

Preserving Cultural Difference in the Translation of Proverbs: A Cultural Linguistics Approach

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Abstract

Emirati proverbs are deeply rooted in Emirati culture and social customs and make heavy use of devices typical of classical poetry. The translation of these proverbs is thus particularly challenging, especially that research on the translation of proverbs from the Arabian Peninsula is still scarce. To fill this gap, this article analysed the English translation of Emirati proverbs, using analytical tools from Cultural Linguistics and drawing on Venuti's ethics of difference. The analysis revealed that while the translation appears to be foreignizing, it replaced Emirati cultural conceptualizations with ones that are more familiar to the English reader. The result is an exoticizing target text that reduces the Emirati culture to a series of clichéd stereotypes.

Keywords: Cultural Conceptualizations, Cultural Linguistics, Foreignizing Translation, Proverbs.

1. Introduction

In mid-nineteenth century, Lord John Russel famously defined proverbs as “the wisdom of many, the wit of one” (as cited in Taylor 1975, 11). This succinct definition, itself very witty, captures two key characteristics of proverbs: their creative use of language and their socio-cultural dimension. As the product of folk wisdom, proverbs are deeply rooted in the history of societies, and reflect people's religion and culture which they encode in usually short sentences using a highly figurative language. These characteristics make proverbs very difficult to get across linguistic and cultural barriers. This difficulty increases substantially when the translation of these artefacts is between languages that are linguistically and culturally very different, as is the case of Arabic and English.

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing body of literature exploring the translation of proverbs either from or into Arabic, giving invaluable insight into the difficulties involved in translating proverbs (Alshammari 2015; El-Yasin and Al-Shehabat 2005; Farghal and Al-Hamly 2015; Shehab and Daragmeh 2014). Much of this literature, however, focuses on proverbs from other parts of the Arab world than the Gulf region, and is based on the concept of equivalence or is concerned with functional equivalence, giving short shrift to proverbs' socio-cultural dimension and related issues of cultural difference.

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To address this gap in the literature, the present article investigates the translation of Emirati proverbs into English, raising two key questions: How are these proverbs as artefacts translated? And to what extent does such a translation preserve Emirati cultural difference? To answer these questions, the article uses analytical tools borrowed mainly from Cultural Linguistics (Sharifian 2011, 2012 and 2017), and draws on Venuti's ethics of difference (1995/2008, 1998/2002) to analyse Emirati proverbs from Abdullah Bin Dalmook's (2015/2021a) collection, *المتموصف: أمثال وحكم من الإمارات*, and their English translation in *Al-Mtwassf: Proverbs and Adages from the United Arab Emirates* (2021b). It argues that while the translation appears to be foreignizing, because of the use of such strategies as transliteration, it often replaces Emirati cultural conceptualizations with domestic ones that are more familiar to the English reader. The result is an exoticizing target text (TT) that fails to preserve the Emirati cultural difference, reducing it to a series of clichéd stereotypes.

2. Literature Review

The proverb is an elusive concept to define. As Dundes (1994, 45) explains, while it is easy to identify what a proverb does, it is not as easy to explain what it is. Most definitions, however, seem to agree on three main aspects of the proverb: its concise nature, its markedness compared to ordinary speech through stylistic features, and its traditionality. Barajas (2010, 7), for instance, maintains that proverbs are characterized by the "tripartite combination of the prosodic, the figurative, and the social." Stressing their social aspect, he describes proverbs as "social tools" that fulfil several social functions, including "the promotion of group solidarity" (9). Likewise, Mieder (2004, 3) argues that proverbs are "invaluable social signs that have a great strategic influence on all types of communication."

In the specific case of the Arab tradition, Hakamies (2019, 302) believes that traditionality, i.e. the "authority or social wisdom" developed over time, appears to be of paramount importance. Arabic proverbs are so highly valued that they are linked to the *hadith*, i.e. the prophet's sayings (306). The authenticity and, hence, value of both proverbs and *hadith* come from the (unbroken) chain of intermediaries that transmitted them across generations. They are both rooted in the past and both constitute "the respected wisdom of the forefathers" (306). In fact, Gutas (1981) asserts that, more than a key component of Arabic "literary wisdom," proverbs were so important that they "competed" with the *hadith* during the prophet's time (56).

This socio-cultural and religious import of proverbs in the Arab tradition is no better captured than in the four conditions that Barakat (1980, as cited in Hakamies 2019, 307) has identified in Arabic proverbs. According to him, proverbs are considered as such when they are situation-oriented, contain *hikma* or wisdom, uphold Arab society's traditional norms, and contain some truth of significance to the community. Three of the four identified conditions emphasize traditionality and rootedness in collective wisdom. While Barakat might appear to be giving short shrift to the stylistic features of the Arabic proverb, a closer look at how these features have been conceived in the Arab tradition reveals that the form of the Arabic proverb is itself an expression of Arab society's traditional norms and a strong marker of the cultural identity of the community, two of Barakat's conditions above.

