
Arabs' Contribution to the Art of Translation

Arif Karkhi Abukhudairi
Faculty of Arabic language and Islamic Civilization
Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University
Brunei Darussalam

Abstract

Seeking knowledge is one of the main factors that urges a nation to transfer a foreign heritage to its language. This took place in the past, and has been taking place at present and will take place again and again in the future. The Greeks received the heritage of the Egyptians. And later on the Europeans received the heritage of the Arabs along with the heritage of the Greeks and Romans. In modern times, the Arabs translated the heritage of the West to their Arabic language.

Ancient Arabic Translation

The Arabs started translating foreign works into Arabic in the pre-Islamic era as indicated in their relations with the Romans, Greeks, Persians, Hindus and others, their writings, the lexicals of their language, and the holy Quran. Their translation at that time, however, was but little. Such translation included the Bible, simple knowledge, proverbs, wise sayings, fables, fairy tales and the like.

After the rise of Islam, the Arabs began to translate Greek sciences and philosophy, particularly in the reign of Khalid Bin Yazid (85 h.), the Umayyad King who was interested in philosophy and logic. He brought several Greek philosophers from Egypt, and ordered them to translate Greek philosophy from both Greek and Coptic languages into Arabic. Besides, after their conquests of foreign countries, the Arabs felt they needed to obtain foreign knowledge and sciences to explore the thought and the civilizations of other nations. They wanted to benefit from the Greek sciences such as astronomy and mathematics in their daily life, and in recognizing the time for their prayers, fasting and pilgrimage.¹

¹ Amir Najjar, *Harakatul Tarjamah*, P. 8.

The translation of the Greek works in the Umayyad dynasty was the true beginning of the translation movement. The golden era of translation, however, was in the Abbasid time. The historians divide this era into three stages.

The first stage began in the reign of Abi Jaafar Al-Mansur (136 h.), and ended with the death of King Harun Ar-Rashid (193 h.). The former ordered the book *Sindhind* be translated. He also directed Muhammad Bin Ibrahim Al-Fazari to write an astronomy book like it, which he did and entitled *Al-Sindhind Al-Kabir*.² In the reign of the latter, two major events in translation work were accomplished. The first was the establishment of *Darul Hikmah*, a bureau to which he appointed Yuhana Bin Masawih, a famous translator and distinguished physician and scholar, as its director and chief translator. His mission was to translate old Greek books on medicine which Rashid had brought from the conquered Greek empire. The second accomplishment was made by Barmak ministers who paid great attention to transferring their Persian culture and heritage to Arabic. Their ultimate intention was to "persianise" the Abbasid administration as well as the Arabs lifestyle. This scheme was carried out by a group of Persian Arab translators such as the Nobikhts, Sahl Bin Harun, and Abdullah Bin Al-Muqaffa'. They translated several Persian works into Arabic including *Amthal Bizr Jimhir*, *'Ahd Ardshir*, *Hizar Afsanah* and *Kililah Wa Dimnah* (which is Hindi in origin.). Persian translators helped to translate Hindi and Greek works which had been translated into Persian earlier. Ibnul Muqaffa', for instance, translated some of Aristotle's books from Persian into Arabic.

The second stage of translation in the Abbasid time began in the reign of Ma'mun in 198 h. and ended in 300 h. King Ma'mun took several measures to encourage the translation movement. He wrote to the Roman king asking him to send him Greek books. He also sent his messengers, including scholars and translators, to bring the Greek works to him. Then he ordered the translators to translate them into Arabic and rewarded them generously as he paid the translators the weight of their works in gold. Many translators became famous in Ma'mun's reign, amongst them are, Thabit Bin Qurrah (288 h.), Qusta Bin Luqa (300 h.), Ibnul Batriq (180 h.) and Hunayn Bin Ishaq (260 h.). A countless number of books on logic, mathematics, geometry, medicine, astronomy, philosophy and others were Arabicized.

