

**من الظل إلى الجوهر: الإخفاق الثقافي في ترجمة  
الأمثال الإنجليزية إلى العربية**

**From Shadow to Substance: Cultural  
Failure in Translating  
English Proverbs into Arabic**

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## الملخص

تقيم هذه الورقة البحثية المشكلات التي تواجه ترجمة الأمثال الإنجليزية ذات الطابع الثقافي والدلالات المجازية إلى اللغة العربية، وذلك من خلال معالجة الفجوة بين معناها الحرفي ودلالاتها الوظيفية. حيث يقارن الباحث ويناقش ثلاثة نماذج من الأمثال الإنجليزية المترجمة إلى العربية من قِبل محمد عطية، وعمر عثمان جبق، والمورد (٢٠٠٢) مستندا في نقاشه وتحليله للترجمات الثلاث على مفهوم التكافؤ الشكلي (يوجين نايدا، ١٩٦٤)، ومفاهيم الترجمة الدلالية (نيومارك، ١٩٨٨)، بالإضافة إلى نظرية فينوتي حول التوطين مقابل التغريب (١٩٩٥). وقد أظهرت نتائج تحليل الأمثال الإنجليزية المختارة ميلا واضحا لدى المترجمين إلى اتباع التكافؤ الشكلي والترجمة الحرفية بدلا من نقل المعنى الضمني للمثل والدرس الأخلاقي المرافق له. حيث تكشف النتائج الكمية عن معدل نجاح منخفض لدى الجميع حين يحقق محمد عطية نسبة ٠٪، بينما يحقق كل من المورد وعمر عثمان جبق نسبة ١٠٪. وهذه النسبة المتدنية تثبت بلاشك الاخفاق في تحويل الاستعارة ذات الخصوصية الثقافية إلى تعبير عربي اصيل. كما تؤكد النتائج التجريبية كذلك الفرضية القائلة بأن اتباع الترجمة الحرفية والاكتفاء بالتكافؤ الشكلي تُضعف الوظيفة البلاغية للمثل وتقلل من النكهة الثقافية الضرورية للجمهور المستهدف. وتستنتج هذه الدراسة في النهاية أن التحول نحو الترجمة التفسيرية ضروري في ترجمات الأمثال من أجل الحفاظ على القوة البراغمية والدلالات الأخلاقية للنص الأصلي.

## Abstract

Translating English proverbs into Arabic is often unsuccessful chiefly because the majority of translators concentrate on the lexical meaning at the expense of the cultural function. Using a word-for-word method simply fails to bridge the gap between the literal text and the actual message. To prove this point, translations from Muhammed Attia, Omar Othman Jabaq, and Al-Mawrid (2002) are examined through the lens of Nida's theory of equivalence, Newmark's semantic translation, and Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization.

The analysis brings to light a typical mistake: translators frequently depend on semantic translation and formal equivalence when they should be uncovering the hidden moral of the proverb. The data provides solid evidence of this problem, as the success rate drops to 0% for Attia and just 10% for Al-Mawrid and Jabaq. These low scores indicate that a literal, lexical treatment of the text prevents metaphors from sounding natural in Arabic.

The findings also show that when the emphasis is strictly on literal meaning, the proverb's impact and cultural flavor are stripped away. To keep the original moral weight of the proverb, the translator must adopt an interpretive approach where the 'sense' of the proverb is given priority over its linguistic form. Making this shift is essential if the message is to function naturally to the target audience.

## SECTION ONE

### 1. Introduction

Proverbs constitute the most significant and influential expression in any language. They summarize wisdom, moral values, and social beliefs in symbolic patterns of language which are difficult to translate literally. They are linguistic expressions which reflect the experience and the mentality of the people who created them. Translators attempt to translate them into different languages along with maintaining their cultural value and making sure that they are still comprehensible and effective in the target language. Because proverbs derive from particular cultural and historical backgrounds, they seldom have direct equivalents in other languages. The rhythm, wordplay, and metaphorical density of a proverb are impossible to render literally, and if such rendering is done, the meaning can be misleading. A proverb can contain figurative meaning that is based on cultural imagery which is not always found in a different linguistic community. For example, an owl represents wisdom in English, but in Arabic cultures it is associated with pessimism or a bad omen. This contrast demonstrates how symbolic meaning is closely linked to culture, and how those associations can be misinterpreted if they are not taken into account in translation.

