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Recreating relevance: translated Arabic idioms through a relevance theory lens

Raja Lahiani  ¹✉

This study uses relevance theory as an insightful heuristic model for translation quality assessment. As translation inherently involves communicating across contextual boundaries, the notion of relevance optimization continues to be a fruitful approach for research and practice. This investigation illuminates idioms as culturally embedded linguistic conventions, semantically abstruse, yet structurally crystallized. Idioms accrue fixed meanings within a speech community rather than by compositing constituent denotations. Classical Arabic poetry extensively harnesses idioms, not as ornamental substitutes for literal statements, but as intensive versions thereof. Losing idioms risks muting tonal intensity. By examining an Arabic verse exemplifying two idioms, and assessing thirteen English and French translations, this study reveals that an effective idiom translation requires looking beyond lexical equivalence. Rather, contextually unraveling connotative lexicons and reconstituting the idiom to achieve equivalent effects and optimal relevance is key. Thereby, successful idiom translation is defined not by formal correspondence, but by conveying implicated meanings and intended impacts. This work elucidates idiom translatability through an interdisciplinary relevance prism, advancing theory and equipping practitioners to navigate the interlingual labyrinth.

¹UAE University, Al Ain, UAE. ✉email: Raja.lahiani@uaeu.ac.ae

Introduction: the relevance-theoretic framework

Relevance theory investigates how humans interpret utterances and other acts of communication. It proposes that humans are geared towards maximizing relevance, i.e., looking for information that connects with background knowledge and yields worthwhile cognitive effects for the least processing effort (Gutt, 1990, p. 139). Relevance theory has significant implications for translation studies, as translating intrinsically involves communicating intended messages across linguistic and cultural barriers. The relevance-theoretic approach suggests that successful translation requires preserving the cognitive effects envisaged by the original communicator as receivers in the source language (SL) and target language (TL) may not share the same cognitive environment.

Gutt put forth a relevance-theoretic translation framework centered around the communicative clue. This signifies the clues that the stylistic properties provide, and that “guide the audience to the interpretation intended by the communicator” (2000, p. 134). A translator is expected to recreatively formulate a communicative clue that leads target readers to intended cognitive effects while minimizing the processing effort required through their linguistic choices (2000, p. 155). Communicative clues involve not only information but also the style used to convey any information (2000, p. 135), which urged Gutt to distinguish between direct and indirect translation. The former allows for the preservation of the source text (ST) stylistic elements, and hence it shares all its communicative clues. The latter is endorsed, though, when the ST and target text (TT) receivers do not share the same communicative clues (2000, pp. 169–170). The chief difference between them is that direct translation is “committed to *complete* interpretive resemblance,” whereas indirect translation “presumes *only adequate resemblance in relevant respects*” ([original emphasis] Gutt, 1990, p. 156).

Direct and indirect translations bring to the fore the notions of explicatures, i.e., explicitly communicated assumptions, and implicatures, i.e., implicitly communicated meanings. The relevance-theoretic approach suggests that translators should make aspects of meaning explicit when the target audience lacks the contextual knowledge to make the same inferences as the source audience (Gutt, 2000, pp. 99–100). Gutt warns that making too many implicit meanings explicit may violate relevance by increasing the processing effort needed. Therefore, translators need to creatively balance preserving relevance with bridging the gap between the cognitive environments of the source and target audiences. This often requires some adaptation in the translational choices while aiming at preserving intended cognitive effects.

Relevance theory aligns with functionalist approaches to translation with the view that translators are cross-cultural communicators. It provides a model for assessing translations—determining if the use of explicitation maintains relevance, if idiom substitutions preserve intended effects if deletions omit important implicatures, etc. Analyzing translated texts through the lens of relevance theory thus allows evaluation of the quality of translational choices. A successful translation needs to reach the “intended interpretation of the original” by deciding in which details it “should interpretively resemble the original in order to be consistent with the principle of relevance” for the TL audience “with its particular cognitive environment” (1990, p. 157).

