

Three Major Stages in the Historical Development of Translation

Dr. Ahmed Mohamed Lemine El-Mokhtar

Faculty of Arts | NKC Modern University | Mauritania

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* Corresponding author:

ahmedlemine@gmail.com

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Abstract: Translation is about the transfer of a meaning or a cultural aspect from one language or culture to another. Translation has been participative in the development of international cultures. The main aim of translation is to facilitate communication between people from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Translators played pivotal roles to transmit ideas, social practices, customs and traditions between nations across the world. There are several stages, which marked the historical development of translation. Covering these stages equips translators with useful information they need during the process of translation. Translation started orally before the invention of writing and continued to develop after the advent of writing and the emergence of technology. Adopting a descriptive approach, this article contextualizes the historical emergence of translation as a means of bridging two or more cultures. It highlights three of the major stages marking the development of the field of translation. It includes three sections on oral translation, translation after the advent of writing and translating religious texts. It concludes that the first form of translation, oral or interpretation, remained a critical form of translation and maintained its popularity up to now in the era of advanced technology.

Keywords: Oral Translation, Religious Translation, Translation and the Advent of Writing, Translation History.

ثلاث مراحل محورية في التطور التاريخي للترجمة

الدكتور / أحمد محمد الأمين المختار

كلية الآداب | جامعة انواكشوط العصرية | موريتانيا

المستخلص: أسهمت الترجمة بشكل فعال في تطوير الثقافات العالمية وربطها ببعضها منذ ما قبل التاريخ. لعب المترجمون دورا رياديا في نقل الأفكار والأنماط الثقافية والعادات والتقاليد بين الشعوب المختلفة في الشرق والغرب. ارتبط تاريخ الترجمة بتاريخ البشرية وبالمشتركة الإنسانية غير المرئية التي تزخر بها الثقافات المختلفة. يحتاج المترجمون دراسة مراحل تطور الترجمة في أبعادها التاريخية والوصفية والوصفية والتقنية للحصول على معلومات هامة تعينهم على تحسين أدائهم أثناء عملية الترجمة. يتناول هذا المقال، اعتمادا على مقارنة وصفية، المسار التاريخي للترجمة ودورها المحوري في تلاقي الثقافات، وأهم مراحل تطورها، وبعض مناهجها، وأساليبها من خلال ثلاثة عناوين فرعية أولها عن الترجمة الشفهية، وثانها عن حال الترجمة بعد اكتشاف الكتابة، وثالثها عن ترجمة النصوص الدينية. توصل البحث إلى أنه رغم التطور الهائل الذي حصل خلال هذه المراحل، وخاصة بعد الثورة التكنولوجية الباهرة، فقط حافظت الترجمة الشفهية على مكانتها وظلت حاضرة بقوة في ميادين الترجمة. الكلمات المفتاحية: تاريخ الترجمة، الترجمة بعد اكتشاف الكتابة، الترجمة الدينية، الترجمة الشفهية.

Introduction

Talking about translation requires first to define the term itself. Etymologically speaking, “the word translation comes from the Latin word ‘translatio’ derived from the perfect passive participle of ‘translatum’ or ‘transferre’, which means ‘to transfer’ – from ‘trans’ meaning ‘across’ plus ‘ferre’ which means ‘to carry’ or ‘to bring’” (Férelleur-Dumoulin, 2009). Having a glance at the origin of the word “translation,” one can deduce that it is about a process that aims at bridging a gap between different cultures. This is to say that human beings share many things in common, but the way they express themselves in their spoken or written languages differs from one geographical place to another and even within the same area. Thus, it is necessary to impede such obstacle. To do so, there must be a means by which people from different social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds can communicate with each other.

Translation is important to exchange knowledge and information about the ways people live, think, and deal with each other. This is not an easy task, and there lies the difficulty that translators face and the pivotal role they play to undertake such huge responsibility. This means that translation, regardless of the various definitions it might be given, revolves around the idea of bringing nations closer as to facilitate individuals’ lives. In this sense, the translator plays the role of the mediator between people who belong to different nations or even the categories within the same nation; consequently, the task of the translator is doubled compared to that of ordinary people. John Cunnison Catford (1965: 1) gives several definitions to translation. He states that translation is “[a]n operation performed on languages, a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another”. In this definition, the writer focuses on translating texts from one language to another. For him, translation requires the existence of an operator whose task is to process a text and transfer it from a source language (SL) to a target language (TL). He continues considering translation as “replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent material in other language (TL)” (Catford, 1965). This quote highlights the idea that a translation of a text is just a “replacement” of its content or meaning in other language.

