

Research Article

Decoding Pragmatic Force: A Cross-Linguistic Analysis of *Istifham Taqriri* in Juz 'Amma Translations

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Abstract

This study examines the pragmatic function of *istifhām taqrīrī* (rhetorical interrogatives) in Juz 'Amma of the Qur'an and its representation in English translations. Unlike ordinary interrogatives that seek information, *istifhām taqrīrī* serves as a rhetorical device to affirm truths, reinforce meaning, and prompt implicit acknowledgment (*iqrār*) from the audience. Despite its importance, systematic studies on this form, particularly from a pragmatic and translation perspective, remain limited. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach using library research. The primary data consist of Qur'anic verses from Juz 'Amma, while secondary data are derived from classical works of *balāghah* and relevant scholarly studies. Data are analyzed through content analysis using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data

display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that *istifhām taqrīrī* primarily functions as *taqrīr* (affirmation) and *ta'kīd al-ḥaqīqah* (emphasis of truth), while functions such as *tasliyah* appear contextually. However, English translations often reduce rhetorical interrogatives into neutral questions or declarative statements, resulting in pragmatic loss and weakened persuasive impact. Therefore, a pragmatic-functional translation approach is needed.

Keywords: *Istifhām Taqrīrī*, Qur'anic Discourse, Pragmatics, Speech act Theory, Translation Studies.

INTRODUCTION

In Quranic discourse, *Istifham* (interrogative sentences) does not always function to seek information. As highlighted by (Jalaludin Al-Suyuthi, 2008, p. 205) In *Al-Itqān*, many interrogative forms serve rhetorical purposes, such as *Taqrīrī* (affirmation), where the question is posed not to obtain an answer but to emphasize a truth that is already evident. Classical Arabic rhetoric thus treats *Istifham* not merely as a grammatical device but as a *balaghī* instrument for *taubikh* (reproof), *tašdīd* (intensification), and *taqrīr* (confirmation), thereby enhancing the Qur'an's persuasive and admonitory power. Recent studies confirm that *Istifham* within Qur'anic discourse frequently operates as a rhetorical device rather than a neutral information-seeking sentence, reinforcing the need to analyze its pragmatic force in both the Arabic original and its translations (Abdukhakim Rakhimov, 2026, p. 6; Muhammad Arfan Gul & Rafique Ahmed, 2024, p. 5)

Nevertheless, systematic analyses specifically focused on *Istifham Taqriri* in Juz 'Amma—the most frequently read and widely translated section of the Qur'an—remain limited. In translation studies, Abdul-Raof (Abdul-Raof, 2013, p. 118) argues that the texture of the Qur'an is unique and often loses its “pragmatic force” when translated literally into non-Semitic languages such as English, because the source and target languages differ in grammatical structure, cultural connotations, and pragmatic conventions. An analysis of the Qur'an's rhetorical questions in various major English translations (e.g., Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, Hilali-Khan, Abdel Haleem) reveals that translators frequently normalize WH-questions into yes/no questions or even declarative statements, thereby transforming rhetorical questions into genuine information-seeking sentences and weakening their functions of affirmation, warning, or emphasis (Ismael Mousa, 2023, p. 63). Najjar's (Ibrahim Najjar, 2024, p. 25) Thematic study on rhetorical questions translated into English and Maitieg et al.'s (Abubaker Maitieg et al., 2023, p. 120) Research on pragmatic equivalence in Qur'anic translation further demonstrates that pragmatic shifts diminish the Qur'an's dialogic and persuasive impact in English. From a broader translation perspective, Baker (2018: 120) emphasizes the concept of pragmatic equivalence and encourages analysts to consider not only semantic accuracy but also the impact on readers in the target language.

Given these previous works, this study positions itself at the intersection of classical *balaghah* (Jalaludin Al-Suyuthi, 2008, p. 205), studies of Qur'anic translation (Abdul-Raof, 2013, p. 118), and translation pragmatics (Baker, 2011, p.

