



## *The Untranslatability of the Algerian Proverbs A Myth or a Reality?*

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Abstract	Article info
<p><i>The intricacy of languages makes us presume that the literary art is untranslatable both linguistically and culturally. The fuzzy issue of untranslatability may occur not only on sophisticated literature, but also on folk literature. The Algerian folklore or oral tradition is so vast; as it is connected with the role of vernacular, cultural forms and social life. One integral component of the Algerian lore is the proverb. This paper attempts to reveal some cultural aspects of the Algerian proverb from the view point of translation. More specifically, the crux of this study is to examine the types of challenges the translator undergoes when translating Algerian proverbs into English and suggest some strategies that can be used to avoid these hindrances.</i></p>	<p><i>Received</i> March 03 ;2024</p> <p><i>Accepted</i> May 02 ;2024</p> <p><b>Keyword:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <i>untranslatability</i></li> <li>✓ <i>Algerian Proverbs</i></li> <li>✓ <i>Translation strategies</i></li> </ul>

## 1. Introduction

The miscellaneous field of translation is inextricably blended with many branches like; linguistic, philosophy, literature, etc. Crossing the world of literature, translation has opened new horizons for the issue of translating folkloric texts. Among these, we may cite the proverb, idiomatic expressions, folk sayings, etc. Translating proverbs or idiomatic expressions is one of the most challenging tasks for a translator. This challenging task involves recognizing a proverb, and making a clear distinction between the proper usage of proverbial and non-proverbial expressions. Catford (1995:20) defines the translation process as “the replacement of the source language (SL) grammar and lexis by equivalent (TL) grammar and lexis”. Despite the fact that the translation process is very difficult and time consuming activity, a good translation necessitates a skillful translator who can convey the message easily and without changes. This paper emphasizes the potential problems the translator may face when translating Algerian proverbs from vernacular into English. However, the translator would encounter two types of hindrances; linguistic and cultural. Going through the linguistic features seem much less problematic to handle. But, problematic issues would arise when going beyond the linguistic level.

Examples of English and Algerian proverbs will be presented and compared so that language similarities and/or dissimilarities and translating strategies will be scrutinized. Each proverb conveys specific meaning in a specific context of

situation. Subsequently, a proverb should be rendered with care to carry the same cultural conventions in the original proverb. Hence, it is not pertinent to translate a proverb while just having a glance at its words’ definitions in a dictionary. In what follow, we will acquaint ourselves with the possible problems that hinder the translation process and focus on the strategies that translators may use when translating Algerian proverbs into English. Among the abundance of strategies, we will shed light on four strategies: using a proverb of similar meaning and form, using a proverb of similar meaning but dissimilar form, translating by paraphrasing and literal translation.

### 1. Definition of the Term Translation

Translation is a broad notion which can be understood in many different ways. In its broad sense, translation is a general term that refers to the process of transferring thoughts and ideas from the source language, be it oral or written, to the target language. In fact, (Azabdaftary, 1996) contends that, translators are often ascribed to be agents for transferring messages from one language to another, while maintaining the underlying cultural ideas and values. Beside this, the translator’s most challenging task is to create conditions under which he/she makes the interaction possible between the source language author and the target language reader. (Lotfipour, 1997)The concise English dictionary defines ‘*translation*’ as an act or an instance of translating a written or spoken expression of a word’s speech or a word’s book in

another language. The first of the two meanings addresses translation as a process, and the second addresses it as a product. This pointedly means that the term translation entails very distinct perspectives. The first one emphasizes the role of translator in taking the original or source text and turning it into a text in another language (the target text). The second sense focuses on the concrete translation product produced by the translator.

One may talk of translation as a process or a product, and distinguish other sub-types like literal translation, technical translation and machine translation. For instance, making reference to machine translation is no longer the preserve of human translators, but in a professional context where computing power and human's ability intermarry.

