A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE TRANSLATIONALITY OF *AL-ḤURŪF AL-MUQATTAʿĀT* IN THE QUR'ĀN

By

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Abstract

The disjointed or incoherent letters (al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt) that appear at the openings of a number of select Qur'anic chapters have long occupied a unique and enigmatic position within Qur'anic studies. Thus, this article explores the panorama of the translationality of the disjointed letters, interrogating how the isolated Arabic letters- such as Alif Lām Mīm and Ḥā Mīm – bare being rendered, interpreted, or deliberately left untranslated across diverse linguistic and exegetical dictional practices. By examining classical and modern translations, the study highlights the tension between semantic opacity and interpretive intervention, revealing how translators negotiate fidelity to the sacred scriptural texts with the communicative demands of target audience. The research work adopts a comparative textual approach, analyzing translations in English, and selected African languages such as Yoruba, alongside classical tafsīr literature. It argues that the translational techniques applied to al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt- ranging from transliteration and annotation to symbolic interpretation- reflect broader theological, linguistic, and ideological orientations. Furthermore, the study situates these letters within contemporary debates on untranslatability, semiotics, the study of signs and meaning, and the limits of human comprehension of the divine scriptural speech. Ultimately, the study contends that the translational treatment of al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt not only exposes the constraints of language, but also emphasizes the dynamic interplay between text, meaning, and reader in the ongoing transmission of the Qur'an.

Keywords: *Al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt, Qur'an translation, Translationality, Tafsīr, Untranslatability, Semiotics*

Introduction

The oddity of opening select chapters of the Qurʾān with *Al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt* (disjointed letters) has been a phenomenon constituting one of the most intriguing and contested features of the Qur'anic discourse. In fact, the letter combinations – such as *Alif Lām Mīm*, *Yā Sīn*, and *Ṭā Hā*, *et al* – are discovered to have divinely appeared at the very beginning of each of twenty-nine chapters (*suwar*), composing fourteen distinct Arabic letters arranged in various divine sequential orders. Their uniqueness lies in their dual nature: although written as connected orthographic units, they are recited as separate phonetic elements, thereby occupying a complex interface between sound, structure, and meaning (Abdel Haleem, 2004).

From a translational point of view, *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt* (disjointed letters) present a significant challenge due to their apparent semantic opacity. Unlike conventional lexical items, these letters do not convey a readily identifiable denotative meaning, making their rendition in another language to be highly problematic. Classical Islamic scholarship often categorizes them among the *mutashābihāt* (ambiguous verses), whose ultimate meanings are known only to the Almighty God (Al-Suyūṭī, 2000). At the same time, other exegetical traditions attempt to interpret them as abbreviations, symbolic references, or indicators of divine attributes (Ibn Kathīr, 1999). This tension between translatability and or interpretability and mystery underscores the complexity of translating such linguistic elements.

The notion of translationality, understood as the extent to which linguistic units can be meaningfully transferred across languages, becomes particularly relevant in this context. The translationality of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt* is not merely a linguistic concern but also a theological and hermeneutical one. Translators must decide whether to preserve the phonetic form through transliteration, provide interpretive commentary, or leave the elements unexplained- each choice carrying implications for both fidelity and readability (Newmark, 1988). Consequently, these letters provide a unique case study for examining the limits of translation in sacred scriptural texts.

This study, therefore, is a panoramic view of the translationality of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt* in the Qur'an, focusing on how different translation strategies negotiate their ambiguity and what this reveals about broader assumptions in Qur'anic translation practice.

There have been a number of scholarly discussions on *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt* which can be broadly categorized into classical exegetical perspectives and modern linguistic and translational analyses. Classical scholars approached these letters primarily within the framework of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), often emphasizing their role in demonstrating the miraculousness and inimitability (*iʿjāz*) of the Qur'an. Many early authorities adopted a position of *tafwīḍ*- refraining from definitive interpretation and attributing their ultimate meaning to divine knowledge (Al-Ṭabarī, 2001). Others proposed symbolic or allegorical interpretations, suggesting that the letters may function as abbreviations of divine names or as markers of thematic content (Ibn Kathīr, 1999).

