

***Cultural Implications of Some Concepts of
Direction in English and Arabic with
Reference to English - Arabic - English
Translation***

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Introduction

Cultural differences between speech communities very often pose difficulties in conveying the different messages including those falling into the domain of human language proper. This is very obvious when one fails to recognize the expected response from a foreigner on hearing some culture-bound expression or other. It is also felt when a translator may fail to find in the target language (TL) an expression corresponding to that of the source language (SL). This manifestly shows that translation is not, as some may believe, merely the rendering of syntactic and semantic structures of the SL into the TL's corresponding structures.

The aim of the present paper is to shed light on some cultural aspects related to certain concepts of direction in both Arabic and

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English and to discuss points of similarity and difference between them. It also studies the difficulties encountered in the process of translating from one of these languages into the other as far as some directional expressions are concerned. Attention is to be drawn that the examples cited in the paper cover diverse topics and range from the highly literary to the very informal. The main directional expressions to be investigated here are those of UP-DOWN/ أعلى (فوق) – أسفل (تحت) and Right-Left/ يسار (شمال) / يمين.

Discussion

“Noolen's the south end of a horse”, said one character in James Hadley Chase's (The Doll's Bad News). Fenner, the protagonist, said later on, talking about the same Noolen: “that guy's supposed to be the south end of a horse. All right, then I'll make him the north end.”

It is only legitimate to ask: Why is it that the hindquarters of the horse's anatomy are associated with the south and not another point on the compass and, hence, used in this example to express disrespect and worthlessness? Why would Fenner adopt an ameliorating posture and pledge to take the trouble of making that man the north end? Why is the word "يمين" (right) in Arabic associated with the favorable and good while "شمال" and "يسار" (left) are usually associated with something unfavorable? Why is

"left" in English used as a political term to indicate a concept different from that of other speech communities embracing leftist doctrines and attitudes? The answer to all these questions, to the best our knowledge, lies in the fact that myriads of linguistic items are culture-bound and should not, therefore, be taken out of their cultural contexts when one tries to study them or to reproduce them through translation in a way that renders a message in the TL similar in effectiveness to that of the SL's.

What is culture then, and how does it affect people's behavior and thinking? We know that every human community has its own ways of dealing with the innumerable phenomena that shape its mode of life and that the life of each community is the outcome of a long process of evolution that involves the change, addition and abolition of certain concepts and values. This implies that there is nothing entirely sacrosanct or fixed as to the factors determining the life of communities (religion is an exception). The outcome of the above variables of a given community is culture and all activities of individuals of that community are encompassed by this component and, indeed, it is the most manifest and important component.

Sapir (1921:207) defines culture as the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determine the texture of our lives. AL-Khatib (1986:14) gives a more detailed definition: "culture is the humanistic, scientific and technological achievement. It

also includes the habits, beliefs and patterns of a people's life-style as well as the social, political, religious and intellectual history of a nation." Culture is then, by definition, that whole context that plays a major role in shaping the thoughts and behavior of individuals and communities by means of conventionalized rules and norms which facilitate communication. There are, however, striking similarities between some different communities in some cultural aspects as there are differences, and the most obvious cultural facet that reflects them is language.

A speech community is any group of people who consider that they speak the same language (Aitchison 1988:105). Arabic and English belong to two distinct linguistic families and to two extremely different cultures. So it is expected that each of them differs from the other in segmenting its physical reality and in how this reality is reflected by each of them. This can be best illustrated in the metaphorical use of words and expressions. Examples on this are 'I see him once in a blue moon', and 'It's raining cats and dogs' and their Arabic counterparts: قلما أراه (standard Arabic); أراه في السنة حسنة (non-standard metaphor) and يهطل المطر بغزارة (standard Arabic); يهطل المطر كأفواه القرب (metaphorical). The above examples and many others result in non-congruence between both languages for the set of terms covering a certain area in one of

them may not correspond to terms covering the same area, simply because the two languages do not match neatly.

The concept of direction in English and Arabic is one area that reveals certain cultural peculiarities in (their respective speech communities. For Arabs, the direction "right" (يمين) and "left" (شمال، يسار) have different connotations. It is advisable in Arab countries (to cross a house's doorstep with one's right leg first to avoid misfortune, while **some** people may be sad on begetting a left-handed child, and hence, left - handedness is associated with "عسر" (hardship) and "أعسر" is used as a synonym to "إيسر" and "أشول", all meaning a left-handed person. Also, of a group of people trying to enter or leave through a door, the person to the right takes precedence and one often hears the utterance: "اليمين أولاً" 'right first'.

