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Translating the biblical key word *hesed* into Arabic and Japanese: A theological and comparative semantic study

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Abstract

Translating culturally and religiously loaded words presents a challenge for translators. The nuanced meanings of these words risk being lost or distorted in the target language. One such word is *hesed* (חסד), a key Biblical Hebrew word that appears to defy translation. The aim of this paper is to investigate how the biblical word *hesed* (חסד) is rendered in Arabic and Japanese. This word is often glossed in English as ‘mercy’ or ‘lovingkindness,’ but research shows that it means neither and that it does not have an equivalent in English. By examining two Arabic and two Japanese translations of the Bible and applying corpus analysis and the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, this study has found that Arabic has a near equivalent to the target word. This equivalent, however, is not utilized in one of the two Arabic translations and appears in only a few verses in the other. As for Japanese, it does not have a near equivalent to *hesed*. The findings contribute to the field of linguistics and theology in general, as well as to Bible translation in particular. It is hoped that they will help Bible translators to pick the best rendering of *hesed* in Arabic and Japanese. It is also hoped that the discussion of the meaning of *hesed* will help Bible translators gain insights into the meaning of this word and determine whether the languages into which they are translating the Bible have exact or near equivalents of this word.

Keywords: *translation equivalents, Bible translation, hesed, Natural Semantic Metalanguage, Arabic, Japanese*

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Перевод библейского ключевого слова *hesed* на арабский и японский языки: теологическое и сравнительно-семантическое исследование

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Аннотация

Перевод слов, имеющих культурную и религиозную окраску, представляет собой сложную задачу для переводчиков. Нюансы значения этих слов могут быть утрачены или искажены в языке перевода. Одним из таких слов является *hesed* (חֶסֶד) – ключевое слово библейского иврита, которое не поддается переводу. Цель данной статьи – исследовать, как библейское слово *hesed* (חֶסֶד) переводится на арабский и японский языки. Это слово часто переводится на английский как ‘mercy’ или ‘lovingkindness’, но исследования показывают, что оно не означает ни того, ни другого и не имеет эквивалента в английском языке. Исследовав два арабских и два японских перевода Библии с применением корпусного анализа и Естественного Семантического Метаязыка, авторы данной работы обнаружили, что в арабском языке есть слово, близкое по значению к исходному. Однако оно не используется в одном из двух исследуемых арабских переводов, а в другом встречается лишь в нескольких стихах. Что касается японского языка, то в нем нет близкого эквивалента *hesed*. Полученные результаты вносят вклад в лингвистику и теологию в целом, а также в перевод Библии в частности. Они могут помочь переводчикам Библии лучше понять значение этого слова, выбрать наиболее близкий вариант его перевода на арабский и японский языки и определить, есть ли в языках, на которые они переводят Библию, точные или близкие эквиваленты этого ключевого библейского слова.

Ключевые слова: переводные эквиваленты, перевод Библии, *hesed*, Естественный Семантический Метаязык, арабский язык, японский язык

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1. Introduction

Translating culturally and religiously loaded words presents a challenge for translators (e.g. Hassanein 2022, Kabakchi & Proshina 2021, Khukhuni et al. 2019, Najjar et al. 2019, among many others). The nuanced meanings of these words risk being lost or distorted in the target language. The word *hesed* (חֶסֶד) is a key Biblical Hebrew word that appears to defy translation. Taking any two different translations of the Bible in a certain language, one can find that the two translations do not always agree on how to gloss this word in all contexts. Even the same translation may gloss this word differently in different verses, even though biblical scholars

seem to agree that this word is not polysemous, i.e. they agree that it does not have different related meanings.

To give but a single example, consider how different English translations of the Bible gloss the word *hesed* as it appears in one of the most well-known psalm verses, Ps 51:1:

- (1) חַנּוּנִי אֱלֹהִים כְּחַסְדְּךָ כְּרֹב רַחֲמֶיךָ מִחַה פֶּשְׁעֵי
hānnēnî 'ēlōhīm kəḥasdekā; kārōḇ raḥāmekā
 have.mercy.on.me God like.*hesed*.your like.to.great mercies.your
məḥēh pāšā 'āy
 blot.out transgressions.mine
 'Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your *hesed*; According to the
 greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions'

Of the 38 English translations of the Old Testament found on (ENA, August 25, 2025)¹ (accessed on January 4, 2025), 19 translations gloss *hesed* in Ps 51:1 as *mercy*, six as *loyalty*, two as *love*, two as *goodness*, two as *kindness*, two as *loving-kindness*, one as *steadfast love*, one as *faithful love*, one as *constant love*, one as *to be faithful*, and one as *faithfulness*. This demonstrates that English does not seem to have a near equivalent of Biblical Hebrew *hesed*.

Such a finding might not be surprising to those who know that English and Biblical Hebrew belong to two different language families. English is Indo-European whilst Biblical Hebrew is Semitic. At the same time, they may expect *hesed* to have exact or near equivalents in other Semitic languages, such as Arabic.

The lack of an English (near) equivalent of Biblical Hebrew *hesed* highlights one main challenge that Bible translators face, that is the challenge of rendering culturally and religiously loaded words (Bassnett 2003: 53, Scorgie, Strauss & Voth 2003: 22–23, Habib 2019: 21). The nuanced meanings of such words risk being lost or distorted in translation. Therefore, it is important for translators to understand the difference in meaning between these words and their counterparts in the languages into which they are translating the Bible. This can enable them to identify the best rendering and, where possible, to (briefly) comment on the semantic difference between the target word and its rendering.

This paper aims to investigate how the Biblical Hebrew word *hesed* is rendered in Arabic and Japanese Bible translations and whether these two languages possess exact or near equivalents of this word. It further seeks to evaluate the semantic differences between *hesed* and its Arabic and Japanese counterparts and spell out these differences in self-explanatory and cross-translatable terms.

Investigating these two languages stems from four reasons. First, even though Christians form a very small minority in both the Arab world and Japan, Bible translation remains a vibrant endeavor in both regions. Multiple Arabic and Japanese versions of the Bible have been produced over the past century. This demonstrates that translation activity is driven by more than sheer numbers. It can

¹ www.biblehub.com

reflect cultural, theological, and/or missiological commitments, which make studying Arabic and Japanese Bible translations of interest to linguists and theologians. Second, Arabic is the mother tongue of one of the authors, and Japanese is the native language of the other author. Third, while (1) English is a language whose speakers are largely Christians or have a Christian background and who, for centuries, have gone to great lengths to translate the Bible numerous times, and while (2) akin to Hebrew, Arabic is a Semitic language and one can expect finding an Arabic equivalent to Biblical Hebrew *hesed*, Japanese is neither connected to Christianity nor to the Semitic language family. Therefore, it would be revealing to investigate how translators gloss *hesed* in Japanese. Fourth, linguacultural insights can be gained when comparing Biblical Hebrew, MS Arabic, and Japanese. A language is a window into the culture of the people who speak this language natively, and different languages can have different cultural and/or religious key words, such as Biblical Hebrew *hesed*. The meanings of these key words need to be analyzed and explained, especially to people whose languages lack equivalents of these words.