Preserving Cultural Difference in the Translation of Proverbs: A Cultural Linguistics Approach

Indeed, a key feature of Arabic proverbs is their strong similitude to poetry, long considered “the cardinal fine art in Islamic civilization” (Geertz 2008, 111). Gamal’s (2008) survey of early Arab linguists and grammarians and their approach to proverbs reveals that Arabic proverbs have always been likened to poetry in their form. Citing tenth-century Arab grammarian and philologist Ibn Jinni, for example, Gamal asserts that “proverbs though written in prose, are characterized, just as poetry is, by poetic license” (173). In the same vein, Mat (2013, 85-86) argues that Arabic proverbs are primarily meant to be spoken and transmitted orally by users familiar with Arabic poetry’s “rhyming and meters.” Referring to the classical Arabic proverb “عش رجباً، تر عجباً”, ‘ish rajaban, tarā ‘ajaban, which means “Live the same month (of Rajab) over and over, and you will see many a wonder,” Mat (86) argues that Arabic proverbial discourse is characterized by heavy reliance on sound devices typical of poetry, including alliteration, assonance, rhyme, rhythm and a metered structure as proverbs will often be composed of two equal hemistichs with the same end-rhyme.

Arabic poetry, however, is more than just the highest form of Arabic literary expression. Since its development in the Arabian Peninsula, it has always wielded great social, cultural and political power in a Bedouin society where everything, “from metaphysics to morphology, scripture to calligraphy, [...] conspires to make of *speech and speaking a matter charged with an import if not unique in human history certainly extraordinary*” (Geertz 2008, 109; emphasis added). By extension, Arabic proverbs fulfil a similar function. Thus, twelfth-century Muslim theologian and linguist Al-Zamakhshari (as cited in Ajdad 2011) described Arabic proverbs as “the ultimate expression of Arabs’ eloquence [...], the most valuable of their wisdom, the essence of their logic, the best of their prowess” (29).

In the UAE, part of the Arabian Peninsula where Bedouin oral culture and Arabic classical poetry originated, proverbs display all the characteristics detailed above. As a consequence, they are “highly valued” in Emirati society, where they occupy a better position than other folklore genres (Hurriez 2002, 82). And yet, while a lot of work on Arabic proverbs has already been done “by both European and Arab scholars in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa,” including Algeria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan (Goitein 2010, 361), proverbs in the Arabian peninsula, including Kuwait and Oman, have not elicited as much scholarly interest even though they condense a reservoir of local knowledge that goes back to the pre-Islamic period (364).

From a translation studies perspective, there has been a growing body of literature on the translation of Arabic proverbs, mostly from other parts of the Arab world than the Gulf region. This research has been valuable in giving insight into the challenges of translating Arabic proverbs. Much of it, however, has other foci than proverbs’ cultural import as explained above. Focusing on the effectiveness of the procedures used in translating proverbs in literary texts, Farghal and Al-Hamly (2015), for instance, investigated the way the translators of the novel *Banat Al-Riyadh* (2005) rendered 24 proverbs that occur in the novel. They found that, with “almost half of the proverbs in the study novel” having been omitted, omission was the most used procedure despite “the obvious semiotic significance of proverbs in literary discourse” (13). This, according to them, has resulted not only in undermining “the literariness and proverbiality of the English translation” (13), but also in obliterating “the function of the proverb as a

micro sign” that acts as “part and parcel of an exposition or an argument” (14). Stressing the importance of a fluent and assimilationist translation, Farghal and Al-Hamly concluded that the translator’s awareness and use of target language (TL) “stock of proverbs and idiomatic expressions in the TL would definitely contribute to the acceptability and naturalness of the translation along with furnishing it with a tinge of aesthetics and proverbiality” (14).

As for Al Rousan and Shatnawi (2023), they approached the translation of proverbs from a pedagogical perspective. They investigated the most common errors that MA students make when translating Jordanian proverbs into English, and have successfully demonstrated that linguistic errors pertaining to syntax and grammar were “the most frequently occurring” while comprehension errors were the least frequent ones (467).

El-Yasin and Al-Shehabat (2005), on their part, drew on the concept of equivalence to “assess the success or failure” (170) of Peter Theroux’s translation of Arabic proverbs in Abdul Rahman Munif ’s novel *Taqasim al-Layl wan-Nahar* (1989). Identifying an overwhelming number of mistakes in the translation of the proverbs, they concluded that the success of such translation requires the reproduction of “the two major characteristics of a proverb: its authentic truth [...] and its characteristic form” (171). While this is a sensible conclusion, the study does not explain what exactly the “authentic truth” of the proverb is or how to find it, or why it is necessary to reproduce both characteristics and not only one, namely the “authentic truth.”

Drawing on the concept of equivalence, too, Shehab and Daragmeh (2014) analysed ten proverbs in two Arabic novels by Naguib Mahfouz, and their respective translations by Trevor Le Gassik and Philip Stewart. Focusing on the context where proverbial expressions are used, they assessed the translations based on “three translation equivalences, namely formal (i.e., semantic translation), functional, and ideational (i.e., communicative translation)” (54). They concluded that since the same proverbial expression can have different meanings depending on the context, translators should “give due attention to proverb’s context before they make their decisions” (66). These decisions range from using an equivalent TL proverb and making any changes as might be dictated by the context, to proposing a new translation, through translating the proverb literally when it “encapsulates a universal theme and its image is shared between the two cultures in question” (66).

