



Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in the Arabic Culture

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Abstract

The article investigates several Arabic translations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Framed by Warren Weaver's book *Alice in Many Tongues*, the article locates the five problematic aspects which are: the parodied verses, the puns, the nonsense words, the jokes that involve logic, and Carroll's twist of meaning. Through a critical comparative reading and analysis of Carroll's original work, *The Nursery Alice*, and the different Arabic translations, the article illustrates how some cultural and linguistic constraints in the Arab world have prevented a faithful translation of Carroll's work and thus limiting it to a solely plot-oriented one. With reference to selected examples from Carroll's work, the article ends up with giving some suggested solutions for these five problematic translation areas.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Literary Translation, Cultural Studies, Arab Children's Literature, Censorship

1. Introduction

Lewis Carroll's work *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* published in 1865 is one of the classical children's literary works that has been translated into more than 100 languages. Warren Weaver in his book *Alice in Many Tongues* published in 1964, at a time when *Alice* was translated into 43 languages, had analyzed 14 translations. He found out that most of these translations had their share of difficulties which he had classified into five categories. According to Weaver, translation complications arise from Carroll's verses, puns, nonsense words, logical jokes, and end with his twists of meaning. At the end of analyzing those difficulties in six languages including French and German, Weaver concluded with the following statement:

Examining these fourteen instances of translation of a typical passage from *Alice* makes one (at least it makes me!) very curious indeed about the degree of success of other languages. What success do Arabic and Welsh and Thai and Turkish and Hindi have? I can only hope that someone will be inspired to find out" (108).

Part of Weaver's hope has been accomplished through many translations of Carroll's work into Arabic. However, most of the Arabic translations also faced the same five areas of difficulties which Weaver identified in his work. The current and most widely printed Arabic version of the work failed to convey the important aspects of Carroll's work. The Arabic version has also excluded many elements that Carroll had cleverly inserted in his work such as the puns, jokes that involve logic, parodied verses, and his satire of education. In fact, the Arabic translations are more similar to Carroll's *Nursery Alice*, than it is to Carroll's *Alice Adventures in Wonderland*.

This article explores the difficulties faced by some Arab literary translators when dealing with Western children's literary texts and the possible reasons for choosing to translate *The Nursery Alice* version. The article, then focuses on the cultural and linguistic difficulties Arab literary translators faced when translating Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into the Arabic language which are possible to overcome. Finally, in order to prove the possibility of translating Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into Arabic, focusing on "A Mad Tea Party" chapter, the article begins with locating the problematic areas in translation, and then providing a possible translation for each one; starting with the parodied verses, continuing with the puns, nonsense words, jokes that involve logic, and ending with Carroll's twist of meaning.

2. Cultural Barriers to Literary Translation

The most popular Arabic translation of Lewis Carroll's *The Nursery Alice* is published in 1956, by Maya Salman. It may have been chosen due to the ease of translating Carroll's lesser work, *The Nursery Alice* is only one quarter of the length of the original *Alice*. Addressed to young children, it is meant to be read aloud by adults. Several Arabic studies note that the original, more complete version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* presents extremely difficult cultural and language system challenges. The different cultural backgrounds of both the English and Arabic societies along with their different language systems are among the main barriers for the translation. Literary translation involves lexical and cultural transfer from one language to another. Thus, translating children's literature is difficult especially if the children of both cultures and languages don't have much in common. Because Lewis Carroll's literary piece *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* presented these problems, it is likely that Salman decided to translate *The Nursery Alice* instead.

In fact, translating the original text of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is not impossible. Arab children and adults of all ages have lost part of the reading pleasure because of the misconceptions that were held by Arab translators during the translation process. Translators may have thought that the Arabic language and culture are not flexible enough to represent Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* especially when it comes to Carroll's hidden messages to the adult readers of the text.

