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EARLY ARABIC TRANSLATORS, THEIR METHODS AND PROBLEMS

The Translators

“Oh Hunayn ibn Ishaq it is said that the caliph al-Ma'mun paid him the weight of the books he translated into Arabic in gold”.

Many a modern translator would hear with envy of so much royal interest in translation activity and of such princely rewards. Why did the translator's work receive so much acknowledgement in those days?

Hunayn ibn Ishaq, the translator mentioned in this quotation from Ibn abi 'Usaybi'a (a 13th-century bio-bibliographer of medicine), was a translator of exceptional skill and he was working at a time when translators occupied a vital position in the transmission of foreign culture to the Arabs. He lived in Baghdad in the 9th century A. D. and his generous sponsor cited above was al-Ma'mun, son and heir of Harun al-Rashid. The Islamic empire reached the zenith of its power during the reign of those caliphs and during this time, too, Muslim culture tried to absorb whatever knowledge was available, whether Greek, Persian or Indian. This foreign—mainly Greek—knowledge laid the foundation for the flowering of Muslim sciences in the next few centuries. The works of the old masters like Aristotle and Galen were zealously translated, studied and commented on by Arab scientists; and it was to be through the Arabs some four centuries later that Europe first became acquainted with the achievements of ancient Greek scholarship, when mediaeval scholars like Michael Scotus and Gerard of Cremona began translating those works from Arabic into Latin. The contents of the books naturally suffered from this long transmission process. A Greek text was often translated first into Syriac, then from Syriac into Arabic, and from Arabic into Latin, with sometimes even a intermediary Hebrew translation between Arabic and Latin. Corruptions were bound to occur. Thus we can find a mediaeval Latin text ascribing to women the cowardly nature that Aristotle had observed in weasels.

Which books were translated into Arabic? The majority of them were Greek, and therefore we will occupy ourselves only with translations from this language. It soon

becomes clear that we would look in vain for an Arabic translation of Homer or Euripides. The literary (i.e. belles-lettres) heritage of the ancient Greeks was scarcely known in the mediaeval Arab world. The works known and translated were the writings of the Greek philosophers and scientists. Almost the whole of Aristotle was translated, parts of Plato, works of Euclid, Galen, Hippocrates and many others. Among the books translated into Arabic is a considerable number of texts whose Greek original is lost and which have come down to us only in their Arabic version.

To understand these writings a considerable amount of knowledge was needed, because the contents were usually of a highly specialized nature. Were the translators themselves specialists in the field in which they translated? This was indeed often the case. Hunayn ibn Ishaq, the translator mentioned before, was a physician himself. The same is true of many others, for instance Thabit ibn Qurra (d. 901 A. D.), who besides being a physician was also a well-known mathematician and philosopher and translated many works in all these fields.

It might surprise the modern reader that many of the mediaeval Arabic translators were not native speakers of Arabic. Very often they were Christians whose native language was Syriac. Hunayn ibn Ishaq was probably bilingual, coming from a region where both Syriac and Arabic were spoken. Thabit ibn Qurra came from Harran, the old center of the Sabian religion, where Syriac was spoken. He is reported to have been a man of exceptional linguistic talents and was especially for that reason invited to come to Baghdad by Muhammad ibn Musa al-Munağğim, one of the “Banu Musa”. They were a family of well-known amateurs of science who stimulated translation activity by maintaining several famous translators, including Hunayn ibn Ishaq and Thabit ibn Qurra, at a cost of 500 gold dinars a month.

How the translators managed to acquire sufficient knowledge of Greek is not always known. It is told that Hunayn ibn Ishaq was forced to leave the medical school in Baghdad because he had annoyed his teacher by asking too many questions in class. He then went to Byzantium, where he acquired his knowledge of Greek. On returning to Baghdad he started his career as a translator. Reports of the way in which knowledge of a foreign language was

acquired, however, are not often given.