The third century was the most fruitful era in the Islamic civilization. Moreover, it was the century of translation in which brilliant translators, such as Hunayn Bin Ishaq, appeared. Ishaq was not only a great translator, but a prominent writer as well. He wrote many books on medicine and philosophy. In addition, he translated numerous Greek books to Arabic. He

² Qifti, *Tarikhul Hukamaa*, PP 270-271.

was helped by a group of his students including Ishaq, his son, Habish Al-Atham, his nephew, Astephan Bin Basil and Yahya Bin Harun. Hunayn revised and corrected their translations. He was known for his accuracy in his translation as he mastered Syriac, Persian, Greek and Arabic.

The third stage began in 300 h. and ended in the middle of the fourth century A.H. During that era, translators were more interested in translating works on logic and physics. Mata Bin Yunus (320 h.) was the greatest translator at that time. He was more interested in Aristotle's works, and translated several of his works including *The Art of Poetry*. With the death of Mata Bin Yunus, as Shawqi Daif says, the golden time of translation came to an end.³

Translation in the 19th Century

As in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, seeking knowledge was the main reason why the Arabs in the 19th century transferred the sciences and technology of other nations into their language. Napoleon Bonaparte's military expedition to Egypt in 1798 awakened the Arabs from their long sleep. They started to compare their backward situation due to the Mameluke and Ottoman occupation (1514-1914) to the developed and scientific methods brought by the French scholars. Moreover, brilliant views of Egyptian scholars like Hasan Al-Attar (1766-1835) helped Muhammad Ali (1769-1849), the ruler of Egypt at the time to draw up his reform plan. He thought that the only way to develop Egypt was to look to the West and adopt its systems and sciences. In order to achieve his goal, he took certain measures. He began by sending several educational missions to Europe. The first of these missions was sent to Italy in 1809 followed by several others to France, England and Austria to specialize in medicine, engineering, science, marine and military arts. The last of these missions was sent to England in 1848. The most fruitful mission, however, was the one sent to France in 1826. It comprised thirty-four students and was headed by Rif'a Raf'a Al-Tahtawi as an imam. He, however, decided to study and took translation as his major. The members of this mission specialized in several scientific fields including painting, marine and military arts, science, humanities, politics, economics, engineering, chemistry, medicine, artillery, architecture, agriculture, biology, French, history, geography and translation.

Muhammad Ali made sure that the members of these missions would concentrate in their scientific fields and on mastering the foreign languages, and each of them would translate at least one book into Arabic before their return to Egypt.

³ Shawqi Daif, *Al-Asr Al-Abbasi Ath-Thani*, P. 134.

In addition to the educational missions, Muhammad Ali took another measure as he paid attention to education. He established several schools in order to produce qualified officials for the government offices, both civil and military. Therefore he founded a military school (1825), school of medicine (1827), school of pharmacy (1831) and school of veterinary (1828). He hired several foreign translators in these schools to translate the lectures of the foreign teachers for their Egyptian students. Such methods, however, proved to be ineffective. Therefore Muhammad Ali directed his attention to translating foreign scientific books, establishing schools for foreign languages and increasing the number of the educational missions to Europe.⁴

Translation was an essential tool for Muhammad Ali in all the measures he took to reform and modernize Egypt. The members of educational missions' ultimate goal was to transfer the European sciences and technology to Arabic. Translation, also, was the means to acquire the knowledge of the foreign professors hired at the Egyptian schools.

At the beginning, translation was carried out by Syrian, Moroccan and Armenian translators before the graduates of the modern Egyptian schools took over. The major translation's work, however, was undertaken later on by the graduates of *Madrasat Al-Asun*, headed by Tahatawi. The graduates of this school of translation managed to translate two thousand books over a period of forty years.

Arab Contribution to Translation

The Arabs' translation movement resulted in translating countless books on science and technology into Arabic. A quick glance at the translated books in works like Ibnul Nadim's *Fihrist* and the like gives us an idea of the tremendous task the Arabs undertook in the field of translation. In addition to that, Arabs contributed considerably to the art of translation. Here, I will focus on only three of such contributions, namely (a) establishing translation centres, (b) formulating translation theories and (c) coining translation technical terms.

