

A Semiotic Approach to Translating between Arabic & English

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Abstract

Drawing on Arabic authentic excerpts that feature key semiotic signs in English translation, this paper shows how challenging it is for translators to capture the communicative value of such signs. The discussion shows that signs have two important components: iconic and indexical. In a few cases in which a happy coincidence may exist in the language pair, the translator can relay both components and, optimally, capture the semiotics of the sign. However, in most contexts, he/she needs to search for other translation procedures. These may include formal equivalents that follow source language norms, functional equivalents that embrace target language iconicity, ideational equivalents that only capture the sign's indexical import, or a combination of two procedures. In any case, the translator should pay utmost attention to the interpretant of the semiotic sign in its relevant context because the same sign may have to be rendered differently.

Keywords: Translation, Semiotics, Sign, Iconicity, Arabic, English.

Introduction

In order to communicate with each other, people normally use language. However, their messages are not transmitted only via the use of the vocabulary of these languages. Rather, they “make significant use of signs, symbols, sounds and other means to convey their messages” (Mahmoud 2005: 74). According to Grutman (2009: 261), one needs to adopt a semiotic approach to see “how people make sense of their experience of the world and how cultures share and give currency to this understanding”. He (p. 260) defines semiotics as “a theory of how we produce, interpret and negotiate meaning through signs”. However, the most common definition of “semiotics” is that it is the study of signs (Almannā 2016: 162). It is defined by Stam et al. (1992: 1) as “the study of signs, signification and signifying systems”. The subject of semiotics is divided by Charles Morris

(1972: 15 cited in Nöth 1990: 50; see also Al-Shehari 2001: 104; Almannā 2016: 162) into three

branches:

- semantic branch, focusing on the meaning of signs and their relationship with what they stand for.
- syntactic branch, dealing with the structural relations between signs.
- pragmatic branch, studying the ways in which signs are used and interpreted.

Fiske (1990: 40), however, divides the subject of semiotics into three main areas, namely:

- the ‘sign’ itself, that is, the study of signs and their different varieties in different contexts.
- the ‘codes’ into which signs are constructed and organized.
- the ‘culture’ within which these codes and signs operate.

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Approached from a different perspective, Faiq and Sabry (2013: 47) hold that semiotics is “the study of the methods in which local populations communicate through signs and symbols that are obviously influenced by cultural traditions”. It is worth noting that there is no single or comprehensive theory of semiotics. However, two semiotic models, originated in the nineteenth century, are widely used as the basis for the study of semiotics. The first model was introduced by de Saussure (known as *structural semiotics*). The second model was proposed by Peirce (known as *interpretive semiotics*). These two models are central in discussions of the origins of semiotics in both American and European traditions (for more details, see Grutman 2009: 260; Faiq and Sabry 2013: 47).

Objective of Study

The aim of this study is to examine how Arabic semiotic signs in authentic translational textual data are tackled in English translation in terms of the indexical and iconic representation of a sign. Through critiquing illustrative examples, there will be an attempt to see what translation procedures translators have employed and how appropriate they are in capturing the meaning of Arabic semiotic signs in English.

Research Method and Corpus

This is a qualitative study devoted exclusively to analyzing translational data involving Arabic signs in English translation from a semiotic perspective. The corpus consists of examples of semiotic significance extracted mainly from translated fictional works. Each example in the corpus is contextualized and subjected to a critical semiotic analysis.

Structural Semiotics vs. Interpretive Semiotics

De Saussure (1916/1983: 67) views languages as a system of signs, which have their own meaning through their relationships with each other. The overall meaning of a sign is primarily determined by its function within the language system as well as by its relationship with other signs. Thus, the meaning of a sign, for Saussure, is “language-based and language related, with thoughts being triggers for meanings which in turn are triggers for language signs” (Adab 1997: 159). As such, his definition of the sign as being composed of a signifier, i.e. the physical form of the sign, and signified, i.e. the mental concept of the sign, can only be applied to linguistic materials. He focuses only on the linguistic signs as two-fold entities which exist only by virtue of the association of the signifier and the signified. The relationship between these two elements is conventional, i.e. the socio-cultural conventions have a crucial role in determining such a relationship. In other words, to generate the required relationship between any signifier and its signified, people should use words, phrases and the like to refer to what people have been used to. Otherwise, the relationship will not work “unless a relevant context is constructed to support the new relationship” (Al-Shehari 2001: 121). Saussure’s definition places restrictions on the concept of the sign, excluding other social phenomena from having their own signs in any interaction. In her critique of Saussure’s approach, Adab (1997: 159-160) rightly comments:

In stating that the description of sign function has to arise from “faits de parole” or language in use, Saussure does not, however, take into account variations in meaning which can arise from idiolect at the level of individual or of sub-group within a given socio-linguistic group (cf. Pergnier), individual intention in specific contextual use.

