Translation and imperial ambitions

Language dynamics in the Italian colonization of Libya

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This socio-historical study seeks to investigate the role played by translation in strengthening the Italian colonial project in Libya. Drawing on postcolonial translation theory and insights from multimodality theory, this article investigates the translation practices utilized by the Italian government to Italianize Libya. Drawing on archival materials from the Libyan Center of Manuscripts and Historical Studies, focusing on records related to education and the press, the article posits that translation served as a crucial instrument wielded by Italian colonizers to assert dominance and exploit resources. Two case studies examine translated colonial newspaper articles from بريد برقة [Barīd Barqah] (1921) and ليبيا المصورة [Lībiyā Almwṣwrh] (1935), illustrating how Italian authority shaped Arabic media discourse through translation. The findings indicate that translated Italian propaganda in Arabic media depicted Libyans as backwards and reinforced colonial power structures.

Keywords: translation, postcolonial theory, the press, Italian colonization, Libya

1. Introduction

After France gained control of Tunisia in 1881, Italy's colonial ambitions in North Africa intensified, leading to its invasion of the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica during the Italo-Turkish War (1911–1912). It exploited Ottoman weaknesses and secured support from Britain and France (Sappino 2025). The initial invasion involved naval bombardments and marked the first military use of aircraft. Italy quickly captured coastal cities such as Tripoli and Benghazi. How-

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ever, Italian control remained largely confined to coastal areas due to fierce and ongoing resistance from Libyan populations, coordinated by the Sanusiyya order. The fascist era under Benito Mussolini, starting in the 1920s, saw a sharp escalation in violence. Governor Italo Balbo promoted a plan in the 1930s to control and create space for demographic colonization by launching a brutal "pacification" campaign (Baldinetti 2015). This campaign included mass internment in concentration camps, executions, and destruction of livelihoods, especially in Cyrenaica. It also resulted in the capture and execution of resistance leader عمر المختار [Umar al-Mukhtār] in 1931, with the rebellion effectively crushed by 1932 (Ahmida and Mundy 2022; Sappino 2025).

In 1934, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were officially merged into the colony called Libya. The Italian colonial period was marked by violence, land expropriation, and efforts at demographic settlement. It continued until Italy's defeat in North Africa during the Second World War, when allied forces occupied the territory and formally ended Italian rule in 1943 (Ahmida and Mundy 2022; Sappino 2025). The history of Italian colonization in Libya brings to light the complex dynamics of language and power, particularly through the lens of translation. As Italy imposed its language and ideologies on the Libyan people, translation emerged as both a tool for communication and a means of reinforcing colonial dominance. This dual role corroborates the potential of translation to perpetuate inequalities and shape narratives within oppressive contexts. By examining the function of translation in such settings, we can better understand its implications in contemporary cultural exchanges and the ongoing struggles against colonial legacies.

The Italian conquest of Libya was embedded within broader European imperial rivalries and driven by nationalist aspirations to establish Italy as a major colonial power. As Wright (1981, 102–104) observes, Libya was portrayed in Italian political discourse as the "fourth shore" of Italy, symbolizing both imperial prestige and economic opportunity. This ideological framing legitimized military expansion and encouraged popular support for colonial intervention. However, Italy's limited military capacity and weak administrative structures initially hindered effective territorial control, particularly in the interior regions (Baldinetti 2010, 67–69). Resistance movements, especially those organized under the Sanusiyya leadership, posed a sustained challenge to Italian authority. Ahmida (2021, 45–47) notes that these movements were rooted in religious networks, tribal alliances, and local knowledge of terrain, enabling prolonged guerrilla warfare. In response, Italian authorities increasingly adopted repressive counterinsurgency strategies, which peaked with the systematic deportation of Cyrenaican populations to desert camps between 1929 and 1933. These camps, which housed more

than 100,000 civilians, resulted in widespread famine, disease, and mortality (Ahmida 2021, 91–94).

Alongside military repression, the colonial administration pursued social and cultural restructuring through settlement schemes, land confiscations, and infrastructural projects, aiming to integrate Libya into the Italian imperial economy (Baldinetti 2010, 143–146). Educational reforms and language policies functioned as central instruments in this process, promoting Italian linguistic dominance while marginalizing Arabic and Islamic traditions. Wright (1981, 156–158) argues that these policies were designed to produce compliant colonial subjects aligned with fascist ideology.

Within this framework, translation and language mediation became essential tools for governing colonial society. Administrative documents, school curricula, and propaganda materials were systematically translated to regulate knowledge and shape political consciousness. Consequently, linguistic practices were inseparable from broader mechanisms of domination, serving to entrench colonial hierarchies and contributing to the long-term cultural and social dislocation experienced by Libyan communities.

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

Translation and postcolonialism are concepts that are closely interconnected in literary and cultural studies. Traditionally, translation has been described as a bridge that narrows gaps between languages and cultures, emphasizing its complex linguistic, psychological, and cultural dimensions (Bassnett 2014, xx; Steiner 1975, x). From this perspective, translation facilitates intercultural exchange, particularly in technologically mediated societies. However, this neutral and benevolent view has been increasingly challenged by scholars who highlight translation's entanglement with power relations. Baker (2006) argues that translation may function as a tool for manipulation and political suppression, particularly in contexts marked by inequality. Postcolonial translation theory developed in the 1990s in response to such critiques and has become a central field within literary and cultural studies. It has been shaped by influential works including Niranjana (1992), Robinson (1997), Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), Gentzler and Tymoczko (2002), and Granqvist (2006). Following the so-called cultural turn (Lefevere and Bassnett 1990, 8), scholars began to challenge the notion of translation as a neutral conduit by recognizing its deep imbrication with imperial power structures. In postcolonial studies, translation is widely understood as a tool of cultural imperialism through which dominant languages impose their interpretations on colo-

nized cultures, leading to the loss of cultural specificity and the homogenization of cultural expression (Simon and St-Pierre 2000; Mühleisen 2010).