(a) Establishing Centres for Translation

Arabs founded several centres for translation in Baghdad, Rabat and Cairo. In Egypt alone, a number of translation centres were established, among them are, the Faculty of Al-alsun (languages) (1951), Institute of Writing, Translation and Journalism, Cairo University (1944), School for Guides and Dragomans (1931), Al-Ahram Centre for Scientific Translation (1975) and Translation Bureau (1841). I will limit myself,

⁴ Shayyal, *Tarikh At-Tarjamah*, P 10.

however, to only two translation centres, namely, the Centre of Baghdad and the Cairo Centre.

- **Dar al-Hikmah**

As mentioned earlier, Harun Ar-Rashid, a famed Abbasid caliph, founded the first Arabic translation centre, *Dar al-Hikmah*, also called *Bait ul Hikmah* and *Khizant ul Hikmah*, in Baghdad. It was basically an enormous public library of foreign books. In it, Yuhana Bin Masawih was appointed to translate old medical works. Other translators were brought from scientific centres like *Jundi-Shabur* as well as other Syriac and Persian translators. King Ma'mun, later on, appointed Hunayn Bin Ishaq as a chairman of *Dar al-Hikmah* as well as a supervisor of the translation work. He also turned *Darul Hikmah* into an academy of science. He equipped it with his famous telescope. Appointing Sahl Bin Harun as a chief librarian of *Dar al-Hikmah*, he also hired many other translators, among them are Yahya Bin Al-Batriq, and Hunayn Bin Ishaq. He made Yahya Bin Abi Mansur a supervisor of his telescope. In addition, he hired a group of famous astronomers like Muhammad Bin Musa Al-Khawarizmi and Al-Abbas Bin Said Al-Jawhari. Thus, *Dar al-Hikmah* became a celebrated school of astronomy. Several prominent astronomers graduated from this school. Studying and benefiting from the previous researches undertaken by the Hindi, Persian and Greek scholars, Arab researchers succeeded in adding new findings and brilliant discoveries in the fields of astronomy, geography and mathematics.⁵

- **Madrastul Al-Sun**

Madrastul Al-Sun, or school of languages, was named first *Madrastul Tarjamah*, or school of translation. It was established in 1835. The first intake of this school graduated in 1839. Some of its graduates were appointed teachers of both Arabic and English in the same school as well as the school of engineering, whereas the others joined the translation bureau established in 1841.

Madrastul Al-Sun lasted fifteen years, from the reign of Muhammad Ali until it was closed by Abbas the First in 1849. A hundred translators graduated from this school. The number of books translated by its graduates, as mentioned earlier, reached two thousand books.⁶

The graduates of *Madrastul Al-Sun*, who were at the same time the pupils of Al-Tahtawi, became prominent translators. Some of them

⁵ Shawqi Daif, *Al-Asr Al-Abbasi Al-Awwal*, P 115.

⁶ Muhammad Abdul Ghani Abdul Rahman, *Dirasah Fi Fanil Ta'rib Wat-Tarjamah*, P 53

majored in mathematics like Saleh Majdi, some specialized in agriculture like Muhammad Neda, and some majored in military arts like Muhammad Laz. Several others majored in law, history, biology and so on.

The students at *Madrastul Al-Sun* studied several courses including Arabic literature, history, geography and foreign languages especially French, Turkish, Persian, Italian and English.

In translation, the school adopted a method that paid a great attention to the meaning of the text and to its form and style as well. This method was formulated by Tahtawi himself and followed by his students in their translation of the French works. It was also adopted by their followers.⁷

(b) Theories of Translation

In addition to their efforts in establishing translation centres, Arabs were also pioneers in formulating valuable theories of translation. Such theories began in the Abbasid era and developed in both nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here, I will refer briefly to the main aspects of the Arabic translation theories particularly in the writings of al-Jahiz, al-Tawhidi, Abdel Qahir al-Jurajani and Salahuddin As-Safadi.

In his book *Al-Haiwan*, Jahiz discussed three significant points relating to translation, namely the qualifications of a translator, translation of poetry and the value of translation.

As for the first point, Jahiz held the opinion that a translator should be as good at writing as his knowledge of the subject of the text he translates. He also must master both the source language and the target language as well.

