

## Translation Strategies for Lexical discrepancies between Arabic and English: The Sand Memory as a Case Study

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### Abstract

The present article explores the semantic, syntactic, and stylistic difficulties encountered in literary translation from Arabic into English. For handling linguistic gaps, the article makes use of domestication strategies. It argues that the foreignization strategy in literary translation appears to be more faithful in the rendition of the source culture into the target one. However, it seems inadequate when it comes to the translation of linguistic features of the novel; hence, domestication strategy proves to be more appropriate in the case of translating syntactic, semantic and stylistic features from Arabic into English. In other words, the article suggests a major solution to the linguistic problems based on two criterions. First, translation should respect the TL system. Second, the source culture should be faithfully transferred to the TRs. That is, the translator must consider the cultural specificities in the ST so as to help render them to the TR in a way that does not contradict what is intended by the author. These two criterions will be further discussed in this article.

**Keywords:** Arabic-English literary translation, culture, linguistic features, foreignization, domestication.

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### Introduction

The article offers extensive analysis carried out via a comparison between Arabic excerpts and their English translations. It explores the problems caused by linguistic differences between English and Arabic in the novel under study and suggests some solutions to overcome them. The lexical differences examined in this article include syntactic, stylistic and semantic discrepancies between both languages. In this article, the possibility of foreignization strategies, such as literal translation and borrowing, to offer an adequate rendition of the cultural aspects is brought into discussion. Merging such strategies with footnote technique, this article tries to reconstruct the source cultural aspect in the target literary system.

### Syntactic Problems

Discrepancies between Arabic/English syntaxes pose challenges for the translator. In the translation process, the syntactic problems such as word order and use of tenses require the translator to be skilled enough to understand both language syntaxes. This enables him/her to convey the meaning of the source sentence without distorting the TL system.

## Sentence Word Order in Arabic and English

With regard to the word order, it is to be noted that Arabic language has two kinds of sentences: nominal and verbal. The structure of the Arabic sentence does not have correspondence in English. Therefore, the equivalence cannot be achieved at the syntactic level. It can be, however, achieved at the semantic level. Noureldin Abdelaal, and I agree with him, warns against the equivalence at the syntactic level in the case it distorts the TL structure. For him, "it is a serious mistake on the part of any translator to try to impose the SL word order on that of the TL."<sup>1</sup> Consider the following example from *The Sand Memory*.

1- هذا كذب

These are lies.

2- تقول صفية إن أهلها لديهم دار كبيرة في نواكشوط

Safiya has said that her family has a big house in Nouakchott

The nominal sentence in Arabic consists of two successive nouns, subject and predicate, without a verb. But, in English, the subject should be followed by a verb, which stands as a simple predicate—the most important part of the complete predicate. Similarly, the verbal sentence in Arabic begins with a verb while its translation in English begins with a noun. If the verbal sentence in English is rendered in the same Arabic order, it would be as follows: "Said Safiya her family ...". Clearly then, the lack of syntactic equivalence is one of the major difficulties to be considered in translation between Arabic and English. Therefore, respecting the syntactic characteristics of the TL system is a key requirement in the translation process.

## Tense Systems in Arabic and English

With respect to the gaps resulting from syntactic divergences between Arabic and English, this study has suggested that Catford's translation shift<sup>2</sup> is useful for handling the difficulties encountered in the translation of Arabic grammatical codes to completely different linguistic system, English. The translator has to ensure that the grammatical functions of the source language are transferred to the TT. To do so, contextualization of the meaning of the tense in the ST helps determine its equivalent in the TL. For example, the Arabic syntactic system has just only one tense for the past. When it is translated into English, the translator must identify its function within the source sentence in order to render it to the appropriate tense in English, because the English system has four tenses for the past; that is to say, an Arabic tense has different equivalents in English, and what determines the best choice of the English equivalent is only the context.

As it is the case with the challenge posed by the word order divergences between the two languages in question, the differences between them in terms of tense systems may cause syntactic problems in translation. To illustrate more, the Arabic tenses are divided into three types: past (*madi*) present (*mudari*) and imperative (*amr*). By contrast, the past tense in English is divided in four tenses: 1) past simple, 2) past continuous, 3) past perfect and 4) past perfect continuous. The present tense in English is also structured into four tenses: 1) present simple, 2) present continuous, 3) present perfect, and 4) present perfect continuous. Unlike Arabic language which has imperative tense, English has no imperative tense but future one. In fact, the imperative sentence in English is used with verbs in simple present. What still need to be mentioned is that although Arabic language lacks future tense, linguists add the word سوف or the prefix س (both carry the meaning of the modal verb "will") to indicate the future. Accordingly, the translator has to not ignore the various types of tenses in English in the process of Arabic-English translation. Consider the following examples from *The Sand Memory*.

