



Translation Textual Incongruity
as
a Background for al-Jāhiz's Rhetorical Work*

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ABSTRACT

Syriac translators were the product of the Syriac School, which flourished in Mesopotamia and was characterized by heavy literalism. They pioneered Arabic translation, during the eighth and ninth centuries, while they did not master Arabic, with a negative impact on that language.

Al-Jāhiz (775-860), the illustrious Arab writer and chief of a religious sect, with an encyclopedic knowledge, lived during that era. He was shocked by the patterns textuality followed. He was, most interestingly as a monolingual reader, the first Arab who tried to regulate translation. He therefore, wrote his famous book *Al-bayān wa al-tabayīn* (on rhetoric), after criticizing translations in the first volume of his previous book *on animals*, which was partly based on translations and in which he led the foundations of adequate translation summarized in an equation with two elements, i.e. *al-bayān* in translation and the knowledge of the subject. One of his main objectives was to avoid spoilage of the language by translators and ensure proper textuality. He drew the attention to the danger of translating the Qur'an and the intricacies of poetry translation.

It should be noted, however, that al-Jāhiz was personally influenced, in his style, by an eminent translator and man of letters, who was of Persian origin, Ibn al Muqaffac (d.759), and admired his literary adaptations from Persian, a language similar to Arabic, mainly *kalilah wa dimnhah*. But he bitterly criticized his translations from Greek in the field of philosophy. The problems of language similarity, specialization and terminological concepts are hereby raised.

In view of the importance of *al-bayān* in the Arabo-Islamic sphere and its place in the Arab heritage, once again religious considerations come into play and are closely related to translation. Actually, "God created Man and taught him *al-bayān* (intelligent speech)" (the Qur'an). The Syriac experience in translating the Bible and Nida's writings inspired by his study of ways to convey the Bible message to different cultures, are a case in point.

The purpose of this paper is to show how text contrasts and anomalies led al-Jāhiz to draw rules for translators and to examine the circumstances which contributed to the conception of his theory, on the basis of two major guidelines, similarity and contrast.

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1. Sources of inspiration

The period of translation, which was at first sporadic, falls roughly between 750 and 850 and the earliest, definitely alien, influence was "in the nature of infiltration rather than direct translation" (Isaacs 1990:343).

Hellenistic and Roman cultures migrated gradually to Baghdad, which became an important pole of attraction of existing sciences, and a melting pot for cross-cultural fertilization. "The Arabs not only assimilated the ancient lore of Persia and the classical heritage of Greece but also adapted both to their own peculiar needs and ways of thinking" (Hitti 1940:363). The Arabic-reading world was thus, in three-quarters of a century, in possession of most of philosophical works of Aristotle and medical writings of Galen, of the leading Neo-Platonic commentators and of Persian and Indian scientific works (Hitti 1940:307). The centuries-old heritage of renowned schools was transmitted to that city, and eminent Syrian Nestorian scholars, who were expelled in the seventh century from Edessa (al-Ruhā), the principal centre of Christian Syrians, emigrated there and worked hand in hand with philosophers of the School of Athens, which was closed by Justinian in 525, and together with Persian and Indian scholars, thus forming a magnificent mosaic of interacting backgrounds and cultures.

Among the schools, which served as a vehicle for the transfer of knowledge into the Arabo-Islamic sphere, was the School of Alexandria. Indeed, Alexandria was a meeting-place of Occidental and Oriental philosophy and an important centre for Hellenic-Byzantine civilization. It was also the abode of many scholars like Plato (427-347 B.C.), Euclid (3rd century B.C.), Archimedes (287?-212 B.C.) and Ptolemy (90-168 A.C.). That school was superseded, in chronological order, by the School of Antioch, one of the many Greek colonies, the

School of Carrhae (an old city in Turkey), the School of Nizip (in Turkey), the School of Edessa, the School of Jundisapūr (West of Persia) and the School of Baghdad (*Bayt al-Hikmah*) and the School of Harrān, which was the headquarters of the heathen Syrians, who claimed in and after the ninth century to be Sabians. In the numberless cloisters of Syria and Mesopotamia, not only ecclesiastical but also scientific and philosophic studies were undertaken. They all served as radiating centers for Hellenic thought and as the earliest conveyers to the world, through Arab channels, of Greek culture, which shifted to the Arab empire, especially during the reign of the Abbasid caliphs. Nestorian scholars were engaged in scientific activity, using Syriac as a teaching tool.

Actually, translation attempts started already at the epoch of the Omayyad dynasty (661-750 A.C.), with Khālīd ibn Yazīd (d. 704), a prince and a most famous Arab dignitary, who showed interest in translation at the inception of the Arab rule. He acceded to the throne but he relinquished power and he was not much concerned with politics and had a marked inclination towards acquiring knowledge and understanding science, to which he became fully devoted. He was the first Islamic personality to order the translation of books on chemistry and medicine and the first Arab to study philosophy. He acquainted himself with existing sciences in Egypt by undertaking many trips to it, and was well aware of the intellectual treasures enshrined in the School of Alexandria, wrote on chemistry and acquired Greek and Syriac manuscripts (al-Jamīlī 1982:61-68). He was taught chemistry by a priest from Alexandria named Marianus (Farroukh 1958 qtd by Mohammed 1987:13).

Later on, with the advent of the Abbasid dynasty (657-1259), al-Mansūr (d.775), the second Abbasid caliph, entrusted abu Yahia (Yuhanna) ibn al-Bitrīq (known to the West as Patricius; d. between 796 and

806), one of the pioneer translators from Greek, with the translation of the major works of Hippocrates and Galen. Ibn al-Bitriq translated Ptolemy's *Quadripartitum* for another patron. He translated also the *Elements* of Euclid and the *Almagest*, the renowned astronomical work of Ptolemy (see, ibn abi-Usaibica, al-Qifti and ibn al-Nadīm).

