1. Introduction

This article deals primarily with three concepts: translation, language and culture. Translation is defined, for our purpose, as follows:

Translation is the expression in another language (or target language) of what has been expressed in another, source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences (Bell 1991: 5)

Language is defined as follows:

A system for the expression of thoughts, feelings, etc., by the use of spoken sounds or conventional symbols.... to communicate with understanding because of common background, values, etc. (Collins English Dictionary 1983).

Nida (1994: 150) expresses similar views:

The nature of language explains in large part why translating is possible. The fact that all languages exhibit so many structural similarities guarantees the potential for effective interlingual communication... Although to a considerable extent languages can be regarded as “rule governed”, they are also “rule defying”; or perhaps more accurately stated, they are “rule stretching” in that analogies within languages can always be pushed into unused, nearby areas.

Language is not seen as “an isolated phenomenon suspended in a vacuum but as an integral part of culture” (Snell-Hornby 1988: 39). This brings us to the third of our concepts which is culture.

The concept of culture was defined by the American ethnologist Ward H. Goodenough as follows:
As I see it, a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning: knowledge, in a most general, if relative, sense of the term. By this definition, we should note that culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organizing of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them. As such, the things people say and do, their social arrangement and events, are products or by-products of their culture as they apply it to the task of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances. To one who knows their culture, these things and events are also signs signifying the cultural forms or models of which they are material representations. (1964: 39–40)

whereas Nida (1994: 157) defines culture as: “the total beliefs and practices of a society”. Words only have meaning in terms of the culture in which they are used, and although languages do not determine culture, they certainly tend to reflect a society’s beliefs and practice”.

These three concepts interlock firmly in the translation of idioms and culturally bound pieces of language.

2. Some notes on the translation of idioms

Idioms are defined as follows:

They are frozen patterns of language which allow little variation in form and, in the case of idioms, often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. (Baker 1992: 63)

Some easy examples might include the following: bury the hatchet, which can be translated into Arabic as: ٌدَفِّعَ الأَنْعَامَ, or the long and short of it, which can be translated into Arabic as: كُلُّ القَصَصَ وَمَا فِيهَا.

However, before we continue discussing some other idioms, let us see what are the main difficulties that may face the translator when translating idioms. The main difficulties were summarized in Baker (1992: 65) as follows:

The main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translating relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language. These difficulties are much more pronounced in the case of idioms than they are in the case of fixed expression.
Idioms can be classified into many types (see Baker 1992: 65). However, we will restrict our analysis to some as representative instances:

2.1 Those that violate truth conditions (easily recognizable), such as:

a. *It is raining cats and dogs.* The meaning of which can be translated into Arabic as: (translation by an idiom, but different form).
   Notice that the phrase *cats and dogs* is replaced by *jars of water*

b. *Throw caution to the winds*, which can be translated as: (translation by paraphrase)

c. *Jump down someone's throat* which can be translated as: (translation by paraphrase)

d. *Storm in a tea cup* which can be translated as:

In fact there is no rule for translating the meanings expressed by this group of idioms except knowing the cultural equivalent of each in the target language regardless of the linguistic forms they take.

This group might include expressions which seem ill-formed because they do not follow the grammatical rules of the language as the following (Baker 1992: 65):

e. *Trip the light fantastic* which might be translated into Arabic as:

f. *Blow someone to kingdom come* which be translated into Arabic as:

    يمسح من على وجه الأرض (يُدمَر إنسانًا تدمره كاملاً)

   كل إنسان (جميع الحاضرين)

A third sub-group might include expressions which start with *like* (simile structure) as the following:

h. *Like a bat out of hell* which might be translated into Arabic as:

   المغادرة/الانسحاب بسرعة فائقة (مثل سير النار في اللهجة العامية)

i. *Like water off a duck's back* which might be translated as:

   دون أي أثر (كأثر الماء على ذيل البط)

These tend to be translated in a semi-literal form.

