

The Importance of Cultural Awareness in English – Arabic Translation

Shadiyah Hamza Sheikh

College of Languages and Translation
King Saud University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that through translation, it is possible to transcend language barriers and gain a better understanding of the world by conveying ideas from one language to another. The translator, therefore, has to shoulder the burden of this responsibility. The first section looks at the inextricable link between language and culture, hence the need for translators to develop their cultural awareness. The second section deals with the process of translation, which involves cultural decoding and recoding. In this context, the two methods of translating cultural words and notions, namely *transference* and *componential analysis*, are discussed along with several levels on which the process of translation takes place, specifically, *linguistic*, *technical*, *conceptual* and *comprehension* levels. Naturally, when the translator faces unfamiliar items related to the culture of the source text, translation can become a difficult process. The third section focuses on the kinds of cultural problems related to the source text namely: *cultural untranslatability*, *highly specific cultural items*, *the problem of equivalence*, *connotations*, *collocations* and *irony*. The fourth section identifies the novice translator's challenges, in terms of his background knowledge and appropriate choice of strategy. The last section proceeds to highlight some of the levels of cultural awareness a translator needs to possess and the paper concludes with some suggestions for good translation.

Keywords: cultural awareness, collocation, connotation, irony, untranslatability

Introduction

The basic assumption of this paper is that problems of translation may be minimized if translators, as life-long language learners, do not separate a language from its culture. That is, to say, when translators achieve cross-cultural awareness and begin to deal with language and culture as two sides of the same coin, successful translation becomes possible. The paper examines the connection between language and culture, and what is involved in the process of translation.

It then focuses on some culture- specific problems of English-Arabic translation and the kinds of cultural awareness a successful translator should enjoy to enable him or her to deal with such problems.

A separate section is devoted to the challenges facing novice translators as it has been noticed that they tend to make random choices of strategies to solve the problem of equivalence, regardless of its appropriateness to the intended meaning. Brief ways to deal with this issue are suggested.

It concludes with some suggestions to raise the translator's cultural awareness to the level that would facilitate the task of bridging the gap between languages, hence closing the gap between different communities with different cultures.

Section One: The Connection between Language and Culture

Although there is no certain answer to the question posed by Damen, “Which came first language or culture?” (1987, p.120), what is certain is that the connection between language and culture cannot be ignored.

As defined by Sapir (1921, p. 8) “Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.” These ideas, emotions and desires are greatly influenced by our culture, since according to most social scientists today, “The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies...People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways.” (Banks, Banks and McGee, 1989).

A language, then, is primarily used for communication, as it is used by members of societies to send meaningful messages and culture defines what is or is not meaningful. Thus, we can only assume that language affects and is affected by culture, in other words as Kleinjans (1972) states, language and culture are analogous. They are certainly bound together as cultures are learned largely through languages rather than inherited biologically or genetically. Hence, the process of learning a new language inevitably accompanies cultural learning. This brings us to the relationship between the triangle of language, culture and communication. As mentioned above, language is used for communication between members of the same society who think, believe, speak and act the way they do because the messages they send to each other bear the stamp of culture. Therefore, it can be said that since culture and communication are directly linked, and since language is used to transmit culture, then language, culture and communication are inseparable. On the other hand, when a cultural dimension is added to communication between people from different language communities, interaction becomes more complex as their cultural perceptions are distinct enough to alter the intended message.

This is highlighted by the fact that there can exist great variation even between the same languages depending on where the speaker is from. For example, both British English and

American English contain culturally bound expressions and phrases that are unique to their cultures. For instance, *doing porridge* is a British slang for serving a prison sentence as porridgeⁱ was once the traditional breakfast served in UK prisons. Without any cultural or factual pre-knowledge, it would be impossible for translators to make logical sense of the sentence “He’s doing porridge.” Likewise, *Thanksgiving Day* is a national holiday in the United States whose origin is commonly traced to 1621 when the Plymouth colonists and Wampanoag Indians shared an autumn harvest feast.

Such factors play an important role in translation, as ignorance of the target language culture may cause problems in translation. Therefore, recognizing the importance of the cultural functions of a language is crucial for successful translation.

