

## The Semiotics of Third Language in Arabic-English Translation

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**Abstract.** The present paper explores how a third language is dealt with in the translation from Arabic into English, illustrated with *al-Qamar il-Muraba': Qiṣaṣ Ghrāibya* by Syrian writer Ghada as-Samman (1994), translated by Issa Boullata (1998) as 'The Square Moon: Supernatural Tales' (SMST). The paper adopts particularized a theoretical praxis approach. The paper argues that the third language does not occur in a vacuum, but within the boundaries of discourse with an eye to the ideology inscribed in the language we produce, viz. enhancing feministic, narcissistic and nihilistic tendencies by the Source Language (SL) author. The paper shows that the wheels of communication in the SL pertain to the third language; it is then incumbent upon the translator to maintain the flow of the communicative thrust intended by text producer. The paper argues that the strategies of translating the third language oscillate between formally-based strategies and functionally-based strategies. The findings of the paper reveal that SL text may have (1) quasi-third language whereby textual occurrences are in the language of the main text; (2) full third language in which textual occurrences are not the main language of SL text as is the case with borrowings; and (3) zero third language which refers to total textual absence of the third language in the main language of SL text, but the third language comes to the fore in translation. The paper finally shows that the strategies employed are (1) quasi-third language in the SL is rendered into quasi- and/or full third language in the TL for translating 1; (2) full third language in the SL is translated into full third language in the TL for translating 2; and (3) zero third language in the SL is rendered into full third language in the TL for translating 3.

**Keywords:** *third language, source language, target language, translation strategies, English, Arabic.*

### Introduction

Translation from one language into another is fraught with multifarious difficulties and problems, and that it is an oft-repeated truism that cultural diversities can be a major source of difficulty in translation. It also goes without saying that such diversities are likely to pose a formidable challenge to translators, especially those working between remote languages as is the case with Arabic and English. The former belongs to a Semitic language family whereas the latter is an Indo-European language. It stands to reason that there is little linguistic and cultural affinity between the two languages. In this regard, Sofer (2002, pp. 65–66) stresses the importance of understanding the pronounced cultural differences between English and Arabic:

*One cannot translate these languages without paying attention to these cultural differences.*

Shunnaq and Abu Kas (1998, p. 152) point out that certain terms may be used in the Source Language (SL), the language from which translation occurs and the Target Language (TL), the language into which translation takes place,

*to refer to certain concepts but they may carry different connotations due to the differences between cultures of the two languages.*

For example, Bassnett (2002, p. 39) says:

*The large number of terms in Finnish for variations of snow, in Arabic for aspects of camel behaviour, in English for light and water, in French for types of bread, all present*

*the translator with, on one level, an untranslatable problem (see also Nida & Reyburn, 1981, p. 2).*

Being the case so, the differences between these two languages are expected to be detrimental to the channel of communication. In the same vein, Salloum and Peters (1990, pp. ix–x) claim that:

*Arabic developed an enormous vocabulary [...] that is scarcely matched by any other language except possibly English [...] nothing can be translated from Arabic satisfactorily. The Arabic version of the foreign is always shorter than the original. Arabic loses in translation but all other languages being translated into Arabic gain.*

No matter how true this claim is, translation across languages postulates labyrinthine complexities, to which the translators' close attention should be paid. Perhaps more to the point is the one-of-a-kind relationship between translation and ideology. Hatim and Mason (1997, p. 146) state:

*The translator acts in a social context and is part of that context. It is in this sense that translating is, in itself, an ideological activity.*

Another point that is needed to be explained is semiotics, roughly defined as 'the science of signs' (De Saussure, 1959). Language, as Swann (2004, p. 275) states, is

*a semiotic system whose signs are words (and morphemes) which stand in a particular relation to objects and concepts.*

Its point of departure is

*what constitutes signs, what regulates their interactions and what governs the ways they come into being or decay (Hatim & Mason, 1990, p. 67).*

Put differently, for communication to take place, Fisk (1990, p. 39) believes:

*I have to create message out of things. This stimulates you to create a meaning for yourself that relates in some way to the meaning I generated in my message in the first place. The more we share the same codes, the more we use the same sign system, the closer our two meanings of the message will approximate to each other.*

Apropos of this is the keyword ‘sign’ which, according to (Hatim & Mason, 1997, p. 197; emphasis in original), is

*a unit of signification in which the linguistic form (signifier) stands for a concrete object or concept (signified). When the notion of sign is extended to include anything which means something to somebody in some respect or capacity, signs can then be said to refer to cultural objects [...] (micro-signs), as well as to more global structures such as text, genre and discourse (macrosigns).*

Insofar as the study is concerned, French is not the main language of the SL, i.e. third language. Using the third language in the text serves as a sign manipulated by text producer to refer to a cultural object, e.g. superiority of people who can speak a foreign language over others. Employing the third language in the text also serves as a macro-sign, referring to attitudinal meanings within the boundaries of male chauvinistic discourse.

