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# “The Ubiquity of Intertextuality: A Case of Arabic-English Translation”

Mohammad Ahmad Thawabteh, MAT



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**Mohammad Ahmad Thawabteh\***

Al-Quds University, Faculty of Arts, Jerusalem  
Israel

**THE UBIQUITY OF INTERTEXTUALITY:  
A CASE OF ARABIC-ENGLISH TRANSLATION**

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The fact that culture and language are two sides of the same coin makes translation activity quite challenging. This is due to the fact that translation is seen as the transference of meaning between two languages; however, translation goes far beyond the transfer of meanings. For instance, intertextuality is a rhetorical device employed by text producers to express more than what is said in an utterance. The present paper examines intertextuality in the translation of *The Square Moon: Supernatural Tales* (1998) by Ghada As-Samman. Intertextuality is first discussed in relation to text, genre and discourse. The analysis shows the realisation of intertextual potentials of Arabic does not only hinge on the process of translation, but it also requires a Target Language (TL) audience with such wide knowledge of the Source Language (SL) culture. The study reveals that when the intertextual reference is esoteric, two translation strategies may be used: foreignisation whereby borrowing and reborrowing are employed, and domestication, in which loan translations are utilised.

**Key words:** *intertextuality, transcultural intertextuality, translation strategies, foreignisation, domestication, borrowing, reborrowing, loan translation.*

**1. Introduction**

Throughout history, translation has been the quintessence of intercultural communication. Western Europe, as Kelly cited in Hermans (1999: 37) points out, "owes its civilization to translators." By the same token, "the Arabs owed the Greeks the initiative and the starting point towards reasoning. But no sooner had they taken the first step, than their vigorous and earnest desire for knowledge surpassed that of Greeks in many fields" (Mouakket 1988: 25). Sofer (2002: 25-26) highlights the role of Arab translators in acting as mediators between their culture and Greek, Byzantine and Persian cultures, among others: "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." The Arab chronicler Al-Tha`albi (died A.D. 1037-38) speaks of the nature of translation between Arab and Persian cultures that (1) some lexis borrowed from Persian were given a new lease of life in Arabic at the time they sank into oblivion in

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\* Al-Quds University, PO Box 20002, Abu Dies, Jerusalem; e-mail: [mthawabteh@arts.alquds.edu](mailto:mthawabteh@arts.alquds.edu)  
Editor's note: the author states that the university is located in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Persian e.g., *khalīfa* (‘caliph’); and (2) with lexis that are Persian-bound, the Arab translators employed two strategies in the course of translation, either loan translation or borrowing e.g., *filfil* (pepper), *yāgūt* (sapphire).

It ensues, therefore, that since time immemorial, translation has played an active role in an intercultural exchange between ancient history and modern world. The role of the Islamic civilization is crystal-clear.

## **2. Culture and Translation**

Many translation theorists speak of the significance of culture in any translation activity, and that disposing of the Source Language (SL) cultural components in the translation would make the Target Language (TL) audience forge its own interpretation which may defy the expectations of the SL audience. A translator can never be called a translator with being competent in two languages and cultures. Translation competence is taken for granted to include not only language competence, but also communicative, cultural among many others. Nida (1964: 147-163) succinctly puts it that “translating can never be discussed apart from the cultures of respective languages, since languages are themselves a crucial part of culture” (see also Nostrand as cited by Hammerly 1983: 516).

In terms of culture-related problems translation-wise, there is a consensus among translation theorists that “the difficulty in decoding cultural signs can be more problematic for the translator than semantic or syntactic difficulties” (Gonzalez 2004: 123). The difficulty becomes even more and more serious when it comes to languages of little cultural affinity as is the case with Arabic and English. Sofer (2002: 65-6) aptly remarks that “there are vast cultural differences between a Western language such as English and a Semitic language like Arabic. One cannot translate these languages without paying attention to these cultural differences”. In what follows, we shall examine one of the ensuing problems in the translation from Arabic into English, i.e. intertextuality.

## **3. The notion of equivalence**

A number of translation theorists consider the notion of equivalence as fundamental in translation studies, and that translation is a rip-off of the original is often a truism in translation studies (see Nida 1964, Catford 1965, Perez 1993, among others). Languages and cultures cut linguistic and cultural reality differently. English and Arabic stand as a perfect example. The ecology of the Arab World

dictates many proverbs, something that is a far cry from those in English culture, for instance. The Arabic proverb *āḏār 'bu sabī' Ṭaljāt kbār marah šmaysah w-marah mṭār w-marah mgagāt iš-šinār* (lit. 'March seven heavy snows, sunny, rainy or birds' singing') can be functionally translated into simply 'March many weathers'. Obviously, English and Arabic converge on the notion 'capricious weathers'; however, Arabic *per se* highlights *mgagāt iš-šinār* ('singing of birds') in March. Lack of equivalence between language pairs is thus the norm.

