

LANGUAGE AND REVELATION: IBN TAYMIYYA ON TRANSLATION

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Abstract. The article reconstructs the understanding of translation developed by the influential Muslim theologian and jurist Ibn Taymiyya (1263 – 1328) through analyses of his concepts of *naql*, *tarjama* and *ta'rīb*. It argues that, for him, translation functions not merely as linguistic transfer but as an epistemological and theological process shaped by revelation, transmission, and authority. The article examines Ibn Taymiyya's critique of the Abbasid translation movement and his reflections on the translatability of the Qur'ān, presenting translation as a form of mediation and negotiation between competing intellectual and religious traditions.

Keywords: Ibn Taymiyya; translation studies; *naql*; *tarjama*; *ta'rīb*; untranslatability; Abbasid translation movement

Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse and organize Ibn Taymiyya's reflections on translation across his works and to reconstruct a coherent account of his position towards linguistic meaning, transmission, and authority.

At first glance the link between Ibn Taymiyyah and translation may appear unusual. Although he did not formulate a systematic theory of translation, his reflections across a wide range of his works reveal a consistent intellectual approach to these questions. Living centuries after the classical Abbasid translation movement in Baghdad (8th – 10th centuries), he was nevertheless deeply concerned with problems of interpretation, linguistic mediation and conceptual transfer. Nor was he entirely removed from multilingual encounters: his political engagements brought him into direct contact with rulers who did not speak Arabic, while his scholarly work drew him into sustained reflection on the boundaries between languages.

The historian Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) reports that during the visit of the Damascene delegation to the Ilkhanid ruler Ghazan Khan, Ibn Taymiyya addressed the ruler through an interpreter (*qāla li-tarjumānihi*). Ibn Taymiyya himself notes that upon hearing Hebrew spoken, he was able to understand a considerable part of it because of its proximity to Arabic (Ibn Kathīr 1998, p. 182; Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 110).

These episodes are not incidental: they point to a lived experience of what it means to communicate across languages. It is out of this personal experience that Ibn Taymiyya developed his broader theoretical positions on translation, transmission, and authority. To examine his understanding of linguistic meaning and conceptual transfer within its broader intellectual context, this article draws on Alasdair MacIntyre's thoughts on tradition, rationality, and translation, alongside Naoki Sakai's work on translation and cultural mediation.

I.

The intersection between tradition and translation is nowhere more evident than in Ibn Taymiyya's reaction to the legacy of the Abbasid translation movement. He argues that the translation activities carried out in the period between the 8th and 10th centuries, facilitated the infiltration of concepts and methods later adopted by rational theologians and philosophers who proclaimed Aristotelian logic as a universal instrument of knowledge.

Ibn Taymiyya positions himself as a major critic of Greek logic and its claims to universality. Consequently, his critique targets the entire translation movement for creating the linguistic and conceptual framework that made Greek logic possible in Arabic. For him, these translations provided a "fertile ground" for doctrines associated with those whom he describes as the "ignorant mystics and speculative theologians" and labels as heretics and hypocrites thriving in "an ignorant (*jāhiliyya*) environment which is far from knowledge and faith" (Ibn Taymiyya 1993, p. 104).

He points out that the translations introduced new linguistic and stylistic models that altered the language itself and made Greek concepts operative within Arabic intellectual discourse. In his critique, Ibn Taymiyya aligns himself with the Sunni traditionalist position, reviving the arguments of the famous 10th century debate (*munāẓara*) between the grammarian Abū Saʿd al-Sīrāfī and his opponent, the Christian philosopher and translator Abū Bishr Mattā (Ibn Taymiyya 1993, p. 100)¹.

Like as-Sīrāfī, Ibn Taymiyya argues that Aristotelian logic is conventional and deeply rooted in Greek language, thereby denying its claim to be a universal method of acquiring knowledge (Ibn Taymiyya 1993, p. 100). He maintains that what the Arabic philosophers accepted as a universal tool of reason was in fact an epistemological system shaped by and embedded in a foreign tradition.

