

Lecture 02

History of Translation in the Arab World

Introduction:

Translation serves as a fundamental channel for communication and interaction between diverse languages and cultures. Without the practice of translation, many cultures would not have thrived as they have. As noted by Kelly (1979), "Western Europe's civilization owes a debt to translators, and similarly, the Arab civilization benefited greatly from the extensive translation of Greek works" (p. 1). Translation, therefore, serves as a vehicle for connecting disparate cultures. It is fundamentally a human endeavor, facilitating the exchange of ideas and thoughts across linguistic boundaries.

Cross-cultural communication greatly relies on translation, as it enhances mutual understanding among various communities by conveying ideas and beliefs effectively. Translation has played a pivotal role in shaping global culture and consistently acted as the bridge between different civilizations. Throughout history, both written and spoken translations have played an essential role in facilitating interpersonal communication.

As Hey-Seung (2006, p. 368) emphasized, translation serves as a form of communication that transcends cultural boundaries. It is a dynamic process in which translators must make deliberate choices and decisions to overcome various challenges. This practice remains fundamentally human, enabling individuals to share ideas and thoughts, irrespective of the languages they speak.

Translation raises the question of how one can bring together various languages, cultures, and political contexts, aiming for mutual understanding without sacrificing the uniqueness of each in a thoughtless assimilation. In this context, translation becomes a process of crafting fresh cultural and political landscapes, forming shared domains, and fostering a form of reasoning that transcends conventional borders, rather than unquestionably adhering to the logic of these borders.

Translation in the Arab Pre-Islamic World

In the Arab world, translation can be traced back to the first half of the second century AD during the times of Assyrians, who translated a huge amount of heritage into Arabic (Prince, 2002). Arabic is a Semitic language. It belongs to the Semitic language family. Semitic languages have a recorded history going back thousands of years. The origins of the Semitic language family are currently in dispute among scholars; there is an agreement that they flourished in the Mediterranean Basin area, especially in the Tigris-Euphrates river basin.

In the Pre-Islamic period, Arabs used to travel and move from one area to another during winter and summer for trading. They used the Arabic language in everyday contexts and used a variety of languages such as Syriac and Aramaic. They had to learn those languages in order

to communicate with other people during their voyages. At that time there was no Arabic writing system.

Translation in the Arab Islamic Empire

The emergence of Islam in the seventh century marked a profound turning point in the history of the Arab peoples. It triggered substantial transformations in their political, cultural, and linguistic landscape. The roots of translation in the Arab world can be traced back to the era of the Syrians, who translated a significant body of heritage, predominantly from the pre-Islamic pagan period, into Arabic. According to Addidaoui (2000), one of the notable Syrian translators, Jarjas, gained recognition for his renowned translation of Aristotle's work, "In the World" (2000).

The period of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) stands out as the most pivotal in the history of translation within the Arab world. To propagate Islam, the Prophet sent messages to various political leaders and non-Arabic speaking communities, encouraging them to embrace the new religion. This necessity led to the Prophet's search for translators who could translate these messages from Arabic into other languages and, concurrently, motivated Muslims to learn diverse languages.

One of the Prophet's translators was Zaid Ibn Thabet, who played a vital role in translating the Prophet's letters from Arabic into other languages and vice versa. As the Islamic Empire expanded, it became a crossroads of Eastern and Western civilizations, amalgamating a diverse array of cultural traditions from Greek, Indian, Persian, and Egyptian sources. Consequently, Arabic transitioned from being primarily a spoken language to a written and spoken lingua franca of a vast civilization encompassing numerous ethnic and linguistic groups (Baker, 1998, p. 318). Additionally, Khan (1983, p. 44) mentioned that Prophet Mohammad tasked Zaid Bin Thabet with translating Arabic letters into Syriac, Hebrew, Persian, and vice versa.

Some early Arabic inscriptions have been discovered, dating back to at least the fourth century. The Quran, originating in the first half of the seventh century, and the language of the Bedouin people provided the foundational elements for the codification of the Arabic language during the eighth and ninth centuries.

The Umayyad Era (661-750)

The Umayyad period, spanning from 661 to 750, marked a crucial phase that laid the enduring foundations of the Islamic Empire. It was during this time that the momentum for translation activities began to grow. It is widely acknowledged that the initial translations conducted in this era were primarily from Greek and Coptic into Arabic.

