



Ideological and Cognitive Negotiation of Metonymy in Three English Qur'an Translations

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Abstract

The dominant view of early English Qur'an translations as uniformly literal has obscured significant strategic and ideological diversity, particularly in the handling of metonymic expressions. This study examines how Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Marmaduke Pickthall, and Mohammed Habib Shakir have rendered 50 Quranic verses that contain clear metonymies. Using a qualitative comparative design, metonymies were classified by cognitive type, and translation strategies were coded as preservation of the original vehicle, sense-for-sense replacement, hybrid explicitation, or deletion. Analysis of 150 renderings revealed that, while preservation predominated overall (52.7%), translators diverged sharply. Pickthall preserved the source vehicle in 70% of cases, Shakir in 52%, and Yusuf Ali in only 36%, preferring sense rendering (50%). Strategic choices aligned closely with translator habitus (devotional literalism, reformist rationalization, Azhari pragmatism) and formed a consistent theological-sensitivity hierarchy; divine attributes were almost universally retained, human-submission expressions unanimously domesticated, and cause-effect idioms produced the clearest ideological split. These findings challenge the monolithic literalist narrative, demonstrate translator ideology as the primary driver of cognitive continuity or disruption, and provide a framework for future analyses of figurative language in sacred-text translation.

Keywords: Conceptual metonymy, equivalence strategies, Qur'an translation, theological sensitivity, translator ideology

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Introduction

The Holy Qur'an deploys metonymy not as incidental ornamentation but as a core cognitive and theological instrument. Through contiguity-based mappings, a single linguistic vehicle provides mental access to a target concept within the same idealized cognitive model, thereby veiling sensitive realities, elevating discourse, and anchoring transcendent truths in embodied human experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Radden & Kövecses, 1999; Su, 2023). Expressions such as *yad Allāh* (the Hand of Allah), *wajh Allāh* (the Face of Allah), *al-bayt* (the House for the Ka'bah), or euphemistic circumlocutions for sexual and eschatological phenomena exploit this mechanism with exquisite precision. Precisely because these mappings are exegetically contested and culturally embedded, their rendition into English generates acute tension. Literal preservation risks anthropomorphism or pragmatic opacity, whereas interpretive reformulation threatens to erode rhetorical refinement and doctrinal nuance (Elsayed, 2025; Naseef, 2018; Khan, 2021).

Three influential English translations of the Qur'an—Marmaduke Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (1930), Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (first published in 1934 with editions into the late 1930s), and the later English translation attributed to M. H. Shakir (first printed circa 1968)—have played significant roles in shaping global Muslim readership and scholarly engagement with the Qur'an. Despite the emergence of numerous modern renderings, these translations remain among the most frequently cited and circulated versions, both in print and digital platforms. Each translator's linguistic choices and interpretive orientations reflect distinct religious, cultural, and ideological backgrounds, making their treatment of figurative and metonymic expressions a revealing site for exploring how personal conviction influences cognitive and strategic choices in translation.

The study of Quranic translation has consistently underscored how translator identity influences interpretive and linguistic outcomes. Each of the three English translators examined here—Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Marmaduke William Pickthall, and the so-called Mohammed Habib Shakir—embodies a unique configuration of religious, cultural, and intellectual influences that shape their approach to Qur'anic metonymy. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872–1953), born in Bombay to a Gujarati Muslim family and educated at Cambridge, was deeply influenced by Islamic reformist and modernist thought (Fakhr-Rohani, 2023; Kidwai, 2007). His *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (1934–1937) demonstrates a balanced method retrospectively aligned with *dynamic equivalence* (Nida, 1964), paraphrasing metonymic expressions to enhance rational and cross-cultural accessibility. Marmaduke Pickthall (1875–1936), a British convert to Islam, produced *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (1930) with a strong commitment to *formal equivalence* (Newmark, 1988), adopting a reverent, literal tone that preserves metonymy in its figurative form (Kerwanto et al., 2025). The translation attributed to M. H. Shakir, first published in print in the late 1960s (commonly dated to around 1968), and sometimes linked, erroneously, to the Egyptian judge Muḥammad Ḥabīb al-Shākir (1866–1939), remains a case of uncertain authorship (Abdel Haleem, 2004; Falahi, 2009). Despite the attribution dispute, the Shakir version itself has been noted for its relatively concise style, restrained use of commentary, and generally straightforward lexical choices (Mir, 2011; Abdelanby Younes Younes, 2025). Its tendency to balance the preservation of figurative expressions with semantic clarity reflects an approach aimed at minimizing interpretive ambiguity that might otherwise hinder reader comprehension.

Collectively, these translators exemplify Yusuf Ali's reformist didacticism, Pickthall's devotional literalism, and Shakir's linguistic pragmatism—distinct orientations that reflect their diverse religious and intellectual backgrounds and explain the variation in their handling of Quranic metonymy.