According to ibn al-Nadīm, in his authoritative biographical book, *al-Fihrist*, Aristotle's book of Animals (*De Animalibus*), comprising 19 treatises, was translated by ibn al-Bitriq and retranslated into Arabic and corrected by cAli ibn Zur'ā (943-1008). It should be noted that the translation of ibn al-Bitriq had many flaws "as he had neither a full command of Arabic nor a good knowledge of the Greek, but he knew Latin" (al-Qifti). This same translation contained so many mistakes in Arabic and the use of terminology was inconsistent and unstable and names and categories of animals were frequently transliterated from Greek. Generally speaking, "all his translations were not properly done and had to be revised or remade under the two caliphs al-Rashīd and al-Ma'mūn" (Hitti 1940: 311).

Actually, until the establishment of *Bayt al-Hikmah* in Baghdad, which attained its apogee under the rule of al-Ma'mūn (786-833), the great Abbasid caliph, Arabic received a cultural and linguistic shock and had to absorb progressively a plethora of new terms and terminological concepts. During the first stages, translations were often characterized by obscurity, lack of comprehensibility and the language was not flexible enough to adopt new terminology and adapt new structures for new ways of thinking and reasoning.

The great majority of translators were traditionally, as mentioned above, from Mesopotamia and of Syriac origin and they tended, in general, to be heavily literal in their rendering into Syriac, and even worse into Arabic, which most of them did not master

(see cIyad 1993:179). Syriac literature, which dates back to the age of paganism, flourished thanks to the industrious efforts of Christianization. Translation of the Bible was, therefore, needed and done by the second half of the second century A.C. (Brockelmann 1909). Translation refining and revision lasted until the seventh century. It was annotated and commented upon. Syriacs were interested in Greek philosophy, and particularly in Aristotle's thoughts, almost exclusively in logic. Religious education was a determining factor in the emancipation of the Syriac language (Nöldeke 1904 qtd by cIyād 1993:167). The influence by Greek was evident in the adoption of the Greek sentence structure, forming patterns and modes of expression. This trend reinforced by translations which borrowed terms and expressions from Greek and imitated that language in flexibility and curtailment, as the Greek sentence is extremely flexible in the arrangement of its elements and admits deletions according to the context (cIyād 1993: 167). This, however, led to some ambiguity and twisting of meaning (Nöldeke 1904 qtd by cIyād 1993: 167). "That kind of language, deeply affected by Greek in its vocabulary and sentence building, was emulated by translators in their transfer of philosophy into Arabic, at a later stage. Actually, Syriac translators did not integrate into the Islamic cultural environment and fabric, as Persian did. They kept their educational system, which they inherited from the ante-Islam period and their youth were educated in monasteries.... most of them did not possess a solid background in Arabic and were ignorant of its basics. Some of them sought help of Arab writers to polish their work in Arabic" (cIyād 1993:168). Their translations from Greek into Syriac were characterized by the following (Pognon 1903 qtd by cIyād 1993: 168):

- Literality, to the extent of ambiguity and nonsense. Translators, whenever confronted with difficult paragraphs, simply

aligned words according to the original text, without trying to convey the meaning. This accentuated literalism and poor knowledge of Arabic were strongly criticized by al-Sayrafi in his famous debate with Matta ibn Yūnus, a leading logician of his time, who translated Aristotle's *Poetics* (see al-Tawhīdī [1953]). Al-Sayrafi raised also the problems of translation through an intermediate language, or relayed translation, as ibn Yūnus translated the above-mentioned book from Syriac. This was a cause for language contamination.

- They contained many mistakes and, when translators were unable to find equivalent words in Syriac, they merely transliterated them.

It should be noted, however, that while heavy literalism was a general trend, Sergius (a monk from Ra's al-ʿAyūn, who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries A.C.) followed a type of translation which was literal but an accurate rendering of the original meaning, which turned out to be a wonderful example of translation, as he was able to combine clarity and precision and reached a level almost equal to the original (Duval qtd by ʿIyād 1993: 168- 169).

In addition to those Syriac translators, some attempts were made to translate from Persian into Arabic. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d.759), who was killed at the age of thirty-six for having sought to imitate the style of the Qu'rān and having translated books undermining the values and morality of Islam, and because he fell in disgrace with the caliph. He was the first to distinguish himself, as he ably translated and adapted books and one of them became a masterpiece of Arab literature, mainly *Kalīlah wa Dimnah* (Fables of Bidpai), which relates stories of animals, with a great deal of logic. This book was a translation from Pahlavi (Middle Persian), which was in turn rendered from Sanskrit and, together with his surviving original works, it reflects "his Iranian Zoroastrian background, and his rationalism bent" (Isaacs 1990:481).

It "was, in itself, a stylistic work of art, and ever since the ʿAbbasid age prose has borne the impress of Persian style in its extravagant elegance, colorful imagery and flowery expression. The ancient Arabic style with its virile, pointed and terse form of expression was replaced to a large extent by the polished and effected diction of the Sasanid period" (Hitti 1940:308). Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ is, therefore, often labeled as the creator of Arabic prose. It is within such a line of action that the aesthetic temperament of the Persian population was transmitted to the cultural life of the Arabs and "next to the artistic, the literary- rather than the scientific or philosophical- was the influence most clearly felt from Persia" (Hitti 1940:308). He wrote in a well-balanced and coherent style and his aim was probably to show Arabs the glory of his ancestors, the Persians, and demonstrate the supremacy of their civilization over that of the invaders. He was in fact, an opponent to the new regime and embarked on the translation and arabization of Persian political literature and its conversion into Arabic political discourse in order to serve the cause of the opposition (al-Jābirī 1986: 69). His tendency, to the extent that some questioned his good faith in embracing Islam, and the character of his work, denote his actual leanings. For example, the book *al-Adab al-Kabīr wa al-Adab al-Saghīr* is teeming with maxims with politico-social connotations and *Risālat al-Sahāba* is like a political and constitutional diktat calling for laicity of the State. Moreover, the inclusion of an additional chapter in *Kalīlah wa Dimnah* on 'barzawih' raises the issue of the struggle between religions and the necessity of resorting to reason only. He does not quote the Qu'rān or Hadīth (Sayings of Mohammed) or mention in any way the Islamic heritage. He, on the contrary, advocates the acceptance of old patrimony. Evidently, his goal should be inscribed within the context of a common strategy aiming at laying new foundations for the new society, which are neither Arab nor

Islamic (al-Jābiri 1986: 68).

