

Larbi Ben M'hidi University
Faculty of Arts & languages
Department of English
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Lecture 04

Translating culture

Introduction

Translating culture is the intricate process of not only converting words from one language to another but also conveying the underlying cultural nuances, values, and contexts embedded within those words. It goes beyond literal translation to capture the essence and meaning of expressions, idioms, and cultural references specific to a particular community or society. This process requires a deep understanding of both the source and target cultures, as well as linguistic proficiency. Translating culture is essential for effective communication, fostering understanding, and bridging gaps between diverse groups of people across the globe.

Where do we find culture when we translate?

Culture manifests itself in various aspects of language and communication. When translating, you encounter cultural elements in several key areas:

1. **Language**: Vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, slang, and metaphors are all rich with cultural connotations that may not directly translate between languages.
2. **Customs and Traditions**: Cultural practices, social norms, rituals, and etiquette differ across societies and are reflected in language use. Translating cultural customs accurately requires understanding the significance and context behind them.
3. **History and Context**: Historical events, societal structures, and political landscapes shape language and communication patterns. Translators must grasp the historical context to accurately convey meaning.

4. **Values and Beliefs**: Cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews influence language use and interpretation. Translating these elements involves understanding the underlying cultural mindset.
5. **Literature and Art**: Translating literary works, art, music, and other creative expressions involves capturing the cultural themes, symbolism, and aesthetic sensibilities unique to a particular culture.
6. **Non-verbal Communication**: Gestures, facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues vary across cultures and may carry different meanings. Translators must be attuned to these subtleties.
7. **Humor and Wit**: Humor is deeply rooted in culture and often relies on wordplay, cultural references, and shared experiences. Translating jokes and wit requires sensitivity to cultural nuances.
8. **Ethics and Taboos**: Cultural norms dictate what is considered appropriate or taboo in communication. Translators must navigate these ethical considerations to ensure translations are culturally sensitive.

In essence, culture permeates every aspect of language and communication, making it essential to consider when translating. Failure to account for cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and ineffective communication.

Types of expressions conveying cultural aspects

1. **Expressions of Politeness and Respect**:

Arabic Sentence: "معذرة، هل يمكنني أن أسألك سؤالاً؟"

Translation: "Excuse me, may I ask you a question?"

Challenge: The Arabic sentence includes a polite apology ("معذرة") and a formal request ("هل يمكنني") which convey respect and politeness, aspects that may not be as explicit in the English translation.

2. **Religious Expressions**:

Arabic Sentence: "الحمد لله"

Translation: "Praise be to God" or "Thank God"

Challenge: This phrase is used to express gratitude or acknowledgment of God's blessings, but the cultural significance of using it in Arabic contexts might not always carry over directly into English.

3. **Greetings and Farewells**:

Arabic Sentence: "مساء الخير"

Translation: "Good evening"

Challenge: While the translation is straightforward, the cultural connotations of warmth and friendliness associated with the Arabic greeting "مساء الخير" may not be fully captured in English.

4. **Expressions of Emotion.**

Arabic Sentence: "أنا أسف جداً لما حدث."

Translation: "I am very sorry for what happened."

Challenge: Translating emotions accurately can be difficult, as the intensity and sincerity of the apology in Arabic might not be fully conveyed in English.

5. **Idioms and Proverbs.**

Arabic Sentence: "الطيور على أشكالها تقع."

Translation: "Birds of a feather flock together."

Challenge: While the literal translation captures the meaning, the cultural background and significance of the proverb may need to be explained for English speakers who are not familiar with it.

6. **Social Hierarchies and Relationships.**

Arabic Sentence: "نعم، سيدي."

Translation: "Yes, sir."

Challenge: The Arabic word "سيدي" denotes respect and deference towards the person being addressed, and finding the appropriate equivalent in English depends on factors such as formality and social context.

7. **Cultural Concepts and Traditions.**

Arabic Sentence: "رمضان مبارك"

Translation: "Blessed Ramadan"

Challenge: While the translation is straightforward, conveying the cultural significance and well-wishes associated with the phrase "رمضان مبارك" might require additional explanation for English speakers who are not familiar with Ramadan and its traditions.

Examples of sentences with cultural nuances that might require careful translation from Arabic into English:

1. **Arabic Sentence:** "ما شاء الله"

Translation Challenge: This phrase is often used to express admiration or to ward off the evil eye in Arabic-speaking cultures. In English, a direct translation would be "What God has willed," but the cultural connotations might not fully carry over. A better translation might be "Blessed by God" or "God has willed it."

2. **Arabic Sentence:** "يا حرام"

****Translation Challenge:**** This expression is used to denote something as sinful, forbidden, or pitiful in Arabic. In English, a literal translation might be "Oh, sinful" or "Oh, forbidden," but these might not capture the emotional weight or cultural context. A more accurate translation could be "Oh, how unfortunate" or "How pitiful."

3. ****Arabic Sentence:**** "ان شاء الله"

****Translation Challenge:**** This phrase means "God willing" or "if God wills it" and is commonly used to express hope or uncertainty about the future. While the literal translation works in English, it may not carry the same depth of religious significance or cultural resonance. However, it's widely understood and used in English in contexts where similar sentiment is expressed.

4. ****Arabic word:**** "تفضل"

****Translation Challenge:**** This word can have various meanings depending on context, including "please," "go ahead," "here you go," or "help yourself." It's often used in Arabic-speaking cultures to offer something politely or to invite someone to do something. Translating it into a single English word can be challenging, and it often depends on the specific context in which it's used.

5. ****Arabic word:**** "ميروك"

****Translation Challenge:**** This word means "congratulations" in Arabic, but its usage can be more nuanced. It's commonly used to congratulate someone on achievements, weddings, births, or other joyful occasions. While "congratulations" is an accurate translation, it might not always capture the warmth and sincerity implied in the Arabic expression.

6. ****Arabic Sentence:**** "وَلَا تَقْرُبُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَنْتُمْ سُكَارَىٰ"

****Translation Challenge:**** This verse from the Quran (4:43) advises against approaching prayers while intoxicated. Translating the verse accurately into English requires conveying the religious prohibition against prayer while drunk, which might not have an exact equivalent in English cultural or religious contexts.

7. ****Arabic Sentence:**** "يا سلام عليك"

****Translation Challenge:**** This phrase is used to express admiration or approval in Arabic-speaking cultures. Translating it directly as "peace be upon you" doesn't capture the colloquial meaning. A more accurate translation might be "Wow, you're impressive" or "That's amazing!"

8. ****Arabic Sentence:**** "لا حول ولا قوة إلا بالله"

****Translation Challenge:**** This expression is often used to express helplessness or resignation in the face of difficulty or hardship. While it literally translates to "There is no power nor strength except with Allah," conveying its depth of meaning and emotional resonance in English can be challenging.

9. **Arabic Sentence:** "إن شاء الله تسمحي"

Translation Challenge: This phrase is used to seek permission or forgiveness with the implication that one hopes for God's will to allow it. While "God willing, excuse me" could be a literal translation, the cultural implications of seeking permission or forgiveness in this way might not be fully conveyed in English without additional context.

10. **Arabic Sentence:** "أهلاً وسهلاً"

Translation Challenge: This phrase is used as a traditional Arabic greeting to welcome someone warmly. While it's often translated as "welcome," the cultural connotations of hospitality and genuine warmth might not be fully captured in English without explanation.

Translating these sentences accurately requires not only linguistic proficiency but also an understanding of the cultural and religious contexts in which they are used.

Translating such sentences requires not only linguistic proficiency but also an understanding of the cultural nuances embedded within the language.