Lesson 3:

Cultural Considerations in Translation

Introduction to Culture in Translation

Translation is never merely a linguistic operation but also a cultural one. As the renowned translation theorist Eugene Nida noted, "For truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism." This insight is particularly relevant when translating between English and Arabic, languages embedded in markedly different cultural contexts. This lesson explores how cultural understanding influences translation decisions and provides strategies for navigating cultural differences effectively.

Religious and Cultural References

The Arabic language is deeply intertwined with Islamic culture, resulting in numerous religious expressions that appear in everyday language. These expressions often have no direct equivalents in English and require careful consideration during translation.

Religious Formulaic Expressions

Examples:

- "إن شاء الله" (in sha' Allah): Literally "if God wills," used when speaking of future events
- "الحمد لله" (alhamdulillah): "Praise be to God," used to express gratitude or satisfaction
- "بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم" (bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim): "In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful"

Translation Strategies:

1. **Transliteration with explanation:** "Insha'Allah (God willing)"
2. **Functional equivalent:** "God willing" or "hopefully" for "إن شاء الله"
3. **Cultural substitution:** "Thank God" for "الحمد لله"
4. **Retention with explanation:** Keeping the Arabic term with a footnote or parenthetical explanation

Extended Example: Arabic Source:

.سنلتقي غدًا في المؤتمر إن شاء الله. أتمنى أن يكون السفر آمنًا. الحمد لله على سلامتك مقدمًا

English Translations:

1. **With transliteration:** "We will meet tomorrow at the conference, insha'Allah. I hope your journey will be safe. Alhamdulillah for your safety in advance."
2. **With functional equivalents:** "We will meet tomorrow at the conference, God willing. I hope your journey will be safe. Thank God for your safety in advance."
3. **Secularized version:** "We will meet tomorrow at the conference, hopefully. I hope your journey will be safe. I'm grateful in advance for your safe arrival."

Each approach has implications for how the cultural content is preserved or transformed. The choice depends on the purpose of the translation and the intended audience.

Cultural References and Allusions

Arabic texts often contain references to:

- Historical events in Arab-Islamic history
- Quranic verses and Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad)
- Classical Arabic literature and poetry
- Local traditions and customs

Example Text: Arabic:

.كان موقفه كموقف عمر بن الخطاب في العدل، لا يخشى في الحق لومة لائم

Literal Translation:

His position was like the position of Omar ibn Al-Khattab in justice, not fearing blame from any critic in matters of truth.

Contextualized Translation:

His stance on justice resembled that of Omar ibn Al-Khattab (the second Muslim Caliph known for his unwavering fairness); he stood firmly for what was right regardless of criticism.

The parenthetical explanation provides necessary context for readers unfamiliar with this historical figure.

Idiomatic Expressions and Proverbs

Idioms and proverbs represent condensed cultural wisdom and worldviews. Translating them literally often results in confusion or misunderstanding.

Approaches to Translating Idioms:

1. **Finding an equivalent idiom: Arabic:** "يضرب أخماساً في أسداس" (Striking fives in sixes) **English equivalent:** "Going around in circles"
2. **Translating the meaning: Arabic:** "على قدر لحافك مد رجليك" (Extend your legs according to your blanket) **Translation of meaning:** "Live within your means"
3. **Literal translation with explanation: Arabic:** "القرد في عين أمه غزال" (The monkey in his mother's eye is a gazelle) **Explanatory translation:** "The monkey in his mother's eye is a gazelle – meaning that a mother always sees beauty in her child"

Extended Example:

Arabic text with multiple idioms:

عندما وصل إلى الشركة وجد أن الأمور قد وصلت إلى طريق مسدود. فالمدير كان يضع العصي في الدواليب، وكان يحاول أن يضرب عصفورين بحجر واحد: التخلص منه وإرضاء المنافسين. لكنه قرر أن يلعب بأوراق مكشوفة.

Translation with idiomatic equivalents:

When he arrived at the company, he found that matters had reached a dead end. The manager was throwing a wrench in the works and was trying to kill two birds with one stone: getting rid of him and pleasing the competitors. However, he decided to put his cards on the table.

Note how each idiom is replaced with an English equivalent that conveys the same meaning rather than translating literally.

Social Contexts and Politeness Levels

Arabic and English differ significantly in their expression of politeness, formality, and social relationships.

Forms of Address

Arabic uses various titles and honorifics depending on social status, age, profession, and relationship:

- أستاذ/أستاذة (ustaadh/ustaadha): For teachers, professionals
- دكتور/دكتورة (duktoor/duktooraah): For those with doctorates or physicians
- حضرة (hadrat): Formal address showing respect
- سيادة (siyaadat): For high officials

Example: Arabic: "تفضل حضرة الدكتور محمد بإلقاء محاضرة قيمة." **Literal translation:** "The presence of the doctor Mohammed gave a valuable lecture." **Natural translation:** "Dr. Mohammed delivered a valuable lecture."

