

Optimal Constraints on Arabic-English Translation: a Case Study of Translating Surat AlFatiHa ‘The Opening’

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ABSTRACT

To add a useful brick to the huge mansion of translation theory in its modern scientific sense, this paper intrinsically endeavors to reduce the wide hiatus between the premises of conventional translation studies and modern linguistic theories in general and Optimality Theory (OT) in particular, in a very earnest hope that translation methods and techniques can find a solid and robust systematic ground that may enable professional translators and institutionalized translation agencies to conduct their translation quality assessment more accurately. Drawing on the assumptions and the mechanism of linguistically-channeled theory of Optimality in phonology, syntax and semantics, this researcher, therefore, banks on setting and implementing major OT constraints that specify the range of choices translators may opt for while oscillating between the clashing Faithfulness and Markedness principles in their vehement quest to achieve optimally the least detrimental effects to the source text and to the target text, instead of looking for the myth of closest equivalence, while translating Arabic texts into English and *vice versa*. Four different translations have been examined and optimally evaluated. The study shows how any choice that translators make must, therefore, be deliberately rationalized and precisely prioritized over other possible choices and candidates in light of universal violable constraints. Therefore, translation studies should be descriptively constraint-oriented and motivated instead of being prescriptively rule-controlled.

Key words: Constraints, Equivalence, Faithfulness, Markedness, Optimal Theory, Translation Studies

INTRODUCTION

The act of translation as an essential tool of cross-cultural communication is one of the most ancient and maybe one the most prevalent practices that humanity has witnessed ever since the very dawn of civilization. The researcher would claim that translation for cultures and civilizations is probably like oxygen for humans; both are quintessentially sought for existence and survival. Translation studies started in ancient Greek as subfields of philosophy, literature and epistemology. Therefore, there is no wonder that most mediaeval endeavors and initiatives in the field of translation were led by philosophers and poets. The twentieth century witnessed some noticeable junctures that marked the purposes, the motivations and the outcome of translation at various levels.

The real beginnings of translation studies as independent fields of research and academic specialization can be traced back to the threshold of the mid of the twentieth century when linguists, not philosophers, start their theoretical enterprises to propose some prescriptive rules that would regulate the process of translation or guarantee the quasi-scientific output of translation projects as such. The fifties and the sixties witnessed the publication of some treatise and manuscripts

that dealt with translation as a subfield of applied linguistics proper as some linguists tried to implement some linguistic terms and notions while theorizing about translation. Thus, Catford (1965) wrote a reasonable analysis that describes and explains translation as a process that mainly hinges upon transferring linguistic elements from a source language into linguistic elements in the target language; hence, he envisaged the whole process as a strict involvement that forces translators to predominantly practice translation as a sort of phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic shifts. Hence, Catford (1965) argued:

It is clearly necessary for translation-theory to draw upon a theory of meaning; without such a theory certain important aspects of the translation process cannot be discussed... Meaning, in our view, is a property of language. An SL text has an SL meaning, and a TL text has a TL meaning... since, following Firth, we define meaning as the total network of relations entered into form-text item-in-text, structure, element of structure, class, term in system- or whatever it may be. (p.35)

The late sixties, the seventies and the eighties witnessed an enormous translation movement theory-wise and practice-wise. Eugene Nida stood out as a well-accomplished

scholar who exploited his morphological, syntactic and semantic theoretical and practical expertise as well as his impressive multilingualism to serve the translation movement from East to West, in general, and to boost the cause of translating the Bible worldwide, in particular. Nida (1964) and Nida and Taber (1969) introduced an amazingly admirable treatise of translation theory in terms of describing the theory itself, setting some principles and foundations, proposing some methods and strategies and explaining many intriguing conventional concepts that he reintroduced as a process of seeking equivalence formally and dynamically.

