

Perceptions of “Untranslatable” Arabic Expressions among Bilingual Saudi University Students: A Qualitative Primary Research Study of Language, Culture, and Worldview

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines bilingual Saudi university students' perceptions of “untranslatable” Arabic expressions and what these perceptions reveal about the relationship between language, culture, and worldview. To address limited research on how bilingual speakers understand untranslatability, eight Master's students from King Saud University, Riyadh were interviewed about three to five Arabic expressions they considered difficult to translate into Standard English. Participants explained the reasons for their perceptions and discussed the cultural, emotional, and pragmatic meanings that may be lost in translation.

Findings indicate that many Arabic expressions contain cultural, religious, emotional, and pragmatic meanings that cannot be fully reproduced in English. Examples included expressions related to communal solidarity (الفرقة), gratitude and blessing (يعطيك العافية), honor and dignity (مويه وجه), and culturally embedded social rituals (نعيمًا). Participants emphasized that perceived untranslatability primarily results from differences in cultural context, emotional nuance, metaphorical imagery, and religious meaning rather than vocabulary gaps alone.

The findings suggest that Arabic expressions often function as cultural scripts reflecting values such as hospitality, respect, solidarity, and social reputation. Translating them into English may therefore simplify or reduce their cultural and emotional depth. The study highlights the importance of cultural awareness in translation and TESOL and supports more culturally responsive approaches to bilingual language teaching.

Keywords: *Untranslatability, Arabic Expressions, Bilingualism, Translation Studies, Cultural Meaning, TESOL*

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Introduction

In this research, the perceptions of “untranslatable” Arabic expressions among bilingual Saudi university students is examined. The aim of this research is to determine what students perceive as linguistically or culturally “untranslatable” into Standard English and what these perceptions reveal about the relationship between language, culture, and worldview. In bilingual academic contexts, speakers frequently move between the two languages (in this study Arabic and English) yet they sometimes report that certain expressions cannot be fully rendered in one of these two languages. While translation studies and sociolinguistics discuss the concept of untranslatability, limited primary research has focused directly on how bilingual Saudi students themselves conceptualize this phenomenon.

Arabic expressions cannot be translated into English or vice versa because expressions often include culturally embedded phrases, religious references, idiomatic meanings, or socially specific terms that students feel lose depth or emotional intensity when translated.

Translation involves not only lexical substitution but also cultural meaning. Intercultural perspectives similarly suggest that

certain expressions are deeply embedded in shared cultural knowledge and social practices.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, this study focuses on collecting and analyzing original student data to explore how bilingual Saudi university students interpret the concept of “untranslatability” in their own words.

The intended audience for this research includes TESOL professionals, ESL/EFL instructors, and applied linguistics scholars interested in bilingualism, translation, intercultural communication, and linguistic identity. The study may be particularly relevant for educators working in English-medium universities in Saudi Arabia and similar multilingual contexts where students regularly navigate between Arabic and English in academic settings.

Given the growing emphasis on multilingual competence and translanguaging practices in TESOL, this research could contribute to professional discussions in conferences, workshops, and academic publications focused on language, culture, and identity in second language learning.

The overall purpose of this study is to deepen understanding of how bilingual Saudi university students conceptualize the relationship between language and culture through their perceptions of “untranslatable” expressions. Rather than determining whether certain words are objectively untranslatable, this research seeks to explore how and why students perceive them as such.

By analyzing student-generated examples and explanations, this study aims to illuminate how linguistic forms are connected to cultural meanings and how bilingual individuals negotiate meaning across languages. The findings may support TESOL educators in recognizing cultural nuance in classroom discourse and developing more culturally responsive instructional practices.

Through conducting this research, it is aimed to answer the following research question:

How do bilingual Saudi university students perceive and explain the untranslatability of certain Arabic expressions into Standard English, and what insights do these explanations provide into the interplay between language, culture, and worldview?

Background

Translation between languages is rarely a simple process of replacing words from one language with equivalent words in another (Nida & Taber, 1969). When languages emerge from different cultural, social, and religious contexts, certain expressions may appear difficult—or even impossible—to translate without losing part of their meaning. In Arabic, particularly within Saudi communicative contexts, many everyday expressions contain layers of cultural knowledge, religious reference, emotional nuance, and pragmatic meaning that cannot always be reproduced in English. As a result, bilingual speakers frequently describe some expressions as “untranslatable” (Kashgary, 2011). Understanding why speakers perceive certain expressions in this way provides insight into the relationship between language, culture, and worldview (Głaz, 2019).

