

## *Stylistic Problems Confronting Arab Students in Arabic-English Translation*

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### **Abstract**

Away from simplistic definitions, translation is, in fact, both a painstaking and an arduous process especially with regard to style. To prove this lucidly, a translation test (Arabic into English) has been administered to 40 advanced-level students of the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Translation, Ajman University of Science and Technology Network. Dealing with a passage of fair length (170 words), the testees have committed stylistic errors in areas pertinent to literal vs. free translation, mistranslations, inadequate translation, inexact rendering, and L1 interference. It has been found that the students have generally focused on translating words as isolated entities. Their task, however, should have been directed, rather, towards dealing with complete discourse in its diverse dimensions.

### **Introduction**

Translation, which procures increasing significance at present, has, from time immemorial, attracted the attention of scholars and men of letters. It has, no doubt, contributed a great deal in connecting various cultures of the world. This interplay has naturally led to the enrichment of human knowledge at large (Cf. Savory, 1968: 37-48; Pinchuck, 1977: 16).

Multifarious definitions of translation, though superficially different, seem to agree upon the point that this activity means conveyance of some sort of information from one language into another (1). This process that might appear simple at face value, is, in fact, painstaking if not arduous in some of its aspects, for it comprises transferring not only meanings of individual words or structures into the receptor language, but also stylistic features and implicational meanings. Translation, therefore, is a reproduction in the translated version of the thoughts and meanings implied in the original text (Khulusi, 1958:16). Not only this, but “to produce the message one must make a good many grammatical and lexical adjustments...Many translations attempt to reproduce the significance of the source language expressions,” (Nida & Taber, 1974: 12)

#### 1. The Test

##### 1. Description of the Test

This paper seeks to investigate stylistic error made by Arab students at the university level in translating a text from Arabic into English. We have chosen, as our tested, (30) advanced-level students of English Language & Translation (2). The tested were allowed to consult dictionaries. Our choice was primarily based on the fact that students at this level have a fairly good command of English after 2-4 years of intensive study. Added to this, they have studied and practiced translation in a number of courses ranging from 2-10 courses. They come from nine different Arab countries. Our concern would, however, be focused on expressive connected writing, i.e. students' versions should reflect the context (including particularly its literary flavour), and not merely on isolated items or structures.

The passage chosen for the test is on Basrah, Iraq. The economic and cultural aspects of the city are especially pinpointed (3). The passage has deliberately been chosen for the following reasons:

1. The students have already been familiarized with the topic by one of the authors of the present who has been teaching them for the last four years. Thus, the details most likely fall within their understanding.
2. It is of a fair length (170 words) to suit the allocated time.

3. Stylistically, the passage is rather interesting for the tested students as they have to deal with its translation requirements, especially in matters like translatability, cultural differences, connective meanings, parenthetical sentences, etc. Students' renderings are analyzed, errors diagnosed, and examples are given for elucidation. The paper is rounded off with a conclusion.

### 2.2 Categorization and Analysis of Errors

The present study is not going to deal with every problematic area facing students in Arabic into English translation, as this would necessarily require more extensive work. It has therefore been found convenient to restrict this study to one of the main scopes where students' pitfalls were observed to revolve around in abundance, namely style.

### 3. Style Operationally Defined

The term 'style' has been looked at in different ways. It would be out of the scope of this study to circumscribe this term fully (4). For the main purpose of the present paper, then, style is intended to mean a mode of expression that differentiates one person (here the student) from the other. Our concern would be, however, confined to the stylistic errors and pitfalls diagnosed in the renditions of the passage given to the tested students. Moreover, the text given is "written in the kind of style which the learners are familiar with"; the students are expected to be aware "of most of the vocabulary included in the text" (Barkho and Gorgis, 1986: 102-3).

### 4. Stylistic Errors

Students' styles in their translated texts would be handled with reference to the following categories:

#### 4.1 Literal vs. Free Translation ( figures of speech)

Corbett (1971: 459) emphasizes that the main function of figures of speech is not to decorate the text, but rather they 'constitute one of the most revealing features of man's prose style. If they are apt and fresh, they can contribute greatly to clarity, liveliness, and interest of man's style'. Therefore, translators should pay special attention to them, particularly when they contribute greatly to the source text author's intention and text-type focus.