Moreover, Peter Newmark as an erudite polyglot and a renowned veteran practitioner of the act and the art of translation presented some remarkable contributions that reshaped the world of translation during the past millennium. In his *Approaches* masterpiece, Newmark (1981) offered an unprecedented record of translation frameworks that both describe and prescribe many appropriate strategies, steps, procedures and approaches to the vast field of translation based on his rich and long experience in the battlefield of translation theory since he served in the battlefield of the World War II.

Newmark's *Approaches* combined with his series of *Paragraphs* set a solid ground for all translators to think about translation in a multidisciplinary fashion; such a source of inspiration was the spark that rigorously opened new horizons and vigorously triggered thousands and thousands of proposals, methods and approaches that undeniably contributed to widening the scope of more specialized translation projects and programs over the globe. Consequently, the past four decades have been replete with accredited major contributors and scholars whose fingerprints and translation-prints have been inscribed on the marble floors of the Halls of Fame such as Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, Bell Roger, Basil Hatim, Mona Baker, Jeremy Munday, Mary Snell-Hornby, Gideon Toury, Lawrence Venuti and many others. These scholars and most of their contributions can pour into the controversial argument of what translation is in light of what Nida and Taber (1969) articulated in few lines:

Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is a manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and its positive aspects can help in the evolution of literature and society. (p.12)

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

This research is a qualitative study that aims at highlighting major constraints that professional translators may need in their attempt to systematize the process and the act of translation. Drawing on the OT constraints proposed by McCarthy as well as Allan and Prince in phonology as a framework, the researcher tried to shift the focus of such constraints and implement the new versions of these constraints which are translation-oriented to an authentic authoritative text in the Holy Qurán, namely, the Opening Sura "AlFatiHa" which consists of seven verses. To achieve this very goal, the

researcher considered four authentic and reliable professional translations by four different acknowledged translators in the Islamic World; namely, T. Al-Hilali and M. Khan, Yusuf Ali, T. Itali and M. Pikhall. These four translators are considered relatively among the best and the most balanced translators whose works have been officially approved by some Islamic states and widely well-received by hundreds of millions of Muslims worldwide. The researcher tried to compare these four versions and to highlight how these translators made such translation choices in their renditions; to explain how systematic they are and to what extent each rendition meets the standards that optimality theory may offer in a way that may regulate the output of such intellectual enterprises in the long run. The optimal nomenclature that the researcher mainly and strictly implemented focus on the clashing goals and ends of both Principles of *Faithfulness* and *Markedness* and the subsequent constraints of *Syntactic well-formedness*, *Lexical Accuracy*, *Standard Formality*, *Cultural Acceptability* and *Functional Appropriateness*. The scope of this study is limited to the implications appertaining to translating Quránic verses as far as these four renditions reveal concerning conditions and constraints; this is due to the complexity of setting crystal-clear and exclusive foundations of translation theory:

However (and unfortunately), "translation theory" also remains a phantasm; there is at present no systematic way of talking about transition from one not-so-banal message to another... Translation means "recodification." Hence, a theory of translation is a set of repositions about how, why, when, where (...) coded elements are rendered into other codes. As such, translation is nothing short of an essential problem of semiosis: it is the problem of transfer of codes. (Frawly, 1984, pp. 159-160)

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Various studies of Holy Qur'an as Divine Text have received unprecedented attention by millions of scholars in diverse fields and disciplines. Therefore, there is no wonder that translation studies, in general, and translation this scripture, in particular have been of paramount significance and have received great priority by individuals, private institutions and governments all over the Islamic World. Therefore, The Holy Qur'an has been translated more than fifty times by fifty different professional translators worldwide; some of them with linguistic background; some of them with theological background; some of them with literary background and some of them with philosophical background (cf. Baker, 2001). All in all, such a huge spectrum of renditions reflect the huge interests in and the keen attitudes on translating this Holy Book in a way that achieves the ultimate goals of the translators themselves and/or the agencies or the institutions who sponsored these arduous missions; such missions and tasks of translating any authoritative text are all in all motivated by the purpose of translation intellectually, ideologically and financially (cf. Vermeer, 1989).

