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Challenges in Translating Colloquial Egyptian Arabic Poetry into English: The Case of Register and Metaphors-A Contrastive Study

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ABSTRACT

This study tackles the challenges of translating poem composed in colloquial Egyptian Arabic (CEA) into English. It applies Halliday's concept of register on a CEA poem and its translation to determine the different varieties used in the original and how far they are maintained in the translation. It pays a special attention to the usage of metaphors and its relation to the register, highlighting the translation challenge of rendering culture-specific and register-specific metaphors into English. It is evident that both the register and the metaphors carry an essential weight of both the semantic and effective meaning, which is lost to a great extent in the translation. The paper applies a case study on at Al- Gakh's panoramic poem "The Call": a longitudinal section of the recent three years in the Egyptian society and a précis of the events of the Egyptian revolutionary path.

The results reveal that there is a significant correlation between the register and the used metaphors. While the register is almost completely lost in the translation; some of the related metaphors are successfully and faithfully rendered into English. This compensates somehow for the lost effective meaning of the register. Notwithstanding, metaphors which are highly related to the register of colloquial Arabic varieties lose their effective meaning in the translation too. Keeping the tenor and the field is proved not to be enough to communicate the effective and the semantic original meaning.

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1. Introduction

This study focuses on the different Arabic varieties used in the Egyptian accent: the most widely comprehended accent in the Arabic world and the lingua franca of colloquial Arabic poetry. It is concerned chiefly with the colloquial varieties and their extensive use in poetry, highlighting and exploring the tremendous challenge of translating such varieties into English. The colloquial varieties are used dynamically in poetry to reflect certain ideologies and poetics which are usually lost or dwindled within the English translation. The colloquial language relies heavily on culture-specific concepts “*culturemes*”, which are difficult to render into other languages. This study, moreover, argues for cross-linguistically conceptual metaphors.

The practical part is a case study conducted on Al- Gakh's panoramic poem "The Call": a longitudinal section of the recent three years in the Egyptian society. Eventually, the paper will recommend some tips banking on the drawn conclusion.

2. Research Questions

1. Can the colloquial Arabic registers be maintained in English translation?
2. Can mood loss in translation distort the original meaning, if both the tenor and the field are maintained?
3. What are the linguistic strategies used to render different Arabic registers into English?
4. Are there common cross-language metaphors in Egyptian colloquial Arabic and English?

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Arabic varieties

A number of studies have referred to the non-native Arabic speakers' misconception that Arabic has only two varieties in Egypt; the formal modern standard Arabic and the informal Egyptian colloquial Arabic.

According to Badawi (1973), the Egyptian community has five varieties; Classical Arabic, Modern standard Arabic, Educated spoken Arabic, Semiliterate spoken Arabic and Illiterate spoken Arabic.

Corresponding to the register of Halliday (1985), each variety is used by a particular speaker in a particular occasion to serve a specific function. Classical Arabic is a mood used in the field of the Holy Qur'an and classic texts and its tenor is somehow restricted to men of religion. Modern standard Arabic is used in the language of media and modern written texts, educated spoken Arabic is used in conversation among educated people in the field of politics, sociology, culture, and science, semi-literate spoken Arabic is used by educated people in their everyday life; discussing ordinary situations and illiterate spoken Arabic used in conversations among illiterate people in daily situations.

The three levels share some features as they belong to the same origin, but they differ in being purely classic, purely colloquial or mixture of both. That's why Mitchel (1986) divided Arabic into three varieties only; vernacular Arabic: used and positively evaluated in both rural and urban areas, standard Arabic which is used mainly in writing and in formal spoken situations and finally a mixture of both which can be used formally and informally.

Halliday (1985) argues that, “language is a system of linguistic choices; the poetic choice of one of the colloquial varieties is deliberately used to deliver a message”. Colloquial Egyptian Arabic appeals fascinatingly to all Arabic speakers. It is chosen to be the lingua franca all over the Arabic world.

