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Some Reservations on Translating Taboos from English into Arabic: Problems and Solutions

ABSTRACT

This study examines the intricate linguistic and cultural difficulties associated with translating taboo terms from English into Arabic, especially those pertaining to sex, micturition, and excrement. Since taboos are ingrained in social conventions, translating them frequently calls for more than just linguistic equivalency; it also calls for cultural sensitivity and ethical consideration. The research examines how harsh or obscene phrases are translated into Arabic via omission and euphemism, using samples from colloquial English. The study evaluates how meaning and function are maintained while adjusting to Arabic cultural norms using Peter Newmark's (1988) communicative translation approach and Eugene Nida's (1964) model of dynamic equivalence. The results indicate that because of social, cultural, and religious constraints, direct translations of such taboo phrases are typically avoided in Arab societies. Instead, they frequently use practical approaches that modify or replace the taboo content while preserving the pragmatic effect. The study ends by suggesting audience-sensitive and context-aware translation strategies for taboos and urging more investigation into how these translations are received in various Arabic dialects and media outlets.

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بعض القيود المفروضة على ترجمة الالفاظ المحصورة لغويا من

الانكليزية الى العربية: مشاكل وحلول

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المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الصعوبات اللغوية والثقافية المعقدة المرتبطة بترجمة المصطلحات المحرمة من الإنجليزية إلى العربية، وخاصة تلك المتعلقة بالجنس والتبول والبراز. ونظراً لأن المحرمات متأصلة في الأعراف الاجتماعية، فإن ترجمتها غالباً ما تتطلب أكثر من مجرد التكافؤ اللغوي؛ بل تتطلب أيضاً مراعاة الحساسية الثقافية والاعتبارات الأخلاقية. ويبحث البحث في كيفية ترجمة العبارات القاسية أو البذيئة إلى العربية عن طريق الحذف والتعبير الملطف، باستخدام عينات من اللغة الإنجليزية العامية. وتُقيم الدراسة كيفية الحفاظ على المعنى والوظيفة مع التكيف مع المعايير الثقافية العربية باستخدام نهج الترجمة التواصلية لبيتر نيومارك (1988) ونموذج التكافؤ الديناميكي ليوجين نيدا (1964). وتشير النتائج إلى أنه نظراً للقيود الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية، فإن المجتمعات العربية عادةً ما تتجنب الترجمات المباشرة لهذه العبارات المحرمة. وبدلاً من ذلك، غالباً ما تستخدم مناهج عملية تُعدّل أو تستبدل محتوى المحرمات مع الحفاظ على التأثير البراغماتي. تختتم الدراسة باقتراح استراتيجيات ترجمة مُراعية للجمهور ومُراعية للسياق للمحرمات، وحثت على إجراء المزيد من البحث في كيفية استقبال هذه الترجمات في مختلف اللهجات العربية ووسائل الإعلام. الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة المحرمة، الترجمة، التكافؤ الديناميكي، الترجمة التواصلية، لطف التعبير

1- Preliminaries

Taboo language has always been a challenge for translators to undertake in English-Arabic translation, particularly as it has different connotations from that of their own cultures. The point is that taboo terms and expressions are variously treated by translators; some are entirely removed in translation to avoid offense and embarrassment to the TL Arab receivers.

Commonly, as identified in the Cambridge Dictionary, a taboo is "a subject, word, or action avoided for religious or social reasons" (Hendal, 2021). Similarly, Yule (2020) defines taboo terms (or obscenities) as "words and phrases, often involving body parts, bodily functions, and sexual acts that people avoid for reasons related to religion, politeness, and prohibited behavior."

Therefore, one of the main challenges in translating taboo (dirty) words from English into Arabic lies in exchanging the cultural taboos associated with such

expressions. Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence (1964) proposes a practical foundation for dealing with this issue. Instead of persisting on a literal translation, dynamic equivalence consists of transferring the same emotional and cultural effect to the target audience. This is markedly urgent when translating dirty words and explicit language, which may be offensive or even unacceptable in Arabic-speaking cultures. For example, interpreting "You screwed us over" word for word would score a vulgar and culturally unsuitable performance. A dynamic equivalent as "لقد خذلنا" sustains the intended sense while respecting cultural limits.

Similarly, the necessity of cultural sensitivity is further supported by Peter Newmark's (1988) distinction between semantic and communicative translation. While communicative translation adjusts the message to suit the cultural and emotional conditions of the target audience, semantic translation preserves the original form and content. Communicative translation is more powerful when dealing with taboo words and expressions because it allows the translator to replace degrading words or expressions with ones that are accepted in the culture without sacrificing the pragmatic force that was intended. As a result, both Nida and Newmark offer crucial theoretical support for the methods employed to culturally appropriate translations of sexual taboos.

