

A Survey of Translation and the Oral Medium of Teaching Arabic

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ABSTRACT

By translation (*tarjamah*) of one language to another is meant the expression of the meaning of its text in a language different from its original language in order that those not familiar with it may know about it and understand it beyond a reasonable doubt. There is agreement among Muslim scholars that it is impossible to transfer the original Qur'an word by word in an identical fashion into another language.

It is the aim of this paper to examine what translation is, its magnitude and limitations. It also focuses on types of translation and the basic requirements of the translators. Likely difficulties that are to be encountered in the process of translating are considered imperative in the discussion.

The title of the paper, as perceived, the oral aspect forms a major part of the title. This presupposes that adequate attention needs to be given to this aspect. In fact, attention is drawn to certain practices that are somehow helpful to the learners in Oral Arabic. The paper ends with conclusion.

Introduction

Translation plays a magnificent role in the development of knowledge. Some people still hold tenaciously to the view of impossibility of translatability.¹ This is due to several reasons:

- Words of different languages do not express all the shades of meanings of their counterparts, though they may express specific concepts.
- The narrowing down of the meaning of one language to specific concepts in a foreign language would mean missing out other important dimensions.

Without translation, there is no way of effective diplomatic relation among different nations and efficient transfer of knowledge to learners since those familiar with the language are few in number, and the vast majority of people have no opportunity to become acquainted with the meaning of that language unless it be rendered into their mother tongue.

Translation from one language to another is not only permissible but a duty and obligation upon scholars and the practical basis for the extension of cordial relationship to other peoples all over the world.

Definition of Translation

Translation literally means rendering the meaning of something (said or written) in another language.² But technically, translation is considered to be ‘the general term’ referring to the “transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language (source) to another (target) whether the languages are in written or oral form; whether the languages have established orthographies or do not have such standardization or whether one or both languages is (are) based on signs as with sign language of the deaf.”³

The foregoing is a general definition from which the word “interpretation” is carved out. The interpretation therefore is

considered as a branch of translation. According to Briston, interpretation refers to:

Oral communication situations in which one speaks in the source language, an interpreter processes this input and produces output in a second language and a third person listens to the source language version.⁴

In accordance with the foregoing definition of the two words, a translator is one who processes a written input while an interpreter deals with an oral input.

Emergence of Translation

There is no doubt, however, that translation of the meaning of the Qur'an had already been made at the time of the Prophet Muhammad as a solution for those who did not understand the language of the Qur'an. When Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor received the message Muhammad had sent to him by a messenger, the verses of the Qur'an therein, together with the message, had to be translated. The report by Abu Sufyan on this matter⁵ states that translators were called for the conversation between the emperor and Abu Sufyan and that the message from the Prophet included a passage from the Qur'an, namely chapter 3:64.

Similarly, translation from a passage from *Surah Maryam* i.e chapter (19) of the Qur'an, which was recited by the Muslims in front of the Negus of Abyssina⁶ must have occurred. It might even be taken as indicating that the Muslims carried with them written extracts from the Qur'an in case the Negus questioned them, before one of them recited from the Qur'an: do you have something with you from what he brought from Allah?⁷

There is also some reference to the Persian language: Some Iranians- one is not certain whether they were from Yemen or Bahrayn, Oman or elsewhere- were converted to Islam and applied for permission to say their prayers temporarily in their mother

tongue. The Persian Salman al-Farsi translated the first chapter (*Surat al-Fatihah*) and sent it to one of them.⁸

Importance of Translation

The employment of translation which is neither limited to one language nor to one period cannot be over-emphasized. It has rendered a remarkable assistance in transmitting the civilization of one nation to another. It also serves as an avenue for the promotion ideas and culture which are transferable through one community to another. Subsequently, this effort led to the spread of acquisition of knowledge to virtually all the communities throughout the nooks and crannies of the globe.

