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Translating *Nineteen
Eighty-Four* into Arabic



Introduction

According to Larson, “[t]he important thing is for the translator to recognize the euphemistic nature of the source language expression and then translate with an appropriate and acceptable expression of the receptor language whether euphemistic or not” (116). If the translator chooses word-for-word translation, known as literal translation, then their voice disappears and their hands are bound to the original text, thus transforming the translator into a mere tool. However, the translator might decide on a sense-for-sense translation, which allows for their own literary talent and capacity for writing. Sense-for-sense translation might give better results for fiction, and particularly dystopias. This is because the worlds in the text are based on very specific cultural frames which might need to be adapted to convey a similar meaning in a different language. However, the culture and norms of any society force limitations, as some words might be offensive and others taboo.

This article considers the difficulties and consequences of translating George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) into Arabic due to linguistic and cultural factors. I will begin by demonstrating the reception of the novel across more than 14 countries in the Middle East. This is not an easy task because each country is under the influence of different regimes, so the reception was not uniform. However, establishing the controversies around the text and how it became used to political ends in some countries in the Middle East helps in understanding why a translation of the text into Arabic might be difficult. In the second part of the article, I will discuss two translations of Orwell’s text,

note the choices made by the translators, and consider the effects of omissions and euphemisms. I would like to note here that dystopia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* centres on the use of language and the ways this might function as mind control. Compromising the language by mistranslation might actually present exactly the kind of risk Orwell is warning about in the novel, as it shows how subtle shifts in words and intentions significantly distort meanings. This article will focus on demonstrating euphemism and to a lesser extent omission in Arabic translations, and the potential misreadings of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* these could produce.

The Reception of Orwell in the Middle East

One of the most significant reasons Orwell's novel gained popularity and broader circulation in the Middle East was because of an article written in 2007 by Saod Al-Omar called "1984: عن الرواية" which means "About the novel: 1984". The article offers a plot summary and explains major concepts in Orwell's work:

أيضاً كان لهذه الرواية تأثير كبير على اللغة الإنجليزية؛ فقد شاع استخدام العديد من المفردات التي ابتكرت (Thought Police - شرطة الفكر), (Room 101 - الغرفة 101), (Big Brother - الأخ الأكبر): في هذه الرواية مثل بل لقد درج استخدم (Newspeak - اللغة الجديدة), (Doublethink - التفكير المزدوج), (Orwellian - أورويلي) مصطلح كطريقة لوصف الحالات, أو المشاهد, أو الأفكار, أو طرق التحدث التي (Orwellian - أورويلي) مصطلح (Al-Omar 1). تشبه ما جاء في أعمال أورويل عموماً وهذه الرواية خصوصاً

The article introduces the Thought Police, Big Brother and other elements of Orwell's dystopic world to Arabic readers. A second, more scholarly, article was published in 2010 by the Egyptian journalist Abd Alrahman Radwan, who considered how Orwell suffered

from his own success, his innovative writing style and ability to stitch words together in a way that no Arabic translator has managed to fully grasp.

After the release of a translation in 2014, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* became more widely available and openly read by students. Ironically, Orwell's predictions about political control came true as Egyptian "thought police" started arresting college students for buying, reading, or talking about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. An article published in 2014, right after the arrests by Yousif Hosni, was titled: "The Big Brother of Egypt arrests the holders of "1984"". The article offered a one-sided argument against the government, which Hosni called "cowards and afraid of educated people" (2). This article shifted popular feeling from fear to hatred and defiance, and those targeted for the reading the book, college students, created slogans to defy the government, such as: "fight them with knowledge" and "you can never stop us from reading" (3).

In 2015 Waleed Khairy decided to write an article in the *Hayat*, the leading Egyptian political newspaper titled "*Nineteen Eighty-Four* Dictatorship (totalitarianism) has many faces" (1). In an article which nearly ended his career, Khairy shed light on a new aspect: censorship of the novel. Up until the second translation no-one mentioned the novel, but it seems that before 2012 few had read Orwell in Egypt. Conversely, the first translation was well circulated in Lebanon. It seems that after the wave of arrests in Egypt in 2014, more copies were sold, and most of the attempts to block the novel, whether by arresting the people or by closing lesser publication houses, backfired. People were now aware of the fear the novel inspired in the heart of the government. Orwell's *Nineteen*

Eighty-Four became one of the most sought-after books in the Middle East, and available in multiple translations. In subsequent years there have been further translations which are similar to those sampled in the next section of this article. After all, you can only change a language a few times before you break it by deviating too far from the original meaning.