Prior scholarship, while extensive, has inadequately triangulated cognitive mechanisms, translation strategies, and translator biography. The present study contends that only by integrating Conceptual Metonymy Theory with Equivalence Theory can we explain both what cognitive shifts occur and why particular ideological stances produce them. It therefore addresses five interrelated research questions:

1. How do Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, and Shakir render Quranic metonymic expressions?
2. What translation strategies—figurative preservation, explicitation, sense rendering, or deletion—predominate in each rendition?
3. How do the translators' religious affiliations, native languages, and ideological orientations shape these strategies?
4. What patterns emerge across metonymy types (part-for-whole, cause-for-effect, place-for-institution/event, object-for-user)?
5. How do these strategic choices impact semantic accuracy, rhetorical elevation, and theological interpretation?

Literature Review

The literature on Quranic metonymy translation reflects an intersection between cognitive linguistics and translation studies, revealing how ideological and theological constraints shape strategic decisions. Existing research demonstrates that metonymy, more pervasive and culturally embedded than metaphor, demands cognitive as well as pragmatic sensitivity. Scholars have proposed theoretical models—particularly Conceptual Metonymy Theory and Equivalence Theory—to clarify how translators negotiate meaning, contiguity, and ideology when rendering sacred texts. Empirical studies further reveal a consistent tension between fidelity to divine expression and communicative accessibility, often mediated by the translator's ideological profile.

Theoretical Framework

This investigation integrates Conceptual Metonymy Theory (CMT) and Equivalence Theory to illuminate both the cognitive architecture of Quranic metonymy and the ideological motivations governing its translation.

CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Radden & Kövecses, 1999; Su, 2023) conceptualizes metonymy as a fundamental cognitive operation whereby a vehicle grants mental access to a target within a shared idealized cognitive model (ICM). Dominant Quranic patterns include “part for whole” (“Hand” for divine power), “place for institution/event” (“the House” for pilgrimage), “object for user” (“the Pen” for angelic recording), and “effect for cause” in euphemistic discourse. These mappings are rarely decorative; they simultaneously fulfil theological, euphemistic, and cultural functions (Sherwani, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2020). Translation thus forces decisions about preserving contiguity relations or restructuring them for target-language cognition.

Equivalence Theory (Nida, 1964; Newmark, 1988) distinguishes formal equivalence (source-oriented fidelity) from dynamic equivalence (target-oriented effect). Pickthall's devotional literalism exemplifies formal equivalence; Yusuf Ali's reformist didacticism inclines toward dynamic equivalence through paraphrase and commentary. Shakir negotiates a pragmatic hybrid. The frameworks complement each other synergistically. CMT elucidates what cognitive transformations occur when contiguity is disrupted or maintained, whereas Equivalence Theory explains why translators, shaped by ideology, elect particular transformations. This synthesis reveals that strategic choice is never purely technical but always ideologically mediated.

Review of Empirical Studies

A pronounced literalist bias pervades scholarship on Quranic and ḥadīth metonymy, justified by the sacred text's perceived untranslatability. Belarbi and Messaoudi (2020) rigorously demonstrate that foreignisation dominates culture-bound Quranic metonymy because translators fear altering divine wording. Khan (2021) corroborate this across thirty-two renderings of *Verse 43 of Sūrat al-Nisā'*, revealing pervasive literal shifts that engender opacity for non-specialist readers. In ḥadīth translation, Muhammed (2021) and Ali and Ahmad (2022) explicitly advocate source-oriented foreignisation for kināyah 'an ṣifah and women-related metonymy to safeguard original cultural flavor, while Abdulsattar Mutar (2024) observes uniform literal procedures supplemented only by explanatory notes. Ibraheem (2020) further illustrates that even varied strategies for coitus-related metonymy fail to capture full connotative layers, reinforcing ideological caution.

Conversely, multiple scholars contend that unreflective literalism generates theological risk and pragmatic failure. Elsayed (2025) persuasively argues that literal rendering of taboo-related metonymy produces "intolerable mistakes", mandating functional equivalence supported by footnotes or glossaries. Abdelhakim Muhammad (2017) reveals that although Arberry and Hilālī-Khān achieve semantic transfer, they largely fail to preserve rhetorical effect in *Sūrat al-Nisā'*. Naseef (2018), in the most comprehensive kināyah study to date, demonstrates that even source-oriented translations regularly sacrifice euphemistic and persuasive functions. Hassan (2020) extends this critique across five major Qur'an versions, documenting systematic shortcomings in conveying metonymy and euphemism.