Some idioms may have either a literal translation which is acceptable out
of a definite context, or an idiomatic translation when the context is known to the translator. Baker (1992: 66) mentions a very nice example relating to this point:

*I’d just done my stint as rubber duck, see, and pulled off the grandma lane into the pit stop to drain the radiator.*

If I am supposed to translate this into Arabic without any support from the context or otherwise, my translation will get stuck when translating the following expressions: *rubber duck, grandma*, simply because the literal meaning does not help. Assuming that I could reach the required meaning from a good reference about idioms or from a native speaker who is familiar with the language of truck drivers, still my translation would still render only the literal meaning of *drain the radiator*, and my translation might be as follows:

لقد أنتهت مهمتي قادماً للرتل، وخرجت من المسار المخصص لسیر العربات والشاحنات

التيلة البطنية، لأقف في الاستراحة لكي أفرّ من المتبقي.

Of course this is a literal translation of the original text; but the real idiomatic meaning of the original is completely different. Now assuming I know the idiomatic meaning of the phrase *to drain the radiator* in the context of truck driving, then my translation can be revised as follows:

لقد أنتهت مهمتي قادماً للرتل، وخرجت من المسار المخصص لسیر العربات والشاحنات

التيلة البطنية، لأقف في الاستراحة لكي أفرّ من المتبقي، "أذهب للحمام".

The point is that without knowing exactly the idiomatic use of the phrase *to drain the radiator*, in the context of truck driving, I would have never been able to render the meaning properly in Arabic. This is an example of the importance of context and cultural background in translation.

3. On the translation of some culturally bound expressions and phrases

3.1 On the translation of some English phrases into Arabic

Some English examples are the translations of the following phrases:

*one parent child, palimony, car boot sale, mentors, big brothers and sisters organization*
The literal translation of these phrases out of context may be as follows:

I don’t think that such translation means a lot to the target reader. In fact, it does not reveal the correct or semi-correct meaning of the English. Even if we put them in complete sentences still the correct meaning is opaque:

1. The one parent child association released its latest booklet which includes all the services it offers to its members.
2. The Lee Marvin palimony case... shows that... married or unmarried... people who live together can not avoid a shared responsibility. (See Neubert et al. 1992: 67).
3. According to the police, car boot sales are notorious places where stolen goods are sold (The Express, Saturday, February 20, 1999).
4. In the US, an organization called big brothers and sisters provides mentors for under-privileged and high-risk children (ibid.).

If we translate the sentences (1–4) without any help from the context, which is not clear at all from the sentences themselves, we may get the following:

Although the phrase one parent child in (1) is translated through paraphrasing (for lack of a formal equivalence) into a complete clause i.e. (1a) to clarify its meaning in English, nonetheless, the meaning of the Arabic translation is very far from being transparent. An Arab or a Muslim reader can not understand the notion of a child with one parent only. The nearest notion in the Islamic culture to the phrase one parent child is the child who has lost one or both parents, in which latter case it is called an orphan in English. Even in this latter case, i.e. losing one’s parents in war or earthquake etc., the parents of the child are still
known through the Civil Service Records. In the case of a child who is found by itself without it being possible to know its parents by any means, it is called لقىٍط, i.e. foundling not one parent child.

This phrase reflects the existence of a concept which, in turn, reflects an event/action that is not found in the Arabic or Islamic culture. Any rendering of the phrase one parent child without adding a commentary or a footnote will not yield a translation that is understandable to the Arab reader. (1a) could be adopted as an acceptable translation, but only if it is coupled with the following commentary:

(5) *It is possible for a woman in the western world to have a baby from with any man she likes, and she is not legally obliged to declare the father’s name or nationality etc. or she may not be certain about them. In this case the family which consists of only the mother and the child(ren) is called “one parent family” and the child(ren) is/are called “one parent child(ren)”.*

Now the translation in (1a) could be modified to include the additional meanings expressed in the commentary, in which case it might be as follows:

(6) أصدرت جمعية الأطفال الذين يعيشون بكون أحد الوالدين (الأم في أغلب الأحيان) والذين ليس من الضروري أن يعرفوا أباهم، آخر كتبتيهما والذي يضم الخدمات التي تقدمها لأعضائها.

