

## The Intricacies of Linguistic Interference in Arabic-English Translation

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### Abstract

The present paper is designed to shed light on the intricacies of Arabic-English translation caused by linguistic interference (LI) when the translators recourse to their mother tongue in the translation from Arabic into English. The data comprises three works, namely *Qiṭṭah bi-Sab 'iti ar-Rwāḥ* (1982) 'A Cat with Seven Lives', *Arkhaṣ Layla* (1954) 'The Cheapest Night' and *Muthakrāt Saim* (1986) 'Ramadan Dairy'. The paper reveals that the translations have traces of interference that are due ignorance by the translators and little linguistic affinity between Arabic and English, which may jeopardise communication, thought to be the ultimate goal of translation. The study shows that LI is minimised when the functional equivalence is opted for whereas it is maximised when formal equivalence is employed. The study yet argues that LI may be a good means for intercultural interaction in view of Venuti's (1998) notions of domestication and foreignization.

**Keywords:** linguistic interference; equivalence; strategies; domestication; foreignization; negative transfer, positive transfer.

## Introduction

Roughly defined as transferring meanings across languages, translation is fraught with manifold difficulties (e.g., syntactic, semantic, stylistic, cultural, pragmatic, etc.). Such transference entails two languages: the language from which translation takes place, the Source Language (SL) and the language into which translation occurs, the Target Language (TL). It goes without saying that when the SL and TL differ, there will be problems in translating and that, the greater the differences are, the greater the difficulties become. Arabic and English stand as a perfect example. The former belongs to a Semitic language family whilst the latter is an Indo-European language. One of the problems which translators should assume a heavy responsibility in the course of translation is Linguistic Interference (LI) which can be imputed to the lack of a flair or native-like intuition of the translators on the one hand, and linguistic divergence of the SL and TL on the other. Generally speaking, LI can be defined as the translator's tendency to use features of his/her native language in his/her attempt to translate from one language to another.

To set our claim clear from the beginning, it would be advantageous to look at interference from a historical perspective. Actually, talking about interference takes us a long route that is deeply rooted in language learning. Interference was first introduced within the ambit of contrastive linguistic analysis. Since then, interference has been subsumed under a rubric that is extensively used in language learning, that is to say, negative transfer as opposed to positive transfer. The former is "the use of a native language pattern or rule which leads to an error or inappropriate form in the [TL]" (Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics 1985: 160); it is often thought that negative transfer is caused by the differences existing between the native and the foreign language. The latter, however, is "a transfer which makes learning easier and may occur when both the native language, and the [TL] have the same form" (ibid). Positive transfer is caused by the similarities between the two languages.

## Literature Review

It may be safe to claim that a large body of literature addresses itself to interference in language learning in which large-scale attempts were made to predict areas of learning problems and difficulties in order to remedy them. Language learning literature on interference is satisfying. In contrast, interference insofar as translation is concerned has received little attention by translation theorists and practitioners and no attention at all, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, by Arabic-English translation theorists. Therefore, in the absence of clear-cut theoretical framework in translation on interference, a dire need emerges and, consequently may be satisfied with reference to language learning literature on interference. The rationale behind this view is based on the argument that translation and learning converge (Harris 1978; Newmark 1988 and Abu Ssaydeh 1991). Newmark (1988) believes that interference poses a real baffling problem insofar as the translators are concerned: "interference is the translator's worst problem, as it is the language learner's. Failure to recognise interference makes him look most foolish" (Newmark 1981: 162). Newmark (1991: 81) further adds that "it is the spectre of the most professional translators, it is the fear that haunts the translation students; the ever-present trap."

