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Translating Synonymy

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2.2.Translation of SYNONYMY: (الترادف)

Synonymy is the sameness, or the similarity of meaning between two or more words. Such words are described as synonymous, or synonyms. For example, 'big', 'large' and 'huge' are synonyms. Usually synonyms are divided into two major types:

1.Absolute synonyms: Words which are perfectly identical in meaning.

2.Near(or close)synonyms: Words which are similar to one another in meaning.

It is a well-established universal fact in the study of meaning, words and language in general that absolute synonyms do not exist in languages or are quite rare, to say the least. The reason is that there is no need for more than one word (or signifier) to describe the same thing or idea (or signified) in a language. However, when two or more words are used to describe the same thing, there must be a difference of some kind between them. The examples used in this section illustrate the reasons for such a *difference*.

Parallel to that is the fact that near synonyms are commonplace in any language, spoken or written. They are even indispensable to cover all shades of difference within one and the same range of meaning. The main problem for the students is that in most cases they understand all synonymous words as absolute synonyms only. That is, all the English words similar in meaning have the same identical meaning in Arabic. The following is a discussion of **four major problems** of translating synonymy.

(1) The first problem is the translation of synonyms of emotive charge: eg.

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|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. "He is angry": | (هو غاضب) |
| 2. "He is discomforted": | (هو متعذب) |
| 3. "He is annoyed": | (هو غضبان/مُغضب/متضايق) |
| 4. "He is disturbed/bothered": | (هو مزعج) |
| 5. "He is inconvenient": | (هو غير مرتاح) |
| 6. "He is agitated": | (هو مضطرب/مهتاج/ساخط) |
| 5. "He is furious": | (هو مغتاظ/يتميز من الغيظ) |
| 8. "He is enraged/outraged": | (هو مشتاط غضباً) |
| 9. "He is worried": | (هو قلق/هو معصب) |
| 10."He is nervous": | (هو متوتر) |

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11. "He is impatient": (هو نافذ الصبر/نفذ صبره)
 12. "He is discontented": (هو غير راض/متذمر)
 13. "He is displeased": (هو متكدر/غير مسرور)
 14. "He is wrathed/raged": (هو متأجج غضباً)
 15. "He is bothered": (هو متنقص)
 16. "He is exasperated": (هو شديد الغضب)

Here are sixteen synonyms for one and the same meaning of 'anger' (غضب). They are not exhaustive. They form together what is called a 'lexical set' or a 'lexical field' of anger. We have sixteen different words in English and fourteen words equivalent to them in Arabic. This can be described as the precision of translation. However, the *problem* for the students is that it is a hard task for them to find the precise synonymous word in Arabic.

The solution to this problem can be traced in the following discussion: On a grading scale, this lexical set can be divided into three main levels of meaning: ANGRY the middle, A LITTLE ANGRY below, and VERY ANGRY above, as illustrated by the following diagram.



In this scale, 'ANGRY' is considered as the central level of meaning, and the other two levels are drawn in comparison to it. Applying this to the whole set of synonyms, we may have the following reclassification under the below (A LITTLE ANGRY) and the above (VERY ANGRY) levels:

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A LITTLE ANGRY: nervous, worried, disturbed, discomforted, inconvenient, displeased, discontented, annoyed, bothered.

"غاضب قليلاً: متوتر، قلق، مزعج، ممتعض، غير مرتاح، غير مسرور (متكدر)، غير راض (متذمر)، غاضب (مغضب/متضايق)، متغص."

VERY ANGRY: impatient, agitated, enraged, furious, wrathful, exasperated.

"غاضب جداً: نافذ الصبر، مضطرب (مهتاج/ساخط)، مشتاط غضباً، مغتاظ، متأجج غضباً، شديد الغضب."

When the students find the equivalent word in Arabic for, say, agitated (ساخط), they are giving the most suitable version. However, when they do not find (ساخط) or (مغتاض) or (مشتاط غضباً), they can use the general translation (غاضب جداً) for it or any of the words that come under it.

Similarly, (ممتعض) is the precise Arabic word for 'discomforted'. Yet, when the students are -for some reason- unable to find it, they can use the general translation of this level (غاضب قليلاً). Also, (مزعج), (متضايق) or (متغص) is applicable here.

