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Cultural Untranslatability in Arabic-English Translation: Theoretical Foundations, Challenges, and Strategies

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Definition

Cultural untranslatability refers to situations in which words, expressions, phrases, or entire conceptual systems encountered in translation cannot be easily transferred from one language to another. Cultural untranslatability reflects differences in worldview, value systems, and shared knowledge. Unlike linguistic untranslatability, which arises primarily from structural differences between languages, cultural untranslatability stems from culturally embedded meanings, social practices, and conceptual frameworks. Importantly, cultural untranslatability does not mean translation is impossible; rather, it highlights the challenges of negotiating culturally embedded meanings across languages. It is important to distinguish cultural untranslatability from related concepts. Linguistic untranslatability arises from structural differences between languages, whereas cultural untranslatability involves culturally embedded meanings and value systems. Pragmatic untranslatability concerns differences in communicative conventions and social usage. Conceptual non-equivalence refers to the absence of a direct counterpart in the target culture. At the same time, translation difficulty represents a broader category that may be resolved through contextualization, explanation, or adaptation. In Arabic-English translation, these challenges often arise in religious terminology, social values, pragmatic conventions, and culturally specific conceptual categories. This work addresses the concept of 'untranslatability' in Arabic-English translation, focusing on its theoretical bases, linguistic expressions, and applications.

Keywords: cultural untranslatability; Arabic-English translation; culturally embedded concepts; semantics; translation strategies; translator ethics

1. Introduction

Translating culturally embedded concepts is one of the most significant challenges in modern translation studies. One of the principal challenges in translation is bridging cultural distance and conveying culturally specific meanings because Arabic linguistic expressions often reflect diverse cultural, religious, historical, and social traditions that may not have direct counterparts in English. This phenomenon is frequently discussed in translation studies under the label of cultural untranslatability.

Arabic cultural meanings are often historically layered and socially situated, as Arabic is a Semitic language with a long literary, religious, philosophical, and intellectual history. The meanings of words such as "بركة" (baraka), "حرام" (ḥarām), "غربة" (ghurba), and "عِرض" (ʿird) are not merely denotative; they are also semantically, morally, and emotionally charged. These terms are embedded in Islamic law, tribal ethics, social structures, and even collective memory. English has developed through diverse literary, religious, philosophical, and historical traditions, including Biblical, classical, and modern secular influences. Differences

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between Arabic and English therefore arise not from simple cultural opposition but from distinct historical and sociocultural trajectories that have shaped conceptual vocabularies differently. These differences complicate the translation of many Arabic cultural concepts, often resulting in loss, distortion, or oversimplification.

This article examines cultural untranslatability in Arabic-English translation through an integrated framework combining linguistic, cultural, and cognitive perspectives. It analyzes representative Arabic concepts that challenge translation and evaluates strategies for communicating culturally embedded meanings. The article contributes to the ongoing debates concerning equivalence, cultural representation, and translator agency in cross-cultural communication.

Recent scholarship has expanded the field of cultural untranslatability in Arabic-English translation, situating it within global debates about identity, power, and technology. Mohammed and Shihab [1] distinguish between linguistic untranslatability, rooted in structural differences between Arabic and English, and cultural untranslatability, which is embedded in social norms and values. Noorain and Alamin [2] further elaborate on this distinction. They emphasize that lexemes such as gharīb, karāmah, ḥayāʾ, baraka, qadar, and ṣabr are not merely linguistic items but repositories of collective memory, spirituality, and moral order. They argue that translators should view themselves as cultural mediators between source and target cultures.

Ennouari and Houssaini [3] bring technology into the conversation, comparing human and machine translation of culturally loaded proverbs and anecdotes. They conclude that machine systems can achieve syntactic and semantic correctness but miss cultural nuances, while human translators capture resonance but risk inconsistency, subjectivity, and uncertainty. They envision a future in which AI works in tandem with human translators to achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency, as hybrid translation methods become increasingly common. This reflects a broader shift in translation studies, where untranslatability is increasingly viewed as a negotiable challenge rather than an absolute obstacle.

Beyond these foundational studies, others have focused on the ethical aspects of translation. Misleading translations and public representations of *jihād*, particularly its reduction to "holy war," have been criticized as examples of how translation choices may contribute to ideological simplification and cultural misrepresentation [4,5]. Ethical approaches to translation emphasize translator accountability, transparency, and loyalty to both the source text and target audience [6]. Translators are encouraged to make culturally significant choices explicit when necessary, particularly when dealing with ideologically sensitive concepts [7,8]. Pedagogical studies have also expanded, stressing the importance of training translators to handle pragmatic expressions (inshāʾAllāh, alḥamdulillāh), gendered concepts (ʿird, nakhwa), and existential terms (ghurba) with sensitivity. Such training equips translators to function as intercultural mediators rather than mere linguistic technicians.

Recent literature similarly contextualizes cultural untranslatability as part of a larger sociopolitical agenda. Translation choices have been identified as important factors influencing diplomacy, media discourse, migration narratives, and intercultural communication [5,9]. For instance, the translation of terms such as ḥarām and baraka in international media can either reinforce stereotypical representations of Arab identity or contribute to more nuanced cultural understanding. Scholars argue that translation is not merely linguistic but a political and ethical task that shapes cultural representation and international discourse.

Scholarship published between 2024 and 2026 highlights several important trends. These include the transition from absolutist to negotiable conceptions of untranslatability, the incorporation of technology and human expertise, efforts to avoid cultural erasure, exoticization, and stereotyping, and the pedagogical need to train translators in intercultural mediation. This shift has made cultural untranslatability an increasingly important focus of

translation studies, strengthening its relevance to research in fields such as global cultural exchange, literature, migration, media, and diplomacy.