The present study aims to identify and look at the third language as one of the various problematic areas in the translation from Arabic into English.

### The Problem of Equivalence

A good starting-point is to admit that the concept of equivalence is a deeply rooted problem in translation and continues to echo by a legion of translation theorists and practitioners down the centuries (Tytler (1790), Nida (1964), Catford (1965), Newmark (1988), and Bassnett (2002) among many others). Bassnett (2002, p. 123; emphasis in original) argues:

*In the discussion of equivalence [...] it was shown that any notion of sameness between SL and TL must be discounted. What the translator must do, therefore, is to first determine the function of the SL system and then to find a TL system that will adequately render that function.*

In this, ‘sameness’ is a quixotic undertaking because translating from one language into another, as often as not, is no more than an “evaporation of the beauties of the original” (Tytler, 1790, p. 20). ‘Function’, on the other hand, may be an outlet for equivalence problem, yet with a caveat in mind as Pym (2004, p. 62) neatly observed:

*Translation is not a mapping of one function onto another; it is a productive function in itself. Translational equivalence is thus ultimately determined by what translators actually do or have done in the past, and not by abstract comparisons between falsely discrete languages and cultures.*

In consideration of these facts and for the sake of the present study, we shall speak of two categories of equivalence, namely, formal and functional. The former

*focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content. One is concerned that the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements in the [SL] (Weissbort & Eysteinson, 2006, p. 349).*

Such equivalence

*seeks to capture the form of the SL expression. Form relates to the image employed in the SL expression (Farghal & Shunnaq, 1999, p. 5).*

The latter, however, “aims at complete naturalness of expression,” by

*seek[ing] to capture the function of the SL expression independently of the image utili[s]ed by translating it into a TL expression that performs the same function (Farghal & Shunnaq, 1999, p. 5).*

Drawing on types of equivalence, we can further speak of two major strategies considered to be of paramount importance in any translation activity: namely ‘domesticating’ versus ‘foreignizing’. To start with, ethnocentric textual practices of the translator vary drastically. The translator may opt for a domesticating method:

*an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to [TL] cultural values, bringing the author back home (Venuti, 1995, p. 20).*

Alternatively, the translator may decide to employ a foreignizing method that

*seeks to restrain the ethnocentric violence of translation, it is highly desirable today, a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of world affairs, pitched against the hegemonic English language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others.*

### Methodology

#### Data of the Study

The data of the study consists of *al-Qamar il-Muraba*: *Qīṣaṣ Ghrāibya* by Syrian writer Ghada Al-Samman (1994) translated by Issa Boullata (1998) as ‘The Square Moon: Supernatural Tales’ (SMST). Curiously enough, the author invented her own discourse outside the reach of male-dominated discourse, and is well-known for her in-your-face feminist views, which conjure up chronic economic, social and political malaise, images of backwardness of Arab women and how they are victims of patriarchal Arab societies. The author tells colourful stories about down-and-outs, sharply evocative stories of immigrants and émigrés in France. The SMST is rendered quite successfully in translation, gaining a new lease of life in the receptor language with a different audience.

#### Sample of the Study

To pinpoint and bring the problem under discussion into focus, a sample, identified by the researcher as problematic, is chosen. It consists of 5 utterances

containing a third language, all of which happen to be in French. The sample is then analysed by mapping the SL on the TL with a view to exploring the translation strategies employed by the translator, bearing in mind that translation is “a productive function” (see Pym, 2004, p. 62).

### Significance of the Study

Translation has received much attention in translation studies, but the translation of a third language is yet a neglected area of study, to the best of our knowledge. The present study aims at exploring one of the most challenging problems the translator is faced with when translating utterances containing a third language. Hopefully, it should be possible to retrace a research path that will bring to light some implications which may be of importance insofar as the translation is concerned. And it will be possible to assess the translation strategies utilised by the translator when translating utterances is imbued with a third language.

### Data Analysis and Discussion

To see how the theoretical framework established operates in practice, we examine some major knotty problems that are germane to the use of the third language in the ST. The approach adopted in the present paper is particularised theoretical praxis, that is, the use of a theory in a practical way. This requires that we address the theoretical framework in conjunction with the practical examples for a better understanding and practical knowledge of the topic under discussion.

