

## **ARABIC TRANSLATION "PAST AND PRESENT"**

**Amna M. Benzaed**

*English Department, Faculty of Arts, Al-Fatah University, Tripoli, Libya*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This work provided historical background on translation activity in Arab and Islamic World since the ninth and tenth century (A.D.), and the famous translators and the current situation of the Arabic translation.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Translation is a very old craft. It is an achievement shared by no other creature most animals possess the capacity of communication but none of translation. The existence of different linguistic communities in the world and the need among people to communicate their experience and knowledge led to the discovery of translation as a solution for overcoming barriers of language and a means of conveying ideas, knowledge and experience from one culture to another. The Arabic translation movement started in seventh century (A.D.), during the Omayyad period and flourished in the Abbasid Caliphate in the Arab Islamic World. The Caliph al-Mansur (754-775) was a great supporter of those who worked in the field of translation. The golden period of al-Mamun (786-833), in which the translation movement flourished in Baghdad, which became the centre of Arabic translation. Al-Mamun sent a delegation to the Armenian Leo (775-820) Emperor of Byzantine to get scientific books for translation into Arabic.

### **DEFINITION OF TERM ARABIC LANGUAGE**

Arabic is considered as a Semitic language. It rooted in the Arabian Peninsula but spread with the rise of Islam in the seventh century. It is the language of the Quran which has a special organisation and style and does not use punctuation, but uses the aya (verse) system instead.

The Omyyad Caliph Abd Al-Malik ibn Marawan (reigned 685-705) declared it the sole administrative language of the state. Since then it has been the official language of all Arab countries (Baker, 1996).

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was getting too weak to defend its borders therefore the Arab World was under the occupation by the early of the twentieth century by the British in Egypt, Palestine, Iraq and Sudan, the Italians in Libya and the French in North Africa and Syria, Consequently the English, French and Italian languages were used extensively in administration, also as the medium of instruction in universities. But as soon as the Arab countries become independent from foreign rule, Arabic became the national language of the Arab countries. After the formation of Arab league in 1945, Arabic was declared the national and official language for the Arab nation. In these days Arabic language, is heavily used in books, newspapers, journals and magazines, and orally on radio and television and by educate people all over the Arab World (Baker, 1998).

### **EARLY TRANSLATION**

The history of Arabic translation started in the seventh century (A.D.), during the Omayyad period. In this period the Arabic language was adopted as the official language of administration, replacing other languages. But Arabic translation reached its peak during the Abbasid era in the eight century (A.D.). The Abbasid caliphs supported translation and set up the house of wisdom in Baghdad which was headed by Hunayn Ibn-Ishaq and took the charge of all scientific translation.

Arabs translated from many languages such as: Persian, Greek, Latin and Hindi. These translations were important in developing European thought.

Baker (1998) pointed out that the most important periods and caliphates are as follows:

- i) The orthodox period of the early caliphate, starting with the death of Mohammad in 632 and ending with the death of Ali, the fourth Guided Caliph, in 661. The seat of the caliphate during this period moved from Medina, in present-day Saudi Arabia, to al-Kufa and al-Basra in present-day Iraq.
- ii) The Omayyad Caliphate (660-750), with its seat in Damascus.
- iii) The Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), with its capital in Baghdad.

- iv) The Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171), a Shi'ite offshoot of the main caliphate, with its capital in Cairo.
- v) An offshoot of the Umayyad Caliphate which was established in Cordoba (929-1031).
- vi) The Ottoman Caliphate (c. 1517-1924), with its seat in Constantinople. This last great caliphate of Islam was Turkish.

From the point of view of the history of translation into Arabic, The most important periods in the history of translation into Arabic are the Omayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, which were followed by a long period of intellectual stagnation in the Islamic World.

Faiq (1996) states that early Arabic translation was distinguished by three main features:

- i) Diversity of sources: Arabs translated from different languages.
- ii) Extensiveness: Early Arabic translation covered almost all the areas of knowledge: medicine, engineering, chemistry, philosophy and logic.
- iii) Organisation: It became well organised during the Abbasid era. The translation movement under the Abbasid was sponsored and supported by the government.

Translation from French into Arabic dates back to the year 1798 with the French invasion of Egypt and the establishment of the first Arabic press in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the type of translated work was mainly of a literary nature.