The kinds of auxiliary material which the translators had at their disposal is a question of some interest. Did they use dictionaries or vocabularies with lists of technical terms? It is possible that they existed, but no mention is made of them and none have come down to us. If they did exist, however, their result has not been that the translation vocabulary became standardized. The translation of technical terms as well as of other parts of the foreign vocabulary sometimes differs greatly from one translator to the other. Among the translators different schools with their own specific vocabulary can be discerned. Translation activity was often organized, and pupils trained among a certain group of translators naturally adopted the methods of their masters. Many translators worked together at the “House of Wisdom”, a scientific institute founded in Baghdad by the caliph al-Ma'mun.

Their methods

The first problem the Arab translators had to solve was how to obtain a more or less reliable text which could serve as a basis for their translation. We possess an account of the method that was followed for this by Hunayn ibn Ishaq himself, indicating that the editorial “textcritical” method of the old translators did not differ greatly from that of modern scholars. He collected as many different manuscripts of the text he intended to translate as was possible, then he collated them to establish the text and when he had reconstructed it as much as he could he translated it. He usually translated first into Syriac and then from Syriac into Arabic. Translating first into Syriac was a common practice among translators whose mother tongue was Syriac. Syriac, although a Semitic language, had in the course of centuries of contact with Hellenistic culture adopted many Greek idioms. That may also have contributed to the adoption of this procedure, as Syriac must have been a helpful intermediary in the process of rendering Greek into the completely different Arabic idiom. Often, too, it was at the request of Syriac-speaking clients that the Syriac translations were made.

The different principles followed in translating and the way in which the result were

appreciated are described by the 14th century scholar as-Safadi (in his work *al-Ghayth al-Musağğam*) :

“There are two methods of translation. One is the method of Yuhanna ibn al-Bitriq, ibn Na’ima al-Himsi and others. According to this method the translator looks at each of the Greek words separately and sees which meaning it has, and he then substitutes for it an Arabic word with the same meaning. Then he goes on to the next word until the whole text is translated. This is a bad method for two reasons: first, it is not always possible to find a corresponding Arabic word for every Greek word, and thus many Greek words are lost during the translation process. Second, the peculiarities of syntax and phrase building are not exactly the same from one language to another, and moreover, mistakes occur because of the frequent use of metaphors in every language.

The other method is that of Hunaym ibn Ishaq, al-Gawhari and others. According to this method the translator looks at the whole sentence and tries to grasp its meaning, and he then substitutes for it a corresponding sentence with the same meaning in the other language without bothering as to whether the words correspond with each other as such. This is a better method, and this is why the books translated by Hunayn ibn Ishaq do not need correcting except those on mathematical subjects, because he did not master this science. The books on medicine, logic, natural science, and metaphysics which he translated do not need correcting, but his translation of Euclid has been corrected by Thabit ibn Qurra, just like that of the *Almagest* and the works that are usually studied between those two books.

Their approach

To keep the style of the book being translated intact, and to choose words with the same connotation for the reader of the translation as for the reader of the original text are important problems confronting modern translators. The first problem becomes more difficult as the

structural difference between the language concerned increases. The second becomes more difficult as the cultures using those languages diverge. Of course the problems are most evident in the translation of poetry, which was indeed impossible in the opinion of Arab writers (as in that of many people): “Poetry”, says Ğahiz (d. 868 A. D.), “is untranslatable and should be left untranslated, if it is translated the poetic form disintegrates, the metre disappears and everything that made the poem beautiful and admirable is lost. With prose it is a different question”. Ğahiz is talking here about Arabic poetry, which he considers the only poetry worthy of that name in the world.

This problem is, of course, less urgent in the translation of scientific literature, but even there we appreciate a translator’s ability to give us an accurate impression of the prose composed by the original author. Did mediaeval Arab scholars consider this important? We might see whether the just-quoted Ğahiz, who expresses his views on translation in his *Book of Animals*, has anything to say on the subject. The fact, by the way, that translators are treated in a *Book of Animals* should not be taken to mean that Ğahiz had an unfavourable opinion of the members of this profession. It merely results from his habit of treating many different subjects together. It turns out that Ğahiz does not mention this aspect of translation at all, although the demands he put upon translators are rather severe. A good translator, he says must be of the same intellectual level as the author of the original text and his knowledge of the subject concerned should be equally profound. There is no other way he can be trusted not to misinterpret his text, and which guarantees that none of the subtleties of the original are lost in his translation.