The original version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was translated into Arabic by Amirah Qeewan in 1943. Unfortunately, this translation was not a success. Qeewan used a word-to-word translation that made no sense at all and prevented enjoyment of the story. The failure of Qeewan's translation in gaining any popularity among the Arab readers, made other translators decide on translating *The Nursery Alice*. However, all of these translation efforts including Maya Salman's translation restricted the transfer of the great amount of imagination in the original English work. Salman made many changes such as deleting and summarizing that will later be discussed in depth. All of these changes restricted the transfer of Lewis Carroll's element of imagination. Reading the current Arabic translation doesn't at all give the pleasure found in reading the original English version. Salman's concern is translating the main plot of the work; unfortunately, her translation overlooks other important elements that Lewis Carroll includes in his work such as the parodied verses, the jokes that involve logic, nonsense words, and the puns in which he intends to twist the meanings of some words and accordingly the hidden messages addressed to the adult readers.

3. Linguistic Barriers to Literary Translation

Of course, culture is not the only reason *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has not been translated into Arabic. Some Arab translators presented the different language system between Arabic and English as another barrier that stands in the way of translating *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. To begin with, it is important to point to two different opinions in which scholars claim that due to the language system differences that are present between Arabic and English, many Western literary works cannot be translated.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is full of language play techniques, songs and rhymes of English origin that make it a difficult text to be translated into Arabic.

However, part of the solution is to provide some existing equivalents in the Arabic heritage. For instance, the following English idiom "A Jack of all trades is a master of none," has the following Arabic equivalent "the owner of two minds owns none or is a liar." It is true that they don't particularly have the same words but they successfully share the same idea. So, the meaning is the most important thing to convey regardless of the words used in the translation process. In some cases, words are simply omitted, whereas in others words are actually added.

Poetry also adds another layer of difficulty when translating from English into Arabic. The first problematic area is the form of the written verse. The process of writing an English poem follows different rules from writing an Arabic "Kaseeda." The Kaseeda is written in one block with no divisions that exist between stanzas in English. However, each line is divided into two equal parts: the first half called the 'chest' and the second half the 'rump,' they form the meter and rhyme of the poem. The two halves are separated by a gap that equals the space of 7 letters or two words as in the following example:

The ends of the "chests" should rhyme together and more importantly the ends of the "rumps". Moreover, the two halves in each line should form a single sentence. So there are no run-on sentences in the Kaseeda at all. These major differences make it very hard for English poems to be translated to Arabic Kaseedas. Therefore, it is not enough for the translator of poetry to be a professional linguist; he or she has to be a poet her/himself or at least an expert in both kinds of English and Arabic poetry. However, poetry could be translated into a prose form instead of verse as long as care is taken not to lose the significance of the existing sounds.

In the same vein, Ismail AL-Naggar demonstrates that the translation of nursery rhymes and poetry in general is a very difficult task. In his article "The Problematic Areas in Literary Translation," he talks about the different challenges Arab translators face when trying to reproduce the form, rhythm, meaning and imagery of an English poem due to the different poetic features between Arabic and English. However, he optimistically explains that such problem could be narrowed down if the translator is acquainted with special skills:

translators have to be poets acquainted with the poetic forms of [both languages]. Equally important, translator-poets must have sensitivity to know when to translate a poem into verse. After that, the translator has to decide when to translate into free verse, and when to translate into measured and rhymed columned poetry. The decision is important due to the fact that cultures differ in the way they use or relate to different types of languages (100).

Thus, in some cases poetry is translated into prose or free verse. According to AL- Naggar, the task of a poetry translator "is not restricted to conveying the meanings of words, it also includes conveying the significance and producing the same effect" (115). He further explains that the success in translating poetry does not depend on the extent to which the translation is referentially close to the original poem; rather "it depends on other criteria based on literary criticism and its applications on language and writing." This is important because "the text is likely to produce meanings not physically present in it" (117).

Although there are Arabic translations of Carroll's work, they are not an accurate, and they also face the same five categories of difficulties. Salman's translation of *The Nursery Alice* includes many changes, omissions and sometimes a

number of additions from Lewis Carroll's original text *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. As a result, the translation is a mixture of both Lewis Carroll's works *The Nursery Alice* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Therefore, it is important to start with a general overview of the differences that exist between the English versions of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Nursery Alice* and Maya Salman's Arabic translation. Then, discuss the reasons for these differences which reinforce that Maya Salman's version is a plot-oriented unsuccessful one. Salman's translation starts nearly the same way as the original version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with slight contextual differences. Her translation starts with the following:

The little girl Alice was sitting with her sister by the river. Her sister was busy reading a book with no picture which made Alice very bored. Suddenly, Alice saw a White Rabbit running by and taking a watch out of its pocket. Alice felt curious to follow the Rabbit that entered its house which was inside a tree. As soon as Alice went inside she fell down in a very deep hole (1).