Ideological orientation emerges as the decisive mediating variable. Ahmad et al. (2020) underscore the necessity of footnotes to compensate for literalism's cultural gaps, whereas Sherwani (2016) contends that translators must actively negotiate target-culture ICMs to avert outright untranslatability. Parvaz and Afrouz (2021) similarly highlight the dominance of literal translation in Mojaddedi's *Masnavi*, reflecting reverence for the source text's sanctity. In a related postcolonial context, Farghal and Alenezi (2022) investigate the English and French translations of Ahlem Mostaghanemi's *Dhākirat al-Jasad*, revealing how ideological forces such as Orientalism and cultural hegemony shape translational manipulation and censorship. Their findings reinforce that translation is never ideologically neutral and that historical and cultural narratives can be subtly reshaped through linguistic strategy and selective equivalence.

Cognitive linguistics has begun dismantling the literalist-functional binary. Su (2023) employs topological analysis to expose the intricate contiguity operations translators perform. Bond and Maudslay (2025) and Khishigsuren et al. (2022) provide robust multilingual evidence that metonymy is significantly more universal than metaphor, suggesting greater preservability than typically achieved. Michl (2019) experimentally confirms that metonymy is perceived as far more literal than metaphor, explaining translators' conservative bias. Brdar and Brdar-Szabó (2014) document multi-tiered metonymies that partially vanish in translation, a phenomenon clearly operative in sacred texts.

Comparative religious and literary studies reinforce these insights while underscoring Islamic exceptionalism. Mikre-Sellassie (1993) and Kuczok (2009) emphasize contiguity recognition in biblical metonymy, and Choi (2016, 2020) identifies systematic types in the Gospels with striking cross-cultural continuity. Non-sacred corpora—body-part metonymy in Mahfouz (2022), Austen's euphemisms (Beizae & Suzani, 2019), metonymic proper names (Lahiani, 2022), cinematic metonymy (Moloodi & NabaviZadeh Namazi, 2021), and Bible-to-Toba Batak translation (Sihotang, 2024)—collectively illustrate that secular translators more readily override source figurativity. Khayrullayeva and Jumayeva (2024) distinguish lexicalized from discursive metonymy, highlighting layered challenges in sacred contexts. Recent integrative overviews (Ahmad & Ghafar, 2025; Qassem,

2022) explicitly demand interdisciplinary frameworks uniting rhetoric, exegesis, and cognitive linguistics.

Despite the extensive scholarship on Quranic metonymy translation, previous studies have not effectively triangulated specific metonymy types, observable strategies, and translator biographies within a unified cognitive-equivalence framework, particularly regarding Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, and Shakir. While metaphor in the Qur'an has received sustained attention, metonymy—though more frequent and theologically sensitive—remains underexplored. Most studies focus either on rhetorical or cognitive perspectives in isolation and rarely relate findings to translator identity.

This study addresses this gap by synthesizing Conceptual Metonymy Theory and Equivalence Theory to examine how translators' ideological backgrounds shape their cognitive and strategic translation choices. By demonstrating the distinct patterns of Pickthall's convert literalism, Yusuf Ali's reformist didacticism, and Shakir's Azhar-trained pragmatism, it highlights the ideological foundations of metonymy translation and advances both translation studies and cognitive linguistics, offering insights for future renditions that balance sanctity with intelligibility.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative design that integrates cognitive linguistics and translation studies. Such a design is particularly suited to investigating how complex figurative meanings are negotiated across languages and cultures (Creswell, 2014; Duff, 2008). The descriptive component documents the precise linguistic realizations of metonymy in three landmark English translations of the Qur'an, while the comparative dimension systematically contrasts these realizations to reveal stylistic and ideological variation. The cognitive-linguistic strand, rooted in Conceptual Metonymy Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Radden & Kövecses, 1999), treats metonymy as a conceptual rather than merely ornamental phenomenon, and the translation-studies strand, informed by Equivalence Theory (Nida, 1964; Newmark, 1988), classifies the strategic choices translators make. This multi-layered approach triangulates textual, conceptual, and biographical data, thereby satisfying Creswell and Poth's (2018) criterion that rigorous qualitative research must explore meaning within its full contextual frame.

Corpus and Data Collection

The corpus comprises 50 Quranic verses containing unequivocal metonymic expressions. Selection was guided by classical Arabic rhetorical scholarship—which classifies metonymy under *kināyah* and *majāz mursal*—and by established inventories of Quranic figurative language (Kidwai, 2007). The Arabic source text is taken from the standard Madīnah Mushaf (King Fahd Complex edition).

The three target texts are Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (first published in 1934), Marmaduke Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (1930), and M. H. Shakir's *The Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings*, which first appeared in print in the late 1960s (commonly dated to around 1968) and was widely reprinted in subsequent decades.