A solution to this issue is offered by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) under the term equivalence. They consider equivalence as cases “*where languages describe the same situation by different stylistic or structural means*” (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995, p. 90). As such, they note that “*a translator must sometimes abandon the literal translation of an expression in order to preserve its meaning and effect in the target language*” (ibid., p. 84). So, the translator's role is also one of cultural mediation, not linguistic substitution alone. This perspective agrees with that of Nida as he explains that “*the best translation does not sound like a translation*” (Nida, 1964, p.166). His dynamic equivalence model uses the notion that translation must be “*the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in meaning and second in style*” ((ibid. p. 12).

Newmark (1988) further develops this communicative focus when suggesting that “*in a communicative translation a communicative*



*translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original*" (Newmark, 1988, p. 39) He further underlines that "*translation is not a science, but a skill, an art, and a matter of taste*" (ibid., p. 7), because of the mediating role of the translator in culturally coded texts.

Contrarily, Venuti (1995) criticizes the urge to "*transform culture's otherness by making it non-cultural,*" because "*domestication entails an ethnocentric reduction of the*

*foreign text to target-language cultural values*" (Venuti, 1995, p. 20). he identifies foreignization as a strategy in which "*signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language*" (ibid., p. 15).

Maguire and Delpino (2015) address this concern in their analysis explaining that literal translation "fails to communicate the contextual force of culturally loaded expressions" (Maguire and Delpino 2015, 72). Translators should not only translate words so people can understand them. They must also act as cultural mediators being faithful to the original culture.

Translators must have thorough knowledge of both source and target language culture so as to render the intended meaning. As proverbs are mostly culture-specific, they cannot be translated literally. Experts like Nida, Newmark, and Venuti have created theories showing the difficulty of such a job. They stress the central role of formal structure, communicative function and cultural meaning, as well as the role of the translator as an active mediator who has to select an appropriate strategy to maintain the full meaning and impact of an expression.

### 1.1. Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that:

1. In translating English culturally proverbs with metaphorical structures into Arabic, translators will show a significant bias toward Formal Equivalence (Nida, 1964) or Semantic Translation (Newmark, 1988). The outcome is therefore likely to be a high occurrence of literal translation, where form is more prioritized than inherent cultural meaning.
2. The dominant reliance on literal translation, or Formal Equivalence, shows a failure to achieve functional equivalence and indicates a rejection of Venuti's (1995) domestication strategy. It also



diminishes the proverb's rhetorical function and the embedded cultural "flavor" for the Arabic audience.

## 1.2. Objectives

Research aims at:

1. investigating the criteria and strategies adopted by three translators in rendering five selected English proverbs which the researcher defines as presenting a significant degree of cultural and linguistic difficulty;
2. analyzing five English proverbs and examine how far each version reproduces a matching rendering into Arabic by using an assessment of success based on Functional Equivalence of Nida, Newmark's Communicative/Semantic translation and Venuti's Domestication in the Arabic target text.

## 1.3. Limitations of the study

This study is limited to an investigation and evaluation of the translations of five English proverbs done by:

1. Mohammed Attia, (Hence-forth: MAT)
2. Omar Othman Jabaq, (Henceforth: OJB)
3. Al-Mawrid 2002, (Henceforth: MAD)

## 1.4. Model of Analysis

The fifteen proverb translations, consisting of (5 proverbs x 3 translators), fall into three main categories of Nida, Newmark, and Venuti. This categorization evaluates the quality of "matching rendering" done by each of the three translators as:

1. Literal / Formal: Formal Equivalence of Nida and Semantic Translation of Newmark are considered a failure because the resulting Arabic text is unidiomatic, lacks cultural resonance, and sacrifices the proverb's moral lesson.



