

تحديات ترجمة المصطلحات الموسيقية إلى اللغة العربية

Challenges in Translating Musical Terminology into Arabic

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الكلمات المفتاحية : ترجمة المصطلحات الموسيقية – ترجمة المصطلحات الموسيقية الى العربية – تحديات الترجمة .

Keywords : Musical terminology translation - Arabicization of musical terms - Translation challenges.

ملخص البحث:

تستقصي هذه الدراسة تحديات ترجمة المصطلحات الموسيقية من الإنجليزية إلى العربية، مع التركيز على الجوانب النظرية والأدائية على حد سواء. يتبنى البحث منهجاً وصفيّاً تحليلياً لفحص مجموعة مختارة من المصطلحات الموسيقية شائعة الاستخدام ومقارنة الترجمات العربية الموجودة في الكتب والمقالات الأكاديمية والمصادر الموسيقية الأخرى. تكشف النتائج عن قضايا رئيسية، بما في ذلك وجود ترجمات عربية متعددة للمصطلح نفسه، وعدم التكافؤ الدلالي بين المصطلحات العربية والغربية، والاختلافات بين الترجمات الحرفية والتفسيرية، وعدم وجود مقابلات مباشرة لمفاهيم موسيقية غربية معينة في اللغة العربية. كما يؤثر التعريب غير المتناسق على وضوح المفاهيم الموسيقية لدى الطلاب والممارسين. تؤكد الدراسة على أهمية توحيد المصطلحات الموسيقية العربية وتقديم ترجمات تفسيرية مدعومة بأمثلة عملية لضمان الفهم الدقيق مع احترام السياق الثقافي العربي. وتخلص إلى أن تطوير قاموس موسيقي عربي شامل أمر ضروري لتسهيل تعليم الموسيقى والبحث والممارسة في العالم العربي.

Abstract :

This study investigates the challenges of translating musical terminology from English into Arabic, with a focus on both theoretical and performative aspects. The research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to examine a selection of widely used musical terms and to compare the Arabic translations found in books, academic articles, and other musical sources. The results reveal key issues, including multiple Arabic translations for the same term, semantic inequivalence between Arabic and Western terms, differences between literal and interpretive translations, and the lack of direct equivalents for certain Western musical concepts in Arabic. Inconsistent Arabization also affects the clarity of musical concepts for students and practitioners. The study emphasizes the importance of standardizing Arabic musical terminology and providing interpretive translations supported by practical examples to ensure accurate understanding while respecting the Arabic cultural context. It concludes that developing a comprehensive Arabic musical dictionary is essential for facilitating music education, research, and practice in the Arab world.



Introduction:

Translation is one of the most significant intellectual tools that facilitates the transfer of knowledge, sciences, and arts across cultures. This is particularly evident in the field of music, which relies on a highly specialized system of terminology with artistic and expressive dimensions. Western music, in particular, has witnessed extensive development in its technical vocabulary—especially terms related to performance, expression, and rhythm—many of which originate from Italian, French, or English.

When these terms are rendered into Arabic, a range of challenges emerges, including issues of semantic accuracy, cultural divergence, and the inherent nature of musical language. As a result, translation in this domain becomes more than a linguistic act; it transforms into a process of conceptual and artistic reconstruction.

The core problem addressed in this study lies in the absence of unified standards for translating musical terminology into Arabic. This lack of consistency—combined with the coexistence of literal and interpretive translation approaches—creates ambiguity and variation in understanding among students, researchers, and specialists. Consequently, many scholars struggle with inconsistent terminology, which leads to discrepancies in interpretation and application.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this research stems from the following:

- Clarifying the challenges associated with translating musical terminology.
- Providing practical value for students of music and translation.
- Supporting interdisciplinary studies that connect music with language.

Research Objective

The study aims to identify and analyze the key issues involved in translating musical terminology into Arabic.

