

## Intertextuality and Literary Translation between Arabic and English

التنصص والترجمة الأدبية بين العربية والإنكليزية

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### Abstract

In our translation programs at Arab universities we devote a lot of time to the teaching of translation theory believing that there are certain rules and theories that if a student masters, s/he will be a better and more competent translator. An awareness of intertextuality undermines the importance of theorizing about translation in favor of boosting translation practices. This paper discusses allusion and the intertextual space in an attempt to highlight the repeated patterns and the tissues of relations that unite all texts. Theorists of intertextuality claim that there is no original text and that there is nothing unsaid before. It is possible, therefore, to deoriginate texts to the zero level, i.e. to find roots for all components of a text in other previous ones. Thus a translator who practices the translation of poetry for several years becomes acquainted with patterns and structures that are repeated in different other texts. Awareness of theoretical materials on the know-how of translation has little value in contributing to the proficiency of a translator; practice is the path of excellence.

**Key words:** Intertextuality, literary translation, allusion, translation theory, reader response.

### ملخص

كثيراً ما نعد في برامج الترجمة، في الجامعات العربية، الى تكريس الوقت لتعليم نظرية الترجمة، إعتقاداً منا بأن هناك مجموعة من القواعد التي لو اتقنها الطالب لأصبح مترجماً

ضليعاً. إن الإلمام بفلسفة التناص يقلل من اهمية دراسة نظريات الترجمة بقصد تحسين أداء المترجم. هذه الدراسة تبحث في موضوع التناص من خلال دراسة التلميح الإيحائي في النص الأدبي، بغرض تبيان النسيج التشابكي بين النصوص المختلفة. يعتقد اصحاب نظريات التناص أنه لا يوجد نص لم يقل أو يكتب من قبل، وأنه بالإمكان إعادة النصوص الى مصادرها بحيث أنه من الممكن تتبع كافة أجزاء النص قيد الدراسة وإسنادها الى مصادر وردت تلك الأجزاء بها من قبل. لذا فإن المترجم الذي يمارس ترجمة الشعر، مثلاً، لعدة سنين يكون قد تعرف على أنماط وتراكيب شعرية تكررت لديه أثناء ترجمته لتلك النصوص المختلفة. من هنا فإن الباحث يعتقد أن الإلمام بنظريات الترجمة لا يكون له قيمة كبيرة في تحسين كفاءة المترجم و أن الممارسة هي طريق الإبداع في الترجمة.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** تناص، ترجمه أدبية، التلميح الإيحائي، نظرية الترجمة، رد فعل ألقارئ

## Introduction

This research is an attempt to investigate the importance of the study of intertextuality in the practices of literary translation between English and Arabic. It is divided into six parts and a conclusion. The first part defines intertextuality with particular reference to literary texts. The second part traces attempts in intertextual studies before Julia Kristeva which are genuinely structural, such as Joseph Campbell's extensive work with myths and their manifestations in different cultures. Campbell's work is a profound demonstration of the network of relations that myths create among cultures of different places and different times. Thus, without using the term "intertextuality", Campbell is virtually engaged in studying some kind of structural relations between texts. The third part is a demonstration of how allusions as one form of intentional intertextuality gain different meanings as they travel among texts, times, places and cultures. The intertextual space is the space in which a sign travels between texts and through which it gains different meanings and implications. The fourth part offers examples and a discussion of intentional and unintentional intertextuality with the assumption that most writers are generally unaware of their borrowings from other texts. Part five is a demonstration of how the matrix of a text influences its reading with the assumption that each reading of a text is a rewriting of it. Part six points briefly to two assumptions of the genesis of texts: the theological and the scientific. There is a growing trend among exponents

of intertextuality to link the evolution of texts to the biological evolution whereby texts are seen as members in a chain similar to the *scala naturae* (the great chain of beings) of Darwin. Monotheistic religions, however, offer a different assumption which traces the origin of texts to the first word of God.

