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THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION: THREE DECADES OF TRANSLATION INTO ARABIC

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Translation from and into any language is not an easy task; indeed it is often a thankless job, as a leading Arab scholar with a great deal of experience in translations from and into Arabic remarked in a recent publication.¹ It requires a particular skill and knowledge, if not fluency, of both languages. Translating a work is often harder than writing it since the translator has to grapple with the writer's terminology and is restricted by the scope of words and meanings used by the original author, and does not enjoy the freedom afforded the latter in choosing the phrases and concepts which appeal to him. Moreover, translation is full of pitfalls and dangers: many a translator have committed grave errors and distortions in their rendition of the original, perhaps owing to their inadequate knowledge of the subject treated. A few examples, by way of illustration, will suffice:

1. The first example is taken from the celebrated elegy on Muslim Spain (القصيدة النونية في رثاء الأندلس) which treats of the vanished glories of Islam, which by the time the poet wrote (2nd half of the 13th century) had been reduced to the small area of the state of Granada. Verse 21 of this poem reads as follows:

تبكي الحنيفة البيضاء من أسف كما بكى لفراق الألف هيمان

A famous orientalist mistranslated this verse as: "**the white**

(1) Ibrahim Z. Khorshid, *Al-Tarjamah wa-Mushkilatuha*, Cairo (1985), pp. 3,5.

wells of ablution...", evidently confusing 'hanifiyyah' with 'hanafiyyah'.² This mistranslation was repeated by another scholar as follows:

"The **tap of the white ablution** fount weeps in despair, like a passionate lover weeping at the departure of the beloved."³ In their new translation of this celebrated poem Ebied and Young corrected this and other mistranslations and misunderstandings of the text in Nykl's rendering.⁴

2. "The **RAF** bombed the city and **the plants**" ⁵

"قذف الراف (sic!) بالقنابل المدينة والنباتات (sic!) ..."

(Taken from a book translated by a Lecturer in the Faculty of Science).

3. "There were in Ancient Egypt artisans, carpenters and **husbandmen**"

"... كان في مصر القديمة صناع ونجارون وأزواج (sic!) ..."

4. Stanley Lane-Poole: *History of Cairo in the Middle Ages*:

ورد في الترجمة مدينة "أبو" (sic!) [for Aleppo] ، والمقصود بها حلب!⁷

5. Somerset Maugham: "The novel is a statement embellished by the **jam of fiction** ... "

"مربى الخيال! : "Jam of fiction" ترجمت [although correct, it would have been better to translate as] "حلو الخيال"⁸

6. The Indian Poet Taghur: "The day comes to us, every morning,

(2) A.R. Nykl, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry and its Relations with the Old Provençal Troubadours*, Baltimore (1946), p. 338.

(3) James T. Monroe, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry: A Student Anthology*, Berkeley (1974), p. 334.

(4) R.Y. Ebied and M.J.L. Young, "Abu'L-Baqa' al-Rundi and his Elegy on Muslim Spain" in *The Muslim World*, vol. LXVI, No. 1 (1976), pp. 29-34.

(5) Khorshid, *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 47.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 48.

(8) *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

naked, white, fresh as a flower ..."⁹

”يظهر النهار كل صباح عريانا (sic!) أبيضاً (sic!) طازجا كالزهور . . .
(يطلع علينا النهار كل صباح سافرا مشرقا في نضرة الزهر . . .)

* * * * *

I now turn to a brief consideration of the important role of translation.

The benefits to any language or culture that can accrue from translations of foreign works cannot possibly be exaggerated. This is certainly the case in Arabic; two examples, one from the distant past and another from the more recent history, may suffice to illustrate this point:

1. The first century and a half of the 'Abbasid dynasty¹⁰ saw the momentous movement of translation of Greek, Syriac and Persian works into Arabic and the transference of Hellenistic lore to the followers of the Arabian Prophet. In the years following the founding of Baghdad the major medical writings of Hippocrates and Galen, the mathematical works of Euclid and the geographical work of Ptolmey became available to readers of Arabic. It was a movement that enriched the Arabic library with the treasures of foreign cultures, having reached its peak during the reign of the seventh 'Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun (786-833).
2. The second example may be taken from the 19th century intellectual awakening in Egypt led by the great reformer Rifa'ah Rafi' al-Tahtawi who, together with his disciples, was responsible for translating more than 2000 books, mainly in the fields of medicine, science, engineering and warfare, given the

(9) *Ibid.* , p. 53.

