

Contextual Synonymy in Translating Religious Texts between Arabic and English: An Applied Study on the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an

Prepared by the researcher

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Abstract

This study addresses the phenomenon of contextual synonymy in the translation of religious texts, focusing on the Holy Qur'an as a complex linguistic and rhetorical model that demands a high level of precision when rendered into English. The study aims to analyze how synonyms are employed in the Qur'anic text and to assess the success of English translations—specifically those by Al-Hilali & Khan and George Sale—in conveying these subtle distinctions in a way that preserves the original rhetorical and religious meaning.

The study adopts a comparative analytical methodology, selecting five clear cases of Qur'anic synonymy: (فلا تقربوها / فلا تعتدوها, خلق / برأ, قتل / ذبح, نجى / أنجى, عبد / عباد / عبید). These cases are analyzed in light of the interpretation of Imam Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rawī, who provides a precise explanation of word meanings within their religious and rhetorical contexts. The interpretations are then compared with the formulations used in English translations.

The findings reveal that synonymy in the Qur'an is not a random linguistic phenomenon but serves specific rhetorical and exegetical purposes that vary by context. The study shows that many translations overlook these distinctions, often unifying meanings or using synonyms that fail to convey the intended semantic charge, leading to a weakening of the text's impact or distortion of its rhetorical objectives. The analysis highlights the importance of employing contextual explanation or reconstructing meaning rather than relying on literal or lexical translation.

The study concludes with several key recommendations, including: the necessity of employing contextual exegeses when translating religious texts; training translators in the semantic structure of Qur'anic texts; supporting translations with explanatory footnotes; and revising existing translations using rigorous linguistic and rhetorical criteria.

Keywords: synonymy, religious translation, Qur'an, al-Sha'rawī, context, rhetoric, Al-Hilali and Khan, George Sale, semantic nuance, exegesis.

1. Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

In an era marked by unprecedented acceleration in cultural and religious interaction among nations, translation has emerged as a pivotal means of building bridges between peoples. It is no longer a scholarly luxury or artistic skill, but a communicative necessity in a globalized world and a central vehicle for transmitting knowledge, beliefs, and civilizational symbols. Among the various domains of translation, religious translation occupies a special status due to the doctrinal and spiritual content it conveys—content that deeply affects the recipient's perception of identity and faith.

Qur'anic translation is one of the most prominent and sensitive examples of this type of translation. The Qur'an is not only a miraculous linguistic text but also a doctrinal and legislative reference for the Muslim community. Given its central position, the translation of its meanings into other languages—foremost among them English—requires a nuanced awareness not only of language but also of the doctrinal, rhetorical, and cultural context of the text.

Numerous studies in the field of translation (Baker, 1992; Hatim & Mason, 1997; Munday, 2001) affirm that literal translation of religious texts often fails to achieve the intended effect in the target language because it neglects interpretive context and assumes unrealistic linguistic equivalence. This issue becomes even more evident when dealing with complex linguistic phenomena such as synonymy.

1.2 Theoretical Background: Synonymy in Language and Translation

Synonymy is a fundamental linguistic phenomenon, traditionally defined as "a similarity or closeness in meaning between two or more linguistic units." However, this simplistic definition conceals a deep semantic and contextual complexity. Numerous linguistic and semantic studies (Larson, 1998; Shehab, 2009; Malmkjaer, 2005) have shown that **complete synonymy**—that is, total identity in meaning—is extremely rare in natural languages. Most so-called synonyms are actually words with similar meanings that differ in tone, usage register, or cultural connotation.

In Arabic, synonymy is a deeply rooted stylistic phenomenon that has been extensively studied by early Arab linguists—from al-Jāhīz in *al-Ḥayawān*, to modern dictionaries such as *al-Muʿjam al-Wajīz*. These sources indicate that many words considered synonyms—such as (ذبح - قتل) or (عبد - عبيد - عباد)—differ in degree of meaning, rhetorical effect, or contextual usage.

In English, synonymy dictionaries (such as *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms*, 1984) also reveal that words like *rescue*, *save*, and *deliver* may be considered synonymous, but they carry nuanced differences in intensity, tone, or stylistic register.

Thus, dealing with synonymy in translation becomes a **contextual and pragmatic** issue rather than a rigid lexical one. Words in the source text cannot always be translated using formal equivalents in the target language. Instead, the function of each word within its context must be analyzed, and the most appropriate equivalent selected to serve the same function in the translated text (House, 2009; Newmark, 1991).

1.3 Synonymy and Context in the Qur'anic Text

In the Qur'anic text, words are not used arbitrarily or interchangeably. Each word carries a specific rhetorical and legal function. The Qur'an does more than convey meaning; it uses language to construct a deep interpretive and spiritual impact. For this reason, synonymy in the Qur'an takes on a unique character: similar words—such as أنجى / أنجى، فلا تقربوها / فلا تعدوها، خلق / برأ—are used in different rhetorical settings to serve precise textual and legislative purposes.

Advanced linguistic exegeses, such as that of Imam Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha' rāwī, demonstrate that these differences are not mere rhetorical embellishments but are part of the Qur'an's deep conceptual structure. For example, the difference between عبد، عباد، and

عبيد reflects variations in doctrinal context: is the discourse about cosmic submission, voluntary obedience, or condemned subjugation?

Accordingly, any translation of the Qur'an that overlooks these distinctions risks losing part of the text's devotional and semantic power, producing instead a superficial meaning that fails to reflect the depth of the original.

1.4 Research Problem

Despite the abundance of English translations of the Qur'an's meanings, most rely on dictionary equivalence without consideration for contextual nuance or semantic precision. This results in the loss of the Qur'an's rhetorical structure and turns a richly meaningful text into a flat one, devoid of interpretive depth.

This study thus poses the following central questions:

- How does Qur'anic context determine the precise meaning of seemingly synonymous words?
- To what extent do English translations succeed in conveying these distinctions while preserving the original word's function in the text?

1.5 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Analyze the phenomenon of synonymy in the Qur'anic text from rhetorical, semantic, and contextual perspectives.
2. Examine five cases of synonymy in the Qur'an and identify the contextual differences between their expressions.
3. Compare the translation of these expressions in two English translations (Al-Hilali & Khan, and George Sale).
4. Assess the extent to which these translations convey the semantic differences between the terms.
5. Offer practical recommendations for improving the quality of religious translation based on contextual analysis.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Academic Significance:

- The study contributes to the development of a context-based translation analysis methodology, moving beyond superficial lexical equivalence.
- It enriches the discourse in contextual synonymy studies and their application to sacred texts.
- It integrates exegetical analysis as a linguistic tool within translation studies—an approach still relatively rare in current literature.

Practical Significance:

- It serves as a practical reference for translators of religious texts.
- It provides an applied framework for using linguistic exegesis (such as al-Sha‘rāwī’s) in supporting translation decisions.
- It contributes to enhancing the precision and impact of Qur’anic translations in English.

