Translating Algerian Arabic Drama into English: An Intercultural Process

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Abstract

Mediating between two languages and/or cultures transcends the linguistic competence of the translator. It is a practice which is very much nourished by an intercultural dialogue between people who want to bridge otherness. Still, some parameters such as onomastics and the history of the target audience are to be considered to shun any cultural clash. This could be cushioned thanks to the technique of adaptation which is applied in the present paper to two Algerian plays "Lagwal" (Sayings, 1980) and "Lamkhakh" (The Two Brains, 1972) by Abdelkader Alloula and Muhammed Adar respectively.

It is commonly acknowledged among literary translators that rendering any dramatic or poetic piece of writing demands a huge proficiency. For some, it is even an intricate, if not an impossible task. Such dispiriting views are largely due to the fact that being skillful in two languages does not automatically open the doors for a good translation. In addition to his/her linguistic mastery, the translator should also be culturally sensitive. Culture, actually, plays a decisive role in attaining an acceptable rendition. But because it is sometimes difficult for translators to access the cultural 'scenery' of the

Résumé

La médiation entre deux langues et/ou cultures transcende la compétence linguistique du traducteur. C'est une pratique qui est bien nourrie par un dialogue interculturel entre des gens qui veulent aller au-delà de l'altérité. Cependant, des paramètres tels que l'aspect onomastique et l'histoire de l'auditoire cible sont à considérer pour éviter tout 'clash' culturel. Ce dernier, je crois, pourrait être amorti grâce à la technique d'adaptation qui est appliquée dans le présent article à deux pièces théâtrales algériennes, à savoir "Lagwal" (Les Dires, 1980) et "Lamkhakh" (Les Deux Cerveaux, 1972).

target language, (take the case of our Translation students) it is usually regarded as the translator's "Achilles' heel".

Being immersed in the target culture is of *prima facie* importance especially when the languages at stake do not share any lexical or syntactic cognates. This is precisely the case of Algerian Arabic and English for instance which are far from being relative tongues. Adding to the fact that each one has a different cultural makeup, the whole rationale would be to see whether it would be possible to find some common grounds between these two languages under the heading of universality.

If we espouse Paul Ricoeur's postulate, there is always a way to engage in rendering target texts when he plainly avers that:

> L'hospitalité langagière…où le plaisir d'habiter la langue de l'autre est compensé par le plaisir de recevoir chez soi, dans sa propre demeure d'accueil, la parole de l'étranger.[1]
>
> (Language hospitality…or the pleasure to dwell in the language of the other is rewarded by the pleasure to receive in one's home, the parole of the foreigner.)[2]

Indeed, this notion of *hospitality* may be the key to unravel the *a priori* beliefs of the impossibility of translation justified – among other reasons – by the phenomenon of *"Communicative Difference"*. This one stipulates that because people have got different rules guiding their discursive practices, any kind of mediation between them remains unattainable.

Any reading in the literature about literary translation reveals the undeniable role played by the Greeks in enriching its venue. In fact, it was mainly the Classic translations of ancient Greek tragedies into Latin which had helped the sphere of drama translation in general to prosper. Likewise, the translation into a large number of languages of some famous playwrights' works (such as those of Shakespeare or Brecht) contributed vastly in the shaping and casting of references as far as translational correspondences are concerned.

This also added in their spreading to distended places as to the Maghrebi region for instance. This was chiefly reported by Henri Kréa (1962) for whom:

…les formes spontanées, originelles du théâtre populaire – celles dont sont issus la tragédie grecque et le théâtre élisabéthain – fleurissent au Maghreb autant que partout ailleurs.[3]

(…the spontaneous forms, originating from popular theatre – those from which descended Greek tragedy and the Elizabethan theatre – flourish in the Maghreb as well as everywhere else.)

But it has been claimed that even if drama translation has fostered Translation Studies with abundant instances of translational equivalences, there had been some other directions which gave it a rather static theoretical portrait such as the way of transcending culture within a dramatic text. In this vein, Lefevere (1980) has from the start noticed that "There is practically no theoretical literature on the translation of drama as acted and produced... "[4]

His account for this kind of gap in the theorisation of drama translation can be depicted through a kind of blame directed towards those literary scholars who laid more emphasis on what is written on the page than on what should be fashioned on the stage. Again, this is due for him to a kind of underestimation of the domain of pragmatics since drama or theatre translation, more than any other literary genre, involves the significance of context and setting for a more "faithful" rendering.

