



## STRATEGIES USED IN TRANSLATING ENGLISH TABOO EXPRESSIONS INTO ARABIC

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**ABSTRACT:** *Untranslatability, or translation fails, takes place when it is impossible to build functionally relevant features of the situation into the contextual meaning of the target language text. Scholars in the field of translation studies distinguish between linguistic and cultural untranslatability: linguistic untranslatability is the failure to find a target language equivalent of the source language item. This translation void is due entirely to the differences between the two languages in question in our case English and Arabic. For cultural untranslatability what appears to be a quite different problem arises, however, when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the source language text, is completely absent in the culture of which the target language is a part. Taboo, on the other hand, can be defined as a cultural or religious custom that forbids people to do, touch, use or talk about a certain thing. Differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure. Drawing on the actual translation between English as a lingua franca and a religiously oriented language like Arabic, this paper examines cultural untranslatability especially when dealing with taboo words and expressions. The paper also suggests certain strategies to be adopted when translating English taboo words into Arabic.*

**KEYWORDS:** Taboo, Translation, Untranslatability, English-Arabic, Culture

### INTRODUCTION

Translation is one of the most important cross-linguistic and cross-cultural practices. One of these practices is the rendering of taboo words and expressions which are the most colorful and vibrant parts of any language. Though their use is generally unacceptable in almost any society, they remain a vigorous part of the vernacular. Taboos fundamentally functioning as vehicles of self-exasperation, so it makes sense that the translation can be approached in a similar manner. Due to their reliance on context and varied usage, taboo words are often the hardest parts facing the process of translation.

Scholars have different viewpoints about taboos. For some, it is a universal phenomenon that takes place in any speech community but for others it is not since it is created by each culture and each language. The latter viewpoint is similar to that of Fromkin et al (2013) who argue that taboo has a strong cultural component representing particular custom and the way people view their society. This is a clear indication that taboo is part and parcel of culture and norms of particular society. In this respect, House (2009) sees culture as a connected series of beliefs and values that are shared through each speech community. Thus, certainly language and culture are strongly associated with each other so far as one can claim that culture is the manifestation of language. Therefore, translation is about the transfer of language and culture from one society to another. However, it is difficult to transfer culture because it is the totality of any society life style, i.e. culture is a complex collection of experiences which conditions



daily life; it includes history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and everyday usage. Translating cultural loaded terms or what Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) call culturally specific items or what Toury (1988) terms cultural turn can create some problems during the translation process. In this respect, cultural barrier may cause more severe complications for the translator than does the linguistic barriers. Due to mismatch of culture, taboo expressions are difficult to deal with especially when translating between English and Arabic.

### **What is Taboo?**

Taboo expressions are thought of as indivisible components of each language. They are considered as a subject, word, or activity that individuals avoid as a result of their extraordinarily offensive or embarrassing impact. According to Ljung (2011: 184-185), these words can be placed into five major classes or themes, specifically “religious theme, scatological theme, reproductive organ theme, sexual activities theme, and finally the mother theme”. The problem even deteriorates in interlingual translation due to different cultures of the source language (SL) and the target language (TL).

Taboo words are often considered offensive, shocking or rude. The duality and vagueness of the nature of taboo words intensify the problem of their translation between different languages. Almost all languages have taboo words (dirty words) and their sources could be linguistic or culture specific. However, some expressions are considered taboo and may elicit embarrassment or offence to certain people whereas they are used naturally by other people. For example, in Chontal (the language of Maya people in Mexico) *devil* is a taboo word, so people call him *older brother*, because they believe if they utter his name, the devil will appear to them. In Finnish, it is taboo to say *he is in prison* instead; people say *he is sitting in his hotel* (Larson 1984). On the contrary, these expressions are not considered taboo among Arab speakers.

