

## Lexis and Culture in Arabic Military Translation

The focus in technical, including military, translation remains firmly centered on dealing with terminology. Though this is largely true, military texts and associated language require more than terminological gymnastics. Contextual and cultural dimensions need to be taken on board for appropriate rendering of source text intended meanings. This paper merely scratches the surface of this interface between lexis and culture in handling military information through translation into Arabic. The examples discussed in this paper provide pointers as to what theory and practice of military translation into Arabic, and perhaps between other language pairs, ought to focus on.

### Lexical Aspects

One of the prominent aspects of translating a military document from English into Arabic is that many English words/terms do not have Arabic equivalents because of the technological gap that exists between the Arab World and the western countries, producers of military equipment and weapons. The thorny problem, translators working into Arabic face, is that new terms are neither translated nor *arabised*. To exemplify, the expression *angle of attack* can be literally translated into Arabic as *زاوية الهجوم* where *angle* means *زاوية* and *attack* means *هجوم*. However, this is not what is intended by the source language as the expression *angle of attack* refers to “The angle between the chord of a wing or the reference line in a body and the direction of undisturbed flow or relative wind in the absence of sideslip” [4: 27]. A possible translation would be *الزاوية المرجعية للهواء بالنسبة للطائر* (literally: *the reference angle of air in relation to aircraft*). Here, the function of the expression is rendered rather than the establishment of a word-for-word correspondence, which remains a prevailing strategy in military translation.

Another feature of translating a military document from English into Arabic is that in some instances an English word is used to refer to different meanings and hence different terms in Arabic, where the deciding factor is the context in which the word/term is used. Translators need to rely on the context of situation to determine the appropriate equivalent for the term involved. For example, the word *order* may correspond to many in Arabic *نظام، ترتيب، زي، تنظيم، أمر*. To illustrate the difference in meaning, consider the following three different contexts for the same word: (1) *battle order*, (2) *marching order*, and (3) *operational order*. In (1), the word *order* is translated as *التنظيم الحربي* (literally: *battle organization*), whereas in (2), it is used to refer to *زي القتال* (literally: *fighting uniform*), and (3) can be translated into Arabic as *أمر عملياتي* (literally: *operational instruction*). In other words, one word in English can account for several ones in Arabic (one – to – many), and in the translation process, translators need to be aware of the different contexts and associated meanings and that a word can be used several times in a text with its meaning changing from one place to another. The interpretation of meaning depends on the context in which that word is used. Translators “would only look up the appropriate translation under the entry corresponding to the situation identified by SL message” [8: 35].

Similarly, there are cases when there are different words in English for one single word in Arabic. This is an ideal situation for the translator as Arabic can correspond to many different terms of the English. Here, the translator's task seems to be relatively easy since s/he can consult a bilingual dictionary and find equivalents. For example, words such as *commander*, *leader*, *commanding officer* can all correspond to one word in Arabic *قائد*.

However, finding equivalents seems to be more difficult than when there is one word in English and several equivalents in Arabic or when there is a single word with several closely related but slightly different meanings in both English and Arabic. Translation can be performed by making choices between two or more terms. For instance, the word *control* can be used as a substitute for different English words such as, *monitor*, *surveillance*, *scanning* or *observation*. The overall meaning is almost the same, but the use of one or the other depends on the context of situation. While *control* can be translated into Arabic as *مراقبة* which can further be substituted in Arabic by *مسح، تتبع، تحكم، رصد، استطلاع*.

The translator's command of and competence in both working languages and the subject matter can all be decisive elements in determining the appropriateness and effectiveness of the resulting translation. Choosing an inappropriate term can lead to serious problems particularly in sensitive fields, such as the military.