Thus, the study is conducted to describe how taboos are treated in English-Arabic translation. The researcher adopts Nida's (1964) and Newmark's (1988) models as the most practical approach in translating English taboos into Arabic, which views the translating process in terms of problems and solutions rather than a general theory and application. This approach views the translation as different kinds of problems that demand proper and acceptable solutions based on solid and practical ground to convey the contextual and cultural meanings of English taboos into their equivalents in Arabic culture without distorting their realities or offending Arab audiences.

2. The Concept of Taboos

The aforementioned taboos seem to be fairly common throughout cultures; however, their specific levels of significance and severity vary depending on the society; some taboos are more important than others. Taboos are also constantly changing in terms of language and culture. The language of discrimination against the target's gender,

age, religion, psychological capacities, and—most importantly—ethnic heritage is the source of some of the most vile epithets in Arabic and English today (Burrige, 2006).

The term 'taboo' originates from the Polynesian word 'tapu/taboo,' meaning forbidding or prohibiting certain actions or behaviors due to cultural, religious, or social reasons, which can cause discomfort, embarrassment, offense, or harm (Oxford Dictionary, 2000).

2.1 Types of Taboos

The concept of taboo is examined in literature under the area of rudeness or impoliteness, which is commonly defined as "any statement, action, or lack of action that offends someone, causing discomfort or annoyance" (Rondina & Workman, 2005).

Bastistella (2005) also sees that taboos are 'forbidden words, including swearing and disbelief words or words of sexual, racial, political, and religious connotations, whether in spoken or written conversation. He identifies four main types of taboos: epithets, which include linguistic expressions of various insulting remarks related to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual slurs, such as "bitch," as in "mother f**ker," and "tit-man." Second, profanity utilizes expressions involving religious cursing; such expressions are related to religion but are manipulated in a secular context to outrage God or any religious affiliations. Third, vulgarity encompasses utilizing words and expressions related to sexual anatomy and excretory functions; such linguistic terms are frequently used by citizens of limited education or those who belong to low socioeconomic classes of society. Fourth, obscenity encompasses utilizing linguistic expressions that are publicly unauthorized as morally deficient for referring to the human body, bodily functions, or sexual activities.

In sum, Allan and Burrige (2006) define taboo language as "a proscription of behavior for a specifiable community of people, for a specified context, at a given place and time". They enumerate the following categories of common human taboos:

1. Human bodies and their waste products (perspiration, feces, menstrual fluid, etc.).
2. Defecation, micturition, and sex organs.
3. Illnesses, mortality, and murder (including fishing and hunting).

4. Identifying, addressing, touching, and observing people, religious things, and locations.

5. Food collection, cooking, and eating

2.2 Functions of Taboos

The translating process is not only considered a linguistic activity but also a cultural activity in the first place. In the sense that language and culture are closely intertwined and translation encompasses transferring the cultural factors from one language into another. The fact that language is merely one component, among others, of the culture of any society, as are religion, ideology, politics, history, beliefs, etc. Hence, comes the importance of translation studies as an interdisciplinary field that allows translators to be totally immersed in other social disciplines to provide better translation (Abbas, 2015). To understand the functions of taboos as part of the language of any culture that witnesses great changes in their use over time, they are classified based on their sources into:

2. 2. 1. Taboos of Linguistic Sources

According to Murray et al. (1884), taboo words involve the deliberate use of words or idioms that replace particular topic matter or social context. It displays words that people frequently use to convey feelings of deception and transgression of social norms and values in a certain community. It is culturally expressed through people's forbidden words, customs, and actions (Samir, 2024).

2. 2. 2 Taboos of Cultural Sources

According to Brousse (2020), language and culture are perfectly intertwined. So, the habitual use of taboo words and expressions by native speakers who possess linguistic competence necessitates a proper understanding of when and how offensive language is used in everyday communication.

To Affini (2017), the unconscious occurrence of taboo transgresses the societal norms or regulations of a specific society. The fact that taboos are prevalent in almost all languages, but what might be taboo in one language might not be in the other. In other words, they are complicatedly woven within the culture and specific norms of that society and can pass from one decent to another. In addition, taboos can transform from one

social group to another or from one age to another. The notion of taboo is not universally applicable unless constructed within the cultural and linguistic frameworks of a society (Samir, 2024).