### **Taboos Untranslatability**

Catford (1965:94) distinguishes between linguistic and cultural untranslatability: "in *linguistic untranslatability* the functionally relevant features include some which are in fact formal features of the *language* of the SL text. If the TL has no formally corresponding feature, the text, or the item, is (relatively) untranslatable". He (Ibid: 99) adds that “cultural untranslatability takes place when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the SL text, is completely *absent* from the culture of which the TL is a part.” He also claims that cultural untranslatability resembles collocation and it is usually less 'absolute' than linguistic untranslatability. On the other hand, Linguistic untranslatability refers to the failure to find a TL equivalent of the SL item. This translation void is entirely due to the differences between language systems. However, collocation untranslatability, according to him, is more relevant to linguistic untranslatability rather than to cultural untranslatability. For instance, international terms like the Greek term *democracy* need not be translated being a lexical item with recognizably similar phonological/graphological exponents in several languages, and having a common contextual meaning.

Most of the taboo words fall in the category of cultural untranslatability, i.e. what is said in one culture cannot be accepted in the other and vice versa. For instance, *the showing of thump up* in Arabic culture is a sign of success, peace and friendliness whereas in Iranian culture it is taboo and gives opposite meaning, i.e. related to sex (Davoodi 2009). Some terms in English,



for instance, may carry different meanings, according to the situation of occurrence: the word *gay* means happy and full of fun, but when it is connected with *gay community*, it becomes taboo at least in the Muslim-Arab culture. In American-English, the noun *cock* (male bird) is replaced by the euphemistic noun *rooster* to avoid its connotative meaning (manhood). In Judaism, the phrase *calling God* is forbidden and considered a kind of blasphemy. Therefore *God* is replaced by *Heaven* while Muslims are *calling Allah* whenever they want to ask for His mercy and forgiveness. Catford (1965) also gives an example of linguistic untranslatability when he mentions that the Finnish term *sawna* has no formal equivalence in English. He adds that formal linguistic differences between the SL and the TL lead to translation failure.

### The Non-descriptive Nature of Taboo Expressions

Before going any further, I would like to stretch a point about the semantic nature of taboo words and expressions. Some scholars such as Halliday (1985) and Lyons (1995) have proposed ways of classifying meaning into two types, descriptive or propositional and expressive or non-propositional. There are some differences between descriptive and non-descriptive meaning: in the former type, the meaning is logical and propositional. It is referential as it guides the hearer in identifying the intended referent(s). It is also displaceable because it is tied to the here-and-now of the current speech situation. Expressive meaning is fully conceptualized and descriptive aspects of the meaning of a sentence are 'exposed' in the sense that they can potentially be negated, questioned or denied. (Cruse 2004).

In the following example the meaning of *bloody* cannot be contradicted because if someone answers *that is a lie* to the utterance *somebody has turned the bloody lights off*, that would mean, the lights had been turned off, i.e. only descriptive meaning would be denied. In this respect, Cruse (Ibid: 48) argues that *bloody* could have a metalinguistic meaning such as "You shouldn't have used the word *bloody*". *Bloody* here, cannot contribute to the meaning of the sentence because it does not contribute to the truth or falsity of the utterance. It is merely prosodic, i.e. expresses the speaker's exasperation or emotion.

Despite their non-propositional nature, it can be argued that taboos are not always about evoking negative emotions, they are also a cultural phenomenon and sometimes they function to convey strong feeling to something and give extra emotional emphasis (Jay, 2009). For example, when we say *bloody good meal* it does not mean that the meal is literally *bloody* but the word *bloody* gives extra emotional emphasis. In Arabic, it could be translated euphemistically as وجبة طعام خارقة للعادة (an extraordinary meal).

