3

Cultural transposition

3.1 BASIC PRINCIPLES

In this chapter, we complete our introduction to the notion of translation loss by looking at some implications of the fact that translating involves not just two languages, but a transfer from one culture to another. General cultural differences are sometimes bigger obstacles to successful translation than linguistic differences.

We shall use the term cultural transposition for the main types and degrees of departure from literal translation that one may resort to in the process of transferring the contents of an ST from one culture to another. Any degree of cultural transposition involves the choice of features indigenous to the TL and the target culture in preference to features with their roots in the source culture. The result is to reduce foreign (that is SL-specific) features in the TT, thereby to some extent naturalizing it into the TL and its cultural setting.

The various degrees of cultural transposition can be visualized as points along a scale between the extremes of exoticism and cultural transplantation.

3.2 EXOTICISM

The extreme options in signalling cultural foreignness in a TT fall into the category of exoticism. A TT marked by exoticism is one which constantly uses grammatical and cultural features imported from the ST with minimal adaptation, and which thereby constantly signals the exotic source culture
and its cultural strangeness. This may indeed be one of the TT’s chief attractions, as with some translations of classical Arabic literature that deliberately trade on exoticism. A TT like this, however, has an impact on the TL public which the ST could never have had on the SL public, for whom the text has no features of an alien culture.

A sample of exoticism in translation from Arabic would be a more or less literal translation of the following simple conversation (we have given versions of the conversation in both Standard Arabic, as it might appear in a short story or novel, and the contextually more natural colloquial Arabic):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literal translation</th>
<th>Standard Arabic</th>
<th>Colloquial Arabic (Egyptian)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Peace be upon you.</td>
<td>السلام عليكم A</td>
<td>سلام عليكم A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B And upon you be peace.</td>
<td>وعليكم السلام B</td>
<td>وعليكم السلام B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A How is the state?</td>
<td>كيف الحال ؟ A</td>
<td>إزي الحال ؟ A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Praise be to Allah.</td>
<td>الحمد لله B</td>
<td>الحمد لله B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is your state?</td>
<td>كيف حالك انت ؟</td>
<td>إزيك انت ؟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Praise be to Allah; how is the family?</td>
<td>الحمد لله A</td>
<td>الحمد لله A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Allah wills, well.</td>
<td>إن شاء الله بخير</td>
<td>إن شاء الله بخير</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Well, praise be to Allah.</td>
<td>بخير الحمد لله B</td>
<td>بخير الحمد لله B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sometimes the nature of the ST makes it virtually impossible to avoid exoticism in the TT. Consider the following from the Classical Arabic text بالخلاء الجاحظ (from Lane 1994: 48, 56–7) in which formal features of the ST are extremely important, but are not easily matched by typical formal features of English:

وليس من أصل الأدب ولا في ترتيب الحكم ولا في عادات القادة ولا في تدبير السادة، أن يستوى في نفس المأكل وغريب المشروب وثمين الملبس وخطير المركوب والناعم من كل فن واللباب من كل شكل، التابع والنتبوع والسيد والسواد [...]

It is not consistent with the principles of etiquette, the hierarchy of authority, the customs of leaders, and the good rule of princes that the follower and the followed, the ruler and the ruled become equals with respect to precious food and marvelous drinks, valuable clothes and noble horses, and the finest and best kinds of things.
3.3 CALQUE

Sometimes, even where the TT as a whole is not marked by exoticism, a momentary foreignness is introduced. A calque is an expression that consists of TL words and respects TL syntax, but is unidiomatic in the TL because it is modelled on the structure of an SL expression. This lack of idiomaticity may be purely lexical and relatively innocuous, or it may be more generally grammatical. The following calques of Arabic proverbs illustrate decreasing degrees of idiomaticity:

What is past has died
A day for you, a day against you
It increased the clay moistness

For most translation purposes, it can be said that a bad calque (like the third example) imitates ST features to the point of being ungrammatical in the TL, while a good one (like the first example) compromises between imitating ST features and offending against TL grammar. Any translator will confirm that it is easy, through ignorance, or – more usually – haste, to mar the TT with bad calques. However, it is conceivable that in some TTs the calque – and ensuing exoticism – may actually be necessary, even if its effects need to be palliated by some form of compensation.

