



Translation Studies in Translation

TRANSLATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

THE ABBASID GOLDEN AGE

Adnan K. Abdulla



Translation in the Arab World

The Translation Movement of the Abbasid Period, which lasted for almost three hundred years, was a unique event in world history. During this period, much of the intellectual tradition of the Greeks, Persians, and Indians was translated into Arabic - a language with no prior history of translation or of science, medicine, or philosophy. This book investigates the cultural and political conflicts that translation brought into the new Abbasid state from a sociological perspective, treating translation as a process and a product.

The opening chapters outline the factors involved in the initiation and cessation of translational activity in the Abbasid period before dealing in individual chapters with important events in the Translation Movement, such as the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Arabic, Abdullah ibn al-Muqaffa's seminal translation of the Indian/Persian *Kalilah wa Dimna* into Arabic, and the translation of scientific texts. Other chapters address the question of whether the Abbasids had a theory of translation and why, despite three hundred years of translation, not a single poem was translated into Arabic. The final chapter deals with the influence of translation during this period on the Arabic language.

Offering new readings of many issues that are associated with that period, informed by modern theories of translation, this is key reading for scholars and researchers in Translation Studies, Oriental and Arab Studies, Book History, and Cultural History.

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Translation Studies in Translation

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Preface

This is a free translation of my book that appeared in Arabic in 2017 (Sharjah, UAE: University of Sharjah Press). As every translator knows, the basic feature of a successful translation is that it addresses two concerns: audience and context. A book addressed to an English audience is clearly different from a book written for the Arab reader. For the English edition, the audience I have in mind is primarily students and scholars of translation and of comparative literature who are interested in the history of translation and the transmission of ideas from one culture to another. This might explain the emphasis on the background of the Translation Movement in the Abbasid period and the role translation and translators played in advancing it and creating a culture of translation in a society that had no prior knowledge of it. The book is not intended specifically for the historian or the specialist in Arabic literature.

The second consideration is context. A word like *zandaqa* (heresy) is easy to understand in Arabic, although the exact meaning of the term is another story. For an English reader, the term has to be contextualized, sometimes briefly and at other times in detail - a process that requires not simple glosses but often a good deal of historical background. So it is with such seemingly “innocuous” terms as “Syriac,” “Arabic poetry,” and *qasida* (Arabic poem).

When I began to translate this book into English, I immediately felt that some parts had to be revised, expanded, or explained. Most chapters needed a lot of contextualization, but none more than Chapter 8 (dealing with the translation of poetry into Arabic), which has expanded to more than double the size of the original. Another factor that makes the English translation different from the Arabic original is that in many chapters the scholarship in Arabic is limited, whereas in English that same scholarship is extensive and is attracting ever-greater attention. For instance, what is written about Hunain’s translations, style, and methods is limited in Arabic to a few descriptive and usually laudatory paragraphs. By contrast, scholarly research on Hunain in the English language is considerable and expanding.

I hope the reader of this English edition finds the book both straightforward and informative and the ideas interesting - although those ideas may sometimes be open to debate. This situation, however, is only natural. In the burgeoning field of Translation Studies, novel ideas lead to controversy and controversy generates more scholarship. This basic process promotes the growth of knowledge. I trust that this book contributes to that growth by presenting some new perspectives on the Abbasid Translation Movement.

A note on spelling and transliteration

Transliteration of Arabic names poses serious problems for Orientalists, who try to be as exact as possible in rendering the original sounds. Because this book is not intended for specialists in Arabic history but for translation students, I have adopted a simple strategy. All Arabic words and proper names have been transcribed with minimum diacritical marks. I have also adopted a domesticating policy of approximating names to English, whenever possible. Some proper names have been replaced by their English equivalents. For instance, Abu Bishr ibn Māttā has been replaced with Matthew, because the name in Arabic is originally domesticated from Matthew. I have tried to avoid all traditional systems of transliterations and have opted for the most natural sounding names in English. Instead of *al-ḡāhiḏ*, for example, I have simplified the word to al-Jahiz. I have also ignored the *hamza*, unless it occurs in the middle of a word.

A note on translations

Because of the complexities associated with translating older Arabic texts into modern English (and because of the frequent archaic touches added by some Orientalists), I have decided to translate all Arabic quotations myself, trying to be as literal as possible, unless otherwise indicated.

