

Translating Culturally-Specific Items in Literary Texts from English into Arabic and Vice Versa

ترجمة العناصر ذات الخصوصية الثقافية في النص الأدبي من الإنجليزية إلى العربية والعكس

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Abstract

Translating cultural items found in literary texts seems a complex process. This paper attempts to tackle various aspects of the translation of culture in literary texts from English into Arabic and vice versa; this includes the discussion of three main variables: 'cultural translation', 'culturally-specific items' (CSIs) and 'literary translation'. Therefore, following the descriptive-analytical method, this paper tries to review literature on the origins of cultural translation and its relationship with translation studies, on the difficulties literary translators may face when translating CSIs, and on the procedures suggested in response to those difficulties. The results have shown that the concept of 'cultural translation' may have taken its origin from anthropology and, then, put into the context of translation studies, that literary translation is more complex than technical translation, that translating CSIs requires translator's awareness of the differences between the source culture and the target culture, and that various procedures can be used to translate CSIs.

Key Words: Cultural translation; Culturally-Specific Items; literary translation; translation procedures; source / target culture.

المخلص

تعدُّ عملية ترجمة العناصر الثقافية التي تحملها النصوص الأدبية أكثر تعقيدا مما قد يبدو لبعض المترجمين. ولذلك، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على جوانب مختلفة من ترجمة الثقافة في النص الأدبي من الإنجليزية إلى العربية والعكس، وهو الأمر الذي يستدعي مناقشة ثلاثة متغيرات أساسية، هي: "الترجمة الثقافية" و"ترجمة العناصر الثقافية" و"الترجمة الأدبية". ولذلك تطرقت هذه الدراسة إلى مناقشة مجموعة من العناصر -فضلا عن عناصر أخرى- وهي: أصل مصطلح "الترجمة الثقافية"، والصعوبات التي قد يواجهها مترجمو الأدب عند نقلهم للعناصر الثقافية والإجراءات التي اقترحها الباحثون في مجال دراسات الترجمة لغرض التكفل بترجمة تلك العناصر الثقافية. لقد أظهرت الدراسة أن مفهوم "الترجمة الثقافية" قد أخذ من حقل الأنثروبولوجيا، ثم وُضع في حقل دراسات الترجمة، وأن ترجمة العناصر الثقافية يتطلب أن يكون المترجم واعياً بالاختلافات بين ثقافة الأصل وثقافة الوصل، وأنه يمكن اللجوء إلى العديد من الإجراءات المتنوعة لغرض ترجمة تلك العناصر، كما أظهرت الدراسة أن الترجمة الأدبية أصعب من الترجمة التقنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة الثقافية، العناصر الثقافية، الترجمة الأدبية، إجراءات ترجمة العناصر الثقافية، ثقافة الأصل/الوصل.

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Introduction

Traditionally, translation was regarded as a substitution of TL, i.e. Target Language, meanings for SL, i.e. Source Language, meanings. This traditional perception of the process of translation, limiting it to a mere transaction between two languages, seem to unfit today's situation, when it rather has become a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions (Toury, 1978, p. 170), which may qualify it to be, rather, an encounter between two sets of culture (Sanchez, 2009, p.139). Hence, intercultural communication inevitably involves cultural awareness, in that the translator's knowledge of the differences between the culture s/he translates from and the culture s/he translates into should be regarded as a key requirement for translating the cultural items (also called Culturally-Specific Items and shortened to CSIs) that are found in literary texts. This being said, translating CSIs seems to be a more complex phenomenon than it may appear to certain translators. On the other hand, as there has always been translation, for almost as long as there has been literature (Trivedi, 2007, p. 277), literary texts are certainly characterized by rich cultural connotation (Wang, 2008, p. 75), and, by extension, heavily loaded with items (words, phrases) that are specific to the culture of the writer (poet, novelist, etc.)