What is common to these last two studies and other similar ones is that they mostly deal with proverbs in standard Arabic, particularly in literary texts. They also focus mainly on the concept of equivalence, which resulted in discussions that all but ignore the socio-cultural dimension of Arabic proverbial discourse, as demonstrated above, and the cultural implications of translators’ choices. In fact, with the cultural turn that Translation Studies has taken in the 1990s (Lefevere and Bassnett 1990), equivalence has long lost its centrality. Snell-Hornby (1988, 22) dismissed it as “an illusion of symmetry between languages [...] which distorts the basic problem of translation,” while Pym (2007, 16) maintains that outside of localization projects where there are “huge doses of equivalence,” the concept “might appear to be dead.”

3. Theoretical framework

To contribute to filling these gaps in the literature, this article will explore the translation of vernacular Emirati proverbs into English by drawing mainly on Venuti's ethics of difference (1995/2008; 1998/2006), and the distinction he makes between foreignizing and domesticating translation. Venuti (2006, 21) takes issue with linguistic-oriented approaches, including theories of equivalence, for presenting a model of translation that "unduly restrict[s] its role in cultural innovation and social change." Such approaches are particularly limited for all types of texts (23), since they "purify translation practices and situations of their social and historical variables, leaving [...] translators unequipped to reflect on the cultural meaning, effects, and values produced by those practices" (25).

Moreover, Venuti criticizes assimilationist and domesticating translation practices, particularly in the Anglo-American context, for they inscribe dominant domestic values in the translated text, producing fluent TTs (2006, 126). Such practices are, according to him, dangerous because they mask the act of mediation that shapes translation, allowing it to wield "enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures," and to "fix stereotypes" for these cultures by "excluding values, debates and conflicts that don't appear to serve domestic agendas" (67). Venuti thus proposes his ethics of difference whereby a foreignizing translation is ethical as it resists "dominant values in the receiving culture so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text" (2008, 18), and to perform what he calls "a work of cultural restoration" (148).

Several scholars have long identified the limitations of this approach, including Baker (2007), Tymoczko (2000), and Shamma (2005). The latter, for instance, rightly warns that a foreignizing translation is not inherently ethical nor does it necessarily unsettle "the feelings of moral complacency and cultural superiority of its readers" (63). He explains that some foreignizing translations construct an "extreme foreignness" of the cultural Other to the point where they become "more 'eccentricizing' and 'exoticizing' than foreignizing" (63).

Despite such criticism, Venuti's approach is "the hitherto most influential ethical approach" to translation (Alvstad 2021, 185), particularly in a context of imbalance in translation flows, as is the case with flows between Arabic and English. Hatim and Munday (2019, 93) point out that very little is, indeed, translated from Arabic into English, and much of it "tends to sound the same, almost as though written by one writer and translated by one translator." They rightly argue that such practices bring about "exclusion" not only of translators who are kept invisible, but also of readers who are "coerced to read in a particular way" (93).

Within the same vein, Spivak (1993, 183) denounces such domesticating and assimilationist practices in the West, maintaining that it is a form of "neocolonialist construction" of the third world whereby cultural differences of third world cultures are obfuscated. She thus joins Venuti in the call for a literalist translation that preserves the rhetoricity of the source text (ST) and foregrounds "areas of difference and different differentiations" (193). Like Shamma, however, Spivak is wary of exoticism and warns against adding "local color" (182) to the text as it will only contribute to a homogenizing and reifying representation of the Other.

Given the objectives of this research and Venuti's ethics of difference with its emphasis on ST culture and belief that translations should "be written, read, and evaluated with greater respect for linguistic and cultural differences" (Venuti 2006, 6), this article borrows its analytical tools from Cultural Linguistics. A recently developed sub-discipline of linguistics that explores the way cultural conceptualizations are encoded in language, Cultural Linguistics provides both a theoretical and analytical framework for translation researchers to move "beyond the semantic, structural, and functional analysis," to gain valuable insight into proverbs from a cultural perspective (Dabbagh 2017, 592). It also offers translators "an analytical model for breaking down cultures and examining their components" in the process of translating (Heydon and Kianbakht 2020, 1).

Conceived by Sharifian (2011, 2012, and 2017), Cultural Linguistics¹ is concerned with how language encodes and instantiates cultural conceptualizations that encompass human experience. These cultural conceptualizations are simply "the ways in which people across different cultural groups construe various aspects of the world and their experiences" (Sharifian 2011, 38). They also have a dialectical relationship with language, since language allows speakers to co-construct cultural conceptualizations, while the latter contribute to shaping both language structure and language use, leaving traces at three levels: morphosyntax, meaning (semantic/pragmatic) and discourse (Sharifian 2017, 3).

Accordingly, he identifies three main analytical categories to examine the interplay between language and cultural conceptualizations, namely cultural schema, cultural category and cultural metaphor. The first refers to values, beliefs and norms shared within a cultural group, and abstracted from collective cognition rather than individual experiences (Sharifian 2015, 478). They are meanings that different groups of people ascribe to different concepts, like 'face' or 'time,' and are essential for communicating culturally constructed meanings. Successful communication is thus predicated on interlocutors being familiar with these schemas (Sharifian 2017, 14).

