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# Theory and practice in the French discourse of translation

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Translation theory has always been intimately connected to practice. For centuries, it was mostly elaborated by translators and was always prescriptive, that is, aiming at defining the conditions for “good” translating. Actually, while it would be tempting to take the emergence of “descriptive translation studies” – to mention Gideon Toury’s (1995) most celebrated contribution to the field – as the birthmark of the study of translation as an autonomous discipline, one could argue that translation studies remain till now dependent on prescription in many ways, as remarks Lawrence Venuti (2000: 4). We find within the field of translation studies a much larger proportion of active translators than, say, the proportion of creative writers within the field of literary studies. All this points to the dependent, subaltern status of the translated text, and – without delving further into the philosophical and ethical implications of this question – provides me with a good starting point. I would like for this contribution to be a reflection on the link between theory and practice in translation, based on my own, three-decade long experience as a translator, a translation editor, and a scholar in translation studies. It has been a very particular experience, because it relies on translation to and from Arabic, and one that has often led me to elaborate a discourse on translation opposite to the mainstream one, whether in France (or, more generally, in the “global North”) or in the Arab world.

In order to explain this, I shall have to dwell on my personal trajectory in some detail, and I will do so not out of self-indulgence, but rather as a way of understanding, through a self socio-analysis of sorts, the objective conditions that made this trajectory possible. While doing so, I hope that I will provide the reader with some useful insights on the recent history of the French Orientalist academic field and French-Arab cultural relations as well.

## ***Beginnings***

I was born in St-Etienne, an industrial town owing its prosperity to the surrounding coal mines that shut down one after the other in the 1950s and 1960s, that is, at the time of my birth (1958). My father, a former miner, benefitted from the conversion plan set up by the mining company and became a successful car repairer. I grew up in a monolingual, monocultural environment, reading world literature in French translation without ever thinking that I was not reading the writer's original words and watching American cartoons, TV series and westerns dubbed in French without ever thinking that Mickey (as we call in French Mickey Mouse, and I should write it "Miquet" to give a flavor of the French pronunciation!), Steve McQueen (Josh Randall in *Au nom de la loi* –the series' French title was, typically, quite different from the original *Wanted: Dead or Alive*) or John Wayne actually did not speak French. I feel it important to mention this because while this kind of monolingual upbringing was and remains the rule for millions of persons in France as in any other main European country or in the U.S., it is not so common within the professional milieu of translators (or within the academic field of translation studies), where many come from multilingual families, social backgrounds or countries. Perhaps it is necessary, in order to grasp fully the meaning of the title of Lawrence Venuti's famous book, *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995), to have experienced this kind of monolingual education. Later, I learned and practiced other languages, went to live abroad and eventually became a translator, but I never forgot my initial innocence, and I have always looked with a pang of envy at my colleagues and friends who lived in two or more languages since their childhood.

Nothing thus destined me to become a translator and a scholar in modern Arabic literature, except a taste for travel quite common among young Europeans, which led me, yet already in my mid-twenties, to register in the introductory course of Arabic language at Aix-en-Provence University. I was planning a trip around the Mediterranean and I naively thought that I could learn enough in a first-year course in modern standard Arabic, to get along with the natives from Aleppo to Casablanca. However, I soon heard from one of my teachers about his colleague Claude Audebert, who had just left Aix-en-Provence's Near-Eastern Studies department to launch a centre for the intensive study of Arabic in Cairo, where students would spend nine months training in written and spoken Arabic with a scholarship from the French government. This was an exciting prospect and I

decided to postpone my Mediterranean trip and instead concentrate on my first-year Arabic classes to make sure I'd be selected for that grant.

That is how I landed in Cairo on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1983 –my first time ever in an Arab country. One of my Aix teachers, noticing my eagerness to progress, had recommended that I try myself at translation from Arabic into French and offer my help at the CEDEJ, the French research center in Cairo, which published at the time a quarterly *Revue de la presse égyptienne*, consisting mainly in two to three hundred pages translated from the Egyptian press. I followed his advice and thus started to translate into French from Arabic at a very early stage as a means to speed up the language acquisition process. Translating material from the Egyptian press was a tremendous school. With the only help of my Hans Wehr-Milton Cowan Arabic-English dictionary (back then, there was no reliable modern Arabic-French dictionary, let alone online resources!) and of occasional Egyptian friends visiting our flat, I could spend hours on a paragraph or even a sentence of *Al-Ahram's* or *Al-Musawwar's* waffle without ever complaining.

