

Chapter 3

Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences: Arabic, Japanese, and the Mobility of Meaning

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1. Introduction

I should say from the beginning that I am not a linguist, and that I have never conducted research on language as such. My field is Islamic economics, and in recent years Islamic welfare in particular. But my attachment to language, and to Arabic above all, is older than any of my academic work. From an early age I was fascinated by the capacity of Arabic to articulate meaning, and I always thought that if I spent my whole life studying Arabic, it would not be enough. For that reason, I never imagined that I would give my time, let alone my affection, to another language. Then, a little more than ten years ago, I found myself in Japan, a country where I had never expected to live, facing a language I had never expected to study.

Living between the two languages soon became more than a private circumstance. My daily work consists, quite literally, of moving meanings between them: Arabic legal and economic concepts have to be explained in Japanese lecture halls and in English publications, and Japanese scholarly ideas have to be carried back into Arabic. Anyone who does this for years discovers that languages are not neutral containers. Some meanings cross easily, some cross with damage, and some refuse to cross at all. The theme of this volume, the movement of language and knowledge in a new era, is therefore, for me, a daily

condition of work, not an abstract topic.

You may ask why these two languages in particular deserve to be set side by side. Part of the answer is biographical, but part of it is substantive. Arabic and Japanese are, in a sense, maximal strangers: they belong to unrelated families, they are written in opposite directions with entirely different scripts, and they encode the position of the speaker in society according to very different logics. Precisely because the distance between them is so great, the crossing between them is instructive. A meaning that survives the journey from Arabic to Japanese has been tested severely, and a meaning that does not survive tells us something about both shores.

These pages are therefore reflections from inside the two languages rather than a linguist's comparison. They begin from the plain facts about Arabic and Japanese, because the facts themselves are instructive, and they then turn to the question that interests me most: how meaning moves, and fails to move, between two linguistic worlds, and what a person who lives in both of them comes to see.

2. Two Linguistic Worlds

(1) Speakers, Space, and Motivations

Both Arabic and Japanese are studied intensively by foreigners, but people come to the two languages through very different doors. In my experience, most learners of Japanese are drawn first by the culture: anime and manga above all, then cuisine, cinema, and the traditional arts. Most learners of Arabic come to it through Islam. There are today about two billion Muslims in the world (Pew Research Center 2025), and nearly all of them acquire at least an elementary contact with Arabic, enough to recite the Qur'ān and to perform the daily prayers,

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while a much smaller group studies the language for research. The asymmetry of motivation is itself revealing: one language attracts through its cultural products, the other through its scripture. This difference will return more than once in the following pages.

The demographic and geographic profiles of the two languages differ just as sharply. Estimates vary with the method of counting, but current reference works put the number of Arabic speakers above four hundred million, of whom roughly three hundred million speak it as their first language (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2025). Arabic is the official or co-official language of the twenty-two member states of the Arab League, and it holds official status in several countries beyond it. Its homeland is a belt of territory stretching from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to the Indian Ocean, more than thirteen million square kilometers in extent, and migration has carried it further still: Arab communities in Europe and the Americas continue to use the language at home, and the second generation still studies it, or at least hears it, in the family. Japanese, by contrast, is spoken by some 123 million people, almost all of them within Japan itself, an archipelago of roughly 378,000 square kilometers (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2025). One language is spread across a vast and porous space shared by many states; the other is concentrated, to a degree rare among the major languages of the world, in a single country of which it is the national language.

Both languages like to describe themselves as ancient, and both are, but the historical record deserves to be stated carefully. The name of the Arabs enters written history in the ninth century BCE: the Kurkh monolith of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, recording events of 853 BCE, lists among his enemies a certain “Gindibu the Arab,” the first clear attestation of an Arabic word (Al-Jallad 2018, 315). Texts composed in a language that scholars now recognize as Old Arabic survive from around the turn of the Common Era: the desert inscriptions of the Safaitic corpus, two

lines of an Arabic prayer embedded in the ‘Ēn ‘Avdat inscription, and the famous Namāra epitaph of 328 CE (Al-Jallad 2018). The Japanese case is curiously parallel. Chinese dynastic histories of the third century CE preserve a handful of Japanese names and titles in Chinese transcription, but books written in Japan itself begin only in the eighth century, with the *Kojiki* of 712 and the great poetry anthology *Man’yōshū* (Frellesvig 2010). In other words, both languages first enter the historical record through the writing systems of others: Arabic, apart from the desert graffiti in local North Arabian scripts, through Assyrian cuneiform and later the Nabataean script, Japanese through Chinese characters. Even at the very beginning, what we know of each language is the product of a crossing.