### Third Language and Translation

Translation is an interlinguistic process; hence it comprises first language or SL and second language or TL. A third language only marginally refers to any language that may exist in the source text (ST), and that is not the main language of it (see also Gimbert, 2005, p. 148). In a spoken exchange, for example, it sometimes happens that language users code-switch. Similarly, in written language, this code-switching, which will be referred to as a third language, may occur. The SMST is infused with ethnocentric violence foreign text which happens to be in French in all of the examples we shall discuss. Three types of third language are observed: quasi-third language, full third language and zero third language. To diversify our argument, let us now consider some translations connected with third language, beginning in fact with quasi-third language.

### Quasi-third Language

The type of language underlying the structure of ST might be called quasi-third language; words, phrases or sentences that are used in the language of the main text. The SL writer may opt for the verb, preposition and language word. An attempt for a model for quasi-third language is shown in Figure 1 below:

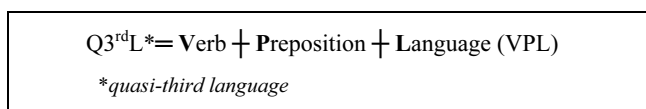


Figure 1. Model for quasi-third language

To elaborate more on this model, consider Text 1 below whereby the characters are peppered their flippant, derisory and off-the-cuff remarks with French phrases.

Text 1

SL *hazzamu gadamaya ma'a idahikāt wahum yahtifūna bi-lfaransīyah* “‘abdūl sa-yagfīz” (as-Samman, 1994, p. 12).

TL They bound my feet, laughing, as they shouted in French, “Abdul will jump” (Boullata, 1998, p. 5).

For swashbuckling holiday fun, a protagonist, Nadine and some friends from the sports club stood on a bridge near Paris. Nadine went an exhilarating bungee jumping. Clearly, quasi-third language is observed whereby a verb plus a prepositional phrase and a language word are used, i.e. *yahtifūna bi-lfaransīyah* (‘they shouted in French’).

Everyone guffawed loudly and shouted ‘*abdūl sa-yagfīz*’ (‘Abdul will jump’). This quasi-third language can be further explained as follows:

*yahtifūna* (‘they shouted’) =V

*bi-* (‘in’) =P

*lfaransīyah* (‘French’) =L

It is worth mentioning that quasi-third language is a micro-signal (Hatim & Mason, 1997, p. 223). It is a sign connected with other signs in an inextricably semiotic relationship. Hatim (1997, p. 210) explains that “[m]icro-signals are those elements which realise overall structural and textural organisation and thus implement the basic rhetorical purpose of a given text.” Hatim (1997, p. 210) further adds:

*These discursual micro-signals enter text organisation through the area of texture which enables us to ‘read off’ a given ideological stance, a commitment to a cause or simply an attitude to some aspect of the text-world as in literary or scientific communication.*

The micro-signal third language enables us to ‘read off’ the feminist and political leanings the speaker holds. Arguably, the version author intends to convey a message that Paris is a friendly ambience with its remarkable free-flowing style, a place that gives free rein to people — free and easy atmosphere, indeed. French is certainly the language to be spoken by everyone as the setting is Paris. The translation for this segment was in the language of the TL, rather than in direct third language. Obviously, formal equivalence is sought by the translator whereby *yahtifūna* (verb), *bi-* (preposition) and *lfaransīyah* (French) are realised.

In Text 2, there is obviously a focus of attention on social intimacy in interpersonal relationships. The speaker had a child, named Shaker who was severely hit with shrapnel leaving the lower part of his body paralysed. At that moment, a strange man assisted the speaker by carrying the child and putting him on the seat. The interlocutors had an exchange in French in the original Arabic text, that is, quasi-third language.

Text 2

SL *gultu li-rajuli bil-faransīyah: ‘ashkuruka ya sayidī. jābani bil-faransīyati aydan: sa’abga ma’aka wa*

'usā'iduka fi ḥamlīhi 'ila al-'al'ābi wa'i'ādātīhi 'ila mag'adīhi (as-Samman, 1994, p. 155).

TL I said to the man in French, "Thank you, sir." He answered me in French also, "I will remain with you to help you carry him to the various games, then return him to his seat" (Boullata, 1998, p. 145).

With hindsight, formally-based strategy is utilised by the translator — the quasi-third language in the SL translates quasi-third language in the TL. The status the ST enjoys goes in harmony with that of the target text.

