# Translation:
# When Communicating across Cultures and Religions

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to bring together translation, culture, religion and communication and without which interreligious and intercultural exchanges could not happen.

The paper starts with shedding light on the importance of translation through which communication is achieved between multilingual and multicultural faith-communities, followed by an analysis of the strategies which would be relevant to the translation of culture and religion specific concepts in terms of intercultural and interreligious communication.      Then the analysis moves to the translation of some concepts and phrases from both Arabic and English. Here we find examples that cannot be rendered into the other language simply for lack of the religious or cultural equivalent.

Thus, the skill and the intervention of the translator are most needed in this respect, because above all translation is an act of communication.

**Keywords :** Translation, culture, religion, concepts, communication, translator, strategies, parameters.

**ملخص:** حاولنا في هذه الورقة البحثية أن نربط بين أربعة عناصر هي: الترجمة والثقافة والدين والتواصل، التي بدونها لا يكمن لأية عملية تبادل في المجالين الثقافي أو الديني أن تتحقق. بدأنا هذه الورقة البحثية بتسليط الضوء على أهمية الترجمة باعتبارها الأداة التي بواسطتها تتواصل بها أمم هذا العالم المتعدد اللغات والثقافات والديانات. ثم أتبعنا ذلك بسرد وتحليل بعض الاستراتيجيات التي يمكن أن تعتمد في التعامل مع بعض المفاهيم والعبارات الحاملة لمدلولات ثقافية ودينية عندما يتعلق الأمر بترجمتها إلى لغة ثانية. وهنا نصادف أمثلة لا يمكن نقلها إلى لغة أخرى لتعذر وجود مكافئ ثقافي أوديني لها. لتبقى مهارة وتدخل المترجم من العوامل الأساسية التي يعتمد عليها لتجاوز مثل هذه الحلالات، وذلك لأن العملية التّرجميّة هي قبل كل شيء فعل تواصلي.

**الكلمات المفتاحيّة:** الترجمة، الثقافة، الدين، الاختلافات، التواصل، المترجم، الاستراتيجيات، المتغيرات.

**I. Introduction:** Since the creation of human life, various verbal and written messages between different communities had to be communicated. It is well known that communication has been achieved through translation, as it is clear that without this tool intercultural and interreligious exchanges could not happen.

Translation is one of the most ancient linguistic phenomenon. It is seen as the necessary solution that brought the great number of languages around the word at a time when mankind had just started extending widely on the planet earth.

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Translation has a particular dimension in communicating between two individuals who speak two different languages and belong to different cultures. This dimension relates to the replacement of words that carry the meaning and accurate transfer of the message between two interlocutors with unmatched traditions, habits and beliefs.

On the basis of the aforementioned, the present paper is targeted to answering the following questions:

-To what extent are culture and religion specific concepts translatable?

-Which parameters need to be taken into consideration in the translation process?

-What translation strategies are most suitable while translating culture and religion?

## II.Translation and communication

### 1. Translation as a means of interlingual communication

Traditionally, the importance of communication has been long debated, either in pure (communication as such), or combined with other notions, such as culture, civilization businesses, globalization, etc. We would like to argue that translation, from the very beginning, has been a form of communicating thoughts among various civilizations and cultures.

It is not our primary aim to clarify the importance of communication on language, although countless books have been written upon the topic. Translation studies often mention that language plays the major role in communication, however ,this statement is rather controversial and seems subjective .We are certain that psychologists ,sociologists or communication experts would give different definitions for communication (including nonverbal communication) and we would like to quote Roy Harris ,a distinguished linguist claim ,according to which "communication precedes language"(Harris, 1978,p.89).

In Steiner's After Babel ,it stated that "translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication ,in the emission and the reception of each mode of meaning"  (Steiner,1998,p.22).He goes even further stating that" human equals translation"(Steiner,1998,p.49).Weissbort supports Steiner's idea ,explaining that all transactions between human beings resort to translations, thus human communication indeed can be related to translation even "the act of writing may itself be regarded as one of translation"(Weissbort,2006,p.314).

