An Analysis of some Linguistic Problems in Translation between Arabic and English Faced by Yemeni English Majors at Hadramout University

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes to explore some linguistic problems in English-Arabic translations and vice versa empirically and find tangible evidence of the areas that pose real problems for English Language Undergraduates at Hadramout University. Further, no studies have attempted to account for the linguistic problems encountered by English Language Undergraduates at Hadramout University by empirically investigating authentic translations produced by them. This study is participatory action research, which draws its principles for research from the qualitative paradigm. 54 students of English Language Department, Faculty of Arts at Hadramout University in the Yemeni academic year 2009/2010 participated in this study. The outcome of this research indicates fundamental weaknesses among students in grammar causing them great hardship in comprehending and translating sentences from English into Arabic and vice versa. Some effective recommendations and proposals have been introduced as pedagogical methods and remedying measures to the deteriorated situation

1. Introduction

Translation is ultimately a human activity which enables human beings to exchange ideas and thoughts regardless of the different tongues used (Antar, 2002: 2). Translation is a channel through which ideas and cultures pass (Hatem and Mason, 1990: 30). Henceforth, nowadays there is a tremendous interest in translation; special programs and courses have been established at several Middle Eastern universities (Al-Hamdalla, 1998: 30). Hadramout University followed suit and established two special courses in translation in the English Language Department BA program at the Faculty of Arts. These courses are taught in the third and fourth level. The focus of these courses is bilingual, English-Arabic.

It may be noted at the outset here that the problem of teaching English in Yemen is different from other parts of Asia. Here English has not been able to establish its strong foothold perhaps
because Yemen is a monolingual country and the society is a very close-knit (Ali, 2007: 40). Arabic is used in all walks of life by all of its population. In spite of all this, a remarkable change is taking place here as the young generation is attracted towards English language learning, and English is becoming popular not only among males but equally females too.

2. The Statement of the Problem

Training students to transfer the message and meaning of the English source text to the Arabic target text is not an easy task. Various problems and mistakes can occur. Students still have problems in understanding the text and in restructuring it into good Arabic / English language. As novice translators, many translation difficulties and problems arise during the process of teaching them how to translate. Therefore, it is a problem, especially in Arabic-English translation, that one may make mistakes in forms or structures when he/she translates from his/her first language into his/her second language. The problem is serious, especially among the third and fourth year Yemeni undergraduates in Hadramout University who are not very experienced in English structures though they are English major students.

The problems are mainly due to the differences in linguistic systems and languages. As put by Baker (1992: 20-21) "Errors and problems in translation mostly result from the non-equivalence between the source and target languages". Ervin and Bower (1953) stated that linguistic problems in translation may arise: 1) from differences in the meanings of words, 2) from differences in syntactical differences, and 3) from differences in the cultural context of the readers or hearers. The knowledge of English syntax also becomes necessary and significant for the translation undergraduate at Hadramout University as the nature of English sentences differs from Arabic.

3. The Purpose of the Study

The main concern of the present study is to explore the linguistic problems of Arabic-English translation facing the English Language Department Undergraduates at the Faculty of Arts in Hadramout University. These problems will be tackled through answering the following two questions:

1. What are the linguistic problems between Arabic and English translation and vice versa confronted by the English Language majors of Faculty of Arts at Hadramout University?

2. What are the educational implications of exploring the linguistic problems in English-Arabic translation facing the English Language majors of Faculty of Arts at Hadramout University?

The researchers believe that the identification of the nature and types of problems that students face in translation will definitely assist:
1. the competence of the would-be graduates in translation.

2. the efficiency of the English Department's program.

3. The proficiency at which subjects in concern are taught, and the extent which they benefit from.

4. **The Significance of the study:**

   It stands to reason that such researches are significantly important for estimating the work of the department, especially when nearly none has been conducted before. If the recommendations and proposals rounding up this research were to be made maximum use of, they should undoubtedly contribute to the improvement of the overall educational process of the English Department in Hadramout University.

