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MEDIEVAL TRANSLATORS INTO ARABIC–

SCRIBES OR INTERPRETERS?

There is a common perception that translation, as a means of transmission of culture and knowledge, is a form of appropriation or recovery, the success, or otherwise, of which depends on the competence of the translator. Yet, any historical reading of translation indicates a diversity of views: Some viewed translation as subversive and fundamentally flawed, being performed by 'interpreters' who would adapt the source text for their own purposes. The debate which surrounded the translation of Greek philosophy into Arabic in the early Middle Ages provides one of the most eloquent exemplifications of this.

It is a well documented fact that translation into Arabic was a key factor in transmitting Greek learning, to the Arabo-Muslim world in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, and subsequently to Medieval Europe, via the medium of translation from Arabic, and my concern here is with the first stage of this transmission. (For a detailed analysis of the factors underpinning this translation movement see Gutas 1998.) There is perhaps less understanding as to what this involved in terms of exegesis and re-writing, partly due to the fact that it is not always possible to distinguish between translations of Greek works and commentaries, and more independent elaborations of Greek concepts, which could not be explained simply in terms of the 'lexicalisation' of hitherto unknown ideas.

Textual analysis of Medieval Arabic translations, with reference to their Greek or Syriac originals, indicates how Greek concepts were incorporated into the Arabo-Muslim system of thought, and that the resources of the Arabic language were mobilised in order to accommodate these 'foreign' abstractions. Works that were written in Arabic after the advent of translation included technical terms and phrases which had been coined by the translators. Assessments of translations, whether these were made by contemporary observers or critics, later translators, or subsequently reported by historiographers, can be indicative of how the notion of translation was viewed at the time, essentially as to whether emphasis was placed on elegance of the Arabic text, or on faithfulness to the original.

Medieval (or more precisely classical) Arabic translators and revisors did refer to

the parameters which influenced the way in which they translated. For instance the many practical problems which they faced were enumerated by Hunayn Ibn IsHaq (194H-260H - 809/873), one of the most productive and best known of the translators from Greek and Syriac into Arabic. In his *Risala*, an index of translations of the Galenic corpus, which refers to the potential unreliability of source manuscripts, and the requirements of the commissioner of the translation as regards clarity and explicitness, Hunayn positions himself in relation to translations he was asked to revise, and in relation to source texts he was comparing in order to establish a complete and reliable manuscript. The translators were constrained in their transmission of texts not only by the nature and status of the individual works (a factor that is emphasised , as shown later in this paper, by certain commentators), but also by the degree of codification of the Arabic language. These factors were bound to affect the way translation was performed and, as will be shown later, they were also to shape the way translation and its practitioners were viewed by others. This is illustrated by Hunayn's comments, as reported by the thirteenth century historiographer Ibn Abii USaybiᶜa. Hunayn complained about detractors whose criticisms led to the wrath of the caliph al-Mutawakkil, a subsequent jail sentence and the loss of Hunayn's library, and I quote:

> *"They could see that I was superior to them by virtue of my science, my work and my translation for them of great sciences, from languages they did not master and did not know, and this with most eloquence,* [Hunayn used the term *"FaSaaHa"*, which refers to discursive competence which is beyond the application of linguistic conventions] *without any errors in the eyes of the grammarians and rhetoricians who are well versed in the rules of syntax, and who could not find any fault, flexion or meaning which was incorrect, and all this was in the most pleasant and limpid style which can be understood by the non-expert in the field of medical science or by he who does not know anything of the ways of philosophy."* (See Ibn Abii USaybiᶜa 1882:190, my translation).

Linguistic constraints are very much to the foreground in this, together with pragmatic considerations of intelligibility and accessibility for the reader. But it must be noted that the standards that were used for the production of translations did not

necessarily match those applied when the translations were reviewed and evaluated. I have discussed elsewhere the construction of translation which emphasises the gap between the practitioner and the observer (Salama-Carr 1997).

The study of Arabic historiographies also provides valuable information on the way translation was viewed. In them translation was perceived as a straightforward exercise, notwithstanding the fact that the degree of complexity was a function of the nature of the source text. Translation was represented as the medium through which knowledge was transmitted, and the translator's role was that of the guardian and scribe. One example of this assimilation of the translators' role with that of the scribes is to be seen in a tenth century treatise by Ibn Juljul (1955:69).