2. Theoretical Framework**2.1 Translation and the Question of Meaning**

The issue of “meaning” has long been the cornerstone of translation studies—it is where the linguistic dimension intersects with the pragmatic one, and where form and content confront each other. It is no exaggeration to say that the success or failure of a translation largely hinges on the translator’s ability to comprehend the meaning in the source language and reconstruct it in the target language—not simply to replace words with their equivalents. This is what makes translation a complex act, requiring the translator to be more than a linguistic intermediary: they must be a deep reader, a conscious interpreter, and an articulate writer.

In this context, many translation theorists argue that meaning is not a fixed entity that can be captured from dictionaries, but rather a dynamic construct that emerges from the interaction of multiple elements: textual context, communicative intent, audience culture, and the writer’s purpose. According to this view, Eugene Nida—one of the pioneers of Biblical translation studies—asserted that real translation lies not in preserving the structure of the original text, but in achieving the same effect on the target reader that the text had on its original audience. He referred to this as *dynamic equivalence*, in contrast to *formal equivalence*, which focuses only on the linguistic form of the text (Larson, 1998).

This shift from form to function in translation was also embraced by European schools such as the German school led by Juliane House, who maintains that a successful translator is one who understands the intentional context of the text and transfers it into a different culture in a way that produces the same effect. Mona Baker takes this further by arguing that every act of translation is a reconstruction of meaning in a new cultural context. This means that the meaning of a word cannot be reduced to its dictionary definition, but is generated from its relationships within the whole text, its function in discourse, and the responses it elicits from the target audience (Baker, 1992).

If this complexity exists in the translation of literary or legal texts, it becomes even more pronounced in religious texts, which carry not only linguistic weight but also doctrinal, spiritual, and legislative dimensions. In such texts, “meaning” is not merely a concept—it is part of an existential and epistemological experience, inseparable from the devotional context of the society that produced it. Thus, the religious translator is expected to combine linguistic sensitivity, rhetorical understanding, jurisprudential knowledge, and cultural awareness in order to reproduce the text in a way that preserves its sanctity and conveys its spiritual impact in another language.

The Holy Qur'an is the most prominent example of such a challenge. It intertwines devotional, legislative, and rhetorical functions, making every word within it rich with semantic and spiritual dimensions that cannot be reduced to a direct equivalent in the target language. Translating the Qur'an does not merely involve conveying its meanings, but striving to preserve its faith-based and rhetorical effect for a reader who may not share the same cultural or doctrinal framework.

Accordingly, the question of "meaning" in translation does not concern what a word *means* only, but also what the word *does* in its context—and whether another word in a different language can generate the same effect. This question lies at the heart of the present study, especially when addressing **synonymy in the Qur'anic text**, where meaning shifts with context and word choices differ in rhetorical precision and legal function.

2.2 The Concept of Synonymy: A Linguistic-Pragmatic Approach

Synonymy has long presented a thorny issue in linguistic and philological studies, as it combines apparent simplicity with underlying complexity. At the lexical level, synonymy appears to be merely a similarity or closeness in meaning between two or more words. However, upon deeper analysis, this closeness reveals subtle differences in usage, tone, context, and cultural significance. Today, synonymy is increasingly viewed as a fundamentally **pragmatic** phenomenon, not merely a lexical relationship between linguistic units.

Newmark (1991) defines synonymy as "a closeness in meaning between two or more words such that one may be used in place of the other in some contexts without essential change in meaning." However, this seemingly clear definition conceals a fundamental dilemma: **Does true "complete equivalence" exist in language? Or is each word summoned in its context for a unique semantic load that cannot be entirely replaced?**

Larson (1998) addresses this issue in more detail, distinguishing between two types of synonymy:

- **Absolute Synonymy:** This is extremely rare—almost a theoretical assumption with little basis in real-world usage. It requires complete identity in meaning, use, context, tone, and style, which natural languages rarely achieve.
- **Near or Partial Synonymy:** This is far more common and refers to semantic closeness in root or concept, while differing in functional, stylistic, or cultural usage.

The importance of this distinction becomes evident when we consider examples from English, such as *fashionable*, *stylish*, and *chic*. All three are used to describe elegance or trendiness, yet:

- *Fashionable* carries a social connotation, suggesting adherence to popular trends within a group.
- *Stylish* emphasizes personal taste, often with artistic overtones.

- *Chic* is usually associated with French or European flair and appears in more elite or exclusive registers.

The same applies in Arabic. The difference between **كاذب** and **كذّاب** is not in root meaning—both derive from *lying*—but in morphological derivation that assigns a new function. **كذّاب** is an exaggerated form (*ṣīghat mubālagha*) used in contexts of blame or social condemnation, and it often carries stronger moral or societal connotations.

These examples confirm that synonymy cannot be understood solely through dictionary definitions. It must be interpreted through the **pragmatic dimension** of the word: how it is used, by whom, in what situation, and for what purpose.

In this light, modern studies indicate that each synonym is part of a broader network of elements:

- **Tone:** Is the word neutral, formal, aggressive?
- **Register:** Is it used in media, jurisprudence, poetry?
- **Style:** Is the word lofty, simple, colloquial, refined?
- **Cultural Connotation:** Does the word carry symbolic, religious, or historical resonance?

All these factors make the **choice between synonyms** a delicate decision that requires both linguistic and cultural awareness—especially in translation, where the challenge lies not only in finding a linguistic equivalent but in selecting a **functional equivalent** that generates in the target reader the same impact as in the original.

Here emerges the core challenge: two words may be similar in the source language, yet the target language may have only one word to cover both, or several alternatives, each with a different tone and register. This places the translator in a critical position to select the most appropriate option.

Thus, dealing with **synonymy in translation**—particularly in highly sensitive texts like religious scriptures—cannot be treated as a mere lexical exercise. Rather, it is a **pragmatic analytical process** that requires deep understanding of “what the word says,” “how it says it,” and “why it was said in that particular context.”

2.3 Synonymy in the Arabic Language: An Analytical Perspective

The Arabic language is among the richest languages in terms of synonymy—a phenomenon that has attracted the attention of Arab linguists since the early centuries of linguistic documentation. Scholars devoted entire works to the topic and explored it from phonological, morphological, semantic, and rhetorical angles. Al-Jāhīz noted in *Kitāb al-Hayawān* that lexical variation in Arabic is not always due to differences in meaning but may serve rhetorical purposes, stylistic variation, or semantic detailing. He believed that each word in Arabic has its own place and context and cannot be replaced without affecting the meaning, rhythm, or impact of the expression.

This perspective aligns with what is now known in modern studies as **relative or functional synonymy**, which holds that even when synonyms share a root or general meaning, they differ in expressive power, tone, usage register, and contextual placement. Thus, the relationship between such words is not one of full interchangeability, but one of nuanced correspondence.

Classical Arabic dictionaries, such as *Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāḥ* by al-Rāzī and *Lisān al-‘Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr, discussed this phenomenon extensively. They, for example, listed over fifty names for "sword"—each indicating a specific state, shape, or usage. **المهند** is not the same as **البتار**, and **الصارم** differs from **الحسام**, although they all refer to the same object. The same applies to terms for horses, camels, rain, and even falsehood—where we find distinctions among **كاذب**, **كذاب**, **أفك**, and **مفتّر**, despite their belonging to the same general semantic field.

