SILENCE IN ISLAMIC TEXTS: TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS' ORDEAL

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate challenges of translating silence in Islamic texts, particularly the Qur'an and Hadith. Silence, or Samt (صمت) embodies profound meanings that extend beyond mere absence of speech, carrying significant theological, ethical, and rhetorical implications. Translators face the dual dilemma of maintaining fidelity to the original Arabic while conveying nuanced meanings to diverse audiences. The study analyzes the linguistic features of silence, emphasizing its role in expressing divine guidance and moral wisdom. Key challenges identified include linguistic ambiguity, the risk of misrepresentation, and the delicate balance between formal and dynamic equivalence in translation strategies. By proposing frameworks such as contextual exegesis, linguistic-functional equivalence, and interdisciplinary harmonization, the paper advocates for a balanced approach that honors both the sacred nature of Islamic texts and the clarity necessary for contemporary readers. Ultimately, this research highlights the moral responsibility of translators as they navigate the complexities of silent meanings to ensure the faithful transmission of divine messages across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Keywords: Silence, Islamic Texts, Translators, Interpreters, Ordeal

Introduction

Translating sacred texts, especially the Qur'an and Hadith, is among the complex and sensitive tasks within religious and linguistic studies. This complexity stems from the unique linguistic, theological, and rhetorical qualities of these texts, which often hold subtle meanings and layers. Among these challenges are what can be referred to as Non-Linguistic features of Islamic texts (The instances where meaning is implied rather than clearly stated). These silences are intentional, serving specific rhetorical, theological, and educational purposes in the Qur'anic discourse and Prophetic speech. They create unique challenges for translators and interpreters, who must find ways

to convey what is left unsaid without misrepresenting the divine intent. (Dalila and Frihi 1–2)

Imperatively, silence in the language of the Qur'an and Hadith acts as a significant way to communicate. It illustrates both the conciseness and the depth of classical Arabic, which often expresses meaning through omission (ḥadhf), implication (dalālah al-iltizām), or contextual suggestion (maqām). For example, Allah says, "Ask the People of the Reminder if you do not know" (Qur'an 16:43). This verse's brevity and lack of explicit detail encourage thought and interpretation. Such expressions challenge translators to remain true to the literal structure of the Arabic while also conveying the implied meaning to non-Arabic speakers. As Baker notes, translation is not just about language; it also involves "a transfer of cultures and interpretive frameworks" (Baker, 2018, p.15).

Translating or interpreting sacred texts sometimes puts one in a dilemma: one finds oneself choosing between being entirely faithful to the source language, even if this makes the meaning unclear to the target audience, and adjusting the expression for clarity, which could risk losing the original nuance.This tension reflects what Nida and Taber describe as the challenge of balancing formal equivalence (faithfulness to form and content) and dynamic equivalence (faithfulness to effect and meaning) in translation (Nida & Taber, 2003, p.201). Translators of Islamic texts, particularly need to be careful, as any perceived misrepresentation can be seen as distorting divine revelation. The Allah warns against modifying or discussing divine revelation without knowledge (Qur'an 2:79; 16:116), highlighting the seriousness of interpretative responsibility.

Furthermore, the cultural and spiritual aspects of silence in Islam deepen the translator's responsibility. Prophetic traditions indicate that silence often conveys approval, disapproval, or reflection. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) reportedly said, "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should speak good or remain silent" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 6018; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 47). This hadith shows that silence, in Islamic ethics, can represent wisdom, restraint, or even consent. Thus, translating silence is more than just a language task; it involves moral and interpretive challenges. As Abdel Haleem (2010) points out, the Qur'an's rhetorical gaps and silences invite readers to "participate actively in deriving meaning through reflection and context" (Abdel Haleem 32).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of *silence* in Qur'anic and Prophetic discourse and how it challenges translators and interpreters. It seeks

to identify the nature of the silent features in Islamic texts, the interpretive issues they create, and potential strategies for addressing these challenges through contextual and interpretative understanding. The research highlights the need for a balanced approach that combines linguistic fidelity with communicative clarity. Such balance ensures that the sacred message is conveyed meaningfully and accurately to various linguistic audiences. By tackling these issues, this paper contributes to the wider discussion on translation theory, hermeneutics, and Islamic linguistics. It positions translation not just as a technical task but as a sacred trust (*amānah*) that requires deep scholarship and humility.

