

Translation Problems Between English and Arabic

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Abstract

Translation as a paradigm of cultural contact is not as clear a concept as it might seem to be. In the last 30 years, the field has expanded considerably towards a macro-level, encompassing the cultural context as a whole. Most recent theories in social linguistics raise the question of intercultural translation; they mean hermeneutic issues rather than the problems of faithfulness. Consequently, the translator is both a text receiver and a text producer who should first read and comprehend the Source Language Text then convey it equivalently into the Target Language Text. However, theorists find out that there is always a cultural gap between the source language and the target language that sometimes influences the emotiveness of the TL text. This paper is concerned with the cultural hindrances in Arabic-English translation. Moreover, it investigates examples to emphasize the fact that intercultural translation can help people understand better the alien cultural elements as long as competent translators keep trying to overcome these hindrances. Thus, the translator has to be both bilingual and bicultural to preserve the emotiveness of the SL text and create a natural text in the TL.

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مشكلات الترجمة ما بين اللغتين الانجليزية والعربية

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ملخص

لم يكن مفهوم الترجمة بوصفها وسيلة للاتصال الثقافى بين الشعوب واضحا خلال ثلاثون سنة مضت، ومع مرور الزمن امتد هذا المفهوم ليشمل البعد الثقافى حيث أظهرت غالبية نظريات اللغويات الاجتماعيه الحديثه أهمية ترجمة البعاد الثقافيه للنص بدلا من التركيز على المعنى الحرفى له.

وبذلك فان المترجم يكون قارئ للنص ومؤلفا له فى نفس الوقت، ولهذا لا بد له من قراءة النص وفهمه كما هو بلغته الأصلية التى كتب بها، ومن ثم ترجمته إلى نص مماثل بلغه أخرى. وبالرغم من ذلك يجد أصحاب النظريات أن هناك فجوة ثقافية بين لغة النص الأصلى واللغة المترجم إليها، والتى من شأنها أحيانا أن تضع التأثير العاطفى للنص بعد ترجمته. ومن هنا يهتم هذا البحث بدراسة مشاكل الترجمة بين اللغتين بين العربية والانجليزية ويدعمها بالأمثلة التوضيحية، وذلك للتأكيد على أهمية الترجمة بين الثقافات خاصة وأنها يمكن أن تساعد على فهم الأبعاد الثقافية المختلفة طالما يحاول المترجمون الماهرون التغلب على المشاكل المتعلقة بترجمة المصطلحات الثقافية.

ولهذا فلا بد للمترجم أن يكون ملما باللغة والثقافة التى يترجم منها وكذلك اللغة والثقافة التى يترجم إليه، وذلك للحفاظ على التأثير العاطفى للنص الأصلى عند ترجمته وتحويله إلى نص مطابق فى المعنى.

Introduction

In recent decades, problematic issues in translation have been widely dealt with by linguists and theorists of translation alike. This study investigates the cultural problems in translating between Arabic and English. These two languages belong to different cultures and different language families. Arabic belongs to the Semitic language family whereas English belongs to the Indo-European language family as a result translators sometimes find it difficult to keep the emotiveness of the SL expressions in the TL when translating between Arabic and English mainly the culture specific terms .

Translators may focus on conveying the denotative meaning of a word which is the basic one. However, it is not the only or whole meaning. Besides denoting or concrete meaning, action or concept, a word may carry various additional overtones generally described as connotations. They express one's attitude towards the concepts that is called an emotive component of meaning. For example, in Arabic we usually refer to father as *أبي* ، *أبى* ، *بابا* ، *الحج* ، *الوالد* ، *الحج* . However, *الحج* is more emotive than the other terms since it reflects more positive attitudes than the others even though all of these expressions can be used as equivalents for the English word *father* .

Consequently, emotiveness plays a role in keeping the readability of the text. It refers to the emotional response which the lexical items arouse in the text receiver. This response could be positive , negative , or neutral , in varying degrees .Some linguists assume that poetic texts are rich in emotive connotations that other types of texts (political, scientific, and legal) may lack. They suggest that some contexts require translators to take care of the emotive and affective elements in the SL rather than the informative or content elements. The same lexical item may have a positive and a negative connotation according to the lexical item it collocates with. Shunnaq (1993) mentioned “the lexical item *ابيض* *abyad* (white) as an example saying that it is denotatively used as in *قميص ابيض* *qamiisun abyad* (white shirt) while connotatively or emotively as in *ثورة بيضاء* *thauratun bayda* (white revolution), which connotes (peaceful, bloodless revolution)”. Thus,

the denotative and connotative meanings have a great influence on emotiveness.

