

Translation - A Problem

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I call translation a problem because it is really a problem, not only because it is so intrinsically, but also because of other multifarious extraneous handicaps, especially in relation to the Third World, including The Arab World. Professor Nida in his book "Towards a Science of Translating" says that, "translating scientific material from a modern Indo-European language into a language largely outside the reach of Western Science is extremely difficult. This is one of the really pressing problems confronting linguists in Asia today". This is very true, not only in translating scientific material, but also in translating practically any other material. It is a sombre prospect for all in general and for the Arabs in particular. I shall touch on that further on. But in passing I would like to say from my own experience that I used to find it easier to solve a knotty mathematical problem than to produce a good translation.

When lexicographers define translation, they generally define it something like this :The process of putting a piece of writing or speech, systematically, into words of another language, retaining the original sense. The definition, as you may see, leaves out more than it includes. There is nothing in it about the nature of the material to be translated, nor about the kind of translator, nor still about the language to be translated from or the language to be translated into. Of course it is too much to ask from a concise definition like that, and the question of the two languages is a subject which can be given its due only in a book or a treatise and not in a short talk. But I would like to say something in brief about the translator, only to give you a glimpse indirectly about how difficult a translation is, apart perhaps from the material to be translated. I read once in a magazine that the London Institute of Linguists had listed the following prerequisites for a translator:

1. A knowledge of the subject matter of the material to be translated ;

2. A well-developed imagination that enables the translator to visualize the equipment or process being described;
3. Intelligence to be able to fill in the missing links in the original text;
4. Sense of discrimination to be able to choose the most suitable equivalent term from the literature of the field or from dictionaries;
5. Ability to use one's own language with clarity, conciseness and precision;
6. Practical experience in translating from related fields. In short, to be a technical translator, one must be a scientist, an engineer, a linguist and a writer.

An American author, Hazard Adams by name, gave a list of qualifications for a science translator and another for a literary, especially poetic, translator. The following are those for the science translator:

denotative adequacy
logicality
precision
intellect
reason
truth to particular truth

For the literary or poetic translator, the list is as follows:

unbridled connotation
lack of argumentative progression
vagueness
imagination or intuition
emotion
truth to the ideal or universal

Adams here emphasizes the importance of denotation for the science translator, and connotation for the literary or poetic translator. I shall have to say something about this dichotomy later on. But where can we find this translator? Surely not in the Third World, and hardly in the Arab World. It is a problem.

To me, the process of translation is analogous to the process of concept-forming in

the human mind. In this stage by stage process, the exchange centre is the mind which by a mysterious mechanism gives shape, colour or identity to the concept formed there. The concept, or the translation, in our case, has an individuality of its own, which in its turn bears the stamp of the individual mind producing it. This is the operational factor in the whole process. Man is the measure, as the ancient Greek philosopher said. Languages differ, structurally and semantically, according to the various mentalities evolving them. A distinctive characteristic, among the Indo-European languages generally is for instance, the use of prefixes and suffixes. This sets them apart from, say, Semitic languages, notably Arabic. Arabic is also, by and large, a connotative language rather than a denotative one.

Now, translation, therefore, is in away a reflection of the mentality of the translator. This puts me in mind of a saying by a French essayist, probably Montaigne, "Le style c'est l'homme." When this dictum is applied to translation, which application is reasonable, one might say: "La traduction c'est l'homme." It is this that another French novelist, whose name escapes me now, had in mind when he said: "Les traductions sont comme les femmes, lorsqu'elles sont belles elles ne sont pas fidèles, et lorsqu'elles sont fidèles elles ne sont pas belles." This is perhaps the idea of French authors about translation. Translation, according to them, must read nice above all other considerations, if it is to be considered worthy of the name. The Arab translators in this respect have the same attitude. Even Fitzgerald in his translation of the Quatrains of Omar Khayyam had the same idea in mind. He made the translation read nice.

But having said that, I have now to turn my attention to another aspect. What about the tool we use in translation? This is the language to which a material, scientific or otherwise, is to be translated. Let me first of all say that languages, of course differ in structure and vocabulary, in consequence of the development and use of each. The Arabic language which is a highly developed language comparatively has, nevertheless, suffered from some emasculation through ages of same misuse which

unfortunately rendered it partly incapable in its present state of meeting the requirements of modern scientific terminology. As I said before, it is a little more connotative than denotative. This calls for a short explanation, and I give here what I think denotation and connotation should mean in this context, although this is hardly needed in this gathering. Well, denotation, or extension as used by logicians, is something like the standard meaning of a word, or, more clearly, the explicit, literal, objective meaning of a word. It is the primary, explicit meaning of a word, as opposed to connotation.

Connotation or intension in logic, on the other hand, has to do only with "associations or emotions attached to a word." A given word has a literal meaning, but in addition it may have pleasant or unpleasant, or other connotation; it is what is implied or suggested by a word beyond its literal or explicit sense. But what does all this mean when considered in relation to the Arabic language?