Bassiouney (2009), among many other linguists, argues for the broader definition of code switching. She adopts the definition of

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Myers-scotton who suggests that code-switching is part of the “communicative competence” of a speaker; it is the “innate faculty” which enables speaker to assess different linguistic choices in different situations. She adopts the broader definition of codes switching as switching between two varieties, not only two languages. “Varieties is a cover term for selections at all linguistic levels so that choices between varieties include, for example, choices of one language rather than another, one dialect over another, one style or register over another, and one form of a directive or refusal over another”

3.2 Metaphors

In the heart of Newmark’s (1998) textbook of translation, he ponders “Whilst the central problem of translation is the overall choice of a translation method for a text, the most important particular problem is the translation of metaphor”.

According to Kearn (1987), Metaphors in Arabic are figures of speech based on simile relationship between two items one of which is deleted. English metaphors are figures of speech (tropes) used to compare two items to each other using the linguistic relation be or have. The major components of both Arabic and English metaphors are the tenor, the compared item (the carrier of the borrowed attribute) and the vehicle, and the compared to item (the original carrier of the attribute). In cognitive linguistics, the terms target and source are replacing tenor and vehicle respectively.

3.3 Register:

Halliday(1985) introduces the concept of register as “a variety of language, corresponding to a variety of situation”. The basic elements of the register are “tenor”, “field” and “mood”. The concept of register combines the three Hallidayan metafunctions. The tenor refers to the language users in a certain context and their relations to each

other, which corresponds to the interpersonal metafunction, field is the topic and the ideas discussed which corresponds to the ideational metafunction, and the mood is the medium by which these ideas are expressed in a coherent appropriate way through formal or informal language, written or spoken, this is directly related to the textual metafunction. Any change in any level of the register leads to a change in the linguistic variety used.

4. Reasons for Selecting Gakh’s Poem for Application

Hesham Al-Gakh (1981-) is a contemporary Egyptian poet known for his poetic wit and epitomical for revolutionary attitude in most of his poems. He was born in Qena and graduated from the faculty of commerce, Ain Sham University. All his poems, including this poem, have been produced verbally in various occasions for more than eight years. Youtube records the highest watching rate in comparison to any other poets. The debut delivery of this poem was in a TV show in February 2014.

The poet is also an eyewitness in the revolutionary path in Egypt. He was, moreover, arrested and suffered torture and incarceration during the past autocratic regime of former president, Mubarak. Hesham seems to usher, hitherto, his vocation against the *so-called* “Moslem brethren” and the uprising military-based regime. Al Gakh is well-known for his poetic wit and epitomical for revolutionary attitude in most of his poems. The selected poem is a panoramic landscape of the contemporary Egyptian revolution, a longitudinal section of the recent three-years-epoch that reflects and crystalizes the various Arabic varieties in question. The style and narration are very original and perfectly compatible with the zeitgeist.



5. The Data Analysis and Discussion

This study examines Hesham Al-Gahk's poem "The Call" [Al-Mukalma]. Both source text and its translation are annexed in appendix A. The study, also, pays a special attention to the cultural-specific expressions and how they are rendered in the English translation. The poem is a phone call between four speakers talking about Egypt in the interval ranging between January 25th, 2011 and August 2013. It is divided into four sections according to the speakers; a representatives of the interim ministry, Islamic political parties, military men, and the Egyptians. The poem is purely colloquial except for eleven lines in the last section. The four sections correspond to four registers:

Section I:

Field: Domination after the ousted president Mubarak.

Mood: semi-literate spoken colloquial Egyptian Arabic.

Tenor: representative of the interim ministry

Dominant feature: slang words.

Section II:

Field: Political domination after the ousted president Mubarak.

Mood: mainly semi-literate colloquial with insertions of Educated spoken Arabic.

Tenor: representative of the Islamic political parties to his Sheikh/leader.

Dominant feature: religious words.

Section III:

Field: military domination after the ousted president Morsi.

Mood: semi-literate colloquial with insertions of Educated spoken Arabic.

Tenor: a military man to his leader.

Dominant feature: respectful terms and determined concise language.

Section IV:

Interestingly, it can be divided into two sections- the shortest section- 11 lines produced by a poet and are meant to be vague

using purely modern standard Arabic and the longest section in the poem:

Field: Egyptians' suffering for three years

Mood: mixture of illiterate, semi-literate, and educated spoken colloquial Arabic.

Tenor: the poet as a citizen.

Dominant feature: mixture of individuality in the first person singular pronoun and collectivity in the first person plural pronoun and mixture of varieties.