A significant strand of the literature highlights the semantic indeterminacy of these letters. Scholars have variously described them as divine ciphers, rhetorical devices, or elements of a broader esoteric system associated with *ʿilm al-ḥurūf* (the science of letters) (Al-Suyūṭī, 2000). Such interpretations underscore their resistance to conventional linguistic analysis and reinforce their status as a unique feature of the Qur'anic text.

In modern scholarship, attention has shifted toward linguistic and translational issues. Studies in Qur'anic translation emphasize the inherent difficulty of rendering the Arabic text into other languages, particularly when dealing with elements that lack clear semantic equivalents (Abdel Haleem, 2004). Translators of the Qur'an have adopted diverse strategies in dealing with *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt*, including transliteration (e.g., *ʿAlif Lām Mīm*), omission, and the addition of explanatory footnotes (Ali, 2006). These variations reflect differing approaches to translation, ranging from formal equivalence, which prioritizes structural fidelity, to dynamic equivalence, which seeks to convey meaning in a more accessible form (Nida, 1964).

Furthermore, recent research highlights the influence of socio-cultural and ideological factors on translation choices. Translators' theological orientations, linguistic backgrounds, and intended audiences often shape how they handle ambiguous or untranslatable elements (Baker, 2018). In the case of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt*, this results in a spectrum of translational practices that reveal underlying assumptions about the nature of meaning and the purpose of translation.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, there remains a gap in studies that explicitly address the concept of translationality in relation to *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt*. Most research treats them either as theological phenomena or as linguistic anomalies, without systematically examining how they function within translation theory. This study seeks to fill this gap by integrating insights from tafsīr, linguistics, and translation studies into a cohesive analytical framework. This study

employs a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative research design to investigate the translationality of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt* in the Qur'an. The primary data are composed of Qur'anic verses containing *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt* across the twenty-nine chapters (suwar) in which they appear at their openings. A purposive sampling method is used to select representative examples that capture the diversity of these letter combinations, including frequently occurring forms such as *Alif Lām Mīm*, *Ḥā Mīm*, and *Yā Sīn*.

Comparative Translation Analysis and *Al-Hurũf Al-Muqatta'āt*

The study examines a corpus of widely recognized English translations of the Qur'an, including those by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Abdel Haleem. These translations are analyzed comparatively to identify patterns and variations in the rendering of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt*. The analysis focuses on:

i. Translation strategies (e.g., transliteration, annotation, paraphrase);

ii. Degree of interpretive intervention; and

iii. Use of para-textual elements such as footnotes and commentary.

This comparative approach enables the identification of both convergences and divergences in translational practice (Baker, 2018).

Baker's comparative approach, outlined in his book titled *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (2018), operates on the principle that placing multiple translations of the same source text side by side reveals translator decision-making patterns: where translators converge, a near-consensus interpretation exists; where they diverge, the source text resists stable meaning or triggers linguistic, ideological, or theological constraints. In this regard, *al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt* (the disjointed letters opening 29 Qur'anic chapters, such as *Alif Lām Mīm*, *Hā Mīm*, and *Yā Sīn*) represent arguably the most acute test case for this framework, precisely because their meaning is genuinely undetermined, not merely difficult (Abdel Haleem, 2004; Yusuf Ali, 2006).

Pinpointing the Appearance of Convergence

Comparative analysis of major Qur'an translations reveals consistent convergence on "non-translation": Arberry (1996), Yusuf Ali (2006), Pickthall (2001), Abdel Haleem (2004), and Khalidi (2008) all transliterate *al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt* rather than providing semantic renditions. This convergence is itself analytically significant. Under Baker's (2018) framework, it signals translator recognition that no target-language equivalent exists and that fabricating one would constitute interpretive overreach. In other words, the convergence is not linguistic but epistemological:

translators collectively decline to resolve what Islamic scholarship itself has not resolved.

