A Debate over Translating VS Localizing 'Democracy'

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▌ ABSTRACT ▌

A brief consultation of English Arabic dictionaries and encyclopedias shows that there is no one single standard Arabic translation of the English concept 'democracy'. Arab authors use, instead, a series of multiple terms that need clarification if the first term is to be clear. In many cases, they tend to localize the term into Arabic using various orthographic forms; at other times, they run a rather lengthy analysis to elucidate the concept that seems to be an essentially contested term. This paper aims to inquire into the reasons for the confusion and inconsistency in the translation of the concept 'democracy', as well as the underlying arguments for advocating the localization rather than translation of this political concept. This will be followed by a discussion of the implications of this study for lexicographers and translators. Given the fact that ideology is of non-Arabic origin, English perceptions of this fluid concept might help account for its lack of clarity in Arabic translations since Arabic is highly influenced by English in various spheres of life. It would thus be wise first to check the perceptivity of English authors of the concept.

To better serve the purpose of this study, the author distinguishes here between 'translation' and so –called 'localization'. The term 'translation' is concerned with finding an existing term in the target language with an equivalent meaning for a foreign word, whereas localization involves taking the foreign term and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target language, by subjecting it to the morphological and syntactic rules of Arabic to be used as if it were originally Arabic.

Key Words
contested, cluster concept, descriptive, evaluative, attributive

Background of the Study

English definitions of the word "democracy" show that the term is contestable.

Although the concept literally means "rule by the people", this simple notion of ruling is vague and has been subject to a bewildering variety of interpretations. According to Heywood (2000), such vagueness is due to the fact that democracy is treated as a

> 'contested' value and a concept that stands for a variety of systems such as 'direct democracy', which is based upon the direct, unmediated and continuous participation of citizens in the tasks of government, and 'representative democracy', a limited and indirect form of democracy where popular participation is infrequent and brief, being restricted to the act of voting every few years.

These two types of government may have impact on people's definitions of the term. Schumpeter (1942:3), for example, opts for democracy in its representative form, noting that a precise definition seems to

be the one in which individuals campaign competitively for people's votes to achieve the power to make public decisions. Thus, campaigning is Schumpeter's preferable core feature of democracy.

Connolly (1998) ascribes the vagueness to the fact that there are two dimensions of the concept: descriptive and normative. The descriptive dimension refers to changing human behaviors and issues such as equity and power. Thus, when one describes democracy from a particular historical point of view, and not on the basis of similarities that it shares with other forms of government, one presents it from the vantage point of certain interests, purposes, or standards. Likewise, one may describe democracy from a moral point of view, thereby imparting a normative view to it. No doubt, interests, purposes, and moral or normative standards differ from one society to another, and accordingly incur incompatible interpretations, thus rendering the concept subjective.

Given that there are numerous core features of the term 'democracy', Bobbio (1998) contends that democracy is an essentially contested term that is open for multiple interpretations. For example, Bobbio argues that democracy is interconnected with kinship, aristocracy, autocracy, which can be seen as appropriate equivalents for the classical meaning of democracy, 'rule by the people'. In this sense, 'rule by the people' designates not only democracy but also other political concepts. In addition to these equivalents, Carter (1973) understands democracy as a kind of dictatorship and suppression of freedom, since "rule by the people", meaning the majority of people in its modern sense, is fundamentally in opposition to the liberty of minorities. This clearly shows that the literal meaning of democracy can lead to ambiguity about whether or not a given political system is democratic.

Likewise, Connolly (1998) argues that democracy is essentially a cluster concept, a concept that is intrinsically connected with several other concepts that seem to stand in their own right as independent terms. To clarify 'democracy', Connolly maintains that we need to clarify concepts such as equity, justice, equality, and impartiality. These terms appear to be neither equivalent nor precisely defined. The word 'equality', for example, does not imply identity or sameness. The term equality has very different implications, depending upon what is being apportioned. Heywood (2000) points out three equality dimensions: :fundamental equality indicates that all human beings are born equal in the sense that their lives are of equal moral value; formal equality refers to equal rights and entitlements before the law; and equality of opportunity means that every one has the same starting point, or equal life chances.
This shows that, even terms that are seemingly equivalents to democracy are multi-faceted concepts.

