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Literary Translation and the Characteristics of Arabic and English

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Abstract:

Literary translation is the translation of literature and it is one of the most important genres within the field of translation. It is a means of bridging two or more cultures through the exchange of the values, traditions, customs and social practices embodied in worldwide literary works. Adopting a descriptive approach, this paper provides a brief overview of literary translation. It focuses on the characteristics and literariness of Arabic and English as translation between these two languages has been participative in the process of filling up the gap between the Arab and Western cultures. This article highlights certain linguistic, structural and cultural issues usually encountered by literary translators as they treat literary products, especially between English and Arabic. It concludes that the development of literary translation in the Arab world, especially in the Maghreb, has been impeded due to foreign invasions of the region, limited sponsorship provided to Arabic English literary translators and the absence of coordination among literary translators.

Keywords: Arabic Language, English Language, Literary Translation

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Literary translation is one of the most important types of translation. This genre of translation is described in reference to literature. This is to say that as literature, in one of its definitions, is the mirror that reflects the daily life details of inner social and cultural practices within certain given societies. With that said, literary translation is also a means that transfers such daily life details from one language (or culture) to another. Always in relation to literature, literary translation is not only about searching for equivalents of a source language words in the target language, but rather concerned with delivering the meaning of such cultural practices in a creative manner. In this spirit, one might say that literary translation is more of a reproduction of an original text in another language. This can be true, but if it is so, this might be within certain limits where the main ideas in the translation cannot contradict those of the original text. The literary translator can only be blamed on breaking the rule if they fail to deliver the same message as it is clearly conveyed in the translated text; otherwise, their product

is always valid no matter how they managed to operate the process of translation. In this respect, it is obvious that the literary translator is given much more space for personal intervention in the process of translation compared to the situation of the counterpart translators in other fields of translation, scientific translation in particular.

The most problematic question, as far as literary translation is concerned, remains the one concerned with the controversy about the position of the translator. In other words, is the task of a literary translator reduced to translating the meaning of words or is he/she more concerned with the translation of the ideas? If the task of the literary translator is limited to transforming words from one language to their equivalents in other language, then they can be considered out of the process of translation. If the task is elevated to transferring ideas, then the role of the translator in this case raises the question about the validity of traditional definition of translation as a process in which a message is transferred from one language (SL) to another (TL) by a mediator (translator)! It is all, then, about the intervention of the translator in the process of translation and the impact of that on the credibility of the output of the whole process. Accordingly, one of the hypotheses from which this research departs is whether the shift of the role of the literary translator from a neutral part in the process to a participant or even a re-producer of the text impacts the validity of the translation, and thus the representation of the original text/culture or not?

Literary Arabic - Characteristics of Arabic Language

Arabic is a Semitic language that has a grammar and structure which are totally different from those of other languages, English in particular. The root of the word in Arabic is inclusive of three consonants. All parts of speech are a combination of three consonants and vowels. Alphabetically speaking, Arabic has twenty-eight consonants and eight vowels and diphthongs. Arabic letters are written in a cursive script from right to left. Unlike the case in English, there is no capitalization or lower case in Arabic. Yet, indentation and punctuation marks, like comma, colon, semi colon and period exist in academic standard Arabic.¹ Throughout the Arab world, and also in many foreign countries, standard Arabic is widely used on radio, television, websites, and in press conferences. With the emergence of social networks, and after the 09/11 attacks, Arab and Islamic issues are increasingly becoming major topics for international media reports and coverages.² One of the unique characteristics of Arabic is its sound system. That is because it includes a number of distinctive guttural sounds that are not found in many other languages including English.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, "Literary Arabic, usually called Classical Arabic, is essentially the form of the language found in the Quran, with some modifications necessary for its use in modern times; it is uniform throughout the Arab world."³ Arabic is not only the mother tongue of around 300 million speakers (Arabs, Africans and Asians) but it is also the religious language of more than 1.6 billion Muslims.⁴ Being the language of this huge

¹ Shoe bottom, Paul. "Language Differences." *A Guide to Learning English*, 2011, esl.fis.edu/grammar/langdiff/arabic.htm. Web. Aug 7, 2017.

² Meakin, Sandra. *Languages and Cultures in English-Language-Based International Schools: A Guide for Teachers*. Petersfield, Hampshire: European Council of International Schools, 1987.

³ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Arabic Language | Semitic Language." Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/Arabic-language. Web. Sept 6, 2017.

