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**CULTURE-BOUND TERMS IN ARABIC-ENGLISH  
LITERARY TRANSLATION**

This paper highlights some of the difficulties that translators face in their attempts to render a culture-bound terms as accurately as possible from its source text. The task is very complex, and the limits of such work are certainly a challenge as a translator tries to be faithful to the source text, to handle cross-cultural concepts, and to construct a correct version in the target language. Although target texts can only be an approximate version of the source text, and although there are insurmountable restrictions on literary translation, the latter continues to enrich the universal culture of peace. Some translators believe that the reader should be involved in the process of learning, should cooperate with the translation and be creative. He / she is able to think out the meaning himself and get acquainted with a new culture, to catch its "original color" or "taste". The purpose of the translator is to promote a better understanding of the cultural heritage. He / she seeks to guide and stimulate readers to discover another world, so that they can interpret and, in their own way, appreciate the differences.

Materials of the article can be useful to every researcher who deals with issues of translation and accurate transmission of cultural terms.

**Key words:** Approximate translation, culture-bound terms, source text, target text, accuracy.

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**Араб-ағылшын көркем аудармадағы мәдени-шартты терминдер**

Мақалада аудармашыларға белгілі бір мәдениетке қатысты терминдерді бастапқы мәтіннен аударылатын мәтінге барынша нақты жеткізу барысында кездесетін қиындықтар қарастырылады. Міндеттің ауырлығымен қатар, аудармашы бастапқы мәтіндегі мәдениетаралық концепцияларды өңдеп, оның аударма мәтіндегі нұсқасын жеткізуге ұмтылатындықтан бұл сынды жұмыстың шектерінің өзі проблема болып табылады. Екінші мәтін бастапқы мәтіннің оған тек барынша жақындатылған нұсқасы ғана болса да, әрі әдеби аудармаға шектеулер қойылса да, әдеби аударма әлемнің жан-жақты картинасын үнемі байытып отырады. Кейбір аудармашылар оқырман таным процесіне енуі, аудармаға өзі де қатысуы және шығармашылық ізденіс танытуы қажет деп санайды. Ол, яғни оқырман мағынаны өзі толықтырып, жаңа мәдениетпен танысуға, «түпнұсқа реңкі» мен «дәмін» байқауға қабілетті. Аудармашының мақсаты – мәдени мұраны жетік түсінуге барынша ықпал ету. Ол оқырманды басқа әлемді ашуға бағыттап, оны өз бетінше интерпретациялап, кейде олардың ерекшеліктерін бағалауға ынталандырады. Мақаланың материалы мәдени сала терминдерін аударумен және толық жеткізумен айналысатын зерттеушілер үшін пайдалы болады.

**Түйін сөздер:** түспалды аударма, мәдени терминдер, бастапқы мәтін, аударма мәтін, нақтылық.

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### **Культурно-обусловленные термины в арабско-английском литературном переводе**

В этой статье освещаются некоторые трудности, с которыми сталкиваются переводчики в своих попытках максимально точно передать термины, связанные с культурой, из исходного текста в целевой текст. Задача очень сложная, и границы такой работы, безусловно, являются проблемой, поскольку переводчик старается быть верным исходному тексту, обрабатывать межкультурные концепции и создавать правильную версию на целевом языке. Хотя целевые тексты могут быть только приблизительной версией исходного текста, и хотя существуют непреодолимые ограничения, накладываемые на литературный перевод, последний продолжает обогащать универсальную культуру мира. Некоторые переводчики полагают, что читатель должен быть вовлечен в процесс познания, должен сотрудничать с переводом и проявлять творческую интенцию. Он способен сам додумывать смысл и знакомиться с новой культурой, улавливать ее «оригинальный цвет» или «вкус». Цель переводчика – способствовать лучшему пониманию культурного наследия. Он стремится направлять и стимулировать читателей к открытию другого мира, чтобы они могли по-своему интерпретировать и, возможно, оценить различия.

Материалы статьи могут быть полезны каждому исследователю, который занимается вопросами перевода и точной передачи терминов культурной сферы.

**Ключевые слова:** приблизительный перевод, культурные термины, исходный текст, целевой текст, точность.

### **Introduction**

Mailhac (1996) defines a culture-bound concept as “any reference to a cultural entity which, because of its distance from the target culture is characterised by a sufficient degree of opacity from the point of view of the target reader to constitute a translation problem.” Therefore, the culture-bound concepts are specific to the source culture, not to the target culture.