It goes without saying, here, that any theatrical text is a kind of dialogue in action[5]; it is a dynamic kind of text with the finality of being acted more than that of being read. For Bassnett (1980), the written text plus its performance constitute an equation which will be incomplete if the *performability* factor is missing.[6] For her:

> A notion of theatre that does not see written text and performance as indissolubly linked, then, will inevitably lead to discrimination against anyone who appears to offend against the purity of the written text.[7]

Not very far from this suggestion, the semiotician Anne Ubersfeld looked at the linguistic code as one among other systems building theatrical demonstrations. In her *Lire le théâtre* (1982), she stressed the dialectical relation tying the script to its performance. By introducing the notion of "texte troué" when talking about the curtailed nature of the written text, she was in fact joining so many other scholars who put to the fore the idea that these two elements should always dovetail.

Furthermore, embarking upon a translation of a play is likely to be seen as a chancy adventure resting on the axiom 'hit or miss'. This is merely because when a playwright presents his work, he has a particular idea in mind; particular characters with culturally rooted names; a specific stage and above all a goal or a message to transmit.

The renowned Algerian dramatist *Abdelkader Alloula*, for instance, devised some of his plays (*Lagwal* among others) on a certain artistic tradition based on the *ħalqa* and a *guwal*. These features obviously stem from our traditions where information is still in some towns (as in Mostaganem) transmitted out loud by an individual who gathers people around him forming a *ħalqa* (s.n.circle) and delivers his speech. This *guwal* may well be translated into English by its lexical cognate 'minstrel' since this one is credited the same function; namely that of announcing or declaring things.

But I believe that the presence of the guwal in the target version will not push the spectators to frown. On the contrary, it will simply adjoin a new cultural aspect to their own cultural repertoire. This is also because the role performed by the guwal goes with what they know a minstrel does. Yet, this process of cultural assimilation cannot be generalized as it should be demonstrated further.

In complementation to his informative role, the guwal has also the function of making us know about the "after-events". That is, what people say after a certain incident takes place; in Alloula's theatre, it is about what happens to protagonists after their narrative has come to an end. In his Lagwal (1980), Alloula presents a "minstrel" who introduces the characters of the play, then tells us about what occurred after Kaddour, an employee in a factory, handed in his notice to his boss (Nacer who used to be one of his best friends) after a heated discussion between them. This is mainly because Nacer turned out to be greedy and abusive; something that Kaddour disclaimed.

Nevertheless, and to make the translated version 'speakable' in the target version, Algerian names have been replaced by English ones. Hence, Kaddour was substituted by Will and Nacer by Victor. This, because of the strong will of Kaddour to regain his dignity, and the same degree of desire of Nacer to win a good position among affluent people. The reason of changing names is again to make these ones sound familiar to the foreign listeners. Imagine the confusion that their preservation would have produced; a Kaddour or a Nacer would have indeed had a weird echo on an English stage! Here is an excerpt:

"The Minstrel: Dear listener, words for me take many forms, things have and haven't   been said about what happened to Will, who moved out after quitting his job. Some said that he was retained by the workers who forgave him asking him to stay with the hope of having their boss change his behaviour. But also because the factory couldn't allow the loss of   one of its most experienced drivers! He joined the group again and his matters went well. Dear listener, words for me take many forms… others who said that he carried his fight with the trade union for the general welfare of the workers, he regained his dignity and became a model during meetings. Victor, on the other hand, had been unmasked... Dear listener, words for me take many forms, let's listen   to…"[8]

  Furthermore, from the moment that we agree to make this process possible, some new elements may be put to the fore. Among these, that of *adaptation* seems to be a handy technique to overcome cultural discrepancies. This technique, in fact, goes hand in hand with the pragmatic tenets which Leo Hickey (1998) was among the pioneers to apply in *The Pragmatics of Translation*. This consists in presenting a version which should produce the same *effect(s)* and stir the same emotion(s) on the target audience.

