

## A General Introduction to Translation

### What is translation ?

Translation is the art or activity of rendering a text from one language to another. Translation is necessary for people of different linguistic backgrounds to be able to communicate. The translator needs to constantly work on his or her knowledge and mastery of the languages they translate from and into, as language is ever changing and evolving.

When translation is performed orally, i.e when the texts to be translated are delivered in speech (as in live conferences), we talk about « interpretation ». The person performing the oral translation is called an « interpreter ».

« Interpretation », as a word, has also a different meaning used in translation terminology. It means 'attributing a certain meaning to a certain word or segment of text'.

### How does translation take place ?

The object of translation is mainly the meaning. It is of a paramount importance to first understand the source text fully, clear up any kind of ambiguity, before starting the translational operation.

#### ➤ Requirements for a good translation :

Translation is mainly a mental activity that requires more than mastering/knowing two languages. It requires reading comprehension skills, research skills (for example, how to find the right equivalent of a word in a dictionary, how to search for a piece of information on the internet, etc). It also requires writing and composing skills, especially in the **target language**, i.e the language to which you translate, the language you translate from being the **source language**.

For example, in order to translate a text from english to arabic, you need :

- Full understanding of the overall meaning of the text.

This require some knowledge about the topic of the text. For example, if you have to translate a text about a certain theory in physics or philosophy, you need to learn about this topic through reading about it on the internet and/or watching videos of popularization, or even learning about it from a tutor. You have to acquaint yourself with the subject matter of the text so that you can reach satisfactory understanding of what it deals with.

- Understanding the intent of the author (i.e the purpose or function of the text : is it an informative text ? does it tell a story (narrative) ? Does the author want me to embrace a certain viewpoint (argumentative) ? This is also of great importance as it helps with the ways you are going to translate the text.

If the author of the text is known, it might be helpful to look for background information about him/her (for example, their socio-cultural background, their positions on certain important matters, their other books/publications, or any other relevant information that helps you acquire better understanding of the text).

It is also of great importance to be able to determine the register of the text. Determining the register (and even tone) of the text is also key in understading and in translating. Legal texts for example, are generally worded in formal, neutral, impersonal language, and the exact author is generally not known to the reader. In a novel, you may find passages where the style of the author shines with all of it peculiarities. He/she may also resort to slange words, colloquial language in dialogues etc. This is important because it will inevitably dictate the way you would translate such passages into the target language.

These were the requirements concerning the source text. Now when it comes to the writing part, i.e the translational process per se, you need :

- mastery of the target language.
- ability to express yourself in the target language.

Generally, translators translate towards their mother tongues because it is the one they necessarily master more than their second language. However, in many cases translators work from their mother tongue to their second language.

When you translate, the object of translation is mainly the meaning conveyed by the text, meant by the author. A translator is not asked or expected, or told, to say anything other than what the author said, but in a different language. So, understanding the meaning as intended by the author is key.

Reexpressing that meaning in the target language is what a translator must do. The translator should formulate a new text, in a different language, a text that says the same thing as the source text. The target text, i.e. the translation as a product, should be worded in accordance with the linguistic rules of the target language: rules of grammar, syntax, sentence structure, word use, spelling, proper register etc. Generally speaking, the translation needs to read as if it were written directly in the target language. This is why the better you master the target language, the better would be your translation to that language.

And anyone who has attempted to translate even a short passage or a sentence, will soon realise that translation is not an activity where you simply substitute the words composing the sources texts with their counterparts of the target language that you find in the dictionary. Language is far more complex and dynamic in its use than it being a mere collection of words. And the translational process is equally complex and dynamic.

➤ **Steps of translation/the translational operation :**

1. ***Reading and understanding the source text :***

The most obvious first thing to do when presented with a text to translate, either in class, in an exam, or in a professional setting, is to read the text. If the text is very long, as is the case of books, it needs to be read at very least once, and well understood before embarking on the translational operation bit by bit. When the text is relatively short, you ought to read it more than once. Especially when it comes to texts that you find difficult, either because of the language or because of the topic, reading the text twice or three times, or more if necessary, will help you uncover layers of meaning and areas of thought that were still hidden to you

the first time you read it. In any case, it is always advisable to read the text as many times as you think is necessary for full comprehension of the meaning.

When you encounter words that are new to you, you can use a dictionary, but you have to be really careful. Dictionaries are tools and not translators. As a learner, and to maximise your learning opportunities, look up the word in a monolingual dictionary in an attempt to understand the meaning of the word directly in the language, then look it up in a bilingual dictionary. You may deduce the corresponding word/expression if you understand what the word refers to without resorting to a bilingual dictionary.