2. Functional Paraphrase: Dynamic equivalence of Nida or communicative translation of Newmark are considered partial successes because even if they achieve functional transfer as they succeed to convey the core meaning of the proverb, they fail to provide a true "matching rendering". The result is a descriptive phrase rather than a recognized idiomatic equivalent.
3. Matchmaking Rendering: Domestication of Venuti is considered full success because it employs an existing, culturally appropriate Arabic proverb, thus achieving ideal Dynamic Equivalence.

### 1.5. Procedures

The practical part of this study seeks to evaluate the quality of the Arabic translations of five selected English proverbs with emphasis on their cultural content and idiomatic expressions. Each of the proverbs is translated independently by three translators and then assessed by using an analytical model developed especially for this research, which is introduced in Section 1.4. The researcher, in the analysis, first, provides the origin of the proverb along with its moral lesson. Next, he makes an explanatory comment to show whether the translation of each proverb is able to convey the cultural specificity, figurative expression and keep the moral lesson. At the end, the findings of the analysis are summarized to check the correctness of the hypotheses set out in Section 1.1.



## SECTION TWO

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

#### 2.1. Introduction to the Analysis

This section addresses the task of evaluating three Arabic translations of five English proverbs. The analysis is conducted using a specific model designed for this task to demonstrate the extent to which each of the translations under evaluation succeeds or fails in adopting appropriate methods for translating proverbs loaded with cultural connotations and concepts. This section concludes by mentioning the advantages and disadvantages of each translation.

#### 2.2. Data Collection

Data consist of two parts:

- i) The original text: The corpus consists of five selected English proverbs.
- ii) The translated text: This includes three comparative Arabic translations of the five English proverbs produced by:

1. MAT 2. OJB 3. MAD

Regarding data selection, the researcher chose five English proverbs which are culturally specific, metaphorical, or exhibiting both features.

#### 2.3. The Analysis

##### 2.3.1.

ST: Catch not at the shadow and lose the substance.

MAT: لا تنشغل بالظل وتترك الجسم

OJB: لا تتعلق بالقشور وتنسى البذور

MAD: لا تتعلق بالظل خشية ان يفوتك الجسم



The saying originates from the ancient fable *The Dog and Its Reflection* (fifth century BCE), in which a dog, seeing its reflection in water, attempts to seize an illusory piece of meat and consequently loses the real one it is holding (Aesop n.d.). The proverbial phrase appeared in its earliest form in the eighteenth century as “*He chops at shadow and loses the substance*” before taking its final form in the nineteenth century. The underlying moral of the proverbial phrase is that one must not chase illusions at the expense of reality.

Literal translation is impossible for proverbs, since they are idiomatic and culturally specific. In this case, both MAT and MAD are formally correct and retain the same imagery of “shadow” versus “substance”. However, both versions lack the moral depth of the original proverb and stop at linguistic equivalence. The imagery “الظل والجسم” is not familiar in Arabic, which renders the translation unclear and non-proverbial.

OJB’s communicative translation “لا تتمسك بالقشور وتنسى البذور” is stylistically fluent and idiomatic but it misrepresents the core moral of the source proverb. It should be noted, however, that although the translation presents a contrast between superficiality and substance, the initial proverb does not primarily address appearance versus essence, nor does it focus on deception by outward illusion. Instead, its central point is that the ambition or desire for uncertain things may come at the cost of guaranteed benefits. The intended meaning is much closer to the Arabic proverb “القناعة كنز لا يفنى” or the common phrase “ضيع المضمون طمعا في الموهوم” as each of them stressing the worth of contentment and the risk of sacrificing certainty for mere possibility.

This is why even in form, none of the three translations succeeds in expressing the actual warning embodied in the English proverb.