Information theory also relies on translation, as in the classical scheme there is a linear arrangement of the source and the target at the two ends. The channel between the two ends serves for transmitting the information(coding-decoding-recoding),the act of decoding is in fact translation, thus we get to the starting point "to translate is to communicate"(Weissbort 2006,p.340).Decoding includes the analysis of the source language segments (word ,phrase, sentence)with the help of a complex knowledge including grammar ,semantics, syntax, idioms and culture, and in the process of recoding (in the target language) these elements are used again.

### 2. Translation as a means of intercultural communication

In our attempt to bring together communication, translation and culture, we would

like to start with Gadamer's views ,although we are aware that he did not think about communication as "passing information from one person to another" but as "some subject matter" becoming mutually accessible for two or more people"(Gadamer,2004,preface).He also stated that "invented systems of artificial

communication are never languages and have no basis in a community of language"(ibid, p.443).He also added that our world should not be conceived as a barrier to knowledge ,but always open to every possible insight"(ibid,p.551).At this point, we should look into this relationship ,as Han correctly observes "human preoccupation concerning globalization is a very acute problem of our times ,as events taking place in one corner of the globe may affect half of the entire planet" (Han,2009,p.101).Seemingly culture and civilization are impossible without communication and language.

As globalization has become fashionable ,communication has turned international as well ,along politics and economics and present day media constantly remind us of that gaining the impression that the entire world are "next-door neighbours"(Lambert 2006,p.64).In our global world communication turned electronic soon ,bring a new notion in the scheme of communication, namely security. Naturally, the security in communication entails security in translation as well as Gil and Pym explain "Translators quite often work on material that is not in the public domain, and this indeed one of reasons why relations of trust are so important .When sending and receiving files, you will have to learn various forms of zipping secure with all their corresponding passwords"(Gil & Pym 2006,p.7)

In Gouadec's translation as a profession, it stated that "the days of paper, pencil and rubber are over"(Gouadec ,2007,p.109) ,thus translators must be prepared for this new type of electronic communication. Furthermore, the days of globalization are completed with the days of localization since the advent of webpages. More and more service providers recognized the importance of national languages, thus localization through translation entered -via technology- our lives. Practically, everything is localized, starting from computer programs to product labels, although the quality of localized texts leaves much to be desired. In fact, it is normal that high quality products are also localized with high quality assurance, whereas low cost products pay less attention to localization.

### III. Culture, religion and translation

**1. The cultural dimension in translation:** Newmark defines culture as "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression"(Newmark, 1988,p.94),thus acknowledging that each language group has its culturally specific features.

The notion of culture is essential to considering the implications for translation .Discussing the problems of correspondence in translation ,Nida offers equal importance to both linguistic and cultural differences between the source language and the target language and includes that "differences between cultures may

cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in languages structure"(Nida ,1964,p.117). The cultural implications for translation are thus of significant importance as well as lexical concerns.

As Bassnet points out , "the translator must tackle the source language text in such a way that the target language version will correspond to the source language version…to attempt to impose the value system of the source language culture onto the target language culture  is dangerous ground"(Bassnet, cited in  Basil & Mason ,2005,p.106).Thus ,when translating ,it is important to consider not only the lexical impact on the target reader ,but also the manner in which cultural aspects may be perceived .

Language and culture may thus be seen as being closely related and both aspects

must be considered for translation. When considering the translation     of cultural words and notions ,Newmark proposes two methods: transference and componential analysis (Newmark,  1988,p.96).As Newmark mentions ,transference gives local color ,keeping cultural names and concepts. Although placing the emphasis on culture ,is meaningful to general readership ,he claims that this may limit the comprehension of certain aspects. The importance of communication in the translation process leads Newmark to propose componential analysis which he describes as being "the most accurate translation procedure, which excludes the culture and highlights the message" (ibid, p.97).

Nida's formal and dynamic equivalence may also be seen to apply when considering cultural implications for translation .According to Nida , this "typifies formal correspondence  where form and content are reproduced as faithfully as possible and the target reader is able to understand as much as he can the customs  ,the manner of thought and means of expression of the source language context"( Nida, 1964,p.124).

