# **Lexical Translation Difficulties and Context-dependent Synonymy**

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the general difficulties involved in translation equivalence at the lexical level, with examples from English-Arabic translation. The study tackles the major difficulties associated with lexical equivalence that are related to dictionary-based meanings. It attempts to provide a more comprehensive and systematic list of difficulty sources in relation to lexical equivalence, by suggesting additional categories that have been overlooked, or loosely mentioned in the literature, using authentic English-Arabic translation examples as much as possible. Six types of lexical difficulties are added to the ones previously listed in the literature. It also highlights cases in which the literal meaning of some lexical items and their intended or implied meanings are in asymmetric relation and cannot be rendered by the use of dictionary-based equivalents, but by using context-based equivalents.

**Keywords:** lexical equivalence, translation difficulties, context-dependent synonymy

#### 1. Introduction

Translation equivalence at the lexical level has been tackled by many scholars since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Vinay and Darbelnet 1958; Jakobson, 1959; Nida 1964; Catford 1965; Koller 1979; McGuire 1980; Newmark 1981; Snell-Hornby 1988; Hatim and Mason 1990; Hall & Hall 1990; Hervey and Higgins 1992; Baker 1992, 2001; Thomas 1995; Hatim 1997; House 1997; Munday 2001; Saraireh 2001; Hatim and Munday 2004; Hall 2005; Nord 2005; Boase-Beier 2006; Bahumaid 2006; Munday 2008; Hoff 2009; Pym 2014, among others).

This study investigates translation difficulties in a number of authentic translated examples that are associated with equivalence at the lexical level, in relation to words' conventional dictionary meanings, as well as cases of translation difficulties where focus is mainly on implied rather than literal dictionary meanings.

### 1.1. Objective

The main objective of the study is to explore the various types and sources of difficulty that are encountered by translators at the lexical level and producing a relatively more systematic and comprehensive taxonomy of them. It also tackles some authentic translation cases where conventional dictionary equivalents do not serve and have to be replaced by context-dependent substitutes. It is hoped that the study will contribute to developing a better understanding of the lexical difficulties involved in translation.

#### 1.2. Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on describing and analyzing some translation lexical difficulties that are additional to the difficulties that have been suggested

by translation scholars. Authentic translation texts were analyzed to investigate other types of lexical difficulties that seem to have been overlooked. A number of such cases are investigated through translators' errors—and added to the inventory of lexical translation difficulties.

#### 1.3. Literature review

Equivalence has been a dominant notion, and has also stimulated a number of theories related to it, whether pro or anti. Some scholars adopted it as a key theoretical notion, and categorized it into types. Nida classified equivalence into 'dynamic equivalence' vs. 'formal equivalence' (1964). Catford presented a linguistic theory of equivalence (1965). Newmark categorized it into 'semantic' vs. 'communicative' translation (1981). Koller (1979: 99-104) suggested five types of equivalence: denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal (Munday 2001:47). Hatim states that these classifications 'have proved influential enough not only to inform theories of translation but also to dictate modes of practice' (1997:9). On the other hand, some scholars expressed discontent with the notion of equivalence and shifted focus to other domains as Vermeer did in his Skopos theory, and Toury's adequacy' vs. 'acceptability' translation in which focus shifted to the socio-cultural norms and historical settings that determine equivalence (Munday, 2001:113). Jacobson said that no full equivalence between two words is possible (Jacobson: 114). Snell-Hornby (1988:19-20) focuses on the importance of cultural, situational and historical factors in achieving translation equivalence. House (1997:109) suggests that the basic requirement for equivalence of ST and TT is that they should match the function of the original text in relation to register and genre. Nord (2005:26) summarizes such controversy concerning equivalence:

The concept of equivalence has been questioned ever since it was first established. From Nida's formulation of "dynamic equivalence" (Nida 1964) it is a long and torturous path via Koller's specification of denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic and formal equivalence (1979:187ff., cf. also Koller 1995) to Neubert's "text-bound equivalence" (1984:68 and 1986:87ff.), which the translator constantly has to strive after and which may compensate for non-equivalent translations on lower ranks (e.g. at the level of words and phrases).