For example, if the strategy is to produce a TT marked by exoticism, the proverb يام لك ويوم عليك may well be calqued as ‘A day for you, a day against you’. But, because of the prevailing exoticism of the TT, it might not be clear that this is actually a proverb. This would be a significant translation loss if it were important that the reader should realize that the speaker is using a proverb. In that case, the loss could be reduced with an explanatory addition such as ‘you know the saying’: ‘You know the saying: “A day for you, a day against you”’.

What was originally a calqued expression sometimes actually becomes a standard TL cultural equivalent of its SL equivalent. Perhaps the most obvious example of a calque from Arabic into current English is ‘Mother of ...’, from the Arabic أم المعارك ام المعارك used by Saddam Hussein to describe the ‘battle’ between Iraqi troops and those of the coalition organized to drive the invading Iraqi army from Kuwait. (In fact, this is often mis-calqued into English as ‘Mother of all ...’, rather than simply ‘Mother of ...’.)

Standardized calques from English into modern Arabic include إعادة تدوير ‘recycling’, لاعنف ‘non-violence’, لعب دوراً ‘play a rôle’, among many others.
3.4 CULTURAL TRANSPLANTATION

At the opposite end of the scale from exoticism is cultural transplantation, whose extreme forms are hardly translations at all, but more like adaptations — the wholesale transplanting of the entire setting of the ST, resulting in the entire text being rewritten in an indigenous target culture setting.

An example of cultural transplantation is the remaking of the Japanese film ‘The Seven Samurai’ as the Hollywood film ‘The Magnificent Seven’. An example involving Arabic would be the retelling of a Juha joke with the replacement of Juha and other typical Middle-Eastern characters with characters typical of the TL culture, and corresponding changes in background setting. In a British context, one might, for example, begin the ‘translation’ of the joke ‘A man walked into a pub’.

It is not unusual to find examples of cultural transplantation on a small scale in translation. For example, in a scene from the short story by the Syrian writer زيكريا كامر, some rich adolescent girls are poking fun at a girl and boy from a poor part of town who are wandering around together, obviously in love. One of the rich girls calls out «قيس وليلي»، alluding to the story of the semi-legendary doomed love affair between the poet قيس بن الملوح (also known as مجنون ليلي) and a woman called ليلى. This has been translated (St John 1999: 30) as ‘Just like Romeo and Juliet’.

By and large, normal translation practice avoids the two extremes of wholesale exoticism and wholesale cultural transplantation. In avoiding the two extremes, the translator will consider the alternatives lying between them on the scale given at the end of § 3.1 of this chapter.

3.5 CULTURAL BORROWING

The first alternative is to transfer an ST expression verbatim into the TT. This is termed cultural borrowing. It introduces a foreign element into the TT. Of course, something foreign is by definition exotic; this is why, when the occasion demands, it can be useful to talk about exotic elements introduced by various translation practices. But cultural borrowing is different from exoticism proper, as defined above: unlike exoticism, cultural borrowing does not involve adaptation of the SL expression into TL forms.

An example of cultural borrowing would be the rendering of a culturally specific term by a transliteration, without further explanation. Thus, for example, فوطة, as used in Iraq, would be rendered by ‘futa’, rather than, say, by ‘wrap’ or ‘robe’ (a فوطة in Iraq being a sarong-like garment which is worn by women). A cultural borrowing of this kind might well be signalled by the use of italics.

Sometimes, the nature of the text may make the use of exoticism more or less unavoidable. Consider the following, from a fairly academic text about
This has been translated (Evans 1994: 15) as:

The concert programme consisted of fifteen sections, six of which were in the Egyptian style as we know it from radio and television. These six parts comprised *muwashshahat* and solos influenced by the Egyptian School – from classical instruments such as the *qanun*, the *ud* and the *nay*. The structure of the music groups was also influenced by the Egyptian School, as they also contained large numbers of violins.

Here the word *کمان* translates easily into English as ‘violin’ – since exactly the same instrument is used in both cultures. However, the other instruments are specific to the Middle East. A *قَانُون* is an instrument rather like a dulcimer, whose strings are plucked using metal plectrums attached to the fingers; an *عَود* is a short-necked lute, the strings of which are plucked with a plectrum; and a *نَاجِي* is a flute without a mouthpiece, made of bamboo or more rarely of wood, which, unlike the European flute, is held in a slanting forward position when blown (cf. Wehr). Translating *قَانُون* as ‘dulcimer’, or *عَود* as ‘flute’ would significantly distort what is meant by the Arabic; even translating *عَود* as ‘lute’ (the word ‘lute’ is derived from the Arabic *العَود*) would disguise the fact that an *عَود* is recognizably different from a European lute. Similarly, translating *مُوضَع* as ‘strophic poem’ or the like, would here disguise the precise nature of the material being used, as well as the fact that what is being dealt with here is poetry set to music. Cultural borrowing on this scale introduces so many exotic elements into the TT that it almost shades into exoticism proper.