Previous research in translation studies suggests that perceived untranslatability is rarely caused by vocabulary gaps alone (Al-Hassnawi, 2011). Instead, translation challenges often arise from cultural meaning, figurative language, pragmatic use, and differences in linguistic conventions across languages (Al-Hassnawi, 2011). Scholars have examined translation challenges related to idioms, proverbs, collocations, cultural references, and religious expressions in Arabic–English contexts. (Dweik & Suleiman, 2013). Additionally, theoretical perspectives from translation studies and linguistic relativity help explain why languages may encode different cultural and conceptual frameworks. (Głaz, 2019). The following review synthesizes current research related to cultural meaning in translation, figurative expressions, phraseological patterns, religious language, and theoretical explanations of untranslatability.

Cultural Meaning and Pragmatic Context in Translation

One of the most widely discussed issues in translation research is the role of culture and pragmatics in shaping meaning.(House, 2018). Many expressions function not only as linguistic units but also as socially meaningful acts that reflect cultural norms and shared assumptions. (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004). For this reason, translating such expressions requires more than literal equivalence.

Al-Awaid and Mohammed (2024) examine Saudi phatic communication, including greetings, blessings, and everyday formulas used in social interaction. Their study demonstrates that many Saudi Arabic expressions perform important relational functions such as maintaining social harmony and expressing shared cultural values. When translated directly into English, the pragmatic meaning of these expressions may not be fully preserved. Consequently, bilingual speakers may perceive translations as incomplete even when the literal meaning is communicated.

Similarly, El-Farahaty and Alwazna (2024) analyze Arabic–English translation in Netflix subtitles and show that translators must frequently negotiate cultural meaning when expressions involve religion, cultural norms, or socially sensitive topics. Rahmani (2024) also demonstrates that translators dealing with culture-specific items must balance accuracy with audience comprehension. These studies collectively emphasize that translation is shaped by cultural context, and therefore certain expressions may appear difficult to translate across languages.

Idioms, Proverbs, and Figurative Language

Another major theme in the literature concerns idioms and proverbs. Figurative expressions often compress complex cultural meanings into short phrases, making them particularly difficult to translate.

Tergui (2024) investigates translation students’ challenges in translating Arabic idioms and proverbs into English and finds that learners frequently struggle with figurative language because idioms depend on metaphor and shared cultural knowledge. Direct translation often produces confusing or unnatural results, which means translators must rely on interpretation or paraphrase.

Alharbi (2023) reaches a similar conclusion in a study of Najdi dialect proverbs. The research shows that many Saudi proverbs rely on culturally specific imagery and metaphor. Although translators can often explain the general meaning, the stylistic and cultural resonance of the original expression may be lost.

Research on Saudi learners further supports this pattern. AlEnezi and Alkhaleefah (2023) demonstrate that Saudi university students frequently encounter translation difficulties when working with idiomatic and culture-bound expressions. These challenges often stem from metaphorical meaning and cultural assumptions embedded within language.

Phraseological Meaning, Register, and Naturalness

Translation challenges also arise from differences in phraseological patterns and stylistic conventions between languages. Even when translations are grammatically accurate, they may sound unnatural or fail to convey the intended tone.

Almjlad (2024) shows that collocations and multiword expressions often resist word-for-word translation because languages organize phraseological meaning differently. A translation may preserve literal meaning while still sounding unnatural to native speakers. This difference in naturalness may contribute to perceptions that an expression cannot be translated effectively.

Saed et al. (2024) similarly emphasize the importance of register and voice in translation. Their research suggests that translators must recreate the stylistic and social positioning of

language rather than simply transferring lexical meaning. When register shifts in translation, the expression may lose part of its communicative impact.

Religious Language and Sacred Meaning

Religious language represents another area where translation may be particularly challenging. In Arabic-speaking contexts, many everyday expressions incorporate references to God, blessings, or religious values.

Othman (2024) discusses debates surrounding the translation of the Qur'ān and argues that sacred language contains rhetorical and spiritual dimensions that cannot be fully reproduced across languages. Even when translated versions communicate the core message, they may fail to convey the religious resonance and interpretive traditions associated with the original Arabic text.

Because many Saudi Arabic expressions include religious elements, this issue is particularly relevant for bilingual Saudi speakers. Expressions that reference faith or religious practices may appear difficult to translate because they carry meanings deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual experience.

Theoretical Perspectives on Untranslatability

Several theoretical frameworks help explain why certain expressions may appear untranslatable. Nida (1964) introduced the distinction between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence in translation. Formal equivalence focuses on preserving the structure of the original text, while dynamic equivalence prioritizes the communicative effect of the message.

More recent scholarship approaches untranslatability as a cultural and interpretive phenomenon. Foran (2023) argues that untranslatability may reveal meaningful differences between languages and cultural systems rather than representing a failure of translation.

Linguistic relativity provides an additional theoretical perspective. Sapir (1929) proposed that language shapes how speakers conceptualize experience. Contemporary discussions continue to explore how linguistic systems influence thought and perception (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023). From this perspective, expressions perceived as untranslatable may reflect culturally specific ways of interpreting social experience.

