

Translation and Inter-Cultural Dialogue

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مستخلص

تهدف هذه المباحثة الى لقاء بعض الضوء على دور الترجمة في حوار الثقافات والحضارات. ولهذه الغاية، تستعرض المقالة بايجاز أهمية الترجمة في الثقافة والحضارة العربية، ودور بعض المترجمين العرب والمسلمين في عملية التلاقح الثقافي والحضاري وارسائهم أسس منهجية علمية للترجمة. هذا بالاضافة الى شرح مقتضب لماهية الترجمة وقضية المعنى وأثر السياق فيه. وأخيرا، يعرض الكاتب أثر الترجمات المغلوطة على حوار الثقافات والحضارات.

Abstract

This paper sets out to shed some light on the role of translation in inter-cultural dialogue. To this effect, the role of Arab and Muslim translators in maintaining inter-cultural interaction and their laying the foundations of a scientific methodology for translation is also highlighted, albeit briefly. Then, the nature of translation and the thorny issue of meaning are pinpointed. Finally, the paper spells out the impact of erroneous translations on inter-cultural dialogue

Declaration

I hereby testify that this paper has not been published or sent to any journal before.

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Introduction

Interest in translation which dates back to the ancient Egyptian Kingdom (Newmark 1988) has been motivated by the desire to communicate with people of different languages, cultures and civilizations. In this sense, not only has translation been an effective tool for communication, but it has helped to maintain human cultural and scientific heritage and hand it over to new generations as well. This has, in turn, led to enriching existing civilizations and establishing new ones. The Roman's civilization, for example, gathered momentum by translating the Greeks' philosophical, religious and scientific heritage. Arab civilization also owes a lot to Greek, Roman, Persian and Indian scholarship.

This paper seeks to shed some light on Arab translators' contribution to human civilization in general and to enhancing international cultural dialogue in particular. It also attempts to pinpoint the contribution of Arab and Muslim scholars and translators to establishing a scientific methodology of translation. To this effect, the author will begin by a historical background which spells out evolution and development of translation in the Arab and Islamic world. A bird's eye view of a glimpse of the nature and methodology of translation and the effect of erroneous translation on communication among different nations.

Arab translators' contributions to inter-cultural dialogue

It was Caliph, Omar Bin al-Khattab, who first gave orders to render Persian Divans into Arabic, hence establishing soldiers, letters, and mail Divans for the new Islamic state. In a sense, translation from Persian civilization contributed to laying the solid foundations of the newly-born Islamic civilization.

This dialogue between civilizations culminated in the era following the Islamic conquests, especially during the reign of Caliph al-Ma'moun. In those days, Beit al-Hikma (House of Wisdom), was established. This place housed a galaxy of Arab and Muslim scholars who rendered into

Arabic the most important philosophical, cultural and scientific works of Greek, Roman, Indian and Persian scholars (Najeeb 2001). Thanks to those Arab translators and thinkers without whose strenuous efforts, the works of Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Archimedes Palladiums, among others, would not have come to light.

A close scrutiny of the process of translation as handled by the translators of Beit al-Hikma spells out the fact that Arab translators were hundred of years abreast of modern translation scholars. Quite recently, Newmark (1988) suggests that a translator has to be a good reader and writer. Translation and writing ran in parallel those days. This rather inseparable relationship between translation and writing made al-Jahith, a great scholar at Beit al-Hikma, write his seminal book, *al-Bayan wa-tabyeen*, so the translator's message can get across to the reader coherently and clearly (al-Didawi 2005). Al-Jahith, who was not himself a translator, used to hold debates with the contemporary translators about the process of translation. The influence of his book on translation brought about what may be called 'textulization' viz. reproduction of the text. This is an act of Arabization as it meant reproducing the source text (ST) in a way which made the target text (TT) read as if it had been originally written in Arabic. Of the famous writers who excelled at arabization were al-Jirjani, as-Sakakini, and Ibn al-Muqafa'. In fact, al-Muqafa's translations were a source of inspiration to al-Jahith. Thus, textualization, an offspring of translation, gave birth to determining rules and features of accurate writing which is exemplified in in Ibn al-Muqafa's *Kalila wa Dimna* (al-Didawi 2005:7).

