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## **The translator as a conveyor of meaning and culture: between fidelity, adaptation and responsibility**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the translator's role as a conveyor of meaning and culture, emphasising the complex balance between fidelity, adaptation and ethical responsibility. Translation is approached not as a mechanical transfer of linguistic signs, but as a creative and interpretative practice through which cultural references, stylistic features, emotions and symbolic meanings are recreated in the target language. Drawing on major contributions from translation studies and examples from the works of Naguib Mahfouz, the article analyses the challenges associated with culturally specific terms, intertextual references, literary style and the preservation of the author's voice. It also highlights the ethical implications of translation choices, since omissions, explanations and adaptations can influence the target reader's perception of both the original text and its culture. The discussion demonstrates that the translator functions as an intercultural mediator and guardian of textual integrity, responsible for reconciling readability with respect for cultural otherness. In the context of globalisation and the increasing use of machine translation, the article concludes

that human translators remain essential for conveying cultural nuances, emotional depth and stylistic complexity, thereby promoting intercultural dialogue and the international circulation of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Literary translation; intercultural mediation; cultural transfer; fidelity; adaptation; translator ethics; stylistic fidelity; human translation.

### **Introduction**

Language cannot be considered in isolation from the culture of which it is an expression. More than merely a system of communication, it reflects a worldview specific to each community (Humboldt, 1836; Sapir, 1929). Through the choice of words, syntactic structures and implicit references, every language conveys values, beliefs and a collective memory. Consequently, learning a language is not merely a matter of mastering its linguistic structures: it also involves acquiring cultural and intercultural skills (Byram, 1997), which have now become essential in a context characterised by diversity and globalisation.

In this context, translation perfectly illustrates the complexity of the relationship between language and culture. Far from being a mechanical process of transcoding, it is akin to a creative practice that requires interpretation, sensitivity and adaptation (Meschonnic, 1999). By recreating a text in another language, the translator seeks to preserve not only the meaning, but also the aesthetic quality, rhythm and emotion of the original work. Furthermore, translation is also an ethical act (Venuti, 1995): it entails a responsibility on the part of the translator, who acts as a mediator between two cultural worlds, influencing the mutual perception of peoples and the circulation of knowledge.

This raises a key question: **How can translation, viewed both as an artistic practice and as an ethical act, contribute to greater intercultural understanding and the promotion of dialogue between communities?**

### 1. Language, culture and translation: rethinking the role of the translator as mediator

Translation from one language to another goes far beyond mere linguistic conversion. As Jakobson (1959) points out, translation always involves ‘an interpretation of linguistic signs by means of another system of signs’. In other words, translating is not merely a matter of transposing words, but of conveying meaning embedded within a given culture.

Indeed, every text carries historical, religious, philosophical and social references. Bassnett (2002) points out that ‘every act of translation is an act of intercultural communication’, as language is never neutral: it conveys a worldview specific to the community that speaks it. Thus, the translator does not operate in a vacuum, but within a space imbued with symbols and values.

In this context, the translator becomes a true intercultural mediator. Berman (1984) emphasises this role by stating that ‘to translate is to open up the foreign in one’s own language’. It is therefore not merely a matter of making a text accessible, but of facilitating an encounter between two distinct cultures, with their respective imaginaries and representations.

This mediating role entails a great ethical responsibility. As Venuti (1995) points out, translation is always characterised by ‘the invisibility or visibility of the translator’, that is to say, by the choices they make between making the strangeness of the source text perceptible, or, conversely, adapting it to the norms of the target language. In both cases, these choices shape how the text is received and influence the perception that one culture may have of another.

Consequently, translation cannot be reduced to a mere technical exercise. It is an act of creation and transmission, in which the translator, far from being a mere technician, becomes a conveyor of meaning and values, tasked with preserving the delicate balance between fidelity to the source text and adaptation to the context of reception. The example of Naguib Mahfouz, in *\*The Passage of Miracles\** (*\*Mīrāt al-Jannīn\**), perfectly illustrates this complexity. In the extract ‘إن الحياة ليست فقط الحزن أو الفرح، بل هي مزيج معقد من كل ما نشعر به... من حولنا’, translated into French by Jacques Berque as ‘Life is not merely sadness or joy, but a complex blend of everything we feel around us...’ (Actes Sud edition, 1992), we see that translation is not limited to lexical fidelity. It must also convey the expressive richness of Arabic, its musicality and its cultural connotations, whilst preserving the emotional intensity and complexity of the ideas conveyed by the author. The translator thus becomes a cultural interpreter: they choose the words, turns of phrase and nuances that will enable the French-speaking reader to grasp both the meaning and the atmosphere of the original text, whilst maintaining the fluidity and harmony of the target language. This example illustrates just how subtle literary translation is, requiring both a thorough command of language, cultural sensitivity and the ability to convey the spirit and voice of the original work, so that the French-speaking reader’s experience is as close as possible to that of the Arabic-speaking reader.

