

## **XXV. Al-Jahidh**

Abu Othman Ibn Bahr Al-Kinani Al-Basri Al-Jahidh or Al-Jahiz was a great encyclopaedic writer from Basra. Despite the poverty he lived in, Al-Jahidh continuously sought knowledge and used to gather with other peers at Basra's main mosque to discuss various subjects. He was taught at the hands of the most learned people in the areas of philology, lexicography and poetry. In addition to becoming well-spoken about these areas, Al-Jahidh acquired considerable knowledge about pre-Islamic and Arab history, Quraan, Hadiths and Greek translated philosophical works.

During the Abbasid era, the Arabs and Muslims were heavily engaged in translating the scientific products of other nations into their own language. The Bait Al-Hikma was likened to a hive of bees actively working round the clock. As such, those translators were busy securing the essential needs of their countrymen for scientific products and did not have time enough to spare on the luxurious activity of speaking about their profession, i.e. speaking theoretically.

In his book Al-Hayawan (Book of Animals), Al-Jahidh spoke about translation. His most quoted pieces can be summarized in two paragraphs. In the first paragraph, he sides with the common view of comparing the inability of the translator with the genius and matchless talents of the original author. He concludes this paragraph by making a

biased comparison of Arab and Muslim translators to Greek masters like Aristotle and Plato:

ثم قال بعض من ينصر الشعر ويحوطه ويحتج له: إن المترجم لا يؤدي أبدا ما قاله الحكيم، على خصائص معانيه، وحقائق مذاهبه، ودقائق اختصاراته، وخفيات حدوده، ولا يقدر أن يوفيه حقوقها، ويؤدي الأمانة فيها، ويقوم بما يلزم الوكيل ويجب على الجري، وكيف يقدر على أدائها وتسليم معانيها والإخبار عنها على حقها وصدقها. إلا أن يكون في العلم بمعانيها، واستعمال تصاريف ألفاظها، وتأويلات مخرجها، مثل مؤلف الكتاب وواضعه، فمتى كان رحمه الله تعالى ابن البطريق، وابن ناعمة، وابن قرّة، وابن فهريز، وثيفيل، وابن وهيلي، وابن المقفع، مثل أرسطاطاليس؟! ومتى كان خالد مثل أفلاطون!؟

In the second paragraph, Al-Jahidh proceeds on to speak about the necessary prerequisites which should be available in the translator. He emphasizes that the translator must be competent in the area he translates it, and the two languages. Surprisingly, Al-Jahidh predates modern linguists in speaking about language interference. Additionally, Al-Jahidh excels in explaining the arduous task of translating new, difficult and little explored areas of science:

ولا بد للمترجم من أن يكون بيانه في نفس الترجمة، في وزن علمه في نفس المعرفة، وينبغي أن يكون أعلم الناس باللغة المنقولة والمنقول إليها، حتى يكون فيهما سواء وغاية، ومتى وجدناه أيضا قد تكلم بلسانين، علمنا أنه قد أدخل الضيم عليهما؛ لأن كل واحدة من اللغتين تجذب الأخرى وتأخذ منها، وتعرض عليها، وكيف يكون تمكن اللسان منهما مجتمعين فيه، كتمكنه إذا انفرد بالواحدة، وإنما له قوة واحدة، فإن تكلم بلغة واحدة استفرغت تلك القوة عليهما، وكذلك إن تكلم بأكثر من لغتين، على

حساب ذلك تكون الترجمة لجميع اللغات. وكلما كان الباب من العلم أعمس وأضيق، والعلماء به أقل، كان أشد على المترجم، وأجدر أن يخطئ فيه. ولن تجد البتة مترجما يفي بواحد من هؤلاء العلماء.

**Reading Guidelines:**

For some scholars, reading and understanding the language of old texts is a kind of translation. Such old texts constitute a special difficulty for beginners. An aspiring and ambitious reader should always train and familiarize himself/herself with such texts because they cannot be escaped.

**Q.I** Give the exact meaning of the following words first in English and second in Arabic: encyclopaedic, poverty, sought, gather with, peers, learned, philology, engaged in, hive, luxurious, genius, matchless, talents, biased, competent, predates, arduous, interference.

**Q.II** Derive as many words as you can from the following words: encyclopaedic, poverty, philology, lexicography, engaged, securing, common, talents, competent, interference.

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

considerable, heavily, essential, common, biased, available, competent, predates, arduous.

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

1. Name the areas of knowledge which Al-Jahidh accumulated.
2. Why did the Arabs and Muslims make little remarks about translation?
3. What did Al-Jahidh express in the first paragraph?
4. What are the necessary prerequisites which should be available in the successful translator?
5. What does Al-Jahidh say about language interference?
6. According to Al-Jahidh, when does translating becomes arduous?

**Q.V** Choose 10 expressions from the first Arabic paragraph and 10 from the second Arabic paragraph and translate them into English.

Research Activity:

Search about Al-Jahidh's views on translation in English. How much are they referred to in the internet? Why? What should we do?

**Quote of the Day:**

Woe to the makers of literal translations, who by rendering every word weaken the meaning!

It is indeed by so doing that we can say the letter kills and the spirit gives life

Voltaire