

## *Original Paper*

# Lexical Meaning Translation of the Root Word in the Holy

## Qur'an; the Word "KATABA" an Example

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Received: September 19, 2020 Accepted: September 30, 2020 Online Published: October 19, 2020  
doi:10.22158/wjer.v7n4p30 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjer.v7n4p30>

### **Abstract**

*This study aims at investigating the translation of the lexical meaning of the root word verb in the Holy Quran. A relatively old and a contemporary translations of the meaning of the Holy Quran are employed to investigate the meaning of the word verb "KATABA". These are George Sale's and King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran's translations of its meaning. The word appears eight times in six chapters ("suras" in Arabic) in the Holy Quran. The two translations give six synonyms for the word through the eight different contexts. The study finds that understanding the context, environment, and reason of revelation guide the translator find the proper equivalent of the Holy Quran word. It is also found that translating the Holy Quran with its miraculous and high linguistic style is not easy. Similarly, translating a word isolated out of its context will turn into a literal distorted text. Furthermore, it is also found that using footnotes and explanations is inevitable.*

### **Keywords**

*holy Quran, translation, meaning, interpretation, context*

### **1. Introduction**

Close studies of the holy Quran have turned to be a necessity rather than a mere scholarly issue that would appear in research works. The holy Quran is not only a book to be recited and used in worship rituals. It plays a great role among Moslems as it provides the canon of their faith as well as the textbook of ritual and the principles of their civil law (Sale, n.d). This ascertains the importance of a well understanding of the Quran word. The word example which this paper investigates is a word that reflects the concept of writing, an act that words and thoughts are reserved in. If the base form of verb

words in English is usually the simple present, it is the so called simple past in Arabic. Therefore, the root word subject of investigation in this paper is “kataba” (its base form in English is “write”) excluded from all its derivations texted in the holy Quran as each derived word needs a specific investigation in its context.

## 2. Research Procedure and Method

With reference to the index book of the words of the holy Quran prepared by Abdulbaqi (1986) there are 320 lexical words related to the root word “kataba” scattered in most of the holy Quran 114 chapters, i.e., “sura(s)” plural of “sura” in Arabic, in the holy Quran. The verb word “kataba” appears eight times in six chapters of the holy Quran: (chapters 2, 5, 6-twice, 9, 58-twice, and 59).

Investigating the translation of the meaning of the Arabic word “kataba”, two sources will be adopted. The first is an old one, may be of the oldest in this regard, George Sale’s “The Koran Translated into English from the Original Arabic”, and the second, a relatively new, may be among the most recent, by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, “Translation of the Meanings of The Noble Qur’an in the English Language”, authorized and printed by King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the holy Qur’an in Madina, Saudi Arabia (KFCPHQ).

## 3. The Texts Body

The text of the context where the word appears in the verses of the holy Quran is transcribed, followed by the two translations of the meaning mentioned above. Sale’s translation is given first, and King Fahd Complex’s (KFCPHQ) follows.

- *Wabtaghoo ma kataba Allahulakum.* (chapter 2, the Cow; verse: 187) Translation of the meaning is: and earnestly desire that which God **ordain**.

seek that which Allah has **ordained** for you (offspring).

- *Yaqawmudkhululardhalmuqddasatallatikataba Allahulakum* (chapter 5, the Table; verse: 21)

O my people, enter the holy land, which God hath **decreed** you.

O my people! Enter the holy land (Palestine) which Allah has **assigned** to you.

- *Kataba ‘alanafseherrahmah.* (chapter 6, the Cattle; verse: 12)

He hath **prescribed** unto himself mercy.

He has **prescribed** Mercy for Himself.

- *Faqsalamun ‘alaikumKatabarabbukum ‘alanafseherrahmah.* (chapter 6, the Cattle; verse: 54)

say, Peace *be* upon you. Your Lord hath **prescribed** unto himself mercy.

say, ‘Salamun “Alaikum” (peace be on you); your Lord has **written (prescribed)** Mercy for Himself.

- *Qullanyuseebanaila ma kataba Allahulana* (chapter 9, the Repentance; verse: 51)

Say, nothing shall befall us, but what God hath **decreed** for us:

Say: “Nothing shall ever happen to us except what Allah has **ordained** for us”

- *Kataba Allah ulaaghlibanna awrusuliinna Allaha qawiunaziz.* (chapter 58, the Woman who Disputed; verse: 21)

God hath **written**, verily I will prevail, and my apostles: for God is strong and mighty.