In the seventh century, as the Arabs extended their influence over regions formerly Hellenized, such as Egypt and Syria, they started to encounter Greek intellectual traditions. However, it's worth noting that many Arabs were initially skeptical of classical learning. Due to this skepticism, the religious Caliphs were unable to support scientific translations. Translators had to rely on wealthy patrons from the business world rather than religious institutions for support. Until the Abbasid rule in the eighth century, there was relatively limited translation work. During

the Umayyad rule, most knowledge of Greek heritage came from scholars of Greek origin who had survived from the Byzantine period, rather than through widespread translation and dissemination of texts. Some scholars argue that translation might have been more extensive during this period than conventionally believed, but this remains a minority viewpoint (Rosenthal, 1975, pp. 3-4).

According to Baker (1998, p. 318), the primary source of information on Arabic translation activities is al-Fihrist, "The Index," compiled by al-Nadim in 988. Al-Fihrist reveals that Prince Khalid, the son of the second Umayyad Caliph, was instrumental in commissioning the earliest translations from Greek and Coptic. He turned to the pursuit of knowledge after failing to secure the position of the Caliph.

Additionally, during the reign of King Marwan Ibn Abed Al-Malek, the process of Arabizing the administration naturally entailed translating official documents, especially in the initial stages. According to Baker (1998, p. 319), translations of Byzantine and Persian songs also began to emerge during this Umayyad period (661-750), with Said Ibn Misjah being credited as one of the translators involved in this endeavor.

Baker (1998) further noted that toward the end of the Umayyad period, a substantial volume of Greek gnomologia, often referred to as "wisdom literature," was translated into Arabic. This included virtually all gnomologia associated with Aristotle. These translations would go on to exert a significant influence on Arabic poetry during the ninth and tenth centuries. Notably, two of the most celebrated Arab poets from this era, Abu al-Atahiya and Al-Mutanabbi, incorporated gnomic material into their poetic works (Baker, 1998, p. 319).

The translations from Greek to Arabic during this period also encompassed treatises on medicine and astrology. The Umayyad Caliphs undeniably played a role in advancing science, the arts, and translation efforts, thereby laying the groundwork for the remarkable cultural, scientific, and material progress that characterized the subsequent Abbasid period.

The Abbasid Era

The Abbasids, a dynasty of Caliphs who governed the Islamic Empire from 750 until the Mongol conquest of the Middle East in 1258, derived their name from Al-Abbas, the uncle of the Prophet Mohammad. The Abbasid era is renowned for its vibrant cultural and intellectual life (Faiq, 2006; Al-Kasimi, 2006), with the most significant period of translation occurring during their rule. During this time, the second Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mansur, relocated the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, where he encountered the impressive Persian Library. This library contained a wealth of texts, including Greek classical works and ancient Indian texts. Al-Mansur directed the translation of this rich repository of world literature into Arabic (Lindberg, 1978, p. 55). Under Al-Mansur's leadership and at his behest, translations were made from Greek, Syriac, and Persian, with the Syriac and Persian texts themselves often being translations from Greek or Sanskrit (Lindberg, 1978, p. 55).

As Delisle and Woodsworth (1995) point out, there was a flurry of translation activity during the Abbasid period (750-1250), with a particular focus on translating Greek scientific and

philosophical material, frequently using Syriac as an intermediary language (p. 112). This period witnessed significant developments in Arab translation, largely supported and promoted by the Caliphs. Translators of this era concentrated on Greek philosophy, Indian science, and Persian literature.

During this time, the translation movement received a significant boost due to the enlightened patronage of three early Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad: Al-Mansur, Harun, and his son Al-Mamun. Al-Mamun founded the "House of Wisdom" in Baghdad, which served as both a library and an institute of translation. It was during Al-Mamun's reign that the translation of medical, scientific, and philosophical texts, primarily from Greek or Syriac, was officially institutionalized. Notable translators who flourished during Al-Mamun's reign include Yaha Ibn Al-Bitriq, credited with translating Plato's "Timaeus," Aristotle's "On the Soul," "On the Heavens," "Prior Analytics," and "The Secret of Secrets."

Baker (1998, p. 320) observes that the Arab translators focused predominantly on scientific and philosophical material from Greek sources and showed relatively little interest in Greek drama and poetry. India also emerged as an essential source of wisdom literature and mathematical knowledge. Among the remarkable works in Arabic literature is "The Thousand and One Nights," which is based on a translation from Middle Persian, itself derived from Sanskrit sources.

The period saw the emergence of numerous active translators, with one of the most notable figures being Hunayn Ibn Ishaq, who received a payment in gold from Al-Mamun, matching the weight of the books he translated (Baker, 1998, p. 320).

