

## **The Edges of Terminology Transliteration**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper takes up the question of what translational and representative functioning are exercised by terminology transliteration. Indeed, a major hindrance to translation resides in the source text terminology elaborated under specific, unshared concept-forming parameters, which hardly leaves the ‘corresponding’ terminology compatible in effect. This calls, among many other things, upon refuge to phonemic translation, or transliteration. Such practice, at one extreme, possesses an attraction, for offering an economic alternative to rephrase translation. There is, however, likelihood that transliteration turns out to diverge from translation to representation, in that the ‘code-siding’ implies a deliberate attempt to spark a desired communicative effect, and to locate the text outside the target language. It is postulated that Arabic enjoys a domesticating potential embodied in the seemingly flexible morpho-phonological system, which appears to subvert and subsume the source language terminology, and, thus, reduce its foreignizing potential.

**Keywords: transliteration; terminology translation; representation; lexical elaboration; equivalence;**

## **Introduction**

Whatever the parameters relegating the purpose behind, and the outlook of the translation end-product, be it—to adapt Lefevere’s term—“patronaged” or otherwise, the “paradigm war” in translation studies seems not to revolve around whether the task of translation remains the seizing of a relative equivalence within the target language store. An apparent fallacy in thinking translation goes that translators, at best, should seek a conceptual equivalence, whose very nature emphasizes an ideology of reduction to familiar references, dragging behind the misconception that what gauges the uptake of a translation is conformity to audience. That translation, after all, implicates cultural enrichment, a conviction of ‘divergence’ from equivalence offers itself, giving likelihood for ‘refuge’ to the source language, either as a form of cultural enrichment or as a way of engaging the target readership in a discovery act—as a continuity to the discovery embodied in the very fact of reading a translated work. One way of doing so resides in transliteration, or phonemic translation. In what follows, we establish the relevance of the transliteration technique for terminology translation, showing the domesticating potential of Arabic as compared to English. That the proposed technique perhaps challenges the notion of equivalence, there arises a need for downplaying the very notion of equivalence..

### Non-equivalence

The linguistic world-picture, Cowie ( Phraseology 56) states, “is commensurable with the mental attitudes and culture of a speech

community.” Indeed, culture is not only implemented for expression, but it is that language expresses, or more accurately, exposes culture in the sense that “if linguistic symbols interpret cultural patterns then these symbols become quasi-standards and quasi-stereotype” (Cowie 56), bearing the subconscious knowledge of standards, stereotypes, expectations and the specific grouping of default element of concepts. Language gets penetrated by culture through words—not all words expose culture—denoting material, historical, and phenomenological realities, for a society is a set of concepts for which a corresponding lexicon has to be elaborated. Lexical elaboration seems to begin by an act of constructing generics, where if we have two practices similar in their “deep structure” but slightly different in their “surface structure”, we are likely to specify two words for each respectively. Thus, the word, as other semiotic tools, marks a concept-bearing element tied with a frame of reference, and delivered upon a presumption of shared, unconscious knowledge as well as pre-established discursive data. This has serious replications on the act of translation: While the writer of the source text launches a term to evoke the mutually shared schematic construct, this evoking is not expected in the target culture. Equally generating non-equivalence is the target language word differing in terms of the expressive from the sources. Baker (1992) notes that, while the English word *mumble* recalls an image of embarrassment, its Italian near equivalent *lugugnare* conveys dissatisfaction. It might be a valid practice to avoid translating the word *archaic* into Arabic as *Kadim* (ancient), while the suitable move is to represent the expressive meaning as *adim el jadwa* (useless). At

the same time, it is pertinent to point to the problem of confusion as whether to translate the propositional or expressive meaning of the word. Hence, a word's default elements are both referential and connotative.