Arabic Translations of Orwell's Work

A euphemism is the substitution of a word or idea that might offend some people due to their beliefs and culture, with another one that conveys the meaning without forcing opposition for being insensitive or blunt. Orwell himself used euphemism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* through wordplay in "Newspeak", a new political language which redeveloped recognizable words and phrases in English into standardized and simplified phrases approved by the fictional government in the text (Orwell 34). In political works in Arabic speaking countries, euphemism is common. This might be the consequence of religious values which limit the choices that translators can make. According to Al-Khanfar:

It also worths[!] mentioning that euphemism is widely used in Arabic prose and poetry. The main reference book of Arabs and Moslems i.e. the Holy Quran uses euphemism to avoid mentioning directly words or phrases that may cause offence or shame. (3)

In Arabic there are taboos which writers and translators alike tend to avoid. For example, the English word "terrorist" is translated into "مجاهد" (pronounced as "mo-ja-hed"), which

means a “Jihadist”, fighter of righteousness. This change happens because the writers who were reporting such words did not want to upset public opinion. Another example is the word “garbage collector”, which when translated into Arabic is “عامل نظافته” simply a “cleaner”. This shows how euphemism is used to escape social embarrassment and to shrug off negative opinion.

Politics can intensify euphemism. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge offer a good explanation on why this phenomenon happens in political discourse by claiming that “[e]uphemisms are alternatives to dispreferred expressions, and are used to avoid possible loss of face” (14). Translation, when combined with politics in the Middle East, often follows the course of propaganda leaflets that publishing houses in many states receive. For example, given the long-term and ongoing conflicts between Israel and other countries in the region, the name of the country undergoes a kind of dysphemism. Sometimes Israel is translated to “الكيان الصهيوني” (kayan Sohyoony) meaning “the Zionist entity”, and other times it is “الاحتلال الغاشم”¹ (Ihtilal Gashem) meaning “the barbaric occupation”. It is common for publishing houses to alter words according to political opinion. However, this compromises the integrity of translation and makes the process harder because few want the burden of attempting to translate political texts. As previously mentioned, Orwell’s novel foregrounds these issues, as history and politics are discussed through Newspeak.

Timothy Lynch, the director of the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice, took special interest in Orwell's political language. In "Doublespeak and the War on Terrorism", Lynch discusses what I consider the most confusing words to translate:

One of the central insights in Orwell's classic novel 1984 concerned the manipulative use of language, which he called "Newspeak" and "doublethink", and which we call "doublespeak" or "Orwellian". Orwell was alarmed by government propaganda and the seemingly rampant use of euphemisms and half-truths and he conveyed his discomfort with such tactics to generations of readers by using vivid examples in his novel. (Lynch 1)

But how can these "tactics" and Orwell's "discomfort" be translated into Arabic? The terms "Newspeak", "doublethink" and "Big Brother" proved to be a challenge for translators.

In the original text, Winston Smith reads party slogans at the Department of Records:

"Who controls the past," ran the Party slogan, "controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered. Whatever was true now was true from everlasting to everlasting. It was quite simple. All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory. "Reality control", they called it: in Newspeak, "doublethink". (Orwell 44)

In the first translation by Anwar Al-Shami, the text was translated as follows:

وأحد شعارات الحزب "من يسيطر على الحاضر يسيطر على الماضي". لكن الماضي , الذي هو في طبيعته قابل لاعادة النظر , لم يحدث ابدا ان يتغير. فما هو صحيح اليوم كان صحيحاً منذ أزل و سيبقى كذلك الى الابد. ان المر في منتهى البساطه, فكل المطلوب هو سلسله لا تنتهي من الانتصارات على ذاكرتك (Al-Shami 43). ""الاستحواذ على الحقيقه" او كما يسمونها في اللغه الجديده "التفكير الازدواجي

A direct English backtranslation would be:

One of the party's slogans is: "Whoever controls the present controls the past." But the past, which by its nature is reconsiderable, has never been changed. What is true today has been true since time immemorial and will remain so forever. The matter is very simple. All that is required is an endless series of victories over your memory, "obsessing over the truth," or as they call it in the new language, "doublethink."

