

Translating Rhetorical Interrogation in the Qur'an: A Comparative Analysis of Literal and Interpretive Approaches

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of conveying the rhetorical purposes of interrogative style in the Qur'an when translated into English. Interrogation constitutes one of the most prominent Qur'anic styles, carrying multiple rhetorical intentions that go beyond its literal interrogative meaning, such as affirmation, reproach, astonishment, and denial. Using a comparative analytical method, the study compares George Sale's translation (1734) with that of Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan (1996). The findings reveal that literal translation often fails to convey the rhetorical depth of the Qur'anic text, while interpretive translation tends to bring these meanings closer to the non-Arabic reader, though sometimes at the expense of Qur'anic brevity and stylistic power. The article concludes that addressing the rhetorical purposes of interrogation requires balancing fidelity to the original text with sensitivity to its rhetorical context, and it proposes adopting balanced strategies that preserve the argumentative intent of the Qur'anic discourse.

Keywords: Qur'an translation, Qur'anic rhetoric, interrogation, rhetorical purposes, literal translation, interpretive translation

Introduction

Since the dawn of Islam, Muslim scholars have devoted great attention to the Qur'an—reciting, interpreting, and reflecting upon it. As the lands of the message expanded, the need to translate its meanings became increasingly urgent for two main reasons: first, to convey its message to non-Arabic speakers in order to spread Islam and realize its universality; and second, to respond to inaccurate translations produced by non-Muslims—whether driven by ill intent or arising from an insufficient understanding of the intended meanings of the verses. Initially, there was considerable debate regarding the permissibility of translating the Qur'an. However, consensus eventually formed that translation is lawful, provided it is understood as a form of Qur'anic interpretation, and that its product should not be called “the Qur'an” itself, but rather “a translation of the meanings of the Qur'an.” Over time, various translations have emerged—some produced by Orientalists, and others by Muslim translators, both Arab and non-Arab.

These translations have generally relied either on literal rendering or on conveying the sense of the text. Like any other type of translation, translating the Qur'an raises a fundamental question: Should the translator render the meaning or the form? Should the words themselves be preserved, or should the focus be on the underlying meanings, even if that means departing from the exact wording?

Theoretical Framework

Interrogation constitutes one of the most prominent rhetorical devices in the Qur'an. It transcends its grammatical function to express various rhetorical purposes such as affirmation, reproach, denial, and astonishment. Consequently, transferring these rhetorical dimensions into other languages poses a considerable challenge for translators, especially since the Qur'anic text is characterized by stylistic beauty and miraculous eloquence that render its translation highly demanding.

This article examines how translators of the meanings of the Qur'an have dealt with this rhetorical phenomenon by comparing selected passages from George Sale's translation (1734) with those of Al-Hilali and Khan (1996).

Since the scope of this academic article does not allow for an exhaustive treatment of the topic, I have chosen—after reflecting on several translations and observing significant variation among them—to focus on one specific aspect: the stylistic level. According to scholars of *Ilm al-Ma'ani* (the science of meanings), styles in Arabic are divided into two main types: declarative (*khbari*) and non-declarative (*insha'i*). The non-declarative style includes both requestive and non-requestive forms, and among the requestive types is the interrogative style (Al-Jarim & Amin, 1999, pp. 139, 167).

In the Qur'an, interrogation appears in multiple forms: sometimes carrying its literal meaning, and other times departing from it to serve other rhetorical purposes, which will be discussed in this article. From this premise and the general problem of Qur'anic translation emerges the central research question of this study:

Should the spirit of meaning in the interrogative style be translated, or is a literal rendering sufficient?

Do literal translations convey the same rhetorical purposes in English?

Answering these questions requires an analytical exploration of the various elements of this linguistic phenomenon, as dictated by scientific methodology:

What is interrogation in Arabic rhetoric, and what are the rhetorical purposes that make it depart from its literal sense?

What should the translator prioritize: meaning or form?

How did the two Qur'an translators handle this linguistic phenomenon? Did they render the rhetorical spirit of interrogation, or did they adhere to literalism? And if literal, does it achieve the same rhetorical effects in English?

To address this problem, it is hypothesized that the translator may have followed one of the following approaches:

Relying on the context of the interrogative expression and translating its intended meaning.

Adopting an interpretive translation approach based on Qur'anic exegesis to clarify the intended sense.

Employing a purely literal translation in an effort to preserve the sanctity of the Qur'anic text. This constitutes the subject of the present analytical-comparative study. My motivation for choosing this topic stems from two main reasons: first, my personal passion for the Qur'an and its sciences; and second, the academic and methodological importance of this issue, particularly given that translation studies are relatively recent as a discipline, and Qur'an-related research within them remains limited—especially when approached independently of linguistic or purely philological concerns.

Definition of the Holy Qur'an

Al-Suyuti (1974, Vol. 1, pp. 181–182) cites the views of linguists and their interpretations concerning the term Qur'an, summarizing them as follows:

Scholars have differed regarding the linguistic meaning of the word Qur'an. Some maintain that Qur'an is a proper noun ('alam) that is not derived from any linguistic root and is unhamzated (i.e., qurān). According to this view—transmitted from Al-Shafi'i and others—God designated this name exclusively for the Book revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him), just as other revealed books were named the Torah and the Gospel.