A few months later, Claude Audebert introduced me to a friend of hers, the Egyptian writer Maguid Toubia, who had just been contacted by the Institut du Monde Arabe for the translation of a collection of his short stories into French. Toubia wanted Audebert, a seasoned Arabist as fluent in *fus'ha* as in the Cairene dialect, to do the job, but she declined the offer and instead suggested my name. I sent a trial sample to Selma Fakhry-Fourcassié, the series director. She found it convincing enough to entrust me with the project, and that was it. I spent a good part of my last months in Cairo translating Maguid Toubia's short stories, including long working sessions with him –and quite a few Stella beers– at the Cap d'Or bar on Abdel Khaliq Tharwat Street. Back in France, now in my third year as undergraduate student in Arabic, I worked on the translation first with Selma Fakhry-Fourcassié, then with Odile Cail, senior literary editor at the Éditions Jean-Claude Lattès, who both gave me my first lessons in translation editing and rewriting at a time when I was still practicing Arabic-French translation as a scholastic exercise with my fellow students in Aix. By the time the book was printed in December 1985 (Toubia 1986), I was back in Cairo with another grant, working on my M.A. thesis project.

I have gone into some details in the previous lines because these beginnings are very telling of the state of Arabic-French literary translation in the mid-1980s. Jean-Claude Lattès' "Lettres arabes" was the first series dedicated to modern Arabic literature to be

published by a mainstream French publisher, and that was made possible thanks to a generous funding by the Institut du Monde Arabe, a then recently created institution that embodied France's cultural diplomacy towards the Arab world<sup>1</sup>. Eleven titles were published in this series between 1985 and 1990, among them the first complete translation of Naguib Mahfouz's *Trilogy* in a foreign language (1985; 1987; 1989). Six beginners in their late twenties or early thirties, with no previous published translation, achieved 10 of these 11 translations – a fact that points at the dearth of translators from Arabic at that time. Only one of those beginners did not publish any further translation, while four others (France Meyer Douvier, Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, Philippe Vigreux and myself) would become some of the most active Arabic-French literary translators in the following decades, each with 15 to 20 translated titles to date. This indicates that the series editors' choices were rather successful, but also that the time was ripe; actually, the launching of the "Lettres arabes" series in 1985 coincided with the beginning of a small boom for modern Arabic literature in French translation. Starting from this year, "at least ten new titles appeared yearly in France in the field of modern Arabic literature. (...) Between 1990 and 1994 the average rose to over 17 titles each year, to reach 25 between 1995 and 2000" (Leonhardt Santini 2006, 166-167).

More broadly, this movement coincided with the coming of age of a new generation of French Arabists, one that had experienced neither the colonial times, nor the struggle for independence of the French ex-colonies in the MENA region. Rather, this young generation was in tune with its Arab peers who, like us, came of age in the post-1968 context, that is, a context of contestation of authority, liberation of morals and solidarity with the oppressed minorities, from women to Palestinians. How does this relate to translation, one may ask? It seems to me that beyond our different political or aesthetical leanings, we as young translators from Arabic shared a common ideal or goal – thirty years later, it has not changed, since it seems yet to be attained. Farouk Mardam-Bey, the leading editor of Arabic literature in French translation since 1995, summarized it as follows: "to *make* Arabic literature *commonplace*, that is, to get it out of its exoticism, to have it read neither as a sociological or political document, nor as an ethnological account, but as a

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<sup>1</sup> Launched in the wake of the oil booms of the 1970s, the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA) was supposed to be funded on an equal basis by the French and Arab states. However, many of the latter either failed to fulfil their pledges or did so with considerable delay, which led French authorities to take control over its finances in 1996, and caused chronic deficit – also due to the high maintenance costs of the building and the generous recruitment policy followed during its first years.

literary creation in its own right” (Mardam-Bey 2000, 85; my translation). Until it would, or will be commonplace, Arabic literature would (will) remain a *minor* literature, the literature of an oppressed minority. It was an “embargoed literature”, as Edward Said (1990) put it in an essay every Arabist sympathetic with the cause of Arabic literature in translation has been quoting ever since. But before delving further into these questions, let us turn back to the late 1980s.

