

Making Translation Theories Work across Space and Time: A Critical Reflection on Translation in the Islamic Era

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the earlier seeds of fragmentary translation theories in the Islamic era. It first presents some renowned philologists, grammarians, writers and linguists who have prominently contributed to translation and articulated their thoughts of translation. The study reveals buried inheritance of Islamic era by means of gaining insight into earlier immature theories of translation and looking into contemporary mature theories of translation, with a view to establishing a dialogical engagement between the two sides. The study asserts the fact that translation has been interdisciplinary since time immemorial, and shows how that was a double-edged sword in the history of translation. The article shows that embryonic theorising in Islamic era can fairly be considered the point of departure for developing contemporary theories of translation, the structural features of which include: (1) teamwork translation; (2) encyclopaedic knowledge; (3) Source Language (SL) versus Target Language (TL); (4) the translator and interpreter; (5) bilingual translator and language acquisition interference; (6) translating sacred texts; (7) codes of ethics; (8) legal translation; (9) translation strategies; (10) and acts of 'no-translation'.

Keywords: *interpreting, Islamic era; translation; translation theories*

Introduction

Roughly defined as the transfer of meaning between two languages, translation has played a pivotal role in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps between the languages throughout history. The translation's ultimate goal is then decidedly intercultural communication. Sofer (2002: 25-26) maintains that "Islamic scholars served as a bridge between antiquity and the modern world. Our scientific world has its roots in ancient Greece and Rome, but many of its branches have grown on the trunk of Islamic culture." Likewise, the era of success and prosperity of Western Europe civilisation depends critically on translators (Kelly cited in Hermans 1999: 37).

Historiography of Translation

Since the 1970s, "a major development in translation studies [...] has been research into the history of translation, for an examination of how translation has helped shape our knowledge of the world in the past better equips us to shape our own futures" (Bassnett 2002: 1-2; see also Pym 1992: 189). To better get started, it is particularly useful to examine the term translation theory in a more reflective way. Farghal (2009: 5) convincingly argues that "[t]he role of translation theory is intended to refine and sharpen the already existing level of translating theory by bringing to consciousness a set of strategies and principles in practicing and/or prospective translators" (see also Newmark 1988: 19; Pym 1992: 154).

Taking all this together, we prefer to assume that the history of translation theories is closely bound up with and further impinges upon those of Islamic era— "the era used in

Muslim countries for numbering Islamic calendar years since the Hegira”¹. Although much of incontrovertible evidence of the indeterminacy of earlier seeds of translation theories in the Islamic era is predominantly fragmentary, their lasting imprint on world’s memory seems to be evidently interesting to translation scholars to date. Yet, some of those theories have so far received minimal attention, to the best of our knowledge, thus pending for prompting further research into the field.

An interest in both translators and the acts of translation among Muslim Caliphs was noticeable in many books, but none of these achieves the mission of introducing the early events of translation theories and practices in a sound scholarly framework. The problem is that while such events were profoundly significant in defining the historical features of Islamic era, they were incapable of defining the historical features of translation theories. For example, *Method in Translation History* (1998) by Pym fairly described by Edoardo Crisafulli² as “a provocative and intelligent book which represents a model of excellent scholarship”, seems to have done injustice to refreshing Arab contributions to translation theories, as is the case with theories of translation. Weissbort and Eysteinnsson (2006: 100) point out that:

This is a part of European cultural legacy which is often downplayed in national histories—including literary histories—and sometimes passed over in relative silence, just like the vital role of Arab scholars in preserving and mediating Classical European learning after the demise of Ancient Greece and Rome, in many cases passing it back into Europe through the cross-cultural efforts of translators in Spain, under Muslim leadership.

The purpose of this article is to search for the reasons why a satisfactory theoretical framework has been emasculated and marginalised in modern translation theories and further to compare translation theories in Islamic era to contemporary translation theories.

