

Subversion through Self-translation

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Abstract

Although it has been taking place rather quietly, the debate about the author-translator duality remains one of the most interesting and prickly issues in translation studies. The topic becomes more encompassing when it is explored under self-translation. Within this context, the aim of this article is to examine instances from the translation of *Autumn of Fury* from English into Arabic by the very author of the source text. The discussion shows how subversion through self-translation manipulates the reading position of the target audience, naturally, for specific purposes.

Keywords: Self-translation, subversion, manipulation, reception

Introduction

The position and positioning of author vis-à-vis translators have been widely and differently explored in translation studies (Flynn, 2013). The exploration has considered issues such as ownership of and power over the text. The topic has also been considered under the area of voice and voices in translation studies, whereby voice and voices of authors and translators are explored under headings such as style, agency, translator in the text, reported discourse (Baker, 2000; Alvstad, 2013). What animates the debate about the relationship between author and translator mostly relates to the agency of each, who is in charge of the text? The debate within the circles of translation studies revolves around the cultural dimensions of author vs translator, including the legal position and rights of each (Pym, 2009).

Be that as it may, received wisdom is that authors and translators complement each other. Yet, translators are frequently criticised for betraying authors through inaccurate and inappropriate translations. The grounds for such criticism vary from the purely linguistic to the more functional, cultural and beyond. Every culture needs both authors and translators. This is because few translators have been “great” authors in their own right, although most, if not all, modern cultures offer examples of authors who are also translators. The contributions of these authors as translators are usually well received since, on the one hand, translating is not their main job, and on the other, they are authors and are thus assumed to show more sense of and sensibility for the foreign works they translate.

It is however safe to say that by and large translators have not been authors themselves. Those authors who sometimes assume the role of translator do so as an incidental way of further developing their own talents or as a tribute to other authors they admire. Block (1981, pp. 124-5), for example, discusses three French authors who turned translators: Nerval, Baudelaire, and Gide, and concludes by arguing that the case of these three French authors suggests that:

... the translator has need of the same imaginative qualities as the novelist, playwright, or poet, and that great translations require the simultaneous presence of unusual linguistic and literary talents in a single person. Translation in the hands of gifted writers is not reproduction but creation, fully deserving of the same informed critical response as other modes of literary endeavor.

It is equally true that authors rarely translate their own works; the task of translation being left to translators. Whereas in the past, translations of great works often took lengthy periods of time, today, thanks to globalization and publishers' desire for quick returns, most bestsellers are often hastily translated. Many authors consequently find themselves filing legal cases to prevent further publication of thrown-together translations of their works. Kuhiwczak (1990) gives the example of Milan Kundera, the East European novelist who has spent more time fighting and correcting inappropriate and often misleading translations of his novels in the West than channelling his energy into creating more novels.

When an author is his or her own translator s/he generates a situation that raises a number of valid questions: What leads someone to decide to translate their own work in the first place? How do authors-cum-translators (referring here to authors who translate their own work) approach the source text (their own), and the translation process? What happens to the issues of position, power, visibility, fidelity, etc. in translations produced by authors of the source text? How, more importantly, does the author-cum-translator perceive the target readership, particularly if the latter shares the same native language and culture as the author turned translator? What, equally important, happens to the semiotic status of the original through translation by its author? It is

questions such as these that I attempt to address in the present article. My discussion of the infrequent situation of author-cum-translator focuses on *Autumn of Fury* (1983) written in English by Heikal (an Arab writer and intellectual) and the Arabic translation (1988) produced by Heikal himself, after expressing his dissatisfaction with an earlier rendering into Arabic by “some” translator.

Translation and subversion

Notwithstanding the diversity of approaches to translation, the activity itself has in the main been practised on the basis that knowing the source and target languages represents a sufficient premise for rendering, transferring or translating. Translators have been expected to achieve the same informational and emotive effect in their translations as that achieved by the author(s) of the source text. At first sight, this goal for translation might appear reasonable and achievable. Yet its implementation often, if not always, creates problems of one kind or another at one level or another or at many levels simultaneously during the translation process.

The situation has been, and still remains, that a number of translators and translation theorists have stressed one method or another in translation and in the process they have sacrificed certain aspects of the source or target text either on the content level or the expressive (form) level depending on the guiding principles espoused. The main guiding principle which has long loomed over the theory and practice of translation is the notion of *equivalence*. The search for equivalence in translation has often led theorists and translators alike to focus on aspects of either the form or content, ignoring along the way the fact that any text produced in a given language is the product of a unique relationship between both form and content, and, more importantly, that it is embedded in a specific culture. Equivalence has consequently been measured according some types/levels of resemblance between the source and target texts on either matter or manner, or both.

