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The Master Discourse of Translation

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1. Introduction

Axiomatically, globalization invokes the existence of something else—not so global, that is something local. Axiomatically still, globalization and its other (localization) produce discourses that compete for power and influence. Within this context, it is a truism to say that different cultures have historically represented each other in ways that have reflected the type of existing power relationships between them. Over the past three decades or so, post-colonial and translation studies, in particular, have contributed a great deal to the issues of the formation of cultural identities and/or representation of foreign cultures, what the late André Lefevere (1999 75) named 'composing the other.' Although, representations of weak cultures by powerful ones—Western cultures that is—in negative terms have been part of the scheme of history, no culture has been misrepresented and deformed by the West like the Arab/Islamic one.

Benjamin Barber (1992 53), for example, posits two futures for the human race. One future is dictated by the forces of globalisation through

> … the onrush of economic and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity and that mesmerize the world with fast music, fast computers, and fast food—with MTV, Macintosh, and McDonald's, pressing nations into one commercially homogeneous global network: one McWorld tied together by technology, ecology, communications and commerce.

The other future is driven by what he calls 'tribalism' and is seen as the complete extreme opposite of the former. This future represents

> …a retribalization of large swaths of humankind by war and bloodshed: a threatened Lebanonization of national states in which culture is pitted against culture, people against people, tribe against tribe—a Jihad in the name of a hundred narrowly conceived faiths against every kind of interdependence, every kind of artificial social cooperation and civic mutuality (53).

Barber's choice of the words *Jihad* and *tribe* to describe the dangerous future for humanity immediately conjures up images of Arabs and Islam as the main causes of destructive nationalisms (tribalisms) that threaten the ways of life of the 'civilized' West.

The literature of translation studies, (inter)cultural and (post)colonial studies is replete with calls for an ethical accommodation of cultural diversity and otherness. Yet, practices within these disciplines and allied others indicate that *mono-isms* have reigned supreme over *multi-isms.*

Taking translation as intercultural communication *par excellence*, this article examines the constraints and pressures of the discourse through which translation is carried out. Particularly between civilizationally distant and power-unequally related cultures, translation demonstrates the complexity

inherent in the process of interlingual communication across cultures. This complexity stems from the carrying-over of specific cultural products (texts) to and recuperated by receivers who have at their disposal an established system of representation with its own norms for the production and consumption of texts, including translations. This system ultimately evolves into a *master discourse of translation* through which similarity and difference are identified, negotiated, accepted and/or resisted.

Drawing primarily on textual import from Arabic, the purpose here is to show how a culturally defined master discourse affects the act of translating. In a rapidly globalized world, a master discourse emerges as the all powerful in its hegemonic discursive norms; leading naturally to desperate and often violent measures from other equally self-perceived master discourses.

2. The Master Discourse of Translation

Between the two antagonistic worlds outlined by Barber, translation remains a prime medium of communication/interaction. Translation usually refers to the handling of written texts; leaving spoken texts to the realm of interpreting, oral translation. Furthermore, translation is taken to refer to both the process of translating and to the product, the target text. As such, it covers a broad range of concepts and denotes as well as connotes different meanings.

The primary objective of translation is to achieve the same informational and emotive effects contained in and by the source texts in the target ones (translations). The main theoretical basis for doing so has centred on the concept of *equivalence*. So, equivalence in and through translation has been sought at the content level and at the expressive (form) level. The search for equivalence in translation has often led theorists and translators alike to focus on aspects of either the form or content. But this polarization of what translation involves ignores the simple fact that any text produced in a given

language is the product of a unique union between both form and content (manner and matter) and that the production and reception of a text are embedded in a specific cultural context.

Seeing translation as equivalence-seeking further ignores that languages and their associated cultures are different and that complete equivalence at one level or at different levels is not always possible. In the main and except for specific samples, texts cannot be accurately, faithfully and neatly translated into others and be the same as their originals. There are linguistic difficulties (vocabulary, idioms, grammar, collocations, etc) and cultural difficulties (perceptions, experiences, values, religions, histories, etc.)

Since the 1980s, translation studies has been extended to consider different and challenging issues. In particular, the view of culture-modelling through translation has ushered in questions that cannot be adequately answered by the conventionalised notions of equivalence, accuracy, fidelity, or 'sourceer vs. targeteer'approaches to translation and translating. The focus has shifted from (un)translatability to the cultural, political and economic ramifications of translation; away from concerns with translated texts toward treating translation as social, cultural and political acts taking place within and attached to global and local relations of power and dominance.