The Arab had recognised the importance of translation from the time immemorial, more especially during the period of Abbasid dynasty. It is on record that al-Mansur, the second Abbasid Caliph encouraged the act of translation. In furtherance of this encouragement, Harun Rashid was another Abbasid Caliph who contributed immensely to the development of translation. He personally established “*Khizanat al-Hikmah*” (House of Wisdom) where many valuable works of Greek, Indian and Persian origin were translated and the earlier translated works were revised.⁹ Like his predecessors, al-Ma'mun, one of the Caliphs in the Abbasid period established a great centre named *Darul-Hikmah* in which he deposited valuable foreign books. He employed many able translators with heavy remunerations for the purpose of translating the books into Standard Arabic.¹⁰

There is no gainsaying the fact that this was how Greek knowledge was transmitted to the Arabs from where it was sent back to Europe. Such knowledge includes Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics, Medicine, etc.

Method of Translation

There are two basic methods of translating namely:

- i. **Word for Word Translation:** This is the situation whereby the translator will look for the meaning of the first word in the source language, render it to the target language, he then moves to the second word and so on till the end of a given text. This method, though, the most popular one among the beginners of translation, is regarded to be a wrong approach method. This is viewed from the fact that it easily destroys the message and confuses the message because the language structure varies from one language to another. The following illustrations are given to substantiate the argument:

ا - مركز التعليم العربى

ب - ولد المعلم

ج - رغب الرجل عن المرأة

ح - إن زرتنى أكرمك

1. *The word for word translation in No. 1 will read “Centre Training Arabic” whereas the correct rendition of the version should read “Arabic Training Centre”.*
2. *Its translation will be “Boy teacher” instead of “the Teacher’s boy” which is the correct one.*
3. *Its word for word translation will read “interested the man about the woman”; whereas the good translation for it is “the man was not interested in the woman”.*
4. *It will read thus “if visited you me I will honour you” while the correct version should be “if you visit me I will honour you”.*

The second method which is the acceptable way of translating is to render accurate information, in a given text, paragraph by paragraph or sentence by sentence or phrase by phrase, into the target language. This method is further subdivided into types as discussed in the following:

Types of Translation

Translation can be classified into various types. They are as follows:

1. Pragmatic Translation: It is the translation that is concerned only with the message intended to convey from the source language to the target language without bothering with other aspects of the original language.

إنتهى العام الدراسي جلس الطلاب للإمتحان وسلموا كتبهم ، ثم تركوا المدرسة ، وذهبوا إلى أهلهم . عاد عثمان إلى قريته ، وسلم على والديه وإخوته . سأله أبوه عن مدرسته ، وسأله عن الإمتحان .

Meaning:

The academic session ended. Students sat for examination and submitted their answer scripts, then they left the school and went to their people. 'Uthman returned to his village and greeted his parents and brothers. His father asked him about the school and examination.

2. Aesthetic-Poetic Translation: Is the type where the translator takes cognizance of the emotion and feelings of an original language i.e. annoyance, joy, sadness, etc. For instance, Imran b. Hittan¹¹ advises his contemporary poets on the mode of giving praise thus:

أيها المادح العباد ليحظى إن لله ما بأيدي العباد
فاسئل الله ما طلبت إليهم وارج فضل المقسم العواد
لا تقل في الجواد ما ليس فيه وتسمى البخيل بإسم الجواد

O you who praise servants that you may be given (something), God is the owner of what is in the servants' hands.

*So ask God for what you request from them, and Seek the great Oft-repeating distributor's favour. Do not praise a generous one for what he lacks And thereby call a miser by a generous one's name.*¹²

3. Ethnographic Translation: The translator under this category takes into consideration the cultural context of the source and the second language version for instance, the Holy Qur'an says:

يأيها الذين امنوا لا تقولوا راعنا وقولوا انظرونا واسمعوا

Meaning:

*Believers, do not say (to our Apostle) Ra'ina,¹³
But say Unzurna¹⁴ Take heed; the Unbelievers
shall be sternly punished.¹⁵*

The word *Ra'ina*, is a derogatory word in the culture of the people wanting to make jest of Prophet Muhammad, though, in Arabic it means "pay attention to us" as the second word *Unzurna*. Hence, Almighty Allah corrected the believing people to avoid using the word to prevent hurting the Prophet.

