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GENDER SHIFT IN TRANSLATION FROM ENGLISH INTO ARABIC AND ALL THAT AGGRO

Abstract: *The present article examines how English grammatical gender is handled in Arabic translation as can be illustrated in a gender-loaded English text taken from the Gulf News English website. To diversify and corroborate our argument, the text was given to a group of forty students enrolled on Translation Studies course for the academic year 2017/2018 at Sultan Qaboos University. The article shows that the translation students fall victim to several problems, most likely attributed to the linguistic reality of the masculine and feminine genders in both Arabic and English. The article reveals that three strategies in translating a gender-loaded text are employed: (1) Source Language (SL) gender-free items are translated into masculine gender in Target Language (TL) in view of the fact that they are contextually determined or that they are closely bound up with unequivocal patriarchal domination in the Arab culture; (2) SL gender-bound items usually observed by complex genders (i.e., the addition of a gender lexical item to a gender-free item) are translated by means of explicitation whereby a that-clause or an astute feminine lexical item is utilised; and (3) the dormancy of a viable computer-aided translation (CAT) strategy is called upon, very frequently, when Strategy 1 and Strategy 2 are to no avail.*

Keywords: *masculine gender, feminine gender, Arabic, English, translation*

Introduction

Translation Studies (TS) has unequivocally been deified for the past few decades as a superb discipline in its own — a relentlessly upward discipline trajectory, indeed. Munday (2012, p. 11), aptly remarks that there has been “a vast expansion in specialized translating and interpreting programmes.” What would then be required is translator training of high quality. Language competence has always been the cornerstone for translator training, simply because the translator should, or even must, not be faulted on grounds of language competence. The ABC of translational action is to be competent in two languages: the language from which translation occurs, i.e., the Source Language (SL) and the language into which translation goes, i.e.,

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the Target Language (TL). Translation *per se* requires as much of other competencies such as ‘cultural competence’: “how cultural expectations for a particular genre [...] require considerable translator mediation” (Hewson 1995 as cited in Hatim and Mason 1997, p. 170), as the parallel ‘transfer’ competence and ‘factual and research’ competence (Nord, 1991). But for the sake of the present article, only language competence will be dealt with, bearing in mind that cultural competence is sometimes needed for a better understanding of grammatical gender shift. It ensues, therefore, that more attention should be given to language competence. However, due to the fact that languages cut linguistic reality quite differently, as is the case with Arabic and English, translation turns out to be difficult.

What poses even more problems in translating from one language into another is culture remoteness. The ultimate aim of translation has always been to reduce the obvious substantial cultural gaps between various cultures to a minimum, an easily achievable aim at a first glance. However, Arabic belongs to the Islamic-Arab culture, which is widely unrelated to that of English, which belongs to the Western culture. Therefore, several difficulties are usually not only relevant to the linguistic system gap between SL and the TL, but they are also very germane to the cultural discrepancy and disparity between languages. In no way can it be claimed that Arabic and English are stylistically, linguistically, semantically, pragmatically and culturally equivalent, but rather that they stand as perfect examples of the languages with little linguistic and cultural affinity, as Sofer (2002: 65-6) argues:

“The conscientious Arabic translator is aware of the generic difficulties in working with two languages as different from each other as English and Arabic. [...], there are vast cultural differences between a Western language such as English and a Semitic language like Arabic. One cannot translate these languages without paying attention to these cultural differences.”

In the same vein, Nida (1964) strikes a fairly obvious claim that, when the SL and the TL linguistic and cultural systems do not share that much, translating undoubtedly becomes rather difficult. When it comes to the deep-seated cultural difference

situations gleaned from feminism or egalitarianism, the aim could operationally be perceived a mirage, as English and Arabic are wholly unrelated languages. The former is a leading exponent of feminism and the realisation of this advocacy is obvious in the recognisable socio-textual practices, whilst the latter, generally, still seems to lag behind the former, as can be shown in the distinctive socio-cultural dynamism promoting different thresholds of patriarchal domination, as it were.