The statement, reported by al-tawHiidii (died c.1023), which was made by the logician and translator Matta Ibn Yunuus (died 328H/940) in an encounter with the philologist Abuu saᶜiid al-siraafii (c.290H-368H/903-978), confirms this view:

> *"The Greeks have perished together with their language, but translation was able to safeguard the elements of knowledge, restore concepts and render truth faithfully."*

However, al-siraafii, who represented the Grammarians in their opposition to Logic, replied:

> *"If we accept that the translation was true and not erroneous, that it tended to redress the text rather than distort it ..."*

al-Siraāfii then went on to question translation as a means of transfer. (See al-tawHiidii 1939:67-68, my translation).

Two main views of translation are evident in the debate. In one case, translation was viewed as *legitimate appropriation*, through transcoding or text exegesis, and in the other translation was regarded as *manipulation*, in both linguistic and conceptual terms, involving literality but also innovation. I am aware that this tentative classification is overloaded with the value attached to these terms in contemporary translation discourse.

It can certainly be argued that the first category, *translation as legitimate appropriation*, is in line with the medieval tradition wherein the distinction between translation and re-writing was blurred. In the context of Muslim philosophy, the appropriation of truth became the appropriation of concepts and tools which could reinforce revealed truth. Though prevalent amongst medieval translators, and evident in

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Arabic historiographies, this view of translation was in conflict with that held by grammarians amongst others, as illustrated above.

The thirteenth century scholar Ibn Khallikaan reminded the reader that few would have benefited from Greek works had it not been for their Arabization. In the ninth century translation was no longer targetted at the individual scholar, as it had been at the time of the early translations of Aristotelian texts into Syriac. It now addressed a wider audience, assuming a didactic dimension in which there was an attempt to make the work of the philosophers more accessible. Nevertheless this objective was not always achieved, Avicenna being said to have lamented the opacity of certain of the Arabic translations of Aristotelian texts, which conjures up the image of the translator as scribe whose literalist approach obscured the original message. The scribe/interpreter dichotomy is particularly clear in a much quoted discussion of al-Safadii's (See al-ᶜAamilii 1380/1961), when he compares the work of the early translators, who painstakingly attempted word for word translation, with that of Hunayn Ibn IsHaq, amongst others, who went beyond word meaning when translating. Such a sweeping distinction should however be interpreted in the light of Gutas' discussion, who rejects the clear cut distinction between a *receptive* stage and a *creative* stage in the translation movement (Gutas 1998: 142-143).

The translator was seen to be more successful if he clarified and disambiguated with a preface or commentary, and the diversity of views on translation is further illustrated not only by the variation in medieval writings in the terms which were used to refer to the process of translation, but also by the fact that the distinction between translation in its narrow commonly understood sense, and the explicative commentary which the translators added, was not always explicit. In the translators prefatory writings, the boundary between translations and their appended commentaries, which were referred to as *MukhtaSir* or *Talakhus* (summary), is sometimes blurred. The substantive *Naql*, which was used to refer to translation conveys the idea of transfer, but *Tafsiir*, which is associated with interpretation and exegesis, was also commonly used. However translations could still be supplemented with explanations of particularly difficult and obscure passages. Hunayn states in the *Risala* that he had added an explanatory appendix to his translation into Syriac of Hippocrates' *Oath*. A similar terminological diversity is also encountered in Arabic historiographies, where the verbs *Naqal* and *Tarjima* are used to refer to translation, together with other verbs such as *SharaHa* (to explain and

expound), and *Fassara* (to interpret). Another term that is found in the compilations of al-QifTii and Ibn Khallikaan, two thirteenth century historiographers, is *taᶜriib* (arabicization).

