



Comparative Assessment of Literal vs. Interpretive Approaches in English Translations of the Glorious Quran

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ABSTRACT

Translating the Quranic Text into English comes up with a peculiar set of challenges due to its sacred nature and the huge gap on both the linguistic and cultural levels, between Arabic as an SL formulated in a Classical form and its counterpart TL (modern English in our case). The present study aims to carry out a comparative evaluation between the two main approaches (literal and interpretive) as employed in the English translated versions of the glorious Quran. The Focus is placed chiefly on such well-known translations as Marmaduke Pickthall's (1930), Abdullah Yusuf Ali's (1934–1938), and Muhammad Asad's (1980)- but also at the same time exploring such contributions as those provided by Arthur John Arberry (1955), Muhammad Abdel Haleem (2005), and others-the study includes an analysis of how various translation strategies would influence the transfer of Qur'anic meaning. Based on the translation theory, especially the notion introduced by Eugene Nida of formal versus dynamic equivalence, the paper endeavors to establish that it is improbable to find a fully literal or fully interpretive translation. Rather, a spectrum of Translation and each translation of the Quranic text into English naturally exists at one place or another between the two edges of that spectrum. It is concluded that, on the one hand, the adoption of the approach of literal translation would normally result in preserving the lexical fidelity to the original, whereas the result of adopting the approach of interpretive translation is achieving greater success in the rendition of the spiritual effect and the functional meaning of the Quranic text for TL receivers (The English audience).

Keywords: Quranic Text, comparative assessment, literal approach, interpretive approach

تقييم مقارن للمنهجين الحرفي مقابل التفسيري في ترجمات القرآن الكريم إلى اللغة الإنجليزية

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الملخص

تطرح ترجمة النص القرآني إلى الإنجليزية مجموعةً فريدةً من التحديات بسبب طبيعته المقدسة والفجوة الهائلة على المستويين اللغوي والثقافي بين العربية كلغة مصدر صيغت في قالب كلاسيكي ونظيرتها اللغة الهدف (الإنجليزية الحديثة في حالتنا). تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى إجراء تقييم مقارن بين المنهجين الرئيسيين (الحرفي والتفسيري) كما هما مستخدمان في النسخ الإنجليزية المترجمة للقرآن الكريم. يتركز الاهتمام بشكل أساسي على ترجمات معروفة مثل ترجمة مرمادوك بيكتال (1930)، وعبد الله يوسف علي (1934-1938)، ومحمد أسد (1980)، مع استكشاف إسهامات أخرى في الوقت ذاته مثل تلك التي قدمها آرثر جون أربري (1955)، ومحمد عبد الحليم (2005)، وآخرون. وتتضمن الدراسة تحليلاً لكيفية تأثير استراتيجيات الترجمة المختلفة على نقل المعنى القرآني. واستناداً إلى نظرية الترجمة، وخصوصاً المفهوم الذي قدمه يوجين نايدا حول التكافؤ الشكلي مقابل التكافؤ الديناميكي، تسعى الورقة البحثية إلى إثبات أنه من غير المحتمل إيجاد ترجمة حرفية تماماً أو تفسيرية تماماً. بدلاً من ذلك، توجد كل ترجمة للنص القرآني إلى الإنجليزية ضمن طيف معين للترجمة في مكان ما بين طرفي ذلك الطيف. ويخلص البحث إلى أنه، من ناحية، فإن تبني منهج الترجمة الحرفية يؤدي عادةً إلى الحفاظ على الأمانة اللفظية للأصل، بينما تكون نتيجة تبني منهج الترجمة التفسيرية هي تحقيق نجاح أكبر في نقل الأثر الروحي والمعنى الوظيفي للنص القرآني لمتلقي اللغة الهدف (الجمهور الإنجليزي).

الكلمات المفتاحية: النص، القرآني، التقييم المقارن، المنهج الحرفي، المنهج التفسيري

1. Introduction

The glorious Book of Islam entertains a distinctive status in the life of Muslims, past and present. Since its revelation, the Quran, uncreated and inimitable, is highly celebrated by Muslims as it represents the glorious word of Allah. The Quranic text is not only a heavenly divine speech but the original form of it. This doctrinal attitude has exceptional value in translation. This explains why Marmaduke Pickthall in the foreword he wrote to his translated version highlights that the Qur'an is by nature is untranslatable (Pickthall, 1930, p. v).

