TOWARD AN EFFECTIVE STYLISTIC TRANSLATION OF ARABIC POETRY INTO ENGLISH

BACEM ESSAM

ABSTRACT:

The stereotypical conflict between the English and Arabic cultures is reflected and reproduced in translating Arabic literature into English, especially when it involves culturally-oriented texts, such as poetry, Makama and other culturemes. Translating Arabic poetry, which is always addressed in terms of overt translation, is a tremendous challenge. Moreover, the trials of native Arabic translators, on the one hand, in rendering their poetic texts into English are always controversial and distrustful. On the other hand, the randomly selected translations of Arabic poetry are not expressive. Accordingly, the verdicts, ushered by such unilateral hegemonic produce, are not satisfying the educated Arabic literati.

This paper tackles this problem, through careful analysis of the challenging obstacles of translating Arabic poetry into English; suggesting systematic procedures toward overcoming such a catch. It's undeniable that translating poetry is a very complex process. However, such complexity may be negotiated and simplified.

Keywords: Translating Arabic poetry, stylistics, Arabic prosody, English poetry, translated poetics

Introduction:

Basically, the well-established allegation states “It's particularly hard to translate Arabic poetry into a language that is not one's native tongue.” Accordingly, the Arab translators are neither eligible nor qualified to get this job done. Essentially, what need to be delivered through a translated poem are the human feelings, reactive emotions and the unrevealed message of the “Arabic” poet. There is verily no smooth road into repairing the given history of conflicts, fixed perceptions, and cultural confrontation between the Arabic and English cultures.

Complicating matters, the conveyed poetic messages are to be delivered through a very odd channel connecting very incompatible cultures and languages. An “ARAB” is westerly standing for “Abuse, Robbery, Adultery and Bomber”. An Arabic pocket is usually hugging a gun or a knife rather than a pen or a feather. Misunderstanding, negative stereotypes and neat dichotomies are so much characteristic of the nature of the Anglo-Arabic communication. We need to translate to eschew such evil notions, paving a new cultural path toward better understanding.

Ironically, we translate Arabic poetry into English to restore the cherub faces of the Arabic youth who are totally captivated by the western glamorous charm and wonderment. The new Arabic generations are mostly xenophilic with or without oriental alienation. They did not find any magnetism in their original culture. The new regenerations trust the English letters even if they were just some transliteration of Arabic words. We need to repair the disfigured picture that is consistent with every Arabic entity. This article shall try to diagnose the very chronic problem of translating into English, describing the best effective treatment based on a transparent justified analysis.
Background and Discussion:

1. Translation activity in scope:

Translation as intercultural communication requires treating the text itself as only one of the cues of meaning. Other, ‘silent’, ‘hidden’ and ‘unconscious’ factors, which when shared may be termed cultural, determine how a text will be understood. In translating, a new text will be created which will be read according to a different map or model of the world, through a series of different set of perception filters. (Katan, as cited in The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies p 91)

We have been, for so long, talking about faithfulness of the rendered translation and the given culture and ideology of both source and target languages. What about translator’s faithful trends and true ideology.

On every level of the translation process, it can be shown that, if linguistic considerations enter into conflict with considerations of an ideological and/or poetological nature, the latter tend to win out. (Lefevere 1992a: 39)

Since no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence there can be no fully exact translations. Attempts to reproduce several formal elements, includes grammatical units, consistency in word usage and meanings in terms of the source context.

For dynamic equivalence translation, it is to describe it as “the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message.” This type of definition contains three essential terms; equivalent, which points toward the source-language message, natural, which points toward the receptor language, and closest, which binds the two orientations together on the basis of the highest degree of approximation. For a natural rendering must fit the receptor language and culture as a whole, the context of the particular message, and the receptor-language audience.

Translating poetry is always a tremendous challenge, for the form of expression (rhythm, meter, assonance, etc.) is essential to communicating the spirit of the message to the audience. But all translating, whether of poetry or prose, must be concerned also with the response of the receptor; hence the ultimate purpose of the translation, in terms of its impact upon its intended audience, is a fundamental factor in any evaluation of translations. (Nida as cited in Venuti’s reader 2000a: pp127-133)

The question of translating Arabic poetry into English by only English translators is no longer accepted. It is not objective by any means. Are Arabic translators eligible to translate prose into English but not poetry? Regarding translating Arabic prose into English, Samah Selim won both the Banipal Prize and the Arkansas Prize for Arabic literary translation. Salma Khadra Jayyusi ran the Project of Translation from Arabic (or PROTA). Why translating Arabic poems by an Arab would be, then, problematic? Is it only from Arabic into English?