⁴ Chappell, Bill. "World's Muslim Population Will Surpass Christians This Century, Pew Says." NPR, 2 Apr. 2015, www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/04/02/397042004/muslim-population-will-surpass-christians-this-century-pew-says. Web. Oct 20, 2017.

number of adherents, it is clear that Arabic, with its unique linguistic characteristics, is reflective of literary and cultural aspects of too many different ethnic groups who share the values of Islam.⁵

During the last few decades, an immense importance started to be given to Arabic as the most translated-from language. This can be related to cultural, political and religious factors. The Arabic culture is one of the oldest cultures that survived centuries of ups-and-downs. With all its specificities, it is set to be one of the most outnumbering and rich cultures as far as literature is concerned. It is the culture of Islam which is one of the world's fastest growing religions with adherents from too many different cultural backgrounds. Islamic culture has attracted the attention of the world for security reasons where this Islam, mistakenly, is being considered as the source of terrorism. Consequently, Quran has been the subject of translation more than any other Arabic literary production. The translation of its meaning into European languages has emerged within the last decades and more people have become eager to know about Islam after the 9/11 attacks. This new importance given to Islamic teachings have been encouraged by the continuous attempts to link terroristic threats in the world to the religion of Islam instead of the extremists criminals who exist in all religions and regions.

Politically speaking, this Islamic heritage that Arabic language stands as one of its symbols has been celebrated in the context of dialogue among civilizations' events. Barack Obama's famous speech in Cairo 2009 was a remarkable step forward in this respect. He praised Muslims for their historical scientific and intellectual contributions to civilization saying that "it was Islam that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment," and that "it was innovation in Muslim communities that developed the order of algebra; our magnetic compass and tools of navigation; our mastery of pens and printing; our understanding of how disease spreads and how it can be healed."⁶ This confess of the great participation of Islam and Muslims in the scientific development throughout the world give a clear idea about the huge difference between the period of time when this religion and its adherents were playing an enlightening role world widely and how they are being looked at now as the sources of violence.

Despite the fact that the Arab world is the focal point of interest for news coverage undertaken by major international media networks, it is noticeable that translation rate of literary works originally written in Arabic is still very low compared to the importance given to daily events taking place in the region, especially in the Middle East. For instance, in a country like Germany where 40% of fiction publications are translated from other languages, only 0.3 of these translations are written by Arab authors. This clear negligence or failure of the Arab writers to present their products to the western readership is due to several factors including the lack of sponsorship and ambition.⁷

Literary English - Characteristics of English Language

Historically speaking, English language started its universality through travel missions to Americas, Asia and the Antipodes. This journey continued with the beginning of colonial era in the nineteenth century in Africa and the south Pacific. In the mid of the twentieth century,

⁵ Owens, Jonathan. *The Oxford Handbook of Arabic Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁶ Ofek, Hillel. "Why the Arabic World Turned Away from Science." *The New Atlantis*. (2011): 3-23.

⁷ Whitaker, Brian. "Language Barrier." *The Guardian*, 20 Sept. 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2004/sep/23/worlddispatch.books. Web. Oct 16, 2017.

the presence of English in the world was reinforced by adopting it as the official or semi-official language in many newly independent states. Today, English is represented in every continent, and even in every country. Simply, it has become the language of travel, science, business and technology. This wide spread of English and its usage in many fields and contexts make it a reality that it is a global language.⁸

Encyclopedia Britannica defines English literature as “the body of written works produced in the English language by inhabitants of the British Isles (including Ireland) from the 7th century to the present day.”⁹ It mentions also that there are other literary works written in English outside the British isles and classify them under American literature, Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand literatures. Abovementioned definition links language, which is a means of communication, to literary works that are reflective of the customs and traditions of certain groups who share geographical and cultural common denominators. Today, English is the global language that is used everywhere in the World. It is nowadays the language of business and science.

In their book *A History of the English Language*, Albert Baugh and Thomas Cable discuss the importance English language has been gaining until it reached its current position as the global language. They state that it is normal that people believe that their own language has got inherent characteristics that make out of it the best language. Yet, they argue that while “scientific approach to linguistic study combined with a consideration of history reminds us that no language acquires importance because of what are assumed to be purely internal advantages,” the fact, they continue, is that “[l]anguages become important because of events that shape the balance of power among nations.”¹⁰ This argument links the position of any language, English in this case, to the power and strength of its native speakers. In this respect, the importance of English is a direct reflection the military, political, economic, scientific, and technological strength of English speaking countries.