The significance of this topic extends beyond academic inquiry [5,8]. Arabic-English translation plays an important role in today's globalized world, where it is used in diplomacy, media, literature, religious discourse, and migration. Culturally charged language may result in misunderstandings of political issues, stereotyping of Arab communities, or misrepresentation of Arab identities. Understanding cultural untranslatability can be crucial not just for translators but also for cultural scholars, policymakers, and interculturalists.

This article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical background of cultural untranslatability, drawing on structuralist, functionalist, cultural, postcolonial, and cognitive approaches to translation. Section 3 explores the linguistic and cultural characteristics of Arabic that contribute to its untranslatability. Section 4 presents case studies of culturally embedded Arabic concepts and the translation challenges they pose. Section 5 analyzes translation strategies, artificial intelligence and hybrid translation approaches, and their implications for cultural representation. Section 6 concludes with reflections on translator agency and the ethics of cultural mediation.

Methodological Note and Case Selection

This entry adopts a conceptual and literature-based approach rather than an empirical research design. It synthesizes major theories of cultural untranslatability and illustrates their relevance to Arabic-English translation through representative case studies. The selected terms (*ḥarām*, *baraka*, *ghurba*, *ʿird*, *jihād*, *nakhwa*, *inshāʾAllāh*, and *alḥamdulillāh*) were chosen because they are frequently discussed in Arabic-English translation scholarship and collectively represent diverse dimensions of cultural translation difficulty, including religious, social, ethical, ideological, emotional, and pragmatic meanings. These examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive and primarily reflect Modern Standard Arabic, while acknowledging that meanings may vary across regional and dialectal contexts.

Arabic terms are transliterated using a simplified scholarly transliteration system that balances linguistic accuracy and readability.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Cultural Untranslatability

Early translation theories focused on equivalence, particularly dynamic equivalence, which emphasizes conveying meaning rather than form [10]. Cultural untranslatability has been approached from several theoretical perspectives within translation studies. Familiarity with these theoretical underpinnings and an understanding of the significant linguistic and cultural differences between Arabic and English are important.

2.1. Structuralist Perspectives: Language Systems and Semantic Gaps

Early discussions of untranslatability emerged within linguistic approaches to translation. Jakobson [11] emphasized the translatability of cognitive meaning while noting difficulties in poetic and formally constrained texts. Catford [12], however, later distinguished between linguistic untranslatability, arising from structural differences between languages, and cultural untranslatability, resulting from cultural differences between source and target communities. This perspective holds that certain concepts cannot be fully translated because the target language lacks equivalent linguistic signs. In Arabic-to-English translation, lexical items do not map easily to English because of structural differences, including rich derivational patterns, high semantic density, and root-based morphology.

Arabic possesses a triliteral root system capable of generating extensive semantic fields (e.g., ح ر م, meaning prohibition, sacredness, taboo, and inviolability). English lacks an equivalent morphological mechanism, making it more difficult to reproduce the interconnected

semantic relationships encoded in Arabic derivational patterns. This linguistic architecture contributes to structuralist accounts of untranslatability by highlighting differences in how meaning is organized across languages.

2.2. Functionalist Approaches: Skopos, Purpose, and Context

Functionalist theorists shifted attention from equivalence to communicative purpose. According to Reiss and Vermeer's Skopos theory [13], translation decisions should be guided by the intended function of the target text. Munday [14] provides a contemporary overview of this approach. From this perspective, untranslatability is not an inherent property of texts but depends on communicative purpose, context, and target-audience expectations.

For example, in a religious context, the term "بركة" (baraka) can mean "blessing"; in a more secular context, it can mean "good fortune"; and in anthropological writing, it can be left in Arabic without translation. Functionalism, therefore, offers a flexible approach to cultural untranslatability because it highlights translators' role in choosing strategies suited to communicative needs.

2.3. The Cultural Turn: Translation as Cultural Negotiation

The cultural turn in translation studies redefined translation as a cultural and ideological practice rather than a purely linguistic one [15,16]. Meaning is embedded in cultural systems and power structures, which makes certain concepts resistant to direct transfer across languages [9,17]. In this sense, cultural untranslatability arises when a concept is so closely tied to a culture's worldview that meaningful transfer requires interpretation through an alternative cultural framework.

For example, the concept of ʿird (عرض) encompasses notions of "honor," "dignity," and the protection of women within the family, which cannot be fully understood in translation without reference to Arab social structures, gender norms, and tribal traditions. This cultural approach thus highlights the sociocultural aspects of untranslatability.

2.4. Postcolonial Perspectives: Power, Representation, and Ideology

Postcolonial scholars highlight the role of power and ideology in translation, arguing that translations can reinforce or challenge cultural dominance [18,19]. Misrepresentation of terms such as jihād reflects ideological distortion rather than purely linguistic difficulty [4]. Untranslatability in Arabic-English translation involves complex intercultural interactions with Orientalist narratives, media stereotypes, and geopolitical tensions.

For instance, the word "جهاد" (jihād) is a religious term with a specific theological and historical usage, and its translation "holy war" is partly ideological. From a postcolonial perspective, untranslatability highlights how translation can be shaped by power relations, ideological agendas, and cultural representation, thereby underscoring the importance of ethical translation practice.