During the 1986-87 academic year, I had passed the *agrégation d’arabe*, a competitive exam much more prestigious than its official purpose, which is to recruit highly qualified teachers for the French public high schools. I did teach the Arabic language at that level during the following year –in my hometown Saint-Etienne, an assignment I did not ask for, and a position I never expected to find myself in when I left the place some eight years before! But I had not undergone the *agrégation* ordeal – ten months of full-time cramming– to become a high school teacher. It made of me a lifetime French civil servant, a highly appreciated move after almost ten years living on seasonal or part-time jobs, scholarships and unemployment benefits. Even more decisively, it made me eligible for the position that took me back to Cairo in September 1988 and subsequently determined most of my future career.

In the mid-1980s, at a time when France’s cultural diplomacy still enjoyed generous funding from the state budget –another legacy from the colonial times the subsequent governments would severely trim in the following decades–, the French cultural mission in Cairo had launched an ambitious translation program and was looking for a young *agrégé d’arabe* with some experience in translation (in the form of one published translation at least) to manage it. I was the perfect match, and the job suited me perfectly. I managed this program for seven years, from 1988 to 1995 and, alongside my experience as a literary translator, it shaped my thinking on translation.

### ***From Arabic into French***

The main goal of this program was, in accordance with the general aim of the French cultural diplomacy, to “contribute to France’s cultural influence” by promoting the translation of French books with Egyptian publishers. Typically, I would either suggest a title for translation to one of my Egyptian partners or listen to his/her proposals, then act

as a go-between between him and the French original publisher until we would secure a contract, entrust a local translator with the Arabic translation and follow up with him on this translation to a various extent, depending on his/her abilities and on the difficulty of the book, until the book was published. Upon the local publishers' requests, we put the stress on social sciences rather than on literature and, within the social sciences, rather on matters especially relevant to the Egyptian audience such as Egyptology and Orientalism in a broad sense. However, this did not prevent us from also promoting the translation of modern classics of French social sciences (Braudel, Bourdieu) and literature (Proust) that were yet not sufficiently available in Arabic. However, this kind of one-way, "missionary" policy hurt my egalitarian vision of Franco-Egyptian relations, and I was eager to work also the other way round.

The moment was favourable: it came with the announcement of Naguib Mahfouz's Nobel prize in October 1988 a few weeks after my start, and with it an unprecedented opportunity to boost Egyptian and Arabic literature in translation –or at least that's what the small *milieu* of Western translators from Arabic hoped, somewhat naively, would happen. In any case, Mahfouz's Nobel certainly fuelled my desire to re-engage actively in literary translation on a personal level. At the same time, the small translation unit I headed embarked in a joint translation project of a series of political essays by Egyptian liberal intellectuals that were co-published by one of our Cairene partners (Dar al-Fikr), La Découverte in Paris and Bouchène in Algiers as well. This latter experience was especially instructive for me.

The first two essays to appear in this series (Al-Ashmawy 1989; Zakariya 1991) had several characteristics in common: they were very recent<sup>2</sup>, they called for a radical separation between religion and politics and, for this reason, had raised quite a lot of debate in Egypt, where mainstream politics as well as the various Islamicist opposition movements stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood practiced or advocated their mixing in different ways (things has not changed much since!). However, they differed in their method: Al-Ashmawy, an Egyptian magistrate, based his arguments in Islamic law and theology, in a way not much different from his predecessor 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (1888-1866) in *al-Islam wa-usul al-hukm* (1925), whose French translation appeared later in the same

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<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Saïd Al-Ashmawy's [1932-2013] *al-Islam al-siyasi* had been published in 1987. The essays gathered in Fouad Zakariya's [1927-2010] translation in different venues between 1986 and 1989.

series (Abderraziq 1994). In contrast, Zakariya, a professor of philosophy, wrote from a modern, liberal perspective familiar to a Western reader. This led to two quite different ways of writing, one (Al-Ashmawy's) very much based on classical Arabic rhetoric, and the other (Zakariya's) using the tools and argumentation techniques of modern critical thought.