It follows then that translating involves the transporting (carrying-over) of languages and their associated cultures to and recuperated by specific target reading constituencies. These constituencies have at their disposal established systems of representation, with norms and conventions for the production and consumption of meanings vis-à-vis people, objects and events. These systems ultimately yield a *master discourse* through which identity and difference are marked and within which translating is carried out (Faiq 2007).

In this respect, Lawrence Venuti (1996 196) succinctly sums up the nature of translation, as a particular instance of writing, within the Anglo-American tradition:

> The violence of translation resides in its very purpose and activity: the reconstitution of the foreign text inaccordance with values, beliefs and representations that pre-exist it in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality.

Elsewhere, Venuti attempts to exorcise the ideological in the process of representation through translation. Using the terms *domestication* and *foreignization*, he argues how over the last three centuries the Anglo-American (by extension Western) translation theory and practice have had normalising and neutralising effects. The ultimate aim of such effects has been to subdue the dynamics of texts and realities of indigenous societies and to represent them in terms of what is familiar and unchallenging to the Western culture.

In intercultural communication, translation should perhaps most appropriately be seen and appreciated as involving interaction (communication) between and across different cultures through the languages of these cultures. This communication means that those carrying out the acts of translating bring with them prior knowledge (culture) learned through their own (usually mother or first) language. In any communicative act (even between people of the same group), culture and language are so intertwined that it is difficult to conceive of one without the other (Bassnett 1998a 81).

A culture seeks to tell its members what to expect from life, and so it reduces confusion and helps them predict the future, often on the basis of a past or even pasts. Cultural theorists generally agree that the very basic elements of any culture are: History, religion, values, social organization, and language itself. The first four elements are interrelated and are all animated and expressed through language. Through its language, a culture is shared and learned behaviour that is transmitted across generations for the purposes of promoting individual and group survival, growth and development as well as the demarcation of itself and its group vis-à-vis other cultures and their respective members.

A very basic definition of language is that it is no more than the combination of a good grammar book and a good dictionary. But these two do not refer to what users actually do with the grammar rules and the words neatly listed in dictionaries. The grammar rules and the words in the dictionary mean what their users make and want them to mean. So use depends very much on the user, and language as a whole assumes its importance as the mirror for the ways a culture perceives reality, identity, self and others.

Because it brings culture and language together, translation means transporting (making to travel) texts (languages and their associated cultures) to become other texts (in other languages and their associated cultures). The culture of the others usually has an established system of representation that helps define this culture to its members but more importantly it helps these members to define those (languages and cultures) they are translating from vis-à-vis their own.

Thus, translation is by necessity a cultural act (Lefevere 1998 75). As such, translation has a culture (politics, ideology, poetics) that precedes the actual act of translation. Culture *A* views culture *B*in particular ways and vice versa. These particular ways of view affect the way culture *A* translates from culture *B* and vice versa. In the same way, people tend to transfer ideas and concepts into other languages and cultures with significant effects and meanings from their own languages and cultures. To express this union between culture and language, perhaps one can restate the statement in the following way: Translation means transporting texts from *culguage A* into *culguage B*, where *culguage*, the blend from culture and language, is intended to capture the intrinsic relationship between the two.

So, in translation the norms of producing, interpreting and circulating texts in one *culguage* tend to remain in force when approaching texts transplanted through translation from another *culguage*. As with native texts, the reception process of translated ones is determined more by the shared knowledge of the translating community than by what the translated texts themselves contain.

This means that understanding what translation is can be stated as: the culture of translation affects (*guides* and determines) the translation of culture. On translation as intercultural communication, Bassnett & Trivedi (1999 2) write,

> …translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in the process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with signification at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems.

The representation of others, mainly external others, through translation is a powerful strategy of exclusion used by a particular culguage as normal and even moral (Said 1995; Venuti 1998). This exclusion is also accompanied by an inclusion process of some accepted members from the other *culguage* as long as these accepted members (foreigners) adopt and adapt to the norms of the *culguage* that is accepting them. The examples of some Maghrebi writers in French and some Indian and Arab writers in English are cases in point (Faiq 2007).

Approached from this perspective, translation yields sites for examining a plethora of issues: race, gender, (post-)colonialism, publishing policies, censorship, and otherness, whereby all parties involved in the translation enterprise (from choosing texts for translation to linguistic decisions) tend to be highly influenced by their own *culguage* and the way it sees the *culguage* they are translating from.

