

The Untranslatability of Islamic and Arabic Cultural Terms

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Abstract

This article deals with the problem of translating the untranslatable in the language pair of Arabic and English. The opening sections consider the problem and its main features. Further sections analyze the role of religion and culture in untranslatability; lexical units, representing different aspects of culture, the ways and problems of their conveyance from Arabic into English. The ways and problems of rendering the meaning of Islam-specific terms have multiple examples. The final section summarizes the key trends, problems, and controversies analyzed in the article. The article reflects the opinions and vision of prominent linguists and journalists.

Keywords: translate, target, source, language, decipher, Arabic, English

Due to the inborn language differences, linguistic pluralism, which is the recognition and support of multiple languages within one society, keeps people from establishing free and unrestrained communication between each other. It is not what causes differences is what stirs interest, but how these can be overcome. This is where interpreters and translators facilitate communication between people by rendering the main ideas communicated in the source language, that is to say, deciphering the linguistically codified messages to make them understandable by the target language speakers. To this end, they need to neutralize the vagueness of linguistic units representing slang, idioms, and neologisms, to name a few, that constitute different cultural layers of the source language. The lack of equivalents in the target language necessitates the use of tools like descriptive translation, compensation, transcription, and calque. It is inevitable that translators have to lose the textually and culturally relevant features of the term and use compensatory translation methods that allow conveying the main semantic value of the expression in different words. The process of rendering such units grows particularly difficult in pairs, representing languages that stem from different language families. More than that, different lifestyles, religions, and cultural traditions have contributed to the problems translators have in interpreting culture-specific terms. Both Arabic and English are in marked contrast to each other, which finds its reflection in linguistic units that make the problem of translating the untranslatable.

Doctor Ahmad Nakhallah (n.d.) noted that translation served the purpose of the means of bilingual cross-cultural communication among people. Technology, media expansion, globalizations, booming international trade, and linguistic minorities' recognition have all contributed to the development of translation. However, in order to connect different cultures and their representatives, translators have to overcome a set of difficulties, of which such culture-related issue as untranslatability is one of the most difficult. Kashgary (2011) stated that untranslatability might emerge at the word level owing to the lack of equivalence between the source and target languages at this particular level. In order for translators to bypass such untranslatability, they need to depart from equivalence at the word level and replace words that are impossible to translate via traditional means with nonequivalent units, which allow accomplishing the acceptable measure of equivalence at the text level. There are nonequivalent problems in Arabic and English that become noticeable by translation since both languages are the products of different cultures (Kashgary, 2011). Guessabi (2013) asserted that culture and language have a complex homologous relationship. The connection between culture and language is so intricate since they have developed together and influenced each other. Philosophy Doctor Adel Bahameed (2014) noted that both languages pertained to different language families and settings. English is a member of the Indo-European family of languages while Arabic is a part of the Semitic family. Both languages demonstrate different word orders, with Arabic being a synthetic and English analytical language, which makes no use of inflectional morphemes to express the relationship between words. Apart from differences in versification and phonology, both English and Arabic are separated by a large geographical distance, which eventually led to cultural distinctions.

According to Guessabi (2013), the problem arises whenever cross-culture contacts occur between a message producer and recipient who represent different cultures. Bahameed (2014) suggested that untranslatability displayed the area where no intercultural equivalence between languages exists. Modern communication technologies and globalization close the cultural gap between nations (Bahameed, 2014). However, there are other ways of culture-specific terms becoming widespread in target languages. For example, the word "jihad" has a highly negative connotation, or cultural association. While it has come to be recognizable due to media coverage of terrorist acts described in the context of jihad, its meaning is rendered through description. In Arabic, it is a noun that means struggle or resisting by itself, this is the literal meaning, but in Islam, it has two meanings. The first meaning, which is commonly recognized as the true meaning of jihad, is the strive to uphold Allah's commandments and condemn all Allah's prohibitions. Another meaning is to fight a holy war against infidels as a religious duty. It is fair to say that when trying to interpret the word jihad, finding an exact equivalent is not the quintessential problem, but being able to capture the true nature and spirit of this widely misunderstood concept. However, according to Bahameed (2014), the ones who destroy intercultural barriers are translators, offering understandable and meaningful target language versions of the source texts. The Arab translators may come across nonequivalent lexical units in Arabic since the concepts they concern do not exist in the English culture. These are usually culture-related units.

Larson (1998) noted that the interpreter's task becomes more difficult when the concept to be translated refers something unknown in the receptor culture because the interpreter will not only look for an appropriate way to refer to something which is already part of the experience of the receptor language audience, but he will also look for a way to express a concept which is new to the speakers of the language. Religious terms are of particular interest since they produce a number of translation difficulties. Al-Shawi and Mahdi (2012) stated that Islamic religion and culture dominated the Arab world, as distinct from Christian religion and culture that prevail in the English-speaking world. Hence, religious and cultural principles influence different linguistic items in both languages. Kashgary (2011) noted that religious terms were chiefly culture-specific with zero dictionary equivalents. Researchers taking part in a symposium dedicated to the translation of the meaning of the Holy Quran have come up with the idea of how to render Islamic concepts and terms. Ghazala suggested applying six kinds of equivalents for conveying the meaning of Islamic terms, such as cultural, functional, religious, explanatory, connotative, and referential equivalents. The most precise way of translation was found to be the use of loan words along with a short descriptive explanation. To quote an example, the word "zakat" can be rendered by using words like "alms" or "charity," as has been done by plenty of Quran translators. Still, the loan translation fails to convey the complete meaning of the concept put into it by Muslims. To achieve adequacy, it important that the explanation of the conditions of the concept be added as well. Qualifiers like "ordained" or "obligatory" can render the maximum meaning if added to the English equivalent. Thus, "zakat" means ordained or obligatory charity. Ghazala (2002) noted that that was an example of the approach called an explanatory equivalent (as cited in Kashgary, 2011).