From this, we can infer that **synonymy in Arabic is not absolute**, but primarily **contextual and rhetorical**. A word is not selected merely for its meaning but for how it conveys that meaning in a particular context, manner, and for specific purposes.

Synonyms in Arabic can be differentiated across five primary levels:

1. Phonological Level

The sound structure of a word contributes to shaping its meaning. For example, the difference between **قَضَمَ** and **خَضَمَ** lies not only in the initial sound but also in the type of chewing: **القضم** implies biting something hard, while **الخضم** suggests smooth, soft chewing. The phonological variation here imparts a distinct sensory effect.

2. Morphological Level

This relates to word derivation and structure. For instance, **كاذب** is an active participle that implies a single act of lying, while **كذاب** is a hyperbolic form that denotes habitual lying, often used in contexts of moral rebuke or social condemnation.

3. Syntactic Level

This pertains to the word's position in the sentence and its syntactic role, which can alter meaning or interpretation. The same word may carry a different implication depending on its placement or grammatical case—for example, shifting the subject and predicate, or changing from active to passive voice.

4. Pragmatic Level

This relates to the word's usage environment—i.e., the social or cultural setting. For instance, the word **نور** (light) is commonly used in religious discourse to signify divine guidance or purity, while **قمر** (moon) appears in poetic or romantic contexts. Though both refer to sources of light, their contextual roles differ greatly.

5. Contextual Level

This is arguably the most critical. The meaning of a word is shaped by its surrounding linguistic and cultural elements. For example, **عبد** in the context of the Prophet implies honor and spiritual servitude, while **عبيد** in another context may denote humiliation or coerced subservience. The intended meaning can only be discerned through textual and rhetorical context.

These multiple levels of meaning underscore the complexity of synonymy in Arabic and show that a word's meaning does not arise in isolation but through its interaction with the overall text and communicative intent. Thus, **dealing with synonyms in translation** cannot be approached at the dictionary level alone; it must be addressed at the level of context, discourse, and purpose.

This becomes particularly essential in translating texts with high semantic and rhetorical density—foremost among them the Qur'anic text—where word selection involves an extremely high degree of semantic precision. Any seemingly appropriate synonym remains **insufficient** unless understood within the broader exegetical and rhetorical system to which it belongs.

2.4 Context in Translation: Structure and Impact

Among the key concepts that reshaped translation theory in the twentieth century, **context** stands out as the decisive factor in understanding, interpreting, and evaluating translation choices. Linguistic and rhetorical studies have moved beyond the constraint of fixed dictionary meanings toward a broader view that recognizes meaning as something born not from the word alone, but from its textual relations, the speaker's intent, the audience's response, and the cultural context in which the discourse is produced.

Hatim & Mason (1990) clearly state that language is not merely an autonomous symbolic system but the product of social practice. A word, in order to be understood, must be read within its broader pragmatic framework. Thus, a word or sentence cannot be translated without understanding the context to which it belongs, since a word may carry shifting or even contradictory meanings depending on its situational use.

Newmark (1991) defines context as “the framework in which language is produced and used, including surrounding linguistic elements, communicative intent, cultural background, and social environment.” This definition transcends the narrow view of the word as an independent unit and urges us to approach the text as an integrated whole with its internal structure and communicative logic.

Context in translation can be classified into four interrelated dimensions:

1. Linguistic Context

This refers to the surrounding words and phrases within a sentence or paragraph. It helps identify the intended meaning among several possible interpretations. For example, the English word *charge* can mean a legal accusation, a military attack, or a financial cost. Its correct meaning cannot be determined without considering the sentence in which it appears. This challenge becomes more pressing in religious or legal texts, where a single term may have multiple doctrinal or interpretive meanings.

2. Referential Context

This is the subject matter or domain of the text—whether religious, philosophical, scientific, or journalistic. It sets the frame for general comprehension and guides the reader's expectations regarding language type, formality, and argumentation style. A Qur'anic text discussing **العبودية** (servitude to God) carries entirely different implications than the same word in a sociopolitical or historical context.

3. Cultural Context

This is among the most influential dimensions in translation—particularly when translating between languages from vastly different cultural systems, such as Arabic and English. Words carry not only linguistic meaning but also cultural, historical, and religious associations that may be difficult to transfer without explanation or reformulation. Terms like **الطهارة** (ritual purity), **الربا** (usury), or **الشرك** (polytheism) in the Qur'an lack precise equivalents in English, as their meanings stem from Islamic theological and cultural frameworks.

4. Pragmatic Context

This relates to the speaker's intent and the effect of the discourse on the listener. It is not conveyed through words alone but through how they are arranged, the pronouns used, and the rhetorical situation. For example, the divine command **فلا تقربوها** ("do not approach it") differs semantically from **فلا تعتدوها** ("do not transgress it"), despite their surface similarity. The former implies a complete prohibition even from proximity, while the latter addresses exceeding a defined limit. Such pragmatic nuances cannot be conveyed unless the translator understands the intended communicative context.

All these dimensions confirm that meaning in translation is not reducible to a lexical equivalent but is instead a **complex contextual construct**. Translation failure often arises not merely from language errors but from neglecting the context that shapes and redirects the meaning of a word.

Therefore, **contextual translation** is not an optional approach but a **fundamental condition** for accurate and effective translation—especially when it comes to Qur'anic texts, whose meanings emerge from the interweaving of devotional, historical, rhetorical, and legislative contexts.

In this light, it becomes evident that dealing with synonymy in the Qur'anic text cannot be separated from context. Each word is chosen for a specific rhetorical and legal purpose, and replacing it with another—even if seemingly synonymous—may distort the original meaning or misrepresent the verse's intended function, even when the surface meaning appears similar.

2.5 Synonymy and Context in Religious Texts

Religious texts are among the most sensitive and complex types of texts to translate due to their deep doctrinal, legislative, and spiritual meanings that go far beyond ordinary linguistic expression. At the heart of these texts lies the Holy Qur'an, regarded as the

highest expression of Arabic eloquence and not merely as a historical document, but as a **miraculous divine text** that holds sacred status in the hearts of Muslims. It is read as a source of law, guidance, worship, and rhetorical excellence.

In this context, **Qur'anic synonymy** emerges as one of the most intricate challenges faced by translators. The words of the Qur'an are not repeated simply for stylistic variation but come with precise semantic, rhetorical, and legislative intentions. Therefore, words that may appear "synonymous" on the surface cannot be replaced without affecting the overall Qur'anic context, the meaning of the verse, and its role in shaping doctrinal or behavioral frameworks.

Linguistic and exegetical studies—such as those by al-Sha'rāwī—emphasize that lexical variation in the Qur'an always signals a difference in meaning, tone, or rhetorical purpose. For example:

- The difference between **نَجَّى** and **أَنْجَى** is not merely morphological, but semantic and functional: **نَجَّى** may imply rescue at the moment of danger, whereas **أَنْجَى** can suggest preemptive divine protection or intervention prior to the event.
- Likewise, the difference among **عَبْد**, **عِبَاد**, and **عَبِيد** reflects shifts in rhetorical framing: **عَبْد** may denote individual servitude, **عِبَاد** is often used in contexts of praise and piety, and **عَبِيد** appears in contexts of humiliation or forced subjugation.