To infer from the use of certain words that translation was seen in a specific way may be an exaggerated projection of our own preconceptions. However, whilst leaving aside the actual terms used to refer to translation activities, examination of the comments on their work which the translators made, for instance in their introductory prefaces, sheds light on what they themselves saw to be crucial elements. Mastery of the target language is emphasised, some of the early translations being described as *radii'a* or *khabitha* (poor) - as the translator's Arabic was not up to the task. But the importance of the subject matter is not forgotten. In a tenth century edition of the Arabic translation of *The Sophistic*, the editor and revisor al-Hasan Ibn Suwar writes that *"YaHya* [the translator] *had translated this treatise prior to commenting it, which explains the problems of comprehension as he did not grasp the meaning and had followed the Syriac language in his translation".* (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, ff.327v-380v).

The view that translation constituted a form of *subversion* was held by some who did not see translation to be at all positive or enriching. Certain commentators deplored what they saw as the pernicious effects that translation had on concepts and ideas, and they lamented the contortions which the translators sometimes imposed on the structure of Arabic. A view of translation was held in which the meaning of a text was further distorted at each successive stage of its transmission, whether it be from Greek to Syriac, Syriac to Arabic, or simply through successive Arabic re-translations. One is reminded of Douglas Robinsons' statement about 'orthodox translators' in the Middle Ages, who feared "divine wrath or cosmic dissolution if they altered so much as a single letter in the texts they were translating." (Robinson xiii).

al-JāaHiZ, the ninth century essayist who was associated with the religious and philosophical movement of Muᶜtazilism, wrote a damning account of translation and of the failings of translators in his *Kitāab al-Hayawaān* (The Book of Animals). He bases his argument on practical problems, such as lack of subject knowledge and poor writing skills on the part of the translators, and on the notion of mutual interference between languages. It is however the very notion of translation that is taken to task in this essay. As suggested by Badawi (1968), al-JaaHiZ may have been concerned by the massive

importation of alien concepts into the culture. His reservations almost became prohibitions if the source text was of a religious nature, when translation was seen as tantamount to tampering with the word of God. Translation can only be a subsidiary discourse as *"Could Ibn-al-BiTriiq, Ibn Naᶜima, Abuu Qurra, Ibn Fihr, Ibn Wahilii or Ibn al-Muqaffaᶜ ever be equal to Aristotle?"* He exclaims, adding: *"Has Khaalid ever equalled Plato?."* A clear hierarchy is established between the original source author and his translator, and al-JaaHiZ also defines a hierarchy of texts, the difficulty of the task of translation being on an incremental scale which ranges from scientific texts to poetical ones, whilst the translation of theological works is regarded as being highly dangerous.

Because *Falsafa*, as an encyclopedic system of knowledge, was not simply the importation of Greek concepts into the Arabo-Muslim system of thought, but combined translations with commentaries and personal reflections, it was regarded as a challenge to the grammarians. Translation was viewed as a disruptive agent, and certainly a fallible one which did violence to the Arabic language. *"What you know only through translation"* is how al-Siraafii dismisses Matta's knowledge in the discussion between the two scholars which was mentioned above.

This debate is underpinned by the perception of translation as a distortive process, both at the level of concepts which were subject to manipulation by the translator and by successive revisers, and at the level of the Arabic language, where translation was seen as imposing alien systems of thought. Had it remained simple transmission, or had it remained marginal, this process might have been more acceptable, but the translated texts and their commentaries were in fact integrated into the philosophical outlook as a whole. We know that the selection of texts to translate, that is the near totality of the Hippocratic and Galenic Corpus and the works of Aristotle and his early commentators, was paralleled by the selective use made by authors such as Ibn Siinaa (Avicenna) in the eleventh century, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in the twelfth, of Aristotelian texts, for the purpose of political philosophy as much as for commenting on Aristotle (Butterworth 24).

To point out that there is a correspondence between the way translation is viewed by a given community, and with the potential challenge which translation may pose to that same community could be stating the obvious. Translation was regarded as legitimate appropriation, and encouraged, if it represented access to learning and could be used to reinforce a philosophical or ideological stance, but if translations were seen to challenge

orthodox views, with the introduction of new concepts, the process was seen in a rather different light, and was subject to close scrutiny. As a consequence, a multi-faceted picture of the translators emerges: Through their own prefatory writing, and more explicitly through the eyes of observers, they would be portrayed as scribes, whose painstaking faithfulness would be praised or criticised. Alternatively, their role would be construed as that of interpreters, whose creative input would be applied, and whose exegesis could be distortive and manipulative.

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