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Translating Islamic Religious Terms for Non-Muslim Audience: A Comparative Study of Three Translator Groups

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Abstract

The translation of Islamic religious terms is of critical importance, as these terms play a vital role in conveying Islamic concepts. Errors in translating such sensitive content may lead to distortions in meaning. This study investigates the strategies employed by three distinct groups of translators when rendering Islamic religious texts for non-Muslim audiences: 1) experienced translators with seminary knowledge, 2) experienced translators without seminary knowledge, and 3) inexperienced translators. Employing a descriptive research design, data were collected through a task-based method and a questionnaire. Participants were asked to translate ten Persian sentences containing key religious terms into English. The translated outputs were analyzed using Larson's (1984) classification for translating non-equivalent terms. Statistical evaluation, including Mean, ANOVA, and LSD tests, was conducted to assess the findings. The results indicate that experienced translators with seminary knowledge predominantly utilized loanwords with explanatory additions. Furthermore, a significant difference was observed between this group and the other two in terms of translation strategies.

Keywords: Religious terms, seminary knowledge, translation strategies, non-muslim audience

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Introduction

Translation serves as a bridge between languages and cultures, facilitating the transfer of meaning from a source text to a target audience. However, translating culturally significant texts – particularly religious texts and terminology – presents unique challenges for translators. Given that non-Muslim audiences often lack sufficient familiarity with Islamic religious terms, careful consideration of cultural context is essential to ensure accurate and meaningful translation.

Mehawesh and Sadeq (2014) emphasize the complexity of translating religious terms, noting that it demands specialized skills and extensive experience. Due to their sacred nature, religious terms are highly sensitive, requiring meticulous attention to preserve their intended meaning across languages. Achieving semantic and functional equivalence between the source and target languages remains a persistent challenge, as translators must fully grasp the nuances of the original expression to avoid distortion or loss of meaning (p. 7).

A pertinent example of such challenges is highlighted by Jahangiri Sohrevardi (2024, as cited in Aliabadi, 2024, June 10), a member of the board of directors of the Qom Seminary Translation Association. He notes that the Persian phrase امام غائب (Imam Ghayeb) has been erroneously translated as *Hidden Imam* in some texts, whereas the theologically accurate rendering in Shia Islam is *Unseen Imam*. This distinction is critical: describing the Imam as *hidden* implies that his followers must also conceal themselves, whereas the term *unseen* affirms his continued presence and divine will. Misinterpretations of terms like غائب (ghayeb), which carries different connotations in Ismaili and Shia theology, can lead to significant theological misunderstandings. Such errors underscore the necessity of precise translation strategies to avoid misrepresenting religious doctrines.

To navigate these challenges, translators must employ strategies that address issues of equivalence, cultural variation, and linguistic divergence (Khammyseh, 2015, p. 104). As Dweik and Abu Helwah (2014) argue, translators must not only convey religious terms accurately but also retain their cultural and theological context, as non-Muslim audiences may otherwise misinterpret their significance (pp. 285–303).

This study investigates the translation strategies employed by three distinct groups: 1) experienced translators with seminary knowledge, 2) experienced translators without seminary knowledge, and 3) inexperienced translators when rendering Islamic religious texts for non-Muslim audiences. Using Larson's (1984) classification for translating non-equivalent terms, the study analyzes translated texts to address the following research question: What translation strategies are most frequently used by experienced translators with seminary knowledge, experienced translators without seminary knowledge, and inexperienced translators when dealing with Islamic religious terms?

Additionally, the study tests the following hypotheses based on task performance:

a. Experienced translators with seminary knowledge predominantly use loanwords with explanatory additions when translating Islamic religious terms.

b. There is a significant difference in translation strategies between experienced translators with seminary knowledge and the other two groups.

Literature Review

The translation of Islamic religious terms into English has been extensively explored in translation studies, with scholars highlighting the unique challenges posed by religious texts. Robinson (2000, as cited in Noviyenty et al., 2020, p. 3) questions the extent to which Islamic religious texts can be translated, examining not only methodological approaches but also considerations such as target

audiences and the authority responsible for translations. He introduces the dichotomy of translatability versus untranslatability, noting that some Muslims argue certain Islamic terms lack true equivalents in English.