These distinctions are often lost in translation when translators rely solely on lexical equivalents. Most translations use general terms like *servant* or *slave*, without attending to the contextual, emotional, or functional differences among these Qur'anic expressions. This often leads to a weakening of rhetorical impact or distortion of doctrinal meaning.

Contemporary studies (Shehab, 2009; Hatim & Mason, 1997) affirm that synonymy in religious texts is not employed merely to convey meaning, but also to construct argumentation, generate effect, and highlight divine intention in the arrangement of speech. Therefore, translations that neglect such distinctions result in a **formal transfer** of the text but fail to reproduce its original **function**—that is, guidance, persuasion, admonition, and spiritual transformation.

This issue becomes even more critical when we realize that many Qur'anic passages are constructed upon **sonic rhythm**, **rhetorical repetition**, and **gradual stylistic development**—all of which are sensitive to word choice within the appropriate context. A single word may allude to a theological doctrine, a jurisprudential ruling, or a deliberate rhetorical image. Overlooking these features may shift the translated text from **faithfulness** to unintended **distortion**.

Hence, the translator of religious texts—especially the Qur'an—must be well-versed not only in language, but also in a range of supporting disciplines, including:

- **Tafsīr (Exegesis)**: to understand the intended meanings and deeper interpretive layers.
- **Balāgha (Rhetoric)**: to grasp the emotional and persuasive effects of the word.

- **Uṣūl al-Fiqh (Principles of Jurisprudence):** to comprehend the legislative dimensions tied to each term.
- **Lexicology and Semantics:** to distinguish between nuanced meanings of similar words.

It also becomes essential to rely on precise linguistic commentaries, such as the tafsīr of **Imām al-Sha‘rāwī**, whose strength lies in uncovering the **semantic nuances** (*zilāl dalāliyya*) of Qur’anic terms and clarifying subtle differences often missed in literal translations. Al-Sha‘rāwī did not merely explain meanings; he connected each word to its context, objectives, and role within divine discourse—making his exegesis an invaluable analytical tool for assessing Qur’anic translations.

In conclusion, addressing synonymy in religious texts must be both **contextual and functional**. There is no value in lexical equivalence if tone, situational context, and intent are ignored. The goal of religious translation is not merely comprehension but the **faithful transmission of the original message**—in spirit, precision, and impact.

3. Methodology and Analytical Tool

3.1 General Methodological Approach

Due to the nature of the topic, which combines the deep semantic dimension of Qur’anic vocabulary with a comparison of how these meanings are represented in English translations, the **comparative analytical method** was adopted as the most appropriate methodological framework for this study. This method aims to trace the use of synonymous expressions within the Qur’anic context, analyzing them linguistically, rhetorically, and exegetically, and then comparing how they are rendered in leading English translations of the meanings of the Qur’an.

This method is based on the principle that subtle semantic differences between words are not merely linguistic issues but are closely linked to the **functional roles of the text in its original structure**, particularly in religious texts with complex conceptual frameworks. Given that the Qur’an functions simultaneously as a devotional, legislative, and rhetorical text, the analysis of synonymy within it necessitates an integration of **exegetical interpretation and comparative translation analysis**.

3.2 Analytical Tool: The Tafsīr of Imām Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha‘rāwī

The tafsīr (exegesis) of Imām Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha‘rāwī was selected as the primary analytical tool for this study, for several methodological and scholarly reasons, chief among them:

- His unique ability to distinguish between semantically close terms by integrating rhetorical, linguistic, and spiritual interpretation.
- His deep focus on the **comprehensive Qur’anic context**, treating no word in isolation from its textual surroundings or legislative and rhetorical purposes.

- His reliance on **Arabic morphology and root-based derivation** to determine word function.
- His consistent linkage between the **linguistic meaning** of a word and its **devotional, theological, or behavioral impact** on the Muslim reader.

The version of the tafsīr used is the edition published by *Akhhbār al-Yawm* in Egypt. The study focuses on passages where al-Sha‘rāwī elaborates on the differences between pairs of words commonly viewed, according to traditional approaches, as “synonyms”—yet his interpretation reveals that **Qur’anic context assigns a distinct meaning to each**.

3.3 Corpus

The textual corpus consists of **five pairs of semantically close Qur’anic words**, selected based on the following criteria: frequency of occurrence across various sūrahs; clarity of distinction between them as demonstrated in tafsīr; and their problematic treatment in various English translations. The corpus is outlined as follows:

Word 1	Word 2	Focus of Comparison
عبد	عباد / عبيد	Submission and obedience in doctrinal context
أنجى	نجى	Temporal and semantic distinction in the act of salvation
قتل	ذبح	Variation in intensity and brutality of the act
خلق	برأ	Difference between origination and perfected formation
فلا تقربوها	فلا تعتدوها	Legislative contrast between full prohibition and transgression

These examples were analyzed using the following steps:

1. **Exegetical-linguistic analysis** based on al-Sha‘rāwī’s tafsīr.
2. **Extraction of translation equivalents** from the works of Al-Hilali & Khan and George Sale.
3. **Critical comparison** of translations and evaluation of how well they convey the semantic distinctions.
4. **Drawing conclusions** regarding the impact of these differences on the representation of the Qur’anic message.

3.4 Analytical Criteria

To guide the critical evaluation of the translations, the study employed four main criteria:

1. The extent to which the **semantic distinction** between similar words is conveyed.
2. The degree of adherence to the **exegetical and rhetorical context** of the verse, as reflected in authoritative tafsīr.

3. The **accuracy of lexical choice** in English with respect to pragmatic function and intended tone.
4. The influence of the **target language's cultural and religious background** on how the translation is received.

This analytical framework is used to assess how effectively the translation captures the **precise conceptual structure** of the Qur'anic text, without compromising its sanctity or rhetorical depth.

3.5 First Case Study: (عبد – عباد – عبید)

First: Selected Qur'anic Verses

To observe the subtle distinctions among the three terms, three Qur'anic verses were selected—each representing a specific contextual use of one of the words:

1. **عبد** in the verse:
(وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا) — [al-Baqarah: 23]

Here, the term is used in reference to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ ('*abdunā*'), in a context of honor and elevation.

2. **عبید** in the verse:
(وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ) — [Fussilat: 46]

This appears in a verse affirming God's justice over all creation, regardless of belief or disbelief.

3. **عباد** in the verse:
(فَبِعَبْتِنَا عَلَيْكُمْ عِبَادًا لَّنَا أُولِي بَأْسٍ شَدِيدِ) — [al-Isrā': 5]

Here, the term refers to a righteous group of believers whom God sent as a form of divine punishment against the Children of Israel.

Second: Linguistic Analysis in the Tafsīr of Imām Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rawī

Al-Sha'rawī places great emphasis on the semantic differences between these terms. His analysis draws upon Arabic root meanings, morphological structures, and rhetorical context to show that these terms are **not interchangeable**, but are selected precisely for their intended function within the verse.