Peirce (1931/1958 cited in Adab 1997: 161), however, defines a 'sign' as anything which is “so determined by an object and [...] so determines an idea in a person’s mind, that this latter determination, which I term the Interpretant of the sign, is thereby immediately determined by the object”. In other words, a sign, for Peirce, is anything that is determined by an 'object' that invokes in a person’s mind an idea, image and the like. Such invocation is what he labels 'interpretant'. So, the interpretant can assume various forms, such as “a synonym or emotive association” (Al-Rubai’i 1996: 79). For example, the lexical item *كلب* 'dog' in classical

Arabic as once used by Bedouin Arab tribes refers to a physical referent in the real world (object) as well as invoking in the mind of the hearer/reader the concept of fidelity. So, the relationship between the object and the concept fidelity is what Peirce calls 'interpretant' that works as a sign. However, while the physical referent has not changed, its interpretant has drastically changed in Standard Arabic and all Arabic vernaculars where the association is now between the object 'dog' and meanness/contempt. The same kind of thing applies to the English word 'gay', which is primarily associated with 'homosexuality' rather than 'happiness' in present day use. In this way, the interpretant of a sign may change over time; hence the translator needs to be aware of such new semiotic associations. It would be, for example, ridiculous for a translator to use the signs **كلب** or 'gay' based on their original semiotic associations when rendering contemporary Arabic and English discourse. From a Peircean point of view, a sign can be anything, such as words, phrases, sounds, symbols, dream, diagram, wink, picture, odour, flavour, and so on.

Peirce further differentiates between the sign and its functions. According to him there are three types of functions, namely iconic, indexical and symbolic. These three functions of the sign can be linked directly to the translation process. In order to understand a sign, which functions in the first place iconically, translators sometimes do 'intralingual' translation, to use Jakobson's (1959/1992: 145) classification, in an attempt to determine the sign's indexical function. If the translator fails to find a target language (TL) sign with a similar iconic function, then s/he relies on the indexical function of the sign to arrive by paraphrasing, expansion and so on at a somewhat different sign in terms of iconicity. It is worth noting here that the iconicity of the sign, i.e. the relation between a sign and its object, "is not wholly established by rules, by a code, as in the case of symbols", and "does not preexist with respect to the code, as in the case of indexes, but rather is invented freely and creatively" by virtue of the relation established between a particular object in the real world and what this object invokes in the mind of the hearer/reader (Pertilli 1992: 240).

Following is an illustrative example in which the translator has followed the semiotic sign only iconically apart the interpretant, thus offering a sign that does not communicate the intended message in the target text (TT): [Arabic semiotic signs and their renderings are highlighted in boldface and renderings within square brackets are literal (word-for-word) translations]

(1) - كلاً يا سيدي، إن ابني لا يرفع عينيه إلى جارة ولا إلى غيرها ... (بين القصرين، ص 123-124)

[No sir, verily my son **does not lift his eyes** to (female) neighbor or any other one ...]

(2) Of course not, sir. My son **doesn't lift his eyes to look at** a neighbor girl or anyone

else. (Palace Walk, pp. 128-129)

The employment of body parts as semiotic signs does not usually lend itself to an iconic rendering between source language (SL) and TL. In several cases, the use of source text (ST) iconicity in interlingual communication may fail to reach the intended indexical interpretation and would linger within the bounds of literalness. Witness how the translators Hutchins and Kenny (1990) have missed the semiotic message in (1). The English translation (2) gives the impression that the referent (the speaker's son) walks around with his eyes fixed on the ground, not looking at anyone. In this way, the physical act (lifting one's eyes), which is used to semiotically index politeness, is interpreted literally as a physical act. To capture the semiotic import, the translator needs to activate the interpretant which would lead them to decipher an indexical import that is part and parcel of the context. In this case, a combination of indexical and iconic rendering like (3) below will do the job perfectly:

(3) Of course not, sir. My son is **so polite that he wouldn't lift his eyes to look at** a neighbor girl or any other girl for that matter.

