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Obstacles Face Sixth-Semester English Students in Translating Proverbs from Arabic into English

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ABSTRACT

Translating proverbs is challenging, as they are culturally bound items. Thus, finding the most accurate equivalence causes problems for novice translators and learners. These problems are related to linguistic, cultural, and inaccurate use of translation techniques. Therefore, it is not reasonable to translate a proverb literally by just looking at the meaning of its individual words in a dictionary because they are culturally bound items. The current study attempts to investigate the problems that sixth-semester students encounter while translating Arabic proverbs into English and analyze the methods employed by them. The sample consists of 37 students in the English Department. The students were given a list of proverbs that contained 11 Arabic proverbs to be translated into English. The results revealed that students faced difficulties in translating proverbs due to cultural differences as well as overusing literal translation. The study recommended that students should use communicative translation, memorize some proverbs and their counterpart translations as well as practice.

KEYWORDS: culturally-bound, equivalence, proverbs, sixth-semester.

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation serves as a bridge that fills the gaps. Furthermore, it is a communicative process that transfers the message of a source language text to a target language. In this respect, translation should not be viewed from a single perspective since it requires more than just rendering words and sentence patterns from one language to another. It also involves a network of ideas, meanings, and most importantly, sociocultural norms. In translating proverbs, translators face some linguistic difficulties due to the lexical, stylistic, and cultural differences between the SL and the TL [1]. Achieving effective equivalence when rendering proverbs from one language to another can be problematic for translators, especially novice translators. In order to overcome such a problem, translators need to be aware of both cultures (SL and TL) and adopt the appropriate translation method to provide accurate translation [2].

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to investigate the obstacles that the sixth-semester students at the University of Benghazi, Faculty of Languages encounter while translating Arabic proverbs to English. Moreover, to investigate the strategies the students employed to render the proverbs.

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Equivalence

Translation plays a crucial role in communication between nations and in bridging the cultural and linguistic gaps among them. The main challenge of translation is finding the most appropriate equivalence of meaning. In this respect, "Translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message" [3, p.12]. Thus, translation is not a mere transfer of words and grammatical structure from one language to another, rather it is a transformation of messages using the most appropriate equivalence. That is to say, translation depends heavily on the transfer of culture. The problem becomes even more sophisticated when dealing with two different cultures: English and Arabic. In addition to the linguistic differences, Arabic and English do not belong to the same family of languages. Thus, the task of the translator is not easy since (s) he should create an effect on the target text reader that is similar to that of the original. Translators, however, frequently encounter several problems when translating texts from English into Arabic and vice versa. Equivalence is one of the problems that translators face. When translating texts with words that do not have a direct equivalent in the target language, the translator is compelled to translate them communicatively or merely translate the meaning. [4]

In the case of translating idioms, sayings, and proverbs which are culturally bound, the translator attempts to find the equivalence that would be known to the speech community of the target language and would imply adequate meaning. For instance, in *Carrying Coals to*

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Newcastle, the proverb sounds irrelevant if transformed literally into Arabic because the audience of the TL has no idea about Newcastle (A place famous for coal mining in Great Britain). Therefore, the appropriate equivalent in Arabic would be يبيع الماء في حارة السقائين. It has been argued that rendering proverbs by identifying word-for-word equivalence is not possible. This emphasizes the importance of considering proverbs beyond their denotative meaning. Thus, it is crucial to consider the cultural layers in the translation process [5]. All in all, equivalence is an important phenomenon in translation, and it involves an attempt to convert the content while retaining the context and meaning of the original.

Translation and Culture

Communication between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds is made feasible through translation. Indeed, translation plays a significant role in cultural exchange. Likewise, culture plays a crucial role in the translation process. Thus, translation and culture are interwoven. In this respect, translators have been entrusted with the highly demanding task of representing cultures for decades [6]. Newmark established the relationship between culture and translation. According to him, although this process has been supposed not to be difficult, in reality, translators have been facing the complex task of translating and conveying culture for a long time. Since the translator is considered a cultural mediator (s)he should be both bilingual and bicultural. To put it another way, (s)he has good knowledge of both SL and TL cultures. Therefore, he/she can render cultural messages to produce a text that has the same tone as the original one. The lack of such cultural knowledge of the SL and TL may cause cultural and semantic problems in conveying the intended meaning from one language to another.