His key insights include:

- **عبد**: This term is often used in contexts of *honor*, especially when referring to the Prophet ﷺ, such as in *'abdunā*. It indicates voluntary submission driven by love and obedience to God. It represents the highest form of servitude, where the servant's will aligns completely with the divine will.
- **عباد**: Refers to a group of righteous, believing servants who consciously and wholeheartedly submit to God. The Qur'an often uses this term to praise those who are pious or who strive in the path of God.
- **عبيد**: This term is used to describe all of God's creation—believers and non-believers alike. It reflects involuntary subjugation to divine power as the Creator and Sustainer. The term carries no connotation of praise, but rather affirms a metaphysical reality.

Al-Sha' rāwī summarizes the distinction as follows:

"All of God's creation are 'abīd who cannot escape His will... but the 'ibād are those whose desires are in harmony with what God desires." (Tafsīr al-Sha' rāwī, Vol. 1, p. 194)

Third: English Translations Compared

Qur'anic Term	Al-Hilali & Khan Translation	George Sale Translation
عبدنا	our slave	our servant
العبيد	(His) slaves	His servants
عبادًا لنا	slaves of Ours	our servants

Fourth: Comparative Analysis of the Translations

1. Al-Hilali & Khan Translation

- Uses the word *slave* in all instances to translate **عبد**, **عباد**, and **عبيد**.
- This translation reflects **lexical rigidity** and lacks **contextual sensitivity**, treating all forms of servitude identically despite their differing rhetorical and doctrinal contexts.
- The term *slave* in English carries a strong negative connotation, associated with coercion and colonial oppression. Its use for **'abdunā** distorts the honorific meaning intended in the verse.

2. George Sale Translation

- Uses *servant* in all cases, a term that appears more neutral than *slave*, and implies obedience by choice.
- While this softens the harshness of the previous translation, it still **fails to distinguish** between **voluntary servitude** (as in **عباد**) and **compelled servitude** (as in **عبيد**), or between **honorific** and **generic** uses.
- Overall, the translation lacks **semantic and emotive differentiation** among the three terms.

Fifth: Conclusion

This case study reveals that both translations treated the three terms as **fully synonymous**, with no regard for the subtle differences emphasized in the original text and clarified in exegetical and rhetorical analysis.

- **Al-Hilali & Khan** prioritized strict dictionary correspondence, using *slave* uniformly, which compromises the Qur'anic message's theological and spiritual depth.
- **George Sale** opted for *servant*, which reduces negative connotations but still overlooks contextual nuance.

Thus, both translations fail to convey the **complex Islamic perspective on servitude**, which differentiates between:

- **عبيد**: absolute, coercive servitude
- **عباد**: praiseworthy, voluntary devotion
- **عبد**: honorific designation of chosen servitude

Accordingly, a more accurate and context-sensitive approach might include:

- *Our devoted servant* → for **عبدنا**
- *Our righteous servants* → for **عبادًا لنا**
- *All beings under His command or creatures* → for **العبيد**

Alternatively, **footnotes or marginal glosses** could be used to explain the doctrinal distinctions, preserving the Qur'anic text's **semantic depth and rhetorical power**.

3.6 Second Case Study: (أنجى - نجى)

First: Selected Qur'anic Verses

The two verbs **أنجى** and **نجى** occur multiple times in the Qur'an. However, a particularly noteworthy comparison arises in two verses that refer to the same event—God's deliverance of the Children of Israel from Pharaoh—yet employ different verbs:

1. ﴿وَإِذْ نَجَّيْنَاكُمْ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ﴾ — [al-Baqarah: 49]
2. ﴿وَإِذْ أَنْجَيْنَاكُمْ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ﴾ — [al-A'rāf: 141]

Both verses speak of divine deliverance, yet the use of two distinct verbs signals a deliberate rhetorical and semantic choice within the Qur'anic discourse.

Second: Linguistic Analysis in the Tafsīr of Imām Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī

Imām al-Sha‘rāwī argues that the distinction between **نَجَى** and **أَنْجَى** is not merely morphological, but also **functional, temporal, and semantic**. Each verb reflects a different stage of divine intervention:

- **نَجَى**
This verb refers to **immediate and reactive deliverance**—divine intervention that occurs **during or after the onset of harm**. The implication is that danger or suffering had already begun, and God then intervened to save the believers. It signifies salvation **from an actualized threat**.
- **أَنْجَى**
By contrast, this verb indicates **preventive and proactive rescue**—God’s intervention **before the harm materializes**. It reflects divine protection and shielding, rather than a response to an existing calamity.

Al-Sha‘rāwī explains:

“The difference between najjā and anjā is great: najjā occurs during the descent of punishment, while anjā means [God] prevented the punishment altogether... God’s favor happened in two stages: prevention first, then rescue from harm when it happened.”

📖 (Tafsīr al-Sha‘rāwī, Vol. 1, p. 325)

This analysis reveals a layered and progressive conceptual framework in Qur’anic usage, where verb selection conveys **not just style, but stages of divine care**.

Third: English Translations Compared

Qur’anic Term Al-Hilali & Khan George Sale

نَجَّيْنَاكُمْ	delivered you	delivered you
أَنْجَيْنَاكُمْ	rescued you	delivered you

Fourth: Comparative Analysis

1. Al-Hilali & Khan Translation

- Uses *delivered* for **نَجَى** and *rescued* for **أَنْجَى**, suggesting an attempt to differentiate between the two verbs.
- However, **no contextual explanation** accompanies this lexical choice, leaving the English reader unaware of the intended semantic or temporal distinction.
- Moreover, the verb *rescued* in English often implies **salvation after harm has begun**, which may contradict the original preventive meaning of **أَنْجَى**, potentially leading to a reversed understanding.

2. George Sale Translation

- Uses *delivered* for both verbs, showing **no distinction** between **أنجى** and **نجى**.
- This choice **neutralizes the rhetorical nuance** in the Qur'anic structure and reduces the dynamic divine narrative to mere repetition.
- The translation ignores the Qur'an's progression from **prevention** to **intervention**, resulting in a flattened textual effect.

3. Semantic Observations

- Neither translation captures the **temporal or spiritual sensitivity** embedded in the Arabic terms.
- The distinction between **preventive rescue (أنجى)** and **responsive rescue (نجى)** is lost, both lexically and contextually.

Fifth: Conclusion

This example demonstrates that the two Qur'anic verbs articulate **distinct theological conceptions** of divine salvation: one tied to **proactive care (أنجى)** and the other to **merciful response (نجى)**.

Despite efforts to vary word choice, the English translations ultimately **fail to convey this layered meaning** due to the absence of explanatory context.

This semantic gap deprives the translation of the **rhetorical depth and conceptual progression** found in the divine discourse, and misleads the reader into perceiving stylistic repetition rather than deliberate theological layering.

To enhance the semantic precision of the translation, several strategies may be employed:

- **Interpretive phrasal translations**, such as:
 - *rescued after being harmed* → for **نجى**
 - *rescued before harm occurred* → for **أنجى**
- **Paraphrased renderings** to clarify temporal distinctions:
 - *God shielded you from Pharaoh's harm before it reached you* → for **أَنْجَيْنَاكُمْ**
 - *God saved you while you were under Pharaoh's oppression* → for **نَجَّيْنَاكُمْ**
- **Explanatory footnotes** that clarify the temporal and doctrinal nuance—especially in scholarly editions intended for readers seeking a deeper understanding of Qur'anic expression.