3. Taboo language: A Cultural-Linguistic Perspective

Some expressions, especially those that relate to sex, micturition (urination), and defecation, are among the most sensitive and controversial elements in language. Therefore, in this research the focus will be concentrated on a set of these taboo terms that cause some embarrassment when translating them from one language to another and the methods that translators try to use when translating these terms, especially from English to Arabic. In this research, the focus will be on some terms related to sex, defecation, and swearing.

Expressions such as “screw,” “dick,” and “fuck” are commonly used in informal speech, media, and literature, whether in the form of vulgarities, idioms, or slang in English. On the other hand, Arabic cultures tend to avoid direct sexual references. To avoid offending anyone, literal translations are usually avoided by using a set of strategies, such as euphemism or omission (Allan & Burrige, 2006). At the same wave, expressions involving urination (e.g., “piss off,” “go piss yourself”) are vastly used as violent or aggressive abuse in English. While, in Arabic, pointing to bodily parts is completely unacceptable in public talk. Translators usually substitute these expressions with functionally correspondent but culturally apt phrases (McEnery, T., 2006).

The last one the author will focus on is words like “shit,” “crap,” and “dump,” or expressions like “talking shit,” which are commonly used in informal English talking to convey disturbance, distrust, or trauma, but, in Arabic, such expressions are too vulgar and do not have equivalents to translate (Pinker, S., 2007). Therefore, translators use the strategy of euphemisms such as “كلام فارغ” (nonsense) instead of literal words.

Eugene Nida (1964) and Peter Newmark (1988) argue for giving priority to functional equivalence or communicative effectiveness over literal reliability, chiefly when treating or handling emotionally or culturally loaded words or expressions.

4. The Strategies of Translating English Taboos into Arabic

Because a direct translation of sexual obscenity could offend some cultures, translators should concentrate on communicating the intended meaning of the taboo words without compromising the traditions of the intended audience, according to Nida's concept of dynamic equivalency. This approach is essential when translating sexual profanity (Nida,1964). Likewise, Newmark's communicative translation paradigm advocates for culturally appropriate message adaptation without losing the essential meaning (Newmark,1988). Translation involves conveying thoughts and ideologies among social groups worldwide, presenting challenges in understanding embedded meanings. Contemporary translators use methods like Omission, substitution, Euphemism to make words suitable for listeners. Translating taboos, which are not tolerated by Arab conservative communities, requires equivalence, reducing "obscenity," and preserving the immoral impact of SLT expressions. (Ghourdou, 2003).

4.1 Omission

A translation strategy in which a word, phrase, or expression is deliberately neglected when it is too insulting, or culturally inappropriate. Popular when English taboo expressions are untranslatable or unsuitable for Arabic audiences (Baker, 1992). Also, Ben Mebarek (2019) defines omission as a censorship. It is used as a tool in translating taboo words due to cultural mismatch between the source language (SL) and target language (TL). This is often done to preserve the source language and avoid embarrassment.

4.2 Substitution

In translation, substitution means removing elements from the SL and replacing them with another that have similar meaning in the TL. Translators often tends to use this strategy as an alternative for the omission procedure in translating English taboos to reduce the obscenity and profanity when substituting elements from the SL and replace them with less offensive counterparts in the TL Arabic (Ben Mebarek, 2019).

However, To House (Almijrab, 2020), such procedure can deviate the meaning if translators fail to choose the relevant substitutes which convey the meaning of the original and the SL term communicative purpose is unfulfilled in the TL. For instance, the word (bar) in English has an associative meaning contradicted to Arabic. In English,

the word refers to a place where people are gathered to make fun, drink and play games, whereas in Arabic it is called (خمارة), a bad place usually people used to come for drinking alcohol which is forbidden in Islamic-Arabic culture which is commonly associated with moral deviance and religious corruption.

Furthermore, the various cross-cultural assumptions between English and Arabic can lead to ideological shift which in turn impacts translating English taboos into Arabic. The meaning of the word (gay) for example, would be extended from the adjective (happy) into its connotative meaning if translated into Arabic as شاذ جنسيا (Homosexual) which contradicts its literal meaning in Arabic in the sense that the term شاذ (odd) denotes extravagance and extremism that is almost void from norms and virtues. However, in both cultures, the term reflects two opposing cultural presumptions which involve an ideological loss when replacing one for the other.

Hence, meaning is not always rooted in the word itself or the accompanied words, but from its use in the relevant cultural context. In addition, in the religious context for example, all the English *F-words taboos* are substituted in Arabic into اللعنة عليك (curse be upon you), or تبا لك (screw you), and أيها الوغد (you shit) are converged by Arabs translators into اللعنة (damn), for Arabic is deeply rooted in religion, whereby, to Moslem beliefs, taboo and swear words are absolutely rejected while communicating with others. As such, taboos should either totally eliminated or euphemized in translating into Arabic to preserve Arab audience (Almijrab, 2020: 25).