One of the basic assumptions of the cultural diversities behind the two languages is the way gender is closely bound up with in both languages. The occurrence of gender is culture-specific. “[T]he gender of a noun, pronoun, or adjective is whether it is masculine, feminine, or neuter. A word’s **gender** can affect its form and behaviour. In English, only personal pronouns such as ‘she’, reflexive pronouns such as ‘itself’, and possessive determiners such as ‘his’ have gender” (Collins Cobuild 2002; emphasis in original). Put differently, “gender is a built-in lexical property of the word,” according to Najjar and Shahin (2015, p. 256). Governing the agreement between nouns and pronouns and adjectives etc., is usually referred to as grammatical gender, i.e., “as a system for nouns themselves” (Najjar & Shahin, 2015, p. 256).

Farghal and Shunnaq (1999; p. 56; emphasis in original) state that “English makes very few gender distinctions in its pronominal system, viz., *he, she, it, who* and *which*”, bearing in mind that ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘it’ “coincide with the real gender of their referents rather than with the grammatical gender of their antecedents. The choice between [these pronouns] comes from the way they present masculinity, femininity, or unknown sex” (Najjar and Shahin, 2015, p. 257). Farghal and Shunnaq (1999; p. 56) further claim that Arabic makes all second and third person pronouns for gender. In terms of gender,

“there are three types of nouns in English: those that have no overt marking that suggests morphological correspondence between masculine and feminine [...] those that have a derivational relationship, [...] and finally those that have dual gender [...]. In Arabic, on the other hand, most nouns that correspond to masculine and feminine have a derivational relationship” (ibid.; see also Newmark, 1988, p. 59; Versteegh, 2006, p. 155).

Beyond this typology, Arab grammarians and philologists also address dual gender, as is the case with *'arūs* ('bride or bridegroom') (Ibn Manzur 1955), a point of disagreement with Versteegh (2006, p. 430), who considers *'arūs* as unmarked for gender and denotes "biologically feminine persons." Crucially, it should be added that all competent speakers of Arabic intuitively recognise *'arīs* as a 'bridegroom' and *'arūs* as a 'bride', both of which have wider currency across the Arab World.

The list also includes *milḥ* ('salt'), *al-'injīl* ('the Bible'), *as-silāḥ* ('weapons') (Ibn Manzur 1955). By the same token, Versteegh (2006, p. 242) speaks of 'unmarked nouns' or 'common gender', e.g., *'ajūz* ('old woman or old man').

In what follows, we hope to illustrate how certain masculine and feminine voices have to be adjusted slightly or drastically in the translation into Arabic, to meet the expectations of audience's assumed gender beliefs and values. Needless to say, it is-in-your-face ideology: "the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination" (Thompson, 1990, p. 56), a meaning within or across linguistic boundaries or, as Ullmann (1983, p. 128), writes: "language is not merely a vehicle of communication: It is also a means of expressing emotions and arousing them in others," reflecting the underlying ideological underpinnings, the aetiology of which goes far beyond the production and reception of texts in an exchange.

Gender and culture

Undoubtedly, there seems to be a tug-of-war relation between the Arabic-Islamic culture and the Western culture when it comes to woman. A woman is respected in both, but the two cultures approach it from a different angle. The Western culture has taken steps towards a presumed reconciliation of the values of equality and liberty in almost all walks of life, perhaps well envisaged along historical, geographical and social lines in the West. Likewise, the Arab culture has been worked up about the fact that women are emasculated and marginalized, and so many steps have been taken towards a more ground-breaking demonstration of amity and goodwill, again, in almost all walks of life. Any gender-marked language has undergone a number of drastic developments and changes for the past few decades, e.g., the gender sensitive English idiom 'right-hand man' disregards gender to mean a trusted helper, and more obviously, the gender-

marked 'fireman' has been changed into the gender-free 'fire-fighter'. "In the case of masculine dominance in English gender, the latter course has been undertaken reasonably successfully and change has proved relatively painless" (Pym, 1992, p. 169).