His emphasis that Quran is untranslatable does not mean that he denies the premise that Quranic translation is necessary as it has become indispensable for the great majority of Muslims unable to understand Arabic and for those who are non-Muslims but seek to investigate and know about Islam. The earliest Quranic translations into English trace their origin back to the seventeenth century, when Alexander Ross (1649) and afterward George Sale (1734) achieved their earliest complete translations. Yet, an increased number translations by Muslim translators began to proliferate during the twentieth century. The beginning was when Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall published (The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an) in 1930 and later Abdullah Yusuf Ali published his translation which was titled (The Glorious Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary) in 1934–1938. After the introduction of these translations, a highly interpretive work by Muhammad Asad titled (The Message of the Qur'an) came into being in 1980. Likewise, Arthur John Arberry introduced his aesthetically oriented translation titled (The Koran Interpreted) in 1955. As for Muhammad Abdel Haleem, he provided an English rendering featured by accessibility and modernity which was titled (The Qur'an: A New Translation) in 2005. Rendering the Quranic message constitutes such a challenging task that each translation represents a distinct approach. Hence, we come across translations favouring the literal approach such as Pickthall's translation as they tend to maintain the syntax, lexicon, and structure of Arabic and convey them into English. In other renderings, like Asad's, a more interpretive stance is adopted wherein communicating the message of the Quran into idiomatic English is prioritized, and explanatory interpolations and extensive footnotes are provided. Still others tend to maintain an intermediary position and are featured by the extensive use of relatively literal translations as well as utilizing frequent commentary. The current paper is motivated by a central question: if translation approaches of the glorious Quran, both literal and interpretive, have their own respective strengths and weaknesses, how can they be identified? In order to provide an answer to this question, key translations across multiple dimensions of the paper are comparatively analyzed. These include: fidelity to the original lexical and syntactic structure, handling of rhetorical devices, treatment of culturally specific concepts, and overall communicative effectiveness. Likewise, this would involve handling such dimensions as rhetorical devices, culture-specific concepts and total communicative effectiveness.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Problem of Untranslatability

Conducting a comparative assessment of any Quranic translation necessitates tackling the challenge of untranslatability as a prerequisite. The Quran differs from any other ordinary text as it is possessing *i'jāz* (inimitability)- a unique status that makes any linguistic, rhetorical, and aesthetic features hard or even impossible to be fully reproduced by human efforts. In this vein, Muhammad Asad, in the foreword to his translation, observes that reproducing the Quran in any other language is impossible. He then proceeds to state that rendering its message is none the less possible in a way comprehensible to people who, like most people in the West, do not know Arabic well enough to read it unaided (Asad, n.d., p. 16).

There is an extensive documentation of the theoretical literature covering the semantic and stylistic challenges encountered in Quranic translation which impede translatability. One argument used since the early medieval era against the validity of any translation of the Quran is the concept of *i'jāz* (Wajdi, 1936, p. 16). Furthermore, according to one study, “the Qur’an could be considered untranslatable and literal translation is key to approximating the unmatched divine words” (Chagour, 2018, p. 169).

2.2 Formal Versus Dynamic Equivalence

Among the useful frameworks for analyzing the translation of the Quranic text is the dichotomy provided by Eugene Nida which makes a distinction between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. While the focus of formal equivalence is placed on conveying the message itself, in terms of both its form and its content, whereby the linguistic features of the source text would be reproduced in the target language as closely as possible. By contrast, the aim of employing dynamic equivalence is a TL product representing the natural equivalent version of the source-language message in which the response of the target audience is the ultimate priority (Nida, 1964, p. 159).

Through the application of this framework to Quranic translation, a comparative study conducted on four selected surahs summed up that “Pickthall’s translation is formal correspondences, while M. Asad’s translation is dynamic. The translation of Yusuf Ali follows both paths” (Tughral et al., 2024, p. 229). Regarding the case of Surat Al-Ikhlās and Surat Al-Falaq, it is evident that the translation provided by Yusuf is more formal, while the other two surahs, it is dynamic (Taghur et al., 2024, p. 229).

2.3 Skopos Theory

Another precious lens, labeled Skopos theory, is offered by Hans Vermeer. His theory highlights that the paramount principle of any translation is its skopos (Greek for (purpose) or (aim)) (Vermeer, 2020, p. 221). It also emphasizes that the purpose of the translator and the TT intended function in the target culture would identify what translation strategies can be utilized, beyond any intangible notion of fidelity to the original text.