Section Two: The Process of Translation

Translation involves a process of cultural decoding and recoding. Translators deal with written words as well as the cultural aspects of the texts. This cultural implication in the process of translation takes several forms, from lexical content to ideologies and ways of life in a certain culture. For instance, items like *Thanksgiving* and *porridge* are not just lexical items; they are culture-specific items that the translator needs to accommodate.

Newmark (1998) suggests two methods of translating cultural words and notions. The first is *transference*, which keeps cultural concepts and names, but has the disadvantage of limiting the comprehension of certain aspects. The other is *componential analysis*, which is a more accurate translation as it highlights the above message. The process of translation, therefore, takes place on several levels:

- i. Linguistic level - where similar meaning is retained in the original and the translated version. That is, the translated meaning remains close to the original.
- ii. Technical level - the formal features of the language such as (grammar, tense, vocabulary etc.)
- iii. Conceptual level - to obtain an identical meaning of concepts that may have different cultural understandings.

Section Three: Cultural Problems in Translation

Translation is inherently a difficult process, especially when the translator faces items related to the culture of the source text. Such items would pose problems if there wasn't any intercultural interaction between the source language and the target language. Cultural problems related to the source text could be summarized as follows:

- i. **Cultural untranslatability:** This occurs when a certain feature in the source language is absent in the target language culture where, such features may include religion and social background elements. For instance the word *christening/ baptism* is usually translated as *Ta'mid* (تعميد)ⁱⁱ in Christianity, but it denotes the same meaning as *'Aqīqah* (عقيقة)ⁱⁱⁱ which is related exclusively to Islam.
- ii. **Highly specific cultural items:** This means that the source text has a concept that is totally unknown to the target language where a native speaker may be needed to convey the accurate meaning, *Bangers and mash*^{iv}, for example, is specific to the British culture, so is a person *doing porridge* and *Guy Fawkes Night*^v, from the Arabic culture we have

- tayamum (التيمم)^{vi}, and Merbe'aneya (مربعانية)^{vii} - which are again highly culture-specific concepts.
- iii. **The problem of equivalence:** It is rather impossible to find an equivalent in the target language, as sameness in translation does not exist between the source language and the target language, especially when the concept is related to culture and religion. For instance, the word *imam* in Arabic is not the same as *priest* in English, as each represents specific cultural features. Whereas in Christianity, a priest is a person who is authorised to perform religious rites, an imam in the Islamic faith deals with both spiritual and temporal issues.
- iv. **Connotations:** This is another problem in translation as connotations in different languages are based on cultural roots. For instance, the literal meaning of the Arabic word "حانوتي" "Hanouti", is "Undertaker", however in some dialects it is used to refer to someone being stingy, a miser and a penny pincher. In English the connotation would be lost, and the translator would need to use the linguistic rather than the connotative meaning of the word in order not to distort the message when translating from English to Arabic and vice versa.
- v. **Collocations:** The interference of the translator's native language can lead to misinterpretation of a collocation. Baker (1992) states that the same collocations are a direct reflection of the social or moral environment in which they occur. An example is the verb *support* in English which collocates with a number of nouns for each of which the Arabic language uses a different verb as shown below:

English	Arabic	
	Verb	Full Phrase
Support a politician	Yu'awyedu/يؤيد	يؤيد رجل سياسة
Support a sport team	Yushaje'u/يشجع	يشجع فريق رياضي
Support an object	Yasnidu/يسند	يسند شيئاً
Support financially	Yad'amu/يدعم	يدعم مالياً
Support an evidence	Yuthbitu/يثبت	يثبت دليلاً
Support a family	Yunfiqu/yu'eel/يعيل	يعيل عائلة

Main Source: Baker (1992, p. 49)

Such a difference in collocation involves different ways of presenting an event between language communities. Hence the nearest acceptable translation of a collocation into the target language involves some changes in meaning. For example, the nearest Arabic translation of **to pay attention** is "يلفت انتباهه" = *yulfetu entebah* (draw the attention) but **to pay a visit** is "يقوم بزيارة" = *yagoum be zeyarah* (pay a visit). To further highlight how the Arabic language uses different verbs, **to pay his last respect** is "يودع فقيداً له" = *yuwadeou fakeedan lahoo* and **to pay his way up** is "شق طريقه" = *yashuku tareeqahoo*

