The Cultural Aspect of Translation: The Workability of Cultural Translation Strategies in Translating Culture-Specific Texts

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Abstract: Culture generally reflects the attitude towards other cultures, people, events and the whole world alongside the way in which attitudes are mediated. In other words, culture points to a set of values and beliefs generally shared by specific social groups and to the stance adopted by text producers and receivers, including translated texts during the process of mediation (Faiq, 2004, 1). Translation has with no doubt played a substantial role in intercultural communication, which has led to large cultural shifts from one culture to another, thus having a great deal of communication between diverse cultures through language (Faiq, 2004, 1). When translation takes place between two different cultures, An inevitable conflict between them for influence and power may emerge. This often results in some form of mediation whose realization can be recognised through language (Faiq, 2004, 2). The concepts of domestication and foreignisation, addressed by Venuti (1995, 1996 and 1998), have been presented as opposed cultural translation strategies that have created a longitudinal dispute among both translation theorists and translation practitioners. This is due to the fact that domestication leads to translation violence through the reconstruction and adaptation of the source text so as to fit the beliefs and values specific to the target language culture, whereas foreignisation gives rise to exoticism through inserting cultural references peculiar to the source language culture in the target text, thus creating foreign terms to the culture of the target reader. The present paper argues for a middle ground; using a double-strategy as a cultural translation strategy which aims at both retaining the content of the source text in the target text and producing a target text which can be comprehended by the target reader.

1. Introduction

The term 'misunderstanding is deemed pivotal in most aspects of life (Rabassa, 1996). It is an inevitable consequence of the disagreement in languages, which are responsible for processing information. Nonetheless, linguistic disagreement is not the only factor which causes misunderstanding, culture also plays an important role in creating this dilemma. This indicates that misunderstanding predominantly takes place in specific historical and social structures along with production and reception of prevalent language norms (Faiq, 2004, 1). Hatim (1997), supporting this notion, Contends that Situations of cross-cultural miscommunication often emanate from a break-down in communication. The problem here lies mainly in misunderstanding of a set of concepts held by a particular party with regard to how the other party views and interprets different communicative objectives (p. 157). Historical as well s social structures along with production and reception of prevalent language norms may generally make up the constituents of the ideology and the culture of a particular language (Faiq, 2004, 1).

The present paper crucially addresses the cultural aspect of translation. It starts by defining culture in relation to translation, presenting the important role played by translation in intercultural communication and viewing translation as a cultural process that involves cultural transposition. The paper then offers a relatively succinct account of the nature of text within both Arabic and English cultures, with clear emphasis on Arabic and English argumentative texts, in an attempt to compare and contrast between the two as this procedure will have important implications on the translation between the two aforementioned cultures. Domestication as a cultural translation strategy, which has largely been adopted by Western translators in rendering Arabic texts into European languages, will then be presented, showing how Arabic Culture and literature have been marginalised by Western translators despite the meticulous attention given in the 1980s and 1990s by

the West to Islamic culture and its people. The present paper will then provide examples of culture in translation from Arabic to demonstrate the use of a set of divergent strategies to surmount cultural problems arising from cultural differences between Arabic and other European languages, particularly English. It can be argued that the use of a single strategy in rendering texts containing culture-specific elements into a particular language may not be appropriate, rather a double-strategy should be employed to take account of the special nature of the culture-specific elements and, at the same time take care of the generic nature of other lexical items contained in the same texts.

2. Culture: Definition and Concept

Culture generally reflects the attitude towards other cultures, people, events and the whole world alongside the way in which attitudes are mediated. In other words, culture points to a set of values and beliefs generally shared by specific social groups and to the stance adopted by text producers and receivers, including translated texts during the process of mediation (Faiq, 2004, 1). Translation has with no doubt played a substantial role in intercultural communication, which has led to large cultural shifts from one culture to another, thus having a great deal of communication between diverse cultures through language. However, one significant distinction between language and culture lies in the fact that while the former is likely to change linguistically (phonologically, morphologically, syntactically and semantically), the latter takes a considerably long time to change (Faiq, 2004, 1). When translation takes place between two different cultures, an inevitable conflict between them for influence and power may emerge. This often results in some form of mediation whose realization can be recognised through language (Faiq, 2004, 2). In Fact, intercultural translation has led to the breaking down of hierarchical aspects between nations and cultures, however, it has also played a substantial role in formulating discourses of power and resistance, which have interacted in cross-cultural prejudice and pride (Faiq, 2004, 11).