According to Richard Brislin (1976: 1), “translation is a general term referring to the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language to another, whether the language is in written or oral form, whether the languages have established orthographies or not; or whether one or both languages is based on signs, as with signs of the deaf”. Brislin focuses on the idea that a translation is a “transfer”. The exchange of information, regardless the form it may take, or the nature of the source or target languages, is what we mean by the term translation. This definition gives a general idea about the aim of all forms of translation without emphasizing a specific type or neglecting another.

Another expert, Wolfram Wilss (1982: 134), states that translation is a transfer process which aims at the transformation of a written source language text (SLT) into an optimally equivalent target language text (TLT), and which requires the syntactic, the semantic, and the pragmatic understanding and analytical processing of the source text. Syntactic understanding is related to style and meaning. Understanding of semantics is meaning related activity. Pragmatic understanding is related to the message

or implication of a sentence. It is obvious that this definition does not state what is transferred. Rather, it states the requirement of the process.

Eugene Nida (1984: 84) states that translation is a process of “reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style”. In other words, “translation is a transfer of meaning, message, and style from one SLT to the TLT” (Taber & Nida, 2003: 12). Peter Newmark (1991: 27) sheds lights on a similar idea when he defines translation as “the act of transferring meaning of a stretch or a unit of language, the whole or a part, from one language to another”.

According to Richard Brislin (1976: 3-4), there are four types of translation. These types are (a) pragmatic, (b) aesthetic-poetic, (c) ethnographic, and (d) linguistic translation. For him, pragmatic translation is the translation of a message in relation to the accuracy of the information intended to be communicated in the target language form. What characterizes this type is the importance of information’s accuracy in the process of translation. Any transfer of technical information is a good example for this type of translation. The second type is aesthetic-poetic translation in which the emphasis is on the invisible components of the translated text, like feeling and emotions. The third type is ethnographic translation that focuses on the cultural context of the texts. The last type is linguistic translation where translators seek only equivalent meanings. It can be deduced from Brislin’s classification that the translation of a literary work should be the aesthetic-poetic one.

The other kinds of translation or translation approach important to review are the ones related to the concept of dynamic translation, semantic translation, communicative translation, and artistic translation. Dynamic translation tries to transfer the messages or ideas into a target language and to evoke in the target language readers the responses that are substantially equivalent to those experienced by the source text readers (Taber & Nida, 2003: 28). Richard Hohulin (1982: 15 & 22) states that dynamic translation contains three essential terms: (a) equivalent, which points toward the source language message, (b) natural, which points toward the receptor language, and (c) closest, which binds the two orientations together on the basis of the highest degree of approximation. Dynamic equivalence approach can be used in the level of translating sentences or group of sentences, because the whole message lies here. It resembles the dynamic equivalence approach in the sense that it rejects the form-oriented translation and emphasizes that a translation should convey the meaning of the original. A translation, according to this approach, should be faithful to the “dynamics” of the original, or the SL’s “naturalness” of language use and ease of comprehension (El-Shafey, 2012: 5).

John Catford (1965: 1) states that translation is “an operation performed on languages, a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another,” or in other words, he continues, it is a “replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent material in other language (TL)”. This implies that the process of translation is more about providing a new text than transferring a meaning of another. He goes on saying that “a linguistic theory of translation is an analysis of the process of

translation,” and proceeds explaining that “such theory is directed to answer general or specific problems that may arise when any translation is undertaken” (Catford, 1965: 2). Catford (1965: 2-3) sheds lights also on several issues involved in the translation process like extent, meaning, level of languages and phonological translation to evolve his theory of translation. Based on extent of source language text, he distinguishes between two types of translation. For him, the first type is “full translation,” where every part of source language is replaced by target language text material. The second type is “partial translation,” in which some parts of source language text are left untranslated or incorporated in the target language text. He proceeds focusing on the levels of language, differentiating between the “total translation”, which involves translation at all levels (grammar, lexis and phonological levels), and partial translation that concerns translation at one or two levels. He analyzes the importance of meaning through translation and states that meaning captures the essence of the text. For him, meaningful translation also can transfer the essence. Thus, meaning is a total network of relations entered by any linguistic form.