Allah has **decreed**: “verily, it is I and My Messengers who shall be the victorious.” Verily, Allah is All-Powerful, All-Mighty.

- *Ulaikakataba fi quloobihim ulimanawaaiyadahumberoohenmenh* (chapter 58, the Woman who Disputed; verse: 22)

In the hearts of these hath God **written** faith; and he hath strengthened them with his spirit.

For such He has **written** faith in their hearts, and strengthened them with Ruh (proofs, light and true guidance) from Himself.

- *Walawla an kataba Allahu ‘alaih emuljala’ aala’ athabahum fiddunya* (chapter 59, the Emigration (by Sale), and the Gathering (by KFCPHQ); verse: 3)

And if God had not **doomed** them to banishment, he had surely punished them in this world;

And had it not been that Allah had **decreed** exile for them, He would certainly have punished them in this world;

#### 4. Discussion

The meaning of the word “kataba” mentioned in all those eight positions in the holy Quran only ranges among six vocabularies by the two translations. These words which the two translations see them as possible synonyms of the word “kataba” are: ordained, decreed, assigned, prescribed, written, and doomed. In fact it is the context which states the selected word in the two translations, as well as their interpretations and reason of revelation. Hatim and Mason (1997) stress the importance of context in determining the appropriate meaning. The table below shows the meaning of the word “kataba” in the chapters and verses as given by the two translations. It also shows where the two translations agree on the same meaning or choose different ones. They use the same meaning “ordain” in verse 187, chapter 2, the Cow. Since Sale’s is the oldest, it uses archaic English “ordainth”, while KFCPHQ uses the past tense of the verb, “ordained”. They also agree on the same meaning of the word in verse 12, chapter 6, the Cattle, using the word “prescribed”. They nearly use the same meaning in the same chapter with verse 54. Here KFCPHQ uses the literal meaning “written” and immediately explains it using the bracketed word (prescribed), a word used by Sale too. Using the word “prescribed” by the two translations comes like the medicine a physician prescribes to the patient. It is mercy which Allah Almighty prescribes to all believers, mankind and everything. Rahman and Raheem are two Arabic names of Allah (God) which carry the meaning of mercy as described in chapter 2, verse 163 “*la ilaha illa huwa ArRahmanur Raheem*” (There is no god but Him, He is the most gracious, the most merciful). But the first goes to the mercy that Allah gives to all mankind and everything, while the other means the mercy that He only gives to the believers (Al-Sha’arawi, n.d., cited in El-Omari, 2009). Because the word “ArRahman” carries this special meaning of mercy that engulfs all mankind,

animals, plants, and everything live and non-live, El-Omari (1990) believes that it is better left in its Arabic form and an explanation might be given in a footnote, as the meaning of mercy it conveys would never be truly disclosed by using any non-Arabic synonym. The two translations also use the same meaning for the word in verse 22, chapter 58, the Woman who Disputed. They use the literal meaning of the word “kataba” (written). This verse draws a clear dividing line between those who believe in Allah and the Hereafter and those who do not. It calls upon the believers not to make any friendly relationship with those who oppose Allah and His Messenger even though they are their fathers, sons, brothers or close relatives. This is why the situation needs a real writing onto the hearts of the believers. In the same chapter 58, verse 21, Sale also uses the literal meaning as Allah confirms His and Messengers’ victory over the disbelievers. KFCPHQ uses “decreed” which means: order given by a ruler or authority and having the force of law, according to Hornby et al. (2000) Oxford dictionary. In verse 21, chapter 5, the Table, Sale gives the word “decreed” translating the meaning of “kataba”. The speaker here is Allah Almighty (God) Who has the power and ruling force, in the tongue of Prophet Moses, peace be upon him (p.b.u.h.) to approach the land, whilst KFCPHQ chooses the word “assigned”. According to Hornby (ibid), it means “give for use or enjoyment, or as a share or part in a distribution of work, duty, etc.”. The two words, “decreed and ordained” are respectively used as meanings of the word “kataba” by the two translations in verse 21, chapter 9, the Repentance. In the last one of the eight verses subject of investigation in this research paper (verse 3, chapter 59, the Emigration by Sale, and the Gathering by KFCPHQ) where the word “kataba” is mentioned, the first uses “doomed” and the latter uses “decreed”. The lexical meaning of “doomed” is “condemn somebody to some fate to do something” (ibid). This chapter is revealed when a Jewish tribe (Banu Nadheer) in Madinah (the second holiest city after Makkah for Moslems) conspire to kill the Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon Him, by dropping a big rock on Him while sitting next to a wall asking for their help to pay the blood-money of two men killed by one of His companions. The conspiracy is immediately revealed to Him, resulting in driving them out of Madinah forever (Shamsuddin, 2002, p. 171). The word “doomed” used by Sale discloses the meanings and interpretations the word “kataba” conveys, and the reason of revealing the whole chapter and this verse in specific. Banu Nadheer are condemned to their fate of departing Madina and later the whole of Arabia forever.