The strongly tight connection between language and culture, particularly in the field of translation studies has given rise to theories which suggest that translation should be viewed as a cultural act/process (Faiq, 2004, 2). Hence, biculturalism is far more important than bilingualism in translation as terms derive their conceptual meaning from the culture in which they function (Nida, 2001, 82). With culture and ideology in mind, a group of theorists have claimed that translation involves some forms of subversion, manipulation, violence as well as

appropriation (Faiq, 2004, 2). This is in line with Venuti (1995, 1996 and 1998), who holds the view that the activity of translation involves violence. Taken on board the concepts of domestication and foreignisation, Venuti points out that the Anglo-American translation has possessed over the last three centuries a naturalizing and normalizing effect. He goes on to argue that such an effect has led to full cover of the voice of the source text producer, and has ipso facto conveyed and reflected the target text cultural values which are peculiar to the Western culture. He explains that the violence of translation lies in the process of the reconstruction and adaptation of the source text so as to fit the beliefs and values specific to the target language culture. This process, Venuti adds, always governs the creation, reception as well as circulation of texts. The difference produced by the translation by all means runs in line with the target language culture, its ideologies and its specific codes (Venuti, 1996, 196).

Translation becomes a highly debatable subject marked by sensitivity when issues of ideology and culture are emphasised. Such elements can be investigated through the theory of relativism between languages and their specific cultures. However, owing to the fact that translation has long been a well-known occupation and a well-developed practice, cultural aspect of translation has been inevitable, thus giving rise to the representation of a particular linguistic and political groups to be crossed into a totally different linguistic and political groups (Faiq, 2004, 3). Within the same line of thought, Venuti (1994) asserts that translation is an ineluctable domestication where the source text is being conformed to the linguistic and cultural norms of the target language and can therefore be comprehended within this specific culture. This process takes place at all stages of translation preparation, including production of the translated text, its circulation as well as the reception thereof by the target audience. Therefore, it can be claimed that translating largely involves adaptation as well as cultural transposition (Carbonell, 2004, 27). In order to address the concept of translating between cultures more profoundly, particularly from Arab culture into English culture, it is crucial to shed some light on the nature of text within these two cultures.

3. Nature of Text within Arabic and English Cultures

Texts usually relay ideological meaning, which makes them exposed to socio-cultural norms which are amenable to change (Hatim, 1997, 35). Intertextuality ascertains the everlasting interaction between several texts, which gives rise to the existence of text types. Following this, and from a

pragmatic point of view, utterances serve as semiotic signs whose purpose is to impart a particular piece of information by a particular person to another person at a particular time period and in a particular place (Hatim, 1997, 36). The emergence of the text type focus may generally be described in terms of its inclination either to manage or to monitor a specific situation (Hatim, 1997, 36). If the main function of the text concerned is to offer a reasonable account of the situation model, 'situation monitoring' is being carried out. On the other hand, if the primary function of the text in question is to direct the situation in such a way that runs in line with the objectives and goals of the text's producer, 'situation management' is being performed (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981, 162).

Comparing and contrasting English and Arabic argumentative texts, Hatim (1997, 44, 46-47) claims that English argumentative texts tend to prefer counter-argumentation. They, specifically favour the Balance type, which includes the sequence of 'thesis, opposition, substantiation and conclusion'. By contrast, Modern Standard Arabic is inclined towards through-argumentation. In that, texts of Modern Standard Arabic tend to follow the sequence of 'thesis, substantiation and conclusion'. Counter-argumentation does also exist in Arabic, predominantly in the form of Explicit Concessive type, albeit with less occurrence than through-argumentation, a form of text which either supports or condemns a particular stand-point.

It is argued that Arabic is characterized by general ambiguity of thought, which springs from the fact that symbols receive more emphasis than their meaning. This, however, gives rise to exaggeration formulated in the style of emotive responses (Hatim, 1997, 161). This runs in line with Shouby (1951, 295), who claims that Native speakers of Arabic seek to make the thought suitable for the word, rather than the other way around. In that, they endeavour to make words substitutes of thought, rather than using words to represent thought. Both English and Arabic texts are deemed presentation/oriented (Hatim, 1997, 166). Taken on board the aforementioned aspects of both Arabic and English texts, which unequivocally spring from totally unrelated cultures, how would translating from Arabic culture into English culture seem to be?