Contrasting with this idea "dynamic equivalence" tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture without insisting that he understands the cultural patterns of the source language context. Nida noted that a good translation should have the feel of the original and be characterized by "naturalness of expression" and that should relate to the culture of the receptor .For this reason, he is seen as being in the camp of those who advocate the "domestication" of translation. Moreover ,he sees that translation is based on a transcendental concept of humanity as an essence unchanged by time and space ,sine "that which unites mankind is greater than that which divides, hence even in cases of every disparate languages and culture there is a basis for communication"(ibid,p.127).

However, how close can any translation come to the original text? Nida notes that "since no two languages are identical either in meanings given to corresponding symbols, or in ways which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences ,it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages…no fully exact translation…the impact may be reasonably close to the original but no identity in detail"(ibid,p.129).Therefore, the process of translation must involve a

certain degree of interpretation on the part of translator .As Nida describes it, the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements of the source language, constant comparison of the two is necessary to determine accuracy and correspondence .

### 2.The religious dimension in translation

The intersection of religion and translation is neither extensive in translation studies nor religious studies despite the interest of both discipline scholars in the transfer of ideas and texts and practices.

Translation studies which is an academic discipline which race back to the early 1970's has been dominated to the Bible translation ,mainly theological and historical issues .There have also been some studies of  The Torah and the Quran in translation studies which started to focus on .The linguistic and conceptual challenges of translation offered a larger perspective on the translation aspects of these texts.

Two edited volume bring together religion and translation in the last two decades. The first edited by the translation studies scholar Lynne Long Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable  (2005) in which he examines a wide range of sacred texts including the Bible ,the Torah as well as the Quran  stating that what renders a sacred text untranslatable  ,that is either its content or context.(2005,17).

The second more recent edited volume by translation studies scholars Mechael P Dajonge and Christiane Tietz ,entitled Translating religion :What is lost and Gained ?(2015) point to the convergence of interests between translation and religion, emphasizing that translation theory and not just practice developed in close relationship with religion(2015,2)  and stating that the framework of "What is lost and Gained " restricts the discussions  and consequently ,the translator focuses on the needs of his prospective reading audience in accordance that the principle of religious translation should  be heard ,read and understood.

### IV. Strategies of translating culture and religion specific concepts

**1. Cultural Borrowing:** In translation, borrowing means "using the same word in the target text as in the source text…this strategy is the common type of language's exchange" (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1997, p.101)

Arabic language borrows some words such as democracy ديموقراطيةstrategy علم الجبر carbonكاربون and virusفايروس.On the contrary ,words like algebra استراتيجية, amberعمبر Quranقرآن Halal حلال Hijab حجاب are borrowed from Arabic.

**2. Cultural Calque:** According to Vinay & Darbelnet, calque means "to translate words literally without any addition or modification to be part of the target language dictionary" (ibid, p.117). Politically "the corridors of power" أروقة السلطة and the "the cold war" الحرب الباردةthey are translated literally as they are without any change. Similarly, "hard currency" عملة صعبة and "the black market" السّوق السوداء   are examples of calque in the field of business culture.

Other examples can be found in translating some religious phrases such as "Peace be upon him" عليه السلام"The fasting month" شهر الصيام.In the holy Quran the phrase أهل

الكتاب refers to followers of pre-islamic monotheistic religions ‚Jews and Christians .The same phrase "People of the Book" (Oxford Lexicon Dictionary). is used in Judaism to refer to Jews . It also used by the Christians in reference to themselves.

**3.Substitution:** Substitution is defined by Paluszliewicz as "replacing a culture specific item or expression in the source text with a target language item which describes a similar concept in the target culture ‚and thus have the same impact on the target readers" (Paluszliewicz ‚2005,p.244).

In commerce, the English use "pound" رطل as a weight unit. Arabs, however, use "kilo" كيلو.So, when we say "four pounds of meat" in English; we substitute this in Arabic with "two kilos of meat".

