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Challenges facing Arab interpreters at the UN: A secondary data analysis in the light of interpretation between Arabic and English

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Abstract

This paper investigates the challenges that the interpreters from the Arab world encounter in interpretation from and to Arabic in the United Nations. In this study, the multiple tasks of UN interpreters are identified. These challenges are probed according to the factors that complicate the tasks for the interpreters. Some of these factors are general and can be applied to all languages such as the difficulties of giving the proper simultaneous translation in the target language in time. That is to say, choosing and uttering the right sentences, syntactically and semantically speaking, is a challenge for the interpreter, especially when the two systems of languages are totally different. Thus, the two systems of English and Arabic languages are compared and contrasted in order to trace the difficulties of interpretation in these languages. The linguistic and structural differences are also analyzed to explore the challenges of delivering the right meaning and proper structure in the target language by the interpreter. The importance of context in translation and interpretation is also highlighted. The role of culture is also emphasized as the cultural backgrounds might form an obstacle for interpreters. Moreover, the Arab interpreter's safety is at risk as most of the Arab countries that entail the necessity of demanding an interpreter for Arabic are conflict zones. Hence, the interpretation process in these zones endangers the life of the interpreter. The findings are given according to the results of secondary data analysis. Thus, this paper digs into the problematic issue of interpretation as a more challenging process than translation, especially simultaneous interpretation between Arabic and English.

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Introduction

According to Pinchuck (1977), interpretation is the process of determining what a single address or statement will be in the target language if it is translated verbatim from the source language. Interpretation is viewed as verbal type of oral translation between two languages (Al-Nashash, 2006) ^[3]. Accordingly, interpretation has to deliver a target text that matches the original, semantically and syntactically speaking, or at least give the accurate meaning of the spoken sentence in a grammatically correct framework of the target language. Al-Nashash classifies the types of interpretation into: liaison interpretation or bilateral interpretation that is concerned with community in a visit or meeting, consecutive interpretation that happens in formal meetings when the translator has to take notes to reproduce the text, and simultaneous interpretation, which is the most difficult type as the interpreter has to listen to the speaker and interpret his/ her speech simultaneously.

The UN Interpretation Service is part of the UN's Meetings and Publishing Division (MPD), Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM). The League of Nations and the San Francisco Conference (1945), both of which came before the formal creation of the United Nations, provided interpreters with considerable opportunities for involvement. As the

original speaker continued to speak, the interpreter would sometimes stop in order to give the original speaker the opportunity to translate what had just been stated while the attendees of the meeting watched and listened. It was routine to have meetings with people in small or big groups, as well as with members of the media (De Jongh, 1991) ^[7].

However, Arabic language was out of the domain of interpretation till 1973. As it was cited in *Cultural bridges*, there were only three translators for Arabic in the UN in the 1950s, and only selected documents were translated into Arabic. Arab presidents had to bring their own interpreters with them. On the 15th anniversary of the UN in 1960, the deceased president of Egypt, Jamal Abdul Nasser, asserted the necessity of adding Arabic to the official languages of the UN as it was the language of more than 100 million people then. After the War of October in 1973 and oil embargo, the GA at its 28th session introduced a draft of a resolution to make Arabic an official language at the UN, and to employ translators and interpreters for Arabic on the condition that the Arab Countries would afford the financial costs. Hence, the resolution came into application in 1974, and Arabic became the 6th official language of the UN (*"Arabic at the UN"*, 2019).

Nevertheless, the first obstacle was to find professional well-trained translators and interpreters for the complicated task. Al-Asun School of Languages, founded in 1835 by Refa'a Al-Tahtawy in Egypt, was the destination to provide translators and interpreters for the UN, freelancers in the beginning, then the first permanent interpreter of Arabic, Sayed Aboulnaga, was assigned for the task (*"Arabic at the UN"*, 2019).

In fact, the task of the interpreter is very difficult and complicated. It is more complicated than translation as the interpretation in the conferences is done without an immediate pause. Thus, the interpreter should have a good knowledge of at least 2 of the official languages, among them are Arabic and English. They should even get prepared well before the task as preparation is the key towards a successful interpretation. Knowledge of the topic and familiarity with jargon are vital in delivering the right meaning in the right context (Hoop, n.d.). However, nowadays the interpreters should pass a test before being able to be recruited by the UN. As interpretation is very important in the world of globalization, and as there are hardly enough studies which have been done on this issue, this paper fathoms the challenges set for the interpreters in the UN, especially in Arabic and English. The interpretation process in the UN plays a vital role in delivering the right messages, particularly for the conflict zones as the Middle East. Thus, it is very important to dig into the gloomy areas of this process and identify these challenges facing Arab translators.