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I would like to thank a number of colleagues, friends, and others for contributing to the translation and preparation of this book to the English reader. In particular, I would like to thank Professor Mona Baker, who, upon reading the original Arabic version, encouraged me to publish it in English for a wider international audience. I would also like to thank my friends for their assistance. Professor Shakir Mustafa, my life-long friend, discussed several issues, challenged some of my conclusions, and offered critical points I had to solve. His generosity helped me to acquire a number of important articles. Stephen Palubiski read some earlier chapters and made valuable comments. Dr. Andrew J. Power read some chapters and suggested a few changes. Professor Sane M. Yagi read Chapter 9 and made several valuable comments. My mentor and teacher, William Elliott, read and polished the draft manuscript chapter by chapter. A special note of appreciation is due to Ms. Nadia Masoud, Director of UoS Libraries, for her constant help. I am also grateful to Yifan Zhu for her suggestions and corrections. But it is the series editor, Professor Brian Baer, who went over the manuscript carefully, made many improvements, and suggested several changes. I cannot thank him enough for his meticulous reading, editorial skills, and keen insights. Any defects that remain in the published work are, of course, my own.



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A polemical introduction

The Translation Movement, which flourished during the Abbasid period, lasted almost three hundred years, reaching its peak during the reign of al-Ma'mun (d. 833 CE). During that time, numerous Greek, Persian, and Hindi manuscripts were translated into Arabic, then the *lingua franca* of the Islamic Empire (Peters 1968: vii). The movement was initially supported by the caliphs, or rulers, but it soon came to be associated with famous families, such as the Barmakis, Bani (sons of) Shaker, and the sons of Moses, who were rich enough to send envoys to distant places to buy rare manuscripts. This fascination with translation might be attributed to the simple desire to disseminate knowledge, or to get closer to the rulers, as translation became a means by which to curry the ruler's favors. Translation also became the means by which people acquired fame and high social status. This situation continued until the Abbasids began to show signs of weakness, signaled initially by a neglect of translation and, later, by opposition to it.

What has been published about translation in Arabic in the Abbasid era is negligible compared to what exists about this period in other fields of knowledge, such as history and history of science. As a new field of knowledge, Translation Studies has yet to gain a firm foothold in academia, and publications in Arabic are sparse. Most publications about this era reiterate information and facts, with little regard to the historical context that shaped the Translation Movement and its intellectual foundations. Modern translation theories provide the necessary theoretical frameworks to help explain such a complex phenomenon, which evolved and changed throughout the period.

Translation Studies gained momentum when modern linguistics started to spread in universities and academic institutes in the middle of the twentieth century. Under the wing of applied linguistics, the study of translation was based on the analysis of the morpheme, the smallest meaningful unit in language, then the word, the sentence and then the text as a whole. The study of translation suffered from polarized viewpoints: On the one hand, linguists were committed to the concept of faithfulness, formal equivalence, and the rigid pursuit of objectivity in the process of translation largely ignoring its cultural and social dimensions. On the other, literary theorists took more subjective approaches, largely ignoring the discoveries of linguistics. Within decades, theorists from both sides realized the importance of listening to what the other party had to say. This led to a recognition

2 *A polemical introduction*

of the importance of modern linguistic findings to the study of translation, as well as the importance of literary and social contexts, which allows translation to be studied not just as a linguistic phenomenon but as a cultural, aesthetic, and social event. This was the moment Translation Studies took the so-called “cultural turn,” which focused on translation as a cultural phenomenon, based on the understanding that each language has its distinct traditions, forms, and literary conventions. Translation can no longer be thought of as the transference of a word, phrase, or sentence to another language without understanding the language’s cultural forms. This turn was led by Susan Bassnett (1945–) and André Lefevere (1945–1996) and soon, under the influence of postcolonial studies, resulted in the investigation of the colonial systems, and cultural frameworks that shape the aesthetics of the original text, a process described by Venuti as “domestication” (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998, 1995). This involved investigating the vocabulary and concepts related to hegemony and its various mechanisms under the umbrella of the “Power Turn.” This turn has explored translation not only as a means by which the colonizer dominates its colonies but also as a means of resisting the colonizer (see, for instance, Munday 2016: 197–221).