In a few cases, however, a happy coincidence may exist between SL and TL as the following example quoted from Fu'ād al-Takarlī's story *خزين اللامرئيات 'A hidden Treasure'*, which is translated by and printed in Husni and Newman (2008: 226-227):

(4) لم أفكر آنذاك بالزواج. ناقشت الفكرة، بهدوء، مع والدتي فانتهينا إلى نتيجة مرحة ومشرفة هي أن القطار لم يفت بعد عليّ.

[I didn't think of marriage then. I discussed the idea, quietly, with my mother so we ended with a happy and bright conclusion that the train has not passed me by yet]

(5) Although at that time I did not think about marriage, I did discuss the idea quietly, with my mother reaching the happy and optimistic conclusion that **it was not too late for me**.

In (4), the sign *القطار لم يفت بعد عليّ* [the train has not passed me by yet] functions iconically. In terms of translation, it can recall an icon in the TL sign system which refers to the same signified in the SL sign system. Thus, it so happens that English has exactly the same sign, i.e. *'to miss the train'*, which has a semiotic potential that can be used in a variety of situations including a marriage context. However, as can be seen, the translators have decided to opt for an indexical approach apart from iconicity in rendering the above semiotic sign, thus producing a paraphrase or what farghal (1994) calls 'ideational equivalent'. The English translation in (5), therefore, fails the semiotics of (4) by paraphrasing a sign which is supposed to be relayed iconically in order to maintain the emotiveness and aesthetics of the ST. One should note that this semiotic translation loss can go unnoticed unless the ST is compared with the TT.

Semiotic Translation

This section examines authentic translational excerpts that feature sensitive semiotic aspects of Arabic into English translation. The purpose is to see how translators handle challenging semiotic signs as well as engage in translation criticism that may help student as well as practicing translators. Thus, building on the premise that languages, in particular those culturally distant like Arabic and English, perceive and conceptualize world realities and experiences differently, one would not hesitate to conclude that the significance of semiotic signs and their functions are different from one language to another. In this regard, Adab (1997: 159) holds:

In translation, no one sign can possibly be considered totally equivalent to a sign in another language system since the associative network of signs within which the second TL sign functions will probably differ from that of the SL.

Further, due to the lexical and syntactic diversity among languages, mismatch of the significance of the micro-signs between the signifying systems of the interfacing languages frequently occurs, making it more difficult for the translator to choose the most appropriate equivalent among the alternatives available. As Shapova et al. (2022, p. 378) states "Language is the most complicated and universal semiotic system, which interpenetrates culture and social reality"; it is "the repository of cultural conceptualizations that have prevailed at different stages in the history of a speech community" (Sharifian, 2014, p. 118). Discussing the role of semiotics in translation, Presner et al. (2021, p. 126) contend that adequate translation needs to decipher and focus on the mental mechanisms involved in linguistic replacement and the transfer of meaning. Similarly, Paolucci (2021, p. 68) argues that a sign is imprinted on the human mind and embodies previous experience and knowledge in a community and that "the notion of sense-making is crucial for cognitive semiotics" (p.13). Petrilli (1992: 233), commenting on the complexity of semiotic translation, states:

Translative thinking is a semiotic [sic.] process in which something stands for something else, in which different sign systems are related, in which one sign is more fully developed, enriched, criticized, put at a distance, placed between inverted commas, parodied or simply imitated, and, in any case interpreted in terms of another sign.

As such, representing a particular cultural identity in the SL becomes a micro-sign that places extra burdens on the translator by assuming further meaning and connotative values, in particular when it does not lend itself easily to the TL. This is in line with Ponzio (1991: 198-199, cited in Pettrilli 1992: 235) who holds that although “propositions are also no doubt conventional-symbolic, they are based fundamentally upon the relation of representation, that is, upon the iconic relation”. Should the translator not take into account the properties of the sign as well as its functions in a particular socio-cultural environment on the one hand and its relationships with other signs on the other, the macro-signs, namely genre, text and discourse, could also be affected. In this respect, Adab (1997: 164-165) writes:

Consideration of signs in terms of micro-units of a message, or meaning content, and in terms of function within overall macro-structure, will also ensure that translation procedures and strategies are not selected on the basis of linguistic forms alone [...] in other words, correspondence of form between SL and TL may often be coincidental and is most certainly not the primary criterion for selection of TL units [...].