4. Culture and Translation from Arabic

Cultural and translation studies crucially deal with how knowledge is given in a specific culture and the way in which this knowledge can possibly be interpreted if given and produced in a different culture (Faiq, 2004, 4). Cultural identity can be constructed in translation through restricted stereotypes (Carbonell, 2004, 30). Within the sphere of translating from Arabic, Carbonell (1996, 1997, 2004) expresses discontent with the way Arabic texts are rendered into European languages. He adds that translators, when translating Arabic texts into a particular European language, tend to domesticate the Arabic culture with its associated literature to live up to the expectations of the Western target reader. Along similar lines, Venuti (1998, 83) claims that under 'ethics of difference', translating from Arabic into a particular European language involves alteration in the reproduction of the source text to fit the dominant target culture such that the source text becomes marginalized. In that, the translator's act is deemed repugnant to the concept of fidelity to the source text in the sense that the translator becomes disloyal to the cultural norms that control the process of translation. This is lent credence by Sara (2004, 107), who contends that Arabic texts are rendered into the host language through reconstructing the Arabic texts with their traditions to fit the lexicon and traditions of the host language. He continues to point out that translation of Arabic texts has been domesticated to fit the values of the Western culture such that the cultural references and ethos of the source language have been wholly dispensed with (P. 107-108). Faiq (2004) points out that the use of manipulation in Arabic translation contravenes the rules of the original Arabic and places it under the control of the target reader and his/her views on Arab culture and people. This kind of manipulation gives rise to text subversion by way of rendering it into another language and/or by way of other discourses at diverse levels (Faiq, 2004; Abdul-Raof, 2004; Carbonell, 2004; Sara, 2004; Jacquemond, 2004). Hence, it appears evident that translating Arabic texts involves shift in meaning so that the target texts would live up to the expectations of the Western reader and his/her culture which is the mainstream world culture and literature. World culture and literature refer to the norms of Western culture which represent humanism and universalism (Asad, 1995).

In spite of the fact that the West in the 1980s and 1990s has been exposed to the Third World nation, its texts and culture, the Arabic and Islamic literature has been left unrealized and has not been put into consideration despite the clearly undenied attention paid to Islam and its people during that specific period of time (Faiq, 2004, 5). Translating texts from Arabic follows well-established scripts where strategies of power and signification exist as a texture of signs, which are connected by infinite denotations and connotations, a complex system of meaning that is clearly shown in writing activity (Carbonnel, 1996, 81). Bassnett (1991) regards the connection between the translator and what he/she

considers inferior source language and culture as being in line with the rise and spread of colonisation. This connection still exists, although colonisation has at least lacked its conventional sense.

Faiq (2004, 8) argues that attitudes of the West and their views of the Arab culture via translation can be formulated on the grounds that Western culture and Arab culture with their pasts are totally different, have long been in conflict and will continue to clash against one another. Cultural problems in translation between the aforementioned two cultures seem evident when translating literary texts from Arabic into English, for instance, as will be exemplified in the following section. There is, however, no agreeable strategy that can be adopted to solve cultural problems in translation. The use of free translation or literal translation in translating literary texts in particular is still a controversial issue. Both strategies have been utilized, for instance in Spain, in the translation of Arabic literary texts, presenting divergent results and different ways of addressing cultural issues and problems (Carbonell, 2004, 26). Literal translation may result in what Carbonell (2004, 27) terms 'foreignising', which is the same as Venuti's 'foreignisation', which lies in inserting exotic cultural elements in the target text, which are peculiar to the source culture through the use of loan words, imitating the structure of the source text and/or the use of calques. By contrast, free translation may lead to what Carbonell (2004, 27) calls 'familiarising', which is the same as Venuti's 'domestication', which resides in the process through which elements peculiar to the source text with their cultural references are replaced by elements deemed familiar to the target reader, so that the content of the source text, albeit with some changes, can be comprehended by the target reader. According to Carbonell (2004, 31), exotic translated texts have made literal translation a recognizable aspect of exotic literature which can be viewed as a particular genre.