By offering this account on intertextuality, and the intertextual space, the researcher hopes that the study of intertextuality will become a major component in the syllabi of translation courses and literature courses at Arab universities so that students become alerted to the tissues of relations between texts in their translation practice and in their study of literature. They, therefore, are encouraged to read extensively in the culture of the English language so that they enrich their reservoir of matrices and boost their comprehension of the language, and, hence, the speed and quality of their translation output.

### **Intertextuality in a Nutshell**

The interest in intertextuality in the domains of literature, linguistics and translation is combined usually with the philosophical trends of post-structuralism and deconstruction that dominated the second part of the twentieth century. In the deconstructive logic a text is seen as a shifting field of relations that are influenced by temporality and space. Deconstruction defies the existence of a transcendental signified – a fixed meaning of a text. The meaning of a text is not necessarily what the writer or speaker intends to communicate. Once a word leaves the lips of the speaker it becomes the property of the listener; s/he may understand it within his/her temporal and surrounding realities and matrices. Meanings according to the conventions of deconstruction, the reader-response approach to texts and intertextuality are produced within a system of relations between texts. “We do not read a text in isolation but within a matrix of possibilities constituted by earlier texts which function as *langue* to the *parole* of individual textual production.” (Fowler, 2000: 117). These relations are influenced by time and place. Something said one hundred years ago in London may be understood in a different way today in Jerusalem. The structure of relations is governed by a dialectic of resemblance and difference; a text is understood by its relationship to



is simply no word that is unsaid or unused in different contexts by different writers or speakers. The originality of a work lies in the writer's or speaker's new ways of putting words together. We generally create our texts out of the surrounding language structures and texts. When we read or listen to texts, we rewrite them according to our new surroundings and our knowledge of other texts. "Kristeva referred to texts in terms of two axes: a *horizontal axis* connecting the author and reader of a text, and a *vertical axis*, which connects the text to other texts" (cited in Chandler, 2004)

Kristeva's enthusiasm for intertextuality, however, did not go without criticism. William Irwin (2004) in his "Intertextuality" (published in *Philosophy and Literature*) debunks intertextuality as a "politically charged theory" which "lacks consistency and which should be stricken from the lexicon of sincere and intelligent humanists" because it "does not illuminate or elucidate but rather mystifies and obscures" (Irwin: 2004: 240). Whereas Irwin's argument sounds enticing for the layman, I think it is caught in the logocentrism of its premise. First the talk about Marxism and the concept of the author as the product of capitalism who is stripped of his ownership of knowledge in favor of promoting the role of a reader, is simply iconic and, in short, Western in orientation. Even while trying to undermine the role of the reader, Irwin is caught in the very tapestry of intertextuality. For example, he writes: "When the reader takes the place of the author the text potentially becomes 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.'" (Irwin: 2004:236). Irwin could only find syntax which, if deoriginated, would remove him two levels from his text; one to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and one to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Second, Irwin cites the example of American Baseball and its relationship to Babe Ruth in interpreting American literature

The problem, though, is that the importance of baseball in general, and Babe Ruth in particular, is marginal at best to the interpretation of American literature. Drawing relations between baseball and literature may generate a *plaisir du texte* for some, but there is no necessary or essential connection between the phenomena. (Irwin: 2004:237)



*adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.* Prometheus ascended to the heavens, stole fire from the gods, and descended, Jason sailed through the clashing Rocks into the sea of marvels, circumvented the dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece, and returned with the fleece and the power to wrest his rightful throne from the usurper. Aeneas went down into the underworld, crossed the dreadful river of the dead, threw a sop to the three-headed watchdog Cerberus, and conversed, at last, with the shade of his dead father (Campbell, 1949: 30)

Campbell, therefore, traces a tissue of relations that is cross-cultural and bound to one origin. The hero of the different myths that Campbell offers as examples becomes a repeated pattern in every culture amounting to an archetype that is shared in the collective unconscious of one culture or different cultures. Campbell's monomyth is one form of intertextuality that searches for tissues of relations among different myths in different cultures, only to find that they all have one hero who wears different faces in different cultures. Each of the above heroes initiates a mission, faces difficulties and returns with the prize. Such pattern lends itself to the textual system which, according to Fowler (2000), "exists before any text" is born.

