

Interpreting Collocations in the Holy Quran: A Ricoeurian Hermeneutic Study of Five Product Translation Interpretations

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Abstract

The Quran is a significant religious text for millions of people worldwide, and its interpretation is of great importance to scholars and researchers in the field of Islamic studies. One area of interest in the Quranic text is the use of collocations, such as "لباس الجوع" (libas aljou), "لباس التقوى" (libas attaqwa), "هن لباس لكم وأنتم لباس لهن" (hunna libas lakum wantum libas lahunna), and "وجعلنا الليل لباسا" (wajalna allayl libasa), which has been the subject of this study. This study aims to explore the interpretation of this collocation in the Quran and compare its translations in various Quranic translations using a Ricoeurian Hermeneutic approach. The analysis is divided into three phases: understanding, explanation, and application, which reveal the cultural influences and underlying meanings behind each translation. By providing a Hermeneutic perspective on collocations in the Quran and presenting a methodology for interpreting sacred texts, this research offers valuable insights for contemporary readers of the Quran and contributes to the field of Islamic studies.

Keywords: Collocation, Cultural influences, Holy Quran, Interpretation, Islamic study, Ricoeurian Hermeneutic approach

INTRODUCTION

The Quran is a religious text of central importance to Muslims worldwide. Its interpretation, however, remains a complex and contested endeavor, especially in the case of collocations—frequently occurring word combinations whose meaning extends beyond the sum of their individual words. Scholars have long approached Quranic collocations through traditional linguistic frameworks, focusing on lexical, grammatical, and semantic dimensions. Recent scholarship has also emphasized the role of historical, social, and cultural contexts in shaping meaning (Alhaj, 2015).

While previous studies (e.g., Alhaj, 2015; Hassan, 2019) have identified the challenges of interpreting Quranic collocations, they have primarily relied on linguistic or corpus-based methods. For example, Hassan (2019) explored the general theory of collocation in relation to Quranic data and highlighted the need for clearer theoretical grounding, while Alrabiah et al. (2014) concentrated on building corpora for Classical Arabic to support distributional lexical analysis. Such contributions are valuable, yet they tend to treat collocations as static linguistic phenomena, paying limited attention to the interpreter's active role in constructing meaning. This study argues that a philosophical-hermeneutic approach, as pioneered by Paul Ricoeur, is necessary to fully unpack the interpretive process involved in Quranic collocations. Unlike purely

linguistic approaches, Ricoeur's hermeneutics foregrounds the dynamic interplay between text, context, and interpreter, emphasizing that meaning is not simply extracted but constructed through interpretation. Applying this lens to Quranic translation allows for a more nuanced account of how translators navigate the cultural, historical, and pragmatic dimensions embedded in collocations. The challenge of translating Arabic collocations in religious texts, particularly the Quran, further underlines this need. Collocations often encode culturally specific concepts with no direct equivalents in other languages (Haeri, 2003), making their translation a site where interpretive choices become visible. By analyzing five Quranic translations through a Ricoeurian hermeneutic framework, this study seeks to highlight how translators' strategies, cultural backgrounds, and interpretive orientations shape the rendering of collocations.

Given the Quran's status as the ultimate source of guidance for Muslims and the centrality of translation for non-Arabic-speaking communities, this research contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it extends the debate on Quranic collocations beyond linguistic paradigms, introducing Ricoeur's philosophy as a critical interpretive tool. Practically, it sheds light on the complexities of translating culture-bound collocations, offering insights that can enhance the accessibility and accuracy of Quranic translation for diverse Muslim audiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Challenge of Collocation in Translation

Collocation, the habitual co-occurrence of words, is central to the cohesion and coherence of texts but presents significant challenges in translation. Defined as lexical units consisting of two or more elements that conventionally appear together to achieve a specific communicative purpose (Granger & Meunier, 2008), collocations cannot always be translated word-for-word without loss of meaning. Corpus linguistics has provided valuable descriptive insights into collocation (Sinclair, 1991), yet its focus has often remained on frequency and distribution, with limited attention to the interpretive dimensions of meaning-making. As Baker (2018) notes, collocations are culturally and contextually embedded, making their transfer across languages particularly problematic.