Delisle (1995) believes that the expansion of Dar al Islam (territories controlled by Islamic State) to include non-Arabic speaking communities was in dire need for and piques great interest in translation. Unlike the concept of “State” in its juridical sense, usually associated with geographical borders, ownership of land, national jurisdiction, army, etc., Islamic State refers to unique religious beliefs, namely to Islamic Caliphate founded in the seventh century AD whereby a caliph rules the far-flung corners of Islamic territories in accordance with Islamic Law. The “Islamic state therefore is not nationality-based; it is an ideological Qur’anic-based state that transcends race and nationality” (Pratt 2005: 157).

Delisle (1995) also sheds more light on the significance of the interpreters’ role, presumably played in the promulgation of Islam in Africa and the flourishing movement of merchandise with Africans (see also Griffith 2008). Nida and Taber (2003: 101) highlight that the Islamic overshadowing effect upon Christians in terms of biblical translation— “[s]ome Christians, both national and foreign tend to adopt the view of the scriptures which is more in keeping with the tenets of Islam than with biblical view of revelation for they regard the Bible as being essentially a dictated document.” No matter how rigorously worked out, Nida and Taber’s claim open the discussion for the determining influence of translation

¹ Available online at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Islamic%20era> (last cited 05.09. 2016). Hegira refers to Prophet Muhammed’s departure from Mecca to Medina in AD 622 to consolidate the first Muslim community.

² Available online at: <https://www.routledge.com/products/9781900650120> (cited 05.09. 2015).

during the Islamic era on the rapidly developing contemporary translation theories. In fact, Western scholars depict a kind of facile evasion of true history of translation in Islamic era.

Methodology

Data of the study

The data of the study is drawn from relatively contemporary sources (e.g. Nida 1964, Newmark 1988 and 1991 Nida and Taber 2003, Pratt 2005, Gouadec, 2007, Griffith 2008, Pym, 2010, among others). On the other hand, the article draws on resources of Muslim scholars like al-Jahidh (861), ath-Tha‘alibi (961-1038 AD) and an-Nawawwi (1234-1277 AD). True, translation is interdisciplinary, i.e. combined with other disciplines, e.g., history, philosophy, sociology, religion and politics, etc.. It is then possible for scholars from different disciplines to write about translation, and even to be translators, as was the case with distinguished Arab philologists (e.g., al-Jahidh (861), ath-Tha‘alibi (961-1038 AD), an-Nawawwi (1234-1277 AD). The flow of data will then take the form of several stations along the Islamic era by introducing some scholars and their pioneering thoughts related to the field of study.

Significance of the study

Arab studies on translation history seem to be on the increase— it is not an embryonic discipline in the Arab World. However, rigorous studies on the history of translation theories *per se* seem to be rare in comparison with other languages. Therefore, this study would be pioneering as it envisages the early thoughts and practices of translation as a buried inheritance of Islamic era. It paves the way for later insights to compare earlier immature thoughts with modern mature theories of translation to establish a dialogical engagement between the two sides. Hopefully, this article will increase the translation theorists’ awareness of underlying continuity of these theories from the past until today.

Analysis and discussion

To make our argument more powerful, a taxonomy for the theoretical constructs to contemporary translation theories is made. The clearest manifestation of these issues is mainly based on the fact that theorisation is part of translational competence (Pym 1992: 8).

Teamwork translation

The idealised theory outlined above accounts for the way Arab translators acted in social contexts. Amongst two positive effects of teamwork translation principles are boosting behaviour and performance monitoring. Crucially, teamwork may help to protect the quality of translation activities. Corollary to this principle, Kiraly 2000 as cited in Najjar (2008: 114) states, is “providing opportunities for extensive collaboration, and collaborative assessments help the translation students appreciate the importance of teamwork in the professional translation world.” This principle was implemented in one of the most famous institutions of translation in the Islamic era, namely Bait al Hikma (‘House of Wisdom’), established by the Abbasid Caliph, al-Ma’moun (reign 813-833), and was considered as “the equivalent of a modern centre of research excellence or academy” (Al-Mani and Faiq 2012: 6). At the time, translators used to further their own interests through manifold arduous tasks of translation of different text types in Astrology, Medicine, Philosophy, Mathematics, Physics, and so on. For example, Ibn an-Nadeem (988; in Arabic) indicated that the team performance monitoring had been practiced by team chief translator and had positive effects on that performance.