### Strategies Used in Rendering Taboo Expressions

Translation strategies are the steps and procedures taken by translators to tackle the source text's (ST) translation problems. In this respect, translators have to bear in mind that the identification of the translation problem should precede the application of the appropriate strategy. In this paper, three approaches are adopted because of their suitability and appropriateness in dealing with the rendering of taboo words and expressions. First, the SL taboo term is not taboo in the TL. Second, the SL taboo term is also taboo in TL. Third, the term which is not taboo in the SL is considered taboo in the TL. It can be said that the first approach, which poses no problem to the translator who is able to render taboo terms directly in the TL whereas the second and third approaches need special treatment by the translators. To elicit the translations of type two and three, the translator may adopt four strategies: (i)



ensorship, (ii) substitution, (iii) rendering taboo for taboo and (iv) applying euphemism. Special emphasis has been put on the application of euphemism. It is worth noting that these applied strategies are an amalgamation of Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) translation strategies specifically *modulation*, Venuti's (1995) domestication and foreignization and Almiqab's (2013) translation procedures and criteria.

### **Censorship or Omission**

According to this strategy, the translator simply omits the SL taboo, i.e. the translator deleted a certain part or parts of a ST while transferring it into the TL. In this case, s/he censors it as an extra term. Consider the following example: *It is bloody cold in here.* الجو بارد هنا (the weather is cold in here) where the taboo word *bloody* is omitted in the Arabic version and the meaning still intact. However, in some instances, the taboo term is a key word in the ST and its omission could distort the meaning of the text. For example, in the expression *the gay community in Europe* the word *gay* cannot be omitted in the target language, therefore the translator has to resort either to substitution or euphemism. However, this strategy is much better than literal translation of the taboo which should be avoided at all costs. As an example, the literally translating of *bitch* into its Arabic version كلبة (female dog) is not so accurate and certainly not faithful to the original text.

When possible, according to many translators, it is best to opt for either substitution or euphemism, as it ensures that your translation will be accepted by the target audience. Translators should choose between translating the text as it is worded or adjusting it to reflect the speech patterns of the target language. They largely agree not to omit specific words based solely on ethical or moral grounds because the text itself is not targeted towards them so they should not be offended by the language and it is within their best interest to provide a faithful translation. However, when the use of swearwords affects a translation's flow, it is sensible to omit them in order to preserve the impact and purpose of the original text.

### **Substitution**

This means to substitute SL taboos with other TL terms. This procedure often distorts the meaning of the original because communicative difficulties constantly confront translators when the text begins with unshared assumptions about its communicative purpose (House 1977). For example, the English word *bar*, which has contradictory associative properties in Arabic, for an English reader, it is a place where people get together, chat, drink and play games. On the contrary, the Arabic counterpart خمارة (place for drinking alcohol) is in itself a stigmatizing term. This is because it involves خمر (alcohol) which is forbidden in the Muslim-Arab culture being associated with moral deviance and religious corruption. Instances of cross-cultural assumptions between Arabic and English are usually subject to a shift of ideology. For example, the word *gay* extending its meaning from the adjective *gay* (happy) but its connotative meaning is most often translated into Arabic as شاذ جنسيا (Homosexual). Notice that unlike English, the Arabic term شاذ (literally: odd) denotes radicalism, extremity and deviance from the norm. Thus, the two names (English and Arabic) represent two conflicting cultural assumptions involve an ideological loss when substituting one for the other. As can be noticed meaning does not always stem from the word or its immediate surrounding but from its use in its cultural context.



In this context, almost all English *F-words* are substituted in Arabic due to the fact that Arabic is religiously oriented, i.e. any taboo and/or swear words are prohibited according to Islamic teachings. For instance, these taboo words usually changed in Arabic as عليك اللعنة (curse be upon you), تبا لك (screw you) ايها الوغد (bastard). In addition, the word *shit*, widely used among the Arabs, is changed into اللعنة (damn).