For translators, this difficulty lies not only in finding linguistic equivalence but also in conveying the conceptual and cultural resonance of collocations (Qassem, M., 2022). When the text at hand is religious—where meaning is both doctrinally significant and spiritually sensitive—the challenge is intensified.

Collocation in Religious Texts and the Quran

Religious discourse is replete with collocational patterns that embody theological and cultural significance. In Christianity, for example, expressions such as *God Almighty* or *Blessed are the poor in spirit* function as doctrinal formulations (Stubbs, 1995; Wardini, E., 2021). Similarly, in Islam, collocations like *Allahu Akbar* carry layered meanings that combine devotion, doctrine, and ritual practice (Esposito, 2004). Such expressions illustrate that collocations in religious texts are not merely linguistic but deeply symbolic.

The Quran, as the central text of Islam, contains numerous collocations whose meanings cannot be reduced to the sum of their individual words. Studies such as Alhaj (2015) have emphasized the necessity of considering historical and social contexts in interpreting Quranic collocations, while (Hassan, 2019) examined the general theory of collocation in relation to Quranic data, pointing to its limitations for theological interpretation. Alrabiah et al. (2014)

contributed to the field by constructing large Arabic corpora to study lexical distribution, offering resources but not interpretive strategies. More recent work (Zare & Zare, 2016; Ali, 2019; Zyzik, 2021; Obeidat et al., 2020) has compared translation choices across versions of the Quran, demonstrating how collocational meaning shifts according to translators' interpretive decisions. Altogether, these studies highlight two important insights, (1) Quranic collocations are vital for understanding the theological and linguistic depth of the text; and (2) translation choices reveal interpretive variation. However, the scholarship has remained largely descriptive and corpus-driven, focusing on *what collocations are* and *how they vary* across translations, rather than theorizing *how meaning itself is constructed in the act of translation*.

Hermeneutics and Translation: The Ricoeurian Framework

Hermeneutics provides a theoretical framework for addressing interpretive gaps in translation Al-Hamzi et al. (2025), and Paul Ricoeur's model of Understanding, Explanation, and Application (Ricoeur, 1976) is particularly relevant to this process. Understanding refers to the intuitive grasp of meaning shaped by the interpreter's cultural and historical horizon, which, in translation, reflects the translator's pre-understanding of collocations within their theological and linguistic context. Explanation entails a systematic and analytic effort to account for meaning through linguistic and structural analysis, paralleling the corpus-based and semantic studies that dominate current Qur'anic collocation research. Application highlights the act of re-contextualizing meaning in the present, as translators render collocations into new linguistic and cultural settings. This triadic model underscores that meaning is not simply transferred but actively constructed in dialogue between text and interpreter. As Alshaje'a (2014) and Kharmandar (2015) observe, such a hermeneutic orientation enables translators to move beyond literalism and engage more deeply with the theological and cultural resonance of the Qur'anic message.

This reviewed literature converges on the recognition that collocations in the Quran are both linguistically complex and theologically loaded. Linguistic and corpus-based studies (e.g., Hassan, 2019; Alrabiah et al., 2014) have mapped their structural patterns, while translation-focused analyses (e.g., Zare & Zare, 2016; Ali, 2019; (Zyzik, 2021)) have documented interpretive variation across translators. Yet, these approaches remain largely descriptive, offering little insight into the interpretive mechanisms by which meaning is negotiated in translation.

This study addresses that gap by applying Ricoeur's hermeneutic triad to the translation of Quranic collocations. By integrating Understanding, Explanation, and Application into the analysis, the study shifts attention from static descriptions of collocations to the dynamic process of meaning construction. In doing so, it contributes both theoretically—by extending hermeneutics into translation studies—and practically—by illuminating how translators navigate the cultural and theological challenges of rendering Quranic collocations into other languages.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a Ricoeurian Hermeneutic approach as its overarching methodological framework. Hermeneutics, as articulated by Ricoeur (1976), emphasizes the interpretive process as a dynamic interplay between understanding, explanation, and application. This makes it especially suitable for examining Quranic collocations, where meaning is not fixed but shaped by context, culture, and translator interpretation. The study is qualitative in nature, focusing on close

textual analysis rather than quantitative measurement, with the aim of uncovering the interpretive choices and cultural influences embedded in translation (Kearney, 2007; Taylor et al., 2015).