In his seminal paper, '*On the Linguistic Aspects of Translation*', the Russo-American linguist Roman Jakobson (1959) makes a very important distinction between three types of written translation: translation within the same language which involves rewording or paraphrasing, translation from one language to another; (interlingual translation) and the intersemiotic translation which is the translation of the non-verbal sign by a verbal sign, for example the translation of music, or image. For Jacobson, only the interlingual translation is considered translation proper. Jacobson's discussion on translation centers on certain key questions of linguistics; including: equivalence between items in SL and TL and the notion of translatability. These are issues that became central to research in

translation in the 1960s and 1970s. This burgeoning field received the name 'Translation Studies'.

### The Translation Strategy

Krings (1983: 18) defines translation strategy as "translator's potential plans for solving concrete translation task", and Séguinot (1989) believes that there are at least three global strategies employed by the translators: (i) translating without interruption for as long as possible, (ii), correcting surface errors immediately (iii), learning the monitoring for qualitative or stylistic errors in the text to the revision stage. Loescher (1991:8) defines translation strategy as "a potentially conscious, procedure for solving a problem faced in translating a text, or any segment of it". As it is stated in this definition, the notion of consciousness is highly vital in distinguishing strategies which are used by learners or translators. In this regard, Cohen (1998:04) asserts that "the element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from processes that are not strategic." On parallel lines, Jaaskelainen (1999:71) considers strategy as, "a series of competencies, a set of steps or processes that favor the acquisition, storage, and/or utilization of information". He maintains that strategies are "heuristic and flexible in nature, and their adoption implies a decision influenced by amendments in the translator's objectives".

#### 4. Defining the term of Proverb

Meider (1985:119) has defined the proverb as : “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation”. He also points to some proverbs that refer to the definition of proverbs. For example: “*proverbs are the children of experience*”, “*proverbs are true words*”, and “*proverbs are the wisdom of the streets*”. (Ibid) So, it is obvious that proverbs are speech entities that prevail in all cultures and they address many daily life situations in a leisurely way. Mieder (2004: 108-9) mentions that “proverbs are found in many parts of the world, but some areas seem to have richer stores of proverbs than others (such as West Africa), while others don’t have any (North and South America)”.

#### 5. The Algerian proverb from the view point of translation

Just like universal proverbs, Algerian Proverbs occur unconsciously in daily conversations. They use proverbs instead of stating long explanations. A proverb can quickly spread among people “as if it is a word with wings.”(Zayler, 2010:39). It is difficult to know the original place from where the proverb came, however, some proverbs can be confined to a particular period of time. For example if we analyze the Algerian proverb / اذا أعطاك العاطي لا /, /تشاطي و لا تباطي/, we will notice that the word /تباطي/ is a distortion of the French word (combattre) which means to fight. Rabeh Eloubi (2001) sheds light on Algerian anti-proverbs or contrary

proverbs. He infers that in some cases people tend to alter the most familiar proverbs to drastically change the meaning of the original proverbs. For example:

✓ /الصوردي الأبيض ينفع في النهار الأكل /  
VS /أصرف ما الجيبجيك ما في الغيب / :

The first proverb advises people to spend their money moderately, while the second proverb advises people not to care about wasting money because Allah is the provider of wealth.

✓ /خوك من / VS /خوك خوك لا يغررك صاحبك /

:واتاك مشي خوك من أمك و باباك. The first proverb means that it is advisable to trust your real brother (biological brother) because whatever may happen to you, your real brother won’t let you down; whereas, the second proverb means that your real brother is not your biological brother, but he is the one with whom you have an affinity; he is the who loves, supports and stands beside you in hard times.