120). By focusing specifically on the *Istifham Taqriri* in Juz 'Amma, this study aims to: (1) classify the pragmatic functions of the *Istifham Taqriri* in Juz 'Amma; (2) identify the pragmatic strengths and weaknesses in various selected English translations; and (3) propose a framework for evaluating pragmatic equivalence specifically for the Qur'an's rhetorical questions. Therefore, this study contributes to three fields: balaghah by clarifying the pragmatic role of *Istifham Taqriri*, Qur'anic translation studies by highlighting systematic pragmatic losses in translations of Juz 'Amma, and translation pragmatics by applying and refining the concept of pragmatic equivalence to a concrete corpus of the Qur'an.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on an in-depth understanding, where the researcher seeks to systematically and factually describe the phenomena (Maman Rachman, 2006). The approach used is library research, as the object of the study consists of written texts that require interpretation and analysis of meaning in the Arabic language and the Qur'an. (Rizqi Fajar Pringgar & Bambang Sujatmiko, 2020).

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data are derived from the Qur'an, specifically focusing on Juz 30. The secondary data are obtained from classical books of balāghah (Arabic rhetoric) as well as scholarly journals relevant to the research topic.

The data analysis techniques used are content analysis and descriptive qualitative analysis, which involve systematically describing the data. In addition, content analysis is applied to examine Qur'anic verses containing meanings of *istifhām* (interrogative forms). In the analysis process, the researcher also refers to the interactive analysis model proposed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing carried out systematically. (*Content Analysis Method and Examples* | Columbia Public Health, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Etymologically, *istifhām* is derived from the root فهم-يفهم-فهما (fahima-yafhamufahman), which denotes the cognitive process involving the qalb (heart). Imam Sibawayhi emphasizes that this knowledge is a synergy between the intuitive (heart) and rational (mind) aspects. The morphological transformation into *fi'il al-mazīd* through the addition of the prefix *al-sudasi* (ا س ت) conveys the semantic meaning of *al-thalab* (request). Thus, linguistically, *istifhām* is not merely a "question," but a "demand for understanding" (*thalab al-fahm*). This aligns with the postulate of al-Zarkashi's *istifhām* as an instrument for seeking understanding of the unknown (*majhul*) reality (Al-Zarkashī, 1988, p. 238).

However, to dissect the complexity of *istifhām* in the sacred text, this classical definition needs to be integrated with John Searle's Speech Act Theory (John Searle, 1969, p. 180). Searle classifies certain illocutionary acts as assertive

illocutionary acts that operate on collective presuppositions. In this context, *istifhām* in the Qur'an often does not aim to fill an information gap, but rather functions as a pragmatic force of amplification.

Mechanically, this interrogative style of language leverages the audience's prior knowledge to create a pragmatic pressure far stronger than that of standard declarative structures. It is this integration between the morphological dimension of *al-thalab* (request) and Searle's pragmatic illocutionary force that is key to understanding how the verses of the Qur'an activate the theological consciousness of its readers. This phenomenon is clearly reflected in the following verses:

1. Surah Al-Fil 105:1

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ ﴿١﴾

Surah Al-Fil 105:1 begins with: "Alam tarā kayfa fa'ala rabbuka bi-aṣḥābi-l-fil?" (Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the people of the Elephant?). This negative interrogative form, *alam tarā*, is not seeking information, but rather an *istifham taqriri*—a rhetorical question for *taqrīr* (affirmation), *ta'zīm* (glorification), and *tadhkīr* (warning). Al-Suyuti classifies the phrase *tarā kayfa* as the most effective form of rhetorical questioning for well-known historical events. (Jalaludin Al-Suyuthi, 2008, p. 212)

Ibn Kathir explains that this verse refers to the destruction of Abraham's army, which attacked the Ka'bah with elephants and was destroyed by the Abābil birds (105:3–4) (Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, 2003/1999, p. 510). The verse evokes the collective memory of the Quraysh regarding the miraculous protection of the House of God.