On the other hand, the Arab culture is tilting towards greater freedom and equality for women in two ways: there is a strong feminist movement that aims to promote the equality concept and bring freedom to women. Like in the Western countries, this runs concurrently with a change in the Arabic language to achieve such an amount of equality. It does not work quite well, however, due to the arbitrariness of handling the issue, on the one hand, and the inimitability of Arabic, on the other. In some Arab countries, e.g., Jordan and Palestine, ministerial posts that involve women have undertaken some changes at the language level by employing the most common marker of the feminine: "the suffix *-at*, which is usually added to the masculine form to derive the feminine. This is known as [*tā' at-ta'nīth*] 'the *t* of femininity' when referring to its grammatical function, or [*tā' marbūṭā*] 'bound *t*' when referring to its orthographic form" (Versteegh, 2006, p. 156). The rationale is to enjoy the fruits of the massive progress of widespread respect to women in the West and to distinguish the post as exclusively for a woman, rather than for a man, e.g. *wazīr* ('minister' +masc.) versus *wazīrah* ('minister' +fem.), *muḥami* ('lawyer' +masc.) versus *muḥamiyah* ('lawyer' +fem.); *qāḍi* ('judge' +masc.) versus *qāḍiyyah* ('judge' +fem.); *nā'ib* ('MP' +masc.) versus *nā'ibah* ('MP' +fem.). It should be added that Versteegh (2006, p. 242) considers *nā'ib* as 'common gender'. No sooner had this trend come out in these two countries, than it diminished again for some posts, due to linguistic restrictions and in order to allow for a certain ambiguity of intention. Arabic is recalcitrant to some changes as is the case with *qāḍi* ('judge' +masc.) versus *qāḍiyyah* ('judge' +fem.) and *nā'ib* ('MP' +masc.) versus *nā'ibah* ('MP' +fem.), as the former, i.e. *qāḍiyyah*, has a polysemous meaning of 'destructive' and the latter means 'calamity'. Official circles in Jordan and Palestine, have re-used masculine gender-marked items for those two posts, again paradoxically, out of respect for women.

Methodology

The present paper explores one of the multifarious cultural problems in the translation from English into Arabic, namely, grammatical gender in both Arabic and English. The two languages approach the matter from a different angle; therefore, problems in translating feminine-loaded texts are likely to arise. Although English intends to use gender-free items, apparently impinging on the Western ethos and cultural values, the intention of the text producer to underlie gender-marked nouns has been clear to describe the Saudi culture efficiently and effectively. The present article examines how gender is adapted in the Arabic translation of gender-loaded units in an English text taken from the *Gulf news* English website (see Appendix I)². The research data consist of the translations provided by forty students taking the Translation Studies course in Fall of the academic year 2017/2018 at Sultan Qaboos University.

It is worth remarking here that only gender-loaded segments are explicated in the discussion and analysis below, whereby these translation segments are bolded and Arabic equivalent(s) is/are displayed in transliterations.

Significance of the study

The present study roughly falls within the ambit of gender studies in relation to translation studies, the amalgamation of which has been a relatively embryonic academic discipline in the Arab World. The study may be considered significant as it broaches interdisciplinary studies and reports a current move away from the focus on traditional translation-oriented topics insofar as the Arab translation studies is concerned, and above all, tackles grammatical gender and the strategies employed by translation students in the context of translator training. The present article hopes to be of great socio-cultural significance in two ways: it is intended to shed new light on grammatical gender at the language level as well as on a more sophisticated cultural level in the Arab World. It also sets a path for further research and draws conclusions that hopefully bring about translator training of high quality.

² Published by AFP: May 8, 2014 appeared in *Gulf News: Saudi Arabia* (<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudi-woman-killed-as-she-defied-driving-ban-1.1330037>) (Accessed October 1, 2017).

