

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATING CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS FROM ARABIC TO ENGLISH AND VICE VERSA

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the problems and issues in translating cultural expressions from Arabic to English and vice versa. It is known that the purpose of translation is communication. Basically, human beings use language as the most important means of communication, and language is influenced by one's culture and beliefs whether consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, translation involves both language and culture. However, most of the definitions of translation do not directly imply cultural expressions. The present research paper aims to discuss the problems and difficulties, which are faced by translators in translating cultural expressions from Arabic to English and vice versa. These problems are mostly related to unfamiliarity with cultural expressions, failure to achieve the equivalence in the second language, ambiguity of some cultural expressions, and lack of knowledge of translation techniques and strategies that may help to solve these problems. In the light of these problems and difficulties, the researcher recommended narrowing the gap between cultures through looking for good and suitable techniques and strategies of translation. In addition, the translator has to read more and more about cultural differences in order to be able to transfer the message as it is meant from the source language into the target language. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the variety and complexity of the problems encountered by a translator in the translation of culture-specific terms between English and Arabic.

Keywords: Translation, cultural Expression, Arabic/English, strategies of translation.

1. Introduction

In order to translate or reproduce the exact meaning of the original in the translated text, translators are generally under the pressure of knowing the cultural similarities and differences between both source language (SL) and target language (TL). However, they have to keep in mind that meaning is constructed by the writers in order to be reconstructed by their readers. Anyone who has ever attempted to translate a text knows that knowledge of the languages alone does not guarantee success (Paluszkiewicz-Misiaczek). Paluszkiewicz-Misiaczek argues that the role of the theory, however, is to make the translator aware of the various factors, which are involved in the translation process and offer some principles and guidelines that will help the translator to make certain decisions and choices. Hence, translation theory must go beyond the boundaries of linguistics that hinder the job of the translator and affect the quality of translation (Paluszkiewicz-Misiaczek 244).

2. The History of Translation between Arabic and English

Translation is a process of carrying across from one language to another, and from one culture to another. Since the beginning of human social development, translation is a very important human activity that involves many religious, political, economic, business, and medical aspects. It is considered as the only tool that enables nations with different languages to communicate. Arabs have been interacting with the other nations and cultures for a long time. Translated documents had been discovered in ancient Egypt

and Iraq. The movement of translation between Arabic and English and other languages started during the Umayyads era (AD 661-750) and reached its zenith under the reign of the Abbasids (AD 750-1258), especially during the reign of Al-Ma'mun (AD 813-33), which was known as the Golden Era of translation. In 830 AD, Al-Ma'mun had established the most important institute of higher learning in Islam, which also became the most distinguished center of translation in the Arabic history.

There were two approaches of translation that had been followed in the above-mentioned eras. The first one was the highly literal translation, which was associated with Yuhana Ibn AL- Batriq and Ibn Na'ima Al- Himsi. However, this method was not highly accurate and successful. That was the reason why many of such translations were rejected by Hunayn Ibn Ishaq. He was associated the second approach, which was translating sense-for-sense. This method created fluent translated texts, in which the translator transfers the meaning of the original without destroying the form and style of the target language (TL).

3. Arabic vs. English Culture-Specific Concepts (CSCs)

As far as translation is concerned, a deep look into Arabic and English cultures may give rise to instances of un-translatability or loss of meaning. The wider the gap between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL), the more difficult the transfer of message between them will be. The differences between Arabic and English in terms of language usage and variation in their cultures make the process of translation a real challenge. Culture is a complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, customs, and other capabilities or habits acquired by man as a member of society. People use it to explain their origins and to predict their future. Taylor (1958) points out that culture plays an essential role in determining the appropriateness of linguistic units. Moreover, cultural variables affect the degree of understanding between two language communities. Therefore, language is an integral part of culture because the vocabulary of language derives its meaning from its culture.