This, however, was not a separate and single phenomenon. The new state faced the conspiracy of Manicheism¹ and Shiite movement spearheaded by the descendents of ʿAli, the son-in-law of Mohammed, who claimed legitimacy for power and were, therefore, fierce adversaries of their nephews, the Abbasids, whom they considered as having usurped the throne. It was this ideological conflict that persuaded the caliph al-Ma'mūn to seek the help of Aristotle, as he pretended he had seen him in his sleep, within the perspective of "a general strategy assigning reason, i.e. cosmic reason, as an arbiter in religious and ideological struggle" (al-Jābiri 1986:225).

Also, there was a rivalry between different national languages and mother-tongues. Persians, Greeks and Syrians, among others, wanted to be educated in their own languages in religious matters. Questions were raised concerning praying and preaching Islam to non-Arabic speaking people, especially to new converts (see Badawi 1987: 25).

Furthermore, modern Arabic in those days was not fundamentally distinct from the language of the Qur'ān. That was precisely why the situation was so dramatic. A net duality would have protected the revealed text and duly ensured its integrality because of its idiomaticity. However, Arabic used by scholars and philosophers was, as compared to the language of the Qur'ān, too similar and too diverse, at the same time. The reader was inevitably dragged into associations of ideas and systems of thinking which were not Quranic. That language facilitated

interpretations which were not so accepted, and even heterodox. It became, by a bitter irony, an instrument for revenge by non-Arabs who invaded and violated the language of their conquerors and infringed upon the substance of their culture. This was, by the same token, a kind of occupation of Islam by non-Moslem thoughts (see Arnaldez :359). Ibn al-Muqaffa^c played a well-marked role in this respect. He was the first to translate books on logic from Persian into Arabic at the very outset of the Abbasid dynasty. He translated three books of Aristotle's "in simple and easily comprehensible terms" (al-Andalusī qtd by al-Jamīli 1982: 75). One of those books was the *Categories*.

This was a brief description of the period preceding the establishment of *Bayt al-Hikmah* (see 2.2), which was characterized by the expansion of the Arabo-Islamic empire, with an amalgamation of cultures and languages and their clustering around Arabic. This latter served as a pivot and came under the influence of those languages through the noteworthy translation efforts made basically by non-Arabs. Arabic came under pressure while striving to accommodate and assimilate new ideas, but textuality suffered a great deal. One of the important books, which were translated before translation took a new turn, partly, because of Al-Jāhiz's remarks, was Aristotle's book on *Rhetoric*. That translation was described by ibn al-Khammār (see Badawi 1987 as "very, very bad" [repeated twice, for emphasis]). That book has had a tremendous impact on Arabic rhetoric, and one of those who were influenced by it was al-Jāhiz.

Arabic was groping its way to assimilate new dimensions of knowledge. Al-Jāhiz, an enlightened writer, with a very curious mind and ravenous appetite for learning endured so much in deciphering the distorted language used by translators to perceive the meaning of existing and emerging - translated texts. He committed

¹ Founded, in Persia, by Manichaeus (Manes), who was executed in 277. A dualistic interpretation of the world dividing it between good and evil powers or regarding matter as inherently evil (Webster's dictionary).

himself to redressing the situation. It is within this context that al-Jāhiz did his thinking.

Like al-Khalīl ibn Ahmad (d.789), who prepared the first Arabic dictionary (*al-Ayn*) for the codification and preservation of the language which started to be spoiled by contacts with foreign languages, he prescribed the meters of Arabic poetry (*al-ʿarūd*) for the same objective, and his student Sibawayh (d.796), who wrote a comprehensive Arabic grammar compendium, *al-Kitāb*. Al-Jāhiz was concerned by bad textuality, which was rapidly gaining ground, as Syriac and other non-native translators were actively engaged in the gigantic scheme of transferring knowledge into Arabic.

It should be noted, however, that paradoxically the style of al-Jāhiz carried the hallmark of two prestigious translators of Persian extraction, i.e. Abdullah ibn al-Muqaffaʿ and Sahl ibn Harūn (d.830). This latter, a contemporary of al-Jāhiz, was nominated by al-Ma'mūn to head of *Bayt al-Hikmah*. He was most eloquent, with a remarkable sense of logic. His style was well-segmented and balanced, achieving a degree of delightful musicality that charms the reader (see ibn al-Nadīm, Daif 1977 and al-Jamīlī 1982). He followed the stylistic pattern of ʿAlī ibn abi-Tāleb in the much-acclaimed *Nahj al-Balāghah* (al-Bustānī 1951-53: 146). These two men of letters left their impact on Al-Jāhiz. He admired Sahl ibn Harūn, as he himself stated, and was so much impressed by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ that he attributed his early writings to him, as he who was a well-known and much-appreciated writer while al-Jāhiz was still obscure, and imitated Sahl ibn Harūn, who wrote a book of animal stories, similar to *Kalīlah wa Dimnah*. He titled it *Tadh wa ʿafrah*. The only short excerpts from that book are to be found in Al-Jāhiz's *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, where al-Jāhiz clearly shows his admiration for him, although he scoffed at his reputed avarice, and ridiculed him in his book *al-Bukhalāʾ* (the avaricious). Despite al-

Jāhiz's admiration for ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, he expressed discontent of his translations of Aristotle's works on logic, and equated them with those done by ibn al-Bitrīq and ibn al-Nāʿima al-Himsī. The narrowness of ibn al-Muqaffaʿ translations outside the literary sphere may have impelled his son Muhammad, who was less celebrated, "to look into the logic of Aristotle and the finding of Greek medical science" (Young et al :481).

