

Faithfulness in the Translation of the Qur'anic Arabic Homographic Word *Kataba* (كَتَبَ) into English: Revisiting the Equivalence Theory

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Abstract

Translating homographic words in Qur'ānic Arabic, particularly the verb *kataba* (كَتَبَ), presents considerable challenges that have long engaged linguists, interpreters, philologists, translators, and scholars. The complexity arises from the rich semantic range and the context-dependent meanings that such words carry within the Qur'ānic discourse. Unlike ordinary language, Qur'ānic Arabic employs terms like *kataba* in multifaceted ways, often embedding layers of theological, legal, and literary significance that are difficult to render accurately in English. This study aims to critically examine these translational challenges through the lens of Equivalence Theory, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining meaning and effect between the source and target texts. Using a qualitative and analytical approach, this research moves beyond mere frequency counts or quantitative analysis to delve deeply into interpretive perspectives on translation strategies. The investigation focuses on how prominent translators—including Abdel Haleem, Pickthall, and Al-Hilali & Khan—navigate the tension between literal faithfulness and dynamic equivalence when translating *kataba*. The findings indicate that these translators often employ a blend of free and faithful translation techniques in an effort to capture the nuanced connotations embedded in the original Arabic. However, the reliance on literal, word-for-word renderings at times limits the conveyance of intended meanings, thereby risking misinterpretation of critical Qur'ānic messages. Such findings underscore the inherent difficulty in balancing linguistic accuracy with the cultural and spiritual dimensions that a term like *kataba* encompasses, suggesting that translators must exercise nuanced judgment in order to bridge semantic gaps and honor the text's profound significance.

Keywords: faithfulness, Arabic homographic word, translation, the Holy Qur'an, Equivalence Theory

1. Introduction

Translation plays a pivotal role in establishing bridges between cultures and nations. It addresses gaps between diverse societies and fosters mutual cultural dialogue and cross-cultural communication (Bachmann–Medick, 2012; Valero–García, 2007). It also enables individuals to understand one another, exchange ideas, and share innovations through cultural trade, regardless of their language differences and speech variations. (Kulick, 1997; Hermans, 2019). Translation has become an increasingly prominent and powerful tool in preventing misunderstanding and misinterpretation among individuals (Betts, 2009; Al-Jabari, 2008). Moreover, the absence of translation hinders the global sharing of science and innovations.

The role of translation is not only limited to strengthening and advancing cultural communication, but also extends to the political and diplomatic realm, as it is an essential factor in international relations (Cronin, 2013; Dittmer & McConnell, 2015). Translators facilitate understanding among individuals from different countries by accurately transferring treaties and law texts, ensuring that sensitive and significant messages reach the relevant parties efficiently and without distortion or falsification (Gorlé, 2022; Ellis, 2016). Any inaccuracies in translation may result in diplomatic misunderstanding, tensions, or political conflicts. Thus, the role of translators in this context is paramount.

In literature and arts, translation is crucial in disseminating national cultural heritage, eventually making it part of global heritage (Labadi, 2013; Lixinski, 2013). Through translation, literature, poetry, and prose were introduced to a global audience, thereby promoting international cultural communication, interaction and enriching global literary perspectives (Fang, 2019). These cultural differences can be addressed through the efforts of translators, who convey artistic and literary creativity using various languages.

Translation encompasses a broad range of activities. It is a process whereby translators convey messages created by authors of the source language (SL) and decode them into the target language (TL), ensuring that equivalent meaning and intended effects are transferred from the SL to the TL (Mustapha, 2018; Dihia & Zakarya, 2023). A key feature of translation is the expectation to convey the implied meaning of the SL as accurately as possible. However, the core challenge lies in ensuring that the SL's objective is effectively fulfilled (Freeman, 2009; Fernández Guerra, 2012). Some meanings may not be fully conveyed in the TL, which can lead readers to question the translation's accuracy.

Translation is among the most effective tools for developing linguistic competence and enhancing linguistic proficiency and translation abilities. Newmark (1988) suggested that translations should produce the same effect on the TL audience as experienced by readers of the original version. Catford (1965) argued that translators should aim for the highest degree of correspondence between the SL and the TL, emphasizing that equivalence is fundamental in translation theory and essential for maintaining the original text's faithfulness. Baker (2007) examined the concept of equivalence at various levels and the translation process, establishing linguistic and stylistic frameworks to achieve faithful translations.