A legion of equivalence types has been discussed by translation theorists, but, in a general sense, three major kinds of equivalence come to the fore in the course of translation according to Farghal and Shunnaq (1999: 5):

- (1) formal equivalence which "seeks to capture the form of the SL expression";
- (2) functional equivalence which "seeks to capture the function of the SL expression independently of the image utilised by translating it into a TL expression that performs the same function"; and
- (3) ideational equivalence which "aims to convey the communicative sense of the SL expression independently of the function and form."

Therefore, 'March is the rife with seven heavy snows, sometimes it is sunny, sometimes it is rainy or sometimes it observes birds' singing', 'March many weathers' and 'March is a capricious weather' are all possible translations of the above Arabic proverb in which formal, functional and ideational equivalence are observed respectively.

#### **4. Methodology**

The present paper comprises *al-Qamar al-Murabba': Qiṣaṣ Gharā'ibia* by Syrian writer Ghada-Samman (1994) translated by Issa Boullata (1998) as *The Square Moon: Supernatural Tales*. The present paper studies 6 intertextual references identified by the researcher and looks at the translations. Only the English translations are provided and the study items are identified and discussed. For the sake of the present paper, Hatim and Mason's (1990 and 1997) discourse analysis approach will be adopted.

## 5. Discussion and Analysis

### 5.1. Intertextuality

Discourse analysis has contributed to solutions for the ever-lasting problems a translator may encounter in translating from one language into another. 'Text Autopsy', as it were, is needed for translation, without which, a myriad of problems may befuddle the translator. In order to prepare the ground for our argument, a review of three major concepts, i.e. text, genres and discourse will be made. A text, as Hatim and Mason (1997: 18) put it, "involves the language user in focusing on a given rhetorical purpose (arguing, narrating, etc.)." "[T]he way in which linguistic expression conventionally caters for a particular social occasion" (ibid.) is a genre *per se*. And discourse embodies "attitudinal expression with language becoming by convention the mouthpiece of societal institutions (sexism, feminism)" (Hatim and Mason, ibid). Furthermore, Al-Mohannadi (2008: 530) argues that discourse is deemed as "the major vehicle of ideology and it often represents the ideology of the powerful against the powerless".

Perhaps it is also important to review the literature on intertextuality. Intertextuality is "a precondition for the intelligibility of texts, involving the dependence of one text as a semiotic entity on another, previously encountered" (Hatim & Mason 1997: 219, see also Fowler 2000: 117; Alawi 2010: 2431). Martin (1992: 74) further argues that "[b]ecause no text is produced or processed in a contextual void, every producer or receiver brings with them 'conceptual baggage' which includes past experience with other texts." Thus, for an exchange to take place, Hatim and Mason (ibid.) add, "texts producers as well as text receivers rely upon their own and other people previous experience of other texts in order to communicate and comprehend the particular meanings that they are seeking to exchange" (see also Hatim 1997: 30). For the sake of elaboration, let us indulge in illustrative examples to show how intertextuality is dealt with in into-English translation.

#### **Text 1:**

"And did it not occur to you that you could marry Salah al-Din on condition you return your *'isma*?"

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you retain the right to divorce him whenever you wish, just as he does exactly."

(Boullata 1998: 69; italics added)

**Text 2:**

If she is widowed, she enters her first *'idda*, the legally prescribed period of months during which she may not see a man or remarry.

(Boullata 1998: 7; italics in original)

As socio-cultural practice in the Arab World, men relegate women to a less important position, perhaps as is the case worldwide. Resisting the image of dominance by men as Text 1 above would imply, the speaker tries to be matriarchal by means of retaining *'isma* (lit. 'potency'). The intertextual reference *'isma* is deeply rooted in Arab culture, which is patriarchal in nature, and also in the Qur'an that reasonably gives men power over women: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means" (Ali 3:34)<sup>3</sup> Ali (ibid.) further offers his explanation of the verse: "Men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the others and because men spend of their wealth on women. Virtuous women are, therefore, obedient; they guard their rights carefully in their absences under the care and watch of Allah."<sup>4</sup> Socially, *'isma* is very much related to a man's virility and, when granted to a woman, such strength and sexual power are in jeopardy.