On the other hand, the dictionary will only provide you with the corresponding word in the second language. But it is up to you to choose the right equivalent, following the context. Words are generally polysemous, i.e they have more than one meaning and can be used in different contexts with different meanings. It is up to the translator to decide which is the right meaning intended by the author, (the context will help elicit that particular meaning), and thereby choose the right equivalent to that word. In many cases, the right equivalent is not found in the dictionary. Failing to decide the exact meaning of a word in a certain text is failing to understand the meaning of the particular segment of the text. Failure to understand will automatically lead to errors in translation.

You can also search for further information on the internet about the topic discussed in the text, if you are not familiar with it, and familiarise yourself with the topic. This can make the operation of translating much easier, yielding better results.

To recap, translation requires you to read and understand a text and to reexpress its content in another language.

## ***2. Reexpressing the meaning :***

This is the second part of the translational operation. If you have well understood the meaning of the text, now you have to reexpress that very same meaning in the target language. When you translate from English to Arabic, you will have to abide by the rules of writing in Arabic. The same applies to when you translate from Arabic to English. It is not correct to simply look for equivalents in the

dictionary and substitute each word with the its target counterpart, which disregarding the rules of syntax of the target language, or replicating the syntax of the original sentences. Translation is an operation of writing, or rewriting. So you are expected to produce a text that is correct, lexically and syntactically, and not merely a number of juxtaposed words.

Translating towards a target language requires a certain level of mastery of writing, of wording sentences and paragraphs correctly in that language.

For example, when translating from English to Arabic, you can ask yourself such questions as : « how would an Arab say this » ? « Would I ever read such an expression a newspaper like El-Ahram ? or Asharq el-Awsat ? ». « Do Arabs refer to this idea using such an expression ? or is this just a literal translation ? » « Would I ever hear this on Aljazeera ? » etc. As mentioned before, the translation must be a correct text that reads naturally and as close to the ways native speakers/writers use the language as possible.

When you translate from Arabic to English, you can ask yourself the same questions about English native speakers/writers' linguistic habits : « Is this how they say it in English ? » « Do English native speakers write like this ? « Does this sound English at all » ? « Would I ever find this expression in the Guardian or an article on bbc.com ? » etc. Of course for you to answer these questions you need to expose yourself to the language, by reading a lot and also listening to the language being used.

### ***3. Comparing/contrasting source and target texts :***

Once your translation done, you may want to verify how exact it is. You have to read your translation again and compare and contrast it to the original, to see if there are any differences of meaning or inaccuracies in rendering it. In this part of the operation, you will also make sure that the target text is worded correctly, without any grammatical or spelling mistakes. Again, you need to make sure both the source and target text convey the same meanings and ideas.

IN this step too, you will ask yourself the same questions about whether the wording you have chosen is close to « native speakers » use of language.

Let us study some practical aspect of translation.

### Science and Technology

There is a difference between science and technology. Science is a method of answering theoretical questions; technology is a method of solving practical problems. Science has to do with discovering the facts and relationships between observable phenomena in nature and with establishing theories that serve to organize these facts and relationships; technology has to do with tools, techniques, and procedures for implementing the findings of science. Another distinction between science and technology has to do with the progress in each.

Before undertaking translation, it is always advisable to carry out an analysis of the text in order to determine its type and function, the register of the language and uncover any other feature that may guide the translational process.

In the text above for example, the text is meant to provide information about a certain topic, in this case the differences between science and technology. It is an informative text intended to provide the reader with a certain amount of information, namely to popularize such concepts as science and technology in a rather simple language. The translation of the text needs to be a text with the same intent and type, and meet as much as possible the same register of language used for similar texts written in the target language.

Let us take the first sentence as an example and the ways in which we can turn it into Arabic . If we proceed word by word, we may get the following results as given by the dictionary :

There / is / a / difference/ between / science/ and / tehcnology

هناك / يكون / اختلاف / بين / العلم / و / التكنولوجيا

What we have just done here is provide the corresponding words in Arabic for each of the words of the sentence in English. But it is clear that this method does not yield a grammatical sentence.

- Science is a method of answering theoretical questions; technology is a method of solving practical problems

• العلم / يكون / طريقة / ل / إجابة / نظرية / أسئلة / التكنولوجيا / يكون / طريقة / ل / حل / عملية / مشاكل

- Science has to do with discovering the facts and relationships between observable phenomena in nature and with establishing theories that serve to organize these facts and relationships

• العلم / يملك (لديه) / يفعل / مع / اكتشاف / ال / حقائق / و / العلاقات / بين / ملاحظة / ظواهر / في / الطبيعة / و / مع / تأسيس / نظريات / التي / تخدم / لتنظم / هذه (أو هؤلاء) / حقائق / و / علاقات

- technology has to do with tools, techniques, and procedures for implementing the findings of science.