Regarding the classification of translation lexical difficulties, Catford (1965:94-96) suggests three main types: shared exponence (homonymy), polysemy, and oligosemy (semantic narrowing) and calls cases of non-equivalence between an ST item and a TT one "zero equivalence" if the item exist in the TL but is not used; whereas he calls it 'nill equivalence' if it does not exist in the TL. Saraireh (2001) tackles the translation difficulties at the lexical level with special focus on inconsistent renderings of English technical terms. Bahumaid (2006) discusses the difficulties with special focus on collocations in English-Arabic translation, and the difficulties related to technical terms. Alhihi (2015: 318-320) discusses English-Arabic translation errors in health documents

in terms of lexical additions, omissions, synonyms, compounds, collocations, and inconsistencies.

Baker (1992:21-26) offers the most detailed discussion and classification of equivalence difficulties at the lexical level (11 cases). Three types of Baker's lexical difficulties (the source language word being semantically complex, source and target languages having different distinctions in meaning and source and target languages having different physical or interpersonal perspective) are representative of different socio-cultural contexts and values and an therefore be merged within the category of cultural difficulties. The problem of 'false friends' (similar words in different languages) is discussed under the heading of 'loan words' by Baker (1992:25), but is given a separate entry in this study. Proper nouns are not included in the study since we believe they are symbol not linguistic signs. Words related to gender and number is excluded from the taxonomy suggested in this study as they are deemed grammatical rather than lexical. In what follows, the sources of difficulty previously mentioned in the literature will be discussed and examples from English-Arabic translations will be provided as much as possible.

# 2.1. Culture-specific concepts

Culture covers a wide range of common human social activities related to traditions, rituals, myths, literature, religion, food, dress, environment, language, kinship, technology, ideology, myths, etc. Culture usually "operates according to its own internal dynamic, its own principles, and its own laws-written and unwritten" (Hall and Hall, 1990:3). Concepts could "mean different things in different cultures" (Keppler: 79). The following are some examples of cultural differences between English and Arabic that may constitute lexical difficulty in translation:

The Arabic term 'suhoor' which denotes a culture-specific example and is also semantically complex (a meal taken by Muslims before dawn after which no food or drink is allowed till sunset in the fasting month Ramadan). The English culture-specific expression 'tea-time' refers to a British light meal usually at 5 in the evening, which includes biscuits and tea, has no equivalent in standard Arabic. The concept of 'tea-time' for Arabs could mean drinking tea at any time during the day, with or without a meal. In the following example from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the concept of not eating 'fish' has some culture-specific meaning: 'and to eat no fish' (*King Lear*, 1.4)

Translators may easily step into this culture-specific pitfall, by translating the word fish at its face value: ولا آكل السمك. Such a rendering does not express the original intended meaning. The ST expression 'eat no fish' uttered by Kent to Lear in the Elizabethan context meant being loyal to the king as Catholics who were the king's enemies then, ate fish and prohibited eating meat on Fridays. Kinship terms reflect cultural differences. The words 'cousin', 'uncle', 'aunt' can have more than one equivalent in Arabic.

The solution in rendering semantically complex culture-specific SL items (such as 'suhoor', 'teatime' 'and to 'eat no fish') that cannot be explained in few words would better be explained in a footnote.

## 2.2. SL concept not being lexicalized in the TL

SL Words that may express a concept known to TL receivers, but the TL does not have a word to express it such as the adjective 'standard' (i.e. ordinary) which has no lexical equivalent in Arabic (Baker 1992:21). The verb 'somnambulate' which signifies sleepwalking is not lexicalized in Arabic and has to be paraphrased into a clause ' يسير اثناء النوم.'

## 2.3. Lack of a super-ordinate (hypernym)

In some cases the translators come across a ST super-ordinate that has no counterpart in the TL. If it has special communicative relevance to the ST message, it becomes problematic for translation. Russian has no equivalent super-ordinate to 'facilities' (Baker 1992:22). There seems no Arabic equivalent for the English super-ordinate 'tableware', which includes the hyponyms: glass, cup, plate, cutlery, napkin, fork, dish, saucer, spoon, mug, tray, table-mat, table-cloth, pan, etc. (Yule 2001:124).

