

Narrative Report Workshop #2

Workshop: Classical vs. Modern Arabic. The Translator's Dilemma as between the "Alien" and the "Familiar"

Tarif Khalidi at American University in Beirut



Opening Remarks: T. Khalidi

Tarif Khalidi spoke on the first day for 30-45 minutes on his experiences as a translator of both classical and modern Arabic texts. How does a translator deal with transcripts of oral and disjunctive speech, e.g. parliamentary debates? Should translators be faithful to the disjunctive original or should they "smooth out" the text? Utter faithfulness vs a coherent rendering? The peculiar problems of Classical Arabic and its challenges to translators. Classical as compared to Modern. The impact of European languages on modern Arabic. The verbal vs the nominal. What can be done with idioms? He ended with a few practical suggestions.

"I suppose I ought to begin these remarks by saying a few things first about my own experience as a translator before I come to the more theoretical aspects of translation and its diverse problems. I first became a translator around the year 1963, and have been translating, off and on, ever since. And now, as a retired professor, I've decided to end my life as a translator, largely because it keeps what remains of my brain busy with dictionaries and thesauruses, and because this activity, I believe, will delay the onset of senility and an unwelcome visit by Herr Alzheimer. Let me now go back to 1963. I was naturally

attracted to translation for two reasons: financial and personal. The financial we don't need to spend time on: as a very junior faculty member at AUB I needed to supplement my meager income. The personal is far more important. At my school in England, I was on the Classical side, i.e. Greek and Latin literature. We spent almost all our classes on translating Greek and Latin texts which we would be asked to prepare a day or two before and then read them out in class. Exam times were always a torture because we'd be given what was called "Unseen Translation", texts that we had not seen before and where no dictionaries were allowed. I call them a torture, but as a mental training they were of exceptional value, especially when I later on came to translating classical Arabic poetry and prose. The "Unseen Translation" was a bit like a jigsaw puzzle. One had to figure out from the general context of a passage what a particular word or phrase might possibly mean, moving slowly from what is understood to what is not understood. You might call it intelligent guessing. It is not surprising that the British Intelligence Services in the nineteenth and twentieth century mostly employed people who had had a classical, Greek and Latin, education. They were experts in solving jigsaw puzzles.

So when in 1963 I began my other career as a translator from modern Arabic to English, the challenges were trivial when compared to what I had been through before at that English school. The first text I was given to translate was "The Minutes of the Union Talks", Mahadir Muhadathat al-Wihdah, an extremely interesting transcript of the meetings between the Egyptians and the Syrians discussing the reasons for the break-up in 1961 of the union which joined them in what was called the UAR, United Arab Republic. These were basically discussions which were recorded then transcribed exactly as they had been spoken. And this was the biggest challenge for a translator in an otherwise straightforward text. The terms and phrases used by the speakers were all familiar to me because I was living through that political era. But the real challenge was how to translate spoken and disjunctive speech. When we speak, we often hum and haw; we move a little forward only to move back; we start a sentence but don't finish it; and so forth. You might compare the overall picture to someone trying, very inefficiently, to park a car: forward, backward, sideways: forward, backward etc. So the gaps of spoken speech had to be filled, and a coherent sentence had to be strung out. But the question remains: as a translator, should I have done so, i.e. turned disjunctive spoken speech into coherent prose? Was I being faithful to the original disjunctive nature of the text, or was I supposed to make it easier for the reader to grasp the speaker's meaning by smoothing out what he had said? To whom does the translator owe ultimate responsibility and loyalty: to be faithful to the text by giving an incoherent rendering, or to be unfaithful to the text by a rendering it coherently for the benefit of the reader? I will not give an immediate answer to this question and may come back to it later in another context. But this issue presents a genuine dilemma to any translator who has to deal with transcripts of spoken speech or other similar texts, e.g. speeches in parliament. Any speaker, I'm sure, would be happy if you, the translator, turn his or her hums and haws into clear, smoothly running and intelligible text. On the other hand, a historian, for example, who examines your translation in fifty years time may well be very interested to know exactly how so-and-so delivered his or her speech. The hums and the haws may indeed be an important part of a historian's analysis. So, once again, where does the loyalty of the translator lie? To a coherent rendering or to utter and total faithfulness? As I said above, let us delay answering this awkward question. Translating Mahadir Muhadathat al-Wihdah was a valuable experience and I continued to translate straightforward political Arabic texts, and occasionally still do, though no longer meeting anything like the Mahadir. I enjoy doing them because I can do them very fast, i.e. modern political Arabic into English. However, English into Arabic is quite a different matter which we might wish to discuss later.