Translation literature on interference is scant in Arab translation studies (Khalil 1981; Al-Qasem 1983; Khalil 1985; Khalil 1989; Kharma & Hajjaj ). Al-Qasem's study (1983) reveals that syntactic and lexical errors committed by Arab learners are mainly ascribed to mother language interference. He makes it clear that because the learners opted for literal translation,

cases of syntactic and lexical interference prevail. By way of example, the Arabic phrasal verb *مصنوع من* (lit. 'made from') has two equivalents in English, either 'made from' or 'made of' as the following two examples show: *مصنوعٌ من القمح الخبزُ* translates 'Bread is made from wheat' whereby *مصنوعٌ من* has a one-to-one corresponding equivalent in English, i.e., 'made from'. However, *الخاتمُ مصنوعٌ من الذهب* translates 'The ring is made of gold' in which *مصنوعٌ من* is rendered into 'made of' rather than 'made from'. Had the latter been used, syntactic interference from Arabic into English is thought to prevail.

Khalil (1989) investigates the difficulties pertaining to prepositions and prepositional phrases in the course of translation from Arabic into English and vice versa. The findings of Khalil's study show that the dominance of mother tongue (Arabic) has its traces on the translation into English, thus had noticeable deleterious effect on the translation. By the same token, Khalil (2010: 192; emphasis in original) examines interference caused by differences between Arabic and English prepositions, e.g., "the English adjective **afraid** is followed by **of** whereas the Arabic adjective **خائف** *خائف* is followed by **من** (from)."

In the ensuing of the aforementioned synoptic remarks on interference historically, it is a good idea to relate these to translation. Newmark (1991) distinguishes between interference and translationese. The former is used to mean more or less negative transfer—"When apparently inappropriately, any feature of the source or a third language- notably a syntactic structure, a lexical item, an idiom, a metaphor or a word order- is carried over or literally translated as the case may be into the TL text" (Newmark 1991: 78). The latter, however, is an "area of interference where a literal translation of a stretch of the [SL] text (a) plainly falsifies (or ambiguates) its meaning, or (b) violates usages for no apparent reason" (Newmark 1991: 78).

### Typology of Interference

Interference can be linguistic, cultural, or communicative (Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics 1985). LI refers to the application of unacceptable linguistic norms already found in the SL to the TL. It is believed that these norms and patterns exercise a negative influence on translation. Interference is "regarded as classic howlers, something to be systematically avoided because it worked against a fluent and transparent reading" (Javier 2009: 75). Cultural interference is caused by wrong application of extralinguistic features of the SL to the non-corresponding TL extralinguistic features (Weinreich 1953). Finally, communicative interference takes place when learners of a foreign/second language use "rules of speaking (e.g., greetings, ways of opening or closing conversation, etc.) from one language when speaking another" (Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics 1985: 49). Based on the most scholarly works of Weinreich 1953; Kettemann 1982; Al-Qasem 1983 and Newmark 1991, LI can be categorised as (1) lexical interference which can be defined as "[t]he translation of a word or a lexical item from the mother tongue into its counterparts in the foreign language which results in a deviant or unintended meaning" (Al-Qasem 1983: 5). Lexical interference errors are thus expected if a given lexical item in the SL, when translated, has more than one corresponding lexical item in the TL. To rid the reader of confusion, lexical interference may be subcategorised into:

–interference at the level of collocation. For example, مدرسة خاصة ‘private school’: “a school which is not supported financially by the government and which parents have to pay for their children to go to” (Collins Cobuild 2003) may also be translated into ‘special school’ which is “a school for children who have some kind of serious physical or mental problem” (Collins Cobuild 2003);

– interference at the level of lexis and idioms, e.g., عصفور في اليد خير من عشرة على الشجرة “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” may be translated as ‘a bird in the hand is worth ten in the bush’ and;

– interference at the level of proper names, e.g., جزر القمر (Comoro Islands) may be rendered erroneously into “Moon Islands”;

(2) syntactical interference in which TL may have its own peculiar properties that are impervious to the SL. This being the case, the translator sees that his mother tongue (SL) will be of great help. These SI-caused errors are thus due to occur. Kettemann (1982: 158) puts it differently saying that “[SI] errors are made as structural elements in the learners[/translators] language are unacceptable in the [TL] and can be related to the [TL] input by SL syntactic structures, rules and features.”