Niranjana (1992, 11–12) conceptualized colonialism itself as a translation project aimed at domesticating the "Other," while Cheyfitz (1997, 15) demonstrated how translation in the Americas alienated indigenous cultures by recasting them within colonial frameworks. Similarly, Rafael's analysis of Spanish missionary practices in the Philippines illustrated how translation reshaped indigenous thought through religious and linguistic imposition, despite instances of "counter-translation" (1993, xix, 121). Robinson (1993, 124) further emphasized the significance of these studies in foregrounding previously repressed power issues and shifting attention toward the ideological dimensions of translation. Young (2003, 138) highlights the centrality of translation in imperial projects, arguing that "[n]othing comes closer to the central activity and political dynamics of postcolonialism than the concept of translation." Spivak (1993) and Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) similarly contend that translation is always shaped by unequal power relations. Munday (2016, 134) further argues that translation has consistently played an active role in disseminating ideologically motivated representations of colonized peoples. These perspectives demonstrate how linguistic transfer has been weaponized to impose legal, cultural, and ideological systems (Niranjana 1994, 40–41; Dolet and Tytler 2018, 136; Carbonell 1996).

Subsequent scholarship has shown that such power dynamics extend beyond historical colonialism into contemporary global interactions (Merrill 2013). Studies indicate that non-Western authors may engage in self-translation to conform to Western stereotypes (Sengupta 1996), while selective translation practices reinforce Orientalist biases and cultural marginalization (Carbonell 1996; Klinger 2014). These patterns reveal the continued influence of dominant linguistic and cultural paradigms. At the same time, postcolonial theory acknowledges the ambivalent nature of translation. While translation can function as an instrument of domination, it may also serve as a site of resistance. Colonized communities have employed translation to preserve local knowledge and challenge cultural assimilation (Shamma 2018, 282), and in doing so, they reclaim agency and voice (Kwok 2020, 2). Consequently, translation emerges as a political act whose function depends on specific historical, social, and ideological contexts. Building on these theoretical insights, this article situates translation within the broader framework of colonial governance, particularly through education and language policy. In colonial contexts, schools and official institutions functioned as key sites where translation mediated cultural domination and facilitated linguistic control. The Italian colonial intellectual project sought to legitimize its presence in Libya even before military occupation (Ryan 2012), and language policy played a central

role in this endeavor. Educational reforms were rejected unless they reinforced Italian linguistic dominance (Appleton 1979, 73).

To consolidate its authority, Italy established an extensive educational system across Libyan territory. Di Marco (translated in al-Muhishi 1988, 15) identifies several types of institutions, including primary schools modeled on Italian curricula, national primary schools for girls, schools of arts and crafts, and the Higher Islamic Cultural School. Primary education for Libyan students was largely delivered through Italo-Arab schools, which emphasized Italian language and history and were supervised by Italian teachers (De Leone 1933). By 1937, the number of Italian schools had expanded to 105 (Di Marco, translated in al-Muhishi 1988, 45), facilitating the widespread dissemination of Italian language and culture (Monserrati 2020). The Italian language was officially recognized as indispensable for colonial collaboration and prestige (Appleton 1979, 102), and Italo-Arab schools became central to promoting Italian culture as secondary only to Arabic (Alarfawi 1991, 414). Enrollment reached approximately 4,000 students, and a Fascist decree in 1928 mandated instruction exclusively in Italian, banning other languages, and restructuring curricula to serve colonial economic interests (Pretelli 2011, 280).[1] These institutions primarily targeted elite and administrative groups (Appleton 1979, 109) and were strategically distributed across major cities. Alarfawi (1991) provides insights into this distribution as follows: Tripoli (eight schools), Benghazi (five), Khumus (three), and Derna (two).

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative research approach that integrates historical analysis with postcolonial translation theory to investigate translation practices during Italian rule in Libya (1911–1943).[2] Data was collected from the archives of the Libyan Center of Manuscripts and Historical Studies, including curricula, textbooks, press materials, and governmental reports. Archival research focused on examining how educational texts and translated materials enforced Italian linguistic and cultural norms. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Niranjana (1992) and Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), the article conceptualizes translation as a mechanism of domination. Two case studies are presented to illustrate how journalistic translations disseminated colonial narratives and shaped representations of resistance movements.

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1. A study by Matteo Pretelli, citing research by Ciampi (1996), and Cresti (2001), provides figures for student enrollment in Italian-Arabic schools in Tripolitania: 1,525 students in 1921 and 4,931 students in 1931.

2. In the broader historical context, Libya was an Ottoman possession before Italian colonization began in 1911. For instance, Pretelli (2011, citing Micacchi 1931) states that there were some European schools in Libya even during Ottoman rule. However, the specific focus of this study regarding Italian-sponsored Arabic publications is on the Italian colonial period itself, not the preceding Ottoman era.