### 2.3.٢.

ST: First catch your hare

MAT: صد الارنب اولاً

OJB: لا تسوّف

MAD: اقتنص ارنبك الوحشي اولاً

The expression originated from Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery* (1747) and gained popularity in the 19th century, reflecting the caution expressed by the French saying "*Il ne faut pas vendre la peau de l'ours avant de l'avoir tué*" ("Do not sell the bear's skin before you've killed the bear"), a proverb that conveys the principle that we should not assume outcomes before they have been confirmed (Lawless n.d.).

MAT and MAD both employ a literal translation strategy, preserving the original image of "catching a hare." MAD includes "الوحشي" ("wild"), which makes it unnecessarily confusing. Both varieties are linguistically clear, though they do not read like proverbial expressions in Arabic. The hare image has no idiomatic meaning; it becomes more of an instructional image and less a proverb. In emphasizing surface imagery and neglecting the pragmatic and moral significance, these translations lose their proverbial tone and cultural resonance.

OJB's "لا تسوّف" ("Don't procrastinate") is idiomatic and fluent in Arabic but misinterprets the main meaning. While the English proverb warns against premature action or taking success for granted before securing its means, "لا تسوّف" warns against delay. So, the message is the opposite of the pragmatic meaning; the point is quite empty and does not render the intended semantic meaning either. In the end, all three translations fail to convey the proverbial and cultural meaning of the original. The literal versions save the imagery but not the idiomatic substance, whereas the communicative version misunderstands the meaning altogether.

A better Arabic equivalent might be "يحضر المعلف قبل الحصان" or "لا تفرح" "بالولد قبل ولادته" which obviously convey the same message: You should never take success for granted before you secure it.

### 2.3.3.

ST. He who pays the piper calls the tune.

MAT: من يدفع للزمار يطلب اللحن الذي يعجبه

OJB: من يدفع لعازف المزمارة هو من ينتقي اللحن

MAD: من ينقد الزمار يستطيع ان يفرض عليه اللحن

The phrase is basically a metaphor: the one who gives the money to the musician (the piper) is the person who can choose which music should be played (the tune). Indirectly, it is talking about a single individual or a certain institution that supplies the money and, as a result, is entitled to making decisions over the way the work is carried out or having the ultimate authority. This is captured in the proverb. "He who pays the piper



calls the tune” (Manser, 2007). The saying dates back to the 1600s, with its first appearance in English literature, indicating that the idea of financial owners holding the power has been recognized for centuries. (Speake 2015,241).

This proverb teaches that the person who pays the money should make the decisions. However, the three translations failed to show this clearly. Both MAT and OJB translated the words literally, keeping the English image of the 'piper' (الزمار) and his 'tune.' This was a mistake because this specific image does not mean anything to an Arabic speaker. Instead of feeling like a natural Arabic saying, it felt like a strange, foreign sentence that lost its original power (Nida, 1964). Both translators failed to transform the original, culture-specific metaphor into a natural Arabic idiom.

MAD moves toward communicative translation, demonstrating partial domestication by using (ينقد) (pays cash) and (يفرض عليه اللحن) (imposes the tune), which captures the central lesson of dominance and control. However, the core issue is that the

literal piper image remains which prevents the proverb from being idiomatic in Arabic.

Paraphrastic domestication, which removes the foreign metaphor while keeping the ethical core intact, is the most effective approach according to Newmark's (1988) communicative orientation. The translation 'من يملك المال يملك القرار' (He who owns the money owns the decision) represents the best functional equivalent. This translation is not only a good compromise between clarity and moral depth but also it has the essential linguistic features of Arabic figures of speech. It is short, has a fixed syntax (من يملك ... يملك ...), and obtains its rhetorical power from the use of parallelism (المال) which is parallel to (القرار). This makes the proverb recognizable and acceptable as a genuine expression within the target culture.

#### 2.3.4.



ST. If you sing before breakfast, you will cry before night.

MAT: اذا غنيت قبل الفطور بكيت قبل المساء

OJB: الفرحة ما بتكمل

MAD: اذا غنيت قبل الفطور بكيت قبل المساء

The proverb was taken from ancient English folk wisdom and was passed down orally before being collected in written texts like Palsgrave (1530), Cotgrave (1611), and Kelly's *Scottish Proverbs* (1721) (Palsgrave 1530; Cotgrave 1611; Kelly 1721). This is the figurative meaning of the proverbs: Celebrate success too soon and despair will meet you, regret will come.