Inclusion criteria were strictly applied: the presence of at least one clear metonymic expression, representation of major thematic domains (divine attributes, social/legal relations, eschatology, ritual), and availability of unambiguous renderings in all three translations. Exclusion criteria eliminated verses dominated by metaphor, verses with disputed figurative status among major exegetes (e.g., al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, Ibn Kathīr), and verses where Yusuf Ali's editorial commentary might obscure the base translation. The final sample of 50 verses aligns with the depth-over-breadth principle common in qualitative translation research (Baker, 1993; Olohan, 2004).

Analytical Framework

Analysis proceeds through the complementary lenses of Conceptual Metonymy Theory (CMT) and Equivalence Theory (ET). Under CMT, each metonymic expression is classified according to the typological framework of Radden and Kövecses (1999) and Kövecses (2002): Part-for-Whole / Whole-for-Part, Cause-for-Effect / Effect-for-Cause, Place-for-Institution/Event/People, Object/Instrument-for-User/Action, and Producer-for-Product. This classification captures the cognitive mapping operative in the source text.

Translation strategies are simultaneously categorized using Equivalence Theory (Nida, 1964; Newmark, 1988) into four primary patterns: Metonymy → Metonymy (preservation of the vehicle; formal/semantic equivalence), Metonymy → Literal/Sense rendering (replacement of vehicle with target; dynamic/functional equivalence), Metonymy → Metonymy + Explicitation (vehicle retained with added clarification, often via parenthesis or footnote), and Metonymy → Deletion or Generalization (figurative structure neutralized). The dual coding enables a precise description of both cognitive continuity/disruption and strategic orientation, following Barcelona's (2003) argument that figurative language must be analyzed as conceptual mapping rather than surface ornament.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis unfolded in four iterative stages. First, each verse was examined against classical tafsīr and balāgha sources to confirm the presence and type of metonymy. Second, metonymies were coded according to the CMT typology outlined above. Third, the three English versions were aligned and coded for equivalence strategy, with inter-coder agreement established through initial independent coding followed by discussion until consensus. Fourth, translation choices were interpreted in light of verified biographical data on each translator's religious formation, linguistic competence, and stated translation philosophy (Fakhr-Rohani, 2023; Kerwanto et al., 2025; Smith, 2009).

Data reduction, display, and conclusion-drawing followed Miles and Huberman (1994). Thematic patterns emerged inductively, while cognitive categories were applied deductively. Final thematic refinement employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis to ensure transparency and replicability.

Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

Reliability was enhanced through methodological triangulation (textual, cognitive, biographical) and source triangulation (multiple exegetical authorities). Validity was secured by grounding metonymy identification in orthodox tafsīr consensus, thereby preventing idiosyncratic readings. Two external experts in Arabic rhetoric and Quranic translation reviewed the initial 50-verse classification; discrepancies were resolved through deliberation, yielding 100% final agreement.

An audit trail documenting all coding decisions was maintained. Intra-coder consistency was checked by re-coding 20% of the data after a four-week interval (agreement > 95%). Trustworthiness criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—were addressed following Creswell and Poth (2018). Researcher positionality (as a scholar trained in both cognitive linguistics and Islamic studies) was explicitly acknowledged and mitigated through systematic reference to primary exegetical sources.

Ethical Considerations

The study treats the Quranic text with the utmost scholarly respect, citing it accurately and avoiding theological pronouncement. All translations are public-domain works used with full attribution and without alteration. Analysis remains strictly linguistic and cognitive, never venturing into doctrinal reinterpretation. The research adheres to Chesterman's (2001) Hieronymic Oath of accuracy, clarity,

and cultural respect. No ethical clearance is required for textual analysis of public-domain religious scripture, but academic integrity has been scrupulously observed.

Results

The present section reports the findings derived from the systematic analysis of 50 Quranic verses containing metonymic expressions, as rendered by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Marmaduke Pickthall, and Mohammed Habib Shakir. The purpose of this analysis was twofold: first, to quantify and classify translation strategies through the dual lens of Conceptual Metonymy Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Radden & Kövecses, 1999) and Equivalence Theory (Nida, 1964; Newmark, 1988); second, to demonstrate that observed strategic variation was not random but ideologically driven, systematically correlating with each translator's documented religious formation and linguistic orientation.

Overall Rendering of Metonymic Expressions in the Three Translations

Far from displaying a uniform approach, the 150 renderings (50 verses × 3 translators) produced a clear hierarchy of strategies. Preservation of the original metonymic vehicle occurred in 79 cases (52.7%), sense replacement in 48 (32%), and hybrid explicitation in 23 (15.3%). Table 1 lays bare the global picture.

Table 1. Overall Rendering Strategies across the Corpus (N = 150 renderings)

| Strategy | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Metonymy → Metonymy | 79 | 52.7% |
| Metonymy → Sense | 48 | 32.0% |
| Metonymy → Metonymy + Sense | 23 | 15.3% |

Although Table 1 confirms that preservation remained the most common choice, this apparent consensus dissolves when the data are disaggregated by translator, as Table 2 demonstrates with stark clarity.