The first to translate Ptolemy's *Almagest* into Arabic was Yaḥya Bin Khalid Bin Barmak. Prior to his translation, some translators translated the text, but it was an unsatisfactory translation. It was then he selected Abi Hassan and chief translator of Bait al Hikma [Ishaq ibn Hunayn] to do the translation tasks, also in the presence of the translators until an excellent Arabic translation was made³ (Ibn an-Nadeem⁴ *ibid.*; see also Wellisch 1986, 31).

In this, reference to the basic orientations for the translation of a piece of scientific paper is made. It raises the awareness of a host of socio-cultural issues like understanding the source text, testing trainers, consulting scholars and finally monitoring and editing translation. Obviously, Yaḥya Bin Barmak, the manager of the translation act during the Abbasid era reminds us of the theory of pre-/post-transfer proposed by (Gouadec 2007), a point which goes in harmony with Islamic era theorisation of translation— “Hunayn sees that translation can be a perfectible act through revision, or if necessary through re-writing, all depending on the competence of the translator of course, as well as the expertise and knowledge of the target reader” (Najjar 2008: 14).

In addition, bad translation seems to be akin to translators who are very individualistic. Newmark states that grotesque semantic translation is usually the work of one translator whilst communicative translation is sometimes “the product of a translation team” (1991: 13). Likewise, Heck as cited in Pym (1992: 164) describes the way two translators often worked on one text in the early Middle Ages: “the first producing a literal version, the second then adjusting the literalism to the stylistic requirements of the [TL].”

Encyclopaedic knowledge

Pym (2010) points out that a translator needs information from an outside world of the text referring to the accrued encyclopaedic knowledge required to any successful translation. What actually Pym theorised dated back to centuries ago as can be shown by al-Jahidh (861: 129), a medieval Arab scholar and critic, that the translator must be bilingual and bicultural so that the translation activity can be done as successfully as possible, “a fact that unfurls before al-Jahidh” (Thawabteh 2014a: 241). Al-Jahidh (*ibid.*) speaks of the competences the translator should have, viz. “a full understanding of the subject matter; an awareness of current methods of translation; a previous apprenticeship with an established translator”, among others (Khoury, 1988: 54, as cited in Al-Mani, Faiq, 2012: 9-10).

The term ‘competence’ is very much related to translation since many centuries. And ‘competence’ is as old as translation profession itself, well-discussed by many translation theorists and practitioners (Nida 1964; Newmark 1988, among others), and is usually linked to knowledge, skills, awareness and expertise. There has been a consensus that language competence is essential and fundamental by many translation theorists (Nida 1964; Newmark 1988, among others), “but not in itself sufficient” as Schäffner and Adab (2002) later claim. Neubert (2000) suggests five parameters with regard to translation competence: (1) language competence; (2) textual competence; (3) subject competence that has mainly to do with the knowledge of outside world at the disposal of the translator; (4) cultural competence “hands-on experience of living and breathing the way of life of another culture” (Skuggevik 2009: 198); (5) and transfer competence.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, translation are carried out by the authors.

⁴ Available online in Arabic at <http://www.alhayat.com/Details/404665> (cited 20.09.2015).

Source language (SL) versus target language (TL)

Catford (1965: 48; emphasis in original; see also Farghal & Shunnaq 1999: 2), views translation as “implantation of SL meanings into the TL text.” With regard to SL, Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997: 157; emphasis in original) offer this definition: “The standard term describing the language in which the text being translated (or SOURCE TEXT) is written. The [SL] is one of the SYSTEMS to which ST belongs (along with, for example, the source literary, textual and cultural systems).” Conversely, the TL is the language into which corresponding TL linguistic and cultural realities occur. Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997, 163) refer to TL as: “One of the two standard terms used to denote the language which being translated into [...] The [TL] is usually the translator’s native language, although there are exceptions to this.”