As to cultural metaphors, and much like conceptual metaphors, they involve a "form of conceptualization across different domains known as the source domain and the target domain" (18), since they help speakers understand one domain through the other. Unlike conceptual metaphors, however, cultural metaphors within Cultural Linguistics are conceived as cultural conceptualizations that are rooted in cultural traditions (18). An important type of such metaphors is "embodied cultural metaphors," i.e., metaphors that use the human body as their source domain. Accordingly, different cultures attribute "different values and significances to various body parts and organs and their functions" (Yu 2015, 227).

Finally, cultural categories are constructed within individual cultures. As a human cognitive activity, categorization is essentially cultural since every culture has categories for "objects, events, settings, mental states, properties, relations and other components of experience (e.g. birds, weddings, parks, serenity [...])" that are all "acquired through normal exposure to caregivers and culture with little explicit instruction" (Glushko et al. 2008, 129). Speaking about the relationship between cultural categories and language, Sharifian (2017, 17) explains that lexical items serve as labels both for cultural categories and their instance: "In English, the word *food* refers to a category, and a word such as *steak* is an instance of

that category” (emphasis in the original). Most importantly, categories are not just labels. They are attached to specific “behavioural norms and expectations” (17).

Another concept that proves useful in the analysis of the rhetorical nature of (Emirati) proverbs from a cultural perspective is that of discourse tradition. Originally introduced by Koch (1987), this notion simply refers to “traditional repetitions” in language use, and is based on the belief that “as in the study of linguistic phenomena, *traditional* phenomena play a crucial role” (Kabatek 2015, 214). Luckert (2019, 138) defines discourse traditions as “sets of more or less fixed norms and conventions for the production and reception of discourse which are specific to a given cultural setting.” She further explains that these norms and conventions could be at the levels of form, language or content. Based on such definition, proverbs could be considered an “important discourse tradition in its own right” (138).

4. Method

For the purposes of this research, the data were collected from one of the most recent collections of Emirati proverbs, namely Abdullah Bin Dalmook’s (2015/2021a) أمثال وحكم من الإمارات, and its English translation *Al-Mtwassf: Proverbs and Adages from the United Arab Emirates* (2021b). The collection has a chapter presenting the method adopted for data collection, another chapter explaining the classification of proverbs, and a third one introducing Emirati proverbs. This is done alphabetically, with each proverb being followed by definitions of specific words in it, an explanation—often-times lengthy and detailed—of its meaning, and the situation(s) where it is generally used.

The intended readership is therefore not exclusively Emirati since it is clearly assumed to include Arabic-speaking readers who need help with Emirati vernacular. This suggests that one of the objectives of the collection is to promote Emirati culture both within and outside the boundaries of the country. In fact, Bin Dalmook (2021) explains that he penned the collection “to revive our oral tradition” (10) and to contribute to the efforts exerted by the state to “preserve, collect and document”² UAE’s heritage for the benefit of the future generations (11). Pictures of a camel in the desert, oftentimes with a Bedouin, separate the different chapters of the book, thus furthering this objective.

The translated version follows the same layout, with one difference: the proverbs are first transliterated then followed by their respective translations. Both transliterations and translations are in red font and bolded, while the definitions, explanations and the situation are written in black and in smaller font size, which gives more visual prominence to the transliterations and translations. Moreover, the name of the translator is conspicuously absent from the English translation, and there is no note or foreword that refers to the translation process. Besides, while the translated version does have an introduction, it is simply the translation of the ST introduction. In other words, the process of translation and mediation that has taken place is backgrounded. In general, both the Arabic collection and its translation could accurately be described as an ethnographic work on Emirati culture.

What makes this ST and TT even more compelling for such a study is that the collection is one of very few similar collections, and only one of two³ such collections to have been translated into English thus far. More importantly, both ST and TT were published by Hamdan Bin Mohammed Heritage Center,

a Dubai government institution whose mission is not only to “enhance UAE’s national heritage, pass it on to the next generation,” but also to “[p]romote UAE’s heritage locally, regionally, and globally” (“Vision and Mission,” 2021). The two texts were thus clearly published to contribute to these objectives, which are, in turn, aligned with the objectives of the ST’s author.

Given the nature of the two texts and their objectives, and to answer the research questions raised above, we will analyse the translation against the Emirati proverbs from a Cultural Linguistics perspective to determine the extent to which UAE cultural difference has been preserved for the international audience. Since this is a qualitative investigation, we adopted one of the main sampling methods used in qualitative research, namely theoretical sampling (Barton 2001; Mason 2018). Theoretical sampling is the selection of “groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance” to the researcher’s research questions and theoretical position and “most importantly the argument or explanation” that s/he is developing (Mason 2018, 124). Since qualitative research does not aim for quantitative representativeness, but for a “window-like” or a “mirror-like” view on the phenomenon being examined (Giacomini and Cook 2000, 480), theoretical sampling is concerned less with representativeness than with “constructing a sample” that “builds in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop and test [the researcher’s] theory or [...] argument” (Mason 2018, 124).