Building on the above, this paper, primarily, attempts to look into the concepts of 'cultural translation' and 'culturally-specific items', to identify some difficulties that a literary translator faces when dealing with CSIs, and to discuss the procedures suggested, mainly, by translation studies' scholars to help translate CSIs effectively. This inevitably requires also the discussion of other issues such as whether there is a possible relationship between cultural studies and translation studies.

The study follows descriptive and analytical research methods, which allow the authors to get to specific answers to the issues identified above. It is, therefore, divided into three main sections. The first section is dedicated to discuss the relationship between cultural translation and translation studies; this opens the discussion to investigating whether there is/are (a) commonality (ies) between cultural studies and translation studies. Section two throws light on literary translation by chiefly highlighting its main characteristics. In section three, the authors discuss culturally-specific items (CSIs); this includes their definition, the difficulties literary translators could encounter when dealing with them and the translation procedures that could be useful to translate them. Also, in this particular section, the authors try to discuss the notion of "Cultural Overlap" between the source culture and the target culture, and how it can be dealt with in a different manner comparing to situations, where there is no cultural overlap.

The authors assume that the translation of CSIs can be a complex process, which requires, besides the linguistic competence, a cultural awareness. We also assume that there may be commonalities between the disciplines of cultural translation and translation studies, and that the translation procedures suggested to deal with CSIs can be used according to the degree of difficulty of the CSIs; in which case, the “cultural overlap” represents the situation of least difficulty.

Cultural translation Vs. translation studies

It seems necessary to point out that the term ‘cultural translation’ may create certain confusion to the readers of this paper as it has created controversy among the researchers and scholars working on the theme of translating culture, in that this term can be used in disciplines other than translation studies - at least in anthropology; of which one particular area being ethnography.

Actually, historically speaking, the use of the term “Cultural Translation” is somewhat new; this may be traced back in time to the sixties, when the ethnographer Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard first used it to refer to the description of the cultures he was interested in studying. For example, in his book, bearing the title “*Nuer Religion*”, first published in 1956, Evans-Pritchard explained that the Nuer community’s word “*Kwoth*” was the equivalent of the English term “god”; this use of only one language (English) was described to be cultural translation in that the Nuer community’s cultural term *Kwoth* was translated in the culture of the English readership. This means that the word “translation”, from the ethnographer’s perspective, did not hold the traditional meaning of carrying messages across languages, but, rather, it meant using one language (English in Evans-Pritchard’s case) to explain a word in the target culture.

From the translation studies perspective, there seems to be a heated controversy on how this particular term of “cultural translation”, as defined above from the ethnographer’s perspective, can relate to the discipline of translation studies¹, or, more specifically, whether there are possible commonalities between cultural studies and translation studies. Out of this heated controversy, it seems legitimate to argue that there are two groups of scholars with quite divergent views. On the one hand, there is number of scholars who argue that there is a tight relationship between the two

¹ It is worth reminding the reader, at this point, that Translation Studies started to be regarded as a discipline in 1972, when James S. Holmes coined the term “Translation Studies” in his seminal essay bearing the title: “*The Name and Nature of Translation Studies.*”

areas of research, and, by extension, welcome the idea that translation can be achieved by means of only one language; these are primarily the thoughts of the defendants of the post-colonialism theory, including Homi Bhabha, Salman Rushdie and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to name a few. But also, in the same direction of thought, a number of translation studies' scholars like S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere share the idea that commonalities exist between the two disciplines.

On the other hand, there are other scholars who argue that there is not – or even there should not be – a relationship between the two disciplines (Trivedi, 2007, p. 281). The following is a summary of the main diverging opinions that fall within this context.