Methodology

Data

In this study, eight Master's students (male and female) from King Saud University were interviewed and asked to identify three to five Arabic expressions they consider untranslatable into Standard English.

- Participants were then asked to explain the following:
Why the expression is considered untranslatable
- Whether English equivalents lose meaning
- The emotional or cultural implications of translation

All responses were collected and are presented in Appendix A.

Discussion and Analysis

The responses provided by the participants demonstrate that many Arabic expressions are perceived as difficult to translate into English because their meanings extend beyond literal

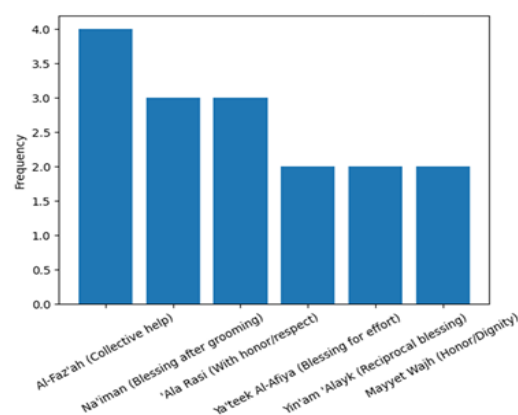
definitions and are deeply embedded in cultural, social, and religious contexts. Participants repeatedly emphasized that although English translations may convey the general meaning of an expression, they often fail to capture the emotional nuance, cultural symbolism, and social expectations associated with the original Arabic phrase.

Cultural Themes in the Expressions

The responses reveal several recurring cultural themes that explain why these expressions are perceived as untranslatable. These themes include community solidarity, gratitude combined with blessings, honor and dignity, social rituals, and metaphorical descriptions of personality or behavior.

As illustrated in Chart 1, expressions related to community solidarity and social responsibility appeared most frequently in the participants' responses. Examples such as *الفرجة* (*urgent communal help/support*), *بدي الفرجة* (*I need urgent help/support*), and *نخوة* (*chivalry, honor-based solidarity*) emphasize the expectation that individuals will assist members of their community during moments of need. These expressions reflect collective social values rather than individual actions, which makes them difficult to translate into English terms such as "help" or "support."

Chart 1. Frequency of Selected Arabic Expressions Mentioned by Participants



The second most common theme involved expressions that combine gratitude with blessings, including phrases such as:

- يعطيك العافية* (*may God give you health / thank you with a blessing*)
- تسلم* (*may you be kept safe / thank you*)
- الله يكتب أجرك* (*may God reward you*)
- ينعم عليك* (*may God bless you with well-being*)

In Arabic communication, expressions of gratitude often include wishes for health, reward, or divine blessing. English equivalents such as "thank you" focus mainly on politeness and therefore fail to convey the additional spiritual and cultural meanings embedded in these expressions.

Frequency of Expressions Mentioned by Participants

Chart 2 illustrates the frequency of several key expressions mentioned by the participants. Expressions such as:

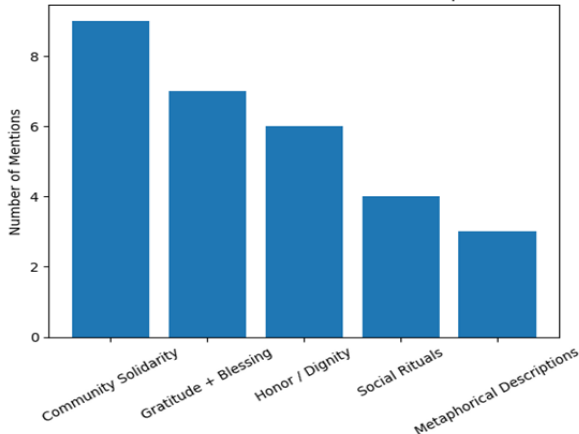
- الفرجة* (*urgent communal help/support*)
- نعيمًا* (*may you enjoy it; said after grooming*)

- على رأسي (on my head; expression of deep respect and willingness to help)

appeared multiple times across responses.

This pattern suggests that these phrases play an important role in everyday social interaction in Arabic-speaking communities.

Chart 2. Distribution of Cultural Themes in Arabic Expressions

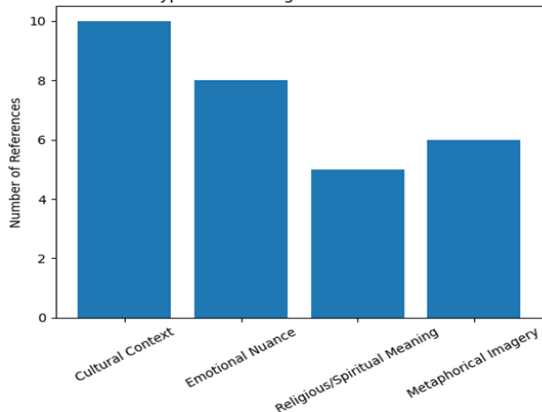


For example, نعيمًا (may you enjoy it; said after grooming) is used to acknowledge grooming activities such as shaving or getting a haircut, while على رأسي (on my head; I am at your service) expresses strong respect and willingness to help someone. English-speaking cultures typically lack direct equivalents for these expressions because the social situations in which they are used are not linguistically ritualized in the same way.

