

Translation and News Making in Arabic

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Abstract

This practical paper explores blockages in media communication resulting from less appropriate choices made by translators and editors (news makers) in translated news into Arabic. It explores ways to rectify this problem by rediscovering Arabic, changing professional practices and effectively handling new challenges posed by global media. Through the analysis of media examples, the paper suggests ways to improve media communication in Arabic by indicating how news makers can remain closer to the linguistic and cultural specificities of their language.

Keywords: news makers, news Arabic, culture-specific, communication blockage, linguistic expressions, native audience.

Introduction

In many news media outlets, Arab readers often find themselves reading translated news report into Arabic that feel familiar, but only to the ones who are bilingual or multilingual. Native recipients (NR), however, find the same news reports stilted and not Arabic enough. With the rapid advances in media associated technologies, it is easily noticeable that Arab media and its language have been affected rather in negative terms. I recall once a friend, with very little knowledge of English was reading an evening Arabic newspaper, suddenly asked “what is الادلجة” that appeared in in a news report about the “ideologizing of the media.” This is a term transliterated from the English “ideology” meaning “to cause to comply with or yield to a particular ideology.” In the Arabic news report, the verbal noun transliterated form solves the problem for the translator, but leaves many NRs, like my friend, at a loss. Perhaps, what is needed here is a footnote or an in-text bracketed bit of information to help understand and thus establish effective communication such as the following, which means the same English definition of the term given above. (جعل جهة ما ان تنسجم مع او تخضع لفكر معين)

This strategy would assist my friend and all NRs like him decode and understand what for them are strange Arabic terms and expressions in news reports. As suggested above, this blockage of communication can easily be removed by collateral bracketed clarifying information. In this regard, Hachten & Scotton (2007, p.91) argue that “[E]ffective communication across national borders, regardless of other cultural and political differences, certainly requires the sender and receiver communicate in a mutually understandable language.” Naturally, globalization has affected Arabs and Arabic, but this could be managed through linguistic adaptations through a rediscovery of Arabic itself. Before they become unmanageable and threatening to NRs, obstacles in news Arabic, such as the example discussed above, need to be addressed by Arabic news-makers. Within this context, this paper posits that the presupposition on the part of the news makers and insufficient linguistic background on the part of NRs causally lead to blockages in communication. So, perhaps Arab news makers need to be clearer, more selective and stay as close as possible to the linguistic identity of Arabic when handling information (news) interlingually and interculturally for their NRs to drastically decrease communication blockages.

Causes of the Problem

For the Arab World, and perhaps the globe, Western media outlets remain the main sources of news (cf. Hassan, A. J., 2008). Non-NRs are often intrigued by apparently unpolished translated news reports into their native languages. In the case of Arabic news making, English is the dominant donor. The following English expressions, for example, may easily cause communication blockages if the news-makers in Arabic do not carefully communicate their meanings for their Arab readers.

Mechanics of registration

Chemistry of love

Politics of the nuclear bomb

Biological mother

Genetic engineering

True, languages and their speakers cannot live in isolation, but not all users become users of foreign languages. As such, news-makers need to facilitate the reading-process of their NRs when transferring news items into their native language. In this regard, Fawcett (2003, p, 46) argues that Providing the audience with enough information to understand the translation can be a headache because the translator has to make often difficult judgments about the readers' level of sophistication and the degree to which they can be expected to show the initiative, while trying to balance such things as cultural judgments and readability.

Educated Arabs with little English language knowledge or even bilinguals, frequently either simply ignore the meanings of certain terms and phrases, or ask for clarifications. They often opt for the former as the latter solution may show them as "ignorant." I have personally been asked by many about the intended meaning of Arabic phrases like

" الشيطان في التفاصيل (the devil in the details)

حل الدولتين (a two-state solution)

الرجوع الى المربع الاول (back to square one)

اعطي الضوء الاخضر (s/he was given the green light)

These Arabic phrases are literal translations of their English sources. Most Arab readers would manage their overall meanings out of the sum total meanings of individual words. Still, most NRs, in particular, would find the Arabic translations "unnatural" and foreign. The problem is that Arab news makers tend to use these ready-made, half-baked phrases presupposing that their broad audiences enjoy the same linguistic "gymnastics" for effective communication. Further, these news makers may believe that in a fast-paced media context searching for alternatives in Arabic could be time consuming and may go against the business interests of their media outlet in a competitive market. But, the problem could be addressed through cooperation between the different Arab media providers. What is needed is basically good will, some investment in training, and a code of ethics regarding this matter.