2.5. Cognitive Linguistics: Conceptual Metaphors and Worldviews

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, language encodes culturally specific conceptual metaphors that shape how speakers understand the world [20]. Differences in conceptual systems contribute significantly to cultural untranslatability. Conceptual metaphors are encoded in language and represent a culture's models of thought. In the case of Arabic, for instance, expressions such as "قلبي يتمزق" (my heart is tearing apart) conceptualize emotional suffering through bodily fragmentation. Similarly, expressions involving the heart (qalb) frequently encode moral, spiritual, and emotional states. Such conceptual metaphors do not always correspond directly to conventional metaphorical patterns in English.

Many Arabic conceptual metaphors lack direct functional equivalents in contemporary English usage. However, partial correspondences may appear in literary, historical, or theological English. The challenge therefore lies primarily in differences in conceptual organization rather than in complete absence of equivalence. This mismatch operates not only at the lexical level but also at the level of conceptual structures and culturally specific worldviews.

2.6. Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives

While these theoretical approaches differ in emphasis, they should be viewed as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Structuralist theories identify lexical and semantic gaps between languages; functionalist approaches focus on communicative purpose and audience expectations; cultural and postcolonial frameworks highlight ideology, representation, and power; and cognitive linguistics explains how culturally specific conceptual systems shape meaning. Together, these perspectives suggest that cultural untranslatability is neither an absolute barrier to translation nor merely a linguistic problem. Rather, it is a dynamic phenomenon whose significance depends on context, purpose, culture, and translator decision-making.

Additional perspectives are offered by Baker [5], who emphasizes the role of translation in shaping cultural narratives; House [21], whose distinction between overt and covert translation highlights varying approaches to cultural transfer; Nord [6], who extends functionalist theory through the principle of translator loyalty; and Pym [8], who focuses on translator responsibility and intercultural mediation. These approaches further demonstrate that translation decisions are influenced not only by linguistic constraints but also by ethical, cultural, and communicative considerations.

3. Linguistic and Cultural Features of Arabic That Produce Untranslatability

Arabic linguistic and cultural structures contribute significantly to cultural untranslatability because meanings are often shaped by semantic density, religious intertextuality, sociocultural embeddedness, and context-dependent usage [22]. Examining these features helps explain why certain Arabic concepts pose challenges for translation into English. Linguistic variation and context-dependent meaning are fundamental properties of language that influence translation [23]. Lexical choices in Arabic often reflect culturally specific meanings that require contextual interpretation [24]. Arabic is linguistically complex, and its structure, lexicon, and pragmatic conventions carry cultural knowledge that may not have equivalents in English. This section examines several features of Arabic that contribute to cultural untranslatability, including morphological structure, semantic density, cultural embeddedness, religious intertextuality, and pragmatic conventions.

3.1. Root-Based Morphology and Semantic Networks

One of the most distinctive features of Arabic is its triliteral root system, in which most words derive from a three-consonant root that carries a core semantic field. Arabic uses this morphological structure to build extensive networks of related meanings from a given root. For instance, the root ح-ر-م (ḥ-r-m) produces:

- حرام (ḥarām)—forbidden, taboo
- حريم (ḥarīm)—women of the household, private space
- حرم (ḥaram)—sacred sanctuary
- محرم (maḥram)—unmarriageable kin
- إحرام (iḥrām)—state of ritual consecration during pilgrimage

The underlying semantic field encompasses sanctity, prohibition, and inviolability. English, which has no equivalent morphological system, cannot capture this degree of morphological interconnectedness.

A word-for-word translation often fails to preserve the thematic coherence perceived by Arabic speakers. This produces morpho-semantic untranslatability, where the difficulty lies not in finding the same word but in the conceptual network surrounding it.

Similarly, the root ك ر م (k r m) forms a semantic field encompassing generosity, nobility, and honor.

- كرم (karam)—generosity
- كريم (karīm)—noble, generous
- مكرمة (makrama)—honorable deed
- تكريم (takrīm)—honoring, recognition

Words like "generosity" or "honor" convey only parts of this semantic field. Many cultural constructs, such as karam as a Bedouin virtue, a religious virtue, and a social calling, cannot be conveyed through translation without explanatory context.

The cultural meanings embedded within Arabic morphology constitute another source of untranslatability, as English lacks an equivalent root-based semantic system.

3.2. Semantic Density and Polysemy

Arabic words often carry multiple layers of meaning, including literal, figurative, emotional, and spiritual connotations. This stems partly from the language's long literary and intellectual history and partly from its cultural and religious functions.

Consider the word "بركة" (baraka). Its meanings include:

- divine blessing
- spiritual energy
- abundance without material cause
- a sense of sacred presence
- intergenerational continuity of goodness

As discussed in studies of Arabic religious, cultural, and anthropological traditions, *baraka* is associated not only with blessing but also with divine favor, spiritual efficacy, and socially recognized forms of goodness whose meaning is shaped by religious and cultural contexts [25–27]. "Blessing" is the closest equivalent, but it does not fully encompass the dimensions of baraka as a concept. Likewise, the term "فتنة" (fitna) may be interpreted as temptation, civil strife, seduction, trial, or chaos depending on the context. English requires several different words or phrases to express these nuances.

This semantic density is particularly evident in religious vocabulary, much of which has been shaped by centuries of theological interpretation.

For example:

- "تقوى" (taqwā) combines fear of God, piety, moral consciousness, and spiritual vigilance
- "إيمان" (īmān) encompasses faith, trust, conviction, and embodied practice

Words such as "faith" or "piety" may capture important aspects of these concepts but do not always convey their full theological and experiential dimensions.

Such semantic density contributes to lexical untranslatability because multiple layers of meaning are concentrated within a single lexical item.