On the other hand, Al-Jahidh (861: 129; in Arabic) made an interesting proposition for the more elegant and perhaps least confusing technical terms deemed to be the cornerstone for any translation activity: “The translator and interpreter should be well versed in *al-lughah al-manqūla* (lit. ‘the language from which transfer is made’) and *al-lughah al-manqūl il-layha* (lit. ‘the language into which transfer is made’).” These substantially articulate two contemporary terminologies, namely ‘the SL’ for the former and ‘the TL’ for the latter. The Arab legacy-specific terms are perhaps pompous at first glance, but they only really have an intimate relationship with actual translating, in that they describe the transference of both linguistic realities (e.g. syntax, semantics, pragmatics, etc) and cultural realities (e.g. material culture, ideology, etc.) from *al-lughah al-manqūla* (or the SL), into those corresponding ones of *al-lughah al-manqūl il-layha* (or the TL). The *al-lughah al-manqūla* refers to unlimited transferability of linguistic and cultural realities into corresponding *al-lughah al-manqūl il-layha*.

The translator and interpreter

Another point relevant to the discussion by al-Jahidh (ibid.) is ‘translator/interpreter’. Consistent with Arabic nomenclature, al-Jahidh (ibid.) used *turjuman* (lit. ‘translator’ and ‘interpreter’) as opposed to English and many languages which use two terms to distinguish written translation (i.e. ‘translation’) from oral translation (i.e. ‘interpreting’). Al-Jahidh’s theory rests on the assumption that the translator and interpreter actually do the same task which encompasses the transference of meanings from the SL into the TL, thus employing *turjuman* (lit. ‘translator’ and ‘interpreter’) to refer to such process.

Bilingual translator and language acquisition interference

Interference is considered an intrinsic factor in any act of translation. Newmark (1991: 78) says that interference “includes cases when sentences length, punctuation, proper names, neologisms, or cultural words are evidently transferred in the translation.” The translators cannot avoid translation mistakes simply because languages cut linguistic and cultural realities quite differently. Thawabteh (2013: 197) states “that mother-tongue interference has a pernicious influence on the performance of Arabic-English translators in terms of what type of equivalence they are opting for and, consequently employing such a type of equivalence will affect the quality of translation.” Interestingly enough, al-Jahidh (861: 129; in Arabic) spoke of an affinity between the translation theory and the theory of language acquisition interference.

When it ever happens that the translator speaks two languages, we should then know how difficult it is to fully master the two languages because each language gravitates towards its own system, borrows from and conflicts with the other as well. How comes then for the translator to be fully competent in the two languages at the time it is within his power to speak only one competently, so is the translation from one language into another.

As can be noted, language interference for a bilingual or multilingual translator is inevitable according to al-Jahidh. He suggests that a translator would be in the ascendant should he speak one language. Otherwise, the translator's linguistic power is circumscribed. However, in clinical sitting, for instance, (Foster 1998) suggests two types of bilingual translator. First, well-trained translators i.e. "balanced" are those who have the ability to master two languages. Second, ill-trained translators i.e. "unreliable" are those who suffer from the mother language interference. More to the point, Toury (1979: 226) claims that "virtually no translation is completely devoid of formal equivalents, i.e., of manifestations of interlanguage", thus giving rise to what Newmark (1988: 21) argues, "unnatural translation [which] is marked by interference, primarily from the SL text, possibly from a third language known to the translator including his own, if it is not the [TL]."

