

TRANSLATING METAPHOR IN WRITTEN ARABIC: ISSUES IN CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Hamad Aldosari

Abstract

This research aims at examining the difficulties that Saudi EFL learners majoring in translation encounter when translating metaphor-laden discourse from English into Arabic. The researcher selected a random sample that comprised 60 undergraduate students who were enrolled in a translation course during the second semester 2014/2015. The researcher designed a translation test that consists of 20 statements which EFL learners were requested to translate from English into Arabic. Each statement contained a metaphoric expression. Sample metaphors were extracted from a variety of discourses. The researcher also conducted informal open-ended interviews with teachers of translation to garner additional information from the teachers' points of view regarding these difficulties in creative translational writing. Findings revealed that participants encounter a variety of difficulties when translating culturally laden expressions, especially metaphors. These difficulties are generally produced by the learners' being unfamiliar with these metaphoric expressions and consequently their crash to creatively gain their nearest equivalence in Arabic. Findings also showed that ambiguity of some metaphoric expressions can result in the obfuscation of understanding and hence rendering metaphors into Arabic. Another difficulty revealed was the lack of knowledge or use of translational writing techniques and strategies in reformulating metaphoric meanings from the source language to the target language. In this light of the findings, the study shows that empowering translation programs with more courses that address cultural differences, enrich cultural knowledge, and increase cultural awareness should be essential components of the programs that prepare translators.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a system of thought assumed to be deeply grounded in the culture of its speakers. Translation between languages should therefore involve an understanding of the culture and thought patterns esoteric to a certain language for "contrastive rhetoric analysts confirm that people transfer those patterns when they write in another language" (Hammad, 2003, p. 2). Whorf (1956) suggests that language is the tangible representation of people's thoughts. There could be similarities in people's thought patterns and cultures, but languages need to be enriched by intercultural exchanges which languages incorporate in their linguistic repertoire via translation. However, the most difficult aspects in language which are highly culture-specific are metaphors. Metaphors are also hard to translate even by competent Arabs learning a foreign language. Arab EFL speakers who show a high degree of communicative competence in English in that they do not produce many linguistic errors continue to produce ineffective EFL translational writing, especially when it comes to the rendition of metaphors. It is extrapolated, according to prior research findings of Hall (1981), Whorf (1952), Kaplan (1966; 1987), and Mekheimer (2012) in addition to many other contrastive analysis researchers (Liebman, 1992; Mann, et al., 1992), that the rhetorical development and organization that are manifested in the EFL (translational) writing of Arabic speakers are those patterns that Arab speakers learn and use in their own tongue, i.e., Arabic. Those patterns are described by Kaplan (1972) in terms of a series of parallel structures and by Ostler and Kaplan (1982) as relying on the excessive use of cultural and linguistic similarities between the target language and the source language. Albeit, in many cases, there are no such similarities. Arabic speakers who translate from English into Arabic and vice versa can find the thought patterns in both languages obscure, especially in

Arabic which has a circular rhetorical pattern of thought. In this circular pattern, translators and writers go around the point without directly stating their opinion or affirming a position. This circular pattern is similar to Kaplan's description of the thought pattern of Oriental languages. The problem of translating such circular discourse is even more prominent when translators encounter metaphors, which are esoteric to the culture and geography of Arabic speakers. According to Goatly (1997),

“Metaphor occurs when a unit of discourse is used to refer unconventionally to an object, process or concept, or colligates in an unconventional way. And when this unconventional act or reference or colligation is understood on the basis of similarity, matching or analogy involving the conventional referent or colligates of the unit and the actual unconventional referent or colligates”. In some cases, metaphors can become untranslatable. One example can be taken from the Koran: upon describing that the infidels will not enter heaven for sure, the Koran says “They will not enter heaven until a camel can pass through the hole of needle”. Describing something as impossible to happen metaphorically as a camel passing through a needle's hole is highly cultural and the metaphor may be unintelligible for native speakers of English or for westerners at large.

The difficulties are not only semantic, but they are also syntactic, grammatical, and above all, rhetorical and stylistic. These difficulties in translating metaphoric language are manifested in the form of grammatical and rhetorical errors made during the rendering of metaphor both into English from Arabic and from English from Arabic. Although some native speakers of Arabic can develop a degree of competency in the translational writing into English without errors, their writing continues to have significant contrastive differences. The source of those contrastive differences has been attributed to first language transfer.