4. Linguistic Translation: It deals with equivalent meanings of the constituent morphemes of the second language and grammatical form.¹⁶
5. Other theories have been propounded on translation such as directionality translation which is the technique of making explicit in the target text information that is implicit in the source text.¹⁷
6. Free translation: It refers to the mode of translating source text without necessarily giving any consideration for target text.¹⁸
7. Interlingua Translation: It deals with the translation between two languages.
8. Intertemporal Translation: The translator under this category is concerned with the two forms of the same language.¹⁹

However, Catford uses three sets of criteria for translation:

- a. In terms of the extent of translation, Catford distinguishes between full translation and partial one where the entire text is submitted to the translation process in which every part of the source language (SL) text is replaced by target language (TL) text material in the former while the latter

is where some parts of the source language (SL) text are left untranslated.²⁰

- b. In terms of the level of language involved in translation, a distinction is drawn between total and restricted translation. In total translation, all the linguistic levels of the source text (phonology, graphology, grammar and lexis) are replaced by target language material. Catford defines total translation as “the replacement of SL grammar and lexis by equivalent TL grammar and lexis with consequential replacement of SL phonology/graphology by (non-equivalent) TL phonology/graphology”.²¹
- c. In terms of the grammatical or phonological rank at which translation of equivalence is established, Catford distinguishes between rank-bound translation which involves a deliberate attempt to consistently select TL equivalents at the same rank in the hierarchy of grammatical units, for example, at the rank of morpheme, word, group, clause or sentence. Unbounded translation is where equivalences “shunt up and down” the rank scale, but tend to be at the higher rank sometimes between large units and the sentences.²²

It is expected of a good translator to strive in selecting the most suitable type for the given text for more effectiveness and efficientness.

Limitation of Translation

In spite of the significant role of translation in the development of knowledge, there are limitations for it. Philologists have discussed the question of translatability and believed that there are certain features that cannot be directly translated. As a result of this assertion, some of the Philologists have the belief that translation is impossible. The word “Allah,” for instance, is believed by translators to have been derived from Arabic, to be translatable. They hold the opinion that the word “God” is not an equivalent

word for it. There are also some sociolinguistic dialects that cannot be directly translated. For instance, the word *Sabada* and *Asiko* both of which are found in Yoruba language cannot be directly translated into any language. There are so many words and phrases like that. Therefore, it is impossible to believe that translation must involve no loss of information whatsoever. However, if a translator finds himself in such a situation, he makes sure that he explains the word or the phrase by employing closer words or nuances.

Requirements of a Translator

No translator is perfect no matter how competent he is. This is notwithstanding, there are certain things that are required of a good translator. A translator should know both the source and receptor languages.

He should be familiar with the subject matter and its relative terminologies. He should be familiar with the language structures of the source and target languages. In addition to these basic requirements, E.A. Nida in an article says:

*In addition to competence and skill in verbal communication, a translator must have at least three other characteristics if he is to excel in his work. First, he needs to have a sincere admiration for the formal feature of the work to be translated..... He should have a respect for the content of the text.... Third, he must be willing to express his own creativity through someone else's creation.*²³

Arabic Conversation

Conversation or Oral Arabic is crucial to simultaneous interpretation from and into Arabic. It is believed that for one to be competent and fluent in Arabic he needs three basic things namely:

- (a) Acquisition of Arabic Vocabularies;
- (b) Good expressions in Arabic; and
- (c) Constant practice of conversing in Arabic.

It is pertinent to note that question may be raised here i.e how to acquire the first two basic requirements (Vocabulary and Good Expressions). By answering this question, we heavily rely on Shaykh Adam Abdullah's response who quoted Ibn Khaldun as he says:

إن اللغات كلها ملكات في اللسان للعبارة عن المعانى والملكات لا تحصل إلا بتكرار الأفعال إن حصول ملكة اللسان العربى إنما هو بكثرة الحفظ من كلام العرب حتى يرتسم فى خياله المنوال الذى نسجوا عليه تراكيبهم فينسخ هو عليه ويتنزل بذلك منزلة من نشأ معهم وخالط عباراتهم فى كلامهم حتى حصلت له الملكة المستقرة فى العبارة عن المقاصد على نحو كلامهم . ووجه التعلم لمن يبتغى هذه الملكة ويروم تحصيلها أن يأخذ نفسه بحفظ كلامهم القديم ومخاطبات فحول العرب فى أسحاعهم وأشعارهم

