

# ISSUES IN TRANSLATING ARABIC OM- AND ABU-EXPRESSIONS

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## Abstract

This article considers the cases where literal translation is the most common strategy.

**Key words:** literal meaning, context, translation

## INTRODUCTION

Although, "Om" and "Abu" in Arabic literally mean "mother" and "father", there are several meanings, usages and contexts. In Arabic culture, parents are addressed by the name of their first/oldest child (*Om Ali* أم علي، *Abu Ali* أبو علي). A grandparent, a foster parent or an old person can be called Om~ or Abu~ out of respect. A bachelor can be called Abu~ after his father out of respect or jokingly. *Abu*, along with its lexical variants *Abi*, *Bu*, and *Baa*, is used in some surnames (*Abu-Adas* أبو عدس، *Abi Nader*, *Bu Saab*, *Ba Yazeed*). Each is used in a different Arab country. Om and Abu are also used in proper nouns referring to people's first name (*Abu Huraira*، أبو هريرة، *Om Kulthoum* أم كلثوم), nicknames (أبو الايد for Eyad; *Om Alnoal* for Nawal). Here Om and Abu mean "having, possessing". Thus, Om Kulthoum means "a woman with chubby cheeks".

Denotatively, "Om" and "Abu" appear in city, place and monument names as in (*Om Qasr* أم قصر means "with" a palace; *Abu Dhabi* named after a land with deer أبو ظبي; *Om Dorman* أم درمان named after a woman; *Sphinx* أبو الهول which means place of God Horos, or showing awe). In a biology, Om and Abu are used in bird, insect, fish, animal and plant names as if they have a certain color, shape or characteristic (*robin* أبو الحناء، *sword fish* أبو سيف، *centipede* أم أربعة وأربعين; *naval orange* أبو صورة; *chestnut* أبو فروة). In medicine, they are used in names of diseases or body parts such as (*mumps* أبو كعب، *omasum* أم التلافيف) and mean (*the shape of*); in brand names (*Axe brand* أبو فاس) they mean "with"; in colloquial Arabic, Om and Abu are used to identify an unknown person by describing his/her physical appearance (man wearing sunglasses أبو نظارة; lady in blue dress أم فستان أزرق).

Connotatively, Om and Abu have metonymous and figurative meanings. A metonym such as *أبو صابر* refers to "salt"; *أم عامر* and *أبو زلومة* refer to an "elephant with a trunk", and "hyena". Some have a religious connotation such as referring to Satan أبو مرة and أم الخبائث which refers to "alcohol" means the "biggest or main vice" أم الكتاب; refers to "*Surat Al-Fatiha*", the main Sura in the Quran or *the Preserve Tablet*". Other metonyms describe bad demeanor (*a child who keeps nagging* أم نكد) or good demeanor (*a man of generosity* أبو الكرم). In addition, Om and Abu can mean a prototype or best example (*mother of democracies* أم الديموقراطيات; origin or founder of (*father of history/medicine* أم المعرك; *the biggest or most significant example of its kind*: *the mother of all battles* أم المعرك; *mother of all parties* أم الحفلات and *السهرات*; extraordinary in size, or intensity as in (*galaxy* أم النجوم); cause or origin of (*mother of invention* أم الاختراع; *mother colony* أم مستعمرة; *mother bank* أم مصرف); a person who serves or is thought of as a protector (*father of Egyptians* أبو المصريين; *the mother of UAE*, referring to *Shaikha Fatima* الإمارات أم; innate or native as in (*mother language* أم اللغة). In collocations and idioms *بأبي عيني* means "with my own eyes"; *ضربه على رأسه* means "hit him on the back of his head"; *بأبي أنت وأمي يا رسول الله*; means "I sacrifice my father and mother for the Prophet's sake".