**Table 1. Frequency and Meaning of “Kataba” in Chapters and Verses of the Holy Quran**

Chapter, No. and Title	Verse No.	George Sale	KFCPHQ
2, the Cow	187	Ordainth	Ordained
5, the Table	21	Decreed	Assigned
6, the Cattle	12	Prescribed	Prescribed
6, the Cattle	54	Prescribed	written (prescribed)

9, the Repentance;	51	Decreed	Ordained
58, the Woman who Disputed	21	written	Decreed
58, the Woman who Disputed	22	Written	Written
59, the Emigration (by Sale), and the Gathering (by KFCPHQ)	3	Doomed	Decreed

## 5. Findings

Translating sacred and holy texts has always been problematic. The study agrees with other researchers who state that the Holy Quran cannot be literally translated because Arabic words often have more than one literal meaning, not to mention their figurative meanings (Alhaj, 2015, p. 53). A translator of the Holy Quran finds difficulty because of its literary nature (ibid, p. 55). This paper discussed the meaning of a word verb “KATABA” (write) which two translations of the meaning of the Holy Quran had given. The two translations are examples of the earliest and latest efforts in this regard. The study found that the same word verb has been given different meanings and understandings usually according to the context it came in. The two translations agreed on the same meaning in four cases but chose different synonyms for the other four. The two translation adopted in the study give the word verb “KATABA” six different synonyms: ordained, decreed, assigned, prescribed, written, and doomed. Isolating a Quran word out of its context will render it to its literal or lexical meaning. The literal or lexical meaning of the word “KATABA”, subject of investigation in this research, merely means “wrote” which has been used only once as an equivalent of “KATABA” among the eight contexts mentioned in the Holy Quran by the two translations. It is one word, one part of speech (verb), one morpheme, one syllable, three phonemes only, but carries all those meanings and understandings in only two efforts of translation, not to mention the big bulk of other endeavors in this regard, though. This research found that ‘context’ means the syntactic, grammatical, and semantic features, as well as the interpretations of the scholars of the Holy Quran and the reason of the verse revelation as reported by the Prophet Mohammad p.b.u.h. It was also found that old and recent translations of the Quran word could agree on the same meaning and understanding. However, giving different word form does not necessarily mean completely different meaning, as all chosen words are nearly synonyms in some way or another, since all translation efforts rely on interpretations of the Quran word understood by Quran interpretation scholars (Tafseer). That is why the two translations give six synonyms for one word verb. More and more synonyms could be given if more translations were investigated.

## 6. Recommendations

In light of the study findings, it is strongly recommended that a Quran word is studied and translated in context and never stripped out of the environment it is revealed in. Views of Islamic and Quran scholars are to be highly consulted and considered. This task is preferably undertaken and given to

authorized committees. In many cases, interpreting the Quran word is not done word for word by most interpreters. One word is often given many interpretations which makes the work of translators very hard and leaves them helpless before the decision of what meanings to take and others to abandon. Bearing in mind the importance of the Holy Quran in the life of Muslims, especially the non-Arabic speaking, and its miraculous nature, conveying most of the meanings in its expressions and verses turns to be a necessity. This makes the employing of explanations and footnotes very inevitable. With the new technologies and advancement in pursuing the previous Islamic and Quran scholarly works and inventions of sophisticated printing and typing methods, achieving a satisfactory understanding of the Quran word becomes an in-hand prospect.

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