Ibn Taymiyya emphasizes the historical contingency of this influence, noting that logic "was formulated by Aristotle three hundred years before Christ" and "only appeared in Islam when Greek books were translated into Arabic (*'uribat al-kutub al-rūmiyya*) during the reign of al-Ma'mūn" (Ibn Taymiyya 1993, p. 162; Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 9, p. 241). This historical argument allows Ibn Taymiyya to challenge the universal claims of Arabic logicians and philosophers by presenting logic as historically and culturally conditioned, deeply rooted in the structures of Greek grammar.

Within Alasdair MacIntyre's framework of "tradition-constituted" rationality (MacIntyre 1988, pp. 9 – 10), the translations of the Abbasid era can be understood not simply as a neutral linguistic operation but as the transmission of an entire conceptual system. MacIntyre argues that when the translators render the concepts of one tradition into another language, they are often forced to adopt the "naming scheme" of the receiving tradition to make these concepts intelligible.

This framework helps illuminate Ibn Taymiyya's critique of the Abbasid translators. In his view, the issue was not merely the translation of words, but the reinterpretation of Islamic concepts through Greek logical and metaphysical categories. By translating and explaining Islamic concepts through this foreign vocabulary, the translators introduced rational standards external to revelation and the Arabic linguistic tradition. In doing so, they forced the Arabic language itself to adapt to the vocabulary of Greek philosophy, in order to make the Islamic revelation acceptable to those committed to Greek logic. As a result, and in a dynamic that MacIntyre identifies as inherent to translation between incommensurable traditions (MacIntyre 1988, p. 371)², the Prophetic message began to appear "defective" and irrational unless validated by these foreign principles and categories.

From this perspective, Ibn Taymiyya's critique can be read as a reaction against the subordination of revelation to foreign epistemological standards. In his view, the encounter between Greek logical categories and the Islamic linguistic tradition created a situation in which revelation had to justify itself through conceptual criteria external to its own framework. Islamic concepts were thus made to appear deficient or irrational precisely because they were being evaluated according to standards derived from another intellectual and linguistic tradition. In this context, Ibn Taymiyya contrasts Greek logical principles with the divinely revealed "Balance" (*mīzān*) (Ibn Taymiyya 1993, pp. 101 – 102)³, arguing that human beings do not require Greek logic in order to validate knowledge, since God Himself has already provided the proper criteria of validation through revelation. This was what Ibn Taymiyya regarded as a failure of the Abbasid translation movement: the replacement of the "Balance" revealed by God with a human-made, foreign logic.

Ibn Taymiyya's hostility toward the Abbasid patronage of translation, particularly under the caliph al-Ma'mūn (813 – 833), is reflected in his own writings as well as in the accounts of his contemporaries, who portray him as holding the caliph responsible for introducing foreign philosophical sciences into the Muslim community⁴. The Abbasid translation movement⁵ was driven in part by the belief that foreign sciences and methods could be translated into Arabic and employed in the service of Islamic theology, intellectual inquiry, and debates with other religions. Such an understanding of translation presupposed that knowledge could be transferred across languages and traditions through a largely transparent linguistic process. In this sense, the translation movement may be interpreted through what

Naoki Sakai describes as a “regime of translation” (Sakai 2010, pp. 25 – 34)⁶, in which distinct conceptual systems are represented as mutually commensurable, and translation appears as a rational linguistic transfer between them. Yet for Ibn Taymiyya, the consequences of this process were not merely linguistic but amounted to a serious reconfiguration of the epistemological foundations of the Muslim community grounded in the Arabic language.

Central to his argument is his understanding of the fundamental connection between linguistic practice and human mind. He insists that “the habit of using a language has a clear and strong effect on one’s intellect, character and religion” (Ibn Taymiyya 1999b, vol. 1, p. 527). From this perspective, he suggests that the adoption of the Aristotelian logic and Greek philosophy represented not simply the introduction of foreign concepts into Arabic, but the displacement of the rational standards through which revelation and truth were understood. Since linguistic habits shape intellectual and religious dispositions, for Ibn Taymiyya this process also entailed a form of cultural and epistemological “resemblance to the non-Arabs (*al-tashabbuh bi-l-’a’ājim*)” (Ibn Taymiyya 1999b, vol. 1, p. 526).

