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Transformation, Appropriation and Medieval Arabic Translation Tradition

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**Abstract:**

An examination of the historiography of translation, as a transformative and/or appropriationist act, for example, is important for a discipline that affects the contact between peoples interculturally, even intraculturally. Such an examination should consider translation as cultural movements that stem from and affect crisis, nation-building, and identity. Within this context, the purpose of this article is to assess what history labels the Medieval Arabic Translation Tradition (MATT) in terms of its culture, how it accommodated foreign cultures into Arabic and its role building the Arab/Islamic Empire (transformation) that globalized the world for centuries (appropriation). In other words, how MATT transformed its culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, how it assisted this culture in acquiring global influence.

*Keywords:* Arabic Medieval translation, appropriation, transformation, culture.

## Introduction

Translatology has made significant strides over the last four decades or so. The contributions of many scholars from different parts of the world and from different theoretical and cultural backgrounds have influenced the issues and directions, which have characterised the study of translation on both macro and micro levels. A number of researchers from the so-called periphery (Latin America, Africa, Asia (particularly China and India), the Middle East), and many scholars in the centre (North America and Europe) interested in post-colonial and cultural studies, have all contributed to a burgeoning field with rich and varied theoretical bases.

The historiography of translation indicates that developments in the study of what translation involves and what ramifications it has are wide and cover issues almost unrelated to what seems to be an 'obvious' activity. In this context, Bassnett & Trivedi (1999, p. 2) —representing centre and periphery referred to above — appropriately write:

... translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in the process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with signification at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems.

It follows that the two obvious components of translation are culture and language. Since by its nature translation brings the two together, it is by necessity a multi-faceted, multi-problematic process with different manifestations and realizations in various cultures/traditions. Culture can be defined as shared knowledge: what the members of a particular community ought to know to react toward and interpret their experience and identity in distinctive ways. Language can be seen as the system that offers its users the tools to realize such distinctive ways. This intrinsic and intertwined relationship between culture and language is expressed by Bassnett in the following simple way: 'Try as I may, I cannot take language out of culture or culture out of language' (1998, p. 81). Emig (2001, pp. 203–4) summarizes the intrinsic and intertwined relationship between culture, language and translation:

Culture itself is shown to be the result of translations, and these translations are depicted not so much as inevitable forces of history, but as individual acts that rely on their interplay with social and political contexts. Inside these contexts they often fail, and the consequences of these failures can indeed be fatal. But equally fatal is the attempt to ignore or even abandon translation as a crucial prerequisite of the formation of identity, be it personal, national or indeed cultural.

So, an examination of the historiography of translation, as transformative and/or appropriationist acts, for example, is important for a discipline that affects the contact between peoples interculturally, even intraculturally (Faiq, 2010). Such an examination should consider translation as cultural movements that stem from and affect crisis, nation-building, and identity. Within this context, the purpose of this article is to assess what history labels the Medieval Arabic Translation Tradition (MATT) in terms of its culture, how it dealt with accommodating foreign cultures into Arabic—a hitherto predominantly literary language and of limited geopolitical influence—and to understand and explain it as a social and historical tradition. MATT played a central role in the rise of the Arab/Islamic Empire (transformation of a culture) that globalized the world for centuries (through the appropriation of knowledge from other cultures). The article first provides a short synopsis of MATT, and then considers how transformation and appropriation apply to MATT.

### **MATT: A Synopsis**

Regarding Arabic translation in general and to coincide with the Arabic Booker Prize of 2009, the newspaper, The National, commissioned an article from which the following excerpt is taken:

When the Muslim armies were on the move, defeating their enemies in battle and giving birth to a glorious and widespread empire, it was the translator who brought home the greatest prize. As warriors overran foreign cities, he entered the libraries of earlier civilisations and redrafted in Arabic the wisdom found there, allowing Islamic scholars to absorb the knowledge of thinkers who had gone before. His work laid the foundation for a golden age, strengthening the Islamic empire and making Arabic the global language of

the time. In this medieval period, the activity of translation had two clear objectives: to enrich the Arab world with what the rest of the world had to offer; and to enrich the rest of the world with what the Arab world had to offer. Consequently, centres of learning and splendour, unrivalled in their time, were created in Baghdad in the east and in Cordoba in the west. (Faiq, 2009)