To see how, for example, the omission of a semiotic sign can seriously affect a whole episode in the translation of a novel, let us cite AlSanea, the author of the novel *banaat al-riyaadh* 'Riyadh Girls', 2005/2006, which is translated as *Girls of Riyadh* by AlSanea and Booth, 2008). She employs the colloquial Arabic proverb يضرب الحب شو بئل *yidrab-il-hub šuu biðil* (lit. Damn love's humiliating power i.e. Damn love: how humiliating it can be! p. 12) within an episode that lengthily quotes the well-known Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani (popularly nicknamed the Woman's Poet) from a poem in which he laments the status of Arab women. AlSanea's semiotic purpose of citing this proverb is to emphasize the power of love (which led Qabbani's sister to commit suicide [when Qabbani was a teenager] because she was forbidden to marry the man she loved) and to argue that Qabbani's positive attitude towards women was not a genetic leap in Arab psychology but rather an accidental consequence of a painful, personal experience (i.e. the tragic death of his sister). In this way, the proverb may be semiotically construed as a micro sign used to consolidate and enhance a macro sign (women's suppressed status in Arab societies). Examining the translation of this episode (pp. 3-4), one can generally trace the macro sign regarding Arab women's status but, unfortunately, the translation (which has opted for omitting the proverb) fails to bring out two significant sub-themes: the humiliating power of love (as envisaged proverbially by Arab culture) and the personalization of Qabbani's attitude towards women. In other words, the deletion of the micro sign (the proverb) has seriously damaged the semiotic message intended by the ST. Therefore, due to the omission of the proverb, which has semiotic functions, target readers may find it difficult to follow the thread of argumentation in the ST. They are only presented with a semiotically impoverished picture of a culturally-oriented state of affairs.

To reconcile differences between the signifying systems of languages involved in translation, translators may make use of certain procedures in order to transfer the semiotic entity that needs special treatment under certain conditions. Hatim and Mason (1990: 105-106) suggest four stages for this purpose:

- 'Identification', in which the translator pinpoints the ST semiotic entity that needs special treatment;
- 'Information', in which the translator selects an appropriate TL 'denotational equivalent' for the ST sign;
- 'Explication', in which the translator evaluates the denotational equivalent chosen in stage two to see whether it is 'self-sufficient' or not. If not, the translator should “seek to explicate by means of synonymy, expansion, paraphrase, etc.”; and

- 'Transformation', in which the translator identifies “what is missing in terms of intentionality and status as a sign”.

To implement these stages, the following example quoted from Jandāri's story *حكاية قديمة An Old Tale* (1997: 22) can be considered:

(6) على كل حال وجدت نفسي قبل سنوات وسط عدد كبير من البدو في مجلس عزاء أقيم على روح رجل كانت تربطني بولده صداقة حميمة ...

[Anyway I found myself years ago amid a large number of Bedouins in a gathering of mourning held for the soul of a man with whose son I have a close friendship]

- Identification: the sign that requires special treatment here is مجلس عزاء [a gathering of mourning].
- Information: it may be translated into English as '*consolation gathering*' or '*ceremony of mourning*'.
- Explication: the mental picture conjured up in the mind of most of the original readers when reading/hearing the sign مجلس عزاء is that it is conventionally a three-day ceremony of mourning in which people express their sympathy to the deceased's family.
- Transformation: the missing information in terms of intentionality and status as a sign is that the '*three days*' as well as the other elements of the sign, i.e. '*people express their sympathy to the deceased's family*', could be recovered from the context as well as co-text.

Therefore, relying on the TL denotational equivalent of the ST phrase مجلس عزاء '*consolation gathering*' or '*ceremony of mourning*', which is culturally-bound, without any sort of explication, might seriously affect the intentionality of the ST sign. Hence, after providing the reader with the missing information by either using square brackets or a footnote, the above example may be translated into:

- (7) At all events, some years ago I found myself sitting among a large number of Bedouins at a **consolation gathering [conventionally three days]** to mourn the life of a man with whose son I had formed a close bond of friendship.