   The translation of the specific cultural aspect of the ħalqa, where people surround the guwal and listen to his speech, constitutes a kind of bridge which shall make the 'Other' know more about our own 'literary demeanor'. To put it differently, its reproduction on a foreign stage would reflect one of the multifarious facets of what is basically referred to as "intercultural communication" with the translator as an intercultural communicator who:

> is normally confronted with people who do not share his or her perceptions of the external world, and who may respond to that world in a manner that is often hard to understand.[9]

   The target audience would certainly respond in an unexpected way if there is a clash between their own vision of the world and that presented to them. This is why a pragmatic process of cooperation seems necessary since this one is, in its turn, going to appeal to that of adaptation. Besides, it is quite common to establish a distinction between translation and adaptation. Adaptation, being a polyvalent notion, covers a large scheme of translating activities which aim first

and foremost at naturalizing the foreign work by giving priority to its transmissibility in accordance with the audience expectations.

At this juncture, consider that culture is an umbrella term encompassing, in addition to people's social organization and social relationships, features of their history. This could be depicted through historical moments experienced by the source language author and his audience, but which are totally absent from the target listeners' background knowledge. Here, the translator is faced with two options: either to delete the historical information available in the source text, or to find an almost equivalent historical event to include it in the target one. In this particular context, knowledge of history is de rigueur.

It is a well-known fact that Islam, and Arabs in general, knew a cultural as well as an intellectual boom during the eighth century. It was also the era of what is called "*Fatħ al-Andalous*" (the Conquest of Andalusia) in which Spain fell under an Islamic regime. This historical era was mentioned in Muhammed Adar's "Lamkhakh" (The Two Brains, 1972) where one of the protagonists exclaims:

"*Judge*: you, go out! (now addressing the thinker) you, prostrate! (addressing the loon) you, stand up! And I'll be turning around (he goes on turning around them) I love to see you as you are, I'm the very person to protect you, you showed me your feebleness, let me exploit you now…from now on you'll roll up the carpet for me. I love listening to music while eating and I love admiring female-dancers while drinking *(just as our ancestors used to do in Andalusia),* the eldest girl should be eighteen! That should be taken in charge by our diplomat…"[10]

It is worth noting that the same historical event is displayed in Alloula's Lagwal where Will (Kaddour) accuses Victor (Nacer) of having used the factory for his own benefits:

"Will: no sir, the truth is that…! its floor was imported from Spain and when I asked you about the reason, you told me that it's on account of its ancient arabesque architecture…(let me tell you that our ancestors invaded Spain and left wisdom there!) Victor, a lot is being said in the factory about the machines you imported from Italy…machines that are useless to our manufacture and which are left to rust in the hangars!..."[11]

The sentences put between brackets have been omitted from the adapted version. This is merely because these parts of speech are supposed to be delivered by an English character who cannot speak about a historical event which lacks validity in the eyes of his viewers. So, to avoid any kind of puzzlement, we chose to skip over these details which are quite irrelevant for a target listener; knowing that the same sentences would pass unnoticed in a non-adapted version.

Consider that what is called dynamic or pragmatic translation is to produce a version which should try to come across some typical cultural features of both source and target readers/listeners to put them on the same footing. Accordingly, preserving a homogeneous effect could only be achieved if all the elements presented in a translation go with the audience's expectations.

The following excerpt is taken from the second act of Muhammed Adar's same play where the terms party and Koran put between parentheses had been adapted by those of Monarchy and Bible respectively:

"*Door-keeper*: …never speak again about Monarchy (*the party*), it's something that doesn't concern you, it's something sacred! As soon as I knew that Monarchy (*the party*) was a sacred thing, I brought the Gospel and started reading it till I learnt Psalms by heart; then I went on reading Torah till I learnt the Bible (*Koran*) by heart, but in none of them was the term Monarchy (*party*) mentioned! I found eras which differed one from the other and in which the door-keeper stands in front of the door even if he is the very person to open it!"[12]

Adar, here, mentions some politico-religious elements which might well be understood by a foreign person. All of the terms party, Koran, Psalms, Bible, Torah and Gospel are known worldwide and are likely to be shared by both source and target audience's schemas[13]. But the problem resides in the establishment of the first term for instance in the recipient community's political system. England is a kingdom in which political parties cohabit but in terms of sacredness, it is rather the monarchy which is regarded as a sacred royal establishment. This is why the above adaptation seemed to us more acceptable for the target reader or spectator.

Further, and to obtain the same effect of bemusement, no deletion or alteration was brought to the irrational language used by Adar, in which reading the Gospel and Torah will lead to the learning by heart

of Psalms and that of the Bible accordingly. It should be noted that the only sacred religious book which was substituted in this passage was the Koran. This was a necessary move to prepare the ground for what follows. The first translation is literal and quite faithful to the original version:

Judge: May God make the Islamic religion and the court blossom!