Literature Review

In fact, relatively few studies have tackled the challenges of interpretation, especially when it comes to English - Arab interpretation in the UN and vice versa. That is to say, the peculiarity of these languages creates the need to come up with more researches on not only English and Arabic translations, but on the complicated task of the simultaneous interpreters as well as interpreter of the UN forces whose safety is at risk.

Prior to 1990, the researches that dwelled on the history of interpreting were still in the very early stages. The majority

of scholarly emphasis was directed on the practice of professional conference interpreting, which resulted in very little academic research being conducted on the practice of historical interpreting (De Jongh, 1991) ^[7].

In 2000, there was a rise in the academic community's interest in interpreters as a result of the growing significance and need of interpreters in various international settings. The war on Iraq entails a necessity for providing Arab interpreters for the military forces, UN and Press Agencies. Thus, a number of different articles have investigated the factors that have impacts on the work of interpreters in various geographical regions (Rosendo *et al.*, 2021) ^[17].

Researchers such as Palmer (2007) ^[15], Inghilleri (2009) ^[13], Ruiz Rosendo (2020) ^[17] along with others, have conducted researches on the dangers, difficulties, and ethical concerns that interpreters confront while doing their jobs. Examples of these include interrogations conducted at facilities set up by the intelligence or military services. Other disputants' narratives portray the interpreters as adversaries (Baker, 2010) ^[6]. Further studies investigate the consequences for national security of employing translators, including the controversial topic of Western countries refusing to provide visas to interpreters who are attempting to escape post-conflict dangers in Iraq and Afghanistan (Fitchett, 2012; Juvinal, 2013) ^[8, 14]. Todorova (2017) ^[19] also explores the function of translators in disasters and emergency situations in an article entitled "Interpreting at the Border: Shuttle Interpreting for UNHCR". According to the majority of respondents in Todorova's (2016) ^[18] study on the role of interpreters in conflict mediation in Kosovo and Macedonia, interpreters need training in addition to what is typically taught at interpretation schools. That is why most of the interpreters are graduates of the schools of translation or the colleges that have courses in translation.

Ali, H.I.H *et al* (2019) ^[2] dwells particularly on the challenges that face the interpreters in conflict zones, taking a sample study from the interpreters of the UN in Darfur, Sudan. The study elaborates on the barriers that the interpreters have such as the cultural barrier of the city, the dialects which sound different, especially by the local people there, and the difficult situation of the zone that has ongoing conflicts. The lack of security and the threats they witness complicate their tasks, particularly the reactions of the local people and fighters who view them as enemies or cooperators with the enemy.

The barriers and challenges of the interpretation process at the UN are sorted out by a former interpreter at the UN, Julie van der Hoop as she dwells on the difficulties of simultaneous interpretation. She insists in her article on the differentiations between translation and interpretation as the latter entails a quick delivery of the speech and paraphrasing. That is to say, whatsoever the target language of speech or the source language, interpretation needs preparation, knowledge of the jargon of both languages, SL and TL, and familiarity with the context. The interpreters of the UN have challenges such as being away from the speaker who is reading a prepared speech that makes him/ her so fast in reading and the difference in the accents of the speakers that makes the task more difficult; so the interpreter should recognize all the accents even for those of other nationalities like Japanese giving a speech in English for example (Hoop, n.d.).

Another interpreter for the UN, Nadia Abu Rida, who is Arab, elaborates on the difficult task of the interpreter for the UN

who has to be so accurate and well-educated in the “three main pillars of the UN work” which are “peace and security, human rights, and development” in addition to the accuracy in delivering the interpretation:

‘A UN interpreter must be versatile and well informed of the different issues at hand and the positions of states. Interpreting for the UN requires very accurate rendition, since many organs maintain verbatim records of their meetings and their delegates' statements. The techniques needed for the different organs of the organisation are not necessarily the same, and interpreters working for the UN have to take this into consideration.’ (“*Arabic at the UN*”, 2019).

Gile (1998) ^[9] elaborates on attention sharing that is a common problem for verbal interpreters. Al-Nashash (2006) ^[3] identifies interpretation as verbal translation of oral texts. She asserts the importance of expertise in the spoken text by the interpreter and she asserts that the interpreter should have “awareness about what interpretation is and what process (linguistic, pragmatic, practical or cognitive) is engaged during an interpretation” (Al-Nashash, 2006, p. 3) ^[3]. Al-Nashash refers to some of the challenges that the interpreter faces; these are space between the speaker and interpreter, and the absence of virtual context, in addition to the challenges related to the linguistic as well as cultural differences between English and Arabic that demand some tricks from the interpreter such as lexical shift, omission of some words or paraphrasing.

