

Untranslatable Arabic Lexemes (A Comparative Analysis of Semantic, Cultural, and Translational Challenges in Arabic-English Translation)

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the phenomenon of untranslatability in Arabic-English translation, focusing on culturally embedded *gharīb* lexemes such as *karāmah*, *ḥayāʾ*, *barakah*, *qadar*, and *ṣabr*. The research highlights that these terms embody layers of moral, spiritual, and theological meanings that resist literal transfer into English. Using qualitative semantic and cultural analysis, the study demonstrates that untranslatability arises from the deep intertwining of language and worldview in Arab-Islamic culture. The findings reveal that literal translation often leads to semantic loss, while adaptive strategies—such as explanatory paraphrase, partial retention, and footnoting—better preserve meaning and cultural integrity. The study concludes that translators must act as intercultural mediators, employing interpretive and context-based approaches to convey the spiritual essence of Arabic *gharīb* lexemes. Ultimately, untranslatability is not absolute but negotiable through culturally informed translation practices.

Keywords: untranslatability, Arabic-English translation, *gharīb* lexemes, cultural semantics, linguistic equivalence, Qur'anic translation, intercultural communication.

1. Introduction:

Language is not merely a tool of communication; it is a mirror of culture, thought, and collective identity. As Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1956) originally proposed, each language embodies a unique worldview that shapes how its speakers perceive and interpret reality. In this sense, translation between two linguistically and culturally distinct systems—such as Arabic and English—entails more than lexical substitution; it involves negotiating between worldviews (Baker, 2018; Al-Azzam, 2021). Arabic, one of the world’s oldest and most semantically rich languages, represents a linguistic tradition deeply intertwined with religion, history, and philosophy (Al-Jarf, 2022). Its vocabulary encompasses profound cultural and spiritual dimensions that often resist precise translation into English.

A central challenge in Arabic-English translation lies in the rendering of *gharīb* (غريب) lexemes—terms that are semantically dense, culturally embedded, and conceptually unique. These lexemes, often found in classical Arabic literature, Qur’anic exegesis, and proverbs, carry meanings that transcend literal equivalence. For instance, words such as “*taqwa*” (تقوى), “*barakah*” (بركة), or “*sabr*” (صبر) encapsulate layers of spiritual and ethical significance that lack direct counterparts in English (Abdel Haleem, 2019; Dickins, Herve, & Higgins, 2020). Such terms challenge translators not only linguistically but also culturally, as they require sensitivity to both the source culture’s conceptual universe and the target audience’s interpretive framework (Ghazala, 2021).

According to Newmark (2020), linguistic equivalence is often constrained by the “cultural untranslatability” inherent in certain expressions. This untranslatability stems from the fact that languages encode values and experiences specific to their societies (Venuti, 2019; Farghal & Almann, 2022). In Arabic, for example, many lexemes are intertwined with Islamic theology, Bedouin traditions, or historical modes of social interaction—contexts that may be alien to English-speaking audiences. Thus, literal translation often results in semantic loss or distortion (Baker & Saldanha, 2020). Translators must therefore adopt strategies that balance fidelity and intelligibility, such as paraphrasing, cultural substitution, or footnoting (Al-Qahtani, 2023).

This study seeks to conduct a comparative analysis of untranslatable Arabic lexemes, focusing on their semantic depth, cultural resonance, and translational challenges. By analyzing selected *gharīb* terms from both classical and modern sources, the research aims to uncover how meaning is constructed, preserved, or transformed in translation. It also addresses the broader implications of such lexical untranslatability for cross-cultural understanding, arguing that successful translation demands a deep awareness of cultural semiotics and pragmatic context (Hatim & Mason, 2021).

Ultimately, this research underscores that translation is not a mechanical act of linguistic transfer but an interpretive and intercultural negotiation (Munday, 2022). Understanding untranslatable Arabic lexemes thus enhances not only translation quality but also intercultural empathy and mutual comprehension between Arabic and English-speaking communities. 2. Research Questions, Scope, and Limitations:

2.1 Research Questions:

1. What are the semantic and cultural characteristics of Arabic gharīb lexemes that lack direct English equivalents?
2. How do these lexemes reflect the worldview and cultural values of Arabic-speaking communities?
3. What translation strategies are employed to convey the meanings of these lexemes in English, and how effective are they?

