X. The Translation of Humor

Response to humor is a cognitive process which varies even among individuals of the same culture. Nevertheless, there can be found a general pattern of response common to a single society. The translation of humor can prove to be difficult. It happens sometimes that an Arabic passage which is found comic by the majority of its readers fails to convey the same effect in the translated version. This may be ascribed to the incompetence of the translation in reproducing in the target language the humor of the original. But more often than not, the unsatisfactory outcome is due to differences between the cultural and psychological backgrounds of the readers of the two texts.

Certain jokes and humorous passages require extra-linguistic data in order to be appreciated by the reader, and these data cannot be applied, in any reasonable way, by the translator. We can classify inadequate translation of humor in two main categories:

(1) Humor which cannot be transferred satisfactorily because of linguistic reasons.
(2) Humor where failure of translation is due to cultural factors.

A well-known example of the first type is the almost impossible task of translating puns. This linguistic phenomenon is based on word play exploiting two or more of the polysemes which a given word has. But since polysemic development of words in different languages do

not follow the same lines, it clearly becomes very difficult to transfer punning words into another language. Puns, of course, are used for their wit and humor-aspects which very often are destroyed in translation. Another difficulty in translation which arises from purely linguistic factors is that of malapropism and other related phenomena. This case is not beyond the potentialities of translation but there is no guarantee that the witty and humorous effects can be faithfully reproduced. Two examples will be given here of situations in which the author has wittily and humorously tried to depict the character as belonging to particular social class:

- اسمه حسين إيه يا ولية ؟ في ألف حسين في البلد لقبه إيه؟
- ما عرفش نقبه إيه يا سيدي. البنت قالت اسمه حسين و أنا مالي بقه اسأل عن اصله و فصله. (نائب في الأرياف، توفيق الحكيم، ص 110)

- What is his family name?
- I don't know his name, Sir. The girl said his name was Husain, so why should I ask about his family and all the rest of it.

(Maze of Justice, p. 84)

In trying to repeat what the public prosecutor has said, the woman, illiterate and simple utters the malapropism "نقب" for "لقب" thereby creating a humorous situation. The translator has chosen to overlook this aspect of dialogue. He could have tried to reproduce it by using the word surname in question and some perversion of it in the answer. This, however, would be unlikely to produce the desired effect.

The Arabic original is effective because "نقب" is credible malapropism given the background of the witness.

Extract from: Najah Shamaa, A Linguistic Analysis of Some Problems of Arabic-English Translation, 1978.

> Reading Guidelines:
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> After being well trained in loud reading, I would recommend memorizing by heart some catchy phrases, sentences and lines to improve the power of your language both grammatically and stylistically and in compositionality.

Q.**I** Give the exact meaning of the following words first in English and second in Arabic: cognitive, individuals, ascribed to, incompetence, outcome, appreciated, puns, polysemes, wit, malapropism, prosecutor, utters, perversion.

Q.**II** Derive as many words as you can from the following words: response, single, happens, reproducing, applied, classify, transferred, exploiting, destroyed, potentialities, depict, repeat, original.

Q.**III** Give the opposites of the words below and use them in good English sentences of your own: difficult, comic,

incompetence, inadequate, failure, destroyed, faithfully, illiterate, overlook, effective.

Q.**IV** Answer the following questions briefly:

1. Does response to humor vary among individuals of the same culture? Why?
2. What are the two main reasons behind the unsatisfactory outcome of translating humor?
3. What are the two main categories of inadequate translation of humor?
4. What are puns? Give examples from both Arabic and English.
5. What is malapropism? Give examples from both Arabic and English.
6. When a translator fails to convey a humorous expression or situation, what strategy does s/he usually follow?

Q.**V** After cracking some English jokes among your friends and colleagues and seeing their responses, translate paragraph 1.

Research Activity:

Collect a number of jokes in English and translate them into Arabic. State the type of difficulty inherent in translating each joke.