Literary language intentionally flouts pragmatic norms to achieve poetic relevance. Translating it therefore requires great creativity to achieve relevance for target readers who lack the exact contextual assumptions as source readers (Gutt, 1990, p. 140). Literary translation is an interpretive act at its core. It puts forth the translator’s reading of the ST, including their discernment of the ST’s meaning and which of its rhetorical devices and

figures of speech are integral to guiding the audience toward grasping the communicative signification(s) that actualize the ST’s communicative function. In this framework, Koster notes that the “textual presence of the translator pertains to her double position as both addressee and sender, as reader and author, but also pertains to the strategy, the conscious choices, of a translator in solving technical problems of literary translation” (2014, p. 140). This double position becomes even more complex and delicate when the ST is composed in verse. Versification usually conspires with the text’s schemes and/or tropes to generate a complementarity that creates the ST communicative clues. This highlights the most problematic aspects of the translatability of poetry and raises the question of whether poetry needs to be translated exclusively into a verse or can be successfully translated into prose or any of these two modes of discourse.

Further, the contextual implications of a poem play an undeniable role in its interpretation. Colina rightly argues that texts “adopt different linguistic features and forms [...] dependent upon extra-linguistic factors such as the characteristics of the audience they address, the textual function, the motive for production, and the time and place of reception” (2015, p. 73). These situations may be personal and affect the poet directly; hence, the translator’s task entails looking out for inferred situations and culture-bound expressions to make sense of what would otherwise seem senseless to the reader of the translation. After all, the writer does not write for the readers of the translation, but rather for those who speak and read the same language (Al-Batineh and Alawneh, 2021, p. 210). Therefore, translation should be understood as an act of constructing a text rather than representing it. In their work, translators produce a translation and simultaneously contribute to the elaboration, mutation, transformation, and dissemination of these narratives through their translation choices (Lahiani, 2020a, p. 43). In order to achieve this aim, target-text (TT) oriented strategies are considered most suitable for achieving an effective translation that is clear and accurate, and at the same time, avoids presupposition mismatches (Al Tenajji and Al-Batineh, 2024).

Objective of the study

This study uses relevance theory as a practical tool to assess the quality of Arabic idiom translations into English and French. As translation inherently involves communicating across contextual boundaries, the notion of relevance optimization is considered a fruitful approach for research and practice. By using a classical Arabic verse as a case study, the present article argues that translating an idiom requires more than just finding a lexical equivalent in the target language. The translator must also consider the connotative meanings encoded in the idiom’s component words and how those words are manipulated in the wider textual context, which allows the translator to gauge the idiom’s intended relevance in the ST. The article proposes that a successful idiom translation should aim to preserve cognitive effects and communicative clues that achieve optimal relevance for target readers, not just formal correspondence. In this way, the translation conveys similar implicit content and achieves an equivalent impact as the ST idiom. Overall, idiom translation should be evaluated in terms of conveying the intended meanings and implications in a maximally relevant way for the target audience.

Idioms: navigating the Labyrinth

Broadly speaking, an idiom is an “expression unique to a language, especially one whose sense is not predictable from the meanings and arrangement of its elements” (McArthur et al. 2018). As it is “a multi-word unit that has a syntactic function within the

clause and has a figurative meaning in terms of the whole or a unitary meaning that cannot be derived from the meanings of its individual components" (Abdou, 2011, p. 4), an idiom is to be deciphered and then interpreted within its cultural context rather than limited to its narrow textual framework. Abdou sees an idiom as "a storehouse of cultural data [...] a repository of information on the prominent values, attitudes, and ideas in the speech community" (2011, p. 2). Idioms are a microcosm of an entire culture's view; a way of thinking; a mode of vision. To use Al-Shawi and Sepora's words, idioms are "colorful, dramatic, lively, closer to the way people really feel and near to the local culture" (2012, p. 140); they inform about people's experiences with reality, values and prohibitions, and general rules and wisdom the elders want to implant in the minds of the young (2012, p. 140).

By identifying idioms as highly complex configurations of language, Langlotz explains that "these units differ considerably with regard to their structural complexity, their lexical, morphosyntactic, syntactic and semantic organization as well as their discursive function" (2006, p. 1). Langlotz defines idioms as "conventional multi-word units that are semantically opaque and structurally fixed" (2006, p. 2; Zagood et al. 2023, p. 2), for they are conventionalized in a specific linguistic system by making up part of its grammar, and at the same time performing certain discourse-communicative functions gained through a socio-linguistic process. Langlotz adds that as institutionalized expressions, idioms' extended meanings and figurations become embedded in the lexicon of their respective speech community (2006, p. 4). It follows that outside of their cognitive contours, idioms lead to intimations of a different sphere of meaning.