Since the various Quranic translations are intended to serve different purposes. The version by Pickthall, for instance, was targeting the Western audience during a specific period of time (the early twentieth century) whereby the Quran can be presented in a style reminiscent of the King James Bible. Thus the translation would feel more familiar and with spiritual resonance to the readers of English (Kerwanto et al., 2025, p. 455). The translation performed by Ali , on the other hand, was intended for da'wa (propagation) purposes, to acquaint the English audience with the message of Islam and spread it across the world (Yakubovych, 2024, p. 15). As to Asads` translation, it was produced to address “People Who Think”—a high-brow readership wishing to rationally explore the Quranic text (Asad, n.d., p. 312).

3. The Spectrum of Approaches

Before indulging in carrying out detailed analysis of specific translations, it seems necessary to have some idea of the spectrum of the available approaches to achieve Quranic translation. At one end, there is highly-literal translation—the focus of the translator in this approach is placed on rendering each Arabic word by a corresponding English word preserving the word order of the original, even if an ungrammatical or unintelligible English will ensue. At the opposite end paraphrastic translation exists — an approach that allows a free rephrasing of the source text yielding an idiomatic English translation, wherein the original content is expanded or implicit meanings are explained.

Between these extremes lie several intermediate positions:

1. Conservative literal translation: Remains close to the Arabic syntax and lexicon but employs natural English where possible . This is exemplified by Pickthall.
2. Moderate literal translation with commentary: Preserves a relatively literal rendering of the Arabic but supplements it with extensive explanatory notes. This is exemplified by Yusuf Ali.
3. Interpretive translation with explanatory apparatus: Renders the Quran in idiomatic English while providing extensive footnotes justifying translation choices . This is exemplified by Asad.
4. Functional equivalence translation: Prioritizes the communication of meaning in natural English, often avoiding archaic language. This is exemplified by Abdel Haleem.

4. Marmaduke Pickthall: The Literal Approach

4.1 Background and Methodology

Marmaduke William Pickthall (1875–1936) was a British novelist, journalist, and convert to Islam who served as the Imam of the London Mosque in Notting Hill. His translation, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, was published in 1930 while he was in the service of the Nidham of Hyderabad in India. Pickthall's translation was the first complete English translation of the Quran produced by a Muslim convert and gained the approval of an important Muslim authority, the Nidham of Hyderabad.

Pickthall's methodology was explicitly literal. One study notes that “in his work *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (1930), Pickthall uses a literal approach with a classic English style ala the King James

Bible” (Kerwanto et al., 2025, p. 455). The goal was “for Western readers to feel familiar and be able to understand the text with a similar spiritual nuance” (Kerwanto et al., 2025, p. 457).

4.2 Strengths

Lexical Fidelity: Pickthall’s translation is widely regarded as one of the most faithful to the Arabic original in terms of word-for-word correspondence. A study of metaphor translation in the Quran found that “ the translations done by Yusuf Ali and Pickthall were considered to be more literal and thus more accurate renderings of metaphors in the Quran... while Asad’s translations were considered to be less accurate, containing, on the whole, more paraphrasing and individual interpretation” (Eweida, 2007, p. 28).

Avoidance of personal interpretations : Pickthall refrains of indulging in unjustifiable liberties as other earlier Muslim translators did who had "intrusion of some whimsical, even pugnacious notions into their translations and passing these off as the intended meaning of the Quran itself ” (Kidawi. 2017, p. 243).

4.3 Limitations

Archaic Language: One study notes that “ although his translation has been criticized for its archaic language style and extreme literal tendencies, Pickthall’s work remains an important reference and has made a major contribution to building bridges of cross-cultural understanding ” (Kerwanto et al., 2025, p. 455).

Extreme Literal Tendencies: Pickthall’s literalism sometimes results in English that is awkward or unnatural. According to Abdel Haleem, his translation came as a response as he viewed that previous translations contained " commentation offensive to Muslims and employed a style of language which Muslims at once recognize as unworthy " (Abdel Haleem, 2025, p. XXviii). While employing artificially archaic language, " his translation keeps close to the original Arabic , and is still very popular among Arabs and Muslims" (Abdel Haleem, 2025, p. XXviii).

5. Abdullah Yusuf Ali: The Moderate Literal Approach with Commentary

5.1 Background and Methodology

Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872–1953) was an Indian-British scholar, barrister, and translator whose (The Glorious Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary) was published in fascicles between 1934 and 1938, with a revised edition appearing in 1939–1940. Yusuf Ali’s translation was prepared for da’wa purposes, to spread the message and guidance of Islam in the English language, and it became the most widely read English translation among English-speaking Muslims.

