



The North African Journal of Scientific Publishing (NAJSP)

مجلة شمال إفريقيا للنشر العلمي (NAJSP)

E-ISSN: 2959-4820

Volume 1, Issue 1, April-June 2023, Page No: 281-287

Website: <https://najsp.com/index.php/home/index>

Towards an Eclectic Approach to the Translation of Lexical Differences between Arabic and English: The Sand Memory as a Case Study

Mohamed Sidi Mohamed Sidi Mahmoud*

PhD in English Studies, English Department, Nouakchott University, Mauritania

*Corresponding author: sidimahmoud85@gmail.com

Received: April 19, 2023

Accepted: May 25, 2023

Published: May 30, 2023

Abstract:

This article has attempted to identify the cultural difficulties and linguistic gaps encountered in Arabic-English literary translation. Such difficulties and gaps are accounted for by using integrated approach that merges linguistic and cultural models of translation in order to look for practical solutions to the problems that might be faced by a translator in his/her rendition of literary text from Arabic into English. For solving the lexical gaps in Arabic/English literary translation, this article highlights a practical framework that is built on two criteria: consideration of the cultural terms of the source culture and respect of the target language system. To do so, I make use of foreignization strategies including literal translation and borrowing with footnote in order to transfer the entire cultural content of the ST. The obtained findings point out that literary translation is not simply technical renditions of the ST lexemes into their counterparts in the TT, but rather requires the translator to offer explanations and comments in order to convey the entire meaning of the cultural items embedded in the source text to the TRs.

Keywords: Arabic-English literary translation, cultural aspects, lexical gaps, foreignization, domestication

Cite this article as: M. S. Sidi Mahmoud, "Towards an Eclectic Approach to the Translation of Lexical Differences between Arabic and English: The Sand Memory as a Case Study," *The North African Journal of Scientific Publishing (NAJSP)*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 281–287, April-June 2023.

Publisher's Note: African Academy of Advanced Studies – AAAS stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee The North African Journal of Scientific Publishing (NAJSP), Libya. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1.1 Introduction

English and Arabic do not belong to the same language family, and this poses considerable challenges for the translator. In this regard, the translator has to deal with the problems, arising from lexical divergences between both languages. Thus, this article examines the linguistic problems encountered when translating literary prose, namely novel, from Arabic into English, with an attempt to modulate some methods for solving them.

Major problems in Arabic-English translation stem in main from lexical gaps resulting from syntactic and semantic discrepancies. As stated by Newmark, "the chief difficulties in translating are lexical, not grammatical - i.e. words, collocations and fixed phrases or idioms."¹ This is because the multi word units, to use Baker's words, "reflect the cultural settings in which they are

¹Peter Newmark, *A Textbook of Translation Studies* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1988), 32.

embedded.”²Hence, lexical non-equivalences pose difficulties for the translator to convey the message from the SL into the TL. Viewed in this way, this section attempts to analyze the lexical gaps experienced in the translation of *Thakirat al-raml (The Sand Memory)* and the strategies by which they are solved.

Collocations

Collocation is a source of lexical problems in translation between Arabic and English. According to Showqi Bahumaid, “the term ‘collocation’ has been generally used to refer to a phenomenon in language whereby a lexical item tends to keep company with other words.”³ What makes the translation of collocation difficult is that its elements constitute a whole meaning, which is deeply rooted in the SC. Baker called these difficulties “collocational restrictions (which) tend to show more variations across languages.”⁴ Translating *The Sand Memory*, I follow foreignization strategies including borrowing and literal translation, along with footnotes, in addition to paraphrasing technique to solve the problems caused by collocations. See the following collocating items:

- | | |
|---|--|
| - I rely solely on Allah | -1 حسبي الله ونعم الوكيل |
| - Might is obtained but through Allah | -2 ولا حول ولا قوة إلا بالله |
| - Praise be to Allah | -3 سبحان الله |
| - Glory be to Allah | -4 أعرف رجلا من أهل انواكشوط مستعد لبنائه في سبيل الله |
| - I know a man in Nouakchott ready to build it for the sake of Allah. | -5 الحمد لله |
| - They would not have done to me what they did or thought of taking my land with force. | -6 ولما فكروا في اغتصاب أرضي |