• التكنولوجيا / يملك / يفعل / مع / الأدوات / التقنيات / و / الطرق / من أجل / تطبيق / ال / الاكتشافات (النتائج) / ل / العلم

- Another distinction between science and technology has to do with the progress in each.

• آخر / تمييز أو اختلاف / بين / العلم / و / التكنولوجيا / لديه / يفعل / مع / ال / التطور أو التقدم / في أو داخل / كل

It is obvious after observing this limited number of example of translation consisting of simply providing the equivalents of the words in the target language, that this method is no good for translation ; in fact this is not translation and the result is not text.

Translation means creation of equivalences to the units of meaning in the source texts, the term « equivalence » refers to the coinciding of the source text and target text especially in terms of meaning.

So, a more acceptable translation of the first sentence would be :

هناك اختلاف بين العلم والتكنولوجيا

We may also say

يوجد اختلاف بين العلم والتكنولوجيا

The words need to be adjusted and composed to form **correct sentences/segments** of text that convey **identical meaning as the original text**.

- Science is a method of answering theoretical questions; technology is a method of solving practical problems

العلم هو طريقة/ منهج يعتمد للإجابة على أسئلة نظرية، أما التكنولوجيا فهي طريقة لحلّ مشاكل عملية.

العلم هو منهج نعتمده للإجابة على أسئلة نظرية، والتكنولوجيا هي منهج لحلّ مشاكل عملية.

- Science has to do with discovering the facts and relationships between observable phenomena in nature and with establishing theories that serve to organize these facts and relationships

- يتعلّق العلم باكتشاف الحقائق والعلاقات بين الظواهر التي نراها في الطبيعة، وكذا بتأسيس النظريات التي تتولّى/تكفل/تنظّم/تنظيم تلك الحقائق والعلاقات.
- يرتبط العلم له علاقة باكتشاف الحقائق والعلاقات بين الظواهر الطبيعية، كما يتعلّق بإرساء نظريات تنظّم تلك الحقائق والعلاقات.
- ينطوي العلم على كشف الحقائق والعلاقات التي تربط الظواهر الطبيعية، وعلى وضع النظريات التي من شأنها أن تنظّم تلك الحقائق والعلاقات.

So translation does not consist of linear correspondants to the words in the text. Rather, it is a dynamic operation where the main focus is on the meaning carried



by these words. The meaning is what make a text a text ; it is also the main element that guides the translational process.

The meaning in the source text and the target text must be the same. You should not add any information that is not mentioned in the original.

- technology has to do with tools, techniques, and procedures for implementing the findings of science.

● التكنولوجيا تتعلق بالأدوات والتقنيات والإجراءات التي تكفل تطبيق الاكتشافات التي توصل إليها العلم

Notice here the the verb «توصل» has no direct correspondant in the source text. Yet, the meaning is there : when we talk about the « findings of science » it is implied that these findings do not inherently belong to « science », rather they were « achieved » or « reached ». The other implied idea that the reader is normally aware of is that these findings were discovered by the people who are doing the science or the scientists/researchers. It is thus possible to have the following translation :

ترتبط التكنولوجيا بتلك التقنيات والوسائل التي تقوم بتطبيق الاكتشافات التي توصل إليها الباحثون.

Etc.

There is always more than one possible translation to a text. The translation needs to read naturally in the target language, as if it were written directly by a native writer.

In a great number of cases of translation, literal translation (i.e substituting the words of the original text with their correspondants in the target language), does not result in a text that reads correctly. Translating is about reformulating the meaning intended in the source text, in the target language, so as the result is also a text.

Let us go over the same steps of literal translation with a different type of text.

### Report from a War Zone

The streets were filled with rubble and broken glass was everywhere. Food, water, medicine – the necessities of life – were scarce, and hospitals were overwhelmed with casualties. Apart from the obvious danger of bombing, there was also the threat of unexploded shells, snipers and other forms of random violence. Soldiers and civilians alike suffered from the tension, and were never far from breaking point, but most people refused to desert their city. How did I get through that period? Adrenalin, that alone kept me going in the face of the grim reality that confronted a city under siege.