(10) I.e. ca. A.D. 750-900.

needs of the newly established army by the then Governor of Egypt, Muhammed 'Ali who did not learn how to read until the age of 45 and whose era was described by the eminent Egyptian historian, Ahmad 'Izzat 'Abd al-Karim, as: (عصر الترجمة والتعريب). Al-Tahtawi founded and directed the "School of Translators" which played a very important role in cementing the intellectual renaissance in Egypt in the first half of the 19th century. Thus the old translation movement which began during the 'Abbasid Period flourished once more in the Nile Valley about twelve centuries later.

This activity was revived at the beginning of the 20th century when the leading scholars, such as Taha Hussain and Khalil Mutran, occupied themselves with translating the masterpieces of world literature which appealed to them.

Nevertheless, it is regrettable that translations into Arabic have been neglected in recent times in Egypt and the rest of the Arab World (as I shall point out in the second part of my paper) at a time when the need for such translations is perhaps greater than at any other time. This could be partly attributed to the fact that the fee paid to translators in Egypt, for example, has been, and still is, very mean.¹¹ Although the rate has been increased to 6 *milliemes* per word, it is still far from being satisfactory let alone attractive, and until recently it was the practice **not** to count foreign words consisting of less than three letters in the payment! (**Example:** Shakespeare's famous words: "To be or not to be that is the question ...").¹²

In a recent article in *Al-'Arabi* (No. 379, June 1990) the leading Arab writer, Raja' al-Naqqash, is quoted as follows:

"لقد تخلفنا في مجال الترجمة بصورة واضحة، وأستطيع أن أقول بغير أن أتجاوز الحقيقة: إننا أصبحنا متأخرين عما يصدر في العالم من آثار أدبية فكرية وعلمية بما لا يقل عن نصف قرن"

(11) See *Sabah al-Khair*, No. 1764, 26 October (1989), pp. 22-23.

(12) Cf. Khorshid, *Op. cit.*, p. 150.

This statement, I believe, sums up the situation with regard to the activity (or rather *inactivity*) of translations in the Arab World in recent times, as can be seen from the second part of this paper.

* * * * *

** Since 1949 UNESCO has published an annual volume entitled *Index Translationum* which sets out to list the titles of all the translations which have been made into any language in any part of the world during the previous twelve months. More than 30 volumes have appeared so far (Paris 1949-1981). These titles are listed not according to language, but according to the country where the translation was made, from returns made to UNESCO by the Ministries of Education of Information of the different countries concerned. In the more recent volumes the returns from Egypt have been provided by the National Committee for Bibliographical Services.¹³

The entries under each country are arranged according to the Dewey Decimal System which is also known as the UDC (Universal Decimal Classification), and the original language from which each translation was made is given with each title. In the earlier volumes, however, the arrangement is somewhat erratic; the titles of translated works often being omitted. In a few cases the original languages are not indicated, or it is stated that the translation was made from 'various languages'.

By examining all the entries for the Arab countries given in the first 30 volumes of the *Index* it is therefore possible to produce:

** This part of the paper is an updated and revised version of an article by R. Y. Ebied and M. J. L. Young, published in *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 2 (1975), pp. 40-46.

(13) It is possible that the returns have missed some titles, particularly in the earlier volumes. However, one finds that titles are sometimes inadvertently repeated in succeeding years, and thus tend to cancel out any deficiency in the total numbers.

- a) totals of the number of works translated into Arabic during the three decades of the fifties, the sixties and the seventies;
- b) totals of the number of works falling into particular categories;
- c) the most frequent original languages;
- d) the most frequently translated authors, and so on.

The interest for cultural history of such currents of influence thus exhibited hardly needs to be stressed, as has been shown by Ibrahim Abu Lughod in his study of translations into Arabic during the nineteenth century in his book *Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A study in Cultural Encounters* (Princeton, 1963).