Moreover, the emotive meaning is necessary to convey the history of the term usage and its reference. The reader of the TL text needs to understand the real functional responses of the SL expressions or the sphere in which the discourse takes place. Thus when the translator is familiar with the stylistic reference of the word he / she will convey the real and natural message in the TL as well as he/she will not confuse the TL reader. For example , in English the words *father, dad, daddy, pop, old man* - all have the same denotative meaning (they are all synonyms), but they have different emotive meanings and stylistic references.

Thus, an Arab translator translating cultural terms from Arabic into English should take into consideration the emotive aspect encapsulated in these terms by means of paying attention to their denotative and connotative meanings. Shunnaq (1993) emphasizes this point in that an Arab translator who renders emotive lexical items into English should bear in mind this suggestion as well as to the cultural context that can be very helpful in conveying the emotive meaning encapsulated in the SL expressions into the TL.

On the other hand, there are numerous examples of cultural items or expressions which pose a difficulty when translating into English, and their translation looks incongruent despite the efforts translators made, such as euphemized words .For example, ‘died’ is a blunt, factual term used to express the event of death. However, ‘passed away’, ‘departed from the world’, ‘went to his reward’, ‘found rest’, etc. are terms of euphemism in English. In Arabic, these terms express the same idea and they can be rendered as *انتقل إلى جوار ربه* (moved to his Lord’s neighborhood), *انتقل إلى رحمة الله* (moved to God’s mercy), and *انتقل إلى* *مثنواة الأخير* (moved to the last abode).Nevertheless, the Arabic terms are more emotive than their English counterparts .

In addition, proverbial expressions can be problematic for the translator since they are products of culture and heritage. Each language reflects different shades of meanings due to the difference in cultures. Translation of proverbs is difficult unless the translator is fully aware of the idiosyncrasies of SL culture. For instance; it is difficult to translate the Arab proverb

كالباحث عن حتفه بظلفه into English. It could be rendered literally as 'like one searching for his death with his own hoof'. However, such rendering seems meaningless unless it is accompanied by the story underlying the proverb (originating from the story of a ewe digging up a knife in the earth and then being slaughtered with it).

Furthermore, the Arabic proverb إكراما لعين تكرم مرج عيون is difficult to be translated unless the translator is familiar with both the Arab and English cultures to opt for a functional and natural proverb in the TL as (Love me, love my dog).

Statement of the problem

Some translators may mislead the TL reader due to their ignorance of the cultural aspects of the SL terms. Thus, they may render them into incongruent equivalents in the TL.

Aims of the study

This study aims to shed light on problems that translators may encounter in translating between Arabic and English due to cultural differences between the SL and the TL. It also aims to urge translators for paying more attention to the shade of meaning encapsulated in the SL culture specific expressions in order to convey a natural message in the TL.

Hypothesis

Differences among cultures represent an area of difficulty in translation due to the fact that the term may be completely missing in the TL, or the TL equivalent may not preserve the same connotation of the SL term that leads to lack of emotiveness in the TL.

Questions of the study

1. Do translators convey the shade of meaning that culture specific terms may have?
2. Are culture specific concepts easy to be translated?
3. Can translators render cultural concepts into natural equivalents in the TL?

Literature Review

Newmark (1988) defines culture as the way of life and its manifestations peculiar to a society. Bloch (1991) defines culture as what needs to be known to operate effectively in a specific environment. Rohner (1984) is more specific than Newmark and Bloch defines culture in a non-behaviorist way, as a system of symbolic meanings that shape one's way of thinking. The emphasis for Rohner is on how people conceive their behavior. Rohner's definition highlights two things: (i) Culture is systematic, i.e. it is organised in a group. (ii) Culture is a way of representing one's world through thinking. Furthermore, Sapir (1949: 79) notes that "culture is technically used by the ethnologist and culture historians to embody any socially inherited element in the life of man, material and spiritual." Lado (1957: 111) defined culture as "structural systems of patterned behavior". To Bennett (1968: 10), "culture is the reflection of the total behavior of a society".

Culture, then, is a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom, ecology, and habits acquired by a group of people in a society. Language is the foundation upon which culture rests. Thus, words only have meaning in terms of the culture in which they are used. Even though one culture should have one language, a single language sometimes crosses several culture borders. English for instance, has become the dominant and official language of societies having different cultures.

