

Difficulties and Challenges of Translating Legal Texts from English into Arabic

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Abstract:

It is essential to investigate the field of legal translation further, because translators face real challenges while dealing with law. Law manages our lives; hence it is obvious that the demand for its translation is high. Legal texts create with themselves dilemma and challenges in translation. Therefore, the language of law needs experienced translators, who can decode these complex texts.

This paper specifically focuses on problematic issues in English and Arabic translation of legal texts. In order to show the difficulties of the translators, in translating legal texts, some examples are provided. The main aim in this study is to show that some legal concepts are not readily transferrable into the target language. Hence, the legal translator should seek the meeting point between the two legal systems involved. Another main aim is to investigate the characteristics of the legal writings, as that allows translators to avoid possible difficulties and provide a translation of a better quality.

المخلص

من المهم اهتمام أكثر بمجال الترجمة القانونية لأن المترجم أثناء الترجمة القانونية يواجه مشاكل. القانون يدير الحياة وطلب على الترجمة القانونية كثيرة. وتوجد المشاكل وصعوبات في النص القانوني أثناء العملية الترجمة ولهذا السبب من الضروري أن يكون المترجم ذات التجربة لمعرفة صعوبات لهذا النصوص. هذا البحث بالأخص تركز على المشاكل الترجمة النص القانوني في اللغة الإنجليزية والعربية، ونماذج مأخوذة لمعرفة صعوبة العمل المترجم في ترجمة نصوص القانونية. الهدف الرئيسي لهذا البحث إظهار المصطلحات القانونية الذي ليس من سهل لتغيير إلى اللغة الثانية ومن الضروري على المترجم القانوني السعي للحصول على النقطة المشتركة بين نظام القانوني في اللغتين. والهدف الرئيسي ثاني هو البحث عن خصوصيات الكتابات القانونية ليسهل أمور المترجم من أزمات وحصول على الترجمة بالنوع أفضل.

پوخته

زۆر گرنگه بایه خه زیاتر به بواری وهرگیرانی یاسایی بدریت، چونکه وهرگیر له کاتی وهرگیرانی یاسایی دا ږوو به ږووی کیشی به چاود دهیتته وه. یاسا ژیا نمان به ږیوه دهبات هه ږویه داواکاری له سهرو وهرگیرانی یاسایی زوره. وه دهقی یاسایی کیش و گیر وگرفت له ږووسی وهرگیراندا دروست دهکات، له بهرنه وه زمانی یاسا پیویستی به وهرگیر به نه زمونه بو درکردن به ناسته نگه کانی نه م جوړه دهقانه. نه م توپیرینه وه به تاییه تی تیشک نه خاته سهرو کیشه کانی وهرگیرانی دهقی یاسایی له زمانی ټینکلیری و عهده بی دا. نموونه به رجسته کراوه بو ناشناږوون له نه رکی سه ختی وهرگیر له وهرگیرانی دهقه یاسایی یه کاندا. نامانجی سه رهکی نه م توپیرینه وه به پیشاندانی هه ندی چه مکی یاسایی یه که به ناسانی بو زمانی دووم ناگوردرین. لیردها نه وهی پیویسته له سهرو وهرگیر یاسایی هه وئدانه بو به دهسته یانانی خانی هاو به ش له نیوان سیستمی یاسایی هه روو



زمانه که دا. نامانجیکی سهرهکی تر لیکۆئینه وهیه له تاییه تمه ندی یه کانی نووسراوی یاسایی، که نه کریت ریخۆشکه ر بیت بو دوورخستنه وهی
وه رگپر له زهحه ته وه دهسته به رکردنی وه رگپر به جوړیکی باشت.

I: Introduction

Law is an integral part of every society's life. It deals with various subjects and matters that require different legal actions, e.g. creating contractor agreements or enacting statutes. Therefore, it needs a written language to record these legal activities in a precise and official manner. The need to write down legal documents gave rise to a separate form of specialized language known as Language for Legal Purposes (Online presentation, titled: Legal Language by Peter Tiersma). It is a special form of language used amongst lawyers and law specialists, which differs greatly from our everyday language. For example, it is characterized by a large number of archaic and old-fashioned vocabulary, that are not used in other text types. Legal translation is a special and specialized area of translational activity, which may cause many difficulties for professional translators. This study attempts to make a small contribution to the work that has already been done regarding the specialty and complexity of legal translation (Saldanha, 2005: 168).

