

# The Limits of Translation: Reconsidering Teyfur Erdoğan's Concept on Faith-Based Epistemology

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the limits of translation through the philosophical perspective of Teyfur Erdoğan, whose reflections on *eşanlamlığın imkânsızlığı* (the impossibility of synonymy), *yönlendirilemezlik* (untranslatability), and *kavramsal dakiklik* (conceptual precision) present a profound challenge to modern epistemology. Erdoğan argues that every concept is embedded within its own linguistic, cultural, and metaphysical context, making absolute translation, both linguistic and conceptual, impossible. This study reconsiders his position through a faith-based epistemological lens, particularly within the framework of Islamic thought, where knowledge (*ilm*) is understood as both divinely revealed and humanly constructed. The paper contends that the limits of translation are not merely linguistic barriers but epistemic boundaries that reveal the diversity of human understanding shaped by revelation, reason, and culture. By examining the semantic shifts between *kimlik* (identity) and *hüviyet* within Turkish intellectual history, the discussion highlights how translation across languages and worldviews can lead to subtle distortions of meaning. Comparing this with the Indonesian academic and religious context, the study underscores how faith-based values can restore conceptual integrity and humility in cross-cultural scholarship. Consequently, this paper argues that recognizing the limits of translation is essential for building a more reflective and ethically grounded social science. Rather than striving for perfect equivalence, scholars should embrace interpretive awareness that respects the spiritual and cultural origins of meaning, an approach that enriches dialogue between faith, knowledge, and the human sciences.

**Keywords:** conceptual precision, social sciences, untranslatability.

## Introduction

Translation has grown as an essential aspect of international information sharing in a time of unparalleled cross-cultural contact. However, translation is an epistemic process with cultural, historical, and philosophical implications; it is much more than just a mechanical act of changing words between languages. When ideas are transferred between civilizations with disparate intellectual traditions, this complexity is especially obvious. Through his views on *eşanlamlığın imkânsızlığı* (the impossibility of synonymy), *yönlendirilemezlik* (untranslatability), and *kavramsal dakiklik* (conceptual accuracy), Turkish scholar Teyfur Erdoğan highlights this problem (Erdoğan 2016). His work raises doubt on the widely held belief that meaning can be conveyed across linguistic

boundaries and that language functions in an objective way. Rather, Erdoğan contends that every idea arises inside a distinct worldview shaped by historical experience, society, and revelation (Erdoğan 2021). This viewpoint is in alignment with faith-based epistemologies, particularly those found in Islamic philosophy, which stress that knowledge (*ilm*) comes from both human reason and divine revelation. From this perspective, the bounds of translation reflect deeper epistemic conditions that shape human perceptions of reality in addition to linguistic boundaries.

There are several places to start this conversation in the scholarly literature. Western philosophers who have questioned the possibility of precise translation include George Steiner, Jacques Derrida, and W.V.O. Quine. They have highlighted the instability, deferred meaning, or indeterminacy

inherent in language expression. While modern thinkers like Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Syed Naquib al-Attas stress the synthesis of spiritual and rational knowledge, classical Islamic academics like Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Al-Ghazali investigated the relationship between language and logic and metaphysical reality. The relationship between translation theory and faith-based epistemology is still insufficiently understood despite these rich intellectual traditions. By providing a paradigm that views language as a bearer of metaphysical understanding as well as a means for communication, Erdoğan's contribution partially closes this gap. The deeper levels of meaning ingrained in a concept's original context can be obscured or altered by translation, as demonstrated by his example of the conceptual change from *hüviyet* to *kimlik* and finally to "identity." (Erdoğan 2016)

The main issue this study attempts to address is this gap in the body of existing research. It is a common assumption in contemporary academic discourse that ideas from one linguistic or cultural context can be applied without question to another. The epistemic depth of terms derived from certain religious or cultural traditions may be simplified by such an assumption. Fundamental meanings may be lost or distorted when translation puts functional equivalency ahead of conceptual simplicity. The western academic reinterpretation of terminology like *hüviyet* that were first shaped by Islamic metaphysical viewpoints shows how translation limitations can lead to changes that have philosophical implications. In light of the growing dominance of Western paradigms in international academia, this study contends that recognizing these limitations is crucial to maintaining conceptual validity and preventing epistemic misinterpretation.