Discussion and Analysis

Thus far, in our analysis, the theoretical framework established requires that we examine some representative examples in order to make the much-needed argument. It has been found that three major strategies are employed in the course of translation; namely, the SL gender-free text is rendered into masculine gender and the SL gender-bound text is translated into explicitation by a *that*-clause or using a feminine lexical item. A third CAT-based strategy is called upon when Strategy 1 or Strategy 2 fails. At this point of juncture, it is perhaps worth noting that:

“From the perspective of the translator, what is perhaps particularly significant in this area of language use is the motivation behind such departures, the functions served by them and the compensation strategies which would have to be adopted in languages whose rhetorical systems do not share this phenomenon, in order to rectify the likely communicative loss” (Hatim and Mason, 1997, p. 94).

It is the effect of a given strategy to overcome translation problems, a strategy that has often been determined in translator training. Insofar as translation strategy is concerned, Krings (1986, p. 18; see also Nida and Taber, 1969; Molina and Hurtado, 2002) offers a fairly comprehensive definition: “translator’s potentially conscious plans for solving concrete translation problems in the framework of a concrete translation task.” In what follows, we hope to discuss and analyse the examples to corroborate our argument. Let us consider Text 1 below:

Text 1

SL: Ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world where women are not allowed to drive. However, **they** usually get behind the wheel in desert regions away from the capital.

TL: (a) *yaqumna bisyyaqat assyyarah*
(b) *yaqumu bisyyaqat assyyarah*

In Text 1 above, the English gender-free second person pronoun ‘they’ is rendered into an overt feminine marker attached to the end of the verb, i.e. *yaqumna* (‘performing’, 2nd

person pronoun+ fem.+ pl.), a gender marker without which communication is likely to suffer and getting the message across may be in jeopardy. It is crucial to highlight the gender distinction. The translation student seems to have made a correct choice in TLa. However, in TLb, the rendition made by the student, i.e., *yaqumu* ('performing', 2nd person pronoun+ masc.+ pl.) would kill the SL cohesion stone-dead; that is, cohesion is not established by a straightforward link of masculine plural pronoun *u* and 'women'. Consider Text 2 below for more elaboration:

Text 2

SL: Thursday's deadly accident was not the first of its kind involving a **woman driver**.

TL: (a) *imr'ah sāl'iqā*;
(b) *imr'ah taqūd as-sayyārah*;
(c) *sāl'iqā*

Closer scrutiny of the three translations shows a source of difficulty for translating the distinctive gender in English, i.e., 'a woman driver', that can be said to be an instance of "markedness" in texts: "either as infrequency of occurrence (that is, less frequently occurring expressions are somehow more significant when they do occur) or as informativity (that is, the less predictable in context an item is, the more information it potentially relays)" (Hatim and Mason, 1997, p. 10).

The item 'woman' is usually used in English to underline the fact that the action is performed by a woman. Ostensible straightforward equivalent seems to be possible at work. It is never possible to be certain about it, however. The first student's *imr'ah sāl'iqā* ('a woman driver') in TLa may look like pandemonium to target audience, that is to say, ungainly, repetitive and grotesque. The English complex gender seems to be formally adopted, whereby a distinctive gender lexical item (i.e., 'woman') is added to a gender-free item (i.e., 'driver'). In other words, "markedness" and "informativity" in English are maintained in translation by means of adopting a formal translation, thus giving rise to complex genders in Arabic, i.e. *imr'ah sāl'iqā* ('a woman driver'), which is succinctly anomalous in Arabic. The student could be presumed to have internalised a set of the TL linguistic norms rather than merely copying the SL

socio-textual conventions. The second translation in TLb, i.e. *imr'ah taqūd as-sayyārah* ('a woman who is driving a car') is remarkably creative, though it sounds verbose in Arabic. The SL gender-bound item is translated via explicitation into a that-clause or using a feminine lexical item. One of the most salient translation is observed in TLc, obviously corresponding to the feminine gender-marked lexical item in English, i.e., 'a woman driver'.

