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Translating Temporal Meaning in the Qur'an: Tense, *Aspect*, Pragmatic Force, and Context in Three English Translations

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Abstract

This article examines how Arabic verbal forms convey temporal reference and pragmatic force in three English translations of purposively selected Qur'anic verses. Using a qualitative, contrastive method, it compares the versions of Marmaduke Pickthall, Muhammad Taqi-ud-din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, and Ahmad and Dina Zidan. Twelve illustrative verse references are discussed, with particular attention to directive imperfects, performative perfects, particles that redirect temporal interpretation, perfect forms with future reference, and narrative tense shifts. The analysis distinguishes event time from the rhetorical perspective through which an event is presented. It argues that a translation may preserve temporal location while representing obligation, certainty, emphasis, or vividness differently; formal correspondence alone is therefore an insufficient measure of adequacy. On the basis of these examples, the article proposes an exploratory five-stage analytical heuristic: identify the verbal form and associated particles, establish the temporal domain from discourse, consult relevant interpretation where documented, identify pragmatic function, and select an English tense, aspectual, or modal construction accordingly. The framework offers a transparent procedure for evaluating temporal and pragmatic choices in Arabic–English Qur'anic translation and for designing larger, corpus-based studies.

Keywords: Qur'anic Translation, Arabic Tense & Aspect, Temporal Reference, Pragmatic Equivalence, Translation Shifts

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Introduction

Tense is one of the most persistent sources of difficulty in translation between Arabic and English because the two languages organize temporal reference through partially different grammatical resources. In Arabic, the traditional distinction between perfect and imperfect forms does not map neatly onto the larger inventory of English tense–aspect constructions. English makes extensive use of auxiliaries and combinations of tense and aspect, whereas Arabic frequently distributes temporal information across verb form, particles, adverbials, lexical material, and context. The resulting asymmetry becomes particularly consequential in Qur'anic translation, where a grammatical form may

simultaneously contribute to temporal reference, discourse organization, rhetorical emphasis, and pragmatic force. The Qur'an presents a particularly demanding case because its temporal system cannot be approached as though every verbal form had a single, context-independent temporal value. The present analysis from which this article is developed observes that the Qur'anic text contains both conventional and contextually shifted temporal reference. A perfect form may refer to a completed past event, but in appropriate contexts it may also evoke an event understood as certain to occur in the future. Likewise, an imperfect form may express present or future reference but may acquire past or gnomic readings through contextual and discourse factors. The translator therefore faces a problem of interpretation before facing a problem of lexical or grammatical substitution. (Abdul-Raof, 2001) The present article reformulates that problem for translation studies. Rather than treating differences among the three English versions simply as errors or stylistic preferences, it asks what kinds of temporal and pragmatic information are preserved, weakened, or redirected when an Arabic verbal form is rendered through an English tense or modal construction. The central claim is that temporal equivalence in Qur'anic translation is best understood as contextual and multidimensional: a successful rendering must account not only for when an event is located, but also for how the Qur'anic form presents that event and what communicative force the form contributes in context. The article has four objectives. First, it identifies the principal structural asymmetry between Arabic and English that creates difficulty in translating Qur'anic tense. Second, it examines how particles and contextual devices modify the temporal value of Arabic perfect and imperfect forms. Third, it analyzes selected cases in which the three translations use different English tense or modal choices. Fourth, it develops practical principles for translating Qur'anic temporal meaning without reducing it to mechanical tense correspondence. The study is deliberately source-oriented. The Qur'anic text is treated as the primary linguistic object, while exegetical works and discussions of reasons for revelation are used to clarify temporal and contextual interpretation. This approach follows the premise that translation of the Qur'an involves the interpretation and transfer of meaning rather than the replacement of the Arabic text itself. As Abdul-Raof (2001) explains, Qur'anic discourse combines syntactic, semantic, rhetorical, phonetic, and cultural features in a highly integrated texture (Abdul-Raof,

2001). The study is guided by the following research question: How do Pickthall, al-Hilali and Khan, and Zidan and Zidan represent the temporal, aspectual, pragmatic, and discourse functions of selected Qur'anic verbal constructions, and what forms of equivalence or shift are observable in their English choices?