Addressing this issue is essential considering an intellectual, practical, and societal standpoint. By combining Erdoğan's views into an integrated model for comprehending how meaning travels – or even fails to travel – between worlds, the study advances Islamic epistemology, translation studies, and the philosophy of language. In practical terms, it provides academics, teachers, and translators with a more thoughtful and morally sound method of transmitting knowledge across cultural boundaries.

Understanding the metaphysical aspects of language promotes awareness and humility in academic communication, particularly when collaborating across cultural and religious divides. By recognizing that many cultures have diverse conceptions of truth, this viewpoint fosters tolerance for one another and intellectual variety in society. Examining the boundaries of translation through a faith-based epistemic lens can improve intercultural communication and expand educational knowledge in heterogeneous cultures like Türkiye and Indonesia.

This study's main focus is theoretical and interpretive. Erdoğan's philosophical triangle and its implications for faith-based epistemology are the main topics of discussion. Selected conceptual examples are used to show how meaning changes during translation. The study does not attempt a thorough empirical or linguistic examination, despite references to the Turkish and Indonesian contexts. Instead, it aims to provide a conceptual framework that can be expanded upon by comparative, textual, or empirical case studies in the future. In its conclusion, the paper makes the case that developing a more comprehensive and respectful model of knowledge exchange in a worldwide world requires an awareness of the metaphysical and cultural aspects of meaning.

## Materials and Methods

The qualitative, interpretive, and conceptual methodology used in this study works well for analyzing philosophical claims, epistemological frameworks, and the semantic development of important concepts in various linguistic and cultural contexts. The research focuses on conceptual analysis, comparative reasoning, and textual interpretation rather than gathering numerical data. This approach is in line with the study's goal, which is to critically interact with Teyfur Erdoğan's views on *eşanlamlığın imkânsızlığı*, *yönlendirilemezlik*, and *kavramsal dakiklik* while also investigating the boundaries of translation within a faith-based epistemological paradigm.

Textual interpretation and document analysis are the primary research tools used in this study. Conceptual theme coding, semantic comparison,

terminological mapping, and interpretative reading techniques derived from hermeneutics and discourse analysis are examples of analytical tools (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). These tools assist in identifying the epistemic presumptions that are present in important phrases and analyzing how they change during translation. Data collection is conducted through the identification and selection of textual sources relevant to the key concepts under investigation. These include primary writings of Teyfur Erdoğan, entitled *Kavram ve Kavramsallaştırmada Üç İddia: Eşanlamlılığın İmkânsızlığı, Çevrilemezlik ve Kavramsal Dakiklik* (Three Claims in Conceptualization: The Impossibility of Synonymy, Untranslatability, and Conceptual Precision) (Erdoğan 2016). Source was chosen purposively based on their conceptual relevance rather than statistical representativeness. Both published and archival texts are analyzed to provide a comprehensive interpretive foundation. Conceptual analysis, hermeneutical interpretation, and comparative semantic mapping are all used in the data analysis. The language origins, epistemological presumptions, and cultural embeddedness of concepts are investigated. Finding patterns of meaning, differences between the original and translated phrases, and the metaphysical implications of these changes are the next steps in the investigation (Huberman and Miles 2002). The study reconstructs the epistemic boundaries that define the boundaries of translation through iterative comparison across Turkish, English, and Indonesian contexts. The results are then used to develop a conceptual framework based on faith that explains the limitations of translation

## Results and Discussion

**The Impossibility of Synonymy Across Languages**  
Erdoğan's claim that absolute synonymy is unobtainable is supported by the study's first significant finding. It is clear from qualitative research of philosophical, linguistic, and religious texts that no two phrases from different languages carry the same metaphysical, cultural, and semantic weight (Erdoğan 2016). The deeper ontological and epistemological layers are irreducible, regardless of

the appearance of equivalency created by surface translation.