Other scholars argue that Qur'an is derived from the word qarā'in (correlations or counterparts), because its verses confirm and resemble one another, functioning as mutual indicators (qarā'in). This opinion is attributed to Al-Farra'. Another group considers the term to be hamzated (qur'ān), derived from the root qara'a ("to recite"), and thus a verbal noun (maṣdar). This interpretation was adopted by Al-Lihyani and others.

Al-Zajjāj and several other scholars maintain that Qur'an is derived from al-qar' ("to gather"), as in the expression qara'tu al-mā'a fī al-ḥawḍ ("I gathered the water in the basin"). It is therefore called Qur'an because it gathers its chapters together, or—as Al-Rāghib explained—because it brings together the essential truths and benefits contained in the previous revealed scriptures.

Terminological Definition of the Qur'an

From a technical (and indeed, legal) perspective—since God Himself named it Qur'an rather than it being a mere scholarly convention—the Qur'an is defined as:

"The speech of God revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him), the recitation of which is an act of worship" (Al-Qattan, 1995).

This definition entails three essential qualifiers:

The speech of God: excludes anything that is not His word.

Revealed to Muhammad: excludes revelations sent to other prophets.

The recitation of which is an act of worship: excludes texts such as the Hadith Qudsi, whose recitation is not an act of worship in itself.

From these linguistic and terminological definitions, several conclusions can be drawn:

The Qur'anic text possesses a unique sacredness, being the literal word of God, and thus differs from any other human text that translators deal with.

The Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) within a specific historical and cultural context. Therefore, to grasp its full meaning, translators must understand its context by consulting Qur'anic sciences, exegesis (tafsir), reasons for revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl), and even the Prophet's biography (sīrah).

The Qur'an is a devotional text (ta'abbudi), unlike ordinary texts encountered in translation. This distinctive nature necessitates a discussion of a specific type of translation—religious translation, particularly the translation of the Holy Qur'an.

The Linguistic Features of the Qur'anic Text

The term features (Arabic: **خصائص**) refers to the specific attributes that distinguish one entity from another. The Qur'anic text possesses unique characteristics that set it apart from all human discourse—qualities so profound that no researcher can fully encompass them. It has been the subject of reflection and study by scholars since its revelation, and its wonders remain inexhaustible through the ages. Here, however, we will focus on the features that directly affect the process of translation, as summarized by Fahd bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rumi (1997).

1. From a Stylistic Perspective

a. Composition (An-Nazm)

This refers to the unique structure of the Qur'an. Al-Jahiz devoted an entire book to this feature, entitled *Nazm al-Qur'an*. His concept is based on the idea that the eloquence of the Qur'an lies in the beauty of its phrasing, perfection of composition, and harmony of structure. He writes:

“The Shaykh held that the excellence of the Qur'an lies in the arrangement of words, not merely in the meanings, for meanings are common and well known to Arabs and non-Arabs, nomads and townsmen alike. The matter lies in the proper rhythm, the choice of expression, the ease of articulation, the abundance of expression, the soundness of taste, and the excellence of construction.”

(Al-Jahiz, 1965, Vol. 3, p. 131)

b. Diversity of Expression and Unity of Meaning

The Qur'an expresses the same command in multiple stylistic ways. For example:

Using an explicit command:

﴿ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا ﴾

“Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due.”

(Surat An-Nisā', 4:58)

Expressing obligation through divine prescription:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴾

“O you who have believed, fasting has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you that you may become righteous.”

(Surat Al-Baqarah, 2:183)

Showing divine right:

﴿ وَلِلَّهِ عَلَى النَّاسِ حِجُّ الْبَيْتِ مَنِ اسْتَطَاعَ إِلَيْهِ سَبِيلًا ﴾

“And [due] to Allah from the people is a pilgrimage to the House—for whoever is able to find thereto a way.”

(Surat Āl 'Imrān, 3:97)

Reporting about the obliged individual:

﴿ وَالْوَالِدَتُ يُرَضِعْنَ أَوْلَدَهُنَّ حَوْلَيْنِ كَامِلَيْنِ ﴾

“Mothers may breastfeed their children two complete years.”

(Surat Al-Baqarah, 2:233)

This variety of expressions conveys a single core meaning through multiple rhetorical forms, demonstrating the Qur'an's stylistic richness.

c. Combination of Conciseness and Clarity

A Qur'anic verse may appear fully clear upon the first reading; yet, upon deeper reflection, it yields new and equally valid meanings. This layered depth of interpretation reflects the inexhaustible eloquence of the divine text.

d. Brevity of Expression with Completeness of Meaning

In human language, brevity and completeness are often mutually exclusive; the Qur'an uniquely combines both, achieving perfection without redundancy or deficiency in a single letter. The secret lies in the fact that it is the word of the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, free from human limitations and imperfection.