- vi. **Irony:** The translation of irony depends on the way in which the target language reader perceives the irony. Hatim (1997) defines it as "saying one thing literally and meaning the opposite figuratively". The problem occurs when the translator fails to appreciate the source language and resorts to literal translation, for example, the Titanic was promoted as being 100% unsinkable! Here, the translator will have to transfer not only the features of the language, but its cultural characteristics too. He would have to add an extra text to show the irony "من السخرية أن ... *minal sukhreya anna* (the irony is, the Titanic...).

Section Four: The Novice Translator's Challenges

Faced with the problem of equivalence, a novice translator makes the inappropriate choice of relevant strategies, paying inadequate attention to the message, the collocation restrictions, and the implied connotations, which renders his translation inefficient and the implied meaning will inevitably be lost. This is particularly true for novice translators who translate from Arabic-English–Arabic, as translation is bound to be from and into Standard Arabic which is intrinsically formal and lacks equivalents in formal and colloquial English. The translator's issue of appropriateness is shown in several aspects, some of which are:

- i. **Word association.** The novice translator's problem with connotation is more intense than others. He may associate negative connotations to the meaning of certain words, while it has no such connotations to the source text. For example, the word "owl" does not have negative connotation to the English Language, on the contrary, it symbolizes wisdom, yet the translator may disassociate its meaning from the context and give the word a very negative association (Arabs believe that owls bring bad luck and symbolize pessimism), hence he failed to maintain the neutral intention of the source text.
- ii. **Ignorance of the pragmatic connotation of cultural expressions,** which renders its translation extremely difficult. For example the Arabic word "*Tuhoor wa Noor*" "طهور ونور" is a social expression used when visiting a patient. "Min Oyuni" "من عيوني" is another social expression used to agreeing to do something, the nearest meaning in English is "with pleasure". Those casual social expressions are used in almost all Arab communities, and have idiomatic rather than literal meanings. Therefore, the translator's failure to employ that meaning in translation would pose a problem at the semantic level resulting in misunderstanding the actual meaning of those expressions in their relevant context. To reach a sound translation, the translator may apply additions to give broader contextual knowledge that would be of great value to the target language reader.
- iii. **Insufficient knowledge of the target language.** A novice translator may resort to using transliteration of terms related to specific aspects of the culture, such as religion, when a direct equivalent does not exist and on the assumption that the target reader is familiar with the terms. He would write the following terms specific to Islam as: "*Salat al Estekharah*" "صلاة الاستخارة", or "*Suhur Ramadan*" "سحور رمضان", or "*Tayammum*" "تيمم". In doing so, the translator does not acknowledge the fact that they most likely do not exist in other languages and that transliteration would not assist the target language reader in understanding the intended message. He should realize that choosing the right strategy in translation is a necessary skill for a successful translator. In the above case, a short footnote saying that these terms are specific to Islam then explaining the nearest intended meaning, rather than transliteration, would convey the actual meaning and would also give a better quality to translation. "*Salat al Estekharah*" would be explained as a special prayer requesting God to help us making the right decision. Similarly "*Suhur Ramadan*" refers to food eaten before dawn in the fasting month of *Ramadan*, and "*Tayammum*" would be explained as the dry ablution in Islam using sand or dust in the absence of water (see endnote 6).
- iv. **Insufficient knowledge of the subject matter.** In the absence of knowledge of a specialized text, the translator is unable to identify terms with specific references, regardless of his command of the target language. In a social text, for instance, "he

dropped her off" was translated into Arabic as "أطاحها" "Atahaha", as in dropped her on the floor. With a basic knowledge of the subject, an accurate translation would have been "أوصلها" "Awsalaha". Another example from a military text; the word "division" is translated into Arabic as "قسمة" "Kisma" as in mathematics, rather than "فرقة" "Firka" a military group. In the above examples, the translator's lack of knowledge base, which gives the terms their specialized meanings, rendered them into general words and therefore distorted the actual meanings. To overcome this problem, the translator should arm himself with basic background of the subject field before engaging the translation, thus he would be equipped with the necessary required concepts and consequently use them in skillful and appropriate ways.