In the second translation by Alhareth Al-Nabhan, the same passage reads:

يقول شعار الحزب: "من يتحكم بالماضي يتحكم بالمستقبل: و من يتحكم بالحاضر يتحكم بالماضي". ورغم هذا, فان الماضي.... على الرغم من طبيعته القابله للتغير لم يتغير قط. كل ما هو صحيح الان كان صحيحا منذ الازل و يضل صحيحا الى الابد! ولا يلزم لتحقيق ذلك الا سلسله من الانتصارات على ذاكرتك نفسها. يدعون هذا الامر باسم "التحكم بالواقع": و هو نفسه "التفكير المزدوج" في اللغه الجديده. عوى (Al-Nabhan 38). "الصوت الامر من جديد لكن على نحو اكثر لطفا بعض ال شيء" راحه

This passage, translated back into English, would look like this:

The party's slogan says: "He who controls the past controls the future: and he who controls the present controls the past." Despite this, the past... despite its changeable nature... has never changed. Everything that is true now was true

forever and will remain true forever! All that is needed to achieve this is a series of victories over your memory itself. They call this "reality control": which is the same as "doublethink" in New Parlance. The voice howled again, but in a somewhat gentler way. "Rest!"

Al-Shami tries to convey meaning using the sense-for-sense method of translation. The word "reality control" was changed into "الاستحواذ على الحقيقه" (al estehwath ala Al-hakikah) which is not only inaccurate, but also misleading. The word "الاستحواذ" (al-estehwath) is meant to substitute the word "control". However, "al-estehwath" means to possess, usurp or take something with power. This means that the people of Oceania were being forced to submit to the horror of the Inner Party. This translation cannot capture the idea of mind control in the novel. The other part of the term combines the word "reality" with "possession" (ala Al-hakikah), which implies "possession of the truth". If an English speaker reads the novel in its original language, then they might notice that "reality control" means shaping our conception of reality, rather than forcing it upon us. Changing this message by altering the symbolic theme of the mind control does not adequately convey Orwell's original meaning to an Arabic reader.

The second major term in the first translation was "Newspeak" which became "لغة جديدة" (logah jadeedah) which literally means "new language". In my opinion, it works as a poor substitute for the original term, because "Newspeak" did not only mean a new language but a new enforced mental schemata for the people of Oceania. "Newspeak" should have been translated into something similar to "new thought". To call it "new

language” misleads Arabic readers into believing that this idea was limited to communication or language, while it is much closer to a way of thinking.

The last term in the first translation is “doublethink”, which in the novel means saying one thing while believing in something else. In the first translation it became “التفكير الازدواجي” (al-tafkeer al-ezdewagee) which means “double thinking”. However, for an Arabic reader this would likely be taken to mean that someone has two ideas about something or is hesitant, just like the English term “second thoughts”. Simply put, “التفكير الازدواجي” means having two ideas about the same topic or two opinions about the same thing. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that in some cases it can also mean schizophrenia, which does not really capture Winston Smith’s experience in the novel. It is true that Orwell’s “doublethink” implies a psychological struggle, but in the original work Smith is not hesitant, he is rather self-contradictory, and the first Arabic translation misconstrues this idea.

In the original text and those familiar with Orwell’s work in popular culture, “Big Brother” implies the technological actuality of surveillance. However, when translated into Arabic it becomes “الاخ الكبير” (Al-Akh Al-Kabeer) which means “the older/big brother”. The word on its own in Arabic has positive connotations, without the capacity to ever mean something negative. A “Big Brother” is a protector and never a ruthless controller. This means that the satire and sarcasm Orwell uses to change the meaning of the term “Big Brother” cannot translate. Despite this, “الاخ الكبير” has been used relatively consistently in translations that followed Al-Shami’s 2006 version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The second Arabic translation of the passage mentioned above is more distant from Orwell's original work because the author of the second translation added his own words. Al-Nabhan has similar issues when it comes to translating "doublethink", "Newspeak" and "reality control". For example, "reality control" was changed into "التحكم بالواقع" (Al-tahakom Bel Waqe') which means "to control or shape reality". In comparison to the first translation, this comes much closer to Orwell's intention. However, "Newspeak" was translated into "new language" and therefore limited in much the same way as Al-Shami's version.

