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**Translating Zikr: A Linguistic Analysis of Its English Equivalents
in Qur'anic Translations**



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Abstract

Abstract This paper examines the lexical semantics of the foundational Qur'ānic theological term *Dhikr* (remembrance/divine awareness) as rendered in the prominent English translations of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Abdel Haleem, and Arthur John Arberry. Rooted in the inherent linguistic and theological complexities of Classical Arabic, this study utilizes semantic field theory and componential analysis to systematically identify and categorize semantic shifts, including narrowing, broadening, substitution, addition, and semantic loss. The analysis demonstrates that Yusuf Ali's interpretive approach frequently results in semantic broadening and addition, expanding theological meanings into active moral guidelines. Conversely, Abdel Haleem offers a highly contextualized and textually direct rendering that balances clarity while narrowing polysemous ranges to suit target sentence environments. Arberry's focus on formal fidelity and structural rhythm results in semantic compression and frequent lexical narrowing, which occasionally leads to partial semantic loss of the deep affective or behavioural dimensions of the source text. Ultimately, this paper illustrates how distinct translation philosophies actively construct divergent representations of a Muslim's spiritual and moral obligations, emphasizing the need for comprehensive semantic consciousness in translation reception and cross-cultural religious pedagogy.

Keywords: Lexical semantics, semantic shifts, Qur'anic translation, *Dhikr*, translation studies, componential analysis, semantic field theory.

1. Introduction

The translation of sacred texts presents unique linguistic and conceptual challenges, particularly when dealing with Classical Arabic texts like the Holy Qur'ān. Within the discipline of lexical semantics, words are not independent tokens but deep, interconnected units of meaning that function within structured frameworks (Saeed, 2011). The linguistic arrangement of the Qur'ān relies heavily on a dense network of theological vocabulary where single terms encompass simultaneous behavioral, ethical, and spiritual obligations. The concept of *Dhikr* is a quintessential example of this semantic complexity, as its meaning is deeply intertwined with the moral psychology of Islam and cannot be mapped perfectly onto target language words without structural negotiation (Rahman, 2009).

2. Problem Statement

The core issue in translating key theological terms like *Dhikr* into

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English lies in the fact that English lacks direct vocabulary equivalents that can simultaneously represent all layers of the source language entry. *Dhikr* suffers from significant conceptual reduction when translated simply as "remembrance" or "memory". In the Qur'ānic dynamic framework, *Dhikr* goes far beyond cognitive recall or passive mental reflection. It entails an active, conscious, and vigilant state of divine awareness that coordinates the mind, tongue, and human physical action in continuous alignment with the divine (Saeed & Rahman, 2020). Translating the term via simplified static equivalents strips it of its holistic, operational, and spiritual dimensions.

3. Significance of the Study

This study systematically analyses the lexical choices made by three distinct translators—Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Abdel Haleem, and Arthur John Arberry—to address the interpretive and structural variability that results from these non-equivalences. Each represents a highly specific translation philosophy, ranging from Yusuf Ali's expansive commentary-driven style and Abdel Haleem's modern, reader-centered context-driven method, to Arberry's strict poetic and formal orientation (Newmark, 1988; Saeed & Rahman, 2020). By mapping their specific choices across identical textual settings, this paper explores the exact types of semantic shifts that occur during translation and evaluates how these shifts alter the perception of moral and spiritual duties for non-Arabic-speaking readers.

4. Research Objectives

- To explore and analyze how the key Qur'ānic theological term *Dhikr* is translated into English by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Abdel Haleem, and Arthur John Arberry across diverse contextual settings within the Holy Qur'ān.
- To systematically identify and classify the various types of semantic shifts (including semantic narrowing, broadening, substitution, addition, and semantic loss) that occur in the selected English translations.
- To evaluate the impact of these translational semantic shifts on the representation of the believer's moral, ethical, and spiritual obligations for English-speaking readers.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The analysis of this study provides an enhanced understanding of how translation choices influence the interpretation and transmission of Qur'ānic theological concepts across languages and cultures, providing crucial insights for religious pedagogy and translation pedagogy.

6. Research Questions

- How do selected English translations of the Qur'ān render the term *Dhikr*, and what do these choices reveal about cross-linguistic meaning and theological

interpretation?