Analyzing the Point of Divergence

Divergence emerges in the para-text, which is where Baker's (2018) comparative method becomes especially productive. Translators' introductions, commentaries, and footnotes reveal competing interpretive frameworks:

i. Abbreviation hypothesis: Some translators note that these letters may be abbreviations for divine names or chapter titles (Abdel Haleem, 2004);

ii. Rhetorical device hypothesis: Others treat them as attention-arresting devices marking the oral-recitative register of revelation (Khalidi, 2008);

iii. Esoteric/divine secret hypothesis: Yusuf Ali (2006) and other commentators explicitly frame them as known only to God, thereby foreclosing interpretation entirely; and

iv. Numerological hypothesis: A minority position links the letters to *abjad* numerical values (Rahman, 1982).

This para-textual divergence is precisely what Baker's (2018) comparative lens is designed to surface: the translation text converges, but the translational worldview behind it fractures.

Theoretical Implications

The central assumption of Baker's (2018) framework is that divergence identifies interpretive instability in the source text. *Al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt* confirms this assumption but introduces a further complication: the instability here is ontologically embedded, not merely linguistically produced. The letters are not obscure vocabulary with recoverable meanings. Rather, they occupy a unique category in Islamic hermeneutics, namely *mutashābihāt* (ambiguous verses), where interpretive restraint is itself theologically mandated (Rahman, 1982). This means that the comparative approach may be extended to account for what could be termed ‘sacred untranslatability’: a category in which convergent non-translation is the only defensible professional and theological choice, and where divergence exists not in the translated text but in the metalinguistic framing of that silence.

Baker's (2018) model handles this phenomenon better than most equivalence-based frameworks because it focuses on translator behaviour and decision-making patterns rather than source-target matching. The case of *al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt* essentially confirms that the comparative analytical approach is most revealing not when it

identifies what translators said, but when it systematically maps what they collectively chose not to say and why their justifications differ.

Theoretical Framework and Its Justification for Translating *Al-Hurũf Al-Muqatta'āt*

The study is grounded in key concepts from translation studies, particularly:

i. Formal versus dynamic equivalence (Nida, 1964);

ii. Semantic versus communicative translation (Newmark, 1988); and

iii. Untranslatability and hermeneutic approaches.

The selection of these three frameworks is not arbitrary. Each addresses a distinct layer of the translation problem that *al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt* presents, and together they create analytical coverage that no single framework achieves alone.

Nida's Formal vs. Dynamic Equivalence (1964)

Nida's framework is the necessary entry point, because it establishes the foundational tension any translator tends to face, reproducing the form or reproducing the effect on the receptor audience. For *al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt*, this tension is immediately unresolvable through standard application:

i. Formal equivalence: This demands preserving the letters as discrete graphemic units, which translators do through transliteration. But transliteration is not formal equivalence in Nida's strict sense because the phonological form in Arabic carries recitative, liturgical, and possibly semantic weight that the Romanized rendering cannot carry in English or any other target language.

ii. Dynamic equivalence: This requires producing in the receptor the same effect the source produces in its original audience. But the effect on a native Arabic-speaking Muslim listener is itself contested: awe, contemplation, recognition of divine mystery, or acoustic rhythm depending on the scholarly position adopted. You cannot reproduce an effect whose nature is theologically disputed.

This is why Nida is essential as a 'starting framework': *al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt* exposes the limits of his binary. The case demands a framework that can account for untranslatability as a legitimate translational outcome, which Nida's model does not formally accommodate.

Newmark's Semantic vs. Communicative Translation (1988)

Newmark refines Nida by shifting from audience effect to textual meaning and authorial intention. This makes his framework more precise for sacred texts.

Semantic translation: This prioritizes the exact contextual meaning of the source, tolerating awkwardness in the target language to preserve source fidelity. Applied to *Al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt*, this supports transliteration plus dense annotation, the approach most scholarly translations adopt.

Communicative translation: This gives priority to natural target-language reception. Applied here, it would theoretically demand a functional equivalent, something that produces in the English reader the same sense of confronting the opaque and the sacred. No such equivalent exists in English.

Newmark's added value over Nida is his concept of 'untranslatability as a gradient' rather than an absolute condition. He tries to distinguish linguistic untranslatability (no lexical equivalent) from cultural untranslatability (no conceptual framework in the target culture). *Al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt* involves both simultaneously, and Newmark's model gives you the vocabulary to analyze that distinction clearly.