Without such commentary the translation is not understandable at all. Although (6) is more accessible to the target reader, nevertheless it is still opaque without the commentary in (5).

Let us move to (2a) which represents the translation of (2). The problem lies in the word palimony (pal informally means a close friend + alimony, an allowance paid under a court order by one spouse to another when they are separated, either before or after divorce, Collins English Dictionary 1983) Arabs and Muslims in general cannot understand how a person could be obliged to pay a regular sum of money for someone he or she is not legally married to. More than that, according to the Arab’s culture and religion and in fact to all Muslims alimony, rather than palimony, is to be paid by a husband to his former wife if they are legally divorced, but the opposite can never be, i.e. a divorced woman can never be obliged, neither by court nor by culture or tradition, to pay alimony to her divorced husband. We have a twofold cultural gap: first, in the Islamic culture and religion we can not have a couple living together as husband and wife without being married legally; and second, in the case of divorce, only the man can be obliged by court to pay alimony. How to overcome this cultur-
al gap? I believe that the translator has to translate the original and then supply the necessary missing information either by a footnote or between parentheses. (2a) could be accepted as an adequate translation with the following commentary:

(7) *It is common in Western civilization for a man and a woman to live under one roof and to have a sexual relationship without being married legally.*

Without the additional commentary (2a) would not achieve its purpose.

Turning now to (3a), we find that the problem lies in the phrase *car boot sale*. The nearest equivalent in Arabic would be an auction sale, which is, of course, not what *car boot sale* is. This problem too is a cultural mismatch. (3a) could be accepted but only with the following commentary:

(8) *In Britain, it is usual for a person to collect some goods (second hand or new) in his car boot, and sell them in some assigned places on weekends, special occasions, festivals etc. and this event is called car boot sale.*

Moving to (4a), we have two unfamiliar phrases: *big brothers and sisters* and *mentors*. Each of them needs a commentary from the translator because the concepts that lie behind them are not found in the Arabic culture yet. The nearest equivalents to *mentor* in Arabic would be *musherf* which means academic supervisor, or *murabii* which means a person who teaches small children good behavior, or *mu’adeb*, which is a synonym to *murabii*. However, these words are not equivalent to the English original, so (4a) could be adopted as a translation but only with the following commentary:

(9) *In the USA, there is a special organization of adults and experienced volunteers who spend about five hours weekly with underprivileged or high-risk children to help them overcome the difficulties they may face in their daily life so that they may not be victims of drug traffickers etc. A member in this organization is called a mentor and the organization itself is called Big Sisters and Brothers.*

The point I would like to stress is that in these cases the event/case is not found in the Arab/Muslim target culture, therefore the concept expressing it does not exist and consequently, the language has not devised linguistic means to express it.

These examples have shown that Bassnet (1998: 79–81 passim) is absolutely right when she expresses similar ideas:
But all sorts of things happen during translation. It may be that some words and phrases are untranslatable because they do not exist outside the source language. Or the form may be untranslatable... And it is important to recognize that the task of the translator is not to ignore cultural difference and to pretend that there is such a thing as universal truth and value free cultural exchange, but rather to be aware of those differences. Through awareness, translators may find a way of helping readers across frontiers, some of which are heavily armed and dangerous to approach. Nevertheless, the translator always, essentially, works with language...Try as I may, I cannot take language out of culture or culture out of language.

3.2 On the translation of some Arabic culturally-bound phrases into English

Let us take the following sentences:

(10) بعد أن استهلك كل الماء لديه كان لابد له من التمامي کي يصلح صلاة العصر.
(11) لقد اعتكف جاري في المسجد لمدة عشرة أيام في رمضان الماضي.
(12) كي تكون مؤمنا حققيا لابد من دفع الزكاة.