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Hofstede (1980) states that culture is learned rather than inherited. It is related to one's social environment, not to his/ her genes. He refers to culture as a construct processed by "human mental programming". Human nature consists of the basic parts of 'mental programming,' such as the ability to feel anger, love, joy, sadness, observation of the environment, and the ability to communicate those feelings and observations to others. The way one expresses these abilities is modified and influenced by culture.

Lotman's states that "no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language" (Lotman, 1978:211-32). Bassnett (1991: 13-14) underlines the importance of this double consideration when translating by stating that language is "the heart within the body of culture," the survival of both aspects being interdependent. Linguistic notions of transferring meaning are seen as being only part of the translation process; "a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria" must also be considered. As Bassnett further points out, "the translator must tackle the SL text in such a way that the TL version will correspond to the SL version... To attempt to impose the value system of the SL culture onto the TL culture is dangerous ground" (Bassnett, 1991:23). Thus, when translating, it is important to consider not only the lexical impact on the TL reader, but also the manner in which cultural aspects may be perceived and make translating decisions accordingly.

The more disagreement there is between the concepts of the source culture or its linguistic system and those of the TL culture or its linguistic system, the more these variables hinder intercultural translation. This may lead to untranslatability such as in cases overwhelmed by tension between form and meaning. This can make obtaining full equivalence difficult, or even impossible. Regarding this point, Winter says:

The system of form and meaning in language A may be similar to that in language B, but it is never identical with it. This statement implies that there is no completely exact translation. If an interpretation of

reality as formulated in language A does not exist in isolation, but as part of the total system of this language, then its correlative in language B cannot be isolated from the overall system of B, which must be different from that of A.

Winter's argument is obviously applied to the translation of text in which form and meaning are closely interwoven. There is an infinite number of shades between form and meaning. In expository writing, form and meaning are not as close-knit as they are in poetry, for instance. Indeed, impossibility of translation could arise from the untranslatability of context, that is, life patterns expressed in the SL text could be completely alien to the TL reader. However, the cultural gap among nations could still be bridged; in recent times, globalization and modern communication technology has helped the world's cultures to get closer and become more accessible (mostly through the English language). This, of course helps to enlighten the TL reader and increase his awareness of many concepts that belong to cultures completely alien to his own.

Thus, Al-Najjar states that the receptor-culture reader may share with the source-culture reader knowledge about the life patterns of the source culture. He may have been informed previously about the source culture. He may have read an anthropological study of the other culture, or may have lived for a certain time with the society of the source culture.

Discussion :

Most linguists and theorists emphasize the fact that culture has a great impact on translation as it represents different aspects of human life. Thus theorists realize that it is a very complex and controversial issue because "all human groups are cultured, though in vastly different manners and grades of complexity" (Sapir, 1949: 80). Moreover, this complexity lies in the fact that what is considered culturally acceptable to one group of people can be regarded as totally strange and mysterious to another. For instance, The Arabic concept طلاق بائن قبل الدخول is completely missing in the English culture ,thus if the

translator is unfamiliar with such term he /she may render it as (irrevocable divorce before coming in) which seems odd where as a competent translator can describe it conceptually as (irrevocable divorce before consummation of marriage) that seems natural and emotive in the TL.

In addition, the term **زكاة** does not exist in the English culture so this term may be translated as (charity) which conveys only part of the meaning of the Arabic term . However, when the translator is familiar with this term he/she will paraphrase its concept naturally as (compulsory charity in Islam when the income conditions are met). On the other hand, A translator who is not well versed with the English culture may convey the biblical terms (**Death by Crucifixion**) and (**Good Friday**) as **الموت صلبا و الجمعة الصالحة** that are not natural nor emotive in the TL. Nevertheless, a competent translator will translate them consecutively as **القتل صلبا و الجمعة العظيمة** regardless of whether these terms are familiar in the Arabic culture or not .

It is difficult to avoid problems in translating culture specific terms simply because the translators lose the connotative meaning encapsulated within the SL expressions. Consequently, these expressions do not convey the same responses intended by the SL speakers. In this case, the translator should overcome such a problem by adding extra images to clarify the meaning. "When the languages involved are so distant that the same figures do not exist in one or the other, different procedures for the translation are implemented to achieve a partially successful transfer. In this case, compensation is nearly always resorted to" (García, 1996: 64). For example, the Arabic term **الهجرة النبوية** is completely missing in English so that the translator may transliterate it as *Hijrah of prophet Mohammad* but he/she should add a footnote to explain it as the prophet Mohammad migration from Makkah to Madeenah.

