

**EXPLORING DIFFICULTIES IN LITERARY TRANSLATION FROM ARABIC TO ENGLISH**Afeera Khanam<sup>1\*</sup> , Razan Khasawneh<sup>2</sup><sup>1,2</sup> (Lecturer in English, University of Jeddah, Jeddah)

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“Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.”- Anthony Burgess[1]

Translation is the process of providing the closest natural meaning in the target language, in other words it is the replacement of the source text with another text. Words form meaningful sentences, and when we come to translate these sentences, we don't divide them into parts. We rather tackle them as a whole. It literally translates Source Language into Target Language. Usually, the purpose of translation is to produce various forms of texts like literary, religious, scientific, and philosophical texts in the intended language.

Translation is a communicative act between the author, the translator, and the reader, and the selection of words by translator is a core act in the process of translating as an artistic communication.

“Literature is both the condition and the place of artistic communication between senders and addressees, or the public”[2]

Literary translation comprises of translating poetry, prose, drama, etc. in which, a translator is expected to concentrate on the language. To replace the information of the source text is not the only intention of literary translation but also to create a parallel text is an important task on the part of the translator. In this sense, a translator who is engaged in literary translation is supposed to be equipped with not only two languages but also have a relevant knowledge of two cultures.



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Translation is not an easy task as it has distinct values called the aesthetic and expressive values. The aesthetic value emphasizes the beauty of the diction, symbolic language, allegorical, metaphors, etc. while the expressive values puts forward the ideas of the writer, emotions, etc. which the translator should try, at his best, to replace these specific values into the target language.

Translation is an association across cultures. A good translation sustains the inner self and the sense of the original in the strength of the

structures, force of expression, mastery of language, and the qualities of imagination and perception. A perfect similarity to equalize at all levels is quite difficult to attain. In the present article, we would like to focus on the challenges and obstacles faced while interpreting from Arabic into English language like lexical and structural differences between languages, problems that originate due to cultural untranslatability and several constructions of grammar and stylistic problems which are deficiently accepted.



This paper also presents the readers with realistic instances of translation challenged by the target language translators. Translation is an intricate and complicated activity which can't be skillfully accomplished. What can support this fact is that translators come across difficulties and issues while executing their work which commands many skills on the part of the translator. Some texts might be easy to translate, as translation is not an impossible task, but others are difficult and could even be described as untranslatable.

Translation problems with the source language text is that it is difficult to read or printed incorrectly or unfinished or badly written. Some theorists present few challenges faced by translators.

1. A particular word in one language often includes meanings that involve several words in another language.
2. Grammatical particles (verb tenses, singular/dual/plural, case markers etc.) are not available in every language, and
3. Idioms of one language and culture may be utterly perplexing to speakers from another language and culture.

### LEXICAL PROBLEMS

Among the problems that translators face is finding an appropriate equivalent for a specific source language (SL) a lexical item. This is what is known as lexical problem. Equivalence is defined in terms of the relations between source and target language. According to Nida, "Formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content". Lexical problem occurs when translators fail to find an appropriate translation of a certain item, and on other cases they translate literally. However, words are used together to form a certain meaning and translating each item independently will not convey the true meaning or sense of the sentence, or the text. This doesn't mean that literal translation is not inapplicable at all.

There are a number of lexical problems that may encounter any translator. However, the most common problems are: synonyms, polysemy and monosemy, collocations, idioms and metaphors.

When a lexical item is made ambiguous on purpose by the author, the translator most tries to keep the same ambiguity in the TL. The word "خال" "Khal" in

Arabic is an example of a homonymic word. "Khal" means the mole on the face or mothers brother. Sometimes the linguistic context does not help to solve the ambiguity of a word.

Example:

- له خال -

LhKhal.

The above example can be translated as:

He has an uncle.

He has a mole.

According to Nida (1964:165), a translation which is based on formal equivalence focuses attention on the Source Language (SL) text with regard to both forms and content. It is designated to retain as much as possible of the SL text. It will try to produce meaning in terms of the SL context without adjustments even in translating idioms that will be rendered more or less literally. For example:

- خير البر عاجله -

Khyralbr 'ajlh

The problem in translating this proverb will be in translating the lexical item "elbr" البر, which include several meanings like kindness, charitable, deed and others. This proverb has a strong relation with religion and that is why it is difficult to provide an equivalent English word for it. Maybe using the English equivalent "strike while iron is hot" could be more appropriate.

### STYLISTIC PROBLEMS

Style is a part of the meaning and it has an effect on both grammar and meaning equally. When we ignore style it is like we ignore a part of the meaning. HasanGhazala defined style as the different, several choices made in a text, form language stock in regard to layout (or shape), grammar, words and phonology. This means that it is related to all the levels of the language. When we translate we need to try and keep the same style in the SL in the TL when possible. There are several ways to convey style from the SL into the TL.

Shapiro says "I see translation as an attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem



to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass”.