Warren (1992) gives other devices rather than substitution to deal with taboo words. First, compounding which is the combining of two individually polite words forms a euphemism for an unacceptable term. Masturbation العادة السرية, (the secret habit). Second, derivation which is the modification of an English term to form an Arabic expression. The English word *suck*, derived from the Latin word *fellare*, is changed into the Arabic expression الجنس الفموي (oral sex). Third, loan words. Durrell (1968) claims that most of the taboo English banned words seem to be of Saxon origin, while the euphemisms constructed to convey the same meaning are of Latin-French. For instance, *anus* (فتحة الشرج) (Latin –French) and *ass hole* (Saxon). Fourth, metaphor, for instance a multitude of colourful metaphorical euphemisms surround *menstruation* الدورة الشهرية (monthly period) centering around the colour *red*, for instance, *the cavalry has come* a reference to the red coats of the British cavalry, 'it is a *red letter day* and *flying the red flag*.

### Taboo for Taboo

This means to find the word's equivalent in the target language. This is the most effective method but cannot always be used because taboos are often culturally derived and do not always have perfect translations. Although, translators are aware that SL taboo expressions unacceptable to target people and society, they prefer to translate them into the TL taboo expressions. For example, *this woman is gay*. The adjective *gay* can be translated into Arabic as سحاقية (Lesbian) in هذه امرأة سحاقية. However, the Arabic counterpart has negative effect because such act is forbidden according to Islamic religion. Nowadays, and because of the evolution of Arabic as a modern language both influencing and influenced, the new term مثلي (literary, people who are sexually attracted to the same gender) has been introduced to replace the old terms سحاقية for women and شاذ (odd) for men. Another example of taboo for taboo strategy is the translation of the English expression *oral sex* as الجنس الفموي (sex through the mouth). This decorous Arabic neologism is less stigmatizing and is accepted by educated Arab Muslims.

However, applying this method to the translation of taboos into Arabic is often embarrassing to the TL Muslim community. It is undeniable fact that all the three divine religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, reject such activities and consider them as sins. Since taboo is a cultural concept which expresses emotions and exasperation, its meaning can be changed as culture changes, for example the term *nigger*, in the United States, were socially accepted, now they are considered a highly offensive term. Sometimes translators, alternatively, resort to borrowing or loan word strategy which is the idea of taking the SL word and just change its spoken rules in TL. For example, the English taboo word *sex* and *shit* are transliterated into colloquial Arabic without change. This process is called by Pym (2018:43) copying words or transcription in the broadest sense, where items from one language are brought across to another. He (Ibid.) gives some examples as follows: on the phonetic level (e.g. Spanish. *fútbol*), morphology (e.g. Spanish. *balompié*, literally 'ball-foot') or script (e.g. *McDonald's* in all languages, alongside Russian. *Макдоналдс* or Arabic *ماكدونالدز*).



## The Application of Euphemism

Euphemism is a linguistic tool that is universal in almost all languages in both spoken and written discourses. The phenomenon of euphemisation is a politeness strategy that has a significant impact on the English-Arabic-English translation. Euphemism is the substitution of impolite insulting or inoffensive expression to replace one that upsets or something hostile. In other words, euphemism is a decorous synonym used to replace a word or expression that may be considered offensive in the TL. It also aims to tone down the strong language or offensive expression by using fewer offensive words or expressions instead. Beckman and Callow (1974: 120) define euphemism as "a metaphorical or metonymic use of an expression in place of another expression that is disagreeable or offensive". Leech (1981: 53) gives a semantic meaning to euphemism stating, "euphemism is the practice of referring to something offensive or delicate in terms that makes it sound more pleasant or becoming than it really is". He (Ibid.) adds this technique consists of replacing a word which has offensive connotations with another expression, which makes no overt reference to the unpleasant side of the subject, and may even be a positive misnomer.