5.1 Metaphors

5.1.1 Metaphors in the source text

In section I, metaphors are used 9 times, 5 of them are related to the section's dominant feature; slang words. They are related to animals which are culture specific symbols. For example, حمارك [Literally: your donkey]. "donkey" stands for stupidity in both English and Arabic. Accordingly, it is easy to keep such a metaphor in حمارك-donkey referring to the ousted president in both English and Arabic. Moreover, أى كلب [Literally: any dog] is used differently in the Arabic and English cultures. "Dog" is negatively used in the Arabic metaphor to mark a mean unvocal, low or unfaithful person. On the contrary, English uses it to positively describe a loyal person or a faithful friend. The translator has to use, then, a different functional term or idiom.

In Section II, Metaphors occurs 7 times. Some of these metaphors are directly related to the abovementioned register. "الجوامع تحت ايدينا" [Literally: mosques are under our hands] refers to the domination of the Islamic parties and exercising influence over masjids'. It also depicts mosques as a material small item can be controlled by hands. Interestingly, the rhetoric question of "الناس هاتأخذ دينها" [Literally: people will take their religion?] is a metaphor materializes religion as a physical item can be captured and received. "الناس يتمشي وراء الخطب" [Literally: people walk behind sermons] visualizes sermons as a leader



followed by permissive affiliates and subordinates.

In section III, Metaphors are least frequent in this section. The speech mood is highly formal and tough to cope with the relevant military speaker. It, surely, corresponds to the register in which a military man, talking about dominating the country, is using the concise formal variety. The most significant metaphor is the extended metaphor of Egypt as a listener and inspiration to singers “غنا لمصر” [Literally: sang to Egypt], as a mother called upon by her son “يا أمه” [Literally: mother], and as a person living in a stormy sea “مصر عايشة في بحر هائج” [Literally: Egypt lives in a stormy sea].

In section IV, the poet initially incepts with modern standard Arabic lines, eight metaphors are used. The poet makes an extensive use of metaphors in these 11 lines probably to mock other so-called “tawdry” poets who care only for using highly florid language and ignore the crux of meanings. Metaphors such as “الشعر مصلوب” [Literally: poetry is crucified] personify poetry to suffer a crucifixion, “وجع على الأبواب” [Literally: agony is at the door] pertaining to personification of agony, and “قل للسراب” [Literally: tell the mirage] comparing mirage to a communicative person to be told something. All in all, these captures can be ushered within the frame of sufferance and tragic loss. However, the overall content of these eleven lines is vague and obscure.

Next, the poet comfortably shifts to the longest part in the entire poem where metaphors occurs 23 times; about Egypt, the revolution, and people. This triad is directly related to the register which is centered on the Egyptian sufferance after the revolution and is narrated by one of the Egyptians. The metaphors personify Egypt as the poet’s beloved whose eyes are his shelter “بتحامي بعينيكي protect myself by your eyes”, and as a

person who is angry “عملت كل حاجة تزعلك” [Literally: I did everything that makes you angry]. As for the revolution metaphors, they differ according to the poet’s imagination and the ugly reality. It is referred to as “زفتنا” [Literally: our wedding] “and” “حلم” [Literally: dream] as it used to be in the imagination of the Egyptian citizens.

Notwithstanding, it is mostly referred to as “نيلة” which is a colloquial Egyptian Arabic word referring to something very bad and gives the effective meaning of anger and disappointment”, which is a challenge in translation, “الثقيلة” [Literally: heavy”, referring to the disaster, “تسايفه بيتكسر” [Literally: seeing it(dream) being broken].

The metaphors related to the Egyptians are essentially negative and express excruciating sufferance. They are referred to as items bought and sold “بتبيعوا فينا وتشتروا” [Literally: buying and selling us”, “صوابعي” [Literally: my fingers tore] – a culture-specific metaphor comparing severely exhausted fingers to something fray.

Metaphors are rhetoric strategies used to deliver the same message communicated through register. They are poetic realizations of the concept of register. It is evident that metaphors directly correspond to the register of every section in the poem. The poet hinged highly on this literary device to load emotions and capture and entice the enthusiastic and mental interest.