1- عادت أم العيد إلى فراشها وقد قدرت أنه ما يزال في الليل بقية وأن مسعودا ربما لم يؤذن بعد

<sup>1</sup> Noureldin Abdelaal, Translation Between English and Arabic A Textbook for Translation Students and Educators (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 42.

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Catford, A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 73-80.

Om El Eid went back to her bed after she had estimated that there is still enough time and Messoud has not yet made the *athan*.

2- هدين، يا حماري العتيق لا تتوقف... يجب أن تواصل، الجديدة باتت قريبة... أعرف أنك تسير منذ صباح يوم أمس وأنت متعب

Do not stop my old donkey, Heddein! You must go on. Al Jadidah is nearby. I know that you have been walking since yesterday morning and that you are tired.

3- وكانت ما تزال تهذي.

She was still hallucinating.

4- أمك سحرت سليمان حتى قتلتته.

Your mother had bewitched Souleimane till she killed him.

The Arabic tenses in the above-mentioned examples are translated in a way that respect the syntactic system of the target language. For instance, the past tense in these sentences is rendered into three different tenses in English; that is, the past verbs 'عادت *adat*, 'قد قدرت *gad gaddarat*, تهذي *tahthi* are rendered respectively in different ways as flows: went back, had estimated and was still hallucinating. The Arabic syntactic system has no past continuous and past perfect tenses. It has rather one tense for the past. For this reason, the translator must contextualize the Arabic tense through identifying its function in the sentence in order to transfer it appropriately to the target language. The verb تهذي, for example, is in the present, but when we look closely at its location within the sentence, we find out that it should be rendered in the past continuous tense because it is preceded by the verb ماتزال, which indicates a continuity of the action in the past. Likewise, the verb يؤذن is translated into present perfect since the actions happens in the past and has not finished yet. Therefore, the translator has to contextualize the Arabic verbs in order to determine their equivalent tenses in English.

### Stylistic Problems

The lack of stylistic equivalence between Arabic and English poses many difficulties for the translator. Therefore, the stylistic problems that are about to emerge in the Arabic-English translation entail the translator to be both flexible and faithful.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, he/she has to great extent preserve the style of the SL in order to enrich the target language with new stylistic features. On the other hand, he/she has to respect the target language system for achieving comprehension. This section is an attempt to elaborate on some stylistic problems in translation between Arabic and English, providing examples from the translation of *The Sand Memory*.

### Repetition

Repetition of words can cause problems for translator who may feel afraid of being fallen in the trap of redundancy in the TL. In this case, the translator, as just stated, is supposed to flexibly reconstruct a style that respects the TL system and retain its stylistic features. See the following example of *The Sand Memory*

1- لن يبني ذلك الإزدهاء سوى وهم في خيال صبية صغيرة.

That boasting will not build but a small illusion in the fantasy world of a very little girl.

In the above example, the author adds the adjective صغيرة, meaning little to the word صبية, which means little girl. So, the meaning of the word little is repeated in Arabic causing stylistic gap when translated into English. Accordingly, I add the adjective very to the translation in order to faithfully transfer the entire meaning intended by the author. Therefore, the addition strategy is used here to appropriately handle the stylistic gap caused by repetition.

<sup>3</sup>Safia Boushaba, "An Analytical Study of Some Problems of Literary Translation: A study of Two Arabic Translations of K. Gibran's *The Prophet*" (PhD diss., The University of Salford, 1998).

## Language

The author's extensive use of words referring to animals and desert within the figurative language in his novel is meant to portray the Mauritanian society in a particular area of time. As it will be illustrated in the analysis of figures of speech in the following article, similes, metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy in *The Sand Memory* are profoundly rooted within the nomadic Mauritanian culture. Accordingly, these stylistic features have to be retained so as to fully communicate the cultural content of the ST. Though the nomadic culture portrayed in the novel may seem strange and exotic in the Western context, it is still of high significance to preserve the foreignness of the ST to transmit the Mauritanian culture to the receptor audience in a faithful way. More emphasis on the stylistic feature can be offered in a footnote in order to help the TR understand the SC.

## Semantic Problems

Unlike lexical gaps which can be, sometimes, solved in a way that fits the TL system, the semantic problems are preferred to be overcome in the light of the cultural context of the ST. This section discusses the Semantic problems that are more likely to be faced in the translation of *The Sand Memory*. Among the semantic items discussed in this section are homonymy, polysemy and synonymy. These semantic features are likely to cause cultural losses in translation between Arabic and English as it is illustrated below.

## Polysemy

David Crystal defines Polysemy as a "term in semantic analysis used to refer to a lexical item which has a range of different meanings."<sup>4</sup> In fact, polysemy may cause semantic gaps in translation between Arabic and English. See the following examples:

1- كان يتمنى أمامك أن يدفن مع الشيخ أبوشامة في مدفنه

He wished he could be buried with the Sheikh Abu Shama in his cemetery.