Although translating literary texts requires a native-like control of both the source and target languages and a full understanding of the historical and cultural background of the original text, translation will always be an approximation. It has been generally acknowledged that “as rigorous as a translation of a literary work may be, it will always result in a more or less successful approximation to the original and it can never have the precision of a mathematical operation” (Traore, 2005). A language is not always flexible enough to convey the richness of the original text and cannot always go beyond the limits it may encounter.

Many linguists and anthropologists, such as Lyons and Woolfson, refer to the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis to examine the close relationship between language and culture. They have found, for example, that languages differ in terms of structures and vocabulary items. Whorf’s often-cited example on “snow” in Inuit as well as other examples from American Indian languages show that some specific concepts are more or less available than in English or another language (Woolfson, 1981).

Experiments have revealed that the vocabulary items answer the people’s needs in their particular environment, and that their perception and memory are affected by the availability of appropriate words and expressions. People tend to notice and remember things that are more easily codified in their language. Stafford points out that the experiments do not imply that the concepts cannot be understood, expressed or translated in other languages. Linguistic forms may differ, but the essential messages get across. She claims that “When all people realize that no matter which language you speak or which cultural norms you are used to, everyone is capable of intellectual thoughts, poetic visions, technical jargon and personal feelings according to their own experiences, the world will be a much smaller place.” Cross-cultural and even mass global communication is possible, and many books have been quite successfully translated beyond their initial language of composition (Stafford, 2013).

### **Methods**

The article uses methods of discursive analysis of the main features of literary texts in Arabic as an object of translation activity and embodiment of a specific culture, defines the main difference between translation of a literary text and other types of translation.

It also discusses the main criteria and methods of literary translation from Arabic into English, and explores the role of the translator in shaping the outlook of foreign readers.

### Main body

In the process of translating, one may expect to find problems in the source text due to the fact that it is deeply rooted in culture. Therefore, the translator needs to be not only “bilingual” but also “bicultural” (Lyons, 1996), and should possess great sensitivity to differences between source and target cultures. Translation is not an activity that depends on a word-for-word transfer; rather, it emphasizes words that are textually and culturally bound. Such considerations have been discussed previously in a number of works on the issue of translating literary works from Arabic to English, such as Najah Shamaa’s *A Linguistic Analysis of some Problems of Arabic to English Translation* (1979), and Said Faiq’s *Cultural Encounters in Translation from Arabic* (2004).

We agree with the Russian researcher Timko that culture “as a system of beliefs, value orientations, communication strategies and cognitive environments, which, in fact, determine the basis of behavior shared by all members of a certain linguacultural community, is a significant barrier to achieving equivalence in translation because even if people speak the same language, differences in their cultural experience lead to a failure in communication.” She is logical in her conclusion that the translators of the new generation are more focused than ever on mutual understanding in the field of cultures and the effectiveness of cultural dialogue.

Elements of national culture and cultural experience can appear in the text at a visible level - as specific language and speech patterns (grammatical structures, vocabulary, situational rules for the use of language). However, the greatest difficulty in translating is caused not by language differences, but by those cultural elements, which are above the level of elementary language communication. They represent an extra-linguistic reality, connected not with external manifestations of culture (language, gestures, behavior, customs, artifacts), but with internal (ideas, beliefs, values) (Timko, 2010).

The work of translation is undertaken by a non-native speaker who should be fully aware of the fact that the writer is intimately familiar not merely with the history of his homeland in all its phases but also with the emphases and styles that are characteristic of historical writing about his country and its peoples. In his effort to promote a better understanding of targeted culture, a primary effort of the translator is an attempt to reproduce the wealth of information and the detail of ceremony and ritual.

Dealing with Arabic culture-bound concepts and expressions, the translator may ask whether to “domesticate” them and include them in the target

language, or whether to translate them literally, running the risk of defamiliarizing the text such that the target reader might reject it. He can also opt for a third possibility, which is to work out a language conveying the meaning of the source context, but at the same time accessible to the target readers, which is the aim of literary translation. Although the translator can help clarify certain issues to the reader, he can never hope “to supply him with all the pre-information necessary to fully appreciate a translated text” (Shamaa 217). Some translators insist that the reader has to be cooperative and exert himself in constructing meaning and getting familiar with a new culture and to catch its “original colour” or “flavour”. The translator’s objective is to promote a better understanding of cultural heritage. He aims to guide and stimulate readers in the discovery of a different world and let them make their own interpretation and hopefully appreciate the differences.