5.2 Metaphors and word play in the target text:

In section I, metaphors are used 8 times, 4 of them are related to the section’s dominant feature; slang words. They are related to animals which are culture specific symbols. For example, “jackass” that stands for stupidity in both English and Arabic. The connotative meaning and implicature of “jackass” are quite close. They are frequently used by the body politic to refer to the



presidents of the two countries. However, translation technique in rendering “dog” opted for using the hyponym device to employ the word “ill-famed”: keeping the integrity of the allusive and affected meaning of the poetic message.

In the same vein, the inherent imagery of the English idiom “we worship the ground a jackass walks on” is both a marvelous extending metaphor and an allusion for exalting the future president and whatever he touches – a subservience that enable him to be almost a lord. The source text’s allusion is implied in “هنخليه حمارنا” [*Literally*: we make it our donkey] which implies that they will exercise their usual influence whoever be in office. It implies, too, that “Mr President” is just a title or a pliable vocation regardless of the persona: a picturesque that is enhanced by the connotation of the idiomatic expression of “lord it”.

Notwithstanding, the use of the word “stained” in translation of “يتذوق” [*Literally*: to make up] is functional according to *skoppos* theory. The Arabic word means “to make up” that collocates with accessories and paints. The slogans will enable the new president to appeal to the body politic by murmuring and babbling on some ideational slogans. The metaphoric stylistic device of using some words cosmetically or as beautifier is, however, kept.

Phonically, the word حمارك /homarak/ [*Literally*: your donkey] is allegorically close to مبارك/Mobarak/ that puns for the ousted president on the associative meaning and onomatopoeic levels.

Etymologically, the poet converts the proper nouns into slang verbs; the usage of the word قندلنا is a hyponym for Hesham *Kandi* (the *Ikwani Prime Minister*). The word *Kandil* itself is a male given Arabic name meaning “mantle”. This word was used to foreshadow and evoke inductive and invective effects for

reiterating the significance of the deeply felt emotions. The poet uses the noble figures as hyponyms for bravery or prestige, and sometimes stupidity.

Understanding the allegorical use of ‘*Antar*, is essential to comprehend the relation of “flatter” to the prestigious “‘*Antar*”: the famous poet and warrior. In the same vessel, the connotative and associative meanings of using *Ref’at*, and *Ikhwan* are fundamental. Hence, such words are transliterated to be eventually noted in *Appendix B*.

In Section II, Metaphors occurs 5 times. The minus metaphor is “الإعلام سالخنا” [*Literally*: mass media is fucking us]. The slang use of the word “fuck” has many multiple meaning other than copulation or sexual intercourse. The same word “سالخنا” is phonetically close to another Arabic word that literally means *fuck*. This sort of word play or onomatopoeia was filtered at the expense of the metaphoric rendering. This filtration is verily for some pragmatic considerations because the audience would never accept his implicit meaning to be worded explicitly. It is “you hide, I hide. You replace, I replace” strategy played between the poet and the translator.

Moreover, “الجوامع تحت إيدنا” [*Literally*: mosques are under our hands] included omission of the tribune as a whole-to-part relation, expressing the domination of the Islamic parties and exercising influence over masjids’ tribunes, orators and visitors. It also depicts mosques as a material small item that can be controlled by hands. Interestingly, the translation delivers the controlling meaning but doing without the hand element with the use of the passive voice. Otherwise, metaphors are successfully rendered.

In section III, Metaphors are almost inconspicuous. The speech mood is highly formal and tough to correspond to the register in which a military speech about dominating



the country using the concise formal variety. The most significant metaphor is the extended metaphor of Egypt as a listener and inspiration to singers “غناوا لمصر” [*Literally*: sang to Egypt], as a mother called upon by her son “يا أمه” [*Literally*: mother], and as a person living in a stormy sea “مصر عايشة في بحر هائج” [*Literally*: Egypt lives in a stormy sea]. The above celebrating picturesque was delivered intact in “They chirp “Egypt ye, Ma, art our ship”, and “Egypt sails wild waves”. The archaic use of “thou art” is an implicature to the allegorical song that ancestors used to sing many decades ago.

In section IV, rendering the vague lines is a piece of cake. The target text is still “tawdry” and ambiguous enabling word-for-word and idiom-for-idiom translations. The picturesque differs slightly in translating “وجع على الأبواب” [*Literally*: agony is at the door] as “on the verge” which is more analogous and functional to the purpose.