- What specific types of semantic shifts occur in these English translations when compared with the original Classical Arabic term?
- How do semantic shifts in English translations of the Qur'ān redefine the spiritual and ethical duties of Muslims regarding *Dhikr*?

7. Literature Review

The translation of sacred texts, particularly the Holy Qur'ān, involves multi-layered linguistic and semantic complexities. Within the discipline of lexical semantics, words are not merely isolated tokens of communication; rather, they serve as interconnected conceptual nodes that function within highly sophisticated structural frameworks. Classical Arabic is structurally distinct due to its dense theological vocabulary, where a single triliteral root frequently addresses complex moral, behavioral, and spiritual obligations simultaneously. The foundational term *Dhikr* is an excellent example of this conceptual density. Its meaning is deeply interwoven with the moral psychology of Islam and cannot be seamlessly mapped onto any target language without deliberate structural and semantic negotiation (Rahman, 2009; Saeed & Rahman, 2020).

A central issue in translating specialized theological terms into English lies in the non-equivalence paradigm (Baker, 2018). Target languages like English often lack direct vocabulary counterparts that can represent all semantic features of the source text simultaneously. *Dhikr* undergoes serious reduction when restricted to "remembrance" or "memory". Cognitive recall represents only a small subset of *Dhikr*, which natively encompasses regular verbal glorification (*tasbīḥ*), internal spiritual contemplation, ritualized worship, and a vigilant state of continuous God-consciousness integrated into daily economic and social interactions (Saeed & Rahman, 2020). When reduced to static cognitive terms, the active, behavioral, and transformative dimensions of the concept are partially hidden from the target reader.

Translation studies provide several foundational models to elaborately understand how these conceptual gaps are bridged. Eugene Nida's (1964) theory of dynamic equivalence highlights that translation should preserve the core message and create an identical communicative response in the receptor, which often leads to semantic substitutions when dealing with culture-bound concepts. Conversely, Peter Newmark (1988) distinguishes between semantic translation, which stays close to the exact style and linguistic forms of the source text, and communicative translation, which prioritizes target audience accessibility. Vermeer's (1989) Skopos theory asserts that the primary function or purpose (*skopos*) of the translation process dictates the strategies used by

the translator. A translator aiming for devotional education will adopt a completely different lexical strategy compared to one aiming for formal poetic replication. Scholars like Mona Baker (2018) emphasize that culturally dense and conceptually loaded terms are highly resistant to direct word-for-word translation, forcing translators to employ compensatory strategies like simplification, expansion, or contextual paraphrase.

In parallel corpora analysis of the Qur'ān, distinct translation philosophies become highly visible. Abdullah Yusuf Ali represents an interpretive and commentary-driven approach, often utilizing semantic broadening and explicit additions to expand compressed Arabic terms into detailed moral instructions (Newmark, 1988). On the other hand, Muhammad Abdel Haleem adopts a contemporary, reader-centered, context-driven method that emphasizes modern fluency and textual clarity, narrowing polysemous ranges to match specific target sentences (Vermeer, 1989). Arthur John Arberry focuses strictly on formal fidelity and structural rhythm, leading to heavy semantic compression and literal lexical choices that occasionally cause partial semantic loss of emotional and active behavioral layers (Munday, 2016).

In current translation studies, researchers have increasingly evaluated how distinct translational behaviors construct divergent representations of religious obligations. Within Qur'ānic discourse, *Dhikr* anchors continuous moral vigilance and spiritual consciousness. When translators select disparate English equivalents across changing contexts, they actively reshape the moral and spiritual perimeter for the target audience, transforming comprehensive psychological and practical disciplines into either ritualistic formulas or simple cognitive acts. This highlights the vital need for a rigorous lexical-semantic investigation to map translation shifts systematically within precise linguistic frameworks (Newmark, 1988; Saeed & Rahman, 2020).

8. Research Methodology

Theoretical Foundations and Semantic Field Theory

The study of lexical semantics provides the necessary infrastructure to unpack the multifaceted behavior of Qur'ānic words. According to Lyons (1995), semantic fields are structural systems of lexemes where each term achieves its definition through its explicit boundaries and relational links with neighboring terms within the same domain. In the Qur'ān, terms do not exist as isolated points of information; instead, they operate inside highly responsive fields where the meaning of one word depends on its proximity to others (Saeed & Rahman, 2020). For *Dhikr*, the lexeme is linguistically bound to concepts of prayer (*ṣalāh*), tranquility (*ṭuma'nīnah*), awareness, and divine

presence, forcing the translator to account for this relational environment rather than relying on a static dictionary entry.

