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The problem of translating English Linguistic Terminology into Arabic

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Arabic Linguistics has been a full-fledged descriptive science for a long time. However modern Linguistics, as a distinct empirical science, entailed that Arab linguists review their methods of dealing with the linguistic phenomenon. One of the major challenges for this new approach was to create equivalent genuine Arabic terms in modern linguistic terminology. Transliteration is not always recommended as a straightforward strategy, and Arab linguists seek to use linguistic terms that represent the long history of Linguistic research in the Arab culture. The present paper deals with the strategies used for translating major linguistic terms into Arabic and investigates problems involved in this process.

Translation might be the oldest device developed by humans to communicate ideas, thoughts and culture to overcome the problem of having different languages. Translation, in Enani's (1997) view, is a modern science on the borderline of Philosophy, Linguistics, Psychology, and Sociology. Literary translation in particular is relevant to all these sciences, and also to audio-visual arts and cultural and intellectual studies. Translation can be viewed as a science, an art and a skill. Chabban (1984) points out that it is a science in the sense that it necessitates complete knowledge of the structure and make-up of the two languages concerned. It is an art since it entails artfulness in reconstructing the product into something presentable to the reader who is supposed not to know the original. It is a skill because it entails the ability to smooth over any difficulty in the expression of the translation, and the ability to give a translation of something that has no equal in the language of the translation.

Catford (1965) defines translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)". Hatem and Mason on the other hand (1990) define it as "the transfer of meaning from one language to another." Gamal (1993: 61) describes translation as a process when he indicates that it involves "first a sensitive understanding of the communication event, the gist, the message which in good writing should be retrievable. ... the second step is an interaction with the text, in a shuttle movement through the six 'servicemen', the *wh*'s, which results in varying degrees of awareness and ends in 'comprehension'. Ultimately a new process of 'sending' out the same message is undertaken".

One area of translation that presents a high level of difficulty is the translation of terminology in any field of science. We believe that the best equivalent representation for a target language version of terminology can only be achieved with the cooperation of both a professional translator and a professional in that particular field of science. When the case comes to the field of Linguistics - the very field of the translator him/herself - the matter is quite different and relatively more complicated. When dealing with linguistic terminology, a translator is expected to be well-versed in - and knowledgeable about - the linguistic systems of both the Source Language (SL) and the Target language (TL). The translator's dilemma arises from the fact that there are only two possibilities when determining how to translate a linguistic item: the translator either knows this term and understands its meaning and is well-acquainted with the TL version of it, or s/he is familiar neither with the term manifestations in the SL nor its rendered equivalents in the TL. The first case is the easy one where a translator will use the strategy of substitution, by

substituting the SL original term for the TL term. In the second case, a translator may take recourse to a lot of other translating strategies that aim at delimiting the level of nonequivalence. Baker (1998) identifies a number of strategies available for translators. These include: using a super-ordinate lexical item; using less expressive words; using cultural substitution; using loan words with explanation; paraphrasing using related words; paraphrasing using unrelated words; omission; illustrations.

Although a translator has got a lot of strategies to use, there are some restrictions on which strategy is best, according to different important factors. These factors include, but are not limited to, the context, the purpose of the translation, and the nature of the audience to whom the translation is delivered. Since the field of translation at hand is that of Linguistic terminology, one can hardly think of the audience of such a translation to be anyone else than professionals or students in the field of linguistics, and since terminology, in any field of knowledge, represents the down-to-earth level of theoretical knowledge upon which advanced layers of theoretical as well as practical aspects of knowledge are built, one can safely claim that the translation of such terms should be as close to the meaning, and sometimes the form, of the original as possible. Strategies like omission, illustration or paraphrase do not seem to work here. There should be a separate TL term that can be used and referred to many times throughout a whole text.