1. Arabic and English Temporal Systems: A Contrastive Perspective

A useful starting point is the distinction between grammatical form and temporal reference. Arabic traditionally distinguishes two major verbal forms: the perfect, associated prototypically with a completed event, and the imperfect, associated prototypically with an

incomplete or non-completed event. English, by contrast, combines tense and aspect in a more elaborate system. The English verbal phrase can distinguish present and past morphologically and can construct perfect, progressive, and future-oriented meanings through auxiliaries and modal expressions. Consequently, a single Arabic form may require several possible English renderings depending on context. (Comrie, 1976, 1985; Ryding, 2005) The present analysis draws on the observation that temporal contrasts in Arabic are less systematically marked by verb forms alone. Temporal reference may be expressed through the interaction of the verb with particles, adverbials, auxiliary constructions, and contextual information. This point is particularly important for translation because an English translator may be tempted to select the nearest formal tense, even though the Arabic form may derive its actual temporal interpretation from elements outside the verb itself. (Ryding, 2005) The contrast is therefore not adequately represented as Arabic past versus English past, or Arabic present versus English present. The relevant mapping is better represented as a network in which Arabic perfect and imperfect forms enter different constructions and receive contextually determined interpretations. Particles such as /lam/, /lan/, /hatta/, /qad/, and /sa-/ or /sawfa/ can substantially alter the temporal domain of the verb. The Arabic form must thus be interpreted compositionally rather than in isolation. (Catford, 1965; Newmark, 1988). This distinction also explains why a formally literal translation can be semantically misleading. In Qur'anic discourse, tense may operate as a stylistic and rhetorical device. A shift from the expected temporal form can foreground certainty, immediacy, continuity, vividness, or emphasis. The translation problem is consequently one of functional equivalence: the translator must determine which dimensions of the source form are communicatively active in the particular context. (Baker, 1992; Hatim & Mason, 1990)

2. Method and tools

The analysis is based on a purposive selection of twelve Qur'anic verse references already discussed in the manuscript: Qur'an 2:228, 2:233, 2:183, 2:216, 3:170, 2:55, 5:24, 2:38, 76:11, 5:119, 6:27, and 2:255. These examples were selected because they illustrate identifiable construction-level problems relevant to the research question: directive force, performative or enduring prescription, particle-conditioned temporal reference, future

reference in reported speech, conditional futurity, perfect forms interpreted with future reference, and the interaction of tense with discourse perspective. The selection is purposive and illustrative, not statistically representative. The translation corpus comprises three English versions: Pickthall's The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an; al-Hilali and Khan's Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language; and Zidan and Zidan's The Glorious Qur'an: Text and Translation. The edition details currently available in the manuscript are retained in the references; verse numbers are used as locators because the manuscript does not consistently record page numbers for the editions.

The method is qualitative and contrastive. The unit of analysis is the Arabic verbal construction in its clause and discourse environment, rather than an isolated verb token. Each example is examined through five linked operations: (1) identify the Arabic verbal form and associated particles; (2) establish the temporal interpretation supported by the immediate clause and wider discourse; (3) consult exegetical interpretation where a specific source is identified and available; (4) describe the relevant aspectual, pragmatic, and discourse function; and (5) compare the English renderings for the dimensions preserved, made explicit, weakened, or redirected. The analysis does not assume that one English tense is intrinsically equivalent to one Arabic form, nor does it treat divergence from formal correspondence as an error without first considering context. The comparison concerns translation decisions and their linguistic consequences, not a global ranking of the three versions. No statistical tests or software-based frequency analysis are appropriate to this exploratory textual design. The study does not measure reader responses or infer translator intention. The present article presents a structured synthesis and an illustrative comparison; the analysis is presented as a structured synthesis and illustrative comparison.

3. Results and their discussion

3.1 Analytical categories and decision criteria

To make the comparison explicit, each example is assessed along four dimensions. Temporal location concerns the time at which the event or state is understood to hold. *Aspect*ual perspective concerns how the event is presented, including completion, continuation, or habituality. Pragmatic force concerns what the utterance accomplishes in context, such as establishing an obligation or presenting an outcome as certain. Discourse function concerns the contribution of the form to narrative progression, foregrounding, or the relation between a reported utterance and its reporting frame. These dimensions may overlap, but they should not be collapsed into a single judgment of whether an English verb is formally equivalent to an Arabic verb. The unit of analysis is not the isolated verb token. It is the verbal construction in its clause and discourse environment, including particles, temporal expressions, and the immediate narrative or argumentative frame. The Arabic form is first described without assuming that its prototypical temporal value is decisive. The English versions are then compared for the temporal relation they encode

and for any pragmatic effects that appear to be retained, made explicit, weakened, or left to inference. Where the translations differ, the analysis describes the trade-off rather than ranking the versions globally. (Hatim & Mason, 1990; Teich, 2003)