Where precise technical terms are important, one solution is for the translator to add a glossary at the end of the book, or to use footnotes or endnotes. Alternatively, where the translator decides that for some reason it is necessary to retain an SL term, but also to make it plain to the reader roughly what is meant, it is sometimes possible to insert an explanation, or partial explanation, into the TT alongside the cultural borrowing, normally as unobtrusively as possible. Using this technique, the above extract could have been translated along the following lines:
The concert programme consisted of fifteen sections, six of which were in the Egyptian style as we know it from radio and television. These six parts comprised pieces involving the *muwashshah* verse form and solos influenced by the Egyptian School – from classical instruments such as the plucked dulcimer (the *qanun*) and the Arab lute (the *ud*) and the *nay* flute. The structure of the music groups was also influenced by the Egyptian School, as they also contained large numbers of violins.

This translation sounds somewhat strained, but elsewhere the combination of cultural borrowing plus additional explanatory material can be a useful technique. An example is the following (from Pennington 1999: 4), which deals with the response of American Muslims to the use of the crescent and star as a general symbol of Islam in American public places:

«لا يوجد منهم بحجة أن الهلال والنجمة في أمريكا بدعنة تخلالف الإسلام[...]

A few of them objected, on the grounds that the American use of the Crescent and Star is *bid'a* ('innovation', which Islam opposes) [...]

Here, the English gloss 'innovation' on the Arabic word بدعنة has been unobtrusively introduced into the TT. (The translator has also included 'which Islam opposes' inside the brackets, in contrast with تخلالف الإسلام in the ST, which is part of the main text.)

Sometimes, a cultural borrowing becomes an established TT expression. Examples from Arabic into English are often religious in nature; e.g. 'imam', 'Allah', 'sheikh'. A recent cultural borrowing is 'intifada' (cf. Ch. 2.2.1). Cultural borrowings shade into: (i) forms which were originally borrowed, but which are no longer regarded as foreign, e.g. 'algebra' (from الجبر), (ii) forms which have been borrowed, but have shifted meaning in the course of borrowing, e.g. 'algorithm' (ultimately from الخوارزمي, the man who invented them), and (iii) forms which have been borrowed, but have a sense in the TL which is not the normal sense in the SL, e.g. 'minaret' (from مئذنة, where the word for 'minaret' in most of the Arab world is الككح), 'alcohol' (from الكحول, which means 'antimony' in Arabic). It is possible to include these latter types under cultural borrowings, although they might more reasonably be regarded as simple denotative equivalents (cf. Chapter 5), inasmuch as the words are no longer popularly regarded as 'foreign' in nature.
3.6 COMMUNICATIVE TRANSLATION

As we have seen (Ch. 2.1.4), communicative translation is normal in the case of culturally conventional formulae where literal translation would be inappropriate.

Examples of stock phrases in Arabic and English are 'no smoking', 'no entry'. Problems may arise where the TL has no corresponding stock phrase to one used in the SL, e.g. because there is no cultural equivalent. Consider, in this regard, the use of religious formulae in everyday Arabic: "عَلَيْكُمَ السَّلَامُ وَرَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ ﴿الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ﴾ إن شاء الله, and stock phrases in the same sense as the Arabic "أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ نِعْمَأَا" might be translated as 'Your hair looks nice' ('Congratulations' in this context seems over-enthusiastic in English), to which the most natural reply would be something like, 'Thanks very much', or 'Oh, that’s kind of you to say so'. These are not, however, stock phrases in the same sense as the Arabic "أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ نِعْمَأَا", and it would be wrong to over-use them in a TT.

Regarding proverbial expressions, consider again "إِلَيْكَ مَاتَ حَيَاةٌ". Three possible translations of this might be:

**LITERAL**
That which has passed has died

**BALANCED**
What’s past is gone

**COMMUNICATIVE**
Let bygones be bygones/What’s done is done

In most contexts, one might expect 'Let bygones be bygones' to be the most reasonable translation. However, in a context in which the word 'past' figures prominently, it might be that the second translation would be appropriate, since it would echo the key word directly. Similarly, one might want to avoid the use of the proverb 'Let bygones be bygones' in a context where it could make the TT more clichéd than the ST.

