The Impact of Ideology and Censorship on Arabic Translations: A Critical Discussion

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Abstract: This review provides a critical discussion on the impact of ideology and censorship on translation, with special attention to the emphasis on audiovisual translation. The cultural, ideological and linguistic when translating text from English into Arabic or vice versa have been investigated through this review of literature. This review has shown that ideology and censorship play a crucial role in controlling translation activities, starting from the selection of the work to be translated and continuing to the way the translated work is presented. Ideology and censorship remain major challenges in the field of translation studies since they are part of the political and social system.

Keywords: Ideology; Censorship; Translation.

1. Introduction

Translation and culture are so closely connected that to some extent cultural elements can no longer be disregarded. Through translation, cultural exchange and diffusion are established. Still, cultural and ideological issues can also make such exchanges difficult. Since the Arabic and English languages belong to two very different cultures, translators face many issues i.e. cultural, ideological and linguistic, when translating text from English into Arabic or vice versa. Ideology is one of the most common concepts in the field of social sciences. Author in [1] argued that, the concept was first introduced in the 18th century by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836), who used the term to mean the science of ideas. Many scholars and researchers in different disciplines have since proposed various definitions for the term ideology. But since a discussion of all these definitions would exceed the scope of this study, this discussion uses Ian Mason’s definition throughout this paper.

2. Methodology

A literature search was conducted to find the published papers related to the impact of ideology and censorship on translation. To identify articles suitable for inclusion in this review, a search of academic social sciences databases including (ProQuest/ Literature Online: LION, EBSCO, Oxford Scholarly Editions and Google Scholar) was conducted using the search words ideology, censorship and translation. Twelve articles were selected for inclusion in this review. Since there were limited number of articles on this topic, it was decided to perform gray literature search in Arabic and four Arabic publications were included. All of the selected articles came from well-respected English-language, Arabic language social sciences journals and periodicals. Selected articles indicated what the author meant by ideology, censorship and discussed the connection between ideology and censorship on translation. The articles were selected by reviewing their titles and abstracts. Additional literature was selected from the references (Figure 1).

3. Results and Discussions

This review groups findings according to the following emerging themes related to the impact of ideology and censorship on translation: ideology; translation, Lefevere’s Concept of Rewriting, Lefevere’s Concept of Patronage, censorship. This study will discuss in detail the five emerging themes.

3.1 Ideology

Ideology is a “set of beliefs and values which inform an individual’s or institution’s view of the world and assist their interpretation of events, facts, etc.” [2]. The influence of ideology on translation is not a new phenomenon. Many forms of ideological manipulations can be realized in some old translations. For example, there are some very old translations of the Quran which differ remarkably from each other because they reflect the translators’ ideology and the ideology of the society to which they belong. Author in [3] indicates that people and organizations throughout the centuries tended to allow their beliefs to affect their translation. He adds that “translation, simply because of its existence, has always been ideological”. However, the
impact of ideology is not limited to translations conducted in the past; ideology’s impact is still powerful in translations available in the market today. Author in [4] argues that ideology currently exist under the umbrella of globalization, which she considers as another form of economic and cultural colonialism. The films industry, for instance, is one form of globalization. Novelist in [5] points out that more powerful cultures such as America tend to employ films to serve their ideological agendas and impose cultural hegemony over weaker cultures. Both authors in [6], [7] note the power and dominance of American audio-visual programs across the world and in the Arabic context where most of the films broadcast are imported from Hollywood.

Consequently, the fundamental role played by films and other forms of audio-visual materials is to effectively and powerfully in promote cultures and ideologies and shape individuals’ thoughts and beliefs. Many Arabic countries adopt different kinds of manipulative strategies when importing audio-visual materials to ensure that the contents of these materials do not violate ideological and cultural norms and conventions. Author in [8] states that cultural differences and the status of antagonism between Western powers and the wounded Arabic world has led to very restrictive censorship or even exclusion of Anglophone products.

Ideology is manifested through translation in many aspects of the process including the criteria for selecting the source text, the manner the target text is presented, the paratextual elements, the translation strategies used and the topic of the translation. Therefore, consideration of the socio-political factors of the target context can reveal how language is used to support or challenge ideology. Novelist in [9] notes that ideological aspects can be identified within the text on a word level and grammatical level, meaning that the linguistic and grammatical choices made by authors or translators can reveal the way ideology is manifested in the text.

