

## Translation of Culture-Specific Terms from Arabic into English Between Loss and Preservation

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### Abstract

Undoubtedly, translation is one of the oldest means of communication and a bridge connecting various cultures. In this sense, it stands as an effective tool for intercultural communication. Be it through written literary works or media outlets, translation is unarguably listed as one of the best communication channels. Thus, the present paper tackles the problematic issue that translators encounter while translating some culture-specific words or expressions from Arabic into English. A huge gap between the SL and TL may lead to more difficulties to transfer the message. The difference between Arabic and English in linguistic structures and discrepancies in their cultures sometimes make the process of translation a real challenge. Translation, of course, is not an easy task, but it requires a skilled and knowledgeable translator to make it right. In this paper, the primary concern is to shed light on the issue of culturally-specific terms that may generate obstacles for the translator, as well as to see to what extent these obstacles may affect the translation process. Certain translation strategies and methods that are proposed by some theorists are also addressed as remedy solutions for highly challenging culture-specific words or expressions following the model of Newmark (1988) and Aixela (1996). The paper concluded that possessing a cultural background of the source text can be extremely useful in cases of cultural-complexity translation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

When one talks about translation, it surely means bringing up one of the oldest means of communication and carrier of knowledge across countries. Contemplating a little bit on the history of knowledge and circulation of ideas, one can say that translation played an instrumental role in achieving

communication between different communities in different places and times. Although people hold different views of translation, one common attitude is that it is the mother of all sciences in every sense of the word. However, translation in modern times is still struggling to establish itself as an independent discipline in the curriculum of educational systems in many countries. Taking a quick glimpse into history, one can deduce that translation studies have developed and witnessed many changes in both theoretical and practical frameworks with many scholars marking this development from different paradigms. In linguistics, the core issue of translation is the equivalence with all its types including functional equivalence and dynamic equivalence. The main proponents who dealt with translation from a linguistic perspective are (Catford, 1965; Nida & Taber, 1964; Newmark, 1988). Consequently, all these figures contributed a lot to the field of translation with many books. It is worth mentioning that the difficulty of translating culture-specific terms is an issue that imposes itself as a problem for the translator and may hinder the translation process. One should note that this issue has been tackled by different researchers in translation from different angles, namely Sentov (2020), Abdulsallam Ali (2022), and Alwanza (2014).

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND TRANSLATION**

Although the term "culture" is highly complex to define with more than 150 definitions proposed by two anthropologists (Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, 1952), it refers to the customs, beliefs, norms, and conventions that determine the behavior of members of certain groups. The anthropologist Geertz (1973) defined culture as " a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited expressed in symbolic forms by the meaning of which men can communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude towards life" ( p. 89). Further, language is also part of culture, and it is a means through which the latter communicates. Therefore, language reflects culture or is the carrier of culture as it is known among anthropologists. Newmark (1988, p. 94) defined culture as " the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression"

Having defined culture, which is variously defined and conceived, a brief translation definition is also needed to understand the relationship between translation and culture. To begin with, Catford (1965) viewed translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by an equivalent textual material in another language (TL)" Further, Newmark (1988) added that translation " is rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text." . Additionally, in its initial stages, translation was characterized by its emphasis on linguistic elements with an attempt on the part of the translator to render a close translation in terms of form and content. However, later on, translators realized the fact that a text cannot be translated in isolation from its culture. In the same respect, and in an attempt to define translation and the role of the translator, Nida (1964) said " the role of the

translator is to facilitate the transfer of the message, meaning, and cultural elements from one language to another to create an equivalent response to the receivers” (p. 13). However, his orientation tends to be more linguistic than cultural attempting to establish a translation theory based on a scientific basis.

Culturally speaking, translation is considered to be one of the ancient forms used by humans to communicate ideas and exchange cultures and sciences. In the same vein, translation is conceived as an important tool through which scientific works get circulated on a larger scale because it is via translation that the world has developed in all domains like philosophy, medicine, architecture, and math, to name only a few, especially the translation of Greek philosophers and the golden age of Muslims. Translation is seen nowadays as a human act with the translator being the mediator between cultures. As contended by Garcés (p.01), in some contexts, translators occupy a central position in the communication process through their engagement in the production of oral and written works to largely spread understanding between various nations.