A translator, he continues, should be just as well versed in the language from which he translates as in that into which he translates. People who mix two languages in their speech are not to be trusted as translators, because they probably master neither of them completely.

None of Ğahiz strict criteria concerns the rendering of the original’s style. They all deal with the transmission of the contents, although the correct style of the resulting Arabic text was an important point to Ğahiz. Concern with the quality of translation thus seems to be of practical rather than of literary nature, as is further shown by the fact that many

translators did not even come up to the Ġahiz standard of translation into impeccable Arabic. The anonymous translator of Aristotle's zoology, for instance, frequently neglects the rules of classical Arabic (the literary language of all Arabs up to our day, as opposed to the everyday colloquial which varies greatly from one country to another and which every Arab learns as his mother tongue). This practical approach—to give secondary importance to matters of style and to be exclusively interested in transmission of information—is further illustrated by the fact that translations were if necessary corrected by specialists in the subject treated, but not by people with a good knowledge of Arabic composition. Although translators usually tried to follow the original text as closely as possible, they sometimes added bits of information from their own knowledge, like the translator who adds the giraffe to a list of animals endowed with speed as a means to save themselves. And on one particular point the translators, if they were Christians, always felt obliged to deviate from the Greek text, namely wherever Greek deities were mentioned. These traces of paganism were eliminated and substituted by references more in accordance with their own beliefs.

Translation problems

Translation problems in a narrower sense, then and now, fall roughly into three categories: a) understanding the contents of the original (If one did not understand them what did one do?); b) adequate transmission of the contents (Did there exist a scientific vocabulary in Arabic which the translators could use or did they have to create it? Was the Arabic vocabulary on the whole always appropriate for the rendering of Greek words and idioms?); c) linguistic problems, such as the different structures of the languages dealt with.

As to a), this is of course the basic problem of every translator. It occurs in two different forms, namely the case of the translator who realizes his lack of understanding of a passage he is dealing with and the other who does not. The unwittingly uninformed translator passes the problem on to his readers. In the first case, however, there are several possible remedies: help can be obtained, either from a specialist in the field to which the text belongs (if the problem is one of technical understanding) or from someone better versed in

the language concerned (if it is a matter of interpretation of the foreign idiom). Another possibility is to incorporate a passage without translating it, and a third, rather objectionable solution is to leave it out altogether.

Traces can be found of all these predicaments in mediaeval Arabic translation. Cases where the translator misunderstood his text and rendered it so that it does not make sense abound in translation made by less trustworthy translators, as, for instance, the anonymous translator of Aristotle's zoological works, who renders "the size of their (sc. the deers') horns and their numerous branches" as "their (sc. the deers') size and the numerous branches of their horns", and misread a Greek verb meaning "to expel" as another meaning "to concoct", which makes no sense in the context.

Whether specialists were consulted when occasional difficulties about the meaning of technical passages occurred is nowhere explicitly stated. Translations were, however, often corrected by specialists and since those specialists (like Thabit ibn Qurra, the mathematician, who revised Hunayn ibn Ishaq's mathematical translations) were often colleagues of the translators it seems likely that the texts were revised with the consent of the translator, if not at his request.

It is very well possible that translators often sought help from people with more knowledge of the foreign idiom, but help obtained in this way usually leaves no traces in a translation. An exception is seen where a translator renders a Greek word having two different meanings by two correspondingly different Arabic words, even though it is fairly evident which meaning applies in the case. This might be taken as an indication that he scrupulously took down information obtained from somebody else.

Arab translators never adopted the solution of incorporating whole passages without translating them. It was, however, often done with isolated words, as will be seen later on.

Examples of a translator omitting a whole passage abound in bad translations, although it is not always clear whether the difficulty of the text or the wish to abbreviate it was the reason for the omission. However bad translators were not the only ones who sometimes left out parts of the original text.