Arabs' interest in translation in those days reached its peak as a translator was paid the weight of what he translated in gold. This fervent interest resulted in establishing two schools of translation for the first time in the long history of this discipline. Each school had its translation methodology some aspects of which are still controversial issues till now. The first school which was founded by Yuhanna Bin al-Batriq and Ibn Na'mah al-Himsi advocated word-for-word translation. That is the translator should move from one word to the next during the process of translating. This translation method which is equated with literal translation most often produces an erroneous translation as it does not take into account the structural differences between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL). By way of translation, the Arabic

phrase سيارة حمراء would translate as 'car red' according to this method! The other school which was championed by Hunain Bin Ishaq, al-Juhari and others opted for the literal translation of meaning, which has recently been referred to as 'free translation' (Nida 1975, Catford 1915, among others). This method makes allowances for the syntactic and structural differences between the SL and the TL, so the above Arabic expression translates as 'red car'. The influence of the latter school continued till the 3rd H (corresponding to the 9th century B.C.). Then an epoch of creativity in writing ensued. Some Arab and Muslim scholars produced new books based on their understanding of what had been translated into Arabic from other languages. Ibn Sina, al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn an-Nafis, al-Bairouni, Ibn al-Bitar, and Ibn Rushd were but a few of the scholars who enriched human culture and civilization at large with their books, some of which are still considered invaluable references for scholars, researchers and students in varied fields of knowledge. This, in turn, demonstrates how translation can contribute to developing different cultures and civilizations.

Contact between the West and the Islamic civilization took place in Andalusia in the 7th H. century (13th century B.C.). With this contact came what may be called backward translation, viz. translating from Arabic into Latin and other European languages. The westerner translators transferred into their languages the works of the above mentioned Muslim and Arab scholars (e.g. Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, etc.). Roger Bacon, Francis Bacon and Claude Bernard affirm that the new scientific methodology owes a lot to those Arab and Muslim scholars who based their approaches on meticulous observation and experimentation rather than on logical deduction as did Aristotle (Najeeb 2001). In fact, translating from Arabic into those languages was the impetus for the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the Middle Ages and the current accelerating scientific and technological revolution which the entire world now witnesses.

Despite the long period of disruption, translation resumed its role at the turn of the 20th century. But this time, it was a kind of backward translation. Arab scholars, especially those who had their education in Europe such as al-Manfaluti, al-Tahtawi, Taha Hussein, Adel Z'eitir, among others began translating seminal works in different fields of knowledge, especially literature, etc. from European languages into

Arabic. This reciprocal dialogue among cultures and civilizations once again has enriched the literary heritage of Arabs. New literary genres such as novels, plays, short stories, etc. entered Arabic literature for the first time. Most importantly, those scholars adopted a translation methodology which had not been known in the West at the time. Adel Z'eitir's translation approach is a point in case. Before embarking on the task of translation, Z'eiter used to read a lot about the topic of translation for about six months. During the process of translating, he used to check with native speakers about the spelling and pronunciation of some expressions to ensure that they would be transliterated accurately (Jaber 1996). In fact, the translation approach of this scholar is exemplary and would be one of the best produced approaches ever produced.

Nature of translation

In order for translation to play its role as a crucial tool for reciprocal communication and dialogue between different languages, cultures and civilizations, we should first know what translation is and accordingly how translators can avoid faulty translation.

In default of a unanimously approved definition of translation, most scholars and theorists define translation as the process of transmitting the meaning of a text from one language (SL) into another (TL) in a way that makes the TT have an effect on its audience equivalent to that the ST had on its audience (Newmark 1988). Some scholars talk about 'equivalence in meaning' only (Hajjaj and Farghal 1997). In fact, equivalent effect which means that the ST and the TT have the same pragmatic effect on their prospective audience requires more than equivalence in meaning. For example, supposing that the ST stirred its audience to take some kind of action or evoke a certain feeling in them, then the TT is expected to do the same on the part of its readers. This pragmatic effect cannot be achieved solely by rendering the surface meaning of the ST. Rather, the translator has to dig deep between, underneath and beyond the lines to arrive at the author's intended rhetorical message (i.e. inform, protest, warn, argue, etc.). An author may sound supportive of a particular regime while in reality he is denigrating it quite bitterly. It is this tone which the translator has to mirror in the TL.

Reflecting the exact meaning of a text adequately is exigent for continued inter-cultural dialogue. However, the notion of meaning is a sloppy one. Some words may have more than one meaning in the dictionary. The English word 'bank' means, 1) a financial institution, 2) a raised area of land the side of a river (e.g. the West Bank), and 3) a large number of things in a row (e.g. a bank of TV monitors), among others (Macmillan English Dictionary 2002). This is besides the several senses of each of the three meanings and the use of the word to serve as different parts of speech (verb, adjective, compound noun, etc.) (See the above dictionary).