This paper specifically focuses on the problematic issues, in English-Arabic translation related to legal texts, that may encounter legal translators.

There is a strong connection between law and language, to make a balance between them translation has a main role. The main aim in this study is to prove that legal texts and their translation are an integral part of our life. Providing examples of legal translation difficulties is also important to raise the translators' awareness regarding the main challenges they may encounter while translating legal texts between the two languages of English and Arabic.

II: THE LEGAL TRANSLATOR

Translation of legal texts is a complex matter. It requires a competent and experienced translator, who can render them precisely and accurately into the target language. Legal language should not be taken on by someone who is not trained to translate legal documents. Therefore, if one is to produce an accurate translation from one language into another, a legal translator needs to possess extensive knowledge of both legal systems involved. Professional translators agree, that comparative law should be introduced as a compulsory subject in the curriculum for legal translators' training (Larson, 1998: 101). It provides the foundation for legal translation, which is considered more difficult than any other type of translational activity (Zhang, 2013: 81).

It is not enough for the legal translators to have information only about translating the source text's meanings, they should also be able to understand both cultures involved along with all their nuances. That is essential in conveying legal message meticulously. Any mistranslations or imprecise phrases may lead to severe legal consequences. Therefore, legal translators should be competent and objective with the ability to re-read their translation and be able to ensure that there are no hidden mistakes, which may result in misinterpretation of the document.

As far as the legal terminology is concerned, translators should fully understand their conceptual aspects, in order to translate them into another language without losing anything from the original document. It is translator's responsibility to keep up to date with the constant change of legal languages, as well as, with any changes within the legal systems of the two countries involved.

2.1. THE LEGAL TRANSLATOR- REQUIRED SKILLS

It is necessary to identify what skills and characteristics should the legal translator be endowed with. Legal translators should not only possess linguistic knowledge, but should also be familiar with the legal systems involved. That view on translation of legal texts is presented by Sylvia Smith (1995) in *Cultural Clash: Anglo-American Case Law and German Civil Law in Translation*. She claims that the legal translator should have the basic knowledge of the law and legal systems of both countries involved. She also believes that, in order to produce an accurate legal translation, the translator should have a sound knowledge of the specialist legal terminology and be a good writer in the target language (Smith, 1995: 179). Another interesting view on the matter of legal translation is presented by Anne Wagner in her work *Translation of the Language of the Common Law into Legal French: Myth or Reality*. She is convinced that in order to be a good legal translator, the translator should understand the source text with all its nuances and then find the way to render these nuances into the target language. She also shares Smith's opinion about the translator's knowledge and understanding of law and legal systems, both in source and target languages (Wills, 1996: 37).

The legal translator should always aim at producing a translation that will have the same legal effect as the original, by proposing the most accurate terminology. Legal education helps translators to understand the complexity of legal texts. It also increases their sensitivity to the issues and nuances included in the documents, that increases the general quality of the translated text. Thus, legal translators should know how to interpret complex legal issues, which are very often vague and ambiguous (Baker and Saldanha, 2009: 64).

2.2. SWORN TRANSLATORS IN IRAQ

In Iraq translators who are engaged in translating legal documents are referred to as "sworn translators". The translator wishing to become "officially sworn" should pass a full Criminal Record Bureau check and maintain the highest standards of a practical translation job (Online, available at: <http://www.languagewarehouse.co.uk/slownikang.html>, accessed on 11/06/17). Even if the translator passes the examination of translation proficiency, it does not make him/her successful in him/her application which is submitted to be a sworn translator. Very often only translators who have qualifications of translation are authorized to be "sworn" (ibid). While in the UK, a sworn translator is replaced by a certified translator (ibid).

Furthermore, in Iraq sworn translators are required to keep a record of their translation work, as they are subject and answerable to the Ministry of Justice (Ibid). In order to attest the equivalence of legal translation, sworn translator uses a round seal with his/her name inscribed and a unique identification number, issued by the Ministry of Justice. In Iraq sworn translators are needed to



translate any type of a legal document, e.g. translations of marriage/birth/death certificates, diplomas, and many other documents (Maley, 1994: 58).

III: THE LANGUAGE OF LAW AND TRANSLATION

3.1. THE LEGAL LANGUAGE

Law manages all areas of society's life, from public life to civil life. It deals with various matters and subjects, that require many different activities, e.g. contracting agreements, releasing statutes, etc. That is why, law needs written language for these legal activities to be recorded. Law's necessity for some sort of written form gave the beginning to language for legal purposes (Trosborg, 1997: 46).