Salman also summarizes some chapters into a couple of sentences. For instance, in reference to "The Pool of Tears" chapter, she only includes the following:

Alice began to cry when she saw how big she had become. Her tears made a deep river. She took the rabbits fan and fanned herself with it until she realized how small she had become. Suddenly she fell into her pool of tears where she saw many small animals including a mouse and a duck swimming in the pool. She continued swimming with them until they all arrived to the shore. One of the animals suggested having a race so they could all get dry. After the race Alice told them about her cat the thing that made all the animals and birds run and fly away. Alice became all alone again and started to cry (6).

Carroll's mocking and satire about education through Alice's situation in the doorway and the shortage of her knowledge to save her is also not translated into Arabic. Alice's own monologue and her conversations with the other animals is lost through translation. Salman limits the translation of Alice's situation in the Rabbit's house in the following few sentences:

The White Rabbit saw Alice next to his house, and thinking she was his housemaid, he ordered her to bring him a pair of gloves and a fan. In the house, Alice found a little bottle, and decided to drink some of it. She turned into the size of a giant. Luckily she saw small rocks rolling towards her. They turned into candy as soon as she caught them with her hands. She started eating them, and turned very small again and ran away (7).

After being bigger in size, Alice gets hold of one of the rocks that changes into a piece of cake. She eats it and becomes small again; then she is able to run out of the house without anyone taking notice of her escape. So, there is no kind of detail or conversation. The dramatic tension is not conveyed nor is the dangerous situation that Alice faces described.

In the "Mad Tea Party", Salman mentions that Alice only sits at the table for a couple of minutes without even mentioning any kind of conversation that takes place between her and the animals: "Alice found the March Hare, the Hatter, and the dormouse drinking tea and continuously speaking. Alice couldn't stand their gossip and decided to leave immediately" (9). Thus, the Arab child reader will not be able recognize the craziness and madness of the tea party which Carroll had inserted in the conversation through puns, parodied verses and logic jokes. The only "madness" there is the actual word title of the chapter. Then, Salman mentions that Alice goes to a garden through a small door in the middle of a very big tree. Many changes also take place in the queen's Croquet-ground:

Alice saw three life cards painting white roses with red paint. They told her that they were worried that the Queen is going to cut their heads off because they did not finish their work yet. At that time, the queen came and asked Alice about her identity and ordered that the painters head's should be cut off. Alice, then, took the life cards and hid them behind her back (10).

In brief, Salman continues with Alice meeting the live cards painting the white roses with red, who are worried that the Queen will cut their heads off because they have not finished the paintings yet. After that, the queen comes and asks Alice about her identity and orders that the painters' heads cut off. Alice then takes the painters and hides them behind her back. Nothing much is said about the knave or the other animals. Finally, Salman concludes her translation with Alice waking up from a dream while lying on her sister's lap. She starts to tell her sister her adventure then at the end goes home and makes herself a cup of tea:

The queen ordered her guards to cut Alice's head off. So, angrily said "I'm not afraid of you, because you are only a pack of cards. Suddenly all of the cards flew and tumbled down all over her. Just then Alice woke up and found herself in her sister's lap. She had discovered that all of her adventures were a dream. After telling her sister about her dream, she went home and made herself a cup of tea (11).

Salman's decision to include the "drinking tea" part could have been to reinforce the Englishness of Alice. While some scenes are acknowledged in this translation, due to linguistic difficulties it does not convey Carroll's language play at all; none of the jokes that involve the logic, puns, Carroll's twist of meaning, nonsense words, or parodied verses are included. There is also no poetry; the translated text just mentions that Alice had a nice time listening to stories and sad songs from the Mock Turtle without telling what they were. After this general overview, it could be argued that Salman's translation could be described as a process moving from significantly "showing" to merely "telling."