The problem with Arabic Linguistic terms in particular is that in the Arabic tradition, Linguistics is a very rich and deeply-rooted branch of knowledge. Ancient Arabs had always emphasized the importance of a near-perfect mastery of the rules and linguistic jargon of the Arabic language by all educated people. Hence Arab Grammarians - another title for Ancient Linguists who were devoted to the study of the grammar of the language - had their own terms for the study of their language. This tradition of the devotion for language study is still vivid in some Arab countries where there are Arabic Language Academies (Cairo, Amman, Damascus, and Baghdad among others). One of the functions of these Academies is to produce translations and equivalent lexical items for most of the new and up-to-date words and expressions in different fields of knowledge.

If Ancient Arab Grammarians and Modern Arabic Academies have their Arabic version of the Linguistic terminology, why should an Arab translator find it difficult to translate the terms in a linguistics text? The answer is that, although Arabs have their own version of the linguistic terms, the Arabic term sometimes does not convey all the meanings and uses of a certain linguistic term according to the modern theories of Linguistics, in which case the old Arabic term will not be the proper equivalent and the translator has to work out whether or not Arab Academies have translated that term in its modern theoretical sense. Because Academies' reports and glossaries of the new words and expressions are not always available - as for example dictionaries- and are published occasionally, it is the responsibility of the translator to work out how the TL version of the Linguistic term may look like by using a suitable strategy of translation. In the remainder of this paper, we will shed light on some examples of English-Arabic translation of Linguistic terms and will discuss which strategy translators decided to use.¹

The very name of the science *Linguistics* represents a difficulty when translated into Arabic. On the surface, the word is simply rendered علم اللغة (Ilm Al-Lugha= the science of Language). Arab linguists accept the simple translation علم اللغة but seek a more appropriate translation that carries the sense of the distinction of this science in the Arab culture. Omar (1989) explains that Arabic Language Academies have proposed as a translation for the term *Linguistics* الألسنية , الألسنة , اللسانيات (al-alsunyaa, al-alsina, al-lisanyyat= the science of tongues) putting emphasis on the word *tongue* simply because the word *tongue* لسان in Arabic is commonly used to mean language, the use of language, the organs of speech, eloquence, and

¹Arabic words will be written in Arabic followed by transliteration in Latin letters and a literal back translation

many other associated uses. Also they state that the word لغة originally meant (lahjah) لهجة “dialect” and that it has never been mentioned in the Qur’an – the source book for classical standard Arabic. Anis (1966) reports that ابن جني (Ibn Jinni) one of the celebrated classical Arab linguists said about the exceptions of Arab grammar "اجتهد قياسي و أسمى ما خالفني لغات" which literally means “I will use analogy to justify for the common rule and claim the exceptions to be dialects”. Another approved translation is فقه اللغة (Fiqh al-lugha = the jurisprudence of - mastering the rules of- the language) where the word meaning science علم has been changed into the word which means *mastering of a system* فقه, the latter being particularly used in sciences of the Islamic religion. The simple use of the original term was transliterated according to the sound system of Arabic; i.e. اللنجوستيك is not accepted for many reasons. One of them is the unnaturalness of the sound of [اللنجوستيك] which suggests that this is a word for which Arabic does not have an equivalent (compare for example *computer* كمبيوتر). Another reason is the existence of what Enani (1995) calls “the refer-to-the-original translation” الترجمة الإحالية (At-tarjama al-Ihalyaa). This type of translation makes the target language seem defective as it is assumed to lack some of the SL items which represent a lexical gap between the two languages. So the best strategy to employ here is that of using a cultural term that conveys the same meaning in its modern sense.

The problem is exacerbated when coming to translate the different branches of linguistics. For example, should *Semantics* be السيمانتيك i.e. simply transliterating the term or should it have some equivalent such as علم المعنى (Ilam al-Ma’na = the science of Meaning). Both translations are used although the latter is becoming more approved than the transliterated form because of the reasons stated above regarding the transliteration of *Linguistics*. A more approved translation, however, is علم الدلالة (ilm ad-dalaa = the science of reference) which represents a more specific identification of the field of study for this branch of Linguistics rather than the vague word معنى (*meaning*). We should note here that translating *Semantics* into something like علم المعاني (ilm al-maa’ani = the science of meanings) is not accepted because the word معنى in Arabic in the singular form means “meaning” whereas in the plural form and collocated with the word for “science” علم = علم المعاني it refers to another branch of linguistic knowledge which is Rhetoric in writing and Eloquence in speech. This is a field of knowledge with a rich history for Arabs in their analysis of Arabic literary writings. So the strategies used here mainly involve combining words together in a form of paraphrase to represent the nearest equivalent to the linguistic term.