It is within this historiographical context that the importance of MATT lies. Shortly after the establishment of the Islamic polity in the seventh century, the Arabs (new Muslims) recognised the importance of translation for spreading their new faith and strengthening their new state, *Ummah*. The Arabs were among the first in history to establish translation as a government enterprise. Successive rulers made it part of the government with its own budget and institutions. MATT gained momentum early in the eighth century A.D. when Arabs started to produce paper on a large scale and reached its zenith in the ninth and tenth centuries. In its historical development, MATT moved from a necessity phase through a truly golden and glorious phase to a phase of decline. In general terms, three main features characterized MATT.

- 1) Diversity of sources: Arabs translated from any language they came in contact within the course of their conquests: Hindi, Persian, Syriac, and Sanskrit. Their main source language/culture, however, was Greek.
- 2) Extensiveness: MATT, particularly in Baghdad in the east and Cordoba in the west, covered almost all areas of knowledge of the time, including mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, logic, medicine, chemistry, engineering, politics, and geography
- 3) Organization: In the eighth century, translation was seen as a necessity with the focus on medicine and warfare. In the ninth and tenth centuries, translation was made an official undertaking. The rulers encouraged translators, and even enticed them to translate by giving them - so the anecdote goes - the equivalent weight of translations in gold. The Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun (reign 813-833) established the *house of wisdom (baytu l-Hikma)*, which was the equivalent of a modern centre of research excellence or academy. The main political and cultural concern of the rulers was to make Arabic the language of knowledge and learning, not only the language of poetry and religion. In this they succeeded, as Arabic remained the main international donor language for centuries.

The Caliph al-Ma'moun is historically seen as the champion of MATT. He recruited translators including non-Muslims, from different parts of the world as long as they met the strict criteria to function as translators. He made translators state employees with regular incomes. He also organised *baytu l-Hikma* into departments for translation, editing, research, publication and general scholarship. According to Khouri (1988), in one of his peace treaties with Byzantium, al-Ma'moun demanded as reparation a whole library in Constantinople. Nutting (1964, p. 125) sums up the cultural and intellectual aspects of al-Ma'moun's reign:

With a deep love of the arts and sciences, he [al-Mamoun] became the greatest of all caliphal patrons of poetry, theology, philosophy, astrology and astronomy. He encouraged and imported men of learning regardless of race or religion. Christians, Greeks, Jews, Zoroastrians - even heathen Sabians whose star-worshipping was thought to make them experts in astronomy - were patronized and pampered in order that they might enrich the caliphate with their knowledge and creative power. The stream of culture that had earlier flowed into Greece from its sources in Egypt, Babylonia, Phoenicia and Judaea now poured back to refertilize the areas of its origins.

With the Arab-Islamic state firmly established and its resources diversified, a political decision was made: For the state to remain strong, it needed science and technology. This triggered the sustained and large-scale translation of major books in various fields of learning. But, from glory, MATT moved to a phase of chaos and decline, which can be attributed to two main factors:

- 1) The debate between different Islamic schools and between Muslims and other religious groups about Islam and interpretations of its book, the Qur'an, made Muslims decide that they needed philosophy - in particular logic - in order to argue their particular philosophy or interpretation of religion and other topics.
- 2) Translation became fashionable. In addition to the state, rich families and individuals sponsored translation projects, established private translation bureaux and commissioned translations, often given as gifts to rulers (Faiq, 2000). Notwithstanding its contribution to MATT, private sponsorship was also responsible for ushering in the chaotic phase. This historical period coincided with internal political divisions in the Arab-Islamic Empire and with the demise of strong

central government. Translation lost its national momentum and became attached to individuals' and patrons' tastes, rather than national planning and aspirations.

Medieval Arab translators faced immense problems in rendering foreign works into Arabic, which, until the rise of Islam, was primarily a literary language. They had to assimilate new subjects and find appropriate equivalents for alien concepts in Arabic. The main problems they faced were terminological and, accordingly, most early translations remained inscrutably foreign and were revised, amended and at times even re-carried out. These translators adopted three main strategies: literal, semantic and gist. In literal translation, the translators considered each source language word and its meaning and then used Arabic approximations. This often meant that they transliterated technical terms that produced stilted and odd structures and style in the Arabic rendition. This strategy was predominant during the early or necessity phase of MATT.