Alhaddad and Abdullah (2022) emphasize the sensitivity of religious expressions, which often encapsulate concepts tied to identity, sacredness, and cultural values. Such expressions frequently appear as idioms in sacred texts, demanding high levels of translator competence (p. 57). They further argue that translating religious texts is uniquely challenging due to their divine nature – practices deeply embedded in a specific linguistic and cultural context (p. 55).

Nida (1997) observes that religious terminology tends to remain conservative, as many believers regard these terms as divinely ordained. Over time, these terms accumulate profound significance, yet their translation depends on culture-specific knowledge to ensure accurate transference from source to target language (p. 194). Jahanshahi and Kafipour (2015) echo this concern, noting that errors in translating religious terms can distort core Islamic ideas. Such translations must account for non-equivalence, particularly when adapting discourse for English-speaking audiences unfamiliar with Islamic concepts (p. 239).

Larson (1984) identifies religious terms as especially problematic, as they require meticulous analysis of their source-language semantics and careful selection of target-language equivalents (p. 180). Xue-Bing (2006) expands on this, noting that Islamic terminology often creates a "lexical void" in the target language due to the absence of direct equivalents, forcing translators to devise alternative strategies (pp. 82–93). Abdul-Raof (2005) underscores the pitfalls of assumed equivalence across cultures. For example, the Christian conception of "God" (associated with the Trinity) differs fundamentally from the Islamic Allāh, a singular divine entity – a distinction that literal translation may obscure (p. 172).

Mahmoud (2014) illustrates how even existing target-language terms may fail to convey the full nuance of religious concepts. For instance, *infāq* (إنفاق) in Islam encompasses a holistic way of life, far exceeding the literal meaning of *spending*. Similarly, *maḥram* (محرم), denoting a close relative, carries religious and cultural connotations untranslatable without explanation (p. 8). Noviyenty et al. (2020) highlight this issue with terms like *kufr* (كفر), *īmān* (ايمان), and *ṣalāh* (صلاه), where English renderings (*disbelief*, *belief*, and *prayer*) oversimplify their theological depth (p. 4).

The translation of *masjid* (مسجد) exemplifies these challenges. While dictionaries define it generically as "a Muslim place of worship" (Robinson, 2000; Macmillan, as cited in Noviyenty et al., 2020, p. 5), Iqbal (2012) notes that adopting the loanword *mosque* without explanation risks stripping the term of its cultural and liturgical significance. This underscores the need for compensatory strategies, such as glosses, to bridge conceptual gaps (Noviyenty et al., 2020, p. 5).

Translation Strategies

The translation of religious texts demands a high degree of accuracy and fidelity, necessitating strategic approaches to bridge linguistic and cultural divides (Ivir, 1998, p. 118). Ivir (1998) notes that while numerous strategies exist for conveying Islamic religious expressions, translators must carefully select the most appropriate one for each communicative context. This process involves overcoming two primary challenges: first, identifying viable strategies for culturally unmatched elements, and second, choosing the most effective approach, as not all strategies yield equivalent results in every situation (p. 118).

Nida (1964) introduces two fundamental types of equivalence in translation. Dynamic equivalence prioritizes the meaning and its impact on the target audience, while formal equivalence focuses on

preserving the form and structure of the source language (pp. 159–160). Later, Nida (1982) emphasizes the importance of considering the target audience, particularly when translating religious texts like the Bible (pp. 20–23). Similarly, Newmark (1981) proposes two complementary approaches: semantic translation, which aims to transfer the exact meaning of the source text, and communicative translation, which prioritizes the effect of the translation on its audience (pp. 39–45). Newmark (1988) further argues that the choice between these methods should be guided by the nature of the text itself (pp. 81–93).

Baker (1992) offers practical strategies for translating religious terms, including borrowing (directly adopting the source term), explanation (adding clarificatory notes), and conceptual substitution (replacing the term with a culturally familiar concept) (pp. 41–42). Koller (1979) expands on this by outlining five types of equivalence, with particular attention to semantic and cultural equivalence (pp. 186–190). In his later work, Koller (1995) stresses that cultural equivalence is especially critical for accurately rendering religious terminology (pp. 195–200). Venuti (1995) contributes to this discussion by advocating for foreignization, a strategy that preserves the source culture's distinctiveness, though this approach may present challenges for non-expert audiences (pp. 11–73). Larson's classification offers several strengths, including flexibility in addressing diverse translation challenges, heightened cultural awareness in conveying concepts, and proven effectiveness for religious, literary, and cultural texts.