Syntax is translated as علم النحو (ilm el-nah’w = the science of analogy). The word نحو in Arabic is originally an adverb of location meaning *towards* and can be idiomatically used to mean *like this* (Ibn Manthour 1956). Mohammad (2003) reports that the people who first began to classify Arabic grammatical rules noticed some general patterns that work in predicted contexts, and that is the reason why their chief declared انحوا هذا النحو (= do like this, follow this model). Henceforth the adverb of location began to refer to the whole science of application of grammatical rules. Because in the old times the study of language was devoted to the patterns followed in the structure of sentences, the word نحو was equivalent to *grammar* in general and sometimes even to *linguistics* itself. The modern sense of Syntax with its various theories of sentence structure – X’ theory, Binding theory, case theory etc.- cannot simply be represented in a word brimming with historical and cultural implications and which does not represent any of these new theories. Hence another translation was introduced; علم التراكيب (ilm at-trakib = the science of structures), which represents some of the meanings of syntax. However another problem arose; whether these *structures* are sentence structures or word structures (morphology). By itself علم التراكيب can mean both of them. One way to distinguish the two sciences is to add another lexical item to this phrase by saying علم تراكيب الجمل (ilm trakib al-jumal = the science of sentences’ structures). This last translation, however, is not approved as it seems to be redundant; that is why another strategy was used. This strategy consists in combining the two phrases التراكيب

علم (ilm at-trakib = the science of structures) and علم النحو (ilm el-nah'w = the science of analogy) resulting in علم النحو و التراكيب (ilm el-nah'w wa at-trakib = the science of sentence structure analogy). Some advantages of this last translation is that it keeps the original cultural and historical word نحو which will trigger in the mind of the Arab reader the meaning of sentence rules, and that it also keeps the new explanatory word تراكيب which refers to some modern aspects of this old field of linguistic study.

For *Morphology*, however the problem is not quite as severe as with the previous terms; as Ancient Arab Grammarians already had a special term for the science that relates to word structure; علم الصرف (ilm es-sarf = the science of applying patterns). Arab word structure, just like in most Semitic languages, is dictated by changes internal to the root of the word. There are certain patterns that should be followed in order to produce the forms for noun derivations; i.e. the plural or the feminine forms, and verb derivations; i.e. the perfect active or the reflexive forms. However the word صرف by itself still does not imply etymologies and their uses or theories that explain morphological processes, like Optimality theory, or Government morphology. So another word was added to this old term to make it up-to-date with the uses of Morphology as a field of Modern linguistic study, علم الصرف و الاشتقاق (ilm as-sarf wa al-ishtiqaat = the science of applying patterns and etymologies). This last translation expresses the use of the old sense of the word and at the same time gives room for new trends in the science.