Translation is the decision-making, the choice of a word or phrase close to the original, or the creation of a version that sounds more natural in the target language.

Tony Calderbank, a translator with extensive experience, says that while working on the translation of the book *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* by Yousef Al-Mohimeed, he retained many Arabic names of trees growing in the desert, as well as words for clothes that have no English equivalent or require a description. In such cases, the translation may contain a glossary or footnotes to explain Arabic terms (Calderbank, 2018).

Arabic translators often encounter a situation where linguistic understanding is not enough; it is important to understand and explain why the author uses a certain word or expression. For example, pre-Islamic poetic works, the qaseedas, have a meter (rhythm) based on long and short syllables, metaphor, alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhyme. Each line of the poem ends with the same letter. The qaseeda of the poet Imrul Qais is distinguished by his special beauty and expressiveness, in which he describes his horse as *mikarrin mifarrin mudbirin muqbilin ma’an* (swift wheeling retreating advancing all together). The rolled Arabic r’s and the n’s recreate the sound of hooves on hard ground. He completes the description with an image of strength, power and movement: *kajalmoudi sakhrin hattahu s-saylu min ‘ali* (like a boulder tossed by the flood from on high). (Calderbank, 2018).

Another strategy is to deploy paraphrasing, to describe the meaning of the word. First, an idiomatic expression, which has no equivalent expression in English, can be rendered through expansion and ad-

aptation of the meaning. Second, when dealing with images and metaphors, which are unfamiliar to English cultural repertoire, a translator tries to find an analogous image. Third, when a proverb in Arabic does not have any correspondence in English, he can simply translate the meaning, or render it literally.

All the devices described here are usually employed in an attempt to create an accurate translation, which could make the text accessible to the readers regardless of their cultural background. In his efforts to be accurate, the translator puts some strategies for the management of “not found” terms across languages. However, it is necessary to see whether the management of those problems is always successful. In his attempts to render the target text as close as possible to the source text, the translator may have made misinterpretations, or may have failed to find appropriate equivalents.

The limits of translation may be identified in some cases through inconsistency, approximation or absence of exact equivalents in translation. The translation problems may not be due to a lack of research, but they can be understood or tolerated when we consider that dictionaries do not comprehend all the meanings of specific words locally defined. In the process of translation, some imperfections are due to a lack of a local knowledge that is needed in bridging the different cultures, a misinterpretation of some terms or a simple lack of attention.

On one hand, translation requires an acquaintance with traditions. The translator should take into consideration the importance of symbolism to introduce it to the foreign reader. On the other hand, there are challenging expressions, which require from the translator to use once again his dual competencies in both the Arabic language and culture.

The concepts, which are associated with a set of cultural knowledge, are difficult to render. The translator’s attempts –and difficulty– to find equivalent terms are revealed in the use of inconsistent terms to refer to the same concept. As a non-native speaker, he is either misled by cognates, or confused by the literal meaning of concepts. To avoid these problems, the translator should check the meaning of those concepts in dictionaries or with the native speakers while he works on the source text.

The translated culture-bound words and expressions cannot convey the exact intended meaning but represent just an alternative to it. The difficulties of rendering these terms, lie first in the fact that in some cases the translator has not grasped the original meaning because the concepts and expressions are deeply rooted in the target culture. Second, difficulties arise when there is an absence of exact

equivalents in the target culture, hence in the target language. This means that a translation is at times an approximation of an original idea, rather than an exact conveyance of it in a new language.

The environment where people live, the institutions they create, and the beliefs they assume are part of their culture. The architectural heritage of humanity is one of the domains in which the richness and diversity of cultures is reflected. The language of each culture expresses the specificity in this field and others. The specificity of a created item or nation brings about a specific lexicon. People create things and give names to them. Things and ideas are often similar without being totally the same. They differ from one culture to another. Often, a person’s comprehension of another culture is only possible through his or her own culture and imagination, but one can still aspire to enrich their own culture through the cultures of other people. This is why translation is necessary, and that is the very relevance of language. If what is necessary for this minimum comprehension is secured, the translation, which is limited in detail, should be undertaken with this in mind.

