

Comparative Analysis of the Theological and Literary Foundations of English Translations of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the theological and literary foundations underlying selected English translations of the Quran, with particular reference to selected verses from *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*. Adopting a descriptive-analytical and comparative methodology, the study examines how translators' theological commitments, especially Sunni and Shi'ite exegetical orientations, and their literary competence influence lexical selection, grammatical construction, and semantic precision. Drawing on authoritative Arabic lexicons, classical Sunni and Shi'ite *tafsīrs*, and linguistic analysis, the paper investigates the translation of key Quranic expressions such as *walī*, *wa-hum rāki'ūn*, *yuqīmūna al-ṣalāh*, and *munkar*. The findings demonstrate that Quranic translation functions as a condensed form of exegesis, wherein inadequate attention to theological premises or Arabic literary features may result in semantic reduction or doctrinal distortion. The study concludes that faithful Quran translation requires an integrated approach combining theological rigor, exegetical awareness, and literary precision in both source and target languages.

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Introduction

The Quran is distinguished by three constitutive attributes that reinforce its sanctity and set it apart from other revealed scriptures. First, every utterance and word originates directly from God, rendering its recitation an act of pure devotion and a means of attaining divine proximity. Second, it functions as a universal instrument of guidance, orienting all humanity exclusively toward the straight path. Third, it stands as the perpetual miracle of Islam, continuously substantiating the authenticity of the Prophet's mission (Ma'rifat 2003, pp. 185-186). Consequently, Quranic translation cannot be approached as a purely technical or neutral act, but rather as a deeply hermeneutical process shaped by the translator's doctrinal orientation, exegetical commitments, and literary sensibilities.

A faithful translation of the Quran presupposes a comprehensive command of multiple branches of Arabic and Islamic sciences, including lexicography, grammar, rhetoric (*balāghah*), Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and theology (*'aqīdah*). Translators must, therefore, adopt clear and internally consistent positions with regard to these foundations in order to avoid ambiguity, inconsistency, or doctrinal distortion. Where such foundations are insufficiently articulated or inadequately understood, translations often exhibit weaknesses in precision, coherence, or fidelity to the source text.

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of the theological and literary features of selected English translations of verses from *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, a sūra notable for its dense theological content. By focusing on lexical choices, grammatical constructions, the study seeks to uncover how translators' underlying theological assumptions and literary approaches influence their renderings of the Quranic text.

The aim of this research is to highlight the complexities and sensitivities inherent in translating the Quran and to demonstrate how theological and literary considerations play a decisive role in shaping English renderings. Through this analysis, the study aspires to contribute to ongoing discussions in Quranic translation studies by emphasizing the necessity of scholarly rigor, methodological consistency, and deep awareness of the multilayered nature of the Quranic text.

Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarly literature—including articles, books, and academic theses—has been devoted to the comparative study of Quranic translations. Among these works, the following studies are particularly relevant to the focus and scope of the present research:

Behrūz Furūtan's *A Study of the Lexicons and Structures in the English Translations of the Quran* (2019) examines theoretical issues of Qur'ānic translation, analyzes lexical and syntactic challenges across seven English translations, and proposes an integrated framework to address problematic terms and complex grammatical constructions.

The article, "Critique and Evaluation of English Translations of the Holy Quran from *Sūrat al-Insān*" (2009) by Maḥmūd Vā'izī, published in the *Religious Research Journal* [in Persian], conducts a comparative analysis of four translations by Pickthall, Arberry, Shakir, and Yusuf Ali, highlighting their respective strengths and limitations.

The article "A Comparative Study of the Translations of the Holy Quran by Shakir and Arberry" (2002) by Dāriyūsh Nizhād-Anṣārī, published in the *Research Journal of Humanities* at Isfahan University [in Persian], identifies both translations as having shortcomings and failing to provide an adequate rendering.

Muzaffar Iqbal's (2000) article, "Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad: Two Approaches to the English Translation of the Quran," emphasizes the role of translators' socio-cultural backgrounds while prioritizing a detailed analysis of vocabulary and diction in the works of Yusuf Ali and Asad. The study also contrasts their stylistic strategies and highlights select grammatical issues.

What distinguishes this research is its unified, comprehensive comparison of English Quran translations by a diverse range of Muslim and non-Muslim translators, an approach not previously undertaken in a single study. Beyond general evaluation, it closely examines theological and literary dimensions, assessing how their application affects readability, naturalness, and semantic fidelity, or introduces doctrinal bias. Drawing on authoritative Arabic lexicons, morphology, syntax, and both Shi'i and Sunni exegeses, the study systematically identifies each translation's strengths and weaknesses while highlighting the distinctive merits of the selected translation.