(2) Families, Scripts, and Dialects

Arabic belongs to the Semitic branch of the Afroasiatic family (Meyer and Wolff 2019). It is written from right to left in a cursive script of twenty-eight letters, and its grammar is built on the logic of consonantal roots, to which I return below. Japanese belongs to the small Japonic family, whose other members are the Ryukyuan languages of Okinawa and the southern islands; these are popularly regarded as dialects of Japanese, but they are in fact distinct languages of the same family, whose first division falls precisely between Japanese and Ryukyuan (Shimoji 2022, 1–2). Japanese is written in a combination of three scripts: Kanji, the characters adopted from Chinese, and the two syllabaries Hiragana and Katakana, each sign of which represents a mora, the rhythmic unit of Japanese, rather than a single sound. A Japanese sentence normally mixes all three systems, something that has no counterpart in Arabic, where a single alphabet serves every purpose.

For all their differences, the two languages share one condition: each of them lives together with a family of dialects. In Arabic, alongside

Modern Standard Arabic, the shared written and formal language, there are five broad groups of spoken dialects: the Egyptian, the Levantine, the Arabian Peninsula, the Maghribi, and the Mesopotamian, each with its own internal variety (Versteegh 2014). Arabs grow up, in effect, bilingual within Arabic itself, speaking a dialect at home and acquiring the standard language at school. Linguists call this condition diglossia, and the classic description of it was drawn in large part from Arabic (Ferguson 1959); how such layered repertoires open out into full multilingualism is a question my co-editor pursues, from African ground, elsewhere in this volume. Japanese, too, comprises a standard language and regional dialects, divided primarily into an Eastern branch, which includes Tokyo, and a Western branch, which includes Kyoto and Osaka, with the dialects of Kyushu and of Hachijō island often counted as further branches; the Ryukyuan varieties, as noted above, stand outside this picture altogether (Shimoji 2022). The difference lies in scale: the internal variety of Arabic stretches across more than twenty states, while that of Japanese is contained within one.

(3) Words and Grammar

The vocabularies of the two languages expand in entirely different ways. Most Arabic words are generated from a root of three consonants, which can be shaped into a whole family of related meanings. From the root k-t-b (ك-ت-ب), which carries the idea of writing, Arabic derives *kataba* (كَتَبَ, “he wrote”), *kitāb* (كِتَاب, “book”), *kātib* (كَاتِب, “writer”), *maktaba* (مَكْتَبَة, “library”), and many more. Meaning branches outward from the root like a tree. Japanese vocabulary is instead built up in historical layers: a native Japanese stratum, a very large Sino-Japanese stratum written in kanji, such as 学校 (*gakkō*, “school”) and 本 (*hon*, “book”), and a stratum of loanwords written in katakana, from パン (*pan*, “bread”),

taken from Portuguese in the sixteenth century, to the flood of English borrowings of the modern era. What happens to words when they make such journeys, and what happened to one Arabic word in particular on its way into Japanese, is a story I keep for the next section.

The grammatical contrasts are just as instructive. The unmarked word order of formal Arabic is verb–subject–object: كتب الطالب الوظيفة, *kataba al-ṭālib al-waṣīfa*, “The student wrote the homework.” Japanese is a subject–object–verb language: 私はリンゴを食べました, *Watashi wa ringo o tabemashita*, “I ate an apple,” and in practice the subject is very often omitted altogether, for reasons that are cultural as much as grammatical and that I discuss later. Arabic marks gender and number throughout the sentence: a male friend is *ṣadīq* (صديق), a female friend *ṣadīqa* (صديقة), several friends *aṣḍiqāʾ* (أصدقاء), and the verb changes its form with the gender and number of its subject. Japanese marks neither: 友達 (*tomodachi*) serves for a friend of either sex and for any number of friends, and the verb does not change. This makes Japanese simpler in one respect, but this obligatory marking is part of what gives Arabic its characteristic explicitness.