The language of law can be described, as the language of normative, performative, technical and indeterminate nature. The legal language has a normative nature, as it relates or deals with norms. It is primarily prescriptive, because it prescribes norms and standards. It can be said that it presents prescriptions, with the aim to guide the human society (Cao, 2007: 25).

Law deals with the concepts, such as, justice, liberty, equality, rights, obligations, etc. concepts, that are essential for a healthy functioning of each society. Therefore, it should be noted, that the language plays an important role within the specialized field of law.

3.2. TRANSLATION OF LEGAL TEXTS

In order to adequately translate legal texts, it is essential to understand the way they are constructed and their function within the field of law. Legal texts are very different from ordinary writings. They are specialist texts, that not only describe the norms and standards, but very often have a performative character. A good example of that can be found in authoritative legal texts. They prescribe the rights and obligations, that are to be obeyed by the society. Several different genres of authoritative legal texts can be distinguished: constitutions, statutes, contracts, deeds, wills, decrees, pleadings, etc. Legal text has its own characteristics features. They are written in legal language and contain verbs that are meant to perform specific legal actions. They are called the performative verbs. Structurally, legal texts tend to be very formal (Online, available at: <http://www.hi138.com/e/?i162509>, consulted on 29/07/17).

Translation of legal documents means rendering legal texts of the source language in to the target language. That requires the translator to keep the legal status and communicative purposes of the original text. It is important to bear in mind that they are not readily transferrable into the target language (TL) texts, and the legal translator should seek the meeting point between the two legal systems involved while producing a translation.

There are several different classifications of legal translation proposed by different scholars. In her book *Translating Law*, Deborah Cao (2007: 8) divides translation of legal texts into the following categories:

- 1) translation of domestic statutes and international documents;
- 2) translation of private legal documents;
- 3) translation of legal scholarly works;
- 4) translation of the case law.

3.3. LEGAL TRANSLATION IN VARIOUS SPHERES OF SOCIETY'S LIFE

Legal documents are an integral part of the society's life. Thus, legal writings include all sorts of texts, e.g. statutes, judicial texts, legal scholarly works and private legal documents. They provide norms and standards of human behaviour without which the healthy functioning of the society would not have been possible. Law keeps all the areas of society's life in order. Hence, translators as the ones who convey legal messages to another language, need to be aware, what sort of specialized documents are used by the law. It is important to know the characteristics and patterns of legal writings, so that they can be translated successfully (Cao, 2007: 115).

IV: PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH ENGLISH- ARABIC TRANSLATION OF LEGAL TEXTS

In this section, the key challenges and possible problems of the legal translation from English into Arabic will be presented. The translation of legal texts may be considered easy or difficult. On the one hand, it is relatively easy due to the standardisation of legal formulations. On the other hand, it is thought to be difficult, as legal texts are deeply rooted in the legal tradition of a particular country. The translator should make sure he/she is making the right linguistic and terminological choices, as there is no room for doubts within the field of law (Faiq, 2004: 108).

One of the most characteristic features of legal translation is that it is deeply embedded in the country's culture and tradition, that's why "the legal translation requires the translator to be particularly careful, as it consists primarily of abstract terms deeply and firmly rooted in the domestic culture and intellectual tradition" (Chroma, 2004: 48).

Therefore, the knowledge of the legal systems involved in translation is essential in producing an accurate translation of the required legal document. In the researcher's opinion, the comparative law provides the basis for translation within the field of law, as the solutions and equivalents are not always readily available. In many cases, the translator should seek the solution in order to find



the best translational choices. These choices can only be found, while comparing the two legal systems involved.

The high standardization of the legal language can make the translation appear easy and almost automatic. However, the translator should be careful not to fall in the trap of thinking, that should be done is to follow certain patterns. The legal translator should always question and check his/her translational choices, in order to make sure that there are no hidden mistakes. Such hidden discrepancies or incorrect terms could lead to misinterpretations or ambiguity of the translated document. Translation of legal texts should be a precise rendering of the document into the target language, therefore the translator should always strive to make the best terminological choices and keep the structure of the original text. That is required in order to assert the precision, unambiguity and leave no room for free interpretation of the legal message. The language of law has many specialist formulas and is characterized by a specific syntactical structure and all that must be kept in the target text. One of the major problems that makes translation of legal texts relatively hard, is the presence of synonyms (Chomsky, 1964: 53). Synonyms of legal terminology may have similar or considerably different meanings. Translators should be sensitive to that matter, and aware of the types of documents and their characteristics.