The examples above illustrate that Mauritanian culture is profoundly rooted in Islam. The collocations in examples 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 cannot be rendered into equivalent phrases in English. For example, if these Arab-Islamic expressions were translated by their equivalences in Western Christian culture, the religious concept of the ST would not be conveyed to the TL readers. To solve this lexical gap, the use of foreignization methods seems to be more appropriate because they alert the attention of the TRs to the Islamic phrases and get them to acquire the necessary explanations. Therefore, the word Allah is borrowed in every translation of the above examples, with literal translation for the other words. In example 5, the Arabic word ‘سبيل’ (*Sabil*) etymologically means road in English, but when it collocates with Allah it means “for the sake of Allah.” In this case, the collocation transforms the word *Sabil* into a religious concept, which requires to be paraphrased and transferred collectively to the TR.

In a similar vein, the word اغتصاب (*ghitissab*), in example no. 6, is usually used in English to mean sexual intercourse by force. However, when it collocates with the word land in Arabic, its meaning becomes socio-politically oriented to mean taking one’s property by force. Therefore, I find it reasonable to search for an equivalent expression to convey the collocational meaning from Arabic into English, with preserving the cultural load of the ST. Hence, the translation policy adopted in this study as regards translating collocations is as follows:

1. Borrowing with footnote is used to translate particular religious, social and cultural words of the collocations.
2. Equivalent expressions or words are used when collocations stem only from linguistic differences. This is because an accurate translation should respect the linguistic system of the TL as elaborated in my discussion of Nida’s formal correspondence in the theoretical part.

Kinship System

The Arabic family kinship system poses challenges when translating into English. This is due to the non-lexicalization of many Arab kinship names in English. For example, the Arabic words ابن عم, ابن

² Baker, Mona Baker, In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 61.

³ Showqi Bahumaid, “Collocation in English-Arabic Translation,” *Babel* 52, no. 2 (November 2006): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1075/babel.52.2.03bah>

⁴ Baker, In Other Words, 21.

ابنة عمّة بنت عمّة بنت خالة , بنت خال , بنت عم , ابن خالة , خال , ابن عمّة have one equivalent word in English, cousin.⁵ In this case, it seems appropriate to domesticate the translation because rendering بنت خالة as daughter of my aunt would, for example, violate the lexical system of the TL, which uses the word cousin instead. Consider the following examples from *The Sand Memory*:

- 1- مازال العرق يتصبب مني وأرى قطرات الماء التي نفضت فيها ابنة خالتي تعويذتها من شر حاسد إذا حسد
- I am still sweating, and I see the water droplets in which my female cousin read her protecting verses against the jealousy of the jealous when he becomes jealous.

- 2- إذا ضربتك زوجة أبيك ثانياً. فقل لها إن لك خالة قوية قادرة على أن تنتقم لك
- If your stepmother beats you again, tell her you have a strong aunt able to avenge you.

As can be seen above, the Arabic words ابنة خالتي, خالة can cause lexical ambiguity when translated into English. In order to convey the social signification of these words, the translator has to use their counterpart in English—aunt and cousin in this case—with conveying their glosses in the ST in footnotes. As I think, borrowing is not required in this case since the target language has equivalent names. Larson points out that “each language has its own system for arranging concepts into different parts of speech.”⁶ It is thus most probably better to respect the target language kinship system. However, this study suggests, as already mentioned, to write a footnote by which the translator can explain for TRs the differences between Arabic and English systems of kinship so as to transfer the entire conceptual signification of the Arabic social relationships.

Proper Names

Another lexical problem is caused by the translation of proper nouns because they are profoundly associated with SC and may not have counterparts in the TC. Therefore, as it is the case in the translation of the kinship nouns above, this dissertation adopts borrowing with footnotes, when necessary, for the translation of proper nouns on the consideration of being the most likely appropriate technique. Any literal translation of proper nouns is assumed to cause cultural loss. Since these proper names are used in a particular religious and cultural context different from that of TC, it would be then more appropriate to transliterate them. For example, the proper nouns Zahra, Nujoum, Salma and Om el Eid cannot be translated as flower, stars, protected girl, and the mother of feast.