From a semantic perspective, identifying counterparts for sacred words with similar implied meaning or stylistic connotation, such as in the case of hyponyms and hypernyms, is crucial (Abdelaal, 2017; Naji, 2023). The same applies to figurative expressions with expressive connotations. Translators of sacred words use various strategies to address equivalence, enabling readers to interpret religious meanings accurately. (Derrida & Venuti, 2001; Pym, 1992). In certain contexts, translators aim to reflect the readers' beliefs accurately. Hence, the translation of sacred texts should be reader-oriented

The faithful rendering of Qur'ānic Arabic texts, in general, and homographic words, in particular, into English has historically posed a dilemma that has captivated the scholarly interest of linguists, interpreters, philologists, and readers of translated texts (Nassimi, 2012; Taghian, 2013). This issue places significant focus on the implementation and evaluation of translations, sometimes prioritizing these aspects over the quality of rendition when the authenticity of the target text is emphasized. Diniz (2003) noted that a translator's failure to preserve the original wording and expression may result in a lack of faithfulness to the original text. Similarly, Nida and Taber (1982) emphasize the importance of maintaining appropriateness and faithfulness to the original wording. Nord (2014) asserts that translation has often prioritized faithfulness to the source language text, which, however, can sometimes lead to inaccurate translations. On this basis, Pym (1992) argued that if a target text omits certain parts of the original, then the translation reflects a lack of faithfulness. Newmark (1988) also indicated that issues related to faithfulness arise even when translators strive for suitable translations. Nevertheless, effective translators remain faithful to the original version of the text. In this context, faithfulness is viewed as achieving equivalence. To be faithful to the original, equivalence must be attained—although this remains a challenging task.

1.2 Research Questions

This study examines the challenges involved in rendering Arabic homographic words into English, with a specific focus on the Qur'ānic homograph *kataba* (كَتَبَ). It adopts the Equivalence Theory, offering a novel lens to address the underexplored area of Qur'ānic homograph translation. The study responds to the limited scholarly attention given to this topic and aims to bridge gaps in the existing literature.

The specific objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To identify the issues encountered in translating the Qur'ānic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) into English in the translations of Abdel Haleem (2004), Al-Hilali and Khan (1996), and Pickthall (1930), through the lens of Equivalence Theory.
2. To determine the extent to which these translators (Abdel Haleem, Al-Hilali and Khan, and Pickthall) maintain faithfulness to the original Qur'ānic meaning when rendering *kataba* into English, without distorting the source text.
3. To investigate the cultural and stylistic barriers that hinder the translation of the homographic word *kataba*, and to explore how these challenges may be addressed using Equivalence Theory.

1.3 Research Questions

In alignment with the objectives of this study, the following primary research questions are posed:

1. What linguistic and translational challenges arise in the English renderings of the Qur'anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) by Abdelhaleem (2004), Al-Hilali and Khan (1996), and Pickthall (1930), from the perspective of Equivalence Theory?
2. To what extent do the translations of *kataba* (كَتَبَ) by Abdelhaleem (2004), Al-Hilali and Khan (1996), and Pickthall (1930) maintain faithfulness to the semantic and contextual meanings of the original Qur'anic text?
3. What cultural and stylistic barriers, as viewed through Equivalence Theory, impede the accurate translation of the homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) from Qur'anic Arabic into English?

2. Literature review

2.1 Homograph Concept

The term homograph originates from the Greek word *homographos*, meaning “having the same written form.” Homographs are words that are spelled identically but have entirely different meanings (Albahiri & Alhaj, 2025; Crystal, 2003). For instance, in Arabic, the homographs *almushtarak alkitabī* (المشترك الكتابي) refer to words that are written the same but differ in pronunciation and meaning. Similarly, in English, examples include “lead” (/li:d/ – to guide) versus “lead” (/lɛd/ – a metal), and “tear” (/tɪə/ – to rip) versus “tear” (/teə/ – a drop from the eye). Homographs are sometimes also categorized as homonyms (Joshi, 2014). They can be divided into two main types: those that are philologically related (having evolved from a common origin) and those that are completely unrelated in origin and meaning.

(a) Philologically Related Homographs

These are homographs (words spelled the same) that are etymologically connected—they originate from the same root and

evolved through conversion (changing word class, like from noun to verb), sometimes with a change in pronunciation.