In this paper, the researcher moves beyond language to focus on the interaction between translation and culture. It focuses on the way culture impacts and constraints translation as well as on the larger issues of context, history and convention. Therefore, the challenge is to move from translation as a linguistic material or a text to translation as culture and politics.

The work on CSCs appears to be one of the most challenging tasks to be performed by a translator. In other words, culture and intercultural awareness are far more complex phenomenon than it may seem to the translator. Braçaj mentions that the more a translator is aware of differences between cultures, the better a translator s/he will be. The core concern has traditionally been with words and phrases, which are so heavily grounded in one culture and are almost impossible to translate into the terms verbal or otherwise of another.

As mentioned by Wiersema, a translator has three options for the translation of cultural elements:

1. To adopt the foreign word without any explanation
2. To adopt the foreign word with extensive explanations
3. To rewrite the text to make it more comprehensible to the target language audience

Graedler also adds some procedures of translating Culture-Specific Concepts. These procedures are:

- Making up a new word
- Explaining the meaning of the SL expression in lieu of translating it
- Preserving the SL term intact
- Opting for a word in the TL which seems similar to or has the same "relevance" as the SL term

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 are to a large extent determined by these expectations, norms and values.

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 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 Arabic cultures, which are expected to be problematic in Arabic/English translation. Such cultural terms need more explanation in the target language. For example, if we take a word like 'mahr' or "Sedaq" we find that the nearest word commonly used in English is 'dowry'. However, if we come to understand the word dowry in the western culture, it has two meanings. The first meaning refers to the advanced dowry, which means in their culture (money or property brought by a woman to her husband at marriage). That is different for what we do in Arab and Islamic world. In the Arab World, the man is responsible for giving the dowry to woman in case of marriage. The second meaning refers to the delayed dowry, which means (a life estate to which a wife is entitled on the death of her husband). However, in Arab culture, to transfer the real meaning for the word 'mahr', the translator has to use the transliteration, which is a translation technique. So, the word in transliteration will be 'mahr', and the between brackets, the translator has to produce a clear definition for the word to show its meaning in Islam. Another example illustrates a religious event represented by the term 'Sahur', which doesn't have nearest or close equivalent in English language. So, the translator should use the transliteration technique, and between brackets, he has to produce a clear definition of the term to remove the ambiguity and make the idea of the term clear in the target language. The translation will be as follow: 'Sahur (a light meal before starting a new day of Ramadan (before daybreak))'.

We notice that the translator's task becomes more difficult when the concept to be translated refers to something that is unknown in the receptor culture. In this case, the translator will not only look for an appropriate way to refer to something that is already part of the experience of the receptor language audience, but he will also look for a way to express a concept that is new to the target language reader. Religious and social terms are of particular interest, since they produce a number of translation difficulties. For example, the term 'zakat' is not 'charity' as some of people will think. Charity in Arabic means 'صدقة', which is an amount of wealth voluntarily paid by a Muslim out of compassion or solidarity with other members of the society. However, zakat is an obligatory charity, which is the third pillar of Islam. It constitutes a portion of wealth prescribed by Shari'ah to be paid to one or more of deserving recipients. It is the duty of every Muslim to pay Zakat out of his/ her own wealth, provided that a minimum amount of wealth is attained over a lunar year. It is usually annual compulsory alms (2.5 %) of the savings of a Muslim when any amount or property exceeds one year in possession.

Some difficulties of conveying the meaning of cultural terms stem from the need to be knowledgeable of Arabic culture along with its customs and social and religious values. The translator may try to explain words by altering the so-called super ordinate words and revealing their meanings through unrelated words, which is a technique called paraphrase. To give an example, 'sabe' is the super ordinate word that has the meaning of 'the seventh day, or the celebration of a newborn child. Thus, a translator provides the description of the occasion and traditions that accompany it. Likewise, the word 'mahram' is conveyed through the modification of the super ordinate word "someone" as male

chaperon as well as adding description to reveal the connotative meaning of the concept in the Islamic culture.