However, Salman must have made some changes in accordance with Islamic and Arabic cultures. For instance, there is not much information provided for the story that takes place in the Duchess's house which is limited to the following:

Alice entered the kitchen and she saw a cat on the table. The beautiful lady wanted to dress up for the Queens party, so she decided to hand the Baby to Alice. Alice takes the Baby with her outside where she realized that it is not a baby any more but actually a white lamb. She put it down and quickly ran away (12).

Salman's change is due to the fact that the Islamic culture prohibits eating pork. Therefore, pigs are always negatively mentioned in children's stories. For instance, they are always portrayed as lazy, dirty, and greedy creatures in Arabic literature. However, if Salman really understood Carroll's intention of purposefully negatively comparing babies to pigs, changing the pig into a lamb could not have taken place. Another change that takes place in Salman's translation is about the cat in the text. Although Alice's cat Dinah is mentioned, the Arabic translation does not focus on the type of the cat in the Duchess's house because Arabs don't have the habit of having cats as pets. So, mentioning its type is not important for Arab readers. In the same vein, the Duchess is presented as an ordinary woman because the Arabic culture does not have this kind of title and position. So, the Arab reader will neither be able to figure out the reason for the Duchess's presence in the text nor the baby's transformation into a lamb. Moreover, the satire of the educational system which Lewis Carroll reinforces in his work is not included in Salman's translation because it is unacceptable to mock education in Arabic children's literature.

Thus, all these summaries, changes, and omissions of conversations prevent the Arabic version from having the same impact on its readers that the English original text has. This literary translation simply presents *The Nursery Alice* as a story of a girl who follows a rabbit to its hole, meets some animals and then wakes up from her dream to make herself a cup of tea. This unfaithful plot-orientated translation cuts the value of Carroll's work that is included in the imagination, puns, jokes that involve logic, nonsense words and parodied verses in the different conversations between Alice and the other characters of Wonderland. It could be assumed that the failure is due to the total concern of translating the plot and ultimately neglecting any other features in the work. As a matter of fact, Salman's book doesn't actually differ from the book Alice's sister was reading: it could be regarded a boring book that does not present any interesting element for its readers.

4. Solving the Problematic areas of Carroll's Literary Nonsense

Carroll's work falls into the category of literary nonsense and it is thus important to present a definition of this category. Wim Tigges, in his book *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, defines it as:

a narrative genre in which the seeming presence of one or more "sensible" meanings is kept in balance by a simultaneous absence of such meaning. The balance is established by absence of emotionally laden connotations and associations, and by a greater play with rules of language, logic, and form (255-256).

Although Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a very difficult text to translate into Arabic culture and language due to the amount of literary nonsense it holds, it is possible to have a more representative translated Arabic version. The difficulties that exist in translating the parodied verse, puns, jokes that involve the logic, nonsense words and Lewis Carroll's twist of meaning could be solved if more effort is exerted by literary translators who are well-acquainted with both Arabic and English cultures and languages. The Arabic language and culture hold similar equivalents of the puns, and twists of meanings that Lewis Carroll used in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Moreover, the parodied verse and jokes, along with the nonsense words, could be solved with less trouble than the other two areas of difficulties. The literary translator should have a comprehensive understanding of Lewis Carroll's original work and a great knowledge of English and Arabic cultures and languages.

In order to prove the possibility of translating Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into Arabic, this article uses the same episode of "A Mad Tea Party" that Weaver used in his book to investigate how the five areas of difficulties could be solved. It starts with the parodied verses, continues with the puns, nonsense words, jokes that involve logic, and ends with Carroll's twist of meaning.

1-The Translation of the Parodied Verses: The parody of the famous English poem in the Mad Tea Party:

Twinkle twinkle little Bat

How I wonder what you are at

could be conveyed by inventing a parody of a well-known Arabic poem or nursery rhyme to get the same effect Lewis Carroll intended to have on his readers. The following is an equivalent Arabic nursery rhyme:

Nam Ya Hamada NamwinjeeblakJouzainhamam

It is translated into English as:

Sleep Ahmad sleep and we'll bring you a couple of doves.