Example:

- بيدوا عليه الهلع والرعب والخوف.

Ybdw 'lyhalhl' w alr'b w alkhwf.

In the above example we notice that the underlined Arabic words are synonyms for one word in English and it means to feel afraid. Redundancy is not acceptable in translation as it weakens the target text and it does not add anything to the meaning, so it is deleted in the process of translation. However, the deletion of any part does not convey the style of the SL text.

The above example can be translated by deleting the repeated word into:

- He looks banked and terrified.

Yet, if we want to convey the same style of the SL we should keep the sentence whether this gives a bad or good text in the TL. The redundancy of the same word in this example can be considered as an emphasis but it is wasted in the translation. A suggested translation that keeps the same style of the SL text in the TL text is:

- He looks banked and very afraid.

Languages are not the same, each language has its own grammatical and stylistic rules. If we want to say that two translations are the same or paralleled then they must have the same structure. In Arabic word order is: Verb + subject + object (V. S.O), while English word order is: subject + verb + object (S.V.O). We can notice that Arabic language favors the fronting of the verb while English not. Fronting can be defined as moving an item into the initial position from its original place in the middle or in the end of the sentence. For a translator to produce a convenient translation in English translator has almost to change the structure of each sentence.

Example:

- يعيش الرجل في الجبال.

Y'yshalrjlfyaljbal.

lives the man in the mountains.

The underlined word “lives” in English is not in its normal place. Fronting is used to signal emphasis, contrast and cohesion with the preceding text among others. And the English word needs to be in the initial place to reflect the same function that is intended by the Arabic sentence.

Example:

- رأى احمد صديقه عندما كان ذاهباً إلى السينما.

R?a Ahmad sdyqh'ndmakanthahbn?laalsynma.

Ahmad saw his friend when he was going to the cinema.

The underlined part of the sentence holds two meanings. Its either Ahmad is the one who was going to the cinema, or his friend. Neither of these two meanings is clarified in the original sentence. The translator has to keep the same ambiguity in the target text. Another Example:

يستطيع أن يخرج من أي مشكلة كما تخرج الشعرة من العجين.

ystte' ?nykhrjmn?ymshklakmatkhrjalsh'ramnal'jyn.

He can save himself from any trouble like a hair can be saved from dough.

The underlined translation of the Arabic metaphor is not clear and because it's unclear in the Arabic sentence it should be remained the same in English. The Arabic phrase means that someone who is involved in some difficulties or suspicious actions but ends up looking good and respectful. An acceptable translation can be:

- He can save himself from any trouble and make himself come up smiling like a rose.

### GRAMMATICAL PROBLEMS

Different languages like Arabic and English have different grammars as they belong to different families. Arabic language is a Semitic language, and English is a European one. Each language has its distinct grammatical rules, elements, categories, and features. These differences lead to many problems when they translate. Grammar has a set of rules according to Baker which combines units of words and phrases in a specific language. It describes how language is used in two different languages. A person cannot learn a language without learning its grammar rules. Grammar gives a complete meaning to the literary text.

Leith said: “Grammar for linguists is the level of their analysis of linguistic structure which concerns the organization of words into sentences”[3]



## Example 1

هو يحب أخته أكثر من أمه.

hwyyhb?kxth?kthrmn?mh.

The above example means:-

He loves his sister more than his mother. This sentence is ambiguous as it may mean

- He loves his sister more than he loves his mother.
- He loves his sister more than his mother does.

In grammar, we have structural ambiguity in literary translation which results in two meanings. The example above given has two meanings in the target language. To make this sentence unambiguous we should write it as هو يحب أخته أكثر من ما يحب أمه "hwyyhb?kxth?kthrmn ma ?mhthb?kxth" or هو يحب "hwyyhb?kxth?kthrmn ma ?mhthb?kxth". This will produce a correct and good sentence in translation which will help to produce a language that interests readers and it will be away from ambiguity and vagueness.

## Example 2

قال أحمد لمجد أن منزله جميل.

qal Ahmad lKhalid?nmnzlhojmyl

Ahmad told Majed that his house is beautiful.

In the above example, the connected personal pronoun هـ 'ha' in 'mnzlhoh' modifies either the verbal subject 'Ahmad' or the object 'Majed'. This implies that either 'Ahmad' or 'Majed' is repeated after the noun 'mnzlhoh'. The second object is made up of the infinite participle 'an' in Arabic and the noun 'mnzlhoh'. The word 'mnzlhoh' can be replaced by either 'منزل أحمد' (mnzlhoh Ahmad) or 'منزل مجد' (mnzlhoh Majed).

## Example 3

كاتبة قصص عراقية.

Katibat quessassin irakiya

Iraqi novels writer.

The adjective here 'عراقية' (irakiya), either modifies the noun 'كاتبة' (katibato) or the noun 'قصص' (quessassin). In other words, irakiya is an adjective to either 'كاتبة' or 'قصص' (katibato or quessassin).