In Ibn Taymiyya’s view, Arabic language provides the essential framework through which thought is structured to align with the revelation. For him, Arabic functions as a carrier of the ethos and the moral legacy of the *Salaf* – the Prophet’s companions and their followers. Thus, by speaking Arabic, Muslims do not merely communicate, they actively cultivate resemblance to the mindset and ethical values of the early generations. As he argues, linguistic practice fosters resemblance (*mushābaha*) to the first generations and “resembling them increases one’s intellect, religion, and character” (Ibn Taymiyya 1999b, vol. 1, p. 527).

Therefore, Ibn Taymiyya interprets the linguistic transformations in Arabic linked to the Abbasid translation movement as part of a broader epistemological crisis that undermined the Islamic tradition by distancing it from its linguistic, rational and moral foundations and introducing foreign philosophical doctrines (Ibn Taymiyya 1993, p. XIII).

However, Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of the Abbasid translation movement does not amount to a rejection of translation as such. Rather, he develops a far more nuanced position in which the legitimacy of translation is determined both by the mode of the transfer and by the nature of the knowledge being conveyed.

II.

Although Ibn Taymiyya never developed a systematic theory of translation, certain Arabic terms recurrently appear in his discussions of translational practices across different contexts and works. Those terms are *naql*, *tarjama* and *ta’rīb*. They do not merely stand for translation, but reflect different modes of validation of knowledge, interpretation and mediation.

***Naql* – Translation as Transmission**

The Arabic root *n-q-l* denotes the act of moving or transferring something from one place to another. In modern Arabic, the word still commonly refers to “transport” or “transfer”. The term was also used in the context of translation prior to Ibn Taymiyya⁷.

Like earlier Arabic authors, Ibn Taymiyya occasionally employs *naql* in the broader sense of transferring meaning between languages⁸. Discussing translation, he describes one of its forms as purely lexical transfer in which one expression (*lafẓ*) is replaced by another synonymous one to convey its referential meaning. Translation in this sense functions as a transfer (*naql*) of meaning across different linguistic forms through approximate equivalence between expressions.

Yet Ibn Taymiyya simultaneously emphasizes that the equivalence between languages is never complete, since linguistic communities structure and express meanings differently. Certain expressions may overlap semantically across languages, “such as *tannūr* (oven) and the names that remain identical across languages” (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 6, p. 63), while others remain deeply embedded within the conceptual and cultural structures of a particular linguistic tradition.

Nevertheless, the concept of *naql* acquires its primary significance in a theological context. In Ibn Taymiyya’s writings, and particularly in the title of his major work “Averting the Conflict between Reason and Revelation” (*Dar’ Ta’āruḍ al-‘Aql wa-l-Naql*), *naql* refers to the authentic transmitted revelation – *naql ṣaḥīḥ*, namely the Qur’ān and prophetic *ḥadīth* (El-Tobgui 2019, p. 336).

For Ibn Taymiyya, *naql* does not merely signify transfer in a neutral sense, but the authentication of transmitted knowledge through reliable chain of authorities – *isnād*. In this sense, *naql* functions as a religious and epistemological filter through which the authoritative meaning of revelation is preserved and verified. Ibn Taymiyya most often invokes the term in discussions of the Torah and the Bible where he compares their transmission to that of the Qur’ān (Shamma 2022, pp. 141 – 155). Here, *naql* functions as a criterion for evaluating the authenticity of the religious texts by examining the way they were transmitted.

The concept of *naql* determines Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of the Qur’ān as revelation inseparable from its revealed and transmitted linguistic form. Unlike the Torah, which according to him was transmitted to Moses primarily as written scripture, the Qur’ān was transmitted orally “through recitation, not writing (*tilāwatan lā kitābatan*)”, and preserved through continuous transmission in both wording and meaning. The continuity of transmission is grounded in the principle of *tawātur*⁹ which means recurrent mass transmission through successive generations in a manner that renders deliberate fabrication impossible and guarantees the authenticity of the revealed text. The reliability of the mode of transmission is therefore essential for preserving both the revealed linguistic form and the meaning, keeping them as close as possible to the original moment when the revelation was expressed as a historic speech act.

Other religious scriptures, however, fail to satisfy these conditions of transmission. Ibn Taymiyya criticizes the impossibility of verifying all translated copies of the Torah and the Gospels against a single original, as well as the discrepancies and omissions that emerged across different translations and textual traditions (Shamma 2022, p. 143)¹⁰. For this reason, earlier scriptures must be evaluated in light of the Qur'ānic revelation and the prophetic Tradition (*Sunna*), whose transmission, in Ibn Taymiyya's view, remains certain and uninterrupted.