In Text 3 below, however, a quasi-third language case is registered in the ST: no concrete third language in the original exists. In such a case, the Arabic *ḥurriyyah* ('freedom') has been rendered into 'Liberté'. In other words, a quasi-third language in the SL is rendered into a full third language in the TL. Whilst the SL does not have a borrowing, that is, *taṣrakhū bil-faransīyati ... ḥurriyyah* ('shouting in French freedom'), the TL does, i.e., ('shouting in French ... 'Liberté'). Nadin's socio-cultural pedigree and obsessive xenophobia are much more highlighted in the translation than in the original. It is the textual occurrence that allows us as text receivers to arrive at the intended meanings being exchanged through the text above.

Text 3

SL *wamddat dhirā'ayha kal 'iṣfūr wa-gafazat fil-faḍāi wahya taṣrakhū bil-faransīyati al-laṭī tatakalamu biha ṭawāla il-waḡi: ḥurriyyah* (as-Samman, 1994, p. 12).

TL And she stretched out her arms like a bird and jumped into space shouting in French, which she spoke all the time, 'Liberté ...' (Boullata, 1998, p. 5).

The translator seems to have employed the following strategy as Figure 2 below shows:

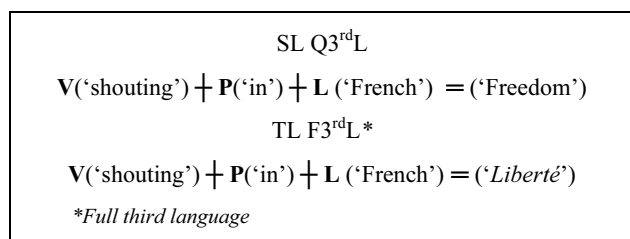


Figure 2. Translating SL Q3<sup>rd</sup>L into TL F3<sup>rd</sup>L

Yet another point needs to be expounded: the French words or phrases do not occur in a vacuum, but as 'scene setters' for a discourse manipulated by SL author to pursue a given ideological goal and to fulfill a rhetorical purpose. The argumentative undertone is realised by the use of the third language. Glorifying with their new-found undreamt of freedom in Paris, the characters are irrepressibly rebellious and want to get away from the drudgery of Arab lives. It is in France that the characters can revel in Freedom, but not in the Arab World because freedom is illusory. The Arab World is at loggerheads with France. Negative connotations of mischievousness are associated with the former whereas positive connotations of more individual freedoms and political 'elbow room' are akin to the latter.

To add spice to the argument, French is employed. Therefore, rendering a quasi-third language in the SL into a full third language in the TL in Text 3 above maintains the ideological goal pursued by the SL author. It is self-evident, however, that the translation in Text 3 highlights western-mindedness of the SL author, apparently more than the SL text *per se* does.

### Full Third Language

Full third language refers to those words, phrases or sentences, probably borrowings that are in the language of the main text. The model for full third language can be displayed in Figure 3:

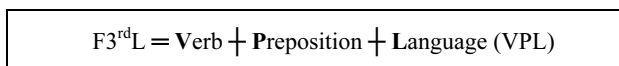


Figure 3. Model for full third language

The third language *urfwār* ('*au revoir*') in Text 4 below is integrated in the original text by means of borrowing, a corollary of contact between languages which "serves to fill a lexical gap, [and] enriches the language" (De Corte 2003, p. 70; see also Armstrong, 2005, p. 134). De Corte, however, warns that "there is a risk in an overly lax attitude, which ceases to search for the indigenous term or turn of phrase but merely repeats the word used in the [ST]" (ibid.).

Text 4

SL *gālat mudā'ibatan: ḥasanan ya Hamlit al-Lubnanī 'urfwār* (as-Samman, 1994, p. 12).

TL She said, teasing. "Fine, you Lebanese Hamlet, au revoir" (Boullata, 1998, p. 5).

At first glance, *urfwār* is a recalcitrant foreign greeting in the ST. Not at all. It reflects the character's personality. The prevalence of a borrowing in the ST is likely to be intended by the western-minded writer. The author wants to spice up the SMST with all what suit the Westerners. In terms of translation, a re-borrowing strategy is employed, paving the way for a full third language item '*au revoir*'. The item underpins the wheels of communication in a general sense, and also provides the backdrop against which elastic interpretations can be made. The author strongly believes that injustice and oppression are inflicted on Arab women as shown throughout the novel. The *pièce de résistance* is *urfwār*, a borrowing from French used with a view to showing resistance to Arabic text, a metaphor for self-resistance to Neanderthal attitudes to Arab women. Figure 4 below explains the potential strategy utilised by the translator.