2. From a Juridical Perspective

The Qur'an is governed by specific rulings that do not apply to any other text:

a. The Prohibition of Interpretation by Mere Opinion

It is forbidden to interpret the Qur'an based solely on personal opinion without evidence, as this would constitute conjecture. Allah says:

﴿وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا﴾

"And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed, the hearing, the sight, and the heart—about all those [one] will be questioned."

(Surat Al-Isrā', 17:36)

And also:

﴿وَأَنْ تَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ﴾

"And that you say about Allah that which you do not know."

(Surat Al-Baqarah, 2:169)

b. The Prohibition of Reciting It by Meaning

The Qur'an's wording is sacred; it is not permissible to alter, add, or omit even a single letter. Ibn Hazm reported the consensus of scholars:

"Everything in the Qur'an is true. Whoever adds a letter not transmitted through the authentic canonical readings, or omits a letter, or substitutes one for another—after evidence has been established that it is part of the Qur'an—and persists in doing so knowingly, is an unbeliever."

(Ibn Hazm, 1998, p. 270)

Hence, it is obligatory to preserve the exact wording of the Qur'an and forbidden to manipulate it.

c. Its Gradual Revelation

The Qur'an was revealed gradually, not all at once. Allah says:

﴿وَقُرْآنًا فَرَقْنَاهُ لِتَقْرَأَهُ عَلَى النَّاسِ عَلَى مَكُثٍ وَنَزَّلْنَاهُ تَنْزِيلًا﴾

"And [it is] a Qur'an which We have separated [by intervals] that you might recite it to the people over a prolonged period. And We have sent it down progressively."

(Surat Al-Isrā', 17:106)

This gradual revelation necessitates an understanding of the circumstances of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl), the distinction between Makki and Madani verses, and other Qur'anic sciences that reveal its meanings and purposes.

(Al-Rumi, 1997, pp. 18, 21, 42, 45, 47, 150, 174, 201)

Religious Translation and the Problem of Translating the Qur'anic Text

Definition of Religious Translation

This term consists of two notions: translation and its qualification as religious. The term's meaning is thus defined by these two components. Below are some dictionary definitions of both notions:

In Mukhtar al-Sihah, it is stated:

"Tarjama (ترجم) is said when one explains speech in another tongue. Hence, tarjumān means interpreter, and its plural is tarājim. One may also say tarjumān with a ḍamma on both the tā' and the jīm." (Al-Razi, 1996, p. 119)

In Al-Mu'jam al-Wasit :

"Tarjama al-kitāb: he rendered it from one language into another; he explained it in another tongue." (Academy of the Arabic Language, Egypt, 2008, p. 86)

In Matn al-Lugha :

"Tarjama kalāmahu" means "he clarified and explained it," and turjima al-kitāb means "it was explained in another tongue" or "transferred from one language to another." (Rida, 1960, vol. 1, p. 391)

According to the Oxford Dictionary :

1. translation (from something) (into something) | translation (of something) (into something): the process of changing something that is written or spoken into another language.
2. a text or work that has been changed from one language into another.
3. translation (of something) into something: the process of changing something into a different form. (Hornby, 2005, p. 1632)

In Larousse (French):

1. Action de traduire, de transposer dans une autre langue : La traduction d'un livre.
2. Énonciation dans une autre langue (ou langue cible) de ce qui a été énoncé dans une langue (la langue source), en conservant les équivalences sémantiques et stylistiques. (larousse.fr, 2017)

- *The act of translation is the transfer into another language — for example, translating a book.*

- *It is the expression, in a target language, of what has been expressed in a source language, while maintaining semantic and stylistic equivalence. (my translation)*

The meaning of translation in these Arabic dictionaries and others revolves around transfer — and it can also mean explanation, clarification, interpretation, or transformation . Similarly, the Larousse definition clearly indicates that translation can mean transferring words or texts into another language while maintaining their meaning, or rewriting them in the same language in a clearer form.

The Term “Religious” This is a qualification relating to religion . In the dictionaries, religion (dīn) is defined as follows:

In Maqāyīs al-Lughā :

"Dīn (د ي ن) originates from one root indicating submission and obedience. Thus, dīn means compliance and servitude; one says: dāna lahu yadīnu dīnan , meaning he submitted and obeyed. A people described as dīn are obedient and submissive. The word madīna (city) is derived from the same root, as it is a place where obedience to rulers is established. Likewise, madīna means servant, and a slave is madīn , both humbled by service." (Maqāyīs al-Lughā, 2017)

In terminology, religion refers to the set of principles and beliefs adhered to by a community, either in faith or in practice.

Accordingly, religious translation refers to the translation of texts related to religion — whether sacred texts, their commentaries, derived rulings, or interpretative works. Among these is the translation of the Holy Qur'an, which is the focus of this study.

Thus, religious translation, particularly the translation of the Qur'an, constitutes a special branch of general translation, possessing its own unique characteristics, discussed below.