Translators of the golden age adopted the semantic strategy which involved reading the original, processing it and trying to find semantically equivalent structures in Arabic regardless of lexical equivalence. Most translations produced according to this strategy did not require any revision or rewriting. There were strict criteria for recruiting translators, particularly during the glorious phase of MATT. As quoted in Khouri (1988, p. 54), al-Jahidh, a medieval Arab scholar and critic who stressed the relativity of translation particularly poetic translation, stipulated the following main criteria for translators (not different from today's requirements/criteria):

- a full understanding of the subject matter,
- an awareness of current methods of translation and
- previous apprenticeship with an established translator,
- a sound command of the translator's working languages,
- full knowledge of the author of the original work, including his style and idiosyncrasies, and

- translating poetry and other sensitive and culturally bound works was to be avoided unless the translators wrote such texts themselves.

Later translators adopted gist translation, a strategy that involved summaries rather than full translations. This strategy came into use when the need for translation from Greek and other languages diminished as Arab scholars started to produce their own research. Gist translation was also characteristic of a new breed of translators who were competent in both the languages and the subjects with which they dealt; true translators-cum-experts.

### **Transformation, appropriation and MATT**

In general terms, transformation often induces structural change, social, economic, political, etc. The change affects the way a community perceives itself and the world around it (Merriam, *et al.*, 2007). In other words, transformation means that a community becomes reflective, critical, open to, and accepting of others and novel ideas (Bear, 2006; Wright, 2008). Transformation occurs when new trajectories and their associated implementation strategies are introduced with the aim of formulating a new reality/perspective for the community.

In this context, while purely practical considerations triggered MATT, it was ideological (that is cultural in the broadest sense of the term) considerations that pushed it to its zenith. Its Omayyad time was witnessed by sporadic *ad hoc* activities and projects. Its Abbasid time, on the other hand, was more organized and prolific. The great achievements of this historically unique tradition reflected the collective cultural and civilizational development of the Arab/Islamic nation. By the same token, translation was a natural response to and reflection of the demands posed by such development.

From the start, MATT was not an end in itself. Translated texts were used to stretch intellectual capabilities and transform society. Through appropriation of the scientific and philosophical heritage of others, medieval Arab translators helped to develop a unique Arab/Islamic

cultural identity. Translators were educators of their community and popularizers of the scholarship of other cultures. Much appreciated by all sectors of the *Ummah* (nation), their work became the catalyst for native scholarship and the production of essentially Arab/Islamic works, the foundations of an empire that globalized (appropriation and transformation) the world for centuries. MATT easily fits the attributes of transformation. Delisle & Woodsworth (1995, p. 103) write:

Nestorian Christians, expelled from the Byzantine Empire after their patriarch Nestorius was condemned for heresy by the Council of Ephesus (431), settled in what is now southwestern Iran; they were responsible for translating the great authors of ancient Greece, along with Indian, and even some Chinese, medical texts. Ancient Greece and Syriac manuscripts were housed in the Bayt-al-Hikma or “House of Wisdom” in Baghdad, where they were translated into Arabic in the ninth century. In the twelfth century, these Arabic translations, many of which had outlived their originals, were translated into Latin in Toledo. Many of these Latin translations, medical works particularly, were subsequently retranslated into vernacular languages throughout Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

But how did MATT succeed in transforming the medieval Arab into a global player? The answer lies in that “process” of translation called appropriation. Appropriation generally refers to the process of importing texts and associated cultures through translation into the socio-cultural and linguistic context of the translating culture.

The often negative connotation of cultural appropriation (state and status of minority/subordinate cultures vis-a-vis dominant ones) notwithstanding, the term is used here to refer to appropriation as the adoption of some elements of one culture by a different one. Once imported, these elements often take on meanings in the receiving socio-cultural contexts that are different from what they stood-for/still stand-for native socio-cultural contexts. Cultural appropriation is often defined by and practiced differently in different cultures.