Methodology

This study involved a total of 15 participants, divided into three groups of translators. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure the selection of participants who met specific criteria relevant to the study's aims – namely, the challenges of translating Islamic religious terms for non-Muslim audiences. Participants were selected based on their academic backgrounds, translation experience, and familiarity with Islamic concepts.

The first group consisted of five translators who hold university degrees in English translation and have also received formal seminary education. These individuals pursued seminary studies following their undergraduate education, thereby acquiring advanced knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and theology. They are currently active in translating religious texts. The second group also included five translators with degrees in English translation; however, they have not undergone seminary training. Despite this, they have independently engaged in translation of religious texts, motivated by personal interest rather than formal religious education. The third group comprised five translators who possess academic qualifications in English translation but have no experience in translating religious texts and limited or no knowledge of religious terminology.

The study faced two primary limitations: difficulty in identifying professional translators who had both academic and seminary training, and the reluctance of some qualified individuals to participate. These constraints contributed to the small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

A descriptive research design was adopted. Data were collected using two instruments: a translation task and a post-task questionnaire. Each participant was asked to translate a set of 10 complex Persian sentences containing culturally and theologically significant Islamic terms (e.g., « ایمان و اعتقاد به امام غائب سبب امیدواری مسلمانان نسبت به آینده‌ی روشن در عصر ظهور امامشان می‌گردد», «مومنان باید در راه خدا جهاد کنند», «مسجد نماد وحدت و برابری مسلمانان است»).

Participants were instructed to translate the sentences into English for a non-Muslim audience. They were explicitly asked not to consult other individuals or use artificial intelligence tools such as

ChatGPT or Gemini. The use of dictionaries was permitted. All translators participated voluntarily and provided informed consent. They were briefed about the research process and assured that their identities would remain confidential and that their translations would be used solely for academic purposes.

Upon completion of the translation task, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire designed to elicit their rationale for choosing specific translation strategies.

To analyze the translated texts, the study applied the classification proposed by Larson (1984) for translating non-equivalent terms. The four main strategies from Larson's model – loan words, loan words with explanations, general translation, and cultural substitution – served as the basis for evaluating the participants' choices. These strategies are discussed in detail in the literature review section.

Statistical analysis was conducted using mean comparisons, ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), and the Least Significant Difference (LSD) test. The mean values were used to identify the most frequently employed translation strategies across the three groups. This helped address the first hypothesis: that translators with seminary training are more likely to use loan words with explanatory notes when translating Islamic religious terms. ANOVA was used to test for statistically significant differences in strategy use among the three groups. This analysis addressed the second hypothesis: that there is a significant difference between translators with seminary training and the other two groups in their approach to religious translation.

Following a significant ANOVA result, the LSD test was applied to conduct pairwise comparisons between groups, identifying which specific group differences were statistically significant in the use of translation strategies.

Results

The analysis of translation strategies employed by the three translator groups reveals distinct patterns in rendering Islamic religious terms. As demonstrated in Table 1, experienced translators with seminary knowledge predominantly utilized *loan words with expression* (68%), significantly more than other strategies. This approach combines direct borrowing of Arabic-Islamic terms with accompanying explanations to ensure conceptual clarity for non-Muslim readers.

Table 2 presents the strategic preferences of experienced translators lacking seminary training, who showed greater variation in their approach, with no single strategy dominating to the same degree. The data indicates these translators more frequently employed general translations and cultural adaptations. Table 3 highlights the translation patterns of inexperienced translators, whose strategies differed markedly from both experienced groups. Their translations featured a higher incidence of general translation.

Table 1. Translations by Experienced Translators with Seminary Knowledge

No	Islamic Terms	Loan word	Loan word with expression	General translation	Cultural translation
1	Imam Ghaeb	-	-	1	4
2	Allah	3	1	-	1
3	Mahram	-	3	-	2
4	Masjid	-	4	-	1
5	Wudu	-	4	-	1
6	Halal	-	5	-	-

7	Haram	-	5	-	-
8	Kufr	-	4	-	1
9	Munkar	-	4	-	1
10	Jihad	1	4	-	-
Total		8%	68%	2%	22%

Table 2. Translations by Experienced Translators Without Seminary Knowledge

No	Islamic Terms	Loan Word	Loan Word with Expression	General Translation	Cultural Translation
1	Imam Ghaeb	-	-	3	2
2	Allah	1	-	4	-
3	Mahram	-	1	2	2
4	Masjid	-	-	3	2
5	Wudu	-	1	1	3
6	Halal	3	1	-	1
7	Haram	3	1	-	1
8	Kufr	-	1	-	4
9	Munkar	-	-	2	3
10	Jihad	-	-	2	3
Total		14%	10%	34%	42%