Likewise, the words "haram" and "halal" have word-for-word equivalents like "prohibited" and "permissible." Still, these Arabic words have specific religious and social meanings, with English equivalents failing to render the extra levels. The point is that both words denote a variety of customs and practices that are allowed or prohibited, as per Islamic law. What is more, they make reference to laws that govern drinks and food. It is insufficient to provide their dictionary equivalents only. Loan translation coupled with a brief description or explanation is the best option, although the context also plays an important role in determining nature of translation approaches required (Kashgary, 2011). For example, the word "haram" refers to an act prohibited by Allah. In the banking sector, it may refer to business activities that are regarded as unacceptable, which forbids issuing loans to customers who want to deal with pork, alcohol, gambling, and other activities that are noncompliant with Sharia, the code of moral and religious norms. This particular context allows providing an accurate description of the word "haram" added to its dictionary equivalent. Kashgary (2011) claimed that terms denoting Arabic social life, food, and customs were related to specific aspects of Arab religion, values, and culture. There is no way to translate them by means of English equivalents, if any. For instance, the word "Al Irdh" is semantically complex, denoting a wide range of concepts that have bearing on men's honor in protecting female family members, people they bear responsibility for, and possessions. Since there is no such concept in the English culture, a translator has nothing else to do but lose the expressive meaning of the term by using such neutral word as "dignity" and describing its associative judgments and emotions.

Difficulty of conveying the meaning of such terms stems from the need to be knowledgeable of Arabic culture along with its customs and social values. The dictionary equivalents of such concepts contain long explanations as well as being devoid of expressiveness. The translator may try to explain words by altering the so-called super ordinate words and revealing their meanings through unrelated words, which is a technique called paraphrase. To put an example, “sabe’e” is the super ordinate word that has the meaning of “the seventh day”, or the celebration of a newborn child. Thus, a translator provides the description of the occasion and traditions that accompany it. Likewise, the word “mahram” is conveyed through the modification of the super ordinate word “someone” as male chaperon as well as adding description to reveal the connotative meaning of the concept in the Islamic culture. Similarly difficult and problematic is finding the equivalents of local cuisines. “Fool and tames” is an Arabic phrase that poses particular interest, denoting a highly popular dish with a local flavor here in Saudi Arabia. Translators may provide its English equivalent “beans and bread”; still, such approach fails to grasp the local flavor of the dish and show its remarkable traits like the time of eating, the kind of people who eat it, cost, and the supposed impact that it has on human mental processes (Kashgary, 2011).

According to Kashgary(2011), semantically complex Arabic words that refer to religious concepts, processes, and social traditions are hard to translate without specific transformations, which may be problematic. Semantically complex notions referred to by such words have no equivalents whatsoever in English. The word “taharah” is polysemantic, denoting cleanness, purity, cleansing, virtuousness, chastity, righteousness, decency, and abstinence, to name a few. Despite its complexity, the notion refers to the process of ablution, which is washing with water prior to saying prayers. Beyond that, the concept may imply cleansing the soul and heart and cleaning the clothes and body an individual is wearing. To quote more examples, “Al Ghusul” has the English equivalent of showering or washing. Based on Arabic customs, it means a symbolic washing of the whole body after a sexual intercourse. “Al Tayamum” has the meaning of washing with earth dust. The meaning remains perplexing unless a brief description is provided. The notion implies a symbolic washing by use of earth dust as a replacement of water if there is no such at hand. “Al E’tikaf” means prayer in seclusion. A broader explanation suggests it is the act of retiring into a mosque in order to worship in the last ten-day period of Ramadan. “AkhBirRidha ’ah” is the concept that implies a milk-brother or sister. A descriptive translation will clarify the culture-specific meaning of the expression by revealing the notion refers to individuals who accomplish the status of sister or brother if the same mother nursed them. Another example is “Hadi Al Ees”, it is an expression that allows description only. It means singing for the caravan of camels to get it to accelerate speed (Kashgary, 2011).

Conclusion

Translation is the process of conveying or decoding the meaning of messages from the source into the target language. Since the languages of a message sender and its recipient correlate with different cultures and linguistic families, the process of deciphering verbalized human thoughts becomes challenging. This holds particularly true for languages that stand in a very sharp contrast to each other like Arabic and English. The former is synthetic while the latter is an analytical language that uses word order, not morphemes to express relationships between words. One of the biggest problems are religious and cultural-specific terms and notions that have few or no equivalents in the target language and require the application of compensatory translation techniques like loan or word-for-word translation usually accompanied by a brief description. In separate cases, context does a lot to narrow the choice of the expressive means of translation. Even so, the expressive power of words and their emotional coloring may be lost in the process of translating their meaning. Food terms may denote polysemantic expressions that describe different properties of food the way English fails to do. While it allows finding a distant equivalent, such approach still renders only a part of the lexical unit, neutralizing its unique connotation. Obviously, meaning conveyance forces translators to lose plenty of expressive means. Even if they try to keep them intact, they still need extensive descriptions to render the whole semantic essence of a lexical unit, which is the case because of cultural differences that pose the problem of untranslatability. Lexical items that do not even have approximate equivalents necessitate the use of description only. For example, “Hadi Al Ees” is an expression that requires description only since there are no close equivalents that could be coupled with extra explanations. The lexical unit means singing for the caravan of camels to get it to accelerate speed. The example shows the extent to which culture and lifestyle leave their imprints on Arabic language. Overall, culture along with its products bring unique, unequalled notions to the receptor language that cause the problem of untranslatability, or the lack of close equivalents, and require the application of specific translation techniques to convey the meaning of the lexical units.

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