A figure of speech can be defined as a word or phrase that departs from the straightforward, literal meaning of its components. Classical rhetoricians have divided figures of speech into two key categories: schemes and tropes. Schemes, derived from the Greek word 'schēma', which means form or shape, are figurative expressions in which there is a deviation from the ordinary or expected pattern of words, such as ellipsis, parallelism, aposition, alliteration, etc. Tropes, however, refer to a figurative language which involves a deviation from its basic, straightfoward meaning, such as metaphor, irony, personification, simile, zoomorphism, etc. ( see Cotbert, 1971).

Perusing the source text, one can identify three main types of figures, namely metaphor in نفظها المتدفقة بالخير والعطاء and personification in معانقا, and parallelism as in the examples below:

تحيطه غابات النخيل الباسقة

مارا بمدينة البصرة

معانقا أسواقها المكتظة

وأرصفتها المزدهمة

وبيوتها القديمة والحديثة

وحقول نفظها المتدفقة بالخير والعطاء ليصب أخيرا في الخليج العربي

There have always been much controversies on the type of translation to follow: either literal or recreation of the original text, i.e. free translation. In this test, the figurative phrase نفظها المتدفقة بالخير والعطاء has conduced to different translations. While (8) students tended to omit the phrase المتدفقة بالخير والعطاء, the remaining tested students rendered it differently, to the extent that not even two counterpart versions were observed. Here is a list of some selected translations depending on literality, i.e. 'faithfulness' to the Arabic text:

Table (1) Showing Literal Translation

Item No.	The Translated Forms (5)
1	which flows copiously with wealth and tender...
2	that are full of treasures and resources...
3	which fluent with good and tender...
4	which is streamed in blessings and tender...
5	that stream by wealth and blessing...
6	that are fluent with goodness and productivity...
7	that are a source of great benefit...
8	and its effluent oilfield in almsgiving and grand...
9	which flowed out present and gift...
10	which are full with good and well-being...

المتدفقة بالخير والعطاء

The disparate renderings included free translations, some of which are quite unusual. The following are only haphazard examples: 'effluent, rich, beneficent, charitable, grand, flood with welfare', and so on.

It is observed that in the above (10) versions, the students sought to achieve literal translation in their attempts to come very close to the style adopted in the original text, i.e. in their views translation should not fall short of the original. Two remarks might be indicated here:

1. The renderings have missed reproducing the effect of the original.
2. They have also failed to convey the connotative or emotive meaning aimed at in the original.

The free translation, on the other hand, appeared both awkward and aloof from the original.

A more reliable translation, then, necessitates little alterations on the original text to bring out the effect required. Such a translation should appear as if it were really the original text reflecting its freshness and spirit (Savory, 1968: 52; 55; 139). A possibly better rendering of the phrase المتدفقة بالخير والعطاء is 'and its oil fields which overflow

with welfare and prosperity,' where the image implied in the Arabic expression is reproduced in the TL (English) (Newmark,1981: 88).

Another example in this respect is the word معانقا in the phrase معانقا أسواقها المكنتة which is related to the Shatt-al-Arab River. Although the students' translations reflected (12) different versions of the word معانقا , yet there appears adherence to literal translation in that (8) students translated it as 'embracing'. Such a noticeable tendency might be ascribed to their wish to convey the connotative or emotive

meaning expressed in the word, for the river, in the sentence, seems to be personified, and the word 'embracing' itself carries a literal as well as a metaphorical meaning. While (7) students avoided translating this word altogether, others made translations like 'enfold', 'surrounding', 'rounded', 'meeting', 'containing'; some went too far as to make translations such as 'necked'? 'includes' 'hung'? 'combined'? and so forth.