3.2 Translation

The field of translation studies has witnessed a remarkable change while many other non-linguistic aspects are investigated and explored. Some of the earliest studies conducted by authors in [4], [10]-[13] have contributed significantly to shifting the emphasis to ideological concepts, power relations and cultural roles in the field of translation. But the linguistic-oriented approach applied in most of the previous translation studies did not consider the role of ideology and its impact on the final products of translation. Author in [14] argues that previous translation studies only focused on faithfulness to the source text and the concept of equivalence. Author in [15] reiterates that researchers in translation studies “remain reluctant to take into the account the social values that enter into translating as well as the study of it”.

Translation as a form of rewriting has been one of the major shifts in the field of translation studies. The field has witnessed a new “cultural turn” which was proposed first by authors in [16], “cultural turn” stresses the importance of the cultural role in translation, and it aims at shedding light on the close relationship between language and culture and how translation is influenced by culture and its related issues such as ideology.

3.3 Lefevere’s Concept of Rewriting

The concept of rewriting was introduced in translation studies by author in [10], who considers translation as not an innocent act but an act which includes ideology, patronage, power, and manipulation, all of which are integral parts of the target language and target culture. He views rewriting as “the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work”. Author in [10] argues that translation is the most obvious form of rewriting as “it is able to project the image of an author and/or a series of work(s) in another culture, lifting that author or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin”. He maintains that rewriting is the presence of ideological and poetological motivations or constraints in the translation. Rewriting is either stimulated by ideological or poetological motivations or controlled by ideological or poetological limitations. An individual can either rewrite in a manner that conforms with the dominant poetics and ideology in a given time and place or rewrite in opposition to the prevalent poetics or ideology. Author in [17] argues that rewriting is not confined to literature but includes different forms of audio-visual translation such as subtitling. Consequently, manipulation may occur in translation either consciously or unconsciously. Conscious manipulation occurs as a response to ideological, cultural and political issues, while unconscious manipulation occurs for psychological reasons. Manipulation and distortions of the translation can happen due to the translator’s lack of knowledge of the source language or target language. Author in [18] differentiates between conscious and unconscious manipulation. He defines the former as an intentional process of manipulation due to social, cultural and ideological factors while the latter takes place without translators’ knowledge and is thus a psychological issue.

3.4 Lefevere’s Concept of Patronage

The concept of patronage proposed by authors in [10], [11] helps in exploring how ideological, social and cultural factors work within the field of translation studies. He stresses the importance of studying the literature in a systematic way, and he identifies two main factors controlling the literary system: professionals and patronage. The professionals are individuals inside the field who can hinder works that are inconsistent with the dominant ideology. The professionals can be critics, reviewers, teachers, academics and translators. Their roles are crucial in determining which books are translated and studied, and their roles as professionals include influencing the perception of translated works through their comments and how works should be translated. In some Arabic countries, there is a determined resistance to Western literature. A teacher, responding to a questionnaire about how the works of Astrid Lindgren are perceived, maintained “that the ministry wants to corrupt our children” (‘ifsād ‘aftālīn) by making them the agents of a system that propagates the values of Western civilization and their translation studies. The last years have witnessed a significant increase in the number of professional translators who are working to promote the Arabic language and culture.

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way of poisoning them with Western thinking through such translated stories” [19]. The second controlling factor is patronage, which manipulates the literary system from outside, and refers to “powers (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature” [20]. According to authors in [20] patronage might be exercised by institutions or by influential individuals. Institutions can be religious groups, political authorities or mass media institutions.

Author in [10] lists three aspects of patronage: ideological, economic and status. The ideological component is related to either the translator’s ideology or the patron’s ideology imposed on translators [14]. Thus, author in [10] believes ideology “acts as a constraint on the choice and development of both form and subject matter”. Patronage is one part of the ideology and is not necessarily limited to the political sphere. “Ideology would seem to be that grillwork of form, convention, and belief which orders our actions” [20]. Ideology is essential in his theory of manipulation, and it is a factor whether patrons impose it or it is voluntarily adopted by translators. The second component is economic the money and jobs given by patrons such as governments, publishers, and newspaper to writers and rewriters to do certain tasks and works. The status component can occur in different forms. For instance, the patron may bestow a prestigious honour or title, and thus the beneficiary is expected to meet and fulfil the expectations of patrons.