This has been adapted to:

Judge: May God protect the court! [14]

This is simply because we cannot imagine a non-Muslim English character voicing such a prayer. Here, too, we tried to shun another alien cultural aspect by using a less controversial one which is that of 'the court' as an alternative to 'the Islamic religion'.

The majority of the excerpts mentioned so far consisted in finding substitutes of some alien political, religious or cultural aspects for foreign recipients. The following passage quoted from Alloula's Lagwal, exhibits two major cultural behaviours reflecting the place and time in which the play was written; i.e. its original context. Here, Peter (originally Ghecham) is recounting his whole life and for the first time to his eldest son Happy (originally Messaoud). The following extract tells us about the day Happy was born:

"Peter: I entered the house disoriented thinking and rethinking about all that…As soon as entered I saw that the lights were on… (I signaled my entrance coughing to make my way through)…as they heard my voice, they started letting out (youyous)…I hit my head and cried out: "Goodness, the baby is born!""[15]

The two cultural oddities for a target reader would have been those mentioned in the enclosed sentences. Presently in Algeria, the fact of 'clearing one's throat' for a man to free his way and allow the ladies of the house to 'hide' before entering his dwelling is starting to fade away. The whole family structure has changed and with it people's social behaviour. Now, the majority of new formed families aspire to live individually. Hence, if this phenomenon is becoming rare in a cultural milieu where society has been moulded on collective life for a long period, what about a setting whose individuals have been brought up with an individualistic vision. The second adapted element has to do with expressing cheerfulness. To celebrate a happy event, an

Algerian lady is likely to voice out youyous. This Arab behaviour has been omitted on account of its non-conformity with the social behaviour of the English people.

It is believed that the principal problem in an intercultural communication is the way in which people encode and decode messages. This activity is tightly intermeshed with the ability to fathom the ropes of communicative events by soundly grasping the cultural implications that set off any character's interaction. Furthermore, translating a play differs markedly from translating a novel, for instance, where no room is left to notes or footnotes. Translating for the theatre, in fact, rests on two major factors; these are 'actability' and particularly 'immediacy' of discourse. Characters can never be interrupted by the audience to present some clarification on a certain socio-cultural aspect.

To conclude, I would say that all of the previously mentioned adapted onomastic, cultural as well as historical source language features are an epitome of what translators can possibly do to reach intercultural communication. It is their mission to make people of different standings 'meet on the stage', but for that to happen, some concessions are to be made. Consequently, the translator becomes a crosser of frontiers, or a 'merchant' whose transactions consist in importing and exporting cultural assets, remolding them when necessary, then letting them unfold on the other side of the fence.

Notes:

[1] P., Ricoeur, *Sur la Traduction* (Bayard 2004), p.20.

[2] All of the translated French quotations in this article are mine.

[3] H., Kréa, "Théâtre Algérien" in Jean Oswald, *Le Séisme* (Société Nationale d' Edition, SNED, 1962), p.7.

[4] André Lefevere,"Translation and comparative literature in Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature" in Gunilla Anderman, Word, Text, Translation (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1999), p. 74.

[5] D., Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (Blackwell, 1997), p. 75.

[6] It should be noted, however, that Bassnett changed her position afterwards. In her 1985 and 1991's articles "Ways Through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts" and "Translating for

the Theatre: The Case Against Perfornability", she came to consider performability as a loose and wooly concept by shifting her attention to the deictic elements and the way they operate in a theatrical text, emphasizing not on their presence but on their function in the text.

[7]-S., Bassnettm, *Translation Studies* (Methuen, 1980), p. 121.

[8]-A., Alloula, *Lagwal* (Moufam Publications, 1997, p. 34. Note that all of the mentioned English translations are mine.

[9]-A., Samovar Larry, E., Porter Richard, C., Jain Nemi, *Understanding Intercultural Communication.* (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981), p. 117.

[10]-M., Adar, "*Lamkhakh*" in *Douroub el Mouwadjaha* (Moufam Publications, 2000), p. 34.

[11]-M., Adar, op.cit., p.27.

[12]-M., Adar, op.cit. p. 18.

[13]-This term was first introduced in the psychological arena by Bartlett in 1932 to denote any background knowledge stored in a person's memory that would make the reminiscence of past stories and experiences possible.

[14]-M., Adar, ibid., p. 33.

[15]- A., Alloula, op.cit., p. 46.

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