Undoubtedly, culture has a significant impact on language; the two are closely linked "Language does not exist apart from culture" [7, p.207]. In other words, language is the mirror that reflects the culture of a particular community. Language obstacles are caused by culture; challenges that translators encounter due to cultural variations between the source and target languages might be more severe than those resulting from linguistic differences. Such challenges are obvious when it comes to the translation between two different languages Arabic and English. This problem becomes more complicated when dealing with culturally specific terms such as proverbs. Culture-specific items are words and expressions that are embedded within a particular language and culture, and they are not familiar to the TL and culture. These items represent a specific type of food, religious practice, specific habits, etc. For example, in Western culture owl is associated with wisdom, whereas in Arabic culture it is a symbol of pessimism. In the same vein, the Arabic proverb أكلتم تمري وعصيتم أمري, a literal translation of the previous will inevitably distort the meaning. The appropriate equivalence would be *pig-headed*; the English people do not use the word "date" because this type of fruit does not grow in the country, so the translator needs to replace the word "date" with the word "pig" as it is a Western animal's pet and becomes a nutritious food for them.

Proverbs

A proverb is a short well-known saying, that expresses wisdom and is derived from common real-world experience. proverbs were defined as "special, fixed, unchanged phrases which have special, fixed, unchanged meanings" [8, p.138]. Proverbs can be very difficult to understand from single words since the literal meaning can mean something different from the figurative meaning. Hence, translating proverbs is challenging as they create problems in the process of understanding and translating them. Even if a proverb has a linguistic equivalent in the TL, there may be a cultural difference involved. For example, the English proverb *A bird in hand is worth two in the bush* has a similar linguistic equivalent in Arabic, however, the cultural equivalent is slightly different due to the cultural languages between the two languages. Although literal translation can be understood عصفور في اليد خير من اثنين على الشجيرة, communicative translation matches the cultural equivalenceعصفور في اليد خير من عشرة على الشجرة. In this case, proverbs cannot be translated literally since they may sometimes have no natural figurative equivalents in TL. Each proverb conveys a specific meaning in a specific context of a situation. Therefore, a proverb should be transformed accurately to carry the same cultural conventions of the original proverb [5]. It is not reasonable to translate a proverb literally by just looking at the meaning of its individual words in a dictionary because they are culturally bound items.

Language of Proverbs

Proverbs are different from ordinary speech because they are made up of figurative language. A proverb may contain metaphor, personification, paradox, and other stylistic devices that identify the figurative nature of the language of proverbs [4]. This causes difficulty for translators since (s)he should render the figurative meaning of the proverb as well as their communicative, for example, simile is a metaphorical device used in the Arabic proverb كالمستجير من الرمضاء بالنار. Nonetheless, the literal device (simile) may not be the same in the translated form. For translators to accurately translate this proverb into Arabic, they must first identify the relevant counterpart in Arabic, which is "out of the fire into the frying pan." The proverb, which is used metaphorically in both Arabic and English, implies that one is going from a difficult circumstance to one that is even worse. Similarly, the English proverb "birds of a feather flock together" and its Arabic equivalent are metaphorically employed to illustrate how individuals who have similar traits gravitate towards each other's companionship. It can be said that

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proverbs cannot be understood from the individual meanings of their elements and can yield different sentiments when treated as separate words. This is due to the fact that most proverbs are metaphoric expressions, such as اليوم خمر وغدا أمر. The previous proverb does not refer to خمر as wine, but it carries a connotative meaning. In this respect, proverbs resemble literary works in that they are like mirrors reflecting the picture of the customs and cultural values of various communities; they depict the experiences and customs of different nations. Most proverbs extend far beyond the literal meaning, which is the most preferred and practiced by people because of their great impact on capturing the audience's intention [9].

Obstacles of Translating Proverbs

Translators mainly novices encounter problems during the process of translation. These problems arise when the translator struggles to accurately comprehend the message or find its equivalent in the target language. One of these problems is the nature of the proverbs because proverbs are figurative and -culturally specific items, giving them a literal translation may distort their intended meaning. There are three main problems that translators face while translating proverbs [10]. These problems are linguistic, cultural, and the use of inaccurate translation methods.

