

## Some Linguistic and Cultural Problems of English and Arabic Translation

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The hypothesis that translation is possible because languages are similar in their deep structure and, as creative systems, they can express any object or action, is opposed by an extreme opinion which holds that translation is impossible whatever the subject-matter may be. The reason is that there is always a loss of meaning between two distinct semantic systems. A third view maintains that translation of technical texts is possible but that of literary texts is not.

I support Catford's<sup>1</sup> view that "SL (source language) texts and items are more or less translatable rather than absolutely translatable or untranslatable" (1965, 93).

Translatability exists when the SL and the TL (target language) display grammatical, lexical and cultural analogies. Yet, as Pinchuck<sup>2</sup> (1977) points out, one-to-one correspondence on all levels rarely occurs. The problem for the translator is that of one-to-none and one - to-many correspondences. Untranslatability can be linguistic or cultural.

### **1- Linguistic untranslatability:**

Linguistic untranslatability according to Catford is "failure to find a TL equivalent" which "is due entirely to differences between the source language and the target language" (1965, 98). But linguistic untranslatability is also attributable to the ambiguity or lack of context (e.g. titles of films, books, pictures,

lists of items, slogans, nicknames of persons and boats, and so on...; and it can be grammatical or lexical.

### **1.1 Grammatical problems**

1.1.1 The lack of case endings in an Arabic text may be a source of trouble, as in the following example: *hadiqatu l-madrasa l-kabira*, where it is impossible to know whether the adjective "l-kabira" (big) modifies "hadiqatu" (garden) or "l-madrasa" (the school). Thus, we have two interpretations: the big garden of the school/the garden of the big school.

1.1.2 English words lacking gender (e.g. child, nurse, lecturer, engineer, translator, you, they, who, etc.) in a context offering no helping linguistic clue are problematic in translation into Arabic where gender must be specified e.g. *tabib* and *tabiba* for doctor.

1.1.3 English pronouns: you, they, them, their, who, which, etc. do not reveal the exact number. In Arabic "you" has three number equivalents: singular (*anta / anti*), dual (*antumà*) and plural (*antum/antunna*); "they", "them" and "their" may be dual or plural.

1.1.4 The morpheme "s" is, in English, a nominal marker of plural or a verbal marker of third person singular present tense. This may be confusing in polysemous words as in "the garden flowers", where the word "flowers" can be translated as a verb or a noun.

1.1.5 A non-finite past participle in an English agentive passive construction, e.g. the damage caused by war, may present two options in Arabic requiring active voice:

*al - Kasà'iru l-lati sabbabathà l-harbu* /*al-kasà. 'iru l-lati tusabbibuhà l-harbu*, according to whether the missing auxiliary is the present "is" or the past "was".

1.1.6 English tenses outnumber Arabic tenses. There is, for example, one Arabic present tense as equivalent for two English present tenses: the simple and the progressive. The choice of one over the other in translation into English depends on the context.

1.1.7 The omission of the definite article in English titles and headings may mislead the translator. There are two possibilities of translation for the following title: "New Universities"

indefinite: Jāmi'ātun jadida

definite: al-jāmi'ātu l-jadida

## 1.2 Lexical problems

### 1.2.1 Homography

By this I mean two lexical items which are graphologically the same but phonologically and semantically different, such as "lead" as a verb and "lead" as a noun. Homography may cause misunderstanding in ambiguous contexts. The Lack of vocalization in Arabic may also be misleading can be cālim (scientist) or cālam (world).

### 1.2.2 Homonymy

This refers to two SL lexical items which are graphologically and phonologically identical but semantically different, which implies that a homonym has more than one equivalent in the TL. e.g. "state" can be hāla, manzila, tabaqa, dawla, wilāya, etc. and "rasm" is either "drawing" or "painting".

### 1.2.3 Polysemy

This also denotes two SL lexical items which are graphologically and phonologically identical. The difference between polysemy and homonymy is that the meanings of a polysemous word are related while those of a homonymous word are not. The word "agreement" may have one of these related equivalents: itifaq, mu'āhada, ʿaqd.

The word masira can be "journey", "departure" or "distance".

In this connection, words denoting kinship (cousin, uncle, aunt, nephew, niece, step-brother, sister-in-law, etc.) are particularly misleading in English for there is rarely a clue that indicates the exact kinship relationship and sex. This is a great source of trouble in translation into Arabic which has a particular term for each meaning. The word "cousin" is a perfect illustration of this problem. As a first cousin it may refer to:

ibnu l- camm = the son of the speaker's paternal uncle  
 ibnu l- kâl = the son of the speaker's maternal uncle  
 ibnu l- camma = the son of the speaker's paternal aunt  
 ibnu l- kâla = the son of the speaker's maternal aunt  
 bintu l- camm = the daughter of the speaker's paternal uncle  
 bintu l- kâl = the daughter of the speaker's maternal uncle  
 bintu l- camma = the daughter of the speaker's paternal aunt  
 bintu l- camm = the daughter of the speaker's maternal aunt

As a second cousin, i.e. child of the speaker's parent's first cousin, there are 16 other interpretations, which makes a total of 24 interpretations for the translator to choose from. In this case, the best solution is to use an Arabic generalised term like *qarib* (a) / 'ahadu (or 'ihdâ) l-'aqrîbâ'.

#### 1.2.4 Terminology

Terminology is a two-fold problem: a lack of TL equivalent terms, in which case the translator has to transliterate the SL term or coin an equivalent in the TL; and a proliferation of non-standardized terms in the TL, which is encountered particularly in social sciences where "concepts are not universally shared and are quite often the subject of open and violent conflict" (Wallerstein (3) 1981, 88). To overcome this difficulty Wallerstein suggests that the translator use the standard translation, i.e. the accepted equivalent, if any, and add the original in parentheses in case of anachronism.

#### 2- Cultural untranslatability:

Cultural untranslatability is due to the absence of an SL situation in the TL. Culture-bound words, phrases, idioms, proverbs, puns and blends may have no TL counterpart. "Allah" of the Muslims is not the "Lord" of the Christians although both communities believe in the existence of one God. In this respect, a sentence such as: "we are the children of God" would be considered by Muslims as blasphemy if translated as: "nahnu 'atfalu l-Ilâh" for Islam regards human beings as *ibâdu l-Ilâh*

(servants of God). "Majlis as-sūrah" is not an accurate equivalent of "parliament" despite the meaning of democracy they have in common. The difference is in the methods of applying democracy; "Ragif" and "loaf" (of bread) are not perfect equivalents for the first is thin and round and the second is thick and rectangular. There is also a loss of meaning when "farmer" is rendered by "fallah" or "muzari c". The former implies wealth and the latter poverty.

"Baladiyya", "Da'ira" and "Wilaya" are administrative divisions specific to Algeria and as such they have no equivalent in other languages. These examples can only be transliterated and explained in a footnote if the TL reader is not familiar with the term.

Idioms with no TL counterpart should be either replaced by a close TL idiom or paraphrased. Another problematic cultural area is that of words with a connotative meaning. "Owl", for example, is a symbol of wisdom and luck in the British Culture. It is despised in North Africa for it is believed to be a bird of ill omen. The SL connotation loses its effect when transferred into the TL.

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