Patronage can be differentiated if the three components mentioned above are not dependent on each other. For instance, differentiated patronage may allow the economic and status components to take place in isolation from the ideological ones. Also, patronage can be undifferentiated in the case where the ideological, economic and status components are provided by one person or institution. This situation happens in totalitarian regimes where the stability of the regime is the top priority. Such regimes only support the activities that preserve the system. In Saudi Arabia for instance, the Ministry of Interior issues directives to the Ministry of Information about how certain topics are treated on Saudi media channels. As per authors in [21] Saudi media laws state that Islamic values, the royal family and national unity and security are sensitive issues that must not be violated either in printed or audio-visual materials, local or foreign. Consequently, the selection of materials to be translated is based on the rules imposed by governmental institutions.

On the other hand, Western publishing houses exercise their own forms of patronage and manipulation. Authors in [22] criticizes the standards that Anglophone publishers adopt for selecting Arabic fiction to be translated into English. He indicates that the Arabic fiction is not selected based on literary and aesthetic values but rather for political and economic reasons. Similarly, authors in [23] blames Anglophone publishers for not translating Arabic literature that represents Arabs and gives a real picture of Arabic culture. In the same vein, authors in [24] maintain that, there are still not enough translations published from Arabic, and that, with some exceptions, interest in books coming from the Arab world is determined by socio-political factors rather than by the desire to explore the literary culture of the Middle East and North Africa for its own merits”. Authors in [25], in his study on the Saudi novel Girls of Riyadh by Raja al-Sanea, concludes that additional excerpts and manipulations took place on the text and paratextual elements of the English translated version aimed at attracting the western readers by planting the concept of backwardness about Arabs and especially Arab women. Therefore, it is not surprising that some Arabic countries impose different forms of manipulation on Western literature if this is already the case in Anglophone countries that claim to be more liberal, secular and open to others.

3.5 Censorship

Censorship has been an essential issue in translation studies, and it is considered one of the most effective methods to manipulate a source text. Per author in [26], censorship is a “form of manipulative rewriting of discourses by one agent or structure over another agent or structure, aiming at filtering the stream of information from one source to another”. Government authorities impose two kinds of censorship, preventive and interference, and both take place before publication [27]. These authorities can be a ministry of information and media, ministry of interior or religious authority, and can be extended to the self-censorship of translators which arises from translators’ knowledge of the target culture and society. Author in [26] indicates that both translation and censorship influence each other and both of have conflicting aims and objectives.

There are many reasons for censorship. Censorship normally happens when there is something taboo, inappropriate or offensive to the target audience. Author in [28] states that the main reasons for censorship are politics, religion, self-censorship and political correctness. I will discuss these reasons in detail in the following paragraphs.

Politics is one of the main reasons for censorship. Governments authorities exercise different forms of censorship to prevent people from knowing other cultures as this information might be unacceptable to their national language, identity and culture. In some countries and for political reasons, dubbing is preferred over subtitling as dubbing allows the dialogue to be domesticated, with non-favourable parts easily deleted or paraphrased. Subtitling, on the other hand, does not give much space to manipulate the acoustic elements compared to dubbing. Even though Arabic countries are normally among the most censored countries, subtitling is still the most prevalent mode of audio-visual translation in the Arab world. Dubbing is not an appropriate option for Hollywood films because dubbing foreign films would be a threat to the local film industry. However, dubbing still can be seen in some programs such as children programs.

Religion can also be one of the major reasons for censorship. In some Arabic and Islamic countries where Islam forbids alcohol, scenes that contain alcohol might be censored and replaced by scenes with non-alcoholic drinks. The words wine and beer are replaced by the word coffee or deleted altogether in the Turkish version of literary works [29]. In Saudi Arabia, the official TV channels censor any types of blasphemous, sexual or alcohol references. References to
alcoholic beverages are strictly prohibited, and anyone who publicly consumes or uses alcohol is subject to severe punishment.