Like all other traditions, MATT did not happen in a cultural vacuum or in isolation from the cultures and ideologies that surrounded Arab/Islamic lands. Armed with their new religion and its linguistic medium, Arabic, the Arabs and Muslims certainly practised what one may call religious



and cultural elitism. To strengthen their new state, they needed everything except for religion, poetry and language. Although medieval Arab translators tried to follow the original text as closely as possible, they often added bits of information from their own knowledge or deleted bits of information that did not confirm with their belief system: ‘traces of paganism were eliminated and substituted by references more in accordance with their own beliefs’ (Kruk, 1976, p. 18).

We would posit that the concepts of ‘monitoring’ and ‘managing,’ as explained by Beaugrande & Dressler (1981), would be useful tools for positioning a particular translation tradition along the continuum of translatology. Monitoring refers to the expounding of texts without intervention while managing involves steering texts towards specific goals and intentions. As for MATT, one could argue that medieval Arab translators managed more than they monitored. But then, their interest in translation did not spring from a genuine interest in Greek or any other culture: it was prompted by their urgent need to satisfy the necessities of a young nation. Thus, they carried out negation of the strangeness of the foreign works.

Medieval Arab translators marginalized certain canons, but they did not try to wholly domesticate them, in the sense Venuti (1995) assigns to the concept. Rather, they used intricate adaptive or compensatory strategies in transferring works into Arabic. Were they invisible or violent? We would argue that the answer lies more in their culture of translation and less in their translation of culture—a clear cultural (ideological) agendum was the thrust behind and catalyst for their translation practice.

Cultural hegemony was practised. Medieval Arab translators translated little literature because, on the one hand, they were proud of their own; and, on the other, because Greek literature contained ideas and myths that were not compatible with their belief system. In this context, Lewis (1994, p. 75) remarks:

... the literature of an alien and heathen society could offer neither aesthetic appeal nor moral guidance. The history of these remote peoples, without prophets or scriptures, was a mere sequence of events, without aim or meaning. [For the

medieval Arab translator], literature meant the poetry and eloquence of his own rich cultural tradition.

Culturally, MATT was the tool for an interactive dialogue between the Arab/Muslim nation and other cultures, but most importantly it was seen as the means for the transformation of a group into a nation through the appropriation of Greek and other nations' intellectual heritage.

### Conclusion

For MATT, it was a new religion, Islam that encouraged believers to do two things: to spread the new faith and to promote scholarship of their own. Within two centuries, the Arabs managed to do both. They carved out a large empire and, at the same time, translated widely from the languages and cultures they came in contact with. Consequently, centres of culture and splendour unrivalled in their time were created in Baghdad in the east and in Cordoba in the west – Muslim Spain.

The historical importance of medieval Arab translators as intercultural mediators is perhaps better appreciated in the assessment given by others as in the following citation from Burnett (1992, p. 1050):

The Arabs of the Middle Ages seem to have had a special flair for mathematics, and the Latin translations in this field provide only a dim reflection of the true splendour of the achievements of men like al-Mu'taman b. Hūd or Omar Khayyam. The translations did, however, introduce into the West calculation with Arabic numerals, algebra, trigonometry and advanced geometry. In medicine, above all, Arabic works became familiar in the Latin forms of Avicenna (this time as author of the *Canon of Medicine*), Rhazes, Mesue, Issac, and Abulcasim.

Medieval European scholars also stated the same. Echoing the views of many of his contemporaries, Hugo of Santalla, for example, wrote: "It befits us to imitate the Arabs especially, for they are as it were our teachers and precursors" (cited in Burnett, 1992, p. 1051).

As a culturally motivated enterprise, MATT managed to strike a balance between the universe of knowledge - as a human activity - and the universe of its discourse with its own cultural guidelines and discursive norms. It would indeed be beneficial to learn from MATT and the particular culture it helped to build at a time when our contemporary world is in a dire need for human, non-violent, non-stereotypical and certainly non-isolationist translation practices and projects. Such a need can be met by considering in a contrastive fashion how different cultural traditions view translation and the process and politics of translating. Projects and movements for translating cultures should be viewed and evaluated within the context of their cultures that triggered them in the first place.

MATT played a vital historical role in the cultural development not only of the Arab/Islamic world, but also of other worlds and cultures: a true mission of translation as intercultural communication. The great cultural shifts of history have been made possible because of translation. MATT is an outstanding case in point.

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