Through this integrated analytical framework, this article demonstrates how translation, particularly within colonial educational and institutional settings, contributed to the Italianization of Libyan society and the marginalization of Arabic and local cultures, while revealing the complex ways in which linguistic practices intersected with broader political, social, and cultural transformations. By linking postcolonial theory with archival and textual analysis of curricula and press materials, this approach affirms translation's central role in colonial governance and establishes its significance as a critical lens for examining power relations embedded in Italian educational policies and practices, which will be explored in detail in the following section.

3. Translation in Italian education

The establishment of Italian schools for Libyan students involved extensive linguistic activity, highlighting the central role of translation in facilitating student comprehension. Italian teachers employed various methods to help students grasp lesson content. Visual aids, such as pictures and diagrams, were first explained in Italian, then clarified through translation by teachers or assistants. Gestures and body language further supported efforts to facilitate understanding, allowing students to interpret meaning even when full comprehension of the words was challenging (al-Shaykh 1972,30). Educators also used interactive games, melodic songs, and engaging narratives, providing enjoyable and immersive ways to acquire the Italian language (Appleton 1979). Despite linguistic and cultural barriers, these methods enabled many Libyan students to achieve proficiency as a vehicle for broader Italian cultural assimilation (Metz 1989).

Beyond language acquisition, Italian education in Libya served as a tool of ideological control that reinforced Italy's perceived superiority and advanced the Italianization of the colony (Zaglio 2024,982). As Libyan students were initially unfamiliar with the Italian language, translation between Arabic and Italian was essential. From the first grade, students practiced oral exercises, learned to read and write Italian, and developed practical skills for daily life, which included drafting letters, handling money orders, and performing basic business tasks. Lessons were punctuated with short breaks, and attention was devoted to personal hygiene, with daily inspections and instruction on disease prevention (Di Marco, translated in al-Muhishi 1988, 51–52). This approach shows that Italian colonial education extended beyond literacy, functioning as a project of cultural assimilation and social engineering. By centering the curriculum on practical tasks conducted in Italian, the system sought to shape Libyan students into compliant subjects of the colonial state. The emphasis on hygiene and inspections

disciplined both body and mind, embedding colonial authority into daily life. Translation and language instruction thus operated not merely as pedagogical tools but as instruments of power, acting to institutionalize linguistic hierarchies and normalize Italian identity as the normative model.

This linguistic and educational framework also laid the foundation for broader multimodal strategies in Italian classrooms, where images, songs, maps, and other semiotic resources reinforced colonial ideology and shaped students' political and cultural identities. The translation process for Libyan students was therefore not limited to linguistic shifting (translating Italian words and texts into Arabic) but extended to the internalization of metalinguistic material such as pictures and songs. For example, images of Italian kings and maps of Italy were displayed in classrooms to emphasize the greatness of Italy and inspire student reverence.



Figure 1. Images of Italian kings and maps to glorify Italy and foster admiration among students

The process of meaning-making for Libyan students in these schools was not restricted to one of understanding the lessons provided by teachers; it also included the decoding (or the translation, as suggested by Boria et al. [2020, 5]) of multimodal items that Italians provided to the students to encourage the ideological conventions of the colonizer. These multimodal items comprised visual aids such as the display of pictures on blackboards and walls within the classroom (see Figure 2: e.g., فلتحيا إيطاليا [Fal-tahya Italiya, which translates as "Long live Italy"]), as well as auditory elements wherein Libyan students were required to recite the Italian anthem or slogans prior to the commencement of classes.

Multimodal strategies suggest that meaning not only resides in linguistic items, whether verbal or written. Rather, meaning also exists in multimodal items, such as pictures, images, signs, gestures, movements, and music. Jewitt et al.



Figure 2. A collection of classroom photos from Italian colonial schools in Libya, capturing students during lessons and gathered in a hall beneath official portraits

(2016, 3) argue that meaning is "made with different semiotic resources, each offering distinct potentialities and limitations." They also suggest that meaning-making demands the production of multimodal wholes. To study meaning, we must be attentive "to all semiotic resources being used to make a complete whole" (ibid., 6). Libyan students, whether consciously or subconsciously, engaged in a process of translating multimodal items such as pictures and maps in the classroom, which contributed to the formation of their political identity. During the era of Italian colonization in Libya, linguistic activities, including translation, were characterized by an inconsistent approach. The sustained Libyan resistance forced Italian authorities into a comprehensive reevaluation of colonial policies. Linguistic strategies, especially the mandatory teaching of Italian, became a focal point of debate. As the pressure from Libyan military and political resistance increased, Italians exhibited greater tolerance of the use of Arabic in Libyan schools. However, this stance took a drastic turn with the rise of fascism in 1920. The Fascists decided to forcefully impose the Italian language and culture, aiming to Italianize the Libyan population. Consequently, Arabic was eradicated from the schools, except for teaching the Arabic language and the Qur'an.