3.2. Scope of the evidence

Analytical decision rule and reporting. The comparison treats a translation choice as evidence of a temporal or pragmatic shift only when the wording can be related to the Arabic construction and its surrounding context. The analysis therefore distinguishes three

levels of claim. The first is grammatical description: the verbal form, particle, or construction visible in the Arabic text. The second is contextual interpretation: the temporal reading supported by the clause, discourse setting, and relevant exegetical discussion. The third is translation assessment: the extent to which an English rendering preserves, makes explicit, weakens, or redirects that reading. Keeping these levels separate helps prevent an interpretive proposal from being presented as though it were a grammatical fact. Where the evidence permits more than one reading, the discussion should acknowledge that range rather than force a single categorical answer. Likewise, the use of "loss" describes a dimension of meaning that is less available in the English wording; it does not, by itself, establish translator error or intention. This decision rule is consistent with the study's qualitative design and limits conclusions to the examples discussed. It also provides a replicable basis for future research: a larger study could apply the same categories to a defined corpus, report inclusion criteria, and compare annotations across independent analysts. The examples are purposively selected to illustrate recurrent configurations discussed in the present analysis; they are not a statistically representative sample of all Qur'anic verbal forms or of all English translations. The study therefore makes analytical rather than frequency-based claims. It does not infer translator intention from a wording choice, nor does it treat any one English version as a definitive benchmark. Claims about a translation's effect are framed as interpretations of the available wording in context. A larger corpus study could test whether the tendencies identified here recur systematically across additional verses and translations. One of the most significant findings concerns cases in which an apparently declarative temporal form carries an additional pragmatic force. Translation that reproduces the propositional content but ignores this force may preserve what happens in time while weakening what the utterance does in discourse.

3.3. Declarative Form and Directive Force

A similar issue occurs in Qur'an 2:233, /wal-wālidātu yurḍiʿna awlādahunna ḥawlayni kāmilayni/. The wording reported in the present comparison distinguishes Pickthall's "shall suckle" from al-Hilali and Khan's "shall give suck"; the Zidan rendering must be checked against the cited edition before a further exact quotation is inserted. The example demonstrates that an English modal construction may make the normative force more explicit than a bare present-tense rendering. It also illustrates why parallel quotations

should be checked against the specific editions rather than treated as interchangeable wording across translators.

A similar issue occurs in Qur'an 2:233, /wal-wālidātu yurḍiʿna awlādahunna ḥawlayni kāmilayni/, where the imperfect form is rendered by the three translators as "shall suckle." Here the English modal construction helps expose the normative force that a bare present-tense rendering could obscure. The case demonstrates that a translation of temporal form may need to recruit modality when the source construction encodes a rule rather than simple description.

3.4 Performative Perfects and Present English

Qur'an 2:183, /kutiba ʿalaykumu ṣ-ṣiyām/, provides a different configuration. The Arabic passive perfect /kutiba/ is rendered by the three translators in the present construction "is prescribed" or "is ordained." At the level of temporal reference, this is not a literal correspondence: Arabic perfect becomes English present. At the level of speech act, however, the choice is motivated. The utterance establishes an enduring divine prescription rather than reporting a merely past act of writing or prescribing. (Searle, 1979).

The present analysis further observes that the Arabic perfect in performative contexts can present an obligation as already established and therefore beyond hesitation. The English present successfully communicates the continuing validity of the prescription, but the particular rhetorical effect of the Arabic perfect is not necessarily reproduced in full. This illustrates an important distinction between semantic adequacy and pragmatic equivalence: a target construction may be communicatively appropriate while still leaving part of the source form's rhetorical profile less explicit. The same pattern appears in Qur'an 2:216, /kutiba ʿalaykumu l-qitāl/, and in other constructions involving /uḥilla/, /ḥurrimat/, and /aḥalla/. In such cases, English present or present-perfect forms may convey continuing validity, but the translator must first determine whether the Arabic perfect is functioning as a historical report, a performative establishment, or an assertion of an enduring rule.

3.5. Particles, Context, and Temporal Reinterpretation

Arabic particles provide a second major source of translation asymmetry. The Arabic imperfect is particularly dependent on accompanying elements for temporal interpretation. The examples discussed here include several recurring structures, including /lam/ + imperfect, /ḥattā/ + imperfect, /lan/ + imperfect, /ʾimmā/ + imperfect, /qad/ + imperfect, and /sa-/ or /sawfa/ + imperfect. These structures demonstrate that temporal reference cannot be recovered from the imperfect form alone.

