

Book review

Translation in the Arab World: The Abbasid Golden Age

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The Translation Movement (800–1150 CE) refers to the efforts of rulers of the Abbasid dynasty to translate many texts from Persian, Hindu, and classical Greek into Arabic. That tradition is characterized by its longevity (lasting almost three centuries), its geographic range (manuscripts were translated from Sanskrit, Persian, and Greek), and its disciplinary breadth (translations covered different fields of knowledge, ranging from literature, history, and mathematics to medicine, pharmacology, and philosophy). No other culture had ever invested so much time, effort, and money in translation. Moreover, translation into Arabic at that time required a great deal of creativity and innovation. The Arabic language, rich in literature and poetry, was made even richer by the Qur'an, but Arabs remained sceptical of the cultural intrusions that resulted from literal translations. The book *Translation in the Arab World: The Abbasid Golden Age* by Adnan K. Abdulla describes phenomena related to translation and interpretation especially from the Global South and broadens our understanding of who is considered a translation theorist and what constitutes a translation theorist. The Translation Movement, which flourished during the Abbasid period, lasted almost three hundred years, reaching its peak during the reign of al-Ma'mun. The book consists of 9 chapters.

Chapter 1 describes emergence of translation among Arabs, especially its transition from an individual effort initiated by Prince Khalid ibn Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah (634–709 CE) to a state-sponsored organized effort under the Caliph Abu Ja'afar al-Mansur (714–775 CE) who turned it into a government institution, which was called *bayt al-hikma*, the House of Wisdom. This institution, besides conducting research primarily in engineering and astronomy, was also responsible for translating manuscripts from Greek and Persian into Arabic. In the era of al-Ma'mun, the House of Wisdom grew in the middle of this hectic activity of translation and thrived unlike any other institution in the East or West. Translators from all over the world came to Baghdad to contribute to this renaissance and numerous manuscripts were translated from Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit. By the time of al-Ma'mun, the Translation Movement had reached its zenith; the highest official in the state, the caliph, had become the supreme patron of translation, investing vast resources. Translation became an important matter of state, and prodigious sums of money allocated to it.

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Chapter 2 explains how the Abbasid period witnessed different types of conflicts, mostly religious, sometimes between different Islamic sects and other times between Muslims and non-Muslims. During the Abbasid era, there were also many political conflicts. The Arab tribes were often in conflict with each other, even as they carried on the struggle against non-Arabs, such as the Persians, morphed into shubia, a nationalistic movement that denigrated the Arabs and questioned their legitimacy to rule. The movement was in fact restricted to a minority who thrived during al-Ma'mun's reign. These Persians never tired of reminding the Arabs of their rich cultural legacy in Persian literature, architecture, philosophy, and science. The translators alone worked hard to coin new words or to derive new vocabulary from old ones to enrich Arabic with new medical and philosophical terms. The Syriacs, who enriched Arabic with new terms and translations, had a great influence on tempering or reducing the Persian influence on the Abbasid society.

Chapter 3 discusses the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Arabic. The only extant translation of this important text belongs to the late period of the Translation Movement. It was completed by Abu Bishr ibn Matthew, a Syriac known for his philosophical writings. He knew Syriac and Arabic but did not know Greek. When the translator tried to transfer Aristotle's concepts into Arabic, he failed to understand them first, and then failed to communicate them to the Arabic reader. The chapter also discusses the efforts of the many Arab philosophers who tried to understand this flawed translation, beginning with Al-Farabi (d. 950 CE) ibn Sina (d. 1037 CE) and ending with ibn Rushd (d. 1126 CE).

Chapter 4 presents a discussion about translation in the Abbasid period. The conflicts that surrounded translation in the Abbasid period notably, involving its relevance to culture and its association with heresy, extended to include grammarians and logicians. From the annals of translation, there exists a unique discussion that highlights the conflict brought about by translation among the numerous social, religious, and intellectual groups of that time. The discussion involved a translator (Matius) and a grammarian (al-Sirafi) in 932 CE on the merits and demerits of translation, logic, and Arabic grammar (Margoliouth 1905). This debate is a rare occasion in the literature of translation in Arabic.

Chapter 5 describes a model of creative translation, which has immortalized its translator, because the translation surpassed the original so much so that it is forgotten. The translator is Abdalla ibn al-Muqaffa'. He was known for his distinctive prose and polished style. His use of prose was unheard of in Arabic, because it was a form associated with "inferior" types of literature. The chapter investigates the strategies adopted by ibn al-Muqaffa' to bring the text closer to its Arab reader, domesticating it to suit Arabic literary standards and Islamic beliefs. These strategies confused his critics, past and present: was this a translation or his own writing? This dilemma is unique in Arabic, because translation was associated in Arabic with the Syriac "word-for-word" model that resulted in awkward and unintelligible texts. Ibn al-Muqaffa's rendering of the Persian text into Arabic in a beautiful prose he called translation puzzled many of his contemporaries who accused him of forgery, because there was a thin line separating his ordinary writing style from the style of the translation. Upon examining the translation methods and strategies used by ibn al-Muqaffa', one realizes that he decided that the best way to make Arabs accept and admire prose (which was not the medium of literature at the time) would be if the translation did not

appear as such. He rephrased and adapted and refined his translation so much that the readers felt that they were reading an Arabic text saturated with Islamic spirit and religious concepts and, as such, they embraced it as their own. The chapter ends with a discussion of other attempts by other poets/translators to translate texts across completely separate cultural boundaries.