According to Linfoot-ham (2005:228) "the need for euphemism is both social and emotional, as it allows discussion of 'touchy' or taboo subjects without enraging, outraging, or upsetting other people, and acts as a pressure valve whilst maintaining the appearance of civility". Euphemisms are used in English to colour the language with decorous expressions. For instance; when a woman says *she is going to powder her nose*, or a man uses some phrases such as; *drain the lizard* and *see a man about a dog*, all of them mean they are off to pee. The translation of such expressions into Arabic could cause problems, if the translator is not familiar with their euphemistic nature

The subject of sex, being a major concern in human life and one that is likely to elicit embarrassment, is the main source of euphemism for all people of most ages and walks of life. "Euphemisms are powerful linguistic tools embedded so deeply in our language that few of us even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them," (Rawson, 1981:1). They are used mainly in sensitive texts to preserve courteousness. People tend to use euphemism to mitigate discourteous discourses, to hide unmannered ideas, to camouflage unpleasant thoughts, or to use any figure of speech such as metonymy, pun and metaphor for replacing taboo words. As Qur'an is a revered text, euphemism, in almost all sensitive issues, is widely used especially in the cases of sexual taboos. Consequently, it is vitally important to highlight the overlap that might result from rendering such euphemistic expressions into English. Sometimes dysphemism, the opposite of euphemism, is employed to clearly underline specific objectives in the Arabic text. A common example of dysphemism is the word *cow* in British English, which can be used as a derogative term for a woman who is thoroughly disliked. Coincidentally, its Arabic counterpart بقرة conveys the same connotative meaning.

Unlike English, Arabic is religiously oriented. It is of course the language of the Divine revelation. The Qur'an states clearly that وكذلك أنزلناه قرآنا عربيا { Thus have We sent this Down-an Arabic Qur'an} (Qur'an (20-113). It is believed by all Muslims that the Qur'an has been declared by Allah as strictly an Arabic text. إنا أنزلناه قرآنا عربيا لعلكم تعقلون { We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an, In order that ye may learn wisdom.} Qur'an 12-2). This means that religion is something confidential and sacred in Islamic culture. Arabic, accordingly, takes its euphemistic nature from the Qur'an, for instance, the euphemistic Quranic Arabic term نكاح



(making love) should take place within the context of marriage, i.e. premarital sex is considered a sin in Islamic teachings and whoever commits such a sin will be heavily punished. Thus, the English phrase *sexual intercourse* can only be rendered معاشرۃ الأزواج (they live like husband and wife). This is because any sexual relations outside the marital frame is socially unacceptable and highly tabooed in Islamic religion. This is due to the fact that children must be born within a nuclear family and named after their legitimate biological fathers as stated in the Qur'an verse ادعوهم لا بائهم هو اقسط عند الله {Call them by (the names of) their Legitimate fathers: that is juster in the sight of God} (Qur'an (33-5). This verse also made it clear that adopting children is not allowed in Islam an adultery is also forbidden ولا تقربوا الزنا انه كان فاحشة وساء سبيلا {Nor come nigh to adultery: for it is a shameful (deed) And an evil, opening the road (To other evils)} (Qur'an 17-32).

In this context, it is difficult to find equivalents to the English term's *boyfriend*, *girlfriend* in Arabic. Some translators render them as صديق أو صديقة (friends) which does not convey the exact meaning because they live together like husband and wife and may have children. Therefore, the Holy Qur'an provides formal correspondence of these terms as مُحَصَّنَاتٍ: أَخْدَانٍ غَيْرِ مُسْلُفَاتٍ وَلَا مُتَّخِذَاتِ أَخْدَانٍ {they should be Chaste, not lustful, nor taking Paramours}. (Qur'an 4:25). This verse also clarifies without any doubt that any sexual relations before marriage (according to Islamic Shariah [law]) is forbidden.

Nida (2000) calls euphemism as softening because according to this process there is a kind of reduction of emotional harm and unpleasant effects of the word. However, he (Ibid.) states that the number of softened words should remain low so that the style of the TT will not be distorted. Therefore, translators are advised to be careful when softening particular expressions in order to preserve the context and the style of the source language text. Baker (1992) claims that it is innocuous to resort to omission when rendering a word or expression as long as the meaning is not vital enough to the development of the text to justify distracting the reader with lengthy explanations. This censorship method results in some loss of meaning when words and expressions are omitted in a translation. Therefore, it is only used as the last resort when producing an appropriate translation is more important than the value of rendering a particular meaning accurately.