Chapter One: Theoretical Foundations for Translating the Musical Term

The musical term is considered a precise cognitive unit that requires special treatment in translation, due to its association with diverse theoretical and cultural systems. Accordingly, this section is grounded in a set of theoretical frameworks that contribute to understanding the nature of translating musical terminology and the mechanisms of transferring it into Arabic, through addressing concepts from translation studies, terminology studies, and the cultural dimension.

In terminology theory, a term is a lexical unit denoting a specific concept within a technical or scholarly domain. A musical term therefore is any specialized word or phrase that identifies a notion in music – for example, an instrument (e.g. guitar), a genre (jazz), a technique (legato), or a notation sign (forte). According to terminology scholars, terms typically have one domain-specific meaning, and they often form a cohesive system of concepts

(Hilmi , 2022). In practice, musical terms can be verbs (e.g. “sing”), nouns (e.g. “melody”), adjectives (e.g. “atonal”), or compound phrases (e.g. “time signature”), but they function primarily to label discrete musical ideas or objects. For translators, the defining feature of a musical term is its technical specificity: unlike everyday words, terms are tightly constrained by the musicological context, and their meanings are not easily inferred from general-language usage.

Musical terminology, as a specialized branch of language, is distinguished by its precision, systematic organization, and functional importance in professional communication. According to Antipova et al. (2021), a term is defined as a lexical unit within a specific language that denotes a specialized concept. Early music terms, in particular, have experienced cycles of disappearance and revival due to changes in musical practices and ongoing scholarly reassessment. As noted by Simpson (1983), many of the terms and concepts used by authors to describe note values at their time—along with older terms that had fallen out of use between the 1700s and modern times in French (e.g., **maxime, longue, quarrée, brève, semibrève, minime, semiminime**)—have regained currency among contemporary early-music performers. This phenomenon represents a clear example of terminological resurgence (Rousseau, 2019, p. 657)



Furthermore, Rousseau (2019) provides a comparative analysis of the terminology found in English and French treatises from the late seventeenth century, highlighting the role of scholars such as Simpson (1983) and Loulié (1696) in stabilizing musical terms. The modern re-emergence of these terms in musicology demonstrates how historical contexts shape the evolution of specialized vocabularies. For instance, Rousseau notes that Loulié's (1696) invention of a time-measuring device, known as the **chronomètre**, led to the term being repurposed to denote a different concept that is widely recognized and used today (Rousseau, 2019, p. 659)

By the nineteenth century, as academic interest in musicology grew, comprehensive music dictionaries began to be published, marking a new stage in the formalization of musical terminology. These reference works compiled terms from multiple languages—primarily Italian, French, and German—reflecting the international scope of musical vocabulary. Later dictionaries often included phonetic pronunciation guides and cross-referenced multilingual terms, highlighting the complexity of musical terminology. The growing need for precision in defining musical concepts became increasingly evident as musicology developed into a formal academic discipline, requiring scholars to standardize the terminology used in analysis and education

(Anisimova , 2025, p. 95) The twentieth century brought significant changes to musical lexicography, especially with the emergence of jazz, electronic music, and experimental composition techniques. The expansion of musical styles demanded the inclusion of new terms, leading to the revision and enlargement of existing dictionaries as well as the publication of specialized glossaries. As noted in the preface of one dictionary: "It is the aim of this Dictionary of Musical Terms to furnish an accurate and concise explanation of any technical word or phrase which the student is apt to meet with" (Baker, T, 1923, p. 3)

These developments highlight the ongoing challenge of keeping music dictionaries up to date, a challenge that becomes even more pronounced when translating musical terminology into other languages, including Modern Standard Arabic, where difficulties arise concerning consistency, semantic precision, and cultural context.