Investigating the meaning of Biblical Hebrew *hesed* and its possible equivalents in Arabic and Japanese can be of importance to Arabic- and Japanese-speaking Christians, who number in millions. The reason is twofold. First, they read the Bible and use it in their liturgies and prayers. Second, Jesus quotes Hos 6:6 twice, in Mt 9:13 and Mt 12:7, and Hos 6:6 includes the word *hesed*. Thus understanding the meaning of *hesed* can help, not only translators and biblical experts, but also ordinary Christians to understand this key word and the verses in which it appears in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The next section gives a brief review of studies on the target word. It is followed by the Study Section, which is divided into three subsections. The first two subsections shed light on the data and methodology, respectively. The third subsection investigates the Arabic and Japanese counterparts of the target word. The last two sections are the discussion and conclusion, respectively.

2. Literature review

Before looking into how Arabic and Japanese translations of the Bible gloss *hesed*, it is necessary to understand the meaning of this word. *Hesed* has extensively been studied, and presenting a summary of each study on this word is not practical in this paper, at least owing to space and length constraints. Therefore, only a few studies that have investigated this word will be presented.

One can divide the opinions of biblical scholars on the meaning of *hesed* into two main categories. The first category includes opinions of scholars who argue that *hesed* is closely tied to the concept of *berit* (בְּרִית) ‘covenant.’ The other category includes the opinions of those who argue that *hesed* is either an emotion or a gratuitous act that is not necessarily connected to any covenant.

Several researchers have argued that *hesed* refers to an action that is done owing to a covenant between the doer and receiver of *hesed* (Zobel 1986, Routledge 1995). Zobel (1986) posits two meanings of *hesed*; the first meaning is secular, whilst the other is religious. Both meanings have three constitutive elements: activeness, sociality, and endurance. *Hesed* is active and social in the sense that it is an act by which one person helps another, and it is enduring in the sense that the act of *hesed* is not an isolated act but a lasting attitude toward others. The only three differences between the two meanings, according to Zobel, pertain to the subject of *hesed*, the realm of *hesed*, and to reciprocity. First, in the secular meaning, the subject is a human being, while, in the religious meaning, the subject is God. Second, the secular meaning refers to an act done between members of the same family or clan; the religious meaning, on the other hand, is extended to the whole of Israel. Third, in all the occurrences in which *hesed* has a secular meaning, the contexts implicitly or explicitly imply that the one who does *hesed* for others “is justified in expecting an equivalent act in return” (Zobel 1986: 47). The same does not go for *hesed* with its religious meaning; God does not expect from human beings to repay him, since they simply cannot do that.

Having said that, the secular meaning and the religious meaning should not be viewed as though they were very different. It is instructive to quote Zobel in this regard:

God’s kindness towards an individual places that individual in a new relationship with his neighbor, a relationship based on Yahweh’s kindness; in his daily contacts with others he must keep the kindness he has experienced, he must practice righteousness and justice, kindness and mercy. Thus *hesed* shapes not only the relationship of Yahweh with human beings, but also that of human beings among themselves. (Zobel: 63)

From the quotation above, it can be concluded that the *hesed* that one human being does for another human being should be modeled after the *hesed* that God does for human beings. That is to say, it should extend to all, and it should not expect repayment.

Other biblical scholars did not view *hesed* from the prism of *berît* ‘covenant,’ and still could not agree on whether it should be referred to as an emotion or an action (Shapiro 2013, Routledge 1995, Olbricht 2009). Shapiro (2013: xi), for example, defines God’s *hesed* as the “unlimited, unconditional, unconditioned, and all-inclusive love for all creation.” He explains that God’s *hesed* is unlimited and all-inclusive in the sense that it extends to all his creatures. It is unconditional because one cannot do anything to merit it, gain it, or even avoid it, and it is unconditioned in the sense that it is not restricted by our ways of understanding of what is good and what is evil (Shapiro 2013: xi–x). Thus, from Shapiro’s definition, God’s *hesed* can be understood as God’s love and help that touches everyone and everything everywhere and at all times.

Kittle, Bromiley, and Friederich (2006) point out that the Septuagint (i.e. the BC 3rd-century Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) uses *éleos* for *hesed*. At the

same time, they remark that the two words are not exact translation equivalents. Greek *éleos* is a *pathos* ‘emotion’ that arises owing to contact with a hardship that another experiences unjustly (p. 477). Biblical Hebrew *hesed*, on the other hand, is an attitude that human beings or God can have because of mutual relationship (p. 479).

Kugler and Magori (2023) use the romanized word *hesed* in their paper arguing that this Biblical Hebrew term embodies many positive attitudes, such as love, mercy, lovingkindness, and faithfulness. Furthermore, as the aim of their paper is to examine the Book of Ruth from the prism of this term, they reach the conclusion that Ruth’s *hesed* is not gratuitous but was a tool for surviving.

Habib (2024) has investigated the meaning of *hesed*, by recording and scrutinizing all 247 verses in which this word occurs. He concludes that, in 245 verses, *hesed* has one meaning, which is a good action that someone does for another who is in need. In other words, this word is not polysemous, as biblical translations may suggest. Using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (Goddard & 1994, 2002, 2014, Wierzbicka 2021, 2022), Habib explicates the meaning of this word using simple, universal concepts, such as *I*, *you*, *someone*, and *people* (see the Methodology subsection in this paper). These concepts are simple in the sense that they cannot be defined using simpler terms, and they are universal in the sense that they have exact equivalents in (nearly) all languages. Habib provides two explications of the meaning of *hesed*, depending on who the agent is.

If the agent is God, the meaning of the sentence ‘God does *hesed* for people’ can be formulated as:

- (A) God does *hesed* for people
 - a. God knows that it is like this:
 - very very bad things will happen to people
 - they will not happen if good things happen for them
 - people can’t do these good things
 - b. Because of it, God does these good things for people

The explication shows that human life is sustained by God’s good actions. Without God’s *hesed*, humankind would face predicaments that they cannot overcome. Habib justifies the inclusion of the words *people* and *good things* by pointing out that the Biblical Hebrew word for *God* collocates with *rah* *hesed* ‘abounding in ‘hesed’ and *hesed* *la’ă lāpīm* ‘‘hesed’ for thousands.’

If the agent is a human being, the meaning of the sentence ‘Someone does *hesed* for someone else’ can be spelled out as:

- (B) Someone does *hesed* for someone else
 - a. Someone can think like this about someone else:
 - Something very very bad can happen to this other someone
 - It will not happen if I do something good for this other someone
 - I can do it
 - I want to do it
 - When I do it, this other someone doesn’t have to do anything
 - b. Because of it, this someone does something good for this other someone

This explication points out that a person is facing an immanent predicament and that this predicament can be prevented if someone knowingly and willingly performs a good action. This paper will rely on Habib's research and will build on it in identifying the nearest equivalents of *hesed* in Arabic and Japanese.

