

Translation from Arabic into Other Languages

Challenges and Recommendations

By Abdullah Mezar

The Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation has played a major and successful role in promoting creative writing and the transfer of science from and to the Arab world through the Dubai International Program for Writing, which began in October 2013.



The program aims to empower and encourage young talents who have displayed a flair for writing in various fields of knowledge, from science and research to novels and poetry, and to help them and their works gain exposure to the world. Presently, the program includes four categories for young talents: Writing, Exchange of Writers, My Story (Qesaty) Competition, and Translation, with plans to add more categories.

In this context, Flashes interviewed a group of non-Arab translators and researchers who have translated from Arabic and have gained in-depth experience of Arab culture, asking them to shed light on the challenges that come with translating from Arabic into other languages.

Understanding the Other

We start with Jana Breska who holds a Master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Pilsen and a PhD in Orientalism from the University of Prague in the Czech Republic. In her studies and research, Jana focused on Arabs and Islam in the history of Europe and contemporary European Islam.

Jana tells Flashes: "After my academic experience, I also acquired experience in the commercial field in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and currently work in the field of government relations in the Czech Republic and the European Union, and I cooperate with Czech universities abroad and translate from several European languages in addition to Arabic. Some of my translated works from Arabic to Czech are: *Six Tears* by Hassan Nasr (collection of stories), *A Tribal Man is Looking for a Party* by Abdel Karim Al Razahi (novel/play), *Hostages of Sin* by Haitham Hussein (novel), and several short stories by Yemeni, Lebanese, Iraqi and Saudi authors."

She adds: "I've studied Arabic at the Institute of Languages and at the university I've studied Orientalism in the Czech Republic, and after graduating, I also studied at language institutes in Tunisia, Damascus and Sana'a. During my time in Syria, Yemen, and UAE, I learned the dialects of Syria, Yemen, and the Gulf. Gradually I discovered that the standard Arabic was so complex that it became a challenge to me—and still is to date."

About the books she chooses for translation and reading, she says: "I often choose through cultural or social debates in the media or the Internet. As far as translation is concerned, I choose the books that I have read, and have an emotional impact on me, so I want to share these emotions with others. Stories often reveal the hidden real life of Arabs, and the unknown causes of the difference between Arab behaviour and our behaviour."

Commenting on the general lack of exposure of

"Gradually I discovered that the standard Arabic was so complex that it became a challenge to me—still is to stay up to date".

Jana Breska



Arabic literature in the Czech Republic, she says: "Unfortunately, the Czech reader is not familiar with Arabic literature and the short stories in particular. In addition, the Czech market is small and publishers are struggling to survive in general, so they focus on popular novels in the West to ensure their sale. In general, most translations from Arabic are research grants from literary or cultural associations and therefore their distribution is limited."

BELT AND ROAD OPPORTUNITY

Shifting to China, we interviewed the Chinese translator Faten Zholing who holds a Bachelor's degree in Arabic Language and Literature from the Beijing Foreign Studies University (1991). In 1995 she received her Master's degree in the same specialty. She lectures at the Oriental Languages School at Zhejiang Gongshang University.

Speaking about her experience with Arabic, she says: "In 1986, after I successfully passed the national standardized exam to admit students to Chinese universities, although I did not choose the Arabic language, it became my destiny. I knew nothing about Arabs at all. At first it was hard for me to master pronunciation, but fortunately, thanks to my outstanding professors, I started to love this language and studied it for five years until I completed all the programs."

Zholing chooses the books she usually reads drawing on recommendations from friends. Asked about the professional challenges she faces, she says: "The big problem for Chinese translators from Arabic to

"The big problem for the Chinese translators from Arabic to Chinese is the lack of experience in Arab culture because they are learning in China, not in the Arab world".

Faten Zholing





Chinese is their lack of experience in Arab culture because they are learning in China, not in the Arab world. Although much information is available during the university period, life in the university is different from daily life.” She adds: “Arabic books attract specific readers, especially stories, novels and literary works. It will attract more Chinese readers under the Chinese government’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ which will be a good opportunity to learn more about the Arab world and Arabs.”

Asked for suggestions on how to improve Arabic to Chinese translation, she says: “Firstly we should choose the appropriate books for Chinese readers from different classes and categories; secondly develop the motivational regulations; thirdly, increase exchanges and visits between Chinese and Arab translators; and fourthly, provide guarantees for printing and publishing of translated books.”

NEED FOR TRANSLATING CONTEMPORARY WORKS

Moving to the Balkans, we met with Prof. Dr. Mesut Idriz, a native of North Macedonia, who is currently Professor of Comparative History of Civilizations and Islamic Civilization courses and Chair of the Department of History and Islamic Civilization at the University of Sharjah, as well as Acting Director of the Sharjah International Foundation for the History of



“There should be translations of various other fields as well, such as children’s books, contemporary Arabic thought, socio-cultural books, not just the religious books”.

Mesut Idriz

Arab and Muslim Sciences. He speaks about Arabic translation through his life and academic experience in many universities in the world. His books have been published in more than seven languages and he has done many translations in his field.