The strategy used in rendering any figure of speech depends on many factors at the front of which comes its type whether it is scheme or trope. Examples of schemes, which depend on 'similarity of sound, that is, alliteration and assonance, are very frequently untranslatable' (Al-Rubai'I, 2005: 39). Tropes, such as metaphor, personification, etc., however, do not fall in the scope of untranslatability; it is, therefore, the translator's task to pinpoint its significance to the text and adopt the most appropriate strategy to render it into the target text. Literal translation in which the denotative meaning of the lexical item معانقا is selected to maintain the ST personification intact in such a context is sufficient.

As for Parallel structure, according to Al-Jaber (1987: 173), it 'involves the use of particular syntactic and semantic configuration more than once, in rapid succession'.

Examining the ST, one can easily identify the parallelism. There are two parallel structures: one is established among phrases starting with a causative object معانقا and مارا , and the other is achieved through the use of phrases starting with a noun in broken plural form (ارصفة / اسواق)

بيوت / بيوت ( + حقول ) / بيوت + an attached pronoun "ها" + the definite article "الـ" + an adjective المتدفقة / القديمة / المرذومة / المكتظة. These parallel structures, according to Koch (cited in Al-Jaber, *ibid*: 173) are 'cumulative parallelism'; it maintains the same syntactic structure, but creates new lexical items. This sort of parallelism is contrasted with 'listing parallelism', which occurs when parallelism shows that 'equal semantico-syntactic configuration repeated more than once belongs to a certain phenomenon' (*ibid*: 173). The cumulative parallelism in the ST is broken twice in the last phrase where another adjective is used, and the preceding phrase in which *Idafa* structure is used in place of a mere noun.

Actually, placing these parallel structures in juxtaposition establishes their surface connectivity (i.e. cohesion); therefore, it is the translators' task to maintain such connectivity regardless of devices utilised by translators.

(placing some examples of students' translation in the test) is followed by suggested translation.

#### 4.2 Mistranslations

To 'mistranslate' simply means "to translate incorrectly" (Webster, 1976: 1446). One main reason for this is the fact that Arabic and English belong to different linguistic and semantic domains. Another reason might be the limited translation experience of the students. Their translations projected a number of pitfalls attributed to a variety of reasons.

It is worthwhile mentioning here that good translation should preserve the idea (s) of the original. The content of the message should then receive a prior concern in the translation process. Nida and Taber summarize this as follows: "obviously in any translation there will be a type of 'loss' of semantic content, but the process should be designed as to keep this to a minimum" (p. 106). Only the form of the message then is liable to be changed. The test clearly shows that the majority of the students face hard hurdles to preserve the meaning of the statements containing figures of speech (as it has been shown above) or parenthetical sentences. An example containing

parenthetical is deduced here for illustration. For the Arabic statement three different versions were chosen:

(1) Ur which is one of the ruin for the Summerian culture and whats (sic.) surrounded it from Marshes, bring to it the visitors and tourists from all of the world.

(2) Today Ure was attractive-it is one of وهي احدى الأثار ..(أور)واليوم تجتذب الشاهدة على  
وما يحيط بها من أهوار -الحضارة السومرية العريقة  
Summerian civilisation on and what الزوار والسائحين من كل أرجاء العالم  
surrounded it from the tourist and  
visitors from all the world.

(3) Today 'Aour' brings visitors and tourists from all the world and it is one of the witnesses on the Summerian civilisation and it is beautiful area because it is surrounding by marshes.

In this example, the translated texts failed to convey the meaning required, for while the first and second texts adhered mostly to literality, the third one delayed the parenthetical sentence to the end; this produced an awkwardly non-cohesive sentence loaded with extra words ('it is beautiful area because it is..'). These renditions and many others are "so badly done that the original is...deformed and mutilated"

(Aziz,1971:20). They, moreover, make it rather hard to understand the message of the original text. Such sentences are better, first, broken down to their main elements, i.e. main Noun + main Verb (+ Complement) to pinpoint its main syntactic structure. Then, only main elements are translated and, finally, the other pieces of information are added. This will enviably make the task of the translator easier. Thus the above sentence can better be translated as follows:



‘Today, Ur, one of the antiquities of the deep-rooted Sumerian civilisation, and the surrounding marshes attract visitors and tourists from all over the world.’

(comma in bold is redundant as it will change the meaning (Ur and the surrounding marshes attract ...))