The source language word, thus, may put forward a concept gap that the proclaimed corresponding item fails to evoke. Baker (In *Other Words: A Coursebook In Translation* 21) explains that a translation of the English word *Speaker* (of the House of Commons) as *Chairman* in Russia does not cater for the salient rules of the speaker “as an independent person who maintains authority and order in Parliament.” This follows from the saliency of the British political landscape that the concept seems to have no equivalence not only in Russian but in several languages whose political communities do not share the same concept. Such difference may not only result in a possible loss of meaning, but may extend to mark an ideology of domestication in that meaning gets substituted for a deformed version. This deprives the target language not only of the linguistic characters as part of the target source lexicon but of the evoked meaning intended behind the specific choice of words.

The very requirement equivalence, though appealing to a possible interlingual harmonization, appears a “violent” container of not only words the enclosure of which purports to signify the associated connotation, but of those terms whose concepts—whether material or abstract—are not established in the target language. Translation, especially the one meant for communication, does not get reduced to

equivalence. Given the unlikelihood for the ‘corresponding’ word to share the semantic and expressive meaning alike, refuge might be sought to cultural substitution, “which involves replacing a culture-specific item or expression with a target-language word which does not have the same propositional meaning, but is likely to have the same impact on the reader.” (Baker 31).

Another way in which non-equivalence might be said to get resolved resides in rephrase translation, which adds information to explain the concept, as the latter requires not words, but phrases and whole sentences in the target language. Alternatively, translators may choose to use loan words for more specification, or when the supposed culturally ‘parallel’ term does not suffice. The use of loan words is relegated either by the norms of translation prevalent in a translator’s society or by the purpose set by the translator himself. Deliberate or unintentional agendas of domestication imply the abundance of loan words for they run in stark contrast with the goal of locating meaning in the target language. Apart from non-equivalence, loan words get prompted by exoticism, for as Baker describes they sound more, modern, smart and high class.

### **Transliteration**

To transliterate is to represent the pronunciation of the source language term through the alphabets of the target language so that it is reads, more or less the same. The word قرية (village) and جاهلية (the pre-Islamic era) gets transliterated as karia and jahilia. Such practice conserves the worldview present in an overriding, communion act of

lexical elaboration. Transliterated terms appear a better substitute for rephrase translation in doing justice not only to the generic nature and default elements of words but to how words are used to refer to concept in the source language, for conceptual distribution marks, among other things, cultural specificity. Another merit of transliteration is that it escapes proclaims of self-sufficiency as evoked through the one-sided conception embodied in a total reliance on the semantics and pragmatics of the target language. The relative enclosure of the source text marks engagement of several ways of looking at the world, penetrated by recognizing the meaning and, thus, the voices of others, where societies appear to share the construction of meaning. This is perfectly reasonable if one accepts that translation is after all a discovery act, and that, by extension, the translator's job involves enculturing the readership. Shifting the medium of expression, transliteration relieves "the translation's invisibility" by removing the illusionistic 'originality' of the translation, and bringing to the surface not the meaning, but the "meaner", whose presence identifies with instantiating reference to the source language. Lawrence Venuti (*The Translator's Invisibility*) complains that:

A translated text is judged accepted...when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic and stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention, or the essential meaning of the original text—the appearance, in other words that the translation is not in fact a translation but the "original." (1).

Venuti further states that “the illusion of transparency is the effect of fluent discourse, of the translator’s effort to ensure easy readability by adhering to current usage.” (Venuti 1) Going on the pace of readership might be at the cost of the intended meaning in case of non- equivalence, as the markedness of the term gets denied and replaced by another familiar to the audience. As such, translation can hardly be said to seek the mere goal of communication, for what lurks behind the surface appears a deliberate attempt by the translator to locate the concepts in the target culture. Hence, transliteration is one surface manifestation of “patronage” wherein the “master signifier” is not fidelity, but the intended goal behind either the “refracted text” choice of text and the manner in which it is translated.

