English Vs. Arabic
Culture-Specific Concepts (CSCs)

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Abstract:

As far as translation is concerned, a deep look into Arabic and English cultures may give rise to instances of un-translatability or loss of meaning. The wider the gap between the source language SL and the target language TL, the more difficult the transfer of message between them will be. The difference between Arabic and English in the language usage and the variation in their cultures make the process of Translation a real challenge. Our primary concern in this paper is to look more closely at

some of the specific aspects or categories of culture which may cause particular problems. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the variety and complexity of the problems encountered by a translator in the translation of cultural specific terms between English and Arabic. Theoretical and practical implications of the problem are discussed with critical analysis and evaluation of some problematic words and expressions along with their suggested equivalents, translations and/or solutions. This study concludeds that, for the translator, awareness of the complexities of differences between cultures is a prime key for solving translation equivalence and untranslatability issues.

Introduction:

In order to translate or reproduce the exact meaning of the original in the translated text, translators are generally under the pressure of knowing the culture and cultural similarities and differences of both source Language (SL) and target language (TL). They have to bear in mind, however, that meaning is constructed by the writers in order to be reconstructed by their readers. "Translation is the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting, and . . . it is potentially the most influential because it is able to project the image of an author and/or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin. (Lefevere 1992a: 9 cited in Munday 2012). However, anyone who has ever attempted to translate a text

knows that knowledge of the languages alone does not guarantee success (Misiaczek 2005). This leads us to deeply consider other aspects that cause failure in conveying the intended massage via translation due to untranslateable content which is mainly cultural.

In this respect, translation theory, certainly, does not provide a set of concrete or magic rules, which can ensure that the translator will come up with a perfect translation. Misiaczek (2005) argues that the role of the theory, however, is to make the translator aware of various factors which are involved in the translation process and offer some principles and guidelines that will help the translator to make certain decisions and choices. Hence, translation theory must exceed the boundaries of linguistics to other aspects that hinder the job of the translator and affect the quality of translation.

The Cultural Turn:

Research in translation studies has moved beyond language to focus on the interaction between translation and culture. This focus has also been on the way culture impacts and constraints translation as well as on the larger issues of context, history and convention. Therefore, the challenge is to move from translation as a linguistic material or a text to translation as culture and politics. This significant switch is called 'Cultural Turn' to

refer to "the analysis of translation in its cultural, political, and ideological context" (Munday 2012). Cultural Turn became the ground for a metaphor adopted by Bassnett and Lefevere in 1990. They attempted to move theory beyond linguistic and drew comparative studies of source text ST and target text TT to examine the way culture effects translation. Their work "*Translation, History and Culture* takes into account the influence of the publishing industry on ideology, discusses feminist writing, examines translation in the context of colonization, and sees translation as rewriting" (Hodges, 2010).

Culture-Specific Concepts:

Handling culture-specific concepts (CSCs) appears to be one of the most challenging tasks to be performed by a translator; in other words, culture and intercultural awareness, are far more complex phenomenon than it may seem to the translator. Braçaj (2015) claims that the more a translator is aware of complexities of differences between cultures, the better a translator s/he will be.

The main concern has traditionally been with words and phrases that are so heavily grounded in one culture that they are almost impossible to translate into the terms –verbal or otherwise – of another. "Long debates have been held over when to paraphrase, when to use the nearest equivalent, when to coin a new word by translating literally, and when to

transcribe. All these "untranslatable" cultural-bound words and phrases continued to fascinate translators and translation theorists" (Braçaj, 2015).

According to Wiersema (2004) a translator has three options for the translation of cultural elements:

1- Adopting the foreign word without any explanation.

2- Adopting the foreign word with extensive explanations.

3- Rewriting the text to make it more comprehensible to the target-language audience.

Graedler (2000:3) puts forth some procedures of translating CSCs:

1. Making up a new word.

2. Explaining the meaning of the SL expression in lieu of translating it.

3. Preserving the SL term intact.

4. Opting for a word in the TL which seems similar to or has the same "relevance" as the SL term.

Culture-bound terms (CBTs) are defined by Harvey (2003:2-6) as the terms which "refer to concepts, institutions and personnel which are specific to the SL culture". He puts forward four major techniques for translating CBTs: 1. Functional Equivalence: using a functionally similar referent in the TL. 2. Formal Equivalence or 'linguistic equivalence': supplying a 'word-for-word' translation. 3. Making up a new word. Therefore, explaining the meaning of the SL expression in lieu of

translating it, preserving the SL term intact and opting for a word in the TL which seems similar to or has the same "relevance" as the SL term. In the following sections there will be an investigation, evaluation and deep look into some problematic concepts, terms and phrases which cause a certain degree of difficulty or considered untranslatable.