Additionally, culture is an intrinsic element in translation since the translator must not just be bilingual, but also bicultural (Martínez-Sierra 2010: p. 117). That is, he/she has to be aware of the norms, customs, and beliefs of the target culture to be able to accomplish his/her task to avoid cultural misunderstandings. While engaging in the process of translation, the translator is not just transferring linguistic items or codes, but he/she is translating, more importantly, a culture from the source text to the target text. Likewise, the idea that culture should be of paramount importance in translation continues to be reinforced especially by the emergence of the descriptive schools which have come into being as a response to the prescriptive ones, and they are target-oriented that regard translations as facts of the target culture especially with the works of Toury (1995) and Even-Zohar (1990).

Being influenced by the works of the descriptive school, a group of theorists, namely Bassnett (1980), Munday (2009), and Lefevere (1962) have come up with what they call ‘the cultural turn’ which is a theoretical framework that goes beyond the interaction between culture and translation to embrace the way culture impacts and limits translation. Munday (2009) explains that the “the cultural turn”

is taken up by Bassnett and Lefevere as a metaphor for this cultural move and serves to bind together the range of case studies in their collection. These include studies of changing standards in translation over time, the power exercised in and on the publishing industry in pursuit of specific ideologies, feminist writing and translation, translation as ‘appropriation’, translation and colonization, and translation as rewriting, including film rewrites (p. 125)

In the same vein, the cultural turn gives rise to theories about how a text can be exploited and rewritten by external forces during the transition from source to target contexts, such as publishing houses, media, religious groups, or ruling social classes which are all named ‘patronage’ to use the term of Lefevere (1992). However, with the coming of cultural and functional approaches, the scope of translation has

shifted from linguistics to culture. The question of whether culture can be translated or not. Furthermore, scholars of cultural or descriptive approaches have agreed on the fact that culture and translation cannot be separated due to the intrinsic relationship between them. Translation, in the last few years, has been regarded as a medium of cultural exchange. Moreover, to translate the exact meaning of the original text into the target text, translators are generally under the pressure of knowing the cultural similarities and differences between both SL and TL texts.

Nevertheless, translation becomes quite problematic when it comes to words or expressions that are culture-specific because some of them are untranslatable. That is, some words do not have equivalents in the target culture. Likewise, the question of untranslatability has been touched upon by many scholars (e.g., Catford (p. 94-95) who talked about the problem of loss in translation and the difficulties encountered by translators. Many articles, on the other hand, have been published dealing with the problems of translating culture-specific concepts and the strategies to overcome, even if partially, these problems. Therefore, as mentioned above, this paper itself is an attempt to briefly discuss culture-specific words from a theoretical perspective. In the following section, the discussion will be about translation and intercultural communication as this latter is the trend within translation studies in recent years.

## **2.2 INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND TRANSLATION**

If there is any discipline that has been proven to be important with the international changes, then, it is intercultural communication as an emerging field that seeks to shed light and study the relationship between the existing cultures and how to achieve effective communication that will foster understanding and eschew all the conflicting issues that stand as an obstacle for common peace and co-existence. As for the origins of intercultural communication, it goes back to the post-world war realities, the victory of the USA and its allies, and the new domination they engaged in. The first foundations of the field are credited to Edward T. Hall, the American anthropologist who was assigned by the state to assist the government and companies to manage their work and interaction with people overseas (Martin & Nakayama, 2018).

Afterward, the Intercultural Communication research and interests have widely spread especially with globalization and the new advances in communication technologies. Among the fields that have been linked to IC is translation and its role in creating cross-cultural communication to bridge all the differences and open the door for new communication and interaction channels that mitigate cultural barriers. Here, the actual relationship between the two fields is manifested, and even translators at this time are required as mediators who need to possess a cultural background of both the source and target cultures to appropriately transfer the intended meanings. Moreover, myriad works have been published connecting translation and intercultural communication, namely Translation as Intercultural

Communication by David Katan and Translation as Communication across Languages and Cultures by Julian House.