1. Conversion Homographs with Stress Shift

- Involve both word class change and stress shift, resulting in different phonemic forms.
- Example:
 - *project* (n.) /'prɒdʒekt/ → *project* (v.) /prə'dʒekt/
 - *record* (n.) /'rekɔ:d/ → *record* (v.) /rɪ'kɔ:d/

2. Conversion Homographs with Phonemic Change

- Involve word class change and phonemic change, but no shift in stress.
- Example:
 - *advocate* (n.) /'ædvəkət/ → *advocate* (v.) /'ædvəkeɪt/
 - *use* (n.) /ju:s/ → *use* (v.) /ju:z/

(b) Philologically Unrelated Homographs

These are homographs that are not etymologically related. They happen to be spelled the same but are entirely different lexemes with distinct meanings and origins. The differences are often also reflected in pronunciation.

- Example:
 - *row* /rəʊ/ (line or arrangement) vs. *row* /raʊ/ (a quarrel)
 - *wind* /wind/ (air movement) vs. *wind* /waɪnd/ (to twist or turn)

These unrelated homographs are generally learned and understood based on context, since there is no shared lexical origin to help infer meaning.

2.2 Overview of the Concept of Faithfulness in Translation

Achieving faithfulness in translation is a challenging task for translators. Hatim and Munday (2019) argued that maintaining faithfulness to the original text involves a complex process of meaning transfer. Similarly, İçöz (2012) suggested that translators are sometimes compelled to deviate from strict faithfulness in order to achieve a more accurate or contextually appropriate translation. Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) further contended that faithfulness should not always be prioritized; in certain cases, adapting the source text is necessary to effectively convey its intended meaning in the target language. Baker (2004) emphasized that the notion of faithfulness depends heavily on the appropriateness and applicability of equivalence. From this perspective, the researcher concludes that the concept of equivalence is of critical importance, as many other theoretical constructs in translation studies are linked to it. Therefore, the notions of equivalence and faithfulness in translation should not be dismissed or overlooked.

Faithfulness in translation refers to the degree to which a target text accurately conveys the intention, purpose, and style of the original text. It involves rendering the source text into the target language while preserving its nuances, implications, and intended meaning (Emery, 2004; Darwish, 2010; Abdelkarim, et al., 2025). Branch (2016) suggests that faithfulness entails transferring the substance of the original text into the translated version truthfully and without deviation. Achieving an accurate and effective representation of the source text requires translators who are proficient in both the source and target languages. Faithfulness is also linked to the translator's writing style, thought process, and emotional engagement (Cachucho, 2017; Huang, 2011). However, maintaining faithfulness can be challenging due to various factors, including cultural and linguistic differences between languages, subjectivity in interpretation, conceptual and ideological barriers, and other translation difficulties (Wechsler, 1998; Croitoru, 2006).

2.3 The Concept of Equivalence

Defining the term “equivalence” with precision presents an early challenge in translation studies, as scholars have not reached a consensus on its meaning or application (Halverson, 1997; Reiss & Rhodes, 2014). Often regarded as the cornerstone of the translation process, the concept of equivalence plays a central role in theoretical and practical approaches to translation (Singh, 2014; Venuti, 2007). Nevertheless, it remains a highly contested notion, sparking ongoing debates among translators and theorists regarding its identity, significance, and feasibility. Equivalence is widely considered a fundamental principle of translation, yet its practical application continues to raise complex issues. Chief among these is the difficulty of identifying appropriate counterparts in the target text. A primary aim of translation theory, therefore, is to define the parameters and types of such counterparts (Catford, 1965; Pym, 2023; Abdelkarim & Alhaj, 2024).

The concept of equivalence in translation has attracted considerable scholarly attention over the past few decades, emerging as a central pillar in translation theory (Berling et al., 2022; Pesse, 2021; Abdelkarim & Alhaj, 2024). Translation is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional, multidisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary endeavor, and it has long been approached from divergent theoretical perspectives (Tieber, 2023; Koller, 1995). Despite these varying approaches, a number of commonalities persist—most notably, the involvement of two languages (the source and the target) and the pursuit of equivalence between the source text and its translation in order to preserve the original's meaning, style, or function (House, 2006; Katan, 2009).