The Concept of Silence (Ṣamt) in the Qur'an and Hadith

Silence (ṣamt) holds an important place in Islamic thought. It is not just the absence of speech; it is a way of communicating, reflecting, and expressing devotion. The Qur'an and Hadith show that silence often carries deeper meanings that complicate interpretation and translation. The terms *ṣamt* or *ṣukūt* appear in various contexts, sometimes suggesting restraint, wisdom, or reverence for divine knowledge. Translators and interpreters of Islamic texts struggle to maintain these subtle or silent nuances that words cannot always convey.

In the Qur'an, silence appears both literally and symbolically. For instance, in the story of Maryam (Mary), when she gave birth to Prophet ʿĪsā (Jesus), she was instructed to remain silent as a sign from God: "So eat and drink and be contented. And if you see any human, say, 'Indeed, I have vowed to the Most Merciful abstention; so, I will not speak today to [any] man.'" (Qur'an 19:26, Saheeh International).

This silence was not just being quiet; it was a spiritual and communicative gesture with divine significance. It embodied submission and obedience, reflecting how God manages human communication. Translators struggle to express the full depth of this silence because its context goes beyond language; it requires understanding of theology and culture.

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ praised the value of silence as a moral and spiritual protection. He stated: "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should speak good or remain silent." (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Hadith no. 6018; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Hadith no. 47).

This hadith shows silence as an ethical guideline, highlighting the need to restrain one's speech to avoid causing harm. For translators, this type of silence goes beyond the literal meaning; it signifies a moral depth that is often

hard to convey. Phrases like "remain silent" can lose the sense of moral responsibility found in the Arabic: *li-yaṣmut* ("let him be silent"), which suggests both a choice to hold back and a spiritual understanding.

Interestingly, scholars like al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī examined silence as part of self-discipline (riyāḍat al-nafs). In Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn, al-Ghazālī devoted a whole section to "The Perils of the Tongue," where silence was seen as a form of worship and self-control. This moral and spiritual side of silence highlights the translator's challenge: how can one capture the unspoken layers of meaning in languages that may not share the same moral richness.

Thus, ṣamt in the Qur'an and prophetic contexts represents more than just a lack of speech. It conveys divine guidance, moral wisdom, and thoughtful restraint. When translating these aspects of silence, translators must consider not only the meanings of the words but also the theological, contextual, and emotional impacts. The challenge is to ensure that the translated text maintains both the literal silence and its communicative importance without losing the original intent.

Challenges in Translating Silent Meanings in Sacred Texts

As established in the preceeding paragraphs, translating Islamic sacred texts, especially the Qur'an and Hadith, is one of the toughest challenges in translation studies. These challenges increase when the texts include silent meanings (implied, contextual, or unspoken elements that hold theological or moral significance). Translators and interpreters often face a serious dilemma: how to express the unspoken without changing the divine intent. The following are the key challenges that place them in this position:

A. Linguistic Ambiguity and Contextual Layers

Arabic, the language of Qur'anic revelation, is rich in multiple meanings and has a flexible structure. A single word can take on various shades of meaning based on context, form, and tone. For example, the Qur'anic word "qalb" (heart) refers to both the physical organ and the spiritual core of human consciousness. Translating such terms literally often loses their metaphorical and theological dimensions. According to Baker (2018), the complexity of these expressions "requires not only semantic equivalence but cultural and pragmatic awareness" (In Other Words 22).

Early scholars like al-Zamakhsharī and Ibn ʿĀshūr mentioned that "silence" in some Qur'anic phrases may come from ellipsis (ḥadhf), where a term or idea

is intentionally left out for stylistic or theological reasons. They pointed out that these omissions encourage reflection. However, in translation, they can seem like gaps or ambiguities. If translators do not understand their rhetorical purpose, the translated text may lose depth and contemplative value.

B. Theological Sensitivity and Fear of Misrepresentation

Unlike regular literature, translating the Qur'an and Hadith carries religious responsibility. Translators may worry that putting divine speech into another language could unintentionally change the meaning or conflict with established interpretation. Abdel Haleem (2010) cautions that being too literal may hide the divine message, while being too liberal risks misrepresentation. Translators often find themselves caught between tafsīrī fidelity (faithfulness to exegesis) and communicative clarity (understandability for the audience).

This conflict often leads to what scholars refer to as the "sacrality barrier." Nida and Taber (1982) noted that when a text has divine or sacred status, translators feel limited by respect, reducing their linguistic flexibility (The Theory and Practice of Translation 12). In Islamic texts, this respect is heightened by the belief that the Qur'an's Arabic is unique (iʿjāz al-Qurʾān). As a result, every translation is seen as an "interpretation" (tafsīr) rather than an equivalent text.