Within this framework, the two uses of *naql*, first, as linguistic transfer, and second, as the authoritative transmission of religious knowledge, remain conceptually distinct, yet they intersect when religious knowledge is transmitted into Arabic. In such a case, the reliability of the translation becomes one of the conditions for establishing the authority of the transmitted text. Ibn Taymiyya makes this connection explicit when he states that what is transmitted from the prophets can serve as proof only once its *isnād* and *matn* are known, its transmission is established as authentic, its translation into another language is shown to be sound, and the intended meaning is correctly identified¹¹.

Translation involving religious texts therefore cannot be accepted independently of questions of reliability and authority. Ibn Taymiyya consequently emphasizes the importance of trustworthy translators (*al-thiqāt*) in discussions concerning the translation of earlier scriptures into Arabic:

It is possible to read from a copy translated into Arabic by trustworthy individuals in Arabic script and wording, and through such trustworthy translators – whether Muslims or those among us who know their script – come to know the contents of their scriptures (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, pp. 111 – 112).

The translator here occupies a role structurally analogous to that of a trustworthy transmitter within the broader structure of *naql*, since the reliability of both forms of mediation is essential to establishing the authority of transmitted religious knowledge. Translation, in this sense, becomes subordinated to the preservation and verification of authoritative meaning.

Tarjama – Translation as Explanation

In modern Arabic the term *tarjama* refers almost exclusively to translation from one language to another. In early Islamic usage, *tarjama* was employed alongside *naql* in discussions concerning the transmission of texts between languages. In pre-modern Islamic literature, the term also frequently designated a biographical genre devoted to the lives of scholars, poets, mystics, *ḥadīth* transmitters, and other influential figures¹².

In Ibn Taymiyya's writings, however, *tarjama* acquires a more specific function. Unlike *naql*, which primarily concerns the reliable transmission of revelation, *tarjama* refers more directly to the explanation and clarification of meaning for those who do not fully understand the original linguistic expression.

Ibn Taymiyya's use of *tarjama* preserves the dual semantic life of the term within the Islamic tradition. On the one hand, *tarjama* signifies translation from one language into another. On the other, it retains its association with the presentation and explanation of an intellectual and religious life. Just as *tarjama* as biography presents the living intellectual and spiritual legacy of a scholar, translation in this sense becomes the transmission and clarification of the living meaning of the text, rendering not merely its words but the understanding that animates them.

Ibn Taymiyya employs the term *tarjama* most frequently when discussing the translation of the Qur'ān into other languages. In a clearly apologetic mode, he argues that a complete and literal translation of the revelation is impossible. For him, the Qur'ān constitutes an organic inseparable unity of revealed wording (*alfāz*) and meanings (*ma'ānī*). Revelation is therefore not merely a linguistic expression detached from context but is embedded within concrete verbal conventions (*'urf qawlī*) and social and practical customs (*'urf 'amalī*) that shape the understanding of the revealed message. Taken together, these elements constitute the linguistic, cultural and social horizon of the Qur'ān¹³.

Consequently, its translation is viewed as impossible in the sense that it cannot satisfy the criterion of complete functional equivalence. No translation into another language can reproduce the same ritual and epistemological functions performed by the Arabic original. Perfect translation would require perfect equivalence in both wording and meaning while preserving the revelatory force of the original speech act, and Ibn Taymiyya considers that unattainable. Nevertheless, he permits the explanatory translation aimed at clarifying the intended Qur'ānic meanings (Hoover 2018).

This explanatory function of *tarjama* also extends outward toward communicating Qur'ānic meanings to non-Arabic speaking communities. Ibn Taymiyya justifies the need for interlingual *tarjama* through legal reasoning, invoking the juridical principle that "whatever is necessary for the fulfilment of an obligation becomes itself obligatory."¹⁴

The point here is that when God obligates something upon His servants, and the fulfilment of that obligation requires learning a certain kind of knowledge, then learning that knowledge itself becomes obligatory. Thus, if a person's knowledge of what God has commanded depends upon understanding the meaning of speech expressed in a language other than his own, and he is capable either of learning the meaning of those expressions that are not in his language or of knowing their translation (tarjama) in his own language, then learning that becomes obligatory for him.