Accordingly, the sampling of proverbs for analysis was based on four categories, namely discourse tradition, cultural schema, cultural metaphor and cultural category as defined above. For discourse tradition, we selected proverbs that are typical of Emirati proverbial tradition, i.e. proverbs with same end-rhyme. For if the proverbial discourse tradition in Anglo-Saxon England favours “proverbs which are alliterative” (Luckert 2019, 138), in the UAE, it favours rhyme and metered structures, made up of two equal hemistichs with the same end-rhyme, as explained above. For cultural schema, we selected and analysed proverbs that instantiate key schemas in Emirati culture, such as ‘face’ and ‘generosity.’ For cultural metaphors, we analysed proverbs that instantiate the embodied cultural metaphor of ‘eye.’ Likewise, for cultural categories, we focused on two of the most recurrent such categories, namely the ‘camel’ and ‘date’ categories.

5. Analysis

5.1 Translating the proverbial discourse tradition

Bin Dalmook’s collection is full of proverbs that are typical of Emirati proverbial discourse. Example 1 below is a case in point.

(1) **Source Text (ST):** لو كان فيه خير ما عافه الطير؛

lū kān fīh khīr / mā ‘āfeh ettīr

Gloss Translation (GT): If there was good in it, the bird wouldn’t have hated it.

Target Text (TT): If it is good, people would not refrain (2021b, 221).

This proverb is made of two equal hemistichs, both ending with the sound /r/. However, not only did the translation fail to reproduce this form, but it also did not compensate for such a loss by using any

of the sound effects also found in proverbs, like alliteration or consonance. A more literalist translation would have allowed the reproduction of the Emirati proverbial discourse tradition at both the plane of form and the plane of content, to use Luckert's taxonomy:

Proposed Translation (PT): If there was any good in it, the birds would not leave it.

The same applies to example 2 below.

(2) ST: ما يعرف رطني غير ولد بطني

ma ye 'raf raṭni ghīr wald baṭni

GT: Nobody knows my gibberish except the son of my womb

TT: No one understands you except for someone from your homeland (241)

This is another two-hemistich proverb with same end-rhyme that loses its distinctive features in translation. As Bin Dalmook (237) explains, this proverb is said when someone says or does something that only his/her children or members of family understand. Moreover, the Emirati word *raṭn* comes from the verb *raṭana*, which means to speak in an unintelligible language. A literal translation of the proverb would thus be: "no one understands my gibberish except for the son of my womb." With the use of the concept of 'homeland' in the TT, the latter fails thus to reproduce both the form and the content of the original proverb. While changing the structure of the original, the translation proposed below reproduces both content and form by using repetition (my) and rhyming:

PT: Only my own gets my tone

Example 3 is yet another instance where the Emirati proverbial discourse tradition is distorted in the translation:

(3) ST: لا عاش مالي عقب حالي

lā 'āsh māli 'agub ḥālī

GT: May my money not live after my health

TT: Spend and God will send [217]

This proverb is said to or about misers to encourage spending (Bin Dalmook 2021, 217). While this translation reproduces the meaning, it is a complete domestication as it replaces a proverb from an Emirati discourse tradition that favours rhyming, with another from the English tradition, favouring alliteration. A literal translation, in this case, would still allow the reproduction of both the meaning and discourse tradition:

PT: May my wealth perish after my health.

In addition to rhyming in wealth/health, the proposed translation also uses alliteration with the repetition of the sound /m/ at the beginning of 'May' and 'my'.

5.2 Translating cultural schemas

An instance of a cultural schema that got lost in Bin Dalmook's collection is the one embedded in the proverb below:

(4) ST: الويه من الويه أبيض

el-wayh minel-wayh abyad

GT: The face is white to the face

TT: Every one of us got his right (100)

This proverb, used when a debt has been paid, a promise kept or a right established between two individuals, instantiates the cultural schema of *wajh*, literally face. More than a case of metonymy or metaphor, *wajh* in many languages and cultures stands for a person's image, including one's dignity and honour, as it relates to one's family or tribe. It embodies values, attitudes and rituals meant to save one's face and, by extension, the family or tribe's face. This conceptualization is reflected in such Arabic expressions and idioms as *ḥifzu mā' al-wajh*, literally the preservation of the face's water, i.e. to keep one's dignity intact. In this specific proverb, the cultural schema of *wajh* is used alongside another schema, that of *abyad*, literally white. Sharifian (2017, 7-8) maintains that languages differ in their conceptualizations of colour since "[i]n one language, for instance, certain cultural schemas may associate the colour green with envy, as in English, [...] and in another language it may be a holy colour associated with paradise, as in Arabic." In Arab cultures, including the Emirati one, the colour white is associated with purity, honour and dignity. Thus, the Arabic expression *ḥāfaza 'alā bayādi wajhihi*, literally means he preserved the whiteness of his face, i.e. his purity, honour and dignity, and describing someone as *abyad* means that someone has a pure honour or a good reputation.

Accordingly, rendering this proverb as "Every one of us got his right" is to completely erase the cultural conceptualizations specific to Emirati culture, especially that keeping the concept of *face* in the English translation is unlikely to result in any unintelligible translation. In fact, in their influential politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) draw not only on Erving Goffman's conceptualization of *face*, but also on English folk notion of *face*, which is linked to notions of "being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'losing face'" (61). Thus, although the emphasis in the English understanding of 'saving face' is on the individual 'self' rather than the self as it relates to the family or tribe (61), *face* in Anglo-Saxon culture is still associated with one's image in society, and its use in a translation will not be too difficult to process for the English reader. Therefore, a possible translation of this proverb in English that preserves at least one of the schemas in the original is the following:

PT: Your face and my face are exonerated.