Meaning:

All languages are based on the capacity of the tongue to express the intended meanings..... The competence is obtained by the repetition of deeds To acquire competence in Arabic depends on memorizing much of Arabic speech until the method of their construction, makes (an indelible) mark on his (the learner's) imaginary thinking so that he is able to construct (sentences) in the same way. Thus he is in the position of one who was brought up with them (native speakers) and mixed their expression with his own speech until he is endowed with strong aptitude so that he expresses in the same form as that of Arab. Whoever wants to follow this method should adopt memorization of the speech of the ancient Arabs. He should also memorize the rhymed prose and poetic compositions of the Arabic masters. He should memorize the words of the classical Arab poets.²²

Shaykh Adam ‘Abdullah al-Iluri in his submission on the topical issues takes the foregoing statement up and argues thus:

أما تعليقا على ما قاله بن خلدون في تحصيل ملكة الإنشاء الصحيح والتخاطب بالعربية الفصحى فكالآتي :

أولا : التعويد على كتابة الإنشاء في مختلف الموضوعات بالإضافة إلى حفظ الأساليب الجيدة الملتقطة من بطون الكتب الأدبية والمسموعة من أفواء العلماء و الأدباء

ثانيا : إن التخاطب بالعربية الفصحى يتم أيضا بالتعود على ذلك سواء أكان الطالب في بلاد العجم أو العرب ، فإن من تعود على شيء اعتاده ويجب ألا يبتحي ولا يخاف من الأقطاب وإنما يتعلم الإنسان التكلم بالتكلم ويفتق اللسان بالمحاوررة و المناظرة مع أهل العلم ومعنى ذلك أن الحفظ الجيد من الجمل والتراكيب ومطالعة الكتب وحفظ القواعد كل ذلك لا يكفي دون التمرن على الكتابة والمخاطبة بالتكرار حتى تحصل الملكة . فعلى الطالب أن يتمرن على الإنشاء الكتابي أولا حتى يصبح له الملكة ثم يتدرج منه إلى الإنشاء الخطابي الشفوي .

Our comment on the statement of Ibn Khaldun about how to develop aptitude for correct composition and conversation in classical Arabic is as follows:

1. *(It is achieved through) constant practice in writing composition on different topics in addition to the memorization of correct construction taken from literary text books and the one heard from scholars and men of literature.*
2. *(Ability to) converse in classical Arabic also depends on constant practice, regardless of the place of abode of the student, be it an Arab or a non-Arab country. Whoever practices something constantly attains perfection in it. He should not shy away from nor fear committing errors. Man learns how to talk by talking, unstitching the tongue and conversing and discussing with the learned. This means that mere memorization of good sentences and constructions, reading books and memorizing the grammatical rules are not enough to develop aptitude without frequent practice in oral and written composition. So the student should start with the practice in the written composition. Then he should move gradually to oral composition after he might have attained some competence. It is believed whoever follows the instructions*

*given in the submission of the two scholars by carrying them out in practical terms will surely acquire competence in Arabic conversation. In turn, such a person will be a competent interpreter of Arabic.*²³

Conclusion

Due to the importance of translation as manifested in the foregoing, it is highly recommended that an adequate attention be paid to it in schools starting from secondary and tertiary institutions. The teacher should be selecting for the student from time to time Arabic Texts in different fields ranging from social, political, religious and academic issues for translation into English and vice versa. It is advisable that a teacher should not do the work of translating for the students but he is just to guide them. He should correct them wherever they make mistakes. This happens only after he might have taught them how to handle translation properly.

As for verbal aptitude in Arabic language, it is recommended for the Arabic learner to adapt himself to memorizing good Arabic prose and poems as well as constant speaking of Arabic language. In this wise, debates, symposia, etc., should be organized from time to time among the students. This as noted before will promote spontaneous interpretation of Arabic at oral level.

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