### 3. Transliteration to Arabic

Noticed from the table below, which represents a proposed transliteration system, that English devises other combinations and scripts to channel the phonemic features of Arabic, where the English reader has to know some Arabic to attain the difference in meaning that is made by the slight difference in diacritical marks. The combinations are awkward enough to estrange the words that ‘strike’ the target readership as foreign.

| Characters |                 |            | Examples |                       |                           |                             |
|------------|-----------------|------------|----------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Arabic     | Transliteration | Buckwalter | Arabic   | Transliteration       | Transcription             | Gloss                       |
| ء          | '               | '          | سماء     | samaA'                | /samã'/                   | sky                         |
| أ          | Ā               |            | أمان     | Āmana                 | /āmana/                   | he believed                 |
| أ          | Ā               | >          | سأل      | saĀala                | /sa'ala/                  | he asked                    |
| ق          | w               | &          | مؤتمر    | muwtamar              | /mu'tamar/                | conference                  |
| إ          | Ā               | <          | إنترنت   | Āintarnit             | /'intarnit/               | internet                    |
| ى          | ÿ               | }          | سائل     | saAÿil                | /sã'il/                   | liquid                      |
| ا          | A               | A          | كان      | kaAna                 | /kāna/                    | he was                      |
| ب          | b               | b          | بريد     | bariyd                | /barīd/                   | mail                        |
| ة          | h               | p          | مكتبة    | maktabah<br>maktabahū | /maktaba/<br>/maktabatun/ | library<br>a library [nom.] |
| ت          | t               | t          | تنافس    | tanaAfus              | /tanāfus/                 | competition                 |
| ث          | θ               | v          | ثلاثة    | θalaAθah              | /θalāθa/                  | three                       |
| ج          | j               | j          | جميل     | jamiyl                | /jamīl/                   | beautiful                   |

**Table 1. Arabic Transliteration Scheme.**

Adapted from Habash, Soudi and Buckwalter  
(On Arabic Translation 17).

Transliterated words are foreignizing, not only through the very concept they bear, but through the foreign characters they come under. It is, thus, pertinent to note that ideology as such comes from greater sensitivity to foreign elements. Yet, a distinction has to be made between transliteration and the use of assimilated equivalence. In the latter case, translation is unproblematic, partly because such words, like Quran, Islam and many others, identify with the target language lexicon, and partly because the word hardly allows an approximation that it is hard to suggest an alternative. It, however, appears that equivalence remains semantic in nature as the dictionary definition of dictionary definition of assimilated words hardly do justice to the original concepts.

A salient feature of transliteration to Arabic—unlike, at least, transliteration to English —is that the word, instead of bearing a foreign element, is domesticated as it is subsumed within the morpho-phonology of Arabic, taking the 28 letters and 8 diacritical marks that can be used as separate letters. The Arabicness of the word is in the morphological adaptation it takes as much as it is in the ‘unusual’ sequence of sounds and letters. The word is not only borrowed but adapted, taking, more or less, the same morpho-semantic variant of original words. Thus, ‘radicals’ is not limited only to راديكاليون but may also ‘evolve’ in use to راديكالية (both adjective and noun) as well. This does reduce the foreignizing effect transliteration is often said to spark.



Transliteration enjoys a preserving function in so far the ‘corresponding’ TT terminology does not possess similar default elements or identical historicity and connotation. Adding to this, the technique unfolds the target language conceptual resources as measured by the source text, recognizing the potential for the source language community to signify and elaborate concepts. Thus, it should not be taken that translated words are there to maintain, say a deal of Englishness, what the translation is measured against is the maintain of meaning. However, consistent deployment of transliterated words, with a cumulative effect, may turn out to suggest an agenda for estranging the text, locating its concepts outside the perception of the target readership, especially in the presence of intertextual equivalence. Mike Holt (Translating Islamic Discourse 71) complains that terms like *shirk* are used in the translation of Islamic discourse, given that an equivalent term—polytheism—might be used without any loss or shift.

## **Conclusion**

It is my contention that there being an overemphasis on the reader’s comfort, in looking at the target readership as readers of the same kind as those addressed directly by means of their language background, and as readers for whom everything ought to be, if not familiar, ‘unproblematic’. It is true that transliterated words pose unfamiliarity on the target readership, but this should be an appreciated payoff, for fidelity is a goal readers of translated text are responsible for ensuring. One of the ethical standards of the translator is acknowledgement of sources of meaning through transliteration, while the suspension of the

latter presents the view that the concept is present in the target language.

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