Peculiarities of Translating the Qur'anic Text

Al-Marāghī states:

"Every Muslim who knows Arabic and understands it must not turn away from reading the Qur'anic Arabic text. It cannot be claimed that the Arabic composition has no influence or beauty for a Javanese, Persian, Turkish, or Chinese Muslim who does not know Arabic. Muslim nations that do not understand Arabic are not now affected by the sweetness and eloquence of the Arabic composition. Therefore, reading translations does not deprive them of that beauty and influence; on the contrary, reading translations allows them to experience the sweetness, pleasure, and effect of the meanings."

(as quoted in Mohamed Ben Abd al-Salam, Arab, 2001, p. 11)

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It has already been established that the language of the Qur'an is unique — unlike any human language in its wording, style, eloquence, and meanings, even in its context and the rulings related to it. Consequently, translating the Qur'an necessarily entails difficulty. The translator must observe certain considerations, which can be termed the peculiarities of translating the Qur'anic text .

One researcher in this field summarizes these peculiarities as follows:

1. The Uniqueness and Polysemy of Qur'anic Vocabulary

The Arabic language can be viewed from two perspectives, as al-Shātibī explains:

"The Arabic language, as a system of expressions indicating meanings, may be considered in two ways: first, as free expressions indicating primary meanings — this is the original denotation; and second, as expressions bound by specific contexts indicating secondary, serving meanings — this is the derived denotation."

The first aspect is shared by all languages, while the second is exclusive to Arabic — it is the core of its rhetorical and miraculous nature. This means that the Qur'an cannot be fully translated; only the first layer of shared meanings can be rendered, while the specifically Arabic aspects are lost.

For instance, consider the verse:

مَا جَعَلَ اللَّهُ مِنْ بَجِيرَةٍ وَلَا سَائِبَةٍ وَلَا وَصِيلَةٍ وَلَا حَامٍ وَلَكِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يَفْتَرُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ وَأَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ

"Allah has not ordained (the making of) a bahīrah or a sā'ibah or a waṣīlah or a ḥām; but those who disbelieve fabricate a lie against Allah, and most of them do not understand." (Al-Mā'idah 5:103)

The words bahīrah , sā'ibah , waṣīlah , and ḥām have no direct equivalents in other languages. As Ibn al-Jawzī explains in Talbīs Iblīs :

The bahīrah was a she-camel that, after giving birth five times, had her ear slit and was forbidden to women. The sā'ibah was a freed animal that was neither ridden nor milked. The waṣīlah was a sheep that, after bearing seven offspring, was spared from slaughter. The ḥām was a stallion that had produced ten offspring and was dedicated to idols, no longer to be ridden. (Al-Fatwa, 2017)

Some translators have rendered these terms using transcription , while others provided footnotes explaining their meanings to avoid ambiguity.

2. The Uniqueness of Fixed or Idiomatic Expressions

These include Arabic collocations and idioms such as ibn al-sabīl (wayfarer), taḥrīr raqabah (freeing a slave), shaqqa al-anfus (risking one's life), qāba qawsayn (at a distance of two bows' length), and expressions like 'alā bayyina (upon clear proof), ḥubban jamma (intense love), or balagha ashuddah (reached full maturity).

Such expressions are unique to Arabic and correspond to what is today termed idioms . Literal translation of these phrases often sounds strange or even absurd; thus, translators must rely on context and meaning , not form.

3. The Uniqueness of Grammar

Languages differ greatly in their grammatical structures. Among the grammatical features that have caused translators considerable difficulty are:

Pronoun reference and sentence structure:

In Arabic, the antecedent of a pronoun may not be immediately clear, requiring deep syntactic and contextual awareness.

For example:

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الَّذِينَ ءَاتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَعْرِفُونَهُ

“Those to whom We gave the Scripture recognize him...” (Al-An‘ām 6:20)

Here, the pronoun هُ (him) in ya‘rifūnahu might appear to refer to the Book, but exegetes explain that it actually refers to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Case endings (i‘rāb):

Arabic syntax defines grammatical relationships through case endings, which can change meaning entirely.

For instance:

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ وَالْأَنْعَامِ مُخْتَلِفٌ أَلْوَنُهُ كَذَلِكَ إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ غَفُورٌ

“And among people and moving creatures and grazing livestock are various colors likewise. Only those fear Allah, from among His servants, who have knowledge. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Forgiving.” (Fāṭir 35:28)

In this verse, the word اللَّهُ (Allah) is in the accusative case, not the nominative — meaning that the scholars fear Allah, not that Allah fears the scholars. Such distinctions demand grammatical precision from the translator.

The Translation of the Qur’an: Between Literalism and Adaptation

After having presented the definitions and features of the Qur’an and religious translation in the previous sections—as partial components of the overall research problem—this section discusses one of the most debated issues in translation studies, a question that has preoccupied scholars since the early beginnings of translation theory:

Should a translator render the words and structures, or the ideas and meanings?

The Qur’anic text, like any other text, is not exempt from this fundamental dilemma. In fact, it is more deeply affected by it, because the Qur’anic wording is semantically charged, combining conciseness (ījāz) with miraculous eloquence (i‘jāz). Here, we will review the perspectives of several translation theorists on this matter.