Baker (1962) ascribes the vagueness of the term to the fact that democracy is a philosophical term, which cannot be objectively assessed. It follows that abstract terms trigger more contentions because they are not based on practical and historical circumstances. In line with this, Oppenheim (1981) views democracy as characterization of human conducts that are subject to change. For this reason, democracy requires an operational definition that clearly states relevant criteria that help denote its connotation in any given period.

For Lercheje (1979), the wide-range of translations of democracy is due to its historical dimension, as well as its social, psychological, and emotional connotations. It follows that the meaning of 'democracy' becomes a matter of choice from multiple semantic alternatives.

At the other end of the scale, definitions of democracy in English dictionaries and encyclopedia do not fare better than those run by English political writers. Although English reference books accord to the literal meaning of democracy, they show varying degrees of differentiation. The *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (2001), for example, provides the following definitions:

> a government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by the elected agents; a state of society characterized by formal quality of rights and privileges; political and social equality; the common people as distinguished from any privileged class.

Similarly, the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines democracy as a form of government in which people have the voice of power through elected representatives. This dictionary, for example, does not refer to social or political rights, or to the 'campaigning' meaning articulated by Schumpeter. It also opts for indirect democracy in that the public do not exercise power themselves; they merely select those who will rule in their favor.

While the above two dictionaries show that power is vested in the people and exercised directly by the elected agents, the Columbia Encyclopedia (2001) defines democracy as a philosophy insisting on the right and capacity of people, acting directly or through representatives to control their institutions for their own purposes. Unlike the above two dictionaries, the Columbia Encyclopedia (2001) views democracy as a philosophy where "rule by the people" can be both direct or through representatives.

Webster's Dictionary (1963), however, shows that justice, freedom, and equality are main constituents of democracy and that they might not be equivalents. These relevant constituent-concepts of democracy are in fact concepts that have their entries in the dictionary and still need clarification to draw clear-cut boundaries between them. It seems that it is uneasy to establish a particular conception of a concept as objectively correct, as in the case of 'true' democracy, 'true' freedom, 'true' justice and so forth, simply because the controversy concerning their terms runs so deep that no neutral or settled definition can ever be developed. That is why Heywood (2000) treats democracy and relevant constituent-concepts of democracy as essentially contested concepts in that each encompasses a number of rival concepts, none of which might be accept as its 'true' meaning

Arabic Translations of Democracy

Although English Arab dictionaries and political encyclopedias seem by and large to agree on an etymological meaning of *democracy*, namely *hukm al-sha'b* (the rule by people), this compound noun triggers a great deal of controversy among Arab authors. Al-Bustani (1930) and Saliba (1971), for example, perceive "people" from a genealogical perspective. According to them, people consist of a number of social formations such as families, clans, and tribes that date back to one father.

Ribbati (1971) defines people as a group of individuals bound by one law whose members speak different languages and hold different religious orientations. This definition in fact reflects the notion of citizenship. Khalil (1980) points to the social relationship that binds individuals to their place. There is no reference to the rule of law in his definition. Khalil is exclusively concerned with the geographical extension of the place.

One major reason Arab intellectuals view people from different angles is that "people" and "nation"

do not appear to refer to one thing. "People" refers to a large group of people not necessarily bound together by a common culture, tradition, language, and religion, but rather, by the same place. But "nation", *umma* in Arabic, actually triggers religious connotations that transcend the boundaries of statehood: it refers to a large group of peoples bound together by a common spiritual bond. So 'nation' is different from its image in the Western thought where the sense of nationhood, according to Saliba (1971), is diverse: language, religion, history, culture and so forth. While language is often taken to be the clearest symbol of nationhood in the Western thought, it is not always so in the Arabic thought due to religious considerations. Iran, for example, is an independent state that is part of the Islamic nation *umma*. Speaking of the Arab nation, Iran is not part of the Arab world because Iranian people have their own language just as Arabs have their language. So both Arabs and Iranians are part of the *umma* (nation) for the religious dimension.

