



# Methods of Rendering Old Languages to English in Translatology

Nusrat Shikhabayev

Department of Translation and Interpretation, Qafqaz University, Baku, Azerbaijan

## Email address:

nshikhabayev@gmail.com, nsixbabayev@qu.edu.az

## To cite this article:

Nusrat Shikhabayev. Methods of Rendering Old Languages to English in Translatology. *Arabic Language, Literature & Culture*. Vol. 1, No. 1, 2016, pp. 1-5. doi: 10.11648/j.allc.20160101.11

**Received:** July 1, 2016; **Accepted:** July 13, 2016; **Published:** August 2, 2016

---

**Abstract:** Certainly, many problems are likely to occur when rendering old languages into English. This is especially true of those languages that are no longer currently in use and especially true of those that has been completely forgotten. Some aspects of translation, such as accuracy or the effort to preserve the originality of source language (SL) meaning when rendering into target language (TL), be it either old or modern language, has always been difficult and problematic. This is so regardless of which language you are rendering to or from accept that when old languages are in consonantal alphabets, the magnitude of difficulty in rendering is significantly increased.

**Keywords:** Old Languages, Culture, Manuscripts, Arabic, Persian, Turkic

---

## 1. Introduction

We believe that the study and analysis of such translation difficulties and learning how misunderstanding or inaccuracies occur when rendering them, can be useful for every researcher who is interested in translation strategies of old languages written in consonantal alphabets. So, the absence of vowel signs in Arabic, Persian and Old Turkic languages, more precisely, writing them without vowel signs in the professional form of the language using just one vowel sign to suggest several vowel signs and make people guess which vowel sign belongs to which vowels amplifies the problem. For example, the letter Aleph (ا) with a sign above in Arabic, Persian and old Turkic is used for each a, e, u, ü vowels, but the letter Aleph (ا) with a sign below is used for i or ə (neutral) vowel (Shikhabayev 2009, 62-63). Certainly such confusions counting the weight of the old words in those languages creates extra burden both for a reader and a translator.

Accordingly, due to the complexity of the vowel system in the phonetic system of Arabic, Persian as well as old Turkic languages, some translators hold themselves free and do not pay closer attention to vocalizing the consonantal text and as a result, they make serious mistakes while rendering. However, all these difficulties in translation, as we noted earlier, are definitely connected with incorrect vocalizing.

For example, researchers O. Shaik and V. V. Bartold pronounced the old Turkic word *çixdi* in 'left' (past participle verb) as *chikhdi*, while M. Ergin and H. Arasli pronounced it as *chakhdi*, unlike S. Jamshidov, who pronounced it quite differently as *choquddu*. Each of them is used in various meanings (Shikhabayev 2009, 63).

This is exacerbated by the fact that most words in some old languages are no longer used today. So we purposively selected some incorrectly or poorly rendered words and expressions as examples from old books written in Arabic script which dates back to XI-XVI c. AD (Mirabile 1991, 27) and tried to reveal some mistakes which are easily encountered by translators when rendering them from old languages (old Arabic, old Persian, old Turkic) into English.

## 2. Material and Methods

The translation of old languages has always been a problematic and difficult issue. Therefore, let us consider some of the reasons these translations are regarded as so difficult. First, consider that before starting the translation of ancient texts, the translator should try to discern whether the manuscript is a copy or the original. If it is a copy of the original, and the original text is extant, the translator should travel and compare the original with the copy on his own. It is, of course, important that this is done early (i.e. at the beginning of study) in order to avoid errors inherent in

working with a flawed copy. This will save the translator many frustrations and difficulties related to the objections of others who are closer to the original text.

Copies of the manuscripts or copies of the copies may leave some difficulties or ambiguity behind, and finally cause translation of such copies to be a waste of time. If, however, the original is not discovered, translators who intend to translate the old language should try to get all available copies of the original. The next step is to put them together and compare all differences and similarities. After this comparison of all existing copies, the difficult decision should be made as to which words or expressions in the manuscript to select as likely to be most authentic. If this is not done, many different and possibly dissimilar translations of one work may appear in future or cause some concern or confusion to readers.

Another of the most evident problems is associated the differences in cultural practices between the culture of the original text and the new culture for which the text has been rendered. Having had such a difficulty, we think that a translator needs to become conversant with the cultural differences between the original language and the translated language of the text and must not ignore any cultural factors. This means that as a first step, the translator must be well acquainted with the cultural and social factors of both the present and the past. Consider the following: Once, the number for seven, seventy, and seven hundred in old Arabic and old Turkic had been used to denote quantifiers like many and much (Hatip 1999, 27). However, today, this word is no longer used for that reason. Let's see similar examples in The book of Dede Korkut and The Koran:

- (1). It is he who has created for you whatsoever is on earth, and then set his mind to the creation of heaven, and formed it into seven heavens; he knows all things. (Sale 1861, 4)
- (2). The fox knows the scents of seven valleys (Lewis 1974, 192)

The translation of old languages requires the translator to be skillfully trained and to have good cultural knowledge. Hopefully, by possessing such broad pertinent cultural knowledge, the translator can comprehend the original text well and translate it correctly.