1. Social and Religion Terms

If we take a word like 'mahr مهر' or 'Sadaq صداق' we find that the nearest word commonly used in English is 'dowry'. But analysis of this word in both English and Arabic would reveal that it denotes the senses shown in Table1

Table1 Senses of the word dowry

ENGLISH SENSES	ARABIC SENSES
1. Money or property brought by a woman to her husband at marriage	1. Advance dowry 'muqaddam Sada:q مقدم صداق': Money or property brought by a man to his wife at marriage
2. A life estate to which a wife is entitled on the death of her husband	2. Delayed dowry 'muakhar Sada:q مؤخر صداق': Money or property stipulated upon in the marriage contract which is due to be paid by the husband to his wife in case he intends to divorce her.

Here a translation would fail or the meaning may be lost if the translator gives more explanation to the words used as equivalents. Another example illustrates a social and religious event represented by the term 'khitan ختان' which denotes a Muslim and Jewish religious rite performed on a male child from a week after birth. Here we have circumcision which is the surgical operation on the male organs but has no reference to the social or religious ceremony associated with this event which has a sense of becoming a Muslim. The above words may seem easier task in translation than the terms in Table2 which have no nearest or close equivalents in English:

Table2 Cultural specific terms

Arabic	Transliteration	Definition
سحور	*suhur*	a light meal before starting a new day of Ramadan (before daybreak).
مسحراتي	*musahharati*	a man who beats a drum in the streets (before dawn) to wake people up to have '*suhur*' before they start a new day of fasting.
إفطار	*ifTar*	the meal at the end of fasting Ramadan day. In a normal day in the rest of the year it means the ordinary breakfast.

Arabic	Transliteration	Definition
عمرة	*umra*	a visit to the Holy shrines in Mecca and Madina out of the time of Pilgrimage considered as a minor pilgrimage
زكاة	*zakat*	an annual compulsory alms (2.5 %) of the savings of a Muslim when any amount or property exceeds one year in possession.
إحرام	*iHram*	special Muslim practices including the type of clothing, hair cutting/shaving and behaviour prior to and during Pilgrimage ceremonies.
عيد الفطر	*?eid alfitr*	the socio religious event in which Muslims celebrate their end of fasting in the Holy month of Ramadan.
أضحية	*udHiya*	a sheep killed as sacrifice on the day of The Greater ?eid.

This area covers a vast range of fields including ceremonies or festivals, titles, customs and rites, sects and varieties, roles, notable or historical personages, beliefs, doctrines, and morals.

1. **Easter**: عيد الفصح Here the translation does not carry enough meaning or denotation to the event: "The most important and oldest festival of the Christian Church, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ and held (in the Western Church) between March 21 and April 25, on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the northern spring equinox. the most important and oldest festival of the Christian Church, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ and held (in the Western Church) between March 21 and April 25, on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the northern spring equinox." .

2. **Verger**: شماس The Arabic word here does not carry any meaning for non Christian Arabs. Another more acceptable word for Verger would be (حامل الصولجان) as shortened translation of " an officer who carries a rod before a bishop or dean as a symbol of office. Or "an official in a church who acts as a caretaker and attendant."

3. **Stag night**: ليلة العريس أو العراسة , a party for men only that is given for a man just before his wedding day. Here the meaning can not be perceived without a clear difinition.

4. **Protestant**: بروتستانتي a member or follower of any of the Western Christian churches that are separate from the Roman Catholic Church and follow the principles of the Reformation, including the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches.   Here the word is trnsliterated

not translated where it remains meaningless out of its culture as non Christians do not tell the difference in the divisions of Christianity.

5. **Roman Catholic Church: كنيسة الروم الكاثوليك** : In order to arrive at a full understanding, the reader/translator should tell the difference among the parts of the church and that the **Roman Catholic Church is** the part of the Christian Church that acknowledges the pope as its head, especially as it has developed since the Reformation.

6. **The Holy Ghost: الروح القدس** Christians believe that God is three prts, God The Father, The Son (Jesus Christ) and God The Holy Ghost(الروح القدس). Without this clear in the mind of the reader/translator the meaning might be lost or misunderstood.

Many of these names or terms have no exact equivalent, or even when one exists, its use and understanding are markedly different, especially to the layman from a different faith. There is apparently more of a problem when translating from Arabic into English as Islam is much more pervasive in society and much more a part of everyday life. The translator must be particularly sensitive when dealing with religious terminology so as to avoid causing any offence. This is especially the case with anything considered sacred such as verses of The Holy Qur'an.