The following parodied verse could be invented and included:

Nam Ya Hamada namwinjeeblakgool el-namnaam

which is translated into English as:

Sleep Ahmad sleep and we'll bring you the mammal beast

This parodied verse starts with the same command to sleep as the original nursery rhyme does, but then the children will notice that it is actually a parodied one because it discourages them and threatens them with a mammal beast if they sleep instead of having a couple of doves as a reward.

2- The Translation of the Puns: puns could be the most difficult part to translate, but still it is not impossible. The three puns in "The Mad Tea Party" chapter can be solved in the following way. Fortunately, Arabic language and culture include double-folded meaning words that can fit the three following puns:

a- *To murder time*: "to spoil the meter of the verse" or: "to kill Father time"

Here the Hatter explains that because the Queen of Hearts had objected the meter of the verse, she had accused him of "murdering the time". So, it is changed into a pun through the fact that the "Time" was so disturbed and "...ever since that, he won't do a thing [the Hatter] asks" and that explains why it is always six o'clock.

Fortunately, the exact equivalent Arabic phrase "Qatl Al-Waqt" carries the same double-folded meaning that Lewis Carroll intends from this pun. If time is killed it is always fixed at six o'clock.

b- *To draw*: "to take liquid from a container" or "to make a picture". Fortunately, the Arabic language word for draw, "yashab be" means "pull" that could be done with a pencil to draw a picture or "pull" water from a well. So, the translation will both refer to that the three sisters could be either learning to draw treacle well or to draw water out of the well. Moreover, some Arabic words can carry multiple meanings if followed or preceded by different prepositions each time to give more than two meanings for the sentence.

c- *Well*: when used as a noun "as a source of water" and as an adverb meaning "completely or thoroughly". The Arabic equivalent also carries the two meanings when changing the vowel letter in the middle of the word. The noun *well* is pronounced as "Bir" while the adverb "completely" is pronounced as "Bar". Reading it in both ways, gives the two intended meanings by Carroll. So, the Arabic translation will also mean that the three sisters are well down in the well.

3- The Translation of Nonsense Words: Literary nonsense could be one of the easiest things to translate but yet the hardest ones to discover at the same time. Therefore, it is important for the literary translator to actually acknowledge the literary nonsense included in the text and moreover know how it is formed in order to come up with a similar one.

The literary translation of nonsense words such as the word "muchness" could be handled by inventing nonsense Arabic words that start with the same sound of the translated Arabic nonsense word. An Arabic equivalent nonsense word for "muchness" could be "motawafir," and any other Arabic words that start with the letter (M) could be included. The selection does not need to make sense. In fact, nonsense is what Lewis Carroll intends to convey through this example.

4- The Translation of the Jokes that involve Logic: the jokes that involve logic are also one of the easiest areas of translation if the literary translator fully understands the joke in English. The joke of the "impossibility of having less than no cups of tea" in this episode is a very simple one to translate into Arabic since it deals with numbers which makes it easier to translate.

5- The Translation of Lewis Carroll's twist of meaning: Carroll's twists of meaning are accompanied with underlying unexpected and disarming humor. According to "The Mad Tea Party," there are many attempts from Carroll to twist the meanings which could be illustrated through the two examples mentioned below. In some of the cases, certain phrases can be inserted before or after the sentence to give the twisted meaning.

a. The Dormouse's surprising answer "it was a treacle-well" is meant to answer Alice's question about the reason that made the three sisters live at the bottom of the well. In Arabic the phrase "the Scissor's story is of two words only" is put at the end of any sentence to show that it has been completely answered and, therefore, "there is no need for further explanation."

b. March Hare's sentence "why not?" in his answer to Alice's question "Why with an M?" is actually unexpected and insulting at the same time. It also shows that he does not have an exact answer for her question because he actually does not know the reason himself. The same way is used in Arabic to make such an expression. Moreover, it is also used as a remark to show how rude it is to ask such an insulting question that should not be asked. In Carroll's work, it seems that March Hare is also suggesting that it was rude of Alice to ask such a question given that he continues to insult her and actually tells her that she "shouldn't talk" in a rather rude and surprising tone.

After reviewing the oppositional articles that held different cultural and linguistic reasons to prevent faithful literary translation of works such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and providing some solutions for them, it is time to translate the original text into the Arabic culture and other texts of children's literature.

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