Most traditional translation studies (1960-1990) bank on the hypotheses that posit some principles and strategies that support the very claim that translation is possible yet often-

times problematic, so semantic and communicative losses of meaning while translating authoritative texts are absolutely inevitable (see Jakobson, 1959; Nida and Taber, 1969; Newmark, 1988; Darbelnet). However, translation process can never stop and translators can never give up trying and trying because translation is a substantial need and not a luxury, especially when such biblical texts constitute a corner stone in the daily life of communities and peoples whose beliefs and whose behavior matrices stem from and rely on such religious texts (Nida, 1964). This goes in tandem with the claim that "The subject matter of religious texts implies the existence of a spiritual world that is not fictive, but has its own external realities and truths." (Dickins, Hervey, and Higgins, 2002, p.178).

All in all, most translation studies concentrate on the very idea that translators must look for some steps and procedures to achieve the maximal degree of equivalence in order to be faithful to the source text and to create the closest effect on the audience to be faithful to the target reader (see Vinay and Darbelnet, 1976 and Newmark, 1981). Such endeavors are justifiable as long as the prime concern of these scholars is fully focused on the scope of the translation as an act, not translation as a competence-based process (cf. Newmark, 1988 and Nord, 2007). Accordingly, most theoreticians and practitioners are always haunted by evaluating the target texts as such instead of explaining the intrinsic motivations that may help professionals assess the quality of translations more objectively due to the visibility and/or invisibility of the translator himself/herself (see Venuti, 2008).

There is no doubt that the process of translation requires a high level of expertise linguistically and culturally; therefore, semantic mastery and communicative awareness play a vital role in improving and enhancing the translator's performance proper (Nida and Taber, 1982). Nonetheless, such mastery is not a guarantee that translations can be oftentimes if ever flawless or as communicative as required since linguistic and cultural gaps and mismatches emerge every now and then; thus translation seems sometimes impossible although at the end translators shoulder the tasks assigned to them whether they like it or not; i.e. whether the quality of their translation meets the standards they set for themselves or the standards and the ethical responsibilities they have to preserve as possible as they can (Hatim and Mason, 1990). Therefore, Newmark (1988) cogently assumed that there are three basic translation processes:

- a. the interpretation and analysis of the SL text;
- b. the translation procedure (choosing equivalents for words and sentences in the TL), and
- c. the reformulation of the text according to the writer's intention, the reader's expectation, the appropriate norms of the TL, etc. (1988, p. 144)

As long as translation is perceived and evaluated in light of the philosophical sociocultural norms and conventions, it would be hard to scientifically lead any scientific assessment for any piece of translation. Such an assessment would be very subjective and less systematized because norms are abundantly language-specific and culture-bound (cf. Toury, 1995). Therefore, computational-like studies are urgently

needed to fill in the gap between the theory and the practice of translation and to enable specialists and help them set more appropriate and more accurate assessment-oriented foundations for an integrated theory of translation; in addition, this can help computational linguists and machine-translation experts design and upgrade hi-tech programs with high precision and effective productivity.

The prime motivation for an OT approach to translation theory is contextualize the process of translation within the unified frame of generative and functional linguistics in order to cater for both competence and performance as well (cf. Chomsky, 1972 and Chomsky, 1995). The generative perspective can guarantee the systematicity of the theoretical argumentation of translation studies while the functional perspective safeguards a high degree of communicative acceptability of the renditions in question (Larson, 1984). Therefore, the idea of borrowing the implementation of OT constraints in order to better regulate and to more objectively evaluate any translation enterprise can be fruitful in the long run because implementing such constraints phonologically, syntactically or semantically can engender a maximal degree of descriptive adequacy and analytic efficacy (see Prince and Smolensky, 1993; McCarthy and Prince, 1993; McCarthy, 2001, *et al*).