- a. Analysis: Divine *istifham taqrīrī* functions as *taqrīr* (affirmation), *ta'zīm* (glorification), and *tadhkīr* (warning) regarding the destruction of the People of the Elephant (Jalaludin Al-Suyuthi, 2008, p. 223).
- b. Locution: "Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the people of the Elephant?"
- c. Illocution: *Taqrīr* (assertion), *ta'zīm ilāhī* (divine glorification), *tadhkīr* (reminder).
- d. Perlocution: To evoke Quraysh's collective memory and affirm divine protection of the Ka'bah (Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, 2003/1999, p. 610).
- e. Pragmatic loss: appears the shift of illocutionary force, where the original *istifhām taqrīrī*—intended as *taqrīr* (assertion), *ta'zīm* (glorification), and *tadhkīr* (reminder)—is reduced in translation to a surface-level question, weakening its function as a firm affirmation and reminder of Allah's past action. It also occurs in the loss of rhetorical effect, as the Arabic interrogative form that powerfully evokes awe and reflection is flattened in translation, making the expression less forceful in conveying divine greatness and the gravity of the event. Additionally, pragmatic loss is seen in implicature and cultural context, where the verse's implicit appeal to the shared memory of Quraysh and its role in affirming divine protection of the Ka'bah are not fully conveyed, thereby reducing its intended psychological and historical impact on the audience.

2. Surah Al-Inshirah 94: 1

أَلَمْ نَشْرَحْ لَكَ صَدْرَكَ ﴿١﴾

Surah Al-Inshirah opens with the expression: "Alam nashrah laka şadrak" (Have We not expanded your chest (O Prophet)?). This verse employs an interrogative form not to seek an actual response, but to affirm the blessings that Allah has bestowed upon the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (Abdullah Hamid, 2004HG, p. 52). In the exegetical context, this verse functions as *tasliyah* (consolation) for the Prophet amid the challenges, ridicule, and hardships he faced during his mission. As explained by Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, this surah was revealed to strengthen the Prophet and his followers in the face of opposition from the polytheists (Nur Zidni Lutfia, 2019). The phrase "expanding the chest" (*sharḥ al-şadr*) refers to granting guidance, inner peace, and a sense of openness to embrace Islam and the Qur'an. Through this expansion, the Prophet is no longer burdened by constriction or distress, but instead experiences ease and readiness in carrying out righteous deeds (*Tafsir Surat Al-Inşirah - IslamHouse.Com*, n.d.). From a rhetorical (balāghah) perspective, this verse utilizes *istifhām taqrīrī*, a form of interrogation intended to affirm and establish a fact. The use of the interrogative hamzah followed by negation (لَمْ) does not imply denial; rather, it serves to emphasize and confirm the truth of the statement that follows (Taufiq Furqan Hasyimi, 2026, pp. 1-17).

- a. Analysis: Divine *istifham taqriri* functions as *tasliyah* (consolation), affirming *sharḥ al-şadr* (chest expansion) as prophetic empowerment (Jalaludin Al-Suyuthi, 2008, p. 198)
- b. Locution: "Have We not expanded your chest (O Prophet)?" (*Surah As-Sharh (The Opening Forth) | English*, 2022)
- c. Illocution: *Tasliyah ilāhiyyah* (divine consolation), *taqrir* (assertion).
- d. Perlocution: to relieve the tightness in his chest and increase his motivation in conveying the message (*da'wah*) (Nur Zidni Lutfia, 2019).
- e. Pragmatic loss appears in the shift of illocutionary force, where the original *istifhām taqriri* in "Alam nashrah laka şadrak" functions as *tasliyah* (divine consolation) and affirmation. Still, in translation it may be perceived as a simple question, thereby weakening its consoling and assertive force. It also involves loss of rhetorical effect, as the gentle, reassuring tone embedded in the Arabic structure is not fully conveyed, resulting in a less emotionally powerful and comforting expression. Additionally, pragmatic loss is seen in implicature and spiritual context, where the implicit meaning of prophetic empowerment (*sharḥ al-şadr*) and divine support is not entirely captured, reducing the verse's intended psychological and motivational impact.