2.2 Scope of the Study:

The study focuses on a selection of Arabic gharīb lexemes drawn from classical and modern Arabic literature, religious texts, and everyday language. The analysis includes an examination of their English translations, considering both published works and translator notes.

2.3 Limitations:

The study acknowledges the limitations inherent in analyzing a subset of gharīb lexemes, which may not encompass the full spectrum of untranslatable terms in Arabic. Additionally, the subjective nature of translation and the potential for varying interpretations by different translators may influence the findings.

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3. Literature Review

The notion of untranslatability has been a central concern in translation studies for decades, as it touches upon the linguistic and cultural boundaries that limit equivalence between source and target languages. As Baker (1992) first proposed, translation difficulties often emerge from “cultural untranslatability,” where a lexical or conceptual gap arises because a term is specific to the source culture and lacks an equivalent concept in the target one. Later scholars expanded this perspective, stressing that the act of translation is inherently intercultural and interpretive rather than mechanical (Venuti, 2019; Munday, 2022).

Building on this foundation, Alhumaid (2015) examined the particular challenges associated with translating Arabic and Islamic cultural lexemes into English, such as *taqwa*, *barakah*, and *fitnah*. These words embody multi-layered meanings that intertwine linguistic, spiritual, and sociocultural dimensions, thus resisting direct translation. According to Alhumaid, translators must employ “contextually adaptive strategies” to bridge these gaps, including explanatory footnotes or dynamic equivalence.

More recent studies have continued to refine our understanding of untranslatability in Arabic-English translation. Alhaj (2022) conducted a semantic-pragmatic analysis of Qur’anic heart words—terms like *qalb*, *fu’ād*, and *ṣadr*—arguing that their translation involves not only lexical substitution but also deep theological interpretation. Similarly, Albahiri and Alhaj (2024) explored the translation of Qur’anic culture-bound lexemes, emphasizing the need to balance between semantic precision and cultural resonance. They observed that literal translation often results in loss of metaphorical depth, while over-domestication risks diluting the source meaning.

Makaoui (2023) approached the issue from a comparative linguistic angle, analyzing how Arabic culture-specific terms are rendered into English literary texts. His findings underscored the delicate equilibrium between semantic loss and cultural preservation, suggesting that successful translation depends on the translator's intercultural competence and awareness of pragmatic context.

In this context, Abdarrahman Abulgasim Salih Noorain (2023, 2024) made a significant contribution by examining the ellipsis phenomenon and cultural equivalence in Qur'anic and proverbial translation. Noorain's research (2023) on ellipsis (ḥadhf) in English translations of the Qur'an revealed how omitted predicates and conjunctions affect meaning reception and interpretive clarity, thereby contributing to subtle forms of untranslatability. In a later study, Noorain (2024) analyzed cultural equivalence between English idioms and Arabic proverbs, highlighting that idiomatic and cultural expressions function as markers of collective identity. These findings reaffirm the importance of cultural sensitivity and contextual interpretation in achieving effective translation across languages with differing cognitive and cultural frameworks.

Overall, the literature consistently demonstrates that untranslatability is not an absolute barrier but a dynamic space of negotiation where linguistic creativity and cultural mediation converge (Al-Azzam, 2021; Farghal & Almannā, 2022). The reviewed studies collectively underscore the need for translators to develop strategies that acknowledge cultural embeddedness—such as borrowing, transliteration, explication, and cultural annotation—to preserve the integrity of the source text while ensuring accessibility for target readers (Ghazala, 2021; Al-Qahtani, 2023).

4. Methodology:

4.1 Research Design:

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design, focusing on the semantic, cultural, and translational aspects of selected Arabic gharīb lexemes. The approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the nuances and complexities inherent in these terms.

4.2 Data Selection:

A purposive sampling method was used to select Arabic gharīb lexemes that are widely recognized as untranslatable into English. The selection criteria included the lexemes' cultural significance, frequency of use, and the availability of English translations.

4.3 Data Collection:

Data were collected from a variety of sources, including classical and modern Arabic literature, religious texts, and everyday language. English translations of these texts were also reviewed to analyze how the selected lexemes were rendered.