Substitution work best when translating proverbs, such as "All roads lead to Rome" كل الطرق تؤدي إلى مكة.In rendering this proverb that deals with a religiously widely known place in the Christian culture, it may not have the same impression in another culture, So for a better intercultural religious transfer "Rome" is substituted with مكة an equivalent that describes the same concept in the   Islamic culture and creates the same degree of impact on Muslim readers.

**4. Compensation:** Compensation procedure is used to compensate for the function of a referent which appears to be rather opaque in its original form (Mailhac, 1996). Dickins (2002, p. 40) states that compensation seems "crucial to successful translation". For instance, in the English shopping culture people are used to "I will go to Clarks",this will be translated as سأذهب للتسوق (I will go shopping) Also, "I need to go to the DIY's" أحتاج أن أذهب إلى محل الأدوات (I need to go to the tool shop) .Here ,the translator is attempting to compensate for the loss of the terms  CLARKS' and DIY's by focusing on their functions. Similarly ‚in a religious context ‚the sentence "He visited the Holy lands». This can be translated as حج (performed pilgrimage) by focusing on the term Holy Lands as a pilgrimage place.

**5. Deliberate omission:** Deliberate omission refers to deletion of words that do not fit in the target culture or words that sound meaningless (ibid). The expression كان جلالة المغفور له ملكا وقائدا  His Majesty was a king and a leader (the forgiven) can be omitted because it is meaningly problematic to render into English. Similarly "detached house" is usually translated simply as "house" as this kind of house is not found in Arab culture.

**6. Lexical creation:** Lexical creation stands for coining a suitable term for words that do not exist in the target language, and thus gain a dictionary entry for all users. According to Ivir's (1987, p.45), "lexical creation is attempted by the translator when the communicative situation rules out a definition or literal translation, when borrowing is sociolinguistically discouraged, and substitution is not available for communicative reasons". The verb "to face book" entered to Arabic lexicon as يفسبك, so did, the popular medical term مكورن to refers to  "A COVID 19 patient".

**7. Footnoting:** Footnoting means to "provide an explanatory elucidation about the difficult word at the end of the translation for further information" (Blight, 2005, p33)

In the United States, there is an association called "One Parent Child Association", if we translate this into Arabic, we may get:

جمعية الطفل من أحد الأبوين

In fact the meaning is ambiguous for lack of formal equivalence. The nearest notion in the Islamic culture to this phrase is a child who has lost one of his parents, in which latter case is called an orphan in English. So, any rendering of the phrase "One Parent Child" without adding the following footnote will be understandable for the target readers.

"It possible for a woman  in the US to have a baby from any man ,and she is not legally obliged to declare the father's name .In this case ,the child is called "one parent child". Now the translation can be modified to include the additional meaning expressed in the footnote, which might be as follows:

جمعية الأطفال مجهولي الآباء والذين يعيشون في كنف أمهاتهم

**8. Definition:** In language, definition means "a statement that explains the meaning of a word or phrase"(Cambridge English Dictionary). It is suggested to be used to define a new concept or term.

 Some words are actually challenging when it comes to conveying their meaning in the target language .So, providing a definition can help. For example, if the readers are non-Muslim, the Arabic term صلاة الاستخارة(decision-making) would have been explained by way of definition by saying that Istikhara prayer is a kind of prayer performed by Muslims asking for God's guidance to make a good choice. On the other hand, the term "baptism" تعميد has no equivalent concept in Islamic culture .Thus, if the readers are Muslims, this term must be accompanied by a definition.

**9. Combination of Procedures:** Combination of strategies or as Mailhac called it "combination of procedures" means to use more than one strategy or method to facilitate the translation process (Mailhac, 1996 p. 141). Using both borrowing and definition together is a clear example of this procedure. This needs to be done with, for example,سحور which is a meal eaten before dawn for fasting in Islam. In addition, a term like "Djellaba" (Long loose robe) will be translated by means of borrowing and adding a footnote which explains that it is customarily worn by both men and women in the Maghreb countries.