In several translated literary texts, we can identify cases of inaccurate translation of some words or expressions, cases of inconsistency, cases of approximate translation, cases of impossible translation in which the translator has kept the original words and cases related to difference in meaning because of difference in culture. The problems that can be identified are beyond the translator’s competence of the source language. They may illustrate general difficulties that translators face in working on literary texts. These difficulties demonstrate why some readers often prefer original versions to its translation. Therefore, a purely accurate and literal translation is impossible, but one can assert that an approximation of the meaning of the original text has been objectively achieved. This does not imply that it is a betrayal of the original text, but by necessity a limited version of the source.

In his effort to promote a better understanding a culture, and his attempt to reproduce the wealth of information, the translator may be successful in transmitting ideas from one cultural context to another, although the understanding of the meaning of a given text and the evaluation of its translation depend to a great extent on intuitive appreciation, and on the translator’s strategy in keeping his translation very close to the original text targeted to give the reader a different flavour of images and manners of thinking and expressing, which allow him to suc-

ceed in penetrating the richness of the text in all its levels, from the “local to universal”.

Usually, when it comes to disciplines or sciences with specific jargon, neutral and objective descriptions, translation is relatively straightforward, but it is less precise with other human disciplines including literature. A commentary on a literary text in the same language is a kind of translation because the problem is the same, explaining to readers what the writer means in his text. Understanding is not merely perception, it is a comprehensive reception. In other words, in the process of translation, the differences in languages reflect differences of manners of thinking, imagining and expressing.

It is interesting to note that some researchers, including, for example, Abdulrahman M. Khalid Bustani, believe that the current system of representation of Arabs and their culture in English translations of Arabic literary works clearly exists and even prevails; a system that emerged long before the colonial period and serves the purpose of hegemony. Obviously, this point of view largely coincides with the pathos of the famous book “Orientalism” by Edward Said, who described «the Western attitude that views Eastern societies as exotic, primitive, and inferior » (Said, 2003). This system, they say, implies careful selection of exactly what needs to be translated and the use of manipulative and domesticated translation strategies. Moreover, these scholars believe that such a situation exists even now in an era of globalization and open communication in the form of preserving stereotypes of Arabs and their culture in the minds of Western audiences. However, the method of supporting this system has changed to meet the requirements of the market that is the translation industry delivers what readers want to read, what is sold (Bustani, 2014).

Since a literary text is a creative work, a “good” translation should reflect the creative dimensions of the source text. Yet the creative text is not only a matter of language, because language is also culture and cultures differ in many aspects: their materialistic crafts, their customs and habits, their beliefs and values, their ways of living and thinking, their style of imagination, even their standards of expressing all of these aspects. The differences in cultures make drastic limits to the translation of

literary texts because it submits them necessarily to concessions.

Nevertheless, through translated literary works, readers discover that humans have common feelings and universal principles and values such as good and evil, beauty and ugliness, justice and tyranny, but that they live them in specific contexts with references to history, to geography and to social imagination. Comparative literature shows that all societies know the tragic and the comic, but they do not always laugh at or cry always at the same things, and they do not always acclaim or condemn the same acts.

### Conclusion

The entire atmosphere of a novel is composed of all the aforementioned aspects. The mission of translation is an extension of that of literature, which consists in enriching our common sense of human identity, by introducing to us a smart or awful image of ourselves in the mirror of our diversity. Through translation, Americans have access to the poetry of Alexandre Pushkin, and Arabs may enjoy the drama of Shakespeare or the poetry of Garcia Lorca. Although target texts can only be an approximate version of the original text, and although there are insurmountable limits imposed on literary translation, the latter goes on enriching the universal culture of the world.

This paper has highlighted some of the difficulties that translators face in their attempts to render a culture-bound terms as accurately as possible from its source text. The task is very complex, and the limits of such work are certainly a challenge as a translator tries to be faithful to the source text, to handle cross-cultural concepts, and to construct a correct version in the target language. Keeping the target text as close as possible, to its source text may have limitations but it also has merits: it serves to communicate and expose the readers to a new culture.

The decision of the translator is determined by a pre-selected and justified strategy and depends on the place cultural information occupies in the value system, presented in the original text. Translation, with all its limits, serves to initiate readers into a new world of cultural differences and stimulates them to understand the differences, and hopefully to appreciate them.

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