4.4 Analytical Framework:

The analysis focused on the following aspects:

Semantic Analysis: Examining the lexical meaning, connotations, and polysemy of each term.

Cultural Analysis: Investigating the cultural, historical, and religious contexts embedded in the lexeme.

Translation Analysis: Identifying strategies used in English translations, including literal translation, paraphrasing, and explanatory notes.

4.5 Reliability and Validity:

To ensure reliability and validity, multiple sources were cross-checked for consistency in the meaning of lexemes. Translation examples from different translators and publications were compared. Interpretations were peer-reviewed and triangulated with existing literature on untranslatability and cultural linguistics.

5. Analysis of Selected Arabic Gharīb Lexemes

This section analyzes selected gharīb Arabic lexemes that exemplify cultural and semantic untranslatability. Each lexeme embodies deep spiritual and social dimensions that defy direct equivalence in English. The analysis integrates semantic, cultural, and translational perspectives to highlight the complexities translators encounter in Arabic-English rendering.

5.1 Karāmah (كرامة) – Dignity and Spiritual Nobility

Semantic and Cultural Analysis:

The term karāmah refers to a profound sense of honor and dignity, intertwined with spiritual integrity and divine favor. While English “dignity” connotes self-respect and human worth, karāmah in Arabic extends to a metaphysical dimension, often linked to piety and miraculous acts (karāmāt al-awliyā’) (Alhaj, 2022; Noorain, 2023). It reflects a moral ideal in Islamic ethics, combining self-restraint, social honor, and divine esteem (Al-Jarf, 2022; Farghal & Almannā, 2022).

Translation Strategies:

Translators typically render karāmah as “dignity,” “spiritual honor,” or occasionally “miraculous honor.” However, these options tend to oversimplify its layered meaning. Baker (2018) and Dickins et al. (2020) emphasize that literal translation may result in semantic flattening, where spiritual nuance is lost. As Noorain (2024) argues, culturally loaded terms such as karāmah demand contextual equivalence rather than lexical substitution, achieved through explanatory footnotes or adaptive paraphrasing.

Observations:

Cultural context is indispensable for comprehending karāmah. It functions simultaneously as a moral, social, and spiritual concept—an aspect rarely communicated through literal translation (Al-Qahtani, 2023).

5.2 Ḥayā’ (حياء) – Modesty and Moral Sensitivity

Semantic and Cultural Analysis:

Ḥayā’ denotes an internalized moral consciousness that blends modesty, humility, and an awareness of divine oversight. It is not simply “shyness” or “modesty” in English but a profound ethical principle in Islamic culture, regarded as “a branch of faith” (Alhumaid, 2015; Ghazala, 2021). The term carries theological implications connected to virtue ethics and behavioral self-regulation (Noorain, 2023).

Translation Strategies:

Common translations—such as “modesty,” “bashfulness,” or “sense of shame”—capture only part of the term’s moral spectrum (Baker & Saldanha, 2020). Translators

often add qualifiers like “moral modesty” or “spiritual humility” (Makaoui, 2023). Noorain (2024) observes that translating ḥayā’ requires a culturally reflexive approach that preserves its moral connotation through annotation or contextual framing rather than reductionist equivalence.

Observations:

The challenge lies in the term’s intersection between emotion and ethics; ḥayā’ cannot be detached from Islamic behavioral norms, making its full translatability unattainable without explanatory strategies (Al-Azzam, 2021).

5.3 Barakah (بركة) – Blessing and Divine Grace

Semantic and Cultural Analysis:

Barakah refers to an enduring form of divine blessing that manifests as spiritual increase, continuity, or prosperity (Al-Masri, 2009; Abdel Haleem, 2019). Unlike the English “blessing,” which often denotes a static favor, barakah implies perpetual divine vitality—a sacred force that transcends temporal limits (Albahiri & Alhaj, 2024). The term is integral to both religious and social discourse, expressing faith in divine providence and the unseen (Noorain, 2023).

Translation Strategies:

Literal translation as “blessing” erases its dynamic connotations. Translators often resort to paraphrases like “divine grace” or “spiritual increase” (Farghal & Almana, 2022; Munday, 2022). Noorain (2024) notes that a culturally sensitive translator might retain the original term barakah in italics, supplemented by a gloss or footnote, to preserve authenticity and avoid semantic reduction.