#### 4.3 Inadequate Translation

In mistranslation (discussed in 4.2), the denotative meaning of the text loses much of its efficiency. In ‘inadequate translation’, the connotative or implicational meaning is missed. To illustrate this point, two examples might be cited here. First, the word غابات in the phrase غابات النخيل الباسقة has elicited a number of different equivalents. The following table explains students’ various renderings of the word غابات:

Table (2) Showing translation Inadequacy

The Arabic Word	The English Equivalent	No. of Occurrences
غابات	Forests	16
	Woods	4
	No equivalent given	10
Total		30

It is evident that the above renderings are all inadequate since they fail to represent the deeper meaning of the phrase, i.e. the connotative meaning. Reading the passage carefully, one could recognise that the writer allocates an appreciable part of the text to describe the Shatt-al-Arab River right from its formation in Al-Garma, north of Basrah, up to its termination in the Arab Gulf. The main aim seems to display how beautiful this river is. Part of the lovely picture of the whole scene is the innumerable number of date-palm trees spreading all along its two banks. The word ‘forest’ means ‘wild trees or bushes grown extensively’; the word ‘jungle’ means ‘a tropical forest too thick to walk through easily’, thus, bringing to mind an African

flavour; the word ‘wood’ suggests an area of land covered with trees, but not as extensive as a forest; while the word ‘grove’ means ‘a group of trees’ limited in number (Longman Dictionary, 1995). The word ‘forest’ is definitely preferable to other items, for it conveys the density of date–palm trees extending all over the banks of the river. However, a local colour could well be infused into the context by using the word ‘orchard’; the translation can thus recast as follows: ‘dense orchards of tall date-palms,’ where the word ‘orchard’ seems to be deeply associated with the scene of palm-trees being fruit trees.

Another problematic area in this connection is the expression بلاد ما بين النهرين where students displayed marked disparity of translations. The following table explains the problem.

Table (3) Showing Translation Inadequacy

The Arabic Expression	The English Equivalent	Total No. of Occurrences
بلاد ما بين النهرين	The country(land)	5
	between two rivers	1
	Iraq	1
	Mesopotamia	18
	No equivalent (6)	5
	Miscellaneous translations	
Total		30

It is worth noting here that only one student was able to grasp the profound meaning incarnated in the word ‘Mesopotamia’. The author, however, wants to communicate that Basrah, after a relatively short time of its establishment, has prospered quickly in various fields; it, therefore, became a distinguished political and intellectual centre for a country whose civilisation and glories date back to the remotest past. To link past with the present, the translator has to be alert to choose a suitable word geared to this purpose.

#### 4.4 Inexact Rendering

Good translation, no doubt, requires fidelity, on the part of the translator, to the text he is going to render into the other language.

Due to the intricate process of translation, translators, as the circulated saying says, are accused of being ‘traitors’. Translation, thus, occurs when “the translator does not tell the whole truth; he either omits from, or adds to, the original sense” (Aziz, p.22) The first aspect above (i.e. omission) is labelled as ‘under-translation’ for important features of meaning are left out (Shamaa, 1978: 68) (7). The table that follows exhibits places where students intentionally omitted words or phrases from the original text; consequently, the translated texts appeared not only inaccurate, but also ambiguous in certain aspects.

Table (4) Showing Under-translation

Item No.	The Arabic Expression	No. of Omissions	Suggested Translations (8)
1	العريقة	6	Deep-rooted
2	المتدفقة بالخير والعطاء	8	overflow with welfare and prosperity embracing
3	معانقا	7	
4	بلاد ما بين النهرين	18	Mesopotamia
5	من كل أرجاء العالم	4	from all over the world
6	غابات النخيل الباسقة	2	forests of tall date-palms

Errors committed by students are either attributed to their incompetence such as in items (4, 5, and 6), or to lexical or structural complexities as in items (1, 2, and 3).

The second aspect is referred to as ‘over-translation’ where the translator adds more items to the text, thus providing extra meaning. The following table is an illustrative example.