If a letter were sent from one king to another in a language different from his own, he would seek someone to translate the intention of the sending king. It would not be permissible for him to say: "You did not send to me someone who speaks to me in my own language", so long as he is capable of understanding the intended meaning through translation. So how could such a thing be said concerning the Lord of the Worlds? (Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, vol. 2, p. 105)

Since God revealed His message in Arabic while addressing humanity as a whole, the transmission of revelation to non-Arabs becomes a necessary extension of the prophetic mission itself. Translation thus acquires the status of a collective obligation (*farḍ kifāya*) aimed at communicating divine truth beyond Arabic speaking community.

Yet this process simultaneously produces a profound asymmetry whereby translation from Arabic into foreign languages is encouraged to communicate revelation universally and to expand the reach of the Muslim community. At the same time, translation into Arabic remains carefully regulated and filtered to protect the foundations of Islam from distortion and foreign intrusion.

This asymmetry also reveals why *tarjama*, for Ibn Taymiyya, cannot be reduced to lexical substitution. Rather, it designates a deeper process, which for him represents the second and more significant mode of translation: “translation of meaning and its clarification” (*tarjamat al-ma’nā wa bayānuhu*) (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, pp. 115 – 117). This form of translation aims at making the intended meaning of the text intelligible to the listener. Ibn Taymiyya compares this process to explaining an Arabic text to an Arabic speaker who hears its words yet fails to grasp its meanings. Translation therefore operates not only between different languages, but also within the same language whenever understanding breaks down, transforming *tarjama* into an interpretive and pedagogical act in the service of religious obligation.

Ibn Taymiyya explicitly states that translation may require “giving examples and analogies” in order to “represent the meaning to the addressee and make him understand it”, adding that such explanatory additions form “part of the complete translation” (*min tamām al-tarjama*).

It is known that the community is commanded to convey the Qur’ān in both its wording and meaning, just as the Messenger was commanded to do so. The communication of God’s message can only occur in this way. Conveying it to non-Arabs may therefore require translation for them, and it should be translated for them as far as possible (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 116).

Ibn Taymiyya nevertheless insists that such complete translation remains extremely difficult to achieve. He argues that even most Muslims, including many religious scholars, fail fully to translate, interpret and clarify the Qur’ān adequately. If this task proves difficult for Muslims, whose intellect he considers superior, and given that he regards the Arabic language as more comprehensive, then it becomes even more difficult for non-Muslims unfamiliar with the subtleties of the Arabic revelation.

This difficulty becomes particularly acute when translation concerns meanings that Ibn Taymiyya regards as false (*al-ma’ānī al-bā’ila*) (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 117) and doctrinally corrupted. False meanings, he argues, resist adequate representation because they possess no true equivalent in the reality and the revelation. Translation therefore cannot function independently from the distinction between truth and falsehood, since explanatory translation requires the ability to discern and clarify both.

This becomes even more pronounced in Ibn Taymiyya's engagement with philosophers and speculative theologians who employ familiar Arabic expressions while attaching to them foreign metaphysical meanings. In such cases, the problem no longer concerns the transfer of expressions between languages, but the translation of meanings concealed beneath apparently common expressions. Discussing philosophical terminology, Ibn Taymiyya reproduces the claim that "even if the expression is Arabic, the meaning still requires translation" (*wa in kāna al-lafẓ 'arabiyyan fa-lā budda min tarjamat al-ma'nā*) (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 118).

He illustrates this through notions such as *'aql* (reason) and *naḥs* (soul), which Arabic philosophers interpret through the Neoplatonic metaphysical terminology of separate intellects, celestial souls and emanation. Ibn Taymiyya demonstrates what he considers to be "the best translation¹⁵" of these terms. He explains and reconstructs the meanings that Arabic philosophers attach to them, before comparing those meanings with the text of revelation, which for him constitutes the ultimate criterion for evaluating their validity. Although he ultimately rejects these doctrines, he nevertheless treats the clarification of intended meaning as necessary form of *tarjama*. In his view, what Arabic philosophers here try to do is to harmonize philosophy and revelation by equating philosophical categories such as the separate intellects and celestial souls with the angels mentioned by the prophets. That is why he insists that translation cannot proceed through the apparent lexical or semantic similarity, since concepts that seem comparable may in fact belong to fundamentally different metaphysics and epistemologies.