Baker similarly refers to the fixedness of idioms in linguistic systems and identifies two main issues related to the translation of idioms: "the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning" conveyed by an idiom in the TL (2018, p. 71). For Baker, the more difficult it is for a translator to understand the meaning of an idiom in a specific context, the more unlikely that they mis-translate it. She, thus, refers to two situations in which translators may misinterpret idioms. The first is when "they seem transparent because they offer a reasonable literal interpretation and their idiomatic meanings are not necessarily signaled in the surrounding text" (p. 72). The second case is when an ST idiom has a very close counterpart in the TL, seeming similar on the surface but in reality having a different meaning (p. 72). Similarly, Vega-Moreno claims that "the meanings of an idiom's elements often play a role in the way we use and understand idiom strings" (2003, p. 304). She adds that some idioms are "none-to-one," as there is no semantic relation to the intended meaning (p. 305). It follows that "idioms vary in their degree of compositionality," i.e., analysability (p. 306).

While researching the construction of idioms within the framework of relevance theory, Vega-Moreno clarifies that in "understanding an utterance containing an idiom, the hearer takes the concepts encoded by the utterance and by the idiom string as clues to the explicatures and implicatures intended by the speaker" (2002, p. 313). As such, rather than being literal or figurative, idiom comprehension is driven by relevance (p. 315). The concepts encoded by an idiom give access to a set of assumptions. Added to the context, these may contribute to the derivation of the intended reading. With no in-depth knowledge of the two cultures involved, the translator is within a labyrinth when translating idioms that carry a heavy, culture-oriented semantic load (Awwad, 1989, p. 59; Al-Batineh and Alsmadi, 2021, pp. 580–581). Al-Shawi and Sepora highlight that different languages "frequently reflect different connotations and associations of feeling because of the differences in cultural roots" (2012, p. 141).

Because reading is part of translation, and because translation entails interpretation, it is part of the translator's role to provide

the clues to the implicatures and explicatures intended in an ST idiom. As Awwad explains, a "major area of difficulty with regard to translating idioms is misinterpreting the intention of the original writer" (1989: 58). In this respect, a translator would have to choose between ST-oriented strategies and TT-oriented strategies. As the former include such techniques as borrowing, literal translation, and calque, their use would require great skill to avoid translation loss, "the inevitable loss of textually and culturally relevant features" (Dickins et al. 2017, p. 18). According to Dickins et al., "translation losses in the TT are only significant in so far as they prevent the successful implementation of the translator's strategy for the TT" (p. 297).

Abdou classifies the functions of idioms into four categories (2011, p. 67). One is "informational idioms; these refer to entities, actions, states, or qualities." The second is "evaluative idioms"; these express the user's "attitude towards one or more discourse referents." The third is the "modalising idioms" that convey different meanings relevant to modality. Fourth is the "organizational idioms" that "indicate different types of relationship between their referents and their propositions" (2012, p. 74).

Baker suggests four strategies for translators to adopt while translating idioms: using an idiom of similar meaning and form; using an idiom with similar meaning but dissimilar form; paraphrasing; and omission (2018, pp. 77–87). She hints at another strategy without delving into it: compensation. Compensation is a technique that "reduces translation loss" (Dickins et al. p. 290). Dickins et al. categorize four types of compensation: compensation by splitting, where ST stretches are rendered into longer stretches in the TT; compensation by merging where ST elements are condensed in the TT; compensation in kind that "involves using a different kind of textual effect in the TT from the one used in the corresponding part of the ST"; and compensation in place, which "involves a TT textual effect occurring at a different place, relative to the other features in the TT context, from the corresponding textual effect in the ST context" (p. 291). This article proposes that TT-oriented strategies that incorporate these compensations are convenient and effective means for translating idioms, as they facilitate the successful preservation of the ST idiom and its communicative cultural function(s).

Case study

The *Mu'allaqāt* is a compilation of seven canonical pre-Islamic odes (*qaṣīda* is the term for ode in Arabic). Ṭarafa (543-569 AD) is one of the poets who contributed to this collection. He was part of a noble Arabian family that valued poetry and supported those family members who wrote it. Within the Arabic canon, Ṭarafa holds a high position: Jarir considered him first amongst the early poets; Labīd and al-Akḥṭal placed him second (Arberry, 1957, p. 74). Ṭarafa was a feckless family member and led an extravagant life, although he loved poetry. His biography reveals that he was rejected by his tribesmen more than once because of his bohemian lifestyle. He composed his *Mu'allaqa* to seek pardon from relatives who had been affected by one of his irresponsible deeds (Arberry, 1957, pp. 68–71). The thematic structure of the classical Arabic ode contains three sequential thematic units: loss of love and yearning (*nasīb*), traveling and departure with the description of the camel or horse (*raḥīl*) and self-praise (*fakhr*). Ṭarafa does not fail to meditate upon his worth and self-pride in addition to his adherence to his tribe's values, including chivalry. As "poetic content not only survives but flourishes [...] and extracts out of its predicament a strange power and solidity of imaginative impact" (Stetkevych, 1993, p. 5), Ṭarafa manipulates the ode's structure in such a way as to make *raḥīl* and *fakhr* much longer

than *nasīb*, in order to make the *Mu'allaqa* reflect the motive for its composition.