4. Italian education policy in Libya

Education in Libya during the Italian colonial period (1911–1943) functioned essentially as a process of translation, albeit often indirectly. Libyan students, largely unable to speak Italian, were inevitably compelled to rely on some form of translation in the classroom, such as needing to translate their teachers' instructions into their native language (Arabic) to understand the lessons. This process was cumbersome, time-consuming, and undoubtedly affected the quality of education. Translation was not merely a neutral pedagogical tool; it functioned as a double-edged mechanism that both facilitated access to learning and perpetuated subordination. While it enabled students to follow the lessons, it simultaneously slowed comprehension, increased cognitive overload, and reinforced the primacy of the colonizer's language as the main criterion for success. As St. John (2008, 32) notes, Italian authorities deliberately prioritized Italian language in schools while relegating Arabic to minor or religious functions. This policy restricted genuine learning and further marginalized the wider Libyan population within the colonial educational framework.

The introduction of Italian as the language of instruction was a milestone in the Italianization of Libyan students. Amerigo Namias, the regional inspector of Arabic schools, claimed that Arabic was well suited for verbal imagery and syntax but inadequate for scientific thought (Appleton 1979). Such assertions were erroneous, as Islamic scholars have made substantial scientific and mathematical advancements while primarily documenting their work in Arabic. Examples include Abū Mūsā Jābir ibn Ḥayyān (c. 721–815), known as the father of Arabic chemistry; Al Rhazes (c. 854–925/935), a Persian alchemist and physician (Newman 2024; Encyclopaedia Britannica 2024); and Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), a preeminent Arab historian considered the father of the philosophy of history (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025).

The marginalization of Arabic and attempts to Italianize Libyan society were met with resistance, as many families either refused to enroll children or withdrew them from schools (Lahmar 2015). This prompted the colonial administration to introduce incentives, including physical and recreational activities through colonial youth organizations, as well as medical and economic services offered by Fascist relief societies for students enrolled in Italian schools (El-Bah 1985, 14). Furthermore, placing education under the direct supervision of the Italian Ministry of the Colonies indicated that schooling primarily served colonial objectives rather than intellectual development. As Spivak (1993) notes, colonialism compels the "native" to regard themselves as deviant, deficient, and "other" within their own country.

4.1 Teachers

Teachers in Italian schools were predominantly Italians, and to address the shortage of qualified instructors, the colonial administration often reassigned soldiers and military officials to teaching posts (Mohamed 2025, 687). As noted above, the language of instruction was Italian and lessons frequently relied on informal translation or interpreting within the classroom. This placed a considerable cognitive and linguistic burden on Libyan students, who had to explore the subject matter in a language foreign to them, making academic progression dependent less on understanding and critical engagement and more on proficiency in Italian, a language that systematically displaced Arabic, their mother tongue, from its natural pedagogical role. Di Marco (translated in al-Muhishi 1988, 49) observes that the Bedouin way of life, along with the scarcity of competent local and Italian teachers, further limited school enrolments and curtailed access to education.

Although Italian colonial policy ostensibly sought to employ teachers capable of functioning in a bilingual environment and of teaching in Arabic, the reality fell far short. Many Italian educators lacked adequate proficiency in Arabic and the administration failed to provide sufficient training, leaving translation as an indispensable yet inadequate bridge between the curriculum and the students. At times, local Libyan teachers were reluctantly appointed but placed under close supervision, whereas Italian teachers enjoyed considerable freedom in following the curriculum and teaching across different subjects (Di Marco, translated in al-Muhishi 1988, 52). While attempts were made to introduce policies and recommendations to remedy these shortcomings, their implementation was persistently undermined by logistical, linguistic, and cultural barriers, as well as by the deeper structural inequalities embedded in the colonial system (Appleton 1979).

As a result, the educational experience of Libyan students remained defined by linguistic hierarchies and restricted access to meaningful learning. This reflected both the limits of Italian colonial educational ambitions and the central role that language, and the mediation provided by translation, played in sustaining social and cultural domination. Translation, rather than merely transmitting knowledge, functioned as a mechanism through which colonial power was exercised in the classroom, simultaneously allowing instruction while entrenching inequalities (Ahmida 2005). Thus, these linguistic and pedagogical dynamics contributed to long-term social and cultural consequences, as generations of Libyan students were systematically positioned at a disadvantage within the colonial educational framework. The privileging of Italian over Arabic not only impeded immediate access to knowledge but also influenced patterns. This has left enduring marks on Libyan society that have persisted well beyond the colonial period.

4.2 Curriculum

According to Appleton (1979), the Italian educational curriculum covered a wide array of subjects, including Italian language and literature, history, geography, mathematics, science, physical education, religion, and civics. Italian language and literature courses were designed to teach grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and the study of poetry, plays, and novels. The history course provided students with an understanding of Italy's historical narrative, covering the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, the unification of Italy, and the Italian colonization of Libya. Geography courses familiarized students with Italy's physical features, climate, and population, while the curriculum also introduced Italian exploration and colonization, focusing primarily on Italy and its colonies (Appleton 1979). Libyan students encountered Italian history and geography before receiving comparable information about their own homeland. Mathematics courses included operations, problem-solving, geometry, and trigonometry, although even basic lessons were often infused with elements promoting Italian ideological beliefs (Lahmar 2015). Civics lessons taught students about the Italian government, society, laws, political systems, and cultural values, often through translation.