But some privately-owned Saudi channels, such as MBC 2, one of the most popular channels in the Middle East, tend to be more permissive than official TV channels in dealing with such references. These channels are located outside Saudi Arabia, and thus they do not comply with the restrictions and censorship guidelines imposed. Also, Saudi authors consider local publishers unreliable and likely to exert many forms of censorship and therefore they prefer to publish their works with other Arabic publishers located in Egypt or Lebanon and other countries outside Saudi Arabia [30]. The same process applies to local audiovisual materials such as films and drama which might begin production in Saudi Arabia and then relocate to other countries for more freedom. One of the most successful programs in Saudi Arabia was Tash Ma Tash, which ran on state-run Saudi television until the highest religious authorities issued a statement forbidding the public from watching it and eventually the program moved to MBC. This issue arises with local programs as well as Western audiovisual materials—such as films—which belong to a very different culture and ideology and tend to contain taboo issues such as swear words and blasphemous and sexual references.

3.6 Self-censorship

Self-censorship happens when translators determine what is right or wrong as they do a translation. Translators feel that they are responsible for protecting the target audience from what he or she deems wrong or dangerous, which means that translators within the same society and culture may think and behave differently during the translation process due to ideological reasons. Self-censorship can be different from one translator to another as some may opt for a source-oriented approach while others may tend to be more conservative and opt for the target-oriented approach. Author in [31] found, in his study of the ideological constraints in the dubbing of children’s programs, that liberal minded translators within the Arabic context may challenge the power of audio-visual industry and violate the norms of Arabic culture. For instance, the translator might go ahead and retain the act of smoking in the presence of one’s parents which is relatively acceptable in western culture but offensive and inappropriate in Arabic culture. On the other hand, some conservative translators may manipulate the source texts to the extent that the theme and the plot of the story are negatively affected. Authors in [19] pointed out that the translator in The Night Birds (1982) substituted the phrase “the stupid dad” with “the strange dad” in the Arabic version. So, self-censorship by translators differs significantly even within the same society, and two translators may approach the text differently regarding what is acceptable to translate and what is not. Author in [31] points out the censorship over subtitling and dubbing of foreign audio-visual materials is not consistent, and it is subject to personal preferences. But it is difficult to identify whether the censorship is done by translators voluntarily or is imposed on them.

Political correctness is another reason for censorship, and it is different from one country to another. What might be regarded as acceptable in one country might not be so in another. Authors in [32] notes that word like “homosexual is not seen as inherently pejorative but its equivalent in Arabic, “shithuth jinsi (literally: ‘sexual perversion’), is inherently more pejorative and would be quite difficult to use in a neutral context without suggesting strong disapproval”.

Author in [28] states that there are three types of censorship which might be imposed on audio-visual materials: changing the title or subtitles, changing the plot and toning down offensive words in a program. Since some translators do not translate titles, producers and editors are responsible for changing and modifying titles. Some other agents might think the translated title is not appealing and not attractive enough to the target audience and thus changing the title might be a necessity for marketing and communicative purposes. The manipulation can be extended to include the plot of the audio-visual materials. For instance, besides changing the title and the names of the characters, the plots of episodes of The Simpsons were manipulated and some parts deleted, which in turn negatively affected the success of the Arabic version [33]. Thus, the Arabic dubbed version did not achieve the same success as the original show. Offensive language might be treated differently from culture to culture. Some expressions might be acceptable in English culture but offensive and taboo in Arabic and Islamic culture. Novelists in [34] stated that “Calling me a bastard may be excusable in England, but here people murder someone who calls another man a bastard”. Therefore, different forms and types of censorship are imposed to avoid cultural clashes and to make the target text suitable and appropriate for viewers.

4. Conclusion

From the discussion above, we can see that ideology and censorship play a crucial role in controlling translation activities, starting from the selection of the work to be translated and continuing to the way the translated work is presented. Ideological, cultural and political aspects are more powerful in identifying the manner a work is treated and translated than translators. Thus, translators remain the weakest link, and they do not have many options but to act within the constraints imposed by other agents such as publishers, political and religious authorities, and TV channels. Therefore, ideology and censorship remain major challenges in the field of translation studies since they are part of the political and social system. Development in such issues tends to take time, but the digital revolution and social media applications have contributed significantly to familiarizing people with other cultures. The role of censorship has become less controlling compared with its role in the past. Even though ideology and censorship are detrimental to cultural exchange and diffusion, they are beneficial in preventing the readers or the audience from seeing what might be offensive to them and violate their norms. So, as author in [35] states, “the ultimate aim of translation is to improve intercultural relations”.

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