3.3. Cultural Embeddedness and Social Concepts

Cultural meanings are embedded in language-specific conceptual systems, which differ across cultures [28]. Many Arabic lexical items are closely associated with particular social, ethical, and cultural traditions. Some Arabic words embody the values and moral principles

of collective life, tribal ethics, communal norms, and social hierarchies and do not always have direct functional equivalents in English.

A notable example is "عِرض" (ʿird), a concept that remains important in many Arabic-speaking societies. Studies of Arabic culture, language, and social values describe *ʿird* as encompassing personal honor, family reputation, moral integrity, and communal responsibility, making it difficult to reduce to a single English equivalent [17,28,29].

- personal honor
- family reputation
- the protection of female relatives
- moral integrity
- social standing

The translation of "عِرض" (ʿird) as 'honor' or 'reputation' does not convey its gendered, familial, and communal associations. Likewise, "نخوة" (nakhwa) refers to a culturally valued sense of chivalrous solidarity, moral courage, and readiness to protect others. No single English term encompasses all these social, ethical, and cultural dimensions. These concepts often require contextualization or explanation when translated into English.

Another illustrative example is ghurba (غربة), which denotes estrangement from one's homeland and frequently conveys a broader sense of social, cultural, and existential displacement. The English term "homesickness" primarily describes longing for one's home but does not fully capture the wider dimensions of alienation and displacement associated with ghurba.

These terms are deeply rooted in specific Arabic cultural traditions and social structures. Although approximate English equivalents exist, they do not fully convey the cultural assumptions and social meanings associated with the original concepts.

3.4. Religious Intertextuality and Sociocultural Usage

Islamic discourse has profoundly influenced Arabic linguistic and cultural traditions, although Arabic is also used in secular, literary, and diverse religious contexts. Expressions such as *inshāʾAllāh* and *alḥamdulillāh* are strongly associated with Islamic linguistic and devotional traditions and occur frequently in Qur'anic and religious discourse. However, they are also widely used across Arabic-speaking communities, including Muslim, Christian, and secular speakers, where they may function as pragmatic, cultural, and interpersonal expressions in addition to their religious meanings [25,30]. In contemporary Arabic-speaking communities, these expressions may serve interpersonal, pragmatic, or conventional functions alongside explicitly religious meanings. This phenomenon contributes to intertextual untranslatability because meaning often depends on shared religious knowledge and cultural assumptions.

Expressions such as:

- "إن شاء الله" (inshāʾAllāh)
- "الحمد لله" (alḥamdulillāh)
- "ما شاء الله" (māshāʾAllāh)
- "جزاك الله خيراً" (jazāk Allāhu khayran)

are not merely religious expressions but also sociocultural practices whose meanings depend upon context, interpersonal relations, and shared cultural knowledge [25]. They function as:

- Expressions of faith
- Markers of politeness
- Social rituals
- Invocations of divine will

The phrase inshāʾAllāh is often translated literally as "God willing," but it does not convey its pragmatic functions. The Arabic expression occurs frequently in casual speech and is common as a polite hedge or expression of hope. In some contemporary English-speaking contexts, "God willing" may sound more formal, explicitly religious, or less frequent in everyday conversation than its Arabic counterpart.

Similarly, alḥamdulillāh can mean:

- "praise be to God"
- "I'm fine" (in response to "How are you?")
- "thank goodness"
- "things are going well"

Its translation depends heavily on context, making it pragmatically hard to translate. Religious intertextuality contributes to a form of cultural and pragmatic untranslatability because meaning is closely tied to shared theological knowledge.

3.5. Pragmatic Conventions and Social Interaction

Pragmatic norms governing politeness, indirectness, and social interaction differ considerably between Arabic and English. Pragmatic conventions in Arabic, including politeness formulas and indirect communication strategies, differ significantly from English norms and contribute to pragmatic untranslatability [31].

These include:

- Indirectness
- Politeness formulas
- Ritualized expressions
- Honorifics
- Collectivist orientations reported in some Arabic-speaking communities

For instance, in some Arabic-speaking interactional contexts, speakers may prefer indirectness (taʿrīḍ) as a strategy for maintaining politeness, whereas some English-speaking contexts may favor greater directness in communication. Such differences may contribute to pragmatic untranslatability.

Expressions such as:

- "تفضل" (tafaḍḍal)—used when offering something, inviting someone in, or giving permission
- "يعطيك العافية" (yaʿṭīk al-ʿāfiyah)—a culturally specific way of thanking someone for their effort
- "نعيماً" (naʿīman)—said after someone showers or gets a haircut

These expressions have no direct functional equivalents in English because the associated social practices are not fully institutionalized in the same way in most English-speaking contexts.

Furthermore, Arabic uses kinship terms differently from English. Arabic encodes distinctions in genealogical relations, such as "خال" (maternal uncle) and "عم" (paternal uncle), lexically, but English does not differentiate them. This highlights the role of cultural models of family structure.

Pragmatic conventions therefore contribute to untranslatability insofar as they embed social norms within language.

3.6. Diglossia and Linguistic Variation

Arabic is characterized by a diglossic linguistic situation in which Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and regional dialects coexist. Consequently, discussions of cultural untranslatability should avoid treating Arabic as a homogeneous linguistic system.

Many pragmatic expressions, social concepts, and cultural references vary according to region, social context, and historical period. Recognizing this variation is essential because translation choices appropriate for one Arabic variety may not suit another.