While the next section will primarily investigate the Modern Standard Arabic and Japanese counterparts of Biblical Hebrew *hesed*, it will offer insights into the meaning of this word, thus confirming whether or not it is related to the concept of *ḥerîṭ* (חֵרִית) 'covenant' and whether it is an emotion or an act.

3. Data and method

This section is further divided into three subsections. The first two subsections discuss the data and methodology, respectively, while the last subsection investigates the Arabic and Japanese counterparts of Biblical Hebrew *hesed*.

3.1. Data

To gain a full understanding of the word *hesed*, the Bible Hub Concordance (ENA, August, 25, 2025)² was used to identify the occurrences of this word. All 247 biblical verses in which this word occurs were examined in the original language. The different verses where this word occurs were recorded, while specifying the different verbs that collocate with *hesed*, as well as – where the context makes it clear – who the doer and receiver of *hesed* are, whether or not the act of *hesed* is related to the idea of a covenant, and whether or not the act can be deduced to be gratuitous. This last element, it should be pointed out, requires examining a certain context while bearing in mind other contexts related to it. To give but a single example, in 2 Chron 24, someone is described as having done *hesed* for another without mentioning the reason for doing so. Since this same incident is narrated in 2 Kings 12, this context, too, should be examined to see whether or not the reason for doing *hesed* is mentioned there.

In addition, the following two Modern Standard Arabic and the two Japanese translations have been examined, while recording how each translation renders *hesed* in each of the 247 contexts:

- The *Arabic Catholic Version* (ACV) is a Catholic translation. It was published first in 1889 but has gone through several revisions since.
- The *Arabic Life Application Bible* (ALAB) is a 20th-century Protestant translation. In addition to the Arabic translation of the biblical text, it provides commentary on most verses while linking them to the daily life of the faithful.
- The *New Japanese Bible* (NJB) is the standard evangelical Japanese Bible; it was published first in 1970 and afterward went through three revisions in 1978, 2003, and 2017.

² <https://biblehub.com/concordance/>

- The *New Interconfessional Translation Bible* (NITB) is widely used among Catholic, Protestant, and other denominations. It was published first in 1987 and was revised in 2018.

Except for ALAB (which was translated from English into Arabic), all the other translations have been translated from the original languages, i.e. the Old Testament was translated from Biblical Hebrew and the New Testament from Greek. Additionally, these Arabic and Japanese translations are among the most widely used translations of the Bible in the Arab world and Japan, respectively.

3.2. Methodology

As mentioned in the Introduction, different translations of the Bible into the same language can render the same word differently. Therefore, exploring the meanings of these renderings and determining which one is the most appropriate becomes necessary. To do so, two tools can be helpful: corpus analysis and the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM).

A corpus is a huge collection of texts written (or uttered and recorded) by native speakers of a certain language. Thus, it reflects how native speakers of that language use their language in different contexts. This paper relies on two corpora, arabiCorpus and the Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ)³. arabiCorpus is largely a Modern Standard (MS) Arabic corpus that has approximately 173.6 million words collected from newspapers, premodern and modern literary works, and nonfictional works (such as political speeches). The BCCWJ stores data on 14.3 million words across genres such as books, magazines, newspapers, white papers, blogs, online forums, textbooks and law.

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) is an approach developed by Prof. Anna Wierzbicka (ANU, Australia), Prof. Cliff Goddard (Griffith University, Australia), and colleagues. It has been used in the semantic analysis of a large number of concepts, including religious ones. It has also been used in unpacking the meanings of biblical texts (Wierzbicka 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004a,b, 2018, 2019).

Based on rigorous investigation of genetically and typologically distinct languages, NSM researchers have identified 65 words that are simple and universal (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002, Peeters 2006, Amberber 2008). They are simple in the sense that they cannot be defined via simpler words, and they are universal in the sense that they have exact equivalents in nearly all languages. These 65 words are:

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, BODY, KIND, PART, THIS, THE SAME, OTHER, ONE, TWO, MUCH, SOME, ALL, GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL, THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR, SAY, WORDS, TRUE, BE, THERE IS, MINE, LIVE, DIE, WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT

³ <https://clrd.ninjal.ac.jp/bccwj/en/>

TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT, WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, VERY, MORE, and LIKE.

The importance of utilizing these words in the semantic analysis of complex concepts lies in the fact that many of these concepts in any given language are language- and culture-specific. Thus, they do not have either exact equivalents or equivalents at all in other languages. When using, e.g., English (as is the case in most academic publications) to describe or define a complex concept in another language via these 65 words, the definition of this complex concept can be readily translated and verified by native speakers of that language. If, however, the definition includes complex English-specific words, translating it can become challenging and may result in meaning loss. This, in turn, can hinder its verification with native speakers of that language.

The next section will investigate the Arabic and Japanese counterparts of *hesed* while making use of corpus analysis and NSM.

4. The Arabic and Japanese counterparts of *hesed*

Using the Bible Hub concordance, *hesed* was located in 247 biblical verses: 11 in Genesis (henceforth, Gen), 4 in Exodus (Ex), 1 in Leviticus (Lev), 2 in Numbers (Num), 3 in Deuteronomy (Deut), 3 in Joshua (Josh), 2 in Judges (Judg), 3 in Ruth, 4 in 1 Samuel (1 Sam), 12 in 2 Samuel (2 Sam), 5 in 1 Kings, 5 in 1 Chronicles (1 Chron), 10 in 2 Chronicles (2 Chron), 3 in Ezra, 5 in Nehemiah (Neh), 2 in Esther, 3 in Job, 127 in Psalms (Ps), 11 in Proverbs (Prov), 8 in Isaiah (Is), 6 in Jeremiah (Jer), 2 Daniel (Dan), 6 in Hosea (Hos), 1 in Joel, 2 in Jonah (Jon), 3 in Micah (Mic), and 1 in Zechariah (Zech).

On two occasions, it has been found to have a negative meaning – the near equivalent of English *disgrace*; these two meanings appear in Lev 20:17 and Prov 14:34. The meaning of *hesed* in Ps 52:1 can also be considered negative. In all the other 244 occurrences, *hesed* clearly carries a positive meaning. Put differently, *hesed* is homonymous, namely it has two different unrelated meanings, one negative and the other positive. These findings align with those of other scholars (Habib 2024, Routledge 1995, Sakenfeld 2002, Zobel 1986). The focus of this paper is on the positive meaning, which is used in 99% of the verses.

Having closely examined all 244 verses in the original Hebrew text, the present authors confirm the conclusion reached by Habib (2024). *Hesed* has only one meaning in these verses, and it refers to an action that someone does for another in need. This semantic consistency in the original text is not reflected, however, in different Arabic and Japanese translations of the Bible. In other words, when investigating two or more translations of the Bible into Arabic or Japanese, one does not find an agreement on how to gloss this word, even in the same translation.