According to Di Pasquale (2003), reading materials in Arab schools teaching Italian included precise Arabic translations of words and phrases, ensuring that the essence of Arabic was preserved. This avoided imposing unfamiliar sounds, vowels, or consonants that could confuse Arab students. Di Pasquale (2003, 96) notes that sounds easily discernible to Italian children might not be as recognizable to Arab students. Thus, the curricula were ill suited for Libyan students: they replicated Italian school practices and aimed to instill Italian ideals. Al-Shaykh (1972, 189) observes that Italian books contained slogans, pictures, and anthems praising colonization, alongside stories emphasizing Fascist patriotism and Mussolini's speeches. The United Nations (1950, 28) reports that "[a] considerable proportion of the curriculum was devoted to the study of the Italian language, which was also used as the language of instruction for many of the classes."

According to Di Marco (translated in al-Muhishi 1988, 56), the schoolbooks contained statements designed to foster love for Italy among Libyan Arab students: "O children of Libya, love the three colors of the Italian flag, for it is your flag, your banner. Greet it, raise your hands towards it, and be prepared to serve it with loyalty and honor." The following pictures (Figures 3 and 4) show Libyan students raising their hands towards the Italian flag, in reference to the iconic fascist salute associated with Mussolini and the Italian Fascist regime.

On the following pages of the schoolbooks, students saw a colored picture of the Italian flag and an image of the fasces, learning about it as a symbol of fascism



Figure 3. Teams of students from the P. Verri and Margherita di Savola schools before leaving (Festa, 1931)

and authority. In a passage dedicated to King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy, students read that he was wise and virtuous, having "fought and won the Great War, and deserved the title of Victor" (Di Marco, translated in al-Muhishi 1988, 56–57). The section on Mussolini, titled "Benito Mussolini the World's Leader," aimed to motivate students in their studies. In their reading about Libya, Arab students were reminded that the country had once been under Roman rule, rich and powerful, but later became poor and depopulated. Under Italy's rule, however, as Rome's heir, Libya was portrayed as poised to regain wealth and prosperity (ibid). Another passage described Italy as a homeland:

> Italy, my second homeland. I am not yet acquainted with it, but I know that it is surrounded by the sea and by the lofty Alps whose peaks are covered with snow throughout the year. I know that the clear sky and fertile soil have made Italy one of the most beautiful countries in the world ... I am happy that I am one of the subjects of the Italian government, and I love Italy with the affection of a son because it is my mother. (Di Marco, translated in al-Muhishi 1988, 56–57)

Libyan students studied history, grammar, arithmetic, geography, science, and health. History covered Libya's past from the cave age through the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Arabs, and up to the Ottoman period. While the Ottomans were portrayed negatively, accused of failing to improve conditions after war, famine, and epidemics, even religion was depicted as failing to bring



Figure 4. Indigenous students of the Sebha School salute the Italian flag on October 28, 1931 (Festa 1931)

Arabs and Turks together, keeping Turks distant from Arabs. The history curriculum also included prominent Italians such as Pellico, Mazzini, Mameli, Manin, Charles Albert, Speri, Garibaldi, Victor Emmanuel II, Cavour, and others, as well as the Carbonari societies and Young Italy. In a broader colonial context, textbooks highlighted Italy's achievements, noting the establishment of colonies in Eritrea and Somalia during King Umberto I's reign and Italy's victory over Ethiopia, with the participation of some Libyan soldiers. The final section recounted Mussolini's proclamation of the Empire on 9 May 1936, accompanied by full-page portraits of the King and Mussolini (ibid., 57–59).

Taken together, the curriculum, classroom practices, and textbook content clearly illustrate the deliberate Italianization of Libyan students. From early encouragement of oral exercises in Italian to the glorification of Italian history, leaders, and national symbols, the educational system systematically instilled loyalty, admiration, and cultural alignment with Italy. Libyan students were not only taught academic subjects but were also exposed to ideological messaging, portraying Italy as Libya's benefactor and Libya as a natural extension of Italian heritage. Through these methods, the Italian colonial education shaped the identities, values, and worldview of Libyan students, ensuring that their allegiance and cultural orientation aligned with the colonial power. The Italian educational system func-



Figure 5. R. Margherita di Savoia Girls' School. Fourth-grade Israelite students (Festa 1931)

tioned not merely as a means of instruction but as a tool of cultural and political indoctrination.

5. Translation in the press

Journalistic activities in Libya predated the Italian invasion of the country considerably. Historical resources suggest that the first Libyan newspaper was issued as early as 1827 (al-Ṣuway'ī 1989). Newspapers such as طرابلس الغرب [Ṭarābulus al-Gharb], الترقي [al-Taraqqī], and الفنون [al-Funūn] were the platforms used to discuss various political, social, sports, and economic issues at that time (al-Miṣrātī 1960,1).

Before the Italian conquest of Libya, the journalistic industry had been witnessing a considerable boom in reporting activities that can be attributed to a variety of reasons. These included the arrival of the print industry at the end of the Ottoman dynasty in North African provinces, and the return of many students from the الأزهر [al-Azhar] and الزيتونة [al-Zaitouna] mosques. These students contributed to the publication of many newspapers dedicated to covering various topics. The languages of these newspapers were Arabic, Turkish, and