Even when SL and TL have equivalent super-ordinates, they may differ in the number and variety of senses each includes. The English super-ordinate 'vehicle' includes the denotation of cars, lorries, trams, buses, bicycles, planes, and ships as in the following examples:

- a. The mobile life style we know today would not be possible without vehicles such as automobiles, buses, trams, and aircraft.
- b. In front of the house were parked three vehicles: a lorry, a car, and a large red bicycle. www.oxforddictionaries.com (retrieved 1/12.2015).

The counterpart Arabic super-ordinate 'عربة' does not include such senses as plane, bicycle, or ship. An Arabic phrase may be the equivalent here: وسائط النقل

## 2.4. Lack of equivalent hyponymy

Although hyponyms exist in all languages, they are not in a one-to-one relation. Since semantic fields differ in different languages, they may become a source of difficulty at the level of lexical equivalence. For example, the following words have no equivalents in Arabic and have to be briefly paraphrased:

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bungalow: منزل صغیر ذو طابق واحد
Chalet: (usually in mountainous areas): کوخ جبلي من
منزل ریفي صغیر :Cottage
منزل ریفي کبیر :Manor (of a feudal lord)
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In Arabic the super-ordinate word ' تمر ' has many hyponyms or sub-types: المريم، الأشرسي، الخضراوي، المكتوم، الخستاوي، الحلاوي، الديري، أصبع العروس، البربن، الزهدي، البلح، بيض الحمام، شكري، الكنطار، العمراني، الشويثي، البربن، البربن، الدكل، المكاوي.

The word 'dates' exists in English (which can translate into the Arabic superordinate 'نشر'), but English does not have equivalent words for the hyponyms mentioned above. If a ST hyponym is functionally relevant, and has no counterpart in the TL, then it becomes problematic in translation. In the following example, the English word 'dates' would not be the right equivalent, as two types of dates are mentioned in the Arabic text:

A solution here would be to use the transliteration of the hyponym followed by the super-ordinate in the TL, besides an explanatory footnote to: I don't like the Barhi dates but like the Khastaawi dates.

#### 2.5. Different connotation

Synonyms within the same language can have different connotations or associative meanings. Words may hold positive connotation (Pos.C.), negative connotation (Neg. C.), or neutral connotation (N.C.). This also applies to counterpart lexical equivalents in different languages. In literary translation, connotation acquires much importance as it contributes to artistic texture, characterization, and meaning, which should therefore be seriously attended to. For example, in Al-Bayati's poem 'عين الشمس' (Frangieh 1990: 52-53), the poet compares mount Qasiyyoon (in Damascus) to a gazelle running after الأخضر (literally: after the green moon). The colour 'green' in Arabic holds very positive connotations that are fully lost in the translator's literal rendering, since the colour green in English does not have such positive connotations (Ilyas 2001).

## 2.6. Differences in word form (prefixes and suffixes)

Languages differ in their morphological structures that sometimes can become pitfalls for inexperienced translators when rendering prefixes and suffixes that are functionally important as in the case of the suffix '-ese' in 'journalese', 'translationese' and the suffix 'ish' in boyish, greenish that acquire negative associations (Baker 1992:24).

### 2.7. Differences in frequency and purpose

Even when equivalent items exist in the SL and TL, their use and function can be different in both languages. For example, the rhetorical and cohesive device of *repetition* may differ in frequency and purpose in different languages (Baker 1992:25). Arabic tends to use much use of repetition compared with English (Dickins, Hervey and Higgins 2002:59).

#### 2.8. Loan words

One of the difficulties that translators may sometimes come across is when a ST contains a foreign loan word. Peter Newmark's *Approaches to Translation* (1988) is a good example for this difficulty in which a large number of loan

words and expressions from many languages (German, French, Italian, Spanish and Russian) are used. For example, Newmark (1988: 60) says that a translator who reads a page of Paul Valery will not be able to "retain the pregnant brevity of *la niase manie... tache d'une erreur... se render perceptible*".