4.1. CONTEXTUAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND ARABIC LAW

It is obvious that full equivalence in translation cannot be possibly found (Nida, 1964: 156). That is the case in translation of legal terms between Arabic and English, the languages that are derived from different traditions and represent different influences. Therefore, translators should remember that legal translation cannot be produced without taking into account the cultural aspects and differences in legal systems. As Sarcevic points out, in order to translate legal texts accurately and precisely, it is essential to understand traditions of the countries involved with all their nuances (Sarcevic, 2000: 13).

Legal languages in the UK and Iraq represent different characteristics, as they have been exposed to different influences in the course of their history. The many discrepancies between English and Arabic history, tradition and legal systems, make a great challenge for any translator who will take on the task of legal translation.

The difference between English and Arabic law is that Arabic legal system is an example of civil law, whereas English legal system is based on the common law (Landskron, 2008: 2). In Iraq the legal system is based on the Civil Code of Iraq, with the Constitution of Iraq being the supreme law. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom does not have a written constitution (Sarcevic, 2000: 13).

4.2. PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE ENGLISH - ARABIC LEGAL TRANSLATOR

Over the years many scholars have highlighted the complexity of translating legal texts. Venuti, for example, presented his own concept of meaning and showed why the translation between two legal systems causes many terminological difficulties (Venuti, 1995: 18).

Taking Venuti's thought into account, it can be said that, keeping the information content in the target language, so that it has the same legal status as the source language, is one of the key elements to a successful legal translation. Apart from being sensitive to the differences between the legal systems, that the translation concerns, it is essential to keep the same communicative function of the translated text. Successful transfer of the legal message is possible only. Therefore, every translator, wishing to produce legal translations, should be trained in comparative law.

The legal function and purpose of translation of contracts are the same in both civil and common law. Their main aim is to influence the future and therefore they have a prescriptive character. They prescribe and determine the conditions of what will happen in a legal situation between the parties involved. Contracts are legally binding agreements, that are interpreted with regards to the legal system, which they originate from (Electronic Source. Harris, 2013, available at: <http://www.businesslawbasics.com/chapter-18-contract-law>, accessed on 23-09-17). The translator should take into account all these issues while making the translational choices. the above said also applies to the other types of legal texts. The translator's challenge is to find equivalents not only between the legal terms, but more importantly between the English and Arabic legal systems. Moreover, the translator should keep in mind, that the nature of legal terminology is dynamic (Nida, 1964, cited in, Munday, 2001: 42).

The equivalence between the legal terms originates from different legal traditions of the countries involved. Therefore, the first step in successful and precise translation will be the full understanding of the source language legal terms' meanings. Secondly, the translator's next step is to compare the legal systems and seek the target language term which have the same legal meaning and status as the source language terms. The main aim of legal equivalence is to have an equal legal meaning both in source language and target language. Following that, the categories of equivalence are proposed by Susan Sarcevic (2000: 238). She presents the classification of functional equivalence, dividing it into three main groups:

- Near-equivalence;
- Partial equivalence;
- Non-equivalence.

The definitions of these types of functional equivalence below together with few examples of English – Arabic legal concepts will be provided.



- Near-equivalence - it takes place when Arabic and English legal concepts have the same or almost the same characteristics. That type of equivalence, however, is very rare between that pair of languages.

Below examples taken from the article by Rek-Harrop, who did research within the field of legal equivalence.

The English term "contractor", when translated into Arabic would be "muta'ahid" or "muqawl". According to the Oxford Alhadith Dictionary, "muta'ahid" or "muqawl" means "one of the parties, who undertakes a contract". That may refer to a one time contract, that has a set deadline and is different from a contract on the permanent basis. That type of a contract has also a clearly described purpose, e.g. building of the St. Mary's hospital - deadline 11 months. The word "muta'ahid" has identical explanation in English language. According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, "contractor" is the person, who undertakes a contract especially to provide materials, conduct building operations, etc. Rek – Harrop (2002: 312) points out, that this meaning differs from the meaning described in the Dictionary of Law, which is, "an employee, who is a person that works under the direction and control of another (the employer) in return for a wage or salary".

She also gives another interesting example of near-functional equivalence, namely, the English term "annual bonus". When translated into Arabic literally the term will be "alawa sanawi". There is no such an expression in Arabic language, therefore, translators should opt for the literal translation of term, in order to ensure equal clarity to both Arabic and English readers.