The most striking change in the second translation is the underlined sentence, which means "the sound of the idea was soothing and soon after he [Winston Smith] was in peace". The translator took the liberty to add this last sentence, it is not a translation of content from Orwell's novel. As discussed in the introduction, sense-for-sense translations allow for creativity, and more substantial alterations might be necessary to meet different cultural contexts. However, adding lines beyond the original text will inevitably distort the meaning of the text and raises questions around the integrity of the translation as a whole. In this case, it does not strengthen the specific and violent use of language which Orwell is describing in the scene, and it is not clear why or how Winston Smith is peaceful.

Cultural sensitivity and translating *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Other problematic areas for translation are sexual themes and taboos. Sexual vocabulary is a sensitive topic in the Middle East, and to talk or write about it is often uncomfortable. This means that any sexual terms in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had to be

significantly revised. To explore this change I have chosen to refer to Orwell's framing of

"Pornosec":

There was even a whole sub-section—Pornosec, it was called in Newspeak—engaged in producing the lowest kind of pornography, which was sent out in sealed packets and which no Party member, other than those who worked on it, was permitted to look at. (Orwell 55)

The first translation by Al-Shami is:

وهناك ايضا قسم فرعي - اسمه في اللغة الجديد بورنوسيك- و يعمل على انتاج انواع المواد الاباحيه, و هذه كانت توزع بمغلفات مختومه لايستسمح لاي عضو من اعضاء الحزب , ما عدا اولئك اللذين يعملون فيها, بالنظر اليها (Al-Shami 52)

Or, translated back to English:

There was also a sub-department - called in the New Language Pornosik - which worked on the production of the lowest types of pornographic materials, and these were distributed in sealed envelopes that no party member, except those who worked in them, were allowed to look at.

The second translation by Al-Nabhan reads as follows:

بل ان ثمة ايضا قسما فرعيا كاملا.... يدعوونه "قسجنس" في اللغة الجديده مهتمه في انتاج احط انواع المواد الاباحيه اللتي يجري ارسالها في مغلفات مختومه, و باستثناء من يعملون فيها , لا يجوز لأي عضو من أعضاء الحزب الاطلاع عليها (Al-Nabhan 48)

Once again, the backtranslation would go like this:

There is even an entire sub-section...which they call "Qasjans" in the new language...concerned with producing the lowest kinds of pornographic materials which are sent in sealed envelopes, and which, with the exception of those who work in them, no party member may see it.

Pornography is both a taboo topic and word in the Middle East, so it is not a surprise that this section would risk negative opinion and be difficult to translate. In the first translation "pornosec" was translated into "بورنوسيك" which is a transliteration of the original. However, it means nothing in Arabic. Consequently, to understand the reference in Arabic the reader must already have an English lexicon in mind. In the second translation it was called "قسجنس" (qesjins) which means sex section. Although the Arabic is related to the topic, it misses the meaning, because "جنس" (qesjins) means sex or gender but not porn. This means that the whole term had to change in order to facilitate an Arabic translation. The only example of a close translation on this theme is the term "anti sex league" which was literally translated into "الشباب المناهض للجنس" (Al Shbab Al Monahed Lal Jins) in both versions.