Translation is a process that takes many forms. This is to say that while the general aim of translation is to transfer a message from one language to another; yet, the nature of that message imposes the form of translation that the translator has got to adopt. It requires also the right translators who are specialized in that specific type of translation. For instance, if we have a scientific text that we want to translate from English into Arabic, we will need first to find someone who masters the source and target languages. Mastering English and Arabic, however, is not necessarily enough to be a qualified translator because translation is a matter of training and practice more than it is a matter of language mastering. In this case, there must be someone who masters the scientific terms in English and their equivalents in Arabic so that they can translate a scientific text, and not only someone with speaking and writing skills in both languages. The same thing can be applied to the other types of translations where every branch of this field has got its own experts, with the exception that there are some translators who are experts in several types of translation due to their long experience in the field.

Contextualising Translation

Historically speaking, translation started orally, and after the invention of writing, it became a manual activity and remained so for centuries; however, with the increasing development of technology, the field knew some new trends most important of which emerged computer-assisted translation or machine translation. Translation has been a human necessity since the existence of humanity. Translating significant literary works from one language into others has contributed significantly to the development of world culture. It is related to the history of the often invisible cross cultural interactions of the world. The influence of eastern concepts and ideas, especially from India, China and Iraq on Western culture goes back to early sixth century B.C. when trade ties were first established between India and the Mediterranean countries (Bhaduri, 2008: 197).

Many medical theories of Plato and Galen of Greece had considerable influence from those of India. Many of the philosophical and scientific works of ancient Greece were rendered into Arabic as early as ninth century A.D. This knowledge spread to Europe via Spain which was a Muslim conquered country by then. The school of translators of Toledo in Spain established by Alfonso VI of Castile and Leon in 1085 AD was responsible for translations from Arabic to Latin and then to Spanish. These scientific and technological works participated later in the advent of the European Renaissance (Sáez, 2022: 1). Despite their key contributions, ancient translators have often remained unknown or in the background. Therefore, their great efforts in bridging cultures and nations have not been acknowledged. They have done their job with painstaking efforts despite many violent conflicts that have dotted throughout history. Translators have enabled Holy Scriptures like the Bible written in esoteric languages like Latin, Holy Quran and other religious books to be understood by ordinary people by translating their meanings into more common languages without depending on a few elite priests or scholars to explain what they contained. Some translators even had to pay with their life for doing it like the famous Bible translator Willaim Tyndale, who was arrested and executed in Holland by the king in 1536 for translating the Bible from its original languages into the common vernacular of English (Adamson, 2016: 3).

Translators have always played a key role in society. Medieval translators for example had a major impact on scholarship, and contributed to the development of vernacular languages and national identities around these languages. Translators went on playing a key role in the advancement of society for centuries. However, most translators have become “invisible” in the 21st century, with a precarious life and their names often forgotten on press releases and book covers. There is much to do to acknowledge the translators’ major impact on knowledge, science, literature and culture (Venuti, 2008: 1).

A major role of translators has been to bridge values between two or more cultures. This issue was discussed in the second century BCE by the Roman playwright Publius Terentius Afer, known as Terence, when he adapted Greek comedies into Roman. Around that time, the debate about sense-for-sense translation versus word-for-word translation emerged. Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus, known as Jerome, was said to be the coiner of the term 'sense-for-sense' in his “Letter to Pammachius”. While translating the Bible into Latin (later known as the “Vulgate”), Jerome stated that the translator needed to translate “not word for word but sense for sense”, “non verbum e verbo sed sensum de sensu” (Lebert, 2022: 2). So, the focus here is on the transmission of the meaning rather than the structure or form. This opens a parenthesis to shed lights on oral translation.

Oral Translation

The need for communication existed with the creation of human beings. People from different cultures need to communicate with each other. Translation is a process in which a message is sent to deliver a meaning of a word or expression uttered by someone or a group to another person or a group of people. Historically speaking, oral translation emerged before all other types of translation and maintained

its importance even after the advent of writing. Today, despite the technological advancement, it is still one of the most popular forms of translation. There are certain contexts, like speeches, conferences and other bilateral conversations, where oral translation is required. Oral translation is tackled in relation to written translation. The first one can be performed by both literate and illiterate people, while the second one can be done only by educated people who are able to read and write. Here appears the fundamental role of literacy in differentiating between oral translation and other forms of translation. In this context, this section discusses major characteristics of oral translation and the several forms it takes (Bhaduri, 2008: 197).