Componential Analysis

Componential analysis complements semantic field theory by segmenting each lexical item into its underlying atomic meaning traits, or semantic features. By isolating features such as Active Resistance, spiritual Endurance, Verbal Expression, or Physical Manifestation, researchers can directly contrast the source text with its English equivalents (Saeed & Rahman, 2020). When Arberry renders *Dhikr* as "remembrance," a componential breakdown reveals that while the English word successfully contains the feature Cognitive Recall, it frequently loses the essential source components of Continuous Ritual Enunciation and Conscious Behavioral Guarding, demonstrating an instance of semantic narrowing and partial conceptual loss (Saeed & Rahman, 2020).

Translation Theory

Catford (1965) notes that semantic shifts are an unavoidable norm rather than an error, occurring inevitably when structural or cultural non-equivalences prevent perfect correspondence. This reality is explained further by Baker (2018), who posits that culture-bound, conceptually loaded terms are highly resistant to direct target language equivalence due to their historical and ideological density. Additionally, Vermeer's (1989) Skopos theory asserts that the primary purpose of the translation determines the strategies used by the translator. Thus, Yusuf Ali's goal to guide and educate results in a heavily communicative and interpretive text, whereas Arberry's focus on formal reproduction leads to a strictly literal, compressed semantic output (Newmark, 1988).

9. Research Procedure

The methodology is designed to systematically track the linguistic journey of *Dhikr* from its original Classical Arabic usage to its respective English translations. The design consists of three integrated phases: Data Collection, Data Processing, and Data Extraction.

Data Collection Phase

A targeted parallel corpus representing both the source language (Classical Arabic) and target language (English translations) was constructed. The core Qur'ānic theological term *Dhikr* (and its morphological derivations from the root *dh-k-r*) was selected due to its rich spiritual, ethical, and behavioral significance within Qur'ānic discourse. A purposive sample of Qur'ānic verses containing morphological derivations of *dh-k-r* was extracted

from the original Arabic text. The selected verses encompass diverse thematic contexts, including internal reflection, ritual worship, psychological tranquility, and physical action.

Data Processing Phase

The selected Arabic verses were aligned with the corresponding translations of Yusuf Ali, Abdel Haleem, and Arberry in a comparative text grid. The morphological form of each instance of *dh-k-r* was identified (verbs, nouns, active participles). Classical Qur'ānic exegeses (*Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* and *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*) were consulted to establish the baseline theological and contextual meanings before comparative semantic analysis.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Aligned linguistic data were subjected to comparative semantic analysis using Semantic Field Theory and Componential Analysis to evaluate lexical choices, semantic feature shifts, and ideological influences.

10. Data Analysis

Extraction of Translations

The exact English lexemes and phrases used by the three translators to render the Qur'ānic concept of *Dhikr* were systematically extracted across the sampled verses. This enabled a structured comparative baseline of the lexical alternatives employed by each translator.

Extraction of Semantic Shifts

Using Componential Analysis, each translated lexeme was decomposed into its constituent semantic features: Active, Passive, Cognitive, Physical, Enunciation, and Affective. These features were compared with the original Classical Arabic root (*dh-k-r*) to categorize shift types;

- **Semantic Narrowing:** Restricting a polysemous term to a single cognitive dimension (e.g., using "memory" or "remembrance" exclusively).
- **Semantic Broadening:** Expanding the term into multi-word phrases to encompass spiritual, ethical, and social domains.
- **Semantic Addition:** Incorporating interpretive moral descriptors directly into the translated text.
- **Semantic Substitution:** Replacing an active/enunciative feature with an internal affective feature.
- **Partial Semantic Loss:** Dropping essential operational components like continuous ritual enunciation or practical vigilance.

Ideological Extraction

The final stage examined how each translator's Skopos (philosophical objective) influenced lexical choices. Yusuf Ali's moral amplification, Abdel Haleem's contextual readability, and Arberry's formal literalism were mapped against the resulting semantic shifts.