The important thing for students is to know that the meaning of any word in this lexical family of anger is within the general scope of (غضب) in Arabic. The next stage is to distinguish the level of this emotion, anger. Is it normal? below normal? or above normal? This distinction is required because 'bothered' (متغص), for instance, is quite different from 'ragged' (متأجج غضباً). That is, a bothered person is normal and controls himself, whereas an outraged person is abnormal, for he does not control himself and loses his senses. That is why a divorce by a ragged husband is pardoned in Islam, whereas an inconvenient, discomforted man's divorce is not.

The solution: When the students are unable to make such a distinction, they should resort to the general name of the whole set, i.e. anger (غضب).

Now the students have three solutions ordered in preference:

1. To distinguish the precise equivalent word in Arabic.
2. To distinguish the general level of the meaning of the word, and translate it into it.
3. To translate any word in the same lexical set into the general title name of this set.

It must be stressed that all the students' efforts should concentrate on number one, so that they can achieve precision of translation, which is the ultimate aim of the translator. Yet, when the students are unable -for good reasons- to take up '1', they can go for '2' and then for '3' as their last resort.

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(2) The second problem of translating synonymy concerns the synonyms which can be described as absolute in a certain context only, because it is extremely difficult to differentiate among them as much in English as in Arabic translation:

e.g:

1. start
2. begin
3. commence

In English, there is no difference in the meaning of these three words as verbs. However, they differ in other respects:

1. Their combination with other words (i.e. collocations and idioms). For example, only 'start' can be used in the following expression:

"To start from a scratch":

(يبدأ من الصفر)

However, both 'begin' and 'start' are used in:

"To start with/to begin with":

(أول ما أبدأ به / بداية / أولاً)

(See collocations and idioms later).

2. The use of 'start' only as a phrasal verb (i.e. verb+a preposition or an adverb) to form new meanings (e.g. start off, start on, start out, etc.), whereas 'begin' and 'commence' are usually not used as phrasal verbs.

3. Only 'start' is used both as a noun and a verb , while 'begin' has 'beginning', and 'commence' has 'commencing/commencement' as nouns.

4. 'Commence' is of Latin origin and, therefore, formal, whereas 'start' and 'begin' are Old English and German and, hence, less formal, or informal.

Yet at translating these words into Arabic, they have one translation only (i.e. بدأ). Students, therefore, do not need to think of three different words in Arabic, such as, say, (بدأ), (ابتدأ), (استهل) because they look artificial. That is, the three words are the same, with (بدأ) as the commonest in use. On the other hand, other synonyms like (افتتح), (دشن) and (شرع) are unnecessary and confusing, because they are further dimensions for the original meaning (بدأ). Thus they have different words in English ('open', 'inaugurate' and 'incept' respectively).

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Thus the problem here has an easy solution for students. In the following examples, the same translation applies.

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|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. "We started at 8 a.m.": | (بدأنا عند الساعة الثامنة صباحاً) |
| 2. "We began at 8 a.m.": | (بدأنا عند الساعة الثامنة صباحاً) |
| 3. "We commenced at 8 a.m.": | (بدأنا عند الساعة الثامنة صباحاً) |

Another common example is the translation of the English words of obligation: 'must, ought to, should, have to, has to, am to, is to, are to'. All these words have one meaning in Arabic (i.e. يجب أن). Other variations like ينبغي أن / (عليك أن) / يترتب (عليك أن) are also equally acceptable, with (يجب أن) as the most frequent in use.

The Arabic translation is not affected by the formality or informality of the English words. That is, 'must, ought to, should, have/has/had to' are more formal than 'am/is/are/was/were to', which are classified as informal in English. However, we can have a similar classification in Arabic for (يجب أن) and (ينبغي أن) as formal, and ((لا بد أن/من)) and ((عليك أن)) as informal. But this classification is not always acceptable in Arabic, as the former is used in the Holy Quran, whose language is all in all formal. Here is an example: (وعلى المولود له رزقهن وكسوتهن بالمعروف) (the father of the child *should* bear responsibility for the cost of the mother's food and clothing) (The Cow, 233). The latter, on the other hand, is used frequently in Arabic classical poetry which is also a formal variety: e.g.:

ولا بد للليل أن ينجلي	ولا بد للقيد أن يتكسر
and handcuffs <i>ought to</i> break down	(and darkness <i>ought to</i> clear up)

So, any of these Arabic words can be used to translate any of the English words of obligation mentioned above, regardless of its formality or informality: e.g.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. "You must leave now !" | (يجب عليك أن تغادر الآن!) |
| 2. "You ought to leave now !" | ينبغي عليك أن تغادر الآن/ |
| 3. "You should leave now !" | عليك أن تغادر الآن/ |
| 4. "You have to leave now !" | يتوجب عليك أن تغادر الآن/ لا بد أن... |
| 5. "You are to leave now !" | يترتب عليك أن تغادر الآن) |

(Any of the five Arabic versions translates all the five English equivalents).