Through this example, Ibn Taymiyya demonstrates how *tarjama* functions on multiple linguistic and semantic levels simultaneously: as explanation and clarification; as an epistemological instrument for attaining knowledge; as a process for verifying meanings and evaluating their truthfulness; and finally, as a means of exposing the conceptual incommensurability between distinct intellectual traditions.

***Ta'rīb* – Translation as Arabization**

Ta'rīb is the third term employed by Ibn Taymiyya to denote translation. Literally meaning "arabization", it refers more directly to the incorporation of foreign expressions into the Arabic language. The emphasis here falls predominantly on the assimilation of foreign linguistic and stylistic forms. Ibn Taymiyya employs the term most frequently in relation to the scientific texts translated during the Abbasid period. Although he criticizes the rendering of foreign metaphysical and theological concepts into Arabic, he does not reject the translation of practical sciences whose value depends primarily upon their utility.

When the Sabian [i.e. pagan] philosopher mentions a statement of the ancient Sabian [pagan] philosophers that was arabized and translated ('urriba wa turjima) into Arabic – he presents it either in its original form or in the modified form developed by later philosophers through additions, omissions, extension or

specification, rejection of part of it and bringing other meanings from outside it, and so on. Then it is acceptable only if he mentioned something which is not related to religion, such as questions of medicine or purely arithmetical topics, and the books of those who learned from them, such as Muḥammad ibn Zakarīya al-Rāzī and Ibn Sīnā and other heretical physicians, whose purpose was the utilization of the heritage of the disbelievers and the hypocrites in the affairs of this world. [...] So, taking medical knowledge from their books is like requesting guidance from the disbeliever on how to get somewhere or seeking his medical advice. In fact, it is better; since their books were not written for any specific Muslim individual, so there is no question of betrayal. Nor is there any need for betrayal on their part. Rather, it is simply a matter of benefiting from their heritage, just as one benefits from clothing, dwellings, farmlands, weapons, and the like (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 114; Shamma 2022, p. 151).

In accordance with a broader traditionalist attitude toward the “foreign sciences”, Ibn Taymiyya argues that such knowledge may be accepted insofar as it serves practical benefit and does not compromise the religious and moral values of the *umma*. He clarifies that the introduction of new terminology into Arabic is not in itself problematic, and that the early generations of Muslims did not condemn translations merely for introducing foreign words into their language. Rather, what they rejected were the metaphysical meanings attached to such terms. Ibn Taymiyya illustrates this through terms such as *jawhar* (“substance”), which he describes as an arabized (*mu’arrab*) rather than purely Arabic expression. Although such terms may be integrated into Arabic usage, he insists that their philosophical meanings remain conventional and terminological rather than rooted in the language of revelation itself. In this respect, Ibn Taymiyya engages in a process already theorized by al-Fārābī, who described the historical formation of philosophical terminology through the transfer and adaptation of a translated name (*‘ism manqūl*) into new linguistic environments¹⁶.

Consequently, *ta’rīb* represents the most pragmatically neutral mode in Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of translation. Unlike *naql*, it does not primarily function as a mechanism for the verification and preservation of revelation, and unlike *tarjama*, it does not necessarily aim at interpretative clarification. Its legitimacy depends instead on the practical utility of the translated knowledge and the extent to which it can be assimilated into Arabic without undermining the epistemological authority of revelation.

Conclusion

Through the notions of *naql*, *tarjama* and *ta’rīb*, Ibn Taymiyya develops distinct yet interconnected modes of translation. *Naql* frames the translational process within the logic of transmission, verification and epistemological authority, where

the legitimacy of translated meaning depends on reliable chains of transmission and conformity with revelation. *Tarjama* functions as explanatory and interpretative mediation aimed at clarifying intended meanings, whether across languages or within the Islamic tradition itself. *Ta'rib*, by contrast, designates the pragmatic incorporation of foreign expressions and forms of knowledge into Arabic, while simultaneously regulating the epistemological boundaries of such assimilation.