Any kind of translation of these sentences into English will reveal the non-existence of a concept in English, which is found in Arabic. A provisional translation of sentences (10)–(12) might be as follows

(10a) After he had used all the water he had, he was obliged to perform 'al-tayyammum (sand ablution) to perform the 'al'aser (afternoon) prayer.
(11a) My neighbour 'irtakafa (secluded) himself in the mosque for ten days last Ramadan.
(12a) To be a true believer, you have to pay 'alzakaata (alms).

Let us check whether the translation of the words in italics have inspired the same effect or meaning in the English reader as the originals for an Arab or a Muslim. For this purpose, I checked two monolingual English dictionaries viz:


and two bilingual dictionaries (Arabic–English) viz:

The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, Spoken Language Services, Ithaca, New York, 1983

and a specialized dictionary in religious terms viz. A Dictionary of Religious
Terms, English–Arabic and Arabic–English, Abdullah Abu-Eshy Al-Maliki et al., Obeikan Bookshop, Riyadh, 1995

Assuming that the reader of these translations has the competence expressed in these dictionaries, but has no access to a native speaker of Arabic nor, to a Muslim that has a fair knowledge of the religious content of these words, let us see what kind of meaning he is going to derive.

For ablution in (10a) he will read in Collins English dictionary the following:

Ablution: n. 1. the ritual washing of a priest’s hands or of sacred vessels. 2. (often pl.) the act of washing (esp. in the phrase perform one’s ablution).

The meanings given in the above quotation from Collins do not render exactly what ablution means in Arabic or, in the Islamic religion as all Muslims know, since ablution is performed by everybody, not only priests, or religious people, before performing certain religious duties, especially the five daily prayers.

On the other hand, the English reader will find in Longman the following:

Ablutions: n. the things that you do to make yourself clean, such as washing yourself, cleaning your teeth etc.

In fact, Longman’s interpretation of ablution is very far from the real meaning of the word in Islam. Compare the following:

(13) Ablution: a ritual purification/cleaning of parts of the body [namely: the two hands from the elbow downward, the face, the two feet from the ankle, washing the mouth by gargling with water, cleaning the nose by rinsing it with water, and cleaning the hair and the outer part of the ear (pinna) by wiping them with wet hands] stipulated as a precondition for certain acts of worship like prayer, recitation of the Holy Qur’an, circumambulation around the Holy Ka’ba etc.

(A Dictionary of Religious Terms. The specification in brackets are mine).

In Islam, if a person does not have water for any reason (as being in a place very far from water, or isolated for some time) he is allowed to use clean sand instead of water for his ablution. “This way of purification is resorted to only in the absence of water and as temporary alternative to ablution. Such ritual purification is performed by striking the hands against clean sand and then passing them over the face” (ibid: 189). This is called sand ablution. This is the action the word ’altayammum indicates in (10a).
It is doubtful whether the English reader can infer the Islamic meanings of the word *ablution* depending only on the monolingual dictionaries he has. Indeed it is not clear whether any translation of *'altayammum* in English will render the appropriate meaning; therefore I suggest that the translation in (10a) should include the transliteration of the Arabic and the English translation be followed by the commentary given in (13). Alternatively, the reader may be advised to consult a specialized dictionary.

Moving now to (11a), we find the word *'i'takafa* which is translated as *secluded*. Resorting to the above-mentioned monolingual dictionaries we find in Collins the following:

*Seclude* vb (tr.): to remove from contact with others. 2. To shut off or screen from view.

while in Longman we find:

*Seclude* v [tr.]: to keep yourself or someone else away from other people.