Section Five: The kinds of Cultural Awareness the Translators Need

The translator is faced with an alien culture with its unique words, proverbs, thoughts and values. Therefore, the translator is expected to do cross-cultural translation where success depends primarily on his or her understanding of the culture of the source language.

Most often, words present features in the source language that are not present in the target language, or they may be present but in a different form. Therefore, the translator would need not only to be acculturated to the foreign language, but would need to gain an understanding and appreciation of the foreign culture too. Schuman (1978) defined acculturation as the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target group. In other words, the linguistic competence of the translator is but one side of successful translation and cultural competence is the other side.

Successful translators, therefore, need to have cross-cultural awareness that comprises of an understanding of their own cultural behavior as well as the behavioral patterns of others from different cultures.

Harvey (1979:73) describes some of the levels of awareness that translators need as follows:

- i. Awareness of superficial traits (stereotyping), which involves getting information from a secondary source. Cultures *have manifest and implicit rules* of behavior. The *manifest* is obvious and known to both the insider and the outsider, but the *implicit* are usually covert cultural rules that are difficult for an outsider to discover without the help of a secondary source.
- ii. Awareness of significant contrastive traits is sometimes associated with frustration as translators often find there exists a conflict between their own patterns of behavior and those belonging to the foreign culture.
- iii. Awareness of insider's view (sometimes called *emic*) of a given culture is extremely important for the translator to discover and understand.

Such awareness moves the learner/translator from ignorance to near total understanding of other cultures. It makes the cultural patterns of behavior predictable or understandable to the translator, making the translators "bicultural".

Section Six: Suggestions for Good Translation

As stated above, different cultures have different items in their languages. For such linguistic items, the translator needs to resort to different strategies to assist the target language reader in

understanding the source text. According to Nida (1969, p.12), “The best translation does not sound like a translation.” It involves the closest natural equivalence between the source language and the target language. To achieve this, the translator needs to concentrate on the meaning rather than the form. The translator may need to resort to some lengthy explanations to make the concept clearer to the target language reader. Lexicographers also resort to lengthy explanations to make the concept clear to dictionary users, for example, *fish-n-chips*^{viii} and *porridge* are not universal lexical items. They are culturally bound and need to be explained to the target language reader.

Another important point a good translator needs to be aware of is the situational feature of the word. He or she needs to be familiar with the meaning of ‘*Merbe’aneyya*’ (see endnote 7) for instance. The translator would almost certainly need to add extra words or a brief explanation to assist the reader with the meaning of *Merbe’aneyya* (cold winds which lasts for forty days during winter). Some other items, such as the ones given below, are only translatable if the translator is familiar with their functions, and tries to find a functional equivalent by following the word with a detailed description.

- a) *Maisonette* = شقة من طابقين (*sheka min tabekeyn*) = a two-story flat
- b) *Smog* = مزيج من الضباب والدخان (*mazeej min al dabad wal dukhan*) = a mixture of fog and smoke
- c) *Tayamum* (التيمم) = substituting water with dust in performing ablution in the absence of water.
- d) The city of Makkah (مكة), cannot be translated only as “A city in Saudi Arabia”, but to be followed by (as in Collins Dictionary, 1988) “The holiest city in Islam because the Prophet Mohammed was born there, all Muslims face towards Mecca when they say their prayers.”