Finally, each language has its own way of complicating the relation between writing and sound. In Arabic, the short vowels are normally not written at all; they are supplied by the reader, or indicated by the diacritical marks known as *tashkīl*. The same three letters yield كَتَبَ (*kataba*, “he wrote”) and كُتِبَ (*kutub*, “books”); the same skeleton gives قُبِّلَ (*qubla*, “a kiss”) and قَبِلَ (*qibla*, “the direction of prayer”), خُطِبَ (*khutba*, “sermon”) and خُتِبَ (*khiṭba*, “betrothal”). The reader of unvowelled Arabic is therefore always interpreting as he reads. Japanese complicates the relation from the opposite side: one kanji may carry several readings, a Chinese-derived *on-yomi* and a native *kun-yomi*, so that 水 is read *sui* in compounds but *mizu* on its own, and a character such as 行 can be read *kō*, *gyō*, *i*, *okona*, or *yuki* according to context. In Arabic, one written

form opens onto several vocalizations; in Japanese, one character opens onto several readings. Both their readers are interpreters, but they are interpreting in different directions.

These structural differences are real, and living with them daily is an education in itself. Yet in my experience the deepest difference between the two languages is not structural at all. It concerns their relation to time, and it is to this that I now turn.

3. The Anchored Language: The Qur'ān and the Stability of Arabic

The most consequential fact about Arabic, for anyone who compares it with other languages, is its stability. The Arabic that the Qur'ānic revelation fixed in the early seventh century CE, and that the grammarians later codified, resembles the written Arabic of today to a degree that has few parallels among the world's major languages. An educated Arabic speaker can open the Qur'ān, a text of more than fourteen centuries ago, and follow its general meaning without a dictionary. The text certainly has sophisticated levels of meaning that demand long study, and the sciences of exegesis exist for that reason, but the surface of the language is not foreign to any literate Arab. There is no equivalent of the training an English reader needs before attempting Beowulf, or even Chaucer.

Two honest qualifications belong here. The claim concerns the written and formal language: spoken Arabic has changed as much as any tongue on earth, as the dialects described above testify. And Arabic is not entirely alone in the depth of its readable past: Greek, Icelandic, and written Chinese are also famous for it. What has few parallels is the mechanism of the stability, and it is this mechanism that concerns me.

Arabic owes its stability to one significant factor. The revelation of the Qur'ān fixed a prestigious form of the language, based, in the

tradition's own account, on the dialect of Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe, together with elements drawn from other tribal varieties of the Arabian Peninsula, and the many local accents that the early philologists still recorded gradually receded from the written language. The entire discipline of Arabic grammar arose, in the second Islamic century, largely in the service of this text: its declared purpose was to describe the language of the Qur'ān so exactly that it could not be corrupted. Since then, the vocabulary of Arabic has grown enormously, and scholars in every generation have worked to accommodate new concepts and the need to describe ever changing daily life, but the core structure, the grammar and the morphology, has remained essentially what it was. The language has, so to speak, dropped anchor.

The Qur'ān itself insists on its own Arabic character with striking persistence. The adjective occurs eleven times. The revelation is called *qur'ānan 'arabiyyan*, "an Arabic Qur'ān" (Q 12:2; 20:113; 39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3), and *lisānan 'arabiyyan*, "an Arabic tongue" (Q 16:103; 26:195; 46:12); one verse poses the rhetorical contrast between the foreign and the Arabic (Q 41:44); and once, uniquely, the revelation is called *ḥukman 'arabiyyan*, "an Arabic ruling" (Q 13:37). The repeated point of these verses is intelligibility: the message was sent down in Arabic so that its first hearers, masters of that language, would understand it. But the last phrase goes further. The classical exegetes read the *ḥukm* as the revealed judgment itself, delivered as Arabic: the Qur'ān a discourse that decides and rules, not a neutral text that happens to be in Arabic (al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, 9:326–327); and some modern voices have pressed further still, hearing in the phrase the claim that Arabic is not merely the medium in which the Qur'ān happens to be expressed, but an idiom that carries within it a way of ordering reason, logic, and life. Whether or not one follows them to that conclusion, the phrase shows how early and how deeply the language

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and the norm were bound together.