5. Examples of Culture in Translation from Arabic

In the process of rendering Arabic texts into English, there is a certain degree of variation in translation due to the clearly noticeable linguistic and cultural differences between the two languages. Specific terms pertaining to the languages in question are totally different as they are derived from two completely unrelated cultures (Sara, 2004, 116). There are a number of examples that clearly illustrate the cultural differences between Arabic and English, one of which has been given by Lefevere (1990, 26), who claims that the camel dung stated in Labid's Arabic poem cannot be expected to have a poetic

effect on the target reader who belongs to the Western culture. Due to this fact, Carlyle, (an English Victorian translator), dispenses with this Arabic cultural element in the English version, thus adopting a strategy called translation by omission, which primarily resides in omitting textual elements from the target text, though they are present in the source text (Dickins, Hervey & Higgins, 2002, 23). On the other hand, German translators endeavour to look for a cultural analogy, albeit with little or no success as the proposed solution is deemed more problematic than the de facto problem itself. Therefore, the strategy of domestication used in the aforementioned poem would unequivocally result in shift in meaning and the intended message that the poet is aiming to convey to his target audience. Bassnett (1998, 57) asserts that poets serve divergent purposes in different cultures, an important factor that should be considered by translators.

Carbonell (2004, 27-28) argues that both linguistic and cultural studies are unable to offer solutions in addressing cultural problems arising from translation between two different cultures. He claims that translating from Arabic into Spanish, for instance, involves an inevitable degree of exoticism where neither foreignisation, nor domestication can appear flexible to both translation theorists and/or professional translators. On the other hand, he asserts that readers can make the unfamiliar references coherent through accommodating and learning a new system of classes and categories as well as different practices of human being that they can provide a description thereof. Consequently, foreignness becomes limited (Carbonell, 2004, 30). Carbonell (2004, 30) goes on to explain that in any discursive construction formulated in the form of a particular text, the assumption that all elements contained within this very text are familiar to the target reader is not plausible, nor is the assumption that the whole text looks alien to the target reader acceptable. Indeed, there are a relatively limited number of texts aspects that are responsible for making the target text known to the target reader, or otherwise alien to him/her. However, and in any case, Carbonell (2004, 37) rejects the concept of fidelity to the source culture, pointing out that loyalty to the culture of the original text often raises problematic ethical questions. Whenever there exists a cultural gap between the source text and the target language, ideological choices make translators suffer and govern the options available to them (Carbonell, 2004, 37-38).

In fact, Carbonell's (2004) argument, which indicates the failure of both linguistic and cultural studies in tackling cultural issues and problems arising from the translation between two different

cultures, seems conspicuous. Unfortunately, there is no agreeable translation strategy which should be employed when confronting cultural differences between the source and target languages. Consequently, it can be claimed that culture-specific texts, which contain culture-specific elements should be treated on their own merit. The nature of the text that needs to be translated, the purpose of the translation alongside the type of the target audience to whom the translation is directed, are all important factors that should be considered by the translator when dealing with the translation of a particular culture-specific text. The translator may resort to a double-strategy in dealing with a culture-specific text, thus avoiding both pure domestication and pure foreignisation, which lead to translation violence and exoticism respectively.

One simple example that illustrates the need for adopting a double-strategy in translating a text that contains a culture-specific element can be shown in the following sentence. When an Arab person receives good news, he/she usually says 'athlaja ṣadrī hadhā alkhabar', the literal rendering of which into English can read as 'this news snowed my chest'. Obviously, the English target text conveys no sense and sounds exotic to the English reader. This lends credence to the notion which states that the use of literal translation only in rendering a text containing culture-specific elements does not work and will yield a text that looks alien to the target reader. However, the translation of the above Arabic text into English as 'this news warmed my heart' would convey the right and intended sense to the target reader and would read well to him/her. It is worth pointing out that the last English translation has made use of a number of strategies alongside grammatical transposition.