Equivalence is a practical phenomenon that can be approached by examining source language (SL) and target language (TL) texts from one perspective, and the foundations of translation equivalence from another (Moreton, 2010; Delabastita, 2021; Alhaj, 2024). Although SL and TL components each possess unique characteristics, they rarely share identical meanings in a strictly linguistic sense, as every language is distinct and autonomous. However, they can operate within similar contexts (Kamal, 2021; Sun, 1994). When translating a specific text, the core elements of the SL and TL overlap to some degree in their pragmatic and situational meanings, mutually influencing certain contextual features.

2.4 The Concept of Equivalence and Its Role in Translation

The concept of equivalence plays an important role in translation. This issue has been a particular focus for many translation scholars and theorists, such as Pym (1992), who asserted that equivalence is an underlying notion in translation theory. Nida (1964) demonstrated two different types of equivalence: formal equivalence, which focuses on the message itself, in form and content (Albahiri & Alhaj, 2025; Abdelkarim & Alhaj, 2024), and dynamic equivalence, which is based on the principle of equivalent effect. Baker (1992) indicated that translation at the lexical level presumably produces the most conspicuous dilemmas for translators. Kade (1968) suggested that a word without an equivalent in the target language can cause varying degrees of difficulty. Moreover, some dilemmas of non-equivalence at the word level are associated with cultural diversities, where no equivalent words exist in either the source or the target language (Baker, 1992; Alfarisi, 2017). Baker (1992) argued that translators should not undervalue the cumulative impact of content choice when interpreting texts. He also recognized the translation difficulties created by non-equivalence. Furthermore, Baker (ibid.) demonstrated that equivalence is used “for the sake of convenience.” He emphasized general issues of non-equivalence and proposed appropriate strategies for dealing with such cases. Vinay and Darbelnet (2000) considered equivalence-oriented translation as a strategy that mirrors a similar situation to the original text while applying entirely different phrasing. They also proposed that if this strategy is used during the translation process, it can maintain the word implications of the original text in the target text. Accordingly, equivalence is ideal for translators handling aphorisms, idiomatic expressions, tropes, and similar elements. Roman Jakobson (1995) presented the concept of “equivalence in difference.” Based on his semiotic approach to language and his dictum “no signatum without signum” (p. 236), Jakobson proposed three types of translation: intralingual (rewording or paraphrase), interlingual (translation proper), and intersemiotic (transmutation). He argued that interlingual translations involve no full equivalence between code elements and consist of two equivalent communications in two heterogeneous codes.

2.5 Rendering the Qur’ānic Arabic Homographic Word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) into English: Controversial Points

The translation of the meaning of the Holy Qur’an from Arabic into English, particularly regarding Qur’ānic Arabic homographic words, has been controversial among scholars, philologists, exegetes, and translators. Some argue against translating the Holy Qur’an and its Arabic homographs, claiming that the religious text is untranslatable and that any resulting translation is not truly the Holy Qur’an. They maintain that this sacred text is the final revelation directly from Allah. However, Muslims believe that this holy source of guidance is not restricted to followers of Islam alone. Rather, through the Holy Qur’an, Allah addresses all of humanity, transcending barriers of language, race, religion, region, and time. Other scholars, linguists, and translators hold an opposing viewpoint. They argue that the Holy Qur’an can be translated without causing any distortion or apostasy from the original Qur’anic text.

In the same vein, translating Qur’ānic Arabic homographic words into English—particularly the verb *kataba* (كَتَبَ)—poses significant cultural, lexical, and stylistic challenges due to their specificity to Islamic culture (Abdelkarim & Alhaj, 2023; Emara, 2013). Newmark (1988, p. 96) notes that translation becomes complicated when cultural focus is involved, primarily because of the cultural gaps or divergences between the source and target languages. The cultural, lexical, and stylistic equivalents offered for these Qur’ānic homographs tend to be either lengthy explanatory paraphrases or less expressive renderings (Asiri, 2020; Mustafa, 2018; Albahiri et al., 2023). Consequently, translating such Islamic culture-specific terms using direct lexical equivalents often results in inadequacies.