The anchoring of the language extended even to its sounds. The science of *tajwīd*, the discipline of the correct articulation of every letter and of the correct joining of words in recitation, did not exist at the time of the revelation, because it was not needed: the first hearers articulated the sounds correctly as a matter of course. It arose when non-Arabs entered Islam in large numbers and had to be taught how to pronounce what they were reading, so that they could recite and pray correctly. It is studied to this day in the context of the Qurʾān, but it is in effect a normative phonetics of recited Arabic, and it has held the pronunciation of the language steady for well over a thousand years. I know of no other language whose sounds have been guarded with this degree of institutional care for so long, with the possible exception of the Vedic recitation of Sanskrit.

Japanese shows what the ordinary life of a language looks like when there is no such anchor. The language has changed continuously and profoundly. A modern Japanese reader needs special training to read the texts of the Edo period comfortably, and the classical written language is studied at school almost as a second idiom. Even the spelling has moved: in the script reform of 1946 the historical kana spellings were retired in favor of spellings that follow modern pronunciation, so that the word for “to say,” long written いふ (*ifu*), is now written いう (*iu*) (Frellesvig 2010). These are small differences taken one by one, but collectively they place the older language at a real distance from the present. None of this is a defect; it is simply what languages do. It is Arabic that is the exception, and the exception has a cause: a fixed, revered, constantly recited text at the center of the language’s life.

The consequence that matters for this chapter is direct. Because written Arabic is moored to a fixed scripture, its central words do not drift; they carry their whole semantic history on their backs, and they

resist being cut loose from it. A language anchored in this way holds its meanings tightly, and meanings that are held tightly do not travel lightly. What happens when such meanings are made to travel is where my own experience begins to speak.

4. What Crosses and What Does Not

Having lived inside both languages for years, I have slowly collected examples of what happens at the border between them. The examples that follow are not systematic; they are the ones that daily life kept putting in front of me until I was forced to think about them. Each shows a different kind of crossing, and a different kind of failure to cross.

(1) The Journey of a Word

Consider the most successful traveler I know: the word for coffee. In the classical Arabic dictionaries, *qahwa* (قهوة) originally denoted wine, so named, the lexicographers explain, because it curbs the drinker's appetite for food (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 15:206; Ibn Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-luġha*, 5:34); the name was later transferred to the new dark drink that spread outward from Yemen. From Arabic the word passed into Ottoman Turkish as *kahve*, from Turkish into the languages of Europe, and from Dutch, through the traders at Nagasaki, into Japanese, where it settled as コーヒー (*kōhī*), complete in time with its own invented kanji spelling, 珈琲, usually credited to the Dutch-learning scholar Udagawa Yōan. The word crossed four or five linguistic borders and survived them all. But look at what survived: the referent, a drink, and a battered sequence of sounds. Everything else was left at the borders. A Japanese speaker saying *kōhī* hears nothing of wine, nothing of Yemen, nothing of the long

Islamic debate over whether the new drink was permissible. The word arrived as a label stripped of its history.

I should add, in fairness, that the mangling of sounds is mutual. Japanese is often teased for what katakana does to foreign words: *intānetto* for internet is barely recognizable to an English ear. But Arabic is no better when it borrows. Our كمبيوتر (*kumbyūtir*) and تلفزيون (*tilifizyūn*) would puzzle their original owners just as much. Every language is hospitable to foreign things and violent to foreign sounds. Things cross easily; it is meanings, as we shall see, that resist.

(2) What the Eye Knows and What the Ear Knows

The two writing systems distribute the work of understanding between the eye and the ear in opposite ways, and this difference turns out to matter for how meaning moves.