The volumes of the *Index* show that only four Arab countries are of any importance in the production of translations into Arabic during this period, viz. Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, in that order. Of these four Egypt is by far the most productive and important.

The figures given in the *Index* show that 6,485 books translated from foreign languages into Arabic were published between 1948 and 1977.¹⁴ Totals for each of the eleven contributory Arab countries are as follows:

(i)	Egypt	5,019
(ii)	Lebanon	589
(iii)	Syria	522
(iv)	Iraq	224
(v)	Tunisia	49
(vi)	Jordan	36
(vii)	Kuwait	36
(viii)	Morocco	5
(ix)	Algeria	2
(x)	Sudan	2
(xi)	Libya	1

The only return for Libya¹⁵ during our period is listed in volume 29

(14) Vol. 30 lists the returns for 1977, although it was published in 1981.

(15) Bibliography established by UNESCO.

(1976) under category 3 (Law, Social Sciences, Education) as: *Ma'arik al-Dabbabat al-Shahirah*, being a translation of Robert Icks' *Famous Tank Battles* .

Returns for Algeria were reported for the first time in the *Index* in volume 30 (1977), where two translations are listed under category 5 (Natural and Exact Sciences).¹⁶

The following table gives the number of returns for each contributory country in each of the 30 years, as well as the total number of translations for each year:

<u>Volume</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of Translation</u>	<u>Contributory Countries</u>
1	1948	66	Egypt
2	1949	36	Syria
3	1950	39	Lebanon
4	1951	100	Egypt (42); Iraq (34); Lebanon (24).
5	1952	39	Lebanon
6	1953	2	Egypt
7	1954	32	Egypt (2); Iraq (27); Lebanon(3).
8	1955	3	Egypt
9	1956	97	Egypt (82); Iraq (14); Lebanon (1).
10	1957	189	Egypt (164); Iraq (20); Morocco (5).
11	1958	221	Egypt (220); Lebanon (1).
12	1959	272	Egypt (264); Syria (8).
13	1960	306	Egypt
14	1961	368	Egypt (367); Syria (1).
15	1962	404	Egypt (386); Jordan (17); Syria (1).
16	1963	249	Egypt (248); Jordan (1).
17	1964	236	Egypt (234); Lebanon (1); Syria (1).
18	1965	297	Egypt (249); Iraq (14); Syria (34).
19	1966	321	Egypt (292); Lebanon (3); Syria (26).

(16) Information supplied by the Permanent Delegation of Algeria to UNESCO.

20	1967	623	Egypt (455); Lebanon (156); Syri (12).
21	1968	289	Egypt (218); Iraq (13); Lebanon (32); Syri (26).
22	1969	270	Egypt (187); Jordan (4); Lebanon (52); Syria (27).
23	1970	275	Egypt (160); Iraq (7); Lebanon (82); Syria (26).
24	1971	281	Egypt (190); Iraq (7); Jordan (3); Lebanon (42); Sudan (2); Syria (27).
25	1972	258	Egypt (147); Iraq (8); Lebanon (49); Syria (53); Tunisia (1).
26	1973	263	Egypt (183); Iraq (23); Jordan (6); Syria (51).
27	1974	199	Egypt (142); Iraq (28); Jordan (2); Kuwait (10); Syria (17).
28	1975	235	Egypt (142); Iraq (10); Jordan (2); Kuwait (13); Syria (68).
29	1976	253	Egypt (164); Syria (45); Tunisia (34); Lebanon (8); Jordan (1); Libya (1).
30	1977	262	Egypt (104); Lebanon (57); Syria (53); Iraq (19); Tunisia (14); Kuwait (13); Algeria (2).
		Total:	6,485

These figures cannot be obtained by adding up the totals of translations made in each country each year given at the end of every volume of the *Index*, since these include all translations made in that particular country during the year, irrespective of the language concerned. It should also be noted that translations of books of the Bible into Arabic are not included in these and the following lists. Each Biblical book is listed as a separate work in the returns from the Arab countries, and their inclusion would give some misleading results.