### 3. Discussions

Languages continually change over time. New words or expressions are being added, while others are left out or start to be used with different meanings. Consequently, the old language is replaced with a new one. One example is that of Shakespearean English as compared with the English of the present. Similar changes still occur even in present day languages. Consider the following: Once the word for cool in colloquial English was used for weather, but now it is used for many reasons, like to express the meaning for relaxed, excellent, smooth etc. For example: She is totally cool and easygoing, This is a really cool setup! or This stuff is so cool. I am just floating (Spears 1975, 87) etc. Similar changes or

innovations exist in other languages too. For instance, once the word *uchmaq* in old Turkic languages was a noun meaning paradise, but now it is only used as a verb meaning to fly somewhere. As for the words like *aytmaq* 'narrate', *esen* 'healthy', *tanuq* 'witness'), *yom* 'good tidings', they are no longer used in the modern Turkic languages now (Dəmirçizadə 1959, 143).

The Arabic language has a very complex writing structure, it starts from the old eastern line drawing format of the character, including the dot marking of most characters, where two, three, or four characters could be discriminated by marking dots only (Zawaideh 2012, 1021).

So, after considering all these difficulties in old languages, to say that translators should learn an old language first before they start translation may not be realistic because it usually takes a long time to learn a language and then to start a translation. If any language learner started rendering, all language learners would be translators. Not every person who learns a language also translates well. Accordingly, we consider that it is better to choose those who already have enough knowledge about the old language in question.

Besides, knowledge of the old language, of course, includes familiarity with idiomatic phrases. There are some mistranslated idioms that we would like to discuss. For example, a proverb mentioned in the book of Dede Korkut was lost from the text during its translation into English and was used instead as if it was a typical sentence rather than a proverb. The well-known proverb They say the neighbor's due is God's due was rendered as "Is this not a neighbor's duty?" i.e. like a question but not as a proverb (Shikhabayev 2009, 79).

Certainly most think that it is not possible to translate any text perfectly and therefore accept such misrepresentations to be quite natural. However we think that translators should not ignore words or expressions written in old language just because it is difficult to research them or discover their actual meanings at the time of their writing. Accordingly, we consider that translators should pay more attention to old language than they pay attention to modern languages.

Another concern is the translators' lack of familiarity with writing rules of old languages which were completely common for people living in the past. Unfortunately, some translations are done by people who are only very well informed in target language but not able to render the intended meaning just because they are not familiar with the numerals, punctuations, marks or signs of source languages which had been applied in the past. So, each and every translator intending to render old languages written in consonantal alphabet should learn the writing rules of those languages well enough before beginning to translate, or, as was noted earlier, such translations should be rendered by those who already have the above mentioned skills.

Old languages report to us about the civilization and the culture of nations. Translation and history of translation has shown that by making any small mistake in the text it is quite easy to depict a civilized nation or person as uncivilized, or vice versa. One example of such a mistake is

the investigation led by the researcher Konul Huseynova (Shikhabayev 2009, 9), in which she discovered a contradiction in the translation by Sümer, Uysal and Walker (1972). She noted the fact that as a result of a single mistake in the first English translation of the book of Dede Korkut from old Turkic into English by Sümer, Uysal and Walker, in which brave King Kazan, who is highly respected among Turkic speaking people, is described as a baby killer and a murderer. Consequently this mistake left a negative impact on readers about Kazan and Turkic kings. So, what was the cause for this expression being understood incorrectly? The translator rendered the word for falcon (a bird) as baby in the chapter of The Sack of the House of Salur Kazan. According to the Turkic tradition, the killing of a falcon which belongs to the enemy simply means to start a fight against them. The word toğan with the first letter t in Turkic language means falcon, but the translator understood it wrongly and rendered it as a doğan with the first letter d which means to give birth to a baby. Let's see the translation by Sümer, Uysal and Walker:

(3). Then let me reach the infidel,  
Kill all his newly born.

Let me wipe off the blood with my sleeve from my forehead.

If I die for your sake let me die (Sümer / Uysal / Walker 1972, page 30).