In Qur'an 3:170, the imperfect /yalḥaqū/ occurs after /lam/, producing past-related negation. The English renderings reported in the three versions include present-perfect forms, which express non-occurrence up to the relevant reference point; this should not be described simply as an English simple past. The example demonstrates that the Arabic imperfect does not automatically correspond to an English present. The negative particle is part of the temporal construction and must be interpreted together with the verb.

In Qur'an 3:170, the imperfect /yalḥaqū/ occurs after /lam/, producing a past negative meaning. The three translations appropriately shift the English form into a past-related construction. The example demonstrates a central principle: the Arabic imperfect does not automatically correspond to an English present. The negative particle is a part of the temporal construction and must be interpreted together with the verb.

3.5.2. /ḥattā/ + Imperfect

In Qur'an 2:55, /lan nuʾmina laka ḥattā narā Allāha jahratan/, the imperfect /narā/ follows /ḥattā/ and receives future reference. The English versions use "till we see," which is structurally close to the Arabic but contextually future-oriented. The example shows that a translation can preserve the surface form while relying on English discourse interpretation to recover the intended temporal relation.

Qur'an 5:24 contains /lan nadkhulahā abadan/ within the quoted speech of the speakers, following a past reporting clause. Because the English versions retain direct speech, "will never enter" or "shall never enter" is appropriate relative to the quoted speakers' temporal standpoint; the past tense of the reporting verb does not require backshift inside the quotation. "Would never enter" would be suitable only if the quotation were recast as indirect or reported speech (see the distinction between direct and indirect speech in standard English grammar). The emphatic force of "never" should be attributed to the full construction, including /abadan/, rather than treated as a permanent-negation meaning carried by /lan/ in every context. This example therefore illustrates the importance of distinguishing the temporal viewpoint inside direct speech from the tense of its reporting frame.

The comparison should consequently preserve the quoted speakers' viewpoint when describing the English future forms. A future-in-the-past analysis is relevant only to an indirect-speech reformulation; it is not an improvement required by the past narrative frame in the translations as quoted.

that even a grammatically appropriate English future may not capture the full discourse perspective of the Arabic construction.

In Qur'an 2:38, the conditional/temporal construction introduced by /fa-immā/ places the event in a prospective discourse frame: "if/when guidance comes to you" (the exact English wording should be checked against each cited edition). Where a translation uses the English present simple in this environment, that form can have future reference because English commonly permits present morphology in conditional and temporal clauses referring to a future situation. Its use does not, by itself, establish that the event is scheduled or certain. The relevant question is whether the clause structure and discourse context support a future-oriented interpretation, not whether present morphology independently encodes futurity or certainty.

With /ʾimmā/ + imperfect, as in Qur'an 2:38, the Arabic construction introduces a future-oriented condition. The translations use either explicit future forms or the present simple, which in English can express scheduled or certain future events. The choice demonstrates that formal future marking is not always required for future reference. What matters is whether the target construction communicates the relevant temporal relation and its degree of certainty.

Qur'an 76:11 provides an example of Arabic perfect forms in a future-oriented eschatological context: /fa-waqāhumu Allāhu sharra dhālika l-yawmi wa laqqāhum naḍratan wa surūran/. The two verbs /waqāhum/ ("He will protect them") and /laqqāhum/ ("and will meet/reward them") are morphologically perfect forms in Arabic, while the surrounding reference to "that Day" places the events in the future. In the three English versions, the relevant contrast is between future-oriented renderings and renderings that use past or present-perfect morphology. The precise wording of each translator must be verified against the cited edition before quotation marks or a translator-by-translator tense label are assigned; the present analysis therefore confines its claim to the contrast in grammatical strategy and does not attribute an unverified form to an individual translator.

Perhaps the most consequential asymmetry concerns the use of the Arabic perfect for future events. The present analysis identifies Qur'an 76:11 as an important example: /fa-waqāhumu Allāhu sharra dhālika l-yawmi wa laqqāhum naḍratan wa surūran/. The verbs are morphologically perfect, yet the contextual reference is to a future Day. The three English versions use different combinations of future and perfect forms. Zidan uses future constructions, while Pickthall and al-Hilali and Khan use past or present-perfect patterns in related cases.