This high position that English language has gained due to previously mentioned factors impact the reception of arts and science expressed in this language regardless the origin of authorship. In turn, this situation reinforces the prestige of English as it reaches its universality and becomes the first dominating language in the world in multiple fields including translation studies. As far as the number of speakers is concerned, English is considered among the widely used native languages in the world more than 380 million speakers in the United States, United Kingdom and the former British Empire. However, as the current position of English language is direct reflection of the power of English speaking countries, the future of this language would also depend on that of the powers currently granting it its universality.¹¹

Vartika Hada (2015) enlists six major characteristics she considers have been participative as internal advantages to get English reach its current international popularity. The first characteristic is ‘receptiveness.’ Adopting words from European, Arab, African, Indian, Japanese and other classical languages like Latin and Greek has been a noticeable feature that characterizes the nature of English language. This feature participated in the fast development of English and enabled this language to be valid for use in all contexts as it is

⁸ Crystal, David. *English as a Global Language*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29.

⁹ Corder, Michael, et al. “English Literature.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Inc., 13 July 2017, www.britannica.com/art/English-literature. Web. Aug 13, 2017.

¹⁰ Baugh, Albert C, and Thomas Cable. *A History of the English Language*. (London: Routledge, 2013), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 4.

flexible to welcome new terms and adopt them into its linguistic diction. This situation develops another characteristic of English known as 'heterogeneousness.' This term means that the mixtures of words from different languages to form speech parts of a specific language. All words that are taken from other languages and maintained their original spelling and pronunciation with slight changes are heterogeneously adopted into English. Examples can be seen in *tower* from the French word *tour*, *sugar* from the Arabic word */sukar/ سكر*.

The third characteristic is about the simplicity of English inflexion. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, inflexion is "a change in the form of a word (typically the ending) to express a grammatical function or attribute such as tense, mood, person, number, case, and gender."¹² This feature concerns flexibility of English word forming in that that a short suffix can change the meaning of a word with slight change to its form. A common example can be the nouns and adjectives that are derived from the names of countries like Algerian from Algeria or Mauritanian from Mauritania. The fourth characteristic is about word order in English. Hada argues that word order in English is one of its strengths that are necessary to avoid ambiguity in sentence structure.

The fifth characteristic is about the development of intonation. Cambridge Dictionary defines intonation as "the sound changes produced by the rise and fall of the voice when speaking, especially when this has an effect on the meaning of what is said."¹³ That being said, intonation in English is another feature that shows a different characteristic of this language. Phonetics has been developing since the emergence of English as a global language as people from different cultural backgrounds have become English speakers bringing with them their own accents and ways of articulation. The sixth characteristic highlights the frequent use of paraphrasing in English as a means of delivering the ideas in different words. This feature is academically approved as a credible and useful way of transferring ideas and thoughts. It expresses also the richness of language diction as one idea can be delivered in multiple ways with approximately the same content or meaning. Paraphrase is very common within the field of literary translation.¹⁴

In conclusion, the development of literary translation in the Arab world, especially in the Maghreb, has been impeded due to three main reasons. The first one concerns foreign invasions that the region was exposed to and had their powerful impacts on the educational systems implemented in Maghrebian countries. The second is due to the limited sponsorship provided to the literary translators interested in translating from Arabic into other languages, English in particular, as most of them fail to achieve their goals because of financial reasons. The lack of encouragement from local governments prevents literary translators from playing essential roles as to depict a bright picture of certain nations and communities through exporting local values to the world. This 'diplomatic role' of literary translators requires an official encouragement and sponsorship. The third reason is the absence of coordination among literary translators in the region, on the one hand, and between them and their counterparts in international translation associations on the other hand. Therefore, it is through overwhelming

¹² "Definition of INFLEXION." *Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's Most-trusted Online Dictionary* (n.d.). www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inflexion. Web. Sept 17, 2017.

¹³ "Intonation Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary." *Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus*. (n.d.). dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/intonation. Web. Oct 18, 2017.

¹⁴ Vartika, Hada. "History of the English Language." Gujarat: Gujarat National Law University, 18 July 2015, www.doccity.com/en/history-of-the-english-language-1/566073/. Web. Nov 18, 2017.

these four obstacles that an effective change can occur to pave the road to a real development of literary translation in the Maghreb.

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