For example, verse 54 of Ṭarafa's *Mu'allaqa* belongs to the *fakhr* section. It reflects the poet's pride in his popularity amongst the poor, as well as the rich¹:

رَأَيْتُ بَنِي غِبْرَاءَ لَا يُنْكِرُونِي
وَلَا أَهْلُ هَذَاكَ الطَّرَافِ الْمَمْدَادِي

[I saw that the sons of ashes did not deny me

Nor did the owners of that laid out leather-covered tents]
(Author's translation)

Literally, the poet claims that those close to dust or the earth (inferring the poor or guests) know him by his generosity; and those who live in leather-covered tents (meaning the rich) do not repulse but rather welcome him. Two evaluative idioms are used in this verse, one in each hemistich: "*banī ghabrā*" and "*ahlu hādihāka ṭirāfi l-mumaddadi*." The first idiom includes the Arabic metonymic reference to the earth as *ghabrā*, literally meaning dusty. Lane explains that this metonymy is used in two Arabic idioms, *banū ghabrā* (the sons of the dusty) and *ghabrā al-nās* (the dusty of the people) (1863, p. 2224). The metonymic idiom used by Ṭarafa may infer poor people or guests (Al-Tibrīzī, 1894, p. 70). Al-Tibrīzī explains that either would visit unexpectedly and yet the poet does not turn his back to them. When El Tayib introduces Bedouinism, he notes that "social barriers between the high and low did not in everyday life show themselves in linguistic stratification" (1983, p. 35). Rather, the poet boasts in this verse that the poor know him very well as he is remarkably generous to them, and the rich do not deny him due to his "prestige and indisputable reputation" (Abd al-Rahman, 2015, 119). His main claim is that all people, the rich as well as the poor, know him and recognize his virtues like generosity, compassion, prestige, and good breeding. This embeds an inference to his tribesmen's rejection and not recognizing of his worth and reputation. The first idiom is based on a shared value in pre-Islamic Arabia, which is the importance of being generous to the poor and the needy. According to El Tayib, this "individualism was both enhanced and tempered by the interactions of a universally observed inter-tribal code of behavior, based on concepts of honor (*sharaf*), represented by blood-feud (*tha'r*), jealousy (*ghayrah*) for their womenfolk, hospitality (*karam*), and succor (*najdah*) of the weak, including women, orphans, and combatants outnumbered by their foes" (1983, p. 27).

The phrasing of the second idiom is based on the pre-Islamic Arabs' reference to the dwelling place that used to characterize non-benouins: *ṭirāf*. This is defined by Abd al Raḥmān as "a house that is made of leather and that has no similar in the neighborhood" (p 117). *Ahlu al- ṭirāf* is hence an idiom that has its root in this concept and that denotes people who are distinctively rich. This idiom communicates the poet's ability to reach up to people who are geographically and materialistically distant from him.

Ṭarafa's use of these idioms is not arbitrary. As Alshaar interestingly notes, "virtue and acting morally is related to a psychological concern: the idea of reward and human motivation and choice" (2012, p. 92). Such an appeal to conventional values substantiates the idiom's message, and at the same time, it reinforces the poet's attitude. In so far as Ṭarafa's poetry is concerned: "strength" in style denotes an element of forthrightness coupled with a purity of diction, not labored, but forceful and energetic [culminating in a] spontaneous flow" (El Tayib, 1983, p. 34). To use Abdou's terminology, these idioms are positive "informational-evaluative idioms" (2011, p. 76), as they express events, actions, situations, people and attributes. At the same time that

they give information about the referents" qualities and states, the idioms also communicate the poet's positive and boastful evaluation of himself. Such a dual functionality reflects the main communicative functions of the two idioms. To this effect, a complementarity is established between the two hemistichs of the verse in the use of the words "*banī*" ("children of") and "*ahlu*" ("family of"), respectively. Both words are collocations. They belong to the register of family, and both communicate immediate kinship. Although the idioms are not to be read as a function of what their individual words mean, this choice enables Ṭarafa to link the idioms with their functions. This is backed up by the internal rhyme used in the first hemistich as the word "*banī*" rhymes with the hemistich terminal word "*yunkirūnani*." This sound effect matches the agonizing tone created by the repetition of the long vowel sound /ā/ that reverberates throughout the verse and reflects the poet's feelings of bitterness and pain. The utilization of acoustic effects by Ṭarafa that correspond to his temperament and emotional state has lately been the focus of scholarly inquiry (Lahiani et al. 2023).