Concepts

Mabānī (Foundations)

The root *b-n-y* denotes a single fundamental meaning, namely the construction of a thing by joining its parts together. One says: *banaytu al-binā'a* — “I constructed the building” (Ibn Fāris 1983, 1:302). *Al-binā'* is a noun denoting that which is built, a constructed structure (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 147). The single fundamental meaning in this root is the joining of parts and materials to one another so that a structure may come into being in a particular form, whether material or spiritual (Muṣṭafawī 2020, 1:371).

1. Theological Foundations of Translation

The Quran is a divine discourse grounded in wisdom, and reason constitutes one of its legitimate sources of exegesis. Both the Quran and reason function as divine proofs (*hujaj*) for humanity: the Quran's authority (*hujjiyyah*) is established through its miraculousness (*i'jāz*), whereas the authority of reason is intrinsic—an inference supported by relevant Quranic verses and hadiths. Accordingly, Quranic interpretation must not contradict demonstrative rational arguments; rather, rational proof serves as a hermeneutical guide to verse meaning. In the domain of beliefs (*'aqā'id*), propositions established by conclusive rational demonstration or grounded in the definitive verses of the Quran and the Sunnah constitute theological premises that exegesis must not contravene, lest it result in doctrinal deviation. Given that translation is, in effect, a concise form of exegesis, these theological foundations must likewise be observed in translation (Riḍā'ī Iṣfahānī 2006, pp. 180-181).

It is evident that a Muslim translator cannot, and must not, abandon or adopt a neutral stance toward the established doctrinal tenets of their sect. The Quran must be rendered in strict conformity with these accepted theological principles; otherwise, the reader risks misguidance and potential adherence to erroneous beliefs. Consequently, a Shi'ī translator of the Quran is obligated to adhere to the theological foundations of Shi'ism (Najjār 2002, 50).

Although adherence to established theological foundations in translation is essential to prevent doctrinal deviations, to ensure scholarly integrity in Quran translation, four principles must be rigorously observed: (1) any theological or denominational foundation employed must be firmly established through compelling transmitted and rational proofs, thereby legitimizing its use as a contextual indicator for interpreting and rendering the verse; (2) the influence of such foundations must be restricted to the absolute minimum, invoked only where their absence would engender intellectual or doctrinal deviation; (3) whenever these foundations are incorporated, they must be explicitly demarcated, typically through parentheses, to distinguish them from the Quranic text and prevent conflation; and (4) the translator's personal theological, denominational, or exegetical opinions must exert no influence, especially when they do not represent indispensable tenets of the authentic faith. Failure to adhere to these principles risks transforming the translation into a vehicle for the translator's subjective views rather than a faithful conveyance of the divine text (Riḍā'ī Iṣfahānī 2006, 189).

Sunni and Shi'ite exegetes diverge in their interpretations of *wilāyah* in the verse 55 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*. For instance, Bayḍāwī interprets the singular form of “*waliyyukum*” as an admonition that “guardianship” (*wilāyah*) essentially belongs to God, extending derivatively to the Prophet (s) and the believers; he construes “*wa-hum rāki'ūn*” (وَهُمْ رَكْعُونَ) as denoting humility in prayer and *zakāt*-giving, acknowledges the occasion of revelation concerning Imam Ali (a), yet rejects “*walī*” (guardian) as implying authority over affairs or entitlement to disposition therein, viewing the plural form as exhortative to emulate Ali's act (Bayḍāwī 1997, 2:132). In contrast, 'Allāmah Ṭabātabā'ī argues that, given the preceding verses prohibiting friendship with disbelievers, Jews, and Christians, the verse cannot connote “support” (*nuṣrah*); rather, “*walī*” aligns contextually with guardianship or affection. Moreover, numerous Shi'ite and Sunni narrations on the occasion of revelation—identifying Ali (a) as the one who donated his ring during prayer—preclude metaphorical readings of “*rāki'ūn*” as mere “submission to God” (Ṭabātabā'ī 1996, 6:6-9). The

verse's use of “*innamā* اِنَّمَا” indicates exclusivity. The concept of *wilāyah*, whether construed as support or friendship, is not confined to those who perform prayer and give *zakāt* while bowing down; rather, it encompasses all believers. Thus, considering the occasion of revelation and the verse's restrictive implication, *wilāyah* here denotes “material and spiritual guardianship, authority, and leadership”—especially as it is positioned coextensively with divine and prophetic guardianship in a single syntactic construction—rendering the verse a definitive Quranic proof-text (*naṣṣ*) for Ali's (a) *wilāyah* and imamate (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 4:423-424).