Ilyas (1989: 124) presents the English term *owl* as an example that clarifies this point. If this term is mentioned in an English text which is to be translated into Arabic. In both languages term *owl* refers to a universal creature i.e. bird. However, its connotations are completely different. In English, it represents positive connotations (wisdom and

grace), but in Arabic it symbolizes negative associations such as pessimism. In such a case, the translator has either to clarify the meaning by adding an extra material in his TL version in order to make such implicit connotations explicit in the TL, or opt for adding an explanatory footnote to make up for the missing connotations in his TL version.

Consequently, when the translator comes across the problem of not finding a cultural equivalent term in the TL that corresponds to the SL term, he/she usually resorts to an equivalent non corresponding term which may convey an equivalent function in the TL culture. For example, translating the phrase *as white as snow* into a language whose people have no experience with snow can be carried out successfully by looking for a non-corresponding but functionally equivalent TL expression that would match the SL. This can be achieved by rendering it into something like: *as white as cotton* for instance, since both convey the same function of emphasizing the feature of whiteness in an expressive way.

This idea is clear when translating colors between Arabic and English. For instance, the Arabic term *عُيونٌ عسليه* does not have a corresponding equivalent in English, thus the translator may render it into non-corresponding equivalent color expression as *brown eyes*. The Arabic term *شعر ابيض* (lit. white hair) also does not have an equivalent in English; The translator has to convey it into a term that conveys the same meaning as *grey hair*

Sometimes the translator has to deal with cultural expressions that have a completely different tastes and conventions. When translating, a translator has to bear in mind the fact that he should exchange ideas and messages rather than merely words. Taking this into consideration, the translator should be familiar with and sensitive to both cultures. For instance, Islamic teaching and conventions are deeply rooted in Arabic culture. These culture-specific expressions are very difficult to be rendered into other languages. Consequently, in translating the Arabic emotive terms as *الله يطول عمرك* and *علي الطلاق*

the translator encounters a lexical gap that cannot be fulfilled due to the fact that such expressions are completely missing in English. Thus the translator may render them conceptually as (I swear) and (May God make long your life) that are not as emotive as their Arabic correspondents.

Moreover, synonymy is a problematic area that translators sometimes may miss the shade of meaning some terms have, as a result they end with unnatural term in the TL. Eugene Nida (1964), Peter Newmark (1981&1988) S.B.McGuire (1980), Anna Wierzbicka (1980) have all attempted to handle the problem of synonymy and translatability. Synonyms may be problematic to the translator since sometimes he/she may have two expressions in the SL that can be rendered into one in the TL. For instance, Arabic distinguishes between the brother of one's father (عم) and the brother of one's mother (خال) whereas English does not have such distinction since the kinship term *uncle* is used in referring to both. In translating these terms into English the translator needs to create a new lexical term to specify their meanings *i.e. paternal uncle and maternal uncle*.

In addition, Arabic distinguishes between the sister of one's father (عمه) and the sister of one's mother (خاله), but English refers to both *aunt*. On the other hand, Arabic distinguishes between the son and daughter of the father's brother (ابن العم، بنت العم) As well as, the son and daughter of the mother's brother (ابن الخال، بنت الخال). English does not have such distinction and refers to these kinship relationships in Arabic as *cousins*.

Further more, Arabic expressions قسمه ونصيب can be rendered into English as (destiny) which is incongruent with the Arabic correspondents. As well as the Arabic terms العَرَضُ والشرف can be translated as (honor) that indicates a lexical incongruency between Arabic and English.

In some situations, translators may encounter untranslatable cultural terms due to the lack of their intercultural equivalents in the TL. For

Catford (1965), intercultural non-equivalence which can cause untranslatability arises when a situational feature is functionally relevant to the SL text, but fully absent from the TL text in which the TL culture is rooted. In Arabic, there are some culture specific terms that are not easily rendered into English. For instance, the compliment at the end of the meal هنيئنا has no equivalent in English; the translator may render it into something like *I hope you liked it* which does not convey the emotive meaning intended by the Arabic term. Other Arabic terms like *dishdasha* and *iqal* are completely missing in English thus the translator may paraphrase them as *loose robe* and *special dress of the head*.