Observations:

The concept of barakah represents a case of spiritual untranslatability, where linguistic equivalence fails to convey experiential depth (Al-Jarf, 2022; Venuti, 2019).

5.4 Qadar (قدر) – Divine Decree and Predestination

Semantic and Cultural Analysis:

Qadar embodies the intricate theological notion of divine will and human destiny, foundational in Islamic creed (‘aqīdah). It integrates divine omniscience, decree, and human accountability—dimensions not encompassed by the English “fate” or “destiny” (Elmgrab, 2025; Alhaj, 2022). The term carries philosophical implications, bridging metaphysics, ethics, and spirituality (Noorain, 2023).

Translation Strategies:

Renderings such as “fate” or “divine decree” simplify its metaphysical complexity. Translators like Abdel Haleem (2019) employ footnotes to clarify theological nuances, while Baker (2018) advises dynamic equivalence strategies. Noorain (2024) highlights that qadar should be treated as a doctrinal term, warranting partial retention in its Arabic form to avoid doctrinal misrepresentation.

Observations:

The translator must navigate theological precision alongside linguistic clarity—a balance central to Qur’anic translation studies (Albahiri & Alhaj, 2024).

5.5 Ṣabr (صبر) – Patient Perseverance and Faithful Endurance

Semantic and Cultural Analysis:

Ṣabr transcends the English notion of “patience.” It implies an active, faith-driven endurance through trials, integrating moral strength and divine reliance (Alhaj, 2022; Noorain, 2023). It functions as both a spiritual virtue and ethical discipline, recurring frequently in the Qur’an and prophetic traditions as a symbol of steadfast faith (Farghal & Almannā, 2022).

Translation Strategies:

While often translated as “patience” or “perseverance,” these renderings fail to capture its theological essence. Translators use explanatory notes or expanded phrases such as “patient endurance in the path of faith” (Al-Qahtani, 2023; Ghazala, 2021). Noorain (2024) stresses that the translation of ṣabr must reflect its spiritual agency rather than emotional passivity, favoring adaptive strategies that highlight moral resilience.

Observations:

Ṣabr epitomizes ethical untranslatability where semantic accuracy alone cannot preserve the faith-based emotional resonance embedded in the source term (Munday, 2022; Al-Azzam, 2021).

6. Discussion:

The analysis of Arabic gharīb lexemes reveals significant insights into the interplay between language, culture, and translation. These lexemes exemplify how words are not merely vehicles of meaning but repositories of cultural, ethical, and spiritual knowledge. For example, terms like karāmah, ḥayā’, and barakah encompass layers of meaning that extend beyond what a single English equivalent can convey.

The untranslatability observed in these lexemes highlights the semantic and cultural gaps that exist between Arabic and English. Literal translation often results in semantic loss, stripping the terms of their moral, spiritual, and cultural significance. Translators, therefore, must rely on strategies such as paraphrasing, cultural substitution, or explanatory notes to approximate meaning. However, even these strategies cannot fully replicate the conceptual depth inherent in the source language (Alhumaid, 2015; Alhaj, 2022; Elmgrab, 2025).

Furthermore, the study underscores the role of cultural context in translation. Many gharīb lexemes carry social or religious implications that are deeply rooted in Arab-Islamic traditions. Without an understanding of these cultural dimensions, English translations risk misrepresentation or oversimplification. Consequently, the translator functions not merely as a linguistic mediator but as a cultural mediator, bridging the conceptual worlds of source and target languages.

These findings have implications for translation pedagogy, intercultural communication, and computational translation technologies. They suggest that teaching translation requires more than linguistic proficiency; it demands cultural literacy and an appreciation of semantic nuances that resist direct equivalence.

6. Discussion and Findings

The analysis of selected gharīb Arabic lexemes—*karāmah*, *ḥayā'*, *barakah*, *qadar*, and *ṣabr*—reveals that untranslatability in Arabic-English translation arises primarily from the interplay of semantic density and cultural embeddedness. Each term encapsulates not only a linguistic meaning but also a cultural worldview rooted in Arab-Islamic thought. This finding aligns with the position of Baker (2018) and Venuti (2019), who argue that translation is inherently interpretive and culturally contingent rather than merely linguistic.