The occasion of revelation (*sha'n al-nuzūl*) for this verse, according to numerous Shi'ite and Sunni exegeses, pertains specifically to Amīr al-Mu'minīn 'Alī (a), who donated his ring to a beggar while in the state of bowing down (*rukū'*) during prayer.¹ This narration is transmitted by authorities including Ibn 'Abbās, 'Ammār Yāsir, 'Abdullāh ibn Salām, Salamah ibn Kuhayl, Anas ibn Mālik, 'Utbah ibn Ḥakīm, 'Abdullāh Ubay, 'Abdullāh ibn Ghālib, Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh al-Anṣārī, and Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī. The work *Ghāyat al-Marām* cites 24 hadiths on this matter from Sunni chains and 19 from Shi'ite chains. Furthermore, this tradition appears in over thirty prominent works, all drawn exclusively from Sunni sources (Makārim Shīrāzī 1995, 4:424-425). Consequently, in Shi'ite Quranic exegeses, *walī* in this verse denotes material and spiritual guardianship which was divinely bestowed upon Imam 'Alī (a).

Such theological divergences are also manifest in the translations produced by certain Shi'ite and Sunni translators. For instance, verse 55 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, widely known among Shi'ites as the “*Āyat al-Wilāyah*” (Verse of Guardianship) is translated by some Shi'i and Sunni translators as follows:

﴿إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ﴾

(المائدة/٥٥)

¹. See Ṭabarī 1412AH, 6:186; Ḥaskānī 1411AH, 1:209; Zamakhsharī 1407AH, 1:649; Suyūṭī 1404AH, 2:293; Fakhr al-Rāzī 1420AH, 12:383; Ālūsī 1415AH, 3:334; Qummī 1363Sh, 1:170; Ṭūsī 1371Sh, 3:559; Ṭabrisī 1372Sh, 3:326; 'Arūsī Ḥuwayzī 1415AH, vol. 1:643; Baḥrānī 1416AH, 2:317; Fayḍ Kāshānī 1415AH, 2:44; Qummī Mashhadī 1368Sh, 4:145; et al.

Sale: Verily your protector is God, and his apostle, and those who believe, who observe the stated times of prayer, and give alms, and who bow down to worship.

Arberry: Your friend is only God, and His Messenger, and the believers who perform the prayer and pay the alms, and bow them down.

Yusuf Ali: Your (real) friends are (No less than) God, His Apostle, and the (Fellowship Of; Believers,-those who Establish regular prayers And regular charity, And they bow Down humbly (in worship).

Muhammad Asad: Behold, your only helper shall be God, and His Apostle, and those who have attained to faith – those that are constant in prayer, and render the purifying dues, and bow down [before God].

Pickthal: Your guardian can be only Allah; and His messenger and those who believe, who establish worship and pay the poor due, and bow down (in prayer).

Mustafa Khattab: Your only guardians are Allah, His Messenger, and fellow believers—who establish prayer and pay alms-tax with humility

Qarai: Your guardian is only Allah, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakat while bowing down

George Sale translates the adverb of manner occurring as a nominal sentence “*wa-hum rāki ‘ūn* وهم ركعون”—which denotes the concurrent performance of *zakāt*-giving while bowing down—as “and who bow down to worship.” This rendition fails to preserve the adverbial function of the nominal clause (*jumlah ḥālīyyah*), introduces the extraneous term “worship” absent from the Quranic text, and diverges from the verse’s established occasion of revelation. As Wright states, the particle “*wa* وَ” in Arabic, like its equivalents in the other Semitic languages, often serves to connect two clauses, the second of which describes the state or condition either of the subject or one of the complements of the first clause, or else of a new subject. This takes place in such a way that sometimes the clause descriptive of the state is nominal, such as (قام زيدٌ) “Zayd rose up weeping” (Wright 1896, 2:330). The adverbial accusative of state or condition (*ḥāl* حال) shows the state of the agent or the object at the time of the action of the verb, such as, (سافرت و الناس نيامٌ) “I journeyed while the men were sleeping” (see Sterling 1904, pp. 193-195).

Pickthall renders the phrase “*wa-hum rāki ‘ūn* وهم ركعون” as “and bow down (in prayer),” which fails to convey the adverbial function of the nominal clause and, like Arberry’s translation, makes no reference to the verse’s occasion of revelation—namely, Imam ‘Alī’s (a) donation of his ring to a beggar while in *rukū’*. In contrast, Mustafa Khattab departs from the verse’s apparent meaning and occasion of revelation to render its inferred implication in accordance with the Sunni theological perspective—namely, humility—translating “*wa-hum rāki ‘ūn* وهم ركعون” as “and pay alms-tax with humility.” However, Qarai attends to both the (*ḥāl* حال) construction and the occasion of revelation, translating “*wa-hum rāki ‘ūn* وهم ركعون” as “while bowing down,” accurately capturing the sense of “in the state of bowing down.”