2. Political and Administrative Terms:

Political terms are sometimes highly charged with emotive or political meaning, which is difficult to render from one language into another. There are also several political terms which do not exist in the other language like 'Shadow Cabinet' in English, and other terms which are familiar only to those who have knowledge of the political structures of most Arabic countries as in 'majlis shura مجلس شورى ' which, when translated, have the vague general term 'consultative council'. Furthermore, there are terms that have been phonologically transliterated from Arabic without recourse to translation due to the vagueness that may from the culturally different counterpart:

1. Amir أمير: an independent ruler or chieftain or a member of his family, especially in Africa or Arabia

2. Jamahiriya جماهيرية: a previous name for Libya which carries the meaning of a totally different system from "republic" political system (jumhuryia جمهورية).

3. intifaDha انتفاضة : uprising (against occupation of land firstly known in Palestine)

4. mujahideen مجاهدين : Islamic (mainly relegious) freedom fighters

5. alqa?ida القاعدة : terrorist organisation established in Afghanistan

6. Hizbullah حزب الله : political party in Lebanon

7. hizb alba?th حزب البعث : political party in Iraq

Names of political parties are problematic for several reasons. If there is no corresponding party then a translation may seem to be straight forward. The Conservative Party is rendered as 'hizb al-muHafiDhi:n حزب المحافظين', yet, it may not convey much meaning regarding its popularity, agenda or policies. Moreover some political and administrative terms in Arabic may prove problematic in translation. This is because such terms are sometimes administratively similar but linguistically different. The term 'province' or 'district' in English, has many cultural equivalents in the Arab countries such as 'muHafaDha محافظة', 'mudiriya مديرية', 'wilaya ولاية' or 'shabiya شعبية', where they are named according to the administrative system in each country. In this case, a translator translating from English into Arabic has to be aware of the political and administrative nomenclature in the relevant countries so that the most appropriate cultural equivalents can be chosen. Hense, in translating political or administrative terms, a translator should bear in mind the level of general knowledge of the readership and decide whether the mere transfer of such terms into the target language is sufficient, or that some additional information must be supplied to complete the translation.

3. Material Objects:

This field covers a vast number of terminologies and it might not be possible to include every aspect in this wide domain. We will attempt to look at some areas and give some examples to illustrate where translation problems might lie. Manmade objects or artefacts include: tools, instruments and devices, clothes and jewellery, food and drink, buildings, transport, and any personal or communal possessions.

Most tools do not pose a problem as they are technical and where the same tool exists for similar tasks in another language there will be a corresponding term. For example, for the word '*brush'*, there is an equivalent term 'furshat فرشاة' in Arabic, though there may be tools exclusive to one culture such as 'miswak مسواك' in Arabic (natural tooth brush from a holy plant, still in use by Arabs and Muslims) which, for lack of an equivalent term, has to find its way into the English lexicon. There are other words with an accepted translation though the use is different: an umbrella to protect against rain is rendered as 'shamsiyya شمسية parasol' which in hot weather countries is used to protect against the sun. Many specialised tools or instruments are likely to be found more in manuals and technical texts rather than general texts, and their translation would require suitable skills.

There are several articles of clothing that present certain difficulties in translation from English into Arabic. However, they are familiar to most Arabs there are no direct terms in Arabic language to refer to them. They are mostly referred to by generic terms or modified by certain adjectives For example, 'mini skirts', 'jeans', 'pullovers' and 'stockings'. On the other hand some items in Arab culture proved more problematic as they came into existence as a result of the religion, tradition, weather, or cultural specific symbols. The following Arabic items of clothing are used in different Arab countries:

1. kufiya كوفية : **head wear** for Arabic men which rendered in English as veil, <u>muffler</u>, yashmak which are confused with other Arabic/Islamic types of head wear.

2. aqal عقال: a **headband** worn by Saudi Arabia and Gulf states Arabs

3. jallabiya/djellaba جلابية: A male long baggy dress worn by Arabs in Morocco and a similar in Egypt

4. dishdashah دشداشة: long baggy dress worn by Arabs in the Gulf states

5. niqab نقاب : **facial veil,** a veil worn by some Muslim women in public, covering all of the face apart from the eyes. (in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Gulf states)

6. khimar خمار :, a **head veil** covering or veil worn in public by some Muslim women, typically covering the head, face, neck, and shoulders. (in Saudi Arabia and Gulf states)

7. hijib حجاب : an **islamic veil** which is worn by Arabic and Muslim women to cover the hair and the neck.