Poems like Correspondances by Charles Baudelaire, Les Fenêtres by Stéphane Mallarmé and Clair de Lune by Paul Verlaine were all translated into English with great applause. Additionally, Translating a modern Italian poet into the discourse that dominated American poetry translation was effectively a canonizing gesture, a poetic way of linking him —for American readers— to canonical poets like Homer and Dante (not to mention the echoes of Tennyson, Shakespeare, Marlowe). Yet this domestic inscription deviated from Ungaretti’s significance in the Italian poetic tradition, the view, as Mandelbaum put it, that “Ungaretti purged the language of all ornament” (Mandelbaum 1958: xi as cited in Venuti 2000).

Again, why don’t the Arab translators meet the expectations? Let’s have a look at the translation of the opening quatrain of Anttara’s ode
Arthur J. Arberry, the British orientalist, translated it as:

*Have the poets left a single spot for a patch to be sewn?*

*Or did you recognize the abode after long meditation?*

*O abode of Abla at El-jawa, let me hear you speak;*

*I give you good morning, abode of Abla, and greetings to you!*

*(Arberry 1957: p 178.)*

Mumayiz, the Egyptian professor and translator, has rendered it as:

*Have poets left aught that had not before been told?*

*Do you now know the house you did not know of old.*

*Abla’s “Jiwaa’” home, of beloved ones, do tell*

*Good morn, Abla’s home! May you e’er fare safe and well*

*(Mumayiz 2010: p. 178)*

For any poetic reader, it won’t be a very harsh task to prefer one of the given translations a little bit more. Surprisingly, this Arabic translator, on the one hand, is following the accentual-syllabic meter (mostly iambic hexameter) throughout his translated poem with rhyming couplets, consistent with the classical approach to meter championed by poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson. This trend has been exactly adopted for not being displaced by the Modernists. Rationally, classics must be followed in translating classical Arabic poetry. On the other hands, A. J. Arberry, the British orientalist, used unrhymed lines with more redundant lines.

2. The Arabic prosody: An analytical outlook of

Etymologically, the nomenclature of the Arabic meters are described as follows; the long (taweel), the simple (basset), the expanded (madeed), the ample (waffir), the perfect (kammel), the intermingled (rammale), the stumbled (rajaz), the vibrant (hazaj), the swift (sareae), the smooth (monsareh), the subtle/agile (khafeef), the trickled (moqtaddeh), the present (modareae), the clipped (moqtath), the coherent (motakareb) and the belated meter (motadarek).

Insofar as it can be ascertained, such nomenclatures will aid nothing but more controversy. We are trying to fathom two civilizations that are well-polished across centuries. What is essentially needed is some skillful dissection. Designations, by definitions, is naming or titling a certain concept or theory. By analysis, we might highlight some matching among the linguistically designated terms.

Similarly, in both classical Arabic and English poetry, the basic rhythmic structure of a verse or lines in verse is called a meter [Arabic equiv. بحر]. The study of meters and forms of versification is known as prosody [Arabic equiv. عروض]. In English poetry, the meter of a verse is described as a sequence of feet [Arabic equiv. قمعيات].

Characteristically, the English foot, on the one hand, is composed of some stressed and unstressed syllables. A syllable, as the basic poetic unit of versification, is a set of one or more units of sound that must consist of a sonorous element (a vowel) and may or may
not contain less sonorous elements (consonants or semivowels) flanking it on either or both sides. On the other hand, the Arab linguists drew neither on close etymological affinity nor on semantic relationship when they carried out their phonetic analyses. They perceived the sounds of Arabic in a totally different manner. They referred to the sounds of Arabic as Harf (Lane, 1863: 549–50) This is why André Alphons Lefeve re, the famous translation theorist, concluded that canonization of Arabic poetry is impossible as it has no obvious “generic equivalent” (Lefevre, 1990: 25).

It is only a solitary step left to find a match. This step is done via finding a conversion method. Because the English prosody hinges upon syllables as the basic unit while its Arabic peer rests on the letter (sound) to consist specific feet, it is worthy to phonetically transiterate these Arabic constant feet for syllabifying them later. Thus, we shall have a working conversion method thereby we can finally harmonize and canonize. The following table concludes the nearest match between the two prosodic systems. To know about our unpublished draft, it was an inter-semiotic transliteration. We have translated each Arabic rhythm melodically on a musical note to produce a sound. The resultant sound was, then, transliterated into English to be analyzed into syllables. It is mostly as if we were finding a way for Japanese and Kuwaiti currencies to exchange (by using an intermediate e.g USD).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The nearest English feet</th>
<th>Number of equivalent syllables</th>
<th>Phonetic Transliteration</th>
<th>Feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dactyl</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fahelonne</td>
<td>فاعل</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anapaest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fahowlonne</td>
<td>فؤال</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anapaest + iamb</td>
<td>3+2</td>
<td>Mostafeielone</td>
<td>مقعول</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spondee + iamb</td>
<td>2+2</td>
<td>Mofahatoline</td>
<td>مقعول</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amphibrach + Anapaest</td>
<td>3+3</td>
<td>Motafahielon</td>
<td>مقعول</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iamb + Anapaest</td>
<td>2+3</td>
<td>Fahellahtone</td>
<td>مقعول</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anapaest + Trochee</td>
<td>3+2</td>
<td>Mafeahielon</td>
<td>مقعول</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anapaest + Dactyl</td>
<td>3+3</td>
<td>Mafeowlhahto</td>
<td>مقعول</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **Requirements of a translator and Criteria of translated poems:**