2. Al-Jāhiz (ca 775-868)

2.1 The insatiable reader

Al-Jāhiz was a keen observer, with encyclopedic knowledge. He was born in Basrah, probably of Negro origin, as his grandfather was black (Pellat 1970: 131 and Pellat 1990:78). He was a rational and realistic thinker, relying on reason and logic, two principles which were among the peculiarities of his birth place. Since early age, he was eager to learn. He became erudite by reading extensively and attending courses given by well-known contemporary scholars. He rented copyists' shops overnight and kept busy until the morning reading all available manuscripts. He also utilized his friends personal libraries. Verily, he turned a huge handicap into a tremendous advantage. He fully embodied ugliness². He was dark-skinned and short with an abnormal protrusion of the eyeballs "hence he was called 'al-jāhiz' or pop-eyed". He, therefore, devoted his entire stamina to the pursuit of knowledge. He was also an ardent defender of

² His ugliness became proverbial. He himself relates, in his satirical style, that a lady invited him to follow her. He did so until reaching a jeweler shop. She then said: "like him!" and went away. Actually, she brought him as a model for a statuette of satan she ordered from the jeweler. On another occasion, he joked saying that he had a son from a beautiful but stupid slave-girl. That son inherited, he said, his father's beauty and his mother's wit!

the ruling Abbasid regime, and skillfully used his remarkable talent to serve the Abbasids successfully in an abundant number of pamphlets and books. He played the role of a modern editorialist. He also "was one of the most productive and frequently quoted scholars in Arab literature" (Hitti 1940 :382).

AL-Jāhiz was monolingual, although he had a rudimentary knowledge of Persian, as he lived in a Persian-speaking environment (see, for example Pellat 1985 and al-Bustāni 1952-53). He travelled to Antioch. He did not know Greek, something he regretted (abd al-Jalil 1960:109). Therefore, he used accessible Arabic texts for reading, including translations of Greek philosophy. He followed a scientific approach consisting of observation and deduction, avidly studying translated manuscripts and "his first works must certainly, date from the end of the eighth century" (Pellat 1990:79). In part I of his first known major book, *Kitāb al-Hayawān* (Book of Animals), an anthology supposed to be centred on animals, but was in fact a veritable encyclopedia, he laid down rules for adequate translation. This was a logical consequence of the shockwave he received by reading puzzle-like and distorted Arabic texts, full of terminology concept loopholes. In that book, it was obvious that he read translations of Aristotle's works. He quoted and criticized him and referred to him as "the first master", in that book which "contains germs of later theories of evolution, adaptation and animal psychology". He also "knew how to obtain ammonia from animal offal by dry distillation" (Hitti 1940:382). He most probably was acquainted with the above-mentioned bad translation by ibn al-Bitrīq of Aristotle's *De Animalibus*, and the extremely bad translation of his book on *Rhetoric* (see above). He reached the following equation for good translation:

Translation quality = bayān in rendering + knowledge of the subject matter

He later on further elaborated the concept of *bayān*, in his authoritative book *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, which was intended to show the genius of Arabs and demonstrate their supremacy in the literary field, in response to the Persian *shucūbiya* movement refusing to recognize the prestige of the Arabs,. That movement had within its ranks the two distinguished translators who served as a source of inspiration and a model for him. He was a politically-motivated chieftain of a religious sect, *al-jāhiziah*, a sub-group of a theological school, the *muctazilah*, which introduced speculative dogmatism into Islam. As such, he vehemently defended the language of the Moslem Holy Book and highlighted the Arabic *bayān*, bearing in mind that the Qur'ān is, after all, a linguistic miracle with sophisticated *bayanic* dimensions.

His style was characterized, in general, by short elegant and clear sentences. He keeps away from artificial and far-fetched ornamentation and is always keen to express ideas clearly and simply. This summarizes his idea of the *bayān* (see 3.1).

Amazingly enough, Lu Xun (1881-1936), a prominent modern Chinese writer and translator, proclaimed and practiced in his years of maturity, "a type of translation conspicuously aimed at creating a cultural shock by subverting, as it were, from within the structure of the Chinese language, old and new, in the hope of effecting a change of mentality in his fellow countrymen. The instrument for this was what he called *hard translation*" (Nolla). But this was principally in the field of literature. It may be said safely that al-Jāhiz had the same reaction, as he accepted and even copied the new type introduced by ibn al-Muqaffa' and ibn Harūn. This corroborates Xu's opinion. Things outside the realm of literature are, however, substantially different, mainly due to the instability of terminology and the difficulty of coining new terms to denote new concepts, or neology.

Finally, al-Jāhiz had an intimate and special relationship with books. He wrote most of them while suffering, at an advanced age, from two incurable diseases, gout and hemiplegia. The last chapter of his life was closely linked to them. Actually, he fell dead under the smashing weight of an avalanche of crumbling books. He cherished and worshipped them so much. This put an end to a tragic but surely highly productive love story.

2.2 *Bayt al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom)

It is considered to be one of the notable achievements of the Arabo-Islamic civilization. It was one of the three most important libraries in Islam. It contained a huge number of invaluable works (al-Qalaqshandi qtd by al-Jamīlī 1982:211). It is generally recognized that it was founded by Harūn al-Rashīd, the fifth Abbasid caliph (786-809). It was so called as a good omen for the role it was expected to play (cAtallah 1989:464) and it pursued the ideal of learning as an ongoing dialectic for its own sake (Isaacs 1990).