Chapter 6 describes a central figure in the history of translation in the Abbasid period—Hunain ibn Ishaq. He is the single most important figure in the history of the Arabic Translation Movement. His invention and his command of Arabic, Greek, Persian, and Syriac set him apart from other translators. He coined many medical and anatomical terms which did not exist in Arabic. His translations covered books on philosophy, medicine, dreams, Greek mythology, and history. He also wrote on Arabic grammar and lexicography. His innovations in translation included the “invention” of a new “sense-for-sense” method which gained popularity and came to be associated with him.

Chapter 7 discusses if the abbasids have a theory of translation? During the Abbasid period, the legitimacy of translation was not in doubt: it was an important social and intellectual endeavour involving many classes of society. No one questioned the legitimacy of translation, the objection is not against translating books in science, but to subjects that challenge traditional thought, such as philosophy. Translation is seen as questionable in terms of its compatibility with Islam and its teachings. The Abbasid translators mostly relied on the Syriac tradition of translation, a tradition that extended hundreds of years before the advent of Islam and before Arabic developed into the lingua franca of the new Islamic empire. The Syriacs believed that a word-for-word approach was not only the “correct” method of translation but that this method also provided protection against any interventions, especially if the texts was religious. With the development of the new Islamic state, the translation of foreign texts became a major concern, and the Syrian was particularly suited to transforming the knowledge of the Greeks into Arabic.

Chapter 8 discusses a puzzling contradiction: how can one explain the abundance of translations in Abbasid society where manuscripts were translated on every conceivable subject—medicine, chemistry, philosophy, history, civics, astrology, perfumery, zoology, falconry, cooking, sex, and witchcraft, but no translations of even a single poem from any languages at the time? Many Persian and Indian tales and fables were translated into Arabic, as were the Greek myths and adages, but the poetry of these nations was not translated; we do not even hear about attempts to translate poems. It seems that writers and critics rejected them and ridiculed their quality. Poetry, in the words of al-Jahiz, is a virtue “confined to Arabs, and to those who spoke in the tongue of the Arabs.” For al-Jahiz, poetry is not a literary genre; rather, it is a virtue that no other nation enjoys except the Arabs. Apparently, what al-Jahiz is referring to is not the poetry we are familiar with, but a much more comprehensive concept that was common to the Arabs. For Arabs at this time, poetry was their pride, a record of their lives and deeds. About a hundred and fifty years after al-Jahiz, a noted grammarian, ibn Faris (d. 1005 CE) criticized Greek poetry, which means this grammarian had read some foreign poetry.

Chapter 9 describes the influence that translation exerted on Arabic vocabulary and structure. In the pre-Islamic era, the majority of Arabs were confined to the Arabian Peninsula, living in relative isolation from the outside world, except for those close to the areas of foreign influence (Byzantine and Persia). Orality was dominant and illiteracy was rampant. Arabic was not exposed to foreign influence, and

remained the basic means of expression for numerous tribes, which were scattered all over Arabia. However, this did not last long. With the advent of Islam, Arabs were exposed to different nations and cultures (i.e., Persian, Syriac, and Greek), whose languages were more developed to Arabic in terms of terminology and writing system. Arabic faced the challenge of accommodating the sciences and new fields of knowledge that accompanied their exposures to other nations and civilizations. This must have been a daunting task, since Arabic had no medical, philosophical, or scientific traditions and vocabulary, and translators had to resort to a range of strategies to express this knowledge. It was the translators who undertook the task of transferring this knowledge by inventing new vocabulary through loan words, coining new terms, transliterating, and deriving new meanings and senses from old words. The one translator who surpassed all others in enriching Arabic with his translations and derivatives is Hunain, who helped establish rules for translating scientific terms by deriving and coining hundreds of words related to medicine and ophthalmology. His efforts led other translators to adopt his terminology, leading to uniformity in the use of scientific and philosophical terminology that helped promote the advancement of the sciences in the Abbasid period.

This edition of the book can be used by students and scholars of translation and comparative literature who are interested in the history of translation and transmission of ideas from one culture to another. Therefore, this book describes the translation movement in the Abbasid period, but it is not intended specifically for historians or Arabic literature scholars.

References

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