However, these cultural structures are not isolated from society, its dynamics, and its interactions, so Translation Studies in the twenty-first century took a new direction, the sociological turn, which deals with translation as a manifestation of social “positioning” and as an integral part of the dynamic life of a society (Angelelli 2014). Studies that resulted from the sociological trend focus on the intellectual and societal motivations behind translation, the conflicts generated by translation between the various social classes, as well as the intellectual and political conflicts that arise from translation it introduces foreign concepts, terminology and language. The role of the relationship between patrons and their translator clients can also be studied from this angle. Patrons are individuals or institutions who assign work to translators and reward them for their efforts, and in so doing consciously or not direct and define the cultural paths of translation, at times even advising translators regarding solutions for the terms and concepts they translate. In the modern age, “patrons” have largely been replaced by “translation sponsors,” who publish the work, after it has been approved by reviewers, copy editors, designers, and printers. After all that, the translated work is then passed to others, those responsible for advertising, marketing and sales. Finally, it moves to shops, libraries, and book fairs before ending its long journey in the hands of its reader. In the Abbasid era, these processes were less complicated. The task of the “scribe” was carried out in cooperation with the *warraqin*, a term that refers to papermakers or paper manufacturers and/or copyists. They receive a copy of the translation, transcribe it, and hand the finished product to the customer for a sum of money agreed on by the two, which depended on the reputation of the scribe, his knowledge and fame, or his mastery of Arabic calligraphy. Despite their prestigious cultural role, the *warraqin* sometimes made simple errors and often manipulated the texts. This might explain why they suffered the wrath of numerous translators and intellectuals. Al-Jahiz (d. 868 CE), for instance, complained bitterly of their transgressions and their distortions of the texts they copied

(see Chapter 7). Whether it is due to the low quality of their work or lack of knowledge of the discipline they were working with or due to the urgency of their work and the many deadlines they had to meet, the *warraqin* made many mistakes and errors. The numerous existing manuscripts of *Kalila wa Dimna* reflect the extent of those errors (see Chapter 5). Moreover, a great translator like Hunain ibn Ishaq (d. 873 CE) took extreme measures to prevent scribes from confusing the names of the different medicinal plants by choosing unfamiliar words to refer to familiar plants, such as *zaatar* (thyme) which he deliberately wrote as *saatar* for fear the scribe might write *shaair* (barley). As he explains in his *Issues in Medicine*, he adopts this strategy “so as the remedy does not turn into a malady” as a consequence of bad copying mistakes (see Chapter 6).

The sociological orientation in Translation Studies is also concerned with studying the social conflict that translated works generate by their introduction of ideas unfamiliar to society or how translation reflects such a conflict. The conflict that obtained in the early Abbasid period between the supporters of Persian culture and Greek culture is a prime example. During the conflict, there was a debate about which of the two cultures was more useful to the young state: the Greek with its rich heritage in science and medicine, or the Persian culture rich in politics and literature. Another serious question is why the conflict ended with the dominance of Greek culture over the Persian culture and its supporters. One could also study the conflict between some social classes who were close to the rulers and their role in promoting certain translations, not to mention the bitter rivalry between the translators themselves (and their methods) in order to obtain more from a patron and the highest wages. The most obvious example that illustrates this are the conspiracies and intrigues that surrounded Hunain by colleagues who begrudged him his wealth and the vast sums he collected from his work in translation, editing, and revision (Chapter 6).

This book investigates translation in the Abbasid era from a new perspective: the texts that were produced during the Abbasid period are controversial and should not be treated as static, or as if the information contained in them were irrefutable facts. Once these texts are studied carefully and once one enters into a dialogue with them, one discovers that they contain a lot of contradictions and prejudices because their authors were human beings who wrote under many forms of pressure. These pressures included political expediency to satisfy rulers (such as writing about ibn al-Muqaffa' as a *shubi* or heretic) and ideological in support of a particular party in the conflict over another (such as looking at al-Jahiz as a *mutazalite*, religiously rationalist). Moreover, one could also investigate the rivalry between translators, or the envy shown by writers to the privileges translators received from the rulers. For instance, one could examine the contempt shown by al-Tawhidi towards Abu Bishr Matthew, a philosopher and the first translator of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Arabic, by accusing him of being stingy and writing under the influence of alcohol, or the various false charges that were levelled against Hunain because of the privileges he received from the caliph al-Mutawakil (d. 861 CE) by questioning his knowledge of medicine and accusing him of being “a mere translator” who has nothing to do with medicine and surgery.