2.6 Previous Studies

A limited number of studies have investigated the difficulties of rendering Arabic homographic words into English in general, and Qur’anic Arabic homographic words more specifically. For example, in their analytical study probing challenges in translating the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *l-du’āi* (الدُّعَاءُ) into English, Albahiri and Alhaj (2025) found that translators such as Abdel Haleem, Al-Hilali and Khan, and Pickthall relied on faithful, programmatic, and free translation approaches. They often succeeded in faithfully conveying the connotative meaning of the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *l-du’āi* (الدُّعَاءُ). In other instances, the three translators considered literal renderings and often failed to convey the implied and deeper meanings of the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *l-du’āi* (الدُّعَاءُ) into English. Eltaif (2019) investigated homographic words in Arabic and English by analyzing their differences and similarities. The researcher found that, in Arabic, homographic words are formed similarly but have different meanings and pronunciations.

Moreover, the absence of vocalic diacritics makes homographic words ambiguous, thereby causing problems in the Arabic language. Attia (2008) discovered that Arabic homographic words are among the factors contributing to ambiguity in Arabic because the language contains many homographic words. These words share the same orthography despite having different pronunciations. Thus, homographic words pose a significant problem in the Arabic language. Abedelrazq (2014) explored the challenges of translating homographs in the Holy Qur’an and found that, in most cases, translators lost the homographic meanings of common words. Khanjani and Azimifard (2021) established that the origin of homographic words in the Holy Qur’an lies in their manifold linguistic roles, variations in discourse, and transformations during inflection. Salman, M. B. (2023) proposed a solution for rendering Arabic homographs: uploading them to Google Translate along

with the meanings of all versions of homographs, marked by diacritics. When a homograph is used without diacritics, a drop-down menu of words with diacritics should appear, allowing the content uploader to identify the intended meaning.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of Study

The present study adopts a qualitative approach with a systematic design, focusing on interpretive standpoints rather than quantitative evidence. In this context, the researcher gathers and explores data before conducting analysis. The data for this study consist of Qur'anic verses and their English translations by Abdel Haleem (2004), Al-Hilali and Khan (1996), and Pickthall (1930). To capture the evidence, selected Qur'anic verses containing the Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) are closely analyzed to identify the challenges of rendering their meanings into English through the lens of Equivalence Theory. Initially, the data are discussed in light of the prevailing problems associated with translating the Arabic homograph *kataba* (كَتَبَ) into English. Subsequently, the analysis evaluates the extent to which the selected English translations of the Qur'an adequately and accurately convey the meaning of *kataba* (كَتَبَ). Finally, from a linguistic perspective, the study identifies the linguistic necessities and constraints that hinder the accurate translation of *kataba* (كَتَبَ) into English.

3.2 Data Analysis Procedure

To carry out this study, the authors relied on the Qur'an Arabic Corpus (QAC), whose content was organized by distinguished linguists, professors, and experts under the guidance of Kais Dukes of the University of Leeds. The QAC includes prominent and authoritative works in the field of Holy Qur'an translation. The English translations by Abdel Haleem (2004), Al-Hilali and Khan (1996), and Pickthall (1930) were compared, analyzed, and examined using a descriptive-analytical method to identify the challenges involved in rendering the Qur'anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) into English, from the perspective of Equivalence Theory.

4. Results and Discussion

In the following section, the researcher thoroughly discusses examples of Qur'anic verses that present challenges in translating the Qur'anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) into English. Each example of these Qur'anic verses, along with their original and translated text, is organized simultaneously. The baseline data for this study include selected Qur'anic verses from the English translations of the Holy Qur'an by Abdel Haleem (2004), Al-Hilali and Khan (1996), and Pickthall (1930).

4.1 Example 1

Source Surah: البقرة Al-Baqara, Chapter 2, *Sūrat al-Baqarah* (The Cow), Verse 183

ST: (البقرة: 183)

(يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ)

(a) Target Texts

1. Abdel Haleem (2004): "You who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of God!" (p. 29).
2. Al-Hilali and Khan (1996): "O you who believe! Observing As-Saum (fasting) is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may become Al-Muttaqun." (p. 36).
3. Pickthall (1930): "Ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, even as it was prescribed for those before you, that ye may ward off (evil)." (p. 49).

General Meaning of the Ayah

Addressing the believers, Allah (the Exalted) commands them to observe fasting, which involves abstaining from eating, drinking, and sexual relations for a fixed period, solely for His sake. This practice is intended to sanctify and purify the soul from sinful thoughts and immoral behavior. Allah states that He prescribed fasting for them just as He prescribed it for those before them, so they are to take their predecessors as an example. They should not only follow them but strive to surpass them in fulfilling this command of the Almighty (Ibn Kathir, 2009, vol. 1, p. 105).