4.3 Euphemism

A euphemism is a mild or indirect word substituted for one that is considered too rough , impolite , or humiliating .Euphemism is an essential strategy in Arabic translations of sensitive or physical taboos, utilized to avoid offense while conveying the general idea(Allan & Burridge,2006). As a strategy, it is called a euphemistic substitution whereby a translator replaces the taboo words or expressions of the SL into their equivalents in the TL as a more politely, socially and culturally acceptable alternative (Allan and Burridge, 2006).

For instance, the English term (buggers) is translated into التافهين means (the pitiful) in Arabic. This strategy is called a "Euphemistic Substitution", whereby the term

(buggers) is potentially offensive replaced with a milder one that captures the intended context. This translation aims to convey the quantity and tone while using a more socially acceptable language in the target text meantime effectively maintains the realm of the original. Another example, is the translation of the English expression (You shit bag) into أنت أيها الحقير whereby a translator replaces it with another milder one that conveys a strong negative sentiment of the original text. The translation aims to convey a derogatory tone while using more socially acceptable language in the target text (Anwar, 2023: 517).

5- Theoretical Framework

The current study depends on descriptive analytics approaches as a research approaches. This method includes the idea of a descriptive analytical approach as one of its branches. The descriptive analytical approach is a concept that describes the various scientific phenomena and problems and solves problems and questions that fall under the purview of scientific research. The descriptive analytical approach then analyzes the data that has been collected in order to extract the relevant explanation and results. The most crucial features that set the analytical descriptive approach apart from other scientific methods are that it allows a scientific researcher to compare various phenomena with one another using the concept of descriptive analytical approach (field of descriptive analytical approach). This allows for the collection of data on the similarities and differences between those phenomena.

In this paper, the author relied on a few expressions as examples of analysis. Mostly used in American and British English, they are considered to be extremely casual and colloquial insults in the language. It is a component of spoken, commonplace vulgar English rather than being connected to any one book, movie, or writer. Peter Newmark's concept (Communicative Translation) is used in the analysis where the translator intends to convey the message naturally and clearly to the target audience, regardless of the literal meaning. This strategy is ideal for translating interpreting a abusive or vulgar expressions, as it allows cultural accordance while preserving the communicative intent (Newmark, 1988).

According to Eugene Nida's (1964) translation theory, dynamic equivalence aims to produce an equal impact on the intended audience even when the original's language or structure are different. Used as an explanation of how translators modify offensive English language into Arabic phrases that are culturally relevant and have the same emotional impact (Nida, 1964).

6. Data Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of the collected samples will be done according to Nida's (1964) Dynamic vs. Formal Equivalence, and Newmark's (1988) Semantic vs. Communicative Translation models.

6.1 Analysis of the First Example

The English Expression (*He can't keep his d***** in his pants*) is used colloquially to criticize someone for being overly promiscuous.

Arabic Translation: "لا يستطيع كبح شهوته."

"He can't control his desire". Here the translator used the strategy of substitution as an alternative for the bad or taboo word(d*****).

According to Nida's (1964) dynamic Equivalence interpretation, the translator averts frank indication to the male erotic organ ("d****") and instead offer appropriate word that maintains the intended effect— as an attempting to describe the undisciplined sexual manner in a socially tolerable way.

While in the Communicative Translation of Newmark (1988), Instead of using semantic translation, the translator opts for communicative translation. The translation uses polite Arabic to convey the pragmatic function, rather than maintaining the vulgar metaphor.

6.2 Analysis of the Second Example

The English Expression "Go piss yourself."

Function in English: Usually used in casual speaking settings, it is an offensive and obscene slur. It conveys disgust or disdain, a wish to degrade or reject the other individual and frequently uttered in fury or rage. The main purpose of using it is that: To rudely shut someone down, telling someone to leave in an extremely disrespectful way, to

disparage or offend someone by suggesting they're weak, cowardly, or unworthy of conversation

Example: "You think you're better than me?" "Go piss yourself."

In this situation, it does not merely mean "go away"; rather, they are demeaning them by suggesting they are absurd or unworthy of respect.

Arabic Translation: "اِخْتَفِ مِنْ وَجْهِ!" or "ابْتَعِدْ عَنِّي!" "Get out of my face!" or "Stay away from me!"