2- . وصاح به قائد القسم قائلا:

- هيا تحرك بسرعة أيها الشيخ الهرم ... لقد نفذ الوقت.

The commanders shouted at him:

Move quickly, the old man ... Old man move quickly... Time is running up.

3- هل تتوقون إلى جولة جديدة

Are you eager to fight for another round?

4- لم يكن صندوقي يخلو من قنينة عطر ويعرف كل السائقين عني حبي له  
ويجتهدون في اختيار هداياهم لي منه.

All drivers know the strong love I have for it, and they do their best to bring me perfumes as gifts.

As can be seen in the first two examples, the word sheikh is polysemous word because it has two different meanings, and this may cause translation difficulty, especially for translators who don't have profound knowledge of the Mauritanian 'Arabic' 'Islamic' culture. In the first example sheikh means spiritual leader while in the second it means old man. In this way, the author's intended meaning is determined by the context. In the second example, we can see that the verb تتوقون is derived from the noun توق which has two meanings:

1. توق : love

2. توق : will

So, the translator is invited to understand the different semantic functions of the word so that he/she can choose the appropriate meaning. The selection between the two meanings refers to the context of the ST. Therefore, some linguistic gaps between Arabic and English are likely to be resolved according

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<sup>4</sup>David Crystal, A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics (Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 373.

to the rules of the ST system. The same applies to the fourth example where the Arabic Verb يجتهدون has two meanings: 1) to do your best and 2) to bring up new ideas.

### Homonymy

In addition to polysemy, homonymy is another source of semantic gaps in Arabic-English translation. Crystal defines homonymy as “a term used in semantic analysis to refer to lexical items which have the same form but differ in meaning.”<sup>5</sup> Like polysemy, homonymy could be handled by decoding and contextualizing the ST word so as to resolve the semantic ambiguity. See the following example from *The Sand Memory*.

- وليس من فاصل بين خيمتها وحجرات منزلك

There is no barrier between her tent and the rooms of your house.

As can be seen above, the Arabic word حجرات meaning rooms has the same spelling with حجرات which is the plural of the Arabic word حجرة meaning stone. Accordingly, the translator has to draw on the context in order to determine the meaning intended by the author. Therefore, the study centers the ST in the process of translation on the consideration of being a source upon which the translator can handle the semantic ambiguities.

### Synonyms in Collocation

Another semantic problem arises when translating synonyms in collocation between Arabic and English. This is because the relation between the two words is deeply rooted in the linguistic peculiarities of the SL<sup>6</sup>. The translator then has to opt for the appropriate strategy to solve the semantic gaps resulting from the translation of synonyms in collocation. Consider the following examples from *The Sand Memory*.

1- واجهتهم حليلة بالسب والشتم

Halima confronted them with curses.

2- أنت شيخ هرم

You are an old man

Here السب والشتم are synonyms in Arabic that function to consolidate the meaning, but when translated into English, it may become a redundant stylistic feature that can be preferably omitted by the translator. Similarly, the second example shows what Noureldin Abdelaal calls “lexicalization differences”<sup>7</sup> between Arabic and English languages. That is to say, Arabic uses many descriptive words to refer to the different stages of the old age. In this regard, we have words such as شيخ, هرم, عجوز, كهل. All of these words have two equivalents in English which are old and aged. Therefore, the translator can use the strategy of omission to render these synonyms in collocation.

### Conclusion

The article shows that unlike lexical and syntactic terms where domestication appears more appropriate, foreignization strategy is preferred in the case of the translation of culture bound terms because it faithfully captures the cultural specificities portrayed in the novel. The translator is not expected to raise up to the expectation of his target audience by adapting the source culture to the target one, but rather he/she has to preserve the foreignness of the ST as to enrich the TL with new cultural values and to enhance intercultural communication.

To convey the intended meaning of the stylistic features of the ST into the TT, the translator must opt for the domestication strategy, particularly for the untranslatable terms, so as to respect the target language system for reasons of readability and fluency. In this regard, the study has elaborated some

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>6</sup> Showqi Bahumaid, “Collocation in English-Arabic Translation,” *Babel* 52, no. 2 (November 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1075/babel.52.2.03bah>

<sup>7</sup> Abdelaal, *Translation between English and Arabic*, 96.

practical strategies for dealing with the problems caused by the stylistic dissimilarities between Arabic and English. It makes use of both omission and literal translation. For example, the translator can employ literal translation to render repetition if the two repeated words have lexical equivalents in English. It is preferably, however, to provide a footnote to explain for the TRs the meaning intended by the author. Other stylistic features related to verbalization and nominalization, short versus long sentences and parallelisms are likely to be resolved with regard to the rules of the TL system

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