The moral lesson in this story is a cautionary wisdom that warns, not encouraging fate, but warning readers against tempting it, and warning of their own grief at the other end of the line. The translation of OJB (الفرحة (ما بتكمل) is also a basic failure in achieving communicative equivalence since the two expressions have a major functional incompatibility. The source proverb warns the speaker against celebrating too soon, and the Arabic translation is used as a descriptive illustration of happiness being fleeting.

This means that the central moral of the tale is lost, as the translator eliminates a powerful warning for a certain premature action which is needed. For this reason, although the Arabic phrase captures the strategy of domestication, its failure to maintain the main warning of the proverb makes the translation ineffective.

MAT's and MAD's versions: (إذا غنيت قبل الفطور بكيت قبل المساء) are similarly poor ways to represent the proverb. Their failure to take into account cultural blindness or the very nature of proverbial language reflects this failure as well. By relying strictly on the word-for-word translation, such translations fail to address the cultural context of the

imagery, and produce passages which are semantically acceptable but communicatively opaque: In Arabic culture, the phrase of "singing before breakfast" or "crying before night" lacks the concrete, idiomatic or proverbial force the original conveys, in which premature confidence results in future loss.

In addition, because the expressions produces sound like artificial remarks rather than inherited knowledge, they do not accomplish the principal function of the proverb as a conditional warning. They do not have the moral lesson cautioning against tempting fate through premature celebration.



An Arabic counterpart for the figurative meaning of this English proverb in this case is in the saying attributed to Imam Ali: “مَنْ اسْتَعْجَلَ بِشَيْءٍ قَبْلَ أَوَانِهِ” (الأمدي، ٢٠٠٧: ص ٤١٣) ”عوقب بفواته“ (ابن عبد ربه، ١٩٨٣: ج ٣، ص ٥٢) ”رَبَّ عَجَلَةَ تُعَقَّبُ رَيْثًا“.

### 2.3.٥.

ST: Any port in a storm.

MAD: عند العاصفة يُفزع الى اي مرفأ

MAT: عند العاصفة الجأ الى أي ميناء

OJB: أي مرفأ في العاصفة

The first known instance of the proverb can be found in John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749), where a character says: "*Pooh, says he, my dear, any port in a storm*" (Speake 2017, 12). The expression was used at that time to mean the closest safe harbour that a storm-beaten sailors would make for. However, the saying changed and is now used to simply denote the act of resorting to whichever means happen to be at one's disposal in a difficult situation, even if the means are not very attractive. In other words, it is often considered to be a more practical decision to take an available alternative in a difficult situation rather than to keep waiting for an ideal but unattainable option.

MAD (عند العاصفة يُفزع الى اي مرفأ) falls into the trap of paraphrastic description. Although it retains the sea-related imagery, the use of the verbal construction "يُفزع الى" turns the proverb into a procedural report of what one does in a crisis rather than a concise piece of inherited wisdom. Moreover, a proverb loses its power when it is too long. It fails to sound like a traditional saying and weakens the impact of the moral lesson.

MAT (عند العاصفة الجأ الى أي ميناء) makes a similar mistake by using the command "الجا" (resort to), which turns the proverb into a direct order. This is a problem because the original proverb is not meant to be personal

advice, but rather a general truth describing a situation where a person has no other choice. By imposing an imperative structure, the translation undermines the proverb's rule-like authority and fails to reproduce its universal moral logic.

OJB (أي مرفأ في العاصفة) represents the most severe mismatch. Through an extreme literal transfer that omits the verb, the resulting Arabic expression becomes grammatically incomplete and semantically not clear. It fails to convey the figurative meaning and cannot deliver the moral lesson that pragmatism should override idealism in times of crisis. The evidence clearly shows that the translation is not a functional proverb at all in Arabic.