It was, most likely, located within the compound of the caliph's palace and was composed of three halls, al-Rashīd's hall, al-Ma'mūn hall and al-Barmakīh's hall³.

It had a superb architectural design and was supplied with luxurious furniture. Colorful curtains were hung on windows and doors, and a beautiful large drape hung down on the main entrance to mitigate the cold (see, for example, al-Jamīlī 1982, Marhaba 1988 and al-Shatshāt 1990).

Bayt al-Hikmah, which became an academy-library, was at first planned as a reading room, *Khizānat al-Hikmah*, but grew into a more sophisticated structure. It was specialized in philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, logic and natural sciences. It had among its objectives the conservation and maintenance of books and manuscripts in various languages, mainly Arabic, Persian, Greek, Syriac and Indian languages, and different spheres of knowledge. It played the role of a translation school (cAtallah 1989) as well.

Its activity lasted from 750 to 900. It had a pavilion of three rooms for dispensing free food and drink and for rest, and was equipped with music chambers for relaxation after exerting intellectual effort. It was a true academy of science. Its edifice was well-structured and was divided according to languages. Books were indexed and indications on shelves provided necessary information, i.e. titles, numbers and comments, missing pages, and so on. Sections were headed by supervisors and managed by a general supervisor. Scholars wore a special garment and a black turban (cAtallah 1989:141).

Two major activities were carried out in parallel: translation and creative research. In fact, "the line of demarcation between translation and original work is not always clearly drawn. Many of the translators were also contributors" and, generally speaking, "the Arabs not only assimilated the ancient lore of Persia and classical heritage of Greece but also adapted both to their own needs and ways of thinking" (Hitti 1940:363). Besides research and translation activities, there were facilities for binding and copyist and librarian services were offered for copying and handling manuscripts. One of the greater accomplishments of *Bayt al-Hikmah* was the codification of the Arabic heritage, as the oral tradition of Arabs was no longer acceptable, because of the coexistence and contacts with

³ The Barmakids were a family of dignitaries who held a privileged position with al-Rashīd, at the highest levels of government, but fell later on in disgrace and were purged. They came from a line of Buddhist abbots of Balkh, who became Zoroastrians. They converted to Islam not long before the Arab conquest.

non-Arabs, and the work of Al-Jāhiz falls within that perspective. It was an advanced school for experimental research. Debates among scholars were held, sometimes in the presence of the caliph himself and with his active participation. One of the principal traits of that academy was the formidable spirit which prevailed among scholars of different creeds, including Christians, Jews and Magians. Many brilliant learned persons worked at *Bayt al-Hikmah*, such as al-Khawārizmi, who is famous for his work in the field of mathematics. Sahl ibn Harūn was among its superintendents, as previously mentioned. The first faculty of medicine was established within the context of that marvelous academy, with Hunayn ibn Ishāq, (808-873), known in the West as Johannitus or Hunainus (Isaacs:844), as its dean. He was the best known and appreciated translator/scholar. He actually embodied the image of the translator, as conceived by al-Jāhiz (see 3.1.3.2.).

3. The *bayanic* approach

3.1 The *bayān*

3.1.1 Defining the concept

This Arabic term, which has become a hallmark of the Arabic language, defies a precise and comprehensive definition. Encyclopaedia Britannica (Micropaedia V:501) describes it as "elegance of expression" and according to the Arabic-English Hans Wehr dictionary it has a wide spectrum of equivalents: clearness, plainness, explanation, elucidation and illustration in addition to being a "rhetorical art of the Arabs". In his translation of Sūrat LV (al-Rahmān)⁴ of the Qur'ān, Ali Yūsuf

commented on the *bayān* saying that it is "intelligent speech; power of expression: capacity to understand clearly the relations of things and to explain them". The Qur'ān itself exemplified it as Arab scholars undertook the tremendous task of interpreting this rhetoric miracle, and the *bayān* served as a pivot to that gigantic scheme.

A more comprehensive and detailed description of the *bayān* was offered by Ibn Manzūr (1232-1311) in his encyclopedic dictionary *Lisān al-ʿArab*. He classified it at five levels: (1) **reunion** (*wasl*); (2) **separation** (*fasl*); (3) **appearance** (*zuhūr*) and **clarity** (*wudūh*); (4) **eloquence** (*fasāha*) and capacity of communication; this includes eloquence with intelligence, disclosure of intention with most eloquent words, aptitude to convince and fascinate the listener to the extent that the false is taken as right and *vice-versa*, and (5) man is endowed with a *bayān* capacity, i.e. he is able to speak and convince eloquently; this is an attribute of human beings.

The *bayanic* theory of knowledge is a vision based on **dissociation** and not on **unitedness**, as *bayān* and *tabyīn* (elucidating), *fahm* (comprehension) and *ifhām* (informing) and *wudūh* (clarity) and *īdāh* (clarification) are realized through **separation** and acquisition of a **distinctive entity**. (Al-Jābirī 1986:33)

At first, and until the 10th century, there was only one Arabic *bayān*, with embryonic Persian and Greek support. Then a two-pronged *bayān* came into existence, one purely Arabic and the other fully engaged in philosophical feats under the influence of Aristotle, who was considered by Husayn as

⁴ (God) Most Gracious! It is He Who has Taught the Qur'ān. He has created man: He has taught him speech (and intelligence). In the version adopted by the Presidency of Islamic Researches, Ifta, Call and

Guidance: "He taught him an intelligent speech". In the French version: "lui a appris à s'exprimer clairement".

the first teacher of Arabs in the **bayān**. Aristotle's work on rhetoric (The Poetics of Aristotle) was translated by Abu Bishr Ibn Mata Ibn Yūnus Al-Qinā'i from Syriac into Arabic. It was revised by Hunayn Ibn Ishāq and summarized and adapted by Ibn Sīna (Avicenne. 980-1038) and Ibn Rushd (Averoes. 1126-1198).