Baker (1992) lists some translation strategies used by professional translators to overcome the problem of non-equivalence for culture specific items, examples of which are:

- i. *Using a more general word*: This strategy works well in most languages. For instance, “*maisonette*” has no direct equivalent in Arabic, so the translator looks at its semantic field and goes up a level to find a more general word (superordinate) that covers the meaning of the missing hyponym “house”.
- ii. *Using a cultural substitute*: This strategy gives the reader a familiar concept with which he can identify. *Saleeg* (سليق), a meal comprising of rice, chicken stock and milk) can be substituted with *porridge*.
- iii. *Paraphrasing*: This strategy allows the translator to achieve a high level of precision. For example, *irreparable* becomes *la yumkenu eslahuhu* (لا يمكن اصلاحه), which means *impossible to mend*. However, the translator would need to only resort to minor paraphrasing to clarify the meaning, not the whole text.
- iv. *Using omission*: This strategy can only be used if the word to be omitted is redundant in the text, or repeated. For instance, *Ahmed sakheyu wa kareem wa taweel al bha'e* (أحمد سخّي وكريم وطويل الباع) would be translated as *Ahmed is generous* since the words underlined are redundant as they all mean *generous*.
- v. *Using a loan word*: This strategy should only be resorted to when the translator has consulted all sources to know the equivalent, but in vain. So he writes the word between inverted commas. An example of this would be the word *Abaya* as given in the following sentence, “Women in Saudi Arabia wear the traditional ‘Abaya.’”

Conclusion

To sum up the above suggestions, one can say that to achieve successful translation, it is of utmost importance that the translator is fully aware of his or her own language and culture. Additionally, as was highlighted above, novice translators face more challenges because they lack the essential knowledge of the subject matter, therefore it was suggested that they educate themselves in the target field before engaging the translation in order to be aware of the intricacies of the specialized source language along with its culture. This is crucial since the cultural implications in the process of translation can take several forms - from lexical content to ideologies and ways of life in a certain culture. Translators also need to be able to choose appropriate methods and strategies of translation in translating cultural words and notions as well as the problems that can occur in translating such cultural items, suggestions on how to deal with such issues were given in section four. Those suggestions would put the translator in the best position to assist the target language reader in gaining the same appreciation of a text as a reader of the text in the source language.

Acknowledgement

I would like to extend my gratitude to the King Saud University Research Centre for their support in producing this article.

Notes

- ⁱ A dish made by boiling ground, crushed or chopped cereal (usually oatmeal) in water or milk.
- ⁱⁱ Arabic term for the christening of a Christian Arab baby.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Arabic/Islamic term referring to the celebration of naming the baby, usually on the seventh day since the baby's birth.
- ^{iv} A traditional British dish made of mashed potatoes and sausages.
- ^v Annually held on 5th November, Guy Fawkes Night marks - the anniversary of the discovery of a plot organized by Catholic conspirators to blow up the Houses of Parliament in London in 1605. On this day, bonfires are lit and fireworks are set off.
- ^{vi} Substituting water with dust in performing ablution (before prayer) in the absence of water.
- ^{vii} Cold winds which last for 40 days during the winter.
- ^{viii} A hot meal of English origin consisting of battered fish and deep fried chips.

About the Author:

Dr. Shadiha Hamza Hamid Sheikh, Assistant Professor and Vice Dean at the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University. PhD in Language Teaching Bradford University, UK. Experience ranges from a Political Attache at the Arab League to a Consultant at the Bureau of Experts at the Council of Ministers, official Translation Department.

References

- Baker, M. (1992). *In other words: A Course Book on Translation*. London: Routledge.
- Banks, J.A., Banks, & McGee, C. A. (1989). *Multicultural Education*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Collins cobuild dictionary (1988). London & Glasgow: Collins Publishers.
- Damen, L. (1987). *Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension in the Language Classroom*. Boston, Mass. Addison Wesley.
- Harvey, R. (1979). *Cross Cultural Awareness*. In E. Smith and L. Luce (Eds.), *An attainable Global Perspective*. New York Center for Global Perspectives.
- Hatim, B. (1997). *Communication Across Cultures*. Exeter University Press.
- Hatim, B. (1997). *The Translator as Communicator*. London, Routledge.
- Kleinjans, E (1972) *On Culture Learning*. For presentation at the Japan Association of College English Teachers' Annual Conference, Hachioji, August 1971, cited from Damen. (1987).
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Nida, U. and Charles, T. (1969). *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Netherlands, Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Shumann, J.H. (1978). *The Acculturation Model for Second Language Acquisition*. In R.C. Gingras (ed.) *Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Learning*. Washington, D.C: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Sapir, E. (1921). *Language: An introduction to the Study of Speech*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.