Data Selection

The data consist of selected Quranic verses containing collocations of *libās* (لباس), a term rich in metaphorical and cultural significance. The chosen collocations are:

- لباس الجوع (*libās al-jū*, garment of hunger)
- لباس التقوى (*libās at-taqwā*, garment of piety)
- هن لباس لكم وأنتم لباس لهن (*hunna libās lakum wa antum libās lahunna*, they are a garment for you and you are a garment for them)
- وجعلنا الليل لباسا (*waja'alnā al-layla libāsan*, and We made the night as a covering/garment)

These verses were selected because they exemplify metaphorical uses of collocation in the Quran and pose particular challenges in translation due to their layered theological, cultural, and semantic meanings.

Data Sources: Quranic Translations

To explore how collocational meaning is interpreted, five widely cited English translations of the Quran were chosen:

- Abdullah Yusuf Ali (2015), renowned for its elegant English prose and extensive explanatory footnotes.
- Arthur J. Arberry (2013), valued for its literary style and fidelity to the Arabic source text.
- Muhammad Asad (1980), known for clarity, accessibility, and use of modern idiom.
- M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (2010), balances accuracy and readability, widely adopted in academic and general contexts.
- Hilālī & Khan (1994/2008), distinguished by literal accuracy and detailed footnotes reflecting traditional exegetical interpretations. All these translations are sourced in (Ali's Translation 2015; Arberry's Translation 2013; Asad's Translation (1980: Abdul Haleem's Translation 2010), and Hilālī & Khan's Translation as in https://quranenc.com/en/browse/english_hilali_khan). These translations represent a spectrum of interpretive orientations, literary, exegetical, accessible, modern, and literal, allowing for a comparative analysis of how Quranic collocations are negotiated across different approaches.

Data Analysis

The analysis follows Ricoeur's hermeneutic triad in a structured, step-by-step process. In the first phase, Understanding, the study begins with a close reading of the original Arabic verses within their broader context. This involves examining the surah, its thematic setting, and, when available, the occasion of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). Particular attention is given to identifying the cultural, theological, and metaphorical resonances of each collocation. The second phase, Explanation, focuses on a comparative analysis of the five selected English translations. Here, the key lexical and stylistic choices made by each translator are documented, with special attention to linguistic patterns such as literal versus metaphorical renderings, the use of explanatory footnotes, and the syntactic framing of verses. The final phase, Application, interprets the translators'

decisions through the lens of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. This includes analyzing how their cultural, theological, or personal orientations may have shaped their renderings and reflecting on the implications of these translation strategies for contemporary readers, showing how meaning is continually re-applied in new cultural and linguistic settings.

This structured procedure ensures that analysis remains both textually grounded and theoretically informed. By integrating Ricoeur’s triadic model, the study moves beyond descriptive comparison of translations to reveal the interpretive dynamics at play when rendering Quranic collocations into English.

RESULTS

The Interpretation of the Collocation "لباس الجوع" (libas aljou)

The analysis shows clear divergence in how translators render libās al-jū‘ (Q. 16:112). Ali’s “taste of hunger” reframes the collocation experientially, while Arberry’s “garment of hunger” preserves the metaphor. Asad’s “misery of hunger” foregrounds suffering, Abdel Haleem’s “garment of famine” historicizes the phrase in collective terms, and Hilali & Khan’s “extreme of hunger (famine)” makes the severity explicit.

These differences reflect what Ricoeur (1976) calls the movement from understanding to application: translators filter the text through their cultural-linguistic horizons. For example, Abdel Haleem’s shift towards “famine” resonates with Baker’s (2018) observation that translators often opt for cultural equivalents to render the wider social experience. By contrast, Arberry adheres closely to metaphor, privileging textual fidelity over reader accessibility.

In practical consequence, translations like “famine” contextualize hunger socially and collectively, which may resonate more with contemporary readers familiar with humanitarian crises. However, the metaphorical “garment of hunger” retains the Quran’s poetic force but risks obscurity for modern audiences unfamiliar with Arabic rhetorical conventions.