In *Between English and Arabic: A Practical Course in Translation*, B. A. Hassan (2014) ^[11] asserts that the goal of translation is to convey the proper meaning which entails analysis of the target text. However, analysis is not possible in interpretation as it happens simultaneously. Hassan identifies general problems that face translators and can be applied in interpretation as well. These are divided into: “the linguistic problems”, that include “lexicon, morphology, syntax, textual differences, rhetorical differences and pragmatic factors”, and “cultural problems”. He introduces some strategies for translation such as lexical shift and paraphrasing (Hassan, 2014, p.10) ^[11].

Akan *et al.* (2019) ^[1] analyze the problems of Arabic-English translation and give some solutions. The problems they introduce are also these of translation as interpretation is a type of translation itself. These problems are related to linguistic lack of knowledge in one of the concerned languages such as syntax and semantics. The two different origins of the two languages, English and Arabic, is also a problematic issue. Contextual as well as cultural differences are other difficulties that the translators face. Hence, vocabulary, grammar, sounds, letters, style, usage, culture and context are all challenges for the translator between English and Arabic. Al-Zahran (2021) ^[4] dwells on the structural challenges in English-Arabic simultaneous interpretation and the other way round as interpretation should be form-based and there is no symmetry between both systems of languages which might lead to breakdown of the structure with non-skilful translators.

This paper comes to culminate the findings of previous studies done on English- Arabic and Arabic- English translation and investigate the challenges that face specifically the Arab interpreters at the UN. However, few

studies have tackled this matter. There has been no specific study identifying the difficulties of Arabic-English interpretation and vice versa in the different tasks required from the UN interpreters.

Methods & Methodology

This research is qualitative. It has an interpretative approach to non-numerical data. That is to say, it does not give surveys or statistical values. It depends on secondary data analysis of books and articles published in books, recognized journals and authentic websites. It reviews the previous studies that have been done on the challenges for the UN interpreters in general and Arab translators and interpreters in particular to identify the challenges that Arab translators face during their work in the UN. It is also analytical, in a way that it analyzes the findings of the resources to give the conclusion. It is also a descriptive as it elaborates on the main ideas that are got via secondary data analysis. It describes the problematic issue of interpretation from Arabic to English and vice versa during the multiple tasks set for Arab interpreters in the UN, and analyzes the challenges these interpreters face. The paper does not introduce primary data. Yet, it relies on authentic and well-chosen resources of the secondary data.

Discussion & Findings

As interpretation is a type of oral translation, the same problems the translator has to face are faced by the interpreter. These are related to the asymmetry of the systems of the languages, cultural challenges and contextual problems. In addition to these problems, the interpreter faces the challenges of instant interpretation that should happen simultaneously without even thinking of the term or meaning. However, Arabic and English are totally different and the interpreter might find a phrase or proverb that needs to be fully shifted from lexical translation into the target language. However, time is crucial and this should happen immediately, let alone the speedy reading of written texts in the conferences of UN. The dangers, that the interpreters encounter in the conflict zones, are also serious challenges.

As language is a “multi-system”, the interpreter “needs not only linguistics theory but also some other theories like socio-linguistics, psycholinguistics, pragmatics, contrastive analysis and cross culture understanding” (Harliani, 2019, p. 121) ^[10]. The linguistic challenges that the interpreter faces between Arabic and English are mostly related to the different systems of languages.

However, the linguistic problems that the interpreter faces in English and Arabic interpretations are diverse. There is the phonetic problem that is related to sound pronunciation. For example, there are sounds in Arabic which are not used in English such as *ظ ، ض*. Thus, Arab interpreters can do better in interpretation into Arabic as they can pronounce these sounds well. There are some articles which are not used in Arabic such as “a, an” with the singular. Vowels are also different in length.

Syntactic challenges arise from the differences in the syntax or structure of the two languages, i.e., English and Arabic. For example, linking verbs such as the verb “to be” do not exist in Arabic, so they cannot be translated. Moreover, the verb “do” in the negative or interrogative sentences has no equivalent in Arabic. We interpret: “Do you like coffee?” as “Hal Tuhibu Al-Qahwa?” (*هل تحب القهوة؟*). Moreover, Arabic does not have tenses as English such as: Present Progressive,

or Present Perfect. The interpreter can refer to these tenses by using some linking verbs or adverbs. For example:

I have just finished the research – لقد أنهيت البحث تَوَّأ

The words "لقد" and "تَوَّأ" indicate the present perfect tense. Yet, the order of the words in the Arabic sentence is different. This complicates the task for the interpreter who should wait till the end of the sentence to give the suitable indication of the tense and might miss some words due to the speed in following the rest of the speech.