4 *A polemical introduction*

This method of dealing with history gives the modern reader the ability to explain events and attitudes without being influenced by contemporary biases, whether dogmatic or political. It also frees the reader from the tyranny of past judgments that fly in the face of logic or reason, or the evidence presented by the translation strategies themselves. The best example might be the case of Abdalla ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 759 CE): instead of studying his great cultural role in creating an Arabic prose that is an appropriate tool for literary expression, many critics devoted a lot of time and effort to investigating his *zandaqa*, or heresy – a loose concept that has led to the loss of countless innocent lives and may refer to many things, including the scientific method adopted by scholars in order to reach the truth. In studying ibn al-Muqaffa's translation of *Kalila wa Dimna*, the reader may discover some of the translation strategies that he used to divorce the text from its Indian polytheistic context and to domesticate it to the new language, rephrasing and remolding it to reflect Islamic culture. The charge of heresy that has been reported is only a ploy that conceals political or personal agendas that aimed to discredit a great translator who served the Arabic language and culture like no other. What has been said about his *zandaqa* does not reflect the translation strategies that he followed to change the Sanskrit text into an Arabic one full of Islamic values and ideas to the extent that some modern Western critics say that the translation is one of the most precious gifts given by the Islamic culture to the world (Lessing 2008: 9–20). How can the charges of heresy be consistent with the Islamic spirit? The study of translation as a product and as a complex process brings new results that contradict old assumptions.

These “accidental” or “unexpected” conclusions are not related to Translation Studies, but nonetheless offer scholars working in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods new data that cannot be obtained from other sources. These data, which are text-based and are neither subjective nor impressionistic, are obtained from analyzing key texts in terms of translation strategies and methods. If such analyses are made available, one could combine them with other documents to study the issue at hand with more subtlety, because our understanding of history is mostly based on texts that yield different opinions and facts, depending on the age, individuals, and general milieu. If new texts are introduced, one could say with certainty that a new understanding becomes available, because each age interprets its history from a different perspective: some texts gain prominence; others are reduced in status. Translation introduces new perspectives that are dynamic and shake our beliefs in accepted ‘facts’ and make us cast doubt on other texts, their import, or meaning. In this way, Translation Studies contributes directly to enriching our historical knowledge, without falling into the trap of subjectivity or hasty generalizations.

However, one should point out in this regard that the history of translation is not a subservient substitute for cultural, political, or public history; it is a new field of knowledge that raises genuine problems and poses bold questions that other types of traditional historical studies cannot answer. Recent studies in this regard indicate that traditional historians have begun to pay attention to the importance of the history of translation in revising their ideas, conclusions, and other

“facts” or “givens” associated with the Abbasid era. This includes the investigation of related phenomena, such as the conflict translation created in the society, the influence of the ruling elites on translation and translators, the role Syriac and Persian translators played in court politics, and the role the Translation Movement played in the promotion of translation, its mechanisms, its intellectual content, its impact on the world of politics, and the art of state administration.

The following is an overview of the contents of the book - which consists of an introduction, a conclusion, and nine chapters - including a summary of each chapter, and the most important issues in it. The introduction provides the theoretical framework of the study and gives a brief idea of Translation Studies and its contemporary trends, with particular emphasis on the “social turn” in translation. This seems appropriate for the study of translation in the Abbasid period because it was not an elite activity confined to a limited group in society, but rather its influence extended to governors, wealthy families, and a large group of translators, editors, copyists, and *warraḡin*. In addition, translation itself was financially rewarding, and some translators became so exorbitantly rich that their colleagues conspired against them. This happened with the greatest translator in Arabic history, Hunain, who was imprisoned and tortured because of his fame and wealth.