In Example 5 below, two cultural schemas are instantiated:

(5) **ST:** خذ بنت اليود عند الزمان تيود

Khed bint el-yūd 'and ezzamān tiyūd

GT: Take the daughter of generosity, in time she will give generously

TT: Get married to a decent woman that has a reputable family (138)

This proverb, said as advice to men looking for a bride, instantiates the cultural schemas of *yūd*, an Emirati variant of the classical Arabic word *jūd*, and *zamān*. The schema of *jūd* in Arab Bedouin culture is subject to layers of interpretation. It means a) something good, b) heavy rain—which, in the desert, is a blessing, and c) generosity. The verbs *ajāda* and *jawwada* mean 'to perfect.' In fact, Eleventh century

Preserving Cultural Difference in the Translation of Proverbs:
A Cultural Linguistics Approach

Muslim scholar Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani (cited in 2012) went as far as to associate *jūd* with *al-īmān*, i.e. faith, arguing that this value allows the faithful to be kind, tolerant and patient in dealing with and giving to people (as cited in Halabi 1988, 170). It is thus more than simply being generous. It also means being generally good and doing whatever is necessary to help whoever needs help. Likewise, the cultural schema of *zamān* in Arabic is complex. As a general concept, *zamān* stands for a period of or point in time or era. But there is also the cultural schema of *zamān* as an adverse experiential moment. Thus, from *zamān* are derived the noun *zamānah*, i.e. poverty, or a disease, illness or disability from which a person could suffer due the passing of time, and the verb *zamīna*, to get sick (Hussam Eddine 2002, 90-91).

Accordingly, the TT above fails to communicate the meaning of the proverb and the cultural schemas embedded in it. It also falls short of reproducing the two-hemistich structure with same end-rhyme. A possible translation that gets both the meaning and cultural schemas across, thereby preserving the Emirati cultural difference, is the following:

PT: Of the women marry the noble and generous; she will help you when times get treacherous.

The same obliteration of cultural difference is at work in the translation of the proverb below.

(6) **ST:** حاسدين الفقير على مودة الجمعة

Hasdīn el-faqīr ‘ala mūdēt el-jum‘a

GT: They are envious of the poor for death on Friday

TT: You can be the moon and still be jealous of the stars (132)

This proverb makes use of the cultural schema of *jum‘a* or, in Standard Arabic, *jumu‘ah*, i.e. Friday, as the holiest day of the week. As a day of the week, *jumu‘ah* might also be regarded as a cultural category, as opposed to the other days of the week, such as *al-khamīs* or *al-ethnayn*. However, reference can also be made to *jumu‘ah* as a cultural schema that encodes all rituals carried out that day, all layers of social and religious meaning ascribed to it, and the roles and expectations of all participants involved. Thus, in many Muslim-majority countries, it is a weekly holiday that sees practicing Muslims perform their *ḡuḥr* (noon) prayer collectively in the mosque. It is also the day of family gatherings and special meals. *Jumu‘ah* derives its status from both Quran and Hadith, i.e. the prophet’s sayings. It is the only day of the week mentioned in the Quran. In Hadith, it is presented as the day of forgiveness and the day where a dying Muslim is spared the trial of the grave. Dying on a Friday is thus one of the greatest blessings. Accordingly, while the translation of the proverb above reproduces the meaning, it does so in a completely domesticating way that goes against the objectives of the collection’s author and the publisher. A more literalist, foreignizing approach in this instance could still achieve semantic correspondence while keeping the Friday schema and its cultural significance:

PT: They begrudge the impoverished man dying on the holy Friday.

5.3 Translating cultural metaphors

In Bin Dalmook’s collection, numerous proverbs involve embodied cultural metaphors, as in Example 7 below.

(7) **ST:** عين تحب وعين تبغض

'ayn teḥeb w 'ayn tebgheḍ

GT: An eye loves and an eye loathes

TT: Variety is the spice of life (185)

This proverb instantiates the cultural metaphor of *'ayn*, eye, as the seat of emotions. In classical Arabic, as in various Arabic vernaculars, including the Emirati one, the eye is often conceptualized as the seat of emotions. When used with *'ayn*, the verb *qarra*, for instance, can instantiate this cultural metaphor. Thus, the sentence *qarrat 'aynuhu* means 'he felt happy and delighted.' Even endearment can be conceptualized in terms of *'ayn*, either in the singular or the plural. For example, *innaha qurratu 'ayni ummiha* means 'she is her mother's source of joy.' Nevertheless, the TT is here again obliterates the cultural metaphor, one that is easy to keep. It also fails to reproduce the rhetoricity of the original proverb, which makes use of two figures of speech, namely repetition (of *'ayn*) and antithesis (the juxtaposition of love and loathe). A possible translation that keeps the cultural metaphor would be:

PT: What one eye loves, another loathes.

This is also a literal translation that keeps the antithesis and compensates for the loss of the repetition of *'ayn* through the use of another figure of speech, namely alliteration through the repetition of the sound /l/.

As to example (8) below, it is proverb that instantiates the cultural metaphor of *'ayn* as a seat of desire.