### 2. Between words and cultures: the translator’s role in conveying literary nuances

The translator acts as a true bridge between cultures, playing a role that goes beyond mere linguistic transposition. It is not simply a matter of understanding the words, but also the socio-cultural contexts that give them their meaning and significance. A strictly literal translation risks distorting the author’s intention, or even rendering the text incomprehensible to the reader. Thus, a competent translator must possess in-depth knowledge of both the source and target cultures in order to ensure a faithful and relevant conveyance of the message. For example, in Naguib Mahfouz’s novel *\*The Palace of Desire\**, the main character refers to the ‘niqab’ (النقاب), a veil worn by some women in traditional Egyptian society. In Arabic, this term carries specific connotations linked to religion, modesty and social norms. A literal translation as ‘veil’ in French would not convey all these nuances, as the French term is more general and can be misleading, encompassing various types of head coverings that do not carry the same symbolic weight. The translator is therefore faced with a delicate choice: either to explain the term in a footnote, or to include a clarification directly in the text, for example: ‘the niqab, a veil that completely covers the face’. In both cases, this represents a conscious effort to help

the French-speaking reader cross the threshold into a foreign culture, enabling them to grasp not just the physical aspect of the object, but also its symbolic and social significance. This process highlights that translation is as much a cultural act as a linguistic one, requiring a keen sensitivity to both cultural worlds in order to convey the depth and intention of the original work.

### 3. Ethical challenges for the translator

Literary translation goes far beyond the simple transposition of words from one language to another. It engages the translator in a complex process in which an understanding of socio-cultural contexts is essential. As Baker (2011) points out, 'to translate is to navigate between distinct cultural worlds, whilst attempting to render the meaning and effect of a source text in a target language' (p. 5). The example of Naguib Mahfouz perfectly illustrates this complexity. In *\*The Palace of Desire\** (*\*Qasr al-Shawq\**), the main character refers to the 'Niqab' (النقاب), a veil laden with religious, social and symbolic connotations in traditional Egyptian society. A literal translation as 'veil' would not fully capture these nuances, as Venuti (1995) notes: 'The translator is faced with choices that determine the visibility of the source culture and the acceptability of the text in the target culture' (p. 20). The translator must therefore decide whether to explain the term within the text or via a footnote, in order to convey the cultural richness and symbolic significance of the object described.

This extract clearly illustrates the major challenge of literary translation: it is not merely a matter of transposing words from one language to another, but of faithfully rendering the atmosphere, cultural nuances and emotional depth of the original text. For example, the expressive richness of Arabic, with its own connotations and rhythms, requires the translator not only to have linguistic mastery but also a deep cultural sensitivity in order to avoid any loss or distortion of meaning.

Beyond linguistic and cultural considerations, translation raises fundamental ethical questions. Translators are constantly faced with the dilemma of fidelity versus adaptation: how can they respect the author's intention whilst making the text comprehensible to the target reader? According to Pym (2010), 'translation always entails an ethical responsibility: any alteration, omission or adaptation transforms the text and influences the reader's experience' (p. 42). In the case of Mahfouz, the aim is to preserve the author's voice, the expressive richness of Arabic and the complexity of the emotions conveyed, whilst enabling the French-speaking reader to grasp the implicit cultural references. As Newmark (1988) points out, 'to translate is also to decide what the reader should perceive and what can be left implicit' (p. 7). Thus, the

translator acts not only as a cultural mediator, but also as a guardian of textual integrity, aware that their choices directly influence the reception and understanding of the work.

They play the role of a cultural intermediary, contributing to the transmission of ideas, values and sensibilities from one culture to another. This position entails significant ethical responsibilities, as every translation choice can have consequences for how one culture is perceived by another.

### 4. The cultural and ethical influence of translation choices

The translator's choices play a decisive role in how a text is perceived and interpreted in the target culture. Every lexical, stylistic or cultural decision can subtly alter the meaning, atmosphere or even the author's intention. As Venuti (1995) points out, 'the translator is always in a position of authority and must decide which voices and which cultures will be highlighted or erased' (p. 20). Thus, the translator's subjectivity is inevitable, and absolute fidelity to the source text remains a difficult ideal to achieve. In this context, literary translation is not merely a matter of transferring words, but of building a cultural bridge, where the translator becomes responsible for the reader's reception and experience within a new linguistic and symbolic universe.