Many directional expressions are metaphorical or idiomatic and a considerable number of them (especially in Arabic) can be traced back to religion as we shall see in later examples.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 14 - 21) discuss metaphors associated with UP - DOWN orientation. They give many examples of which we choose the following: I'm feeling up. You're in high spirits. I'm feeling down. He's at the peak of health. He came down with flue. He fell from power. Don't be underhanded.

In Arabic, similar concepts may be also expressed by using words and expressions that involve UP-DOWN directions. Examples on this are the following, to mention but few:

أنا في قمة الصحة والسعادة.

I am at the peak of health and happiness.

وقع تحت ضغط شديد.

He came under heavy pressure.

جاء اسمه في ذيل قائمة الناجحين.

His name came last in the list of success.

سقط طريح الفراش.

He fell ill.

Talking about directional metaphorical expressions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 14) say;

These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment. Orientational metaphors give a concept a spatial orientation : for example HAPPY IS UP. The fact that the concept HAPPY is oriented UP leads to English expressions like " I'm feeling up today."

These metaphorical uses constitute part of everyday conceptual system of a speech community. They are as Gibbs (1994:203) maintains “the products of our bodily experiences...

some of these experiences may be universal; others may vary across cultures”.

In English and Arabic, directional metaphors have their bases in their respective cultures and there are striking similarities as to the polar oppositions of the directions UP-DOWN/ (تحت) أعلى (فوق) أسفل (تحت) and RIGHT-LEFT (يسار) (شمال). In both languages UP and أعلى / فوق together with words and expressions denoting an upward orientation symbolize something good and favorable as we hinted earlier. To be “On the top of the world” is to be very happy, healthy or successful. To be “In the upper echelon” is to be at a high level of authority. “Above-board” means honest and “high status” means importance. "عليه القوم" are prominent people. "مؤتمر على أعلى مستوى", is a top-level conference, "صاحب المعالي" is His Excellency and the Quranic verse "إن الأبرار لفي عليين" is : The virtuous are at the uppermost heaven. The cultural basis of the above examples is that the good and virtuous actions correlate with social well-being from the society/persons' point of view (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:17).

DOWN and تحت (أسفل) on the other hand indicate something bad and unfavorable in both languages together with other words and expressions denoting a downward orientation. If somebody is “under someone's control” he is in an unfavorable situation. To “fall in status” is to lose prestige, while to “feel down” indicates illness or depression. In

Arabic to be تحت سلطة أحد means under someone's control, "يسقط" means down with, or the borrowed French 'a bas', "ساقط" means base, "ساقطة" is a fallen woman "سقط من عينه" is to drop in someone's estimation and "اليد العليا خير من اليد السفلى" is : the upper hand is better than the lower hand.

In Arabic يمين (right) is preferred to "يسار / شمال" (left); "يمين" (right) is associated with "يُؤْمَن" (good luck or prosperity) and in the Glorious Quran it is used to express blessedness "أصحاب اليمين" : (those on the right path) are the righteous and blessed; "أصحاب الشمال" (those on the left/ wrong path) are bad and cursed. "وما ملكت أيمانهم" lit. (whatever their right hands possess)- their possessions , we read in the Glorious Quran and not "وما ملكت شمالهم" (whatever their left hands possess). In English, the orientation of "right" can be viewed with relevance to our discussion. We have the polysymous "right" - meaning truthful, exact, etc., in addition to "right-the directional" as in "Might is right" and "He was hit right in the head". Yet English has borrowed from French the words "adroit(ly)"- from the word droit (right) as in "un homme droit" and "vous-avez droit" -to mean skillful(ly) and "maladroit" (ly) which means clumsy and clumsily. In English, a "left-handed compliment", is not some remark one is desirous to listen to, and, to cap it, a leftist, which in other cultures and

ideologies has a good connotation, is badly eyed by “rightists” - the conservatives.