Ibn Taymiyya's reflections on translation create a sophisticated framework for understanding the relationship between language, revelation, and Islamic tradition. His critique of the Abbasid translation movement offers an important insight into the epistemic system of Islam and presents translation as a practice capable of challenging tradition, generating internal tensions, and provoking forms of resistance within it. In doing so, Ibn Taymiyya rejects the understanding that translation bridged the linguistic gap between Greek and Arabic and created a historical continuity between "the sciences of the Ancients" and the rational Islamic theology. Translation, rather, opens a space for mediation between competing traditions structured by different metaphysical assumptions, social practices, and conceptions of truth.

Ibn Taymiyya's thoughts on translation ultimately reach one of the central problems of translation theory: the problem of untranslatability. The issue for him is not merely whether words can be communicated from one language to another, but whether meanings embedded within distinct religious and cultural traditions can ever be fully translated and understood outside their original linguistic, ritual and epistemological contexts. Thus, revelation becomes the ultimate test case and the foundational problem of translation itself. Because the Qur'ān constitutes an organic unity of wording, meaning, ritual and lived practice, its complete translation becomes impossible if understood as full functional equivalence.

Ibn Taymiyya thus implicitly distinguishes between linguistic and cultural translatability. While meanings may be approximated and clarified through explanation, the full conceptual, ritual, and epistemological horizon of revelation cannot be entirely reproduced outside its original Arabic form. His understanding of translation therefore shifts attention away from language alone towards the broader structures of meaning, authority, and practice within which language operates.

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NOTES

1. See the text of the debate in Arabic in: At-Tawhīdī 1929, pp. 68–87; and the English translation in Margolius 1905, pp. 111 – 129.
2. MacIntyre argues that when concepts from one tradition are translated into the vocabulary of another, the original framework inevitably appears *defective* and in need of external validation: *The scheme of naming in A, that is, will have to be explained in terms of its differences from naming in B, but so to explain will be to exhibit A's scheme of naming as lacking in justification, as in some ways defective. To understand the translation-plus-explanation into B will entail for those whose language is B rejecting the beliefs so explained.*
3. Ibn Taymiyya 1993, pp. 101 – 102, paragraph 16: *They may argue: "We are not saying that people need the expressions of the logicians, but they do need the principles by which the sciences are validated". We respond: there is no doubt that the unknown can be found out only by means of that which is known, and people need to validate what they do not know of the basis of what they do know. This is one of the validating criteria (mīzān) that God revealed when He said: 'God it is who sent down the Book with the truth and the Balance (mīzān). Such [criteria] exist in this and other religious communities who have never heard of the logic of the Greeks. It is thus established that people do not need the logical principles which the logicians have expressed in their own language [...] Logic is not needed to validate meanings, nor is it fit to be used for this purpose. This is the most fallacious of claims'.*
4. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Al-Ṣafadī (d. 1363) attributes to him the following statement: *I do not think that God will neglect al-Ma'mūn. He will certainly hold him accountable for what he did to this nation by introducing those philosophical sciences among its people.* Translated in Shamma 2022, p. 150. Ibn Taymiyya holds al-Ma'mūn responsible for the calamities that befell the Muslim community (*umma*), arguing that as the "light of prophecy" began to fade, the translation of Roman, Persian and Indian philosophical texts into Arabic – especially those sought from Byzantine lands during al-Ma'mūn reign, introduced blameworthy innovations (*bid'a*) that corrupted the original purity of the faith. See Shamma 2022, p. 155.
5. On the Abbasid understanding of the utility of Greek sciences and the broader intellectual and political motivations behind the translation movement, see Gutas 1998.
6. Naoki Sakai uses the notion of a "regime of translation" to describe an understanding of translation that presupposes transparent communication between already constituted linguistic communities. He contrasts this representation of translation with its actual practice, understood as a historically situated negotiation between incommensurable traditions. See Sakai 2010.
7. In Ibn an-Nadīm's tenth century catalogue *Al-Fihrist*, one of the important historical sources on the translation movement in Baghdad, derivatives of the root *n-q-l* appear in reference to translators and acts of translation. Ibn an-Nadīm, n. d.
8. *The first degree [of translation] is translation of the mere expression, such as rendering (transferring) one expression through a synonymous expression (tarjamat*