The subjective criteria that we have been following since Dryden’s age (1680) delivers:

- To translate poetry, Dryden argues, the translator must be a poet.
- The translator must be a master of both languages, and must understand both the characteristics and ‘spirit’ of the original author, besides conforming to the aesthetic canons of his own age.
- The translator is a painter. He has the duty of making his portrait resemble the original.
- The translation of poetry, into a foreign language, is not advocated to be conducted by a translator who is not native (not one's native tongue).

Recently, the light has been focused upon the produce more than the producer. It is shifted, now, from the subjectivity into objectivity. This shift has been paved in 1920’s when the philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff urged translators of classical literature to “spurn the letter and follow the spirit” so as “to let the ancient poet speak to us clearly and in a manner as immediately intelligible as he did in his own time” (Lefevere 1992:34, 169).

Jackson Mathews (1959:67) followed: “One thing seems clear: to translate a poem whole is to compose another poem. A whole translation will be faithful to the matter, and it will ‘approximate the form’ of the original; and it will have a life of its own, which is the voice of the translator.” This is bringing to mind Berman’s comment about free translations “belles infidels” [the beautiful; Unfaithful]
(Berman, 1985) and the contrastive Jorge Luis Borges’ famous comment, “The original is not faithful to the translation.”

For now, the objective trend is inclined to replace “the translator of poetry” by “the translated poem” so that such rendered poems have to meet most of the formal and esthetic expectations.

4. Obstacles that have impeded the supposedly prolific creation:

- Technically, Berman reminds us that free translation is the belles infidels. Translators are, then obsessed about re-narrating or transcreating in their avid trial to best express the implied messages.

- Arabic poetry has never been satisfactorily translated in the West, because it has no obvious generic equivalent. (Lefevre, 1990: 25).

- The remarkable dwindle in publishing Arabic poetry is, also, a question of Economy and profit. An English publisher wouldn’t philanthropically spend his money to “pamper” another culture heritage. Let, for a moment, the conspiracy theory go regarding selecting bad Arabic produce to keep distorting the Arabian image. The western society is paying for what it is curious about. Funding projects and specifying international prizes for the translated Arabic literature (such as PROTA and Banipal) are highly advocated.

- The translation process is almost selective making the final tiny produce sum up to non-working sample that cannot be expressive of the Arabic literature. An anthological-based curriculum of translation must be enabled.

The ancient Arabic poets are known for their inherent linguistic sagacity, represented in their ability to ad-lib simultaneously very perfect poems. It has never been traced, as far we know, in the English literature. It throws heavier burden upon the translator’s shoulders.

The following example narrates an excerpt from a literary debate between Hamazani and Kowarismi therein both poets ought to competitively ad-lib in simultaneous imitation of a given poetic line.

صقل عن دومها الشريف: أنسجا على متوال الململي:
أرق على أرق ومثل يبارق
فابيدا أبو بكر وكان إلى الغايات سيفاً وقفاً:
فاذدا أبدعت بدبيهة يا سديدي: قاراك عند بديحتي تتعلق
مالي أراك ولمست ملثي في الوري : منموها بالتراهدات مخرب
ونظم أبيانا ثم اعتذر فقال : هذا كما يجيء لا كما يبغي,
فقال البديع : قيلنا عزتك ، لكن رققت بين قافات خشنة ، كل قاف كجليل قاف ، فذخت الآن جراء عن فرضك ، وأداء لفرضك :
مهايا أبا بكر فرتدك أضيق : وأخرس فان أخاك حي يرزق
يا أححما وفاك تلك مقصية : جربت نار معرتي هل تحرم ؟

The context gives two impressive produces for both poets therein the second poet is slightly stronger on the stylistic and semantic levels. The best options here are either to professionally translate the entire passage with paying a meticulous attention to the implied details or to ask another translator to give you an upper hand so that reader may probe some difference. Essam translates this passage as follows:

Ash-Sharefe addressed both Hamazani, and Kowarismi; “ ad-lib challengingly in simultaneous imitation of Mutanabi’s line:

Else with the like, I’m so sleepless and insomnious

Abu Bakre al-Kowarismi, as he was adroitly ambidextrous, commenced:

When we start, you’d be, sir, sollicitous and anxious;

So frightened to match wits within my running circles.