#### **Allusion and the Intertextual Space**

In modern literature, allusions are one major form of intertextuality; they are usually made to significant events, places or people who have very well-known qualities that the speaker or writer wishes to highlight in his/her new text. Allusions are borrowed from history, from myth or from any previous text for the purpose of recalling the qualities of the alluded to text in the present moment of the speaker or writer. According to Hatim and Mason, "each intrusion of a citation in the text is the culmination of a process in which a sign travels from one text (source) to another (destination). The area being traversed from text to text is what we shall call the intertextual space" (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 129). T.S. Eliot alludes to Hamlet in his "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" because he wanted to bring to his readers the qualities of valor, hesitation and procrastination that the Character of Hamlet represents. Hamlet procrastinates for valid reasons related to his prudence and careful



connote the values of justice, democracy, courage humbleness and equality. In the following example Omar is alluded to for his humbleness and justice;

قد راع صاحب كسرى أن رأى عمرا  
بين الرعية عطلا وهو راعيها

“Startled was the envoy of the Caesar when saw he

Omar humble and a guardian amongst his subjects” (Hafez Ibrahim), (My translation).

The following modern allusion to Omar bin Al-Khattab is quite different. New realities and new spaces create new meanings. Or, as the allusion travels between places and times, it gains new meanings and connotations that are decided by the surroundings of the sender and receiver.

مات "ابن الخطاب"  
هأنذا في كل حجيج أنعاه لكم،  
--يا أهل الأمصار البكائين على أطيباف الذكرى

Ibin Al-Khattab is deceased

I here mourn him to you at every pilgrimage

Oh ye natives of far regions, weepers for the shades of memory

(Mohammad Abu Doma, 2006: 7) (My translation)

Abu Doma’s allusion to Omar bin Al-Khattab is very much surprising to present day readers. Omar is generally alluded to to bring to the mind the values of justice, equality and humbleness. But at a time (temporality is recalled here) of spiritual dryness, lack of justice, the urgent need for heroes the likes of Omar and the disintegration of Arabism, the poet, Mohammad Abu Doma, is enraged by people who entertain themselves with the memory of heroes of ancient times when they are incapacitated and when they lack the merit and the courage to defy the enemy. These realities are the matrices that decide the new reading of the text.



Intifada, the use of the word took another turn. While Palestinian people like to use the word to describe the unjust killing of the young Palestinian activists, Israel wants to use different words such as “target killing”. When Palestinian media use the word “assassination” to describe the acts of Israeli soldiers, the old connotation of someone who drugs himself to be brave disappeared or is, perhaps, forgotten; the word is used to describe the unjust killing of an important person for political and unjust reasons. Such knowledge of the etymology of the word and its matrices would enlighten the translator and would make him able to negotiate meanings as s/he translates.

Texts usually give words added meanings. Only in the language of the Holy Bible do we see the word “know” used as a euphemism for lovemaking or sexual intercourse. “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD” (The Book of Genesis, 4:1) This usage of the word “know” is particular to the Holy Bible; it is the matrix of the text that brings to the minds of readers that the word “know” has a different meaning from that which is commonly known to all (to be acquainted with).

Unintentional intertextuality can be sensed in the very mechanics and structures of a language such as the passive voice, the question tags, the different systems of negation in a language, the formation of subjective and objective questions, the use of marked vs. unmarked structures ---etc. Whereas such language features are visible, their use by interlocutors is mechanical and, therefore, less intentional (though at certain instances it can be intentional). Unintentional intertextuality can also be sensed in the writer’s choice of the genre and the general organizational features of a text. When one writes fiction, poetry or drama, his/her choice of the genre is mechanical since s/he follows the possibilities of his/her talent. But when one chooses the stream of consciousness technique in his/her fiction, or the sonnet in his/her poetry, one is making a more intentional choice that lends itself to the "tissues" of intertextual discourse.



**A Persian poet, writer, and journalist**

They sniff at your breath  
in case you have uttered  
a word of love;  
they sniff at your heart:  
These are strange times,  
my precious.