However, this radical difference between their respective styles was largely lost in my French translations, for reasons I did not hesitate to present candidly in the introductions I wrote for these French versions. I had also written an introduction to my translation of Maguid Toubia's short stories –upon the publisher's request, I suppose. I am retrospectively struck by this custom of asking the translator to present the author to his/her new audience through a preface or introduction, notwithstanding the translators' credentials –or lack of thereof, as was my case at the time of Toubia's translation at least. I suspect this had to do with the fact that these were translations from the Arabic, that is, from a distant, different world that needed (in the publishers' view at least) to be explained to the reader. Whatever the case, I used my prefaces to Al-Ashmawy and Zakariya to set out my translation strategies. I wrote at the end of my introduction to Al-Ashmawy:

Against an 'orientalising' translation, that is to say, an integral transposition of the Arabic text into French that was bound to be indigestible, we have made the choice of a substantial rewriting, for this alone allows for the author's thought to find a new life in the target language and culture and thus to be received beyond the small circle of specialists (Jacquemond, in Al-Ashmawy 1989: 8; my translation).

What I did not mention was that this substantial rewriting also involved a massive compression of the Arabic original. Typically, ten lines in Arabic would become five in French, meaning that actually the original was reduced to more than half its length (it is usually admitted that the French translation of an Arabic text is 25% to 30% longer than the original). The rewriting job was much lighter in Zakariya's translation, because of the much lesser distance between his style of writing, much informed by the Western thought he'd been teaching for decades, and its French equivalent. However, reading back my translation today compared to the original, I can see that my priority was clearly to deliver the author's message in the smallest amount of signs!



I had probably developed this kind of translation strategy while translating Egyptian pundits' columns for the CEDEJ's *Revue de la presse égyptienne* during my years as a student in Cairo. I also kept it up by teaching it in the translation classes I was asked to give to Egyptian young French language teachers and academics as part of my assignment. Against my students' basic idea of translation as consisting in replacing Arabic words by French ones or vice versa, my mantra was: we don't translate words, we translate meanings. I had made up my own version of the first translation theory I had discovered, namely, the "interpretative theory of translation" elaborated by Marianne Lederer and Danica Seleskovitch (1984), conference interpreters and professors at the ESIT (École Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs, now part of the University of Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle), France's foremost training school for interpreters and translators. Teaching translation students to understand a given text before starting to translate it and having them produce compressed versions of it, in the original language and in the target one, are actually excellent training methods, which I still use now in my M.A. translation classes at Aix-Marseille University. In addition to this, I now ask my students to do comparative analyses of French translations of reports or columns originally published in Arab newspapers, as they appear in *Courrier international*, a French weekly magazine that consists mainly of a selection of articles translated from the international press. While these translations usually convey the originals' meaning in a quite accurate way, they resort to rewriting, summarizing or clarifying techniques to variable extents, and thus provide my students with an eloquent example of the liberty one can take in the translation process. Of course, this rewriting and summarizing process is not innocent. As Lynne Franjié (2009) has shown in her study of *Courrier international's* coverage of the 2006 Israeli-Lebanese war, these translations tend to suppress or attenuate what may seem either too "politically incorrect" or irrelevant to the French reader.

I ended my introduction to Fouad Zakariya's translation with a warning of sorts:

Because this translation calls the North as witness to the ideological struggles currently taking place within the South, it runs the risk of allowing these struggles to be used as a weapon by the North. And because it seems to offer to a West haunted by the "return of Islam" the backing of the "good Arab", it runs the risk to give arguments to those who, on the Southern side of the Mediterranean, accuse Fouad

Zakariya of being an “enemy from within”. (Jacquemond, in Zakariya 1991: 12; my translation).

Thus, it seems that I was very conscious of the effects of my translation choices –from the very selection of the texts we chose to translate to the kind of translation I practiced– on the book’s reception, and that I was desperately trying to preempt them. It was a desperate attempt, indeed, since the book was released on January 24<sup>th</sup> 1991, in the midst of the Gulf war, in a context obviously contributing to aggravate misrepresentations. I have lost the abundant press book the publisher had compiled (the book was relatively successful, and *La Découverte* reprinted it in 2002 –in the wake of 9/11), but I remember well that what hit me most back then was the fact that there was not a single comment on my translation. In the transparent, domesticating translation strategy prevailing in France, this was the best proof of my success. I was an invisible translator, *ergo* I was a good translator.