3. Translation from Arabic …

Translation from Arabic into Western *culguages*, for example, has

followed representational strategies within an established framework of institutions with its own lexis and norms (Said 1993; Faiq 2004). In a global context, translation, aided by the media and its technologies, yields "enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures" (Venuti 1998 97). Given this situation, cultural encounters between Arabic, and by extension all that relates to Islam, through translation into mainstream Western languages, have been characterized by strategies of manipulation, subversion and appropriation, with the cultural conflicts being the ultimate outcome. Such strategies have become 'nastier' and dangerously *topoied* since the events of September 2001. The media have played a major role in the rapid diffusion of subverted translations and coverage of this world—suffocating the diversity and heterogeneity of the different Arab and Muslim cultures; portraying them instead as a monolith and a homogeneous group and forming a specific cultural identity that creates an otherness of absolute strangers, who need to be isolated, avoided and even abominated, negating thus possibilities of *tertium comparationis* and ethical translatability.

While seemingly both the West and the Arab/Islamic Worlds have decided to block themselves in their own towers, press and other media coverage has created more reasons of cultural misunderstandings. Representations—translations from- of Arabic and its associated cultures and Islam are carried out through lenses that fall within what Sayyed (1997 1) describes as,

> Ghosts are the remains of the dead. They are echoes of former times and former lives: those who have died but still remain, hovering between erasure of the past and the indelibility of the present—creatures out of time. Muslims [including Arab societies] too, it seems, are often thought to be out of time: throwbacks to medieval civilizations who are caught in the grind and glow of 'our'modern culture. It is sometimes said that Muslims belong to cultures and societies that are moribund and have no vitality—no life of their own. Like ghosts they remain with us, haunting the present.

The caricatures depicting Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper, George W. Bush's use of 'shit' to describe the July 2007 war in the Middle East, the many mis-translations (misrepresentations) of concepts such as *jihad* and *fatwa* into fixed meanings and references that deform their native meanings and references, are further examples of authoritarian relationships between a culture (Western) and how it represents—translates—the Arab/Islamic source culture (although not translations as such, transliterations represent powerful strategies of fixing and popularizing in the target language/culture particular connotations that sustain cultural conflicts).

Translation from Arabic has generally suffered from influences of the master discourse of the translating culture in terms of invisibility, appropriation, subversion, and manipulation. Such a situation not only distorts original texts but also leads to the influencing of target readers. Carbonell (1996 80), for example, reports that in his comments on Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, Byron Farwell (1963/1990 366) wrote:

> The great charm of Burton's translation, viewed as literature, lies in the veil of romance and exoticism he cast over the entire work. He tried hard to retain the flavour of oriental quaintness and naivete of the medieval Arab by writing as the Arab would have written in English. (cited in Carbonell 1996 80)

Such views of translation and by extension of readers, lead to translations that imply the production of subverted texts at all levels, "not only the source text, but also the target context experience the alteration infused by the translation process when their deeper implications are thus revealed" (ibid. 93). This alteration ultimately leads to manipulations of the target text through the process of translation, thus, regulating and/or satisfying and agreeing with the expected response of and/or sought from the receivers of the translations given the pressures of the master discourse through which Arab and Islamic culture (s) are perceived prior to the translation activity itself. Particularly in such a

context, translation

> … becomes a significant site for raising questions of representation, power, and historicity. The context is one of contested stories attempting to account for, to recount, the asymmetry and inequality of relations between peoples, races, languages. (Niranjana 1992 1)

Translation from Arabic has followed representational strategies within an established framework of institutions with its own vocabulary and scripts (Said 1993), that is, a particular master discourse and its centripetal pressures. In this framework of relations of power and knowledge, the West, satisfied and content with its own representations, has not deemed it necessary to appreciate and know fully, through translation, the literatures and respective cultures (with their differences and heterogeneity) of Arabs and Muslims (there are, of course, exceptions but they do not affect mainstream trends). Reporting on personal experience of translating contemporary Arabic literature into English, Peter Clark (1997 109) writes:

> I wanted ... to translate a volume of contemporary Syrian literature. I ... thought the work of 'Abd al-Salam al-'Ujaili was very good and well worth putting into English. 'Ujaili is a doctor in his seventies who has written poetry, criticism, novels and short stories. In particular his short stories are outstanding. Many are located in the Euphrates valley and depict the tensions of individuals coping with politicisation and the omnipotent state. .... I proposed to my British publisher a volume of 'Ujaili's short stories. The editor said, "There are three things wrong with the idea. He's male. He's old and he writes short stories. Can you find a young female novelist?" Well, I looked into women's literature and did translate a novel by a woman writer even though she was and is in her eighties.