Table (5) Showing Over-translation

Item No.	The Arabic Expression	The Translated Forms	No.of Occurrences
1	يلتقي نهرا دجلة والفرات ...ليكونا	Meet together (each other) to form...	7
2	...وأستطاعت أن تكون	1. it was able to be 2. it was capable of 3. it could be...	7 2 5
3	واحدا من أجمل ... شط :المجاري المائية ...العرب الذي	one of the loveliest waterways... this river is called (or that is ...)	9
4	يربو عدد سكانها على ألف نسمة 300	its people were 300 thousand in number (or the people who lived in Basrah were...)	8

To avoid redundancy in item (1), the words “together” or “each other”, could be omitted without affecting the meaning. In item (2), the translated forms seem overstated. A better rendering would be ‘... it had become...’ In item (3), the students added more words where they could have omitted them by resorting to ‘punctuation’, i.e. by using either colon or comma after the phrase *من أجمل المجاري المائية* as follows: ‘one of the loveliest waterways in the world: the Shatt-al-Arab River which...’ In item (4), there is redundancy in the translated text which can be tackled like this: ‘... of more than three hundred thousand people...’

#### 4.5 L1 Interference

It is a common fact now that the translated text should appear as an original text and not as a duplicate of the original. Interference from

the mother tongue plays a vital role in distorting the translated text, although in very limited cases it helps in “introducing a local color into the TL text” (Cf Catford, 1965: 21). The following table displays this translation problem:

Table (6) Showing L1 Interference

Item No.	The Arabic Expression	The Translated Form	No. of Occurrences
1	مدينة البصرة	Basrah city	56
2	أل...	1. Al-Basrah 2. Al-Caliph 3. Al-Arab Gulf 4. Al-Iraq	16 14 1 1
3	منذ خمسة الاف عام	Since five thousand years...	17
4	تقع مدينة البصرة، ثاني كبريات مدن العراق...	Basrah lies, the second largest city in Iraq	4

Influenced by Arabic, the students have produced alien English forms, especially in item (2). In item (4), the students go so far that they neglect the syntactic form of the English sentence; rather, they should have recast the sentence as follows: ‘Basrah, the second largest city in Iraq, lies...’

##### 5. Conclusion

In Arabic-into-English translation, the students encounter thorny problems in rendering style. Students’ errors in translating style stems largely from the fact that they focus on words as isolated items whereas their main task ought to be directed to “perform a given function in the best possible way, and the details concerning the

translation of individual words ought to be subordinated to this task” (9) (Kul3maul,1985: 13).

Students’ attention, thus, need to be aimed at “complete discourse, which in turn is incorporated into a particular context of situation’ (Harmann, 1979: 67).

The errors diagnosed in the students’ versions fairly indicate that the task of the translator is rather multiple, for he should be aware of the linguistic, cultural, as well as idiosyncratic features of the language involved in the translation process. Savory both succinctly and eloquently summarizes this as follows: “...to linguistic knowledge and literary capacity, a translator must add sympathy, insight, diligence, and consciousness) (p. 36).

In students' renditions of figurative language, it has been noticed that students have found figures of speech so hard to translate. Due primarily to differences in L1 and L2 cultures, and also the difficulty of understanding figurative language itself, the students-translators have resorted to literal translation. It is "conceivable that they may be less confident that a metaphorical usage is appropriate in that language"(Saygin, 2001). Also, because of the lack of counterparts among culturally different languages "translators will end up with colors, tones, and meanings that don't exist in the original." (Rosen, 1998:13)

### Notes

1. J.C. Catford, for instance, defines translation as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL) (p. 20). Translation “consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style...” (Nida & Taber, 1974: 12). Translation is also defined as a “type of information transfer, the transfer of information expressed in one language into the terms of a second language” (Pinchuck, 1977: 9).
2. The test was conducted on March 4-8, 2006).
3. See Appendix for the full text in Arabic.
4. Crystal and Davy’s distinction of this term might well serve the purpose here. In their book Investigating English Style, they indicate “four commonly occurring senses” of style. It may first refer

to the distinctive language habits of a particular person. It may point to the language habits of a “group of people at one time,” such as the style of the Romantic poets. Style takes a more “restricted meaning” when it points to “the effectiveness of a mode of expression,” i.e. when it is used in an “evaluative sense,” e.g. when we speak of a “clear” or “refined style”. And it is lastly associated with literature when people speak of “good”, “effective” or “beautiful writing” (1969: 9-10).