3.7. Emotional and Aesthetic Expression

Arabic literary discourse exhibits a rich range of expressive and stylistic resources, particularly in poetry and rhetorical writing. The language employs:

- Metaphorical imagery
- Hyperbole
- Rhythmic patterns
- Formulaic expressions
- Intertextual references

These features make it challenging to translate aesthetic effects. For example, the following expression:

"قلبي يتمزق" (qalbī yatamazzuq) means my heart is hurting very much; literally, "my heart is tearing apart." The English expression "I am heartbroken" conveys a similar emotional state but lacks some of the intensity and imagery conveyed by the Arabic formulation.

Likewise, Arabic poetry, too, is imbued with:

- Internal rhyme
- Alliteration
- Root-based wordplay
- Qur'anic echoes

These effects are often difficult to reproduce fully in translation without losing some aesthetic impact.

4. Case Studies of Culturally Challenging Arabic Terms

The manifestations of cultural untranslatability are evident in the interpretation of Arabic terms deeply rooted in religious, social, and historical contexts. Such terms are often difficult to translate directly, not because English lacks lexical equivalents, but because comparable cultural and contextual associations may be absent. This section presents detailed case studies of some of the central concepts in Arabic that illustrate various forms of untranslatability, including religious, social, emotional, pragmatic, and ideological dimensions. The examples illustrate how meaning is negotiated among linguistic form, culture, and communicative purpose in translation, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Major Culturally embedded Arabic concepts and their translation challenges.

No.	Term	Semantic and Pragmatic Range/Components	Cultural Embeddedness/Context	Translation Challenges/Implications
1.	**ḥarām (حرام): Prohibition, Sacredness, and Moral Order**	• religious prohibition (e.g., consuming alcohol) • moral taboo • social impropriety • sacred inviolability (e.g., al Masjid al Ḥarām) • personal boundaries and honor "Forbidden or prohibited" in English only refers to the legalistic aspect; spiritual and ethical qualities are missing.	• a moral judgment • a social regulatory mechanism • a religious category • a marker of communal identity Used to show dismay, sympathy, or moral outrage. Example: ḥarām ʿalayk = "shame on you"/"that's unfair."	• religious connotations • social norms • emotional tone • pragmatic function Literal translation loses meaning; functional translation risks losing cultural specificity.
2.	**baraka (بركة): Blessing, Sacred Energy, and Continuity. Interpretations of baraka differ across religious, cultural, and regional contexts**	• divine grace • spiritual energy • inexplicable abundance • intergenerational continuity of goodness • sacred presence in people, places, or actions "Blessing" or "grace" does not convey metaphysical and communal nature.	• religious discourse • folk traditions • everyday expressions • descriptions of charismatic individuals "Full of baraka" = spiritual charisma, purity, capacity to infuse goodness [27].	• contextual sensitivity • awareness of religious intertextuality • decisions about domestication vs. foreignization Cutting the term may maintain cultural specificity but require additional explanation for readers unfamiliar with the expression.
3.	**ghurba (غربة): Estrangement, Exile, and Emotional Displacement**	• homesickness • alienation • cultural dislocation • longing for familiarity • existential loneliness English "homesickness" or "exile" conveys only partial facets.	• labor migration • political exile • displacement due to conflict • nostalgia for communal life	• capturing emotional nuance • conveying cultural resonance • avoiding reductionism Descriptive phrases or paratextual explanations often required.
4.	**ʿird (عِرض): Honor, Dignity, and Social Integrity**	• personal honor • family dignity • sexual morality • social reputation • communal responsibility English "honor" or "reputation" cannot capture gendered/familial nature.	• group honor transmitted across generations • tribal ethics • social hierarchy • gender norms • conflict resolution • communal identity • In ethnographic descriptions of some Arab communities, perceived breaches of ʿird have been associated with social sanctions, ostracism, or intergroup conflict [29].	• cultural contextualization • sensitivity to gender dynamics • awareness of sociopolitical implications Literal translation misrepresents; explanatory translation may interfere with narrative.

Table 1. *Cont.*

No.	Term	Semantic and Pragmatic Range/Components	Cultural Embeddedness/Context	Translation Challenges/Implications
5.	**jihād (جهاد): Struggle, Effort, and Ideological Contestation Meanings vary across theological traditions, historical periods, and communicative contexts**	• personal spiritual struggle • moral self-discipline • social justice efforts • armed resistance/conflict (specific contexts) • In many theological and ethical discussions, jihād is interpreted as spiritual or moral striving, including struggles for self-discipline and personal improvement.	Translation and discourse studies have noted that public and media representations often privilege militant interpretations of jihād, while broader meanings associated with spiritual striving, moral self-discipline, and social responsibility may receive less attention [4,5]. Translation challenges surrounding jihād often involve both linguistic interpretation and broader ideological, historical, and political considerations.	• theological nuance • political sensitivity • media stereotypes • contextual meaning Requires footnotes/explanation for responsible translation.
6.	**nakhwa (نخوة): Chivalry, Solidarity, and Moral Courage**	• readiness to defend others • moral courage • communal loyalty • generosity in action No single English word captures all virtues.	• tribal honor codes • masculine identity • social responsibility • heroic narratives Praised in Arab poetry and folklore.	• descriptive paraphrasing • cultural annotation • sensitivity to gendered connotations
7.	**inshāʾAllāh (إن شاء الله): Divine Will, Hope, and Politeness**	• hope • uncertainty • politeness • avoidance of commitment • religious faith • In some contemporary English-speaking contexts, “God willing” may sound more explicitly religious, formal, or less frequent in everyday conversation than its Arabic counterpart, though usage varies across communities and regions.	• Religious discourse and broader Arabic sociocultural usage • humility before divine will • social etiquette • communal identity	• Translators must decide: • literal • functional • leave untranslated Each choice carries cultural implications.
8.	**alḥamdulillāh (الحمد لله): Praise, Relief, and Gratitude**	• “I’m fine” (response to greetings) • “thank goodness” • “things are going well” • “I’m relieved” • “I’m grateful”	• daily conversation • moments of relief • social ritual • expression of faith	In some English-speaking contexts, a literal rendering may sound more explicitly religious or formal than the Arabic expression, although effects vary according to audience and context. Example of “pragmatic untranslatability.”

