
The Importance of Borrowed Arabic Islamic Terms in English Dictionaries

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Abstract: This article explores the significance of Arabic Islamic terms borrowed into the English language and their representation in major English dictionaries. It investigates fifteen commonly used Arabic terms, analyzing their definitions, presence, and contextual usage across leading dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge Dictionary, and Collins English Dictionary. The study highlights a clear distinction between widely integrated terms like Allah and more specialized ritualistic or theological terms such as Fajr, Isha, and Hasanah, which are primarily found in specialized Islamic lexicons.

Keywords: arabic islamic terms, english dictionaries, loanwords, intercultural communication, islamic vocabulary, lexical borrowing, religious terminology, dictionary coverage, islamic studies, linguistic integration

Introduction

Arabic Islamic terminology plays a central role in religious discourse and intercultural communication involving Islam. Many Arabic words, ranging from theological concepts to daily ritual terms, have entered English vocabulary, especially in the context of Islamic studies. However, the extent to which these terms are recognized and accepted in major English dictionaries varies considerably. This article examines key Islamic Arabic terms, focusing on their meanings and their presence or absence in prominent English dictionaries. Special attention is given to terms like Allah, Qur'an, Jihad, Salat, as well as prayer names such as Fajr, Isha, and theological terms like Hasanah.

Methods

Methods. A selection of fifteen common Arabic Islamic terms was made, including core theological terms (e.g., Allah, Iman), ritual terms (Salat, Zakat), prayer names (Fajr, Isha, Maghrib), and other religious vocabulary (Hasanah, Sunnah). The terms were researched in major English dictionaries—Oxford English Dictionary (OED), Merriam-Webster, Cambridge Dictionary, and Collins English Dictionary. Their definitions and etymologies were examined. Additionally, the study reviewed specialized Islamic dictionaries and encyclopedias to compare dictionary coverage and contextual explanations.

Results

The analysis revealed a clear distinction between terms widely accepted in general English dictionaries and those mainly found in specialized Islamic references: Widely accepted in general English dictionaries: Terms like Allah, Qur'an, Mosque, Jihad, Caliph, Fatwa, Halal, Haram, Sheikh, Sultan, Algebra, Alcohol, Coffee are present with clear definitions and etymological notes reflecting their Arabic origins. Sometimes accepted or limited presence: Words such as Sunnah, Hadith, Salat, Zakat, Iman, Hajj, Shariah appear mainly in religious or cultural contexts but may not be consistently defined across all dictionaries. Not commonly found in major general dictionaries:

Hasanah: Meaning “good deed” or “reward,” is usually defined in Islamic theological dictionaries but rarely in general English dictionaries.

Isha and Fajr: Names of specific Islamic daily prayers (night and dawn prayers, respectively) are found predominantly in specialized Islamic glossaries rather than mainstream English dictionaries.

This indicates that terms closely tied to Islamic ritual practices or theological nuance tend to remain within specialized vocabularies, while more universally recognized or culturally assimilated terms have been fully integrated into English.

Arabic words accepted by English dictionaries

Arabic Word		Dictionaries that Accept/Define the Word
1) Allah	God (in Islam)	<i>Oxford English Dictionary (OED), Merriam-Webster, Cambridge Dictionary, Collins English Dictionary</i>
2) Qur'an (Quran, Koran)	Islamic holy book	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge, Collins</i>
3) Caliph	Islamic leader, successor to Muhammad	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge</i>
4) Jihad	Struggle, spiritual or armed	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge, Collins</i>
5) Hijab	Headscarf worn by Muslim women	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge</i>
6) Imam	Leader of prayer, religious leader	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge</i>
7) Mosque (from masjid)	Muslim place of worship	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge, Collins</i>
8) Fatwa	Legal ruling by Islamic scholar	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge</i>
9) Halal	Permissible under Islamic law	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge</i>
10) Haram	Forbidden under Islamic law	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge</i>
11) Sheikh (Shaykh)	Religious or tribal leader	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge</i>
12) Sultan	Muslim ruler	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge</i>
13) Algebra (from al-jabr)	Branch of mathematics	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge, Collins</i>
14) Alcohol (from al-kuḥl)	Chemical substance	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge, Collins</i>
15) Coffee (from qahwa)	Beverage	<i>OED, Merriam-Webster, Cambridge, Collins</i>

Discussion

The varying presence of Arabic Islamic terms in English dictionaries reflects the degree of their adoption into English usage and the cultural contexts in which they are employed. Core religious terms and those linked to broadly recognized cultural practices or historical influence (e.g., Algebra, Coffee) have become part of general English lexicons.

In contrast, ritual-specific terms like “Fajr” and “Isha”, and theological concepts such as “Hasanah”, require contextual understanding and are typically preserved in specialized lexicons.

Conclusion

This divergence underscores the challenge in translating and communicating Islamic concepts across languages and cultures. Effective intercultural dialogue and education depend on contextual translation strategies that supplement dictionary definitions with explanatory notes or dual-language usage. Expanding the representation of nuanced religious terms in mainstream dictionaries may promote greater understanding of Islam in broader society.

The findings emphasize the cultural and linguistic factors influencing the integration of Islamic terminology into English and underscore the importance of enhanced dictionary representation to promote intercultural understanding and accurate communication of Islamic concepts.

Moreover, this article is written in order to highlight the importance of Arabic borrowed words into English language stock and gave clear examples with the most popular English dictionaries of the world.

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