In Text 3, it is clear that the student translator seems to have opted for a formally-based translation in T1a, i.e., *'untha sā'iqa* ('a female driver'), leading not only to a redundant, but also to an inaccurate translation.

Text 3

SL: In January 2012, a **female driver** was injured and her **companion** killed when their car overturned in the northern Hael province.

TL: (a) *juriḥat 'untha sā'iqa wa qutila rafīquha*
(b) *juriḥat sā'iqa wa qutilat rafīqatuha*

The other gender-free noun 'companion' has been translated into *rafīquha* ('her companion' +masc.), perhaps this rendition is due to the impact of patriarchal society in the Arab World. Arguably, the student's gender is not an issue here as a large number of students in the data are female. It should be noted that T1a is made by a student whose apparently little cultural knowledge of Saudi Arabia seems to be the reason for such a translation. Conversely, the feminine *rafīqatuha* ('her companion' +femin.), is made in TLb by a student whose knowledge of the Saudi culture seems to be the catalyst for this translation. It is disconcerting for the TL reader. Contextually undetermined, opting for masculine gender in TL does not seem to be an outlet. Similarly, adopting complex gender in the TL would not suffice. Consequently, we propose, in what follows, to consider a fuller analysis of the SL text by means of what we may call computer-aided translation (CAT)-based strategy. We could trace back the news item in its original Arabic on the website of the local Al-Jazeera daily to make a decision on the translation in TLb. Having carried out an appropriate Internet search, we come up with the fact that it was the feminine *rafīqatuha* ('her companion' +femin.) who was killed in the accident.

In the second translation, a derivational relationship clitic is used to give an optimal translation that shows a normal condition of the natural language use in Arabic. For illustration, take Text 4 below:

Text 4

SL: And in November 2010, a woman driver was killed along with three of her **female passengers** in a similar accident.

TL: (a) *musāfirāt 'ināth*
(b) *musāfirāt ma'aha*

A formally-based rendition of *musāfirāt 'ināth* ('female passengers') shows insensitivity to the TL linguistic norms on the part of the student, essentially ascribed to a failure to perceive the SL pattern of "markedness" and "informativity" (see Hatim and Mason 1997). However, the other translation, i.e. *musāfirāt ma'aha* ('female passengers with her' +fem. +plural) sounds natural in Arabic.

Text 5

SL: Women in the kingdom who have the means to hire **drivers** while others must depend on the goodwill of **male relatives**.

TL: (a) *yastajir sā'iqīn*
(b) *al-'qārib ath-thtūr*

Our discussion here will encompass two items. TLa reflects what may be called cultural interference in which patriarchal values and norms are imposed while translating. The student seems to be influenced by the culture of patriarchal domination, thus opting for *sā'iqīn* ('drivers' + masc.) rather than *sa'iqāt* ('drivers' +fem.). It is still valid that the student may be acquainted with the fact that in Saudi Arabia all hired drivers are male and cannot be female. It is perhaps useful to address the co-text and the context. The former refers to "the sounds, words or phrases preceding and/or following a particular linguistic item in an utterance", whereas the latter is "enveloping that particular utterance" (Hatim and Mason, 1997, p. 181). Contextualised, the structure of argumentation in the text is based on the assumption that Saudi women are not allowed to drive, so drivers are

supposed to be primarily male. In TLb, the formal translation sounds natural in Arabic.

Finally, in Text 6 below, the student opted for an embarrassing formal translation in TLa, a sheer failure in establishing translation adequacy as far as the target audience is concerned.

It is perhaps worth stating, however, that TLb and TLc are not only a specimen of masculine genders, but are also the products of the TL culture. The item *walī* ('a person preeminent for holiness' and *maḥram* ("unmarriageable, being in a degree of consanguinity precluding marriage" (Hans Wehr, 1974)) bring to the surface the cultural differences between Arabic and English and further show subtle and intricate connotations used in the Islamic religion. Geographical proximity seems to have played an active role in the choice made by the group.