Japanese writing gives an extraordinary privilege to the eye. A kanji often signifies a whole word or concept, so that a reader can grasp something of the meaning without knowing the pronunciation at all: one sees 学校 and understands “school” before one can say *gakkō*. The radicals reinforce this: characters containing the water element, such as 海 (*umi*, sea), 泳ぐ (*oyogu*, to swim), and 波 (*nami*, wave), announce their family visually. The price is paid by the ear. Japanese has a limited stock of syllables, and enormous numbers of words collapse into the same sound. The syllable *shi* alone may be 詩 (poem), 市 (city), or 師 (master, teacher); hearing it without the kanji or the context, one simply cannot know which is meant. For someone like myself, coming from a phonetic system, this remains one of the most difficult aspects of the language: in Japanese, sound underdetermines meaning, and it is the written character, or the situation, that decides.

Arabic is the mirror image. It is a language of the ear before the eye.

Meaning lives in precise articulation, which is why the tradition built the science of *tajwīd* around pronunciation, as described above, and why the ordinary written text omits the short vowels: the script underdetermines the word, and it is the reader's trained ear and grammatical sense that decide between *kataba* and *kutub*. In Arabic the eye trusts the ear; in Japanese, the ear trusts the eye.

This is not merely a curiosity. The visual logic of kanji gave Japanese a powerful machine for importing meaning. When Japan confronted the flood of Western concepts in the Meiji era, scholars could mint compact kanji compounds for them, such as 哲学 (*tetsugaku*) for philosophy, and the new words looked native from the day they were coined. Arabic, bound to its roots and its sounds, absorbs foreign concepts by derivation or transliteration and, in my experience, more slowly and more suspiciously. Here already is one asymmetry in the mobility of meaning between the two worlds, and I will return to its consequences in the next section.

(3) The Speaking Self

A second border runs not through the writing systems but through the sentence itself: the place each language gives to the speaking self. Arabic inscribes the self in the form of the sentence. The subject, even when no separate word expresses it, is carried by the verb, which marks the speaker's person, gender, and number, and directness in stating one's meaning is prized. Japanese leans the other way. The subject is omitted whenever context allows, which is most of the time. When I introduce myself, I say 立命館大学のアンマールです, *Ritsumeikan Daigaku no Anmāru desu*, literally "is Ammar of Ritsumeikan University": no "I" appears anywhere. The self is present, but it stands quietly to one side of the sentence.

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The grammar reflects a wider communicative order. Japanese is a contextual language: much of the meaning is carried by the situation, the relationship, and what is left unsaid. The distinction between 本音 (*honno*), what one really thinks, and 建前 (*tatema*), what one properly says, is taught by life to every foreigner in Japan; the elaborate system of honorific speech, *keigo*, adjusts the whole sentence to the relative position of speaker and hearer; and the common complaint 空気が読めない, *kūki ga yomenai*, “he cannot read the air,” shows that reading the unstated atmosphere is treated as a basic social competence. Arabic, by contrast, is in its grammar a textual language: it places the burden of meaning on what is explicitly and directly said, however elaborate the indirection of Arab speech may be in practice, and it expects the speaker to stand behind his words in person.

I am aware that generalizations of this kind have a bad reputation, and deservedly so. Japanese scholarship itself has spent decades criticizing the literature of Japanese uniqueness, and every sentence beginning “the Arabs” can be answered with a living Arab counter-example. I offer these contrasts, therefore, not as laws of national character but as a resident’s field impressions of two communicative defaults, each surrounded by enormous internal variety, and each renegotiated daily by the people who live inside it.

Classical Arabic literature offers an extreme but revealing witness. Al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965), perhaps the most celebrated of all Arab poets, declared:

لَا بِقَوْمِي شُرْفُ بَلْ شُرْفُوا بِي • وَبِنَفْسِي فَخَرْتُ لَا بِجُدُودِي
lā bi-qawmī shurriḥu bal shurriḥū bī • wa-bi-naḥsī fakhartu lā bi-judūdī

“Not through my people did I gain honor; it is they who were honored through me, and it is in myself that I take pride, not in my ancestors” (*al-Tibyān fī sharḥ al-Dīwān*, attributed to al-‘Ukbarī, 1:322). His individualism is extreme even by Arab standards, and the reading is

not confined to Arab critics: Larkin describes the “I” of his verse as displacing the patron himself from the focal point of the panegyric (Larkin 2008, 52, 128). No one should take a poet’s boast for a sociological description. But such a verse is conceivable in Arabic; it is very difficult to imagine its equivalent being composed, let alone celebrated for a thousand years, in Japanese.