### **The Problem of Equivalence**

The concept of equivalence is of paramount importance in translation studies. Due to peculiarities of languages in terms syntax, semantics, pragmatics, stylistics and culture. Since time immemorial, translation theorists argue that exact equivalence is rather a mirage. Tytler (1790: 20) aptly remarks that translation is no more than an “evaporation of the beauties of the original.” With regard to Arabic and English, it is oft-truism lack of formal equivalence should be taken at face value. Three major kinds of equivalence worth mentioning for the sake of the present study. We are taking our cue from Farghal and Shunnaq’s classification (1999: 5). First, formal equivalence “seeks to capture the form of the SL expression. Form relates to the image employed in the SL expression”. Second, functional equivalence “seeks to capture the function of the SL expression independently of the image utilised by translating it into a TL expression that performs the same function”. Finally, ideational equivalence “aims to convey the communicative sense of the SL expression independently of the function and form”.

We argue that opting for functional and ideational equivalence may be conducive to optimal translation whereas formal translation may give to LI. In any translation task, the translator should be meticulous enough to equivalence selection.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Data of the Study***

To pinpoint and bring the problem under discussion into focus, a data was selected from *Qiṭṭah bi-Sab’iti ar-Rwāḥ* (1982) by El-Dawiri translated into English by El-Dawiri and Weinstein (1982) into ‘A Cat with Seven Lives’, Arkhaş Layla (1954) by Idris translated into

English by Wadida (1978) into ‘The Cheapest Night’ and *Muthakrāt Saim* (1986) by Bahgat translated into English by Hassan (1988) into ‘Ramadan Dairy’ (see Appendix).

### ***Significance the Study***

Interference in language learning is as old as antiquity; however, in translation it is an embryonic issue in the Arab World. It is almost absent from the Arab translation studies. A search in Translation Studies Bibliography online<sup>1</sup> (a prestigious translation studies database) returns 46 publications with the word ‘interference’ in the title, with only one study addressing interference with regard to Arabic, namely by Kayyal (2008). Hopefully, this paper will increase the Arab researchers’ awareness of interference in translation as a phenomenon in translation which attracts widespread interest in many countries, and offer an insight into possible ways to overcome the problems which may arise from translating potentially interference-loaded utterances.

### **Data Analysis**

The current study is basically limited to problems attributable to mother-tongue interference. Erroneous translations that can be attribute to interference from Arabic were identified, classified and explained in light of the type of error made. The Erroneous translations fall mainly within the following areas: lexical interference-caused errors (e.g., lexis; collocations; idioms and proper names) and syntactic interference-caused errors (e.g., word order; definite article; singular/plural)

#### ***Lexical Interference Analysis***

Under this category, four types of errors are identified namely, lexis; collocations; idioms and proper names). In the following section, discussion of each subcategory will be made.

#### ***Collocation***

Collocation “is concerned with how words go together, i.e., which words may occur in constructions with which other words. Some words occur together often, other words may occur together occasionally, and some combinations of words are not likely to occur.” (Larson 1984: 141). Generally speaking the crux of confusion in respect of collocation lies in the fact that each language has its own unique combinations of words whose equivalent in a certain language does not fit in another (Larson 1984, Kharma & Hajjaj 1989 and Khalil 2010). The problem of interference may intensify whenever the translator thinks of his/her mother tongue as a haven for collocational-problem solving. Consider the following example:

#### **Example 1**

SL

هذه هي الصلة بيني وبين القرآن.

(Bahgat 1986: 116)

TL

So the only link between me and the Holy Koran. (Hassan 1988: 99)

As a point of departure, the violation of collocational restriction in the above example can be ascribed to interference from Arabic. The SL collocation X بيني وبين ('between me and between X') is a far cry from TL combinations 'between X and between me' which happens to occur in a fixed order. If the TL order is kept the way it occurs in the SL, Larson (1984), argues that it will sound strange enough to the TL readership.

### *Idioms*

The problem of lexical interference can be at the level of idioms which fall within the realm of lexicon; they can be roughly defined as expressions whose meaning cannot be predicted through individual constituents (Cruse 1986). Interference occurs when SL idioms are carried over into TL inappropriately (Newmark 1991).