It is true that in some cases, the Arab translator may find certain lexical items in Arabic having no lexical equivalents in English because the concepts they refer to do not exist in the English-speaking culture. As a result, the translator may opt for paraphrasing them. Such terms include: سحور *sahuur* (a meal eaten before the dawn for fasting); خلوة *khalwah* (a man and woman meet in a place where there is nobody else); تيمم *tayammum* (making ablutions with earth by Muslims when water is scarce or missing); العصمه *isma* (when the man or woman retain the right to divorce the other whenever he/she wish); عقيقة *aqiiqah* (a goat, sheep or cow slaughtered to share with family, friends and the poor on the occasion for having a new baby); صلاة الاستسقاء *salaat al-'istisqaa* (the prayer asking God for rain); صلاة الاستخارة *sallat al-'istikhaarah* (the prayer asking God's guidance in making a decision); and عده *iddah* (the legally prescribed period of months during which a widowed or divorced woman may not see a man or remarry). The difficulty in translating these words is due to lexical gaps resulting from the fact that these expressions are completely missing in the English culture.

So translators, in most cases, fail to convey the emotive connotative meanings encapsulated with the Arabic culture specific terms in translating them into English, managing only to convey their denotative meanings.

The role of the translator

According to Al-Najjar The role of the translator can by no means be underestimated, for he is the one who decodes the SL message and analyzes its meaning, and he is the one who re-encodes it into a presumably equivalent TL message. His knowledge, culture, performance, skill, experience and proficiency play a major role to mitigate and dilute the obscurity even of the most culturally complicated items and can discharge them from the obscurity of the SL to the clarity of the TL and make them digestible to the TL readership.

Thus, the issue of translatability is believed to be translator-dependent. Depending on his skill and experience, the competent translator can translate the untranslatable and creatively offer somewhat meaningful TL versions out of the most obscure texts. On this basis, translatability can be defined as the process by which an equivalent TL text exists for a particular SL text. For instance, a particular Arabic cultural item is considered translatable as long as a translator is able to offer an equivalent TL translation.

The translator, then, plays a crucial role in the success or failure of the process of translating. The translator should read the author's mind the moment he starts translating the text so that he can see what the author sees and feel what the author feels. Rose's view to achieve identity with the author of the SL message is declared as he says:

Since as translators we must become the mirror of the original author, think his thoughts, have his opinions and feelings, we must train ourselves to see the world through his eyes or effect a symbiotic arrangement that lets the world impinge upon the resulting compound consciousness.

(Rose 1977, cited in Al-Najjar 1984)

Moreover, we need to bear in mind the fact that the translator is a reader in the first place. He is the one who analytically decodes the author's text and re-encodes it in the TL language. The task of the translator might look simpler than that of the author because the

author is the one who offers new information, while the translator only repeats what the author has said or written. However, the translator's task is more crucial and challenging than the author's:

It is axiomatic to say, therefore, that the translator's task is more difficult than the writer's because the former is confined to the ideas of the latter. Moreover, he is obliged to convey the ideas of the SLT into the TLT giving utmost care to the linguistic and cultural norms of the TL, as well as its naturalness. In other words, the translator is expected to produce a TLT, which should be equivalent, creative, and genuine, and has the SL-cultural flavor.

(Shunnaq 1998)

The premise upon which this assertion is made indicates that the translator's task is more critical since translation always involves difficulties arising from the transfer of the message from the SL to TL. Producing full equivalence in translating certain Arabic texts into English involves major difficulties for Arab translators. These difficulties may affect translating proverbial expressions. Indeed, translation with full equivalence is expected to be hardly achievable for the type of text we are dealing with (i.e. culture-specific terms) because the translator always comes under pressure, on the one hand, from his desire to be faithful and loyal to the semantic and structural properties of the SL and, on the other hand, from his aim to produce a version that suits the mentality and cultural expectations of the TL addressees.

Conclusion

Translation is not impossible, since this human activity, whereby man has overcome the language barrier, has been practiced between different languages of the world since ancient times. By contrast, it is not a smooth and straightforward activity, which can easily be carried out. Translators have always come across perplexing problems and difficulties while carrying out their task, which demands talents and capabilities on their part. Indeed, while some texts are easy to

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translate, others are so difficult that they may almost be described as untranslatable. Thus, the translator has to be familiar with both the SL culture as well as the TL culture in order to convey a natural message in the TL .

Consequently, culture specific terms are difficult to be translated and sometimes the translator may mislead the TL reader unless he/she is aware of the SL culture and the TL culture . As a result; the translator will not convey a natural and emotive message in the TL unless he/she is both bilingual and bicultural. It is important for the translator to be acquainted with the TL's cultural background in order to avoid rendering culture specific terms literally and to make sure not to miss the cultural significance of the SL text.

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