Reacting to such a situation, Venuti (1995), for example, has argued that the very purpose and activity of translation represents violence. Postulating the concepts of *domestication* and *foreignization*, Venuti further argues that the Anglo-American translation tradition, in particular, has had a normalizing and naturalizing effect. Such an effect has deprived source text producers of their voice and culminated in the re-expression of foreign cultural values in terms of what is familiar to the dominant Western culture. Venuti discusses the linguistic hegemony of English in terms of the *invisibility* of the translator. Invisibility is apparent when translations yield fluent readability, and feel like originals rather than imitations -translations-. Invisibility requires a great deal of manipulation on the part of the translator, because as Venuti (1995, p. 2) says the “more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text.” Accordingly, invisible translators produce *transparent* translations which mirror the dominant culture. Related to invisibility is the issue of foreignizing which Venuti (ibid, p. 20) defines as:

... 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's invisibility does not limit itself to translation practice, but is also applicable to politics and language planning policies as well. Since the end of the First World War, the application of the concept of *self-determination* has focused on language as the main criterion of a nation-state. And, since the end of the Second World War, in particular, the American and European obsession with

monolingualism and the one-nation, one-language perception has led to what Pennycook sums up as a very particular Western cultural form. Significantly, Pennycook (1994, p. 106) goes further:

... an almost unquestionable premise of Western linguistics has been that monolingualism is the norm both for communities of speakers and for individuals, with bi-or multilingualism taken as an exception and often stigmatised through its connections to minority groups, the Third World, and English as a Second Language Learners.

Yet, this single-minded approach of the West to issues of national identity has rarely been granted to non-Western communities without provoking situations of conflict/violence. This is because the West perceives the issue of the identity of others as irrelevant or, at best, supportive to its own.

This treatment of translation from an ideological point of view, in terms of power relationships, identity formation, agency of authors and translators, manipulation, and the discourse of translation, has mostly focussed on the Western European and American hegemonic consideration of all that is other (Venuti, 1995; Kuhlwiczak, 1990; Carbonell, 1996; Faiq, 2010), where the term manipulation has found currency in translation studies. Manipulation in translation not only violates the original, but also leads to the influencing of the target readers. Carbonell (1996), for example, reports that in his comments on Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, a Byron Farwell (1963/1990, p.366) says:

The great charm of Burton's translation, viewed as literature, lies in the veil of romance and exoticism he cast over the entire work. He tried hard to retain the flavour of oriental quaintness and naivete of the medieval Arab by writing as the Arab would have written in English.

Such views of translation and by extension of readers, lead to translations that imply the production of what Carbonell (1996, p. 93) calls 'subverted texts' at all levels, "not only the source text, but also the target context experience the alteration infused by the translation process when their deeper implications are thus revealed."

This alteration ultimately leads to manipulations of the semiotic system of the target text through the process of translation, thus, regulating the response sought from the receivers of the translation. Here, the translators blatantly flout all norms and maxims of shared information. Translators become dictators, so to speak, by altering what a group of readers is allowed to know and read; thus, censoring and to a large extent alienating the target readers.

One can find reasons for such practices by Anglo-American translators rendering foreign works, such as Arabic ones, into English since these practices reflect the political and economic power of the English language, but one finds it intriguing when an Arab translating his own work, originally written in English, back into Arabic for his fellow Arabs, adopts the same manipulative strategy. The reference here is to Heikal's translation of his *Autumn of Fury* from English into Arabic and his insistence on carrying out the translation into Arabic, his native language, himself. In this article, the discussion of how Heikal deliberately tries to manipulate the Arab reader is limited to the front and back covers, the introductions of both the English (ET) and Arabic (AT) texts, photographs included in both texts, and the conclusion, which only appears in the Arabic text.

Subversion through self-translation

Written in English, *Autumn of Fury* gives an exciting account of the life of the late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat who was assassinated in October 1981 by members of his own army. The focus of the book is on Sadat's policies which, according to the author, have had disastrous ramifications for Egypt and the rest of the Arab World. It should perhaps be noted here that Heikal was imprisoned, along with very many others, by Sadat, and was released after the assassination.