4. Animals:

Animals may have a variety of roles or may be of differing status: wild, farmed, domestic, work animal, pet, sport, hunting, source of food, etc. Cats often live wild in the Middle East and are considered vermin, though they are loved pets in Britain. Similarly, in Britain, dogs are common house pets and numerous names for breeds are known and used in everyday conversation, though the idea of keeping a dog in the house would be anathema to a Muslim. Conversely, in parts of the Arab world kestrels are kept as beloved hunting pets, which would be illegal in the UK. Animals will also have differing significance according to their prevalence, they may be more or less common, or native to only one region (e.g..*reindeer* or *gazelle*), which may also affect their use as a source of food. Another problem might arise from multiple names in one culture having only one corresponding equivalent in another culture. For example, '*asad* أسد , *laith* ليث , *DhirGa:m* ضرغام , *GaDhanfar* غضنفر' for a lion. With some animals which are specific to a particular part of the world a description has to accompany any translation given to the name of a certain

animal like the case with '*armadillo*' or '*armadillos*' where we have to describe the animal and the region where it normally lives or found.

5. Jobs, Duties, and Activities

Work is more culture-bound than one might think. It includes job types and titles, salaries, work conditions and other related concepts such as unemployment, insurance and job security. Many jobs will have no equivalent, such as 'bawwab بواب', to translate this as doorman would be very misleading. Others may have different status. A 'caretaker' in England would be much more highly regarded than 'farrash فرّاش' in an Arab country, besides some differences in the duties and responsibilities. Salaries and tax systems, of course, vary from one country to another, and what is considered high in one place may be low elsewhere. Tax systems vary and will be taken for granted without explanation in the country where they operate, but would require explanation to a foreigner, Council Tax, national insurance, top rate, or 'zakat زكاة' for example. There may also be different understanding or views of concepts related to work, such as unemployment, workers' rights, redundancy, job security, nepotism, equal opportunities or job titles like dinner lady etc.

Arabic uses gender more than English in the description of some jobs like '*tabi:bah* طبيبة' which has to be translated as a (female doctor), 'ami:nat sir أمينة سر' or 'sekrerah سكرتيرة' for (female secretary) a job

assigned more to women and '*ra:qiSah* راقصة' a (female dancer) which is also, culturally, a professional woman's job not a man's job. Any changes in conveying the gender will result in the loss of the information intended.

6. Regional and Dialectical Differences

The standard form of the Arabic language is referred to as 'classical Arabic'. It is mainly used in all writing and in media as well as in mosques. There are diverse interrelated colloquial dialects in Arabic. These dialects vary considerably from one another and differ from standard Arabic in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar and are usually labelled according to major geographic areas, such as Egyptian, Gulf, Lebanese, North African and Moroccan.

Most recently, socio-linguistic studies and dialectology have indicated that a person can be identified in terms of his/her area of origin, or social class, from the language he/she speaks. A single language may cover various cultures, and likewise, one culture may cross the borders of many languages. For example English, as an international language of politics and science, borders on various cultures in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. The influence of language in the transfer of technology to the Arab countries by various European countries has confronted Arabic and Arab speakers with a serious linguistic problem that made some terms

considered as dialectical and caused difficulty in standardizing a vast amount of terms related to various fields used in different Arab countries. For example, a word like 'mobile phone' is translated in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, where French is used as a second language, as 'portable بورتابل' or 'silolar سلولار ' for 'cellular' in Lebanon and Syria, whereas in Libya, Egypt is translated from English as 'mobile' or less often the Arabic term 'naqqa:l' is used. There were many attempts to give an Arabic equivalent to this term but lack of coordination in various terms that refer to the same concept in different forms like 'naqqal نقال', 'jawwal جوال' which is derived from 'jala جال ' to travel, or 'mahmul محمول' from 'hamala حمل ' to carry, or 'khalawi خلوي' from khaliya خلية , cell 'etc.

Arabic regional nomenclature reflects certain difficulty for translation into Arabic. We have seen, in Subsection (2) above, how a term like 'province' or 'district' in English, has many cultural equivalents in the Arab countries such as 'muhafadha محافطة, mudiriya مديرية, wilaya ولاية or shabiya شعبية', where they are named according to the administrative system in each country.

Conclusion:

Manipulating culture-specific concepts (CSCs) between English and Arabic has generally been the most challenging task for translators; That is to say, culture and intercultural awareness are far more complex

phenomena than it may seem. For the translator, awareness of the complexities of differences between cultures is a prime key for solving translation equivalence and untranslatability issues. The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate the variety and complexity of the problems encountered by a translator in the translation of cultural specific terms between English and Arabic. This paper was an attempt to discuss theoretical and practical implications of the problem. Critical analysis and evaluation of some problematic words and expressions along with their suggested equivalents or solutions were provided.

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