If words can have such a variety of meanings, what about the entire text? After all, the meaning of a text captures more than the total meaning of its words. A great part of the meaning of lexical elements, sentences and whole texts reside outside the text boundary. The context of situation which includes among other things the participants' relations, the setting (time and place) of the text, the translator's and reader's intentions, etc. does affect the meaning of the text. In isolation, words have denotative/ referential/ representative meanings, and in context they acquire connotative/ expressive/ emotive meanings. For example, while the word 'taxi' has one denotative meaning (the vehicle we use to move from one place to another), it does not have the same connotation for a passenger and a taxi driver. For a passenger, 'taxi' is a means of transport, while for a driver it is a means of earning a living. Consequently, when this word is uttered/ written by a taxi driver it may be loaded with an emotive connotation which may be absent from it when used by a passenger. Still, a word in context acquires a functional value which does not exist in its propositional meaning. While in isolation the sentence 'exam results are misleading' can be construed as a generalization, in a school context when uttered after the utterance 'you can't dispel my son from school' by an angry father, it acquires the value of a 'protest'. If this utterance makes the school principal rethink his decision, it can be said that the utterance has achieved its pragmatic effect (Nuttall 1982). Thus, words may have varied meanings in different contexts. Which meaning should be captured by the translator is something the given context determines.

Furthermore, languages also differ in their figurative usage of words, which is mostly culture-bound. This is particularly true of the language of spoken, and to a great extent, media communication. It

follows that understanding and eventually interpreting and/ or translating from the SL largely hinges on an accurate knowledge of the meaning of those expressions in their cultural contexts. Some idiomatic expressions do have equivalents in the TL, but others do not. For examples, Arabic does not have the following idiomatic expressions

- a drop in ocean
- to moonlight
- to rain cats and dogs
- can of worms
- tall order
- monkey business
- etc.

Since Arabic has an equivalent for the first idiom which is نقطة في بحر / محيط, the translator can safely use formal equivalence. But when this type of equivalence does not work, as is the case with the other idiomatic expression, he has to employ functional/ dynamic (Nida 1975) equivalence which yields the following translations respectively:

- يعمل عملاً جزئياً (part-time)
- تمطر بغزارة-
- مليء بالمصائب/ بالمشاكل-
- مهمة شاقة-
- أشياء/ أمور مربكة-

Thus, translation is not only a matter of knowing the dictionary meaning of words and texts, but rather knowing the culture of the SL people. Then translation can be defined as the process of transmitting a source culture into a target culture.

Culture, context and meaning

In addition to the above factors which contribute one way or another to the notion of meaning, the translator must be well aware of certain differences between cultures representing different languages and which also modify the meanings of words and entire texts. For example, meanings of words may be as well modified due to the specific historical, geographical, environmental and cultural context wherein they occur. Differences at these levels can be detrimental to accurate translation. For example, in Arabic we say هذا الخبر أثلج صدورنا while French say " أدفأ صدورنا ". The difference here has to do with climatic

differences between different geographical regions. And it is this reason which made Shakespeare enquire 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' because in English summer is the most favorite season when the weather becomes warm and nature gets more beautiful. In other words, summer to them is like spring to us. Hence, the translator has to render the term 'summer' as صيف but he has to explain this climatic difference to the reader.

Furthermore, certain cultural differences may preclude translation from being an effective instrument of communication and dialogue. By way of illustration, the English culture-specific word 'cohabitation' does not have an Arabic equivalent. This is both forbidden and taboo in the Arab culture. In this case, the translator should use the descriptive translation strategy which entails explaining the term for the Arab reader as 'when a man and a woman live together and may have babies without marriage'. When the explanation is long, it can be added as a footnote. Likewise, the Arabic words زكاة، محرم، ضرة، محلل، الخ have not equivalents in English. Descriptive translation is the only solution here, too.

This being the case, translators should militate against literal translation which may be at times erroneous. Darwish (2006) argues that Arab translators' tendency to translate literally may lead to misunderstanding between nations. For example, interpreting Bush's expression 'Crusade against terrorism' as "حرب على الارهاب" is an example of literal translation which has brought about a wide misunderstanding in the Arab World. The problem in this translation refers to the translator's lack of awareness of the cultural context of the expression and its historical connotation. It is true that the word 'crusade' is associated with 'Crusades/ Crusaders' (الحروب الصليبية/ الصليبيون), but this historical connotation has change by time and the expression is now used in a variety of contexts meaning a 'campaign', hence 'Breast Cancer Crusade', 'Hunger Crusade', etc. By the same token, the literal translation of the expressions 'carrot and stick policy' and 'old guard' which have been rendered as 'سياسة العصا والجزرة' and 'الحرس القديم' respectively. Again, the translator here has missed the historical evolution and cultural context as the 'stick' and 'carrot' are no longer symbols of punishment but only of reward as depicted by cartoonists of Disney Land. Similarly, 'old guard' which used to refer 'real guard' now refers to 'conservatives' who oppose any change. Thus, the two expressions can be better translated as 'سياسة الترغيب والترهيب' and

'المحافظون' respectively. One final example is translating 'money laundering' as "غسيل الأموال" as if money like any piece of cloth is washed! Darwish (ibid) suggests a better translation which is "تمويه مصدر" 'المال الحرام' which may not be acceptable for its religious connotation.