He frequently includes additions for which no corresponding content exists in the text, yet these tend to elevate the ideas given in the Qur’ānic text. For instance, “al-Ḥai al-Qayyum is translated “the Living, the Self Subsisting, Eternal”, “Eternal” is an added meaning neither found in nor justified by the text.” (Arthur Jeffery, 1940).

5.2 Strengths

Accessibility Through Commentary: The extensive footnotes in Yusuf Ali's translation make the Quran accessible to readers who lack background knowledge of Islamic theology, history, and culture. His translation(1872-1952) is "Among those Qur'an translations which found Saudi favor and, therefore, wide distribution" (Ali, 1934).

Balanced Literalism: As noted earlier, Yusuf Ali's translation "follows both paths," being more formal in some surahs and more dynamic in others (Tughar et al. 2024, p. 229).

5.3. Limitations

Archaism: Like Pickthall, Yusuf Ali employs archaic language, including "thee " "thou" and "doth ". This archaism, while perhaps lending a tone of solemnity, can also create distance between the text and the modern reader.

Revisions and Censorship: Yusuf Ali's translation has undergone multiple revisions, some of which have been criticized for altering the original content.

6. Muhammad Asad: The Interpretive Approach

6.1. Background and Methodology

Muhammad Asad (1900–1992) was born in Leopold Weiss in Austria-Hungary to a Jewish family. He converted to Islam in 1926 and went on to become a journalist, diplomat, and scholar who associated with the founders of both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. His translation(was published in 1964. It took him almost 17 years to accomplish the entire work of tafsir that constitute about 1000 pages (Nadzrah and Ahmed, 2016, p. 117).

Asad's methodology is explicitly interpretive. He acknowledged his profound debt to the Egyptian reformist commentator Muhammad 'Abduh (Nadzrah and Ahmed, 2016, p. 117). Asad argued that the *i'jāz* of the Qur'an must be taken into account by the translator, probably involving an ellipticism that often "deliberately omits intermediate thought-clauses in order to express the final stage of an idea as pithily and concisely as is possible" and that "the thought-links which are missing—that is, deliberately omitted—in the original must be supplied by the translator" (Aldahesh, 2014, p. 36).

6.2 Strengths

Communicative Clarity: Asad's translation renders the Quran in clear, modern English that is far more accessible to contemporary readers than the archaic language of Pickthall or Yusuf Ali.

Rationalist/Modernist Orientation: Asad "follows the rational and Mu'tazalite attitudes in his translation", "preferring the intellect, personal knowledge" over blind imitation of traditions (Elnemr. 2020, p. 30).

6.3. Limitations

Loss of Formal Correspondence: Asad's translations were "considered to be less accurate, containing, on the whole, more paraphrasing and individual interpretation" compared to the more literal renderings of Pickthall and Yusuf Ali (Eweida, 2007, p. 30).

Risk of Exegesis: One study examines how Asad "remodels the source text to present his viewpoints in the target text" (Elnemr. 2020, p. 8).

7. Other Significant Translations

7.1. Arthur John Arberry: The Koran Interpreted (1955)

Arthur John Arberry (1905–1969) was a British Orientalist and scholar of Arabic whose translation, *The Koran Interpreted*, was first published in 1955. Arberry was a non-Muslim, and his translation has been praised for its literary quality. One scholar writes that "the translation is without prejudice and is probably the best around" (Mohammed, as cited in Wikipedia, 202, p. 19). However, as Abdel Haleem notes, Arberry's "careful observation of Arabic sentence structure and phraseology makes his translation very close to the Arabic original in grammatical terms ... [however] this feature, along with the lack of any notes or comments, can make the text seem difficult to understand and confusingly unidiomatic" (Abdel Haleem, 2024, p. XXviii).

7.2. Muhammad Abdel Haleem: The Qur'an: A New Translation (2004)

Muhammad Abdel Haleem is a professor of Islamic studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. His 2004 translation, published by Oxford University Press, represents a significant departure from the archaic style of earlier translations. Abdel Haleem's translation "is written in contemporary language that remains faithful to the meaning and spirit of the original, making the text crystal clear" (Penn State University Libraries, 200, p. 20). One study found that "Abdel Haleem captures more precision in Qur'anic explanations" (Elnemr, 2025, p. 1738). It is acknowledged by him, that in his translation, he utilized several tafsirs, including the two tafsirs (al-Baydawi's and al-Zamakhshari's). (Elimam, 1914, p. 178)

8. Comparative Analysis

8.1. Lexical Fidelity

In a study which tackled the translation of metaphor, it is concluded that Pickthall and Yusuf Ali managed to produce "more literal and thus more accurate renderings of metaphors in the Quran" than Asad (Eweida, 2007, p. 28).