Peter Clark's experience is not incidental. His account shows that

translation from Arabic into mainstream Western languages is essentially still seen as an exotic voyage carried out through a weighty component of representation in the target culture, in which the objective knowledge of the source culture is substantially altered by a dialectic of attraction and repulsion. The *Arabian Nights* (a title preferred for its exotic and salacious resonance to the original *A Thousand and One Nights*), for instance, is more famous in the West than in the Arab East. The exotic, and often distorted, view of the Arab and Islamic worlds has led to a situation where the proportion of books written about this world in Western languages is greatly disproportionate to the small number of books translated from Arabic.

The centric assumptions about others—races, nationalities, literatures—has provided, in the West, the site for critiques of representations, language and ideological control towards writers from the Arab/Islamic worlds. These assumptions return time and again to haunt the production, reception and circulation of Arabic texts, and in turn complicate the issue of translation.

Concerning these same issues, Thomas (1998 104-5) examines the relationship between the Arab World and the West in general and the politics behind the awarding of the Nobel Prize in literature to Naguib Mahfouz:

> Arab culture ⋯ vis-à-vis the West, has largely been positioned through the selection of translation material. The prevailing view of Arab culture as a mixture of the quaint, the barbarously primitive and the comfortably dependent, is to a large degree a product of those texts which have been selected for translation. ⋯ In this regard it is interesting to consider Naguib Mahfoudh—the only Arab writer to have been given the full western seal of approval through his winning of the Nobel Prize. He worked as a censor throughout the Nasser and Sadat eras, eras not noted for liberal attitudes to the arts or critical awareness. He also appeared on Israeli television on a number of occasions supporting a pro-western position. Despite what one may think of the literary merits of his work ⋯ the fact remains that nearly all of his work has been translated, which compares very favourably with translations of other Arab writers who

> have been much more critical of the West.

Arabic literary texts are rarely chosen for translation for their innovative approaches or for their socio-political perspectives. Rather, texts chosen are recognizable as conforming to the master discourse of writing about and representing Arabs, Arab culture and Islam. This situation has led many Arab writers to write in and for translation. Discussing the discursive strategies of the female Arab writer, Hanan al-Shaykh in her novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Dallal (1998 8) appropriately comments:

> That *Women of Sand and Myrrh* was written specifically for English-speaking audiences is clear in the opening chapter. References specific to Western culture which would be unfamiliar to Arabs go unexplained, whereas references to customs or practices specific to Arab contexts are consistently accompanied by explanations. Suha explains why "the [imported] soft toys and dolls had all been destroyed" by the authorities: "every one that was meant to be a human being or animal or bird [was confiscated] since it was not permissible to produce distortions of God's creatures". This explanation of a particular interpretation of Islam (or outright fabrication, as most Arab Muslims would believe) used by the Gulf regimes would need no explanation for Arab audiences. However, the narrators' references to "Barbie dolls and Snoopies and Woodstocks" would not be recognized by most in the Arab world, and yet are left without explanation.

Some further examples are. In his translation of Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Yawma qutila z-za iim* (The Day the Leader was Killed/Assassinated) into French, AndréMiquel, for example, explains in his foreword that he kept footnotes to the very minimum. Yet, Jacquemond (1992) counted 54 footnotes in a translation of 77 pages. What transpires is that the translator-cum-orientalist expert assumes total ignorance on the part of readers, and proceeds to guide them through assumed authoritative knowledge of an

unfathomable world where backwardness and the assassination of peace-makers are the norms. But this would be acceptable compared with Edward Fitzgerald's infamous comment on the liberties he had allowed himself to take with his version of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam*, "really need a little art to shape them" (Bassnett 1998b 68). In her address to the conference organized by Korean Association of Translation Studies (KATS), Mona Baker (2009) discussed how an organization like *memri* systematically deforms Arabic source texts to fit the requirements (ideology) of its master discourse, with the aim of further demonizing Arabs and Islam.

Closely related to this issue is the meager number of translations from Arabic. Venuti (1995 14) reports that of all translations worldwide for the years 1982, 1983 and 1984, translations from Arabic into English were 298, 322 and 536 respectively. Compared with translations from Spanish or Hungarian or even Classical Greek and Latin, one can easily notice the insignificance of the number of translations from Arabic. Translations from these three sources were 715, 847, 839; 703, 665, 679; and 839, 1116, 1035; for the three years respectively. This situation prompted Edward Said (1995 97) to aptly remarks:

> For all the major world literatures, Arabic remains relatively unknown and unread in the West, for reasons that are unique, even remarkable, at a time when tastes here for the non-European are more developed than ever before and, even more compelling, contemporary Arabic literature is at a particularly interesting juncture.

