

CULTURAL DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSLATIONS FROM ENGLISH INTO ARABIC

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Abstract: *Translation is an activity of enormous importance in the modern world and has become an established area in language studies, being the main criterion for achieving communication.*

Considering Newmark's theory that translation is an art as well as a skill and a science, three main aspects are taken into consideration when we talk about translation: the foreign and native cultures, the two languages and the writer and the translator.

In the case of Arabic, translations are viewed from a different perspective. The knowledge of the Arabic culture is crucial for English - Arabic translation.

Inaccurate translations reveal the mismatches in beliefs and cultural norms between the Western cultures and the Arab culture. The influence of culture on language heritage is manifested between identity and culture. Secondly the duality of Arabic is another important aspect related to translations differences.

It is useful for English – Arabic translators to be aware that differences between the two linguistic systems may cause problems in translation, for this reason the author tries to specify the most frequent linguistic errors in English – Arabic translations.

Keywords: *translations, difficulties, English, Arabic*

1.1. Introduction

Communication between cultures can be achieved through translation.

Through translation, people are introduced to different languages and ways of thought. It is important to understand the relation between language and culture in order to train translators and interpreters. "What truly distinguishes translation is that it takes place in the context of the relations between two cultures, two worlds of thought and perception" (Delisle 1988, 74)

Newmark (1981, 183-185) argues that there is a cultural value in translation. Language is partly the reflection of a culture. Translators like linguists tend to define culture as the sum of people's customs and ways of thinking. Culture is heavily indebted for its intellectual development to translation. Nothing demonstrates the complexity of language and of specific texts more vividly and explicitly than translation. Further, nothing exposes good writing and bad writing as effectively as translation. Translation is important as a source of diffusion of knowledge of every kind. By understanding the development of every aspect of culture in other civilizations, people can also enrich their understanding of their own culture.

Knowledge of the target culture is crucial for successful English-Arabic translation. Poor comprehension may arise from lack of insight into the target culture. There is a mismatch in cultural norms and beliefs between the Arab and Western cultures. Each

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different language has its own individuality, which makes it distinctive and peculiar to the people who speak it. Words denote things and put them in a distinct category of thought.

As a result, differences between languages are not only related to the linguistic system, but involve differences in the speakers' interpretation and understanding of the world they live in. Languages classify knowledge in various ways for the purposes of speech.

1.2. Defining translations

Catford (1965, 1) defines translation as "a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another". Thus, translation is considered an operation performed on languages. Catford builds his definition on the concept of equivalence, describing translation as the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language. He considers the central problem of translation to be finding target language equivalents. Catford distinguishes between full and partial translation, depending on the extent to which the source language text is submitted to the translation process.

According to him, translating consists, in reproducing RL (receptor language) closest natural equivalent of the SL (source language) message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. According to him, the basis to any discussion of principles and procedures in translation is a thorough acquaintance *in* the manner in which meaning is expressed through language as communication code. He gives importance to the communicative aspects of translation. His views on translation are essentially discourse oriented with a focus on the various socio-linguistic variables, which determine the nature of the translation. He propounds a pragmatic theory of translation by considering the connotative or programmatic as the central focus in transforming the message from the source language to the receptor language.

He says, "basic to any discussion of principles and procedures in translation is a thorough acquaintance in the manner *in* which meaning is expressed through language as a communication code - first in terms of parts which constitute such a code; secondly, the manner in which the code operates; and thirdly, how such code as language is related to other codes. Nida in his theory of translation gives importance to the communicative aspect of translation. His view of translation is essentially discourse oriented with focus on the various socio-linguistic variables, which determine the nature of the translating. The role of the receptor is central to his theory of translation.(Nida and Taber 1969, 31). Nida and Taber emphasize the importance of understanding the original text before constructing the target language text. Nida (1964, 14) argues that "Translation is the interpretation of verbal signs of one language by means of verbal signs of another".

Newmark (1981, 7) defines translation as "a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or a statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language". He (1988,5) states that "translation is rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text". Newmark (1981,18) shares Benjamin's (1932) view that translation goes beyond enriching the language and culture of a country which it contributes to, beyond renewing and maturing the life of the original text, beyond expressing and analysing the most intimate relationships of languages with each other and becomes a way of entry into a universal language.

As a functionalist, Halliday defines the goal of a functional theory of language as explaining linguistic structure, and linguistic phenomena, by reference to the notion that language plays a certain part in our lives; that it is required to serve certain universal types of demand. It approaches language through text. His theory establishes six levels:

-Social system: the world of abstract relations and consciousness as well as the physical world.

-Register: the variety of language used in a particular situational context or the contextual dimensions of social meaning. This represents the socio-contextual or semiotic resources from a socio-cultural system, which apply in a given situation, determining the choice of meaning options in the semantic system of language.

-Semantics: register is realized by semantics. It has three functional components: ideational, interpersonal and textual (Morley 1985, 50-81).

-Lexicogrammar: this realises the semantics. It is the level of wording (Morley 1985, 49).

-Phonology: this realizes lexicogrammar. It is the level of sounding (Morley 1985, 49).

-Phonetics: this is the ultimate 'output', and involves the actual sounds, which are uttered, or the physical graphic marks in writing (Morley 1985, 49).