So it is clear that to kill a bird is one thing, to kill a baby is another and the acts must never be mistaken for each other or even compared. Here, a small mistake caused a big problem and disgraced King Kazan who still has a high reputation and is respected by Turkic speaking people for his bravery and generosity. We can consider that mistakes like those mentioned above are connected to the lack of knowledge of the source language and the culture that translator renders to the modern target language. Fortunately, in later translations (Lewis 1974; Mirabile 1991) the mistake was not repeated:

(4). I shall go to the unbeliever,  
I shall rise again and kill,  
I shall wipe the blood of my forehead with my sleeve.  
If I die I shall die for your sake (Lewis 1974, page 49).

(5). I shall go to the infidel.  
Again I shall kill your falcon-enemy,  
I shall wipe the blood of my forehead with my sleeve.

If I am killed, I shall die for your sake (Mirabile 1991, page 49).

On the other hand, there are unfortunately some translators who completely remove a sentence from a text rather than making any further effort to translate it. Even worse, many don't even leave a note about the exclusion of the words or expressions from the text. One example of this is the sentence May Allah bring you joy within three days which is mentioned in the chapter The Story of Bamsi Beyrek, Son of Kam Büre in the book of Dede Korkut, which was completely removed from the text during the translation process (Shikhabayev 2009, 89). However, in the first of the three translations provided in examples (6) to

(8), the same meaning has been preserved and rendered successfully:

(6). 'Have you some bread in your reed basket?

For three days I have traveled ceaselessly. Feed me!

May Allah bring you joy within three days. ' (Sümer / Uysal / Walker 1972, page 60)

(7). Have you any bread in the crock?

'Three days have I journeyed; give me to eat.'

[not translated] (Lewis 1974, page 77).

(8). Have you any bread from your leather cloth covering?

'I have been on the road for three days; feed me!'

[not translated] (Mirabile 1991, page 88)

Another sentence Your lovely mane is similar to silk (Shikhabayev 2009, 116) was left out in the same way by P. Mirabile in the same chapter. However, the other two translators managed to render it successfully without leaving it out:

(9). Your lovely eyes shine like two torches in the dark.

Your lovely mane is similar to silk (Sümer / Uysal / Walker 1972, page 56).

(10). Your dear eyes are like two glowing jewels,

Your dear mane is like rich brocade (Lewis 1974, page 74).

(11). Your little eyes are like two precious stones that shine at night.

[not translated] (Mirabile 1991, page 84).

Some translators behave as if some sentences or words in old manuscripts were unnecessary and that, accordingly, there is no need or advantage to rendering them. Besides, we consider that translators are required to give it in a note when a word or phrase is difficult to understand or translate and they should not leave them out neither partly nor completely, and they should not even abbreviate the text where it is repetitive or difficult to understand. As in examples (12) – (14), the expression for drawn by scribes (Shikhabayev 2009, 116) was left out in the translation partly by Sümer, Uysal and Walker, in the chapter The Story of Kan Turali, Son of Kanli Kojain the book of Dede Korkut.

(12). My girl with narrow mouth no larger than an almond shell,

My black-browed one [strongly abbreviated] (Sümer / Uysal / Walker 1972, page 113)

(13). Too tiny your mouth to hold twin almonds.

Your black brows are like lines drawn by scribes (Lewis 1974, page 131).

(14). My narrow-mouthed one who cannot contain two almonds.

My black-browed one, drawn from the painters' pens (Mirabile 1991, page 168).

In the example (15), the translator, G. Sale, reduced five verses to three in number when rendering Koran from original Arabic into English and used semicolons instead of numbers.

(15). Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the masters of the elephant? Did he not make their treacherous design an occasion of drawing them into error; and send against them flocks of birds, which

cast down upon them stones of baked clay; and render them like the leaves of corn eaten by cattle (Sale 1861, 499-500).

Let's see the correct version of the same chapter in the translation of Al-Hilali and Muhsin Khan:

- (16). 1. Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the owners of the elephant? (The Elephant army which came from Yemen under the command of Abraha Al-Ashram intending to destroy the Kabah at Makkah) 2. Did He not make their plot go astray? 3. And He sent against them birds, in flocks, 4. Striking them with stones of Sijjil (baked clay) 5. And He made them like (an empty field of) stalks (of which the corn has been eaten up by cattle) (Al Hilali / Muhsin Khan 1998, 851).

However, G. Sale managed to preserve the correct order of the verses in the other chapters of the book when rendering, as shown in example (17).

- (17). For the uniting of the tribe of Koreish; their uniting in sending forth the caravan of merchants and purveyors in winter and summer; let them serve the Lord of this house; who supplies them with food against hunger and has rendered them secure from fear (Sale 1861, 501).

For comparison, consider the translation Al-Hilali and Muhsin Khan in (18):

- (18). 1. (It is a great Grace and Protection from Allah) for the taming of the Quraish, 2. (And with all those Allah's Grace and Protection for their taming, We cause) the Quraish caravans to set forth safe in winter (to the south) and in summer (to the north, without any fear), 3. So let them worship (Allah) the Lord of this House (the Kabah in Makkah), 4. He who has fed them against hunger, and has made them safe from fear. (Al Hilali / Muhsin Khan 1998, 851).