French (al-Ṣuway'ī 1989). Most journalists and news writers had studied in جامع الأزهر [Jāmi'al-Azhar, the Al-Azhar mosque] or other Islamic institutions in the MENA region. They followed a distinct written style, such as citing verses from the Quran or sayings of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him, for example) in their editorials. It was rare to read a newspaper that did not include a poem, wise sayings, or Qur'anic verses in the title. News articles containing stylistic features such as rhetoric, repetition, and assonance dominated the press in early Libyan journalism. Libya's media landscape also featured a vibrant array of foreign newspapers that disseminated both local and global news. Notable examples included *Echo di Tripoli, Lawa Sahyon, Rybeta Site Manili, La, Aljili, Libya, Oya, Tripolitania, Corira di Tripoli,* and *Di Tripolitania.*

Press activities and the translation of journalistic texts from Italian into Arabic were similarly utilized by Italy to prepare the country for its invasion. The Italian invasion of Libya in 1911 aimed at both Tripolitania in the west and Cyrenaica in the east. These regions had been part of the Ottoman Empire since the 16th century. Although the Ottomans officially handed over control of these areas to Italy in the 1912 Treaty of Lausanne, local resistance persisted for many years afterwards (Del Boca 2024). The strategy of national Italian radical parties was to promote the invasion of foreign lands, thereby shifting public opinion and convincing other parties that conquering foreign lands was of strategic economic benefit to Italy (al-Qarawī 1999, 90). Newspapers in Rome played a significant role in promoting the colonization project. Al-Qarawī states that "if the Italian flag flies on Tripoli or Benghazi soil one day, it will be the result of Italian journalism's contribution to the success of the project" (1999, 159).

Foreign newspapers in Libya have a long history, dating back to the Italian colonial period. The Italian colonial administration exploited these publications, along with Libya's educated elite, many of whom were multilingual, to promote its colonization project. Starting in 1912, the colonial authorities established numerous newspapers that disseminated propaganda in both Italian and Arabic, capitalizing on local journalists' linguistic skills and experience (al-Miṣrātī 1960, 203). Examples of such newspapers include بريد طرابلس [Barīd Ṭarābulus], الرقيب العتيد [al-Raqīb al-'atīd], العدل [al-'Adl], Barīd Barqah, and Lībiyā Almwṣwrh. These publications covered various social and political topics in Libya from 1912 until 1941, primarily producing content in Italian and Arabic or translating Italian news into Arabic to serve colonial interests.

In these newspapers, published items translated from Italian into Arabic include Italian leaders' speeches and literary articles. In his research on Libyan journalism, al-Miṣrātī (1960, 206) explores the Arabic version of Barīd Ṭarābulus and suggests that the newspaper's peculiar structure and non-Arabic style are noteworthy. However, it is important to highlight that this observation does not

apply to all Arabic newspapers of the time. Al-Miṣrātī (1960) suggests that the distinctive characteristics of Barīd Ṭarābulus may stem from the fact that the newspaper did not originate in Arabic, but rather incorporated translated news stories from Italian sources. In a similar vein, the archives of the Libyan Center of Manuscripts and Historical Studies show that some of the issues published at that time incorporated political news, columnists and literary articles that were rendered from Italian into Arabic in the Barīd Barqah and Lībiyā Almwṣwrh newspapers.

5.1 Colonial narratives in *Barīd Barqah* and *Lībiyā Almwṣwrh*

This section presents two case studies that emphasize the historical significance of these newspapers within the context of Italian colonization in Cyrenaica.[3] *Barīd Barqah (*بريد برقة*) and Lībiyā Almwṣwrh (*ليبيا المصورة*)* played a prominent role during the Italian colonization era; both newspapers were established in Cyrenaica, with the former being founded in 1921 and the latter in 1935.[4] They operated under the editorship of عمر فخري المحيشي [Omer Fakhari al-Mehishi]. The selection of Barīd Barqah for closer examination stems from its significance as the Italian administration's chosen medium for disseminating daily news and reports in Tripoli and Benghazi. As an authoritative source, Barīd Barqah diligently covered a wide range of topics related to colonial governance in eastern Libya. This includes stories of colonial authorities' orders, reports detailing the movements of المجاهدين [Mujahideen] in the eastern province,[5] lists of martyrs in battles against Italian forces, and accounts of conflicts waged by the colonizers themselves. Therefore, Barīd Barqah was a primary channel of communication between the Italian administration and the local population in Cyrenaica. The two case studies discussed below seek to glean insights into the dynamics of colonial governance, the portrayal of resistance movements, and the representation of historical events within the context of Italian colonization in eastern Libya.

The first case study examines a controversial 18th September 1931 article (see Figure 6 below) announcing the capture of Umar al-Mukhtār, published in the

3. Some Jewish publications in Hebrew or Ladino may have existed in Tripoli (Segr 1992). However, no major Turkish or Berber-language newspapers emerged during this period. While Turkish had been used administratively under the Ottomans (pre-1911), its influence waned under Italian control. Meanwhile, Berber languages, historically marginalized, remained excluded from formal print media (Simon 1987).

4. The Italian invasion was in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, both provinces in Libya formerly held by the Ottomans.

5. The مجاهدين [Mujahideen] were referred to as "militants," thereby emphasizing their armed resistance, and refusal to surrender power or share the Libyan land with the new ruling authority.

Barīd Barqah newspaper. The piece remains contentious today, particularly due to its description of Umar al-Mukhtār as زعيم العصاة [zaʿīm al-ʿuṣāh, leader of the rebels]. This designation provoked strong reactions in Libyan society, where he was reverently known as الشيخ عمر المختار [al-Shaykh Umar al-Mukhtār] or سيدي عمر [Sīdī Umar], honorifics carrying significant cultural and religious weight. However, the word العصاة [al-ʿiṣāh] is the plural form of the word عاصي [Āṣī], denoting a person who does not adhere to the rules or who is a troublemaker.