Viewed like this, 'nation' in its religious sense includes peoples with different languages and histories who have their own statehoods, or those striving for their statehoods. The concept of 'nation' in that sense does not exclude any group of people who are denied the right to their statehood, given that they adhere to the same common spiritual belief.

Thus, the common spiritual belief is what distinguishes 'nation' from 'people'. Given that the Qura'an is a revelation from God, all those believing in it are united by the Islamic spiritual bond, although scattered over several countries and communities. Since God revealed a full Qura'anic chapter (Sura) named *al-Shura* (consultation in English), Arab authors refrain from using the word *al-Shura* 'consultation' as an equivalent for *democracy*, which is a human construct (Saliba 1971). In other words, concepts that are positive are not equal to those that are believed to be divine. It is, therefore, only when peoples are bound by common belief that they become a nation. For this reason, what makes a nation is the religion that binds individuals together. This might explain Pickthal's use of "religion' for 'nation' in his translation of *Surat al-Mu'minoon* (the believers), verse 52: *wa'anna hathihi ummatakum umma wahida wa'ana rabbukum fa'budun (And lo, this your religion is one religion and I am your Lord, so keep your duty unto Me*)

More to the point, Al-Hasan (1981) is an opponent of equating democracy with *al-Shura* on another ground. Islam, according to Al-Hasan, acknowledges that there may be multiple opinions and understandings of a divine principle, but denies that there are multiple substitutions for the same revealed principle. Put differently, a revealed principle cannot be converted to multiple principles, but may incur multiple understandings. The latter is true of democracy being understood from many different and even contradictory angles. In contrast, Abdo (1973) used *al-Shura* as an equivalent translation for democracy, simply because in both *democracy* and *Alshura* people exercise their right to vote. In Abdo's eyes, public participation is the criterion that is true of both terms, with no emphasis on the religious sense of the term, whereas Saliba takes *al-Shura* to be the umma's constitution since the individuals are perceived to be bound by the Islamic religious values.

Moreover, unlike any revealed religion, 'democracy' is a social phenomenon which is subject to change, and thus it is refutable. For this reason, Fakkar (1980) believes that it is erroneous to treat the world's three major religions as social phenomena whose origins are open for debate, simply because they are not human constructs, as is the case of democracy. That is to say, positive ideas are subject to change, and necessarily entail improvement with time, whereas divine religions are perfect and thus require no human interference to change or adjust what might be shortcomings. In this sense, one can argue that Islam or *al-Shura* are not philosophical terms, nor are they systems on the grounds

that neither is an ideology that pre-supposes the existence of a system on the basis of which it is based.

At another level, there is no escape from admitting that English dictionaries and encyclopedia are a major source of controversies and inconsistencies for those reaching for them to solve a problem. A close look at the *Social Science Encyclopedia* (1985) shows that the literal sense of democracy 'rule by the people' in the classical Greek *polis* referred to the rule of the poor who exercised power in their own interests against the interests of the rich and aristocratic. This definition was used more narrowly by Aristotle to refer to the debased form of aristocracy, that is, to government by the few or by a faction. On the other hand, the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (1965) seems to equate 'democracy' with oligarchy, which originated in ancient Greece as a form of government led by a few persons or families. In this reference, oligarchy is like democracy ruling in its own rather than in the public interest.

Likewise, dictionary definitions of the word 'oligarchy' accord closely with its classical use. Actually, *Webster's New International Dictionary* (1981), for example, recognizes a wider range of meanings, but "government by the few" remains the primary definition.

The above-mentioned definitions indicate that 'people' etymologically represents the minority or even the few rather than the majority, and that the few rule in their own interests rather than in the public interests. They also show that there are no sharp lines distinguishing democracy from aristocracy or oligarchy since the three forms of government imply 'rule by the few or minority." On the other hand, one can find that *Webster's English Dictionary* identifies democracy with popular sovereignty, egalitarianism, affability, justice, equity, participation in decision and much else, with no emphasis on a single standard definition for the concept. The dictionary, for example, lists the two constituents, namely equity and justice as entries under democracy. These two criteria are also used as entries under *impartiality*, an entirely independent concept that stands on its own in the dictionary. This is confusing to whoever reaches to an English dictionary for help. After all, democracy is a product of the Western intellectual climate and by no means that of Arab intellectual environment. These entries recur under several political concepts in the English-Arabic bilingual dictionaries and encyclopedias.