4.1.2 Challenges in Translating the Qur'anic Arabic Homographic Word كَتَبَ *kataba* in Chapter 2, *sūrat l-baqarah* (The Cow), Verse 183

The Qur'anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) has been interpreted in several ways by scholars, with Al-Balkhi (2007) and Al-Damghani (n.d.) presenting four interpretations each, and Al-Jawzi (1983) listing five. The commonly agreed meanings include *faraḍa* (فَرَضَ) "prescribed," *qaḍā* (قَضَى) "He decrees," *ja'ala* (جَعَلَ) "made," and *amara* (أَمَرَ) "ordered." The interpretation of *kataba* as indicating an obligation is notably found in the Almighty's statement in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 183: "O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you..." In Tafṣīr al-Qurṭubī (2006, p. 18), it is explained that just as legal retribution (*al-qisās*) and wills (*al-waṣīyyah*) were legislated, fasting was likewise decreed upon believers, making it obligatory without disagreement. This understanding is reinforced by the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) hadith stating, "Verily, Islam is founded on five pillars: testifying that there is no god but Allah, establishing prayer, paying zakāt, fasting during Ramaḍān, and performing the pilgrimage to the House (Ka'bah)," emphasizing fasting as a fundamental duty prescribed by divine command.

As shown in Example One, Abdel Haleem, Al-Hilali Khan, and Pickthall used faithful translation to render the Qur'anic Arabic

homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) as “prescribed for.” The following translations appear relatively similar to *faraḍa* (فَرَضَ) “prescribed,” *qaḍā* (قَضَى) “He decrees,” *ja’ala* (جَعَلَ) “made,” and *amara* (أَمَرَ) “has ordered” or “commanded.” For *faraḍa* (فَرَضَ) “prescribed,” the three translators provided the same English equivalent. This translation suggests an obligatory or ordained act that is enacted and written, indicating that the imposed order, “prescribed,” is an accurate rendering. Abdel Haleem, Al-Hilali Khan, and Pickthall succeeded in rendering the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) to match the exegetes’ interpretation of its meaning as *faraḍa* (فَرَضَ), that is, “prescribes.” Moreover, these equivalents convey the complete meaning of the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ), as understood by Muslims.

In conclusion, from a linguistic perspective, the renderings by Abdel Haleem, Al-Hilali Khan, and Pickthall appear to be more faithful. This finding reveals that the three translators generally did not encounter cultural or stylistic challenges when rendering the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) in Chapter 2 (Sūrat al-Baqarah, The Cow), verse 183.

4.2 Example 2

Source: Surah At-Tawbah (Chapter 9), Verse 51

Arabic:

(التوبة: 51) {قُلْ لَّنْ يُصِيبَنَا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَنَا هُوَ مَوْلَانَا وَعَلَى اللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ}

Target Text:

1. Abdel Haleem (2004):
“Only what God has decreed will happen to us. He is our Master: let the believers put their trust in God” (p. 196).
2. Al-Hilali and Khan (1996):
“Nothing shall ever happen to us except what Allah has ordained for us. He is our Maula (Lord, Helper, and Protector).”
“In Allah let the believers put their trust” (p. 253).
3. Pickthall (1930):
“Naught befallerth us save that which Allah hath decreed for us. He is our Protecting Friend. In Allah let believers put their trust!” (p. 150).

4.2.1 Analysis

General Meaning of the Ayah

“Nothing shall ever happen to us except what Allah has ordained for us. We are subservient to His control and decree, acknowledging that He is our Maula, i.e., He is our Lord and Protector. In Allah let the believers put their trust; in Him we put our trust. He is sufficient for us, and He is the best disposer of affairs for us.”

(Ibn Kathir, 2009, Vol. 2, p. 786)

4.2.2 Challenges of Translating the Qur’anic Arabic Homographic Words *kataba* (كَتَبَ) in Chapter 9, sūrat l-tawbah, (The Repentance), Verse 51.

The Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) in Chapter 9, Sūrat al-Tawbah (The Repentance), verse 51—{قُلْ لَّنْ يُصِيبَنَا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَنَا} (“Say, ‘Only what God has decreed will happen to us’”)—is interpreted in the sense of “decreed” as explained in *Tafsir al-Qurtubi* (2006): “Nothing will happen to us except what God has written for us. Allah’s Book tells us that either we achieve victory, which is good for us, or we are killed, and martyrdom is the greatest good for us.” This highlights the Islamic belief that everything is predestined and determined by divine destiny (*qadar*).