For instance, the Turkish term "*Doğu*" is frequently mistakenly linked to the Western idea of "Orientalism," but a deeper look reveals that "Orientalism" has philosophical, historical, and cultural connotations that "*Doğu*" does not (Erdoğan 2016, 2021). Similarly, the Indonesian term "*keimanan*" (faith, belief) cannot be fully captured by the English word "faith," because "*keimanan*" is deeply intertwined with Islamic jurisprudence, ritual practice, and ethical responsibility. These cases illustrate that synonymy is not merely a matter of vocabulary but reflects the broader philosophical frameworks from which terms emerge.

This result is consistent with the translation studies literature as a whole. Spivak stressed the ambiguity of translation across languages with distinct conceptual ontologies (Spivak 2021), while Belinkov underlined that meaning is always relative to the semiotic system in which a term operates (Belinkov and Glass 2019). The study shows that some a priori concepts—those said to be revealed by God—resist equivalency because they are deeply embedded in divinely grounded knowledge systems by integrating these insights with faith-based epistemology.

## The Limits of Translation in Conveying Conceptual Depth

The epistemic constraints of translation are the subject of the second theme. The results indicate that translation is essentially limited by the cultural and metaphysical connection of notions, despite the fact that it is often regarded... as a technical linguistic process. Many terms' semantic richness cannot be fully transferred across languages, even with advanced linguistic techniques (Akdoğan 2024; Erdoğan 2016). This concept is illustrated by comparing the French phrase "*la civilization*" with the Turkish phrase "*medeniyet*" or "*temeddiin*." Despite the fact that both are frequently translated into English as "civilization," their philosophical and historical meanings are very different. "*La civilization*" has secular, political, and societal undertones and originated within the framework of European Enlightenment thinking (Erdoğan 2016;

Hermans 2019). On the other hand, "*medeniyet*" incorporates Islamic-inspired ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical aspects. When these concepts are translated interchangeably, the moral and spiritual frameworks that underlie their original usage become disregarded and their epistemic depth is flattened. When ideas derived from divine revelation (a priori knowledge) are conveyed in languages or academic frameworks that are not intended to accommodate them, the limitations of translation become more apparent from a faith-based perspective (Hermans 2019). For example, when translated into Western academic languages that are dominated by secular epistemologies, concepts pertaining to spirituality, ethics, and ontology frequently lose their complexity. This emphasizes a key realization that translation is a location of epistemic negotiation rather than just a language procedure.

### Conceptual Precision and the Problem of Semantic Drift

The third finding concerns *kavramsal dakiklik*, or conceptual precision. Concepts inevitably undergo semantic drift as they traverse temporal and spatial contexts. Diachronic analysis (across time) shows that terms may evolve in meaning within the same language, while synchronic analysis (across space) reveals variations in interpretation across cultural contexts (Erdoğan 2016; Pym 2023; Spivak 2021). Without careful attention to conceptual precision, translations may inadvertently introduce distortions or misrepresentations.

The evolution of "*kimlik*" (identity) illustrates this phenomenon. Classical Turkish intellectual thought used the term "*hüviyet*", derived from Arabic roots such as *huwe* ("He") and *heva* (essence), to convey relational and metaphysical dimensions of being. Over time, influenced by Western social and psychological theories, "*hüviyet*" evolved into "*kimlik*", emphasizing personal, individual, and sociopolitical aspects of identity (Erdoğan 2016). While functional equivalence is achieved at a superficial level, the deeper metaphysical and ethical implications embedded in the original term are lost. Similarly, in the Indonesian context, terms like "*keimanan*" or "*akhlak*" lose subtle theological

and cultural meaning when translated into English as "faith" or "morality." These examples demonstrate that conceptual precision is crucial not only for preserving semantic integrity but also for maintaining the epistemic and ethical dimensions of knowledge.