In the following two subsections, the results of how two Arabic and two Japanese translations of the Bible render *hesed* will be presented. In addition, these

renderings will be discussed, highlighting the renderings that most closely capture *ḥesed* in each language.

4.1. The Arabic equivalent of *ḥesed*

In the *Arabic Catholic Version* (ACV), *ḥesed* is translated 246 times; the only occurrence that is not translated is that in Jon 2:8. The table below shows how *ḥesed* is rendered in ACV; the numbers refer to the number of times in which *ḥesed* is rendered as a certain word in Arabic. For example, *ḥesed* is translated as *ʿamānat* (أمانة) ‘loyalty’ once but as *ʿār* (عار) ‘disgrace’ three times. The renderings are ordered alphabetically.

Table 1. How ACV renders *ḥesed*

Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.
<i>ʿamānat</i> (أمانة) ‘loyalty’	1	<i>jamāl</i> (جمال) ‘beauty’	1	<i>mawaddat</i> (مودّة) ‘friendliness’	1	<i>ṣalāḥ</i> (صلاح) ‘righteousness’	1
<i>ʿār</i> (عار) ‘disgrace’	3	<i>khayr</i> (خير) ‘goodness _{sg} ’	1	<i>niʿam</i> (نعم) ‘graces’	1	<i>taqwā</i> (تقوى) ‘piety’	1
<i>ʿaṭf</i> (عطف) ‘sympathy’	1	<i>khayrāt</i> (خيرات) ‘goodness _{pl} ’	1	<i>niʿmat</i> (نعمة) ‘grace’	1	<i>tatafaddalin</i> (تتفضلين) ‘you do a favor’	1
<i>ḥimāyat</i> (حماية) ‘protection’	1	<i>mabarrāt</i> (مبّرات) ‘righteous deeds’	3	<i>raʿfat</i> (رأفة) ‘great mercy’	4	<i>yarḥam</i> (يرحم) ‘to have mercy’	1
<i>ḥuṣwat</i> (حظوة) ‘favor’	1	<i>marāḥim</i> (مراحم) ‘mercies’	11	<i>raḥmat</i> (رحمة) ‘mercy’	211	–	–

The *Arabic Life Application Version* (ALAB) glosses 243 of the 247 occurrences of *ḥesed* and leaves five occurrences untranslated. Here is how *ḥesed* is glossed:

Table 2. How ALAB renders *ḥesed*

Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.
<i>ʿahd</i> (عهد) ‘covenant’	1	<i>ḥasanāt</i> (حسنات) ‘gratuitous deeds’	1	<i>marāḥim</i> (مراحم) ‘mercies’	8	<i>riḍa</i> (رضا) ‘satisfaction’	2
<i>ʿaḥsan</i> (أحسن) ‘to act gratuitously’	8	<i>ḥubb</i> (حب) ‘love’	2	<i>maʿrūf</i> (معروف) ‘favor’	13	<i>ṣalāḥ</i> (صلاح) ‘righteousness’	1
<i>ʿaʾmāl ṣāliḥat</i> (أعمال صالحة) ‘righteous deeds’	1	<i>ḥusn al-jamīl</i> (حسن الجميل) ‘good act’	1	<i>niʿmat</i> (نعمة) ‘grace’	3	<i>talaṭṭuf</i> (تلطف) ‘being kind’	1
<i>ʿār</i> (عار) ‘disgrace’	2	<i>ʾiḥsān</i> (إحسان) ‘gratuitous act’	16	<i>raʾafāt</i> (رأفات) ‘great mercies’	1	<i>wafāʾ</i> (وفاء) ‘faithfulness’	1

Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.
<i>bahā</i> (بهاء) 'splendor'	1	<i>'ihsānāt</i> (إحسانات) 'gratuitous acts'	3	<i>ra'fat</i> (رأفة) 'great mercy'	2	<i>walā</i> (ولاء) 'loyalty'	2
<i>faḍl</i> (فضل) 'favor/grace'	1	<i>khayr</i> (خير) 'goodness _{sg} '	3	<i>raḥīm</i> (رحيم) 'merciful'	1	<i>yatara'af</i> (يتراّف) 'to have great mercy'	1
<i>ḥalīm</i> (حليم) 'patient'	1	<i>luṭf</i> (لطف) 'kindness'	3	<i>raḥmat</i> (رحمة) 'mercy'	162	–	–

The following table compares the renderings of *ḥesed* in ACV to their counterparts in ALAB. For example, the Biblical Hebrew word *ḥesed* is rendered as 'amānat (أمانة) 'loyalty' in one verse in ACV; in the same verse, ALAB renders it 'ihsān (إحسان) 'gratuitous act.' ACV translates *ḥesed* as *raḥmat* (رحمة) 'mercy' in 211 verses; in these same verses, ALAB translates it using different Arabic words, although in the majority of these verses (154), ALAB renders it as *raḥmat* 'mercy.' The null set symbol 'Ø' is used to indicate that ALAB translators did not gloss the word *ḥesed* in one or more verses.

Table 3. A comparison of how ACV and ALAB render *ḥesed*

ACV: (no. of occurrences)	ALAB counterparts of ACV (no. of occurrences)
'amānat 'loyalty' (1)	'ihsān 'gratuitous act' (1)
tatafaḍḍalīn 'you do a favor' (1)	ma'rūf 'favor' (1)
taqwā 'piety' (1)	Ø (1)
jamāl 'beauty' (1)	bahā 'splendor' (1)
ḥuzwat 'favor' (1)	riḍa 'satisfaction' (1)
ḥimāyat 'protection' (1)	raḥmat 'mercy' (1)
khayr 'goodness _{sg} ' (1)	raḥmat 'mercy' (1)
khayrāt 'goodness _{pl} ' (1)	marāḥim 'mercies' (1)
ra'fat 'great mercy' (4)	'ihsān 'gratuitous act' (1), ḥubb 'love' (1), raḥmat 'mercy' (2)
raḥmat 'mercy' (211)	Ø (2), 'ahd 'covenant' (1), 'ihsān 'gratuitous act' (13), 'aḥsan 'to act gratuitously' (8), talatṭuf 'being kind' (1), ḥalīm 'patient' (1), ḥubb 'love' (1), ḥusn al-jamāl 'good act' (1), khayr 'goodness _{sg} ' (3), ra'fat 'great mercy' (2), raḥmat 'mercy' (154), raḥīm 'merciful' (1), riḍa 'satisfaction' (1), faḍl 'favor/grace' (1), luṭf 'kindness' (3), marāḥim 'mercies' (2), ma'rūf 'favor' (12), ni'mat 'grace' (2), walā 'loyalty' (1), yatara'af 'to have great mercy' (1),
marāḥim 'mercies' (11)	'ihsān 'gratuitous act' (1), 'ihsānāt 'gratuitous acts' (3), raḥmat 'mercy' (2), marāḥim 'mercies' (5)
yarḥam 'to have mercy' (1)	wafā 'faithfulness' (1)
ṣalāḥ 'righteousness' (1)	ṣalāḥ 'righteousness' (1)
'ār 'disgrace' (3)	'ār 'disgrace' (2), raḥmat 'mercy' (1)
'aṭf 'sympathy' (1)	Ø (1)
mabarrāt 'righteous deeds' (3)	Ø (1), 'a'māl ṣāliḥat 'righteous deeds' (1), ḥasanāt 'gratuitous deeds' (1),
mawaddat 'friendliness' (1)	walā 'loyalty' (1)
ni'am 'graces' (1)	ra'afāt 'great mercies' (1)
ni'mat 'grace' (1)	raḥmat 'mercy' (1)