People's Names

In *The Sand Memory*, names are divided into three categories. The first one indicates optimism. For example, the name 'Salma' means 'the protected girl'. The society usually gives such name to the girl hoping for her a safe and long life. The translator finds it necessary to explain the social and cultural connotation of this name in a footnote in order to provide its whole meaning to the TRs. The second category is for slaves or what is referred to them in the Mauritanian context as *Harattin*. It includes female names such as Oum El Eid, Halima, Mariya, and male names; Mes'oud, Boushama, Sebbar and Semba. It would be inadequate if the translator directly renders these names without making reference to their social connotations which reveal a lot about social stratification in the traditional Mauritanian society. The third category is for Masters or what they are called *Ashraf* (nobles) or *A'yan* (notables). It includes names such as Khadija and El Aaliya, Ahmed, Abdulhamid, and Abdussalam. It is also necessary for the translator to make the TR aware that these names are exclusively attributed to the notables. He/she has to take into account the social and cultural context within which these names are framed.

Moreover, the translator has to provide footnotes to explain the religious connotations of names such as Ahmed, El Hassen and Ibrahim, which refer to Islamic figures. To communicate the social significations embedded in these names, I mention their connotations in a footnote to prevent the cultural losses and to transmit the whole cultural load of the ST to TRs.

Geographical Names

Since there are no equivalents for the geographical items, the adequate rendition is to provide transliteration with a footnote that mentions their denotations and connotations. By using this strategy, I have been able to convey the real culture of the ST to TRs. Here are some examples:

⁵Noureddin Abdelaal, Translation Between English and Arabic A Textbook for Translation Students and Educators (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 15.

⁶ Mildred Larson, Meaning Based Translation: A Guide to Cross Language Equivalence (New York: University Press of America, 1998). 62.

1. وأما الأطفال فسوف أجمع لك أطفال قرينتنا وحتى من أحسي كافيته.

As for the children, I will collect our village children and even from *HseyKafiah*

2. ولعاد ذلك الشاب القادم من أعالي أدرار

The young coming from the heights of Adrar would come.

3. فلم نكن نعرف الكسكس إلا سماعا عن أهل الشرق

. We only knew about the *couscous* in tales told by people of Sharg

As geographical names, *Hsey Kafiah* and *Adrar* should be defined in order to give the reader certain idea about these names. For example, *Hsey* in Hassaniya dialect refers to 'the well'. The Nomad community in Mauritania usually uses this name because of the difficulties of their life in the desert. In the fourth example, the word *Adrar* as an Amazigh term meaning Mountains was not translated. The reader has been informed about the Mauritanian identity, which is a mixture between the Amazigh and Arabs. This would be only conveyed through borrowing, along with explanation. Moreover, in the third, example, I find it more appropriate to borrow the *sharg*, which refers to a region in the east Mauritania. Though it is literally translatable, I prefer to borrow it and explain it to the TR in order to retain the cultural distinctiveness associated with people of that region.

Honorifics

Honorifics indicate the social and religious status of persons in their societies. Because Arabic honorifics in *The Sand Memory* are profoundly rooted in the religious culture of the Mauritanian society, they might cause total cultural losses if they were domestically translated since they do not have lexicalized English equivalents. This study adheres to foreignization strategies especially borrowing, along with footnotes to transfer the entire meaning of the Arabic honorific titles into English. Here are some honorifics in the novel: '*Sheikh*', '*Hajjab*,' and '*Imam*'. These honorifics are of high significance in the Mauritanian context, and thus they should be borrowed with footnote explanations in order to represent the society in the way it is depicted in the novel.

Culture-Bound Words

Since many culture-bound words in Arabic are not lexicalized in English, the translator is required to search for an appropriate strategy to help transfer the meaning to the TL reader. As elaborated so far in the theoretical part, Nida and Taber reject both literal translation and borrowing strategies since both SL and TL systems are not identical.⁷ For them, the main objective of translation is to achieve the equivalent effect on the TRs. In agreement with Nida, Sadiq states that in case there is no synonym in the target language, paraphrase would be appropriate to transfer the meaning from ST to TT.⁸