As a yardstick for comparison with these returns we may take the most recent annual returns for two other Islamic languages:¹⁷

(17) Apparently no returns from Iran were provided in the latest volumes published, viz. vols. 28-30 (1975-1977).

Turkish	(1976):	918
	(1977):	1,000
Persian	(1974):	194
	(1973):	199

It is also of interest to compare the most recent figures for translations into Arabic (262 in 1977) with those for German, a language with about the same number of speakers as Arabic, for the same year. These numbered over 7,000.¹⁸ Thus as many books were translated into German in the one year, as into Arabic in the 30 years from 1948 to 1977.

II

The total of 6,485 items is distributed among the following subjects according to the Dewey Decimal System:¹⁹

	<u>Subject</u>	<u>No. of Translations</u>
0	General	71
1	Philosophy	521
2	Religion and Theology	334
3	Law, Social Sciences, Education	1,516
4	Philology and Linguistics	6
5	Natural and Exact Sciences	476
6	Applied Sciences	396

(18) See the entries in *Index Translationum*, vol. 30 (1977), under 'Allemagne', 'Autriche' and 'Suisse'. It may be noted that the *Index* shows that normally more books are translated every year into German than any other language in the world. In this respect Russian usually comes second and English third.

(19) The handbook of this important library classification system, M. Dewey's *Decimal Classification*, was translated into Arabic as *al-Taqsīm al-'Ashri* by J.A. Dagher and published in Beirut in 1950.

7	Arts, Games, Sports	177
8	Literature	2,178
9	History, Geography, Biography	810
	Total	6,485

It should be noted that in vol. 25 (1972) and subsequent volumes of the *Index* linguistic works are listed under Category 8, viz. 'Literature'. It may also be noted that the number of translations made in Egypt under Category 3, viz. 'Religion and Theology', increased during the latter years, especially between 1970 and 1977, presumably owing to the increased activity in translating of the *Lajnat Khalas al-Nufus lil-Nashr* (The Salvation of Souls Committee for Publishing), and *Dar al-Thaqafah al-Masihyyah* (Christian Education Publishing House).

III

The original language from which books were translated was English in the great majority of cases. The following list shows the numbers of works translated from particular languages in the period 1948-1977:

English	4,135	Armenian	5
French	1,065	Chinese	5
Russian	239	Dutch	4
German	189	Rumanian	4
Italian	53	Bengali	3
Greek	41	Hebrew	3
Spanish	30	Polish	3
Persian	22	Danish	2
Latin	15	Czech	2
Bulgarian	10	Japanese	2
Serbo-Croat	8	Norwegian	2

Turkish	8	Portuguese	2
Hungarian	6	Sanskrit	2

Just one work in each case was translated from Coptic, Hindi, Finnish, Indonesian, Korean, Kurdish, Syriac, Thai, Urdu and Uzbek.

In the remaining cases (i.e. 625) the *Index* either gives no indication of the original language from which a book was translated or simply states that it was translated from 'various languages'.

Of the three books translated from Hebrew, two are listed in vol. 26 (1973) as having been translated in Iraq and published in 1973 by *Markaz al-Dirasat al-Falastiniyyah*, entitled:

1. *Madha Turidun wa-Man Antum* ;
2. *Yahud Iran: Kiyanuhum wa-Mushkilatuhum* .

The above list only takes into consideration books directly translated from the original. The *Index* also notes books which are translations of translations, i.e. books which in the great majority of cases have been put into Arabic on the basis of an English, French or German version. The totals of such indirect translations over our period are as follows:

Russian	113	Serbo-Croat	4
German	89	Dutch	3
French	46	Hungarian	3
Greek	38	Rumanian	3
Italian	21	Sanskrit	3
English	20	Portuguese	2
Spanish	13	Turkish	2
Chinese	10	Avarian	1
Norwegian	10	Byelorussian	1
Bengali	9	Hindi	1
Swedish	7	Korean	1
Danish	6	Persian	1
Japanese	5	Syriac	1
Latin	5	Tatarskij	1

Bulgarian	4	Tibetan	1
Czech	4	Vietnamese	1
Polish	4		

It will be noticed from the above list that only *indirect* translations have been made from Avarian, Byelorussian, Swedish, Tatarskij, Tibetan and Vietnamese. It is perhaps surprising to note the complete absence in these lists of any translations from Ethiopic and the fact that only *one* translation was made from Urdu and *one* from Indonesian over the 30-year period.