Linguistic Problems

Since English and Arabic originate from separate linguistic families, they are two distinct languages; English is a Germanic language, while Arabic is a Semitic one. Students face difficulties in translation due to the difference in semantics and grammar caused by the origins of these languages [11]. In the case of semantics, some proverbs have more than one equivalent in the TL. That causes confusion to the learners and novice translators. For instance, the Arabic proverb لا تلد الذئبة إلا ذئبا can be rendered in English either as *like father, like son* or *apple does not fall apart from tree* [12]. This is also attributed to the English proverbs when they are transformed into Arabic, for example, the English proverb *after black clouds, clear weather* is translated into Arabic as ما بعد الضيق إلا الفرجor إن مع العسر يسرا. Moreover, some proverbs are difficult to understand in the SL like رجع بخفي حنين, novice translators who are not well grounded in the Arabic language will either interpret حنين as a female name or nostalgia. In addition, words like خير sometimes rendered as *better* as prevention is better than cure, whereas it is transferred worth as in A bird in the hand is *worth* two in the bush. Learners may have problems in rendering such words and they may rely on using the same word whenever they translate another proverb.

Structural mistakes occur when translating proverbs without paying much attention to the grammatical differences between SL and TL, for example, الوقت من ذهب is a nominal phrase in Arabic, however, it becomes a verbal phrase when it is rendered to English (Time is money).

Cultural Problems

the inability to translate culturally-bound words/ expressions effectively providing an irrelevant translation of the proverb. "Translating involves not just two languages, but a transfer from one culture to another" [12, p.28]. These differences are more challenging than the linguistic ones because each culture has its specificities such as religion, literature, and way of living, these cultural problems make the task of translating proverbs difficult. Some proverbs have a direct equivalent in the TL, but many proverbs are specific to the TL. These proverbs may have a historical event like أكرم من سمؤل, or they are derived from SL literature [13] as السيف أصدق انباء من الكتب. Therefore, translators need not only to have bilingual competence but also a good knowledge of the cultures of the languages concerned since literal translation and lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge in both languages cause problems in fully understanding the intended meaning.

The Use of Inaccurate Translation Techniques

Most novice translators and learners are unable to adopt effective procedures that match the translation situation [14]. Some translators overuse literal translation, but this is not useful in translating proverbs that contain culturally bound words. For instance, لا يلدغ المؤمن من جحر مرتين. Undoubtedly, the use of literal translation will distort the intended meaning. Therefore, translators and translation learners should employ communicative translation to render the meaning properly.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data of the study is a collection of some proverbs, Arabic proverbs, and their translation counterparts that were selected from *Learn the Bases of Translation* (2010)[15]. 11 Arabic proverbs written in standard Arabic were chosen to be used as a test. The test was designed to assess the students' ability to translate Arabic proverbs into English. Some of the selected proverbs have absolute equivalence in the TL while others have different equivalence. The sample of the current study contained students who are studying English at the University of Benghazi, Faculty of Languages. They are in the 6th semester. This sample has been selected for the following reasons. Since they have been in the 6th semester, they have been practicing both A/ E and E/ A translation. In addition, they were introduced to different translation theories. The sample consisted of 37 students, and the selection of the sample was based on the Morgan Sampling Table to determine the sample size needed for the study. The students were given a test that consisted of the 11 selected Arabic proverbs to be translated into English. The test lasted about an hour and the students were allowed to

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use dictionaries mainly online dictionaries such as Google Translate and Almaany.

The results were examined after the data had been gathered. 3 alternatives were used in scoring the test. First, the answer was correct if the proverb was translated by using cultural equivalence. Second, the answer was wrong if the proverb is translated by using a literal translation. Finally, no answer if the students did not provide any translation. In order to assess the translation strategies employed by the students, Newmark translation strategies were utilized.

4. RESULTS

Table 1

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
أهل مكة أدرى بشعابها	Transliteration	Students' numbers	3	19	15	37
Know something like the back of your hand.	'ahl makkeh 'adraa bishieabiha	Percentages	8.89%	48.89%	42.22%	100%

As seen in the table above, many students failed to render the proverb accurately. The best evidence is the percentage of incorrect answers 48.89%. They transformed the proverb literally as the people of Mecca know best about its paths. The students neglected cultural differences between the two languages, Arabic and English. However, very few students 8. 89% attempted to find the correct equivalent. Furthermore, 42.22% are left blank.