Table 1 Different Translations of "لباس الجوع" (libas aljou) in Quranic Translations

Translator	Translation
Ali	"Taste of hunger"
Arberry	"Garment of hunger"
Asad	"Misery of hunger"
Abdel Haleem	"Garment of famine"
Khan and Hilali	"The extreme of hunger (famine)"

Source: Data Adapted from (Hassan, 2019)

Table 2 Different Interpretations of "لباس الجوع" (libas aljou) Based on Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Theory

Translator	Interpretation based on Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Theory
Ali	Hunger as a psychological sensation or feeling
Arberry	Hunger as a constant companion or part of one's identity
Asad	Hunger as a cause of suffering or misery
Abdel Haleem	Hunger in the context of a larger famine or food shortage
Khan and Hilali	Hunger as the most extreme form, i.e., famine

Source: Data Adapted from (Hassan, 2019)

The Interpretation of the Collocation "لباس التقوى" (libas attaqwa)

Here, translators oscillate between moral, spiritual, and protective readings. Ali and Hilali & Khan use “*raiment of righteousness*”, which foregrounds virtue as a visible quality. Arberry prefers “*garment of God-fearing*”, emphasizing reverence, while Asad and Abdel Haleem choose “*garment of God-consciousness*”, highlighting mindfulness.

This aligns with Newmark’s (1988) discussion of **semantic vs. communicative translation**: Ali’s choice leans towards semantic elegance, while Asad’s communicates a pragmatic spiritual stance to modern readers. Ricoeur’s hermeneutic circle is evident—each translator’s theological orientation (e.g., Ali’s Victorian moralism, Asad’s modernist accessibility) shaped the interpretive outcome.

Such variation affects how non-Arabic readers conceptualize *taqwā*. A reader of Ali may see it primarily as ethical conduct, while Asad’s audience understands it as **inner awareness**. This directly impacts religious practice, since concepts of righteousness or mindfulness translate into different lived expressions of faith.

Table 3 Product Translation and their Interpretations

Translator	Product Translation
Ali	"Raiment of righteousness"
Arberry	"Garment of God-fearing"
Asad	"Garment of God-consciousness"
Abdel Haleem	"Garment of God-consciousness"
Khan and Hilali	"Raiment of righteousness"

Source: Data Adapted from (Hassan, 2019)

Table 4 Product Translation and its Hermeneutic Interpretations

Product Translation	Hermeneutic Interpretation
"Raiment of righteousness"	emphasizes the pursuit of moral excellence, which leads to protection and safety
"Garment of God-fearing"	emphasizes the need for reverence in religious practice to protect oneself from wrongdoing
"Garment of God-consciousness"	emphasizes the importance of being mindful and aware in religious practice, leading to spiritual protection
"Garment of God-consciousness"	emphasizes the idea that the garment symbolizes protection and a sense of security in religious practice
"Raiment of righteousness"	emphasizes the idea that righteousness is a protective garment that shields one from harm and wrongdoing

Source: Data Adapted from (Hassan, 2019)

The Interpretations of the Collocation هن لباس لكم وأنتم لباس لهن (hunna libas lakum wantum libas lahunna)

Across translations (Q. 2:187), a consistent emphasis on intimacy and reciprocity emerges, though nuances differ. Ali stresses companionship (“*they are your garments...*”), while Abdel Haleem intensifies intimacy with “[*close*] as garments”. Hilali & Khan expand *libās* into glosses (“*body cover, or screen, or sakan*”), offering theological exegesis within the translation itself. The trend reflects Venuti’s (1995) notion of domestication vs. foreignization. Haleem domesticates, making the metaphor immediately accessible, while Hilali & Khan foreignize by preserving Islamic legal and exegetical shades. Ricoeur’s *application* stage is visible here: translation choices reveal the translator’s projection of marital relations—whether relational, intimate, or juridical.

For readers outside Islamic contexts, Haleem’s domestication clarifies marital intimacy, while Hilali & Khan’s gloss-heavy version risks overburdening the verse with legalistic tones. These choices influence how interfaith readers, especially, understand Qur’anic views on gender and marriage.