My journey as a translator now moved into translating classical Arabic. Here, I have so far translated four book-length texts, in addition to translating very many shorter passages in my other books on Arabic/Islamic intellectual history. The most challenging by far of these translations was my translation of the Qur'an. However, since you ought to have in your hands a copy of my lecture entitled "Reflections of a Qur'an translator" I need not spend any time describing the problems I faced during that ordeal,

though of course I would be happy to try to answer any questions you might have in that regard. But let me now move to say a few words about translating classical Arabic. If we accept what is today a fairly common view of language, namely, that language is a form of life, we must admit that classical Arabic embodied a form of life totally different from our own. I used to tell my students that if a time machine suddenly whisked you back to ancient Mecca or Baghdad or wherever, I doubt very much whether you would last a whole day, and I bet that, by the end of that day, you would be begging the time machine operator to bring you back to the present. Whatever you see in that ancient city, whatever you hear, whatever you eat or smell or touch would be quite alien to you. Yes, you might hear a few words that would indicate to you that this was an Arab city, but it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to negotiate your way into or out of it. Classical Arabic is a very concise and dense language. Among other things, this means that an English translation of a classical Arabic text will almost invariably be much longer than the original. It is a highly verbal language as evidenced in its various verbal forms, or taf'ilat: fa`ala, fa`ala, af`ala, af`alla, tafa`ala, tafa`ala, infa`ala, istaf`ala and so forth. These are found in both the active and the passive voice, vastly increasing the usage and significance of a verb. Pronominal suffixes [explain] will very often be attached to these verbs instead of proper names, so the translator will often have to guess who is saying what to whom. All this will need to be tackled by a translator, in addition of course to the completely alien vocabulary which issues from a life alien to us. Orientalists used to joke that there are a hundred or more synonyms for a camel. This may be true but I wish it were only the camel that had a hundred names. Classical Arabic as a whole is addicted to synonyms, far more than say Greek or Latin. Another peculiarity of classical Arabic, in addition to concision, its preference for verbs in their various taf'ilat forms, and its very rich synonyms, is its tendency to rhetorical repetition. For example, a phrase like "and she went home" will be followed by another phrase meaning exactly the same thing but expressed in different terms, e.g. "and she reached her abode." If you are interested in figures of speech (similes, metaphors etc), this rhetorical repetition is called polyptoton: you will find it on Google under List of Figures of Speech. Another peculiarity is its use of rhymed prose, called saj`. But the question for a translator is: what do you do with repetition of phrase or rhyming words? Here also let me delay an answer till later. When classical is compared to modern Arabic, the differences between the two forms of life become quite visible. Let's take one or two examples. Modern Arabic avoids the passive voice and instead uses an auxiliary verb to convey the passive. So we find, for example: tammam musadarat instead of sudirat , or jara tashghil instead of shughghila. So the passive is much less frequent in modern Arabic than in classical. The same holds true of the various taf'ilat, e.g. the form istaf`ala is far less common in modern Arabic than it is in classical.

Then again, nominal forms like the dual have more or less vanished and been swallowed by the plural. Many other examples might be cited. I suspect that the reason for this is that modern journalese or fictional Arabic, a modern form of life, dispenses wherever it can with vowelization and for example, with the shadda, the fatha and the kasra on certain letters, in order to accommodate the prose to faster printing. For example, if you wish to print shughghila, you need a damma, a shadda , a kasra and a fatha, whereas jara tashghil needs no vowelization at all. But yet another reason looms large: the impact of European languages on modern Arabic in structure, diction and so forth. I am not familiar enough with linguistics to tackle this subject, but I distinctly remember a conversation I had with the late Ghassan Tuwayni, owner-editor of the al-Nahar newspaper where I pointed out to him how much I believed the Arabic style of his newspaper had affected at least modern Lebanese Arabic. He immediately offered a scholarship to any student of mine who was willing to write an M.A. thesis on this topic. I was particularly struck by how al-Nahar Arabic was popularizing the use of pronouns like huwa, hiya, hum etc. instead of pronominal suffixes as in classical Arabic. This has meant that, modern Arabic, in my view, by drawing close to English or French in its diction, has facilitated the job of the translator. What we share with our

modern contemporary world is more than what we or that modern or contemporary world share with our own ancient pasts. Then again, and like modern English or French, Modern Arabic tends to be far more nominal than classical Arabic which was more verbal. Here's a typical sentence from a newspaper, where nouns are heaped one on top of the other: muraja`at al-ittifaq al-nuwawi ma`a Iran wa tamdid mihlat ta`liq al-`uqubat. Almost every noun here: muraja`at, ittifaq, tamdid, mihlat, ta`liq, `uqubat would have been expressed as a verb in classical Arabic. Finally, in modern Arabic you will encounter adjectives made from nouns: ra'is> ra'isiyya, jamal>jamaliyya, ta'ifa>ta'ifiyya etc etc, [Listen to an Arabic TV news and count the number of –iyyas you hear!] whereas this is far less common in classical Arabic: fa`il, fa`il and maf`ul are the most frequent adjectival forms.