This was a deliberate choice, one that was going against what was already becoming the dominant trend among French self-conscious, “politically correct” translators, that is, the critique of “ethnocentric” translation, as the late Antoine Berman (1942-1991) put it in a seminal essay (1985). Almost at the same time, Lawrence Venuti published his first important contribution to the critique of invisible translation (1986). Together with Meschonnic, Spivak and others, Berman and Venuti would become connected with the “ethical turn” in translation, that is, with a theory and practice of translation aiming at recognizing the Other’s alterity and giving it a place within the target language and culture through “foreignizing” translation strategies. How come then that, while my own ethics and politics should have led me to identify with the Berman and Venuti ethics of translation that were gaining ground in the 1980s and 1990s, I was going the other way around?

To find an answer to this question, let us go back to the first pages of this essay and my description of the 1980s’ context as regards Arabic literature in translation. We had read Edward Said, we had celebrated Naguib Mahfouz’s Nobel price, we were fighting to put Arabic literature “out of the ghetto”, to “make it commonplace” it, as I said, so that it could be read in French or English just as other foreign literatures –and of course, the model everybody had in mind, in the Arab literary milieus, was the success story of South American literature and “magical realism” in Europe and North America, which was at its

height in the 1980s. For me, and for many of my colleagues I suppose, it meant first to adopt translation strategies susceptible to help this “normalisation”. That meant that we had to get rid of certain Orientalist traditions which, in their scholarly side and in their more popular one as well, had contributed to the longstanding ghettoisation and exoticisation of Arabic literary heritage in the West and were now influencing the reception of modern Arabic literature in translation, and to replace them with the mainstream domesticating translation strategies. Indeed, this is what I was doing, quite consciously, in my published translations at the turn of the 1990s.

This would turn out to be, it seems to me, one of my major contributions to translation theory. In an essay I was lucky enough to publish in a collective book directed by Lawrence Venuti (Jacquemond 1992), I proposed that the history of translation from Arabic into French (or English for that matter [see Shamma 2009]) teaches us that foreignising translation strategies are not necessarily more “ethical”, that is, better suited to make a place for the Other in the target culture. On the contrary, such strategies can further confirm the Other’s alterity, as long as this specific other is kept by the target culture in a radical alterity. Actually, Berman had himself realised this, as is shown by his criticism of Mardrus’ “exoticizing” translation of the *Arabian Nights* (1985: 79).

Robyn Creswell (2017) has recently provided us with a very eloquent reflection on this dilemma. He asserts that:

A central task for translators from the Arabic is to assert the bare translatability of the language into English. By translatability, I mean its interpretability, its potential for making sense –including, of course, aesthetic sense. (...) This isn’t an argument for “domesticating” translations, that is, for neutered English versions that privilege ease of reading over linguistic estrangement. Instead, the argument is that at a moment when the estrangement of English and Arabic is a brute historical fact, eloquent translations from the Arabic can provide exactly the experience of shock and defamiliarization that any powerful reading experience, including those of translations, must involve. That lucid and legible English versions might indeed provoke these experiences suggests to me that the categories of “domesticating” and “foreignizing” translations are essentially meaningless, or at least highly contingent. (Creswell 2016: 452-453)

However, in the example he gives further, selected verses from a poem by an ISIS female militant he translated with his colleague Bernard Haykel (2015), the two appear to have also resorted to domesticating strategies, such as selecting the verses (ten out of the sixteen composing the original [al-Nasr 2014: 43]) that best suit their point (that is, showing that the poem “combines the politics of jihad with a visionary cosmopolitanism” [Creswell and Haykel 2015]), explaining al-Nasr’s “Qahtan wa-‘Adnan” as “the Arab of the South [and] the Arab of the North”, etc. While their translation is indeed an “eloquent” one, as Creswell claims, I would argue that it does not escape from the domestication/foreignisation polarity and its effects. It does produce an “experience of shock and defamiliarization”, as he expected, but rather, I would say, through the unlikely mix of the message’s strangeness and its rhetoric’s familiarity. Actually, such a mix is already noticeable in the Arabic original, with its pan-Islamist message expressed in the classical form (one rhyme throughout and one of the canonical metres), yet in a very modern style devoid of the archaisms and flourishes that usually come with this kind of poetry. As a matter of fact, the familiar aspect of this style, whether in the Arabic original or in the English translation, stems from the fact that it resembles much of the patriotic song’s rhetoric common to so many modern nations (and, as in this case, supranational imagined communities).