Equivalence-wise, the translator is almost looking for phantoms as far as the term EQUIVALENCE is concerned and as far as its meaning can be understood and as long as translators believe that equal counterparts exist linguistically and/or culturally (cf. Baker, 2004). However, the optimal candidate is always attainable and manageable because it is always the one with the lowest-ranking constraint violations, so the task of the translator/the linguist is to set some universal constraints that can explain how EVAL (evaluation) and GEN (generation) work. The OT constraints, therefore, are confined to the choices translators can make between *Faithfulness* and *Markedness* in light of subjecting all possible choices or candidates to GEN (generation); i.e. probable underlying candidates and to EVAL that helps translators pick up the optimal choice which achieves the minimal degree of serious violations to ranking of the constraints, the hierarchy of which can be prioritize by the translator himself/herself (cf. Chesterman 1997). So Tyler's Principles (1791) and Toury's Laws (1995) can be converted into optimal constraints and the results can be more elegantly and more objectively implemented and justified. Therefore, speaking of Newmark's (1981) would be almost more meaningful while setting the OT constraints, i.e. translation strategies Newmark proposed such as Transcription, Through translation (loan translation), Lexical synonymy, translation by a close TL equivalent, Componential analysis, Transposition, the replacement of one grammatical unit by another, Modulation, Compensation, Cultural equivalence, Translation label, i.e. an approximate equivalent, Definition, Paraphrase, Expansion, Notes.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As a point of departure, perfect translation does not exist and cannot exist at the textual level whatsoever. Coincidentally notion-wise and time-wise, this is the core claim of semiotic

'myth of equivalence' (Gorlée, 2004) and optimality theory 'fallacy of perfection' (Kager, 2004). The implications of any OT findings cannot be universally generalized in the field of translation for the time being because little has been done so far, unlike some other fields like phonology and morphology. Therefore, the researcher tries in this section to investigate how Ali has made his choices while translating the seven verses of Surat AlFatiHa and to what extent his choices can be optimally explained and justified.

Setting the Constraints

Most scholars in the field of translating biblical and religious texts agree that the semantic content of the input must be given utmost priority unless it overtly and utterly clashes with the communicative flow (see Nida, 1964; Newmark, 1981) As long as competing *Faithfulness* and *Markedness* constraints can be prioritized, we should bear in mind the following principles: *Syntactic well-formedness*, *Lexical Accuracy*, *Standard Formality*, *Cultural Acceptability* and *Functional Appropriateness*. The input in this optimal argument stands for the Source Text (ST) while the output stands for the Target Text (TT); and any violation between the input and the output must be regulated and dominated by faithfulness constraints (McCarthy, 2007).

Faithfulness Constraints

Morphology, syntax, semantics and stylistics are among the most essential sources of linguistic constraints in any language, so here are the four basic violable faithfulness constraints that should be considered at this very stage:

IdentSem: this constraint necessitates preserving the compositional content of the words and the phrases of the input syntactically and semantically.

MaxST-TT: the content of the ST must be maintained; no deletion of any segment is permissible.

DepST-TT: No additional segments can be inserted to the output.

F/STYLE: this constraint stipulates that levels of formality and poeicity must be given a degree of priority in such religious texts.

Faithfulness Constraints

Having proposed these *Faithfulness* constraints, it is a must now to devise and to synthesize some essential *Markedness*

constraints that recap basic assumptions proposed by many translation figures and scholars from Tytler (1791) till now as it can be seen in Hatim and Munday (2004); and the researcher believes that three major constraints should be closely considered in this regard:

***OddLitT:** Odd literal content must be avoided in the TT because it is oftentimes awkward or absurd.

M/Natr: the output must read as natural as possible for the target reader.

M/Styl: a high level of formality and poeicity must surface in the output since the ST is a religious text revealed in classical Arabic.