As shown in Example 2, Al-Hilali and Khan, Abdelhaleem, and Pickthall used free translation to maintain the differences between Arabic and English, which led to different cultural connotations and forms of expression. When the form impeded the rendering, the three translators appeared to favor the free translation method in translating the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ). Thus, they maintained the richness and accuracy of the rendition at the expense of the original Qur’anic Arabic form by rendering *kataba* (كَتَبَ) as the verb “ordained,” signifying preordained order, inevitability, imposition, and obligation. Abdelhaleem and Pickthall completed their renderings using the equivalent lexeme “decreed,” which shares the same meaning as “ordained,” serving as synonyms in a relatively accurate free translation.

Therefore, the three translators succeeded, to some extent, in transferring the meaning of the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) accurately or literally into “has decreed,” “has ordained,” and “has decreed” because they were knowledgeable about the exegetes’ interpretations of the lexeme *kataba* (كَتَبَ).

4.3 Example 3

Source Surah: Chapter 3, Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān (The Family of Imrān), verse 53

ST:

{... فَأَكْتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ} آل عمران 53

(a) Target Text:

1. Abdel Haleem (2004): “Record us among those who bear witness [to the Truth]” (p. 58).

2. Al-Hilali and Khan (1996): “So write us down among those who bear witness (to the truth, i.e., *La ilaha ill-Allah* — none has the right to be worshipped but Allah)” (p. 75).
3. Pickthall (1930): “Enroll us among those who witness (to the truth)” (p. 66).

4.3.1 Analysis

General Meaning of the Ayah

“So record us among those who bear witness (to the truth),” which is a beneficial testimony: bearing witness to the oneness of Allah (Tawheed), believing in His Messenger, and adhering to that (Sa’di & Nasser, 2009, Juz 1–3, p. 421; Ibn Kathir, 2009, Vol. 1, p. 218).

4.3.1 Problems of Translating the Qur’anic Arabic Homographic Word *fa-uk’tub’nā* (فَاُكْتُبْنَا) in Chapter 3 sūrat āl ‘imrān (The Family of Imrān), Verse 53

The Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *fa-uk’tub’nā* in Chapter 3, Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān (The Family of Imrān), Verse 53 — *faktubnā ma’a ash-shāhidīn* — is translated as “so write us down among those who bear witness,” indicating that it is *ja’ala* (or “made”).

Al-Qurtubi (2006) stated: “So write us down among those who bear witness,” indicating that for the nation of Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, on the authority of Ibn Abbas. This translation implies establishing our names alongside theirs and making us part of their group. Furthermore, it means: “So write us with those who acknowledge the truthfulness of your prophets.”

In Example 3, Abdelhaleem, Al-Hilali and Khan, and Pickthall applied a literal translation strategy, which attempts to create the same effect on English readers as that on the original Arabic. They attempted to capture the rich meaning of the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *fa-uk’tub’nā* (فَاُكْتُبْنَا). The three translators rendered the lexeme as “record us,” “write us down,” and “enroll us,” which are unsuitable for the target language (TL) readers or recipients.

Moreover, the three translators used literal translations as a strategy for rendering this verse by providing the equivalents “record us,” “write us down,” and “enroll us,” indicating record, write, register, and enroll in English. These renderings disrupt the transmission of the general meaning of the verse because literal translations often do not consider accuracy and faithfulness in context.

Therefore, in these examples illustrating the translation of the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *fa-uk’tub’nā* (فَاُكْتُبْنَا), all three translators faced cultural and stylistic challenges in maintaining faithfulness to the language, having to switch or adjust it to fulfill linguistic requirements. In the same vein, translation is a culture-bound phenomenon notwithstanding the meaning produced by the translated text. The three translators were required to consider the target culture and adapt the translation to the intended audience or language recipients..