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Naming and kinship terms, in general, have been the subject of research for a very long time. Numerous studies investigated naming and kinship terms in a variety of languages such as: Syrian and Palestinian Arabic kinship terms (Davies, 1949); naming and address forms in Afghan society (Miran, 1975); cross-cultural comparisons of 20 kinship terms in 17 languages, cultures and communities (Tzeng & Others, 1975); meaning and usage of Arabic status and kinship terms that occur in daily person-to-person interaction (Khuri, 1981); the meanings of English kinship terms as used by educated Yoruba speakers in relation to specific sociocultural contexts of the Yoruba environment (Alo, 1989); kinship terminology of Argentine Sign Language (LSA) compared to standard Spanish kinship terminology used by non-deaf members in Argentine society (Massone & Johnson, 1991); Seri kinship terminology (Moser & Marlett, 1993); spatial distributions of Japanese family names (Longley, Singleton, Yano, & Nakaya, 2010); kinship terms in Kalhori, which is a southern Kurdish dialect in Iran (Gheitury, Yasami, & Kazzazi, 2010); kinship terms of Tabaq in Nuba Mountains (Ismail, 2015) and others.

As for lexical items referring to "father" and "mother", in particular, a limited number of studies were found. For example, Murdock (1959) as reported in Jakobson (1962) collected 1072 kinship terms, of which 531 terms referred to mother and 541 referred to father. Later, Jakobson (1962) investigated "mama" and "papa" in nursery rhymes phonologically. In Arabic, Shahrour (1991) gave the semantic differences between "parents" and "mother and father," and their occurrence, denotative and connotative meanings in the Quran.

Due to the dearth of studies that investigate linguistic, cultural and translational aspects of Arabic parental terms "Om" and "Abu", the present study examines expressions and/or compounds containing Om and Abu, and shed light on their denotative, connotative, metonymous, figurative, idiomatic, contextual, and cultural meanings. It compares Arabic Om and Abu expressions with English "mother" and "father". It also reports student-translators' difficulties in translating Om and Abu expressions into English and gives recommendations for Arabic-English translation instruction of Om and Abu expressions.

## **SUBJECTS**

A total of 93 translation students (43 students in semester 6 and 48 students in semester 9 of the translation program) at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia participated in the study. Students in semester 6 constituted the beginning translators' group, those in semester 9 constituted the advanced translators' group. Subjects in both groups completed 4 semesters of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary building courses (20 hours per semester). In semester 5 both groups took linguistics, semantics, text linguistics, and 3 interpreting courses. Students in semester 6 completed two specialized translation courses in physical sciences and the humanities. Those in level 9 completed 14 specialized translation courses in Physical sciences, humanities, medicine, engineering, media, Islamic studies, military, administration, sociology, education, security, commerce, politics and computer science.

## **OM AND ABU DATA**

A corpus of 210 Om-expressions (2-word compounds) and 135 Abu-expressions (2-word compounds) were collected from Almaany and Alwaset Online Dictionary, in addition to my own collection. The Om and Abu expressions were classified under several categories: (i) diseases (Om=49%; Abu=2%); (ii) fish, birds, insects, animals (Om= 4%; Abu=35%); (iii) metonyms (Om=20%; Abu=22%); (iv) cities (Om=8%; Abu=4%); (v) people's names (Om=3%; Abu=9%); (vi) general (Om=5%; Abu=0); (vii) brand names (Om=0; Abu=7.5); (viii) in administration terms (Om=5%; Abu=0); (ix) names of monuments (Om=0; Abu=2%); (x) in physical descriptions (Om=1.5%; Abu=5%); (xi) plant names (Om=1%; Abu=8%); (xii) idioms (Om= 2%; 1%); and (xiii) food, dessert, astronomy, transport (Om =2.5%; Abu=2.5%).