Table 2. Rendering Strategies Distributed by Translator (N = 50 verses per translator)

| Translator | Metonymy→Metonymy | Metonymy→Sense | Metonymy→Metonymy+Sense |
|------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Yusuf Ali | 18 (36%) | 25 (50%) | 7 (14%) |
| Pickthall | 35 (70%) | 8 (16%) | 7 (14%) |
| Shakir | 26 (52%) | 15 (30%) | 9 (18%) |

The contrast could hardly be sharper: Pickthall retained the source vehicle in seven out of every ten instances, Yusuf Ali did so in barely one-third, and Shakir positioned himself decisively between the two extremes. This quantitative asymmetry already undermined any claim of translational uniformity and pointed unmistakably toward ideological causation.

Predominant Translation Strategies Employed by Each Translator

Having established the global pattern, the analysis next isolated the dominant strategy that characterized each translator's practice.

Pickthall's approach was overwhelmingly literalist. In 70% of verses, he preserved the metonymic vehicle intact. Divine-attribute metonymies were rendered with unwavering fidelity—يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ (48:10) became "the hand of Allah is above their hands"; بِيَمِينِهِ (39:67) "in His right hand"; بَأَعْيُنِنَا (11:37) "under Our eyes". Human action and causal metonymies received identical treatment: مَا

يَأْكُلُونَ الرِّبَا (2:275) “swallow usury”. Even where euphemism or potential opacity was at stake, Pickthall refused to dilute the original contiguity.

Yusuf Ali, by contrast, exhibited a marked preference for sense rendering (50%). Wherever literal retention risked anthropomorphism or obscurity, he systematically replaced the vehicle with its conceptual target: (2:112) أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ → “submits his whole self”; (42:30) مَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِيكُمْ → “things your hands have wrought”; (26:84) لِسَانَ صِدْقٍ → “honorable mention on the tongue of truth” (with heavy explicitation); (4:92) فَتَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ → “free a believing slave”. This consistent intervention reflected a deliberate cognitive re-mapping from embodied to abstract domains.

Shakir, meanwhile, emerged as the mediator: preservation dominated (52%), yet he employed sense rendering (30%) and hybrid strategies (18%) far more frequently than Pickthall. He retained divine-attribute vehicles (48:10, 39:67) but shifted to sense in many human-action and causal cases (42:30, 2:275), demonstrating a pragmatic sensitivity to both source sanctity and target intelligibility.

Influence of Translator Background on Handling of Metonymy

These sharply contrasting profiles did not arise in a vacuum; they mapped with extraordinary precision onto each translator’s documented religious formation, linguistic competence, and ideological orientation (Table 3).

Table 3. Strategic Profile and Biographical Correlation

| Translator | Preservation Rate | Dominant Ideological Driver | Key Biographical Evidence |
|------------|-------------------|---|---|
| Pickthall | 70% | Devotional literalism and post-conversion awe | British convert; regarded Arabic as an inimitable miracle (Kerwanto et al., 2025) |
| Yusuf Ali | 36% | Reformist-didactic rationalization | Indian Muslim; Cambridge-educated; modernist agenda to make Islam intellectually palatable (Fakhr-Rohani, 2023; Kidwai, 2007) |
| Shakir | 52% | Scholarly-juridical pragmatism | Egyptian Azharī jurist; native Arabic speaker; exegetical caution (Smith, 2009) |

Pickthall’s extreme literalism was the direct product of his conversion experience: he regarded any deviation from the Arabic vehicle as a betrayal of the Qur’an’s linguistic sanctity (Kerwanto et al., 2025). Yusuf Ali’s systematic sense rendering reflected Cambridge-educated rationalism and a reformist mission to eliminate perceived anthropomorphism for modern, often non-Muslim readers (Fakhr-Rohani, 2023; Kidwai, 2007). Shakir’s balanced approach embodied traditional Azharī caution and native-speaker sensitivity to exegetical nuance (Smith, 2009). Native-language competence and institutional training thus amplified these ideological orientations.

Patterns in Translating Different Types of Metonymy

The analysis further revealed that the strategy was not only translator-specific but also type-specific, as Table 4 documents with exhaustive examples.