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The final example for this point is the translation of the adverbs of contrast at the beginning of sentences only: 'however, but, yet, nevertheless, nonetheless', and the expression 'having said that' (see also ch.1: sentence connectors):

Usually, 'but' is translated into (لكن/لكن); 'however' into (مهما يكن من أمر /على أية); 'yet/still' into (ولكن/وبرغم هذا(ذلك)); 'nevertheless/nonetheless' into (وبرغم ذلك/ومع); and 'having said that' into (وبرغم ذلك/وبرغم قولنا ذلك). Three points can be noted here:

1. All the translations in Arabic express the meaning of contrast. Therefore, anyone can be used to translate all the words in English, in case other synonyms are not within reach, for some reason.
2. Three more translations are available in Arabic and can equally translate all the English synonyms: (غير أن/بيد أن/إلا أن).
3. The more frequent translation for 'however', (على كل حال) is dropped because it is informal, or even colloquial, and, therefore, not advisable to use.

The problem of synonymy here lies only in the students' ability to understand these words of contrast, especially confusing ones like 'having said that', which would be translated *wrongly* by many as: (ويقولنا هذا/وبما أننا ذكرنا(قلنا) هذا).

Then, the solution is to choose any word of contrast in Arabic to translate them e.g.

"Snakes are harmful. Yet they can be useful": (الأفاعي مؤذية. إلا إنها/بيد أنها/لكنها/ومع)
(ذلك/ومع هذا/وبرغم ذلك) يمكن أن تكون مفيدة

(Multiple technical terms can also be subsumed under absolute synonymy (see pp.169-70 below)

(3) The third problem of translating synonymy, which is difficult for many students to work out, is the possible multiplicity of synonymous versions in the TL which can be acceptable, but *only in general terms*. This is a common practice in everyday use of language, be it written or spoken. We frequently express ourselves in different synonymous ways and in other words, with the same meaning in general being kept. More frequent than this is the habit of explaining difficult words by means of using synonymous common, easy words. This is fairly recurrent with almost all words and phrases in language except for most technical, scientific terms which cannot accept

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but one recognized translation to avoid ambiguity or being confused with other close terms. The following example illustrates the point.

This English statement: "The soldiers stood to their guns in the battle" can be translated into the following versions in Arabic, which I venture to call "the Language of Synonymy":

١. صمد الجنود في المعركة
٢. استبسل الجنود في ساحة المعركة
٣. ثبت الجنود في الميدان
٤. تشبث الجنود بمواقعهم في ساحة الحرب
٥. أظهر الجنود شجاعة نادرة في المعركة
٦. تصدى الجنود ببسالة للعدو في ساحة الوغى
٧. تفانى الجنود في ساحة الشرف
٨. ذاد الجنود عن حياضهم في المعركة
٩. استمات الجنود في قتالهم في المعركة
١٠. استرخص الجنود أرواحهم في القتال

All these versions render the SL message in broad terms and within the same range of meaning of steadfastness (الصمود/الثبات). They are good translations that anyone can be used to translate the English origin satisfyingly. Having said that, we have to admit that there are considerable stylistic differences of lexical choice and grammatical structure among them. That is, for stylistic reasons, and when specification and high degree of accuracy are required, they have to be reconsidered in translation. Stylistic differences of these types are discussed exhaustively in the next chapter, which is wholly assigned to stylistic problems of translation.