## COMPARISON OF OM AND ABU WITH ENGLISH FATHER AND MOTHER USAGE

The translation of each Arabic Om and Abu-expression was taken from Almaani Online dictionary. The author, together with two professors of English-Arabic translation, verified the English equivalents. Comparisons showed that Arabic "Om" and "Abu" and English "mother" and "father" share the following meanings: A priest or nun in the Christian faith (*Mother Teresa* الأم تريزا); one that originates or institutes as in (*the father of medicine* أبو الطب); a source of (*the father of mercy* أبو الكرم والجود); one of the leading men (أم الإمارات); something that is an extreme or ultimate example of its kind especially in terms of scale (*the mother of all construction projects*; أم المعارك). Arabic has equivalents to the following English expressions: "*Queen mother* الملكة الأم; *father of the bride*, أبو العروس; *foster father/mother* بالتبني أم/أبو; *lactating mother* المرضع الأم; *nursing mother* المرضعة الأم; *father figure* الأب الرمز; *godfather* الأب الروحي). However, the following English concepts have no equivalent in the Arabic culture although they can be translated (*single father/mother*; *surrogate mother* الأم البديلة; *putative father* الأب المزعوم; *paternity leave*). English has no forms of address like (*Abu Ali* أبو علي, *Om Ali* أم علي); no appellations, surnames, pseudonyms, or nicknames containing "father" and "mother"; no city, monument, animal, insect, fish, bird, plant, disease, dissent or brand names and no metonyms referring to people, animals containing "father" and "mother". No English equivalents to Om and Abu idioms and collocations.

### Comparison of English & Arabic

Arabic "Om" and "Abu" and English "mother" and "father" share the following meanings:

- *A priest or nun in the Christian faith (Mother Teresa)* (الأم تريزا).
- *one that originates or institutes as in (father of medicine)* (أبو الطب).
- *a source of (father of mercy)* (أبو الكرم والجود).
- *one of the leading men (أم الإمارات)*.
- *something that is an extreme or ultimate example of its kind especially in terms of scale (mother of all construction projects; أم المعارك)*.

Arabic has equivalents to the following English expressions:

- *Queen mother* الأم الملكة
- *father of the bride* أبو العروس
- *foster father/mother* بالتبني أم/أبو
- *lactating mother* المرضع الأم
- *nursing mother* المرضعة الأم
- *father figure* الأب الرمز
- *godfather* (الأب الروحي)

The following English concepts have no equivalent concepts in the Arabic culture although they can be translated:

- *single father/mother* والد يربي أبناءه وحده
- *surrogate mother* الأم البديلة
- *putative father* الأب المزعوم
- *paternity leave* إجازة أبوة

English does not have equivalents to the following:

- *No forms of address like (Abu Ali, Om Ali)*.
- No appellations, surnames, pseudonyms, or nicknames containing "father" and "mother".
- No city, monument, animal, insect, fish, bird, plant, disease, dissent or brand names.
- No equivalent metonyms referring to people, animals containing "father" and "mother".

- No equivalents to *Om* and *Abu* idioms and collocations.

### Some idioms that have no equivalents in English:

- بأم عيني “with my own eyes”
- ضربه على أم رأسه “hit him on the back of his head”
- الله رسول يا وامي أنت بآبي “I sacrifice my father and mother for the Prophet’s sake”

## OM AND ABU TRANSLATION TEST

At the beginning of the semester, the subjects in both groups were given a translation test. which consisted of 30 *Om* and 20 *Abu* expressions that were randomly selected from the corpus. The items were presented in isolation as presenting them in context would help the students infer the meaning. The subjects were asked to translate each expression into English. The students were not allowed to use a dictionary. The students were given open time to respond to the test.

The students answered a survey about their difficulties with *Om* and *Abu* expressions.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The subjects’ written responses were marked by the author. To be marked as correct, each *Om* and *Abu* expression had to be translated correctly, either by an equivalent English expression or by an explanation if equivalents are absent. To find out the strategies that the subjects used in translating *Om* and *Abu* expression, mistranslations were compiled and subjected to further analysis. The percentage of correct responses was calculated.

Reliability of the test scores was calculated using the Kuder-Richardson 21’ formula as it estimates the internal-consistency of the test items from a single administration of the test. The reliability coefficient of the test scores was .73 for the beginners’ group and .72 for the advanced group. Inter-scorer reliability was also calculated by having a colleague who taught translation mark a sample of answers and by comparing both analyses. There was a 95% agreement between the two scorers in identifying meanings and expressions available in both English and Arabic and those that are available in one language only and classifying the faulty responses into translation strategies. Disagreements were solved by discussion.