His framework also handles the 'authorial intention problem' better. Since Islamic theology attributes the authorship of Qur'ān to divine origin, communicative translation in Newmark's sense becomes theologically impermissible: The translator has no mandate to approximate divine intention through functional substitution. This is a critical theoretical point that justifies why semantic fidelity, even when it produces opacity, is the only defensible position.

Untranslatability and the Hermeneutic Approach

The concept of untranslatability suggests that some elements of a source text cannot be fully transferred into another language due to linguistic or cultural differences. Scholars often distinguish between: (i) Linguistic untranslatability: when there is no direct lexical or syntactic equivalent in the target language; and (ii) Cultural untranslatability: when concepts, traditions, or references are deeply embedded in the source culture and lack parallels in the target culture (Catford, 1965).

Rather than seeing untranslatability as a dead end, hermeneutic approaches treat translation as an interpretive act. Drawing on philosophical hermeneutics (e.g., Gadamer), this perspective views translation as a process of understanding, interpretation, and re-expression. The translator actively engages with the text, negotiating meaning between cultures and contexts (Steiner, 1975). Considering this standpoint, translation is not about perfect equivalence but about interpretive

dialogue, where meaning is continuously reconstructed rather than transferred unchanged.

This is the framework that resolves what the first two cannot. Where Nida and Newmark operate within the assumption that translation is achievable at some level, the hermeneutic approach, drawing from Steiner's After Babel (1975) and extended through Islamic hermeneutics, treats the interpretive act itself as the object of analysis.

The hermeneutic approach contributes three things Nida and Newmark cannot provide:

First, it frames translation as interpretation, not transcoding. Every translator of *al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt* who adds a footnote is making a hermeneutic choice, selecting one interpretive tradition over others. Comparative analysis of those choices reveals ideological and theological positioning, not just linguistic decisions.

Second, it accommodates the concept of intended opacity. In Islamic hermeneutics, *mutashabihāt* verses are not failures of communication but deliberate features of divine discourse designed to provoke reflection and mark the boundary of human comprehension. A translation framework must be able to represent this intention without eliminating it through false clarification.

Third, the hermeneutic approach addresses the translator's epistemic position. No translator of *al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt* has access to the meaning being translated because that meaning, if it exists determinately, is held to be known only to God. This is not a gap in research. It is a constitutive feature of the text. Steiner's notion of the hermeneutic motion, trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution, maps onto this situation by explaining why translators adopt caution and restraint rather than interpretive boldness.

No single framework covers all three levels. Nida without Newmark leaves the semantic-communicative distinction undertheorized. Both without the hermeneutic approach treat untranslatability as a problem to be solved rather than a condition to be theorized. The hermeneutic approach alone lacks the precision to evaluate specific translation choices comparatively. Therefore, the combination produces a framework capable of explaining not just what translators do with *al-hurũf al-muqatta'āt*, but why the full range of their choices, from bare transliteration to elaborate annotation, is theoretically coherent and, in each case, defensible on different grounds.

Comparative Table of al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt (Disjointed Letters) in English and Yoruba Qur'an Translations

Arabic Letters	Sūrah Reference	English Translation Style	Yoruba Translation Style	Commentary / Annotation	Translation Fashion Used
الم (*Alif Lām Mīm*)	Al-Baqarah 2:1	"Alif. Lam. Mim." – transliterated directly	"Alif lam mim"	The letters are preserved without interpretation. Classical tafsīr states that their ultimate meaning is known only to Allah.	Literal transliteration
الر (*Alif Lām Rā*)	Yūnus 10:1	"Alif. Lam. Ra."	"Alif lam ro"	Yoruba rendering adapts Arabic pronunciation into Yoruba phonology ("Rā" → "ro").	Phonetic transliteration
كهيعص (*Kāf Hā Yā ʿAyn Ṣād*)	Maryam 19:1	"Kaf Ha Ya Ain Sad"	"Kaf ha ya ain sod"	Multi-letter formula retained as sacred symbols; no semantic translation attempted.	Symbolic preservation
طه (*Ṭā Hā*)	Ṭā Hā 20:1	"Ta-Ha"	"To-Ha" / "Taha"	Some commentators regard it as one of the Prophet's names; others classify it among the mysterious letters.	Interpretive transliteration
يس (*Yā*	Yā Sīn	"Ya-Sin"	"Ya-Sin"	Frequently preserved	Conventional