The article's publication led to accusations of treason against the editor عمر فخري المحيشي [Omer Fakhri al-Mehishi]. However, archival research reveals a crucial detail: the text was not originally composed by the editor al-Mehishi but rather translated from Italian to be published in Arabic newspapers. This finding was corroborated by Hamama (2020), who, in an article for بوابة الوسط [Bawwābat al-Wasaṭ] (a prominent Libyan digital newspaper), advised that he had located an identical Italian-language version of the report in the Italian National Library in Rome. This discovery underscores the asymmetrical power dynamics in colonial media, wherein imperial authorities could impose their narratives on occupied populations via translation, as argued by Niranjana (1992). After examining the language used in the article on Umar al-Mukhtār's capture, we concluded that the article was not originally written in Arabic, as the vocabulary used, sentence structure, and style in general were not consistent with Arabic norms.

The translated article announcing the capture of Umar al-Mukhtār and labelling him leader of the rebels, continues to fracture Libya's social and political cohesion. Its legacy persists in contemporary conflicts, where it is weaponized to fuel regional antagonism. During the 2019 civil war, for instance, factions in western Libya invoked the article to discredit eastern communities, accusing them of historical disloyalty to the anti-colonial resistance. By citing the derogatory terminology originally imposed by Italian authorities in the Barrīd Barqah newspaper (1931), western actors sought to stigmatize eastern Libyans as collaborators by exploiting the translation's enduring controversy to undermine their opponents' legitimacy. This deliberate misappropriation reflects how colonial-era propaganda, even when linguistically repurposed, can be reactivated to serve modern political agendas.

In the context of local illiteracy, it is noteworthy that the indigenous population often remained unaware that certain news items were translations from Italian sources. Additionally, Omer Fakhari al-Mehishi's article mentions the phrase "for consolidation of peace." The focus of the article was specifically about the arrest of Umar al-Mukhtār, which was presented as part of the peace process between the colonizers and the colonized. The Italian authorities accused the Mujahideen of opposing their rule. They portrayed them as the rebels who posed a threat to the peace-building efforts claimed by the colonizers. However, it is cru-

cial to consider an alternative perspective that the entire conflict was framed as a construction of the peace process, rather than the occupation of foreign lands.

The second case study was taken from the Lībiyā Almwṣwrh newspaper, volume (7), which was released in 1939. The paper notably published different political, literary, agricultural, religious, and scientific stories, and incorporated political stories translated from Italian to Arabic. The article (see Figure 7 below) under investigation here was rendered from the Italian Difesa della Razza magazine into Arabic under the title سياسة إيطاليا الفاشستية الاستعمارية [Siyāsat Īṭāliyā al-Fāshistiyya al-Isti'māriyya, which translates as "Italian colonial Fascist policy"]. The article was written by Marino Martino, the General of Political Affairs at the Italian Ministry of Africa, to defend Fascist policy of segregating whites (colonizers) from locals (colonized people). In his article, Martino uses racist words and phrases such as "colored man," "to take care of him," and "modernize his behavior." The author likewise discusses how hegemonic power imposes legal measures on both Italian citizens and indigenous people in the empire. Furthermore, he describes how fascism teaches a "colored man" to act in the empire of the "white man," who is intelligent and civilized. This is because the "white man" belongs to the upper class in the social order of the colonized land.

Within the hierarchical structure of the colonized society, the "white man," representing the colonizer, held a superior position. The culture associated with the "white man" was considered superior, while other cultures were deemed inferior. Martino's ideology, as reflected in his selection of words, clearly emphasized these distinctions. However, the translator of the article, al-Mehishi, primarily focused on linguistic accuracy and lacked the necessary tools to address the intricate cultural values embedded in the text. This highlights an early limitation within the discipline of translation studies, which historically disregarded ideological concerns. Bassnett and Trivedi (1999, 6) argued that "for too long translation was seen as purely an aesthetic act, and ideological problems were disregarded. Yet the strategies employed by translators reflect the context in which texts are produced."

In the colonial context in Libya, the Ministry of Colonies mandated that pictures of its officials and leaders be sent to newspaper editors to be published as covers for daily news. Consequently, writers and editors were compelled to convey the messages of the colonizing power, leaving no room for the creation of unbiased and independent news stories. Failure to comply with these expectations would result in imprisonment or even death, as experienced by rebels and dissenting writers (al-Miṣrātī 1960).