As a result, one may wonder whether the entries in *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* are synonymous or different in some senses. This condition might have led Arab translators to assign contradictory definitions to democracy, which is of non-Arabic origin. Al-Alawi (1998), for example, argues that democracy is essentially political and denies the social and moral properties of the concept. Conversely, Naser (1981) views democracy as having faith in the average person, thereby imparting a moral aspect on the concept. Still, Abdullah (1986) views it as equality and redistribution of wealth between the poor and the rich. This definition seems to mirror Heywood's perception of equality that refers to an equal distribution of income, wealth and other social goods (social equality). On the other hand, Hanafi (1988) assigns several meanings to democracy: public opinions, the right to designate parties, freedom of speech, and respect for those with opposing views, thereby highlighting the political dimension of the term.

Another reason for the lack of clarity about 'democracy' on the part of Arab thinkers is that their definition of democracy is shaped by their political affiliation with socialistic and capitalistic ideologies, which are at variance. While in forms of socialist democracy the dogma of the ruling party prevails and only allows for pluralistic thinking to emerge within the party, forms of capitalistic democracy allows for free elections among multi parties and maintain individual liberties. The socialistic view is evident in Abdulla's above view of democracy, whereas capitalistic view of democracy is evident

in Hanafi's above view of democracy.

The above discussion shows that, although dictionaries agree on the exact literal definition of democracy, people interpret it differently, due to their cultural orientations and the complex nature of the term. This perhaps prompted Daher (1986)), an Arab political author, to contend that the concept does not really exist because it is a mere romantic idea that serves as a vehicle by means of which people actually express their hopes and desires that are yet to be fulfilled, simply because they ever search for ideals.

In the light of the above discussion, it is evident that Arab translations of the word 'democracy' mirror similar instances of vagueness, given the fact that Arabic is highly influenced by English in all spheres of life. English writers appear to have a particular attitude toward democracy, with many of them having a distinctive conception of how democratic rules can be achieved. As a corollary to this, the word 'democracy' remains a vague concept and one that is subject to bewildering interpretations. This conclusion leads us to consider localizing the word 'democracy' for more plausible reasons, as we will see next.

Rationales for Naturalizing Democracy into Arabic

The concept of 'democracy' has taken different orthographic forms in Arabic dictionaries and political encyclopedias. The most typical forms are ديمقراطيّة, ديموقراطيّة, دقرطة – *demkratiyyah*, *demukratiyyah*, *dakratah*, respectively. The first two forms are Arabic words for democracy, whereas the third form is the Arabic word for democratization. These orthographic forms violate the Arabic system of verbal derivation, since none of them can be derived from a basic three-consonant root that is familiar to Arabic native speakers, which is the dominant pattern in the language. For derivative purposes, a three-or-more consonant root is to be derived from the imported concept, so that the term, though originally imported, can be treated as native-like and language enriching. This is at least one way of Arabic natural growth.

The root in Arabic is always a past verb referring to the third person singular pronoun (He). Four- or five- existing consonant roots in Arabic are less common than three-letter roots. All one can do to get to the root is simply take away the long vowels from the noun. These are *y* (ee), *waw* (u), and *aljf* (aa). Applying this to the imported concept 'democracy' *demokratiyya,* one can derive either a four-consonant root *dakrata* or a five-consonant root *damakrata*, neither of which was familiar to Arabic native speakers before the concept of democracy was imported. Put differently, the two possible root sequences that can be derived from *demokratiyya* (democracy) are penta-lateral *d,m,k,r,t* and quadric-lateral *d,m,k,r,t*, neither of which is a pre-existing root sequence in Arabic linguistic system before democracy was localized into Arabic. The latter root was strongly advocated by Al-Karmi (1987), who is a proponent of localizing the word 'democracy' into Arabic, a process that essentially centers on the morpho-syntactic modifications that the borrowed concept undergoes in order to become Arabic-like and thus grammatically derivative and inflectional.