Regarding the term “*walī* ولي” in the aforementioned verse, the most appropriate English equivalent—considering both Shi‘ite and Sunni narrations on the occasion of revelation and the Shi‘ite theological perspective—is “guardian,” which signifies a keeper, protector, defender, and one entrusted with the care and custody of a person or thing (OED 1989, 6:917). Arberry and Yusuf Ali render “*walī*” as “friend,” a term that conveys mere affection and fails to capture the comprehensive connotation of guardianship—encompassing both spiritual and material authority—evident in the verse’s occasion of revelation and Shi‘ite exegesis. Muhammad Asad employs “helper,” which is not consistent with the occasion of revelation and the Shi‘ite theological framework. Overall, translators’ theological orientations and exegetical commitments are manifest in their lexical choices. Inattention to or unfamiliarity with authentic Shi‘ite perspectives may lead to the inadvertent replication of Sunni interpretations, thereby producing renderings incompatible with Shi‘ite doctrine or the occasion of the revelation or the apparent meaning of the verse. Consequently, a competent Quran translator must possess thorough familiarity with the theological and doctrinal positions of both Sunni and Shi‘ite schools to ensure a balanced and accurate translation.

Analysis

Theological perspectives—particularly on pivotal doctrines such as the divine guardianship (*wilāyah*) of the Infallible Imams (a) and related

matters—must be accurately reflected in authentic Quran translation. Where necessary, translators may insert brief clarifications within parentheses to illuminate the intended meaning for the reader; however, such additions must remain concise to preserve the fluency, diction, semantic precision, and literary qualities of the Quran in English as closely as possible. When further elaboration is required, translators may employ footnotes to explicate essential doctrinal points, ensuring reader comprehension. Nevertheless, they must scrupulously avoid injecting personal bias or subjective opinions, confining themselves exclusively to established and consensually recognized doctrinal positions.

2. Literary Foundations of Translation

Beyond an abundant aesthetic sensibility for apprehending the rhetorical eloquence of the Quran, translators must possess mastery of Arabic literature and its expressive modalities, coupled with acute linguistic discernment in uncovering lexical nuances through rigorous examination of lexicographical sources and Quranic contextual usages—an ensemble of competencies that is indispensable. Complementing this proficiency in the Quranic idiom, expertise in the grammar, rhetorical fluency, and idiomatic repertoire of the target language emerges as an equally critical and foundational asset, equipping the translator to navigate the intricate demands of rendering the sacred text with precision and fidelity (Naqīpūrfar 2002, 352).

2.1. Lexical Selection

In the context of Quran translation, “literature” is construed in its broadest sense, encompassing morphology, syntax, lexicology, rhetoric, and eloquence. A cardinal principle is that the Quran constitutes the primary and authoritative source, while Arabic literary disciplines remain derivative and subordinate: as the earliest and most reliable regulated text in Arabic, it serves as the ultimate criterion for linguistic correctness and grammatical validity, rather than being judged by subsequently formulated rules. Consequently, any literary norm incompatible with Quranic usage is treated as exceptional, precluding the attribution of linguistic infelicity to the sacred text (Riḍā’ī Iṣfahānī 2006, 156).

The divergent translations of the phrase, “الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ” in verse 55 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, underscore the critical role of lexical precision in preserving Quranic semantic nuance and contextual fidelity for the target readership.

﴿إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ﴾

(المائدة/٥٥)

Sale: Verily your protector is God, and his apostle, and those who believe, who observe the stated times of prayer, and give alms, and who bow down to worship.

Arberry: Your friend is only God, and His Messenger, and the believers who perform the prayer and pay the alms, and bow them down.

Pickthal: Your guardian can be only Allah; and His messenger and those who believe, who establish worship and pay the poor due, and bow down (in prayer).

Qarai: Your guardian is only Allah, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakat while bowing down.

George Sale translates “الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ” as “who observe the stated times of prayer,” implying those who adhere to the prescribed times of prayer. This rendition diverges from the verse’s intended meaning. In contrast, Qarai translates it as “who maintain the prayer,” which appears to be the most accurate equivalent. The term “*iqāmah* إقامة” denotes both the establishment of something and its sustained continuation (Qarashī 1991, 6:48). Rāghib Iṣfahānī similarly interprets “الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ” as the ongoing performance and preservation of prayer (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 690). Etymologically, “maintain” derives from Latin “*manu*: (hand) + *tenere*: (hold)” and signifies habitual execution of an action, as well as its continuation and safeguarding (OED 1989, 9:223). Thus, Qarai’s translation most faithfully conveys the Arabic term’s semantic depth to the reader.