To demonstrate how not applying these stages in authentic translation practice and, instead, being content with the denotational equivalent of the SL sign, may lead to a different sign in the TT, thereby affecting the overall meaning of the text, let us consider the following Quranic verse, along with Arberry's translation:

(8) يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِذَا طَلَّقْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَطَلِّقُوهُنَّ لِعَدَّتِهِنَّ وَأَحْصُوا الْعِدَّةَ (١، الطلاق)

[O Prophet if you divorce women, divorce them for their period and count the period]

- (9) O Prophet, when you divorce women, divorce them when they have reached **their period**. Count **the period**. (Arberry, 1955/1996, p. 284)

The semiotic term that needs special treatment is عِدَّة *'iddah*, which is a Quranic term referring to “the legally prescribed waiting period before a divorced woman can remarry; the legal period is prescribed to rule out pregnancy” (Farghal and Bloushi 2012: 5). Therefore, relying on its denotational equivalent, i.e. ‘period’ without any sort of explication, would not only affect the intentionality of the ST sign seriously, but also might invoke in the mind of the TL readers the idea of monthly period that women have, thereby producing a completely different sign. Being aware of the asymmetries between the SL and TL signifying systems,

Asad, another translator of the holy Quran, explicates the term by resorting to both paraphrasing and a footnote:

- (10) O Prophet! When you intend to divorce women, divorce them with a view to **the waiting period appointed for them, and reckon the period [carefully]**. (Asad, 1980/2003, p. 994)

Let us now consider the following example quoted from ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Madani’s *حكاية القنديل* ‘*the Tale of the Lamp*’, cited in and translated by Husni and Newman (2008: 26-27):

(11) فقال السلطان للرجل: "تناول ما شئت من وسخ الدنيا فأصلح به حالك!!"

[The Sultan said to the man: "Take what you please from **the world's filth** so you fix your condition"]

- (12) The Sultan said to the traveller: "Take what you like from those **worldly goods** and improve your situation with it!"

The sign that functions iconically is *وسخ الدنيا* [the filth of the world], which, in this context, triggers another signifier, i.e. *نقود* or *فلس* 'money', with the same signified. In other words, the expression *وسخ الدنيا* here refers to a physical referent in the real world (a constellation of objects) as well as invoking in the mind of the hearer/reader the image of 'money'. So, the relationship between the object and the image of money is what Peirce calls 'interpretant', which works as a sign. As it is difficult to find a TL sign with the same iconic function, the translators have fallen back on the symbolic function, i.e. the association between the TL sign and the signified amongst the users of the TL. That is, they have opted for a 'generalizing strategy', to use Dickins' *et al.* (2002) term, in rendering the above proposition as 'worldly goods', which may include several things other than money, such as food, appliances, even women.

To witness the translator's suffering while trying to take into account the semiotic dimension, along with the elements of signs created by the original writer, let us consider the following example quoted from Mahfuz's (1959/1986: 127) novel *أولاد حارتنا* *Children of the Alley* and translated by Theroux (1996:103):

(13) دخل الأفندي البهو مصفر الوجه من الغضب فوجد زوجته واقفة مقطبة، فقالت: حركة غريبة

لها ما بعدها، ستكون حديث الحارة، وإذا تهاونا في الأمر فقل علينا السلام.

[The Effendi entered the hall with a yellow face from anger to find his wife standing glowering, so she said:

A strange move with something to follow it, it will be talk of the alley, and if we are lenient in this matter, then **say peace be upon us**]

- (14) Effendi strode into the hall, pale with fury, to find his wife standing there glowering. "That was something", she said. "We haven't heard the last of it either. It will be the talk of the alley, and if we ignore it **we will have no peace**".

The expression *فقل علينا السلام* is normally used in Arabic either literally to mean: "say peace be upon us", or metaphorically to mean "to live in or face trouble". Being aware of the SL expression along with its denotative and connotative meanings, the translator has offered a rendering that reflects closely the original expression's form and function at the same time, thereby preserving partially the expression's functions, i.e.

iconic, indexical and symbolic. However, to produce a more congruent and effective rendering, the translator could have opted for something more formulaic in English like '*we won't get much peace*'.