The Difficulty of Translation, Equivalence, and Linguistic Difference

Translation is, without doubt, among the most mentally demanding tasks. Al-Jāḥiẓ offered a detailed reflection on this topic, which, despite its length, deserves to be quoted in full:

“The translator can never render what the wise man has said, preserving the precise meanings of his thoughts, the truth of his doctrines, the subtleties of his expressions, and the hidden limits of his ideas. He cannot fulfill their due rights or perform his duty faithfully unless he possesses the same level of understanding of meanings, the same command of linguistic variations and interpretations, as the original author himself.

How could Ibn al-Biṭrīq, Ibn Nā‘ima, Ibn Qurra, Ibn Fuhrīz, Thifil, Ibn Wahlī, or Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ ever be equal to Aristotle? Or how could Khālid be the same as Plato?

A translator must have eloquence in his translation equal to his knowledge of the subject. He should be the most learned of people in both languages—the source and the target—so that he is equally proficient in each. But whenever we find someone speaking two languages, we realize that each weakens the other within him, for every language draws upon and interferes with the other. Thus, his command of both together cannot be as strong as his command of one alone.

The more complex and specialized the field of knowledge, and the fewer its experts, the harder translation becomes and the more likely the translator is to err. You will never find a translator fully matching one of those great scholars.

This is true even for books on geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, and music. What then of books on religion reports about God, exalted be He, about what is permissible and impermissible, and discussions of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) and interpretation (*ta'wīl*)?

How can one translate accurately the meanings that deal with divine nature, revelation, allegory, and the fine distinctions between truth and falsehood? A translator must distinguish between general and specific expressions, between reports that are *ḥadīth* and those that are *Qur'an* , and between what reason determines and what custom or circumstance limits. He must know when a statement can be considered true or false, and what it means for an expression to be 'impossible' (*muḥāl*), and whether such impossibility can be called falsehood.

Unless the translator masters all this, he will err in translating religious discourse. And error in religion is far graver than error in mathematics, philosophy, or the practical sciences."

(Al-Jāḥiẓ, 1965, pp. 75–79)

Commentary

Al-Jāḥiẓ, in this remarkable passage, sets without compromise the necessary conditions for producing a satisfactory translation.

He presents insightful linguistic observations about bilingual interference, equivalence, and the limits of translation.

He insists on two main dimensions of translator competence:

1. Mastery of the subject matter of the text.
2. Full command of both source and target languages.

He also underscores the impossibility of the translator equaling the original author in understanding or expression.

Moreover, he draws attention to linguistic interference between languages—how each affects and distorts the other.

Finally, Al-Jāḥiẓ warns of the grave danger of translating the *Qur'an* inaccurately, as an error in religious translation carries far greater consequences than one in scientific or technical texts.

Following this discussion of the difficulty of translation and the intellectual and linguistic qualifications it demands, the next section will address the approaches and strategies that translators adopt—whether direct , such as literal translation , or indirect , involving varying degrees of adaptation and interpretation.

The Problem of Literal and Free (Interpretive) Translation

Upon reflection, translation can be divided into two main types : literal and interpretive (or free) translation.

Literal translation seeks to imitate the form and structure of the original text. It is akin to substituting a word with its direct equivalent in another language. Some scholars call it verbal translation , while others refer to it as equivalent translation .

Interpretive or free translation , on the other hand, does not adhere to the original wording and structure . Its main concern is to convey the intended meanings and purposes accurately and effectively. For this reason, it is also called semantic translation or interpretive translation , since its goal resembles that of *tafsīr* (interpretation).

Thus, the literal translator focuses on individual words, understanding each and replacing it with its counterpart in the target language—often at the expense of meaning—because of differences in idiomatic usage or contextual connotations between the two languages.

Meanwhile, the interpretive translator grasps the intended meaning conveyed by the structure of the original text, then recasts it in an equivalent form in the target language that best reflects the author's intention, without being constrained by the literal form or order of the original words.

The Non-Literal (Rhetorical) Purposes of Interrogatives in the Qur'an
Classical scholars of 'ilm al-ma'ānī (the science of meanings) such as Al-Ṣāhibī and others have noted that interrogatives (questions) in Arabic often move beyond their basic meaning of seeking information to express various rhetorical purposes. Below are some of these functions with examples from the Qur'an, keeping the Arabic text and its translation:

1. Negation (النفي)

﴿هَلْ جَزَاءُ الْإِحْسَنِ إِلَّا الْإِحْسَنُ﴾ الرحمن: 60

"Is the reward for goodness anything but goodness?" (Surat al-Raḥmān, 60)

2. Denial or Reproach (الإنكار)

﴿قَالَ أَسْتَبْدِلُونَ الَّذِي هُوَ أَدْنَىٰ بِالَّذِي هُوَ خَيْرٌ﴾ البقرة: 61

He said: "Would you exchange what is better for what is inferior?" (Surat al-Baqarah, 61)

3. Affirmation (التقرير)

﴿أَلَيْسَ اللَّهُ بِأَحْكَمَ الْحَكَمِينَ﴾ التين: 8

"Is not Allah the most just of judges?" (Surat al-Tīn, 8)