In this way, Robyn Creswell’s plea for the translatability of Arabic –by which he means the moral and political necessity to translate from this language, including poetry of the Islamic State– echoes very much my own plea for the normalisation of Arabic literature in translation, which has always prevented me from adopting the “resistant translation” strategies Venuti would call for. As it appears clearly from Creswell’s recent essay (and one could quote dozens of others in the same direction), the material and symbolic status of the Arabic language in the centres of the Western world has not improved since the 1980s. I would even contend, on the basis of my three decades long experience, that it has deteriorated, in France at least. Looking back to my numerous contributions to both theory and practice of Arabic translation since 1992 and my essay in Venuti’s collection (more than fifteen articles and book chapters and as many translated books), it seems to me that I have been mostly developing variations on the same theme. In summary, as regards theory, and, as regards practice, I have consistently tipped the scales in favour of domesticating choices rather than foreignising ones –in various doses surely, depending on the text and the context, but the general trend has remained clear.

### ***From French into Arabic***

Let us turn back now to what was my main occupation between 1988 and 1995, when I was in charge of the Translation Department of the French cultural bureau in Cairo, that is, translation into Arabic. During the 1980s, the Egyptian publishing sector was gradually recovering from the erratic policies implemented under the Nasser and Sadat regimes (see Gonzalez-Quijano 1998). I was soon convinced that working with the public sector would probably be risky in many ways, especially given that the private sector was recovering some vigour at the hand of small entrepreneurs, often with a militant, leftist background, who entered the publishing market both with political and commercial ambitions. Those would become my favourite partners. I would also find out later that some of my best and most effective translators had a similar profile –that is to say that they had a militant background and that translation was for them both a means of living and a political or ideological project.

But what fascinated me most soon was to discover that, while we –my Egyptian colleagues, French-Arabic translators, and myself, Arabic-French translator– did apparently the same job, we actually worked in very different ways and, more broadly, we occupied radically different positions in our respective societies. Mine was an extremely peripheral one (as a literary translator, that is, one of the least recognized occupations within the cultural field, and furthermore, a translator from the Arabic, a very marginal language in the translated book market in France), while theirs, albeit not better on the material level, was certainly more favourable on the symbolic one. Of course, they remained second-hand writers, and thus not as highly regarded as first-hand authors. Yet, because of the Egyptian (and more broadly Arab) cultural (or: literary, academic, publishing, etc.) field's dominated position in the global economy of symbolic exchanges, their social role or mission was much more recognized than mine –as translators, that is, as indispensable actors of the “transfer of knowledge” from more developed cultures or societies, and especially as translators from French, that is, from a language that was still at the forefront of critical thinking in several domains, as was attested by the popularity of “French theory” on American campuses in the 1980s.

There was, thus, a fundamental inequality between Arabic-French and French-Arabic translation. But prior to this inequality was another one, one that had to do with the production of knowledge and representations related to Egypt (or the Arab world at large). In France (and this can be extended to the West in general), this knowledge and these representations, instead of being imported from the place, was mostly produced by the group of individuals and institutions that form together the Orientalist field. One of the main consequences of this state of affairs was that one of the first requests I received from my Egyptian partners was to fund translations of books dealing with the Egypt and the Arab region, from Egyptology to current economic and political issues. The case of Egyptology, which turned out to be one of our most successful series in Arabic translation, is especially interesting because it epitomises this issue of translation as reclaiming a knowledge related to the Self, as opposed to translation as a pure import of foreign knowledge. From Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt (1798-1801) and Champollion's deciphering of the Rosetta Stone (1822-1824) until way into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Egyptology, that is, the study of history of ancient Egyptian history, remained largely monopolized by European scholars and archaeologists who ignored or patronized their native counterparts (Reid 2015). The latter did not recover their full independence until the 1950s and yet, till now, the field of Egyptology remains dominated by foreign scholars, and Egyptian Egyptologists have to publish in English, French or German if they want their foreign peers to recognize their contribution.