However, this study considers borrowing as the best solution to translate cultural bound terms for two reasons. First, it furnishes the TC with new cultural concepts. Second, in contrast to paraphrase which, among other domestication strategies, sometimes muffles the voice of the cultural other and thus perpetuates stereotypes about the Other, borrowing and literal translation allow for faithful representation of the SC. The problem of domestication strategy lies mainly in projecting interpretation as an essential perception of the term, which, in turn, deceives the TL reader in the sense of preventing him from the chance to search for the exact meaning. By contrast, borrowing tells the TL reader of the specificity of the cultural term to be translated. In so doing, the TR might become interested in searching for its signification. On this account, foreignization strategy would be crucial for solving the problems posed by the culture-bound terms in the novel under translation. In short, cultural-bound terms can be best translated using borrowing with footnote explanation to help foreign reader grasp the entire conceptual meaning. See the following cultural-bound words from *The Sand Memory*:

1- ولكن الشيخ أبو شامة حرزني وحرزكما منهم وأخبرني بأني حورية من حور الجنة

⁷Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E, J, Brill, 1969), 24.

⁸ Saudi Sadiq, *A Comparative Study of Four English Translations of Sūrat Ad-Dukhān on the Semantic Level*(Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 12.

But sheikh Abu Shama had provided me and you with protective spells against them. He told me that I am a paradise mermaid.

2- قبح الله تلك الحمى اللعينة التي ذهبت بأبيك وأختك فاضطرتك إلى الخروج من المحظرة قبل أن تأخذ الإجازة
Damn such cursed fever that took away your parents, forcing you to leave *Mahdhara* before taking your license

3- تواردت تلك الافكار على الإمام وهو يستعد للذهاب لصلاة الجمعة
These ideas crowded into the Imam's head as he was getting ready to go to Joumouaa's prayer.

4- وأنا أدعوكم جميعا، أنتم وبقية رجال الحي إلى الحضور إلى منزلي بعد صلاة العصر لنعقد اجتماعا هناك
I am inviting all of you, together with the other men in the neighborhood, to come to my house after Al Asr prayer.

5- لقد رزقك الله من المال الحلال بما لا يحوجك إلى وظيفة.
Allah has given you *halal* fortunes; you don't have to get a job.

As noted above, the lack of equivalent words for some culture-bound terms in English causes lexical problems. For instance, the words, (haraztouhou) حرزته, (hajjabin) الحجابين, and المحظرة (mahdhara) are deeply rooted in the Mauritanian Muslim culture. To bring to life the Mauritanian cultural tradition behind these terms, the translator must contextualize the meaning in the ST by transliterating them and then providing the most approximate explanations in footnotes. Such renderings may sound exotic within Western society but interesting at the same time since they alert the attention of Western readers to new different cultures in need of study.

Sometimes, the word can be rendered into a similar lexeme in English if it is culturally known for English readers. But, if it is culturally bound to the SC, then it should be literally translated or transliterated. The former is appropriate for words such as السلام عليكم (*salam alikum*) which is better to be rendered to "Peace be upon you" instead of "Hello". Some translation thinkers, however, prefer the choice of the word "Hello" as a synonym for *salam alikum* as it is thought to transmit the meaning in accord with the cultural system of the target language.⁹ This rendition seems inadequate to convey the religious connotation of the Islamic greeting, *salam alikum*; the religious load of the phrase *salam alikum* does not exist in the English word "Hello".

In the last example, *Halal* has no equivalent lexeme in English. The term should be then borrowed with explanation in a footnote in order to preserve the religious implication of the term. Any search for an equivalent English lexeme would be inaccurate, since it conveys partial meaning of the source word. Similarly, words such as, الإمام, (imam) حرزني, (harazeni) and الشيخ (sheikh) require the same strategy in order to avoid total cultural loss of such religious framed terms. In the same vein, the names of prayers are likely to be better borrowed and explained to successfully transfer the entire religious load of the prayers. It would be thus inaccurate if the translator renders صلاة الجمعة, as Friday prayer because this prayer is to be performed at the noon of Friday with particular duties. Therefore, if it is rendered as Friday prayer, the TR may get confused and thought that it means any prayer on Friday.

Additionally, *The Sand Memory* includes other social and cultural bound words which do not have equivalents in English. See this group of words:

6- أما أنت فلا خوف عليك من الشياطين ما دامت القدر تفور وظل السقيفة ممتد ومادام في الشكوة شربة باردة لمسافر. لا خوف عليك، بل هم من يخافونك. أنت بإذن الله قاهرتهم.

As for you, there is nothing to fear from the devils as long as the pot keeps boiling and the shadow of *Saqifa* extended and as long as *Shikwa* contains cold drink for the wayfarer.