3.7 Third Case Study: (ذبح – قتل)

First: Selected Qur'anic Verses

The Qur'an uses different verbs to describe Pharaoh's massacre of Israelite male infants. Notably, the verbs **يذبحون** and **يقتلون** are both used in reference to the same historical atrocity, yet each appears in a different verse:

1. (وَإِذْ نَجَّيْنَاكُمْ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ... يَذْبَحُونَ أَبْنَاءَكُمْ) — [al-Baqarah: 49]
2. (وَإِذْ أَنْجَيْنَاكُمْ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ... يَقْتُلُونَ أَبْنَاءَكُمْ) — [al-A'raf: 141]

While the event is the same—the killing of male children—the variation in verb choice reflects a **deliberate rhetorical and psychological nuance** within the Qur'anic message.

Second: Linguistic Analysis in the Tafsīr of Imām al-Sha'rawī

Imām al-Sha'rawī highlights the **semantic and rhetorical** distinctions between the two verbs. According to his interpretation, **قتل** is more general in meaning, while **ذبح** denotes a specific and more graphic form of killing.

- **يذبحون:**
This verb signifies **bloodshed through the use of a sharp instrument**, typically from the neck, and implies **intentional, organized killing**. It evokes a **ritualistic or systematic slaughter**, such as the slaughtering of sacrificial animals. The term carries **horrific imagery**, intensifying the emotional and visual impact on the listener.
- **يقتلون:**
This is a **broader term** encompassing any form of life termination—by sword, suffocation, drowning, stoning, etc. It does **not specify the method** of killing, nor does it necessarily invoke a vivid or gory image.

Al-Sha'rawī explains:

“Dabḥ (slaughter) must involve the spilling of blood... whereas qatl (killing) may occur by slaughter, suffocation, drowning—any of these are forms of killing, but not all involve bloodshed.”

(Tafsīr al-Sha'rawī, Vol. 1, p. 327)

Thus, the distinction relates not only to the **method and form of violence**, but also to the **psychological effect and rhetorical force** intended by the verse.

Third: English Translations Compared

Qur'anic Term	Al-Hilali & Khan	George Sale
يذبحون	killing your sons	slaughtering your male children
يقتلون	killing your sons	slew your male children

Fourth: Comparative Analysis

1. Al-Hilali & Khan Translation

- Uses *killing your sons* for both verbs, which **eliminates the semantic and dramatic distinction** between *يذبحون* and *يقتلون*.
- This creates the false impression that both verses carry the same weight and tone, thereby **flattening the Qur'anic rhetorical intensity**.
- The verb *يذبحون*, intended to evoke horror and depict Pharaoh's brutality, is **deprived of its full impact** in this rendering.

2. George Sale Translation

- Differentiates between the verbs using:
 - *slaughtering* for *يذبحون*, a term that suggests **bloody, brutal killing**, often used in the context of animals.
 - *slew* for *يقتلون*, a more **neutral past-tense form** without vivid imagery.
- Despite the antiquity of the translation, Sale succeeds in offering a **closer approximation of the rhetorical variation**, recognizing a distinction in tone and intensity.

3. Stylistic and Translational Impact

- Al-Hilali & Khan's rendering **fails to highlight the horror of ritualized infant murder**, a crucial element in conveying Pharaoh's savagery.
- Sale's translation, although linguistically dated, achieves a **more nuanced differentiation**—though ideally, it would benefit from **additional explanatory notes**.

Fifth: Conclusion

The difference between *ذبح* and *قتل* in the Qur'anic context is not merely linguistic but is **rhetorical, dramatic, and emotive**. The Qur'an does not simply report events—it **constructs scenes** that provoke **empathy, outrage, and reflection**.

- When the verb *يذبحون* is used, the goal is to **paint a scene of systematic butchery**, akin to the slaughtering of animals, with all its horror and revulsion.
- The verb *يقتلون* serves to **generalize the killing**, suitable for broader contexts and less emotionally graphic purposes.

Translations that **fail to distinguish between these two verbs** risk diminishing the **Qur'an's persuasive power and rhetorical precision**.

To achieve greater fidelity and rhetorical clarity, the following strategies are recommended:

Qur'anic Verb	Suggested Translation	Additional Explanation
يذبحون	<i>slaughtering or butchering</i>	Conveys graphic, bloodshed-focused killing
يقتلون	<i>killing or murdering</i>	Indicates general or systematic killing

Further, **marginal footnotes or explanatory glosses** should be added in scholarly or educational translations to explain the distinction, as articulated by al-Sha‘rāwī. Alternatively, translators might use expanded renderings such as:

- *They slaughtered your sons like beasts* → for **يذبحون**
- *They killed your sons in every possible way* → for **يقتلون**

These renderings preserve the **thematic depth and psychological realism** of the Qur’anic narrative.

3.8 Fourth Case Study: (خلق – برأ)

First: Selected Qur’anic Verses

The Qur’an employs multiple verbs to express the act of creation, each carrying a distinct semantic dimension, despite all falling under the general category of “bringing into being.” Among these, **خلق** (*khalaqa*) and **برأ** (*bara’a*) appear in the following verses:

1. **إِلَىٰ (فَتَوْبُوا) — [al-Baqarah: 54]**
Here, *bāri’ikum* (your Shaper) appears in the context of repentance after the Israelites worshipped the calf.
2. **(الَّذِي) — [al-A‘lā: 2]**
In this verse, God is described as the one who **created** and then **proportioned**, highlighting successive phases in the act of divine creation.

The juxtaposition of these two verbs indicates that the Qur’an differentiates between **creation as origination** (خلق) and **creation as structuring or shaping** (برأ), thus revealing a precise progression in divine action.

Second: Linguistic Analysis in the Tafsīr of Imām Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha‘rāwī

In his tafsīr, Imām al-Sha‘rāwī emphasizes the **distinct functional and temporal roles** of *al-Khāliq* (the Creator) and *al-Bāri’* (the Shaper). He describes each as representing a **separate stage** within the divine act of creation:

- **خلق** (**khalaqa**):
Refers to **bringing something into existence from nothingness**. It represents the initial moment of origination—the absolute beginning of existence.
- **برأ** (**bara’a**):
Indicates a **subsequent phase**, involving **design, structure, and refinement** of what has been created. It is not mere origination, but organization and perfection—giving the created entity its **distinct form and functional identity**.

Al-Sha‘rāwī summarizes the distinction as follows:

“*Al-Khāliq is one thing, and al-Bāri’ is another... The Creator brings something into existence from nothing, while the Shaper gives it a proper, upright form.*” (Tafsīr al-Sha‘rāwī, Vol. 1, p. 343)

This distinction reflects a **precise temporal and structural order** in divine verbs, where each verb denotes a particular phase in the unfolding process of creation.

Third: English Translations Compared

Qur'anic Term	Al-Hilali & Khan Translation	George Sale Translation
بارنكم	your Creator	your Creator
خلق	created	hath created

Both translations used the **same equivalent**—*Creator* or *created*—for both terms, thereby **erasing the conceptual distinction** clearly expressed in the Arabic original.