For the last section, idiom-for-idiom translation, collocation and verbal connotation proves a great success in translating the 23 metaphors; including “the venous wall”, “Nile groans”, “the have-nots”, “I spurt”, “tatters that ripped”, “hustle and bustle”, “selling us short”, “invincibly massed”, “I’m deeply rooted”, “down your throat”, “make my blood boil” ..etc.

This magnificent success rate in rendering very similar and domesticated imagery hinges on the common cross-language metaphors especially between these two languages.

5.3 Prosody and phonology

Generally speaking, the colloquial Arabic poems follow neither certain meter nor any rhythm. Some of them follow internal or external rhyme or both. In this case, Al-Gakh plays a very conspicuous musicality by adopting the heroic couplet along with his long poem. Intermittently, he uses inner rhyme. The musical sounds are rising and declining in pitch according to the tone and register. For example, the military-based section delivers the lowest manacled musicality while the final section produces the highest pinnacled sound.

Accordingly, the translation has approached mostly the heroic couplet and preserved some phonological aspects of internal rhyme and rhythm. For example, “hustle and bustle” in translation of /sadah madah/ with the initial letters different. This idiom for idiom translation is not stemming out of a brainy translator. It is, however, assessed through searching translation corpora and using the Computer-assisted translation (CAT).

Rhythmically speaking, the translated lines follow the accentual syllabic meter with all lines ten-syllabled. Although such constrains might seem, to many translators, complementarily or voluntarily, the ideational content of the final translated produced is tightly linked to the poetic uniqueness -- developing the greatest emotionality that is intensely-loaded in the source lines.

5.4 Register

The following table summarizes the (un)maintenance of the four registers in the target text



	Section I	Section II	Section III	Section IV
<i>Field</i>	Maintained	Maintained	Maintained	Maintained
<i>Mood</i>	switched (formal English)	switched (formal English)	switched (formal English)	To the least extent
<i>Tenor</i>	Kept	Kept	Kept	Kept
<i>Dominant feature</i>	To the least extent	To a lesser extent	To the least extent	To a lesser extent

6. Conclusion

The different Colloquial Arabic registers are expressive to the ideology of the poet and cannot be insofar maintained in English translations. Mood loss in translation maims and distorts the original meaning for a great extent in spite of maintaining both the tenor and the field. There are some common cross-language metaphors in both Egyptian colloquial Arabic, and English. Accordingly, poetic metaphors and register in colloquial Egyptian Arabic are significantly related. Domestication whenever possible! It means that idiom-for-idiom translation and sense-for-sense are to be advocated to transfer most of the poetic messages.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Computer assisted translation is mandatory in providing the translators with nearest cultural and conceptual equivalence—preserving the translated registers mostly intact and figuring out genuine solutions to the trajectory of imagery, implicature and culturemes. This is specifically fruitful within the scope of the colloquial Egyptian Arabic. Further studies are required toward fathoming this poetic treasure. Tele-communicative discourse is characteristic to Al-Gakh with no poems ever published in press: a phenomenal factor is worthy to be explored as an influential promoting tool.

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APPENDIX: A Translation by B. A. Essam

Translation by B. A. Essam	Transcription of Original poem
The Call is a conversation with several conflicting speakers	المكالمة أربع أشخاص بيتخانجوا
...	
I	I
I knew the ropes I previously did.	خلاص عرفت خلاص عرفت
they revolted to get a jackass ousted,	عملوا ثورة وشالوا زفت
But it's not to do on just his person.	بس ما تقوليش خلاص مشوا حمارك
We worship the ground a jackass walks on;	أى واحد بعده هنخليه حمارنا
despite his name was not even "jackass"!	حتى لو ماكانش اسمه " .. حمارك
Talk inanely no more about the folks.	شعب مين يا جحش إنت
Has Egypt ever been ruled by the folks?	هي مصر إمتى حكمها شعب

The complete English translation of the Poem 'The Call' by B. A. Essam can be requested through mail to- literaryartrans@gmail.com .

Appendix B: Glossary

'*Antar*': a pre-Islamic famous poet and warrior; epitomical for bravery and creativity.

Athan: the call for Moslem's prayers; five times a day.

Ikhwan: affiliate of the "Moslem Brethren": *theopolitical* association/ group. [Adj. *Ikwani*]

Ref'at: a modern Islamic enchanter whose voice is classical to the Egyptian ears especially on voicing the *Athan* .