The bayanic researchers were divided into two streams of thought, one at the very initial phase was preoccupied with the rules of **discourse interpretation** (analysis) and the other with the conditions for **discourse production** (Al-Jābiri 1986:16). The interpretation trend was championed by Al-Shāfi'ī (767-820) who considered that the bayān is a comprehensive term combining multiple facets of meaning, as he was systematically and methodologically carrying out the task of interpreting the Qur'ān. (Al-Jābiri 1986:18)

3.1.2. Al-Jāhiz as a precursor

For more than two centuries, intensive discussions took place between illustrious scholars, among them Al-Jāhiz (775-868) and culminated in the widely acclaimed works of cAbd Al Qādir Al-Jurjāni (d. 1075). Those discussions were centred on the coupling of word and meaning. (Al-Jābiri 1986:75)

Al-Jāhiz observed that :

... ideas come to life only when they are given utterance, brought into the open and used. Then they impinge on the understanding [of others], are made **plain** to the mind, revealed after being hidden, present after being absent, and near at hand after being remote ... To the extent that they are expressed **plainly**, with appropriate gestures and **proper conciseness**, ... ideas become clear. The **clearer** and more **lucid** the expression and the more eloquent and luminous the gesture, the more useful and effective they are. **Clear expression** of a concealed thought is **bayān**. (Al-Jāhiz :102, emphasis added)

and:

the word **bayān** comprises anything that reveals the sense and brings out the inner meaning, so that the hearer may grasp the reality of it ... The main object of both speaker and hearer is simply to understand and be understood; and any means used to make oneself clearly understood is **bayān**. (Al-Jāhiz :102, emphasis added)

Regarding eloquence, he considers that it "means conveying the meaning, aiming at **lucidity** without unnecessary words and with an eye to the difference between **separation** and **reunion**" (Al-Jāhiz :112, emphasis added). This should be coupled with "conciseness", "economy of words", while "verbosity", "prolixity" and "undue repetition" should be avoided. (Al-Jāhiz :111-112)

The ideas of **clarity** and **lucidity**, plain and clear expression are brought into relief.

There are five categories of **bayān** in Al-Jāhiz's conception:

1. **Fluency** (talāqat al-lisān) and ability to make understand (ifhām) and understand (fahm);
2. **Proper selection** and combination of words;
3. At the semantic level, "words"⁵ should convey an appropriate connotation and contain a meaning;

⁵ "Words" (al-fāz) are meant to be utterances of Arabs. Nazm, i.e. the "arrangement of words" concept of Al-Jurjāni (Al-Jābiri 1986:25) is based on the premise that "eloquence does not appear in single words but in words combined in a certain way. In combination, each word must acquire a quality" and "there is no order or discipline in speech unless its parts are related to each other and based on each other, one part being a corollary of another". (Al-Jurjāni qtd by Al-Jābiri 1986:78)

4. Rhetoric: it is meant to be conformity of "words" to the meaning;
5. Authoritative statement having an impact over the reader or listener. In fact, Al-Jāhiz follows a **bayanic didactic** approach vis-à-vis the reader. He took into full account the psychological readiness of his reader who takes a prominent place in the process (Al-Jābiri 1986:20-21). He aims at **word use skillfulness, convincing argumentation and well-balanced impact** (Al-Jābiri 1986:25).

The debate on word/meaning relationship was launched by Al-Jāhiz who first declared his preference of word over meaning. He was however the precursor of the "nazm"² theory further elaborated by Al-Tawhīdī (d. 1010) and Al-Jurjānī (d. 1087) and his successors undertook the task of highlighting the importance of word sequence in the bayanic process (Al-Jābiri 1986:75-76).

Generally speaking, there was a concordance on the necessity of conveying the meaning in good wording with a consolidation of word and meaning. Al-Sakkāki (1160-1228) went a further step in his attempt to reconcile the **discourse system** and **mental system** (Al-Jābiri 1986:90). However, Arabs had eventually a **bayanic vision** of the world as their mental process hinged on the text *per se* (Al-Jābiri 1986). Many factors, historical among others, conditioned the whole text treatment, with

adverse consequences for communication through Arabic, as the mechanism of thought became confused with the form and was suppressed by it.

For the purpose of this study, the original referential frame of **bayān** is here reaffirmed. It means **separation** (*fasl*) and **disclosure** (*izhār*), on one hand, and **dissociation** (*infisāl*) and **appearance** (*zuhūr*), on the other hand. It is the principle of **transparency** with suitable **antecedent control** and pertinent utilization of the **language virtual system** relying on logic (mainly through theme/rheme progression). Clarity with a touch of elegance and conciseness are therefore a *sine qua non* requirement for a good bayanic performance, and intertextuality and memory play a key role in this respect.

In other terms, anyone who produces a text should know:

how to express abstruse ideas in a simple, easy style; let him taste the joys of conciseness and the delight of the economy of words, but warn him against affectation, and impress on him to abhor logomachy: for the best style is that which is clearest to the listener, requires no commentary or explanation, and confines itself to the idea being expressed, neither going beyond it or stopping short of it. Chose ideas which are not shrouded in complexities or scattered throughout a long affected discourse. Many men do not scruple to smother their meaning under the exuberance of their style, and so obscure it from the reader: the discourse goes on, but the meaning remains hidden, and is not disclosed by the words. Then the whole remains obscure, and the words are but a plaything and an empty shell.

The worst sort of writer is the one who plans the style to clothe his idea before planning the idea itself, out of fondness for certain words and for the pleasure of deploying certain expressions, so that he drags the meaning along behind him (al-Jāhiz : 113).