The streets were filled with rubble and broken glass was everywhere

الشوارع/ كانت/ مملوءة/ مع/ ركام/ و/ مكسّر/ زجاج/ كان/ كل مكان

The right translation should take into consideration the rules of writing correctly in arabic :

- كانت الشوارع مملوءة بالركام، وكان الزجاج المكسور في كل مكان
- كانت الشوارع تعجّ بالركام، والزجاج المكسور يعمّ الأرجاء
- كان الرّكام يكسو الشّوارع والزجاج المنكسر منتشر في كل مكان

Etc.

Notice that the equivalent مملوءة generally refers to « recipients » being filled, in Arabic, and not flat surfaces like streets ; a better equivalent would be the superlative form

Food, water, medicine – the necessities of life – were scarce, and hospitals -  
were overwhelmed with casualties.

- الطعام/ الماء/ الدواء / الضروريات/ ل/ الحياة/ كانت/ نادرة/ و المستشفيات/ كانت/ مغمورة/ مع/ الإصابات أو المصابين

So here again we notice that simply providing word equivalents does not yield the right translation. The meaning expressed in the original needs to be reformulated/ reexpressed in Arabic. Thus we can get a sentence like this :

- الطعام والماء والدواء، أي ضروريات الحياة، كانت قليلة وكانت المستشفيات مغمورة بالمصابين.

Still, the above translation can be improved and made to sound more like if it were written directly in arabic :

- كانت ضروريات الحياة من طعام وماء ودواء قليلة، والمستشفيات تعجّ بالمصابين.
- أساسيات الحياة من طعام وماء ودواء كانت غير متوفرة، وكانت المستشفيات مكتظة بالضحايا.

- Apart from the obvious danger of bombing, there was also the threat of unexploded shells, snipers and other forms of random violence.

- بمعزل / عن أو من/ الواضح / الخطر / الانفجار أو التفجير/ هناك / كان / كذلك / التهديد/ ل / غير منفجر / القذائف/ القناصون / وآخر/ أشكال/ عشوائي/ عنف

When reordering these equivalents to get a grammatical sentence, we may obtain the following sentence :

- بمعزل عن الخطر الواضح للتفجير، كان هناك كذلك تهديد القذائف غير المنفجرة والقناصون وأشكال أخرى من العنف العشوائي\*

Let us try to make this sentence better worded, while keeping the very same meaning :

- بصرف النظر عن الخطر الواضح الذي تمثله التفجيرات، كانت هناك كذلك تهديدات أخرى مثل القذائف التي لم تنفجر بعد والقناصين وكذا أشكال أخرى من العنف العشوائي.

We can also say :

- زيادة على الخطر المتوقع الذي تشكّله المتفجرات فقد كانت هنالك تهديدات القذائف التي لم تنفجر بعد وتواجد القناصين وألوان أخرى من العنف العشوائي.

Notice that the idea of « has not exploded yet » (لم تنفجر بعد) is not mentioned explicitly in the original text, yet it is implied and understood, since if these shells were not going to explode sometime in the future, they would not constitute a

danger. Therefore, keeping the literal translation (unexploded) would not convey the entire meaning, or even would be mistaken, meaning wise.

- Soldiers and civilians alike suffered from the tension, and were never far from breaking point, but most people refused to desert their city.

● الجنود / و المدنيين / على حدّ سواء / عانوا / من / الضّغط / وكانوا / أبداً / بعيدين / من / الانكسار / النقطة / لكن / جَلّ / الناس / رفضوا / يتركوا / مدينتهم

We notice here that most of the words in the original find their corresponding equivalents in arabic, and the order of the words will not change dramatically to obtain a good translation, yet some tweaking is needed :

● كان الجنود والمدنيون على حدّ سواء يعانون من الضّغط ولم يكونوا بعيدين عن نقطة الانكسار، لكن معظم الناس رفضوا ترك مدينتهم.

Even after these improvements which allow the sentence to be more lexically and grammatically acceptable, the sentence still does not sound natural and has room for improvement, especially in terms of word choice. For example, the expression "بعيد عن نقطة الانكسار" is not the first expression that a native speaker using standard Arabic would think of. Rather she or he may say « على وشك الانهيار », keeping in mind that the « breaking point » as well as "الانهيار" here refers to « a mental or psychological breakdown », rather than physical break or collapse. So we may have the following improved translation :

● كان الجنود والمدنيون على حد سواء تحت وطأة ضّغط نفسي كبير وعلى وشك الانهيار، لكن معظم السّكان رفضوا إخلاء مدينتهم.

Here too, "السّكان" is not a direct equivalent of « people » that you would find in the dictionary, but it is understood from the contexts that « people » refers to none other than the inhabitant of the town described in the text.

Also, « desert » would be rendered by either, هجر or التخلّي عن مدينتهم or إخلاء مدينتهم or ترك مدينتهم etc.