Moreover, about the current paper's issue of culture specific-terms, one can assume that if the translator manages to transfer these words or phrases that are culturally bound, their meaning is preserved as intended by the author and read by the target audience which can lead to intercultural communication. In the same context, it should be noted that managing culture-specific words is a highly challenging task that the translator may encounter. That is to say, knowing the culture and its details are two different things that may appear (Elkateb, 2016). **Culture-Specific Terms (CSTs)**

Concerning CSTs in general, different terminologies have been produced in the literature varying from one researcher to another. For example, Newmark (1988) talks about cultural words. As for the definition is concerned, Baker (1992, p.21) viewed CSTs as a word that " expresses a concept which is unknown in the target culture". On the other hand, Aixela (1996, p. 85) regarded CSIs as "those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the non-existence of the referred item or its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text".

As demonstrated in the quote, CSTs are generally words that exist in the source language but lack their equivalence in the target language due to the nature of culture and language system which then represents a problem or breakdown in translation. These terms or items are not necessarily words but may be phrases expressions, or anything that represents the cultural aspects of a certain community. It is known that cultures worldwide are rich in numerous contents that express something that is rooted in the cultural system, be it food, clothes, religion, or even proper names. CSTs are only understood by the host community, and they sound weird to the target audience. Thus, the translator is required to resort to translation strategies to make those terms understandable to the reader.

### **2.3 CLASSIFICATIONS OF CULTURE-SPECIFIC TERMS (CSTS)**

The issue of culturally-bound terms is familiar to translation theorists and practitioners alike; this makes them classify those terms for the sake of efficiently analyzing them for a better translational process. One of the prominent classifications is provided by Newmark (1988). He classifies CSTs into five categories, namely ecology, material culture, social culture, organizations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts, and gestures and habits. He substantiates this by giving examples in each category. First, he demonstrates that ecology includes words such as Flora, fauna, winds, plains, hills, honeysuckle, and downs, etc. (Newmark, 1988.). Second, for material culture, it refers to clothes, houses, and food as "the most sensitive and important expression of national culture" (Newmark, P.97). Third, the social culture such as work and leisure activities that are concerned with source culture and its specificities. Fourth, organizations, customs, activities, procedures, and concepts. This one is divided into political, administrative, religious,

and artistic terms (). The last category is gestures and habits that are different from one culture to another. This depends on the gesture and its function in various societies ().

, Aixela (1996, p. 59) further classified culture-specific items into two main categories which are called “proper nouns” and “common expressions”. It is worth mentioning that CSTs cannot exist out of the source text context because they are culturally bound to their environment, and this is why translators are required to have some knowledge of the source culture, especially if they do not belong to the source text culture which makes it difficult for them to proceed in their translation without impediments. After all, translation is about making the right decisions in difficult moments; that is, the translator does not expect to translate a foreign text without the need to go through hard stages from the simple syntactic analysis to more complex cultural connotations. In the same vein, Venuti (2000) stated that “translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text” (p. 486). Consequently, it is not possible to ignore culture as an indispensable element in the translational process that can measure to a great extent the success of the translator in conveying the message appropriately.

What's more, while translating CSTs, the translator is sometimes incapable of conveying the exact or at least the proper equivalence of the ST especially when he does not possess enough knowledge about the source culture. He may resort to certain alternatives, but he partly succeeds in keeping the local sense of the words. Therefore, the translators' mission is sometimes risky due to the meaning loss that may occur when the two languages are too different on both sides the linguistic and the cultural. In the same vein, Tiwiyanti and Retnomurti (2017: p.2) expounded that " If the translator is not competent in the target language, some words and phrases might be deleted and unfortunately loss occurs. The other cause of loss occurs due to the linguistic and extra-linguistic differences between the source language and target language".

Moreover, the aspects of loss in translation from Arabic into English are also prevalent in translating religious texts especially the translation of the holy Quran 'whose language is characterized by its unique linguistic architecture, rhetorical beauty and prototypical texture" (Mohammed 2018: 01). Also, the challenge for the translator is literary works which are riddled with implicit meaning and metaphors. This necessitates in-depth cultural and linguistic knowledge for avoiding any meaning loss or mistranslation. The following part will be about the strategies that the translator can opt for in case he finds some difficulties.