Regarding translation *per se*, al-Jāhiz notes the effect of interlingual discourse:

Al-Jurjānī further clarifies that "composing speech is like melting fragments of gold or silver into one piece... this resulting in a global meaning. Meaning deduced from the whole utterance signifies the intentions and purposes" (Al-Jurjānī qtd by Al-Jābiri 1986:83-84). He transcends the duo word-meaning in his analysis of the **bayanic phenomenon** and uses grammar as a referent (logic of language) and considers that the secret of rhetoric lies in "grammatical meaning". (Al-Jābiri 1986:87)

But when we find someone able to speak two languages we can be sure that he corrupts them, for they are bound to influence each other, borrow from each other and distort each other. Besides, how is it possible to have the same mastery of two languages as of one? A man has only one capacity, which he can devote entirely to learning one language, whereas in the case of a polyglot his capacity needs to be split up (al-Jāhiz :133).

He was also aware, thanks to his encyclopedic knowledge that while specialization was of utmost importance, translators' cognitive background could not match that of the original text producer. He therefore insisted that:

The narrower and more difficult of access the door to the subject is, and the fewer specialists there are in it, the harder is the translator's task and the greater the risk of his making mistakes; for no translator can ever be the equal of one of those scholars (Al-Jāhiz :133).

He remarks also, regarding the problems of translating poetry, that:

if the wisdom of the Arabs were to be translated, the marvelous rhythm completely disappears (:133).

The following rules were laid down by him for adequate translation (see, for example, Badawi 1987:24):

- translators should have the same intellectual level as authors;
- they should have a comparable level in both the source and target languages;
- readjustments to the target text are needed, because there is no total correspondence between languages (see also al-Sayrafi in al-Tawhīdī).
- translation of religious texts is of great concern, as it is hard if no impossible and of grave consequences;
- manuscripts should be checked carefully, and translators should ascertain their quality (in this regard, he enumerates causes of text deficiencies).

Indeed, these ideas are still valid and denote a high sense of criticism.

In emphasizing the knowledge gap between text-originators and translators, he mentioned by name ibn al-Bitrīq, ibn al-Nācima al-Himsī, among others. But the name of Huayn ibn Ishāq was not listed among them. Actually, al-Jāhiz wrote part I of *Kitāb al-Hayawān* under the influence of Aristotle and Ibn al-Muqaffāc (*Kalīlah wa Dimnah*). He began at that time to be exposed to bad translations and experienced difficulties in understanding texts. This was before Hunayn ibn Ishāq became famous (see Badawi 1987:25).

In fact, it should be assumed that al-Jāhiz's remarks on bad translation textuality and his bayanic approach guided Hunayn, who learned the lessons very well and incarnated the model recommended by al-Jāhiz, by following his guidelines

Centuries later, inspired by al-Jāhiz's work, Salāh al-Dīn al-Safadī (1296-1362) and Bahā' al-Dīn al-Āmilī (1547-1637) pointed out that:

There were two methods followed by translators, one adopted by Yuhanna ibn al-Bitrīq, ibn al-Nācima al-Himsī among others, in which the focus was on the meaning of single Greek words transferred one after the other and replaced in Arabic by corresponding Arabic words having the same meaning until the translation of the required text is completed. This method was defective for two reasons, firstly because not all Greek words had Arabic equivalents, and that is why many words were kept in their original form, secondly the syntax and sentence structure of one language do not always equate with those of another one and the use of metaphors, frequent in all languages, is a factor of disturbance. The second method was that of Hunayn ibn Ishāq, al-Jawāhirī and others. This consisted of reading the whole sentence, comprehending its meaning and expressing it with a corresponding sentence whether words are equivalent or not. This was better.

As a monolingual, al-Jāhiz did not venture into discussing the technicalities and mechanisms of the translation process. He adapted a *skopos* position, thus expressing the point of view of a learned end-user, who endured a great deal from poor textuality and hermetic texts. This is evident in the principles he laid down. As a monolingual, and an end-user, he was able to evaluate the end-products of contemporary translators from a very practical and pragmatic angle.

3.1.3 Bayānic translation

3.1.3.1 Hunayn Ibn Ishāq as a model

After carefully studying various translations, Al-Jāhiz made the following requirements for a good performance (see above):

1. thorough knowledge of the subject;
2. perfect command both of source and target languages;
3. knowledge of **customs and traditions** (culture);
4. **improvement** of the text by the translator, through an adaptation to the TL;
5. **revision, verification and comparison** of different copies (in SL);
6. translation for **the reader**;
7. **conciseness, clarity, simplicity and elegance**;
8. translation should be sentence-based (al-lafdh).

Hunayn Ibn Ishāq (809-873) was a model of Al-Jāhiz's concept of translation. He was under the dual influence of the heavily literal Syriac translation school and the Arab bayān. It seemed that Hunayn was influenced by Aristotle's book of poetics and that Al-Jāhiz developed his bayanic theory on the basis of that book and of Hunayn's translations.

1.3.2. Hunayn's methodology

According to Salāh al-Dīn Al-Safadī (1296-1362) and Bahā' al-Dīn al-cĀmilī (1546-1637), Hunayn's method (see above) "consisted of reading the **whole sentence**, comprehending its meaning and then expressing it with a **corresponding sentence** whether words are equivalent or not." (Al-Jamīli 1982:36, Khūri 1988:51 and Salama-Carr 1990:64-65, emphasis added). The sentence occupied a central position in his translations and was, therefore, recognized by him as the unit of the meaning, thus translating *ad sensum* (see also Young et al :488).

In fact, the importance of the sentence and the word has been emphasized in modern linguistics, and within the context of machine-translation (Papegaaïj and Schubert 1988). Sinclair (1994:17) affirms that:

The text is the sentence that is in front of us when an act of reading is in progress. Each sentence then is a new beginning to the text. Each sentence organizes language and the world for that particular location in the text, not dependent on anything else.

An accurate translation will, therefore, concentrate on the **sentence**, with special emphasis on terminology and phraseology. **language parallelism** is guaranteed and a high degree of accuracy and correspondence is reached.