### Discussion

The comparative case study of "identity" provides concrete evidence of the epistemic friction that arises during translation. Western sociological and psychological frameworks often frame identity in terms of individuality, autonomy, and personal agency (Spivak 2021). In contrast, classical Turkish and Islamic conceptions of identity, as captured by "*hüviyet*," emphasize relationality, divine connection, and ethical responsibility.

When "*hüviyet*" is translated as "*kimlik*" and later as "identity" in global academic discourse, essential layers of meaning are either diluted or reinterpreted according to secular frameworks. This phenomenon exemplifies Erdoğan's claim regarding *yönlendirilemezlik*: certain concepts are intrinsically untranslatable in their full epistemic and cultural depth (Bozkurt 2018; Çetinel 2019; Erdoğan 2016). Furthermore, it illustrates the moral responsibility inherent in translation—scholars must recognize that every act of translation entails interpretive choices that shape how knowledge is understood and applied (Yardim 2024). By comparing Turkish and Indonesian contexts, the study highlights the broader applicability of this insight. Both contexts show that faith-informed epistemologies produce concepts whose meaning cannot be fully captured in secular academic discourse. Recognizing these limits allows scholars to preserve conceptual integrity while fostering intercultural dialogue.

The study's findings have multiple implications for scholarship and practice. First, they challenge the assumption of universality in social science concepts. Many terms assumed to be globally applicable are deeply situated in specific linguistic, cultural, and epistemic frameworks. Second, the research underscores the ethical dimension of translation: misinterpretation or oversimplification of faith-informed concepts can produce epistemic distortion and compromise scholarly rigor.

From a faith-based epistemological perspective, acknowledging the limits of translation reinforces the interplay between divine and human knowledge. Scholars must recognize that some knowledge, particularly that derived from revelation, cannot be fully encapsulated in secular or foreign linguistic frameworks (Spivak 2021). This insight has practical implications for education, interfaith dialogue, and comparative research. By maintaining conceptual fidelity and sensitivity to cultural and metaphysical contexts, scholars can engage in cross-cultural knowledge exchange without undermining the original epistemic integrity of the concepts involved.

Finally, the results highlight the necessity for methodological humility. Translation is never neutral; it carries epistemic, ethical, and cultural responsibilities (Pym 2023). By explicitly acknowledging the limits of translation, faith-based epistemology can guide researchers in navigating intercultural and interdisciplinary scholarship with care, precision, and respect.

### Conclusions

This study set out to explore the limits of translation through the lens of Teyfur Erdoğan's conceptual triad—*the impossibility of synonymy, untranslatability, and conceptual precision*—and to examine how these issues manifest within faith-based epistemology. The analysis demonstrated that concepts rooted in particular linguistic, cultural, and metaphysical traditions cannot be fully or faithfully transferred across languages without significant loss or distortion. The findings show that absolute synonymy is unattainable because words do not function merely as neutral labels but carry layered historical, cultural, and epistemic meanings that bind them to specific worldviews. Likewise, the process of translation cannot fully capture the conceptual depth of terms shaped by religious or philosophical traditions, particularly when translating from faith-based epistemic frameworks into secular or differently structured intellectual languages. This inherent limitation becomes especially evident in the case study of "*kimlik / hüviyet / identity*," which illustrates how concepts

undergo semantic drift when transplanted across different epistemic landscapes. As terms move between contexts, their original metaphysical and ethical dimensions risk being diluted or reinterpreted according to foreign conceptual orders.

The implications of these findings are significant for both faith-based epistemology and the social sciences. They highlight the ethical and methodological responsibility scholars bear when engaging in translation, conceptual borrowing, or cross-cultural comparison. Recognizing the limits of translation encourages greater humility, rigor, and contextual sensitivity, particularly in academic environments that often assume the universality of Western-derived conceptual frameworks. For faith-based knowledge traditions, acknowledging these limits protects the integrity of concepts grounded in revelation and spirituality, ensuring they are not reduced to secularized approximations. In sum, this study underscores that translation is never a neutral linguistic act but an epistemic encounter that reshapes meaning. By attending closely to conceptual precision and contextual depth, scholars can foster more authentic and meaningful intellectual exchanges across languages, cultures, and epistemological traditions

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