From the perspective of this paper, the root causes lay in the readiness of Arab news makers to opt for choices such as the above Arabic expressions that yield often distorted media language in Arabic. There are linguistic and cultural causes, which can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Unlike English and other Indo-European languages, Arabic is a Semitic language. As such it is mostly derivational not combinational (Aljuzu, 1992; Ziadeh, 2003).
- 2) Cultural, semantic and syntactic unfamiliarity on the part of the news makers (translators and editors).
- 3) High frequency of usage by news makers of ready-made news phrases often transliterations or calques.
- 4) Speed is the name of the game in news media outlets.
- 5) Reluctance by bilingual/multilingual employees and/or news editors to rectify the tendency of using ready-made linguistic structures.
- 6) Lack of effort and interest in affecting reform / change.

There are also a number of reasons why translators, reporters and editors, working in Arab media outlets, do not tend to be amenable to changes in their ways or styles of making Arabic news.

- They are governed by the institution media policy, particularly in the political and economic sectors related to international relations,
- In no accountability areas, they are guided by the translator choices, particularly in areas where politics is rarely touched upon as opposed to scientific news, for example.
- They make no effort or are reluctant to look for effective equivalents,
- They take new expressions to be more up-to-date and/or better alternatives.
- The availability of ready-made patterns, which are helpful for the news makers to keep them on the safe side. For example, they readily employ Arabic patterns like ((قضايا ذات الاهتمام المشترك)) or ((قضايا تهم البلدين)) for the English expression "Issues of common interest/concern".

Arabization (also Arabicization) of foreign expressions has been a matter of debate among Arab researchers. Almarghani (1982), for example, postulates a number of common rules for Arabization. But, even here the question remains: Why are some Arabic representations of English counterparts in the news comprehensible to the audience while others are not? The answer could be one of the following:

- -Frequency of use: New Arabic equivalent expressions are of three types: highly frequent (the green light ((الضوء الاخضر)), less frequent (cloning (الاستنساخ)), and rarely used (working on an hourly basis (المساوغة) or daily basis (المياومة)).
- -Date of entry into use : Usually the highly frequent expressions are the ones that quickly come into circulation such as academic course (المساق الاكاديمي), but less or rarely frequent expressions do not become so frequent such as sophistication (السفسطة) and mosaic (موازيك).
- -Extent of approximation: Despite the availability of the same or similar Arabic equivalents, Arab news makers tend to use often dissimilar translation like expressions (يضع العربية قبل الحصان) for “To put the cart before the horse.” For this and similar English expressions there are native Arabic equivalents such as (يحضر العلف قبل الحصان) and /or the more classical one (يحضر القماط قبل الرضيع)
- -Audience educational and cultural background: As in other countries, there is a considerable number of Arabs whose knowledge of foreign languages is minimal or insufficient to allow them to cope with modern media. They are unable to decode some messages in Arabic that are influenced by a foreign languages, that is literal or direct translations.
- -Miscalculation on the part of the equivalent creators and/or makers. The presupposition here is that the new linguistic expressions will be easily consumed and will not cause confusion for the average Arab receivers, as is the case with “mobile phone” which is usually rendered into Arabic as محمول. But even here, there is no agreement between the so-called Arab academies since others expressions are also in circulation for “mobile phone” - منقول|محمول|خلوي|متحرك; - leading to a situation of one-to-many equivalents in Arabic.
- - Self-distinction on the part of news-makers: News-makers and other users tend to create use for the created Arabic expressions to demarcate prominence or distinction for themselves, particularly when it comes to rarely or less frequent expressions.

Data Analysis and Discussion:

The body of the data is composed of examples collected from professionals and instructors of translation at university level. The purpose is to describe the problems associated with news-making in Arabic and the increasing influence of foreign languages, particularly English, on contemporary Arab media. The situation becomes one of searching for tools and alternatives available in the target language (in this case Arabic) to either degrade the foreign influence or eliminate it, as Kholousi (2000) argues. Then and only then maximal audience comprehension of the unusual Arabic equivalents can be achieved.