So let me now draw a few conclusions and attempt answers to some of the questions I left unanswered earlier. To whom does a translator owe his or her loyalty? I would say to the text exactly before them, warts and all. This includes repetition of phrase in, say, classical Arabic though rhyming words are far more difficult to translate. The Qur'an is full of saj` but there is no way you can duplicate this without distorting the meaning in one way or another. What do you do when you come to an idiom? For example, ikhtalata al-habil bi'l nabil? It would look odd if you translate it into English as follows: "The fellows hunting with ropes were intermingled with the fellows hunting with arrows" because that is what the phrase literally means. I think the rule of thumb here is this: if you are translating an ancient text you should try to preserve as much of the idiom as possible in order to emphasize the alienness of the text, whereas in a modern text you want to emphasize familiarity. I am amazed at the way in which the phrase first uttered by Saddam Husain "Umm al-Ma`arik" passed immediately into English and became an English idiom: the mother of all this, that and the other. This is how languages in the modern world manage to enrich each other. Let me end with a few practical points in no particular order of Importance:

1. Arabic >English transliteration. This should already be under your belt.
2. Dictionaries: Hans Wehr for modern, Edward Lane for classical [free download at: www.tynedalearchive.com/tabs/lane/]
3. Thesaurus: absolutely essential. Roget's Thesaurus in alphabetical form.
4. Read a whole passage before you begin translating it, in order to determine structure and tone."





DAY 1: Classical Arabic: Translating the Alien: Al-Jurjani, Asrar al-Balagha, as a case study.

Al-Jurjani (d.1078) was arguably the most original literary critic of pre-modern Arabic/Islamic civilization. His ambition as revealed by the title of his work, was to “discover” the secrets of eloquence.

- Before you attempt to make complete sense of this text, and before solving the problems of the meaning of various words, participants cast their eye on the text as a whole to try and grasp the problem that Jurjani was wrestling with: eloquence as a visual art, resting on an image, its opposite and the final synthesis.
- Participants collectively marked out passages that you think are especially difficult to translate for later discussion. But try to gain a sense of the whole before you attempt to translate.
- (From Tarif’s instructions: Do not assume that a word like nukta, e.g., in this text has the same meaning as in modern Arabic. This is the Arabic of a thousand years ago. “The past is a foreign country.”)



DAY 2: Modern Arabic: Translating the Familiar : Zakariyya Tamir, Sa Nadhak

Zakariyya Tamir (born 1931) is a Syrian short story writer of wide renown in the Arab world. His short stories, critical of political repression, are often described as “surreal.” This of course will be a far easier text to translate. The tone here is very ironical. Does irony present a special challenge to translators? Tamir achieves his effect by employing a tone that one might call “pseudo-documentary,” as if he is reporting an incident for a newspaper. How do we preserve this tone in a translation?

- Participants were placed in groups of four to translate passages from the text
- Participants shared their translations with the whole group, and Tarif read out his original translations at the end of the day, discussing the different choices that were made.



Reports

Report on Translation Workshop, AUB, 23-24 March, 2018 by Tarif Khalidi

“When invited to lead this workshop I was not at all certain I could be of any use to the students. I have been translating since the early sixties of the last century but had not, frankly, paid much attention to what I was doing, to the theories or mechanics of translation. So I began by a sort of apologia [attached] where I sketched, for about forty minutes or so, my various experiences as a