In 1805, under the rule of Muhammad Ali, translation took a different direction as the means used by Mohamed Ali's incipient state in its attempt at closing the intellectual and technical gap between Arab and Europe. Understanding the urgency of mastering European languages for political purposes, he sent a mission of Arab students to France, under the supervision of a young Sheikh, Rifaha Al-Tahtawi (1801-1873).

Several French books on astronomy and natural science were translated into Arabic.

The limited influence of Western literary forms on Arabic narrative at that time seems clear not only in the French works chosen for translation, but also in the dominant technique of translation, for this consisted most frequently in a very free transposition of the French narrative and actually was not called 'translation', 'tarjama', but adaptation'(iqtibas) or 'arabisation' (tar'ib). The French text was not treated as a whole which ought to be respected and fully rendered; rather, it was completely transformed into something familiar to the Arab relationship in its style, form and content. This very free relationship with Western culture also appears in the titles of the translated works: the French titles were often 'arabised' to catch the Arabic reader's attention, either in the Arabic tradition of rhymed titles or in a more modern fashion. Furthermore, these adaptations were done by Mustafa Al-Manfaluti (1876-1924) successfully that their author grew much more famous than the French authors: for example, those of Mustafa Al-Manfaluti have been constantly reprinted in Egypt and other Arab countries, while nobody, with the exception of a few scholars, remembers the names of their original authors.

More accurate translation started to appear, mainly produced, not by specialists of transposition such as Al-Manfaluti, but by intellectual who was first of all creative writer, such as Taha Husayn (1889-1973).

Around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, translated literature was growing more popular among Egyptian readers, if we judge by the success of the first cheap, popular collections such as *Riwayat Al-Jayb* (pocket Novels) or *Riwayat Al-Hilal*, which introduced a great number of a bridged translation of French literature.

In a way, the remarkable increase of translations in the years from 1952 to 1967, and the best example of these translations the Thousand Books project (*Mashru Al-alf Kitab*), launched in 1955 with explicit purpose of allowing the Egyptian people to read the most essential books of modern world culture.

## THE FAMOUS TRANSLATORS IN THE EARLY PERIOD

The earliest translators in the Arab World dated back to the reign of the Omayyad's and the Abbasids.

Documents showed that translation was carried by brilliant translators who were concerned primarily with the translation of knowledge of Greek and Latin into Arabic, the language of the new Muslim State.

Hunayn Ibn-Ishaq (809-875) was bilingual and studied medicine. He translated Greek texts into Arabic, and used to revise the Arabic of the other translators with the emphasis on linguistics. He headed *Bayt Al-Hikma* and took charge of all scientific translation work. He enriched Arabic with new scientific words. Also, Ibn al-Muqaffa translated many works in logic and medicine.

Thabit Ibn Qurra (826 - 901), was an Arab astronomer and mathematician, who was known as Thabit in Latin.

Rifaha Al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), who graduated from the famous Islamic language, his life and translations have been discussed by many Egyptian scholars. When Al-Tahtawi went back to Egypt, he founded the first Egyptian school of translation, *Madrasat Al-AI-sun* or the school of Languages.

The other eminent scholar and translator was the Lebanese Butrus Al-Bustani (1819-1883), who established the first school of higher education there. In 1835, he translated Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* into Arabic. In the field of translating English poetry into Arabic, Sulayman Al-Bustani (1848-1884) was one of the translators who published a translation of some sections of Homer's *Iliad*, accompanied by an introduction about Greek and Arabic poetry. Later on, several writers followed in their footsteps by translating many European poems, chiefly romantic French poetry by Lamartine (1790-1869) and Hugo (1802-85). As a result of several translations done by many Lebanese scholars who had contacts with American missionaries, Western methods of thought, new forms and themes were introduced to Arabic literature.

The output of the early translation activities was considerably big. Beside translation not only helped to set up a new system of thought that way the

founder of Arabic - Islamic culture but also helped to create the European culture.