3.7 TRANSLITERATING NAMES

The issues involved in cultural transposition are well illustrated in the transliteration of names. In transliterating Arabic names, it is possible to follow either one of a number of more or less standard transliteration systems or to adopt a more ad hoc approach. A transliteration of the mountainous area of Yemen "بَعْدَان" using a transliteration system, for example, might be *ba'dān*. Here the symbol ْ transliterates the Arabic letter ع, while the symbol
â transliterates the Arabic combination ٰ. The advantage of a transliteration system is that it allows the reader to reconvert the English back into Arabic script. However, since this is something which is only normally required in an academic context, the use of transliteration systems is generally limited to academic translations. The use of a transliteration system in other cases may give a stronger sense of the exotic than is appropriate for the context.

The use of a more ad hoc approach is illustrated by the transliteration of ٰ as Ba’dan or Badan. The advantage of this approach is that the transliterated form looks more like an English word; there are no obviously strange symbols involved – although the transliteration may contain elements which are not standard letters in English, an example in this case occurring in the first transliteration of بَدَان, Ba’dan, which involves the use of the apostrophe. The disadvantage of the ad hoc approach is that the transliteration adopted may suggest a pronunciation of the word in English which is very far from the pronunciation of the Arabic original. The form Badan for example is supposed to render the Arabic بَدَان in this case. However, the same English form could also correspond to Arabic forms such as بَدَن or بَدَان or بَدَان etc.

Many Arabic proper names have transliteration-type English equivalents. For instance, ٰ is standardly ‘Amman’. In other cases the transliteration-type English equivalent is more localized. In many part of the Middle East, the name حُسين is standardly transcribed as ‘Hussein’, or ‘Hussain’; in north Africa, however, where French is the dominant European language, the standard transcription is ‘Hoceine’.

Some Arabic proper names, obviously, have standard indigenous English equivalents which cannot properly be regarded as transliterations; e.g. ‘Cairo’ for القاهرة, ‘Damascus’ for دمشق. Other cases are even more complicated; for example for الدار البيضاء, English uses ‘Casablanca’, i.e. the Spanish name for the city, of which the Arabic is itself a calque.

Where there is a standard indigenous English equivalent, a translator would be expected to use this, except where there is a compelling reason not to do so; e.g. a need to introduce a greater degree of exoticism into the TL text than would be conveyed by the use of the standard English TL equivalent.

PRACTICAL 3

Practical 3.1 Cultural transposition

Assignment
(i) Discuss the strategic decisions that you have to take before starting detailed translation of the following text, and outline and justify the strategy you adopt. You are to translate the text as part of a collection of translations of short stories by يوسيف إدريس which you are
producing. The intended readership consists of educated native English speakers with general knowledge of the Arab world, but no specific expertise in Arabic or Islamic culture. Accordingly, the translation is expected to be readily understandable to the target audience. However, it should attempt to avoid extreme deviations from the source culture (cultural transplantation).

(ii) Translate the text into English.

(iii) Explain the main decisions of detail you made in producing your TT.

Contextual information
The text is taken from Ministério do Interior, a short story by the Egyptian writer José de Alcamo, who is detailed to take a deranged woman, Zainab, from her home in the Delta to a mental hospital in Cairo. The character has become detained in Cairo, and it is now evening. He has been thinking about what he can do with Zainab overnight. At this point in the story, the two characters find themselves caught up in the popular Sufi ceremonies which regularly take place by the mosque of Sayyida Zeinab (who was a granddaughter of the Prophet) in central Cairo.

This text contains a number of features which are taken from Egyptian Arabic. In this regard you may find the following information useful:

حُرْمَة This means ‘woman’ as well as ‘sanctity’, ‘inviolability’ in both Standard Arabic and colloquial Egyptian. However, it is more commonly used to mean ‘woman’ in Egyptian. As the double meaning ‘inviolability/woman’ suggests, the word carries strong cultural associations of the status of women in Egyptian society. The rendering of the feminine suffix as ـه, here, rather than ـة, indicates the colloquialism.

حساب This means ‘arithmetical problem, sum’ (Wehr), but in Egyptian colloquial it has the sense of ‘calculation’. Here what is meant is the cost of the hotel.