**V.Parameters of translating culture and religion specific concepts**

**1. Purpose of a text:** Ivir (1987) draws the attention to the importance of knowing the general purpose of a text as reflected in its various communicative functions is a main parameter which will influence to a certain degree a number of other parameters. In addition, the choice of selecting the right and accurate strategy will depend entirely on this parameter due to its importance. Dickins (2002, p. 177) point out that "the term 'text-type' is often used in a similar sense to 'genre '".

Then they define genre as "a category to which, in a given culture, a given text is seen to belong, and within which the text is seen to share a type of communicative purpose and effect with other texts; that is, the text is seen to be more or less typical of

the genre" (ibid, p. 236). Before translating any text, the translator has to take into consideration the genre of that text. So, he can make an accurate design while choosing the best equivalent vocabularies. Dickins (2002) suggest main five categories of genres: literary, religious, philosophical, empirical and persuasive and sometimes there will be a hybrid genre

**2. Cultural Reference:** Means to decide whether it is a must to translate the cultural refernce or not depending on its suggestive significance in both the ST and the TT (Ivir, 1987). For example, the word مخلوع (ousted) in the phrase الرئيس المخلوع (ousted president) is socially derogatory. So, it must be translated and not left. Here it is of a central meaning word and cannot be dropped. However, رحمهم الله ) May God have mercy on them) in توفى خمس مرضى كوفيد 19 في المستشفى is not central and therefore needs to be omitted as "Five COVID 19 patients died in the hospital) .

**3. Readership:** Readership means the type of reader we are addressing in terms of age, nationality and gender (Ivir, 1987). Newmark (1988) classifies readers into: expert, educated generalist, and uninformed. Readership can play a major role in choosing a procedure. Similarily, Dickins (2002) emphasise on the importance of knowing the readership before starting translating. To illustrate this point, The word ضرة in Arabic , a word that a wife uses to call her husband's second wife – does not exist in English. We may translate it as fellow-wife. This challenge exists because some societies are monogamous while others are polygamous. By the same token, it is better to use the "lift" rather than "elevator" when we address the British readers. In Islam, we have عقيقة and زكاة which are purely Islam-specific. To translate such words, we better gloss them or provide explanatory footnotes to make the meaning transparent. Likewise, in Christianity, we have "baptism" which is not there in Islam. This term needs to be glossed or explained, too.

**4. Semiotic value of referent:** Ivir (1987) states that semiotic value of referent means that some referents have different semiotic values in cultures. Some referents have the same semiotic values in the source culture and the target culture. To illustrate this point, The Islamic term أهل الكتاب People of the Book or People of the Scripture is an which refers to Jews and Christians, It is also used in Judaism to refer to the Jewish people and by the Christians to refer to themselves.

However, some referents may not have the same semiotic values .The bird (owl) طائر البوم has a positive connotation in west countries and it refers to wisdom, while it has a negative one in Arab countries and refers to "pessimism". Thus, in translation form English into Arabic, a translator has either to compensate owl with any animal which has the same positive impact or use a footnote to explain the difference of connotative meaning of owl between the two cultures.

**5. Cultural coherence:** Mailhac (1996, p. 147) states that "cultural coherence should be considered first in terms of homogeneity of the culture(s) portrayed". He explains cultural coherence by stating that one should not mix the source culture with a foreign one (ibid). To clarify this point, in Arabic we have الفتح الإسلامي and يرتل القرآن in

English these two phrases have no equivalents, we just say " to recite" and " the Islamic Conquest" This is totally absent in English. It needs to be glossed or modified.

**VI. Conclusion:** I would like to end my paper by asserting a principal of intercultural communication which illustrates that no two people have exactly the same communication background, to that extend communication is a process across cultures. On the basis of this, I claim that translating culture and religion is a complicated task but never impossible.

And yet, there are many strategies available to the translator, parameters in general and two parameters: text type and readership in particular should not be neglected while translating culture and religion specific concepts, because they provide the basis of selecting the appropriate strategy that would produce an accurate and equivalent translation.

Moreover, the skill and the intervention of the translator are most needed in this respect, because above all translation is an act of communication as stated above. Thus the primary task of the translator when rendering culture and religion specific pieces of information is to be a good communicator and not just a translator.

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