IV

In examining the particular titles which appear in the ten Dewey categories, we find that in Philosophy two of the most frequently translated authors are Sigmund Freud and Bertrand Russell. Examples are (a) *Al-Dhat wa'l-Ghara'iz* (*Freud's Das Ich und das Es*); (b) *Tarikh al-Falsafah al-Gharbiyyah* (*Russell's History of Western Philosophy*).

The works in the field of Religion and Theology are mainly books of Christian interest, with works of Protestant churchmen well represented, including C.H. Spurgeon (e.g. *Grace Triumphant = Al-Kull bi'l Ni'mah*), Billy Graham (e.g. *Seven Deadly Sins = Sab'at Khataya Mumitah*) and William Barclay, four of his Commentaries on New Testament books were translated in Egypt in 1974. Roman Catholic works in translation tend to appear more frequently in Lebanon, as one would expect.

Under the heading of 'Law, Social Sciences, Education', we find a predominance of English and Russian political books; the general character of the latter is indicated by titles such as (a) *Al-Duwal al-Ishtirakiyyah Taqif Ma'ana Didd al-'Udwan* ; (b) *Naz' al-Silah, Mustaqbal al-Insaniyyah* (*Disarmament, mankind's future* by B. Bacanov and V. Ivanov).

In the 'Natural and Exact Sciences' most of the works translated are popular or semi-popular presentations of scientific subjects, the specialist text-books of which in western languages remain for the most part untranslated into Arabic. Such a translation as *Al-Kimiya' ghayr al-'Udwiyyah (Lehrbuch der anorganischen Chemie)* by Heinrich Remy is a rare exception to this statement.

Those books entered under 'Applied Sciences' include a large number of English popular works dealing with health, for example A.L. Blakeslee, *Kayfa Ta'ish bi-Qalb 'Alil* and R.M. Cunningham, *Your Operation (Al-'Amaliyyat al-Jirahiyyah)*. Only a small number of specialist technical works are listed, such as E.J. Kates, *Diesel and High Compression Gas Engines: Fundamentals (Muharrikat al-Dizil wa-Muharrikat al-Ghaz)*.

The category 'Arts, Games, Sports' perhaps surprisingly shows a predominance of works dealing with the theatre in its many aspects (e.g. E.G.M. Gallaway, *The Director in the Theatre (Dawr al-Mukhrij fi al-Masrah)*).

In 'Literature' there is a very wide coverage of English and French works, from Shakespeare to Agatha Christie, from Moliere to Georges Simenon. The works of Alfred Hitchcock are also well represented, no less than seventeen books by him having been put into Arabic in Egypt alone (listed in cols. 27 and 28: 1974/1975). In the other European languages only the major classics have as a rule been translated, books such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Clausewitz' *Vom Kriege*, Pushkin's *Kapitanskaya Dochka*, and so on. Occasionally the award of the Nobel Prize leads to some of a writer's work being translated, such as Ivo Andirc's *Na Drini Cuprija (Jisr 'ala Nahr Drina)*.

In the field of 'History, Geography, Biography' the predominance of English works among those selected for translation must tend strongly towards making Arab readers see the history of the world through Anglo-American eyes. From a wealth of examples, the following may be selected as typical: Sir J.A. Hammerton and H.E. Barnes, *New Illustrated World History (Tarikh al-'Alam)* ; H.A.L. Fisher, *History of Europe (Tarikh Urubba)*; the two-volume edition of Arnold

Toynbee's *Study of History (Mukhtasar Dirasah lil-Tarikh)*; Lord Avon's *Memoirs (Mudhakkirat Eden)*; John Gunther, *Inside Africa (Dakhil Ifriqiya)*; Will Durant, *Story of Civilization (Qissat al-Hadarah)*; W.L. Langer, *Encyclopaedia of World History (Mawsu'at Tarikh al-'Alam)*, etc.