However, the author, who is known for taking nihilistic and feministic point of view, argues for matriarchy and against patriarchy. On the face of it, the translation in Text 1 seems to have failed to relay the intended message of original Arabic *'isma*, but having looked more deeply into the above rendition through the intertextual webs, i.e., "It means that you retain the right to divorce him whenever you wish, just as he does exactly", we come up with function *'isma* was supposed to perform in the text, namely a woman's desire to marry a man and to exercise power over her husband. However, as text receivers, we may use our experience in the world to recognise the rebellious character of the author, that *'isma* grants a woman the right to break up in Islam, something that is not permissible. Obviously, the text concatenates with a view to arguing under the umbrella of feminism as discourse.

In Text 2, the sign *'idda* can be understood better if the TL audience is well-versed in the SL culture. A woman must observe *'idda* by means of refraining from

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: [http://www.searchtruth.com/chapter\\_display.php?chapter=4&translator=2&mac=&show\\_arabic=1](http://www.searchtruth.com/chapter_display.php?chapter=4&translator=2&mac=&show_arabic=1) Visited November 1, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <http://www.searchtruth.com/tafsir/tafsir.php?chapter=4> Visited November 1, 2012.

applying cosmetics, wearing fancy clothing and getting remarried if her husband has recently died or if she is divorced.

Formal-based translation strategy is employed in translating Arabic *'isma*, i.e. the strategy of foreignization, in which "translation seeks to restrain the ethnocentric violence of translation, it is highly desirable today, a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of world affairs, pitched against the hegemonic English-language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others" (Venuti 1998: 20). Besides opting for foreignization to render *'idda*, 'domestication' whereby "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home" (Venuti 1998: 20) is utilised. The translator has paraphrased *'idda* as "the legally prescribed period of months during which she may not see a man or remarry" to facilitate comprehension on the part of the TL audience.

Genre-related intertextuality is worth mentioning whereby text producer conventionally employs given utterances to set off a speech, oration etc., and cultural-bound elements in which socio-cultural practices are subsumed within a text for a rhetorical purpose to fulfill (González 2004; see also Martin 1992: 74). In Text 1 and Text 2 above, *'isma* and *'idda* are used for a marriage setting and a death or divorce context. Consider Text 3 below:

**Text 3:**

What do you know about Safi?"

"Nothing, except that I love him. He is looking for a job. He also sings and had a beautiful voice. He continuously repeats the song 'Register: I'm an Arab' and I have learned it from him."

Before I could tell her that the song "*Register: I'm an Arab*" was a beautiful poem by a poet living in Paris, she interrupted me, overflowing with happiness like a stream, and she began to sing, "Register I'm an Arab woman ... Register I'm an Arab woman ... And my name is not Gloria but Zakiyya ... Please call me Zakiyya from now on."

(Boullata 1998: 61; italics added)

The italicised intertextuality is akin to a well-known poem by Darwish (1977): "Record: I am an Arab. And my identity card is number fifty thousand. I have eight children and the ninth is coming after a summer. Will you be angry?" Singing the poems by Palestinians and Arabs, writers or laymen has been common. The

functions the poem intends to perform are resistance, persistence, diligence, prudence, sobriety and fidelity, among others (see Thawabteh 2007: 48). Thawabteh (ibid: 49) further explains, this poem intends to

mitigate the incessant suffering of Palestinians after 1948 war, a war that has made an indelible mark on the world and brought Palestine political upheaval since then. Thousands of Palestinians were killed and thousands more fled or were driven from their homes to the neighbouring countries and lived in deteriorating and humiliating conditions. Darwish was impelled to leave his country for Lebanon; then he returned back home and fought a long rearguard action to get an Israeli-issued identity card.

The speaker in Text 3 is not only hijacking Darwish's, but she is also adding to it and modifying it for a rhetorical purpose to fulfill, that is to say, to argue against the western values the immigrants from the Arab world are usually faced with while trying to reconcile changes in an unfamiliar milieu in Paris, for instance. Furthermore, it is in-your-face feminism that is meant to shock the reader. Therefore, whilst Darwish says "Register: I'm an Arab", the author says "Register I'm an Arab woman".