Transfer of rhetorical errors in translational language comes as a result of misuse of those rhetorical devices that Arab students of translation have learned in Arabic into their EFL writing. Contrastive rhetoric studies that examine the writing of Arab EFL students have mainly been concerned with comparing the translational writing of Arab students with that of Native speakers of English (Silva, 1993). Kaplan (1966, 1972, & 1987) was the first to investigate the rhetorical differences in the patterns of some languages, including Arabic. He claims that Arab students, as well as other EFL students, tend to follow those rhetorical patterns they have learned in their first language (L1). Maintaining a parallel structure seems to be the predominant pattern used by Arab EFL speakers. This parallelism is what creates the difficulty in producing sound, clear and understandable translations in both languages, especially when metaphor is there in the translation text.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The translation of metaphors has been an argumentative issue in translation studies, especially in the domains of translatability, interlanguage and language transfer (Gadacha, 2006; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Pinchuck, 1977). Language, culture, and related paralinguistic features and metaphoric discourse manifested in cultural variations play a vital role in the processes and across the different steps of translation. Therefore, training programs of translators should be enriched to develop an inter-lingual, intercultural awareness of L1 and L2 in practice. This intercultural, inter-lingual awareness can be achieved only when translators are linguistically equipped with sufficient knowledge of the SL and TL in terms of language skills preparation, cultural/linguistic awareness, and translation skills; any lack thereof, according to Larson (1984), could often be challenging. Therefore, Cook (2003) aptly observes that “translation cannot be conducted at a purely linguistic level but must incorporate cultural and contextual factors too” (p. 55). The problem of this study indicates that the translation of metaphors between English and Arabic can be reflected into three broad trajectories, namely, language proficiency defects; insufficiency in intercultural knowledge; and curriculum design issues.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The researcher followed a descriptive method of research in order to collect data on the current patterns of challenges and difficulties that hinder translation students from performing accurate renditions of metaphors. In this way, the researcher collected data through different tools: classroom observation, a questionnaire to investigate the perceptions of the participants in the study on issues related to the difficulties in translating culture-laden discourse and metaphoric discourse. The questionnaire was personally handed over to the participants in the beginning of the second semester of the academic year 2015. The participants of this study were 60 undergraduate students selected randomly and assigned to an experimental and a control group. The participants were enrolled in Translation III course – an advanced course in translation. Qualitative responses to open-ended questions were collected via the questionnaire. The responses were coded and analyzed for identifying several themes and sub-patterns.

Findings

Statistical data and qualitative analyses of observations and open-ended data helped the researcher in identifying three distinct patterns that describe the prominent challenges participants in this study perceive in the translation of metaphors. The following is a discussion of these most important patterns.

3.1 Lack of Proficiency in English and Unfamiliarity with Figures of Speech

The participants showed that they encounter problems with language. Participants indicated that they lack proficiency that can enable them to practice translation in a skillful way. Part of the problem is attributable to the low level of pre-tertiary education in foreign languages. In this vein, it can be attributed to the weak lexical and grammatico-syntactic knowledge they possess. Indeed, they stressed the fact that their limited vocabulary range is a strong reason why they cannot practice translation well. Table 1 below summarizes this finding:

Table 1. Frequencies & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to problems with linguistic competence

Statements	Freq.	%
1. Proficiency insufficiency in both target and source languages.	28	97
2. Insufficient knowledge of grammatico-syntactic competencies in English.	29	98
3. Difficulties in building grammatical sentences, phrases, and clauses that match the standards of English syntax and stylistics.	24	77
4. Inappropriate use of English words or classical Arabic.	23	75
5. Difficulty understanding metaphoric language.	23	74.7
6. Difficulty finding suitable equivalence in the dictionaries of both target and source languages for metaphoric items.	15	50

7. Difficulty finding an acceptable/appropriate meaning of words in context due to obsolescence, connotative meanings, polysemy, or flowery language rich in figurative expressions.	13	38
8. Difficulty in translating compound words, or restructuring compound and complex sentences from Arabic into English and vice versa.	11	34
9. Mismatches between concepts in English and Arabic.	11	34
10. Linguistic intricacies due to variety, diglossia, dialect and idiolect resulting from ambiguity	10	32

The participants of the present study perceived the understanding of culturally loaded words and idioms that form the structure and semantic content of metaphors to be one of the main problems they face when they render culturally loaded texts. A lack of cultural background of the TL and the difficulty of translating of some proverbs are, according to the study participants, one of the major problems that may hinder an appropriate translation of a text or part of it. Items on the questionnaire demonstrate a high percentage of agreement to items corresponding to these issues ranging between 85% and 50%. Table 2 below summarizes this finding:

Table 2. Frequencies & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to Lack of Cultural Competency

Statements	Freq.	%
11. Lack of cultural awareness of English.	24	85
12. Translation of metaphors in the target language is difficult when there are different cultural usages of the idioms, proverbs, adages, etc.	21	77
13. Students are less aware of the connection of some idioms when they occur in context in translation texts.	21	77
14. Lack of sufficient exposure to the target culture.	18	62
15. Cultural misunderstandings due to communication, written language, presentation of idiomatic expressions, etc.	15	50