In this analysis, ten linguistic issues are discussed with examples of Arabic news-making and suggestions are made as to how to deal with them.

1-Using the derivative forms of the Arabic trilateral verb when possible:

A- The Arabic root verb form is composed of three radicals (ف.ع.ل) and the root form can be prefixed or suffixed to produce at least seven derivative verb forms (cf. Hassan, A., 1975). These derivatives can be employed in the media to help solve a number of instances of the foreign influence and polish Arabic equivalents of different foreign language expressions.

More importantly, being a Semitic language, Arabic has a distinctive merit; its ability to express situations not only through grammatical sentences, but also through single lexemes. Consider the following examples where one Arabic lexeme stands for full sentences in English:

توحدنا=we reached a point of no return.

اصطاف= he had a summer holiday.

انخذل= he swallowed his pride

استحمت=she took a bath

استفحلت= it has got out of control

B- Trilateral verb derivatives can probably be better used to render the English passive forms expressions instead of the conventional, journalistic passive expressions or even normal active ones. The following examples show that only the derivatives can be employed to render the first two English passive voices while the third is better rendered by the derivative (تفعل) in Arabic:

1. Their civilization had fallen into oblivion=اندثرت حضاراتهم
2. They were divorced yesterday=تطلقا يوم امس
3. Ancient Ethiopians influenced the Egyptian civilization=تأثرت الحضارة المصرية بقدماء الاثيوبيين

2-Negated opposites instead of literal translations:

The particles of negation in Arabic are numerous and time-specific, particularly at the sentence level (cf. Aflaih, 2001). In many languages, there are expressions that have more than one connotation when used with others. But when used with certain words in certain contexts, the plain denotation is not preferred to the recipient. When an adjective, for instance, is employed in a phrase to persuade audiences, for emphasis purposes, its negative interpretation is preferred to the plain one as in:

1. Safe medicine=دواء غير ضار= harmless medicine
2. Clean environment=بيئة غير ملوثة= unpolluted environment

In these examples and informed by the context of situation, the English adjectives 'safe and clean,' are rendered by the negated opposite Arabic equivalents 'harmless and unpolluted' as they are more effective in Arabic. Equally when the English news-makers describe a failed coup in a state, for example, they usually use the "negated adjective" as in "unsuccessful coup attempt" which is (lit. محاولة غير ناجحة). This Arabic equivalent sounds less acceptable to an Arab audience than the assertive non-basic meaning (فاشلة), meaning 'failed.'

3-Bracketed clarifying information

When there are no precise or approximate Arabic equivalents for foreign culture-specific expressions in the source language, bracketed clarifying expressions are desperately needed in the target language (Arabic) to convey the message clearly. In this regard, the news makers or creators should not presuppose that their audiences are fully equipped with the necessary information or familiar with the culture-specific language items. They should bear in mind that full or maximum comprehension in communication should be blockage-free. Here are some media examples:

- 10 Downing Street=(مقر الحكومة البريطانية)= lit. HQ of the British Government
 Diat=(البرلمان الياباني)=lit. Japanese Parliament
 Chancellor of the Exchequer=(وزير المالية في بريطانيا)= lit. British Finance Minister
 The Fed=The Federal Reserve=(البنك المركزي الامريكي)= American Central Bank

This strategy should be employed with often unfamiliar acronyms or initials that need clarifying:

- SMEs= small and medium enterprises=المشاريع الصغرى والمتوسطة
 CEO=Chief executive Officer=(المسؤول التنفيذي الرئيسي)
 OAPC=(the Organization of the Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries)= (منظمة الدول العربية المصدرة للنفط)
 ASEAN=Association of South East Nations=(منظمة امم جنوب شرق آسيا)
 The BRISC Countries= Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa and China = (دول البريسك وهي البرازيل وروسيا والهند وجنوب افريقيا والصين)

4-Temporary information gap filling

When news-makers or creators presuppose smooth communication, they should not leave information gaps unfilled for one obvious reason that their goal is to achieve maximal or blockage-free communication. When information gaps are left unfilled by the news-makers, ambiguity prevails. In the following phrase, the Arabic equivalent of the English expression is confusing:

Two- state solution=(حل الدولتين) is a phrase that emerged as a way of ending the Arab-Israel conflict by establishing two states on the same land. In the phrase (حل الدولتين) the Arabic equivalent (حل) has two inseparable interpretations. The phrase can accept both interpretations:

- a- Solution
- b- Dissolution

To achieve maximal media communication, the confusion can be delimited and removed by adding the needed information during the initial entry of the phrase into circulation in a way that helps receivers avoid confusion of meaning. So for 'two-state solution,' one can suggest:

(حل يعتمد على إنشاء دولتين) =lit. A solution based on establishing two states. The gap between the lexemes (حل) and (الدولتين) is filled and adequate communication is achieved. Once the phrase becomes known the added information can be removed as was the case the Arabic equivalents of (stones' throwers) = (أطفال الحجارة). This strategy of gradual identification/familiarization introduces the audience first and reduces redundancies later.

5-Conversion of culture-related linguistic expressions

The universe is a composite of different cultures, where each culture is reflected by and in its language. Because of geopolitical and economic reasons, languages of the "third world" and developing countries are generally culturally receptive. Western media items, including news reports, are awash with fixed proverbs and sayings. Imported linguistic expressions from other languages through the media need processing and adjusting. Some of these expressions are unproblematic and have sometimes the same counterparts or acceptable frequent translations in the target language as in these two examples:

A friend in need is a friend indeed = (الصديق عند الضيق)
Protection is better than cure = (الوقاية خير من العلاج)

Others, however, have approximated or semi-equivalents where selection must be carefully calculated as in following underlined phrase in this Shakespearian saying: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day." To opt for the 100% equivalent يوم صيفي in Arabic keeps the source idea intended for a Briton, who usually gets a day or two of proper summer at any given time (before global warming, anyway). To an Arab, however, this does not signal the same intended effect of beauty because a summer's day is not rare; it is almost every day of the year. In this case, opting for an approximation equivalent like "يوم ربيعي جميل" =lit. a beautiful spring day' may well do the job.

The same applies to the phrase of the former British M.P. Enoch Powel when he commented on the integration of immigrants in Britain during last century and anticipated catastrophes:

Rivers of blood = (بحور من الدماء). Moreover a proverb like the following "to take coal to Newcastle" has neither identical Arabic equivalent nor an approximate one because it is too culture specific. A culture-specific counterpart should be sought in the target culture which could be a classic proverb such as "بيبع التمر في هجر (اليمن)" = lit. to sell dates in Hajar (Yemen); or a Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) one "بيبع الماء في حارة السقاين" = lit. to sell water in the district of water-sellers.

And so is the case with this phrase used by the former British Labor M.P. Denis Healey in describing parts of a speech delivered by the former Tory M.P. Geoffrey Howe: To be savaged by a dead sheep = (افترسته شاة خائرة القوى)

6-Adjusting time and aspect

In English and other Indo-European languages, the perfect tenses are frequently used (cf. Comrie, 1985). Since Arabic verbs do not only indicate time, but also completion and non-completion, news makers and creators face difficulties in delimiting situations with current relevance of the perfect tense in Indo-European languages. Here usually a verb form indicating completion is used instead of a form or forms highlighting the current relevance. Ways that can be of help to Arab media practitioners to maintain the current relevance of the English perfect in are discussed through the following examples:

The liberation of our country has started = (ان تحرير بلدنا قد بدأ)

The Arabic particle (قد) indicates that the event is in progress.

We have worked together for two years = (مرامضى على اشتراكنا في العمل سنتان)

There is a third way of maintaining the current relevance by using the Arabic verb forms (فعل ويفعل) connected by (الواو) as in:

He has lived in this country since 2011 = (عاش ويعيش في هذا البلد منذ 2011) =lit. he lived and still lives in this country since 2011.

Another possible way of indicating the English perfect is the use of the two Arabic defective verbs (كان) و (ما زال) + (يفعل) (the verb form)

2011 كان وما زال يعيش في هذا البلد منذ =lit. he was living and still is still living in this country since 2011.

As for situations of current relevance in the past indicated by the past perfect, the most effective way of formulating this tense is by using the two Arabic defective verbs discussed above but without the (و) as in

He was killed when he had been in this country= (قتل حينما كان مايزال يعيش في هذا البلد)=lit. he was killed when he was still working in this country.

7-Adjusting word classes

During the assembly and editorial process of the components of the news, some media translators and editors are often reluctant to change the word classes in the sentences (cf. Al-Jabouri, 1996). This way, the end products sound less Arabic and are often in need of reworking and adjustment as the following example, where the verbal Arabic is used as equivalent for the English adjective.