translator, appending where I could certain practical problems that I faced and some suggestions as to how to solve them. The two-day workshop was, I confess, a tiring though scintillating experience. Two texts were assigned to the students for translation, one medieval and the other modern. A fly-sheet [attached] was distributed to the students outlining the tasks in hand and suggesting how one might proceed. The medieval text was extracts from *Asrar al-Balagha* of `Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 1078), arguably the most original literary critic of the pre-modern period. The extracts had to do with his discussion of similes and how they may be said to be arresting, successful or otherwise acute. This text allowed us to discuss certain topics like the translator's strategy when dealing with ancient texts: should she/he preserve the alien nature and diction of the text or should she/he strive for the modern and familiar? The discussion also allowed me also to say a few things about Lane's *Lexicon* which many had not dealt with before, and about Ibn Manzur's *Lisan al-`Arab* and how one uses it, together with a discussion of the changes of meaning that come over familiar Arabic words across time. To help resolve some of these problems, a lecture I gave in London entitled "Reflections of a Qur'an Translator" was also distributed to the students. Day two was far easier. The texts assigned were three short stories by the well-known Syrian short story writer Zakariyya Tamir (b.1931) in a collection called *Sa Nadhak*. The mood here is often called "surreal" and we discussed this concept at some length, together with its cognates like sarcasm and irony, and how best to convey this mood in translation. I had less chance to improve on the students' versions which in some cases were better than mine. I was very pleased with the level of the students' competence. There were numerous discussions between and amongst us: they were a very lively lot, which accounts for my exhaustion at the end of it. I will, however, note a few points that need attention. To begin with, I am not sure that their transliteration of Arabic terms is as it should be, and had no chance to determine this, though Dr Isa did point them in the right direction. Another issue is English to Arabic translation which we did not touch upon at all, and which might be included in future workshops. There is, finally, the question of translating Arabic idioms. This is an interesting problem for every translator and one which we did not have enough time to discuss at any length. I suggest that future workshops could profitably spend time investigating that issue. This is where the imagery of one language can enrich another, but the translator must at the same time avoid the peril of the ridiculous or the incomprehensible. I dealt briefly with this issue in my "Reflections of a Qur'an Translator."

Tarif Khalidi

April 4, 2018"



Student Reports

Student #1

- Workshop coordinator (methodology, tools, organization)

Well informed and friendly coordinator; well prepared; relevant and useful tools, structured methodology.

- Workshop material (focus, accessibility, relevance, interest)

Relevant material, interesting, challenging and accessible, covered a wide range of issues.

- Workshop participants (aptitudes, diversity, collaboration)

Welcoming, encouraging, with various academic interests and always offering helpful insights.

- Workshop benefits

The workshop offered a playful and stress-free setting to work on Ar&t;En translations of both classical and modern texts, I was also introduced to several valuable resources and concepts which I plan to learn more about them.

Additionally, the workshop facilitated my interaction with other colleagues who are more involved with academia than I am, which is important for me now as I am still considering the potential options for my future career, both in academia and as a professional translator.

- Recommendations for improvement

Maybe with two more days next time.

- Other comments

I am grateful for this opportunity.

Student #2

- Workshop coordinator (methodology, tools, organization)

The workshop was very well organized, it the methodology was efficient and helpful in having a big space of practical translation rather than theoretical discussions.

- Workshop material (focus, accessibility, relevance, interest)

The material was available for everybody, I think it was carefully selected to go with the objectives of the workshop. It covered old and modern literary texts which enabled the participants to deal with different literary translation challenges.

- Workshop participants (aptitudes, diversity, collaboration)

Participants were from different backgrounds, which enriched my experience in this workshop. The teamwork was very efficient and helpful at the same time.

- Workshop benefits

It was the first time I come into contact with practical translation (not translation theory I mean), which was the most beneficial part of the workshop.

- Recommendations for improvement

I would have liked to translate an English literary text to Arabic, as part of this workshop, as I think it would have dealt with different translation challenges, that I would have liked to deal with and learn about.

Student #3

- Workshop coordinator (methodology, tools, organization)

We had a very distinguished coordinator who ensured we had a varied and engaging two-day workshop. Looking at two completely different styles of texts on the respective days meant we were able to have context-specific, but also general discussions about the questions raised during the exercises. We were introduced to different resources, but it was the collaborative nature of the workshop which benefitted me most. Thus, we were able to work both independently and then reconvene - help each other out as well as exchange ideas and give feedback: all aspects central to the practice of translation that, while being a solitary task, requires a lot of re-working and examining texts from various angles. Trying our own hand at translating the coordinator's work and then comparing the results with his own renditions suggested how every translation can contribute new aspects or raise new

Questions

- Workshop material (focus, accessibility, relevance, interest)

The material provided was suitable and not too much (which allowed for closer reading and constructive discussion) and having been sent the texts in advance, we were able to come to the workshop with a bit of an idea where we were headed. The balance between classical material on day one and more simple, everyday language on day too provided for interesting comparative questions. The sustained usage of a thesaurus was interesting since it provided examples of how choosing the right word from a list of synonyms can greatly enhance the end Product.