Arberry translates “الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ” as “who perform the prayer.” The verb “perform” typically denotes the execution of a useful or difficult task (Longman 2009, 742) and, in this context, implies fulfilling or carrying out the prayer, a rendering that is technically correct yet fails to capture the dimensions of continuity and

preservation inherent in “maintain.” Pickthall renders the phrase as “who establish worship.” While “establish” connotes initiating an activity or institution intended for permanence (Longman 2009, 341), it conveys durability to some extent but does not fully express vigilant preservation of the act. Moreover, “worship” broadly encompasses various devotional acts, including prayer, whereas the Quranic phrase “الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ” specifically designates “*ṣalāt*” (ritual prayer). The translation should therefore retain this specificity rather than generalize to “worship.”

2.1.1. Reference to Authoritative Lexicons and Semantic Distinctions in Source and Target Languages

The consultation of classical Arabic lexicons constitutes a fundamental literary principle in Quran translation, as dictionaries composed closer to the early Islamic era more accurately reflect the linguistic milieu of revelation and the conventional usage of terms. This proximity illuminates etymological roots, enhances semantic fidelity, and clarifies lexical connotations more effectively. Prominent among such works are “*Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur’ān*” by Rāghib Iṣfahānī, “*Maqāyīs al-Lughah*” by Ibn Fāris, and “*Kitāb al-‘Ayn*” by Khalīl ibn Aḥmad, among others (Riḍā’ī Iṣfahānī 2006, 157).

2.1.2. Consideration of Exegetical Insights in Lexical Comprehension

The exegetical insights play a pivotal role in the comprehension of certain Quranic words. A salient example is the term “*walī*” (وَلِيٌّ) in verse 55 of *Sūrat al-Mā’idah*, whose English renderings vary significantly according to Shi’ite and Sunni exegetical traditions. The verse, “... and give the *zakāt* while bowing down” (*Quran* 5:55) is regarded in Shi’ite *tafsīrs* as one of the most explicit textual proofs for the immediate succession of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (a) to the Prophet’s leadership. In *Majma’ al-Bayān*, the argument proceeds as follows: if “*waliyyukum*” (وَلِيَّكُمْ) linguistically denotes one with paramount authority over the community’s affairs and whose obedience is obligatory, and if the referent of “*the faithful*” is established as ‘Alī (a) through the verse’s occasion of revelation, then the text constitutes an unequivocal designation of his imamate. Lexicographical evidence confirms the first

premise, while the restrictive particle “*innamā* إنما” precludes alternative interpretations such as mere “affection” (*al-maḥabbah*) or “religious affinity” (*al-muwālat fi al-dīn*), as such meanings lack exclusivity among believers. Thus, the verse establishes a unique, authoritative guardianship that cannot be shared equally among all faithful (Ṭabarsī 1993, 3:326).

Bayḍāwī interprets the singular form of “*waliyyukum*” as an admonition that “guardianship” (*wilāyah*) essentially belongs to God, extending derivatively to the Prophet (s) and the believers; he construes “*wa-hum rāki ‘ūn* وهم ركعون” as denoting humility in prayer and *zakāt*-giving, acknowledges the occasion of revelation concerning Imam Ali (a), yet rejects “*walī*” (guardian) as implying authority over affairs or entitlement to disposition therein, viewing the plural form as exhortative to emulate Ali’s act (Bayḍāwī 1997, 2:132).

Such exegetical differences are reflected in English translations of the Quran. For instance, Arberry and Yusuf Ali translate “*walī*” as “friend,” whereas Qarai employs “guardian,” which is in harmony with Shi‘ite exegetical tradition as the most precise equivalent. In Mustafa Khattab’s rendition, exegetical priority overrides the verse’s apparent meaning of “*wa-hum rāki ‘ūn*” (while bowing down), substituting “with humility” in accordance with a Sunni exegetical emphasis on spiritual disposition rather than the literal act of bowing down.

Analysis

Exegetical insights are an indispensable component of Quranic hermeneutics. Accordingly, a competent translator must either be an exegete or possess comprehensive familiarity with established interpretive traditions pertaining to the verses. Such knowledge is critical, as it frequently resolves lexical ambiguities and informs the selection of the most contextually appropriate equivalents. Nonetheless, the translator must refrain from producing an alternative exegesis; the paramount objective remains the faithful and precise rendition of the Quranic text into the target language while preserving its formal and semantic integrity.

2.1.3. Precision in Equivalence for Foreign Terms in the Target Language

The translator faces inherent limitations in fully conveying the meanings of the source text. The primary challenge arises from the absence in English of semantically equivalent terms for certain Arabic words that are central to the Quranic message, such as *taqwā*, *kufr*, *īmān*, *shirk*, *ḥaqq*, *bāṭil*, *ma'rūf*, *munkar*, *fitnah*, *ghayb*, *sunnah*, *tawbah*, *walā'*, and *ẓulm*. In these instances, the translator must resort to approximations that fail to capture the full semantic scope and richness of the original terms, resulting in a truncated or unbalanced rendition of the communicated message (Qarai, *Translator's preface*, 2005, xv).