Text 6

SL: In addition to not being allowed to drive, Saudi women must cover themselves from head to toe and need permission from a **male guardian** to travel, work and marry.

TL: (a) *ḥāris thakar*
(b) *walī*
(c) *maḥram*

Here the analysis conducted from the standpoint of geographical and cultural perspective shows that Saudi Arabia borders Oman and the two peoples undoubtedly share common linguistic and cultural background. Besides Hans Wehr's definitions, the items *walī* and *maḥram* (roughly equivalent for 'male-guardian') is possible in the judiciary. In Oman, for instance, *walī*'s permission is required for various socio-practices. In *Gulf News*, the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs in Oman has "affirmed that a guardian or 'maḥram' needs to be present when a woman performs Haj [...] A guardian is a must for women who want to perform Haj."³ However, in other

³ Published on May 24, 2016 and appeared in *Gulf News*: Saudi Arabia <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/oman/male-guardian-must-for-women-to-perform-haj-oman-1.1833726> (Accessed December 1, 2017).

parts of the Arab World, say, Jordan, *qarīb* ('male relative') can be roughly used for a male guardian.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has shown that gender poses problems in the translation from English into Arabic. The task of the translator is fraught with peculiar perils, not only because of the linguistic disparity between the two languages but also, and perhaps more significantly, because of the culture-specificity in Arabic, as can be seen in grammatical gender in a general sense. It is quite true that incongruities (be linguistically and/or culturally) in Arabic and English are quite clear. This means that, as we have noted with respect to the examples discussed above, each language has its own subtle nuances in terms of syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and culture.

It is clear that, in order to dispell the above incongruities, processing translation strategies need to be employed in the translation of both gender-bound and gender-free items insofar as our data are concerned. The grammatical gender is approached differently in Arabic and English, and it is culture-specific. The SL gender-free items may happen to be completely context-determined and are consequently translated into masculine gender. The choice made by students is also ascribed to the patriarchal domination in the Arab culture, or, as Burke, P. and Hsia, (2007, p. 150) state a "form of adaptation was the translation from one gender to the other." For the SL gender-bound items (usually not desired as the SL culture resists patriarchal domination), explicitation is opted for, in which a that-clause or a feminine lexical item are employed. We have to cater for a situation in which neither of the two strategies work. It has been found that the CAT-based strategy works pretty well, as can be shown in Text 3 above.

In order to ensure translator-training programmes of good quality, (1) trainers should pay due attention to this area of difference between Arabic and English grammatical gender so that translation problems can be reduced to a minimum; (2) student translators should be aware of how to deal with gender-loaded utterances; (3) students should be trained to employ the right strategies; and (4) CAT tools seem to be closely bound up with employing other strategies in the course of translation and

thus training with these tools would unequivocally be commendable.

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Appendix I (SL)

Saudi woman killed as she defied driving ban

A Saudi woman was killed in a car crash in the capital Thursday as she defied the kingdom's long-standing ban on female driving, local media reported. The woman, in her 20s, lost control of her vehicle and crashed into the wall of a youth club in Riyadh, according to the website of the local Al-Jazeera daily. The car caught fire and she died, it said. Ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world where women are not allowed to drive. However, they usually get behind the wheel in desert regions away from the capital. Thursday's deadly accident was not the first of its kind involving a woman driver. In January 2012, a female driver was injured and her companion killed when their car overturned in the northern Hael province. And in November 2010, a woman driver was killed along with three of her female passengers in a similar accident. Women in the kingdom who have the means to hire drivers while others must depend on the goodwill of male relatives. Women's rights activists make frequent calls to challenge the ban and those who do so post online videos showing themselves behind the wheel. In addition to not being allowed to drive, Saudi women must cover themselves from head to toe and need permission from a male guardian to travel, work and marry.