## 4. Conclusion

We consider that translation of old languages should not be an individual effort, but rather should be a team effort involving both scholars and translators who have theoretical and practical knowledge of old languages as well as a strong background in the culture and history of those languages. Hopefully, such a team sitting and working intensively together should be able to overcome such difficulties and problems that occur in translation of old languages and any misunderstanding or misinterpretation related to the history and the culture encountered in the text could be solved by this functional group.

To sum up the research, we advise a translator intended to translate old languages written in Arabic script to become aware of difficulties and suggestions which suggested here before they start translating.

### 4.1. Difficulties

- (1). The most evident difficulty in translating old languages written in Arabic script is the alphabet itself,

including the writing rules of those languages.

- (2). Differences in cultural practices between the old and the new culture of the original text.
- (3). The phonetic system of the languages. Absence of vowel signs in Arabic, Persian and old Turkic especially in the professional form of the language confuse readers.
- (4). The translators' lack of familiarity with Arabic script types. Taking into account that old Turkic language was used with Arabic script types like Kufic, Naskh, Thuluth, Ta'liq, Nasta'liq, Riq'a, Diwani and others (Classic Arabic Script Types, 2012).
- (5). Some translators intending to translate old languages into English attempt to translate old languages on their own without seeking any advice or help.

### 4.2. Suggestions

- (1). The translator should make it clear whether the manuscript is the copy or the original.
- (2). In the event original doesn't exist, a translator should try to obtain all available copies or even the copies of the copies.
- (3). The translator must attain all necessary knowledge about the old SL and should have a good command of present TL.
- (4). It would be better if a translator is chosen from among whom is well aware of the old language or already experienced in that type of translation.
- (5). The translator should be more careful while translating old languages and must avoid making any small mistake, accept that translation of old languages bears importance to the culture of people.
- (6). The translator should try to seek the best fitting meaning of the word of the original and not remove it instead in order to avoid wrong translation.
- (7). The translator should report what they have omitted in the original text no matter how difficult the language is and give them in a note on the pages of their translation.
- (8). The translator should neither abbreviate nor extent the meaning in sentences when it is repetitive or looks long.
- (9). The translator should not play on the words or phrases translating the same word in a different way in the same translation.
- (10). In the event an available professional translator is hard to identify, it is better to hire someone who is rather experienced in SL than being a professional in the TL.

Surely, such skillful and reliable translators are especially needed today. So many countries with their differing religions and cultures must live closer as a global community than ever before. Such accurate translations can help bring them together and form friendships while teaching some traditional values of each. This type of high quality and correct translations can only but help to bring peace and solidarity in this multicultural world.

---

## References

- [1] Al-Hilali, M. / Muhsin Khan M. (1998): The Noble Qur'an: The English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary. Madinah: King Fahd Complex.
- [2] Cəmşidov, Ş. (1999): Kitabi-DədəmQorqud. Bakı: Elm.
- [3] Dəmirçizadə, Ə. (1959): Kitabi-DədəQorqud dastanının dili. Pedaqoji institutların tələbələri üçün tədris vəsaiti. Bakı: APİ.
- [4] Ergin, M. Sözlük (1994): Dede Korkut Kitabı II. İndeks-Gramer.
- [5] Hatip, A. (1999): Mülk, Nebe ve Saf surelerinin tefsiri. Bakı: Baku State University Press.
- [6] İsxanlı, H. (2002): Kitabi-Dədəm Qorqud Aşiqi. Bakı: Xəzər Universitəsi Nəşriyyatı.
- [7] Lewis, G. (1974): The Book of Dede Korkut. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- [8] Mirabile, P. (1991): Legends of Dede Korkut. Istanbul: İnkilab Kitab Evi.
- [9] Sale, G. (1861): The Koran: Commonly called The Alcoran of Mohammed. Los Angeles: Southern Regional Library Faculty of University of California.
- [10] Shikhbabayev, N. (2009): Kitabi-Dədəm Qorquddastanının ingilis dilinə tərcümələrinin müqayisəli təhlili. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Khazar University.
- [11] Spears, R. (1975): NTS's dictionary of American slang and colloquial Expressions. Third edition. Chicago: NTC Publishing Group.
- [12] Sümer, F. / Uysal, A. E. / Walker, W. S. (1972): The Book of Dede Korkut. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- [13] Zawaideh, F. H. (2012): Arabic Hand Written Character Recognition Using Modified Multi-Neural Network. In: Journal of Emerging Trends in Computing and Information Sciences 3/7, 1021-1026.