Similarly, it is difficult to find the equivalents of local cuisines. "Fool and tamees الفول و التميمس" is an Arabic phrase that poses particular interest, denoting a highly popular dish with a local flavor here in Arab countries. Translators may provide its English equivalent 'beans and bread'. Still, such an approach fails to grasp the local flavor of the dish and show its remarkable traits like the time of eating, the kind of people who eat it, cost, and the supposed impact that it has on human mental processes.

The semantically complex Arabic words that refer to religious concepts, processes, and social traditions are hard to translate without specific transformations, which may be problematic. Semantically complex notions referred to by such words have no equivalents whatsoever in English. The word 'taharah طهارة' is polysemantic, denoting cleanness, purity, cleansing, virtuousness, chastity, righteousness, decency, and abstinence, to name a few. Despite its complexity, the notion refers to the process of ablution, which is washing with water prior to saying prayers. Beyond that, the concept may imply cleansing the soul and heart and cleaning the clothes and body of an individual. To add more examples, 'Al Tayamum التيمم' has the meaning of washing with earth dust. The meaning remains confusing unless a brief description is provided. As we know 'Al Tayamum التيمم' is a symbolic washing by use of earth dust as a replacement of water if there is no such at hand. Another example is the term 'Al E'tikaf', which means prayer in seclusion. A broader explanation for that term refers to the act of retiring into a mosque in order to worship in the last ten-day period of Ramadan.

On the other hand, some English terms don't have good equivalents in Arabic language, and the translation does not carry enough meaning to the situation. For example, the term 'Easter عيد الفصح', which is the most important and oldest festival of the Christian Church, doesn't have an equivalent in Arabic. Therefore, when the translator transfers the meaning of this event, he must give a clear description between brackets to make the notion clear for the target language reader. As it is known in western culture, Easter is a festival and holiday celebrating the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which is described in the New Testament as having occurred on the third day of his burial after his crucifixion by the Romans at Calvary c. 30 AD. This is the description of the term 'Easter عيد الفصح', which makes the meaning of the event so clear in TL.

Moreover, some English cultural expressions require the translator to look for the deepest meaning instead of concentrating on the surface idea of their literal meaning. For example, the following English sentences require looking for their deep meaning in order to transfer the exact meaning for the original writer. In translating the source sentence '**Forbidden fruit is sweet**', the first idea that will come to the mind of the translator is that it means (الفاكهة المحرمة حلوه). This translation is not the exact meaning that the original writer wants to transfer to the target reader. The exact meaning for this sentence is (كل ممنوع مرغوب). Here the translator conveys the meaning of the (SL) cultural expression into the (TL) correctly and effectively. Another example is '**A cat has nine lives**'. If the translator doesn't know the culture of the target reader, he may translate the sentence as the following 'القطعة بتسعة أرواح'. However, the exact meaning of this sentence is 'القطعة بتسعة أرواح', which is the meaning known in the target society. In addition, the sentence '**what a dog day!**' will further clarify the cultural problems that a translator may face in the translation process. If the translator does not know the cultural meaning of the sentence, he will give only its literal meaning 'يا له من يوم كلب', which is wrong, and not the real meaning of the sentence. A good translator should look for the exact meaning for this sentence and transfer it in its right meaning to the target language. The right meaning for this example is 'يا له من يوم سيء'. Now the idea will be clear to the target reader.

Finally, translation is a process of carrying across from one language to another, from one culture to another. Translating cultural expressions have been the most challenging task for translators; That is to say, culture and intercultural awareness are far more complex phenomena than they may seem. For the translator, awareness of the complexities of differences between cultures is a prime key for solving

translation equivalence and untranslatability issues. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the variety and complexity of the problems encountered by a translator in the translation of culture-specific terms from Arabic to English and vice versa. This paper is an attempt to discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the problem. Critical analysis and evaluation of some problematic words and expressions along with their suggested equivalents or solutions are provided.

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