- mujarrad al-lafẓ mithl naql al-lafẓ bi-lafẓ murādīf*). So, in this type of translation, you want to know that what is meant by this word amongst one group of people is the same as that which is meant by the same word amongst another group of people. This is useful knowledge, as many people tie the meaning to the word, so then it cannot be stripped from both words at the same time. See Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 115; Shamma 2022, p. 152.
9. See Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, vol. 2, p. 93: *Thus, knowledge that those ancient copies themselves were not altered does not prevent alteration from occurring in some later translations or in some copies made from them. There is no way to know that they agree with one another while existing in seventy-two languages. This is unlike the Qur'ān, which is in the language of the Arabs and written in the script of the Arabs. For it is possible to know the agreement of the copies that exist of it, and it is preserved in the hearts (al-ṣudūr) and does not depend solely on preservation in books. Therefore, it has been transmitted (manqūl) through tawātūr, both in wording and in writing*". On tawātūr as epistemological category see: El-Tobgui 2018; Weiss 1985.
 10. *I myself have seen in the Psalms a number of copies translated into Arabic whose differences are practically unconstrained, and that which is seen to have been exchanged and altered cannot be trusted. I have also seen some copies of the Torah in Arabic in the translation of a group of the People of the Book [the Jews and Christians] have lied greatly about. How could one gather all the copies in the 72 languages and compare the copies in each of the languages side- by- side to show that there is amongst them the original copy taken from the Apostles then compare between the copies in all the languages?* In: Shamma 2022, p. 143, translated by Adam Gargani.
 11. See Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, vol. 3, p. 238: [...] *what they transmit from the prophets can only serve as proof once its isnād [chain of transmitters] and matn [textual content] are known, such that it is established to have been transmitted through authentic transmission (naql ṣaḥīḥ), and that its translation from Hebrew into another language – such as Greek, Arabic, or Syriac – is a sound translation (tarjama ṣaḥīḥa), and furthermore that is known that this was indeed the meaning they intended.*
 12. See "Tarjama" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (EI²), vol. 10, pp. 225 – 235; On the etymology and semantic development of the term, see Tageldin 2024.
 13. On Ibn Taymiyya's understanding of the contextual and communicative dimensions of the Qur'ān and the Sunna, see El-Tobgui 2019, pp. 193 – 208; Ali 2000, pp. 87 – 130.
 14. *Mā lā yatimmu l-wājib illā bihi fa huwa wājib.* Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, vol. 2, p. 105.
 15. See Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 4, p. 118: *Those, then, are their 'intellects' and 'souls'. And what we have presented here is among the best translations of the meaning of 'intellect' and 'soul', yet most of them [the philosophers] are unable even to achieve that.* Here Ibn Taymiyya explains that, although these expres-

sions are Arabic, the philosophers employ them within an imported metaphysical framework shaped by Neoplatonic cosmology and theory of emanation. Thus, *'aql* no longer signifies merely “reason” in a common or Qur’anic sense, but refers to separate immaterial intellects detached from matter, while *nafs* stands for cosmic souls governing celestial bodies.

16. See Ibn Taymiyya 1999a, vol. 5, pp. 11 – 12: *As for language, the term “jawhar” [substance] is not part of pure Arabic (al-‘arabiyya al-‘arbā’). For this reason, it is not known in the pure speech of the Arabs. Rather, it is arabized (mu‘arrab). [...] Thus, it belongs to arabized Arabic, not to pure Arabic speech, like the terms sijjīl and istabraq and other such arabized expressions. Moreover, this word does not occur in the Qur’ān. Nevertheless, once arabized, its meaning in the language referred to the well-known jewel. But calling that which subsists by itself or occupies space a ‘substance’ is merely a matter of terminology (‘amr ‘iṣ ilāhī). It does not belong to the ordinary linguistic usage, common convention, or the language of the revelation”.* Here Ibn Taymiyya employs the same example discussed by the philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 950) in relation to the historical formation of specialized philosophical terminology. Al-Fārābī describes this process demonstrating how ordinary expressions become part of the philosophical terminology. See Zimmermann 1981, paragraph 49, pp. 228–229.

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