**CULTURAL PROBLEMS**

The culture as a perspective is defined in the dictionary as: "[culture] the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behavior, and social habits etc...,

of the members of a particular society". For many people culture is considered as a gateway to a given society, to have a close insight about its identity. In spite of its crucial role in displaying cultures through history; demonstrating and introducing cultures of different people, old nations, ancient civilizations, and even prehistoric events, thoughts, and achievements, a few writers, translation theorists, and linguists have fully discussed the problems of translating cultures in the various departments of thought; fewer members have dealt with translating what is culturally specific either from Arabic into English or vice versa. This may be due to several reasons. On the one hand, it is always difficult to make generalization. On the other hand, interest in translation has been submissive to the target language. The problem is that, some languages are loaded with cultural terms and expressions called (cultural specific). The cultural specific expressions are somehow difficult to translate, even professional translators find it difficult to deal with them. That is because the cultural context is too vague, it represents the world view of a society, its beliefs, emotions and values. Thus it comprises some important factors which help in building up the information necessary to interpret the message; enable the translator to translate easily and effectively. That's why, any term; one word or an expression is said to be cultural specific when it denotes concrete objects or abstract aspects that may be related to religious beliefs, social habits, customs and traditions or social situations, moral values, a type of cloth or a life style, kind of food, economical principle, political ideology...that are specific to the culture in question. Henceforth, when translating cultures, linguistic element should be related to the cultural context they belong to. For instance, the person who is engaged in translating from one language into another ought to be constantly aware of the contrast in the entire range of culture represented by the two languages. Meaning that, language is considered as a part of culture and the society's identity.

One of the most important aspects of literary translation is dealing with culture, or translating specific cultural items from the Source Language Text into the Target Language Text. Two



basic strategies of translation which the translator may adopt to solve the linguistic and cultural issues in the Source Text is that the first strategy is known by the term 'Foreignizing', and the other one by 'Domesticating'. The distinction between these two strategies is defined by Schleiermacher,

"Either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him"[4]

'Domesticating' is the type of translation that would be adopted to produce for the target readers a smooth and clear translation which would have the minimum strangeness or peculiarity of the foreign culture of the Source Text. By adopting this strategy, the translator ignores all the differences of the source culture (SC) and moves readers from the SLT into their TL conventions (2007:12).

'Foreignizing' strategies, on the contrary, is the type of translation that preserves the foreignness of the SC in order to highlight for Target Readers the differences that exist between the two cultures; their own culture and the foreign culture of the Source Text. Thus, the word-for-word approach is associated with this type of translation that retains something of the Source Culture's strangeness.

Though some cultural concepts seem to be universal, however; they are not interpreted in the same way; each language has its own interpretation according to its people way of thinking, living style, and even their geographic position. Since as said before by Ivir (1981: 56) that languages are equipped and lexicalized differently. The interpretations may completely different as they may just slightly different, subtle overlaps. The differences between cultures and life perceptions from a society into another may cause a lot of problems to translators; it creates a lot of gaps which lead to plenty of overlaps between language pairs. Hence the translation task is going to be too complicated.

#### Example 1

العثور على لقيط في الشارع.  
Al'thwr 'la lqetfyalshar'.

The word 'لقيط' has a specific cultural meaning in Arabic which is 'an orphan for unknown parents'. However there is no word in the target language which gives the same meaning whereas it provides a wrong translation for this word in English as 'illegal person' and 'abandoned baby'. This causes a cultural gap as the target language readers misinterpret the text in a completely different manner from the source language readers.

#### Example 2

النبي سليمان كان أحد الملوك الحكماء.

AlnbySulimankan?hdalmlwkalhkma?.

Prophet Sulaiman is one of the wisest kings.

In the above example, the proper name "سليمان" is wrongly translated in English as 'Solomon'. In this, the reader might think that the author is mentioning about another Prophet called 'Solomon'. The translator needs to maintain the original names like 'Sulaiman' without any change in the target language so that the readers don't misinterpret it.

Arabic proverbs are characterized of using word "Allah" "الله" a lot.

#### Example 3

يد الله مع الجماعة.

Yd Allah m' aljma'a.

The above example is literally translated as "The hand of Allah is with the group". However, this version of the translation cannot be understood in the English culture. Translators need to find an equivalent for the above proverb in the target culture. The above example can be translated as "Many hands make a light work". On the other hand, some proverbs that carry certain beliefs may sometimes be untranslatable like "ما عز من اذل جيرانه".

Cultures cause a lot of problems that is why translators are required to be competent not just at the linguistic level, rather at the cultural level.

The present article discussed some of the problems Arabic translators face when translating Arabic texts into English. Translation problems are many at all different levels. We tackled lexical and structural differences between the two languages, grammar and stylistic problems which are poorly



understood and the problems that arise from cultural differences.

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