## METHODS USED IN EARLY ARABIC TRANSLATION

Arab medieval translators adopted three main translating methods in their translation (Faiq, 1996):

- **Word-for-word method:** This method was adopted in the very early stages of Arabic translation in order to translate very quickly. At first translators considered every word in the source language and its meaning then found the Arabic word that was approximately of the same meaning, but because it is impossible to find a corresponding word in Arabic for every foreign word, Arabic translators appealed to sentence for sentence translation. For example: Yuhanna adopted a method which consisted of translating each Greek work with and where none existed, he was borrowing from the Greek text into Arabic.
- **Semantic translation method:** This method was first adopted by what is called the golden era translators (translators of the Abbasid era). In this method, translators were involved in reading the original text, processing it and trying to find the corresponding semantic equivalent with the same meaning in the source language. This method associated with Ibn-Ishaq and al-Jawhari consisted of translating sense- for senses creating fluent target texts which conveyed the meaning of the original without distorting the target language.
- **Gist translation method:** The need for more translations of Greek and other works motivated early Arab translators to follow this translating method which includes summarising and extracting the meaning rather than full translation. The emergence of the gist translation method gave the translation process a considerable boost and indicated a new breed of translators who were very competent in the languages they read the Greek and Latin texts and wrote summaries in Arabic.

## **CURRENT SITUATION OF THE ARAB TRANSLATION**

In this century there have been efforts to develop a coherent pan-Arab programme of translation. One such attempt took place in Tunis in 1979.

Translation training programmes exist in various parts of the Arab World, either in the form of independent institutions (as in the case of the King Fahd School of Translation) or university departments or centres within departments (for example in Yarmuk' University, Jordan, and Alexandria University). Iraq had a thriving school of translation (Al-Mustansiriyya). The King Fahd School of Translation publishes a biannual scholarly journal of translation under the title of *Turjuman* (Translator); this contains articles in Arabic, English, French and Spanish (Baker, 1998).

Hassan (1989) reported that the history of translation in the Arab World is reasonably well documented. Evidence of the continued use of Arabic both as a source and a target language is not difficult to obtain. The place Arabic holds in the educational system and in science and technology is being debated by practically all organisations concerned with the Arab world. This is the case even though countries such as Syria have decided to arabise their educational system long before many Arab countries.

Practically all work carried out in the field of technology transfer by way of translation was, and still is, being carried out on an academic basis. This is so in spite of the presence of language specialists in several Arab capitals, such as Baghdad, Damascus, Amman, Cairo and Tunis as well as major institutes and centres contributing to translations, such as The Arab Development Institute in Tripoli, Libya; The Kuwait Research Institute in Kuwait; King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and King Faisal University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Among other things, these academies, institutes and centres devote a great deal of their time attempting to unify and regulate translation and Arabisation. However, as yet no consistent agreement or systematic communication seems to exist between them. The famed schools of translation in the history of Arab countries have disappeared from the scene and have been replaced in many cases by individuals doing their best.

In addition to the efforts of language academies almost all universities in the Arab world have translation departments or at least offer taught courses leading to undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications. Also, there are one or two specialized tertiary level institutions of languages where candidates are trained in specific languages for translation and interpreting purposes. One such institution is based in Cairo and offers courses in European and non-European languages. The king Fahd School is concerned with the training of translators between Arabic and a number of European languages. In Algiers the university offers high level courses in translation.

It might be useful not to forget that the Arab League Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (*ALESCO*) plays the role of documentation, guidance, observation of the position of translating and translator in the Arab countries and the publication of directories. In 1981, *ALESCO* has conducted a series of studies on the subject of translating and the ways of promoting it. These studies have addressed the following issues:

- 1) Formulation of the National Plan of Translation.
- 2) Training of translators and the foundation of the Arab Collage for translation.
- 3) The establishment of the Arab Centre for Arabisation, Translating, and Publishing.

Also (*ALESCO*) conducted a survey for what translation activity in the Arab World has achieved. It showed that, the number of translations made in the Arab Countries (1970-1980) is (number of the translated books=2840), distributed disproportionately as shown in the table below (Shaheen, 1990):



Country	No. Books	Country	No. Books	Country	No. Books
Jordan	22	Sudan	9	Qatar	3
UAE	2	Syria	442	Kuwait	95
Tunisia	40	Iraq	238	Lebanon	152
Algeria	16	Oman	5	Libya	44
KSA	9	Palestine	5	Egypt	1758
Morocco	2				
<b>Total</b>					<b>2840</b>

(Shaheen, 1990)

From the table cited above, we conclude the following:

- 1) There are big difference and numbers of translations made from one country to another.
- 2) The number of translations is very small in comparison with either the population or their intellectual needs.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

To sum up, translation is one of the fundamental links between the Arabs and Muslims of the east in particular such as, Syrians and Persians, and other people of the east and west, such as Indians and Greeks. Arabs and Muslims used translation as a communication medium to deal and interact culturally with the people from other civilizations exist at those times.

Translation is also the medium which was exploited by the Western World to make use of the great civilization.

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