- Workshop participants (aptitudes, diversity, collaboration)

A very inspiring, open and encouraging group of participants allowed for a respectful environment where everyone was given equal opportunities to add their own ideas while

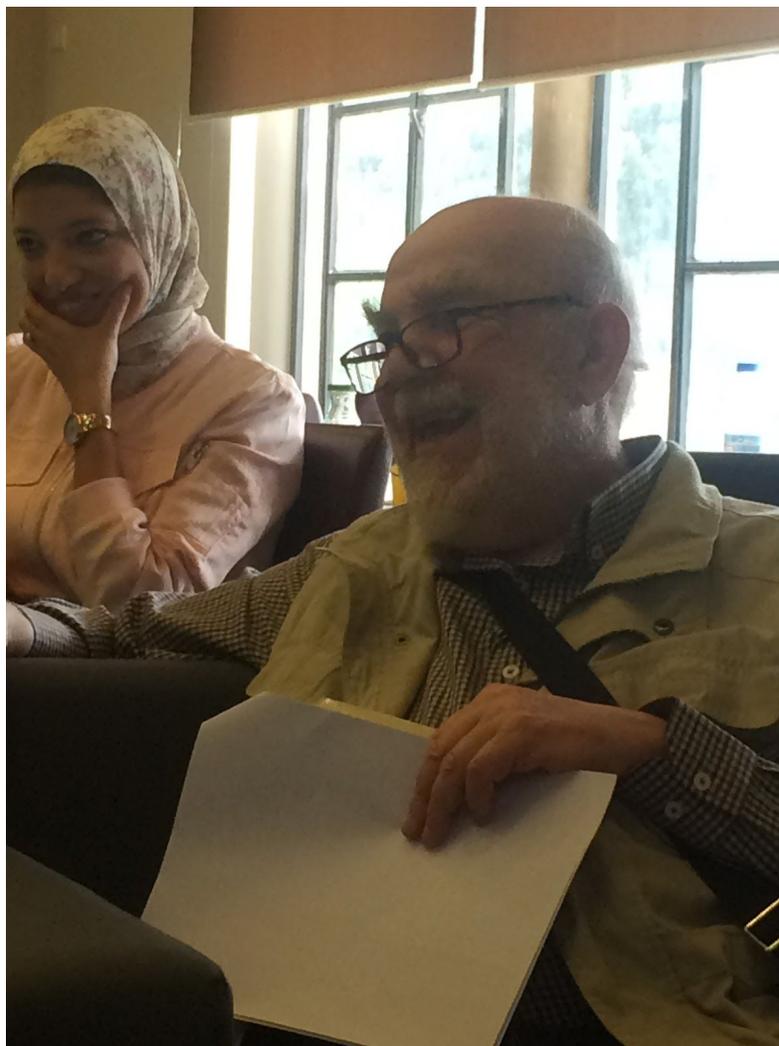
listening to others and learning from each other. It was great to work with students from various educational backgrounds related to language and literature, and with a range of interests, yet all bringing motivation and a sincere interest in translation and linguistic/language issues.

- Workshop benefits

Going beyond theory and actually 'practicing' translation is so necessary as it triggers a set of essential questions pertaining to translation. Looking at different types of texts showed us how differently translation can be approached and yet there are certain issues such as ensuring 'elegance' and trying to convey the original 'tone'/'sense' etc that always emerge and demonstrate how one can only really learn translation by doing it and by thinking and talking about it with others.

- Recommendations for improvement

I really liked the format and do not have much to add for now.



Student #4

- Workshop coordinator (methodology, tools, organization)

I am immensely grateful to Dr.Rana for the way she's coordinated the workshop. I am particularly thankful to Dr.Rana for the following reasons: 1) Methodology: How we discussed texts together and situated them in their relative political and cultural contexts before getting together in groups to translate parts of the text.

2) Tools: providing us with useful online resources that made the translation process all the more possible.

3) Assistance: Providing us with Dr.Tarif's English translation of Zakaria Tamer's stories and comparing Dr.Tarif's translation with ours.

- Workshop material (focus, accessibility, relevance, interest)

I found the idea of working with both classical and modern texts to be highly beneficial and interesting. I particularly enjoyed working on a modern literary text (Zakaria Tamer's short stories), which I think must have something to do with my own interest in modern Arabic literature. The universality of the text: I think I also enjoyed working on Tamer's text because, as Dr.Rana has stated earlier today, the text transcends its specific political context and echoes daily grievances experienced by people everywhere.

- Workshop participants (aptitudes, diversity, collaboration)

As is usually the case with similar workshops/collective endeavors, I found the diversity among group participants to be highly beneficial. I love the fact that we come from different disciplines and that we have different research interests. I also found our group discussions and our collective attempts to capture the essence of both texts to be really useful.

- Workshop benefits

Learning to work with different literary texts/different time periods/literary styles. Translating collectively. Being sensitive to the political, cultural and social elements of the text.