Fourth: Comparative Analysis

1. Lack of Semantic Differentiation

- By rendering **بارنكم** as *your Creator*, both translations equate *bara'a* with *khalaqa*, whereas the Arabic text clearly presents **barā'a** as a distinct and **subsequent act**.
- The word *created* in English typically conveys only the **initial act** of origination, and does not imply **shaping, proportioning, or structuring**—which are central to the meaning of **برأ**.

2. Loss of Philosophical and Rhetorical Depth

- In Islamic theology, distinguishing between **خلق** and **برأ** is fundamental to understanding the **multi-level expression of divine power**.
- While *al-Khāliq* refers to origination, *al-Bāri'* reflects **purposeful design, order, and harmony**—elements central to Qur'anic discourse on creation.
- Rendering both as *Creator* reduces the depth of this theological insight and **flattens the Qur'anic conceptual hierarchy**.

3. Failure to Convey the Sequential Logic of Divine Acts

- The Qur'anic structure often sequences acts as **سوى → برأ → خلق** (creation → shaping → proportioning).
- Ignoring these stages in translation deprives the reader of the **layered understanding** of divine action that the original text builds through **precise verbal progression**.

Fifth: Conclusion

This case study illustrates how **lexical equivalence fails** to capture the **layered conceptual architecture** of Qur'anic diction. The verb **خلق** is not simply *to create* in the generic sense—it initiates a **process** that continues through **برأ** and beyond.

- A translation that conflates *khalaqa* and *bara'a* **undermines the rhetorical and theological structure** of the text.
- General terms like *Creator* obscure the **contemplative and hierarchical** nature of divine creation in the Qur'an.

Translation Recommendations

Qur'anic Verb	Suggested Translation	Optional Clarification
خلق	<i>Creator or Originator</i>	Denotes the absolute act of bringing into being
برأ	<i>Shaper or Fashioner</i>	Refers to structuring, organizing, and refining

Supplementary Gloss for English Readers:

“*Bāri*’ (*Shaper*): denotes the act of forming a creature into its intended form after it has been brought into existence.”

Further, translators can align these choices with the recognized renderings of **the Divine Names**, such as:

- **Al-Khāliq** → *The Creator*
- **Al-Bāri**’ → *The Evolver* or *The Shaper*

This approach reinforces the **precision of Qur'anic vocabulary** and honors its **conceptual complexity**.

3.9 Fifth Case Study: (فلا تقربوها – فلا تعتدوها)

First: Selected Qur'anic Verses

The Qur'anic text sometimes presents structurally similar phrases that differ in crucial legal and rhetorical function. A notable example is the contrast between **فلا تقربوها** and **فلا تعتدوها**:

1. (تَقْرُبُوهَا) — [al-Baqarah: 187]
This appears in the context of **fasting**, particularly prohibitions regarding conjugal relations during specific times.
2. (تَعْتَدُوهَا) — [al-Baqarah: 229]
This occurs in the context of **divorce** and permissible bounds for reconciliation or separation.

Although both statements refer to “**God’s limits**”, the **choice of verb** in each—**تقربوا** vs. **تعدوا**—carries distinct **legal and moral implications**.

Second: Linguistic Analysis in the Tafsīr of Imām al-Sha‘rāwī

Imām al-Sha‘rāwī emphasizes that the selection of each verb is **intentional and contextually driven**, reflecting the nature of the associated ruling:

- **تقربوها فلا (do not even approach them):**
Used in contexts involving **categorically prohibited acts**, such as illicit sexual relations or misuse of orphan wealth. The prohibition is **comprehensive**—not only is the act itself forbidden, but also **anything that leads to it** is to be avoided. It reflects a principle of **blocking the means** (سد الذرائع).
- **تعتدوها فلا (do not transgress them):**
Applied to **permissible acts that have legal limits**, such as the procedures and waiting periods related to divorce. The command warns against **exceeding lawful boundaries**, not against the act itself.

Al-Sha' rāwī states:

“When addressing prohibitions, the verse says: ‘Do not approach them.’ But when addressing obligations or permissions, it says: ‘Do not transgress them.’” (Tafsīr al-Sha' rāwī, Vol. 2, p. 992)

This analysis underscores that **“not approaching”** is **stricter** and **more preventative** than **“not transgressing,”** which is about **observing limits**.

Third: English Translations Compared

Qur'anic Term	Al-Hilali & Khan	George Sale
فَلَا تَقْرُبُوهَا	do not approach them	do not approach them
فَلَا تَعْتَدُوهَا	do not transgress them	transgress not those ordinances

Both translations correctly reflect the **verbal variation**, but stop short of **clarifying the legal or functional distinction**.

Fourth: Comparative Analysis

1. Al-Hilali & Khan Translation

- Distinguishes between verbs with:
 - *do not approach them* → فلا تقربوها
 - *do not transgress them* → فلا تعتدوها
- However, **no explanatory commentary** is provided to **highlight the different types of prohibition** involved.
- An English reader may notice a linguistic difference but **miss the legal severity** of one command over the other.

2. George Sale Translation

- Uses similarly distinct expressions:

- *do not approach them*
- *transgress not those ordinances*
- His **legalistic tone** fits the genre, yet **lacks contextual interpretation**, leaving the difference in moral weight unexpressed.

3. General Observations

- Both translations **mirror the lexical variation** but **fail to transmit the underlying legislative logic**.
- Neither translation explains that:
 - *فلا تقربوها* implies **absolute avoidance**, even of precursors to the act.
 - *فلا تعتدوها* warns against **going beyond permitted boundaries**, not against the action itself.

Fifth: Conclusion

This case demonstrates the Qur'an's **precision in verb selection** to convey layered legal directives:

- **“Do not approach”** serves as a **preventative measure**, blocking access to sin even at the level of temptation or intent.
- **“Do not transgress”** defines a **juridical boundary** around allowable actions, discouraging misuse or excess.

Such distinctions are **fundamental to Islamic jurisprudence** and constitute a subtle form of **legislative rhetoric** and **moral instruction**.

While the English translations technically differentiate the verbs, they **fail to reveal their distinct functions**, potentially misleading readers into viewing both prohibitions as equally severe or of the same type.

Translation Recommendations

Qur'anic Verb	Recommended Translation	Suggested Explanatory Note
فلا تقربوها	<i>Do not even approach them</i>	<i>Avoid not just the act, but anything that may lead to it</i>
فلا تعتدوها	<i>Do not overstep these limits</i>	<i>Remain within the boundaries of what is permitted by God</i>

Footnote (for academic editions):

“‘Do not approach’ is used after major prohibitions, indicating complete avoidance, including the means or intentions that may lead to sin. ‘Do not transgress’ follows permitted actions, serving as a warning not to exceed the lawful framework.”

This strategy supports **functional fidelity**, aligns with **Islamic legal methodology**, and enhances **reader comprehension** of Qur'anic jurisprudence.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Analytical Findings

Through the analysis of five apparent cases of **contextual synonymy** in the Qur'an, this study has demonstrated that each instance carries subtle semantic and functional differences. Ignoring these distinctions risks distorting the intended message of the sacred text. The comparative analysis between Imām al-Sha'rāwī's tafsīr and English translations reveals that these nuances are frequently omitted or flattened in translation, resulting in a reduced or even misleading representation of the original meaning.