## **2.4 STRATEGIES AND METHODS FOR CSTS**

It is common among translation practitioners that culturally specific items pose challenges as those by the syntactic structures of the language, and maybe even more. Based on this, various suggestions are recommended in the literature to find effective solutions or at least alleviate meaning complexity. Although

there are multiple proposals by different translation theorists, the utmost purpose remains the same. Baker (1992) admitted that the lack of equivalences poses serious difficulties for the translator, and she even goes on to propose some strategies to deal with this issue, especially at the word level. For example, a cultural substitution whereby the translator replaces a word or expression from the target culture that can to some extent have an impact on the original word (Baker, 1992). The most common strategy suggested by Baker is called loan word which is accompanied by a short explanation for one time so that the reader can understand it and ‘‘not distracted by further lengthy explanations’’

Irrespective of Baker’s suggestions, Newmark (1988) also came up with certain strategies and procedures to be applied when facing culture-specific words, such as transference, naturalization, cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, descriptive equivalent, synonymy, through translation, modulation, recognized translation, translation label, componential analysis, compensation, reduction and expansion, paraphrase, couplets, notes, additions, glosses, and literal translation

First, transference is more like ‘loan word’ of Baker; it means to transliterate the source language word into the target language. Second, naturalization is when the translator needs to adapt the source language word to the target language system and norms like (pronunciation and morphology). The cultural equivalent is transferring the SL word into an approximate TL cultural word. The functional equivalent is using a cultural term that adds a sense of generalization to the SL word. Moreover, the descriptive equivalent is a strategy that requires a bit of description of the cultural word. Added to this, there is also synonymy; it is finding a close equivalent to the SL word in its context. These were just explanations of some strategies put forward by Newmark (1988, 84-85).

Additionally, Aixela (1996) is another figure who discusses a few procedures to be followed in translating CSTs especially since she views them as less subjective strategies. For example, he proposes conservation which includes ‘‘repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic translation, extratextual gloss, and intratextual gloss; while substitution encompasses synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, deletion, and autonomous creation’’ (Aixela, 1996, as cited in Blažytė and Liubinienė 2016: p.46).

Similarly, Ghazala (2008) provides some solutions to the problem of challenging words to translate from English into Arabic, namely linguistic or cultural. For instance, among the solutions, the translator can resort to the closest colocation in case there is no similar word to describe the right colocation. Second, he talks about translation via an appropriate collocation like (two words for two, or three for three). He further substantiates that a direct meaning in the SL needs to be translated by a direct meaning in the TL and an indirect meaning into an indirect meaning, not the other way around. Moreover, he also touches on the preservation at the level of formality whereby a formal English word should be translated by a formal equivalent from Arabic (Ghazala, 2008).

In brief, the translation strategies and procedures should be highly considered and given the deserved importance, for they occupy a central role in the translation process. They assist the translator in his/her task when he encounters certain challenges. Although some may underestimate the efficiency of these strategies, they certainly matter in the pursuit of intercultural communication no matter what the SL and TL are.

### **3. Conclusion**

Translation of culture-specific terms from one language to another has always been an enduring task for translators. This seems more challenging when the SL and TL do not share the same linguistic roots as in the case of Arabic and English. Thus, before embarking on any translation task, the translator is required to carry out a background research of the source text culture to have an overview and sometimes a detailed description to render proper equivalents. Thus, the translator's fundamental objective is to find a way to solve the hindrances that are posed by the complexities of the two cultures. Moreover, the translator should be aware that managing to tackle culture-specific terms is an important step toward cross-cultural communication. After all, the translator is not just a language analyst but also a cultural mediator, a task that necessitates having certain skills and strategies that enable him/her to translate without many obstacles. The current paper was a theoretical overview of the most salient issues that revolve around culture-specific items, as a common problem encountered by translators in general. Also, it was an attempt to shed light on the relationship between translation and intercultural communication as the latter is regarded as the utmost purpose of translation.

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