Egyptology is but an extreme example of the marginalisation of the Arabic language as a vector of knowledge production, an issue of growing importance in many fields –and one that concerns actually most national languages, given the rapidly growing use of English as the lingua franca of scientific communication, but of course it takes specific dimensions in postcolonial contexts such as the Arab-speaking areas. But however important this “translation as reclamation” part of our programme was, the latter's core remained the “transfer of knowledge”, especially in the social sciences and humanities, from literary criticism to sociology, history and political science. My Egyptian partners had little interest in literature, at least until 1993 when I started to work with a newly-founded publishing house, Sharqiyyat, which would become closely connected with the young literary avant-garde known as *gil al-tis'inat*, the Nineties generation –but on the whole, there was much less interest for French literature than for French social sciences.

Back then, when I made these choices, I did not realise that they actually corresponded with general trends in Arabic translation, which I would document and analyse in later research (2008), and that these general trends did not differ much from those one can observe in other comparable linguistic areas (Heilbron 1999). Actually, what struck me most at that time were the multiple differences between my own practice as a translator from Arabic into French and my Egyptian peers' practice as translators from French into Arabic, and among them, especially, their tendency to favour foreignising translation strategies. Although I was working with translators with very different backgrounds and from different generations, it seemed that they were all trained in the same school, where a good translation was not, as we would consider in France (or in the U.K. or the U.S.), an invisible one but, quite the opposite, a very visible one. In the worst case, it had more to do with laziness and a lack of professionalism that would lead them to deliver word-to-word versions without taking the necessary time either to fully understand what they were translating or to reformulate it in a clear, eloquent Arabic version. However, I soon became convinced that for many of my Egyptian peers, this was rather a deliberate choice, and one consistent with the mainstream trend of Arabic translation whether in the country or in the region at large.

As part of my job, and in order to check the market trends, I had been surveying the translated Arabic book market, especially translations from French, published all over the Arab world, which I used to search and buy at the Cairo book fair every year. Although I never read them thoroughly, I would make a try at it, and it was often a rather unsettling experience: suddenly I was confronted with an Arabic language I was not familiar with. Part of my unease had to do with my lack of intimacy with the specific Arabic jargon of this or that subject, but I was soon convinced that the main reason for my malaise was that actually, translated Arabic often "sounded" different from original Arabic. The level of foreignness, so to speak, in translated Arabic was variable, depending on many factors, but on the whole, it seemed clear that most of the time, translated Arabic had a distinctive smell – exactly the opposite of French "invisible" translator's golden rule: the translated text ought not to smell.

Being born and raised in a central, dominant culture where translation was made invisible, it was not easy for me to accept these foreignising aesthetics, and I spent hours editing translations too literal for my taste or trying to convince their authors to write a

more idiomatic Arabic. These biases leaked out of my first essays on French/Arabic translation, where I would equate between these aesthetics and the dominated position of Arabic language and culture, and thus call for their liberation from this domination (see e.g. Jacquemond 1992). Later, when I got back to Arabic translation as a scholarly object, almost ten years after I ended my term as director of this translation program, it seems to me that I developed a more nuanced approach. For instance, studying Bourdieu's Arabic translations (Jacquemond 2015) in the light of, amongst others, Moroccan translator and philosopher Abdessalam Benabdelali's reflections on translation (2006), led me to reconsider the Arab translator's position. I would situate it in a broader perspective, where it does not differ radically from that of translators working in other languages, on one hand, and on the other hand, to identify and discuss the specific problems of Arabic translation, which are related to the specificities of the Arab linguistic area. This is an area consisting of more than twenty countries where there are many political and economic obstacles to book circulation, where the publishing industry is still dominated by poorly professionalised actors, an area populated by more than three hundred million but where the translated book market is ridiculously small for many reasons, the main one being that a significant part of the local elites continue to privilege the use of English (or French) over Arabic in many fields, as a means to perpetuate their social domination. Add to this that Arabic, a Semitic language, has no common roots with the major European languages, that it accepts reluctantly loanwords and prefers to coin new terms by drawing on its extremely rich and fertile triliteral word root system and enriching it, the result is that Arabic neology –which relies largely, here as elsewhere, on the translators' creativity– is always fragile, uncertain and hectic. Therefore, it can take a very long time for a new word or an old word's new meaning to reach the critical mass that will impose it on the language users, whether at the level of the whole region or at that of part of this region.