4.4 Example 4

Source Surah: Chapter 5, Sūrat al-Mā’idah (The Table Spread with Food), Verse 21

Arabic:

(يَا قَوْمِ ادْخُلُوا الْأَرْضَ الْمُقَدَّسَةَ الَّتِي كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَلَا تَرْتَدُّوا عَلَى أَدْبَارِكُمْ فَتَنْقَلِبُوا خَاسِرِينَ) (Al-Mā’idah: 21)

Target Text:

1. Abdel Haleem (2004):
“My people, go into the holy land which God has ordained for you—do not turn back or you will be the losers.” (p. 112)
2. Al-Hilali and Khan (1996):
“O my people! Enter the holy land (Palestine) which Allah has assigned to you, and turn not back (in flight), for then you will be returned as losers.” (p. 146)
3. Pickthall (1930):
“O my people! Go into the holy land which Allah hath ordained for you. Turn not in flight, for surely ye turn back as losers.” (p. 98)

4.4.1 Analysis

General Meaning of the Ayah

“O, my people! Enter the Holy Land (Palestine) which Allah has assigned to you,” meaning that which Allah has promised to those who believe among you by the words of your father Israel. Do not turn back, i.e., flee from Jihad (struggle in Allah’s Cause); for then you will be returned as losers.” (Ibn Kathir, 2009, vol. 1, p. 436).

4.4.1. Problems in Translating the Qur’anic Arabic Homographic Word *kataba* (كَتَبَ), Chapter 5, sūrat l-māidah (The Table Spread with Food), Verse 21.

The Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) in Chapter 5, Sūrat al-Mā’idah (The Table Spread with Food), Verse 21, is interpreted to mean *amara* (أَمَرَ), or “has ordered” or “commanded.” In *Tafsir al-Qurtubi* (2006), the phrase “which Allah hath ordained for you” indicates that Allah imposed this entry upon you, promised that you would enter it, and settled it for you.

In example four, Abdel Haleem, Al-Hilali and Khan, and Pickthall used a literal translation to render the Qur’anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) in Chapter 5, Sūrat al-Mā’idah, Verse 21, into English. They translated it as “ordained,” “assigned to,” and “ordained” respectively, without providing any parenthetical explanation within the text to clarify that the intended meaning is a command and not simply “assigned,” as the lexeme implies in English. This literal translation lacks faithfulness and fidelity to the accurate meaning intended

by the Qur'anic Arabic homograph *kataba* (كَتَبَ).

Therefore, the renderings by Abdel Haleem, Al-Hilali and Khan, and Pickthall do not maintain the context of the Qur'anic message. They exhibit a higher communication load and morphological loss, making them confusing for the average reader.

5. Conclusion

The challenges of rendering the Qur'anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) into English arise from its isolated connotations and varied meanings, as well as the misunderstanding between the hidden and intended meanings and their inherent understandings. This approach highlights the inherent ambiguity of homographs in general and the Qur'anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) in particular. The Qur'anic Arabic language is abundant and rich with homographic words that impact the triangle of language. Homographic words pose stylistic and cultural difficulties in both Arabic and English.

Through this analytical study, the researcher observed a variance in the extent of faithfulness and accuracy in conveying the specific meaning of the Qur'anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) into English. This variance forces translators of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an to strive for an accurate translation. This effort is evident in the type of translation strategy that translators employ. Faithful translation is reflected in the translation approach used. Furthermore, the researcher found that, for example, Abdel Haleem, Al-Hilali and Khan, and Pickthall sometimes relied on free and faithful translations, yet they often succeeded in capturing the hidden meaning of the Qur'anic Arabic homographic word *kataba* (كَتَبَ) through their chosen frameworks. In other instances, they depended on literal translation and often failed to convey the intended meaning of these Qur'anic Arabic homographic words.

5.1 Implications of the Study

This study highlights the critical need for translators of Qur'anic Arabic, particularly homographic words like *kataba*, to balance literal faithfulness with dynamic equivalence in order to preserve both the semantic and cultural-spiritual nuances of the original text. Its findings contribute to translation theory by demonstrating the complexities of achieving meaningful equivalence in sacred texts and offer practical guidance for improving English translations of the Qur'an. By addressing linguistic, cultural, and stylistic challenges, the study supports more accurate and contextually rich translations, which can enhance cross-cultural understanding, promote respectful interfaith dialogue, and uphold the authenticity of Qur'anic messages for diverse audiences.

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Authors' contributions

The authors made significant contributions to the conception and design of the work. The first author carried out the textual analysis. Also, the three authors contributed to the interpretation of the gathered data. All authors edited, proofread and revised the work critically for important intellectual content based on the editor and reviewer's comments. All authors approved of the final version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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