Erroneous translation and inter-cultural interaction

Erroneous translation which fails to capture the political and cultural context of the SL expression or text may lead to misunderstanding and eventually disruption of global cultural interaction. A case in point is the use of the term 'pigmy' instead of 'dwarf' by an interpreter in the United Nations to refer to some Africans who were short. The result was withdrawal of many African delegations from the session, protesting against the term which denotes racial discrimination. Although such translation errors may be due to the translator's incompetence, the result would often be devastating on the part of the involved parties.

However, producing translations which deliberately aim to distort the image of the source cultures and civilizations is not uncommon. Now and then, a fake translation of the Holy Quran comes out. This also applies to deliberate misinterpretations of Prophet Mohammad's (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) Hadith (tradition). However, since the Holy Quran and Hadith are learned by faithful Muslims' hearts, such fake translations would be easily discovered. Furthermore, the Arab heritage which has done a priceless service to humanity at large is often mistranslated by some western translators. The intent is to distort the image of Arabs and Muslims to the west. This has resulted in the 'terrorist' image of any Arab and Muslim.

This, in fact, leads to an important issue concerning the influence of translation on international dialogue. It is always the case that the culture of powerful nations affects that of the less powerful or rather weak nations. For example, when the first Palestinian Intifada erupted in the occupied territories, the western and even American media adopted the term Intifada intact. But when this expression lost its luster in the Arab World, it was first replaced by the term 'uprising' and now the expression 'violence' has gained more currency in the western and American media. On the other hand, because Japan is a powerful country, at least

economically, the Japanese term 'hamikaze' has been borrowed into English and is still in use.

In order for translation to play its role as a tool for dialogue between civilization, al-Aali (2006) argues that translation must be bound up with reinterpretation of the SL text. He remarks that a text should not be viewed as the property of a certain individual or nation. Rather, it is a piece of universal discourse which can be reinterpreted several times. This was what the Arab translators and scholars of Beit al-Hikma did when they translated the works of Greek, Roman, Indian and Persian thinkers. Those works were Arabized so they became part of the Arab and Islamic culture. That is way those works were transmitted to Europe afterwards. In other words, in order for translation to enhance inter-cultural dialogue, it should aim at creating target texts which read as if they were originally written in the TL. This is what could be termed inter-dialogic translation which does not attempt to phase out cultural differences but rather employ them to create understanding between different cultures and civilizations.

It is a well-known fact that the current revolution in communication and informatics has made the role of translation much more influential. Different mass media do play a prominent role in constituting the public views towards varied international issues. There is a fervent struggle between the multiplicity of TV channels to win over the audience and make them adopt their views. Translation can be an effective instrument in this regard. These are but a few examples:

-عمليات استشهادية- is rendered in the American and western media as 'suicide operations'. -Iraqi fighters for freedom (al-mujahidun) is translated as 'insurgents' (المتمردون).

-جدار الفصل العنصري (في فلسطين)- is transferred as 'security fence'. Notice how the translator has opted for a very neutral term which does not capture the criminal and discriminatory meaning of the 'wall'. Paradoxically enough, some Arab mass media have adopted these translations and hence marketing them to the Arab audience!

This being the case, translator should know the discourse of the SL people. This will enable him to grasp the intended meaning of their utterances/ texts and address them in their own discourse. This way only can inter-cultural dialogue be maintained and enhanced.

It is true that translation in the Arab World witnesses an eclipse these days. While the annual contribution of all Arab translators amounts to 300 books, Israeli translators translate about 3000 books a year (abdul-Hadi 2003). One main reason for this deplorable situation could be the absence of an official body (i.e. organization, union, etc.) which strictly decides on what to be translated and who has the proper qualifications to do translator, and most importantly keeps an eye on the translations concerned with the Arab and Islamic culture which are produced by some biased western translators to serve insidious political purposes. Such a translation organization/ union can also look into the translation programs offered at many Arab universities and private centers. It should be the only body which certifies qualified translators and prevents disqualified ones from practicing this enterprise; otherwise, translation will continue to be 'the job of jobless people' (مهنة من لا مهنة له) (al-Jabr forthcoming).

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