#### 2.9. False friends

This term refers to formal Similarity of some words in different Languages. It is quite possible sometimes to find such false friends in both SL and TL which may become problematic and misleading when such pairs of languages are genetically or culturally related as is the case between English, French, German, Dutch, Spanish etc. (McGuire 1980). For example, the word 'brutal' in English means 'cruel' or 'savage', while in French it means 'serious'. In English, the word 'large' means 'big', but in French it means "wide". In Spanish, "largo" does not mean "large", but means 'long'. The word 'sensible' in English means 'rational'; but in German it means 'sensitive'.

## 2.10. Homonymy

For some scholars, "homonyms are one of the most frequent causes of problems in assigning sense correctly" (Thomas, 1995: 7). Different words or expressions that share the same written form (homographs) can be a source of difficulty in translation when the co-text and context do not clarify the referent as in the following the sentence:

It gives me wonder great as my content To see you here <u>before</u> me. (*Othello*, 2.1.177-178)

The word "before" can mean 'earlier than' or 'in front of'.

Jabra translated this word into (أمامي: 'in front of me', as an adverb of place), but three other translators rendered it in the sense: arriving earlier (as an adverb of time).

### 2.11. Polysemy

Polysemous words that have many different but related senses are sometimes problematic in translation. Translators often produce different renderings. For example:

And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona A most dear husband (*Othello*, Act 2, 1:286).

The word 'dear' can mean 'loving and loved', or 'costly', and being uttered by Iago who plots to undermine Othello and Desdemona's love, reflects Shakespeare's intention and artistic use of this ambiguity as a clue to Iago's character. The translators Jabra and Mutran unfortunately disambiguated this homonym, by choosing the first sense only:

Jabra: زوج جد عزیز Mutran: بعلا وفیا

### **2.12. Oligosemy** (denotative narrowing)

Oligosemy refers to narrowing the denotation of a word, which can become problematic. In Arabic, many synonyms have narrowed denotation, which may become a source of difficulty for translators when that narrowing feature is communicatively relevant. The following words are such examples:

الأسى	light sorrow
اللهف	sorrow over something gone or lost
الكمد	covert sorrow

#### 3. Additional lexical translation difficulties

Some additional cases of lexical difficulties will be discussed below, with explanatory examples from English-Arabic translation.

### 3.1. Homonymous acronyms

Some acronyms are homonymous too with multiple meanings, and hence can become problematic sometimes. When the same acronym happens to be an abbreviation of more than one expression, it becomes a source of difficulty unless the context clarifies the intended one. The following are some such examples:

	California State	ولاية كاليفورنيا
	Central America	امريكا الوسطى
CA	Current Account	حساب جاري
	Credit Account	حساب ائتمان

#### 3.2. Different dialects

A word that has different meanings in different dialects can sometimes become a pitfall for translators. For example, the word 'billion' in British English is a twelve-zero number (1,000,000,000,000, i.e. a million million), but in American English, it is equivalent to 'milliard' or a nine--zero number (1,000,000,000, i.e. a thousand million). American 'billion' should be translated into بليون in Arabic, but British 'billion' should be translated into بليون in Arabic.

# 3.3. Words with similar forms in the same language

Words that are similar in the same language can also be a source of mistakes, especially when translation is handled with inadequate care, or done in haste. Students of translation or inexperienced translators sometimes mistake a certain word for another because of such formal similarity. For example, the translator may mistake one of the following items for the similar one:

	allusion	(n.):	a	reference	to	illusion (n.):	a wrong impression:
ı	اشارة الى: something				و هم		

continuous (adj.) nonstop: متواصل	continual (adj.): going on with some interruptions: متقطع	
feminine (adj.): similar to women أنثوي	feminist (adj.): supporter of women's rights: مناصر لحقوق المرأة	
imaginary :(adj.) not real: وهمي	imaginative : (adj.) having a good imagination: خصب الخيال	

### 3.4. Words that are no more used in the modern language variety:

Some words have indeterminate meaning that are no more used in the modern language variety, and may become a source of difficulty for translators. This is the case in old literary works and religious books. For example, archeological excavations in Palestine in the twentieth century helped to resolve a Biblical ambiguity, as the meaning of the Hebrew word 'pim' was indeterminate until it was found written on sets of excavated stones, that denoted the wage given to farmers for their work (Ilyas, 1981:89).