(4) Language and Belonging

The most interesting border of all concerns who is allowed to belong to the language. Japanese society is famously welcoming to the foreigner who speaks its language well, and famously slow to count him as anything but a foreigner. The pattern admits exceptions, and I report it as a widely shared experience rather than a rule; still, however complete the mastery, the language can be learned while membership does not come with it. Arabic draws the boundary in the opposite place. Historically, alongside descent, the tongue itself was advanced as a criterion of being an Arab, and modern nationalism made it the criterion (Suleiman 2003). A report recorded by al-Muttaqī al-Hindī puts it with perfect clarity: “O people, the Lord is one and the father is one. Arabness is not from a father or a mother; it is a matter of the tongue (إنما هي اللسان, *innamā hiya al-lisān*), and whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab” (al-Muttaqī al-Hindī, *Kanz al-‘ummāl*, no. 33936, 12:47). The report reaches us *mursal*, without a Companion in its chain; Ibn ‘Asākir, who preserves it, adds that it is isolated, and Ibn Taymiyya judged it weak while defending part of its sense, namely that the rulings of the tongue belong to whoever acquires the tongue, “even if his origin be Persian” (Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, 24:224–225; Ibn Taymiyya, *Iqtidā’ al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*, 1:456, 461). I do not cite it as an established Prophetic saying; I cite it because its very circulation shows how deeply the idea took root. And

it is striking that al-Mutanabbī himself, in the verse that follows the one quoted above, defines the community he has just refused to be defined by in exactly these terms: وَبِهِمْ فَخْرُ كُلِّ مَنْ نَطَقَ الضَّادَ, *wa-bihim fakhru kulli man naṭaqa al-ḍāda*, “in them is the pride of all who utter the *ḍād*,” the letter that, as the classical commentary on the *Dīwān* puts it, none but the Arabs pronounce (*al-Tibyān*, 1:322).

This open door was not a theory; it was the working constitution of Arabic learning. Sībawayh (d. ca. 180/796), whose *Kitāb* is the earliest surviving and foundational grammar of Arabic, was of Persian origin. Ibn Jinnī al-Mawṣilī (d. 392/1002), one of the most original linguistic minds of the tradition, was the son of a Byzantine slave. Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004), whose *Mu‘jam maqāyīs al-luġha* mapped the semantic roots of the language, came from the region of Qazvin; al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), whose *al-Kashshāf* remains a monument of Qur’ānic and rhetorical scholarship, came from distant Khwārazm. The compilers of the six canonical collections of ḥadīth came, all of them, from the Persian-speaking east: Bukhārā, Nīsābūr, Sijistān, Tirmidh, Nasā, Qazvin. The pattern hardly needs multiplying. For a thousand years, entry into Arabic was entry into the workshop of an entire civilization’s knowledge production, and the door was the language itself.

Things cross between the two worlds easily, stripped of their histories; sounds cross and are mangled; the deep settings of a language, the place of the self, the division of labor between eye and ear, the rules of belonging, do not cross at all. They can only be inhabited, and slowly learned. It is against this background that I want to look at the vocabulary I work with every day.

5. Meaning on the Move: Islamic Economic Vocabulary between Three Languages

My own field offers an unusually clear observation post for the mobility of meaning, because I must constantly say the same things in Arabic, English, and Japanese, and the three languages refuse to say them identically.

