabic translation of sacred texts, with the Quran and the Bible serving as principal case studies. It addresses three central questions: What linguistic, theological, and cultural difficulties do translators encounter? Which strategies can help them deal with those difficulties? And how do religious, institutional, and ideological expectations affect the translation process?

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TRANSLATION

The translation of sacred literature raises some of the oldest questions in translation studies. Can every meaning be transferred from one language to another? What counts as equivalence? Should the translator remain as close as possible to the wording of the original, or should the translation prioritize the way a contemporary reader understands the message?

Eugene Nida (1964) addressed some of these questions through his distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence. Formal equivalence gives greater attention to the linguistic form and structure of the source text, whereas dynamic equivalence focuses more strongly on producing a comparable response in the target audience. Both approaches have implications for religious translation. A highly literal translation may preserve important elements of the source wording, yet it can sound unnatural or obscure in the target language. A freer translation may be easier to understand, but it can introduce interpretations that were less explicit in the original.

Sacred texts add another layer to this problem. Some aspects of religious language resist complete translation because their meaning depends on historical associations, theological traditions, or rhetorical features that do not have exact counterparts in another language. In Islamic scholarship, for instance, the concept of the Quran's linguistic inimitability, or '*Ijaz al-Quran*', plays an important role in discussions of translation. From this perspective, a translation can communicate the meaning of the Quran, but it cannot reproduce the Arabic revelation itself in every linguistic and rhetorical respect.

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Comparable difficulties appear in biblical translation. Biblical Hebrew and Koine Greek contain idioms, metaphors, grammatical structures, and theological expressions that do not always correspond neatly with contemporary English or Arabic. Translators must consequently make choices between competing possibilities rather than simply identify one universally correct equivalent. The tension between literal fidelity and interpretive clarity lies at the heart of religious translation. Translation in this context is not merely a linguistic operation. It also involves interpretation: the translator mediates between a historical source text and readers who may belong to a different linguistic and cultural environment (Venuti, 2008).

3. LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES

Lexical Gaps

One of the most persistent difficulties is the absence of exact lexical equivalents. Religious vocabulary often carries several layers of meaning at once, and a single target-language word may capture only part of that semantic range.

The Arabic term *taqwa*, for example, is frequently translated as “piety,” “God-consciousness,” or “fear of God.” Each expression conveys something important, but none fully encompasses the associations that *taqwa* has acquired within Islamic discourse. The same problem occurs in the opposite direction. Terms such as “grace” and “atonement” carry specific theological meanings in Christian contexts, and selecting suitable Arabic equivalents requires attention to established religious terminology as well as ordinary language.

Syntax and Structure

The grammatical systems of Arabic and English differ considerably. Arabic morphology allows words to develop through root-and-pattern structures, while its relatively flexible syntax can support different arrangements for emphasis, rhythm, and rhetorical effect. English, by contrast, generally depends more heavily on fixed word order and auxiliary constructions.

These differences create practical problems for translators. A structure that sounds powerful or elegant in Arabic may appear awkward if transferred too literally into English. At the same time, reshaping it for natural English can remove a rhetorical feature that matters to the original. The translator therefore has to decide which elements deserve priority: grammatical form, semantic precision, rhythm, emphasis, or overall readability.

Cultural References

Sacred texts frequently contain references to people, places, customs, historical events, and social practices that belonged to particular cultural settings. Modern readers may not immediately recognize the significance of such references.

A translator who provides too little context may leave readers confused. Yet excessive explanation can interrupt the text or encourage an interpretation that goes beyond what the source actually says. The challenge is to provide enough cultural information for understanding without allowing the translation to distort or overinterpret the original.

4. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

Domestication and Foreignization

Lawrence Venuti (1995) describes two broad approaches to translation as domestication and foreignization. Domestication makes the target text more familiar to its intended readers by adapting expressions to their cultural expectations. Foreignization, on the other hand, retains noticeable elements of the source culture and reminds readers that they are encountering a text originating in a different linguistic and historical environment.

Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages in sacred-text translation. Foreignization can protect culturally and theologically significant features of the original, but it may also make the text difficult for readers who lack background knowledge. Domestication can improve accessibility, yet excessive adaptation may make an ancient religious text sound as though it originated within the target culture.

For sacred texts, translators often need a middle position. Some foreign elements should remain visible because they carry historical or theological significance, while other expressions may require adjustment so that the target audience can understand them.

Annotation and Commentary

Notes, glossaries, and commentaries provide another way of dealing with words and concepts that cannot be adequately represented by a single equivalent. Rather than forcing all of the meaning into the translated sentence, the translator can preserve a relatively close rendering and then explain the term separately.

English translations of the Quran, for example, may include explanatory notes concerning terms such as *rahma* (mercy) or *jihad* (struggle). Such notes can give readers additional context and draw attention to meanings that would otherwise disappear during translation.

This strategy is particularly useful when a term has a broad semantic range or when different interpretations exist within the relevant religious tradition. It also allows the main translation to remain relatively concise.

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Form-Based Approaches

Recent scholarship, including the work of Abuarrah and Issa (2024), has proposed approaches such as “translation by evidence,” which places considerable emphasis on reproducing observable linguistic and rhetorical features of the source text. Instead of focusing exclusively on general meaning, this method gives attention to the evidence provided by the original form, including patterns of wording and rhetorical organization.