Quranic translators have employed a variety of English renderings for “*munkar*” in verse 79 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*, a diversity that underscores the challenge of identifying a single term capable of encapsulating its full semantic range within the Quranic framework. Selected translations of the verse are presented below to illustrate this variation:

﴿كَانُوا لَا يَتَّاهُونَ عَنْ مُنْكَرٍ فَعَلُوهُ لَبِئْسَ مَا كَانُوا يَفْعَلُونَ﴾ (المائدة/٧٩)

Arberry: They forbade not one another any dishonour that they committed surely evil were the things they did.

Pickthall: They restrained not one another from the wickedness they did. Verily evil was that they used to do!

Muhammad Sarwar: They did not prevent each other from committing sins nor would they themselves stay away from them. Evil was what they had done!

Yusuf Ali: Nor did they forbid one another the iniquities which they committed: evil indeed were the deeds which they did.

Shakir: They used not to forbid each other the hateful things (which) they did Certainly evil was that which they did.

Saffarzadeh: They did not forbid each other From evil things which they committed; Surely, evil were the things they did.

Qarai: They would not forbid one another from the wrongs that they committed. Surely, evil is what they had been doing.

The triliteral root “*nūn-kāf-rā'* نكـر” in Arabic, signifies the antithesis of “*ma'rifah* معرفة”—that form of cognizance toward which the heart

inclines with tranquil certitude. Accordingly, the verbs “*nakira al-shay*” and “*ankara-hu*” denote a state wherein the heart rejects the object and the tongue withholds acknowledgment thereof (Ibn Fāris 1983, 5:476). “*Al-Munkar*” refers to any act that sound intellects unequivocally judge to be morally repugnant, or concerning which rational faculties remain ambivalent in their assessment of its reprehensibility or commendability, only for the Sharī‘ah to decisively pronounce its ugliness (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 823).

Certain equivalents proposed for “*munkar* منكر” such as “committing sins,” “the hateful things,” or “the evil things,” are explanatory in nature. In contrast, *munkar* constitutes a single term of broad semantic scope; thus, selecting a single English word that similarly encompasses this breadth is preferable. “Iniquities” is defined as unrighteous acts or doings, encompassing sins and wrongful acts or injuries (OED 1989, 7:975). “Iniquity” refers to the inherent quality of being wicked or sinful, as well as the enactment of immoral conduct. As such, it falls short of capturing the full semantic scope of *munkar*. “Wickedness” is defined as the inherent quality or state of being wicked, encompassing a disposition marked by depravity, iniquity, and immorality. It further denotes specific wicked actions or conduct—manifestations of iniquity as enacted or perpetrated—and, occasionally, extends to wicked speech or statements (OED 1989, 20:311). The term “wickedness” pertains to immoral action or disposition; however, it fails to encompass the full semantic scope of *munkar*, which extends beyond mere wickedness to include that which contravenes established norms or standard conduct. In such cases, the intellect may lack a definitive judgment, necessitating recourse to the shariah to determine its precise moral quality. “Dishonour” is the antithesis of honor, involving the withholding of due esteem, respect, or reverence, resulting in a state of shame, disgrace, or ignominy. It includes specific acts of inflicted disgrace—such as indignities or insults—and encompasses any cause or source of shame (OED 1989, 4:781). The term “dishonor” primarily pertains to disgrace manifesting in an individual’s personality or conduct; however, it does not fully capture the semantic breadth of “*munkar*.”

“Wrong” denotes that which is morally unjust, inequitable, aberrant, or improper—the antithesis of right and justice, and the negation of equity, goodness, or rectitude. It further signifies deviation from fact, accuracy, or established standards, manifesting as incorrectness or error. In conduct, “wrong” encompasses unjust action, the infliction or endurance of harm, or the inequitable treatment of others, thereby constituting injustice or unfairness (OED 1989, 20:649). The English term “wrong”, which encompasses any deviation from what is right and standard—whether in ethics or conduct—emerges as the most suitable equivalent for “*munkar* منكر”. The latter, as the antithesis of “*ma’rūf*” (the recognized good), denotes any action that sound reason deems reprehensible or the divine legislation explicitly condemns for its moral ugliness, and this term reflects this meaning better than other equivalents.

2.2. Grammatical Considerations

The significance of meticulous attention to grammatical nuances in translation cannot be overstated, as these elements profoundly influence the accuracy, naturalness, and overall fidelity of the rendered text. Grammatical structures often embody culture-specific conventions that, if overlooked, can lead to distortions in meaning or stylistic incongruities; for instance, variations in tense usage, article placement, or syntactic order may alter interpretive layers inherent in the source language.