'Athlaja' is an Arabic verb, which is derived from the Arabic noun 'thalj', the literal rendering of which into English is 'snow'. Due to the usual hot weather in many Arab countries, especially in summer, and owing to the fact that 'snow' is rarely seen in these countries throughout the year, this element 'snow' is a source of happiness to Arabs generally as it is rarely seen in their countries compared to the west. Hence, Arabs make use of the verb 'athlaja', affected by their countries' overall weather, and therefore, by their culture, when expressing something pleasant. Conversely, Westerners always see 'snow' in their countries due to the geographical nature of their countries, and certainly love to have some sunny and warm days. Consequently, affected by the weather of their countries, and therefore, by their culture, 'warmth' to Westerners is a source of happiness as it is rarely felt in the west compared to the east. Hence, Westerners

exploit the verb 'warm' when expressing good feeling or informing of something pleasant.

Following the foregoing, the strategy of domestication has been adopted to domesticate the Arabic verb 'athlaja' as 'warmed' to live up to the expectations of the target reader and be fully comprehended by him/her. Free translation has been employed to render the Arabic phrase 'ṣadrī' into English as 'my heart'. The reason behind the use of free translation in lieu of literal translation in this particular instance stems from the fact that it is the implicit meaning of the phrase 'ṣadrī' which is intended, but not the literal/denotative meaning. Hence, the phrase 'ṣadrī' has been freely rendered into English as 'my heart', and has not been literally rendered into English as 'my chest', a construction which, if used, would look stilted with the rest of the English text and would not relay the intended message. By contrast, literal translation has been adopted in translating the Arabic phrase 'hadhā alkhabar' as the meaning intended from this particular phrase is the literal meaning and owing to the fact that the literal translation of this particular phrase into English fits well with the rest of the English text. Therefore, the Arabic phrase 'hadhā alkhabar' has been verbatim rendered into English as 'this news'. Having considered the translation of the aforementioned Arabic text into English, which contains a culture-specific element, a set of diverse strategic approaches have been adopted to arrive at an acceptable English translation. The strategies of domestication, free translation and literal translation have been used respectively to render the above Arabic text into an acceptable and comprehensible English target text. Adherence to only one strategy, such as domestication, for instance, would lead to complete failure of conveying the intended message content of the source text in the target text. On the contrary, following literal translation only would create ill-formed, ill-constructed and incomprehensible English target text. This is given credence by Sara (2004, 116), who points out that a single approach to language analysis adopted in a particular translation project, such as domestication or foreignisation, poses a real challenge and a complex problem to the translator.

Other alternative strategies and procedures that can be taken by the translator to surmount crucial cultural issues and problems are also possible. Carbonell (2004, 30) asserts that The translator, avoiding being invisible, often chooses a particular position to himself/herself before achieving the target text, making introductions, glossaries, footnotes, endnotes, etc. All these procedures are taken in an attempt to scaffold the target reader to fathom the target text. The translator may also resort to tail

his/her translation with a linguistic analysis/commentary to explore and analyse the crucial linguistic and cultural issues and problems which have confronted him/her during the translation process, and outline the set of strategic decisions adopted to resolve such problems.

6. Concluding Remarks

It is evident that language and culture are tightly linked to one another in such a way that they can never be severed as the former is part of the latter. Within the realm of translation studies, this strongly tight connection between language and culture has resulted in formulating theories that view translation as a cultural act. Consequently, translating within this view involves a great deal of adaptation and cultural transposition.

One crucial result that has emerged due to the strongly tight connection between language and culture is that texts pertaining to any particular language are formulated on the basis of the language norms and culture to which these texts belong. This has unquestionably had significant bearing on translating Arabic texts into English as Arabic and English texts are structured differently owing to the clearly noticeable difference in language norms and culture to which each text is related.

Domestication, as a cultural translation strategy, has predominantly been employed in Arabic-English translation by Western translators such that target texts would be produced in such a way that fits the culture of the target language and lives up to the expectations of the target reader. Besides, Arabic culture with its literature have been overlooked in spite of the fact that Islam and Muslims have received clear attention by Western translators, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, it can be strongly argued that the use of pure domestication or pure foreignisation, as cultural translation strategies, in translating text which comprises culture-specific elements does not seem appropriate as the text in question would include culture-specific terms along with other typical lexical items, which should be treated by the translator differently as they would appear different to the target reader. Moreover, pure domestication and pure foreignisation or familiarizing and foreignising may lead to translation violence and exoticism respectively. It seems evident then that double-strategy appears more plausible and effective in rendering texts of culture-specific elements than adherence to a single strategy as such elements should receive careful treatment and should be evaluated on their own merit.

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