The temporal shift in Arabic is not merely a grammatical irregularity. In the interpretation presented in the contextual analysis, the perfect form can portray a future event as though it had already occurred, thereby foregrounding its certainty. This effect creates a conceptual difficulty for English because the ordinary English past cannot freely perform the same function in an actual, non-hypothetical future context. Translating the form simply as past would therefore risk misleading the English reader about temporal location; translating it simply as future may preserve temporal location while weakening the rhetorical presentation of certainty. This problem suggests that the translator should distinguish two questions: What time does the event refer to? And how does the Arabic

form present the event? In Qur'anic future- reference contexts, the first question may require an English future construction, while the second may require contextual compensation elsewhere in the clause or discourse. The English translator may not be able to reproduce the Arabic grammatical shift directly,

but can seek to preserve its communicative effect through lexical, modal, or discourse-level choices.

A further challenge arises when the same Arabic form permits more than one temporally defensible interpretation. Qur'an 5:119, /hādhā yawmun yanfaʿu ṣ-ṣādiqīna ṣidquhum/, illustrates this issue. In its immediate discourse, /hādhā yawmun/ ("This is a Day") occurs within the represented Judgment Day setting. The present form /yanfaʿu/ can therefore be understood as present relative to that represented scene. A broader gnomic or timeless interpretation should not be inferred from the English present form alone; it would require independent contextual or exegetical support. The translations reported in the manuscript use future "will profit," future "shall profit," and a present form "profiteth." These choices should be evaluated first against the local Judgment Day discourse rather than assumed to represent distinct near-future, remote-future, and gnomic readings.

This is not necessarily a failure of translation. A target-language expression may select a temporal perspective that is coherent with the represented discourse even when another rendering chooses a different grammatical form. The relevant question is whether the choice is compatible with the clause and its surrounding context. Exegetical sources may help establish a wider interpretive range, but no specific tafsir authority is attributed here because the original manuscript did not identify the editions or passages consulted.

This is not necessarily a failure of translation. A single target-language expression may legitimately select one interpretation from a source text that sustains several. The important issue is whether the translator has recognized the interpretive range before making the choice. Exegesis therefore functions here not as an optional supplement but as part of the interpretive environment in which tense is resolved.

3.8. Syntactic and Rhetorical Shifts

Another relevant pattern is the use of the imperfect in historical or narrative contexts. The historical present can increase vividness and foreground an event. In the examples discussed here, this possibility is treated as a discourse-level option rather than as a general tendency established across the Qur'an or across all three translations. An English historical present may sometimes provide a functional resource for representing narrative immediacy, but the suitability of that choice must be assessed case by case.

The comparison therefore asks whether the target construction reproduces a comparable discourse effect in the particular passage, not whether the two languages use identical tense forms.

concludes that English and Arabic historical presents can perform comparable stylistic functions. This suggests that not every tense shift requires compensation; in some cases, the target language has a resource that can reproduce the same discourse effect.

3.9. What the Three Translations Reveal

3.9.1. Distinguishing temporal and pragmatic outcomes

The examples in the preceding sections show why a single label such as "tense shift" is not sufficiently precise for translation analysis. In Qur'an 2:228, the comparison between "shall wait" and "must wait" concerns the degree and type of directive force made explicit in English, rather than a simple difference in temporal location. In Qur'an 2:183, by contrast, "is prescribed" presents a prescription as valid in the current normative order, while the Arabic perfect contributes to the presentation of the prescription as established. The two examples therefore involve different relationships between verbal form and pragmatic function. Treating them as instances of one undifferentiated shift would obscure the reason that the English constructions differ. The same distinction applies to perfect forms interpreted with future reference. In Qur'an 76:11, the future-oriented discourse setting constrains the temporal interpretation of forms that are morphologically perfect. A future English construction can guide readers toward the intended temporal domain, but the shift may reduce the rhetorical effect of presenting the event as already accomplished. The relevant comparison is thus two-dimensional: whether the target version places the event in the appropriate temporal domain, and whether it preserves the source form's perspective on the event. A rendering may succeed on the first dimension while only partially matching the second. This is not necessarily an error; it is a translation trade-off that should be described precisely. Particles provide a useful counterpoint because they show how temporal interpretation can be determined by the larger construction. With /lam/ + imperfect, as discussed in relation to Qur'an 3:170, the negative particle directs interpretation toward a past-related reading. With /ḥattā/ + imperfect, as in Qur'an 2:55, the event is interpreted as a prospective endpoint or condition. In such cases, an evaluator should not attribute the entire temporal value to the verb morphology. The construction-level account is more explanatory because it identifies the linguistic element responsible for constraining the interpretation and makes the translation decision easier to justify.