The Arabic language initially started as a language of objects, as a result of its birth in an austere environment. It retained this character for ages, until almost all of a sudden a change came over it and transformed it into a connotative language by and large, and this by progression rendered it in general a language of poetry, with an overall tendency to flee from reality. Of course a language, as usual, is subject in its growth and development or in its decline to the manner in which it is used by those who speak it. Therefore, it looks to me that the Arabs in their not very remote history must have passed through a psychological phase of despondency or frustration which made them rather unconcerned with fact and were predisposed to turn a blurred eye to reality. This state of affairs put emphasis on the emotional dreamy side of language, and eventually led to the adoption of poetic diction, not only in poetry but also to a lesser degree in prose. Words lost gradually their factual identity, and were left with slightly hazy, vague and fanciful meanings which made them rather indefinite and without much core and as such were capable of diverse interpretations, contradictory sometimes and mostly unscientific. The Arab lexicographers fell under the same

influence, and they were unable to rescue the Arabic language from this condition. The Qur'an, to my mind, had as one of its aims the awakening of the Arabs to the realities of life through dissociation from poetry, but this was unfortunately lost upon the Arabs, and the tide was not stemmed. This partial lack of objectiveness in the meaning of words is reflected generally in the difficulty under which Arab lexicographers are labouring nowadays. The Arab translators at the United Nations, the university teachers and above all the Arab academicians who are supposed to enrich the Arabic language with new Arabic terminology for use in schools and colleges in the various sciences are all faced with the same difficulty. At the United Nations, for instance, there are Arab translators and also Arab revisers, and yet there is almost always disagreement about whether a certain word in Arabic is the correct rendering of a corresponding word in English or French or what have you. But a more serious problem obtains in the work of Arab academies, in their attempt to find scientific and technical terms in Arabic for schools, colleges and universities. In this operation there is a fundamental misconception and that is the belief that somebody who is a specialist in a scientific or technical subject is always capable of supplying the requisite Arabic terms necessary for his speciality. But this specialist in most cases is the graduate of a foreign university and consequently unable perhaps to deliver the goods. This resulted in a state of some chaos, and the chaos has been compounded so much that the Arab academies seem to be at a loss what to do to get rid at least of this accumulated dead material. A committee, representing the cultural branch of the Arab league, is now responsible for the unification of scientific and technical terms for the Arab World. These terms, in their final form, do not seem to be what we might call genuine idiomatic terms, in the strict sense of the word, for they are for the most part mere literal translations.

Now the shift in the Arabic language from objectivity to subjectivity or from denotation to

connotation has rendered the translation of Arabic texts problematical, unless they have first to be interpreted. Interpretation first and then translation. To make myself clear, I give here as an example a verse from the Qur'an and show how its translation should go. The verse is this (*) :

{عسى ربكم أن يرحمكم وإن عدتم عدنا وجعلنا جهنم
للكافرين حصيرا }

Pickthall interpreted this to mean: "It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you, but if you repeat (the crime) we shall repeat (the punishment) and we have appointed hell as a dungeon for the disbelievers". Here you see that Pickthall had to add (the crime) after "if you repeat" and to add (the punishment) after "we shall repeat" to make the meaning intelligible. But another interpretation may be: "It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you, but if you return to (obedience) we shall return (to forgiveness) ". This is a different interpretation, and therefore the translation is different. This happens less often in the translation of the Qur'an than in the translation of classical Arabic poetry, and as is the interpretation so is the translation. It is a problem, which has the effect of multiplying in many cases the translated versions of a line of poetry, especially the romantic, the elegiac or the panegyric ones, depending upon the interpretation that a translator puts on it. The problem also arises in poetry when the poet, according to his whim, expresses his own emotions without regard for factuality or truth. Usually in order to impress, he allows his imagination to run away with him. I cannot give you now appropriate illustrations for fear that will require a special talk. This makes classical Arabic poetry generally extremely difficult to translate into a European language. I may, if I have a chance in the future, deal with this in detail.

But the root of the problem may be traced to the Arabic dictionary. Arab linguists, perhaps as early as the 8th century A.D., were pioneers in dictionary-making. Nevertheless, their

(*) Al-Lisan Al-Arabi, :N°31, p.45.

methods in lexicography proved to be in many cases faulty and wrongly directed. They, when they started their work, were affected by the same disorientation as the Arabic language in its shift from concreteness and objectivity to metaphoricality and subjectivity. The words for the most part, were vaguely defined. Even the concrete words for the most part, were vaguely defined. Even the concrete words were treated superficially without adequate explanation and exemplification. The result was so vague that even the organs of the body were hard to recognize, a circumstance which led to confusion when trying to translate names of body organs into, say, English. A notorious example of this is the lack of precision in designating in Arabic the component parts of a horse's harness or the degrees of a horse's pace, let alone the parts of a horse's body from head to tail. The Arabs knew those things and they were very careful to give a name to every part, small and big in the human and animal bodies with amazing accuracy and keen observation. But the lexicographers made a mess of that.

Therefore, the first thing that we should do is to revise the Arabic dictionary, which has remained static for nearly 12 centuries and to try to translate it into a standard European language, such as the English language, for the purpose of defining the meanings of the Arabic words. I tried to do this in my Arabic/Arabic dictionary Al-Hadi, and particularly in my series of Al-Mughni English/Arabic dictionaries in which I attempted the reverse process, namely, to give, as far as possible, the exact word in Arabic for every English word, basically and according to context. This effort should be expanded and continued, by others until we get a clearly worded dictionary.

What I have said so far is a summary of what I thought would be enough to show how difficult translation is for an Arab when it comes to highly technical, philosophical or psychological subjects, and how much it is a problem. Finally, I would like to say that a society for translators has been recently established in Jordan and its main purpose is to improve the standard of translation both linguistically and intellectually.