Definitely, the order in the sentence is very important to give the correct meaning. Al-Zahran (2021)^[4] speaks about the different orders of the verbs and subjects in English. That is to say, if the subject is complex, the interpreter cannot wait till the verb comes in the English sentence to start interpretation. Thus s/he should start by the subject, the noun in Arabic and make it a noun phrase. For example:

- The universities that graduate international students in India play a vital role in the global exchange of knowledge.

Here the interpreter should start immediately with the noun and s/ he can add some linking words such as "إن" to give an expressive sentence in a good Arabic:

إن الجامعات التي يتخرج منها طلاب دوليون في الهند تلعب دوراً محورياً في تبادل المعرفة عالمياً.

The interpreter has to make some syntactic shift to suit the target language such as the adjective "global" to be an adverb in Arabic, and the verb graduate to make it intransitive verb. Some verbs have no counterparts in the other language, for example: "It smells nice." It can only be interpreted as "رائحته زكية", i.e., "Its smell is nice".

Another linguistic problem that the interpreter faces between Arabic and English language is the semantic problem. The lack of equivalence in the target language can be a real problem such as words like: Shariyaa, which is different from code; yet it is interpreted as code, or for example: Queen's bench court that has no equivalence due to the differences in the legal systems in Arab countries. Sometimes, there should be a semantic shift in order to deliver the proper meaning. For example: "في يوم من الأيام" cannot be interpreted as "a day from a day". Its English proper interpretation is: "Once upon a time". Proverbs and idioms also have to be totally changed. For example: "It rains cats and dogs." "أنها تمطر بغزارة". So, "cats and dogs" are interpreted here as heavily. "صعد بخفي حنين" It can be interpreted as: "He came disappointed or with a failure." However, these idioms have more complications for the interpreter who is following the speech and gives the interpretation immediately without even having time to think. The cultural difference is another challenge for the interpreter who should be familiar with both languages' cultural backgrounds. For example, some expressions are not accepted in the Arabic language such as the interpreters of movies when they interpret filthy words such as: "bastard", they shift it into scornful or mean "سافل – حقير". Thus, the interpreter delivers not only speech, s/ he recreates the phrases to suit the culture of the target language.

As it has been mentioned in the literature review, the interpreters also risk their lives when they accompany the UN forces to the conflict zones. Inghilleri, M. (2009)^[13] digs into the terrible and horrible circumstances that translators live in in Iraq. Ali, H.I.H *et al* (2019)^[2] also clarify the dangers that UN interpreters face in the conflict zones citing examples from Darfur, Sudan. They are even viewed as enemies by the

native inhabitants of the country. The dialects are also a challenge for them as the Arab countries have different and multiple dialects that can be non-comprehended to the Arab interpreter.

All in all, the challenges that Arab interpreters for the UN face are serious. They have to live under pressure due to the simultaneous interpretation in the conferences and the need to follow the speech and give the right meaning in a correct form of the target language, and due to the peculiarities of English and Arabic translation that have totally different systems. Cultural difference is a challenge for Arab interpreters. On top of these challenges are the dangers that threaten their lives in the conflict zones.

Conclusion

In conclusion, interpretation in the UN is not an easy task. There are many complications that are associated with the process. The asymmetry between the systems of languages is a main obstacle that makes the task more difficult, let alone the cruciality of time. The syntactic and semantic differences between Arabic and English entail shifts in meaning in many occasions, but that should happen immediately. Hence, the interpreter should be trained enough to choose the suitable words in the right place. Moreover, the cultural background plays a vital role as the interpreter has to get a good knowledge in the cultures and idioms of both languages. Sometimes, the interpreter has to change the whole sentence to give the right meaning in the target language as happens in proverbs. Additionally, some idioms lack counterparts in the target language, so the interpreter has to explain them or give approximate words to deliver the right meaning. Many Arab interpreters have also to accompany the UN forces to the conflict zones that endanger their lives and complicate their tasks. Dialects in Arabic are also a barrier for interpretation. Thus, this paper only introduces the challenges that interpreters for UN face in interpreting Arabic to English and vice-versa. However, other researches might depend on the findings of this research to present solutions for those interpreters.

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