Table 2

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
لا تلقوا بأيديكم إلى التهلكة	Transliteration	Students' numbers	10	25	2	37
Don't put your head in the lion's mouth.	la talqawa bi'aydikum 'iilaa altahluka	Percentages	27.03%	67.57%	5.41%	100%

The table above shows that the majority of the students translated the proverb inaccurately. Those students represent the highest sample by 67.57%. Most of them rendered this proverb literally as *do not throw yourself into destruction*. This proverb is culturally bound, and literal translation does not fulfill the intended meaning. However, only ten students succeeded in providing an accurate interpretation. 5.41% are left blank.

Table 3

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
الوقاية خير من العلاج	Transliteration	Students' numbers	35	2	0	37
Prevention is better than cure.	alwiqayat khayr min aleilaj	Percentages	94.59%	5.41%	0.00%	100%

Nearly all the students translated the proverb correctly 94.59% because it has a direct equivalence in the TL. Only four students rendered it literally as *protection is better than treatment*. In addition, the percentage of no answer is 0.00%.

Table 4

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
سبق السيف العذل.	Transliteration	Students' numbers	0	16	21	37
It's no use crying over spilled milk.	sabaq alsayf aleudhl	Percentages	0.00%	43.24%	56.76%	100%

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56.76% of the respondents did not submit a translation for the proverb as seen from the table above. This can be due to the students' unfamiliarity with the proverb and the difficulty of finding the most appropriate equivalence. On the other hand, 43.24% incorrectly rendered the proverb as *the sword preceded the humiliation*. Indeed, such a translation is inaccurate, and it distorts the meaning. In addition, none of the participants provided a correct translation.

Table 5

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
الضرورات تبيح المحظورات.	Transliteration	Students' numbers	9	20	8	37
Necessity needs no rules.	aldarurat tubih almahzurati	Percentages	24.32%	54.05%	21.62%	100%

This table indicates that the highest percentage is the wrong answer where the students render the proverb improperly; they employed a literal translation. In addition, 21.62% are left unfilled spaces and only nine students succeeded in transforming the verb accurately.

Table 6

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
الأقربون أولى بالمعروف.	Transliteration	Students' numbers	15	19	3	37
Charity begins at home.	al'aqrabun 'awlaa bialmaeruf	Percentages	40.54%	51.35%	8.11%	100%

This proverb is culturally religious bound. In addition, it is widely used by Arabic speakers. 40.54% succeeded in providing an accurate translation. Nevertheless, 51.35%gave other irrelevant answers such as *the closet, the relatives*. Those participants failed to render the meaning because they used literal translation. In addition, 8.11% did not translate the proverb at all.

Table 7

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
لا دخان بدون نار.	Transliteration	Students' numbers	33	4	0	37
No smoke without fire.	la dukhan bidun nari	Percentages	89.19%	10.81%	0.00%	100%

The table above shows that the proverb لا دخان بدون نار seems easy to be understood and the majority of the students are at ease with this proverb. The best evidence is the percentage of correct answers 89.19%. In addition, this proper interpretation is mainly due to the wide use of the proverb in English. In contrast, only four failed to transform this proverb accurately.

Table 8

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
يزيد الطين بلة.	Transliteration	Students' numbers	11	22	4	37
Add fuel to fire.	yazid altiyn bila	Percentages	29.73%	59.46%	10.81%	100%

59.46% of the students responded with *increasing the wet of the clay*, this means that they transferred the proverb literally. Although the proverb is commonly used in Arabic contexts, students failed to find the appropriate equivalence. Furthermore, 10.81%did not answer; they did not translate this proverb. 11 students provided the correct translation.

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Table 9

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
اللبيب من الإشارة يفهم.	Transliteration	Students' numbers	5	21	11	37
A word is enough to a wise man.	allabib min al'iisharat yafhamu	Percentages	13.51%	56.76%	29.73%	100%

The percentage of students who did not translate the phrasal verb accurately implies a greater percentage, as seen in the table above, which is 56.76%. The students translated the proverb literally. The literal translation was seen as both unacceptable and inaccurate, they translated the proverb as follows *smart understands from the sign.* Such translation does not fulfill the intended meaning. Moreover, the number of the blanks is 29.73%. Just five students had translated the proverb correctly.