Translation is an important and serious act that has far-reaching implications for the thought, language, and culture it receives (Delisle and Woodsworth 2012). Translators have introduced many terms into Arabic, including numerous medical terms. Some words were transliterated from Greek. Perhaps the most subtle aspect of translation is that the translation methods of the originals creep into Arabic, the most important of which is the “word-for-word” method that was common among the Romans and Syriacs, and which became a feature of the translated works. This approach to translation was rejected by the Arabs, until Hunain, came up with what he called “my translation method,” which is essentially a “sense-for-sense” model that follows Arabic style and literary conventions. Many earlier versions that adopted the “word-for-word” method were retranslated according to the new way, most of them by Hunain himself and/or his team (Chapter 5).

Chapter 1, “Beginnings and endings,” deals with the emergence of translation among Arabs, especially its transition from an individual effort initiated by Prince Khalid ibn Yazid ibn Mu’awiyah (634–709 CE) to a state-sponsored organized effort under the Caliph Abu Ja’afar al-Mansur (714–775 CE) who turned it into a government institution, which was called *bayt al-hikma* – *The House of Wisdom*. This institution, besides conducting research primarily in engineering and astronomy, was also responsible for translating manuscripts from Greek and Persian into Arabic. It also attracted translators and sponsored the search for manuscripts, sending delegations to obtain them from different countries. Translation enjoyed a high reputation and a good social status, so much so that some influential families, such as the Barmakis and Bani Shaker became important patrons for translators, paying them handsomely for their efforts. In the era of al-Ma’mun, the *House of Wisdom* grows in the middle of this hectic activity of translation and thrives unlike any other institution in the East or West. Translators from all over the world came to Baghdad to contribute to this renaissance and numerous

manuscripts were translated from Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit. When a patron or an official was unhappy with the final product, translators were ready to have it revised and edited; if still unhappy, it was retranslated by a different translator, or re-translated in its entirety, as Hunain states in his *Epistle*. However, this renaissance, which was associated with translation, carried with it the seeds of its own death. Al-Ma'mun, despite his great efforts in promoting multicultural tolerance, translation, and philosophy, was a mutazalite and tried to impose this belief on people by force and coercion, and thus, in the minds of the people, both translation and al-Ma'mun were inextricably linked together. When al-Ma'mun died, the death knells for both translation and Mu'tazlism had rung; by the time of caliph Al-Qadir (d. 1031 CE), one of the great missions of the State was to persecute the Mu'tazilites, to crucify them, to destroy their texts, and to burn all translated books (along with every vineyard in the country – from which wine is made!). Additionally, and perhaps not surprisingly, women were also banned from leaving their homes day and night.

Chapter 2, “Translation and cultural struggle,” deals with the controversial topic of translation and the conflicting interests of the various components of society: The religious, the language scholars, and the diverse political groups whose loyalties were colored by their interests and the interests of the group they belong to it. Finally, there is the conflict between Arabs and Persians, which is called *shu'bia*; a term which generally refers to the (mainly) Persians' denigration of Arabs (Norris, “Shu'biah” 1990: 31–47).

Arabic had no history of translation, its methods, and its principles, but Syriac, also a Semitic language, had evolved in terms of writing centuries before Arabic, and developed scientific, medical, anatomical, and philosophical vocabulary, a challenge that Arabic had to face with the advent of the Translation Movement. The translators alone worked hard to coin new words or to derive new vocabulary from old ones to enrich Arabic with new medical and philosophical terms. The Syriacs, who enriched Arabic with new terms and translations, had a great influence on tempering or reducing the Persian influence on the Abbasid society. Eventually, the Persian intellectual influence diminished and its supporters no longer advocated it. When the Syriacs began to propagate the medical, pharmacological, and philosophical heritage of the Greeks into the Abbasid society, Persian culture could not produce anything remotely similar in terms of its scope or depth.

Chapter 3, “Translation of literary criticism,” discusses the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Arabic. The only extant translation of this important text belongs to the late period of the Translation Movement. It was completed by Abu Bishr ibn Matthew, a Syriac known for his philosophical writings. He knew Syriac and Arabic but did not know Greek. His translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* is literal, difficult to understand, and is fraught with linguistic and grammatical errors. Matthew's language is also criticized by the renowned grammarian al-Sirafi (see Chapter 4). This translation had far-reaching negative effects, because it hindered any interaction between Greek and Arabic criticism and made literary critics of the era turn away from Greek thought, thinking that Aristotle was merely a philosopher. They did not realize that Aristotle had laid