بالراحة In Standard Arabic this means ‘leisurely, gently, slowly, at one’s ease’ (Wehr). Here the author has used the phrase in the more colloquial sense of ‘at least’.

علي الله The phrase is used in Egyptian Arabic ‘to imply misgiving about an outcome’ (Badawi and Hinds). حكاية in Egyptian Arabic can mean ‘matter’, ‘affair’ (as well as ‘story’). Here what seems to be meant is that the character can’t afford the hotel.
ST

وجيه كان يستدرد أنفسه لاحظ له فكرة اللوكاندة، ولكن نهذيها في الحال فهما اثنان، وزيادة حرمه وخطرة، والحساب فيما بالراحة، خمسون ستون قرشاً، والحكاية على الله.

ولم يبدو الشبراوي كثيراً فقد تربع أمام جامع السيدة وجدبها حتى تهاوت بجانبه، الحيا يمنعه من البكاء، فلم يكن يعتقد أن أنسانا آخر في العالم له مثل تعاسته.. وبوسه، وكان مجانيب السيدة حولهما كالنمل، وحين غردت زبيدة ضاع صوتها في تمثمة الشيوخ وبسملتهم وزفقة النساء ودوامات الذكر..

Practical 3.2 Cultural transposition

Assignment

(i) Discuss the strategic decisions that you have to take before starting detailed translation of the following text, and outline and justify the strategy you adopt. You are to translate the text as part of a brochure for a British museum exhibition on folk customs in Sudan. The intended readership of the brochure will be museum-visitors who do not necessarily know anything about Sudan.

(ii) Translate the text into English.

(iii) Explain the decisions of detail you made in producing your translation.

Contextual information

The text is taken from a book entitled the الشروخ by the Sudanese academic يوسف فضل حسن (1986: 51–2). This book is a study of the origins and social significance of the traditional custom of ‘scarification’ (التسلخ) in northern Sudan: that is, the making of long cuts (normally either vertical or horizontal) into people’s cheeks with a sharp blade or razor, in order to produce a lasting scar on the face. A scar produced in this way is called a شلخ or شلخة (plural شلخ). The action of producing the scar is referred to in this book as فصل (cf. Wehr for general senses of فصل).

Boys typically underwent scarification around the age of five, and girls around the age of ten. The custom of scarification has in effect died out in the last few decades (although it may still persist in some very isolated rural communities).

The second paragraph of this extract begins with a recapitulation of some ideas which have been discussed just prior to the extract itself (hence the opening phrase نخلص من هذا كله).

You may also find the following information useful:


Cultural transposition

Ed Damer': town on the Nile, north of Khartoum.

the Ja'aliyyin': large tribal grouping in northern Sudan (sg. جعلي).

متعاسي

- refers to the tracing of ancestry to the paternal uncle of the Prophet العباس بن عبد المطلب.

the Shaygiyya': tribe in northern Sudan. The Shaygiyya are sometimes classified as part of the Ja'aliyyin.

حساب الجمل

- a system of numerical representation which predates the introduction of Arabic numerals (الأرقام الهندية) in the Arab world. Each letter represents a particular number. Accordingly, by adding together the numerical values of each of the letters which make up a particular word, it is possible to calculate a numerical value for the entire word.

طريقة

ST

والرجل هناك اختصاصي معلوم يتفرد بإجراة عمليات الفصادة. إذ الغالب أن يقوم بها الحجاج أو المزين أو البصير (الطيب البلدي) أو القابلة وأمثالهم. وهناك من اشتهروا بإجراء هذه العملية لحسن أداءهم لها، مثل بنت المزين التي كانت تعيش في الدامر في أواست هذا القرن وكانت قبالة لكثير من الراغبين في الشقوق من سائر المناطق الجاورة.

نحلص من هذا كله إلى أن الجماعات الجعليّة عادة ما توصلنا إليه من قدم هذه الشقوق الثلاثة خطوط العمودية في تلك المنطقة فإن هذا التفسير غير منطقي.

ومع أن كلمني (مشقل جعلي) تشيران أساساً إلى الثلاثة خطوط العمودية، فإن الجعليين قد عرفوا علامات تمبيز أخرى. ومن أشهر هذه العلامات (السلم) ذو الدرجة الواحدة وهو كحرف أُنش بالحروف اللاتينية [...] ويشمل البعض هذا الشقيق بسُلم الشيخ الطيب البشير الجماعي (1874-1844) منشئ الطريقة السمانية في السودان.