Although there is no escape from admitting that variations in Arabic orthographic forms have been a source of controversy, it appears that it is less critical than the controversy concerning semantic connotations brought out by translating the concept. For example, Hanafi (1988) prefers to adopt the orthographic form دقرطة *dakratah* (democratization) as the most appropriate form because it is easier in pronunciation in its singular, dual, and plural forms *dakratah* (a democracy), *dakratatan* (two democracies), *dakrataat*

(democracies) than the other versions. These Arabic orthographic forms, for example, are not as lengthy as ديمقراطية, ديمقراطيتان, ديمقراطيات *demkratiyyah* (democracy), *demkratiyyataan* (two democracies), and *demkratiyyaat* (democracies). There are, therefore, fewer sounds in *dakratah* than in either of the other two orthographic versions and its pronunciation is easier. The use of *dakratah* as an appropriate orthographic form is also brief and desirable in translating English texts into Arabic, especially when the word democracy recurs in the text fairly frequently.

It would be reasonable to acknowledge that whatever may be the orthographic form that an author uses as an equivalent for the English political term 'democracy', it is very unlikely that the reader will miss its English denotation regardless of the connotation that the concept might invoke in his or her mind. Arabs, for instance, maintain the Greek concept of 'philosophy' as a localized concept, probably in recognition of its Greek origin on the one hand, and perhaps for its elusive definition in English thoughts on the other, though neither can differ over its literal sense *ilm al-hikmah* (science of wisdom).

The decision therefore to either translate or localize the concept is not straightforward. It makes considerable demands on the translator in that he or she might need to find how well the concept in question fits into the TL morpho-syntactic rules as opposed to translating it. There are various grounds for localizing the concept into Arabic. Ibrahim (1987) advocates localizing the concept of democracy into Arabic also in recognition of its Greek origin. This concept in fact has been assimilated into most European languages in expression of that recognition. In line with this train of thought, one would say that the identity of the language is not derived from the identity of its vocabulary. Arabic has many non-Arabic words which are used as though they were originally Arabic. Words such as سجّيل, سندس استبرق *istabrak*, *sundus, and sijjil* are of non-Arabic origin. The first two words describe two different types of cloth, whereas the third word denotes a hellish stone. Similarly, Ibrahim (1980:305) deems that "almost 80% or even more of English words are of Greek origin, yet English is the first language spoken in the world". Hence, Arab linguists should not refrain from opening up to the borrowing of foreign vocabulary, especially if the concept in question is originally extremely confusing.

Another rationale for the localization of 'democracy' is the fact that, besides being contentious, the most shared translation of 'democracy' in Arabic dictionaries - حكم الشعب *hukm asha'ab* (ruler ship by the people) is neither derivative nor attributive because it is a two-word construct. Lack of derivation and attribution for a two-word term is linguistically unwelcome in Arabic, although attribution has been noticed in some particular names of persons like طحسني *tahsaniyy* for the modern Egyptian writer طه حسين (*Taha Husein*). This said, examples of such coining remain very limited in Arabic because of pronunciation problems. This might also explain why Arab writers almost always use the localized form of philosophy (*falsafah* in Arabic) though it has been translated literally, among other terms, into a two-word term *ilm al-Hikma* (the science of wisdom) in many Arabic references. No doubt, authors are inclined to welcome brief and short translated forms when faced with contested terms.

It remains to be said that the literal translation of the concept in question does not help to illustrate its slippery nature on two accounts: first, it is connected with other independent political concepts, and, second, its literal translation *hukm asha'ab* (rule by the people) is a compound noun that violates the criteria set by lexicographers and linguists. That is, it is not attributive and derivative. Although a single-word equivalent fulfils the criteria of Arab linguists and lexicographers, the complex nature of the concept makes it quite impossible to translate into a single word. Even several words might not be sufficient to shed light upon its derivative, intertwined aspects.