Table 3. Translations by Inexperienced Translators

No	Islamic Terms	Loan Word	Loan Word with Expression	General Translation	Cultural Translation
1	Imam Ghaeb	-	-	5	-
2	Allah	1	-	4	-
3	Mahram	-	-	3	2
4	Masjid	-	-	5	-
5	Wudu	-	-	4	1
6	Halal	3	-	2	-
7	Haram	3	-	2	-
8	Kufr	-	-	4	1
9	Munkar	-	-	4	1
10	Jihad	1	-	3	1
Total		16%	0%	72%	12%

Table 4 presents the average scores of translation strategies across the three groups. For experienced translators with seminary knowledge, the scores were 1.1 (loan word), 4.0 (loan word with expression), 0.1 (general translation), and 3.4 (cultural translation), indicating a predominant use of loan words with explanatory expressions.

Among experienced translators without seminary training, the average scores showed different preferences: 0.7 (loan word), 0.5 (loan word with expression), 1.7 (general translation), and 2.1 (cultural translation), demonstrating their greater reliance on cultural translation.

The inexperienced translators exhibited yet another pattern, with average scores of 0.8 (loan word), 0.1 (loan word with expression), 3.6 (general translation), and 0.6 (cultural translation), revealing their primary use of general translation for Islamic religious terms.

Table 4. Average Scores of Translator Groups

Groups	Mean			
	Loan word	Loan word with expression	General translation	Cultural translation
Experienced translators with seminary knowledge	1.1	4	0.1	3.4
Experienced translators without seminary knowledge	0.7	0.5	1.7	2.10
Inexperienced translators	0.8	0.1	3.6	0.6

Table 5 reveals statistically significant differences between translator groups in their use of three translation methods: loan words with expression, general translation, and cultural translation ($p < 0.05$ at 95% confidence level). However, no significant difference was found among groups in their use of loan words ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5. Analysis of Variance

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Loan word	Between Groups	.867	2	.433	.324	.726
	Within Groups	36.100	27	1.337		
	Total	36.967	29			
Loan word with expression	Between Groups	67.400	2	33.700	33.825	.000
	Within Groups	26.900	27	.996		
	Total	94.300	29			
General translation	Between Groups	61.400	2	30.700	28.194	.000
	Within Groups	29.400	27	1.089		
	Total	90.800	29			
Cultural translation	Between Groups	11.667	2	5.833	5.215	.012
	Within Groups	30.200	27	1.119		
	Total	41.867	29			

The LSD post hoc test further specifies which translator groups employed each method more frequently, providing detailed comparisons between the groups.

Table 4.6. Post Hoc LSD Test

Dependent Variable	(I) GROUP	(J) GROUP	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Loan word with expression	Translators with seminary knowledge	Experienced translators without seminary knowledge	2.90000*	.000
		Inexperienced translators in the religious field	3.40000*	.000
	Experienced translators without seminary knowledge	Translators with seminary knowledge	-2.90000*	.000
		Inexperienced translators in the religious field	.50000	.273
	Inexperienced translators in the religious field	Translators with seminary knowledge	-3.40000*	.000
		Experienced translators without seminary knowledge	-.50000	.273
General translation	Translators with seminary knowledge	Experienced translators without seminary knowledge	-1.60000*	.002
		Inexperienced translators in the religious field	-3.50000*	.000
	Experienced translators without seminary knowledge	Translators with seminary knowledge	1.60000*	.002
		Inexperienced translators in the religious field	-1.90000*	.000
	Inexperienced translators in the religious field	Translators with seminary knowledge	3.50000*	.000
		Experienced translators without seminary knowledge	1.90000*	.000
Cultural translation	Translators with seminary knowledge	Experienced translators without seminary knowledge	-1.00000*	.044

The three translator groups exhibited distinct strategy preferences, confirming the first hypothesis that seminary-trained translators predominantly used loan words with expression. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, there was a marked distinction in their use of loan words with expression compared to the other groups. The analysis also revealed significant variation in cultural translation between seminary-trained and non-seminary experienced translators, whereas no such difference was observed among inexperienced translators. For general translation, notable differences were evident across all three groups. Finally, the ANOVA and LSD test results substantiated the study's second hypothesis, confirming statistically significant differences in strategy selection between seminary-trained translators and the other groups.