Begin with the discipline's own name. English "economics" descends from Greek *oikonomia*, the management of the household, and has come to name a science of scarcity and choice that presents itself as morally neutral. The Arabic word, *iqtisād* (اقتصاد), derives from *qaṣd*: aiming rightly, keeping to the just middle, which the lexicographers define, for expenditure, as the mean between extravagance and miserliness (Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 3:353–354). The root is Qurʾānic; the Book names the *muqtaṣid*, the one who keeps to the middle way, between the wrongdoer and the foremost in good works (Q 35:32), and counsels وَأَقْصِدْ فِي مَشْيِكَ, *wa-qṣid fī mashyika*, "be moderate in your walking" (Q 31:19). To speak of *iqtisād* in Arabic is thus already to speak of measure and rectitude, not merely of allocation. The Japanese word, 経済 (*keizai*), was pressed into service in the 1860s, on the eve of Meiji, as the translation of "economy," but it was cut down from the old Confucian phrase 經世濟民 (*keisei saimin*), "ordering the world and saving the people." Three languages, three moral genealogies: neutral management, right measure, ordering-and-saving. When one says "Islamic economics," ইসলাম 経済 (*Isurāmu keizai*), الاقتصاد الإسلامي (*al-iqtisād al-islāmī*), one is not saying quite the same thing three times.

Now take the term on which the whole edifice turns: *ribā* (ربا). The Qurʾānic verse is categorical: وَأَحَلَّ اللَّهُ الْبَيْعَ وَحَرَّمَ الرِّبَا, *wa-aḥalla Allāhu al-bayʿa wa-ḥarrama al-ribā*, "And God has permitted sale and forbidden *ribā*" (Q 2:275). The root r-b-w means to increase, to grow, and in the language of the jurists the term came to cover, with great precision, any stipulated increase on a loan, together with certain inequalities, and certain delays, in the exchange of specified goods. The word is anchored, in the exact sense of the previous sections: it stands in a fixed scripture,

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surrounded by fourteen centuries of juristic elaboration, and every Arabic speaker who utters it stands in that history whether he intends to or not. What happens when it travels? The old English translation, “usury,” is a trap: in modern English usury means excessive interest, so the translation quietly converts a categorical norm into a complaint about degree. The newer translation, “interest,” is a different trap: it is technically closer, but it is a neutral accounting term, and the moral charge of the original evaporates in transit. Japanese offers 利子 (*rishi*), 利息 (*risoku*), 金利 (*kinri*), all perfectly serviceable and perfectly neutral words of modern finance, and all equally unable to carry what *ribā* carries. Faced with this, Japanese writing did not settle on one answer, and the disagreement teaches more than a settled practice would have. The best-known translation of the Qur’ān domesticated the word. Izutsu, whose version was the first made in Japan directly from the Arabic, uses the second of those three words throughout his revised edition of 1964, rendering *ribā* as 利息 (*risoku*), interest, at Q 2:275–278 as at Q 3:130 and Q 4:161 (Izutsu 1964, 1:68, 94, 139). Legal scholarship keeps the Japanese word but refuses to let it pass unmarked: Morozumi’s monograph on the prohibition carries 「利息」 in its own title, inside the brackets Japanese uses to hold a word at arm’s length, while the analysis itself proceeds in katakana as リバー (Morozumi 2011). The literature of Islamic economics goes furthest and declines to translate at all: there the word generally appears as リバー (*ribā*), glossed but not replaced (Nagaoka 2011, 53, 213–214). A fourth practice prints both, as when Kosugi writes *zakāt* as ザカート (喜捨), *zakāto* (*kisha*), the Arabic transliterated with an old Buddhist word for giving something away gladly set behind it in brackets (Kosugi 2009, 211).

Three renderings of one word, then, and a fourth device that refuses to choose, and each of them is a position rather than a preference. 利息 buys intelligibility at the price of the history. 「利息」 keeps the Japanese

word while flagging it as a stand-in for something the Japanese word is not. リバー keeps the history and asks the reader to learn a new word. ギャカート (喜捨) declines the choice and prints both. What deserves notice is not which of them has prevailed, for none has, but that Japanese can hold all four in view on the page: a syllabary reserved for foreign words, a stock of kanji, and a bracket convention give the translator instruments that make his decision legible. English has no comparable equipment. Italics can mark a word as foreign, but they cannot distinguish a term that has been borrowed from one that has been translated and then held under suspicion. As far as I can see, the division among these practices falls not by period but by audience and by burden. Where a Japanese word already carries the weight it is used and keeps its kanji: *ṣawm* is 断食 (*danjiki*), fasting, and the *hajj* is 巡礼 (*junrei*), pilgrimage, in Japanese writing on Islam as in Japanese writing on anything else. Where no Japanese word carries it, the term tends to cross as itself. *Ribā* sits on that boundary, which is why Japanese has written it in three ways within living memory. These are observations from reading rather than the findings of a systematic survey, and a fuller treatment, setting the successive Japanese versions side by side term by term, must wait for a separate study.