The fact that intertextuality is "intimately concerned with issues broadly related to notions of genre" (Martin 1992: 74) is also worth mentioning here. In Text 3 above, genre 'violation' is observed. The SL receivers can easily make a distinction between the poems and prose. In Text 3 above, such distinction is of paramount importance because "the author employs Darwish's poems probably to win her a kind of reputation. As far as Arab culture is concerned, in everyday conversation, people would use poetry to look more persuasive on the one hand, and to show off their literature muscles on the other" (Thawabteh 2007: 26-7). Obviously, the SL text encompasses at least two genres whereas the translation in Text 3 shows one genre. By means of intertextuality, however, it is perhaps possible for TL audience to recognise the poetic value of the translation as "'Register: I'm an Arab' was a beautiful poem by a poet living in Paris" would imply. For more elaboration, take Text 4 below:

#### **Text 4**

In the weak light, he contemplated his own picture as a child, and those of his sisters and brothers, who were all older than he. Some of them had killed the others in the war, but in the picture they were hugging one another. These are



the pictures of the family of *Abel and Cain*. (Boullata 1998: 13-14; italics added)

The intertextual sign in Text 4 is linked to Cain's grudge he had against his brother Abel. We can make out of the above sign only, and only if, we rely on our experience of a previous text. True, the Qur'an says:

And (O Muhammad) recite to them (the Jews) the story of the two sons of Adam (Habil and Qabil-Abel and Cain) in truth; when each offered a sacrifice (to Allah), it was accepted from the one but not from the other. The latter said to the former: "I will surely kill you." The former said: "Verily, Allah accepts only from those who are Al-Muttaqun (the pious)

(Khan 25: 27-8)<sup>5</sup>.

The intertextual sign Abel and Cain has become a recurrent theme in human being life on account of the relationship of people which has always been characterised of amity or enmity.

## 5.2. Transcultural Intertextuality

Intertextual potential proper happens to be alien to SL cultural domain, but very much related to and the product of the TL culture. Ideologically motivated, a SL author may opt for a foreign phrase, expression, quote. Thawabteh (2007: 28) claims that an intertextual potential "could be used to instil in the [SL] readers a sense of love for Western way of life", and consequently "pose fewer translation problems" (ibid) as it may be known for TL readers. For the sake of illustration, consider Text 5 below:

### Text 5

I don't want to get married to him. *Concubinage* grants me many more rights than those legal rights my father wants for me... (Boullata 1998: 7; emphasis added)

In Text 5, the italicised study item that translates Arabic *alkunkubināj* ('concubinage'), which is a borrowed word, is transcultural intertextuality utilised by text producer with a view to riding roughshod over marriage in its traditional sense.

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<sup>5</sup> Available at:

[http://www.searchtruth.com/search.php?keyword=cain&chapter=&translator=5&search=1&start=0&records\\_display=10&search\\_word=exact](http://www.searchtruth.com/search.php?keyword=cain&chapter=&translator=5&search=1&start=0&records_display=10&search_word=exact) Visted November 14, 2012.

The author wants to inculcate a sense of defiance for ethos of Arab societies by means of fully adopting Western thinking and hence using western language expressions. Observe Text 6 for more elaboration

**Text 6**

“I don’t believe you really want to jump. Think how dangerous that is. To jump or not to jump, that is the question.”

(Boullata 1998: 5)

In Text 6 above, the intertextual reference has various connotations in English culture. This reference is linked to Shakespeare’s “To be or not to be, that is the question”. Because intertextuality is deemed as a “signifying system which operates by connotations and extends the boundaries of textual meaning” (Hatim & Mason 1990: 129), the translator should be conscientious about such connotations (ibid: 129). The author in Text 6 intends to steer her readers to a particular course of action: Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy showed it was a matter of life and death for him and so is for the speaker in Text 6 above.

**6. Conclusion**

Thus far, in our analysis, we have established a view that version authors carefully designed their literary works drawing on intertextuality as much as possible. For intercultural communication to take place, text receivers should, or even must, call up knowledge structures. Alawi (2010: 2455) highlights: “If there is no original text and if all texts are a rearrangement of other texts, it must be useful for translators to acquaint themselves with textual patterns in both the target and the source languages.” Likewise, Thawabteh (2007: 35) says that “without a translator of great sagacity and immense experience, the translation of intertextuality would turn out to be difficult; the end-product would also be utterly beyond TL recipients’ comprehension.”

In terms of strategy, intertextuality may be transferred into English via foreignisation and/or domestication. The former includes borrowing, i.e. the transference of an item from a SL into a TL phonologically, orthographically, morphologically, semantically and lexically may be adopted as is the case with *'isma* with the proviso that the context reveals the intertextual signs. Reborrowing is another possible strategy to render a foreign intertextual potential, which also falls within the ambit of foreignisation. This strategy may help to translate the flood of

foreign borrowings into Arabic. The latter comprises loan translation in which "a phrase or compound word [...] translates a foreign expression part by part" (Al-Najjar 1989: 86). This strategy may include paraphrase within the translation or in footnotes.

The study finally shows that the realisation of intertextual references of Arabic does not only hinge on the process of translation, but it also requires a TL audience with such wide knowledge of the SL culture.

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