Additionally, proverbs are used to adjust people’s behavior through clarifying what they should or should not do. Ibn Abderrabuh (1982) comments that when one speaks using proverbs, his/her speech would be more logical and it would attract and charm the hearer. He also drives people’s attention to another important aspect: the proverbs currency, i.e., proverbs are used and accepted by the community members. To focus on this idea, E’Seyouti says: “the proverb is a brief sentence that is characterized by acceptance and is well known by its currency ...” (1988, 486) Arora (1992) has investigated the stylistic features of proverbs which are as follow:

Next to Arora's, we've tried to attribute these stylistic features to the Algerian proverbs with their English equivalents:

- ✓ **Alliteration:**) / هرقة النساء ما تنتسى و /هدرتهم ما تنحصى  
women make good dishes but not good speeches.
- ✓ **Parallelism:** / لا تفاهموا عليك النساء بات / قاعد و اذا تقاهموا عليك الرجال بات راقد

#### 4. Defining the Term

##### Untranslatability

Untranslatability refers to the difficulty in translating a textual utterance for which no exact equivalent text can be found in the target language when translating. In fact, the degree of difficulty depends on translator knowledge of both the SL and the TL.

Catford (1965: 93) writes that translatability appears "intuitively, to be a cline rather than a clear-cut dichotomy", and "SL texts and items are more or less translatable rather than absolutely translatable or untranslatable". To discuss the topic, Catford (Ibid: 94) distinguishes linguistic and cultural untranslatability.

Bahameed (2007) terms these difficulties/problems (untranslatability) as hindrances for they hinder translators from moving forward and staying in the same spot and classifies these hindrances of Arabic-English translation into lexical and cultural hindrances.

#### 4.1. Linguistic and cultural Untranslatability

Linguistic untranslatability stands for grammatical, stylistic and lexical constraints the translator may face. For

hell has no fury like a woman scorned. **Rhyme:** /الوالفة خير من التالفة/; better a devil you know than a devil you don't know.

- ✓ **Hyperbole :** /على كرشه يخلي / عرشه/ when it comes to the stomach the brain is lost/duff.

example, the grammatical problem is related to the difficulty in translating modal verbs, conditional sentences, articles, etc. Stylistic problems pertain to potential difficulties imposed by the style of a particular phrase or utterance, or stylistic issues like parallelism, ambiguity, redundancy and nominalization VS verbalization (Ghazala, 1995). Lexical problems, on the other hand, usually occur when a word or an expression is not understood, misunderstood, or totally unknown by the translator. Synonymy, polysemy, collocations, metaphors and idioms are considered as the most common lexical problems.

Bassnett (1980) argues that differences between cultures constitute a barrier before translators. Nida (2001) substantiated Bassett's belief when she claimed that cultural differences represent severer intricacies than languages structures differences do. Culture for Larson (1984:431) is "a complex of beliefs, attitudes, values and rules which a group of people share", and this is the reason behind the type of untranslatability that occurs when a situation's feature is functionally relevant for the SL text and totally absent from the culture of the TL. Hence, the role of the translator appears to work like a mediator between the SL culture and TL one so that "he molds what is said in one

language in the convention of another”. Cook (2003:55) Baker (1992) believes that the most blatant problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose are traceable to two areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly and the difficulties in rendering various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language.

There are four main difficulties in any translation as maintained by Al-Darwish (1983 78): “a- no two languages have exactly identical phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic features. b- Languages differ in terms of sentence arrangement. c- A translator is forced to exclude certain items. D. the impossibility of the translator to completely master two languages; however this problem can be resolved through specialized scientific committees” (as cited in Al-Hamdalla, 1998: 24)

Therefore, the translation process requires sub-processes and strategies that help the translator transmitting the proper meaning from SL to TL. Being so, this later demands developed skills to convey the appropriate meaning.

In what follows, we will see the potential translation strategies that are used to overcome the Algerian proverbs cultural untranslatability.

## **5. Translation Strategies to Translate Algerian proverbs**

Algerian proverbs’ untranslatability may occur when trying to translate socio-cultural aspects that are unfamiliar to the receiving audience, because they consist of material culture like; food, and dress, and factors of social life like festivals, rituals

and ceremonies. Among the numerous translation strategies, we will explore those suggested by some scholars in the field like, Larson (1984), Baker (1992), Trim (2003), Newmark (1982) and Wright (1999).