Here the writing system reappears as an agent in the story. Katakana gives Japanese a dedicated visual channel for words that are to be kept foreign: リバー (*ribā*), ムラーバハ (*murābaḥa*), タカーフル (*takāful*), ワクフ (*waqf*), ハラルル (*ḥalāl*), and the rest of the working vocabulary of my field, including *zakāt* and its siblings, live in the Japanese texts of my own field inside this visible quarantine, present but marked, borrowed but not absorbed. The lesson I draw is that anchored words travel best untranslated. A term that carries its history cannot be exchanged for a local equivalent without losing precisely the thing that made it worth carrying; it can only be transliterated, glossed, and

slowly taught; students of translation have compiled a whole lexicon of such resistant words (Cassin 2014). Translation, for such words, is a negotiation, not a transfer, and the negotiation is never finished.

The reception of the field as a whole shows the same refraction on a larger scale. In the Anglophone world, “Islamic finance” is discussed above all as an industry: a market niche to be measured, regulated, and occasionally doubted, alongside a substantial critical and historical literature. In Japanese scholarship, much of it shaped by historically grounded area studies and standing outside both the Islamic tradition and the Western liberal one, a different reading became possible: a substantial body of work has approached Islamic economics as a financial civilization with its own view of the world, an economic system different from both capitalism and socialism, what Nagaoka calls a “great divergence” in the history of financial systems (Nagaoka 2011, 5, 186, 194; 2024, 71–72). I do not claim that one reading is right and the other wrong. I claim something more useful: that the same body of concepts genuinely means different things in the three scholarly worlds, jurisprudentially anchored norms in Arabic, an industry and its critics in English, an alternative modernity in Japanese, and that only a reader who moves among all three can see the refraction itself. The substance of those economic debates belongs to my other work (Khashan 2022); what belongs here is the movement, and what the movement reveals.

6. Conclusion

I have offered these reflections as what they are: the field notes of a traveler who ended up living on both shores. If they have a single lesson, it is that the crossing itself is a method. From inside one language, that language’s settings are invisible, as water is to a fish. It was Japanese that taught me that Arabic is a language of the ear; it was Arabic that

taught me how much of Japanese meaning lives outside the sentence; and it was the daily labor of carrying one vocabulary into the other that taught me the difference between words that travel and words that are anchored. A researcher who works in three languages is not merely three times equipped; he stands at an angle from which each language shows what the others conceal.

The era named in this volume's title gives these old questions a new urgency. Machine translation now performs these crossings, at enormous scale, one by one. It renders *ribā* as "interest" without hesitation, and 空気 (*kūki*) as "air," and it does so fluently, confidently, and at a scale no human mediation can match. Whether the anchored meanings of the world's languages will survive this new mobility, and who is actually speaking when the machine speaks so well, are questions too large for a closing paragraph; they are the subject of my second chapter in this volume.

Let me end where I began, with the personal. When I started studying Japanese, I was already thirty years old, and I did my best without expecting much. I remember thinking: who begins a language at this age and hopes for some benefit in the future? I was not young, I was very busy, and I believed I would never truly enter the language. But as I continued with this beautiful language, something changed, and a real relationship grew where I had expected only necessity. I still hope to find the time to go back and study it properly, to revisit what I learned when I first entered the Japanese language world. The deeper our understanding of a foreign language becomes, the more it grows upon us. And in an age when machines promise to spare us the crossing altogether, I find myself believing more, not less, in the slow, personal, transforming labor of learning another world from the inside.

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3. Dr. Ammar Khashan



Chapter 3. Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences: Arabic, Japanese, and the Mobility of Meaning

Chapter 4. Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation? Language, AI, and the Ethics of Knowledge Production

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