In their book *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1998) stress the importance and necessity of unifying –as an opposite to isolating– the two mentioned disciplines; they note:

[...] in these multifaceted inter-disciplines, isolation is counter-productive. Translation is, after all, dialogic in its very nature, involving as it does more than one voice. The study of translation, like the study of culture, needs a plurality of voices. And similarly, the study of culture always involves an examination of the processes of encoding and decoding that comprise translation. (pp. 138-39)

In the same vein, S. Faiq (2004) argues that the reason why translation has recently received much attention from cultural studies is that translation is a privileged space where linguistic and social systems “meet, intermix or come into conflict.” (p. 29)

On the other side, rejecting the idea of a possible commonality between the two disciplines, Trivedi (2007), in his essay *Translating Culture Vs. Cultural Translation*, traces back in time the evolution of the two mentioned disciplines and notes that “Through the 1990s, alongside the rise of Translation Studies, we also saw interestingly the rise of a larger and more influential field of study, Cultural Studies, without however any perceptible overlap or interaction between the two.” (p. 254)

Building on the above, it seems that Trivedi has many reasons behind his opinion against any kind of relationship between the two mentioned disciplines. Trivedi (Ibid) goes on and explains that:

one crucial difference between the two inter-disciplines is that Cultural Studies, even when concerned with popular or subaltern

culture, nearly always operate in just the one language, English, and often in that high and abstruse variety of it called Theory, while Translation Studies, however theoretical they may get from time to time, must sully their hands in at least two languages only one of which can be English. (p. 282)

Furthermore, to back his opinion, Trivedi argues that the term ‘cultural translation’ is not mentioned in a very famous and basic translation studies reference; that is *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies* edited by Mona Baker and Gabriela Sandalha and first published in 1998. However, on this particular point, it is worth mentioning that the second edition² of the mentioned encyclopaedia actually mentions the term in more than three occasions, and more interestingly, dedicates an entry to discuss the very term of ‘cultural translation’. In this regard, according to the Encyclopaedia, this term can be used in various contexts; one of which is “a metaphor that radically questions translation’s traditional parameters.” (p. 67)

The above may imply that Trivedi’s opinion of the lack of commonalities between the two mentioned disciplines –i.e. Translation Studies and Cultural Studies, could be true only in the beginning of their emergence.

It is also interesting and seems in the service of this paper to add that in the mentioned Encyclopaedia, Baker & Sandalha suggest that a “somewhat narrower use of the term cultural translation refers to the practices of Literary Translation” (p. 67) among which are the practices of mediating cultural differences and representing another culture via translation. In this sense, more interestingly, the authors stress that the term ‘cultural translation’ raises complex technical issues such as the manner in which features like literary allusions and culturally-specific items, such as food or architecture, can be dealt with. (p. 67)

The above being said, the authors think that the first group of scholars seems to have brought basic changes to the traditional definition of translation, in that it no longer necessitates the requirement of two languages to achieve a translation proper process. However, a compromise should be found somewhere in the middle between the first group’s openness and the second group’s rejection of a possible commonality between the two disciplines of cultural studies and translation studies.

² It is of equal importance to mention that the first edition of the encyclopaedia was published in 1998, which makes sense when considering Trivedi’s thoughts quoted from his essay, mentioned above, first published in 2005, four years before the publishing of the second edition of the Encyclopaedia (2009).

Literary translation

Historically speaking, literary translation can be traced back to very old times; a living evidence that literary translation preceded, by far, many types of translation is formed by the ancient literary translators, who are still known, through their works: Marcus Tullius Cicero, John Dryden and Thomas Hobbes, to name but a few, the collection and translation into Arabic of the *Thousand and One Arabian Nights* in the 9th century, and, more recently, the French translation of Homer's Iliad in 1555; the language from which Arthur Hall translated the Iliad into English in 1581 and, later, George Chapman in 1598 (apps.lib.umich.edu, consulted on 24/09/2020).

Hassan (2011) defines literary translation as “a type of translation which is distinguished from translation in general.” (p. 2) He stresses that “a literary translation must reflect the imaginative, intellectual and intuitive writing of the author.” (Ibid). Riffaterre (1992, pp. 204-205), in turn, stresses that literary translations must reflect all the literary features of the source text such as sound effects, morphophonemic selection of words, figures of speech, etc. In the same vein, Belhaag (as cited in Hassan, 2011, p. 2) mentions 9 characteristics of literary translation; these are as follows:

1. Expressive;
2. Connotative;
3. Symbolic;
4. Focusing on both form and content;
5. Subjective;
6. Allowing multiple interpretation;
7. Timeless and universal;
8. Using special devices to ‘heighten’ communicative effect;
9. Tendency to deviate from the language norms.