As seen from the table, in 162 of the 247 occurrences of *ḥesed*, ACV and ALAB gloss *ḥesed* in the same verse using the same word. In 154 of these 162 verses, they gloss it as *raḥmat* (رحمة) ‘mercy,’ in 5 verses as *marāḥim* (مراحم) ‘mercies,’ in one verse as *ṣalāḥ* (صلاح) ‘righteousness,’ and in two verses as *‘ār* (عار) ‘disgrace.’⁴

None of these renderings perfectly reflects the meaning of *ḥesed*. The word *ṣalāḥ* ‘righteousness’ refers to morally correct behavior, encompassing both actions and speech. The words *raḥmat* ‘mercy’ and *marāḥim* ‘mercies’ include the word *yash‘ur* ‘feel’ in their definitions, while Biblical Hebrew *ḥesed* does not. Additionally, *raḥmat* ‘mercy’ requires hierarchy. According to Habib (2024: 369), “One has mercy on another only if the former has authority over the latter. This authority can be permanent, as in the case of a king and his servant, or temporary, as in the case of a person who has kidnapped another. In the case of *ḥesed*, on the other hand, one can do it for those who are above, below, or on a par with him/her.”

As for the rest of the glosses, the only ones that refer to acts are *‘iḥsān* (إحسان) ‘gratuitous act,’ *ma‘rūf* (معروف) ‘favor,’ *ḥusn al-jamīl* (حسن الجميل) ‘good act,’ *‘a‘māl ṣālīḥat* (أعمال صالحة) ‘righteous deeds,’ and *ḥasanāt* (حسنات) ‘gratuitous deeds/acts.’

Arabic *‘iḥsān* ‘gratuitous act’ can be argued to be the best translation and even as the Arabic nearest equivalent of Biblical Hebrew *ḥesed*, as it is used to refer to a good act that someone (God or a human being) does for another (a human being) without waiting for any repayment. Here are two illustrative examples from arabiCorpus:

- (1) تأمل عظيم فضل الله وإحسانه
ta‘ammal ‘aẓīm faḍl ‘allāh wa‘iḥsānih
 contemplate great favor God and.gratuitous.act
 ‘Contemplate the greatness of God’s favor and gratuitous act.’
- (2) أمر الله بصلة الأرحام والبر والإحسان
‘amar ‘allah biṣilat al‘arḥām walbirr
 ordered God in.connection the.wombs and.the.righteousness
wal‘iḥsān
 and.the.gratuitous.act
 ‘God ordered [people] to take care of their relatives and act righteously and gratuitously.’

Among Muslims, but not Christians, *‘iḥsān* can refer to worshipping God (Brown 2009: 180). This meaning will not be considered in this paper, because it is an Islamic concept with which – based on anecdotal evidence – native Arabic-speaking Christians do not seem to be familiar.

⁴ As mentioned earlier, Biblical Hebrew *ḥesed* is homonymous, that is it has two different unrelated meanings. One of these meanings is negative while the second is positive. This paper focuses only on the positive meaning, and therefore, the word *‘ār* ‘disgrace’ will not be discussed further.

The word *ḥasanāt* ‘gratuitous deeds/alms’ can equally be used to render Biblical Hebrew *ḥesed*, as it refers to good acts performed by God or a human being for someone in need. Here are two examples from arabiCorpus; they respectively show God and a human being as the agents of the action. Also, the second example demonstrates that the act is done *liwajh* ‘allāh ‘for the sake of God,’ an Arabic phrase that is employed to show that the agent is doing the good act without awaiting any recompense.

- (3) ربنا آتانا في الدنيا حسنة
rabbanā 'ātinā fī 'aldunyā ḥasanat
 lord.our give.us in the.life gratuitous.deed
 ‘Lord, do a gratuitous act for us in this world.’
- (4) من أنفق لوجه الله، ضاعف الله له الأجر، فالحسنة بعشرة أمثالها
man 'anfaq liwajh 'allāh, dā'af 'allāh lah 'al'ajra,
 whoever spent to.face God doubled God for.him the.reward
faḥṣanat bi'ashrat amthālihā
 for.the.gratuitous.act in.ten equivalents.its
 ‘Whoever spends money for the sake of God, God will double their reward, for the gratuitous act [is rewarded] tenfold.’

The word *'ihsān* ‘gratuitous act’ and *ḥasanat* ‘gratuitous deed/alms’ are derived from the same root $\sqrt{h}sn$ (ح.س.ن). There seems to be only two differences between them. The first is that *'ihsān* ‘gratuitous act’ can act as a count or non-count noun while *ḥasanat* ‘gratuitous deed/alms’ is a count noun. Thus, *'ihsān* ‘gratuitous act’ behaves like Biblical Hebrew *ḥesed*. Second, *'ihsān* ‘gratuitous act’ has one meaning, whilst *ḥasanāt* can mean either ‘gratuitous deeds/alms’ or ‘advantages.’

As for *ma'rūf* ‘favor,’ its agent is a human being and not God. The word *ma'rūf* ‘favor’ occurs 33,236 times in arabiCorpus, but in none of these contexts is God the doer of the action. Therefore, *ḥesed* can be glossed as *ma'rūf* ‘favor’ in all the verses where the agent is a human being. Note that, while ACV never uses this word for this purpose, ALAB uses it in 13 verses.

The phrase *ḥusn 'aljamīl* ‘good act’ is used only once in ALAB, and it is not frequent in Arabic. It appears only twice in arabiCorpus. Also, of three Arabic dictionaries consulted (1986, Ibn Manzour 1988, Qazwini 1999), only *Almunjid* (1986: 102) includes this phrase and defines it via the words *'ihsān* ‘gratuitous act’ and *ma'rūf* ‘favor.’ This phrase can still be understood by many Arabic speakers because, in their different non-standard Arabic dialects, there is the word *jmīl* (جميل). In these dialects, this word refers to an act that a human being does for another who is in need of help.