Types of Meaning Lost in Translation

Chart 3 highlights the main types of meaning that participants reported losing during translation. The most significant loss relates to cultural context, followed by emotional nuance, metaphorical imagery, and religious or spiritual meaning.

Chart 3. Types of Meaning Lost in Translation



Many Arabic expressions incorporate multiple layers of meaning simultaneously. For instance, the phrase يعطيك العافية (may God give you health / thank you with a blessing) functions both as an expression of gratitude and as a blessing for health and strength. When translated simply as “thank you,” the religious and cultural dimensions of the phrase disappear. Similarly, expressions such as:

- مويه وجهه (social dignity / reputation; literally “water of the face”)
- يبيض الله وجهك (may God whiten your face; meaning “may you be honored/rewarded”)

rely on metaphorical imagery connected to social reputation and honor.

Cultural Interpretation of Language

The results suggest that Arabic expressions often function as cultural scripts that regulate social interaction and reinforce shared values. These expressions communicate not only information but also emotions, moral expectations, and social relationships.

For example:

- Expressions like الفزعة (urgent communal help/support) and نخوة (chivalry, honor-based solidarity) reflect collective responsibility.
- Phrases such as يعطيك العافية (may God give you health / thank you with a blessing) and بتسلم (may you be safe / thank you) express appreciation combined with goodwill and blessing.
- Expressions like مويه وجهه (social dignity/reputation) and هيبة (prestige, authority, respected presence) relate to honor and social standing.

Because these expressions simultaneously convey linguistic meaning, emotional tone, and cultural values, translating them into English typically reduces their meaning to a simplified equivalent.

Overall Interpretation

Overall, the findings indicate that the perceived “untranslatability” of Arabic expressions arises primarily from cultural differences in communication practices rather than linguistic limitations. Many expressions reflect deeply rooted cultural values such as hospitality, solidarity, honor, and communal relationships.

Therefore, effective translation requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural interpretation and contextual understanding. These results highlight the importance of cultural awareness in translation studies and demonstrate how language functions as a carrier of social identity and shared cultural experience.

Conclusion

This study explored how bilingual Saudi university students perceive the concept of “untranslatable” Arabic expressions and what these perceptions reveal about the relationship between language, culture, and worldview. By analyzing responses from eight Master’s students at King Saud University, the research aimed to identify which Arabic expressions students consider difficult to translate into English and to understand the reasons behind these perceptions.

The findings demonstrate that many Arabic expressions contain layers of meaning that extend beyond literal translation. Participants frequently identified expressions related to community solidarity, gratitude combined with blessings, honor and dignity, social rituals, and metaphorical descriptions of personality and behavior. These expressions illustrate how language reflects shared cultural values and social practices within Arabic-speaking communities. While English equivalents may convey the basic semantic meaning of these expressions, they often fail to reproduce the cultural context, emotional nuance, religious references, and metaphorical imagery embedded in the original Arabic forms.

The results also suggest that the perception of “untranslatability” is not necessarily the result of linguistic limitations between Arabic and English. Rather, it arises from

differences in cultural frameworks, communicative conventions, and shared social knowledge. Many Arabic expressions function as culturally meaningful social acts that reinforce values such as hospitality, respect, solidarity, and moral reputation. When translated into English, these expressions often lose part of their relational and cultural significance.

From a TESOL perspective, these findings highlight the importance of cultural awareness in language teaching and translation practices. Educators working with bilingual learners should recognize that language learning involves more than vocabulary acquisition or grammatical accuracy; it also requires understanding the cultural meanings embedded within expressions. Encouraging students to reflect on culturally specific language use may help develop intercultural competence and deeper awareness of how meaning is negotiated across languages.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The research involved a relatively small sample of participants from a single university, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the participant pool to include students from different universities, age groups, or regional dialect backgrounds. Additionally, further studies could examine how bilingual speakers actually translate such expressions in real-time communication or explore how these expressions are negotiated in multilingual classroom interactions.

Overall, this study contributes to discussions in translation studies, sociolinguistics, and TESOL by highlighting how bilingual speakers interpret the concept of untranslatability. The findings reinforce the idea that language and culture are deeply interconnected and that understanding culturally embedded expressions requires not only linguistic knowledge but also awareness of the social and cultural contexts in which language is used.

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