And love itself is whipped and hanged  
at a public crossroads:  
better to hide your love  
in a cellar.

In the twists and turns of  
this cold dead-end  
they keep their fires alight  
fuelled with songs  
and poems;  
don't try to think:  
these are strange times,  
my precious.

He who knocks on the door  
at nightfall,  
has come to destroy your light:  
Better to hide your light  
in a cellar.

Look, these are the butchers  
guarding the roads,  
their axes dipped in blood:  
these are strange times,  
my precious.

Smiles are sealed onto lips,  
songs are stuffed into  
gaping mouths:  
better to hide your joy  
in a cellar.

Canaries are barbecued  
on the wood-fires of lily  
and jasmine:  
these are strange times,  
my precious.

Lucifer, crazed with victory,  
feasts on the fruits of our  
mourning:  
better to hide your God,  
in a cellar.

(Shamlu, retrieved 15/4/2009 <http://inside-margins.blogspot.com>.)

As students become acquainted with the poet and what prompted him to write the poem, a new matrix is developed and a new less sympathetic reading emerged. From an intertextual point of view, every reading is a rewriting of a text and our reading (rewriting) of a text is strictly governed by time and place; our understanding of things has to do generally with our experiences in life that are manifold. The most immediate of experiences are the most influential on us. That is why Freud considers a slip of a tongue as a mail from the unconscious mind and not simply an incidental speech faltering. A hungry person is likely to read “breadspread” instead of “bedspread” as s/he argues with his/her partner and a thirsty person is likely to read “water” as s/he talks to someone about his “daughter”. One, therefore, feels the dictations of time and place either intentionally or unintentionally as they mold his own feelings as s/he reads (rewrites) the poem; each reading differs as the matrix of that particular reading differs.

Introducing intertextuality to the domain of translation does not necessarily aim at aborting attempts at theorizing about translation; it only offers models of interpreting texts by texts and linking texts together so that the translation practice becomes more creative, lucid and attainable. Translation theory labors hard in explaining and espousing to students theories of translating poetry that are now contemplatively laborious now laboriously contemplative with little attention paid to translation practice.

The following are excerpts from a poem by Mustafa Al-Jazzar (2008) titled “Oh! Antara”: The poem laments Iraq and the dilemma of Iraqi people after the American invasion. It is a parody of “Mu’allaqt Antara,” one of the famous poems of the *Jahilia* (pre-Islamic) period referred to as “Mu’allaqat” (hangings). These “Mu’allaqat” are poems that recount bravery, pride, platonic love, chivalry and valor among many other heroic traits; traits that are, according to the poet, much needed in present-day Iraq. A little exercise in deoriginating the most visible intertextual relations in the poem demonstrates how familiar patterns and stretches of language become textual oases for a translator or an interpreter.

يا عنتره

عَبَسْتُ تَخَلَّتْ عَنْكَ... هَذَا دَأْبُهُمْ  
كَفَكَفَ دُمُوعَكَ وَأَنْسَجِبُ يَا عَنْتَرَةَ  
فَعَيُونَ عِبِلَةَ أَصْبَحَتْ مُسْتَعْمَرَهُ  
لَا تَرُجُ بِسَمَةِ ثَغْرَهَا يَوْمًا، فَقَدْ  
سَقَطَتْ مِنَ الْعَقْدِ الثَّمِينِ الْجَوْهَرَةَ  
قَبْلَ سَيُوفِ الْغَاصِبِينَ.. لِيَصْفَحُوا  
وَإِخْفُضْ جَنَاحَ الْخَزْيِ وَارْجُ الْمَعْدَرَةَ

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يا دارَ عِبِلَةَ بِالْعِرَاقِ تَكَلِّمِي  
هَلْ أَصْبَحَتْ جَنَاتُ بَابِلَ مَقْفَرَةً؟  
هَلَا سَأَلْتِ الْخَيْلَ يَا ابْنَةَ مَالِكِ  
كَيْفَ الصَّمُودُ؟ وَأَيْنَ أَيْنَ الْمَقْدَرَةَ  
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وعيونُ عبلة لا تزالُ دموعُها  
تترقبُ الجسرَ البعيدَ.. لِتَعْبُرَهُ