3.9.2. A practical evaluation protocol

For each example, the analyst can formulate three separate questions before evaluating the English versions. First, what temporal interpretation is supported by the clause and its discourse setting? The answer should be based on the Arabic construction as a whole, not on a one-to-one mapping between verbal forms. Second, what additional perspective or

pragmatic effect is plausibly active? Relevant possibilities in the present dataset include obligation, certainty, emphatic denial, continuity, and narrative vividness. Third, what does each English version lead a reader to infer, and is that inference compatible with the proposed interpretation? This sequence helps prevent a circular evaluation in which a translator's choice is treated as evidence for the very interpretation used to justify it. The protocol should also distinguish direct encoding from contextual inference. A modal auxiliary may directly express a relation that the Arabic context communicates through a

declarative form and its interpretive setting. An English present tense may communicate an enduring rule without reproducing the rhetorical presentation associated with an Arabic perfect. A future tense may establish the event's location but leave certainty to the surrounding discourse. These are different translation mechanisms, and naming them makes comparison more transparent. In a published analysis, the researcher should identify the linguistic evidence for each claim and avoid presenting an interpretive preference as though it were an unavoidable grammatical fact. Finally, the protocol makes room for ambiguity. Where a form allows more than one contextually defensible reading, the analyst should record the alternatives before assessing the translation. Qur'an 5:119 illustrates this issue because the temporal domain associated with "this Day" affects the interpretation of /yanfaʿu/. A version choosing "will profit" makes a future reading explicit; a present form can instead support a more general or gnomic interpretation. The comparison should ask whether the target choice is coherent with the surrounding discourse and interpretive tradition, not whether it reproduces every possible reading at once. This approach recognizes that translation entails decisions while still requiring those decisions to be evidence-based. The comparison of Pickthall, al-Hilali and Khan, and Zidan reveals recurring tendencies rather than a simple hierarchy of quality. Pickthall frequently retains formal or stylistic features through archaic English forms and present-tense constructions. Al-Hilali and Khan often make implicit modal or explanatory meanings more explicit, sometimes through "can," "shall," or parenthetical additions. Zidan frequently uses contemporary English forms, including future constructions and present perfects, to establish temporal relations. These tendencies can produce different trade-offs between formal proximity, explicitness, readability, and pragmatic force. For example, in Qur'an 2:255, /man dhā alladhī yashfaʿu ʿindahu illā bi-idhnihi/ is rendered by Al-Hilali and Khan and Zidan with "can," whereas Pickthall uses a present form closer to the Arabic surface structure. The present analysis interprets the interrogative as carrying an assertion of impossibility. The modal "can" makes the possibility dimension more explicit in English. The example illustrates how grammatical modality may serve as a functional counterpart of pragmatic meaning that is not overtly encoded in the Arabic verb form.

The comparison therefore supports a functional rather than mechanical conception of equivalence. A translation should not be judged only by whether the same tense label appears in the target language. It should be examined for whether temporal location, aspectual perspective, pragmatic force, discourse function, and relevant interpretive possibilities have been appropriately represented. (Nida, 1964; Nida & Taber, 1969)

The analysis proposes a five-stage analytical heuristic rather than a validated predictive model. The first stage is FORM: identify the Arabic perfect or imperfect and all grammatical particles associated with it. The second is CONTEXT: establish the temporal domain from the immediate clause, surrounding discourse, temporal adverbials, and narrative setting. The third is INTERPRETATION: consult identifiable exegetical explanations, where available, and determine whether more than one temporal reading is supported. The fourth is FUNCTION: determine whether the construction contributes only temporal reference or also certainty, obligation, warning, emphasis, continuity, vividness, or another pragmatic effect. The fifth is TRANSFER: select the English tense, aspect, modal, lexical item, or combination that best represents the dimensions of meaning active in that context. The sequence can be summarized as: Arabic form → contextual temporal domain → supported interpretive possibilities → pragmatic/discourse function → English realization. It is iterative: if the English form creates an unintended temporal implication, the translator should revisit the contextual and functional analysis. Some Arabic rhetorical effects may have no direct English grammatical counterpart, in which case compensation may be considered. Other mismatches may result from premature formal matching, such as translating an imperfect as present without examining /lam/ or /ḥattā/, or translating a perfect as past without checking whether the context establishes future reference.