Table 5 Product Translation and their Interpretations

Translator	Product Translation
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Ali	"They are your garments and you are their garments."
Arberry	"They are as a garment for you and you are as a garment for them."
Asad	"They are as a garment for you and you are as a garment for them."
Abdel Haleem	"They are [close] as garments to you, as you are to them."
Khan and Hilali	"They are Libas [i.e., body cover, or screen, or sakan], for you and you are the same for them."

Source: Data Adapted from (Hassan, 2019)

Table 6 Product Translation and its Hermeneutic Interpretations

Product Translation	Hermeneutic Interpretation
"They are your garments and you are their garments."	Emphasizes the idea of mutual support and companionship in a relationship, where both partners provide comfort and protection to each other. This interpretation suggests that the relationship between two people is like a garment, providing comfort and protection.
"They are as a garment for you and you are as a garment for them."	Emphasizes the idea of mutual support and protection in a relationship. This interpretation suggests that the relationship between two people is like a garment, providing comfort and protection.
"They are as a garment for you and you are as a garment for them."	Similar to the previous interpretation, emphasizing the idea of mutual support and protection in a relationship. This interpretation suggests that the relationship between two people is like a garment, providing comfort and protection.
"They are [close] as garments to you, as you are to them."	Emphasizes the intimate nature of the relationship, suggesting that the two partners are as close and intimate as the garments they wear. This interpretation suggests that the relationship between two people is very close and intimate, like the garments they wear.
"They are Libas [i.e. body cover, or screen, or sakan], for you and you are the same for them."	Emphasizes the idea of protection and shelter, suggesting that each partner provides a sense of security and comfort to the other. This interpretation suggests that the relationship between two people provides protection and shelter, like a garment.

Source: Data Adapted from (Hassan, 2019)

The Interpretation of the Collocation "وجعلنا الليل لباسا" (wajalna allayl libasa)

In Q. 78:10, renderings vary between protective (“*covering*”, Ali; Haleem), poetic (“*cloak*”, Asad), and theologically interpretive (“*appointed...for a garment*”, Arberry). Hilali & Khan specify “*covering (through its darkness)*”, narrowing metaphor into explanatory prose. This variation illustrates Nida’s (1964) principle of dynamic equivalence: some translators seek to evoke the effect of the metaphor (Asad’s “cloak”), while others clarify its function (Hilali & Khan). Ricoeur’s *explanation* phase is key—translators refigure the metaphor according to how they conceptualize night (a shelter, divine decree, or cosmic veil). In practice, choices shape theological imagination. For example, “appointed...for a garment” underscores divine intentionality, appealing to readers attentive to cosmological design. Conversely, “covering” stresses night’s practical sheltering function, accessible to a wider audience but less evocative of divine agency.

Table 7 Product Translation and their Interpretations

Translator	Product Translation
Ali	"and made the night as a covering"
Arberry	"and We appointed night for a garment"
Asad	"and made the night [its] cloak"
Abdel Haleem	"give the night as a cover"
Khan and Hilali	"and have made the night as a covering (through its darkness)"

Source: Data Adapted from (Hassan, 2019)

Table 8 Product Translation and its Hermeneutic Interpretations

Product Translation	Hermeneutic Interpretation
"and made the night as a covering"	Emphasizes the idea of the night as a shelter or a refuge, providing protection and comfort. This interpretation suggests that the night provides a sense of safety and protection to those who seek refuge in it.
"and We appointed night for a garment"	Suggests a deliberate act of designating the night as a garment, which can be interpreted as a symbol of God's power and wisdom. This interpretation suggests that God has created the night as a protective garment for humanity, highlighting the idea of divine protection and guidance.
"and made the night [its] cloak"	Emphasizes the idea of protection and security, where the night is like a protective garment that covers everything. This interpretation suggests that the night provides a sense of safety and protection to those who seek refuge in it.

"give the night as a cover"	Emphasizes the idea that the night provides a sense of safety and protection to those who seek refuge in it. This interpretation suggests that the night is a symbol of safety and security, providing protection to those who seek it.
"and have made the night as a covering (through its darkness)"	Emphasizes the darkness of the night and how it functions as a covering or a veil, emphasizing the idea of concealment and mystery. This interpretation suggests that the night has a mysterious and mystical quality, inviting contemplation and reflection.