The translation of the Lībiyā Almwṣwrh newspaper served as a key instrument for disseminating colonial ideology, functioning as a channel through which colonial discourse was communicated and reinforced. This use of translation as



بريد برقة

BERID BARCA

18 SETTEMBRE - 1931 N. 346

حادث حاسم آخر في بيك توطيد سلم البلاد

القبض على عمر المختار زعيم العصاة في برقة

البلاغ الرسمي

في سبيل السلم

Figure 6. A *Barīd Barqah* newspaper announcement of Umar al-Mukhtār's capture (Volume 346, September 1931 [Festa 1931])

a vehicle for colonial propaganda aligns with Ahmida's (2005) critique, as it illustrates how colonial discourse not only silenced Libyan voices but also imposed contradictory narratives that legitimized domination, while masking violence and dispossession. Ahmida (2005, xv) critiques that under "colonialism and post-colonialism, Libyan society confronted contradictions of modernity, genocide,



Figure 7. An Arabic translation of an article from the Italian *Difesa della Razza* magazine, titled "Italian Colonial Fascist Policy" (Volume 7, 1939 [Festa 1931])

the nation-state, and alienation." For instance, in one of Mussolini's speeches of November 1936, the phrase أعدل الحروب [A'dalu al-ḥurūb, translated as "the fairest war"] appeared in the Lībiyā Almwṣwrh newspaper and was used to justify the colonization of third world lands. However, one must question how a war or engagement in a battle against weak and impoverished nations that have long been subjected to slavery can be described as a fair war. Yet, in the given context, the newspaper Lībiyā Almwṣwrh conveyed the viewpoint of the colonizer, presenting Mussolini's efforts to persuade his subordinates that he was fighting against other powerful nations for the benefit of the local populations in Africa. This perspective reflects a deliberate depiction of the colonizer's justification for their actions. Mussolini sought to present the conflict as a noble endeavor aimed at uplifting the African communities under their control, while positioning the colonizer as champions against external powers. It is important to critically analyze and interpret such narratives, as they reflect the power dynamics, propaganda strategies, and ideological underpinnings employed by colonial powers during that era. It is evident that translation has played a significant role in enhancing the colonizer's perspective. It is through translation that the colonizer attempted to persuade the indigenous people of the legitimacy of the invasion.

The speech given by Mussolini after the youth force parade on 24th May 1936 also incorporated ideological concepts of the colonizer, such as الروح الفاشيستي [Al-Rouh Al-Fashisti, "Fascist spirit"], revealing how Italian power was preparing

the young generation within its colony to defend the Fascist revolution. In the same context, the Italian governor Palpo convincingly persuaded local citizens of the Italian empire's investment projects in Libya by stating that the projects were not for للمعمر الإيطالي [lilmuʿammir al-ʾīṭālī, "Italian developers"]. He claimed that Italy's intentions were good when allocating some of the farms and newly built houses to Arab Libyans. One observes in the colonial argument a selective strategy in utilizing certain terms, as written in the Arabic version of Lībiyā Almwṣwrh "Developer," for instance, indicates that Italy was building the country, rather than colonizing it. Moreover, the newspaper Lībiyā Almwṣwrh mentions the phrase العقيدة الفاشية [Al-Aqidah al-Fashiyah, "Fascist ideology"] used by Mussolini. These examples represent clear cases of employing persuasive tactics to convey Fascist political beliefs to the Libyan audience, despite their lack of veracity. The role of translation in enhancing Italian colonization is apparent. Translation was used to disseminate the colonizer's ideology, to justify the invasion, and to control the indigenous population. In many cases, there was no other way to persuade the indigenous people of the legitimacy of the invasion, other than through translation.

6. Conclusion and translation effects

Translation has been used directly and indirectly to promote Italian colonialism. It has played a vital role in supporting the colonization project of Libya. This role was clearly manifested in the education system implemented by Italy, as colonial officials used translation to control Libya in several ways. One method was to use translation to control the flow of information. The Italian colonial government censored the press and controlled the distribution of books and other publications. They established schools that taught the Italian language and culture, and discouraged the teaching of the Arabic language. Italian colonialism in Libya employed translation as a means of exerting control, specifically by instilling a sense of inferiority among the Libyan population. The Italian colonial government also strategically translated Italian propaganda into Arabic and disseminated it widely across the country. Through this propaganda, Libyans were consistently portrayed as culturally and socially inferior, perpetuating a narrative that positioned them as backwards and uncivilized in comparison to Italians. Consequently, this deliberate manipulation of information and perception reinforced the power dynamics of colonial rule.

The utilization of translation as a tool by Italian colonialism had profound and detrimental repercussions for Libya. Its implementation resulted in the stigmatization of Libyan culture, the propagation of misinformation, and the

gradual erosion of Libyan identity. Furthermore, the deliberate use of translation obstructed effective communication among Libyans and hindered their ability to organize resistance against Italian rule. This deliberate manipulation of language through translation serves as a poignant reminder of the immense power language holds in controlling and oppressing marginalized populations.

By tracing news articles in different newspapers, the voice of colonization was noticeably evident. The exploration of lexical phrases in newspapers that were published in Libya during Italian colonization reflects the significance of translation in promoting the colonization project. Furthermore, the use of translation in the colonial context had an unintended consequence of introducing alternative modes of thinking among educated individuals, which inadvertently challenged the dominant perspective of the colonizer on various levels. In fact, postcolonial translation emphasizes the profound impact that translation can have in reshaping ideologies, subverting power dynamics, and generating resistance within postcolonial societies.

It can be concluded that the translation activities in Libya during the Italian colonization era (1911–1943) transpired at a relatively slow pace and were of limited duration. After fierce resistance, the Italians were forced to revise their policies in Libya, including the linguistic policy. As the pressure of Libyan military and political resistance mounted, Italians showed more tolerance towards Libyans, allowing them to use the Arabic language in schools and in the press. However, a significant shift had already occurred with the rise of Fascist power in 1920, when the new regime made a decisive choice to enforce the Italian language and culture upon the Libyan population through coercive measures, with the aim of imposing a process of Italianization.

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