Every language is governed by its own unique grammatical system, with sentences constructed in accordance with specific syntactic rules and structural conventions. A translator of the Quran is, therefore, required to have a comprehensive command of the target language’s grammar to ensure that sentences are rendered accurately and with structural integrity, thereby preventing literary errors stemming from grammatical deficiencies (Riḍā’ī Iṣfahānī 2006, 172).

2.2.1. Attention to Morphological Elements Impacting Translation

A morpheme constitutes the smallest meaningful unit within a language, encompassing roots, prefixes, suffixes, and inflectional elements (Newmark 1988, 284). Attention to morphological elements

is paramount in Quranic translation, as these minimal meaningful units carry intricate semantic, syntactic, and rhetorical loads that shape the divine text's precision and eloquence. Neglecting morphological fidelity can distort lexical nuances, alter case endings that signal grammatical relations, or obscure derivational patterns embedded in the root system, thereby compromising the target text's accuracy and stylistic equivalence.

The varied translations of the Arabic construction “كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ” in verse 105 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* exemplify the challenges inherent in rendering Arabic morphological elements into English.

﴿... إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ﴾ (المائدة/١٠٥)

Qarai: ... To Allah will be the return of you all, whereat He will inform you concerning what you used to do.

Shakir: ... To Allah is your return, all (of you), so He will inform you of what you did.

Yusuf Ali: ... the return of you all is to Allah; it is He that will inform you of all that ye do.

Pickthall: ... Unto Allah ye will all return; and then He will inform you of what ye used to do.

Arberry: ... Unto God shall you return, all together, and He will tell you what you were doing.

In the verse under discussion, the Arabic phrase “كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ” is rendered by Qarai and Pickthall as “you/ye used to do,” by Arberry as “you were doing,” by Shakir as “you did,” and by Yusuf Ali as “ye do.” The construction employs the perfect form of “كان” followed by the imperfect of the main verb, which denotes past continuous or habitual action (see Alhawary 2011, 85; Haywood & Nahmad 1965, pp. 112-113). The modal verb, “used to,” specifically conveys habitual action in the past that happened regularly or all the time in the past, but does not happen now (Longman 2009, 1111). Consequently, the translations by Qarai and Pickthall, which utilize “used to,” most accurately capture both the habitual aspect of the actions and their location in the past. Yusuf Ali’s “ye do” reflects a present tense, failing to convey either habituality or past time reference. Arberry’s “you were doing” correctly indicates past tense and continuity but does not emphasize the

discontinued habitual nature of the deeds, thus falling short of full semantic precision. Shakir's "you did," while past in tense, reduces the construction to a simple completed action and omits the habitual dimension.

2.2.2. Attention to Syntactic Elements Impacting Translation

"*Nahw*" (Arabic syntax) is a foundational discipline in Arabic language that investigates the principles governing the accurate formation of sentences and the morphological states of word endings within sentences. Its principal objective is to safeguard against lexical and interpretive errors in both the production and comprehension of Arabic discourse. This discipline specifically addresses the syntactic position of words and the inflectional state of their final letters within the sentence. Accordingly, the subject matter of *nahw* is the individual word and the complete sentence (Īrānī 2020, 8).

Syntax is the study of the way in which words are arranged to form sentences (Dickins et al. 2002, 96). Attention to syntactic elements is indispensable in the translation of the Quran, where the arrangement of words into phrases and sentences adheres to Arabic-specific patterns that encode rhetorical sophistication, logical progression, and emphatic intent. Discrepancies in syntactic conventions between Arabic and target languages—such as variable word order flexibility, the integration of verbal and nominal sentences, or the deployment of coordination and subordination—can precipitate misalignments in meaning or diminish the text's rhythmic and persuasive force if not systematically addressed. Translators must therefore map source-language syntactic configurations onto functionally equivalent structures in the receptor language while mitigating losses in cohesion and stylistic resonance.

Verse 58 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* includes a nominal construction rendered by translators as follows:

﴿... ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ﴾ (المائدة/٥٨)

Qarai: ... That is because they are a people who do not apply reason.

Shakir: ... This is because they are a people who do not understand.

Saffarzadeh: ... that is because they are a People who do not use their reason.

Yusuf Ali: ... that is because they are a people without understanding.

Irving: ... That is because they are folk who do not use their reason.

Pickthall: ... That is because they are a folk who understand not.

Arberry: ... that is because they are a people who have no understanding.