Illustrative Translation Comparisons

The challenges of cultural untranslatability become more visible when culturally embedded terms are examined in authentic translation contexts rather than in isolation. Published translations demonstrate that translators rarely encounter isolated lexical items detached from their communicative environment. Instead, translation requires the negotiation of cultural meaning within broader textual, ideological, and pragmatic contexts. The following examples illustrate common challenges discussed in Arabic-English translation scholarship. Example 1 presents published translations, whereas Examples 2–5 are illustrative constructions designed to demonstrate recurring issues of cultural untranslatability.

Example 1: Translation of the Qur'anic Expression tabāraka

Source Text and Published Translations: The following comparison is based on published English translations of the Qur'an 67:1 by Abdel Haleem [30], Yusuf Ali [32], and Pickthall [33].

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ الْمُلْكُ (Qur'an 67:1)

Published English translations of *tabāraka* (Qur'an 67:1) are compared in Table 2.

Table 2. Published translations of *tabāraka* (Qur'an 67:1).

Translator	Translation
Yusuf Ali	"Blessed be He in Whose hands is Dominion."
Pickthall	"Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Sovereignty."
Abdel Haleem	"Exalted is He who holds all control in His hands."

Analysis

The three translators render the concept differently.

- Yusuf Ali and Pickthall retain the religious notion through "Blessed".
- Abdel Haleem avoids literal rendering and uses "Exalted".

The translations reflect different interpretive choices regarding the derived form tabāraka. Lexicographical and exegetical traditions associate the root *b-r-k* with meanings related to blessing, abundance, beneficence, and exaltedness [26,30], although the precise interpretation varies across contexts. The example illustrates how translators foreground different dimensions of a semantically rich root. From a structuralist perspective, the example illustrates lexical non-equivalence. From a functionalist perspective, each translation prioritizes a different communicative goal.

Example 2: inshāʾAllāh

Arabic:

سأراك غداً إن شاء الله

Literal Meaning:

I will see you tomorrow, if God wills.

Alternative translation strategies for *inshāʾAllāh* are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Translation strategies for *inshāʾAllāh*.

Strategy	Translation
Literal	God willing, I will see you tomorrow.
Functional	Hopefully, I will see you tomorrow.
Foreignizing	I will see you tomorrow, inshāʾAllāh.

Analysis

The literal translation preserves religious meaning.

The functional translation communicates future uncertainty but loses theological significance.

Retaining the Arabic phrase preserves cultural identity but may require explanation for non-Arabic readers.

This example demonstrates pragmatic untranslatability because the expression functions as an expression of faith, politeness, and acknowledgment of uncertainty.

Example 3: jihād

Arabic:

جهاد النفس

Different renderings of *jihād al-nafs* are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Alternative renderings of *jihād al-nafs*.

Translation	Rendering
Literal	struggle of the self
Religious Studies	spiritual striving
Media Simplification	holy war

Analysis

The phrase refers to self-discipline and moral striving.

The rendering "holy war" is inaccurate here because the source text contains no military reference.

This example demonstrates the postcolonial argument that translation can be influenced by ideology and public discourse rather than linguistic considerations alone.

Example 4: ghurba

Arabic:

عاش سنوات طويلة في الغربة

Alternative English translations of *ghurba* are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Alternative translations of *ghurba*.

Translation	Rendering
Literal	He lived many years in estrangement.
Common Translation	He lived many years abroad.
Literary Translation	He endured years of exile and longing for home.

Analysis

"Abroad" communicates physical absence.

"Exile" communicates displacement.

Neither fully captures the emotional, psychological, and existential dimensions associated with **ghurba**.

The example illustrates cognitive and cultural dimensions of translation difficulty.

Example 5: ʿird in Different Contexts

Arabic:

الدفاع عن العرض

Diplomatic Report

protecting personal dignity
Human Rights Report
protecting family honor
Anthropological Study
protecting ʿird (a culturally specific concept of family honor and social reputation) [29].
Analysis
According to Skopos theory:

- Diplomatic translation prioritizes accessibility.
- Anthropological translation prioritizes cultural specificity.
- Human-rights translation prioritizes communicative clarity.

Thus, the translation of ʿ**ird** depends on purpose rather than on a single correct equivalent.

5. Translation Strategies and Ethical Implications

Translation is also a communicative act shaped by discourse, context, and audience expectations [34]. Descriptive translation studies emphasize norms and cultural constraints that influence translation choices [35]. Translation of Arabic culturally bound expressions often requires problem-solving strategies such as paraphrasing and cultural explanation [36]. In Arabic-English translation, cultural untranslatability rarely implies that translation is impossible; rather, it highlights the need for informed strategic choices. This section explores translation strategies for culturally embedded Arabic concepts and discusses their implications for meaning, representation, and intercultural understanding. It also examines the ethical role of translators in Arabic-English translation and how inaccurate renderings may perpetuate stereotypes or distort cultural realities.

Arabic translation scholars such as Ghazala [36] and Abdul-Raof [26] likewise emphasize the importance of cultural explanation and contextual interpretation when translating religiously and culturally loaded concepts.