### **5.1. Using a Proverb of Similar Meaning and Form (Translating by Equivalence)**

This strategy involves using an idiom in the target language to convey nearly the same meaning as that of the source language proverb; in terms of form and function. In this context, Newmark (1982: 123) argues that translating by equivalence or correspondence is achieved when “expressions and functions correspond in both languages”. He adds that this match can be occasionally achieved. The following proverbial expressions are instances of English and Algerian proverbs with almost similar meaning and form.

### **5.2. Using a Proverb of Similar Meaning but Dissimilar form:**

Baker (1992) claimed that it is often possible to find an idiom or fixed expression in the target language which has a meaning similar to that of the source idiom, or expression, but which is made of different lexical items. For example, the English expression ‘One good turn deserves another’ and the French expression ‘A beau jeu, beau retour’ (a handsome action deserves a handsome return) use different lexical items to express more or less the same idea. (Fernando and Falvell, 1981 as cited in Baker, 1992).

Let us consider the following examples that well illustrate this strategy :

Algerian Proverbs	Proverbs in English
كل خفوس عند امه غزال	The monkey thinks of its own offspring fairest.
طويل بلا خصلة	Beauty without virtue is a curse.
كل طيارة تنزل	Every sun has a sunset.
يستتى على الجمر	Be waiting on needles and pins.
ضيف المومن ثلث أيام	A constant guest is never welcome.
مشي كل اللي خضر حنشيش	All what glitters is not gold.
زيتنا في دقيقتنا	Better wed over the mixen than over the moor.
الحر بالغزمة	A word to the wise is enough.
كل شئى ييرا غير الهدرة المره	Words cut more than swords.
الوالفة خير من التالفة	Better a devil you know than a devil you don't know.
اللي بلسانه ما يتودر	Ask the way or go astray.
بالرزانه تتباع الصوف	Rome was not built in a day.
البكاء ما يرجع المييت	There is no need to cry over spilt milk.

### 5.3. Literal Translation/ Direct Translation, or Word-for-word Translation

This strategy is used when rendering the text from one language to another with or without conveying the meaning of the original whole. Trim (2003:18)

believes that “translator has to decide whether to translate the idiom itself or to find a target language equivalent, in accordance with the more problematic criterion of equivalence of effect or to abandon the idiom and express the idea in plain language, losing the stylistic value of the proverb. Each solution has its gains, losses and dangers”.

### Examples:

Algerian Proverb	Its literal translation in English
دير الخير و نساو و دير الشر.	Do bad and remember, do good and forget.
الصبر مفتاح الجنة.	Patience is the key to paradise.
قول كلمة خير و لا أسكت خير.	Speak kindly or keep silent
الغايب عذره معاه	The absent has always got a justification.
الغراب جا يمشي مشية الحمام نسي مشيته	The crow wanted to mimic the pigeon's walk and forgot his own.
من خاف سلم	The one who shows his fears ensures his salvation.
كي نتفكر هم الناس ننسى همي.	When I think of the other's misfortunes, I forget mine.
عيش تشوف.	Live long and you shall come to know much.
العيشة تدبار.	Living depends on good planning.

### 6. Conclusion

This study tackled some of the potential potholes that translators may encounter when translating Algerian

proverbs into English and some strategies that help the translator overcome the lexical and cultural untranslatability. Through the abovementioned discussion, we may conclude by saying that it is of paramount importance for the translator to have a complete savvy about both the SL and TL. Nonetheless, he/she must go through extensive and intensive training and have a thorough knowledge about different strategies that can be used for translating idiomatic and proverbial expressions. Though we have explored some of strategies, there are many other useful strategies that can be used to translate idiomatic expressions; such as: translation by omission, translation by compensation, translation by superordinate, translation by using loan words, etc.

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