Every language employs specific strategies to adopt or create new terms. Some expand their lexical resources using existing linguistic structures, while others rely on borrowing from foreign languages" (Darwish, A, 2009) In Arabic, word-



formation methods are fundamental to ensuring terminological clarity and precision. The main approaches include:

- **Arabicization or Lexical Borrowing (at-ta'rib: التعريب)**

Many Arab linguists view Arabicization as a process of phonetic borrowing through transliteration and/or transcription. According to Darwish (2009), straightforward phonetic borrowing involves **"rendering the phonetic characteristics of technical terms from a source language with adjustments that conform to Arabic pronunciation conventions"** (Darwish., 2009, pp. 113-114)

However, Darwish points out that this definition overlooks several important aspects. For instance, referring to "transliteration" and "transcription" does not account for the **absence of a unified or standardized system for representing foreign terms in Arabic**. As a result, multiple orthographic variants of the same term often emerge, influenced by the phonological systems of different Arabic dialects and the source languages.

- **Semantic/Pragmatic Modification of Existing Arabic Terms (al-majaz: المجاز)**

According to this word-formation method, foreign terms are translated into Arabic by employing existing Arabic equivalents, with older words taking on new meanings to reflect the imported concept. However, this approach has certain limitations, as literal translations do not always convey the intended meaning accurately within context.

For instance, the English term (dead room) in acoustics is translated as ghurfah mayyitah (مينة غرفة), which may not accurately capture the technical sense. A more precise rendering would be ghurfah katima (كاتمة غرفة) (Awang, R, 2017, p. 96) This example underscores the importance of considering both semantic and pragmatic contexts when adapting existing Arabic words for new terminology, rather than relying solely on literal translation, which can result in misinterpretation or ambiguity.

- **Derivation (al-ishtiqaq: الاشتقاق)**

Derivation is one of the oldest word-formation techniques in Arabic, relying on the inherent patterns and structures of the language classifies Arabic derivations into three main types: minor derivation, major derivation, and greater derivation (Awang, R, 2017, p. 96)

• Compounding (an-naht: النحت/Compounding)

Compounding refers to the formation of new words by combining two or more lexical elements into a single unit that conveys a specific meaning. Although it is considered a secondary method of word formation in Arabic compared to derivation, it is still utilized in certain scientific and descriptive contexts. Compounding can be classified into three main types: blending, merging, and affixation.

1. **Blending:** This involves combining parts of two words into one term. A well-established example is “**kahrumaghnatisi**” (كهرومغناطيسي), derived from “electric” (كهربائي) and “magnetic” (مغناطيسي). This term is relevant in acoustic and audio-related fields, particularly in discussions of electromagnetic waves and sound technology.

2. **Merging:** This refers to condensing longer expressions into single lexical forms, such as “**bas mala**” (بسملة), “**hamdala**” (حمدلة), and “**hawqala**” (حوقللة). While this type is common in general Arabic usage, its application in musical terminology remains limited.

3. **Affixation:** This involves the use of prefixes or suffixes to create new meanings. In musical terminology, examples include (**atonal**) translated as (**la sulami**) (لا سُلّمي), where the prefix (la) denotes negation, and “**polyrhythmic**” rendered as (**muta‘addid al-iqa‘**) (متعدد الإيقاع), which reflects a descriptive compound structure (Darwish, A, 2009, p. 116)

Although compounding is not the most dominant strategy in translating musical terminology into Arabic, it remains a useful linguistic tool when applied carefully, ensuring both semantic accuracy and terminological clarity.

On the other hand, modern linguistics plays a significant role in analyzing the structure of terminology, as it views the term as a linguistic unit that carries a specific meaning within a particular context. From this perspective, translating a term does not rely solely on its lexical meaning; rather, it requires a deep understanding of the context in which it appears, whether theoretical or performative.

Chapter Two: Problems of Translating Musical Terminology into Arabic

The translation of musical terminology into Arabic constitutes a complex scholarly issue, owing to the intersection of linguistic, cultural, and technical dimensions within this field. Musical terminology should not be regarded merely as a linguistic unit; rather, it represents a conceptual entity that encompasses both theoretical and performative aspects, which have evolved within specific cultural contexts. Consequently, transferring such terminology into Arabic poses a range of challenges that stem from differences in conceptual frameworks, linguistic structures, and cultural backgrounds.