Regarding to the translation of poetry, Jahiz thought that if translated to another language, Arabic poetry lost its beauty.

With regard to the value of translation, Jahiz felt that a translator could never produce a translation that can be as good as the original writing. This can never happen, unless the translator was as knowledgeable as the writer.⁸

Tawhidi dealt with the errors committed in Arabic translation and attributed them to the indirect translation. He claimed that the translation from Greek to Hebrew and from Hebrew to Syriac, and then from Syriac to Arabic, had badly effected the meanings of the original texts.⁹

⁷ Muhammad Abdul Ghani Hasan, *Fanul Tarjamah*, P 47

⁸ Khurshid, *At-Tarjamah Wa Mushkilatuha*, PP. 6-8.

⁹ Amir Najjar, *Harakatul Tarjamah*, P 20.

Jurajani talked about the translation of metaphor and concluded that metaphor must not be translated as simile or vice versa. To him, the mere transfer of their meanings is unacceptable. Otherwise, the translator's task would not be considered a translation, but rather a mere composition.¹⁰

Safadi highlighted the methodology of translation. He pointed out that there were two methods of translation. One belongs to Yuhana Bin Al-Batriq, Ibn Na'imah Al-Himsi and others, in which they translate word by word. The second belongs to Hunayn Bin Ishaq, Al-Jawhari and others in which they translate the meaning of a whole sentence regardless of the number of words.

Safadi rejected the first method and called it bad for two reasons, firstly because in Arabic there are no words equivalent to Greek words. That is why many Greek words appeared in the Arabic translations. Secondly, because the structures of one language are different from the structures of another. According to Safadi, the shortcoming of a translation occurs in the use of metaphor. The second method, on the other hand, is good and is adopted by most of Arab translators.¹¹ Both methods were used in translating scientific texts in particular.

In modern times, however, Ahmad Hasan Az-Zayyat came up with a third method especially for translating literary texts. His method is quite unique as he endeavors to bring out the feeling of the writer or the poet. The method involves three steps. In the first step, Zayyat translates the foreign text literally according to its language system. In the second step, he changes the translation according to the Arabic language style. In the third step, he pours the soul of the writer into the translated text.¹²

A few years later, Abdul Wahab Azam introduced a new method he used in translating poetry in particular. In his method, he not only shows the soul of the poet and his meanings, but also strives to keep the poet's style and music as well.¹³

Aqqad gave priority to *Tarjamah* (translation) over *Ta'rib* (arabicization). He said that a translator should first search for Arabic words to translate the foreign words. If he cannot find Arabic equivalents, then he resorts to arabicizing the foreign lexicals.¹⁴ His opinion was supported by Ali Mustafa Musharafa, a prominent

¹⁰ Arif Karkhi Abukhudairi, "Arabic Translation Theory Its Rize And Development", P 49.

¹¹ Khurshid, *At-Tarjamah Wa Mushkilatuha*, PP 8-9.

¹² *Ibid*, P 10.

¹³ Muhammad Abdul Ghani Hasan, *Fanul Tarjamah*, P. 25.

¹⁴ Khurshid, *At-Tarjamah Wa Mushkilatuha*, P 16-17

Egyptian scholar, on the condition that the foreign term is used in all other international languages or most of them.¹⁵

Tahtawi, the pioneer of modern Arab translators, adopted Jahiz's view on the translation of poetry. In fact Tahtawi's opinion supplemented that of Jahiz. He stated that translation diminishes the eloquence of the original literary text. When translated, splendid French poems turned out to be cold and dull, the same as beautiful Arabic poems if translated into foreign languages.¹⁶

Radwan Ibrahim believed that a translator should be specialized in the topic he translates, whereas Muhammad Abdel Ghani Hasan felt that a good knowledge about the subject is quite enough. Ali Adham, however, thought that a profound knowledge is a must, not only in scientific texts, but also in literary ones. To him, a translator of poetry must be a poet as the knowledge of the two languages is not enough.¹⁷

Ali Adham supported the phenomenon of having several translations for one book. He said that it was due to the fact that language undergoes continuous change, and following such a change requires a new translation that suits the new generation, its taste and trends. Moreover, the splendid features of a masterpiece cannot be contained by one translation.¹⁸

Many discussions were made about the translation of the Holy Qur'an. Some scholars like Ibn Taymiah and Muhammad Shaker opposed it, while others like Muhammad Mustafa Al-Maraghi supported it. Among the latter, several terms were suggested. Luri Maraky used *Tarjamah* (translation), whereas Maraghi suggested both *tarjamat ma'ani* (translation of meaning) and *tarjamat tafsir* (exegesis).