5. **Literature Review**

   In the present era of globalization, translation plays a major role in conveying messages from one language to another. Translation is, in Enani’s (1994: 5) view "a modern science at the interface of philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and sociology". According to Antar (2002:7), translation is a science, an art, and a skill. It is a science in the sense that it necessitates complete knowledge of the structure and make-up of the two languages concerned. It is an art since it needs artistic talent to re-build the original text in the form of a product that is presentable to the reader who is not supposed to be familiar with the original. It is also a skill because it reflects the ability to smooth over any difficulty in the translation, and the ability to provide the translation of something that has no equal in the target language. "Translation is a profession besides being an art" (Al-Hamdalla, 1998: 27).

   Al-Darawish (1983: 46) indicates that translation is “interpreting speech into another tongue.” Gerding-Salas (2000:43) points out that the main aim of translation is to serve as a cross-cultural bilingual communication tool among peoples. Most translation theorists agree that translation is known as a transfer process from a foreign language or a second language—to the mother tongue (Ibid). In the aftermath of having defined translation, it would be of a pivotal importance to kick-start explanation by further concentration on linguistic problems that are out there amongst Arab students who on one form or another have specialized in the field of translation. Pym (1992: 271) defines translation problems as "a linguistic element that becomes a translation problem when the translator has to decide between more than one way of rendering it". According to Antar (2002: 10), translation problems can be divided into linguistic problems and cultural problems: the linguistic problems include grammatical differences, lexical ambiguity and meaning ambiguity; the cultural problems refer to different situational features.
5.1 Previous Studies

In the last two decades, the emphasis of the Arabic researchers, for instance Egyptian and Jordanian ones, in the field of translation teaching and learning was on various issues such as: the product, the development of teaching techniques, design of courses and evaluation of examinations such as Aly (1986, 1990), El-Sheikh (1987, 1990), Kamel (1990), El-Sakran (2002), and Solhy (2002).

Aly (1986) analyzed the errors made in written translation by Egyptian prospective teachers of English. Again, Aly (1990) designed a translation course for the students of English at faculties of education. El-Sheikh (1987) suggested a communicative approach to the teaching of translation that might help the students to develop their skills systematically. Kamel (1990:55) developed a technique for teaching learners how to help themselves by effective problem solving. El-Sheikh (1990), again, carried out a study on the setting of translation examinations as well as the evaluation of students' performance on these examinations. El-Sakran (2002) investigated the problem of personal gender in the translation from English into Arabic. Finally, Solhy (2002) evaluated the current state of teaching translation in the Arab universities and suggested a comprehensive systematic program of a translation course design.

In the Yemeni context, Al-Zakri (2006) made an attempt to investigate the problems of lexical and grammatical ambiguity in Arabic translation as being encountered by fourth year students, Faculty of Education– Sabir– Aden University. The researchers, having been motivated by their experience in teaching translation and their knowledge with recent studies in this dynamic field, have conducted this research to explore the current state of translation as a discipline taught in Hadramaut University, especially that no previous studies have been conducted in the considerably young history of the university.

Owing to the above-mentioned facts, the present study tries to explore some linguistic problems faced by the English Language majors at the Faculty of Arts in Hadramout University in the translation process from Arabic into English and vice versa. This would help bridge the gap in the literature, which, in turn, will hopefully lead to more understanding of the learning and teaching of translation. Accordingly, the study has been especially designed to draw the students' attention to the fact that understanding the mechanism of grammar, and the syntactic ties between constituents are far more important than mere dictionary search for meanings.

6. Methodology

The design of this study was participatory action research, which draws its principles for research from the qualitative paradigm. A qualitative approach was chosen because a primary focus of this study was to explore the linguistic problems that Hadramout University English language department undergraduate students face in Arabic-English Action research is a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level (Cohen et al., 2000). According to McNiff (1988), action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry. It encourages a teacher to be reflective of his own practice in order to enhance the quality of education for himself and his students.
Very recently as cited in (Caravo and Neves, 2007), various authors have come to refer to the use of action research as a means for researching translation (Albir, 2001; Hatim, 2001; Williams & Chesterman, 2002), others have actually used it in specific domains such as in translator and translation teacher education (Cravo, 1999) and translator training (Kiraly, 2000) or are using it in specific fields of audiovisual translation (Neves, 2005).