### *In conclusion*

This too quick survey reveals the causes of the deep difference between translation conditions and practices in French and the counterpart in Arabic. This difference struck me very much when I started to work in both directions at the turn of the 1990s, and I tried to reduce in my practice and in my theorizing as well. It is probably a good thing that I was not able to succeed: I imagine with a chill the kind of Arabic translation that could have been produced by an Egyptian translator who would have applied to a French



political essay the same naturalizing techniques I used in my French translation of Al-Ashmawy's *al-Islam al-siyasi*. Or am I wrong, and shouldn't I admit rather that this kind of Arabisation (*ta'rib*) has always existed and still exists, under different forms from my Francisation, and that it is actually a good thing?

Trying to assess how my practice of Arabic-French translation and my analysis of the reverse activity has evolved since the late 1980s and early 1990s, it seems to me that I have become more attached to respectfulness or less prone to rewriting, as regards my practice and, on the other side, more prone to understand the need for literal, word-to-word translation into Arabic. This has not prevented me from engaging sometimes in various forms of editing, but this is another subject altogether. True, it is not always easy to draw the line between rewriting (as part of the translating job) and editing (that is, taking advantage of the translation to make corrections in the original work), but it is a rather common practice, and one that benefits the author at the end of the day. I remember that while I was exchanging letters with Pierre Bourdieu regarding the Arabic translation of *Les règles de l'art* (1992), he sent me a list of two or three dozens of minor corrections to the published version, which had been suggested to him by his Dutch translator, asking me to make sure they would be inserted in the future Arabic translation. I have also practiced this kind of intervention in many of my translations, yet quite marginally.

On the other hand I can see more clearly now the reasons behind the pervasiveness of the word-for-word in Arabic translation, a phenomenon I referred to as the "deferential translational norm" (2015: 201). This deferential pattern is the clearest manifestation of the deep inequality between the two languages and cultures at the present point of their encounter. However it varies a lot from one translator to another and from one translated book to another, and probably this follows a general pattern one can observe in incoming translations into any language. Deference has to do with the value the target language's specific cultural field grants to the source text it decides to import. The more the target cultural field values a source text, the more its translation is bound to be deferent. At a given time and place, the different subsectors of a society's cultural (literary, academic) field can have different kinds of relationship with their foreign counterparts, from an equal, peer-to-peer relationship to a very unequal one when the importing field considers itself in a position of inferiority and need of its foreign counterpart in order to move

forward or go beyond a situation of crisis. At a more micro level, a deferential, foreignising translation strategy will be used by avant-garde or dissident actors within a given subfield who will use the importation of a foreign text or author in order to further their own agenda and add legitimacy to it (see Casanova 2002 for a full description of these dynamics). The history of modern translation in the main European languages is full of examples of such translation strategies, which by the way is an indication at the necessity of always contextualising the study and analysis of translations. Unfortunately, we are in serious lack of such studies as regards modern Arabic translations. “The construction of a history of translation is the first task of a *modern* theory of translation”, Antoine Berman aptly wrote (1992: 1), and this is an especially urgent one for Arabic translation. Although tremendous progress has been made in this field during the last two decades, it has focused mostly on the *Nahda* period, that is, the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. There is yet much to be done as regards Arabic translation since the end of World War II, a period less favoured by researchers but nevertheless extremely rich and whose impact on Arab language and culture is as decisive, if not more so, than that of the *Nahda*. This is indeed a vast research program awaiting the coming generation of scholars working on translation into Arabic, and for translators as well.

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<sup>3</sup> As this is not the place here to list a full bibliography of these works, I refer the reader to the references provided in the introduction of *The Translator’s* recent issue on translation in the Arab world (Jacquemond and Selim 2015).

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