Translating sacred texts

The fact that "nothing can be translated from Arabic satisfactorily" (Salloum and Peters 1990: ix-x) postulates the nature of translating the Qur'an *per se*. The pre-supposed sacred status of the Qur'an is of an inimitable nature to the point that the pre-Islamic eloquent Arabs failed definitively to compose in Arabic even a Qur'an-like Sura (chapter) as is demonstrably explicit in the following verse: "And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Sura like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers (If there are any) besides God, if your (doubts) are true" (Ali 2:23)⁵. Admittedly, the main translators participating in the Qur'an projects in the early translation into Latin in the twelfth century described their "participation as a 'digression' from their scientific translations" (Pym 1998:130). Pym (ibid.) further adds that "[t]he abbot of Cluny remarks that it cost him 'many prayers and much expense' to have the Qur'an translated into Latin". Furthermore, Pym (1992) describes translating sacred texts as the 'impossible approach to God' referring to the impossible perfect rendering to what is said by God, a view with which al-Jahidh (861: 129; in Arabic) agrees: "Fully competent translation in all sciences is rather impossible and when it comes to religious text, translation tends to be a 'mirage'." Translating sacred texts is challenging, and usually requires an extensive knowledge of cultural studies, language sciences, communication science, history, politics, and religious disciplines, among others. Translating sacred texts can, or should, mean that the translator is constrained by fidelity to original text in terms of, to mention only a few, word order, grammatical voice, and rhetorical features thought to be the be-all and end-all to translation the Qur'an. Apart from this, dynamic equivalence, i.e. an effect to an effect in translation (Nida, 2003) or functional translation at the expense formal translation will doomed to failure. Accordingly, translating religious texts in the Islamic era seems to have adhered to formal equivalence approach rather than to dynamic approach.

Codes of ethics

⁵ Available online at: <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=2&verse=23> (cited 20.09.2015).

Ethics is an old professional concern, perhaps as old as antiquity. Abu Ḥayyan at-Tawḥīdī (984) speaks of codes of ethics adopted by Ibn al-Moqaffa‘, one of the most prominent figures in translation and writing. Ibn al-Moqaffa‘ (724-759 AD) was quite aware of how translators may make hasty decisions in the course of translation, which is likely to leave deleterious impacts on the overall outcome. Not only did Ibn al-Moqaffa‘ establish ethics for texts of written communication but he also did for the production of oral communication and interpreting. These recommendations made by Ibn al-Moqaffa‘ can be fully implemented to control the behaviour of interpreters abiding by ethical codes. He stresses the importance of some oral communication as well as the importance of deep concentration and successful listening. However, such recommendations are ideally adopted nowadays by translation theorists, particularly by communication theorists. Gouadec (2007: 6) says “the effectiveness of communication is the ultimate test of quality in translation.” Gouadec (*ibid.*: 235; emphasis in original) stresses that “[a]ny *bona fide* translator will tacitly comply with an ethical code.” Interpreting-wise, Corsellis (2005: 153) states that the codes of ethics for interpreters, that they (1) interpret truly and faithfully; (2) observe confidentiality; (3) observe impartiality; (4) act with integrity; (5) not accept assignments which they judge beyond their competence; (6) deal professionally with any limitations which may reveal themselves during an assignment; (7) recognise and admit to any conflicts of interest; and (8) do everything possible to safeguard professional standards and support each other.

Legal translation

Almost all acts of translation were carried out in line with Islamic jurisdiction (Thawabteh 2014b). Legal translation is no exception. An-Nawawwi (2017: 1629; in Arabic) points out that “legal translators should know the language of the witness and defendant with which the judge is not familiar, with proviso that he is an adult, emancipated and fair.” By the same token, Thawabteh (2014b: 70) adds that among the significant ethical characteristics of the legal translator are that translator should not be the property of another person, but an adult plenipotentiary, fully loyal to the SL.

Al-Jāhīdh (861: 129) argues that when judges are not familiar with the language of a defendant or a witness, interpreters are then highly needed to facilitate communication among all parties. In some legal cases in Islamic era, it was sometimes compulsory in the court of law (and in accordance with Islamic jurisdiction again) to do any translation activity to have two male translators and, if not available, one male translator and two female translators.

Translation strategies

True, translation is befuddled with multifarious difficulties. This leads to the inception of theorisation which, according to Pym (1992: 197) “begins when there is a practical problem to be solved, usually in a context of social tension.” This further entails devising different strategies to surmount translation difficulties in various acts of translation. Very broadly, translation strategies refer to “the steps, selected from a consciously known range of potential procedures, taken to solve a translation problem which has been consciously detected and resulting in a consciously applied solution” (Scott-Tennent, *et al.* 2000: 108). Almani and Faiq (2012: 9) discuss the translation strategies employed in the Islamic era:

These translators adopted three main strategies: literal, semantic and gist. In literal translation, the translators considered each [SL] word and its meaning and then used Arabic approximations. This often meant that they transliterated technical terms that

produced stilted and odd structures and style in the Arabic rendition. This strategy was predominant during the early or necessity phase of [Medieval Arabic Translation Tradition].