(8) **ST:** اللي تشوفه العين كلو تباه

Ellī teshūfu al-'ayn kellu tebāh

GT: What the eye sees, it wants

TT: Whatever you see, you wish to have! (222)

Once again, the metaphor is erased in a domesticating translation and, with it, the Emirati cultural specificity. An alternative translation that both keeps the cultural metaphor and reproduces sound patterns associated with Emirati proverbs, including word-repetition and alliteration, is the following:

PT: The eye desires what the eye sees.

5.4 Translating cultural categories

Bin Dalmook's collection is replete with proverbs instantiating cultural categories that say much about Emirati culture but that are often erased and replaced with categories more familiar to the Anglo-American reader. Example 10 below is a case in point:

(10) **ST:** إن سلمت أنا وناقتي ما علي من رفاقتي

In selemt ana w-nāqti mā 'alaya men rfāqti

GT: If I and my she-camel are safe, I don't care about my friends

TT: After me, let the deluge flood (105)

This proverb is said in disapproval of egotistical individuals who put themselves above all the others. It instantiates the cultural category of *nāqah*, literally she-camel, which is a sub-category of the *ibēl*

category, i.e. camel. But *nāqah* is itself a category with sub-categories as instances of it, including *al-bāzel*, literally the pregnant she-camel. In fact, the camel has been so important for the Bedouins that they identified dozens of sub-categories under the category of *ibel*, depending on physical attributes, age or condition. The camel has historically been an integral part of the Arabian Peninsula culture. More than just an animal used for transportation, food and energy, it had over the centuries been of a “primary importance [...] for the Bedouins; their history, economy, ideology and culture in general” (Jung 1994, 231). This cultural value of the camel has lived on in the region. In the UAE, the camel is still considered a “primary symbol” of Emiratis’ cultural heritage (Meheesan 2015), and many proverbs reference (sub)categories of the camel, thus bringing out its centrality in the culture, as is the case in this proverb, where *nāqah* is valued as much as the self and put above friends. Replacing this cultural category and marker by one that is more familiar to the Anglo-American reader, namely deluge, is to go against the very objectives of the collection. The translation proposed below both keeps the cultural category and reproduces the metered structure:

PT: If my camel and I are safe, my friends’ feet can chafe

Example 11 below is another instance where an Emirati proverb instantiating a cultural category gets domesticated, including through the removal of the category:

(11) ST: الشيص في الغبه حلو

Ash-shīṣ fil-ghebbah ḥelu

GT: Raw dates at sea are sweet

TT: Appreciate little things for you may need them one day (85)

The Bedouins of the Arabian Peninsula have also identified dozens of sub-categories for the category *tamr*, literally dates, which is itself an instance of the category of food, precisely because of the centrality of this food in the unforgivingly arid region. One of these sub-categories is *ash-shīṣ*, which in classical Arabic means dates that have not ripened up and are, thus, chalky and bitter to the taste. A more literal translation that involves a definition of the concept rather than a transliteration, would have yielded an intelligible translation all while keeping the cultural categorization in the original:

PT: Raw dates are sweet when you are at sea

6. Discussion

Arguably, the English version of Bin Dalmook’s collection is not a wholesale domestication of the ST given the big, red, and bolded transliteration preceding every translation of a proverb, and the quasi-ethnographic explanations of all the proverbs. These could act as constant reminders for the Anglo-American reader that what s/he is reading is a translation, a text mediated by a translator. The foreignizing effect of these elements, however, is significantly reduced due to all the other discursive strategies used in the English translation.

First, the absence of any mention of or reference to the translator and the translation of the collection, represses the act of translating, which, as Venuti (2006) has demonstrated, conceals the work of mediation involved in translation and can create the unethical illusion of immediate access to the

Other. The translations also fall short of preserving the Emirati proverbial discourse tradition, which is itself very much a marker of Emirati Bedouin culture. More importantly, the translations of the individual proverbs are overwhelmingly domesticating since Emirati cultural conceptualizations are replaced with ones familiar to the English reader whenever this is possible, even when a more literalist translation that could preserve these cultural conceptualizations is both possible and intelligible and would thus not only keep cultural differences but also bring out cultural similarities. Keeping the cultural schema of *face*, for instance, would have at once introduced the Anglo-American reader to a key aspect of Emirati culture and shown that there is similarity despite difference.

Finally, the reproduction of the pictures featuring a Bedouin, a camel and the desert in the translation merely adds “local color” (Spivak 1993, 182) to it. While it is true that these same pictures are used in the source text and for the same purpose, i.e. to separate the chapters, they necessarily take on a different significance as they move from one context to another. In the context of the source text, published in the UAE for a readership that is primarily Emirati, these images will be read as both a part and a reminder of a rich heritage, as hoped for by the writer. In the context of an English translation meant for a primarily Anglo-American readership, these same pictures will be read and consumed as part of a centuries-old archive of texts and images that have stereotyped and reified the Arab other as backward and exotic, still living in the desert and riding camels. As Shaheen (2009) has well documented through his exhaustive and meticulous study of over 1000 Hollywood movies, for instance, this archive has constructed a “uniform ‘seen one, seen ‘em all’ setting,” one that he calls “Arab-land” and describes as a “desert locale” full of “palm trees, tents [...] and, of course, camels” (10). Because of Hollywood’s reach, these images, constructed and propagated through hundreds of movies and TV series, do not shape only the Anglo-American audience, but the international one, as well (6). In other words, instead of reminding of the rich Emirati heritage, and highlighting the foreignness and specificity of the foreign Emirati culture, these pictures, foreign and different but still very much familiar, will only contribute to exoticizing it and reducing it to a few clichéd stereotypes in the eyes of an international readership.