Baker (1998) described two distinct translation methods that were prevalent during this era. The first method, associated with individuals like Yuhanna Ibn al-Batriq and Ibn Naima al-Himsi, involved a highly literal approach where each Greek word was translated with an equivalent Arabic word. When no direct equivalent existed, they incorporated the Greek word into Arabic (p. 321). This method can be characterized as a word-for-word translation.

The second method, associated with figures like Ibn Ishaq and al-Jawahari, followed a sense-for-sense approach. Translators adopting this method aimed to convey the meaning of the original text in a fluent manner without distorting the target language (Baker, 1998, p. 321).

The golden era of translation during the early Abbasid rule was succeeded by a flourishing period of original literary output in various domains, including astronomy, alchemy, geography, linguistics, theology, and philosophy. According to Baker (1998, p. 321), the primary interests of the Arabs during this period were primarily focused on medicine and philosophy, although astronomy gained popularity due to their interactions and trade with India. The choice of texts to translate often aligned with state objectives, such as Arabization, but the personal interests of individual Caliphs and courtiers also played a significant role in the decision-making process. During this time, translation and original creation were closely intertwined, as translation contributed to establishing a new system of thought that formed the basis of Arabic-Islamic culture on both conceptual and terminological levels.

In summary, the establishment of the "House of Wisdom" in 830 played a pivotal role in the assimilation of cultural treasures from China, India, Persia, and Greece into Arab culture. Intense translation activity persisted throughout the empire until its eventual decline in the 13th century, as noted by Delisle and Woodsworth (1995):

[...] the translated works acted as raw material which nourished the creative talents of Arab translators and furthered the development of science before being passed on to the Western world. The next significant step in the transmission of knowledge occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as the hub of translation moved from Baghdad to Toledo. (p. 115)

School of Toledo

The "School of Toledo" is a term used to describe a vibrant period of translation activity that unfolded during the 12th and 13th centuries in Spain, particularly in and around Toledo. This school played a pivotal role in transmitting scientific and philosophical knowledge to medieval Europe. The focal point of this activity was the philosophical and scientific achievements of the Arab world, with a particular emphasis on medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and astrology (Delisle and Woodsworth, 1995, p. 115).

Delisle and Woodsworth (1995, p. 116) also noted that the introduction of key Arabic scholarly terms and concepts to Europe expanded the breadth of knowledge and provided a more comprehensive perspective on the world. The Western world was introduced to the Arabic numeral system, algebra, the Ptolemaic model of the universe, and the works of Hippocrates and Galen, along with a significant body of medical knowledge from both Greek and Arabic traditions. The influence of this translation movement in fostering a form of renaissance was substantial.

During the 12th century, translations were predominantly from Arabic into Latin, while in the 13th century, the focus shifted to translating from Arabic into Spanish.

The Arab world is undeniably credited with pioneering the first organized and large-scale translation endeavors in history. This initiative commenced during the Umayyad dynasty and reached its zenith during the Abbasid rule.

Furthermore, the flourishing of knowledge in the Arab world during the 10th and 11th centuries played a pivotal role in stimulating the advancement of various domains of knowledge in the Western world, including the natural sciences and philosophy. This remarkable transformation would not have been possible without the rigorous translation program executed under the patronage of the Abbasid Caliphs.

The Ottoman Era

During this period, it's well-documented that the Arab world faced significant hardships. Turkish became the dominant language, and Arabs were prohibited from using their language even in everyday conversations. Those who lived through this era can attest that Turkish was the language of instruction in Arab schools.

Baker (1998) stated:

Starting with the late tenth/early eleventh century, the Islamic Empire began to experience a long period of gradual disintegration, resulting in the establishment of rival Caliphates in Egypt and Spain and endless petty dynasties in various parts of the empire. (p. 322)

Additionally, the Arab world experienced isolation and a lack of cultural exchanges during the initial centuries of Ottoman rule. The first significant contact with Europe occurred when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798.

While most of the translation activities under the French administration were primarily focused on official and legal documents, there were some notable translations of interesting texts during this period. Among them, a grammar of spoken Arabic was translated (Baker, 1998, p. 322).

Under this new political authority, as Baker (1998) pointed out, Arabic retained its position as the language of education and jurisprudence. While Arabic continued to be a significant player in the translation endeavors, it now had to share this role with Turkish (p. 322).