4. Mockery, Sarcasm, or Derision (التهكم والسخرية)

﴿قَالُوا يُسْعِيْبُ أَصْلَوكُمْ تَأْمُرُكَ أَنْ نَتْرَكَ مَا يَعْبُدُ آبَاؤُنَا أَوْ أَنْ نَفْعَلَ فِي أَمْوَالِنَا مَا نَشَاءُ إِنَّكَ لَأَنْتَ الْحَلِيمُ الرَّشِيدُ﴾ هود: 87

They said: "O Shu'ayb, does your prayer command you that we should abandon what our fathers worship or that we should not do what we please with our wealth? Indeed, you are the forbearing, the right-minded!" (Surat Hūd, 87)

5. Astonishment (التعجب)

﴿وَقَالُوا مَالِ هَذَا الرَّسُولِ يَأْكُلُ الطَّعَامَ وَيَمْشِي فِي الْأَسْوَاقِ﴾ الفرقان: 7

And they said: "What is with this messenger that he eats food and walks in the markets?" (Surat al-Furqān, 7)

6. Equivalence (التسوية)

﴿سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أَسْتَغْفَرْتَ لَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تَسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ لَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ﴾ المنافقون: 6

It is the same for them whether you ask forgiveness for them or do not ask forgiveness—Allah will never forgive them. (Surat al-Munāfiqūn, 6)

7. Encouragement or Appeal (التشويق)

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا هَلْ أَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَىٰ تِجَارَةٍ تُجْزِيكُمْ مِّنْ عَذَابِ أَلِيمٍ﴾ الصف: 10

O you who believe! Shall I direct you to a trade that will save you from a painful punishment? (Surat al-Ṣaff, 10)

8. Wish or Desire (التمني)

﴿فَهَلْ لَّنَا مِن شُفَعَاءَ فَيَشْفَعُوا لَنَا أَوْ نُرَدُّ فَنَعْمَلْ غَيْرَ الَّذِي كُنَّا نَعْمَلُ﴾ الأعراف: 53

"Then shall we have intercessors to intercede for us, or could we be returned that we might do other than what we used to do?" (Surat al-A'raf, 53)

9. Command (الأمر)

﴿فَهَلْ أَنْتُمْ مُنْتَهُونَ﴾ المائدة: 91

So will you not desist? (Surat al-Mā'idah, 91)

10. Rebuke (التوبيخ)

﴿مَا سَلَكَكُمْ فِي سَقَرٍ﴾ المدثر: 42

What led you into Hellfire? (Surat al-Muddaththir, 42)

11. Encouragement (الحث)

﴿وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّذَكِّرٍ﴾ القمر: 22

And We have certainly made the Qur'an easy to remember, so is there anyone who will be mindful? (Surat al-Qamar, 22)

12. Urging or Exhortation (التحريض)

﴿أَلَا تُقَاتِلُونَ قَوْمًا نَكَثُوا أَيْمَانَهُمْ ... فَأَلَّهِ أَحَقُّ أَنْ تَخْشَوْهُ﴾ التوبة: 13

Will you not fight a people who broke their oaths...? Allah has more right that you should fear Him. (Surat al-Tawbah, 13)

13. Invitation (العرض)

﴿أَلَا تُحِبُّونَ أَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ﴾ النور: 22

Would you not love that Allah should forgive you? And Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (Surat al-Nūr, 22)

14. Intimidation or Magnification (التهويل)

﴿الْحَاقَّةُ ۝١ مَا الْحَاقَّةُ ۝٢ وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الْحَاقَّةُ﴾ الحاقة: 1-3

The Inevitable! What is the Inevitable? And what will make you know what the Inevitable is? (Surat al-Hāqqah, 1-3)

15. Reproach for Delay or Impatience (الاستبطاء)

﴿أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَنْ تُدْخَلُوا الْجَنَّةَ وَلَمَّا يَأْتِكُم مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ...﴾ البقرة: 214

Or do you think that you will enter Paradise while there has not yet come to you the like of those who passed away before you? (Surat al-Baqarah, 214)

16. Impossibility or Improbability (الاستبعاد)

﴿أَنَّى لَهُمُ الذِّكْرَى وَقَدْ جَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ مُبِينٌ﴾ الدخان: 13

How can there be a reminder for them now, when a clear messenger had already come to them? (Surat al-Dukhān, 13)

Methodology

The article employs an analytical and comparative approach to examine two examples of Qur'anic translations that feature the rhetorical use of interrogation. The study includes George Sale's translation, which represents an older, more literalist tendency, and the Hilali-Khan translation, which follows a more interpretive and explanatory approach. The translated texts are compared with the original Qur'anic verses, with an analysis of how rhetorical purposes are conveyed in translation.

Analysis and Discussion

In Arabic rhetoric, *istifhām* (interrogation) is defined as a rhetorical device used to seek understanding or knowledge of something, though it is often used figuratively to express various rhetorical purposes such as affirmation, wonder, reproach, negation, or denial, among others. Rhetoricians have emphasized that interrogation in the Qur'an is one of the most expressive and persuasive devices that enrich meaning and deepen the argumentative intent of the Qur'anic discourse.