The phrase *'a'māl ṣāliḥat* ‘righteous deeds’ refers to good deeds in general and not necessarily to good deeds that one does for another who is in need. The following example from arabiCoprpus is illustrative. It clearly shows that *'a'māl ṣāliḥat* can refer to prayer and fasting and not necessarily to a gratuitous act done for someone in need:

- (5) كلما أذنب ذنباً، أتبعه بعمل صالح من صلاة أو صيام أو صدقة
kullamā 'adhnaba dhanban, 'atba 'ah bi 'amal ṣāliḥ min ṣalāt
 whenever sinned sin he.followed.it in.act righteous from prayer
wa ṣiyām 'aw ṣadaqat
 and fasting or almsgiving
 'Whenever he committed a sin, he followed it with a righteous act of
 prayer and fasting or almsgiving'

The reader may wonder why ACV and ALAB have opted for *raḥmat* 'mercy' in most occurrences despite the existence of a better rendering. The only explanation appears to be the effect of previous Bible translations on these two translations, particularly the Septuagint. The Septuagint, also known as LXX, is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from the 3rd century BC. Greek does not have an equivalent of Biblical Hebrew *ḥesed*. Therefore, when the Bible was translated into Greek, the translators used the word *eleos* (ἐλεος). The meaning of this word, however, includes the concept of 'feel,' and its normally glossed in English as 'mercy' and in Arabic as *raḥmat* (رحمة) 'mercy' (Bultmann 2006, Habib 2024: 378–380).

To accurately compare the meanings of the Arabic renderings of Biblical Hebrew *ḥesed* to that of *ḥesed*, it would help if these meanings were defined using words that exist in both languages. This ensures that the comparison is based on shared concepts and reduces the risk of misinterpretation. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), discussed previously, offers a set of 65 such shared concepts. Owing to space constraints and to avoid a lengthy discussion of the 30 different renderings, the explications of only two renderings will be presented. The first is *'ihsān*, which this paper argues to be the best rendering. The second is *raḥmat*, which is the most frequently used rendering in both ACV and ALAB. Like Habib (2024), this paper argues that the meaning of each of these words differs depending on whether the agent is God or a human being. Theologically speaking, while human beings think, God does not think but knows.

The meaning of the verb *yuḥsin*, from which the noun *'ihsān* 'gratuitous act' is derived, can be explicated as follows:

- (C) God *yuḥsin* [does *'ihsān*] for people
 a. God knows that it is like this:
 Very very bad things will happen to people
 They will not happen if good things happen for them
 People can't do these good things
 b. Because of it, God does these good things for people
 (D) Someone *yuḥsin* [does *'ihsān*] for someone else
 a. Someone can think like this about someone else:
 Something very very bad can happen to this other someone
 It will not happen if I do something good for this other someone
 I can do it
 I want to do it

When I do it, this other someone doesn't have to do anything

- b. Because of it, this someone does something good for this other someone
- c. When this someone does this, this someone does not think like this:
'I want this other someone to do something good for me because of this'

When comparing these two explications with those of Habib (2024), one can see that the meanings of the Arabic and Biblical Hebrew terms are identical when God is the agent. When the agent is a human being, on the other hand, the two explications are the same except for the last component. Arabic *'ihsān* refers to an act whose agent does not expect anything in return. The meaning of Biblical Hebrew *hesed*, however, does not have this last component because, as Habib explains, in some – but not all – contexts, the agent of *hesed* expects something in return (see, e.g., Josh 2: 12).

The meaning of the verb *yarḥam*, from which the noun *rahmat* 'mercy' is derived, can be spelled out as follows:

(E) God *yarḥam* [has *rahmat* toward] people

- a. God knows that it is like this:

People often do not live like I want

Because of it, very very bad things will happen to them

They will not happen if these people want to be with me

When they want it, I feel something very good toward them

- b. Because of it, very very bad things will not happen

The explication above captures the idea that God has *rahmat* 'mercy' toward sinners. A sinner is anyone who does not live according to God's will. If a person sins, they expose themselves to very bad consequences, the worst of which is total separation from God in the case of dying without repentance. On the other hand, if the sinner repents, God forgives, and the very bad consequences are avoided.

(F) Someone *yarḥam* [has *rahmat* toward] someone else

- a. Someone can think like this about someone else:

I feel very bad toward this someone

I can do something very bad to this someone

I want to do something very bad to this someone

This someone knows this

This someone feels very bad

This someone thinks like this about me:

'This someone is (like) someone above me

This someone can do something very bad to me

This someone wants to do something very bad to me

I don't want this

I want this someone to feel something toward me

because of it, this someone will not do this very bad thing to me'

Because of it, this someone does something

Because of it, I feel something toward this someone

- b. Because of it, this someone does not do this very bad thing to this other someone

A human being (the agent) typically has *rahmat* ‘mercy’ on another human being (the recipient) when the following scenario takes place. The agent feels very bad toward the recipient, due to the recipient’s identity or action. The agent can and wants to punish the recipient; the latter is aware of the imminent danger, so he or she acts in a certain way. As a result, the agent experiences an emotional response that inhibits him or her from inflicting the punishment on the recipient. The component ‘this someone is (like) someone above me’ is necessary because having *rahmat* ‘mercy’ entails either temporary or permanent superiority of some kind. This idea is reflected in the Arabic idiom *taht rahmat fulān* ‘at the mercy of someone.’

It is worth noting that Arabic-speaking Christians use the phrase *a‘māl alrahmat* (أعمال الرحمة) ‘acts of mercy’ to refer to gratuitous acts that one does for other people in need. Arabic-speaking Muslims do not seem to use it; this is attested by its nonexistence in *arabiCorpus*. The explication of this phrase would be identical to that of *‘ihsān* ‘gratuitous act’ with the exception that it will include the word *feel*.

4.2. The Japanese counterpart of *hesed*

Hesed is translated 247 times in the *New Japanese Bible* (NJB). Table 4 shows how *hesed* is rendered in NJB.

Table 4. How NJB renders *hesed*

Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.
<i>ai</i> ‘love’	3	<i>koui</i> ‘favor’	2	<i>seijitsu na okonai</i> ‘righteous deeds’	1	<i>shinsetsu</i> ‘kindness’	2
<i>chūsei</i> ‘loyalty’	1	<i>megumi</i> ‘blessing’	200	<i>seijitsu</i> ‘righteousness’	10	<i>yūjo</i> ‘friendship’	1
<i>hazubekikoto</i> ‘shameful act’	1	<i>sakae</i> ‘prosperity’	1	<i>shinjitsu</i> ‘truth’	9	—	—
<i>hazukashime</i> ‘humiliation’	2	<i>sei</i> ‘sincerity’	8	<i>shinjitsu no ai</i> ‘true love’	6	—	—

The *New Interconfessional Translation Bible* (NITB) glosses 244 of the 247 occurrences of *hesed*, leaving three occurrences untranslated. Here is how *hesed* is glossed in NITB:

The following table compares the translations of *hesed* in NJB with those in NITB. In one verse, the Biblical Hebrew word *hesed* is rendered as *ai* ‘love’ in NJB, while the same verse in NITB translates it as *itsukushimi* ‘affection.’ In 200 verses, NJB renders *hesed* as *megumi* ‘blessing’; in these same verses, NITB uses different Japanese terms, although in most of these (188 verses), it is translated as *itsukushimi* ‘affection.’