He is perfect in French= (يتقن اللغة الفرنسية)

In the next example, the verbal Arabic item is used to function as equivalent for the English adverb form.

The government quickly withdrew its ambassador = (أسرعت الحكومة في سحب سفيرها)

The implication here is that news makers need to be selective when it comes to word classes and thoughtful about their media products vis-à-vis the audience. Furthermore, Arabic news makers need to avoid the orthodox approach of selection at the expense of appropriate Arabic structures for fear of jeopardizing loyalty to the original text. In Arabic, news makers have at their disposal numerous alternatives for class switching that yield better sounding Arabic structures that are acceptable to Arabic language readers.

8-Word order and lexical repetition

At the sentential level, languages differ, particularly about the fronting of the verb. Arabic favors fronting while English does not. The problem here does not only lie in fronting, but also in the amount of information filling the slots allocated for the verb and the subject in a sentence. In Arabic, the amount of information filling the subject slot frequently surpasses that of the verb and as such a reminder of the verb is required. The often huge amount of information in the subject slot is the result of incremental information, and therefore, requires verb repetition in order not cause communication loss or confusion. In English the problem seems less serious because the verb is not fronted and there is thus no need for a reminder. This can be illustrated by the following constructed example where the verb (ناقش) is repeated:

The 6-member Iraqi sport delegation who arrived in the Jordanian capital Amman yesterday evening on 4-day official visit discussed the exchange of sport expertise

ناقش الوفد الرياضي العراقي المؤلف من ستة اعضاء والذي وصل الى العاصمة الاردنية عمان مساء امس في زيارة رسمية تستغرق اربعة ايام ناقش تبادل الخبرات الرياضية بين البلدين

(lit. Discussed the Iraqi sport delegation which is composed of six members and which arrived at Amman the Jordanian capital yesterday evening on a 4-day official visit discussed the exchange of sport expertise).

9-Pluralizing Verbal Nouns:

Arab news makers face difficulties in introducing some pluralized Arabic infinitives (verbal nouns) of the trilateral verbs as equivalents for English, particularly English verbal nouns ending with (-ings). The problem here is due to the Arabic verbal noun of the trilateral root form which it is not always easy to derive regular plural forms through feminine suffix (ات) . One solution is to place a singular verbal noun after a plural noun with the feminine suffix as in these two following examples:

Killings= (عمليات القتل) = (lit. operations of killing).

Failures= (حالات الفشل) – (lit. cases of failing).

But, if mishandled, Arabic plural forms can often be confusing and may thus cause communication blockages.

10) Anaphora and Cataphora

The two linguistic tools of anaphora and cataphora are usually used in some languages like English at sentential and intersentential levels. The former is employed by language users when a pronoun in the language stretch refers back to a previously mentioned noun (backward reference), while the latter is used when an earlier pronoun refers forward to a noun in the structure as in these two examples:

The president mentioned that in his speech= (ذكر الرئيس ذلك في خطابه) = (lit. *mentioned the president that in speech his).

In his speech the president mentioned that= (في خطابه ذكر الرئيس ذلك) = (lit. * in speech his mentioned the president that).

Conclusion

As the discussion in this paper indicates, the aim here is to explore ways of reducing confusion and foreignness of expressions in news making in Arabic with a view to assisting Arab receivers of news effectively and appropriately process information and thus facilitate communication. Along a similar line, Kramsch (2014: 252) writes:

These differences are based not only on conventional semantic definitions but also on the subjective, social and cultural resonances of utterances, not only on their standard meaning but on their indexicality, that is, their meaning relative to the context of the utterance.

Through some examples, the paper has discussed how Arab news makers can achieve maximal communication through plausible native substitutes instead of the now widely used foreign sounding structures. The paper suggests that Arab news makers need to be considerate to their readers who may not have the required background in the foreign languages they rely on in making news in Arabic. As the discussion above indicates, Arabic provides ample productive strategies for modern standard Arabic news structures that take into consideration the audience and the purpose of news making; that are effective mutual communication between producers and receivers alike. It is hoped that this paper has provided indications that Arabic has tools, often need to be rediscovered, for effective news making that respond to the requirements of news media in today's global context without alienating Arab NRs.

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