The front cover of the ET shows the main title *Autumn of Fury* followed by the subtitle *The Assassination of Sadat*. Though Heikal keeps the main title of his book intact on the front cover of the AT, the subtitle, however, changes into *The story of the beginning and end of Anwar Sadat's era* * (this and all examples marked * are my translations from Arabic). This subtitle on the front cover of the AT is the first indication of Heikal's intentions to manipulate and appropriate Arab readers' reactions and the ways he wants them to interpret and read his text. His manipulation of the subtitle is a case of the highest levels of invisibility or what one can call visible invisibility. On the one hand, the front cover of the AT does not mention at all that it is a translation, but gives the impression that it is originally written in Arabic. On the other hand, Heikal's invisibility and appropriation reflect his attempt by using what is semiotically familiar, thus unchallenging, to Arab readers. The words he uses - *story, beginning and end* and *era* - all form part of the way Arabs generally perceive history and progress and hit at the very heart of their religious belief system which, compared with European equivalents, has a strong influence. In other words, it is easy for an Arab reader to accept the ideas of beginning and end of an era as these things are part of the divine will. The word *assassination* would have not triggered the same reaction in the readers of the AT. But to an English language reader, *assassination* sums up that mysterious, violent, fundamentalist, autocratic, exotic Arab World. Here, and like those Western subverting translators and authors, Heikal gives Western readers what is familiar to them: an Arab World where peace makers are assassinated.

Our next instance is the introduction. Like any introduction written within an English tradition, the introduction of the ET runs to five pages setting the scene for the book and ending by the author acknowledging his debt to all those who helped him in any way, and reiterating the familiar statement that he alone assumes responsibility for any errors of fact or judgement. The translation of this introduction in the AT, runs more or less in the same way, until the last paragraph. All the Arab academics mentioned in the ET appear in the AT, but one sentence is omitted: *Finally, I would again wish to thank my friend and colleague, Edward Hodgkin, for all the assistance he has given me in writing this book* (ET 7). Here, Heikal aware of the sensitivity of the issue eliminates any reference to a non-Arab who assisted him because otherwise Arab readers may interpret the writing of the ET in the first place as some kind of a conspiracy designed to vilify the Arab World. They may conclude that Heikal is nothing less than an agent for the 'external enemies' of Egypt and the Arab World. Heikal adds to the introduction in the AT the following statement: *And, I have tried to be no more than a witness of an important and strange period in Egypt's history* (22).* This statement is intended to direct readers of the AT who culturally believe that messengers are not to be harmed in any way regardless of the news they bring. By defining himself as a witness Heikal deliberately distances himself from the judgements he makes about Sadat and his presidency, and tries to make Arab readers believe that he is a mere 'objective' reporter of events.

The translation of the introduction in the AT is preceded by two introductions: one for Egyptian readers and one for the wider Arab constituency. The two introductions, not found in the ET, go into details about the number of reasons why the book should be read in a particular way, i.e. that it simply chronicles events that led to what happened on 6 October 1981 (the assassination of

Sadat) and not as an account of Heikal's own assessment of Sadat's rule. But, it is a truism to say that language is both itself and its circumstances, and that any text is bound to represent in varying degrees its socio-cultural context and the position of its author.

The two introductions in the AT run to 10 pages of explanations and instructions on how to approach the text. One of the reasons given by Heikal for deciding to undertake the translation of something written by him in English about the Arab World back into Arabic is that the level of debate the book generated has been such that he could not let other translators do the job for this highly sensitive book. But even here Heikal manipulates the Arab readership by indicating that the outcry the ET created may be due to the fact that *a lot of people benefitted during Sadat's rule, and consequently do not wish to see his legacy tarnished because they will ultimately lose all that they had previously amassed* (AT 14).^{*} This camouflaged reference to political, and ultimately financial, corruption in the Arab World is cleverly intended by Heikal to turn all potential enemies into allies. Appealing further to Arab readers, and ultimately hoping to shape their reading of the AT, Heikal labels Sadat's reign in Egypt *an historical mistake* which he maintains is worse than any crime. This, it seems to me, is intended to play on the feelings of most Arabs who viewed Sadat as someone who weakened the Arab nation by signing the Camp David peace treaty with Israel in 1979.