5. It is to be noted here that those and any other renderings are cited as they have exactly appeared in students’ versions, hence any error whatsoever was retained.

6. Other translations included expressions such as ‘the two rivers city’, ‘people of Iraq’, ‘the country of Al-Rafidain (sic), ‘automospharia’, ‘to the country, etc.

7. J.C. Catford refers to this as “partial translation”, where “some parts of the SL text are left untranslated: they are simply transferred to and incorporated in the TL text” (p. 21)

8. The translations given in Table (4) are suggested by the writers of the present paper.

9. Nida and Taber confirm that the ideal translation should keep away from “translationese”, i.e. “formal fidelity” with no constant attention to the “content” and the effect of the message (p. 12).

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#### مدينة البصرة

تقع مدينة البصرة ثاني كبريات مدن العراق في منطقة أتمت منذ القدم والى يومنا هذا بأهميتها الثقافية والاقتصادية. والى الشمال من مدينة البصرة يلتقي نهرا دجلة والفرات ليكونا واحدا من أجمل المجاري المائية في العالم: شط العرب الذي ينساب جنوبا . تحيطه غابات النخيل الباسقة مارا بمدينة البصرة معانقا أسواقها المكتظة وأرصفها المزدهمة وبيوتها القديمة والحديثة وحقول نفطها المتدفقة بالخير والعطاء ليصب أخيرا في الخليج العربي. منذ خمسة الاف عام خلقت ارادة الإنسان العظيمة في هذه المنطقة من جنوب العراق احدى اولى الحضارات التي اقامها الإنسان على الأرض. واليوم تجتذب (اور)- وهي احدى الآثار الشاهدة على الحضارة السومرية العريقة- وما يحيط بها من احوار الزوار والسائحين من كل أرجاء العالم. لقد أختار موقع البصرة الخليفة عمر بن الخطاب (رض) عام ٥١٧ - ٦٣٨ م لكي تكون موقعا حربيا لكنها ما لبثت أن نمت وأصبحت في أقل من خمسين عاما مدينة بحرية تجارية كبيرة يربو عدد سكانها على ٣٠٠ ألف نسمة، واستطاعت أن تكون مركزا سياسيا وفكريا عظيما لبلاد ما بين النهرين وفيها غدت اللغة العربية، التي لم تكن قد استخدمت من قبل للاغراض العلمية، لغة الحضارة والفكر الإسلاميين.

#### المصدر:

دليل جامعة البصرة 1981

ملخص**المشاكل الأسلوبية التي يواجهها الطلبة العرب في ترجمة النصوص من اللغة العربية الى اللغة الأنكليزية**

الدكتور كاظم حسين باقر  
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بعيدا عن التعريفات التبسيطية تعتبر الترجمة عملية مضمّنة وشاقّة سيما مايتصل منها بالأسلوب. وبغية البرهنة على ذلك تم إجراء اختبار ترجمة من اللغة العربية الى اللغة الأنكليزية شمل أربعين طالبة من طلبة قسم اللغة الأنكليزية بكلية اللغات الأجنبية والترجمة بشبكة جامعة عجمان للعلوم والتكنولوجيا. وقد تم اعتماد قطعة نثرية قصيرة الى حد ما ( ١٧٠ كلمة). لقد بيّن البحث أن الطلبة الذين خضعوا للاختبار قد ارتكبوا أخطاء أسلوبية في مجالات الترجمة الحرفية / الحرة وعدم التمكن من الترجمة الصحيحة والترجمة غير مستوفية الشروط والترجمة غير الدقيقة فضلا عن تدخل اللغة الأم (اللغة العربية). وقد وجد أيضا ان الطلبة يركزون عموما على ترجمة الكلمات بصفتها مفردات مستقلة في الوقت الذي كان يتعين عليهم التعامل مع النص بصفته خطابا متكاملًا يمتلك أوجها متعددة.