3.2 Translation Pedagogy and Practice

The participants also showed that the lack of knowledge or use of translational writing techniques and strategies in reformulating metaphoric meanings from the source language to the target language can be a hindrance to the understanding and accurate translation of metaphors. They also indicated that the absence of practicing translation in the classroom leads to having difficulties in translation and so is the case with the absence of specialized translation instructors as well as absence in reading literature and practicing translation freely at home. They finally informed the researcher that translation is not taught systematically to address issues in the translation of culture-laden discourse. Table 3 below summarizes these findings:

Table 3. Frequencies & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to Translation Pedagogy and Practice

Statements		
16. lack of knowledge or use of translational writing techniques and strategies in reformulating metaphoric meanings from the source language to the target language	28	98
17. The absence of practicing translation in the classroom leads to having difficulties in translation.	27	96
18. The absence of specialist instructors in the field of translation is problematic.	27	96
19. Lack of adequate practice of translation at home and lack of readings, especially in literature.	23	75
20. Translation is not taught systematically to address issues in the translation of culture-laden discourse.	23	75

3.3 Discussion

Findings from this study are congruent with some researchers' emphasis that "the most important language component for learners" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 449). Developing a mental lexicon in foreign language learning is not only essential to translation training, but is so for second language acquisition/foreign language learning as Laufer (1997) assumes learning lexicons is the first essential step for L2 learners. In addition, lexical use is an important area where translation students can make mistakes, correct and learn from lexical errors more effectively compared to the other components of the language system (Bahameed, 2007; Moharram, 2004). Insufficient lexical knowledge not only can be conducive to lexical use errors in second language acquisition/foreign language learning, but can also hinder the basic steps in the translation process, forcing students to over-rely on dictionaries in translation assignments or exams – a very time-consuming and ineffective method, especially when key words are lost and they cannot practice any guesswork (Gass and Selinker, 2008). There are several studies that show how important vocabulary learning is for error correction and efficient translation work, given that problems in vocabulary use are the most serious of all (Politzer, 1978; Levenston, 1979). Several studies also show that vocabulary training in translation work is more essential for students than grammatico-syntactic training (Meara, 1984; Blaas, 1982), thus indicating that lexical errors are more numerous than grammatical one by the third in a specimen text. For native speakers, too, lexical errors were perceived to be more troublesome than grammatical mistakes could be (Johansson, 1978; Meara, 1984).

These findings also suggest that translation instructors and learners should emphasize the presentation of sufficient lexical knowledge and training in both ordinary language discourse and literary discourse in classroom training. In the same way, the present study emphasizes the issue of insufficient lexical knowledge being a real barrier to the metaphor translation process. The results also suggest that that it is difficult for the participants to find appropriate equivalents in both L1 and L2 dictionaries due to polysemy, figurative usages, obsolescence or nuances in word usage according to context which add up to the impediments behind adequate translation of metaphors. In

addition, students perceive a difficulty in forming compound words, and expressions that contain a lexicon whose meanings are loaded with cultural content. These findings are congruent with those of Baker (1992) who stated that “Errors and problems in translation mostly result from the non- equivalence between the source and target languages” when training programmes fall short of satisfying these needs (pp. 20-21). The results also demonstrated the importance of teaching the target language culture to the students as agreed by almost all participants in the present study. These findings further support the literature related to the significance of teaching culture in translation programmes; this is commensurate with findings in the study of Jabak (2007) which suggested that 45% of the problems that faced the participants (N=200) upon translating texts from Arabic into English related to cultural problems. Translating proverbs is difficult for students because the meaning of proverbs is culture-bound. Finding equivalent proverbs in English and Arabic can be rare due to the fact that these languages belong to different families and their cultures are, to a large extent, different too and such differences bring about a barrier between L1 and L2 (Newmark, 1981; Nida, 2001).

4. CONCLUSION

This study showed the difficulties and challenges that Saudi students enrolled in colleges of languages and translation encounter during the translation of metaphoric discourse. Qualitative and quantitative analyses helped identify three trajectories of the problems and challenges that student translators encounter upon rendering metaphoric language both in English and Arabic. Findings indicated that lexical knowledge insufficiency, inadequate grammatical and communicative competence, and inadequate cultural competence were important difficulties that should be addressed in the curriculum of these colleges. Findings revealed that participants encounter a variety of difficulties when translating culturally laden expressions, especially metaphors. These difficulties are generally produced by the learners’ being unfamiliar with these metaphoric expressions and consequently their crash to creatively gain their nearest equivalence in Arabic. Findings also showed that ambiguity of some metaphoric expressions can result in the obfuscation of understanding and hence rendering metaphors into Arabic. Another difficulty revealed was the lack of knowledge or use of translational writing techniques and strategies in reformulating metaphoric meanings from the source language to the target language. In this light of the findings, the study shows that empowering translation programs with more courses that address cultural differences, enrich cultural knowledge, and increase cultural awareness should be essential components of the programs that prepare translators.

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