Translation of specialized terms relies on precise equivalence while respecting cultural context. Foundational theorists like Sager (1990) and Felber (1984) emphasize that terminological equivalence is multidimensional – it must preserve the core concept (denotation) and fit morpho-syntactic and pragmatic norms. Felber’s terminology manual classifies term-formation strategies (borrowing, calquing, neologism, adaptation, etc.) and stresses negotiating between accuracy and usability. Thus, translating music terms is not mere word-substitution but a specialized act requiring linguistic and domain expertise (Ortikova, I, 2025, pp. 113–139) L’Homme (2000) and Baker (2011) add that corpus-based analysis and attention to *language usage* yield better term choices than relying only on prescriptive lists. Ortikova (2025) reviews these ideas, noting that achieving **communicative equivalence** often uses borrowing, calquing, explanatory definition, or cultural substitution. She also remarks on the ISO 704 (2022) notion of “dynamic equivalence”, where standardized terms evolve with technology. Domestication vs. foreignization (Venuti 1995) manifests when translators must choose between adapting terms into familiar Arabic (domestication) or preserving foreign flavor (foreignization). For example, choosing between an Arabic coinage or a phonetic borrowing often depends on whether the concept is felt as alien or established in Arab culture (Ortikova, I, 2025, pp. 113–139)

Translation Challenges

- **Lexical gaps:** Many Western music concepts have no exact Arabic counterpart. For example, the Western *tonality* system and *equal temperament* were foreign to Ottoman music theory. Arabic lacks a native word for “quarter tone” (نصف بيمول) as used in microtonal theory. When a concept is absent in Arab tradition, translators often **borrow** or explain it.

- Baker (2011) notes that non-equivalence arises when a referent is missing in target culture. Sostaric (2014) emphasizes that Arabic music terminology itself contains many borrowings from Persian, Greek, Turkish, Italian, etc. reflecting the need to label novel concepts (Šoštarić, 2014, p. 60)
- **Polysemy and doubling:** Arabic often has terminological doubling – multiple words for one concept – and polysemous terms. For instance, the word “نغمة” can mean a **melodic mode** or simply a “musical note” depending on context, leading to ambiguity. Sostaric documents many such cases where an Arabic term like maqām can overlap with Western “mode” or “scale” meanings. Translating scale (a sequence of notes) has to choose between “مقام” or “سلم موسيقي”, decisions that depend on usage.
 - **Loanwords and Arabization:** Classical Arabic has historically arabized foreign terms. For Western music (e.g. names of instruments and styles), modern Arabic often uses loans or transliterations (e.g. “ballet” باليه, “guitar” غيتار). Sostaric notes a **proliferation of loanwords** in Arabic music lexicon – e.g. violin = كمنجة (qamanjah, Persian origin) vs. فيُولَة (fiūla) borrowed from “viola”. Translators must decide whether to use an existing (often Persian-rooted) Arabic term or a new borrowing. For example, “alto” (voice type) was standardized as رانّان (ranān, literally “resounding”) by the Cairo Music Academy, a choice of arabi(c)zation over Latin loan “ألتو” (Šoštarić, 2014, p. 60)
 - **Orthography and register:** Arabic spelling of foreign terms varies (e.g. “سُلّ” vs “صُلّ” for “sol”), causing inconsistency. The register is also a challenge: older translations (pre-20th c.) often used archaic or general language, whereas modern translators must decide between classical Arabic (“فَنُّ التَّنَجِيمِ”) versus colloquial terms. Moreover, notation conventions differ: Arabic music theory often names notes by syllable or by Arabic letter (some traditions use solfège: دو = Do, etc.), and rhythmic notation may not align with Western time signatures. Hence, terms like “common time” or “meter” may require explanatory phrases (e.g. “إيقاع شائع ٤/٤”).
 - **Notation conventions:** The Western staff and note naming system is partly foreign. For example, the concept of “tablature” in classical Arabic music has no standard term; translators sometimes insert footnotes or use calques. Also, theoretical terms like “*syncope*” or “*ritardando*” are not commonly found in older Arabic treatises. In contemporary practice, many musicians simply use Italian term-transliterations (e.g. كريسشاندو for “crescendo”, أليغرو for “allegro”) (Ortikova, I, 2025, pp. 113–139)