## RESULTS

The translation test results showed that students in both groups translated about 20% of the *Om* and *Abu* expressions on the test correctly. No difference was found between the beginner and advanced students in the amount and quality of responses. Many items were left blank especially those with disease names. Items where Arabic *Om* and *Abu* expressions and their English equivalents are similar such as “Mother of invention”, “father of medicine” were translated correctly. Literal translation was the most common strategy in faulty translations especially in cases where a fixed equivalent should be used as in disease names. Since in most expressions, there is no one-to-one correspondence between Arabic *Om* and *Abu*-expressions and their English equivalents, fixed equivalents should be used without translating each word in the phrase. In translating “أم الفستان الأزرق”, the students gave several explanatory equivalents with varying syntactic structures instead of saying “lady in blue dress”. Students’ responses show lack of proficiency in Arabic. Their responses to the survey showed that they never heard of many *Om* and *Abu* expressions especially those used in disease names and metonyms. They did not know whether to translate names of cities and people literally or just transliterate them.

Correctly translated	
ابو فروة	ام العروس

أبو وجه جميل	أبو التاريخ
ام البشر	ابو الطب
ابو جهل	ام الاختراع
ام العروس	ام القرى
ام فستان احمر	ام الدنيا
ابو نظارة سوداء	شركة ام
ابو الهول	ابو لهب

Funny translation (literal – invented meaning)	
Drama queen /dramatic boy	ام نكد/ ابو نكد
Prawn girl - mother loves to eat shrimps -	ام الروبيان
Big head	أم الرأس
Perfect inventor - strong inventor	ام الاختراع
Building owner	ام عمارة
Mother with a big house – who has palace	ام قصر
Person collect scissors	أبو مقص
Special knees	ابو ركبة
Person smell nice always – misk father	ابو المسك
Old books	امهات الكتب
Old man	ابو التاريخ

Funny translation (literal – invented meaning)	
worm	ام الدم العنقودية
Mother of newspapers – mother of books	أمهات الصحف
Woman always nosy	ام التلايف
Father of tiger	ابو نمر
Funny father	ابو دم خفيف
Father of heels	أبو كعب
Mother of 44	ام اربعة واربعين
Mother of company	شركة ام
Father of millions	ابو الملايين

Father of glass	أبو كاس
Smart – mother of head	أم الرأس
Father of bankrupt	أبو الإفلاس

Partial translation	
mother colonization	مستعمرة أم
black glass	أم نظارة سوداء
necessity - invention	أم الاختراع
history -	أبو التاريخ
Evil	أبو المصائب
generosity	أم الجود
Dudaij father	أبو حديج
Farwa father	أبو فروة

Gave metonyms, explanations, what they stand for	
Egypt -	أم الدنيا
A brand of biscuit -	أبو ولد
Hatem Attaee -	أبو الكرم والجود
Mohammed PBUH	بابي انت وامي
Al Fatiha	أم الكتاب
Ibn Sina - Hippocrates	أبو الطب
Mecca	أم القرى
insect	أم اربعة واربعين
A kind of rice	أبو كاس
Name of person -	أبو جهل
Spirit drinks - wine	أم الخبائث
Main company	شركة أم

Transliteration
أبو صرة، أم شر، أبو ركبة، أبو الهيجاء، أبو حديج، أبو سيف، أبو العز – أم العز، أبو جعار، أبو الشباب، أبو الهول، أبو المسك، أبو خنجر، أم الجود

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings of the present study showed that beginning as well as advanced student-translators have considerable difficulty in translating Arabic Om and Abu-expressions to English, especially those where there is no one-to-one correspondence such as disease names, bird, fish, insect and animal names, metonyms and idioms. To help students translate Om and Abu expressions correctly, the present study recommends that English and Arabic language and translation instructors raise students' awareness of the similarities and differences between Arabic Om and Abu and English "father" and "mother expressions, the idiomatic meaning of some Om and Abu expressions, and how to translate those that do not exist in English. When translating Om and Abu expressions into Arabic, students should take into consideration their multiple connotative and idiomatic meanings. They should translate names of birds, animals, fish, plants, diseases as a bloc sequence without breaking the compound into single words. They may use explanatory equivalents in transferring the meaning of metonyms; and transliterate proper nouns referring to appellations, surnames, nicknames, pseudonyms, cities and monuments and pay attention to the syntactic structure of the English expression in cases where the Arabic Om and Abu expressions mean "possessing something".

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