Politically speaking, the language that Orwell used is considered subversive and easy to misunderstand. The novel uses irony in almost all the names and titles such as "Big Brother" or the slogan "war is peace". However, what I have found that challenged the translators the most were the names of the ministries, because they were translated first by Orwell into his fictive language and way of thinking "Newspeak". In the original text Orwell writes:

The Ministry of Truth, which concerned itself with news, entertainment, education, and the fine arts. The Ministry of Peace, which concerned itself with war. The Ministry of Love, which maintained law and order. And the Ministry of Plenty, which was responsible for economic affairs. Their names, in Newspeak: Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv, and Miniplenty. (Orwell 7)

In the first Arabic translation, Al-Shami offers the following lines:

فوزارة الحقيقه تختص بشؤون الاخبار ووسائل اللهو و الاحتفالات و التعليم و الفنون الجميله, ثم وزارة السلام التي تعنى بشؤون الحروب, ثم وزارة الحب و هي المسؤوله عن حفظ النظام و تطبيث القانون, ثم اخيرا وزارة الوفرة و هي ترعى الشؤون الاقتصاديه (Al-Shami 7)

These lines translated back into English would look like this:

The Ministry of Truth is responsible for news, entertainment, celebrations, education, and the fine arts, then the Ministry of Peace, which is concerned with war affairs, then the Ministry of Love, which is responsible for maintaining order and enforcing the law, and finally the Ministry of Plenty, which looks after economic affairs.

Al-Nabhan translated the same section into:

وزارة الحقيقه التي تعنى بالانباء و الترفيه و التعليم و الفنون الجميله. ووزارة السلم المختصه بالحرب, ووزارة الحب التي ترعى الفنون و النظام. ووزاره الوفرة المسؤوله عن الشؤون الاقتصاديه. واما اسماء هذه الوزارات في اللغه الجديده فهي (وزاحق, وراسلم, وزاحب, وزافره) (Al-Nabhan 8)

Here is the English backtranslation:

The Ministry of Truth, which deals with news, entertainment, education and fine arts. The Ministry of Peace is concerned with war, and the Ministry of Love is concerned with the arts and order. The Ministry of Wafra is responsible for economic affairs. The names of these ministries in the new language are (Wazhaq, Zasalam, Zahib, and Zafarah).

In both translations the names of the ministries were translated using the word-for-word method. However, what the first translation does not include are the names of the ministries in “Newspeak”. Al-Shami chose to omit these words completely throughout the novel whenever he could. Perhaps he assumed that they would not have any effect on a reader whose first language is not English. I would argue that this decision damaged Orwell’s world-building as it stripped Newspeak of some important words as well as showing how “Newspeak” changes English. This is another example of when the decisions of the translator come at the expense of the writer’s intention.

The second translation tried to convey Orwell’s original meaning using sense-for-sense translation. This was attempted using the linguistic tool of lifting, clipping and combining words together. Unfortunately, Al-Nabhan’s process doesn’t necessarily fit with the rules of the Arabic language. Thus, the names of the ministries in “Newspeak” are completely out of context for an Arabic reader, and the titles of the ministries become incomprehensible stretches of letters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has a controversial history in the Middle East, both in terms of adequate translation and in provoking protests. Some of the mistakes of the Al-Shami's translation were avoided by Al-Nabhan by attempting to capture the meaning of Orwell's original. However, the lexicon developed by Orwell specifically for the novel, as well as its overt political language make translations difficult. The theme of control in terms of thought and speech are essential both to the story world and its reception.² Whether it is by language or by surveillance, the dangers of political control are integral to Orwell's message. Control is the bridge between his ideas about totalitarianism and the role of "Newspeak", something which remains difficult to translate.

End Notes

¹ A few examples from the titles of news articles: "The Zionist Entity and the Palestinian Arabs: A Study in Colonialism and Self-Determination" by Walid Khalidi, published in the Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring, 1974), pp. 5-21. "The Zionist Entity's War Against Palestinian Children" by Ramzy Baroud, published in CounterPunch on July 30, 2018. "The Zionist entity's quest for a 'Jewish majority'" by Jonathan Cook, published in Middle East Eye on November 23, 2020. "The Zionist Entity: How Israel's Influence on US Foreign Policy Has Created a Dangerous Situation" by Whitney Webb, published in MintPress News on September 10, 2019.

² This issue was not only the Middle East, as discussed here, but non-Western European countries, too. For example, the Hungarian reception of both utopian and dystopian literature (almost universally excluded from comprehensive overviews produced in Western Europe or the US) is uniquely shaped by the Socialist regime and its cultural politics which has a positive effect on the reception of utopian texts promoting communal property (see Maczelka 2019, 13), but caused a considerable delay in the reception of Orwell and other politically suspicious authors (see Czigányik 2011).

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