Therefore, the constraints must be hierarchically placed in this order before we move to our next section

IdentSem/Lex>> *OddLitT, M/Natr>> F/STYLE, MaxST-TT, DepST-TT

Optimal Analyses

In this section, the researcher tries to present concise optimal representations and analyses of the translations in question so that it would be perceivable enough to capture how such choices compete against one another and how optimal candidates always win and thus it would be optimally possible to evaluate these translations more objectively; The order of the candidates will be tabulated from a-d according to the alphabetical order of the translators' names; i.e. AlHilai (TTa), Ali (TTb), Itani (TTC) and Pikhthall (TTd); where the symbol "*" in any cell means a violation of the constraint while the symbol "*!" indicates a *fatal* violation; the pointing hand indicates the winning optimal candidate with the least number of fatal violations:

As it can be noticed, TTb and TTC made no fatal violations as they did maintain the exact semantic content of the input, so the high ranking IdentSem has not been violated (if we assume that Allah and God are not different, and this is what we will hypothesize in the following verses unless the only distinction between any two renditions is manifested only in the word God and the word Allah, then Faithfulness to the latter should be prioritized assuming that Allah fits the style more appropriately as it can be seen in the second verse). TTa made two non-fatal violations of Dep-ST-TT and by adding the superlative structure twice and another fatal violation of OddLitT using the word "Beneficent" instead of "Gracious" while TTd made one fatal mistake, so TTC is the

Verse No. One

ST	IdentSem	*OddLitT	M/Natr	Max ST-TT	DepST-TT	F/STYLE
بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ						
TTa In the Name of Allah, the <u>Most</u> <u>Beneficent</u> , the <u>Most</u> Merciful.		*!			**	
TTb In the name of <u>God</u> , <u>Most</u> <u>Gracious</u> , Most Merciful				*		
☞ TTc In the name of <u>God</u> , the <u>Gracious</u> , the <u>Merciful</u>						
TTd In the name of Allah, the <u>Beneficent</u> , the Merciful			*!			

winning candidate as it conforms to both the faithfulness and the Markedness constraints.

In the second verse, TTa made a terrible number of violations of both Faithfulness and Markedness constraints; TTb made one minor fault by adding to the content of the input, thus violating DepST-TT. TTc and TTd show strict conformity to all constraints but with one single minor problem in TTC as God is stylistically less faithful, so TTD wins this time.

Considering the translation of the third verse, Tableau (3) illustrates how TTc, TTa and TTb made four, three and two minor violations, respectively but without any fatal violations; however, TTd Made one fatal violation and no minor ones; thus the winner is TTb.

In the fourth verse, the first translator in TTa made a huge number of faithfulness and Markedness violations, so he immediately got excluded. Interestingly the other three translations in TTa, TTb and TTC are just a replica in everything. The only violation all these three renditions committed is related to the F/STYLE as far as the ST “كَلِمًا” is narrated with two different recitations “كَلِمًا” and “كَلِمًا”; i.e. king or Owner. In this case the lexical choice “Master” would be less corresponding to the ST; thus “Lord” would be better. Since none opted for Lord and the three translations used “master” as a minor violation, the three candidates won the contest together.

Evidently, TTa is out of the contest as both fatal and non-fatal violations occur several times. TTD exhibits

Verse No. two

ST	IdentSem	*OddLitT	M/Natr	Max ST-TT	DepST-TT	F/STYLE
أَلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ						
TTa All the praises and thanks be to Allah, the Lord of the 'Alamin (mankind, jinns and all that exists).	*!	*	*		***	
TTb Praise be to God, The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds					*	
TTc Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds						*
☞ TTd Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds						

Verse No. three

ST	IdentSem	*OddLitT	M/Natr	Max ST-TT	DepST-TT	F/STYLE
الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ						
TTa The Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful			*		**	
☞ TTb Most Gracious, Most Merciful					**	
TTc The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful					****	
TTd The Beneficent, the Merciful		*!				