Another aspect of English military language is the use of abbreviations and acronyms to account for many terms. In Arabic, however, there is a lack of military abbreviations, which are rarely used anyway and monolingual Arabic military dictionaries or glossaries of abbreviations and acronyms are also very rare. A particular problem with acronyms is that a single term may account for different semantic references [2]. For instance, the acronym *AAM* can be used to refer to *air-to-air missile*, *airborne armament maintenance* or *anti-armour mine* [2: 3]. The choice of the meaning of an acronym depends on the context of situation and the translator's knowledge of the subject matter. The translator needs to "examine his own text before consulting every possible dictionary" [6: 157]. A translator in Oman attempted to render the acronym *FOD* into Arabic as *forward ordnance depot* to refer to one of the army's units in Oman. But the original writer intended *foreign object damage* [1].

A further problem with acronyms is that they are often used at a local level (i.e. not universal). For example, the acronym *MTD* internationally stands for *moving target detector*, whereas it is locally used in Oman to stand for *madrasat tadriib al DubbaaT* (Literally: *Officer Training School*). Clearly someone who is not familiar with the local meanings given to such acronyms in Oman, for example, would opt for the standard meanings, albeit the inappropriate one.

### Cultural Aspects

Culture refers to "beliefs and value systems tacitly assumed to be collectively shared by particular social groups and to the positions taken by producers and receivers of texts, including translations, during the mediation process. Intercultural contacts that resulted in the great cultural shifts from one civilisation to another have been made possible through translation. This has meant a good deal of exchange, naturally through language" [3: 1].

Within this framework, language is intrinsically linked to its culture and translation is used to describe and explain the world view of one people to another. Most current translation theorists share the opinion that cultural gaps are inevitable and cannot be easily bridged because "translations are not made in a vacuum. Translators function in a given culture at a given time" [5: 14].

In Arabic, where culture is closely related to Islamic teachings, it is natural to find an overwhelming number of expressions of Islamic nature/source. Consider the word *retreat* which can be translated into Arabic as الانسحاب. But, considering the Islamic culture of Arabic, this word may be rendered as تولية الأديبار (literally: *to turn one's back*). However, the two Arabic words have two different contexts. If the enemy retreats, the latter would be the most appropriate word because it places a special effect on Arab and particularly Muslim readers in that to turn one's back always has negative connotations. However, if one's own forces retreat, you would use the word الانسحاب because it is neutral in Arabic.

A term which has now entered other languages is the Arabic word جهاد (*jihad*) which can be literally rendered as *holy war*. However, this is a purely Islamic term جهاد which means fighting against non-Muslims. But in Islam, if fighting takes place between two Muslim states, the term used would be قتال which again would mean in English fighting, but not جهاد (*jihad*) in this particular context. In such situations, translators need to be aware of the use of such expressions since translation is affected by the kind of society from and to which it is performed. Any term is the result of the behaviour of a certain society and in translation this cannot be easily conveyed without undergoing "a degree of adaptation to match the different characteristics of the target language and its culture" [7: 1].

In Islamic military doctrine, to give another example, Muslims before or during the times of fighting usually perform a special prayer called صلاة الخوف (literally: *prayer of fear*). This is a culturally bound expression, which although can be translated into other languages, cannot be understood by other peoples where Islam does not affect culture.

It follows, therefore, that the meaning of a given expression is culturally determined, not only lexically so, and can only be conveyed within a certain margin of success. Readers from a particular culture will expect the translation to be associated with their customs and beliefs with expressions derived from their culture because they look at things from their own perspectives. For example, the verb *killed* if used in the passive voice would be

translated into Arabic as *استشهد* (literally: *fell as martyr*) or *قتل* (literally: *was killed*). The difference between the two renderings is that the former, *استشهد* (*fell as martyr*), is a culturally (Islamic) motivated term used only for Muslims killed in war, whereas the latter, *قتل* (*killed*), does not have the same cultural dimension for and impact on the Muslim audience.

To conclude, one may consider the following factors if called upon to translate in the field of military affairs. First, regional variations have to be considered, whereby one term can mean something locally even though it refers to a universal concept. Second, the lexical gap between different languages / cultures, as the case between Arab countries and western World, needs to be taken into consideration during the process of translating. Third and most important, decisions in translation should be taken on the basis of the context of situation as this parameter is an overriding factor in all translation activities, especially military translation.

## References

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