This is not to say that translators should abide by the criteria of linguists and lexicographers when

dealing with any foreign terms. Doing so will always result in the borrowing of foreign concepts. What determines the borrowing of a given foreign term is the extent of its complexity and ambiguity in its original as well as in the target language culture. Concepts that are originally contentious and continue to be so should be localized by being made fit into the morphological and syntactic rules of the target language, as is the case with 'democracy' and 'philosophy', although this violates the basic derivative system of Arabic. After all, language is a matter of taste more than of rules (Al-Mala'ika 1986).

Implications for Lexicographers and Translation

The problematic feature of Arab dictionaries and encyclopedias is the fact that they display numerous definitions without pinning them down to their respective historical contexts. All a translator can see is a quantity of juxtaposed definitions from which he or she has to make a choice. The risk of translators confusing two or more translations as to when and where they are used is considerable, and this will surely affect their readers' view of the concept. It is therefore necessary that Arab lexicographers and linguists cooperate in a joint effort with a view to making a unified bilingual political dictionary, wherein political terms are delineated etymologically and their senses are recoded according to their historical contexts.

Yet it is safe to say that, whereas Arab lexicographers and terminologists succeeded in publishing a unified medical dictionary that serves as a guide for those in the Arab world, the chance of seeing this happening in politics is rather slim. What appears to be crucial for the realization of this project is a joint political decision by pan-Arab countries, though this seems untenable because political ideologies are at variance. Such a decision would need to be coupled with joint development plans on the basis of which the Arab world would also unify the senses of the used terms.

While it seems right that lexicographers should account for etymological questions, at least in certain types of dictionary, there are still attendant difficulties. Concepts do not change in time systematically or gradually. Unlike phonological and grammatical aspects of language, there are no rules to control gradual or systematic change of concepts through time. Even if someone proposes the Greek definition of democracy as a starting point in solving its ambiguity, I would say it is odd to conceive of a sense for the concept, because it is shaped by ever changing social, moral, and political circumstances. It is therefore impossible to find a clear- cut definition or an existing form of democracy that can be good for use every time.

In the light of these considerations, it would be more plausible to localize the concept linguistically into Arabic to avoid chaos and confusion in the translations of democracy. Al-Habbabi's (1980) words on democracy and freedom show how fuzzy defining democracy is, "if people know by instinct what freedom means, I would admit that I am also by instinct totally ignorant of what both democracy and freedom mean. I would also add that I know of no boundaries of their meaning in reality" (p. 15)

Conclusion

Although the classical Arabic tendency to coin one-word terms whenever necessary requires a basic existing derivative form, there is no harm in using a term that has no existing derivative base, or,

put differently, to extend the rule. After all, it could be argued that language is more a matter of taste than of grammar. The complex nature of 'democracy' that refers to a constellation of concepts with no clear boundaries makes its translations an onerous task. There is also the ideological dimension that cuts across translations. This factor may result in having contradictory translations since authors have their incompatible affiliations.

In view of all these considerations, it is more reasonable to assimilate than translate this concept into Arabic. The assimilation has allowed the concept to undergo changes to accommodate Arabic phonological and morphological patterns and become inflectionally productive. More importantly, its localization into Arabic would sidestep the difficulties relative to the multifaceted rival definitions that Arab dictionaries and authors show.

Although brevity and ease of articulation are preferable features in the localized form, this should not be to the detriment of the meaning. *Dakratah*, a four-consonant root, is easier in articulation and shorter than the other set of democracy's localized forms. However, it is a poor choice because it stands for democratization rather than for democracy. This does a dictionary user harm rather than good. As such, either of the other two forms, namely *demkratiyyah* and *demukratiyyah* could be an appropriate choice, although they both come from five-consonant roots. These orthographic differences, however, remain less important than the ambiguity about its translations, which show in the form of lengthy analyses and discussions within a network of concepts closely intertwined. At least, there is little chance for the reader to mistake any of the orthographic variations of the term for any other term, whereas there is no single term in the Arabic lexicon to 'translate' the word "democracy".

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