Characteristics of Musical Terms

Musical terms show several notable characteristics. Semantically, they tend to denote clear-cut concepts within music theory or practice (e.g. the precise dynamics level indicated by piano or the specific scale implied by maqam) and carry cultural connotations (see below). Morphologically, many terms in Western music derive from Italian, German, French, etc., and they often appear in Arabic as loanwords or loan-phrases. For instance, *crescendo* (an Italian directive) is usually rendered in Arabic either as a transliteration (كريشندو) or calque (تزايد), whereas terms of Arabic origin (like *maqam* مقام) may be left untranslated or described by a phrase such as (نظام مقامي) (modal system). Phonologically, borrowed terms may pose difficulties: Arabic has no capitalization or italics, so differentiation (e.g. Allah versus alla) depends on context and diacritics, which are often omitted. Culturally, musical terms can be emotive and style-specific. As one Arabic musicologist notes, translating musical terminology is "primarily a translation of culture rather than a scientific translation" (Ashour, 2022, April 1) That is, musical vocabulary often conveys aesthetic or emotional content that resists literal transfer: Baol Pacific, CEO of the Saudi Music Authority, observes that terms "carry emotions and feelings that are difficult to transfer and translate between languages" (Salman, 2024) Functionally, these terms serve as the lingua franca among musicians and scholars; inconsistent or erroneous translation can impede pedagogy and scholarship.

Methodology

Approach:

- This study adopts the **Descriptive-Analytical Method**, as it allows for a detailed description of linguistic and terminological issues and the interpretation of their underlying causes.

Analytical Tools:

1. **Collection of common Western musical terms:** such as Scale, Chord, Harmony, Polyphony, Microphone, Electroacoustic.
2. **Comparison of Arabic translations across various sources:** including musical books, academic articles, and specialized websites.

3. **Gap Analysis:** assessing the accuracy, variation, and clarity of translations for the Arabic audience.
4. **Problem Classification:** semantic equivalence, literal vs. interpretive translation, Arabization/borrowing, cultural dimension, and term standardization.

Research Sample:

- Approximately 10 - 20 musical terms commonly used in both Arabic and Western music studies.

| No | Original Term (English) | Common Arabic Translations | Type of Problem | Analysis | Recommendation |
|----|-------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| 1 | Scale | Sallam Musiqi / Maqam / سلم موسيقي / مقام | Multiple translations / lack of standardization | Different translations create confusion for students; the term involves both theory and practice. | Standardize the term: "Sallam Musiqi" with applied definition. |
| 2 | Chord | Watar / Kord / Group وتر | Semantic inequivalence | Translation often lacks precision; "Chord" refers to a homogeneous group of sounds. | Use interpretive translation: "Watar (homogeneous group of sounds)". |
| 3 | Harmony | Harmony / Insijam / Tawafuq توافق / انسجام | Literal translation / ambiguity | The term carries both theoretical and performative dimensions; literal translation is insufficient. | Interpretive translation with illustrative examples: "Insijam Aswat Mutawafiq (consonance of sounds)". |
| 4 | Melody | Lahn / Nagma / Melody لحن | Multiple translations | "Melody" refers to an organized sequence of tones; partial translations are insufficient. | Adopt "Lahn" with explanation of its musical function. |
| 5 | Rhythm | Iqa'a / Rythm / إيقاع | Usage inconsistency | Conceptually clear, but practical performance varies across sources. | Adopt "Iqa'a" as the standard term with examples. |