Translation Under Mohammad Ali

In 1805, Mohammad Ali, an Ottoman soldier originally sent to assume control of Egypt on behalf of the Caliph, successfully established himself as the governor of Egypt and later extended his rule to include Syria and Sudan. He initiated the establishment of professional schools, sponsored groups of students to study in Europe, and upon their return, tasked them with translating texts required for the modernization of his army and administration. During this period, a group of Maronite Christians from Lebanon and Syria was among the most active translators, working on the translation or adaptation of various works of Catholic theology.

Notably, some of the translations produced during this time were undertaken by Europeans. For instance, the French consul Basili Fakhr translated several French books on astronomy and natural science into Arabic. In 1826, one of Mohammad Ali's student missions to France included a religious guide, a graduate of Cairo's renowned al-Azhar institution. This guide, Rifaa Al-Tahtawi, became one of the most influential figures in translation during this era and a leading educator of his time. He spent five years in Paris, where he attained an excellent command of the French language. Upon his return, he worked as a translator in one of Mohammad Ali's newly established specialist schools and eventually headed the school of translation.

As Baker (1998, p. 223) noted, the instruction in the various schools set up by Mohammad Ali was initially conducted by foreign instructors who taught in French or Italian. In the classroom, these instructors relied on interpreters to communicate with their students. Consequently, the use of interpreters in the educational context appears to have been a fairly common practice during this period.

The Twentieth Century

In the early 19th century, France, Britain, and Italy began exerting their influence over various parts of the Arab World. The weakening Ottoman Empire struggled to defend its territories, and

by the early 20th century, much of the Arab World was under foreign occupation. However, efforts to develop a coherent pan-Arab translation program began in the last century.

Today, various parts of the Arab World have established translation training programs, either as independent institutions, such as the King Fahd School of Translation in Tangier, or within university departments, like at Yarmouk University in Jordan. Arab translation is currently undergoing significant changes, with a multitude of studies contributing to the development of translation activity and the emergence of new theories. The use of computers, digital materials, and terminology databases has also become prevalent, providing translators with an extensive array of resources.

This evolution has led to the creation of numerous translator associations, including "The Committee of Arab Translators" in Saudi Arabia and others. Among these, the "World Arab Translator's Association" (WATA) stands out as a professional non-profit organization registered in Belgium. WATA focuses on linguistics and translation to and from Arabic and consists mainly of experienced, highly qualified linguists, translators, and translation professors.

Notably, one of WATA's ongoing projects is the "KALIMA Project," a translation initiative based in the United Arab Emirates and sponsored by the government. The project's goal is to translate, publish, and distribute hundreds of books throughout the Middle East. KALIMA was established to address the gap in translation in the Arab World, where translated literary and scientific works are often only available in the original language. Its aim is to provide Arabic readers with broader access to a more diverse range of works. KALIMA has earned a strong reputation in the UAE and the Arab World for revitalizing translation as a significant movement in the region.

KALIMA is actively engaged in promoting the translation movement in the Arab world and ensuring the quality of translated works. It achieves this through various activities, including the organization of seminars and conferences on translation. One such event is the Abu Dhabi International Conference on translating, which took place in February 2012 and was organized by KALIMA in collaboration with the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. Dr. Ali Bin Tamim, the project manager of KALIMA, emphasized the organization's dedication to providing distinctive translation books for Arab readers, enabling them to benefit from and enjoy a wider range of literary and scientific works.

Translation of the Quran

The translation of the Quran is a significant milestone in the history of Arabic translation. The first official translation of the Quran was undertaken into Persian during the Abbasid era (c. 750-1258). Today, the Quran has been translated into nearly all languages worldwide, with various versions of each translation (Mustapha, 1998).

Another crucial period in the history of translation in the Arab world involved the translation of the Holy Quran for individuals who did not speak Arabic. The translation process was viewed as a means to transfer the Quran's meanings to non-Muslims (and/or Muslims who did not speak Arabic) to help them understand the message of Islam. While all Muslims concur that the style of the Quran is unparalleled and inimitable, Islamic scholars did not oppose the translation of the Quran's meanings. However, they unanimously agreed that the Quran's unique style cannot be replicated in translation. Additionally, they emphasized the necessity of having access to the Arabic original, as no translation could serve as a substitute for the original text.

As noted by some scholars, Salman El Farisi, for instance, translated the meanings of Surat Al Fatiha (the first seven verses of the Holy Quran) for Persian Muslims. During that period, there was a particular interest in translating the Holy Quran, and it was translated into many languages, with some of these translations still preserved in Western libraries.

The translation movement that evolved under Islamic rule received substantial support. Government sponsorship played a crucial role in advancing the translation movement, and various translation seminars were established at different points in the history of the Islamic Empire to facilitate the translation process.