At the end of the AT, Heikal includes two letters which do not appear in the ET. The first letter, one page and a half long, was written by Al-Hakim, an Egyptian writer, comparing Heikal's *Autumn of Fury* with a book he wrote himself about Nasser's rule. Al-Hakim wrote his in Arabic, however. In his lengthy response to this letter, of over eight pages in length, Heikal expresses his dismay at all those Arabs who did not read the book, yet passed judgements and conclusions. But, what is extremely interesting in Heikal's letter is that he states that his book, *Autumn of Fury*, was *not meant for the Arab World, otherwise he would have written it in Arabic* (AT 473).^{*} Accordingly, the book was aimed at the outside English language reading world, the other, and not the Arabic reading world, the us. Heikal's reply letter discusses the differences between his book and Al-Hakim's, and stresses that he, Heikal, did not receive any financial remuneration for carrying out the translation of his book into Arabic, although he acknowledges accepting with thanks six boxes of cigars from the publisher.

The back cover of the ET lists excerpts from reviews: *Compulsively readable, a formidable indictment of the Sadat's years, a riveting account, a brilliant sense of history, devastating ... eloquent power*. These sentences clearly indicate that the book was generously received by the English language reading world, because it stays within the familiar and yet at the same time foreign parameters, and because Heikal successfully manipulated the English language readers by telling them what they are used to being told about the mysterious, violent and president-assassinating world. The back cover of the AT, however, carries a paragraph written by none other than Heikal himself. The paragraph further tells the Arab readers that they should remember *the text as a mere account of the reasons that led to the assassination of Sadat and as an attempt to explain why Sadat's end came the way it did*.

Another of Heikal's manipulatory ploys involves his use of photographs. In the ET 16 different photographs of Sadat are stacked between pages 156 and 157. They are not numbered and can be taken out without affecting the overall flow of the text. In the AT, however, 33 photographs of Sadat are strategically spread throughout the text in a way that makes them form a sub-text without which the text itself will lose its structural design and its information flow.

Conclusion

The translation instances discussed above represent the major, macro, alterations to the ET by Heikal with a view to manipulating the response of the readers of the AT. Within the semiotics of communication, the status of something being a text is conditioned by the shared and/or assumed knowledge that the author and the reader each positions himself/herself, through a process of projecting onto the text their absent counterpart. Both author and reader can only occupy one position vis-à-vis a particular text. When we talk of translation, the same positions do not change dramatically. A translator assumes the role of a reader first, and then endeavours to mirror the position of the author through translation.

In the case of *Autumn of Fury*, however, the author finds himself in a complex position. He tries to manipulate the position which readers of the translation are assumed to occupy. He does so by blurring his reading position as a translator and his position as the author of the source, while all the time laying claim to objectivity in his translation. Objectivity (vs subjectivity) is a subtle way of positioning oneself along the authorship-readership continuum. Heikal, however, and as our discussion of instances of his translation into Arabic of his English original text shows, subjectively manipulates Arab readers to position themselves where he wants them, not where their status as readers would normally allow them. He blurs the distances between author, text, translator, and reader, with the ultimate goal of steering Arab readers into a particular position and consequently a particular reading mode, which makes their own interpretations of the text almost impossible.

Throughout the AT, Heikal neither fades away nor disappears, thus preventing the readers from assuming their position as intelligent agents of communication through translation. On the contrary, one clearly senses the struggle for power between Heikal, author and translator, and the reader over the text, a struggle not unlike a conflict, armed or otherwise, between colonial powers over a territory or territories.

The issue of subversion also stems from the fact that the ET itself represents an instance of translation that gives the English language readers what they are generally familiar with in terms of representations and stereotypes narrated through the politics and ideologies of the power dictated by the other, namely Anglo-American culture. In this respect, the figure of the author and/or translator appears as authority to the unknown: Arab politics and culture, an exotic, yet violent Arab World. It is within this cultural space-between that Heikal should be located.

The problem for Heikal is that what he made familiar and natural for the English language reading world, and which, according to him, was not meant for Arab readers, wants to be born again Arab. But this is not an easy task. How can one refamiliarize and renaturalize something Arab that was forcibly shaped for a particular non-Arab audience? Heikal's cunning strategy was to the Western subversion around. He did this through a sustained and systematic manipulation of the reading position and ultimately of the readers. He generally succeeds in renativizing what he denativized utilizing all powers available to him as the author (owner) of the English source text and as the translator/author (owner) of the Arabic target text. But in the process he made Arab readers look like, to use Kuhlwiczak (1990) words, "deplorable small peoples". Heikal's Arabic translation of his own English book, belittlingly tells readers how to make meaning out of words. But, the question remains whether a self-translator can assume the right to be more subversive, while all would cry foul were s/he an *ordinary* translator?

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