Politeness Formulas

Arabic communication often includes elaborate expressions of politeness that may seem excessive in English:

Arabic greeting sequence:

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته. كيف حالك؟ أتمنى أن تكون بخير. كيف حال العائلة الكريمة؟

Direct English translation:

"Peace be upon you and God's mercy and blessings. How are you? I hope you are well. How is the generous family?"

Culturally adapted translation:

"Hello! How are you doing? I hope you're well. How is your family?"

The translator must find the appropriate level of formality and elaboration for the context.

Historical References and Connotations

Words and concepts may carry historical baggage or connotations in one language that are absent in the other.

Example: English term: "Crusade against corruption" **Potential Arabic translation issue:** The word "crusade" (حملة صليبية) has negative historical connotations in Arabic, associated with medieval religious wars. **Alternative translation:** "حملة لمكافحة الفساد" (campaign to combat corruption)

Extended Translation Example with Cultural Analysis

English Source Text:

The university's board of trustees held their annual retreat last weekend. During the two-day event, they brainstormed strategies for the upcoming capital campaign while enjoying team-building activities. The chairman emphasized that it was time to think outside the box. "We need to stop putting all our eggs in one basket," he said, suggesting a more diversified approach to fundraising.

Cultural elements to consider:

1. Business/academic concepts: "board of trustees," "retreat," "brainstorming," "capital campaign"
2. Idioms: "think outside the box," "putting all our eggs in one basket"
3. Direct speech quotation style

Arabic Translation:

عقد مجلس أمناء الجامعة خلوتهم السنوية نهاية الأسبوع الماضي. وخلال هذا الحدث الذي استمر ليومين، قاموا بعصف ذهني لوضع استراتيجيات لحملة جمع التبرعات القادمة، مع الاستمتاع بأنشطة لتعزيز روح الفريق. وأكد رئيس المجلس أنه قد حان الوقت للتفكير بطريقة إبداعية ومبتكرة. وقال: "نحن بحاجة إلى عدم الاعتماد على مصدر واحد فقط"، مقترحًا نهجًا أكثر تنوعًا لجمع التبرعات.

Cultural adaptations made:

1. "Retreat" translated as "خلوة" (khalwa), a term with suitable connotations in Arabic

2. "Think outside the box" rendered as "التفكير بطريقة إبداعية ومبتكرة" (thinking in a creative and innovative way) rather than a literal translation

3. "Putting all our eggs in one basket" translated conceptually as "الاعتماد على مصدر واحد" (relying on a single source)

Practical Exercise in Cultural Translation

English Text:

Dear Mr. Thompson,

I hope this email finds you well. I'm writing to follow up on our meeting last Thursday. As discussed, I've attached the proposal for your review. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions. I look forward to your feedback.

Best regards, Sarah Johnson

Arabic Translation with Cultural Adaptations:

السيد المحترم طومسون،

تحية طيبة وبعد،

أرجو أن تصلكم رسالتي هذه وأنتم بأتم صحة وعافية. أكتب إليكم لمتابعة اجتماعنا يوم الخميس الماضي. وكما تم مناقشته، أرفق لكم المقترح لمراجعته. لا تترددوا في التواصل معي إذا كان لديكم أي استفسارات. وأتطلع إلى تلقي ملاحظاتكم القيمة.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام والتقدير، سارة جونسون

Analysis of cultural adaptations:

1. **Opening formality:** Added "تحية طيبة وبعد" (Greetings and thereafter), a standard formal opening in Arabic correspondence

2. **Enhanced well-wishes:** Expanded "hope this finds you well" to include reference to health and wellness (بأتم صحة وعافية)

3. **Plural of respect:** Used plural forms for addressing the individual (تصلكم، أنتم، لكم) as a sign of respect

4. **Closing:** Used the formal Arabic closing formula (وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام والتقدير) rather than the simpler "Best regards"

Strategies for Handling Cultural Elements

1. **Research thoroughly:** Understand cultural references before attempting translation
2. **Consult native speakers:** When in doubt about cultural connotations
3. **Consider the audience:** Adjust cultural elements based on their knowledge level
4. **Be consistent:** Maintain the same approach to cultural elements throughout a text
5. **Provide explanations when necessary:** Through footnotes, glossaries, or within the text
6. **Be aware of taboos:** Some topics acceptable in one culture may be sensitive in another

Conclusion

Cultural competence is as essential to translation as linguistic skill. Effective translators between English and Arabic must develop deep cultural knowledge alongside language proficiency. They must recognize when to preserve cultural elements and when to adapt them for the target audience. In our next lesson, we will examine practical text analysis and translation, building on our understanding of both linguistic techniques and cultural considerations.