7- ولكنني لم أتصور أنها قادرة على أخذ سليمان فقد حرزته مرارا عند كثير من الحجابين.
but I did not think they were able to take Suleimane as I had recurrently provided him with *hirz* of various *hajjabin*.

8- ا السلام عليكم
Peace be upon you

9- نريد زريفا وكأس شاي
- We would like to have some *zrig* and a cup of tea.

⁹ Abdelaal, Translation Between English and Arabic, 15.

As it is seen, the cultural bound terms *Saqifa*, *shikwa*, *zrig*, *hirz* and *hajjabin* have no equivalent lexemes in English. Thus, transliteration with a footnote would be the best appropriate strategy for conveying the entire cultural and social meanings of the words, particularly those with *Hassaniya* roots. For example, the term *Saqifa* cannot be rendered as room or house since it signifies a place built by palm woods and used for gathering of the tribal or familial council. So, borrowing with footnote seems the appropriate method to communicate its traditional connotation. This rule applies to all above-mentioned terms. The conclusion obtained dictates that the translator must consider the cultural specificities in the ST so as to help render them to the TR in a way that does not contradict what is intended by the author. Here, Lefevere and Bassnett's idea of the translator as a writer is of high significance in the sense that his/her role is to decode and then reconstruct the meaning in the receptor language, but I shall add, with being faithful to the cultural connotations of the ST.¹⁰

Conclusion

Throughout this study, practical strategies, including literal translation, borrowing, and footnoting, have been used to help deal with the difficulties resulted from semantic, lexical, and syntactic divergences between Arabic and English. Whereas foreignization strategies have proved to be helpful in translating cultural features, domestication strategies, to great extent, are more pertinent in translating the linguistic items of the SL into the TL. To illustrate more, in cases where foreignization strategies such as literal translation and borrowing with footnote are not appropriate, this study has opted for the use of domestication strategies such as paraphrase, addition and/or omission techniques. The latter appears to be definitely fruitful for translating collocations and idioms where equivalence may not be probably achieved at the lexical level. On this account, adherence to domestication strategies help avoid the violation of the TL system.

Through my comparison between the above two mentioned strategies of translation, I have found out two major justifications, illustrating why foreignization strategies seem unfit for translating idioms. On the one hand, borrowing multi-word units interrupts the smoothness and readability of the TT. On the other hand, literal translation proves unpractical and inadequate for translating lexical inequivalences such as idioms and collocations, as it is already implicated.

For culture-bound terms which have no lexicalized forms in English, it is perhaps more appropriate to borrow them and convey their entire conceptual meaning via comments in footnote. Here, an extensive analysis on the part of the translator is required before writing down his footnote in which he/she is supposed to help the TR grasp the cultural signification of the terms. The adaptation of the culture-bound terms to the SC might cause cultural losses and misunderstanding; it may result in the deception of TRs and thus prevents from the cross-cultural communication.

In a similar vein, the proper nouns, which are deeply rooted in the SC, are found out to be best explained in footnotes so as to convey their entire religious and social connotations to the TRs. This strategy can grant the TRs the chance to get introduced to the cultural specificities being represented by the ST.

References

- [1] Abdelaal, Nouredin. Translation Between English and Arabic A Textbook for Translation Students and Educators. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- [2] Bahumaid, Showqi. "Collocation in English-Arabic Translation." *Babel* 52, no. 2 (2006): 133-152. <https://doi.org/10.1075/babel.52.2.03bah>
- [3] Baker, Mona. In *Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- [4] Larson, Mildred. *Meaning Based Translation: A Guide to Cross Language Equivalence*. New York: University of America Press, 1998.
- [5] Lefevere, Andre and Susan Bassnett. Preface to *Translation, History Culture*, by Andre Lefevere, xi-xii. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- [6] Newmark, Peter. *A Textbook of Translation*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1988.

¹⁰Andre Lefevere and Susan Bassnett, Preface to *Translation, History, Culture*, by Andre Lefevere (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), xi.

- [7] Nida, Eugene, and Charles Taber. *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: E, J, Brill, 1969.
- [8] Sadiq, Saudi. *A Comparative Study of Four English Translations of Sûrat Ad-Dukhân on the Semantic Level*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.
- [9] Salem, Mohamed. *Thakirat al-raml*. Rabat: Dar el Aman, 2008.