The analysis supports a practical model consisting of five stages. The first is FORM: identify the Arabic perfect or imperfect and all grammatical particles associated with it. The second is CONTEXT: establish the temporal domain from the immediate clause, surrounding discourse, temporal adverbials, and narrative setting. The third is INTERPRETATION: consult relevant exegetical explanations and, where necessary, the circumstances of revelation to determine whether more than one temporal reading is sustained. The fourth is FUNCTION: determine whether the tense contributes only temporal reference or also certainty, obligation, warning, emphasis, continuity, vividness, or another pragmatic effect. The fifth is TRANSFER: select the English tense, aspect, modal, lexical item, or combination that best reproduces the active dimensions of meaning. This model can be represented as follows: Arabic form → contextual temporal domain → interpretive possibilities → pragmatic/rhetorical function → English realization. The sequence is deliberately non-linear at the level of interpretation: if the English form creates an unintended temporal implication, the translator should return to the contextual and functional stages rather than forcing the Arabic form into a predetermined English tense. The model also provides a useful way to distinguish unavoidable loss from avoidable loss. Some Arabic rhetorical effects have no direct English grammatical counterpart. In such cases, full formal equivalence may be impossible, and compensation may be necessary. Other losses result from premature formal matching—for example, translating an imperfect as present without examining the effect of /lam/ or /ḥattā/, or translating a perfect as past without checking whether the context establishes future reference. The latter losses are potentially avoidable through contextual analysis.

3.10. Discussion

The findings have implications beyond Qur'anic translation. They reinforce a broader translation-studies principle: grammatical categories are language-specific resources rather than universal containers with identical boundaries. *Tense*, aspect, modality, and discourse function may overlap differently across languages. A translation-oriented analysis must therefore move from category matching to functional interpretation. The Qur'anic data make this particularly visible because the source text frequently exploits the rhetorical potential of temporal forms. The perfect and imperfect are not merely devices for locating events before, during, or after speech time. They can shape the reader's perspective on an event. A future event presented as completed may be understood as certain; an imperfect form in a narrative can create immediacy; a declarative form can perform a directive function; and a temporal particle can redirect an apparently present form toward the past or future. The findings also support the view that context is not an external supplement to grammar. In the cases examined, context participates in determining what the grammatical form means. Temporal adverbials such as "the Day" or "the Day of Judgment," narrative frames, and lexical references to historical figures can constrain the temporal interpretation of a verb. Exegetical traditions can further identify whether a construction is descriptive, directive, emphatic, or interpretively open. For translation practice, the implication is that tense should be analyzed at discourse level. Translators working from Arabic into English should resist the assumption that the English tense nearest to the Arabic morphological form is necessarily the most faithful choice. Equally, they should avoid replacing every Arabic perfect with an English future or every imperfect with an English present. Both strategies can obscure the context-sensitive nature of Qur'anic temporal reference.

For translator training, the same procedure can be used as a guided annotation exercise. Students can compare alternative English renderings, state the temporal interpretation each encourages, and explain whether modality or discourse-level compensation is needed. The exercise shifts discussion away from a binary literal-versus-free opposition and toward explicit evidence about meaning, context, and reader inference. The evidential limits of the comparison should remain visible in any interpretation of these findings. The analysis is qualitative, the examples are selected rather than exhaustive, and the three translations differ in style as well as in their treatment of temporal meaning. It is therefore not possible to infer a general ranking of the versions or to quantify the frequency of a strategy across the Qur'an. Nor can the present comparison determine how all readers actually interpret each rendering; that would require reader-response evidence. The claims made here are consequently limited to the linguistic and pragmatic possibilities of the cited formulations in context. These limits do not weaken the value of the framework. They specify what the current analysis can establish and identify the additional corpus and reception evidence needed to test its wider applicability.

Implications for translation assessment

The proposed distinctions have practical consequences for the evaluation of translated scripture. A comparison should not begin by counting how often a source perfect is rendered by a past form or an imperfect by a present form. Such counts would treat morphological similarity as the principal criterion and could misclassify contextually motivated shifts as errors. A more informative assessment records the construction, the contextually supported temporal reading, the likely discourse function, and the target-language strategy. The resulting description makes visible why two translations may differ even when both are defensible, and why a formally close rendering may occasionally be less effective in context. The framework also encourages evaluators to distinguish explicitness from equivalence. A translator may introduce an English modal such as "must" or "can" to make an inferred directive or possibility relation overt. This can help readers recover a pragmatic effect, but it can also narrow the interpretive range or make an implication appear more grammatically explicit than it is in Arabic. Conversely, a less explicit English construction may preserve the openness of the source while requiring readers to infer more from context. The question is therefore not whether explicitation is always desirable, but whether the chosen level of explicitness is warranted by the construction and its interpretive setting.