Translation Difficulties

To Aziz and Muftah (2000:90) “cross-cultural translation may raise a number of problems. The greater the gap between the source and the target cultures the more serious the difficulty would be. . As English and Arabic belong to different linguistic families and cultures, one would expect many problematic areas in translating from one of them into the other and, expressions denoting a direction, are but one area. Many of these expressions as mentioned earlier are culture-bound and cannot be fully rendered once taken out of their cultural context. If a native speaker of English hears or reads the translation of: "اليمين أولا" as (right first) without being made aware of the cultural background of the situation, he or she will not understand the implications of the expression. Also when a native speaker of Arabic reads and translates: (Our plans went west) as (خططنا ذهبت إلى الغرب), he or she will not get the message and will have questions as to what that could mean. "أعسر" in Arabic has a coloring different to that of left-handed in English, and in this case, as in all similar cases, translators should pay attention as to make the reader / hearer aware of the cultural implications of such words and expressions.

There are, however, some expressions which can be ambiguous in the SL if used with no reference to the context of

situation. For example in: “I’m out in left field today,” the speaker can mean either “I’m playing in the left part of the baseball outfield today” or “I’m mistaken.” The same applies to “I’m out in the right field today” which can be given two interpretations opposite to those of “I’m out in left field today” (See Keller, 1998: pp 172 - 74). In this case, as sentences like these are taken out of their context of situation, ambiguity arises in the SL itself and, thus, the translation of any of these sentences requires a distinction between the literal and metaphorical meanings in the SL. The case being so, a translator, in turn, should not take language as something for granted. Language to Rice and Waugh (1989 ; 239 - 40) is ;

a social process; language is utterance, emerging from concrete social communication not from any abstract objective system of language. When viewed in its social contexts, language appears not as a close system of self-identical forms (that is the one-to-one correspondence of a signifier to a signified), but as a generative and continuous process.

This shows that the mappings between language and culture are dynamic and that they vary according to the contexts in which they occur. Therefore, a translator, after being himself made aware of the cultural context, should try to give the receiver the full implications of a given impression. This can be achieved by

circumlocution or explanation. A translator should be able to explain to the reader / hearer the association between the hindquarters of a horse and the south and the word. "تافه" (worthless) would not give the exact cultural implication resulting from this association, the south end here being associated with the anatomy of the horse where it excretes and urinates^(*). So, we believe that the words "قذارة" "dirtiness" and "حثالة" "dregs" are nearer to the intended meaning, here derived from the American culture of cowboy life where horses are always present. Also when we translate أصحاب اليمين as 'those of the right path, the implication of the word يمين (right) should be made obvious because 'right' can be interpreted as 'correct' and as the 'right direction'. So, the association of يمين in Arabic when rendered into English should be made obvious either by explaining it between brackets or by using a footnote. The same applies to وما ملكت أيماهم; Lit. 'and whatever their right (hands) possess', i.e., 'what is in their possession' where using the word أيما (plural of يمين - right) indicates the dominance of 'right' over 'left'. The same can be said about other examples discussed on the preceding pages.

(*) It is clear that the expression "the south end of a horse" is used euphemistically. English has other vulgar expressions as does Arabics related to this meaning.

Conclusions

From the preceding discussion we conclude the following:

1. Culture is a fundamental factor in determining the way people dissect the realities of their lives and how these realities are reflected in language.
2. Despite the great gap between English and Arabic cultures, points of similarity can be detected in using some concepts of direction in English and Arabic.
3. Some difficulties of translating English concepts of direction into Arabic and vice - versa can be attributed to the absence of the context of situation.
4. Sometimes using foot - notes and brackets is necessary in order to show other implications each concept of direction may have in the SL.

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ملخص

المضامين الثقافية لبعض تعابير الاتجاهات في العربية والإنكليزية بالإشارة إلى الترجمة من إحدى هاتين اللغتين إلى الأخرى

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يهدف البحث إلى تسليط الضوء على بعض الجوانب الثقافية فيما يخص بعض تعابير الاتجاهات في العربية والإنكليزية ومناقشة أوجه التشابه والاختلاف بينهما ويدرس الصعوبات التي تنشأ لدى ترجمة هذه التعابير من إحدى هاتين اللغتين إلى الأخرى فيما يتعلق بالمفاهيم المعبر عنها في هذا الخصوص. والأمثلة الواردة في البحث تشمل مواضيع متنوعة تتراوح بين الأسلوب الأدبي والكلام العامي. إن التعابير الخاصة بالاتجاه التي يتناولها البحث هي:

في الإنكليزية Right-Lef, UP-Down

وفي العربية: أعلى / فوق وأسفل / تحت وكذلك يمين / يسار (شمال).

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