Arabic Letters	**Sūrah Reference**	**English Translation Style**	**Yoruba Translation Style**	**Commentary / Annotation**	**Translation Fashion Used**
Sīn)	36:1			unchanged because of devotional familiarity among Muslims.	transliteration
ص (*Ṣād*)	Ṣād 38:1	"Sad"	"Sod"	Yoruba orthography approximates Arabic emphatic consonant sounds.	Phonological adaptation
حم(*Ḥā Mīm*)	Ghāfir 40:1	"Ha Mim"	"Ha Mim"	Treated as sacred abbreviations; often followed by explanatory footnotes in tafsīr editions.	Literal retention
ق(*Qāf*)	Qāf 50:1	"Qaf"	"Qof" / "Qaf"	Some exegetes associate it symbolically with divine power or the Qur'an itself.	Single-letter transliteration
ن(*Nūn*)	Al-Qalam 68:1	"Nun"	"Nun"	Classical commentaries offer symbolic meanings, but translators usually avoid definitive interpretation.	Minimalist transliteration

Commentary on Translation Approaches

Literal Transliteration: Most English and Yoruba Qur'an translations simply reproduce the Arabic letters in Latin script: Example: الم → **Alif Lam Mim.** This method preserves the sacred and mysterious nature of the text.

Phonological Adaptation: Yoruba translations sometimes adjust pronunciation to fit Yoruba speech patterns: رَا **(Rā)** becomes **"ro" and** ص **(Ṣād)** becomes **"sod".** This reflects Yoruba phonetics while still preserving the Arabic identity of the letters.

Interpretive Annotation: Some Qur'an editions include explanatory footnotes such as:

i. "These letters are among the mysteries of the Qur'an";
ii. "Their meanings are known only to Allah";
iii. "They may signify the miraculous linguistic nature of the Qur'an"; and
iv. "These letters are one of the miracles of the Qur'an and none but Allah (Alone) knows their meanings".

In Yoruba translation of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭaʿāt* through transliteration, the refrain below becomes the commentary of each place where the letters open the Quranic chapters: "Olọhun nikan ni O mọ ohun ti o gba lero pẹlu awọn harafi yi" (i.e. Only Allah knows what He meant by these letters).

It is evident that both English and Yoruba translators generally avoid assigning fixed meanings to *Al-Ḥurūf al-Muqaṭṭaʿāt*. Instead, they preserve the Arabic forms through transliteration, sometimes adding annotations from classical tafsīr traditions. Yoruba translations additionally reflect local pronunciation and orthographic adaptation while maintaining the sacred structure of the Qur'anic text.

Conclusion

This study has panoramically examined the translationality of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt* in the Qur'an, focusing on how different translation strategies engage with their inherent ambiguity. The analysis demonstrates that these letters occupy a unique position within the Qur'anic text, characterized by semantic opaqueness and formal distinctiveness. The findings indicate that transliteration remains the dominant strategy among translators, reflecting a consensus on the limitations of semantic translation in this context. At the same time, the use of para-textual elements reveals an effort to bridge the gap between textual fidelity and reader comprehension. This dual approach underscores the complexity of translating sacred scriptural texts, where linguistic, theological, and interpretive considerations intersect. Ultimately, the translationality of *al-Ḥurūf al-Muqattaʿāt* can be described as limited but not absent.

While their phonetic structure can be transferred across languages, their meaning remains open-ended, informing interpretation and commentary rather than definitive translation. No doubt, this highlights the broader challenge of attempting the translation of the Qur'an and many other sacred scriptural texts, where meaning is often layered, symbolic, and context-dependent. Future research may expand this study by exploring translations in other languages, examining reader reception, or applying computational methods to analyze translational patterns. Such further studies would go a long way in enhancing the comprehension and understanding of the interplay between language, meaning, and translation in the context of scriptural texts and sacred literature.

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