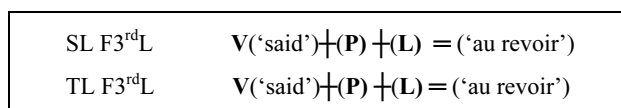
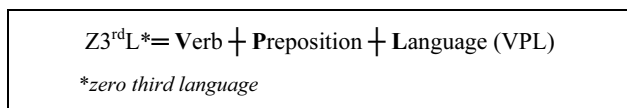


Figure 4. Translating FL3<sup>rd</sup>L into TL F3<sup>rd</sup>L

### Zero Third Language

Zero third language refers to the textual absence of third language, but it is implied by means of contextualisation.

Figure 5 presents the possible model for zero third language.



**Figure 5.** Model for zero third language

No third language in original is recorded in Text 5 below, but the translator as a cultural mediator seems to context the interlocutors by a third language: a French song “*Ne me quitte pas*” (‘don’t leave me’) by Jacques Brel.

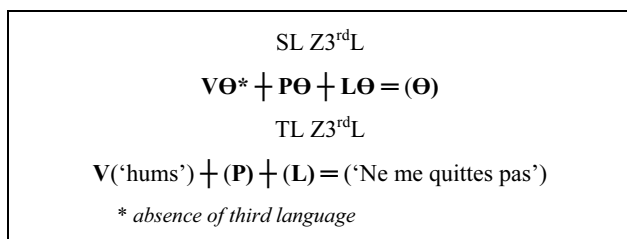
Text 5

SL *hal min 'wāmira 'ukhra mufriḥatan ya mawlāya? lā yujību lākinahu yudandinu bi-'ughnyyati lā tatrunkī* (as-Samman, 1994, p. 131).

TL “And are there other joyful commands, my lord?”  
He does not answer, but he hums a song, “Ne me quitte pas ...” (Boullata, 1998, p. 123).

The intertextual potential of *bi-'ughnyyati lā tatrunkī* (‘don’t leave me’) is akin to a song by Jacques Brel which evokes a spine-tingling sprit. As a macro-sign, this full third language discourse establishes a cultural code that goes in harmony with version writer’s attitude, but not necessarily with the SL text which is third language-free.

It ensues, therefore, that the possible strategy goes as follows as Figure 6 shows:



**Figure 6.** Translating SL  $Z3^{rd}L$  into TL  $F3^{rd}L$

Zero third language is rendered into full third language, i.e., “Ne me quitte pas ...”.

### Concluding Remarks

The foregoing analysis has shown that the third language occurs in three ways in the SL and the translator has adopted different strategies in translating it. First, quasi-third language does not come to the fore in main text and is intended to camouflage what the main ST intends to say. The occurrence of quasi-third language is expressed by VPL model. Here, two translation strategies are employed: either into quasi-third language or into full quasi-third language. Second, full third language occurs in the main ST, usually as a borrowing from French. A re-borrowing

strategy is opted for to bring about full third language in the translation. Finally, zero third language in which no occurrence of the third language in the SL is registered, but, via context of situation, full third language is observed in the translation.

The semiotic of third language is crystal-clear. Third language becomes a constructive principle of the text. It is a sign that occurs across the semiotic boundaries of the original to achieve an ideological purpose.

Though as slight as a feather so-to-speak, the third language is ideologically-motivated. It can be described as a language embellishment.

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### **Trečiosios kalbos semiotika verčiant iš arabų kalbos į anglų kalbą**

Santrauka

Straipsnyje tiriama, kaip verčiant iš arabų kalbos į anglų kalbą vartojama trečioji kalba. Tyrimas iliustruojamas Sirijos rašytojo Ghada as-Samman kūrinio *al-Quamar il-Muraba qiSaS Ghaibyia* (1994), (išvertė Issa Boullata (1998) *The Square Moon: Supernatural Tales*). Straipsnyje pateikiami konkretūs praktiniai pavyzdžiai. Teigiama, kad trečioji kalba neegzistuoja vakuume; ji pasireiškia konkrečiame disкурse ir tam tikroje mūsų produkuojamos kalbos ideologijoje, t. y. pabrėžiant kalbos, iš kurios verčiama, autoriaus feministines, narcisistines ar nihilistines nuostatas. Straipsnyje parodoma, kad kalbos, iš kurios verčiama komunikacijos variklis yra susijęs su trečiaja kalba, todėl vertėjui privalu palaikyti teksto autoriaus numatytą komunikavimo esmę. Taip pat teigiama, kad trečiosios kalbos vertimo strategijos įsiterpia tarp formaliųjų ir funkcinų strategijų. Straipsnio išvadose pabrėžiama, kad verčiamos kalbos tekste gali būti 1) kvazi-trečioji kalba, 2) pilna (visa) trečioji kalba, ir 3) nulinė trečioji kalba, kai trečioji kalba pasireiškia verčiant. Straipsnyje taip pat aptiriamos naudojamos vertimo strategijos.

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