As against this, both Lenin²⁰ and Hitler²¹ have found translators into Arabic, as also has Marx, no less than four translations having been made into Arabic of *Das Kapital*, twice from French, once from English and once from German.²² This latter example illustrates the fact that there is considerable wastage of effort in making translations into Arabic.

Finally in regard to history and biography we may note the large numbers of works by western orientalisists which have been put into Arabic. These include the following:

Arnold, Sir T.W. *Al-Da'wa ila al-Islam (The Preaching of Islam)*. Cairo, 1958.

Asin Palacios, M. *Ibn 'Arabi, Hayatuh wa-Madhabuh (Ibn 'Arabi: his Life and Doctrine)*, Cairo, 1965.

Bartold, V.V. *Tarikh al-Hadarah al-Islamiyyah (Kultura Musulmanstva)*. Cairo, N.D.

Brockelmann, G. *Tarikh al-Shu'ub al-Islamiyyah (History of the Islamic Peoples)*, tr. from the English version. Beirut, 1949-51.

Brockelmann, G. *Tarikh al-Adab al-'Arabi (Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur)*. Cairo, N.D.

Gibb, H.A.R. *Dirasat fi Hadarat al-Islam (Studies on the Civilization of Islam)*, Beirut, 1964.

Le Bon, G. *Hadarat al-'Arab (La Civilisation des Arabes)*. Cairo, 1956.

(20) E.g. *Al-Dawlah Wa'l-Thawrah* (Cairo, N.D.).

(21) *Mein Kampf (Kifah)*. Beirut, 1952.

(22) For 'Das Kapital' in Arabic dress, see S. Wild, "Das Kapital" in arabischen Ubersetzung' in *Festgabe fur Hans Wehr* (Wiesbaden, 1969), pp. 97-111.

Nicholson, R.A., *Fi al-Tasawwuf al-Islami Wa-Tarikhuh* (The Mystics of Islam), Cairo, 1956.

O'Leary, De Lacy. *'Ulum al-Yunan wa-Subul Intiqaliha ila al-'Arab* (How Greek Science passed to the Arabs). Cairo, 1962.

Smith, W.C. *Al-Islam fi al-Tarikh al-Hadith* (Islam in Modern History), Cairo, N.D.

Wellhausen, J. *Al-Dawlah al-'Arabiyyah wa-Suqutuha* (Das Arabische Reich und sein Sturz).

V

It would of course be impossible to generalize about the quality of such a large body of translations, but a few comments on a number of examples taken at random may help to illustrate the extremes between which the mass of translated works lie. Ernst Kuhnel's *Die Islamische Kunst* appeared in an Arabic version in Beirut in 1966 (*Al-Fann al-Islami*, tr. by Ahmad Musa). This is an example of a translation which adheres so closely to its original to the extent that it becomes frequently unintelligible. One reader at least had to refer to the original German to understand many passages.

A translation of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* was published by Dar al-Hilal in 1959.²³ This book is in an agreeable style and reads at all times intelligibly, but a comparison with the original shows that approximately two thirds have been omitted, although nothing is said anywhere in the Arabic version to warn the reader of this. One suspects that this sort of drastic abridgement is frequently visited upon other foreign works.

Lastly we may cite the Arabic version of William White Howell's *Back of History: the story of our own origins*,²⁴ a work dealing with a

(23) *Ifanhu aw al-Faris al-Aswad* (Riwayat al-Hilal, No, 131).

(24) *Ma Wara' al-Tarikh*. Cairo, 1965, tr. Ahmad Abu Zayd.

technical subject of some complexity - anthropology. Here we have a translation which omits nothing, which reads smoothly and intelligibly, and which only gives up the attempt to find Arabic equivalents when faced with such problems as the Arabic for 'Neanderthal'. It fulfils in every way the criterion that it should be read with pleasure and understanding by a reader unacquainted with the original.

It is hoped that the foregoing survey will help to give an impression of the general nature and volume of translations into Arabic since the Second World War, and to illustrate the cultural currents which they exemplify.