Those who opposed the translation of the Holy Qur'an such as Muhammad Suliman 'Inara, believed that the Holy Qur'an was a light which was impossible to translate.¹⁹

Nevertheless, those who supported the translation of the Holy Qur'an suggested that the translation must not be literal and must depend on the commentaries of the Holy Qur'an.²⁰ In my opinion, such translation must be undertaken by a team of translators, linguists and religious scholars. They all must be fluent in both Arabic and the target language, presumably English. They must be highly knowledgeable in theology, history of religions in general and in Islam in particular. The translation should be both accurate and eloquent. Therefore, it

¹⁵ 'Isamuddin Ahmad, *Harakatul Tarjamah*, P. 264.

¹⁶ Khurshid, *At-Tarjamah Wa Mushkilatuha*, P. 22.

¹⁷ Muhammad Abdul Ghani Hasan, *Fanul Tarjamah*, P. 34-36.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, P. 183.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, P. 168.

²⁰ Khurshid, *At-Tarjamah Wa Mushkilatuha*, P. 56.

should be finally revised and rewritten by a distinguished English writer. Finally, the translation must be accompanied by the Holy Qur'an and called *Tarjamat Tafsir Al-Quran* (translation of the interpretation of the Holy Qur'an).

(c) Translation Terms

Arab translators, like Hunayn Bin Ishaq, showed a great ability in understanding scientific, medical and philosophical terms. They also succeeded in selecting the right Arabic terms corresponding to them. Arabic logical terms they coined such as *maudu'*, *mahmul*, *had*, *qias* and the like attest to that. The Westerners, on the other hand borrowed the Greek and Latin terms themselves, a fact that indicates the superiority of Arabic to other languages in terms of the richness of its own vocabulary.²¹

Arabic contributed plenty of words and terms to several world languages including a number of translation terms such as *terjemah* and *tafsir* in Malay, and *Dragoman* in French.

Meantime, Arabs coined special terms of translation to convey the meanings of transferring heritages from foreign languages into Arabic. The most relevant of such terms are *naql*, *tarjamah*, *ta'rib*, *tafsir* and *tamsir*.

The first two terms convey the idea of transferring in general, though the first is a bit wider than the second.

Ta'rib means transferring a text into Arabic, unlike *Tarjamah*, which refers to translation either into or from Arabic. *Ta'rib* carries also a special meaning as it stands for transferring foreign terms into Arabic as they are, or with some change like *falsafah*, *geographyh*, and *musiqah* which were borrowed by Arab translators in the Abbasid era, and *politika*, *journalat*, and *tiyatar* which were introduced by Tahtawi in the 19th century.

As for *tafsir*, it conveys a wider meaning than *tarjamah*, for it means explanation and interpretation. It is also associated with the translation of the holy Quran in particular, as it neither changes the original text, nor transfers it from one meaning to another.

Tamsir means translating the text into the Egyptian dialect.

The plan which the ancient translators followed was to replace the foreign terms by Arabic ones. They did not use *ta'rib* unless there were no equivalent Arabic words to use. They also used the arabicized

²¹ 'Isamuddin Ahmad, *Harakatul Tarjamah*, P 24.

foreign terms with a brief definition to help the reader to understand the meaning.

Borrowing foreign words, however, is essential to Arabic provided that such words do not disagree with the Arabic taste. Translators, as well as writers, should borrow words and terms which we do not have in our language and use them in their writing. To write correctly and to understand what we write is more important than the origin of the words.