Indeed, these strategies combined have resulted in a translation that is, to borrow Venuti’s (2006, 12) words, “inflected with [the target text’s readers] own codes and ideologies as if it were an immediate encounter” with this collection of proverbs and the culture they represent. Since this culture and its texts are generally consumed through homogenizing and reifying filters, such an assimilationist translation can only result in the flattening of the source culture’s complexity and richness and the obfuscation of differences and, with them, commonalities, as well. As Spivak (1993, 193) aptly put it, such a translation makes it difficult to “track a sort of commonality in being set apart.”

7. Conclusion

In this article, the researchers raised two questions: How are Emirati proverbs as artefacts translated? And to what extent does their translation preserve Emirati cultural difference? Using analytical tools borrowed mainly from Cultural Linguistics, and drawing on Venuti’s ethics of difference, to analyse the

Preserving Cultural Difference in the Translation of Proverbs:
A Cultural Linguistics Approach

English translation of Emirati proverbs from Bin Dalmook's (2021) collection, they found that the proverbs were generally domesticated in the process of translation insofar as Emirati cultural conceptualizations were replaced with TL ones whenever possible. The Emirati proverbial discourse tradition, which favours rhyme and metered structures, was likewise undermined. While these changes mean a generally more easily accessible English TT, they also mean a TT that erases Emirati cultural difference. Moreover, in the absence of Emirati cultural conceptualizations, the use of pictures of a camel and a man in Bedouin garb in the TT risks to reduce Emirati cultural specificity and richness to images that have become overused clichés in Western representations of the Arab world.

By addressing the socio-cultural dimension of proverbs and related issues of cultural difference, the article complements existing literature on the translation of Arabic proverbs that remains more focused on issues of equivalence. While the concept of equivalence is useful for understanding "decontextualized" translation activity, such as localization (Pym 2007, 17), it is rather inadequate for cases where translation is expected to promote cultural heritage as is the case of Bin Dalmook's (2015/2021) collection and its English translation. Such a translation does not take place in a vacuum and cannot be examined as a "decontextualized" practice as it will be competing with and consumed against dominant narratives. The article shows that for such translations, Cultural Linguistics can be a fruitful framework. It offers useful analytical tools to dissect cultural components, enabling translators to produce TTs that foreground the source culture, and providing researchers with a framework for understanding and theorizing translation activities focused on culture.

هل بإمكان ترجمة الأمثال أن تحافظ على الاختلاف الثقافي؟ مقارنة مبنية على نظرية اللغويات الثقافية

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قسم اللغات الأجنبية، جامعة الشارقة، الإمارات العربية المتحدة

عدنان عبدالله

باحث مستقل

الملخص

تضرب الأمثال الإماراتية جذورها في الثقافة والعادات الاجتماعية الإماراتية، كما أنها تستخدم العديد من أدوات الشعر، فكانت ترجمتها أمراً صعباً وبخاصة أن الدراسات والأبحاث التي تتناول ترجمة الأمثال من شبه الجزيرة العربية لا زالت نادرة. ولسد هذه الفجوة، تحلل هذه المقالة ترجمة مجموعة من الأمثال الإماراتية إلى اللغة الإنجليزية، وذلك باستخدام أدوات تحليلية مستقاة من نظرية اللغويات الثقافية وبالاعتماد على مفهومي التغريب والتوطين للمنظر لورانس فينوتي، وكشف التحليل أنه على الرغم من أن الترجمة تبدو تغريبية، فإنها قد استبدلت المفاهيم الثقافية الإماراتية بمفاهيم أقرب إلى ذهن القارئ الإنجليزي، فكانت النتيجة نصاً غريباً وليس تغريبياً يختزل الثقافة الإماراتية في مجموعة من الصور النمطية المبتدلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأمثال العربية، الترجمة، اللغويات الثقافية، التصورات الثقافية، التغريب.

Endnotes

- ¹ Sharifian (2017, 2) distinguishes between Cultural Linguistics, with capital letters, as he developed it, and the expression 'cultural linguistics' with small letters, more commonly known as 'ethnolinguistics,' and generally referring to an "area of research on the relationship between language and culture," as explored by Palmer (1996).
- ² All translations are ours unless otherwise stated.
- ³ The other collection is Nasser Isleem's (2017) *Popular Proverbs: An Entrance to Emirati Culture*, which contains both Emirati proverbs and their English translation.
- ⁴ It is worthy of note here that this proverb, along with many other Emirati vernacular proverbs in Bin Dalmook's (2021) collection, may exist, either in this form or in a different one, in other Arabic vernaculars. According to Goitein (2010, 365), "despite the great differences in the stocks of proverbs peculiar to the various Arab countries, localities or sections of population, there remains a considerable common core found almost all over the Arab world, from Morocco to Oman".

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Preserving Cultural Difference in the Translation of Proverbs:
A Cultural Linguistics Approach

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