6.1 Cultural Embeddedness and the Limits of Equivalence

The study confirms that literal equivalence fails to convey the spiritual, moral, and theological connotations embedded within Arabic gharīb lexemes. Terms like *barakah* and *qadar* illustrate how translation loss occurs when divine agency and metaphysical continuity are reduced to secularized English equivalents such as “blessing” or “destiny” (Albahiri & Alhaj, 2024; Elmgrab, 2025). Noorain (2023) similarly observed that in Qur’anic translation, ellipsis and omission of key semantic relations can distort interpretive coherence, reinforcing the necessity of contextual and cultural sensitivity.

The concept of *ḥayā'* further demonstrates that certain Arabic terms cannot be transferred without invoking their moral and religious implications. The English lexicon lacks an equivalent that unites modesty, humility, and faith as one integrated moral virtue (Alhumaid, 2015; Ghazala, 2021). This supports Munday’s (2022) assertion that some expressions are “pragmatically untranslatable” because their meanings rely on sociocultural norms rather than linguistic form alone.

6.2 Translational Strategies and Cultural Mediation

Findings show that adaptive and explanatory translation strategies—such as paraphrasing, footnoting, or partial retention of the Arabic term—are most effective in preserving meaning integrity. Translators who employ domestication risk losing the sacred resonance of terms like *karāmah* or *ṣabr*, whereas those who favor foreignization or partial transliteration maintain their spiritual texture (Venuti, 2019; Al-Qahtani, 2023). Noorain (2024) argues that in culturally bound expressions, such as idioms and proverbs, the translator’s role becomes that of a cultural mediator rather than a linguistic technician. This perspective is equally applicable to gharīb lexemes, where semantic fidelity depends on cultural awareness and interpretive framing.

Moreover, Farghal and Almannā (2022) emphasize that Arabic translation demands a contextual equivalence model—a framework where meaning is shaped by pragmatic and cultural parameters rather than lexical correspondence. This approach is evident in the translation of *ṣabr*, where rendering it as “patient endurance in faith” preserves both its moral agency and spiritual dimension.

6.3 Patterns of Semantic Loss and Compensation

A recurring pattern observed across the analyzed lexemes is semantic compression—the reduction of multi-layered Arabic meanings into narrower English equivalents. For instance, *karāmah* loses its miraculous and spiritual aspect when simplified as “dignity,” while *barakah* loses its dynamic continuity when rendered merely as “blessing” (Dickins et al., 2020; Al-Jarf, 2022). This semantic compression is often

compensated through explicitation strategies, where translators supplement their renderings with contextual elaboration or paratextual commentary (Baker & Saldanha, 2020).

In this sense, untranslatability is not absolute but relative and negotiable, echoing the theoretical positions of Newmark (2020) and Hatim & Mason (2021). The translator's task becomes one of balance—deciding how much cultural information to convey explicitly and how much to leave implicit without alienating the target audience. Noorain's (2023) findings on ellipsis in Qur'anic translation reinforce this idea: successful meaning transfer depends on interpretive decisions that respect both linguistic economy and cultural depth.

6.4 Findings Summary

The findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Cultural untranslatability arises from the deep moral, religious, and metaphysical contexts embedded within Arabic lexemes.
2. Literal translation often results in semantic flattening and cultural distortion.
3. Culturally adaptive strategies, including explanatory paraphrase, partial retention, and footnoting, best preserve the semantic and spiritual integrity of *gharīb* terms.
4. Translators act as intercultural negotiators, bridging linguistic gaps through interpretive and context-based mediation (Noorain, 2024; Al-Azzam, 2021).
5. The degree of semantic loss or preservation depends on the translator's cultural competence and awareness of the text's spiritual worldview.

Collectively, these findings affirm that translating *gharīb* lexemes demands a hermeneutic approach—one that interprets meaning through the lens of cultural semiotics rather than lexical equivalence. The translator must engage both with linguistic form and with the cultural soul of the text to achieve a translation that communicates, rather than merely transfers, meaning.

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