3. Surah At-Tin (95):8

أَلَيْسَ اللَّهُ بِأَحْكَمِ الْحَاكِمِينَ ﴿٨﴾

The verse "Alaysa Allāhu bi-aḥkami al-ḥākimīn" (Is not Allah the most just of all judges?) is the final verse of Surah At-Tin. This verse affirms that Allah is the wisest and most just of all judges, particularly in relation to the establishment of

the Day of Judgment as the Day of Recompense. Implicitly, it rejects the notion that human beings will be left without accountability (*Surat At-Tin Ayat 8 Arab, Latin, Terjemah dan Tafsir, TafsirWeb, 2018a*). Rather, Allah will judge all His servants with perfect justice, rewarding good with good and requiting evil accordingly. From a rhetorical (*balāghah*) perspective, this verse employs *istifhām taqrīrī*, an interrogative form intended to affirm and establish a truth. The structure “*alaysa*” (“is it not”) does not function to seek an actual answer; instead, it directs the audience toward acknowledging that Allah is indeed the best of judges. Thus, the verse also contains elements of *ta’kīd al-ḥaqīqah* (emphasis of a factual truth) and *iqrār* (affirmation), which the listener or reader is implicitly encouraged to express.

This sense of *iqrār* is further supported by a narration from Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him), in which the Prophet ﷺ said:

“Whoever recites (Surah At-Tin) and reaches its final verse, ‘Is not Allah the most just of judges,’ let him say: ‘Yes indeed, and I am among those who bear witness to that.’” This narration indicates that the verse rhetorically invites the reader to explicitly affirm the truth it conveys (BK, 2024).

- a. Analysis: Divine *istifhām taqrīrī* in the verse “*Alaysa Allāhu bi- aḥkami al-ḥākimīn*” functions as *ta’kīd al-ḥaqīqah* and *iqrār*, affirming Allah’s absolute justice and wisdom in establishing the Day of Judgment as the Day of Recompense, implicitly rejecting the absence of human accountability and prompting the listener’s inward – and even verbal – assent to this truth (BK, 2024)
- b. Locution: “Is not Allah the most just of judges?” (*Surah At-Tin (The Fig) | English, 2022*)
- c. Illocution: *Ta’kīd al-ḥaqīqah* (emphasis of a factual truth) and *iqrār* (affirmation).
- d. Perlocution: It instills a strong conviction that Allah is perfectly just, evokes a balance of fear and hope (*khauf* and *raja’*), reinforces awareness of the Day of Judgment (the Hereafter), and leads the listener to inwardly affirm, “Indeed, Allah is the best of judges.” (*Surat At-Tin Ayat 8 Arab, Latin, Terjemah dan Tafsir | Baca di TafsirWeb, 2018b*)
- e. Pragmatic loss: appears in the shift of illocutionary force, where the original *istifhām taqrīrī* (a form of strong affirmation) is reduced to a simple interrogative in translation, weakening its function as a statement of certainty. It also manifests as a loss of rhetorical effect, as the emphatic and persuasive nuance of “*alaysa*” is not fully carried over, resulting in a flatter, less compelling expression. Additionally, pragmatic loss is seen in implicature and cultural context, where the implicit call for acknowledgment and the theological depth (divine justice and accountability) are not fully conveyed, reducing the verse’s intended impact on the reader.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that *istifhām taqrīrī* in Juz 'Amma is far more than just a

grammatical question. While it looks like a request for information, its real purpose is to drive home a point. By combining classical *balāghah* with modern speech act theory, this research shows that these questions function as tools for affirmation (*taqrīr*), divine comfort (*tasliyah*), and emphasizing truth. These verses are designed to make the reader stop and think, creating a deep spiritual connection that a simple statement cannot achieve. This research also finds that English translations often lose this special vibe. When a powerful rhetorical question is turned into a flat statement or a basic question in English, the original emotional and persuasive force is weakened. This means translators need to look beyond just the meaning of the words and focus on the impact of the message. This study suggests that future translations should use better rhetorical markers so that the heart of the Qur'anic message remains clear and moving for English speakers.

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