Technological advances and globalisation further emphasise the importance of these choices. Whilst machine translation tools certainly enable rapid translations, they remain incapable of capturing the cultural subtleties, connotations and ethical implications of literary or specialised texts (Baker, 2011). Human translation therefore retains an irreplaceable role, particularly for works where style, cultural context and emotion are central. As Pym (2010) notes, 'translation always involves an ethical responsibility: any alteration, omission or adaptation transforms the text and influences the reader's experience' (p. 42). In this context, the translator must strike a balance between fidelity and readability, whilst taking into account cultural sensitivity and the author's original intention, which highlights the crucial impact of their choices on the circulation and reception of works on an international scale.

#### 4.1. Translation and intertextuality

Translation is not limited to the conversion of words and sentences: it must also deal with intertextuality, that is, the cultural, literary, historical or religious references that enrich the original text. As Baker (2011) points out, 'understanding the source text in its cultural context is essential for producing a translation that preserves both implicit and explicit meanings' (p. 12). In this sense, the translator must identify allusions, proverbs, quotations or literary references and

consider how to make them accessible to the target reader. A failure to adapt or explain these elements can lead to a loss of meaning or a misunderstanding of the text, transforming the work and altering the reader's experience.

Intertextuality also raises ethical and strategic questions for the translator. Venuti (1995) asserts that 'every translation decision involves the translator's visibility and the relationship between the target culture and the source culture' (p. 20). Thus, when a literary work contains cultural references specific to the source society, the translator must choose between making them explicit in the text, explaining them in a footnote, or finding a cultural equivalent. For example, in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz, terms such as 'niqab' or allusions to Egyptian religious or social traditions often require cultural mediation to be understood by a French-speaking reader. Translation thus becomes an active process of cultural negotiation, in which the translator does not merely transfer words, but facilitates the reception and interpretation of works within a new linguistic and cultural context.

#### 4.2. Translation and stylistic fidelity

Literary translation involves not only the transfer of meaning, but also the recreation of the author's distinctive style. Stylistic devices, rhythm, repetitions and wordplay are essential elements that shape a text's identity and contribute to the reader's aesthetic experience. As Newmark (1988) points out, 'to translate is also to adapt the author's style to the constraints of the target language without betraying the source text' (p. 7). The difficulty lies in the fact that every language has its own structures, sounds and stylistic resources, making an exact reproduction impossible. The translator must therefore find creative equivalents that preserve the stylistic and emotional impact of the original, whilst ensuring readability and fluency in the target language.

This issue is particularly sensitive for texts with a strong musical quality or complex poetic structures, such as certain novels by Naguib Mahfouz, where rhythm and repetition contribute to the psychological depth and narrative dimension. The translator is thus faced with a real challenge: making the stylistic subtleties accessible to the French-speaking reader without distorting the author's voice. According to Baker (2011), 'the translation of stylistic features requires a balance between fidelity to the source text and adaptation to the conventions of the target language' (p. 18). This process demonstrates that translation is not merely a technical exercise, but a creative and interpretative endeavour, in which every stylistic choice influences the reader's perception and experience.

## Conclusion

The translator is far more than a mere transcriber of words: they are a true cultural mediator, tasked with conveying not only the literal meaning of a text, but also its stylistic, emotional and symbolic dimensions. They must navigate between cultures, understand socio-cultural contexts and make references, nuances and intertextualities accessible to the target reader that might otherwise be lost. Stylistic fidelity – whether in terms of rhythm, figures of speech or the author's distinctive use of sound – presents a major challenge, as each language has its own constraints and resources. The translator must strike a balance between adaptation and respect for the author's voice, so that the text retains its musicality, emotional depth and originality.

Furthermore, translation involves a significant ethical dimension. The translator's choices influence readers' perceptions of cultures and texts, and every decision – whether adapting a specific cultural term or rendering intertextual allusions – carries with it a sense of responsibility. In a globalised world where texts circulate rapidly and where digital tools offer instant but often decontextualised translation solutions, the role of the human translator remains irreplaceable. They ensure cultural mediation and the faithful transmission of ideas, whilst respecting the author's integrity and intention. Carrying out translation with rigour, neutrality and sensitivity is therefore essential to ensure not only that the text is correctly received, but also that there is a respectful and profound understanding of cultures, thereby strengthening intercultural dialogue and the circulation of knowledge on an international scale.

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