To see how different translators may jeopardize semiotic signs in translation, let us consider the two Arabic-into-English renderings below, which involve a Kuwaiti culture semiotic sign, viz. the concept of 'one-eyed vote' صوت أعور in parliamentary elections. In this scene, a voter reports on what Ali Faraj (a parliamentary candidate) confided in him just before going into the poll room:

(15)- ... he came close to me and whispered in my ear, "Look! I want a **one-eyed vote**". (Al- Maleh and Farghal, 2004: 223)

(16)- ... he came close to me, whispering in my ear, "We want **your vote**". (Al-Sanousi, 2006)

To first explain the culture-bound sign, a 'one-eyed vote' means exercising only one of the two votes to which a voter is entitled in order to increase the chances of the candidate voted for. So, Ali Faraj wanted the voter to give him a vote and refrain from exercising the right to the other vote. The first rendering opts for an iconic translation of this cultural element, leaving it to the target reader to understand what it means based on the context, which the translators Al-Maleh and Farghal have deemed sufficient for that purpose. Surprisingly, however, in a questionnaire given to 10 native English speakers (college students and teachers), only one informant was able to understand the said semiotic function, despite the fact all the informants had copies of the two translations in order to consult the context if they need it. What does this finding mean? Probably, the translator needs to be more transparent when rendering semiotic signs by combining local strategies, e.g. iconic representation followed by a parenthetical definition or paraphrase to insure transferring the indexical import. In this example, a parenthetical phrase following the sign like (exercising one of the two votes only) would do the job.

What about the other rendering in (16)? It was comprehensible and preferable to all the informants although the semiotic import of the sign is completely lost and, consequently, the rendering does not cohere with the surrounding co-text in which the voter says that he did not listen to Faraj and exercised the right to the two votes, albeit he was influenced by the big favour Faraj did him. As a matter of fact, he tells the reader that his first vote went to another candidate (Mohammed Farhan), while he happily (in the excitement of the said favor) gave the second (which he had planned to give to Fahd Al-Jasim) to Faraj. Here, one wonders what happened to this culture-bound element which functions as a key semiotic sign in the ST. This serious under-translation does not only cripple the TT in terms of cultural transfer, but it also distorts the coherence of the translation because it does not logically fit within the surrounding text (for more on this, see Farghal and Al-Masri 2000; Farghal 2004).

Following is an example featuring two semiotic signs: the first calls for an iconic translation, but the second requires an indexical translation (The extract is quoted from Mahfuz's (1959/1986, p. 245) أولاد حارتنا *Children of the Alley* and translated by Theroux, 1996, p. 201).

(17) وهتف عم شافعي محذراً:

يا هوه! للحيطان آذان، لو سمعوكم ما وجدتم من يسمي عليكم.

[And uncle Shafi'i shouted warning:

Hey you! **For the walls (there are) ears**, if they heard you, you wouldn't find **anyone to say in the name of Allah** upon you]

(18) "Please everyone! The **walls have ears**. If they hear you, **no one will listen to a word you have to say**," Shafi'i warned.

In (17) there are two signs that need special treatment, i.e. للحيطان أذان [for walls there are ears] and من يسمي عليك [anyone to say in the name of Allah upon you]. To begin with, the first sign أذان للحيطان is normally used to warn someone that it is not safe to talk about a certain affair at that particular time because the conversation may be overheard. It so happens that both languages, Arabic and English, iconically conceptualize and utilize such a socio-cultural activity in a similar way. From a semiotic point of view, as the SL sign and TL sign refer to particular referents in the real world, viz. 'wall' and 'ear' along with the relational process expressed by the verb 'to have', and meanwhile invoke in the minds of readers/listeners the same idea, we have an optimal equivalent where the both sign's iconic and indexical imports are reflected in the TT.

However, it is quite rare to have optimal equivalents when translating between two languages which are linguistically and culturally distant like Arabic and English, as signs do not usually lend themselves to the same iconic representation as the example above shows. In several cases, the use of iconic representation alone (15 above, for example) would fail to create a similar sign along with its functions and elements, thus producing a completely different micro-sign that would affect the meanings of the macro-signs, i.e. text, genre and discourse (cf. Mason 1994: 23-24). Similarly, the translator's inability to call up the appropriate sign's indexical import would do comparable damage. Witness how the translator has failed to deal with the second sign in (17), i.e. من يسمي عليك by offering a rendering that hardly makes any sense within the context, i.e. 'no one will listen to a word you to have to say'. In Arabic, such a sign invokes in the minds of the readers/listeners the idea of being vulnerable and in danger. Further, it seems that it is used by the original writer to emphasize the first sign, i.e. the warning not to talk about something because 'walls have ears'. Had the translator given the elements and functions of the sign full consideration, he could have suggested something like *'you'll find yourselves in real danger'* or *'you'll have serious trouble'*, which captures the sign's indexical import independently of its iconic form.