In short, none of the three translated versions had a proverbial form, had a figurative meaning, or conveyed the moral lesson correctly; hence, all of them were mismatched. An Arabic equivalent that is both culturally and functionally appropriate can be found among Arabic maxims, such as "الضرورات تبيح المحظورات" (Necessities permit the forbidden). They reproduce the moral principle that a pragmatic necessity is above ideal considerations in cases of a crisis. This principle is very much a part of Arabic literary heritage and is supported by classical poetry expressing the same principle: إذا لم يكن إلا الأسيئة مركب / فلا رأي للمحمول إلا / رُكوبها (الكميت ٢٠٠٠ ص ٧١)

Relying on this kind of well, established cultural capital is what makes the translated proverb morally authoritative and figuratively meaningful. In summary, all three translations are mismatched because they were unsuccessful in conveying the proverbial form, figurative meaning, and the moral lesson.



## SECTION THREE

### CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation of the three Arabic translations of five English proverbs confirms the reliability of the study hypotheses regarding the difficulty of translating culturally specific and metaphorical proverbs. The study findings which support the reliability of the hypotheses are presented in a qualitative assessment of translation methods adopted by the translators and a quantitative summary of their performance.

The detailed data in Table A1 (Appendix A) show the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic failures of the three translations. The results prove a reliance on literal and foreignizing methods at the expense of figurative meaning and the moral lesson. A scoring system was used to see if the translations worked. As shown in Table A2, it was clear that finding the right match for these proverbs was very difficult. The numbers prove that literal translation methods do not work for these proverbs. They fail to keep the original metaphor, cultural meaning, or moral lesson.

The data shows that translators often followed the original words too closely. This is proven by the high number of literal translations found in Table A1. The translators consistently chose to focus on words rather than the cultural meaning. Because of this literal approach, the Arabic translations do not sound like real proverbs. These translations failed to work because they were not natural. The 0% success rate found in the data confirms the first hypothesis, which predicted that literal translation would be used too often.

The results also support the second hypothesis. The data shows quite explicitly that missing the cultural context of the proverb leads to losing its moral point. These two elements are linked so closely that a translator cannot convey the lesson without understanding the culture first. This explains why the literal approach failed so consistently in this study. The success percentages of 0% to 10% clearly indicate that the translators were unable to bridge the cultural gap between English and Arabic.

#### Recommendations for Further Studies:

- Future research to investigate paraphrastic and communicative methods to bridge the gap between English metaphorical structures and Arabic cultural frameworks;



- Further studies to examine whether total domestication can preserve the proverb's moral lesson more than partial adaptation.

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## Appendix A

Proverb	Translator	Metaphorical Transfer	Cultural Meaning	Moral Lesson	Overall Result
1	MAT	Literal / Opaque	Failed	Lost	Failure
	OJB	Domesticated	Partial Success	Lost	Partial Success
	MAD	Literal / Opaque	Failed	Lost	Failure
2	MAT	Literal / Alien	Failed	Lost	Failure
	OJB	Discarded	Failed	Lost	Failure
	MAD	Literal / Alien	Failed	Lost	Failure
3	MAT	Foreignized	Failed	Lost	Failure
	OJB	Foreignized	Failed	Lost	Failure
	MAD	Partial Adaption	Partial	Partial	Partial Success
4	MAT	Literal / Opaque	Failed	Lost	Failure
	OJB	Discarded	Failed	Weakened	Partial Success
	MAD	Literal / Opaque	Failed	Lost	Failure
5	MAT	Literal / Imperative	Failed	Lost	Failure
	OJB	Ungrammatical	Failed	Lost	Failure
	MAD	Descriptive	Failed	Lost	Failure

Table A1: Qualitative Assessment of Proverb Translations.



Evaluation of Arabic Translations of English Proverbs

Proverb	MAT	OJB	MAD
1	%	33%	%
2	%	%	%
3	%	%	50%
4	%	17%	%
5	%	%	%
Overall	%	10%	10%

Table A2: Comparative Success Rates