- Partial equivalence - it takes place, when the legal terms in English and Arabic are relatively similar and the possible differences are quite easy to describe and clarify.

Rek - Harrop illustrates the partial formal equivalence taking the English term "director" as an example. It can be seen, that in Arabian countries the "mudir/director" does not have to be a member of the board of directors, like it is in the UK. It can be any person, that is in charge of for example a company or a business.

Another example, the English term "Common-law wife". That legal term refers to a female living with a male without being married to him. That term is often translated into Arabic as "Almahzia" (concubine). However, these two terms do differ, as in English Common law a "common-law wife" has certain rights and in certain aspects of the law she is recognised as equivalent to a married person (Online, available at: www.harroptranslations.com/_bd/art1.doc, consulted on 06/08/17).

In Arabic civil law, "Almahzia" does not have any rights. In that case, the term in the target language is not fully equivalent with the original term in the source language. In that case, translator shall clarify the full meaning of the term, so there is no ambiguity, e.g. put the explanation in brackets or footnotes.

- Non-equivalence- it takes place, when the legal concepts do not have anything in common or if there are no functional equivalents available in the target language.

Rek - Harrop gives several interesting examples of non-equivalence. One of them is the English phrase "a contracting out certificate", which is presented together with description "under the Pension Schemes Act 1993". As explained, that refers to an option given to certain civil service employees to contract out of the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme by joining occupational or personal pension schemes in the United Kingdom (Online, available at: www.harroptranslations.com/_bd/artl.doc., consulted on 12/08/17).

As the concept does not exist in Iraq, the translator must use descriptive phrases in order to find a way of precise conveying of the legal meaning into Arabic language. Therefore, the Arabic translation would be "Tahta ratb taqawti li mashru'a al a'mal". As described by Rek - Harrop, it is the reader's responsibility to investigate the sort of agreement it concerns - in that case - the Pension Scheme Act 1993 (ibid).

Summing up, every legal concept shall be carefully thought through by the translator. There are many legal terms in English language, which translated by someone not acquainted with the English legal system, would not make any sense in Arabic. They could lead to a terrible ambiguity or misinterpretation. That is why, the translator, who is producing such a translation, should be trained in comparative law. Otherwise, the damages resulting from misinterpretation and mistranslation of a legal document might be very serious. Therefore, that task should be taken on with great care.

V: CONCLUSION

Finally, law manages our lives. There should be a greater attention to the translation of legal texts, because translating law between languages is not a straightforward matter. The legal translator faces a real challenge of translating not only words, but more importantly legal concepts. These concepts are deeply rooted in a culture they derive from. Therefore, the legal texts should be handled with precision and diligence.

The aim of the study was to show what kind of difficulties the legal translators may face. The research particularly focused on the challenges in English-Arabic legal translation. It is a fact, that the translation of legal texts is a complex matter, requiring precision and accurateness. The field of law needs highly qualified specialists in legal translation, who are able to decode the complicated and very specific legal language. It is not enough for a translator to have command of a foreign language. He/she should also have a sound knowledge of the legal systems involved. That is crucial in order to understand the numerous nuances of the legal language and to train translators how to notice the nuances and sometimes very unclear differences between the legal systems of the two countries involved. Legal education helps translators to understand the complexity of legal texts. It also increases their sensitivity to the issues and nuances, included in the documents, which increases the general quality of a translated text.

There are various genres of legal writings. Translators should be aware that, each of them tend to follow certain patterns and conventions and they have different communicative purposes. Legal



texts are also very formally drafted in order to assert the precision of the document and some of the legal concepts are not readily transferrable into the target language. It is required to know the characteristics of the legal writings, as that allows translators to avoid the possible difficulties and provide a translation of a better quality. Similar to the types of legal texts, it is important to know which spheres of the public life involve translation. It is extremely significant when making the translational choices.

Apart from the matters discussed earlier in this paper, one of the basic step in English-Arabic legal translation, as the main source of problems in translating law within this language pair is the difference between the legal systems. The fact that Iraq is an example of the Civil Law country and the English legal system is based on the Common Law, creates many conceptual and terminological difficulties for translators. For example, legal Arabic is written in the active voice, but passive voice uses for legal English language. Another problem is that some legal terms in a country have no equivalence in another. Therefore, comparing Arabic and English law will help legal translators to overcome the possible difficulties.

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