8.2. Syntactic Correspondence

It seems obvious that Pickthall's translation is the most literal as he almost succeeded in maintaining the Arabic word order. Asad, on the other hand, is the least literal, and tends to freely reorganize syntax to lend itself to English patterns.

8.3. Readability and Audience Appropriateness

Abdel Haleem's translation is characterized by highest readability among contemporary English speakers, followed by Asad's. Pickthall and Ali who prefer to use archaic words more extensively, are much less readable for modern English Quranic translation receivers.

9. Case Studies: Verse-by-Verse Comparisons

9.1. Surat Al-Fatiha, Verse 1

The different approaches discussed are well illustrated by the opening ayyah of Surat Al-Fatiha: (Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm):

Pickthall (1930, p. 4): (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful)

Yusuf Ali (1934, p. 1): (In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful)

Asad (n.d., p. 22): (In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Dispenser of Grace)

Pickthall uses transliteration to render the word (Allah) rather than providing a translation of it into (God), which indicates his preference of preserving the Arabic naming. By contrast, Asad translates (Allah) into (God). On the other hand, he opts for the interpretive choice in rendering al-Raḥīm into (the Dispenser of Grace).

9.2. Surat Al-Baqarah, Verse 223

This ayah addressing marital relations poses obvious challenges:

Pickthall (1930, p. 19): (Your women are a tilth for you (to cultivate) so go to your tilth as ye will, and send (good deeds) before you for your souls, and fear Allah, and know that ye will (one day) meet Him)

Pickthall opts for a highly literal rendering in which the Arabic agricultural metaphor is preserved.

9.3. Surat An-Nur, Verse 35

The (Verse of Light) is one of the most celebrated Quranic texts:

Pickthall (1930, p. 174): (Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star)

Here, Pickthall opts for a literal rendering in which the structure and key terms of the Arabic are preserved.

10. Discussion

10.1. The Impossibility of Purely Literal Translation

The comparative analysis confirms that such thing as a purely literal translation does not exist. In rendering an Arabic term, every choice of English word involves some sort of interpretation. The process of decision-making as to whether to use a transliteration or translation in rendering a culture-specific term involves interpretation.

10.2. The Trade-Off Between Formal and Dynamic Equivalence

Pickthall's formal correspondence preserves the linguistic features of the Arabic but sometimes sacrifices clarity in English. Asad's dynamic equivalence produces clear, natural English but sometimes sacrifices formal correspondence with the Arabic.

10.3. The Role of Commentary

Yusuf Ali's combination of literal translation with extensive footnotes has proven highly successful. Asad's translation, with its even more extensive footnotes, is also highly valued by serious students.

11. Conclusion

In the present study, both literal and interpretive approaches in the English Quranic translations are comparatively assessed. Through investigating such landmark translations as those introduced by Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, and Asad and at the same time also examining the translations of Arberry, Abdel Haleem, and others, it has been concluded that no single translation can be thoroughly literal or thoroughly interpretive. Each and every translation inevitably takes up some position along a line connecting between these two extreme ends, and no translation is without interpretation.

The literal approach adopted by Pickthall is characterized by faithfully preserving the lexis and syntax of the Arabic original and is highly celebrated by Muslims for maintaining closeness to the original text. Yet, his adherence to the use of archaic language and extreme literal approach can obscure meaning. The moderate literal approach followed by Yusuf Ali as well as his extensive use of commentary tend to strike a balance between faithfulness to the original and accessibility to audience, a matter which explains why his translation is the most favoured among the English-speaking public of Muslims. While the interpretive approach employed by Asad gives precedence to communicative vividness and contextual precision, such that a highly accessible translation to modern readers can be produced. However, this approach sometimes result in sacrificing formal correspondence with the Arabic original.

To sum up, the untranslatability of the Quranic text is not a shortcoming attributable to translators rather it highlights that the original Arabic is of a unique character. Choosing between literal and interpretive approaches is not the choice but it is recognizing that there is a need to use both and to employ them carefully, paying special attention to showing sensitivity to the textual content, the nature of the target audience, and the purposes of the task of translation.

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