Acts of 'no-translation'

Translation policy is to translate or subvert. Quite true. 'There would be no translation' is very possible and indeed common throughout history. Toury (1980: 75) speaks of the term 'preliminary norms' which includes 'translation policy', that is, the reason for a selection (or not,) of certain text for translation in a particular language. This is valid in Islamic era as Lewis (2001: 75) remarks as to translating literature: "the literature of an alien and heathen society could offer neither aesthetic appeal nor moral guidance. The history of these remote peoples, without prophets or scriptures, was a mere sequence of events, without aim or meaning." Therefore, Almani and Faiq (2012:11) admit that "Medieval Arab translators translated little literature because, on the one hand, they were proud of their own; and, on the other, because Greek literature contained ideas and myths that were not compatible with their belief system."

Concluding remarks

Thus far, the discussion makes a plea for greater consideration to the translation theories from the angle depicted by the study. Translation theories are considered to exist explicitly and/or implicitly both in the acts of translation and in the literature and polemic about translation. A workable taxonomy of these theories are tentatively proposed and can be envisaged as teamwork translation; encyclopaedic knowledge; SL versus TL; the translator and interpreter; bilingual translator and language acquisition interference; translating sacred texts; codes of ethics; legal translation; translation strategies; and acts of 'no-translation'.

In conclusion, first, translation theories are not conclusively attached to a given geographical and temporal world. Rather, these are ubiquitous and were open to every culture. For example, interesting convergences between Pym's (2010) points of view and al-Jahidh's (861) are readily apparent as for the encyclopaedic knowledge the translator should have had. Second, that translation practices are akin to theories hidden in every single practice of translation seems to be oft-truism. The unsatisfactory translation of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, possibly due to literalness, encouraged Yahya Bin Khalid Bin Barmak to revised, edit or even re-translate for more optimal translation. Third, non fully-fledged translation theories will not remain so at a certain point of history as is the case with term *turjuman* (lit. 'translator' and 'interpreter'), coined by the Arabs with given shades of meanings and blossomed into two terms, namely 'translator' and 'interpreter', each with its own meanings. In this regard, Mouakket (1988: 211) "The historical developments of different processes followed in translation, from Roman times to the present, reveal increasing interest on the part of investigators and translators in setting certain rules as guidelines for would-be translators." Fourth, translation theories have given translation studies all over the world a jump-start to further include sub-disciplines, e.g., Audiovisual Translation, Discourse Analysis, Interpreting, Translation Technology, among many others. For instance, the refinement of key notions of *al-lughah al-manqūla* (SL) and *al-lughah al-manqūl il-layha* (TL) into contemporary SL and TL paves the way for developments of other disciplines as they are, at the end of the day, notions which constitute the backbone of these disciplines. For instance, subtitling, as a mode of Audiovisual Translation, refers to the process of transferring a SL dialogue into subtitles (TL) usually displayed on the screen. Fifth, it seems possible to

argue that most Islamic literature on translation theories has been marginalised in the academic circles by highlighting only the western contributions to the field. The notions of *al-lughah al-manqūla* (SL) and *al-lughah al-manqūl il-layha* (TL) have not been paid any attention at all by translation historians, to our best knowledge. Sixth, translation has been paid due attention by Muslims since Prophet Mohammed who ordered his companion Zayd Bin Thabit to be qualified enough to be appointed as the Islamic State's translator and interpreter namely to the Jews oral and written communication. Since the Islamic State is not nationality-based, but rather ideology-based, translation was the only vehicle that promulgates Islam across the globe. Finally, it can then be safely argued that translation theories operate in virtuous circle, rather than vicious. Given translation theories put forward centuries ago can be studied, developed and further related to meanderings of life of modern times.

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