Hunayn ibn Ishaq gives a good justification for his suppression of a certain paragraph:

“In the next passage Galen quotes Aristophanes. The Greek manuscript from which I translated this work into Syriac, however, contained so many mistakes that I would never have understood it if I had not been familiar with Galen’s Greek and had known most of his ideas from other works of his. I am not familiar with the language of Aristophanes however, and that is why I did not understand the quotation very well and decided to leave it out altogether. Another reason to do so was that when I read it I found that it added nothing to what Galen had already said, and I thought it better to spend no more time on it and to go on with more useful things”.

The problems which come under b), transmission problems, are rather interesting. They are the same problems which today’s translators of technical and scientific texts have to solve. When the mediaeval Arab translators started to work there did not yet exist an Arabic terminology which corresponded with that of Greek science. They had, therefore, to create it themselves. The result of their efforts was an all-round philosophical and scientific vocabulary which formed an adequate means of expression for Muslim scholarship. New terms were coined in different ways. The most frequent practice was to create them in a way which was analogous to their derivation in Greek: the Arabic word for logic, *mantiq*, is related to the verb “to speak” just as in Greek. Another method was to take over Greek terms, either incorporating them completely in the Arabic declension system (as was done with such words as “philosophy”, *falsafa* in Arabic) or simply transcribing them and using them as such. The latter method was often followed for the names of unknown plants and animals, as is common practice in every language. That is how Arabic camels and jerboas (a kind of mice) found their way into English.

Besides the difficulties presented by technical terms there was the general problem of conveying the meaning of Greek words as precisely as possible even when no exactly corresponding Arabic word was available. Some translators in this case resorted to using two or more Arabic words instead of one: the Greek word for “upbringing” which is related to the word for “food” is translated into Arabic as “occupying oneself with food and taking care of one’s offspring”. Resorting to this device, however, was a sign of bad translatorship.

Hunayn hardly ever needed it. The same is true of another method employed to render the meaning of Greek sentences as clearly as possible, namely translating in a very circumlocutory, often pleonastic way. The many words used on these occasions contribute nothing to the understanding of the text. Paraphrasing is another means used to escape from the difficulties presented by the foreign idiom. The results are often fairly satisfactory since they make the text easier to understand for the Arab reader.

The problems which fall under c), linguistic problems, are rather complicated if one of the languages in question belongs to the Indo-European and the other to the Semitic group. Some obvious difficulties confront the translator, for example the Arabic verb which uses only two tenses, the past tense for every completed action and the present for all others including future actions. In Greek, on the other hand, a number of tenses exists. Is it possible to render them in Arabic so that nothing of the subtlety of the Greek is lost? Usually not, but the contents of the texts do not suffer greatly from this as regards their meaning. It is only the elegance of the original's style which suffers. If, for instance, three different tenses and the past participle as well, of the verb "to say" are all rendered by the same Arabic form, the prose looks rather monotonous as compared with the original. Arabic has of course its own stylistic means to avoid such monotony, but in translations they do not get much chance. Translation in—and also from—Arabic presents numerous problems of this kind. One more must suffice as an illustration: the fact that in Arabic, as opposed to Indo-European languages, no composite nouns or verbs exist. Only a translator with a very wide knowledge of the Arabic vocabulary can avoid using such periphrasing translations as "without change and modification" for "unchanging", "not having an end" for "endless", "subject to sight" for "visible" and so on.

Conclusion

The work of the Arab translators of the 9th century was not in vain. In the following centuries Muslim science benefited greatly from their efforts to make Greek science accessible to the Arabs and to create an adequate scientific vocabulary in Arabic. Mediaeval Europe also

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owed its first acquaintance with Greek science and philosophy to the Arab translators, because the Arabic texts were translated into Latin before the Greek texts found their way into European centers of learning. Interest in these old translations has not ended even in our day. They are widely studied by modern scholars who hope to find in them additional information about the Greek texts, since the translations have often preserved the Greek text at an earlier stage than the Greek manuscripts which have come down to us. Other useful material which the translation might yield is knowledge of the philosophical and scientific vocabulary and other lexicological details. Finally, knowledge of the books that were studied by Arab scholars gives us a better idea of what they knew and though important, and helps us to come to a better understanding of their own scientific writings.

Source : *Babel*, vol. 22, n° 1, 1976, pp. 15-20.