Here, the translator utilized euphemism as a strategy to substitute the target language's counterparts of the source language's bad words or expressions for more polite, socially and culturally acceptable ones.

The literal reference to micturition ("piss") is avoided here according to Nida's (1964) Dynamic Equivalence theory. The translator aims to produce a similar emotional reaction in the target audience (i.e., rejection and aggression) while avoiding cultural offense.

While Newmark (1988) in his Communicative Translation theory, the focus is not on reproducing the same meaning of the bad word (which would be vulgar in Arabic), but on capturing the illocutionary force (the insult and dismissal).

6.3 Analysis of the Third Example

The English Expression (He talks shit all the time)

Arabic Translation: "يتحدث بكلام فارغ دائماً." (He always talks nonsense.).

This expression is used to discredit someone, implies that he/she is: Talking gibberish, lying, and exaggerating, or making statements that aren't worth hearing. In this regard, the translator used the strategy of omission as a tool to preserve the source language and avoid embarrassment.

For Example: A: "You know John? "I met the president once," he told me.

B says, "Ugh, he talks shit all the time."

In the example above, B mentioned that John is not to be believed and frequently fabricates or lies. The bad word "shit" that is used in the original statement is one that Arabic-speaking cultures find extremely insulting. It would be absurd and repulsive to translate anything like "يتحدث بالبراز دائماً" directly into Arabic. The function (that is)

accusing someone of uttering unhelpful or untrue things—is what is being preserved, not the form. Therefore, the translator employs neutral and culturally acceptable expressions such as "تفاهات" (nonsense), "كلام فارغ" (empty talk), and "أكاذيب" (falsehoods) in certain contexts.

The Dynamic Equivalence of Nida (1964), a culturally neutral term that conveys the same meaning is used by the translator in place of the extremely insulting word "shit." Once again, the Communicative Translation of Newmark (1988) is preferred. For Arabic readers, the translator avoids the semantic approach (literal meaning of "shit"). It is not form preservation but function preservation.

6.4 Analysis of the Forth Example:

The English expression "Don't be such a dick."

Arabic Translation: "لا تكن وقحًا" "Don't be rude!"

This expression involves the tacky slang term "dick," which literally indicates male organs, but in casual English, mainly in American and British use, mostly used metaphorically to insult someone and describe him to be mean, rude, lofty, or intentionally unpleasant.

"لا تكن وقحًا" (Don't be rude) or "لا تتصرف بهذه الوقاحة" (Don't act this rudely)

The dynamic equivalence theory of Nida focuses on response rather than form, so there is no literal reference to the bad word. He replaced the bad word ("dick") with a culturally appropriate expression where the position behind the insult is preserved.

Newmark, in his theory, focuses on clearness and cultural favor, "لا تكن سخيفًا" (Don't be silly). He avoids the bad word in Arabic and chooses a word that fits the situation without violating traditions and norms by making a paraphrase or substitution of the vulgar word. Both authors reject a literal translation of the word "dick" as it would be culturally unacceptable in Arabic. Nida emphasizes emotional disapproval, while Newmark prioritizes cultural tradition and readability.

6.5 Analysis of the Fifth Example:

The English expression "Holy shit!"

Arabic Translation: "يا إلهي" or "يا للهول" "Oh my God!" or "What a shock!"

This expression is widely used in English as an exclamation of shock, stagger, or disbelief; it is often casual and insulting.

Nida used the strategy of substitutes. He depends on an emotional response that is culturally more suitable for shocking. According to Newmark, he chooses an interjection that fits Arabic conversation traditions and norms and is acceptable for the context. Finally, according to this analysis, we conclude that both models discourage word-for-word translation of abusive/taboo expressions between languages like English and Arabic, with Nida focusing on eliciting similar emotional reactions and Newmark prioritizing comprehensible, suitable versions.

7- Conclusion

Translating taboo expressions, such as sex, micturition, and defecation, is a challenging task for English-speaking translators. These expressions are often censored and socially unacceptable in Arabic-speaking contexts. To avoid violating cultural norms, translators use strategies like omission, euphemism, and generalization. These strategies aim to preserve the intended function of the source text while avoiding offensive content. Translators must balance linguistic fidelity with cultural sensitivity, utilizing a functional, audience-oriented approach grounded in dynamic and communicative translation theories.

To conclude, using taboo language is universally a prohibited phenomenon, socially, morally, religiously, and ideologically unless contextually modified and euphemized to suit the cultural norms of the receptors' language. Taboos as part of any language existed centuries ago and it keeps changing constantly over history, yet, it remains an inseparable part of one's culture that must be censored in communication in order not to harm or humiliate the hearers.

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