Phonology is rendered as علم الأصوات (ilm al-aswat = the science of sounds). The word *sounds* does not seem to be an equivalent to *phonology* which cares for sound systems and the universal rules for sounds in human languages. Thus علم الاصوات اللغوية (ilm al-aswat al-lughawya = the science of linguistic sounds) was introduced which identified *sounds* as only the sounds of linguistic study; that is, human sounds. The problem, however, is exacerbated with *phonetics* as a branch of linguistics that is different from - though interconnected with - phonology in its study of the description, production and perception of *phonemes*. *Phonetics* is accordingly translated into Arabic by using a different etymology from the stem meaning *sound* صوت which is علم الصوتيات (ilm as-sawtyatt = the science of sounds formation). Now what about words like *phoneme*, *segment*, or *segmental element* as they all represent, according to different theories, the smallest unit of phonetic and phonological study? The vague word صوت *sound* will not satisfactorily distinguish among them. The best strategy used is that of either paraphrasing as in the case of *subsegmental element* عنصر - مكون - صوتي (unsor- mukawen- sawti = a sound element or component) or transliterating as is the case with *phoneme* فونيم. Although one form produced by Arabic linguists and lexicographers for *phoneme* is صيغيم (sayghim = a small sound unit) which plays with the sound of the original word *phoneme* and the Arabic word صيغة meaning a *unit* or a *form*, still this translation seems awkward because the application of English sound system on Arabic words sounds so unnatural to the Arabic ear. The same thing can be said about *morpheme* where the transliteration مورفيم is preferred to the unnatural صرفيم (sarfiim = a small morphological unit) or the long collocation صيغة صرفية (sighaa sarfiya = a morphological unit). For the basic terms *consonant* and *vowel* Arabic offers صامت (samet = non sonorous) and صائت (saa'it = sonorous) respectively to avoid the confusion that results from the traditional terms ساكن (saken) for *consonant* and متحرك (mutaharik) for *vowel*. The term متحرك can refer to the quality of a consonant when it occurs in different case positions with different diacritics (Arabic short vowels; kasra /i/, fatHa /æ/, or dhama /u/) and the same consonant is said to be ساكن once the diacritic سكون (sukoon = a pause) falls on it. متحرك for *vowel* by its turn refers to the three long vowels in Arabic (ا, و, ي) alif, waw, and yaa) on which no diacritic (short vowel) falls in whatever case position they occur. The problem however is that these three letters (ا, و, ي) are sometimes vowels and sometimes consonants; that is, they are sometimes متحركة or ساكنة. With all this confusion on the use of the latter two terms, صامت and صائت offer clearer

identification of the sounds based on their behaviour rather than on any orthographic representation.

Pragmatics is generally translated by the transliterated form البراجماتيك as most English words that share the form “pragma” ; *pragmatism, pragmatic, pragmaticism, etc.* However, other translations are also attested, as for example the translation paraphrase علم المعنى فى السياق (ilm al-maa’na fi as-siyaq = the science of meaning in context.) which seems quite long, and that is why both this paraphrased form and the transliterated form are always combined in the translation of *Pragmatics*. Enani (2000), however, uses an alternative; علم التداولية (ilm at-tadawilya = the science of the meaning manipulated by users) which serves as an original Arabic phrase that captures the meaning of the field of the study of Pragmatics. التداولية is a noun derived from the verb تداول (tadawala) which has the following range of meaning:(Ibn Manthour 1956)

to alternate

to manipulate, or handle something differently according to users

to change from state to another

to be used frequently ...etc.

When it is applied to the role played by the context and the participants in a situation, it better reflects the meaning carried by the term *Pragmatics*².

Considering the range of Linguistic terms discussed in this study, it seems that Arabs tend to avoid transliteration as much as they can especially in a field of knowledge on which they pride themselves. A translator of linguistic terms should be aware of the uses of a term in contemporary theories of Linguistics and should be aware at the same time of the forms approved by Language Academies or dictionaries. When no such dictionaries or Academy reports are available, a translator is advised to work out the nearest equivalent to the original linguistic term in its current use, bearing in mind similar uses within the Arabic tradition and language history.

The range of examples discussed in this study does not represent an exhaustive list of all the attested translated forms of linguistic terms. Other forms also exist and it is likely that we may find other more appropriate forms in the future. The strategies discussed in this study range from simple transliteration, cultural substitution, paraphrasing, coining new terms to a combination of any of these. The recommended strategy when translating Linguistic terms is to coin new words – or work out etymologies of Original Arabic words - that sound natural to the Arabic ear and, at the same time, be familiar with what the Arabic Language Academies have introduced into the linguistic terminology, especially when translating for an audience of linguists.

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²*Pragmatism* on the other hand is used in the transliterated form البراجماتية to refer to the philosophical trend, while *Pragmaticism* is rendered by another transliterated form but also by changing the last sound into a sound equal to hissing sounds at the end of the original word البراجماسية

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