C. The Dilemma of Balancing Literal and Dynamic Equivalence

Eugene Nida suggested two main translation strategies: formal equivalence (word-for-word) and dynamic equivalence (meaning-for-meaning). In Islamic sacred texts, neither approach works alone. Literal translation ensures accuracy but may lead to confusion; dynamic translation offers clarity but could stray from divine precision. Thus, finding a balance is crucial: achieved through contextual analysis, referencing classical commentaries, and being sensitive to the spiritual tone.

In summary, translating silent meanings in Islamic texts involves dealing with linguistic ambiguity, theological caution, and cultural differences. Success lies not in perfect equivalence but in faithful communication : a translation that maintains both the form and essence of revelation.

Methods for Translating and Interpreting Silent Meanings in Islamic Texts

Translating silent meanings, which include implied, elliptical, or context-dependent expressions, in Qurʾānic and Prophetic texts requires approaches

that go beyond mere word-for-word translation. Translators must use methods that honor the sacred nature of the texts while making them understandable for readers who may not grasp the subtleties of classical Arabic. This section outlines four main frameworks: (1) contextual exegesis (tafsīr siyāqī), (2) linguistic-functional equivalence, (3) pragmatic inference and discourse analysis, and (4) interdisciplinary harmonization.

A. **Contextual Exegesis (Tafsīr Siyāqī)**

Contextual exegesis emphasizes understanding Qurʾānic phrases within their situational and historical context. The Qurʾān often uses ellipsis (ḥadhf), implicit reference (kināyah), or omission to express significant theological ideas. For example, the verse "And ask the town" (Q 12:82) leaves out the specific meaning—the people of the town—which must be inferred from the context. Al-Zamakhsharī (2009) explains this ellipsis in Al-Kashshāf as a deliberate rhetorical technique that enhances the clarity and eloquence of divine speech. Therefore, translators should rely on tafsīr literature, like that of Ibn ʿĀshūr (1984), to identify these rhetorical gaps and convey them clearly without changing their sacred tone.

Mona Baker (2018) supports this contextual approach with her idea of co-textual equivalence, saying that grasping meaning requires looking at linguistic context, not just isolated words. Thus, accurately translating silent Qurʾānic meanings relies on how the Arabic expressions fit with readings in the target language.

B. Linguistic-Functional Equivalence

The second method involves using Eugene Nida's principle of dynamic equivalence. This principle aims to create the same impact on the target audience that the original text had on its first listeners (Nida and Taber, 2003). In translating sacred silence, this means conveying the implied or elliptical structure in a way that maintains its theological role. For instance, Qurʾānic phrases like "Alif Lām Mīm" (Q 2:1) resist direct translation. However, functional equivalence may include transliteration along with explanatory notes to keep the respect and scholarly neutrality intact.

Abdel Haleem (2010) highlights that functional equivalence must never compromise the respect required for divine speech. He warns that the translator should balance literal and functional meanings to ensure both understanding and reverence. Thus, linguistic-functional equivalence provides a balanced approach between strict literal translation and excessive rephrasing.

C. Pragmatic Inference and Discourse Analysis

Pragmatic analysis centers on the intended meaning (maqṣūd al-kalām) rather than the literal wording. The Prophet Muḥammad's statements often contain silences that have communicative or ethical significance. For example, his silence in response to certain questions or actions is viewed by scholars as implied approval (taqrīr). Translating such silence requires understanding speech Act theory and the pragmatic rules of Arabic communication.

Hatim and Mason (1990) state that the translator must act as a "discourse mediator," interpreting how meaning flows within the communication. By recognizing illocutionary forces—whether a statement is declarative, imperative, or permissive—translators can express silence meaningfully, portraying it as intentional communication rather than a mere absence. Pragmatic inference is therefore vital for interpreting the unspoken aspects of Islamic revelation.

D. Interdisciplinary Harmonization

Finally, effectively translating silent meanings calls for interdisciplinary harmonization. This involves integrating classical Arabic rhetoric (balāghah), Qurʾānic exegesis, and modern translation theory. Newmark (1988) emphasizes that "no translation can be considered complete unless it combines linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic elements." Translators should therefore work within a framework where linguistic analysis is informed by theology and theological interpretation is clarified through linguistics.

Today, digital tools like corpus linguistics and artificial intelligence can support translators by identifying patterns of omission, ellipsis, or contextual silence. However, as Ibn ʿĀshūr (1984) reminds us, divine discourse goes beyond human analysis. Technology can help, but it cannot replace human ijtihād (independent reasoning) and spiritual insight. Thus, interdisciplinary harmonization remains both a necessary method and a moral responsibility.