Oral translation can be an easy task for a translator who is required to deliver a general meaning from one language to another. This seems similar to the tasks played by any other translator; yet, an oral translator may not need much knowledge and language skills to perform his task successfully. That is because some people find themselves in multicultural environments where they acquire several languages or dialects without having any courses or being taught by any tutor or school teacher. Therefore, they reach a point where they can understand and transfer the meaning of what they hear, but without following any rule usually recommended during the process of written or literate translation (Edmonson, 1971: 323). It is noticeable that the majority of languages spoken throughout history did not find their way to writing. This is to say that "language is so overwhelmingly oral that of all the many thousands of languages – possibly tens of thousands – spoken in the course of human history only around 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have produced literature, and most have never been written at all. Of the 3000 languages spoken that exist today only 78 have a literature" (Edmonson, 1971: 332).

Oral translation is also more practical in the contexts where the meaning of the message must be conveyed immediately. For instance, if there is a press conference between officials from different cultural backgrounds, an immediate translation would be required as to maintain the rhythm of question-answer equation and to keep conveyed ideas and opinions within their normal context. Here lies the importance of a form of oral translation known as 'interpretation' or 'simultaneous' translation.

Oral interpreter focuses firmly on recited words and conveys the meaning of what has been uttered. So, the emphasis here is put on the voice. This is to say that oral translation is concerned with any process in which a message is delivered vocally to an audience that does not understand the language of the sender. The role of an oral translator is similar to that of any other translators. The major difference is that oral translation does not make use of written words, rather it renders the meaning immediately and vocally. Yet, it may make use of facial expressions that might be pivotal during the process of interpretation. The same thing applies to body language gestures which play clarifying roles. The importance of oral translation lies in the fact that it was the first form of communication in history that was used to bridge different nations and cultures. Moreover, the need for this type of interpretation remained

after the invention of writing and the field maintained its popularity up to now in the era of advanced technology (Bhaduri, 2008: 197).

Translation after the Advent of Writing

The date when writing was first invented remained controversial. However, some historians state that the first manuscripts had appeared in different places and times throughout the history of humankind (Center for Instructional Innovation, 2017: 2). Of these first attempts, one can mention the manuscripts of ancient Sumer around 3200 BC. The form of writing emerged at that time was known as 'cuneiform.' Another attempt was the one that took place in ancient Mexico before 400BC by the Olmecs. The third attempt was believed to have occurred in Northern China around 1200BC. The idea that many historians bring into spot light is that writing scripts developed probably from pictures, designs and symbols that were marked on bones, especially in China, and carved in stones (University of Illinois, 2017: 5).

In human history, poets have always been playing pivotal roles in preserving heroic legends about the victories of their communities as a part of recording the pride and cultural heritage throughout the ancient world. Writing, then, was a new means of communication that permitted transcribers to record major events and religious beliefs of their times. These efforts participated in the emergence of a new art form known since then as 'literature'. The first writer in history known by name is the Mesopotamian priestess Enheduanna (2285-2250 BCE), daughter of Sargon of Akkad, was the first writer in history known by name when she wrote her chants to the goddess Inanna and signed them with her name and seal (Kleiner, 2014: 41). Among the first transcribed literary works, one may mention The Epic of Gilgamesh by the Mesopotamian transcriber Shin-Legi-Unninni and Mahabharata by the Indian Veda Vyāsa (Maier, 1997: 158 & 178). Therefore, it was after the advent of writing that these works and many others that followed were made possible.

The invention of writing and printing was a turning point in the history of translation. It was the beginning of a new era marked with prolific manual activities which helped to enforce and advance the development of the field. Translators began their attempts to bridge cultures by translating written texts from source languages to target languages. That was the first step towards preparing a proper environment for educated communities in which people suffered from illiteracy for centuries. In this context, written translation has always been tackled in relation to oral translation as the first stands for literacy and commitment to rules; whereas, the latter is spontaneous and does not necessarily require affectation.

In his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Ong Walter (1982: 40) states that "[w]ith writing, the mind is forced into a slowed-down pattern that affords it the opportunity to interfere with and reorganize its more normal, redundant processes". Walter emphasizes the idea that by the invention of writing, there was a 'forced' shift from the normal and spontaneous transmission of

information in orality environment to a more complicated situation where new factors will impact the whole process of translation.