Ethical debates in translation have been explored through Venuti's ethics of difference [37], Baker's narrative theory [5], Nord's principle of loyalty [6], and Pym's model of intercultural responsibility [8]. These approaches emphasize the translator's obligation to balance fidelity to source-culture meanings with accessibility for target audiences.

5.1. Artificial Intelligence and Hybrid Translation Approaches

Recent advances in neural machine translation have improved Arabic translation; however, culturally embedded concepts remain difficult for automated systems. Terms such as *baraka*, *taqwā*, and *ʿird* often require contextual interpretation and cultural knowledge that extend beyond lexical meaning. Expressions such as *inshāʾAllāh* may receive accurate literal translations while losing pragmatic functions related to politeness, mitigation, or social convention. Consequently, recent scholarship increasingly advocates hybrid translation approaches that combine machine translation with human expertise. In such models, machine translation provides linguistic output while human translators remain responsible for contextualization, explicitation, and cultural mediation.

Current neural machine translation systems generally perform well when translating literal lexical meanings but often struggle with strategies such as explicitation, pragmatic adaptation, and cultural annotation. For instance, expressions such as inshāʾAllāh are frequently rendered as "God willing" regardless of context. In contrast, culturally embedded concepts such as baraka or ʿird rarely receive the explanatory additions that human translators may provide. Consequently, hybrid models combining machine output with human post-editing remain especially valuable for culturally sensitive texts.

5.2. Applying Theoretical Frameworks to Translation Decisions

The following examples illustrate how theoretical perspectives may inform translation decisions:

Structuralist Perspective

The term baraka illustrates structural lexical gaps because no single English equivalent reproduces all semantic dimensions.

Major translation strategies for culturally embedded Arabic concepts are summarized in Table 6.

Functionalist Perspective

The translation of ʿird depends on purpose.

- diplomatic text = dignity
- sociological text = honor code
- literary text = ʿird + explanation

Postcolonial Perspective

The translation of *jihād* illustrates how contextual interpretation may differ from ideologically driven representations.

Cognitive Perspective

ghurba represents a culturally specific conceptualization of exile.

5.3. Limitations

This entry adopts a conceptual and literature-based approach and does not provide empirical validation through corpus analysis, reader-reception studies, translator interviews, or experimental research. The discussion focuses primarily on Modern Standard Arabic and selected culturally embedded concepts frequently discussed in Arabic-English translation scholarship. Regional dialects, historical language variation, and non-Arabic Islamic traditions remain beyond the scope of the present study. Consequently, the examples should be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive representations of cultural untranslatability. The discussion also recognizes that Arabic is used by communities of diverse religious backgrounds, including Christian and secular speakers, whose linguistic practices may differ from those discussed in religious examples.

Table 6. Translation strategies for culturally embedded Arabic concepts.

Strategy	Definition/Foundations	Applications/Examples	Advantages	Limitations/Risks
Domestication	Venuti [7]: adapts source text to target norms, making it familiar and intelligible.	Substituting culturally specific terms with general ones; simplifying concepts; adapting pragmatic expressions; eliminating religious references. Example: "الحمد لله" *alḥamdulillāh* → "I'm fine."	Easy for readers; smooth flow; accessible.	Risks cultural erasure; oversimplifies meaning; loss of cultural depth.
Foreignization	Venuti [7]: retains source culture authority, even if less accessible to readers.	Preserving cultural references; using Arabic script correctly; adding footnotes/glossaries; maintaining pragmatic patterns. Example: leaving "إن شاء الله" *inshāʾAllāh* untranslated but explained.	Preserves authenticity; maintains cultural specificity.	May alienate readers; requires explanation; risks exoticization if not contextualized.
Balancing Domestication and Foreignization	No single "better" strategy; depends on purpose, audience, and cultural meaning.	Translator assesses context and communicative goals.	Flexible; context-driven.	Requires judgment; balance is difficult.
Borrowing/ Transliteration	Using source language words directly in target text.	Terms like *baraka*, *jihād*, *nakhwa*, *ʿird*.	Preserves cultural specificity; avoids reductionism; introduces new concepts; maintains semantic richness.	Confuses unfamiliar readers; contested meanings; requires paratextual support.
Calque (Literal Translation)	Translating components literally.	"بيت الشعر" *bayt al-shiʿr* → "house of poetry"; "صلاة الاستسقاء" *ṣalāt al-istisqāʾ* → "prayer for rain."	Retains imagery; conveys partial meaning.	Lacks cultural resonance; may sound odd; needs contextual explanation.
Explicitation/ Paraphrase	Adding explanation or restating meaning.	*ʿird* → "family honor, specifically caring for female relatives."	Enhances comprehension; conveys nuance; avoids misinterpretation.	Disrupts narrative flow; risks overinterpretation; imposes translator's perspective.
Cultural Substitution	Replacing with analogous target term.	"نخوة" *nakhwa* → "chivalry"; "غربة" *ghurba* → "homesickness."	Functional equivalence; accessible.	Misleading; misses existential/communal depth.
Paratextual Strategies	Supplementary aids: footnotes, glossaries, prefaces.	Footnotes explain *baraka*, *taqwā*, *ʿird*, *nakhwa*; glossaries for multiple terms; prefaces outline philosophy and challenges.	Maintains meaning; supports comprehension; useful in academic/literary contexts.	Interrupts reading flow; requires scholarly context.