The **architext**, as a whole and as a sequence of sentences, determines the general context.

Hunayn fully adapted each sentence according to standards of Arabic. He was perfectly imbued with the Arabic bayān, and his translations were characterized by elegance, clarity and smoothness (cf Bergsträsser 1913, Meyerhof 1928, Rosenthal [1975] and others). He was quality-minded and he systematically revised his colleagues' work in *Bayt al-Hikmah* or even some of his

own translations done at an earlier stage as he gained more experience and expertise.

His approach had two other main traits:

- his translations were modeled according to the specific needs of the user and the purpose of translation, thus applying what is known today as *skopostheorie* in the German School, with special emphasis on **informativity** and **acceptability**. This idea is stressed in modern linguistics, as a text-producer should always have in mind an **imagined reader** (Coulthard 1994).
- as a specialist, a scholar in his own right, he was always anxious to deliver a product with a **touch of elegance and clarity**, as he was in full command of the cognitive content (cf Bergsträsser 1913, Meyerhof 1928, Rosenthal [1975] and others). He particularly excelled in the translation of medical texts, as he was a renowned physician.

It is, therefore, evident that he departed from the literal concept of the Syriac School and developed it into a more balanced technique with a skillful combination of a maximum correspondence between the ST and TT at the micro-level and a foremost utilization of the Arabic **virtual system** (see de Beaugrande 1995), with the valuable support of the Arabic *bayān* which was flourishing at that time.

The number of Hunayn's students ranged between 90 and 100 (Mohammed 1987:148). He prescribed for them a methodology, in which the sentence occupied a pivotal position and based on the following principles (see, for example, Bergsträsser 1913, Rosenthal [1975], al-Jamīlī 1982, Mohammed 1987 and Salama-Carr 1990):

- comparison of manuscripts and verification of originals;

- maximum clarity and conciseness;
- text revision and refinement, including of previous own translations⁶;
- he cared very much to transfer the meaning, taking into due account the original content;
- his style was eloquent, clear, elegant and colorful;
- he refused any abridgement or omission;
- he was aware of the importance of grammar⁷ and of the central role of verbs in the sentence;
- he realized the cardinal importance of metaphor, idiomaticity and other rhetorical devices;
- he read translations without referring to the source texts, as a final translation phase, in order to get rid of residues, fully incarnate the role of the reader, clarify ambiguities and correct mistakes, especially grammatical ones;
- he was well-acquainted with translated subjects, and aware of the necessity of specialization (see, for example, Salama-Carr 1990):
- he was keen on terminology accuracy and, in this regard, he created numerous neologisms which are still in use (in ophthalmology, for example) and was an authority in terminology⁸;

⁶ He started translating at the age of 17 and he revised his early translations when he forty. He also exercised critical control over his disciples' output.

⁷ He prepared a manual on comparative syntax of Arabic and Greek for translators (*ahkam calā madhab al-yūnāniyīn*; see al-Zarkān 1983; see also Young et al :490)).

⁸ Sbath and Meyerhof (1938:5) mentioned that he created, in his translations, a multitude of medical terms and that he contributed significantly to the formation of

- he adopted a *skopos* approach, as he translated integrally for peers, produced simplified versions for the general public and annotated and commented translations for students, especially at the school of medicine (see above).

He, therefore, exemplified al-Jāhiz's principles on translation and textuality, going as far as adopting a didactic approach, so much cherished and advocated by the former.

Conclusion

Al-Jāhiz is a very interesting phenomenon in the Arabic language history. He lived during the golden age of the Arabo-Islamic Empire, as translation activity was rapidly gathering momentum. This was a very happy coincidence. As a contemporary of eminent translators and an alert witness attentive to the formidable development and progressive assimilation process of the changing Arab mentality, and thanks to his intellectual curiosity, he closely monitored the different stages of transformation through knowledge transfer by translators. He was a product of translation, as he was deeply influenced by two illustrious translators of Persian descent, who introduced into Arabic new modes of expression more consistent with the age spirit, thus adding another aesthetical dimension to Arabic and opening up new horizons beyond purely religious purposes.

semi-classical scientific Arabic language. Moreover, "Hunayn's style was no mere play with words but a search for Arabic vocabulary for the exact meaning equivalent to the Greek. He was the translator *par excellence* and faithful to the original Greek - a language which he mastered in his youth..." and "to evaluate briefly the importance of Hunayn's role as a transmitter of knowledge, it is important to know that Arabic scientific knowledge, until Hunayn's time, was not only meager but also lacked the terminology which is so essential for the transmission of thought" (Young et al :344). He struggled, as a consequence, to create an Arabic and Syriac vocabulary (Young et al :489).

By reading defective texts in Arabic, toiling through poor translations for understanding broken sentences, making painstaking efforts to guess the meaning of strange terms, often transliterated from other languages, mainly Greek and Latin, he reflected on ways to improve textuality and avoid the disintegration of the Arabic language and the looming destruction of its structure by non-native translators, who pioneered translation into Arabic without being fully equipped to do so. At the very beginning of his career as a writer, he concluded that the *bayān*, together with the cognitive content, were the two main pillars and the two major components of translation equation. He further elaborated the notion of *bayān* in his second most voluminous book after *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, namely *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*. His axioms on translation paved the way for subsequent translators and guided them. The most prominent among them was the talented scholar/translator Hunayn ibn Ishāq. Translation textual incongruity was a serious obstruction for al-Jāhiz, who was entirely and unusually devoted to reading and learning. His rhetorical work and ideas on translation are very much indebted to translators. He exploited his genius for both of them. The result, for translation, is what may be termed bayānic translation which finds its roots at his bayānic concept. It combines clarity, conciseness, simplicity and elegance and is reader-oriented. Revision, for quality control purposes, play an important role in it. This kind of translation guarantees a maximum parallelism between Text and is suited for machine-aided translation.

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