Table 10

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
احذر عدوك مرة واحذر صديقك ألف مرة.	Transliteration	Students' numbers	11	21	5	37
A good enemy is better than a false friend.	ahdhar eaduuk mara w ahdhar sadiqak 'alf mara	Percentages	29.73%	56.76%	13.51%	100%

The table indicates that more than half of the students failed to transform the proverb properly. They relied on the literal translation *be aware of your enemy once and be aware of your friend a thousand times* neglecting the use of communicative translation. Therefore, the literal translation does not match the meaning. Moreover, the number of blanks is 13.51%. In contrast, very few participants rendered the proverb accurately.

Table 11

Arabic Proverb and its Translated Version			Correct Answer	Wrong Answer	No Answer	Total
عصفور في اليد خير من عشرة على الشجرة.	Transliteration	Students' numbers	25	12	0	37
A bird in hand is worth two in the bush.	eusfur fi alyad khayr min easharat ealaa alshajarati	Percentages	67.57%	32.43%	0.00%	100%

As seen in the table, the number of students who translated the aforementioned proverb is very high because of the students' familiarity with the verb as well as its usage. On the contrary, very few students provided the wrong translation, and they represent 32.43%. They rendered the proverb literally as *a bird in the hand is better than ten on the tree*. None of the students left them without providing any answer.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed that most students faced some difficulties when translating Arabic proverbs into English. Many students failed to find the appropriate equivalence, and they depended solely on the literal translation. They ignored that literal translation distorts the meaning of these culturally bound items. This can be attributed to many reasons. First, the students were unable to infer the meaning of some proverbs in their mother tongue like سبق السيف العذل, therefore, they either gave a poor translation or gave no response at all. Second, some of the proverbs are related to culture, and any misinterpretation will lead to inaccurate translation. Such proverbs as أهل مكة أدرى بشعابها. Many participants did not transform the proverb correctly. In addition to being culturally bound, Arabic proverbs are closely interwoven with religion. For example, لا تلقوا بأيديكم إلى التهلكة most students were not able to provide the target language equivalence. Thirdly, for some proverbs like الوقاية خير من العلاج, the participants attempted to render this proverb accurately; however, they used the word *protection* instead of prevention to transform الوقاية and the word *treatment* rather than using cure to render العلاج. Another example is اللبيب many students translated as *the smart person*. This is due to the fact that when rendering individual words from Arabic to English, the word may have more than one translation. In this case, students are facing difficulty in

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choosing the closest equivalent. On the other hand, proverbs that have absolute equivalence do not pose any difficulties for students, such as لا دخان بدون نار since the literal translation matches the meaning of the original. It can be said that students overused literal translation to render the proverbs, however, they did not successfully provide the proper translation. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge of the TL culture compelled the learners to utilize the literal translation.

Despite using an electronic dictionary to assist them in translating proverbs from Arabic to English, the students translated many proverbs inaccurately because online dictionaries, like Google, only offer literal translations rather than the intended meaning in the target language. As a result, students need to first understand the proverb in their native language. Then search for the appropriate equivalent in the target language. Students are recommended to utilize dictionaries like المنجد في اللغةalmunjid fi allugha because it contains various Arabic proverbs with elaboration. Moreover, they are recommended to use *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* to understand the meaning of English proverbs.

To overcome the difficulties of translating proverbs, students should not rely on literal translation because it distorts the meaning of those proverbs that do not have absolute equivalence in the TL. Moreover, they need to memorize a wide range of proverbs in both languages as well as understand the cultural meaning and do more practice. Since these culturally bound expressions cannot be translated literally, students should be familiar with different translation techniques as it is one of the obstacles that students encounter. Therefore, students need to be trained to use translation techniques properly to provide accurate translation.

6. CONCLUSION

Translation of proverbs poses a challenge for novice translators since these items are closely related to culture. In addition, literal translation is problematic because it distorts the meaning. Therefore, translators need not only to be bilingual, but they have to be bicultural to render the cultural words and expressions accurately. The current study recommended that students should be taught translation courses as practical training not only as theoretical to assist them overcome the challenges when translating from Arabic into English and vice versa. These courses should include independent courses that focus on the best strategies that can help the students to translate accurately. Students should be involved in translation tasks to be able to select the appropriate techniques. In addition, proverbs should be introduced as part of the material to make students aware of the cultural and syntactic differences between the SL and TL.

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