The questionnaire results, presented in Tables 7 through 9, document the rationale underlying the choice of strategies in each translator group.

The questionnaire results in Table 7 reveal that seminary-trained translators believed the target audience has limited understanding of Islamic religious terminology and thus requires additional explanation. Their predominant use of loan words with explanatory additions (e.g., *Jihad* [striving in the path of Allah]) stemmed from two key motivations: preserving Islamic theological precision and compensating for non-Muslim audiences' limited religious knowledge. This approach reflects their specialized understanding of Islamic terminology.

Table 7. Questionnaire Results – Experienced Translators with Seminary Knowledge

No.	Reasons	Answers
1	Limited vocabulary for expressing Islamic concepts	3
2	The audience's limited understanding of Islamic religious terminology requires additional explanation	5
3	As the text addresses English readers, Islamic terms should be translated into English	-
4	Maintaining Islamic identity and values	4
5	Certain religious terms have become common and naturalized in English usage	4

Table 8 findings indicate that non-seminary experienced translators favored cultural translation (equivalence, explanation, addition, omission), believing Islamic concepts required adaptation for English readers. Their renderings (e.g., *Forbidden according to Islamic law* for *Haram*) demonstrate this compensatory approach toward perceived audience limitations.

Table 8. Questionnaire Results – Experienced Translators without Seminary Knowledge

No	Reasons	Answers
1	Limited vocabulary for expressing Islamic concepts	2
2	The audience's limited understanding of Islamic religious terminology requires additional explanation	4
3	As the text addresses English readers, Islamic terms should be translated into English	4
4	Maintaining Islamic identity and values	-
5	Certain religious terms have become common and naturalized in English usage	1

Inexperienced translators, as shown in Table 9, treated Islamic terms as conventional vocabulary, employing direct equivalents (*Holy War* for *Jihad*; *Unbelief* for *Kufr*) without theological nuance. This tendency toward general translation methods appears to reflect both their limited Islamic knowledge and different translation priorities compared to the experienced groups.

Table 9. Questionnaire Results – Inexperienced Translators

No	Reasons	Answers
1	Limited vocabulary for expressing Islamic concepts	3
2	The audience's limited understanding of Islamic religious terminology requires additional explanation	1
3	As the text addresses English readers, Islamic terms should be translated into English	5
4	Maintaining Islamic identity and values	-
5	Certain religious terms have become common and naturalized in English usage	-

Conclusion

Translating Islamic religious terms presents significant challenges due to the intrinsic connection between religion and culture. Cultural disparities between source and target languages often result in a lack of equivalent terms, and even apparent equivalents may fail to convey identical meanings. For instance, seminary-trained translators frequently prefer *Allah* over *God*, recognizing that while God has broad interpretations in non-Muslim contexts, for Muslims it refers exclusively to the Islamic conception of the divine. Similarly, terms like *Halal* and *Haram* resist simple translation as *lawful* and

forbidden, as these English terms lack the specific theological connotations of their Arabic counterparts. In Islamic tradition, these concepts derive their meaning from divine commandments, whereas their English equivalents suggest more general secular prohibitions or permissions.

This study's findings reveal distinct patterns in translation strategy usage among different translator groups. Seminary-trained translators predominantly employed loan words with explanatory additions, followed by cultural translation, loan words, and general translation. Experienced translators without seminary training favored cultural translation, while inexperienced translators relied most heavily on general translation, often overlooking important theological nuances.

The research highlights several key differences in strategy application: seminary-trained translators used loan words with expression significantly more than other groups; notable variations existed in cultural translation usage between seminary-trained and non-seminary experienced translators; and all three groups differed substantially in their employment of general translation.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study's sample size was constrained by the limited availability of translators with both professional translation qualifications and seminary education, as well as by participant recruitment challenges. These factors may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the geographical scope, and by incorporating a broader range of religious terms. Additional studies in this area would help validate and build upon these findings.

This research underscores the importance of specialized religious knowledge in producing accurate translations of Islamic terminology, particularly for non-Muslim audiences. The findings suggest that optimal translation of religious texts requires both linguistic expertise and deep theological understanding to adequately bridge cultural and conceptual gaps.

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