1.3. Cultural Differences between Western Culture and the Arab World

Culture is the complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities or habits acquired by man as a member of society (Taylor 1958, 1). It is the set of general meanings that people use to explain their origins, and to predict their future. Culture plays an essential role in determining the appropriateness of linguistic units. In addition, cultural variables affect the degree of understanding between two language communities (cf. Kussmaul 1995, 65). As a result, language is an integral part of culture because the vocabulary of a language derives its meaning from its culture. Arabic is associated with specific cultural and social norms quite different from those, associated with other languages. According to Sapir (1949), "environment and culture have a considerable influence on the language of speakers as is clearly seen in their vocabulary". Through translation, translators become transmitters of different civilizations. Inevitably to some extent, any translation will reflect the translator's own mental and cultural outlook, despite the best of impartial intentions. Every translator has her/his own beliefs, knowledge and attitudes. "A target language culture can also be extended by the introduction of new ideas and styles... the translational act may give rise to new forms of the target language" (Holman and Boase-Beier 1999, 15). Discrepancy in cultural beliefs, norms and linguistic expression between the two cultures and languages is responsible for difficulties in English/ Arabic translation. Cultural differences often impose greater difficulty for translators than linguistic features such as language structure.

There are often cultural gaps caused by different aspects of societies, which lead to linguistic gaps. Therefore, finding translation equivalents for cultural terms requires the bridging of the cultural and linguistic gaps and meeting readers' expectations. "Translators have to be aware of the fact that readers' expectations, their norms and values, are influenced by culture and that their comprehensions of utterances is to a large extent determined by these expectations, norms and values" (Kussmaul 1995, 70).

A lot of the translation difficulties discussed in this chapter are closely connected to the distinction in Arabic between Standard Arabic and colloquial Arabic (r+4. .1-3) (Dickins et al 2002, 167).

Translation from English to Arabic is normally bound to be into Standard Arabic rather than colloquial Arabic. Although Arabic has colloquial equivalents for many English terms, Standard Arabic has limited terms. Standard Arabic is also intrinsically formal in register terms. So, there are almost no informal terms available in Arabic to relay informal English ones. Some of the translation problems presented in this chapter involve the interaction between cultural and linguistic problems. They often involve the lack of equivalents in Standard Arabic for certain English terms. It is the role of the translator to understand the applications and connotations of words and determine suitable equivalents in specific contexts. The translator should decide whether to use the original term to preserve the essence of meaning of the culture-bound word or to use an appropriate translation equivalent. Borrowings can often be used to fill lexical gaps but they sometimes need an explanatory gloss. Sometimes, a translation equivalent shows links between languages and can bridge the lexical gap between the source and target language.

General cultural background about the first three cultural aspects is provided. This general background illustrates a number of differences between Western, and particularly British, and Arabic cultures, which are expected to be problematic in English/Arabic translation. Some examples of translation difficulties from the research translation sample are also provided. Due to limitations of time and space, these texts are limited to political, social and religious aspects of culture. In fact, translation difficulties appeared in virtually all of the translated texts. These difficulties illustrate that cultural texts can pose difficulties for some students of a degree that hinders target readers' understanding. Better understanding of Western culture is important for translators to overcome cultural difficulties in English/Arabic translation.

1.4. Religious facts

Islamic beliefs are connected with every aspect of Muslim social culture even proper names. "Mohammed" and "Abdullah" are common names in Islamic culture because they have religious significance. Many of the Muslims choose their children's names from the Quran, names of prophets, compound variations of -14a "slave", "servant" and the names of "God" or religious occasions. Parents believe that these names will bless their children. So, Arab societies are more conventional and traditional in using proper names than Western societies. It is difficult for the target language reader to understand the religious dimensions related to such proper names. Traditional proper names may also be a good indicator of social and cultural background. For instance, urban communities have a greater tendency to use new names than rural communities. Sometimes, it may be appropriate to have a footnote in the translation to explain the related social and cultural aspects or religious dimensions of proper nouns.

Islamic-based greetings are another important aspect of Muslims' daily life. Expressions of good will, resignation to God, self-ingratiation and other forms of social grace have different social functions.

1.5. Diglossia

One of the first to have systematically developed and defined *diglossia* was Ferguson in a famous article, 'Diglossia',¹ which appeared in the *Word* journal in 1959, in which he endeavoured to define this type of language contact through four distinct situations:

- Greece: the alternation of Katharevusa and Demotic
- Switzerland: the alternation of Swiss German and German
- Arabic-speaking countries: the coexistence of literary and dialectal Arabic
- Haiti: the alternation of Creole and French

Since the first definitions from Ferguson were reviewed and amended by Fishman (1971) and subsequently by many other sociolinguists over the years, we will avoid the extraneous question of whether diglossia implies that the high (H) and low (L) languages are inevitably related (Ferguson spoke of two varieties of one language). It will be quite clear that Ferguson's analyses, which were perhaps valid in 1959, are often no longer a true description of the relationships between the languages he described. Demotic has now completely prevailed over Katharevusa and Haitian Creole is no longer restricted to the situations assigned it by Ferguson, having progressively taken over many areas of expression.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether the concept of diglossia is still actually relevant in Haiti given that approximately 90% of the population are monolingual Creole speakers while only a fringe minority of the population is actually diglossic (or possibly even bilingual).

Another important aspect related to translation difficulties is diglossia (Dickins et al 2002, 167)¹. This is a language situation in a specific speech community in which two or more varieties of the same language exist side by side. One of them is a "high" variety that is used in formal situations such as Modern Standard Arabic. The other is informal and colloquial. The colloquial variety typically varies considerably between speech communities (Johnson & Johnson 1999, 97)². Certainly, there are great similarities between the speech forms of communities which are near to each other geographically, but variations between areas which are further apart can be so great that some linguistic forms that are used in one community may not be understood in another region. This linguistic phenomenon gives rise to certain difficulties in English-Arabic translation. Arab translators may understand formal English but they may not understand colloquial English, for example, "canny" in Newcastle (Geordie) means friendly.

It is useful for English/Arabic translators to be aware of the differences between the Arabic and English linguistic systems, since differences between the two linguistic systems may cause problems in translation.

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