Table 5. How NITB renders *hesed*

Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.	Rendering	No.
<i>ai</i> 'love'	4	<i>haji</i> 'shame'	2	<i>koui</i> 'favor'	4	<i>shinjitsu no itsukushimi</i> 'true affection'	1
<i>aijo</i> 'affection'	1	<i>hazubeki koui</i> 'shameful act'	1	<i>magokoro</i> 'true heart'	3	<i>shinsetsu</i> 'kindness'	1
<i>awaremi</i> 'pity'	1	<i>itawaru</i> 'care for'	1	<i>megumi</i> 'blessing'	4	<i>tsukusu</i> 'devote'	1
<i>chūjitsu</i> 'faithfulness'	13	<i>itsukushimi</i> 'affection'	199	<i>şasae</i> 'support'	1	<i>yūkouteki na taido</i> 'friendly attitude'	1
<i>chūsetsu</i> 'loyalty'	1	<i>keishin</i> 'piety'	1	<i>seii</i> 'sincerity'	4	–	–

Table 6. A comparison of how NJB and NITB render *hesed*

NJB: (no. of occurrences)	NITB counterparts of ACV (no. of occurrences)
<i>ai</i> 'love' (3)	<i>itsukushimi</i> 'affection' (2), <i>tsukusu</i> 'devote' (1)
<i>chūsei</i> 'loyalty' (1)	<i>chūjitsu</i> 'faithfulness' (1)
<i>hazubeki koto</i> 'shameful act' (1)	<i>hazubeki koui</i> 'shameful act' (1)
<i>hazukashime</i> 'humiliation' (2)	<i>haji</i> 'shame' (2)
<i>koui</i> 'favor' (2)	<i>ai</i> 'love' (1), <i>koui</i> 'favor' (1)
<i>megumi</i> 'blessing' (200)	<i>chūsetsu</i> 'loyalty' (1), <i>chūjitsu</i> 'faithfulness' (3), <i>itsukushimi</i> 'affection' (188), <i>koui</i> 'favor' (3), <i>megumi</i> 'blessing' (3), <i>şasae</i> 'support' (1), Ø (1)
<i>sakae</i> 'prosperity' (1)	Ø (1)
<i>seii</i> 'sincerity' (8)	<i>awaremi</i> 'pity' (1), <i>itawaru</i> 'care for' (1), <i>itsukushimi</i> 'affection' (1), <i>seii</i> 'sincerity' (4), <i>yūkouteki na taido</i> 'friendly attitude' (1)
<i>seijitsu na okonai</i> 'righteous deeds' (1)	<i>magokoro</i> 'true heart' (1)
<i>şejitsu</i> 'righteousness' (10)	<i>ai</i> 'love' (2), <i>aijo</i> 'affection' (1), <i>chūjitsu</i> 'faithfulness' (1), <i>itsukushimi</i> 'affection' (4), <i>keishin</i> 'piety' (1), <i>magokoro</i> 'true heart' (1)
<i>shinjitsu</i> 'truth' (9)	<i>chūjitsu</i> 'faithfulness' (7), <i>itsukushimi</i> 'affection' (1), <i>shinjitsu no itsukushimi</i> 'true affection' (1)
<i>shinjitsu no ai</i> 'true love' (6)	<i>ai</i> 'love' (1), <i>itsukushimi</i> 'affection' (4), <i>magokoro</i> 'true heart' (1)
<i>shinsetsu</i> 'kindness' (2)	<i>shinsetsu</i> 'kindness' (1), Ø (1)
<i>yūjo</i> 'friendship' (1)	<i>chūjitsu</i> 'faithfulness' (1)

Apart from *megumi* and *itsukushimi*, NJB and NITB employ different renderings with little overlap. The terms used as translations are highly diverse, ranging from *ai* 'love' to *seii* 'sincerity', *shinjitsu* 'truth', *shinsetsu* 'kindness', and *yūjo* 'friendship'. While most of the glosses are nouns, only *itawaru* 'care for' and *tsukusu* 'devote' are verbs that refer to actions. However, *itawaru* refers to actions directed towards those who are weaker, such as the elderly or children, and *tsukusu* refers to working or striving diligently for others. Also noteworthy is the use of terms related to *haji* 'shame', such as *hazubeki koto*, *hazubeki koui* 'shameful act' and *hazukashime* 'humiliation', which are culturally specific Japanese emotion concepts (Farese 2016).

Both the term *megumi* and *itsukushimi*, which are mainly used in the two Japanese translations, do not exactly match the meaning of *hesed*. *Megumi* refers to a fortunate event due to something beyond one's own efforts. It is closer to the English *blessing* and differs from *hesed* in two ways. Firstly, the focus in *hesed* is on the bad situation that someone is going through and their need for help. In contrast, the focus of *megumi* is on receiving something good, especially from nature or divine entities. Below is an illustrative example from the BCCWJ.

- (6) *shizen kara nōgyō, suisangyō, ringyō, kankōgyō, shōkōgyō nado de ōkuno*
 nature from agriculture fisheries forestry tourism commerce etc. in many
onkei-o uketeimasu. Kono shizen-no megumi-o ukerareru no-wa,
 benefits-ACC receive.POL this nature-GEN blessings-ACC receive.able-TOP
senjintachi-ga naganen, shizen-o taisetsuni mamottekitekureta okage desu.
 Predecessors-NOM long.time nature-ACC cherish protect.PST thanks COP
 ‘Humans benefit greatly from this abundant nature through agriculture, fisheries,
 forestry, tourism, and commerce. These natural blessings are available thanks
 to the long-standing efforts of our predecessors to protect and cherish nature.’
 (Kōhō Kirishima)

As stated in (6), humans benefit greatly from nature, resulting in many positive outcomes for themselves. The corpus shows that in the construction *N no megumi* ‘megumi of N’ (N is the agent of *megumi*), the most common examples are *shizen* ‘nature’ (74 instances), *kami* ‘God’ (35 instances), and *daichi* ‘earth’ (14 instances). While the three monotheistic religions consider God to be a rational, personal agent, Japanese *kami* ‘gods’ are perceived as sacred beings residing in nature as well as in specific places and objects. This may account for why natural elements such as the sun, trees, mountains, and oceans are often the agents of *megumi*.

Another significant difference is that not only the agent but also the recipient of *megumi* can be inanimate while the agent and patient of *hesed* are always personal agents. In (7), it is the flowers and vegetables that receive *megumi* from the rain.

- (7) *ame-no megumi-o ukete sodatteiru wagaya-no niwa-no hana*
 rain-GEN blessings-ACC receive grow.PROG our.house-GEN garden-GEN flowers
ya yasai
 and vegetables
 ‘The flowers and vegetables grow in our garden thanks to the blessing of the
 rain’
 (Yahoo! Blog)

Megumi can also be used when both the agent and the patient are human. The following example illustrates cases in which a human gives *megumi* to another human.