The word حطة that occurs in Quran, Sura 2, Aaya 58 is given different translations:

Sale renders it into 'forgiveness', Pickthall translates it into 'repentance', Arberry opts for 'unburdening', Muhammad Ali paraphrases it into a full sentence 'Put down from us our heavy burdens', whereas Palmer and Bell just transliterate the word.

## 3.5. Words that have changed denotation

Translators may also come across words in older texts that have changed denotation. The word 'conserved' in its modern sense means 'kept', but in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it meant 'prepared':

And it was dyed in mummy which the skilful

Conserved of maidens' hearts. (Othello, Act 3, Scene 4, 72-73)

Jamal inaccurately translated this word according to its modern sense, i.e. ('kept'):

The word 'invention' as used by Shakespeare had nothing to do with inventing new things, but simply meant 'imagination'.

Of so high and plenteous wit and invention (Othello, 4.1.184-185).

Jabra translated this word according to its modern sense of 'creating':

It should therefore be translated as:

The word 'usurp' in modern English means: to take something wrongfully. In Shakespeare's time it meant 'disguised'.

Iago. Follow thou the wars, defeat thy favour with an <u>usurped</u> beard. [*Othello*, 1.3.334-335]

Jabra translated this word according to its modern sense which produced a vague and incoherent meaning: شوه وجهك بلحية مغتصبة

The right equivalent here is: مزيفة

غير ملامحك بلحية مزيفة

# 3.6. Different style

The term *style* relates to linguistic choices of lexis, structure, form, layout, sentence length, etc (Hocket 1958). Leech and Short (1981:18) rightly state that "style is the property of all texts". Stylistic features (such as formality, addressivity, transitivity, metaphorical language, and even non-sense expressions) that are associated with a character reflect his socio-cultural identity. For Gibbs and Pye, style constitutes a complex set of notions. Style "is a web, a network, a texture, a pattern, or more mechanistically, a system" (Munday 2008:174-175). Boase-Beier rightly emphasizes the importance of stylistic analyses and a translator's awareness of a text's stylistic features:

Much of the work of stylistic analysis will involve explaining how texts have the effects they have on the analyst in question or on others) and why they are understood in the way they are, by uncovering views, stances and states of mind not immediately obvious without such analysis. This applies to both literary and non-literary texts, and is helpful to the translator in both cases (2006:29).

The term 'style' has more than one meaning. For some scholars, style in the sense of word and structure choices is ideological (Fairclough 2001:77). The choices made between terms such as "freedom-fighter" and "terrorist" by writers and translators reflect their ideological stances (Carter and Nash, 1990:21, Dijk, 1998:203). Style is also viewed in the choice between specialized jargon and ordinary or everyday words such as choosing between 'stomach' and 'tuberculosis' versus 'belly' and 'consumption' respectively.

An important Stylistic distinction in translation is related to formality. The following sentences are examples of such Arabic-English stylistic shifts:

'I <u>wonder</u> if he has any plans' (Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea'

(Baclabaki's translation: 1978): 'سيت شعري.....' ألا ليت شعري....

'Once I could see quite well in the dark'

(Baclabaki's translation: 1978): '... من الدهر من الدهر الدهر...'

In the two examples above, Hemingway's style is simple, straightforward, and conforms to the fisherman's simple character; but the translator has shifted it into high literary style which does not befit the old fisherman's simple character.

Style as a meaningful semiotic device and artistic tool requires careful handling by translators in order not to distort its values. The choice of one synonym rather than another one in communication may indicate a change of style.