6.1 Participants

The subjects for this study were fifty four students of English Language Department at Hadramout University in the Yemeni academic year 2009/2010. Of the 54 participants, 36 were male and 18 were female. When the study was conducted, the subjects had already studied several specialized courses including introduction to linguistics, syntax, translation principles, in addition to literature and skills courses. All the subjects are native speakers of Arabic and they graduated from public or private schools, which means that they had received eight to ten years of instruction in English before joining the university.

The students, the researchers followed, were observed for a period of two semesters. Each semester consists of a cycle of action research. In each cycle a predominant way of teaching English grammar was used, gradually requiring, from the students, a more and more responsible and independent way of translating, and leaving more time to the training of writing and translation inside the classroom.

6.2 Data collection

In order to answer the first research question: “What are the linguistic problems between Arabic and English translation and vice versa confronted by the English Language majors at the Faculty of Arts in Hadramout University?”, the data collection were performed over a period of two semesters and consisted of different samples of students’ works such as tests and translation tasks. The goal of participatory action research is to collaborate with participants as much as possible in the design of the study (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Rheinharz, 1992). Allwright (2000) proposes that by discussing and making decisions about language learning in class, Exploratory Practice becomes a practical means of teacher development, while simultaneously working for learner development.

7.3 The sources of data

7.3.1 The English-Arabic part:

In this part the following test sample which consisted of five sentences was selected, three of them to be translated from English into Arabic, that are:
1. He denied being paid hush money.
2. I still recall having been invited to an Elizabethan-styled, family-run house.
3. Thoroughly-revised and highly-stimulating university training programs are badly needed.
7.3.2 The Arabic-English part:
This part consists of only two sentences to be translated from Arabic into English. The sentences are:
1. بدأ يشعر بالتعب لأنهم كان يجري لمدة طويلة.
2. تمنيت أن يفرغ العمال بمجيئنا.

6.4 Data analysis
There were two research questions investigated in this study which included:
1- What are the linguistic problems between Arabic and English translation and vice versa confronted by the English Language majors at the Faculty of Arts in Hadramout University?
2- What are the educational implications for exploring the linguistic problems in English-Arabic translation and vice versa facing the English Language Department Undergraduates at the Faculty of Arts in Hadramout University?

In order to answer the first question, the data are presented, and discussed in relation to the following major points:

a. The students’ different answers to translation tests
b. The learners’ problems in English-Arabic translation and the reasons underlying them
c. The learners’ problems in Arabic-English translation and the reasons underlying them

The answer of the second question is disseminated in the recommendations and suggestions subsection below.

7.0 Discussion and analysis of linguistic problems in English-Arabic translation:
The renderings of the overwhelming majority of students have revealed large amount of errors, demonstrating unexpected complete ignorance of basics of English grammar. Mistranslation is the common shared feature among most of the answers. This can be attributed to the fact that Arabic and English are completely different languages and share few similarities in structure, form and logical relationships. Unlike other Germanic languages, it is extremely difficult to set up simple equal rank equivalence in translation from Arabic into English (Abdarabou, 2004: 53).

To "mistranslate" simply means: "to translate incorrectly" (Webster, 1976: 1446). The following are some examples of this kind:

1. Instead of translating the phrase (hush money) as (نقوداً للإسكات), it has been translated as:

(يدفع) مالاً خلسة، مالاً بهدوء، مالاً سرياً... نقوداً مزيفة

Due to limited experience in translation, students figured out to have been unaware of the significance of the connotative implicational meanings of words, that is when dictionary meanings do not go in line with contexts, in which case a need for alteration is certain. Instead, however, students tend to translate words separately and aloof from context, which inevitably brings about weak, hesitant and wordy improvisations.
Adding salt to the injury, some traditional English-Arabic dictionaries, being not generous in illustrative examples, they mostly provide meanings of separate words rather than of phrases and expressions, where combinational meanings stimulate the emergence of connotative meanings. For beginning translators, training them to trace the shades of implicational meanings is crucially important for preparing professionals valuing the search for meanings beyond meanings.