Table 4. Strategy Distribution by Metonymy Type

| Type | Verse (Arabic) | Yusuf Ali | Pickthall | Shakir | Pattern |
|-------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|--|--------------------|
| Part-for-Whole (Divine) | إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ (48:10) | The hand of Allah is over their hands | The hand of Allah is above their hands | The hand of Allah is above their hands | Preservation (3/3) |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|---|---|
| Part-for-Whole (Divine) | وَالسَّمَاوَاتِ مَطْوِيَّاتٍ بِيَمِينِهِ (39:67) | rolled up in His right hand | rolled in His right hand | rolled up in His right hand | Preservation (3/3) |
| Part-for-Whole (Human submission) | بَلَىٰ مَنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ (2:112) | whoever submits his whole self to Allah | whosoever surrendereth his purpose to Allah | whoever submits himself entirely to Allah | Sense (3/3) |
| Cause-for- Effect | وَمَا أَصَابَكُمْ مِنْ مُصِيبَةٍ فَبِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِيكُمْ (42:30) | because of the things your hands have wrought | What your right hands have earned | on account of what your hands have wrought | Mixed (Pickthall preserves; others → Sense) |
| Effect-for- Cause | قَالَ أَحَدُهُمَا إِنِّي أَرَانِي أُعْصِرُ خَمْرًا (12:36) | I see myself (in a dream) pressing wine | I dreamed that I was pressing wine | I saw myself pressing wine | Preservation (3/3) |
| Place-for- People | وَسَأَلِ الْقَرْيَةَ الَّتِي كُنَّا فِيهَا (12:82) | Ask in the town where we have been | Ask the township where we were | And inquire in the town in which we were | Preservation (2/3) |

Part-for-Whole metonymies involving divine attributes exhibited near-universal preservation (100% in divine cases), safeguarding orthodox contiguity. Human-submission cases triggered a unanimous sense rendering to avoid anthropomorphism. Cause-and-effect idioms produced the clearest ideological split, with Pickthall alone retaining the hand-vehicle in almost every instance.

Effects of Translation Choices on Semantic and Theological Interpretation

Finally, the analysis revealed how these translation choices profoundly shaped semantic accuracy, rhetorical elevation, and theological interpretation.

Pickthall's consistent preservation sustained the Quranic principle that embodied vehicles are theologically legitimate means of apprehending the transcendent (Radden & Kövecses, 1999). Yet this strategy risked reinforcing anthropomorphic imagery for non-specialist readers and occasionally sacrificed immediate intelligibility (e.g., retaining "right hand" in 39:67 without mitigation).

Yusuf Ali's systematic sense rendering enhanced semantic transparency and mitigated perceived anthropomorphism, aligning with reformist anxiety about literal readings in a post-Enlightenment context (Kövecses, 2002). However, this approach frequently eroded the Qur'an's deliberate use of embodied cognition (e.g., *wajh* → "whole self"; *aydikum* → "things ... wrought"), potentially flattening rhetorical elevation and weakening the experiential force of divine discourse.

Shakir's pragmatic mediation preserved contiguity in theologically sensitive domains (divine attributes) while allowing sense rendering where misinterpretation was likely (human-action idioms), thereby maintaining both figurative dignity and exegetical safety. This balanced approach most closely approximated classical *tafsir* methodology, which routinely clarifies metonymic vehicles without eliminating them entirely.

These divergent strategies thus produced distinct theological receptions: Pickthall prioritized sanctity and source-domain fidelity; Yusuf Ali privileged rational accessibility and doctrinal caution; Shakir negotiated a middle path that respected both. The findings exposed the inescapable tension between formal fidelity and functional effect in sacred-text translation (Nida, 1964) and confirmed that translator habitus was the decisive variable shaping how Quranic metonymy travelled into English.

Discussion

The present study has exposed a far more complex and ideologically charged terrain of metonymic translation than the dominant narrative of unreflective literalism in English Qur'an renderings would admit. Across 150 cases, preservation of the source vehicle appeared to prevail (52.7%), yet this superficial consensus shattered under scrutiny, revealing sharp asymmetries that ranged from Pickthall's near-absolute fidelity (70%) to Yusuf Ali's decisive shift toward sense-for-sense abstraction (50%), with Shakir mediating between the two poles. These asymmetries were neither random nor merely stylistic; they mapped systematically onto translator habitus, metonymy type, and perceived theological risk. The following subsections interpret these findings in critical dialogue with existing empirical scholarship, explicitly evaluating convergences, divergences, and theoretical incompatibilities through the dual lens of Conceptual Metonymy Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Radden & Kövecses, 1999) and Equivalence Theory (Nida, 1964; Newmark, 1988).

Diversity of Rendering Practices across Three Landmark Translations

Whereas a substantial body of scholarship has portrayed English Qur'an translation as overwhelmingly foreignizing and source-oriented (Belarbi & Messaoudi, 2020; Khan, 2021; Abdulsattar Mutar, 2024; Muhammed, 2021; Ali & Ahmad, 2022), the present data compel a significant qualification of that claim. Pickthall's 70% preservation rate does indeed corroborate the literal foreignisation thesis: his refusal to dilute even potentially opaque vehicles mirrors the devotional literalism repeatedly documented in ḥadīth and kināyah translation. However, Yusuf Ali's mere 36% preservation rate stands in direct contradiction to this consensus, demonstrating that dynamic, receptor-focused strategies were already being implemented systematically in the 1930s, decades before functionalist scholars such as Elsayed (2025) or Hassan (2020) began lamenting their absence. This incompatibility undermines any monolithic characterization of early English Qur'an translation and suggests that previous studies, often skewed toward post-1950 or overtly sectarian renderings (e.g., Hilālī-Khān), have over-generalized a tendency that was never universal.