#### 4. Context-dependant Equivalents

The second category of lexical difficulties includes context-dependent equivalents that are based on implied contextual meanings, for which literal dictionary meanings do not match. This feature belongs to pragmatics of communication in which communicative acts are intricately intermingled with culture. Communicative acts do not always follow Grice's cooperative maxims (quantity, quality, relation and manner). For example, when a visitor in Jordan is offered coffee after a meal, it politely signals the host's indirect message that the visit time is over. Meanings in written texts are often indirectly expressed in violation of Grice's cooperative principle, producing implicatures that sometimes lead to pragmatic communication failure.

Since all human communication involves a certain context of situation in which it takes place, meanings are affected by the relevant contextual features. The very first words a child learns are usually context-bound (Hoff 2009:187). In fact the notion of 'context' has been given different explanations. For Hall (2005: 60), part of a word's conventional meaning is stored in our minds, and another part is "supplied by the context in which the word is used". For Malinowski, context is the real situation in which communication takes place, but for Firth and Catford (1965), it is a theoretical model of many layers that involve formal and contextual relations. Halliday (1976:22) views context in terms of field, mode, and tenor. Hatim and Mason (1990) analyse context in terms of semiotic (in which field, mode and tenor interact with other signs), communicative (receivers' interpretation) and pragmatic dimensions (intentions and goals). Van Dijk (1995:383-410) views context in terms of two models, a situational-semantic model (applicable to similar situations), and a sociopragmatic model (shared knowledge, intentions, goals, beliefs in relation to genre, culture and communicative context).

When the lexical equivalent cannot be established in terms of dictionary-based meanings, it should be handled in terms of context-dependent meanings. In what follows, explanatory examples of some genuine English-Arabic translations will be provided, in which context-based meanings take priority over conventional dictionary meanings.

**a.** "Artists liked the way the palms <u>grew</u>" ['Cat in the Rain', Ernest Hemingway].

The word 'grew' in the OALD is given the senses: developed, increased in size, became older, became more deeply rooted, and planted. It has been translated according to the last sense which does not express the original meaning. The dictionary- oriented equivalents in Arabic would not produce a good equivalent here.

A better context-dependent equivalent would in this case be: 'تشكلت' which highlights the palms' attractive shape formation:

**b.** "A life's but a span" (Ridley (ed.), *Othello*, 2.3.67).

The main senses of the word 'span' in the OALD means: distance between the tips of a person's thumb and little finger when stretched out/ distance or part between the supporters of an arch/length in time from beginning to end.

Adopting one of the dictionary-based meanings will not produce a good translation here. Jabra opted for the first sense and rendered it as شبر:

A context-oriented translation here would be much better:

**c.** And this may help to thicken other proofs

That do demonstrate thinly" (Othello, Act 3, 328-329).

Jabra's translation of the above instance is indeed vague and inexpressive as a result of following the SL diction and collocations.

A better rendering could be suggested as:

**d.** "There was a lot of money <u>in the strong room</u>" (Charles Dickins, *Hard Times*)

The Arabic underlined rendering for "the strong room" is awkward and unfamiliar which takes the word strong literally, as if the room is strong whereas it implies being a safe and secure place for storing money. A better rendering in Arabic is: الغرفة الحصينة

# 5. Conclusion

Besides the difficulties related to the translation of words that have been suggested in the literature (mainly by by Catford and Baker: 2.1. – 2.12.), this study has added six additional types of translation lexical difficulties (3.1.– 3.6.) that include: Homonymous Acronyms, words of different dialects, words with similar formal features in the same language, words that are no more used in the

modern language variety, words that have changed denotation, and words with different style.

Presenting a more comprehensive inventory of translation difficulties at the level of lexis in both cases of symmetric SL-TL meanings and asymmetric meanings, with translation examples will enhance translators' theoretical and practical awareness, knowledge and skills in handling such lexical problems of equivalence.

The lexical-oriented approach that tackles lexical equivalence becomes practical and useful when the literal meaning and the intended or implied meaning are in a symmetric relation. When the literal meaning and the intended or implied meaning in a text have asymmetric relation, conventional dictionary-based equivalents do not work, and they should be rendered in accordance with the implied contextual meaning that override lexical meanings as in examples 4.a-d above.

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