If we know that the meaning expressed by the verb *'i'takafa* in (11a) is something like:

(14) *Seclusion in a mosque during the last ten days of Ramadan for the purpose of worshipping Allah, only. The one in such a state should not have sexual relations with his wife, and one is not allowed to leave the mosque, except for a very short period of time and only for special or urgent purposes, i.e., answering the call of nature, for taking meals, to join a funeral procession, etc.*

(A Concise Dictionary of Islamic Terms 27)

then I think the English reader will immediately recognize the differences in meanings between the Arabic concept expressed in the verb *'i'takfa* and the English one *seclude* in this context. It should be added that this seclusion of oneself is completely voluntary in Islam, whereas the meanings expressed by the verb *seclude* might include compulsory seclusion according to Longman’s. Also if the reader knows that Ramadan in (11a) is the month of fasting for Muslims, this will help him narrow the meanings of verb *'i'takfa* to those related to worship. Therefore I would advise the translator to couple his translation in (11a) with the additional explanations in (14). He may also leave the transliteration of the Arabic verb in the text so that the interested reader may consult an Arabic–Arabic dictionary or a specialized one in the field.

Let us move now to (12a) which includes the word *'alzakata*, which is translated into English as *alms*. Returning to our English–English dictionaries, we find in Collins the following:
Aims pl. n. charitable donations of money or goods to the poor or needy.

whereas in Longman we find:

Alms n [plural] old-fashioned money, food, clothes etc that are given to the poor people.

The reader of (12a) might feel puzzled or might think that there is a contradiction since true believing is apparently conditioned by the donation of some money, old clothes etc. to the poor or needy. And above all charities can never be compulsory at any rate. This is the meaning derived from (12a) and the English–English dictionaries mentioned above.

Now if the target reader is informed that the meanings of the word 'alzakaat in (12a) are something like the following:

(15) 'alzakatu/ n One of the five Pillars of Islam designating a compulsory form of poor owing amounting to 2.5% of the surplus wealth over and above a stipulated minimum rate (called nisaab) that has remained in the possession of a Muslim for a year. The following categories of people are entitled to this poor owing: the poor, the needy, those who are charged with collecting it, those who are newly converted to Islam and those whose faith is still weak and need encouragement to consolidate their faith. In addition, 'alzakaat may also be paid for setting captives free, for assisting those who are in debt, for promoting the cause of Allah, and/or for wayfarers. 'alzakaat is paid once a year.

(Adapted from A Dictionary of Religious Terms)

I believe that our target reader will derive meanings that may be either completely or relatively different from the ones he derived before. This analysis in (15) shows that 'alzakaat cannot be taken to mean alms in absolute terms; they may overlap in meanings but they are not interchangeable. The information in (15) should be known to the translator and should be included in the translated text in the form of a commentary or footnote.

Is this translation or something else? Should the translator add all this information? Is he allowed to? I believe the answer may be yes if the following statements are accepted:

Vermeer has for many years vehemently opposed the view that translation is simply a matter of language: for him translation is primarily a cross-cultural transfer (see Vermeer 1986), and in his view the translator should be bicultural, if not pluricultural,... Secondly, Vermeer views translation as action, as "Sondersorte von Handeln" (1986), in other words, it is a cross-cultural event (Snell-Hornby 1988: 46).
The key thing is therefore that when confronted with a problem case, we should decide what the appropriate strategy should be and that the decision arrived at should be governed by more far-reaching considerations of text-function within situation within culture (Kussmaul 1995:72).

The translator may have to intervene by inserting footnotes, providing translators notes, or creating explanatory paraphrases. The translator is trying to bring the L2 reader to an informational threshold by providing extra information. Informativity is not just a function of transferring information already in a text (Neubert & Shreve 1991:91).

If we base translation theory on translation practice, then we are not faced with choosing linguistic/semantic over pragmatic/communicative approaches or emphasizing source-culture over target-culture values. Rather, we recognize that there is a translation reality which is extremely diverse and which calls for different translation responses. Our approach to translation insists that all of these approaches are valid if they have a basis in the textuality of translation and are empirical in method. (ibid:35)

We have resorted to this strategy of coupling the translation of the original text with a commentary because the word in the original text embodies a concept that reflects an action/event which is not found in the target language and culture. The translator has to compensate for this mismatch between the two languages and cultures if his translation is to interpret the source text correctly both linguistically and culturally.