All in a nutshell, the definitions above may seem to suggest that literary texts mirror the thoughts of the writer (poet, novelist, etc.), immediately taken from his/her surrounding, in other words: his/her culture, and, by all means, the translation of these literary texts becomes, whether partially or entirely, directly or indirectly, a reflection of the writer's cultural items in another culture that may be alien; these cultural items may be specific to the writer's culture. At this point, a plethora of questions may come to surface; some of these are as follows: what are culturally-specific items? Do they pose problems to literary translators? What problems? How can the literary translator deal with them? The next section of the paper will try to offer answers to the questions above.

Culturally-Specific Items

The term ‘culturally-specific items’ (CSIs) is one of many terms that seem to have been used interchangeably by translation studies’ scholars, cultural word (Newmark, 1981) and (Ivir, 1987), cultural reference (Leemets, 1992; Mailhac, 1996), to name but a few.

Newmark (Newmark, 1988) defines a cultural word as the word that belongs only to the source culture such as the words: monsoon, steppe and dacha (p. 103). Also, Newmark stresses that “wherever there is a cultural gap “distance” between the source language and the target language, as a result of ‘cultural focus’; there is a problem in translation” (p. 103). For Ivir (1987), a cultural word is an element of the source culture which is absent from the target culture (p. 36). In the same vein, Leemets (cited in Ranzato (2016)) defines ‘cultural references’ as the “words denoting concepts and things that another language has not considered worth mentioning, or that are absent from the life or consciousness of the other nation” (p. 54). In the same context, borrowing Leemets’ term, Mailhac (1996) describes a ‘cultural reference’ as “any reference to a cultural entity which, due to its distance from the target culture, is characterised by a sufficient degree of opacity for the target reader to constitute a possible problem.” (pp. 133-134)

Admitting a high degree of convergence between the definitions stated above, one crucial commonality may be noticed: they all suggest that cultural items are of lexical nature (words), excluding the possibility that these could be of structural nature (phrases or sentences). However, different from the definitions stated above, Javier (1996)’s definition of culturally-specific items, suitably, seems to use the term ‘item’, which encompasses both lexical and structural cultural elements. According to him, CSIs are:

Those textually actualised items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the non-existence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text. (pp. 52 - 78)

In the same vein, Dickins (2012) includes the word “phrases” under the umbrella term “item”; he defines a culturally-specific item as “the item (word or phrase) that is specific to one culture” (p. 43); this, similarly to what has been mentioned previously, implies that this item is absent in the target culture.

Considering the definitions above, the notion of the absence of a word or a phrase that belongs to one particular language, and by extension, culture from the other language, and by extension, culture, seems to be the defining feature

of a culturally-specific item, and the point where all the above definitions meet. Another important point that could be common between the definitions above is that the translation of CSIs may pose problems to translators (see, for example, Newmark's and Mailhac's definitions above). In the following section, the authors will demonstrate how the translation of CSIs could be problematic to translators.

Difficulties of translating CSIs

It seems always necessary, when discussing any translation matter, to consider the historical parameter. In this particular instance of discussing the problems that cultural translation may pose, the authors think that it is necessary to consider how translation was looked at by scholars in the sixties – being the period of time when many disciplines (linguistics in particular) gained particular attention from researchers, and, by extension, witnessed revolutionary changes. In this sense, J. C. Catford's book "A Linguistic Theory of Translation", published in 1965, stated that translation was a pure linguistic process, which may imply the marginalization of the cultural aspect of translation. However, it is worth noticing that a year before Catford's statement (i.e 1964), Eugene Nida clearly mentioned that translation, besides being a process of transferring messages from one language to another, was also a transaction between two cultures, and, more particularly, argued that translating culture would be more complex and difficult than translating linguistic structures (Nida, 1964, p. 161), and that these problems may vary in scope depending on the linguistic and what he termed 'cultural distance' between the two (or more) languages and cultures concerned (Nida, 1964, p. 160.) For Nida, "where linguistic and cultural distance is least, one should expect to encounter the least number of serious problems." (Ibid). In the same vein, specifically, when it comes to literary translation, Trivedi (2007) argues that:

[...] in a paradigmatic departure, the translation of a literary text became a transaction not between two languages, or a somewhat mechanical sounding act of linguistic "substitution" as Catford had put it, but rather a more complex negotiation between two cultures. The unit of translation was no longer a word or a sentence or a paragraph or a page or even a text, but indeed the whole language and culture in which that text was constituted.

(p. 254)

The above being said, it is very important that translators, especially those dealing with texts that are known to be heavily loaded with source culture's items, should be aware of the differences between the culture s/he

translates from and the culture s/he translates into. In this context Robinson (Robinson, 2004) argues that:

It is probably safe to say that there has never been a time when the community of translators was unaware of cultural differences and their significance for translation. Translation theorists have been cognizant of the problems attendant upon cultural knowledge and cultural difference at least since ancient Rome, and translators almost certainly knew all about those problems long before theorists articulated them (p. 186.).

But, to some extent, Robinson's statement may not seem to apply to all language combinations; at least to English and Arabic, in that there are plenty of Arabic translations of English novels that seem to be loaded with numerous errors both at the linguistic and cultural levels.

Cultural overlap

By definition, the word "overlap" refers to the common area of interest, responsibility, (www.lexico.com, consulted on: 26/09/2020, at: 07:26) or culture, and, thus named 'cultural overlap'.

Many scholars consider cultural overlaps as situations, where the use of translation procedures is not necessary, since the translator does not feel to have a problem with the translation of the cultural items. In the case of translating from/into Arabic/English, many examples of cultural overlaps may be considered. In this context, Newmark (1988) notes that "there will be a translation problem unless there is cultural overlap between the source and the target language (and its readership)" (p. 94). Dickins (2012, p. 58), mentioned an example of cultural overlap, but using a different term 'cultural analogy'; his example is that Qays (قيس) and Laila (ليلى) love story in the Arab culture is somewhat analogous to Romeo and Juliet love story in the English culture. In this particular case, Dickins suggests that "قيس وليلى" may therefore, in some circumstances, be replaced by Target Text 'Romeo and Juliet' by a process of cultural analogy"; in this sense: cultural overlap.

Building on the above, the example of the cultural overlap/analogy implies that cultural-overlap situations do not create problems to translators dealing with (or specializing in) the translation of texts loaded with cultural items such as literary translators.

Procedures for translating culture

From a translation studies perspective, a translation procedure is defined as "the technical devices used to transfer the meaning of a text in one language into a text in another language" (Pinchuck, 1977, 188). It seems interesting to

In the table above, Dickins mentions three translation-procedure typologies suggested by Newmark (1981; 1988), Ivir (1987), and Hervey and Higgins (1992).

According to Dickins (2012), the translation procedures mentioned in the table above can be organized according to various classifications. One of these is: the lexical / structural classification. By lexical category, Dickins refers to the feature of words used (considered as single units); i.e. *monomorphemic words*, while, by structural category, he refers to “a feature of the way in which words are put together from individual morphemes (morphotactic) or the way in which words themselves join together to form larger phrases (syntactic)—or both (one single unit)” (pp. 48-49)

In the lexical/grammatical organization of the three mentioned typologies, Dickins suggests that the translation procedures that may be useful to translate individual morphemes can be different from those that may be useful to translate words with more than one morpheme; i.e. *morphotactic/syntactic* phrases; an example of this is the procedures of cultural borrowing, referred to in the next pages as CB, suggested by Hervey and Higgins, and Lexical Creation, referred to in the next pages as LC, suggested by Ivir. On this particular point, Dickins notes:

What Hervey and Higgins call ‘cultural borrowing’ is normally a case of a monomorphemic word, i.e., a word which consists of only one morpheme: as such it is lexical rather than structural [...] By ‘lexical creation’ Ivir [...] Ivir may also mean to include words involving more than one morpheme in the Target Language. (pp. 49 - 51)

Dickins (2012) goes on in this sense and gives the example of the Arabic word ‘دَبَّاب’³ and its equivalent in English ‘dabab’ (p. 49). In this context, following Dickins, the cultural borrowing ‘dabab’ is monomorphemic and, by extension, belongs into the lexical category. Applying this as a pattern, more examples of cultural borrowing, both from English into Arabic and from Arabic into English, can be offered in the following table:

³ which is used in Yemen to refer to a particular type of minibus (normally a Toyota mini-van).

Table (2): Examples of cultural borrowing

English word	CB	الاقتراض الثقافي	اللفظة العربية
Jeans	جينز	Cave	كهف
Geep	جيب	Fellah	فلاح
Apple	آبل	Imam	إمام
Bus	باص	Jinn	جن
Album	ألبوم	Couscous	كسكس
Autobus	أوتوبيس	Wazir	وزير
Petrol	بترول	Sheikh	شيخ
Sandwich	سندويتش	Ifrit	عرفيت

On the other hand, in the case of lexical creation, the foreignising element is structural; that is to say, it either has more than one morpheme (morphotactic) or it is a phrase (syntactic). Dickins offers the example of the Arabic sentence 'ضربني ضربتين' and its foreignizing equivalent: 'He beat me two beatings', which consists of standard English words, with the overall form being structurally (syntactically) foreignizing. It is worth mentioning, in the same vein, that Hervey and Higgins' term for Ivir's LC is 'Ungrammatical calque.' They offered the following example: "He increased the clay moistness" as the ungrammatical calque of the Arabic "زاد الطين بلّة". This suggests that two procedures, lexical creation and ungrammatical calque, have many features in common; they both describe ungrammatical (i.e. they do not belong to the grammar of English in that the adverbial use of a phrasal noun cognate to the verb is not part of English, and that 'clay moistness' misses the possessive 's'), and semantically anomalous (i.e. they don't have a fixed systematic meaning in English).

Building on the above, both CB & LC procedures are exotic translation procedures in that they offer exotic features to the output text. However, they also seem to offer a solution to literary translators and enrich the target language. With reference to the language enrichment, the meanings of some words that are mentioned in the tables 2 could become fixed with the time, for example today's target Arab readership (readers of Arabic), different from that of the past, should now recognize that the word جينز means Hard-wearing casual trousers (www.lexico.com, retrieved on 02/10/2020, at: 14:20).

Conclusion

The authors have argued that the translation of culturally-specific items (words and phrases) found in literary texts is a more complex process than a mere linguistic rendering; this means that translating CSIs inevitably requires that literary translators have awareness of the differences between the source culture and target culture. We also assume that there may be commonalities between the disciplines of cultural translation and translation studies, and that the translation procedures suggested to deal with CSIs can be used according to the degree of difficulty of the translation of the CSIs. The study has revealed that there could be a relationship between translation studies and cultural studies in that they both are inter-disciplinary and complementary one to another. The study has also revealed that translation procedures may be suitable to monomorphemic CSIs or to morphotactic CSIs, and that, in this particular context, James Dickins' summary of the influential translation-strategies typologies, and the model he has offered can be very useful in investigating this particular area of CSIs translation. It has been revealed that the procedures of cultural borrowing and lexical creation (may also be called 'ungrammatical calque') are foreignizing procedures and that they could be used as solutions by literary translators to deal with CSIs that are deeply rooted in the source culture. The authors encourage more research in this particular area believing that, despite the increasing interest of researchers, it still deserves to be paid more attention.

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