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هذي يدُ الأوطان تجزي أهلها  
مَن يقترفُ في حقها شراً.. يَرَهُ  
الشاعر مصطفى الجزار (2008)

Oh! Antara

Abs has forsaken you; it is their temperament

Hold back your tears and withdraw, oh Antara

Abla's eyes are now colonized

Do not hope for her smile again

For the jewel has fallen from the precious necklace

Kiss the swords of coercers with blessing so that they absolve

And lower to them the wing of shame and ask for their forgiveness

-----  
Oh Abla's home in Iraq, say:

Have the heavens of Babylon become graveyards?

Have you not asked the steeds oh daughter of Malik?

How steadfastness? And where is forwardness?

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And the tears of Abla's eyes

Are still monitoring the far bridge to cross

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This is the hand of homelands and it will reward its people

Whoever commits an evil in its path will see it

(Al-Jazzar, 2008) (My translation)

Intertextual relations are, of course, not limited to poetry; all literary genres as well as all kinds of discourse and texts can be deoriginated in the same way. Poetry, though, is known to be one of the most challenging genres in translation practice. A reader who is acquainted with Arab culture and literature will find numerous examples of intertextual relations in the above poem. There are frequent links to the original parodied poem in addition to some other tapestry of resources. The resources alluded to (marked in bold type) are as follows:

In the first line the phrase “كفكف دموعك” (hold back your tears) recalls the first words of a poem written by Ibrahim Touqan, the Palestinian poet, which contains the following line:

“كفكف دموعك ليس ينفحك البكاء و لا العويل” (hold back your tears for neither tears nor wallowing will do you any good)

In line five, “قبّل سيوف الغاصبين” (kiss the swords of coercers) is an echo of one line in the source poem, “Mu’allaqt Antara,” in which Antara wishes to kiss the arrows since they resemble Abla’s (his beloved) teeth. The simile is perhaps meant to serve the theme of platonic love and bravery.

In line six, “واخفض جناح” (and lower the wing of) is part of the Quranic phraseology (Verse: 23 Al-Isra’, the Holy Quran). Lines 7&9 are echoes of the source poem.

Line 13, “هذي يد” (this is the hand of) is a phrase which echoes part of a poem by the Egyptian poet, Hafez Ibrahim:

“هذه يدى عن بنى مصر تصافحكم فصافحوها تصافح نفسها العرب” which translates as follows:

This is my hand on behalf of the people of Egypt; if you shake it all Arabs will come to reconciliation.

Line 14, the phrase “شراً يره” (evil he will see) is an echo of one verse from of the Holy Quran: “So whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it” (Verse 8, Al-Zalzala, the Holy Quran).



name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11, King James Bible)

The Holy Quran, makes a similar reference to a beginning of words or an early text:

"And He taught Adam all the names, then presented them to the angels; He said: Tell Me the names of those if you are right. They said: Glory be to Thee! We have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us. Surely Thou art the Knowing, the Wise" (Verse 31, Al-Baqara, The Holy Quran)

Monotheistic religions seem to have unanimity in assuming the beginning of all things including languages and their origins. The Holy Quran refers to the infinite possibility of word formation: "And if all the trees that are in the earth were pens, and the ocean were ink, with seven oceans swelling it thereafter, the words of Allah would not be exhausted. (Verse 26, Luqman, the Holy Quran)

But modern science has a different say. There is the trend that likes to think of the evolution of texts, the way Darwin thought of the evolution of species; all evolved from a one-cell ameba.

### **Conclusion**

Awareness of intertextuality has become of paramount importance for translators. If there is no original text and if all texts are a rearrangement of other texts, it must be useful for translators to acquaint themselves with textual patterns in both the target and the source languages. I am not suggesting memorization of translated texts, but an engagement in the translation process with the assumption that every stretch of language (part or whole) is likely to recur sometime somewhere. This assumption should also lead us to understand that since every reading of a text is a rewriting of it; then every translation in a sense is a new reading and a new rewriting that is influenced by the factors of time and place.