11. Discussion

Lexical Interrogations of *Dhikr* (Remembrance and Awareness)

The term *Dhikr* presents a high frequency of semantic shifts due to its dynamic application across cognitive, verbal, affective, and ritual domains. In Surah Ar-Ra'd (13:28)—"*Those who believe and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of Allah. Surely in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find comfort*"—the root *dh-k-r* functions as a multi-layered catalyst for psychological and spiritual tranquility.

Yusuf Ali renders *Dhikr* as "remembrance," but expands the surrounding textual environment by framing it as a comprehensive spiritual anchor that connects individual human psychology with universal divine order (Newmark, 1988). This strategy of semantic expansion ensures that the relational framework between the divine and the human is highlighted, emphasizing that *Dhikr* is an active, protective moral practice rather than a passive mental exercise.

Abdel Haleem provides contextual variance for *Dhikr*, rendering it alternately as "remembrance," "mention," or "mindfulness" depending on the syntactic and thematic environment of the surah (Vermeer, 1989). In contexts involving active worship, combat, or social engagement, his choices shift toward terms implying immediate, conscious vigilance ("mindfulness"). While this context-driven broadening preserves local textual relevance, it creates a parallel loss of the multi-layered unity of the Arabic lexeme. The English reader, encountering different terms across chapters, fails to realize that the source text repeats a single, unified theological pillar, thereby losing the structural continuity of the original discourse.

Arthur Arberry consistently chooses "remembrance" or "mention" across almost all occurrences. Through Componential Analysis, Arberry's uniform literalism reveals a clear instance of semantic narrowing and partial semantic loss. While "remembrance" successfully captures the cognitive recall component Cognitive Recall, it lacks the active physical enunciation Verbal Tasbīḥ and the continuous behavioral discipline Moral Vigilance inherent in the Classical Arabic root.

Influence of Semantic Shifts on Ethical Duties of Muslims

The comparative evaluation demonstrates that semantic shifts are systematic, structured, and directly reflective of each translator's underlying

ideology (Newmark, 1988; Nida, 1964).

Yusuf Ali's pattern of semantic broadening and addition presents a Muslim's spiritual obligations as comprehensive, highly interactive moral guidelines governing both private spiritual states and public social behaviors (Newmark, 1988). By incorporating interpretive extensions, Ali bridges the linguistic gap but introduces an explicit moralizing lens that shapes reader reception toward a socially conscious, active practice of faith.

In contrast, Muhammad Abdel Haleem's work projects a clear, modern, and accessible set of obligations contained within local textual settings (Vermeer, 1989). By avoiding excessive interpretive additions, Haleem reduces personal bias. However, this method requires the target reader to possess prior knowledge of Islamic theology or consult external exegesis (*Tafsīr*) to extract the deep, layered spiritual values compressed by his concise choices.

Arthur Arberry's model demonstrates the impact of prioritizing formal fidelity over conceptual equivalence. His reliance on semantic narrowing creates a formal, ritualistically constrained representation of Islamic duties (Munday, 2016). Under Arberry's lens, *Dhikr* appears primarily as an internal cognitive or poetic exercise rather than a living, continuous behavioral imperative that governs all facets of daily human action.

12. Conclusion

This study concludes that the translation of the key Qur'ānic theological term *Dhikr* is an interpretive and value-driven process that significantly alters the presentation of religious obligations (Newmark, 1988). The choices made by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Abdel Haleem, and Arthur Arberry demonstrate that no single translation can fully capture the polysemous, multi-layered depth of Classical Arabic terms. The resulting semantic shifts—ranging from Ali's broadening to Arberry's narrowing—create distinct versions of the text that shape how non-Arabic-speaking audiences understand Islamic ethics, spiritual vigilance, and religious psychology (Newmark, 1988; Saeed & Rahman, 2020).

Based on these insights, it is recommended that future translators move away from rigid, single-word correspondences when dealing with conceptually dense theological terms. Instead, they should adopt a layered translation approach that pairs direct lexical equivalents with concise contextual footnotes or moderated in-text explanations to preserve the full semantic field of the source text (Baker, 2018).

In academic pedagogy, students of Translation Studies and Qur'ānic Linguistics should be explicitly trained to identify, categorize, and evaluate semantic shifts like narrowing, broadening, and substitution. Finally, future

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research should expand upon the foundations of this study by broadening the parallel corpora to include a larger group of both historical and contemporary translations, utilizing digital corpus tools alongside Semantic Field Theory to further map the translation dynamics of sacred texts (McEnery & Hardie, 2012).

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