Verse No. four

ST	IdentSem	*OddLitT	M/Natr	Max ST-TT	DepST-TT	F/STYLE
مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ						
TTa The Only Owner (and the Only Ruling Judge) of the Day of Recompense (i.e. the Day of Resurrection)	*!	*!	*		***	*
☞ TTb Master of the Day of Judgment						*
☞ TTc Master of the Day of Judgment.						*
☞ TTd Master of the Day of Judgment						*

Tableau 5. Verse No. five

ST	IdentSem	*OddLitT	M/Natr	Max ST-TT	DepST-TT	F/STYLE
مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ						
TTa You (Alone) we worship, and You (Alone) we ask for help (for each and everything)	*!				***	*
☞ TTb Thee do we worship, And Thine aid we seek						
TTc It is You we worship, and upon You we call for help						*
TTd Thee (alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help					**	

Verse No. six							
ST	IdentSem	*OddLitT	M/Natr	Max ST-TT	DepST-TT	F/STYLE	
أَهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ							
TTa Guide us to the Straight <u>Way</u>							*
TTb <u>Show</u> us the straight <u>way</u>							**
☞ TTc <i>Guide us to the straight path</i>							
TTd Show us the straight path							*
Verse No. seven							
ST	IdentSem	*OddLitT	M/Natr	Max ST-TT	DepST-TT	F/STYLE	
صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ							
TTa		*!					**
The Way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not (<u>the way</u>) of those who earned Your <u>Anger</u> (<u>such as the Jews</u>), nor of those who went astray (<u>such as the Christians</u>)		*!					
☞ TTb <i>The <u>way</u> of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, Those whose (portion) Is not wrath, And who go not astray</i>							*
TTc The path of those You have <u>blessed</u> , not of those against whom there is <u>anger</u> , nor of those who are misguided							**
TTd The path of those whom Thou hast favoured; Not the (path) of those who earn Thine <u>anger</u> nor of those who go astray							**

two non-fatal violations by epenthesizing or adding some segments that do not exist in the input, i.e. “alone”. TTc is apparently less faithful to the formal style of the input, so one non-fatal violation has been incurred. The optimal choice in this case is TTb again as it survives without showing any violation.

Scrutinizing all the candidates in Tableau (5), one can see how TTa and TTd made two nonfatal violations and TTc made one by failing to convey the exact stylistic dimension of the word “اندها” or “طارصل” or both of them. However, TTc won the race as it complied with all the constraints including the stylistic constraint to a satisfactory degree.

Again and again, TTa is the worst version as the violations are enormous and fatal. TTc and TTd are almost similar in the number of nonfatal violations as they are less conformant with the formality of F/STYLE while rendering “تم عن ا” and “مديل ع بوض غملا”. However, TTb. Is the optimal candidate as one single minor violation occurs by using “way” instead of “path”, yet the deformity of the choice seems fixed as the rhyming feature of “way” and “stray” satisfy the F/Style in a different way at the level of poeticity although it lost the battle at the level of formality.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the researcher tried to examine the translation of seven verses of Surat AlFatiHa as rendered by four different professional translator in order to understand how translation

mechanisms can operate at the competence level when professional translators deal with such authoritative texts. The lexical choices such translators make in such tasks seem systematic to a great extent as they follow optimal constraints the violation of which is linguistically and communicatively ranked in a certain hierarchy that determines the relationships among such constraints and thus anticipates the translator’s optimal candidate. The study showed how Ali’s translation choices won three times according to these optimal constraints; Itan’s won twice and Pikthall’s once and the three won together in one case; however, AlHilali’s and Khan’s rendition won none of the seven case. Admittedly, such an optimal enterprise is somehow a newborn endeavor that needs to grow up and to be mature enough in order to satisfactorily and optimally succeed one day; otherwise, it might be doomed to academic oblivion. The researcher recommends that scholars, in the short and the long run, lead and conduct further intensive qualitative and quantitative studies that can bank on more elaborate computerized OT analyses so that solid foundations can be more comprehensively set one day. All in all, let us hope that more multidisciplinary studies can work hand in hand with OT (cf. AlBzour, B. and N. AlBozur, 2015), so let us conclude with Vermeer’s (1987) vision about the future of translation studies:

Linguistics alone won’t help us. First, because translating is not merely and not even primarily a linguistic process. Secondly, because linguistics has not yet formulated the right questions to tackle our problems. So let’s look somewhere else. (1987: p.29)

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