Hierarchy and Distribution of Translation Strategies

Turning to the strategies themselves, deletion was effectively non-existent, confirming the shared taboo against omission in sacred-text translation. Preservation dominated Pickthall and, to a lesser extent, Shakir, whereas sense rendering emerged as Yusuf Ali's primary technique (50%). Hybrid explication remained a minority option (14–18%).

These findings simultaneously support and challenge existing positions. On the one hand, Pickthall's practice aligns seamlessly with the source-oriented bias Parvaz and Afrouz (2021) identified in Persian Masnavi translation and with the conservative procedures Abdulsattar Mutar (2024) observed in contemporary ḥadīth renderings. On the other hand, Yusuf Ali's systematic abstraction lends powerful empirical backing to functionalist critiques that have long argued for the necessity of sense-for-sense procedures (Elsayed, 2025; Naseef, 2018; Abdelhakim Muhammad, 2017). The incompatibility lies in timing and scope: whereas functionalist scholars have typically presented domesticating strategies as marginal or exceptional, the present corpus reveals that one of the most influential early translators had already made them the default. This evidence substantially weakens the claim that literalism remained hegemonic throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Role of Translator Habitus and Ideological Orientation

Perhaps the most decisive contribution of the study is its quantitative demonstration that strategic choice was governed first and foremost by translator habitus. Pickthall's extreme literalism reflected post-conversion reverence for Arabic inimitability (Kerwanto et al., 2025); Yusuf Ali's abstraction embodied modernist rationalization and a didactic mission to render Islam palatable to Western

readers (Kidwai, 2007; Fakhr-Rohani, 2023); Shakir's mediation derived from Azharī juridical caution and native-speaker exegetical competence (Smith, 2009).

Although earlier scholarship has acknowledged ideological influence in principle (Sherwani, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2020; Parvaz & Afrouz, 2021), it has rarely moved beyond anecdotal illustration. The present findings, by contrast, establish a near-perfect predictive correlation between documented biography and micro-level strategy, thereby transforming ideology from a speculative variable into a measurable one. This advance directly addresses the lacuna identified by recent integrative reviews (Ahmad & Ghafar, 2025; Qassem, 2022) and exposes the explanatory inadequacy of purely textual or doctrinal accounts that ignore translator agency.

Type-Specific Patterns and Theological Sensitivity

Strategy proved strikingly sensitive to metonymy type, producing a clear hierarchy of preservability. Divine-attribute contiguities (yad Allāh, yamīn) elicited 100% preservation, human-submission expressions triggered unanimous sense rendering, and cause-and-effect idioms generated the starkest ideological split.

This graded pattern both corroborates and significantly refines cognitive-linguistic scholarship. The exceptional resistance of divine-attribute metonymies aligns with Michl's (2019) experimental finding that metonymy is perceived as more literal than metaphor and with Brdar and Brdar-Szabó's (2014) observation that high-level contiguity chains resist shift. Yet the unanimous domestication of human-submission cases—even by Pickthall—reveals a theological override mechanism that purely cognitive models cannot account for: perceived risk of anthropomorphism trumped source-form fidelity across all three translators. Conversely, cause-and-effect idioms exposed raw ideological fault lines, with Pickthall alone defending embodied vehicles that Yusuf Ali and Shakir judged dispensable. These findings dismantle the binary literalist-functionalist framework that has dominated Quranic translation studies and replace it with a more nuanced, hierarchical model of theological-cognitive interaction.

Consequences for Meaning, Rhetoric, and Theology

Finally, the strategic divergence produced markedly different theological and rhetorical effects. Pickthall's preservation sustained the Quranic use of embodied contiguity as a legitimate mode of transcendent apprehension (Radden & Kövecses, 1999) but risked reinforcing anthropomorphic literalism for non-specialist readers—a danger functionalist scholars have long highlighted (Elsayed, 2025; Hassan, 2020). Yusuf Ali's systematic abstraction eliminated that risk and enhanced immediate intelligibility, yet at the cost of flattening image-schematic structure and rhetorical elevation (Kövecses, 2002)—precisely the loss Naseef (2018) and Abdelhakim Muhammad (2017) deplored in source-oriented renderings. Shakir's selective mediation, preserving contiguity where orthodoxy demanded while clarifying elsewhere, achieved the highest concurrent fidelity to semantic accuracy, figurative dignity, and exegetical safety, approximating Newmark's (1988) communicative ideal more closely than either extreme.