Strange as it may sound at first sight, the researcher stakes a claim that formal equivalence may play a role in producing commendable interference utterances though, as mentioned earlier, formal-based translations are usually catalyst to interference and help to bring about fabricated as well as delusive renditions. This claim can be particularly affirmed when it comes to (non)culture-related idioms. Take the following example:

### **Example 2**

SL أبو الحكاوي: (مهلا) أبو الخير عمره ما مات.  
كبير المثلثين: (كالمجنون) فطة بسبع ترواح .... خلصو عليه.

(El-Dawiri 1982: 53)

TL ABU EL HAKAWI: (joyfully) ABU EL KHEIR FATHER OF FERTILITY NEVER DIES.

SHARR EL TARIK: (madly) oh, cat of seven lives... Finish him off!  
(Weinstein and El-Dawiri 1988: 49; emphasis in original)

English people say 'a cat has nine lives', but never 'a cat has seven lives', and will certainly ply the translator with several questions in case the latter is used. The idiom in the TL is a case of interference, but in Newmark's point of view, it is a 'virtue' that may pave the way for SL-TL cultural interaction. In this spirit, Newmark (1991: 79) points out that "the positive aspect of interference comes into play when the translator decides to introduce into the TL some specific universal, cultural, personal linguistic values in the source text." This implies two main translation strategies as Venuti (1998: 20) suggests: 'domestication' and 'foreignization'. The former involves "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home." Such a strategy "masks both the translator's work and the asymmetrical relations -cultural, economic, political- between English-language nations and their others worldwide" (Venuti 1998: 38). The latter, however, "seeks to restrain the ethnocentric violence of translation, it is highly desirable today, a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of world affairs, pitched against the hegemonic English-language nations and the unequal

cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others” (Venuti 1998: 20). Whilst the former may consider interference as abominable, the latter deems it commendable.

### *Lexis and Proper Names*

Before dwelling on interference-related problems at the level of lexis, one has to remember that translating lexis literally changes the meaning and sometime results in nonsensical translation. This type of interference is due to occur as Arabic-speaking translators build their translation on Arabic lexemes, thus bogged down in multifarious difficulties. Consider Example 3 below

#### **Example 3**

SL إن حباً عظيماً دونه حبُّ قيسٍ لليلَى ليسبح حول اشجار الدخان.

(Bahgat 1986: 25)

TL It was a great love, greater even than that felt by Qais for Laila. It was wandering around columns of smoke. (Hassan 1988: 37)

The rendering in Example 3 above bears evidence of lexical and proper nouns interference— Qais and Laila are not mere proper names when occurring together. They have emotive overtones and connotations by virtue of their deep association with Arabic culture. These two names depicted a very romantic love story in the Arabic literature. To put the story in a nutshell, Qais fell in love with Laila up to the hilt and had had his share of heart-breaks when her family took his beloved a way and departed for an unknown place. Since then, Qais devoted himself to searching for his love wandering over deserts and secluded himself from the world composing poems with a view to mitigating his incessant suffering.

### *Syntactic Interference Analysis*

Like many others, Arab translators are apt consciously or unconsciously to impose staggering peculiar properties of Arabic structures on English. It should be stated that the SL and TL are characteristic of a tug-of-war, so fastidiousness by translators is badly needed not only with lexical items, but also with syntax. Explicitly enough, Larson (1984: 189) states that “translation is much more than finding word equivalencies. The source text must be abandoned for the natural receptor language structures without significant loss or change of meaning.” The problem of SI is represented by the presence of certain structures in the SL linguistic systems and the absence of these in the TL. Transferring such structures from and into a language should be carried out with great prudence to ensure minimum interference and a maximum flow of communication.

### *Word order*

Arabic and English are not cognate languages. It is expected, therefore, that the two languages will be a witness to different word orders. Arabic may be said to be a flexible language in its word order whereas English is relatively fixed, i.e., it undergoes some changes if

the position of certain words is changed. In English, for instance, words indicating oneself (e.g., I, me, mine and myself), for the most part, go after those indicating another or others (e.g., you, they, etc.) (Crowell 1964). To appreciate this problem, observe Example 1 again, now to discuss totally a different point. The enquiry over the translation in Example 1 is whether the structure is or should be regarded as natural in the actual usage of the English language. It is typical of English that for the sake of politeness, second person or third person usually goes before the first person. Here the individual lexical items are basically correct, but the syntax is clearly un-English due to word order interference from Arabic. However, in Example 4, the translator was careful enough not to impose Arabic word order. Thus the translation sounds natural as far as the TL readership is concerned.