Table 6. *Cont.*

Strategy	Definition/Foundations	Applications/Examples	Advantages	Limitations/Risks
Pragmatic Adaptation	Altering expressions to fit target communicative norms.	*yaʿṭīk al-ʿāfiyah* (“may God grant you health”) → “thank you.”	Fits norms; aids fluency.	Obscures cultural practices; loses blessing/social ritual dimension.
Translator Agency and Cultural Mediation	Translator mediates between cultures, shaping representation.	Scholars such as Venuti, Baker, Nord, and Pym argue that translators should seek to avoid stereotyping, acknowledge cultural complexity, and remain transparent about significant interpretive choices. Example: avoiding *jihād* → “holy war.”	Ensure cultural sensitivity; ethical integrity; transparency.	Requires visibility; choices carry ideological consequences.
Ethical Perspectives on the Representation of Arabic Cultural Concepts	Cultural sensitivity in religious, political, and gender contexts.	Translation ethics scholarship often emphasizes the importance of avoiding reductions in culturally complex concepts to narrower equivalents (for example, rendering *baraka* simply as “luck”); avoiding unnecessary exoticization through unexplained retention of culture-specific terminology (*ḥarām* untranslated without context); navigating political sensitivity (*jihād*, *sharıʿā*, *fatwā*); carefully representing religious expressions (*inshāʾAllāh*, *alḥamdulillāh*); handling gender norms (*ʿird*, *nakhwa*).	Promoting culturally informed representation; avoids stereotypes; respectful handling of sensitive terms.	Demands deep cultural knowledge; risk of bias if mishandled.
Ethical Framework for Arabic-English Translation	Principles for responsible translation.	Contextual fidelity, communicative clarity, cultural humility, critical awareness, transparency.	Integrity; cultural sensitivity; balanced approach.	Requires skill, awareness, and explanation.

6. Conclusions

Cultural untranslatability is not a marginal phenomenon in Arabic-English translation; rather, it reveals the complex relationships among language, culture, and worldview. As demonstrated throughout this article, Arabic linguistic practices are shaped by diverse religious, social, historical, and cultural traditions. Concepts such as ḥarām, baraka, ghurba, ʿird, jihād, nakhwa, inshāʾ Allāh, and alḥamdulillāh illustrate how cultural meanings become embedded within linguistic expression. The difficulty with these terms lies not in English itself but in the cultural contexts and systems of meaning that shape these concepts.

The theoretical perspectives discussed in this study, namely structuralist, functionalist, cultural, postcolonial, and cognitive-linguistic approaches, demonstrate that untranslatability is a multidimensional phenomenon. Lexical and morpho-semantic difficulties can stem from structural differences between Arabic and English, including Arabic's root system and semantic density. Cultural, religious, and pragmatic factors further complicate meaning transfer. Cognitive linguistic analyses reveal that the two languages often employ different conceptual metaphors and worldview structures, while postcolonial theory underscores the political nature of translation, particularly when Arabic concepts are reframed through ideological narratives in target-language discourse.

The case studies of Section 4 demonstrate that Arabic cultural concepts often require explanation, adaptation, or contextualization because their spiritual, emotional, social, and historical dimensions cannot always be conveyed through direct English equivalents. The concept of ḥarām encompasses legal, moral, social, and sacred dimensions; baraka carries metaphysical and communal connotations associated with blessing and continuity; ghurba represents a culturally specific form of existential displacement; and ʿird encompasses gendered and familial notions of honor deeply embedded in tribal ethics. These examples demonstrate that cultural untranslatability emerges from the interaction of language, culture, and socially embedded systems of meaning.

Section 5 outlined the principal strategies a translator can use (domestication, foreignization, borrowing, calque, explicitation, cultural substitution, and paratextual support). Each approach has advantages and disadvantages, and no single approach can fully resolve the tension between fidelity and communication. Instead, translators must make informed choices based on context, balancing the needs of the target audience and the appropriateness of the new context with the cultural integrity of the source context. This requires not only linguistic competence but also a deep understanding of the cultural values and social norms that shape translation decisions.

The ethical issues of culturally embedded terms are especially crucial in today's global sphere of translation. Loosely used terms such as *jihād*, *sharıʿā*, or *fatwā* can reinforce stereotypes and misconceptions, contributing to misunderstandings of religious, political, and cultural realities. By contrast, when domestication strips away cultural specificity, it becomes harder to see the richness and diversity of Arab cultural life. Thus, ethical translation demands accuracy, contextual awareness, and cultural sensitivity, principles emphasized in translation ethics literature through concepts such as translator loyalty, intercultural mediation, and ethical responsibility [6,8,37]. Translation scholars argue that translators should avoid ideological simplification and seek to represent cultural complexity in ways that promote understanding without distortion [5,8,37].

Cultural untranslatability should thus not be seen as a hurdle to translation but as a challenge for deeper engagement with cultures. It reminds us that languages are not interchangeable "codes" but living systems shaped by the histories, values, and lives of their users. Consistent with functionalist and ethical approaches to translation, cultural untranslatability highlights the importance of sensitivity, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility in intercultural mediation [6,8]. It also emphasizes the need for intercultural dialogue in a

globalized world, where translation between Arabic and English plays an important role in fields such as diplomacy, media, literature, communications, and migration.

Ultimately, cultural untranslatability reflects the limits of straightforward equivalence rather than the impossibility of translation itself. It challenges translators to negotiate meaning across cultures with sensitivity, reflexivity, and ethical awareness while preserving the richness of cultural difference. By recognizing forms of cultural untranslatability, translators can embrace complexity while promoting intercultural understanding. Ultimately, the transformative potential of translation lies not in erasing cultural difference but in making it intelligible across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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