Despite this interesting juncture, despite a Nobel Prize in literature and despite the current almost hysterical attention given to Arabs and Islam, translation from Arabic still proceeds along a familiar and established master discourse whereby

> … stereotyping, strategies of signification and power: the network in

> which a culture is fashioned does appear as a texture of signs linked by endless connotations and denotations, a meaning system of inextricable complexity that is reflected, developed and recorded in the multifarious act of writing. (Carbonell 1996 81)

What transpires here is that through adherence to the requirements and constraints of a master discourse of translation, source texts become situated into ways of representation ingrained in the shared experience and institutional norms of the translating community or communities (self, selves, us). Source texts and their associated peoples are transformed from certain specific signs into signs whose typifications translators and others involved in the translation enterprise claim to know. As the antonym of the self (the translating culture), the other (them, the translated culture) is used to refer to all that the self perceives as mildly or radically different. Historically, the other and otherness have been feared than appreciated with the exception perhaps of the phenomenon of exoticism, where the other, though often misunderstood and misrepresented, is perceived as strange but at the same time strangely attractive (O'Barr 1994).

In intercultural contacts through translation, otherness is measured according to a scale of possibilities within a master discourse: when the other is feared, the lexical strategies one expects are those that realize hierarchy, subordination and dominance. Otherness can and often does lead to the establishment of stereotypes, which usually come accompanied by existing representations that reinforce the ideas behind them. The representation of others through translation is a powerful strategy of exclusion used by a self as normal and moral (Said 1995). This exclusion is also accompanied by an including process of some accepted members from the other as long as these accepted individuals adopt and adapt to the underlying master discourse and its associated representational system and ideology of the accepting self (Faiq 2000).

4. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the complexities of intercultural communication, the ethics of translation, in theory, postulates that it should lead to a rapprochement between the *au-delà* (Bhabha, 1994 1), the Arab/Muslim World for our purpose here, and the Western World, as the translator of this *au-delà*. And, since it covers the *betwixtness*(the space-between cultures), translation could render encounters less painful, less conflictual, less antagonistic, and less bloody.

In our age and more urgently than ever before, the ethics of translation postulates that it should lead to a rapprochement between different *culguages* to bring both globalization (the *culguage* of the multinationals—often equated with the *culguage* of the United States of America and Western Europe) and localization (individual *culguages* –often equated with the rest of the World) together to celebrate differences. That is, translation should be defined within and carried out as a tool for some *glocalization* objective (bringing the hegemonic global and the not-so-hegemonic local together in peaceful encounters)!

A critical understanding of the ways in which discourses operate might contribute to more efficient self-monitoring on the part of producers of master discourses and might lead to making translation a true process of intercultural understanding rather than reinforcing existing representations and images of one culture about the other. This can be achieved through a cross-cultural appraisal of the discourses underlying translation and translating with a view to better understanding the issues of identity (self and other), translation enterprise (patronage, agencies, translators) and norms of representation (master discourse).

But current practices of translation indicate that this aim is almost untenable. Arabic literary texts, for example, are rarely chosen for translation for their innovative approaches or for their socio-political perspectives. Rather, texts chosen are recognizable as conforming to the master discourse of writing

about and representing Arabs, Arab culture and Islam.

If we are to examine the process of intercultural communication through translation, we ought to carefully consider the culture of doing translation since the culture of translation (master discourse) ultimately guides and regulates the translation of culture.

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[Abstract]

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Translation demonstrates the complexity inherent in the process of interlingual communication across cultures. This complexity stems from the carrying-over of specific cultural products (texts) to and recuperated by receivers who have at their disposal an established system of representation with its own norms for the production and consumption of texts, including translations. This system ultimately evolves into a *master discourse of translation* through which cultural differences are negotiated.

Drawing primarily on textual import from Arabic, the purpose of this article is to show how culturally defined master discourse affects the act of translating. In a rapidly globalized world, a master discourse emerges as the all powerful in its hegemonic discursive norms, leading to the conclusion that the culture of translation affects and guides the translation of culture.

▸ Key Words: Translation, intercultural communication, master discourse, representation, Arabic, self, other.

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