The Balance between Linguistic Fidelity and Communicative Clarity

Translating sacred Islamic texts requires a careful balance between staying true to the original language and ensuring clarity for the audience. While fidelity honors the divine nature of the Qurʾān and Prophetic sayings, clarity keeps the meaning intact across different languages and cultures. Translators face the challenge of being faithful to Arabic expressions, which often carry layered meanings, while also making those meanings accessible to readers from various backgrounds.

Peter Newmark (1988) differentiates between semantic and communicative translation. He suggests that sacred or literary texts tend to favor the semantic approach due to their sensitivity to linguistic form and religious subtleties (Newmark 45). In the case of Qurʾānic translation, this distinction is vital. Changing syntactic or rhetorical structures can distort theological meanings. For example, Lawrence Venuti (2008) warns that too much domestication (making a text read smoothly in the target language) can erase cultural elements, diminishing the sacred text's unique or divine presence (Venuti 16). On the other hand, being overly literal can obscure the message of revelation, confusing readers who are not familiar with classical Arabic idioms.

Achieving this balance requires awareness of context and strong interpretive foundation. Translators who focus only on linguistic equivalence, as Eugene Nida and Charles Taber (1982) point out, might miss the emotional or spiritual tone found in divine speech. Their idea of dynamic equivalence emphasizes understanding not just the text's content, but also its meaning in context (Nida and Taber 22). However, in translation, this method should be moderated by careful consideration of theology. The Qurʾān is not just a source of information; it is divine revelation, and its language has spiritual weight (Abdel Haleem 7).

Classical Islamic scholars like al-Zamakhsharī (2009) and Ibn ʿĀshūr (1997) stress that the style of the Qurʾān embodies divine wisdom. Therefore, translators need to respect its eloquence, even when paraphrasing for clarity. Ibn ʿĀshūr, in his work Al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr, argues that every expression in the Qurʾān is purposeful and layered. Understanding this hierarchy of meaning requires both language skill and knowledge of the maqāṣid al-sharīʿah(the higher objectives of revelation) (Ibn ʿĀshūr, vol. 1, p. 28). Likewise, al-Qurṭubī (1964) emphasizes that interpreters should avoid over-interpretation, ensuring that translation choices do not compromise religious integrity (Al-Jāmiʿ li Aḥkām al-Qurʾān, vol. 1, p. 23).

Modern scholars like Mona Baker (2018) and Basil Hatim (1990) add that translation includes an ethical aspect, bridging two different worldviews. Translators of Islamic texts must adopt what Baker describes as "textual and pragmatic awareness," blending language accuracy with social and cultural relevance (Baker 131). The Qurʾān's message, revealed in seventh-century Arabia, speaks to all humanity. Thus, translation must convey this universal message without losing the contextual details that give the text its authority.

The ultimate goal, as Abdel Haleem (2010) describes it, is "faithful intelligibility." This means balancing linguistic loyalty to the Arabic of the

Qurʾān while keeping it accessible enough to share its wisdom with readers in other languages (Abdel Haleem 12). Translators need to recognize that the Qurʾān's silences, omissions, and rhetorical details often convey meaning just as powerfully as its words. Therefore, effective translation of Islamic texts depends not on choosing between fidelity and clarity, but on harmonizing both within the theological and linguistic boundaries defined by Islamic scholarship.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study of silence in Islamic texts reveals the complex relationship between language, meaning, and divine intent. The Qurʾān and Hadith often use ellipsis, metaphor, and implicit expressions that suggest depth beyond the words themselves. Translators and interpreters face a challenging balance between staying true to the sacred source and ensuring clarity for their audience. This study demonstrates that literal translation alone often fails to convey the intended meaning, while excessive paraphrasing can distort divine messages.

The solution lies in finding balance between linguistic accuracy and clear communication. Translators should approach Islamic texts using a three-part framework: (1) a foundation in classical tafsīr (exegesis) to understand the original context, (2) knowledge of modern language theories for accurate translation across languages, and (3) respect for the sacred nature of revelation.

Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

1. Translators of Islamic texts should receive specialized training in Arabic rhetoric (balāghah) and comparative linguistics.

2. Institutions involved in Qurʾānic translation should create interdisciplinary teams that include ʿulamāʾ, linguists, and communication experts.

3. Translators should work with annotated editions that explain implicit or "silent" expressions instead of simplifying them into everyday language.

4. Future research should investigate computational tools and AI assistance to identify pragmatic silence, ellipsis, and implied meaning in Qurʾānic Arabic, improving translation accuracy.

By combining these approaches, translators can address the long-standing issue of balancing fidelity and understanding. Translating sacred silence can become a means to foster deeper intercultural and interfaith connections.

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