Our study has also figured out that students mistranslate because of weakness in basics of grammar, particularly in parts which are responsible for decoding syntactic ties between members of the sentence affecting comprehension.

Weakness in grammar naturally raises the question of how the would-be graduates in the study have passed their examinations with such unspeakable preparation. Examples of weakness in grammar can be noticed in their obvious confusion between the active and the passive. For instance, the passive phrase (being paid) in the sentence (he denied being paid hush money) has been rendered in the active in a deformed way:

إجباراً / هو أنكر أنه دفع المال... هو يرفض أن يدفع النقود بهدؤ/ يرفض أن يدفع رشوة / رفض أن يدفع المال

In addition to what has been said, the above translations have also revealed incredible carelessness and/or absence of mind among most of the students. Examples of that are the rendering of the past simple verb (denied) into the present, and the plural noun (programs) in the third sentence into the singular (برنامج). Not few renderings have only violated norms of Arabic, but another burning question, concerning the students' competence in their mother tongue, also intervenes. Introducing an English sentence with the pronoun (he) is a common sense for an isolating feature of a mixed-type language. However, introducing the same pronoun in the translation might be considered redundant in the case of a more inflectional language such as Arabic, in which the pronoun (هو) in the phrase (he denied) should be omitted as it is fused with the stem of the past Arabic verb (رفض). Such errors are frequent, and known as L1 interference. Unawareness of Arabic grammar is also noticed in the formation of wrong Arabic passives, as in the case of the translation of the phrase (are needed) in the sentence:

Thoroughly-revised and highly-stimulating university training programs are badly needed.

The students came up with the following answers:

برامج تدريب الترجمة الجامعية في أمس الحاجة إلى التحفيز والمراجعة.
برامج تدريب...........محتاج لها بشكل كبير/ يُحتاج لها بشكل واسع...

In many other cases, and in addition to forming incorrect passives, students have also preserved the original order, which does not go with the structure of Arabic. The phrase (are badly needed), being the predicate (الخبر) of the sentence comes too late and after a very long subject (مبدأ). In such cases reversing the original order and starting the translation with the predicate (الخبر) is more appropriately accepted in practical translation, i.e., the sentence should start with:

(هناك- توجد) حاجة ماسة) ل...
Many students took too many unjustified liberties with the translation of the same phrase, some examples are:

ignorance of English grammar, no doubt, is also the main reason for mistranslating some phrases where the participle is used as noun modifier, for example, the phrases (Elizabethan-styled) and (family-run hotel) in the second sentence have been translated as:

The students' ignorance of basics of English grammar, such as noun modifiers, exhibits itself in the translation of the noun phrase (university translation training programs). Unexpectedly, and oddly enough, the renderings in many occurrences have been:

Concluding the analysis of the English-Arabic part, it is worth mentioning here that a good translation requires, among many essentials, commitment and fidelity to the original text, which proved to have been missing in most of the studied cases. This is clearly evident when students resort to either adding unnecessary words, or deliberately omit difficult fragments of the text, in the hope they would go unnoticed.

An illustration of this fact is evident in the translation of the compound adjective (family-run) which has, in many of the studied cases, been intentionally omitted. To quote (Aziz, p.22) "the translator does not tell the whole truth; he either omits from, or adds to, the original sense"

7.1. Discussion and analysis of linguistic problems in Arabic-English Translation

The Arabic-English part consists of only two sentences to be translated from Arabic into English. The sentences are:

1. بدأ يشعر بالتعب لأنه كان يجري لمدة طويلة.
2. تمنيت أن يفرغ العمال بمجنينا.