4. Conclusion

I would like to finish this article with some other comments about the possible ways of translating idioms and culturally bound expressions. Baker (1992: 71–78) mentions four strategies for translating idioms namely: (a) using an idiom of similar meaning and form, (b) using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form, (c) translation by paraphrase, and (d) translation by omission. She (1992:78) touches very briefly on another strategy when she says:

One strategy which can not be adequately illustrated, simply because it would take up a considerable amount of space, is the strategy of compensation.

We think this is the strategy which may be the proper one in translating some culturally bound expressions. In this strategy the translator is called on to intervene and supply the information required to make the processing of the idiom or other similar phrases possible in the target language. If he does not in-
Arabic translation across cultures

tervene, the purpose of translation as an act of cross-cultural communication is not respected, and we can be sure that the reader in the target language will not get the message expressed in the source text. The following quotation makes the point:

A good translator will almost invariably supply extra information in the L2 text. The L2 community does not share the mutual knowledge necessary to make the appropriate references to social, cultural, and geographical phenomena. (Neubert et al., 1992: 79).

Tannen, expresses similar views, concerning the pragmatics of teaching, understanding, and learning the cultural aspects of foreign languages, which can be extended to the translation of culturally bound expressions. She says:

Ways of communicating meaning in talk are learned in the speech community, that is by talking to people with whom one identifies socially. As social networks are always local, not global, people in different communities have different ways of using linguistic means to communicative ends, and their ways of talking, like other cultural patterns, define them as a community. This illustrates Hall’s (1959) assertion that culture is communication. To the extent that no two people have exactly the same communicative background, to that extent, all communication is cross-cultural, and understanding cross-cultural communication is a means to understanding language at the same time that it is a means to understanding and, one hopes, improving problems and tasks facing the world and the people in it, including the task of teaching and learning new languages [and translation across cultures] (Tannen 1983:194. The emphasis and words in square brackets are mine.)

Note

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References

Abstract

This paper deals mainly with some of the difficulties the translator might encounter when translating some culturally bound pieces of information. These would include the translation of some idioms, and some culturally bound concepts.

The paper starts with definitions of translation, language and culture followed by an extensive analysis of the examples provided. All the examples are drawn from Arabic and English. The examples include the translation of some idioms which violate truth conditions, which are easily recognizable, and some others which may be translated either literally or idiomatically with obviously different results.

Then the analysis moves to the translation of some culturally bound expressions from both Arabic and English. Here, we find examples that cannot be translated into the other language simply for lack of cultural equivalents. The skill and the intervention of the translator are most needed in this respect because above all translation is an act of communication.

Résumé

Cet article traite principalement de certaines difficultés que le traducteur peut rencontrer quand il traduit des textes d’information qui présentent un aspect culturel. Ces difficultés ont trait à certaines locutions idiomatiques et concepts culturels.

L’article commence par définir la traduction, la langue et la culture, puis analyse en détail les exemples fournis. Tous les exemples sont tirés de l’arabe et de l’anglais. Ces exemples comprennent la traduction de certaines locutions idiomatiques qui trahissent
les conditions de vérité et sont facilement reconnaissables, et de quelques autres qui peuvent être traduites soit littéralement, soit de manière idiomatique, mais avec bien sûr des résultats différents.

Puis l'analyse passe à la traduction de certaines expressions de nature culturelle, en arabe et en anglais. Nous y trouvons des exemples qu'il est impossible de traduire dans l'autre langue, tout simplement parce qu'il leur manque des équivalents culturels. L'habileté et l'intervention du traducteur sont des plus nécessaires dans ce cas, parce que la traduction est avant tout un acte de communication.

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