- (8) *kodomo-wa, me-ni mienai oya kara-no takusan-no megumi-o ukeru.*
 child-TOP eye-DAT invisible parent from-GEN many-GEN blessings-ACC
 receive

‘Children receive many blessings from their parents that are invisible to the eyes.’

(Tanaka Sumie, *shikarikata no umai oya hetana oya*)

The example above relates to parenting and discusses how children are supported in their development when parents spend more time with them. In all the examples above, the recipients of *megumi* receive benefits thanks to circumstances beyond their control.

Another frequently used term is *itsukushimi*. It expresses the feeling of wanting to do something good for someone for whom one has affection. While *itsukushimi* is similar to *hesed* in that it can involve doing something good for others, it differs in that it requires a feeling of affection towards the recipient; a mother’s feeling for her child is a typical example. Below are examples from the corpus.

- (9) *Jitsuno musume dōzen-no o-itsukushimi-o Shōdaijin-sama-ni tamawatteimashita.*
real daughter like-GEN affection-ACC Minister Shōdaijin-POL-DAT bestow-PROG
‘Minister Shōdaijin bestowed affection as if she were his own daughter.’

(Nagai Hidenao, *ōchō no banka*)

- (10) *Akago-o atsukau tegiwa-wa nareteite, shikamo yasashiku, chiisana*
baby-ACC handle skill-TOP accustomed moreover gently small
inochi-ni taisuru itsukushimi-ga kanjirareta.
life-DAT toward affection-ACC feel.PST

‘The way she handled the baby was skilled and gentle, and one could feel the affection toward the small life.’

(Mōri Shioko, *gehōshi meiro no tsuki*)

As shown in these examples, *itsukushimi* is used when a person treats another with kindness and affection, similar to a parent lovingly caring for a child. For this reason, it is unnatural to use inanimate objects as the subject (e.g. ? *shizen no itsukushimi* ‘itsukushimi of nature’).

Based on the discussion above, this study proposes an explication for *megumi* and *itsukushimi*. The following explication for *megumi* refers to its use with the verb *ukeru* ‘receive’, which is the most common co-occurring verb (30 out of 190 instances where a verb follows *megumi*).

(G) Someone receives *megumi*

- a. Something very good happens to someone
- b. It happens not because this someone did anything
- c. It can be like this: This thing happens because of something
- d. It can be like this: This thing happens because of someone else

The explication captures the idea that something very good happens to someone thanks to something beyond their own efforts. As the corpus shows, *megumi* can be received not only from nature and divine entities, but also from other people. Therefore, both ‘something’ and ‘someone else’ are included as sources of *megumi*.

Next, the meaning of *itsukushimi* can be spelled out as follows:

- (H) Someone has *itsukushimi* toward someone else
- a. Someone thinks like this about someone else:
‘I feel something very good toward this someone
because of this, I want to do good things for this someone
I can do these things’
 - b. Because of it, this someone does these good things for this other someone

This explication indicates that the person who has *itsukushimi* feels strong affection towards the recipient and has a desire to do something for them. Unlike *megumi*, *itsukushimi* is not usually used with inanimate subjects. The corpus indicates that the agent is mainly a parent, with some examples involving God, specifically in the context of Christianity.

Thus, various words are used in the two Japanese translations to render *hesed*. Although *megumi* and *itsukushimi* are primarily used, their meanings still differ from *hesed*. This suggests that there is no near equivalent of *hesed* in Japanese.

5. Discussion

This paper has explored the rendering of *hesed* in Arabic and Japanese. It has been found that one of the renderings in Arabic, i.e. *’ihsān* ‘gratuitous act,’ most closely captures the meaning of the Biblical Hebrew word. Nevertheless, this word is not used at all in ACV, while it (or one of its derivatives) is used in only 27 out of the 247 verses in ALAB. It would be revealing to examine more Arabic translations of the Bible and find out whether and to what extent they use this word. It is hypothesized that, like ACV and ALAB, these translations utilize the word *rahmat* ‘mercy’ in most verses. If this hypothesis is confirmed, the explanation would be that these translations have been directly or indirectly affected by the Septuagint (the BC 3rd-century Greek translation), which uses *eleos* (ἔλεος) ‘mercy’ for *hesed*.

Regarding the Japanese renderings, *hesed* is mostly rendered as *megumi* or *itsukushimi* in the two Japanese translations that have been investigated. These renderings, however, do not exactly match the meaning of *hesed*. The term *megumi* refers to a good event taking place due to something beyond a person’s own efforts, whereas *itsukushimi* expresses the desire to do something beneficial for someone one cares about. This suggests that Japanese does not have a near semantic equivalent to *hesed*.

Using Natural Semantic Metalanguage, two Arabic and two Japanese renderings have been explicated. The explications employ words that have exact equivalents in English, Hebrew, Arabic, and Japanese. This makes possible the translation of the explications from English into the three other languages and their verification with native speakers. Additionally, the explications facilitate the comparison of the meanings of the Arabic and Japanese renderings to that of Biblical Hebrew *hesed*.

Exploring the meanings of Biblical Hebrew *hesed* and its counterparts in Arabic and Japanese can contribute to the field of Bible translation. It can assist

translators in gaining a better understanding of the meaning of this word. It can also help them in choosing the best rendering in Arabic and Japanese, as well as in other languages into which they are translating the Bible. This, in turn, can help Christians and Jews who are native speakers of these languages (but who do not know Hebrew) understand the verses containing this word in a better way.

6. Conclusion

There are three main conclusions, one general and two specific. The general conclusion is that Bible translators do not always agree on how to translate a Biblical Hebrew word. This variation is evident when comparing two translations of the Bible into the same language. It is equally evident when examining different verses within the same translation where the target word appears. Such variation can be understandable, given that translating the Bible is a demanding and complex endeavor that may require more than one translator to carry it out.

As for the specific conclusions, it has been found that Arabic has a near equivalent word of Biblical Hebrew *ḥesed*. This word, however, is not used at all in one of the two Arabic translations of the Bible investigated in this paper, and it is used in only a few verses in the other translation. The reason for this apparent oversight is likely to be the influence of earlier translations, in particular the Septuagint. It is hoped that this paper will draw the attention of Arabic Bible translators, prompting them to use the word *ʾiḥsān* ‘gratuitous act’ as a more precise rendering of *ḥesed*. It has also been found that Japanese has no near equivalent of Biblical Hebrew *ḥesed*. In the two Japanese translations, the words *megumi* and *itsukushimi* are primarily used, but both differ significantly from *ḥesed*.

It is hoped that the discussion of the meaning of *ḥesed* will help Bible translators gain insights into the meaning of this word and determine whether the languages into which they are translating the Bible have exact or near equivalents of this word. It is also anticipated that the use of simple and universal concepts in explaining the meaning of *ḥesed*, as in this study, will promote a deeper understanding of this word among Arabic and Japanese Christians.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sandy Habib: Conceptualization, Methodology, Analysis and Discussion of the Arabic data, Writing – original draft, Writing – Review & Editing. **Hiromichi Sakaba:** Analysis and Discussion of the Japanese data.

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