7.1.1 The choice of the sentences

Though few and simple, the two sentences in this section are intended to assess, through translation, the students' real understanding of the perfect tense. Students, having been studying the English tenses since the High school, having done a lot of exercises and tests about the perfect, they even utter sentences in the perfect in their daily conversations, yet, the researchers have doubts about this bright picture being illusive and contrary to reality. The doubts are based on the fact that our use of the perfect is merely a simulation of the tense, which does not necessarily mean having the same corresponding concept in the grammar of Arabic. The simulation of the perfect in writing happens by adding extra words to our Arabic translations, which is sometimes done in an awkward way. In speech this usually happens when we instinctively repeat, produce and even imitate features of sentences stereotypical of the perfect.

Thus, there should be a line drawn between what is practised and between the conceptual understanding of the perfect, which seems to be missing, even not existing in the mentality of the
average Arab speaker. To prove this point of view, an Arab native would normally translate the sentence:

\[
(كانت عيونها محمرة لأنها كانت تبكي)
\]

* Her eyes were red because she was crying.

For native speakers of English, however, this translation is not only incorrect, but odd, to say the least about it, for the correct one should read:

Her eyes were red because she had been crying.

As expected, most of the students have translated the first sentence as:

*He began to feel tired because he was running for a long time.

The students’ preference of the past continuous over the past perfect, though odd and context-disproportioned, reflects a poor degree of distinction between the concepts of the past simple continuous and the past perfect continuous tenses. It might be interesting here to mention that, even the few students who happened to guess the right answers had not been able to justify their answers.

Surprisingly enough, a lot of students proved to have been illiterate even in the fundamentals of grammar, which is shamefully outrageous when speaking about university-would-be graduates. The renderings have demonstrated complete haphazardness in grammar use. This is clear from the misuse of the perfect and the passive voice. The following renderings illustrate the point:

*He began to feel tired because he had been run for a long time.
*He has been tired because he was run for a long time.

The renderings of the second sentence are again proving the students' major weakness in grammar. Misuse of the passive along with misuse of the future in the past has frequently been noticed; the auxiliary (been) is randomly used with the passive; the auxiliary (will) instead of (would) with future sentences from a point in the past shows lack of knowledge in grammar. These points are clearly illustrated in the following renderings:

*I hoped that the workers will finish/ will be finished/ will have been finished when we arrive/ when we had been arrived.

8.0. Conclusion

The outcome of this research indicates fundamental weaknesses among students in grammar causing them great hardship in comprehending and translating sentences from English into Arabic and vice versa. Neubert (2000: 3-18) claims that the practice of translation and, hence, teaching translation require a single competence that is made up of or could be considered to integrate a set of competencies that include, for instance, competence in both the source and the target languages. Thus, the study is introducing some effective recommendations and proposals as rescuing measures to the deteriorated situation.

9. Recommendations and proposals:

In order to answer the second and last question of the present study: “What are the educational implications for exploring the linguistic problems in English-Arabic translation and
vice versa facing the English Language majors at the Faculty of Arts in Hadramout University?”,
the following implications and recommendations are suggested in the light of the research
findings:
1. Open enrolment to the English language department at Hadramout University without
admission exams had its negative effects on staffing status, student achievement, students and
instructors' attitudes, classroom instruction, management and assessment, and utilization of
resources and facilities. Therefore, it is recommended that every student should undergo
admission examination in fundamentals of grammar before joining the university.
2. In order to meet the requirements for the university level, both the grammar lectures and the
examinations should be efficiently carried out and in accordance with the entire syllabus. A
careful analysis of the varying merits of alternative translations provided by the students can
form the fundamental nucleus of a successful translation course.
3. When grading examination papers, every teacher, regardless of the subject he/she teaches,
should seriously take into account grammar errors made by students. It is, however, a
commitment on the part of the instructor to create an optimal classroom atmosphere to discuss
‘errors’ and ‘inaccuracies’ and to explain them rationally in linguistic terms.
4. Since this study has also revealed weakness in Arabic language, besides English language, the
researchers suggest conducting further researches on the efficiency of the syllabus of Arabic
language.
5. The department of English is advised to evaluate the level of the tests given in each of the
courses and will likely make recommendations concerning the students' performance, the
instructors’ efficiency and the need to alter the syllabus.

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