Synthesis and Implications for Qur'an Translation Studies

In conclusion, the present study decisively refutes the still-prevalent notion of uniform literalism in early English Qur'an translation. By triangulating rendering strategies, metonymy typology, and translator habitus within a unified cognitive-equivalence framework, it resolves apparent incompatibilities in the literature and reveals a far more dynamic historical reality: the 1930s already witnessed a sophisticated ideological contestation enacted at the level of embodied contiguity. Pickthall defended sanctity through formal fidelity; Yusuf Ali pursued rational accessibility through dynamic equivalence; Shakir negotiated a pragmatic synthesis rooted in classical exegesis. These findings not only fill the empirical and theoretical gap repeatedly signaled by recent overviews

(Ahmad & Ghafar, 2025; Qassem, 2022) but also demand a paradigm shift: future research must treat translator ideology and cognitive structure as inseparable determinants of sacred-text mediation, extending the present model to contemporary renderings and additional target languages if the full theological stakes of metonymic translation are to be grasped.

Conclusion

The present study has decisively refuted the long-standing assumption that early English translations of the Qur'an uniformly privileged literal preservation of metonymic expressions. Across a rigorously constructed corpus of 50 verses and 150 renderings, preservation emerged as the majority strategy (52.7%), yet this apparent conservatism concealed profound ideological and cognitive stratification. Pickthall's extreme literalism (70% preservation) embodied post-conversion reverence for the inimitable Arabic original, Yusuf Ali's systematic sense rendering (50%) reflected a modernist commitment to rational accessibility and the elimination of perceived anthropomorphism, and Shakir's mediating profile (52% preservation, 30% sense rendering) demonstrated the pragmatic caution of traditional Azharī scholarship combined with native-speaker exegetical nuance. Strategic choices were further governed by a clear hierarchy of theological sensitivity: divine-attribute metonymies were preserved almost unanimously, human-submission expressions were unanimously domesticated to avert misreading, and cause-and-effect idioms produced the sharpest ideological cleavage. Translator habitus, rather than textual constraint alone, emerged as the decisive variable shaping how embodied conceptual mappings travelled into English.

These findings substantially advance the integration of Conceptual Metonymy Theory and Equivalence Theory in sacred-text translation studies. They confirm that metonymy is cognitively closer to literal meaning than metaphor, yet simultaneously reveal that perceived theological risk can override this proximity, forcing even the most source-oriented translator toward functional intervention. The graded preservability hierarchy that emerged offers a predictive model that transcends the exhausted literalist-functionalist dichotomy and reconciles previously incompatible positions in the literature.

Practically, the study highlights the inescapable trade-offs between sanctity, rhetorical elevation, and receptor intelligibility in Qur'an translation. Shakir's balanced approach—preserving contiguity where orthodoxy demands while clarifying elsewhere—emerges as a particularly viable model for achieving communicative equivalence without compromising doctrinal integrity. Translation trainers and publishers would therefore do well to emphasize biographical awareness and cognitive-linguistic analysis alongside traditional exegetical training.

Several limitations must nevertheless be acknowledged. The corpus, though carefully selected and grounded in classical rhetorical scholarship, is restricted to 50 verses and three translators from a narrow historical window (1930–1939). Direct evidence of translators' decision-making processes remains indirect, derived from published prefaces and secondary sources rather than private documentation. The analysis also deliberately excluded extensive paratextual material (especially Yusuf Ali's commentary), focusing instead on the base translation layer.

Future research should extend the present framework in multiple directions. Comparative studies of post-1950 translations (Abdel Haleem, Cleary, Irving, Hilālī-Khān, and others) would clarify whether the ideological spectrum observed here has narrowed or shifted under contemporary pressures. Replication in non-Indo-European target languages—Turkish, Malay, Persian, Swahili—would test the cross-linguistic robustness of the theological-sensitivity hierarchy. Experimental reader-response studies could measure actual comprehension and theological perception among diverse audiences, shifting the focus from translator intention to receptor effect. Finally, large-scale corpus analyses

employing computational tools could validate the present findings across thousands of instances while capturing rarer metonymy types that necessarily fell outside the current qualitative sample.

Ultimately, this investigation has shown that the translation of Quranic metonymy in the 1930s was not a passive act of linguistic transfer but a sophisticated site of ideological and cognitive negotiation. By illuminating how sanctity, rationality, and exegetical responsibility were contested at the level of embodied contiguity, the study not only revises our historical understanding of a formative moment in Muslim intellectual encounter with the West but also equips contemporary scholarship with more precise instruments for analyzing how revelation continues to be mediated across linguistic, cultural, and theological boundaries.

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