“About a quarter century ago, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, I studied in Damascus, Syria, where I completed my studies in the field of Arabic Language and Islamic Studies. Later on, I completed my MA and PhD in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where I learned the English language and wrote my thesis also in English. While writing my thesis, I needed to use several languages as it was related to the Ottoman Court Records in the Balkans. Hence, a lot of passages needed to be translated into English from Albanian, Turkish, Macedonian, Arabic, etc. There I realized the importance of translation. Between 2006 and 2010, I translated a two-volume work in the field of Islamic Civilization from Arabic into English, which was published by Malaysian Publishing House (MPH).”

He believes the Balkans are no less interested in Arabic books, saying: “As a matter of the fact, the Muslim population of the Balkans has great respect for Arabic language books, even though most of the local folks do not speak or read Arabic, except the Holy Qur’an.” He adds: “As far as translation of Arabic books into the Balkan languages is concerned, until the late 1980s this was rarely done. But starting from the 1990s, a massive translation movement has developed all over the Balkan countries, especially into the Albanian and Bosnian languages. And this volume keeps increasing every year. This is due to students from the Balkan region graduating in Arab countries and upon their return, some of them explore translating Arabic works into their own local or native languages. In addition, the translated works were mostly in the fields related to the religious studies of Islam.”

He says: “My humble advice is that there should be translations of various other fields as well, such as children’s books, contemporary Arabic thought, socio-cultural books, and works pertaining to recent developments in the Arabic world, language, arts and heritage. This is highly important and there is a dire need for it, especially among university-level students in the Balkan countries”.

FOCUS ON QUALITY

For Turkish writer and researcher Hakki Ercetin, who translated the long poem ‘The Dice Player’ by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish into Turkish, his experience with Arabic is a bit different. Flitting between literature, economics, and humor, his works have been published in a number of Arab magazines. He works in the banking and humanitarian fields, in addition to his writing and translation.

Ercetin speaks of his introduction to Arabic: “I learned Arabic first through my high school education and through my personal efforts. As for choosing books and topics for translation or reading, I take advantage of all channels including friends, newspapers, magazines, and websites. I don’t stick to one option.”

“However, the publication of Arabic translations, given the absence of broadcast executives in charge of Arabic in most publishing houses in Turkey, is severely limited. For this reason, translators have to find special channels to publish their translations. In recent years, Turkey has seen good developments in this regard with publishing companies being founded focussed entirely on publishing works in Arabic and Turkish. In addition, special fairs were started on this subject,” he adds.

He says that “translators working in this field should learn efficiently their own language first. Then they need to know that it is imperative that they continue to improve their Arabic language. These issues are necessary for a translation work of quality. Let’s not forget that quality translations have a different importance in every period of history. This importance will continue in the future. Arabic and Turkish are two languages with strong historical and cultural ties. The translations from Arabic to Turkish were limited to certain issues. Therefore, there are many issues and areas that are considered untouched yet. In short, there is a very long way to go in the field of translation from Arabic to Turkish and quality translators are needed. Everyone working in this field should continue their work by taking this fact into consideration.”

OVERCOMING CULTURAL MISCONCEPTIONS

Ann Ainlay Chebbo holds an M.A. in English/Arabic/English Translation and Interpreting from the American University of Sharjah, an M.Ed. in TESOL from Boston University, and a B.S. in Arabic from Georgetown University. She is a faculty member and a full-time translator in the Office of the Chancellor at the University of Sharjah.

She recounts her story with Arabic: “I first began studying Arabic in my hometown of Goshen, Indiana in the United States prior to college. At

“In my opinion, translation plays an important role in breaking language barriers and overcoming cultural misconceptions.”

Ann Ainlay Chebbo



“There is a very long way in the field of translation from Arabic to Turkish and quality translators are needed.”

Hakki Ercetin



that time, I studied Arabic with a student from Somalia, Ahmed Haile (to whom I am much indebted), who was studying at Goshen College. He taught me the basics of the Arabic language. I then applied for admission to Georgetown University’s Arabic language program, one of just five undergraduate Arabic programs in the U.S. at that time, and was thrilled when I received acceptance. I have never stopped studying Arabic, both standard and spoken, since.”

She adds: “My experience as a translator is largely institutional since I work in the Office of the Chancellor at the University of Sharjah (UOS) in the United Arab Emirates, although I translated the book Islam’s Just Treatment towards Non-Muslims for my Master’s degree thesis at the American University of Sharjah. In the Office of the Chancellor, I translate a vast array of materials, primarily from Arabic into English.”

She says that “in the U.S., there is a demand for Arabic/English translation, especially in the government sector, and certainly, universities provide a good atmosphere for the translation of books and literature. The demand in the government sector has increased primarily for political reasons, and there are now many more Arabic language programs in the U.S. than in the past. In my opinion, it is important to support the Arabic student learning experience with student exchange programs in the Middle East. Attaining a translation position in the U.S. generally requires testing and passing security clearances. In addition to universities, there are some language academies offering training in the Arabic language and test preparation to help translators with these challenges.”

Asked about prevalence of stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims, she says: “I find that this varies from place to place and person to person. Generally, many people in the U.S. hold the Arabic language, Arabic speakers, and Muslims in high regard. In my opinion, translation plays an important role in breaking language barriers and overcoming cultural misconceptions.” †