A cautious model for future research

The five-stage procedure proposed here can be operationalized in future work by preparing a verse-level annotation sheet. For each item, the researcher could record the Arabic form, associated particles, discourse setting, proposed temporal domain, exegetical basis for the reading, pragmatic or rhetorical function, each English rendering, and the principal translation shift. A second analyst could independently annotate a subset of examples, after which disagreements would be resolved through stated criteria. Such a procedure would make the analysis more transparent and allow a larger study to report how often particular strategies occur. It would also help separate observations grounded directly in grammatical form from interpretations that depend more heavily on exegesis or discourse context. Any extension of the present study should preserve the distinction between linguistic description and theological adjudication. The purpose of comparing translations is to explain how temporal and pragmatic meanings are represented, not to settle doctrinal questions or to replace exegetical scholarship. Where more than one temporal reading is supported, the analysis should document the interpretive alternatives and explain the consequences of the English choice. This restraint is especially important in Qur'anic translation, where a small grammatical decision can affect how readers understand obligation, promise, warning, or the certainty of a future event.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the translation of Qur'anic tense is fundamentally a problem of contextual temporal interpretation rather than formal tense substitution. Arabic perfect

and imperfect forms possess broad temporal potentialities, and their interpretation is shaped by particles, lexical items, syntax, discourse context, exegetical interpretation, and rhetorical shifts. English provides different grammatical and modal resources, which means that equivalence must often be constructed functionally rather than reproduced formally. Three conclusions are particularly important. First, Arabic temporal reference is distributed across a system larger than the verb form itself. Second, Qur'anic tense may carry pragmatic and rhetorical meanings that are not recoverable from tense labels alone. Third, the translator's task is to identify the temporal and communicative function active in context and then select the English construction capable of carrying that function as closely as the target language permits. The comparison of the three English translations demonstrates that different solutions can each preserve different dimensions of the source meaning. One translation may retain formal proximity, another may make an implicit modal meaning more explicit, and another may produce a more idiomatic temporal construction. Rather than assuming a single mechanical equivalent, translation analysis should therefore identify the trade-offs involved in each choice. The article consequently proposes a context-first approach to Qur'anic tense translation. Form should be the starting point, not the endpoint: the Arabic form must be interpreted through its construction and context, its temporal domain must be established, its pragmatic and rhetorical function must be identified, and only then should an English realization be selected. This approach provides a more systematic account of why temporal meaning shifts in translation and offers a practical framework for future corpus-based research on Arabic– English temporal equivalence.

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Ethical approval

This study consists of a qualitative analysis of published Qur'anic texts, English translations, and scholarly literature. It involved no human participants, animal subjects, or identifiable personal data. Ethical approval and informed consent were therefore not applicable to the research described.

Author contributions

Rehab Kamal, as the sole author, was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, methodological design, selection of textual examples, comparative analysis, interpretation, and manuscript drafting and revision. The author takes responsibility for the content and integrity of the work.

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Data Availability Statement

The study draws on published Qur'anic verses and the English translations by Marmaduke Pickthall, Muhammad Taqi-ud-din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, and Ahmad and Dina Zidan, as identified in the reference list. The verse references and analyses supporting the study are presented in the article. Appendix A provides a summary mapping of the recurring translation problems examined.

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Appendix A. Analytical Mapping of Recurring Translation Problems

Arabic configuration	**Primary temporal issue**	**Potential pragmatic/rhetorical effect**	**Translation consideration**
/lam/ + imperfect	Past reference	Temporal shift encoded by particle	Do not translate the imperfect as present in isolation.
/ḥattā/ + imperfect	Future reference	Event projected as a condition or endpoint	Use the clause and discourse context to establish the prospective endpoint.
/lan/ + imperfect	Future negation within direct speech	Emphatic denial in the quoted speakers' temporal perspective; emphasis is associated with the full construction including /abadan/	Retain will/shall in direct quotation; use would only if the utterance is recast as indirect speech.
Perfect in performative contexts	Present/continuing validity	Obligation or established rule	English present or modal construction may be more functional than past.
Perfect with future reference	Future event	Certainty and emphasis	Future English may preserve temporal location but require compensation for rhetorical force.
Imperfect in narrative contexts	Past/historical reference	Vividness and foregrounding	Historical present may sometimes provide functional equivalence.
Declarative form with directive force	Normative reference	Command/obligation	Consider English modality such as shall/must where warranted by context.