Translating Religious Texts

Religion is a common belief that people from different cultural backgrounds share. As all believers need to understand the teachings of their religion, it has always been necessary to translate religious texts to the number of languages spoken by the followers of that religion. For that reason, translation played an essential role in the historical process of religious awareness. In this section, the focus will be briefly on the historical development of religious translation. In this context, it will provide samples of the most important religious texts that were translated and the impact of translation on the three major monotheistic religions.

One of the first translations known in the West took place in the third century BCE for Hebrew Bible into Greek. The reason for translating Hebrew Bible was to enable detached Jews, who had forgotten Hebrew, their ancestral language, to read it in their new adapted language, Greek. This translation was done in Alexandria, Egypt, and was known as 'Septuagint', which referred to the seventy translators who performed the translation. It was said that each translator worked on their own, and that all versions were identical. The "Septuagint" became the source text for later translations into Latin, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and other languages. Many other biblical texts that were originally written in Hebrew were also translated into Greek in Alexandria during the two following centuries. Translation theorists in the West had debates for more than ten centuries over Jerome's approach in translating the Bible in the fourth century CE (Metzger & Coogan, 2008: 571).

For centuries, it has been believed that religious translation dates back to the days of Noah's descendants whose story was narrated in the book of Genesis. The major theme of Babel Tower story is that the descendants of Noah decided to settle down in the land of Shinar after a huge flood. They committed a great sin in their new settlement and tried to challenge God by building a tall tower to reach Heaven. Divine punishment was through linguistic stratagem. God made them speak different languages so that they do not understand each other anymore and then scattered them on the earth. According to the story, that incident marked a new era where many languages emerged and a need for a communication means appeared, and that means was translation (Traugott & Pratt, 1980: 2).

In her book *Translation Studies*, Susan Bassnett (1980: 4) states that "translation came to be used as a weapon in both dogmatic and political conflicts as nation states began to emerge and the centralization of the Church started to weaken evidence in linguistic terms by the decline of Latin as a universal language". This shows that translation was essential in the conflicts that took place by the period of time when attempts at minimizing the role of Church started giving a space to what will be known later as nation states. This is to say that translating religious texts would have participated in enriching the discussions over the role of Church in relation to managing daily life chores of the people. In this respect,

translation helped clarifying all point of views about the necessity of separating religion from state institutions.

Of the critical recent books to read about translating religious texts is *Postcoloniality, Translation, and the Bible in Africa* (2017). This book covers the major stages of the historical development of religious translation in African colonial and postcolonial contexts. It is useful for translation theorists, gender, political science and biblical studies' students (Musa & Wafula, 2021). There are many other books written on the translation of Islamic texts, namely the Holy Quran and the Hadith, Prophet Sayings. However, it is noticeable that what characterizes the field of translation within the Islamic context is that the first known translations were actually translations of Arabic interpretations of the Holy Quran and not real translations of the original text itself. These Arabic interpretations are called *tafsir* (interpretation) and not *tarjama* (translation). That is why, in Islamic terms, there is no translation of the holy Quran; instead, there is an interpretation of the meaning of Quranic verses. This is because the Quran includes the words of Allah and they are inimitable. Historically speaking, interpretation of the Quran was first translated into Persian language through the translation of Tabari's *Tafsir* around the tenth century (The Library of Congress, 2014). According to Alexander Bevilacqua (2014), the first translation of the Holy Quran from Arabic into English was published in London in 1733 by George Sale and then followed by too many other translations.

The translation of the Quran knew tremendous development in the West, especially in the USA during the twentieth and twenty first centuries, in particular after the 09/11 attacks where people became eager to read about Islam. This being said, it was obvious that more translations of Islamic texts and values were needed from Arabic into English and other western languages. Nowadays, the phenomenon of 'Islamophobia' is encouraging an increasing number of Muslim translators to write back about the real teachings of Islam as to defend their religion and traditions amid continuous accusations of terrorism linked to Islam and Muslims.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the translator is the mediator whose task is to ensure that there is always a cross-cultural environment in which people from different backgrounds meet and exchange knowledge about their cultures and inner practices. Indeed, being in a position of transferring information and cultural aspects from one language/culture to another is not an easy task, but there lies the importance, necessity and effectiveness of the roles played by translation experts and practitioners. We have seen that despite the pivotal impact of the advent of writing and the technological revolution on the development of translation, oral translation, or interpretation, remained a critical form of translation. This paper is limited to three major stages of translation development and does not claim covering all important historical and contemporary development phases. It is recommended for future research related to this topic to focus

only on one of these stages, break it into sub-titles, and tackle them in details from historical, descriptive and analytical approaches.

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