In modern times, Tahtawi made a plan. He made a glossary for each book he translated from French to Arabic. He also directed his students to do the same so that, in the end, they could gather all the glossaries together to compile a French-Arabic dictionary.²²

In their translation, Tahtawi and his students benefited from the translations of the ancient Arab translators as well as their vocabulary books like *Mufradat Ibn Al-Bitar*, *Qanun Ibn Sina*, and *Kuliat Ibn Rushd*. They also made use of the few French-Arabic dictionaries compiled by Herpan (1783-1806), Meriksy (1860) and Ilias Buqtur (1829).

Tahtawi's plan was followed by other translators in the 20th century Ali Mustafa Musharafa, a well-known Egyptian scientist, made a glossary for his book *Al-Handasah Al Wasfiah* (1937). The glossary was in English, French, German and Arabic. In the 30th session of the Academy of Arabic Language in Cairo, Muhammad Musa Ahmad suggested that each translator should make a glossary of the terms used in the translated book, and put it at the end of the translation.²³

In 1945, several terminology committees were set up at the Arabic Academy of Cairo such as Words of Civilization Committee and the Terms of Various Sciences Committee. The academy itself compiled a number of dictionaries including *Al-Mu'jam Al-Wasit* in 1960. Many other dictionaries were compiled, such as *Alqamus Al-Englizi Al-Arabi Fi Alulum Al Tibbiah*, *Mu'jam Asmaa Al-nabat*, *Mu'jam Al-Alfaz Al-Zira'ah*, *Al-Mu'jam Al-Falaki*, and *Mu'jam Mustalahat Al-Adab*.

Such dictionaries are plentiful and useful. Their great number indicates the Arabs' concern about the art of translation, and their keen interest in importing modern Western development to their countries. It also shows that they aspire to bringing back their past glory and to taking their place as leaders of the world.

²² Ibrahim 'Imarah, *At-Tahtawi*, P 10.

²³ 'Isamuddin Ahmad, *Harakatul Tarjamah*, P 265.

Conclusion

As shown through this paper, Arabs made great endeavors in the field of translation, and they succeeded in transferring the treasures of foreign thought such as Greek, Persian, Hindi, European and others into Arabic. Besides, they preserved the Greek heritage and added to it their own ideas and theories. Moreover, they managed to invent new and valuable sciences and scientific methods upon which the Europeans built their present civilization.

In fact, the Arab translation movement was a well-planned project based on their love of knowledge and their religious and worldly needs.

Arabs have two remarkable experiences in translation, one in the past and the second in the modern time. In both experiences, Arabs used translation as a means to develop and to achieve civilization. They looked to the civilized nations to transfer their sciences and knowledge to Arabic. The second experience emulated the first one, though its result was not as fruitful as the first.

In both translation movements, the kings or the rulers themselves highly regarded translation. They invited foreign translators to Damascuss, Baghdad and Cairo. They gave them high positions and showered them with money, presents and awards. Ma'mun, as mentioned earlier, paid translators the weight of their work in gold, a reward no other ruler has ever given either in the East or the West.

In both translation experiences, government supervised and directed translation. To enhance translation, statesmen established schools of translation, built schools for foreign languages, set up libraries, sent educational missions abroad, and formulated lists of foreign books needed to be translated to Arabic.

As for us, we can benefit from these valuable and successful experiences. Our government can supervise new translation projects. They can encourage translation, establish translation centres like *Dar Al-Hikmah* and *Madrasat Al-Asun*, and set up translation bureau in all ministries and universities.

The governments can also pay more attention to other important activities related to translation, particularly education, teaching national as well as foreign languages, literature, journalism, libraries and so on.

Arabs transferred the Greek, Persian, Hindi and Syriac heritages, as they were the best sciences and knowledge in the old time. In modern times, they transferred the European sciences and technology. At present, we can transfer the Western and Eastern civilizations altogether to our language, as Japanese, Korean, Hindi and Chinese experiences are also significant to us. We, however, should transfer literature and art too, as materialism alone cannot lead to sufficient and satisfying development.

Foreign heritage can be greatly beneficial to us. Likewise the Arabs' contribution to translation can be invaluable to the West and the East as well.

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