Such an approach may be especially valuable when translating texts whose structure contributes substantially to their meaning. The Quran presents a notable example because its rhetorical organization, repetition, sound patterns, and shifts in expression can contribute to the force of particular passages. A translation that focuses only on basic semantic content risks overlooking these dimensions.

5. CASE STUDIES

The Quran in English

The Quran has been translated into English by numerous scholars and translators, producing versions that differ considerably in vocabulary, rhythm, explanatory material, and degree of literalness. The translation associated with Abdullah Yusuf Ali is known for its literary and sometimes elaborate style, whereas Saheeh International generally uses more direct contemporary English.

These differences reflect the difficulty of translating a text that combines theological statements, legal guidance, narratives, imagery, exhortation, and highly developed rhetorical patterns. Translators must communicate the meaning of individual passages while also considering how their choices affect the wider theological interpretation of the text.

The task is particularly sensitive because Muslims traditionally distinguish between the Quran in its Arabic form and translations that communicate its meanings in other languages. For this reason, an English rendering cannot simply be treated as linguistically equivalent to the Arabic original.

The Bible in Arabic

The Arabic Bible has a long translation history, with Arabic versions appearing over many centuries. Among the best-known modern examples is the Van Dyke translation, published in the nineteenth century. Later translations have adopted different approaches, with some placing greater emphasis on formal correspondence and others prioritizing accessibility and contemporary language.

Arabic biblical translation also involves particular theological challenges. Concepts associated with the Trinity, Christology, salvation, and other elements of Christian doctrine must be expressed through terminology that is understandable within an Arabic-speaking environment. This becomes especially important because Arabic is also the language of Islamic theological discourse, where certain religious terms may carry established meanings that differ from their Christian usage.

Consequently, translators cannot always rely on familiar Arabic religious vocabulary. They must consider how a particular term will be interpreted by readers who may encounter it within a cultural environment shaped by both Christian and Islamic traditions.

6. ETHICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Translator's Faith and Bias

A translator inevitably brings personal assumptions and interpretive habits to the translation process. This does not mean that every translator intentionally changes the meaning of a sacred text. More often, bias can appear indirectly through decisions about word choice, emphasis, explanatory notes, or the treatment of ambiguous passages.

Religious background can therefore influence translation. A translator working from within one faith tradition may understand particular theological concepts differently from a translator belonging to another tradition. For example, a Muslim translator of the Bible and a Christian translator of the Quran may approach passages concerning Jesus, prophecy, revelation, or scripture with different assumptions.

Recognizing this possibility does not make translation impossible. Instead, it highlights the importance of transparency, scholarly review, and awareness of interpretive choices.

Political and Institutional Pressure

Translation can also take place within institutional or political environments that influence what translators are permitted or encouraged to publish. Religious organizations, governments, publishers, and other institutions may have expectations concerning terminology and interpretation.

In some circumstances, these pressures can result in changes designed to support a particular ideological position. Critics sometimes describe such practices as “translation as manipulation,” especially when translators systematically reshape a text to support political or theological objectives.

For this reason, the translator's responsibility extends beyond linguistic competence. Ethical translation requires an awareness of the power that translation gives to those who select, frame, and explain religious language for new audiences.

7. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Religious Education

Translations of sacred texts play an important role in schools, mosques, churches, universities, and interfaith programs. For readers who cannot access the source language, the translation may become their principal means of engaging with the text.

The quality of that translation therefore matters. A clear and carefully researched version can help readers understand unfamiliar concepts and encourage meaningful dialogue between religious communities. An inaccurate or poorly contextualized version, however, can produce misunderstandings that extend beyond individual vocabulary choices and affect the interpretation of entire passages.

Technology and AI Translation

Digital translation tools have changed the way people approach multilingual texts. Services such as Google Translate and AI-based systems such as ChatGPT can identify possible equivalents, compare wording across languages, and assist researchers with preliminary lexical analysis.

Their usefulness has limits, particularly with sacred texts. Automated systems can recognize linguistic patterns, but they do not possess religious authority, personal faith, or complete knowledge of the historical traditions surrounding a particular passage. A machine may also select an apparently reasonable equivalent while missing a theological implication that an experienced human translator would immediately recognize.

For these reasons, AI and machine translation are better viewed as supporting tools rather than substitutes for specialist translators. They can assist comparative research and identify patterns, but human scholarly judgment remains essential when theological precision is at stake.

8. CONCLUSION

Translating sacred texts between English and Arabic presents a combination of linguistic, cultural, theological, and ethical difficulties. The problem is not simply that the two languages use different vocabulary and grammatical structures. Sacred language carries historical associations, doctrinal meanings, rhetorical patterns, and emotional significance that cannot always move neatly from one linguistic system into another.

Translation theories based on equivalence remain useful, while approaches that pay attention to textual form and contextual annotation can address problems that purely literal methods leave unresolved. Still, no translation can reproduce every dimension of a sacred source text. Something may be lost in wording, rhythm, cultural association, or rhetorical force, even when the translator works with considerable care.

The most responsible approach is therefore neither unrestricted literalism nor complete adaptation. Translators need to preserve the central meaning and significant features of the source while giving readers enough linguistic and cultural information to understand what they are reading. That requires technical skill, theological awareness, intellectual honesty, and a willingness to acknowledge uncertainty when an exact equivalent does not exist.

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