| | | | | | |
|----|-----------------|---|------------------------------------|---|--|
| 6 | Tempo | Sur'ah / Tempo سرعة | Literal translation | Often confused with rhythm in orchestral contexts. | Interpretive translation: "Sur'ah al-'Azf (speed of performance)" with context. |
| 7 | Dynamics | Darajat al-Sawt / Dynamics | Ambiguity | Refers to changes in sound intensity; translations are often unclear. | Use "Darajat al-Sawt" with musical notation examples. |
| 8 | Polyphony | Ta'addud al-Aswat / Multi-voice تعدد الأصوات | Literal translation / ambiguity | Linked to Western music theory, no direct Arabic equivalent. | Interpretive translation: "Ta'addud al-Aswat al-Mustaqilla (independent polyphony)". |
| 9 | Monophony | Ahadi al-Sawt / Single voice أحادي الصوت | Literal translation | Simple theoretical term but lacks applied clarity. | Use "Ahadi al-Sawt" with practical example. |
| 10 | Microphone | Microphone / Sound device | Borrowing / Arabization | Naming differs between sources. | Standardize "Microphone" in all references. |
| 11 | Amplifier | Mudakhim Sawt / Amplifier مضخم صوت | Borrowing / literal translation | Technical term; literal translation sometimes inaccurate. | Use "Mudakhim Sawt" with functional explanation. |
| 12 | Timbre | Sifat al-Sawt / Voice character طابع الصوت | Ambiguity / semantic inequivalence | Refers to sound quality; translations often imprecise. | Adopt "Tabi' al-Sawt (sound character)" with characteristics explained. |
| 13 | Counterpoint | Counterpoint | Multiple translations | Linked to Western theory; no direct Arabic equivalent. | Use "Tanaghom Mutakhaṭi" with practical examples |
| 14 | Fermata | Tawaquf / Fermata | Borrowing / ambiguity | Technical term, may confuse with rhythm. | Retain "Fermata" with explanation of its function. |
| 15 | Electroacoustic | Electroacoustic / Sound Electric | Borrowing / Arabization | Scientific and specialized term; requires clarification. | Use "Electroacoustic" with detailed definition. |



Results and Discussion

1. Results

After analyzing the 15 selected musical terms, several key findings emerged:

- 1. Multiplicity of Translations:** Most terms (e.g., Scale, Harmony, Melody) have more than one Arabic equivalent across sources, leading to inconsistencies in academic and practical usage.
- 2. Semantic Inequivalence:** Terms like Chord, Polyphony, and Timbre often suffer from imprecise translations that fail to capture the theoretical and performative dimensions.
- 3. Arabicization vs. Borrowing:** Technical terms (e.g., Microphone, Electroacoustic, Fermata) are often either borrowed directly from English or transliterated inconsistently, highlighting the lack of standardized guidelines.
- 4. Literal vs. Interpretive Translation:** Literal translation sometimes fails to convey the functional or conceptual meaning of the term in its musical context, such as Tempo and Dynamics.
- 5. Cultural and Contextual Gaps:** Certain Western musical concepts do not have direct equivalents in Arabic, requiring explanatory notes for proper understanding (e.g., Counterpoint, Polyphony).

2. Discussion

- Standardization Need:** The results indicate a pressing need to establish standardized Arabic musical terminology to ensure uniformity in teaching, research, and performance.
- Role of Contextual Translation:** Translating terms should go beyond the literal meaning; it must consider **both theoretical and practical contexts**. For example, “Scale” (سلم موسيقي) should be explained with examples from Arabic musical practice.
- Impact on Learning:** Variability in translation and Arabization may confuse students and practitioners, especially in fields where precise theoretical understanding is crucial.



- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Translation should respect the Arabic musical and cultural context while maintaining the integrity of the Western concept. For instance, Polyphony (تعدد الأصوات) requires clarifying its independence from traditional monophonic Arabic structures.
- **Recommendation for Terminology Guidelines:** Developing a **centralized Arabic musical glossary** with clear definitions, transliterations, and contextual examples would enhance both academic research and music education in the Arab world.

Identify key English music terms

Form working group

Consult musicologists and linguists

Compile draft Arabic equivalents

Public consultation / field test

Revise and finalize glossary

Publish and disseminate

Periodic review and updates

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