#### Example 4

SL

إغسل يديك قبل الأكل وبعده.

(Bahgat 1986: 115)

TL

Wash your hands before and after meals (Hassan 1988: 99)

#### *Definite Article*

This is an area which is truly very problematic to Arabic-speaking translators and, therefore, is worth detailed examination. Translations into English seem to prefer inserting definite article where unnecessary. By way of illustration, take Example 5

#### Example 5

SL

كان جسمها ناعم نعومية يا ولاد. أنعم من بذر الخروع. قلت لها أنا في عرضك. أنا خلاص. قالت طيب تعال. وخذتني على السرير

(Idris 1954: 90)

TL

And her skin, boys! It was smooth and soft as silk. I said: 'Please, I cannot stand it any longer'. She said: 'all right, come along'. And she took me to the bed.

If we look more deeply into the above rendition, we will find that it falls short of relaying the intended message of the Arabic utterance, a message that is well-shown in a woman's desire to make love to a man. The addition of the prefixal definite article to the English noun 'bed'- notably caused by mother tongue interference-makes the message rather feeble, i.e., the woman took the man to a piece of furniture, i.e. 'bed' to do anything rather than making love to someone.



### *Singular/Plural*

In Example 6, singular/plural interference is observed as is the case with the rendition of يا ولاد (vocative + noun+PLUR.) into ‘boys’ (noun+PLURA) to express pleasure state. English employs ‘boy’ or ‘oh boy’ (noun+SING.) as an exclamation “in order to express feelings of excitement or admiration” (Collins Cobuild 2003). Due to Arabic interference, the translator opted for ‘boys’ (noun+PLURA). As can be noted, the translator restructured the TL constituents in a way similar to that of the SL by means of inserting the definite article ahead of the noun ‘bed’ and using the plural form in ‘boys’. It seems that the translation is a formal one rather than functional. In other words, the translation is source-oriented rather than target-oriented. One can stake a claim that reliance on the mother tongue plays a very active role in determining which type of equivalence a translator is to opt for or out.

### **Conclusion**

This study examines the main traces of mother tongue interference in Arabic-English translation as it appears in translators’ work. Analysis of the translated sentences yields the following conclusions: Unlike formal equivalence-based strategies, functional equivalence may reduce the extent of interference errors to a minimum for a maximum flow of communication; nevertheless, formal equivalence reflects positive aspect of interference in which version translator can introduce new cultural elements and features into TL. Consequently, interference may be conducive to bringing about acceptable translation. What has been said permits the conclusion that mother-tongue interference has a pernicious influence on the performance of Arabic-English translators in terms of what type of equivalence they are opting for and, consequently employing such a type of equivalence will affect the quality of translation. Very much to the point is Venuti’s (1998) notion of ‘foreignization’ which is the periphery of LI— it promotes source-oriented translation project.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Available at: <http://benjamins.com/online/tsb/> [visited on March 1, 2013]

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### Appendix

- (Bahgat 1986: 116) 1. هذه هي الصلة بيني وبين القرآن.
- (El-Dawiri 1982: 53) 2. أبو الحكاوي: (مهلاً) أبو الخير عمره ما مات.  
كبير الملتمين: (كالمجنون) قطة بسبع ترواح .... خلصو عليه.
- (Bahgat 1986: 25) 3. إن حباً عظيماً دونه حبُّ قيسٍ لليلَى ليسبح حول اشجار الدخان.
- (Bahgat 1986: 115) 4. إغسل يديك قبل الأكل وبعده.
- (Idris 1954: 90) 5. كان جسمها ناعم نعومية يا ولاد. أنعم من بذر الخروع. قلت لها أنا في عرضك. أنا خلاص. قالت طيب تعال. وخذتني على السرير.