(4) The fourth problem of translating synonymy is the translation of the so-called 'familiar alternative terms' (Newmark, 1988: 201-4. See also Ghazala's translation of the book, 2004: 330-336). Familiar alternatives (البدائل المألوفة) are informal, local, intimate and cordial nicknames, words or phrases used as substitutions for other formal ones. Here are examples:

1. "The Secure Land/City" (for Makkah Al-Mukarramah)
(البلد الأمين: مكة المكرمة)
2. "The Good City" (for Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah)
(طيبة الطيبة: للمدينة المنورة)
3. "The Sharp Distinguisher" (between truth and falsehood) (for the Companion

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of the Prophet Muhammad -peace be to him-, Omar Ibn Al-Khattab)

(الفاروق: لعمر بن الخطاب رضي الله عنه، صاحب رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم)

4. "*Allah's Drawn Sword*" (for: the Muslim Leader and Companion, Khaled Ibn Al-Waleed)

(سيف الله المسلول: للصحابي والقائد المسلم خالد بن الوليد رضي الله عنه)

5. "*The malicious disease/that disease/The disease, oh, God protect us*" (for: cancer)

(المرض الخبيث/ذاك المرض/مرض اللهم عافنا: للسرطان)

6. "*Chicken pox*" (for: varicella)

(جدري الماء: للحماق)

7. "*Old Reekie*" (for: the city of Edinburgh)

(ريكي العجوز: لمدينة إدنبره الاسكتلندية)

8. "*The Boot*" (for : Italy, after its map which looks like the boot)

(الجزمة: لإيطاليا لأن خارتطتها تبدو كالجزمة)

9. "*The Red Devils*" (for: the English Manchester United Football Club)

(الشياطين الأحمر: لفريق مانشستر يونايتد الإنجليزي لكرة القدم)

10. "*The Boss*" (for: the Saudi Football Club, Al-Hilal);

"*The Chief/Leader*" (for: Al-Ittihad Football Club)

(الزعيم: لنادي الهلال السعودي لكرة القدم؛ والعميد: لنادي الاتحاد)

These familiar alternatives (italicized in English, and underlined in Arabic) translate their formal equivalents properly. However, they create a problem of translation for students in two respects: The difficulty to find them in general reference books like dictionaries; and, when found, the difficulty to understand their local connotations and cultural implications for foreign students of different cultures (e.g. some might be sensitive to a nickname like 'the red devils' الشياطين الأحمر in Arabic). These problems, however, are solvable nowadays with sophisticated channels of communications among peoples and countries being accessible to almost everybody, everywhere. In any case, students are reminded to be careful at translating these terms, or using them in translation. The safest solution is perhaps to explain these terms in brackets..

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Implied in all these major problems of translating synonymy is the disturbing problem of hesitancy as to which synonym is more appropriate to use in a certain text and context when several options are available in the TL, especially when accuracy is demanded. 'The Great Theatre', to take an example, can be translated into المسرح (المسرح الكبير/العظيم/الضخم/الهائل). However, and perhaps surprisingly, only المسرح الكبير is acceptable because it is the habitual collocation in Arabic. Such hesitation is mainly due to monosemous, literal understanding of words, native language interference and poor skills of collocability and word combination, and habitual use of language on the part of students and translators. The solution to this problem is to beware of understanding words as monosemous, having one common meaning in all texts and contexts, and check and double-check word combinations and collocation in the TL that are nowadays available in good general bilingual dictionaries (e.g. Al-Mawred Al-Akbar (English-Arabic)(2005), Atlas Encyclopedic Dictionary(English-Arabic) (2003)) and specialist dictionaries of collocations (a case in point is Ghazala's two Dictionaries of Collocations (English-Arabic) (2007), and (Arabic-English) (forthcoming 2009).

To sum up, the translation of synonymy is sometimes difficult and complicated. Some synonymous words, especially those with emotive charge (e.g. anger, fear, love, hatred, etc.) may have a meaning of different levels each. The students of translation as well as translators are, therefore, required to take them into consideration in their Arabic translation.

Nevertheless, synonymy can be translated easily when the distinction between the levels of meaning is unnecessary and unimportant. Only a term of general nature (e.g. expressing consent, contrast, surprise, courage, etc.) is needed instead.

Also, the possibility of having several synonymous, equally acceptable versions of translation is very often available, but with some restrictions, though, as will be demonstrated in the third chapter below.

The tricky, but interesting problem of translating familiar alternatives should be handled with care in translation into Arabic for its sensitive, cultural and local flavour and nature in language.

Generally speaking, when accuracy is essential, the translation of synonymy becomes more difficult and delicate. Yet, with more care and concerted efforts by teachers, students of translation and translators, it is hoped that this accuracy in the translation of synonymy can be achieved.