A summary of the comparative results is provided below:

1. (عبد – عباد – عبید)

Original Term	Contextual Meaning	Al-Hilali & Khan	George Sale	Observation
عبد	Honorific, voluntary servitude	<i>slave</i>	<i>servant</i>	First is pejorative, second too vague
عباد	Devout, chosen believers	<i>slaves</i>	<i>servants</i>	No doctrinal distinction observed
عبید	General compulsory subjugation of all creation	<i>slaves</i>	<i>servants</i>	Neither translation captures intent

Both translations fail to distinguish between **honorific**, **voluntary**, and **coercive** forms of servitude. As a result, a **core theological concept in Islam** is distorted.

2. (أنجى – نجى)

Qur'anic Term	Context	Al-Hilali & Khan	George Sale	Observation
نجى	Rescue during actual danger	<i>delivered you</i>	<i>delivered you</i>	No distinction at all
أنجى	Preemptive, protective salvation	<i>rescued you</i>	<i>delivered you</i>	Subtle attempt, but still unclear

Despite Al-Hilali & Khan's effort to differentiate, both translations **fail to clarify** the temporal and theological contrast, which al-Sha'rāwī strongly emphasizes as part of God's layered mercy.

3. (ذبح – قتل)

Qur'anic Term	Context	Al-Hilali & Khan	George Sale	Observation
يذبحون	Graphic, ritualistic killing	<i>killing</i>	<i>slaughtering</i>	Al-Hilali & Khan obscures intensity
يقتلون	General form of killing	<i>killing</i>	<i>slew</i>	George Sale offers clearer distinction

Al-Hilali & Khan miss the opportunity to express the **graphic horror** of يذبحون, whereas George Sale **succeeds partially** in reflecting the rhetorical weight of the original Arabic.

4. (خلق – برأ)

Qur'anic Term	Function	Al-Hilali & Khan	George Sale	Observation
خلق	Bringing into existence (origin)	<i>created</i>	<i>hath created</i>	Identical renderings
برأ	Structural formation and shaping	<i>Creator</i>	<i>Creator</i>	Misses distinct phase of development

Neither translation distinguishes between the two verbs, which **obscures the Qur'anic layering** of divine acts. The **cumulative sequence** of creation is lost, reducing the theological and rhetorical depth of the text.

5. (فلا تقربوها – فلا تعتدوها)

Qur'anic Term	Legal Status	Al-Hilali & Khan	George Sale	Observation
فلا تقربوها	Absolute prohibition	<i>do not approach them</i>	<i>do not approach them</i>	No explanation of the severity or legal implication
فلا تعتدوها	Regulated permissibility	<i>do not transgress them</i>	<i>transgress not ordinances</i>	Does not distinguish types of legal boundaries

Both translations reflect the **lexical difference** but **fail to convey the legislative distinction**: “do not approach” entails **prohibition of means**, while “do not transgress” regulates behavior **within the permissible**.

4.2 General Discussion

These five case studies illustrate that **contextual synonymy in the Qur'an is not ornamental**, but **functional**, directly tied to the **legal, spiritual, and rhetorical structure** of the text.

Key observations include:

- **Literal translations** often fall short in transmitting this system of meaning, especially when **exegetical reference is absent**.
- The **neglect of Arabic analytical tools**, particularly **al-Sha'rawī's tafsīr**, results in the loss of **semantic precision** and **contextual depth**.
- The existence of synonymy in the source language **does not justify direct substitution** in the target language, as each word carries a **unique functional load** in its original context.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This study, through the analysis of five cases of apparent Qur'anic synonymy, has revealed that synonymy in the Qur'an is never arbitrary or absolute. Instead, it is a precise functional phenomenon, in which lexical selections are embedded within a rhetorical and legislative structure that reflects both the divine intent and the devotional nature of the discourse.

Key conclusions of the study are as follows:

1. Qur'anic synonymy is functional and contextual, not purely lexical:
 - Differences between terms such as (عبد / عباد / عبيد), (نجى / أنجى), (قتل / ذبح) indicate deliberate variation with rhetorical, theological, and contextual purposes.

- These terms cannot be treated as interchangeable equivalents; each serves a unique communicative and theological function.
- 2. English translations often neglect these semantic subtleties:
 - Both modern interpretive translations (e.g., Al-Hilali & Khan) and classical literary ones (e.g., George Sale) fail to reflect these deep distinctions.
 - This omission disrupts the intended meaning and diminishes the educational, legal, and spiritual functions of the text.
- 3. The tafsīr of Imām al-Sha‘rāwī is an effective analytical tool:
 - This tafsīr combines linguistic analysis, rhetorical function, and spiritual insight, making it highly suitable for analyzing lexical variation.
 - It enabled the study to uncover semantic layers often overlooked in translation, and it may serve as a model for future function-based translation studies.
- 4. Translations lacking interpretive context result in incomplete or distorted renderings:
 - Translating a term such as عبد as *slave* or *servant* without distinguishing between voluntary devotion and coerced subjugation deprives the reader of the theological dimension of servitude to God.
 - The absence of explanatory notes or annotations strips the translation of its depth, even when the lexical choices seem linguistically accurate.
- 5. Lexical equivalence alone is insufficient in translating religious texts:
 - Translation must be a functionally-aware interpretive act, one that reproduces the discourse structure of the original in a meaningful and impactful way in the target language.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the analytical findings, this study offers the following recommendations to translators, publishers, and institutions engaged in the production of Qur’anic translations:

1. Do not rely solely on lexical matches; use authoritative tafsīr sources: Tafsīrs such as al-Sha‘rāwī, al-Ṭabarī, and Ibn ‘Āshūr should be consulted to fully grasp the semantic and functional context of each Qur’anic term.
2. Differentiate lexical equivalents based on functional context:
 - Example: “عبد” ≠ “عبيد”، and “نجى” ≠ “أنجى”.
 - Translators should either use differentiated equivalents or include explanatory footnotes to clarify these distinctions.
3. Integrate explanatory footnotes directly into the translation, Particularly for terms with theological, legal, or rhetorical weight, where lexical equivalence does not suffice.
4. Avoid literalist translations of sacred texts, Literal translation often empties the text of its rhetorical power, especially in the Qur’an, which fuses devotional and rhetorical force in its expression.
5. Specialized training programs should equip translators to analyze Qur’anic discourse function, rhetorical tone, and socio-religious register.

6. These should include context-sensitive equivalents and theological annotations that guide translators and readers alike.
7. Encourage applied comparative research, Like this study, which contrasts source text with its translations using an analytical-exegetical model, such research proves invaluable in enhancing translation fidelity and depth.

Conclusion

The question of synonymy in the Qur'an is not merely linguistic. It is a gateway to understanding the rhetorical, epistemological, and legislative system that underpins the sacred text. Translating without awareness of this system strips the text of its impact and coherence.

The central message of this study is that translation is not simply linguistic transference—it is a process of comprehension, interpretation, and re-construction of meaning, context, and function. This is especially true when the text in question is the Word of God.

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