From a translational perspective, religious translation in general—and Qur'an translation in particular—requires an acute awareness of the rhetorical dimension of the source text. The translator's task is not limited to transferring the superficial meaning; rather, it involves capturing and reproducing the rhetorical intentions in the target language to achieve a degree of semantic and functional equivalence.

Analysis of the Models

First Model: Negation

Allah the Almighty says: "هَلْ جَزَاءُ الْإِحْسَنِ إِلَّا الْإِحْسَنُ" (Surat Ar-Rahman, 60)

The interrogative here conveys the meaning of negation, which can be confirmed by substituting the interrogative particle with a negation particle. Outside the Qur'anic context, one could say, "There is no reward for goodness except goodness," without any change in meaning.

Interpretation of the Verse:

Al-Tahir ibn 'Ashur explains:

"The interrogative form here conveys negation, and the use of exception (لَا) emphasizes the restriction of reward to goodness only. This restriction expresses that such is the true recompense and the one required by wisdom and justice." (Ibn 'Ashur, 1984)

Hilali & Khan's Translation:

Is there any reward for good other than good?

George Sale's Translation:

Shall the reward of good works be any other than good?

Analysis:

It is evident that both translators rendered the interrogative literally, with only slight stylistic differences. The question arises: will the English reader perceive the implied negation? Some might interpret it as a real question, while others may grasp the intended rhetorical sense. However, rendering it as a direct negation could expose the translator to criticism for deviating from the original text in favor of meaning.

Both translations lean toward literalism, especially in Hilali and Khan's version, which mirrors the original syntactic structure almost completely. This choice is likely motivated by the sacredness of the text and the translator's commitment to fidelity. The use of the question mark is also crucial—its omission could have weakened the intended rhetorical effect.

George Sale's version includes the word *works*, which narrows the broader semantic scope of *good*—a word shared by all three translators. From a structural perspective, the translations are functionally adequate in conveying the rhetorical intent, since English also employs rhetorical questions that do not expect an answer but rather prompt reflection.

Given this, the translation achieves a high degree of semantic equivalence. However, stylistically, the repetition of *good* may sound awkward to an English reader, resulting in a minor stylistic loss that cannot be entirely avoided.

Suggested Translation:

The reward for good works is not other than good.

(Inserted between brackets to clarify the implied negation.)

Second Model: Affirmation and Confirmation

Allah the Almighty says: "أَلَمْ نَشْرَحْ لَكَ صَدْرَكَ" (Surat Ash-Sharh, 1)

Interpretation of the Verse:

The rhetorical purpose here is *taqrīr* (affirmation and confirmation), in which the question prompts the addressee to acknowledge something, whether to affirm or deny it, often for purposes such as gratitude or moral reflection.

Al-Qurtubi explains:

"The interrogative here conveys affirmation, as in 'Have We not expanded your chest?' meaning, We have indeed expanded it. The negation particle (لَمْ) in such interrogatives implies affirmation, as in: 'Is not Allah the best of judges?'—that is, indeed, He is." (Al-Qurtubi, 2006)

Hilali & Khan's Translation:

Have We not opened your breast for you (O Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم)?

George Sale's Translation:

Have We not opened thy breast?

The pronoun *thy* is an archaic form of *your*, typical of older English usage (Hornby, 2005).

Analysis:

This example represents one of the simplest rhetorical functions to translate—affirmation through an interrogative. The English inter-negative construction (Have we not...?) naturally carries a tone of confirmation, thus adequately conveying the rhetorical force.

The translations are almost identical, except for Hilali and Khan's addition of *for you*, which seems redundant and overly cautious. Both versions remain literal and faithful to the source.

Yet, a subtle cultural issue arises: while an Arabic reader readily understands "شرح الصدر" (expanding the chest) as a metaphor for relief or enlightenment, an English reader may interpret "opening the breast" literally, which could be confusing.

However, since *open* is also used metaphorically in English expressions like *open the mind* or *open the heart*, the meaning can still be understood figuratively. Still, translators should ideally clarify such expressions perhaps through footnotes or parenthetical glosses—to guide readers toward the intended metaphorical meaning.

Third Model: Magnification and Exaltation

Allah the Almighty says: "اَلْحَاقَّةُ ۙ مَا اَلْحَاقَّةُ ۚ" (Surat Al-Haqqah, 1–2)

Interpretation of the Verse:

Al-Qurtubi explains:

"The interrogative form here expresses magnification and glorification, as when one says, 'Zayd—what a man Zayd is!' to emphasize his greatness." (Al-Qurtubi, 2006)

Hilali & Khan's Translation:

The Inevitable, what is the Inevitable?

George Sale's Translation:

The Infallible! What is the Infallible?

Analysis:

In English, the closest equivalent to Arabic magnification through interrogation is the exclamatory form, which is typically expressed using *what* or *how*. However, rhetorical interrogation for magnification is rare in English, and most interjections (*wow*, *oh*, etc.) belong to colloquial speech rather than formal or sacred contexts.