Finally, translators need to be aware of the fact that the same semiotic sign may function differently in different contexts. Witness how the same semiotic sign (the swearing expression الله يقطعك/يقطعه [May God strike him down/May God strike you down]) functions differently in (19) and (21) below:

(19) - كنت قبيل حضورك أتذكر سهرة الأمس واستعيد منظر الفار وهو يرقص، الله يقطعك.

(قصر الشوق، ص 333)

[I was remembering just before you came last night's soiree and recovering al-Far's appearance while he was dancing, **may Allah strike him down**]

(20) "Just before you arrive I was remembering last night and what al-Far looked like dancing. **May God strike him down!**" (Palace of Desire, p. 323)

(21) - دعيني أتكلم، لا تقاطعيني، لا تتدخل في ما لا تفهمين، انتبهني إلى عملك، الله يقطعك.

(قصر الشوق، ص 348)

[Let me speak, don't interrupt me, don't interfere in what you don't understand, pay attention to your work, **may Allah strike you down**]

(22) "Let me speak! Don't interrupt me. Don't interfere in things you can't comprehend. Pay attention to your work. **May God strike you down!**" (Palace of Desire, p. 337)

Whereas the Arabic semiotic sign embodied in the swearing expression **الله يقطعه** is intended as a flippant/intimate compliment in reference to the speaker's friend al-Far in (19), the speaker of (21) intends the same semiotic as a serious condemnation directed at the interlocutor. Not being aware of that, however, the translators Hutchins and Kenny (1991) have rendered it iconically as *'May God strike him down/May God strike you down'* respectively in both cases. On the one hand, they have opted for an iconic representation in (20) where it does not work, thus offering a rendering that misses the sign's indexical import and that could in no way function as a compliment in English. Hence, the translators ought to have sought an indexical rather than an iconic translation by offering something like:

(23) "Just before you arrive I was remembering last night and what al-Far looked like dancing.
Hilarious, wasn't he?" (Palace of Desire, p. 323)

Or even a flippant English swearing expression that can function as a compliment, such as:

(24) That son of a ...!

Note that the English flippancy in (24) is semiotically closer to the Arabic semiotic sign because it maintains the same register's tenor (Halliday 1978).

On the other hand, the translators have rightly chosen an iconic translation in (22) which can be interpreted as a serious condemnation, thus relaying the cultural value of the swearing expression, though not following the norms of TL in such contexts. To do so, they could have given something like:

(25) "Let me speak! Don't interrupt me. Don't interfere in things you can't comprehend. Pay attention to your work. **To hell with you!"**

One should note that while the semiotic mishap in the rendering of (19) can't be tolerated because it deviates seriously from the intended message, the slight mishap in the translation of (21) can be tolerated taking into account the purpose of the translation. That is, some translators may give priority to 'adequacy' over 'acceptability' (Toury 1995). However, within a semiotic approach to translation which aims to bring culture to spotlight, the translator also needs to strike a balance between the different constraints in translation activity, in order to do justice to both cultures.

Conclusion and Limitations of study

To conclude this paper, languages perceive and map socio-cultural activities and world experiences in different ways. Such differences between the signifying systems of languages require translators to use their utmost effort to reconcile any cultural clashes or encounters by transferring most, if not all, semiotic properties of the ST signs. However, a semiotic translation needs to be executed with utmost care in order to capture mismatching semiotic subtleties. From a semiotic point of view, when translators attempt to reflect the semiotic properties of the ST signs alongside their elements, viz. iconic, indexical, and symbolic imports, the resulting equivalent is one of five possibilities:

- an optimal equivalent where a happy coincidence occurs between the SL sign and TL sign, thus capturing both iconic and indexical imports.
- a formal or iconic equivalent when the focus is placed on the iconic function, i.e. the image, which works albeit it does not follow TL norms.
- an ideational/periphrastic equivalent when translators pay special attention to the indexical function, i.e. the idea, independently of the sign's iconic function;

- a functional equivalent when translators completely ignore the sign *per se* and try to find another sign that effectively works in a similar TL situation; and finally
- a combination of more than one equivalent, e.g. an iconic equivalent alongside a functional or ideational equivalent.

As for limitations, the study discusses data extracted from Arabic and English only. Future research may involve translational semiotic data from other languages, especially from works that have been translated into several languages. Another limitation has to do with confining the corpus mainly to one genre (fictional discourse), which leaves ample room for such investigation in other genres within literary discourse and beyond it.

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