Following Williams (1975) and Warren (1992) Al-Awda (2015) outlines the main components of the revised model of euphemisation as follows:

- (i) Widening. This involves the use of a general term to replace a more specific one in a particular context, or the replacement of a specific cause with a generalised effect, for example, to replace *pork* with *meat* in the Arabic translation. The noun *meat* is a subordinate of *pork* and *pork* is a hyponym of *meat*, i.e. it is a kind of *meat*. This relation is often as one of inclusion. Muslims are not allowed to eat *pork* لحم خنزير therefore, it is translated as لحم (meat) in order to please the Muslim-Arab readers.
- (ii) Implication involves two propositions, where the second is usually a logical consequence of the first. Euphemisms generated by this process suggest their meaning implicitly, forcing the addressee to make some effort before identifying their implied value. *Sexy woman* could be rendered into Arabic امرأة لعوب (frivolous woman).
- (iii) The meaning of euphemism is similar to the Arabic figure of speech كناية (metonymy) which means to speak about something but you mean something different, or to use words



or expression that relate to the meaning allegorically. Tymoczko (1999: 42) defines metonymy as “a figure of speech in which an attribute or an aspect of an entity substitutes for the entity or in which a part substitutes for the whole”. Mihas (2005: 129) gives somewhat similar use of euphemism to that of metonymy when he states “euphemisms are used when one wants to name things without calling up a mental picture of them”. The main aim of this cognitive point of view is that euphemisms strike at a person's imagination and they do not depict complete pictures in the mind, i.e. they partially define an event or object. Hence, the ability to comprehend the true meaning of a statement is obscured.

Metonymy is similar to *widening*: both result in general substitutions. However, *metonyms*, as the term suggests, are metonymically related to the items they substitute. It should be pointed out here that euphemisms produced by the process of metonymy represent the whole which conceals specific parts or attributes. In other words, the direction of the relationship between the whole and specific parts or attributes, as offered by Tymoczko (Ibid.), is reversed in euphemising taboo words (the euphemism represents the whole entity, which stands for specific part or attribute, not the other way around). *Metonymy*, then, broadly refers to using a word or phrase that stands for another entity associated to it in a whole-part relationship. For instance, the English sentence: *he said he had committed adultery* is rendered into Arabic metonymically *قال انني أقمت علاقة ائمة* (he said he had a sinful relation). Not only *adultery* is changed to (sinful relation) but also the verb *committed* which its literal Arabic meaning *اقترب* is changed to the Arabic neutral verb *أقام* (had/made).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Due to the strong spiritual relationship between Islam and its believers, it is clear that religion has played a vital role in the rendering of taboo words and expressions. Therefore, and in order to create a fluent TT, translators should translate the SL in a way compatible to the TL culture. From what preceded, it is found that euphemism, amongst the strategies mentioned above, plays an important role in rendering English taboos into Arabic. Other strategies vary in their usage according the cultural constraints and situation of occurrence.

Nonetheless, translators should not give themselves the authority to manipulate the ST in order to achieve the objectives of the TT. This behaviour could lead to ideological shifts. However, exploring the meaning of taboo words is up to the ST readers and depends on their cultural knowledge, and social class and age. The translator could convey the implicit meaning of the original while elucidating meaning in terms of TT culture. It is the translator's task to bridge the gaps between source and target cultures and move toward the TT readers' background knowledge and expectations.

To deal with the untranslatability of taboos, the translator should not only compare the structural differences but also should compare the cultural mismatch between the two languages. The task becomes even harder when translation involves texts from unrelated cultures. In this case, comparison could be useful as translators should be able to take into account the different cultural presuppositions of the SL and the TL. Finally, it is hoped that the strategies discussed so far, although not exhaustive, encompass some solution to the problems of rendering taboos and offer some insights that could be of great help to translators.



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