Why do I peer at you; deluded and un-analogous,
with your trivial corpus effaced, yet obsequious?

Abu Bakre al-Kowarismi had, then, composed some below-average lines before refraining from utterance; commenting “It is spontaneous, yet not expectantly impressive”.

Hamazani replied “You are excused”. However, your fricative turbulences were perilously laminating. Your alveolar sounds sloped over cacophonous ridges; ridges that are mostly fabulous and superstitious. For now, receive, after such composition, what you deserved. Listen to what shall get your duty served.

Abu Bakre’s little arms are powerless an’ tenous;
so, shutter no words within my vigorous presence!
Enough jackass, desist your woeful incompetence,
Enough! Isn’t battling my blaze so fierce and intense?

Tips for outstandingly translating Arabic poetry into English:

- Be impressively creative.
- In translating Arabic poetry into English, rephrase the lines in prose. The given emotions, implied messages are bracketed before paraphrasing into poetic lines. The more brackets your primary draft have, the greater messages you are delivering. (cf. case study)
- Modify Venuti’s rule in applying cultural filters to be “loosen the foreign and over-domesticate when very indicated.”
- Read as much poetry as possible and familiarize yourself very well with the basics of phonetics, stylistics, pragmatics, semantics and theories of translation studies.
- Adhere insofar to the aesthetic expectation of the English language; banking upon devices as ellipsis, structural rearrangement, sentences splitting, condensation, allegory and allusions that reads English.
- Avoid redundancy because verbosity and wordiness are very boring the English readers and expressing, mostly, the translator’s linguistic incapability.
- Avoid too much imagery and unnecessary odd melody.
- In translating classical Arabic poetry, use the equivalent English feet that correspond phonetically to each Arabic meter. If it is too much, you may use accentual-syllabic meter with rhyming couplets (cf. table 1). Moreover, splitting Arabic poetic lines is semantically approved. However, the esthetic expectations are best met with quatrains and a closing couplet.
- In translating Arabic free verse, that is following sequentially repeated feet, do you best to reflect such a melodious harmony.

Additional tips for the toppers:

- Master the art and science of versification to stain the poem with its chronological origin. Accordingly, the analogous era in the English literature must be fully studied.
- Specify a definite stylistic style to every Arabic poet if possible. Otherwise, translate only works of an Arabic poet. (Give some space to other colleague to help you get the job of variation done)
- Address the contemporary English reader smoothly to disseminate the Arabic literature widely abroad. However, render the translation on various levels phonetically and semantically according to the contextual analysis because not all poems have been written synchronously.
- Remember that the superiority of the ancient Arabic poets is inherent in their ability to ad-lib simultaneously very perfect poems. It throws heavier burden upon the translator’s shoulders.
- Characterize the genre that you are delivering.

These tips might be better comprehended by application.
CASE STUDY

Translate the opening line of Shawki’s “The River Nile”

من أي عهد في القرى تتفقد، ومن السماء نزلت أم فجرت

First, let’s rephrase the lines in prose expressing insofar the implied message. Here we are:

The poet [captured by the charm of the lively river] wonders; from which epoch [O Nile] have you ever burst into villages? How [amazingly] are you bountifully allowing your [past numerous] tributaries to extend into cities [based on the Qur’anic verse that traces its richness back to the age of Moses’s pharaoh]? Are you heavenly descending? Or do you [generous creature]emanate from much higher celestial origin to supply abundantly with such magnanimous rippling streams?

Since these poetic lines follow the Arabic perfect meter whose feet are (متفاعل متفاعل متفاعل), the ideal corresponding versification are achieved by repeating trisyllabic feet or using symmetrically accentual-syllabic verse. The lines are not allusive. However, they are employing a slew of extravagant hyperboles. Structural rearrangement is recommended with a very careful usage of connotative words. Eventually, the suggested translation shall read:

Oh! How early into villages do you ever flow,

letting meandering tributaries lavishly go?

Are you heavenly gushing or super-celestially,

spouted into streams, rippling very reverentially?

(Translated by B. A. Essam)

In conclusion, Translating Arabic poetry into English must increase dramatically and systematically to cover the anthological diversity along the history of the Arabic literature in an attempt to escape the contemporary pledge. Arab translators must be appreciated as long as the follow the objective criteria of translating poetry into English.

Acknowledgement

Our deep thanks are heartily expressed to Dr Hania Hodeib, Major Ahmad I. Hegazy and Miss Esra’ Mustafa for their ineffable help and support.

Conflict of interest: None

Funding sources: None
Bibliography