Source: Data Adapted from (Hassan, 2019)

The synthesis of findings across the four collocations reveals consistent patterns. Translator background plays a key role: modernist translators such as Asad and Haleem favor accessibility and detailed explanation, whereas earlier translators like Ali and Arberry maintain a more elevated literary style. A second pattern concerns the treatment of metaphor. Some translators preserve the Arabic imagery—for example, “garment of hunger”—while others replace it with culturally equivalent explanations such as “garment of famine.” These differing strategies have practical consequences, shaping not only reader comprehension but also theological orientation by influencing how audiences conceptualize central Qur’anic ideas such as *taqwā*, marriage, and divine creation. Aligned with Ricoeur’s hermeneutic model, the findings underscore that Qur’anic translation is far from a neutral transfer of meaning; it is a dialogical process in which translators inevitably reconfigure the text through their own cultural, theological, and historical horizons.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how Qur’anic collocations are interpreted and how language, culture, and personal experience shape that process. Using Ricoeurian hermeneutics, which frames interpretation as a dialogue between text and interpreter, the analysis of five English translations revealed that meaning is never fixed but constantly negotiated (Kharmandar, 2015). While this echoes previous scholarship, the specific translation choices uncovered here show how theological understanding can diverge in concrete ways.

For instance, when translators preserve the Arabic metaphor of *libās al-jū’* (“garment of hunger”), readers are invited to view deprivation as a divinely mediated trial. Others render it as “garment of famine,” shifting the focus to a sociopolitical crisis. Such lexical decisions can guide audiences toward distinct theological conclusions about whether suffering is primarily a spiritual test or a human predicament. Similar differences appear in the treatment of *taqwā*, where some translators foreground rational moral consciousness (Sardar, 2017), while others emphasize reverence and awe, encouraging more devotional responses (Cragg, 2021; Sinai, 2017).

These findings resonate with studies stressing the importance of historical and cultural context in Qur’anic interpretation (Haleem & Haleem, 2010; Sardar, 2017; McAuliffe, 2006; El-Desouky, 2014) and with research highlighting the challenges of conveying the Qur’an’s nuances across languages (Alhaj, 2015; Campanini, 2010; Saeed, 2006; Almakrob, A. Y., & Al-Ahdal, A. A. M. H., 2020). Together, they show that translators’ theological orientation and cultural

background inevitably shape how core concepts—such as divine creation, marriage, and moral responsibility—are presented to readers.

Consequently, Qur’anic translation emerges not as neutral transfer but as theological mediation. Translators, consciously or not, accentuate particular divine attributes and moral imperatives, influencing communal belief and practice. Recognizing this dynamic is essential for both translators and readers, for it underscores that every translation is an interpretive act with the potential to form distinct theologies (Kharmandar, 2015; Neuwirth, 2019; El-Desouky, 2014). By demonstrating how specific lexical and metaphorical choices redirect meaning, this study extends the wider literature on Qur’anic interpretation (Haleem & Haleem, 2010; Sardar, 2017; McAuliffe, 2006) and contributes to ongoing discussions in religious and translation studies about the power of language to shape belief.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the interpretation and translation of Quranic collocations through a Ricoeurian hermeneutic framework, highlighting the interplay of language, culture, and interpreter subjectivity. The analysis of selected collocations across five translations revealed that cultural background and interpretive orientation significantly shaped translational choices: Arab translators often emphasized lexical fidelity, while non-Arabic translators tended to privilege communicative clarity for target audiences. Personal experiences and implicit biases also surfaced, resulting in thematic emphases reflective of individual hermeneutic stances. While the findings underscore the importance of acknowledging culture, history, and interpreter subjectivity in Quranic translation, the study is limited by its focus on only four collocations, reliance on the researcher’s own interpretive lens, and the small number of translations analyzed. To address these limitations, future research should extend the Ricoeurian framework to a broader corpus and incorporate systematic comparative methods. Practical implications also emerge: translators of sacred texts should explicitly state their hermeneutic stance and translation strategies in prefaces, scholars should expand corpus-based hermeneutic studies of Quranic collocations, and educators should integrate philosophical hermeneutics into translation curricula. Ultimately, this study affirms that Quranic translation is not a neutral linguistic exercise but a profoundly interpretive act that requires critical awareness to preserve textual integrity while ensuring accessibility for diverse audiences.

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