This presents a linguistic and cultural challenge: how can the grandeur and solemnity of the Qur'anic style be preserved when the target language lacks a corresponding rhetorical device? The Qur'anic repetition—"الحاقة، ما الحاقة"—achieves conciseness and awe simultaneously, while in English, repetition may sound awkward rather than powerful.

To compensate, a translator might consider adding a clarifying element to preserve the intended exaltation without compromising stylistic decorum.

Suggested Translation:

The Inevitable what (great) is the Inevitable?

Conclusion, and Recommendations

The comparative analysis revealed that *literal translation*, as represented by Sale, often strips the Qur'anic text of its *rhetorical depth*, since it confines the interrogative form to its surface meaning without reflecting the *intended rhetorical purpose* behind it. For example, verses carrying tones of *reproach* or *denial* were rendered in a *neutral manner*, losing much of their persuasive power.

In contrast, the Hilali-Khan translation made visible efforts to convey rhetorical meaning through interpretation and explanatory additions, which made the text clearer for non-Arabic readers. However, this approach sometimes resulted in the loss of Qur'anic conciseness and in stylistic dilution due to over-expansion.

The key findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Literal translation causes the Qur'anic text to lose its rhetorical intentions, as it preserves only the interrogative's surface form.
2. Interpretive translation comes closer to conveying rhetorical meanings, yet it may sacrifice the text's brevity and stylistic force.
3. Translators are encouraged to adopt balanced strategies that consider both semantic accuracy and rhetorical effect.

The study concludes that rendering the rhetorical functions of interrogation in the Qur'an constitutes one of the most challenging tasks in translation. Neither literal nor interpretive translation alone can fully reproduce all intended dimensions. Therefore, the study recommends adopting a balanced communicative approach that combines fidelity to the source text with the ability to convey its rhetorical purpose to non-Arabic readers. It also suggests that future research explore the translation of other rhetorical forms in the Qur'an, such as imperatives, prohibitions, and similes.

In concluding this research, it is important to emphasize that our focus—approached with utmost objectivity—was on the process and product of translation, while avoiding subjective judgments. This explains our reliance on linguistic analysis as the foundation of our methodology. Our aim was to assess the translatability of religious meaning and to identify the challenges and distinctive features that set Qur'anic discourse apart from other forms of writing, as well as how this distinctiveness impacts the translation process.

Our findings can be summarized as follows:

First, as shown in the theoretical section, the Qur'anic text is unlike any other form of discourse, both in form and substance. Its linguistic structure differs significantly from that of ordinary Arabic—its diction, syntax, and stylistic patterns are unique. Commands, prohibitions, narratives, and moral lessons are all expressed with remarkable precision and aesthetic eloquence that surpass even the finest works of poets and prose writers. These stylistic and rhetorical features require a high linguistic competence and a refined aesthetic sensibility to be properly appreciated—especially by the translator.

This specialized use of language has deep implications for meaning, as Qur'anic expressions cannot be understood at face value. They demand close reading, interpretation, and contextual reflection to grasp the subtleties conveyed through diction and structure. Consequently, translating such a text poses unique challenges, requiring careful reasoning, profound linguistic insight, and great stylistic caution to preserve the intended meaning.

Second, the linguistic features mentioned above are clearly present in the interrogative samples analyzed. These features are precisely what make it so difficult to find equivalent renderings in the target language. Literal translation often leads to significant stylistic and rhetorical loss, while interpretive translation, though compensatory, may obscure the formal characteristics of the original. Moreover, certain cultural and religiously charged terms evoke different responses from Arabic and non-Arabic readers. This places the translator in a dilemma: either preserve these terms to foster linguistic and cultural exchange at the cost of rhetorical effect, or adapt them to achieve a similar overall impact in the target language.

We observed such difficulties in both linguistic and cultural untranslatability, which often compel translators—willingly or not—to resort to borrowing or cultural adaptation. Such interventions may invite criticism, raising concerns about fidelity, scholarly integrity,

and religious responsibility. Linguistic adaptation, on the other hand, may be stylistically motivated or simply inevitable due to structural differences between languages, often leading to the loss of some of the original text's aesthetic power. Thus, loss in translation is inevitable, especially in sacred texts. Religious translation can only convey some of the beauty of the original, and stylistic equivalence between two languages so different in nature is practically impossible. Yet, this reality should not discourage attempts to render the Qur'an comprehensible to non-Arabic audiences, since Islamic scholarship recognizes and permits translation for the sake of understanding.

Third, our comparative analysis and discourse-based translation techniques have proven to be effective theoretical tools for achieving objective and systematic analysis. They allowed us to explore intricate rhetorical structures, to examine semantic possibilities, and to measure the degree of equivalence or divergence between the source and target texts. We also found that reading the source and translation in isolation is insufficient; true understanding emerges only through comparative and contextual analysis.

Finally, it is clear that translators do not deliberately choose one style or another; their performance is largely intuitive and depends on how well they fulfill the conditions of religious translation—conditions that cannot be fully acquired through training alone. Practice may develop some of these skills, but the missing link often lies in bilingual linguistic mastery.

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