The Quranic sentence under discussion is a nominal construction initiated by the demonstrative pronoun “ذَلِكَ” as the “*mubtadā*” (subject), with its “*khabar*” (predicate) being the accusative clause “بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ” (Sāfi 1997, 6:390). Structurally, it constitutes a complete sentence comprising both subject and predicate, yet it maintains a strong semantic linkage to the preceding Quranic verse and the broader contextual framework. In translation, it is, therefore, advisable to render it as an independent clause to preserve its grammatical integrity, while acknowledging its consequential relationship to the prior content. Capitalizing “That” to initiate a new sentence, as translated by Qarai, Irving, and Pickthall, effectively highlights this autonomy and coherence. In contrast, the lowercase “that” employed by Saffarzadeh, Yusuf Ali, and Arberry appears to subordinate the clause, thereby emphasizing its role as a resultative extension of the antecedent sentence, though at the potential cost of diminishing its standalone syntactic status.

The noun “*qawmun* قَوْمٌ” appears in the indefinite form (*nakirah*), warranting preservation of this indefiniteness in the target language through the insertion of an indefinite article, such as “a people” or “a folk,” as consistently adopted by most translators. The phrase “لَا يَعْقِلُونَ”, a negative imperfect verb, underscores a habitual failure to employ reason and should thus be translated with a corresponding negative verbal construction to retain both form and nuance. Qarai’s “*who do not apply reason*” faithfully captures this verbal dynamism and semantic precision; similarly, Saffarzadeh and Irving’s “*do not use their reason*” adeptly conveys the aspectual continuity, albeit introducing the possessive “their,” which, while grammatically viable, adds an unnecessary specifier given that intellect is divinely endowed and universal to humanity, with variation lying in its application rather than possession. Shakir preserves

the verbal form via “do not understand” but misaligns with the verse’s intent, which critiques deliberate neglect of reason rather than mere cognitive deficiency. Arberry’s “have no understanding” deviates in meaning, and Yusuf Ali’s “without understanding” neglects the verbal structure altogether and deviates in meaning.

The opening of verse 1 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah* exemplifies the critical role of syntactic elements in Quranic translation:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا...﴾ (المائدة/١)

Sale: O true believers, ...

Arberry: O believers, ...

Pickthall: O ye who believe!

Saffarzadeh: O, you who believe!

Qarai: O you who have faith!

This verse commences with the vocative address to the believers, “يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا”, comprising the particle of vocative address “يَا”, the vocative particle “أَيُّهَا”, the relative pronoun “الَّذِينَ”, and the perfect verb “آمَنُوا” (Ṣāfi 1997, 6:266). Saffarzadeh and Pickthall render this phrase as “O you/ye who believe!”, which appear precise and appropriate, faithfully reflecting the vocative particle, relative pronoun, and verb in the translation. Arberry employs “O believers,” and Sale uses “O true believers;” both renditions seem incomplete, failing to adequately attend to the syntactic roles of the constituent elements in this Quranic phrase. Qarai translates it as “O you who have faith,” which constitutes an acceptable rendering. The term “faith” denotes belief and trust in God (Longman 2009, 363), effectively capturing the nuance of “*īmān*,” which pertains to the heart; the construction “have faith,” comprises an auxiliary verb plus a noun and evokes the same connotation as “believe.” Nevertheless, “believe” appears more apt, as it is the primary verb and aligns directly with “آمَنُوا.” Consequently, the renditions by Saffarzadeh and Pickthall emerge as the most optimal translations of this phrase.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the translation of the Qur’an—particularly verses with theological density such as those found in *Sūrat*

al-Mā'idah—is inseparable from the theological and literary foundations adopted by the translator. Through a comparative analysis of selected English translations, it has been shown that translators' doctrinal orientations and exegetical commitments significantly shape their lexical choices, grammatical constructions, and interpretive strategies. Variations in rendering key terms such as *walī*, *iqāmat al-ṣalāh*, *wa-hum rāki'ūn*, and *munkar* illustrate how insufficient attention to Shi'ite and Sunni exegetical traditions, or the uncritical privileging of one theological framework, may result in semantic reduction, doctrinal bias, or departure from the apparent meaning and occasion of revelation. The findings confirm that Qur'anic translation functions, in essence, as a concise form of exegesis and therefore cannot be detached from established theological principles without risking distortion of meaning.

Moreover, the analysis has underscored the decisive role of literary competence—particularly mastery of Arabic lexicography, morphology, syntax, and rhetoric, alongside sensitivity to the expressive capacities of the English language—in achieving a faithful and coherent translation. The study has shown that reliance on authoritative classical lexicons, informed engagement with exegetical insights, and precision in selecting English equivalents are indispensable for preserving the semantic depth and stylistic integrity of the Quranic text. Ultimately, this research highlights the necessity of scholarly rigor, methodological transparency, and balanced engagement with diverse interpretive traditions in Qur'an translation. By foregrounding the interplay between theological fidelity and literary accuracy, the study contributes to ongoing debates in Quranic translation studies and offers a framework for evaluating translations in a manner that respects both the sanctity and the linguistic complexity of the Quran.

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