Most idioms in the Arabic language perform multiple functions (Abdou, 2011, p. 74). The idioms used in this verse are no exception and are by no means simple alternatives to less semantically impervious expressions. They rather represent more intense versions of possible literal statements that might replace them. They reduce a comprehensive idiomatic vision to a microcosm. From this microcosm, a pattern of the mind, a way of thought, a mode of vision, and the need for a comprehensive synthesis of an entire culture's view of the world and of life is fulfilled, which justifies the choice of this particular verse as a case study here. The main argument here is that the loss of idioms in translation or paraphrasing them leads to the loss of intensity, and hence the loss of a great deal of the ST's communicative functions. The issue is, thus, far from being mere idiomatic exhortation. To this effect, Arab commentators' work has always been necessary to understand the full interpretations of this pre-Islamic text. A translator would need to access these commentaries, in addition to previous translations, to grasp the full meaning of an original statement (Lahiani, 2022b).

Methodology

The current study utilizes a qualitative methodology through the examination of the sample verse presented above, to explore the translation of Arabic idioms. The selection of this verse is grounded in its cultural implications and the presence of two idioms within it, as previously noted. This work also takes a multilingual approach by using a corpus of thirteen English and French translations to measure the translatability of these idioms with the functions that they perform in their original context. In addition to Arabic, English, and French are the only foreign languages with which the author of this work is familiar, thus accounting for the lack of translations into other tongues. The process of compiling the translations commenced in 2003 through exploration of academic libraries in the UK, France, and Tunisia, and persists owing to the author's scholarly passion for the *Mu'allaqāt* and their translated iterations. Regarding the corpus utilized in the present study, five translations were rendered into prose and the remainder into verse. Both synchronic and diachronic analyses have been conducted, with each translation compared against the ST and the translations evaluated in relation to one another. Moreover, the prose translations are first assessed separately from the verse translations, though some prose-verse comparisons are undertaken to delineate similarities and divergences. Chronology is taken into account in all cases. This methodology has already been initiated in Lahiani (2022b), where translational hermeneutics is used as a framework to assess the voyage of the esthetic dimension through translation.

Significance of the study

The quality assessment undertaken in this study examines the efficacy with which the translations convey the cultural nuances encoded in Arabic idioms. By applying relevance theory, the analysis illuminates the extent to which the translations capture the source idioms' connotative lexicons, affective components, imagery, and collocations, which unlock their cultural relevance. This study aims to demonstrate that rigidly mirroring idiom lexicons often compromises intended meanings, while creatively harnessing communicative clues facilitates optimal cultural transfer. Whereas Lahiani (2009) has assessed translations of cultural nuances in Arabic poetry through a relevance lens, the original contribution of the present work lies in its tight focus on the translatability of informative-evaluative culture-laden idioms. This investigation pushes existing boundaries by revealing the interpretive complexities of idioms and charting pathways to enhance their reconceptualization in interlingual contexts. The findings will provide implications for practitioners negotiating the labyrinth of idiom translation. By spotlighting relevance as the crux of idiom translatability, this study paves inroads into untapped interdisciplinary terrain.

Comparative critical assessment

William Jones (1746–1794), the first translator in the corpus, adopted two different techniques to render the ST idioms. In both, the idioms are effaced with no compensation in terms of style:

Yet even now I perceive, that the sons of earth (*the most indigent men*) acknowledge my bounty, and the rich inhabitants of yon extended camp *confess my glory* (1782, p. 24)

Jones' *literal* translation of "*bani ghabra*" into "the sons of the earth" is semantically supported by an interpolated explanatory phrase: "(*the most indigent men*)." The second idiom is also translated *literally*, which results in a loss of communicative function. Though both ST idioms are translated *literally* here, the meaning of the first is maintained, whereas that of the second is lost because of the lack of explanation. This choice of an ST-oriented strategy runs counter to one of Jones' motives behind translating pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, which is to transfer to the English-language reader a poetry in which "vehement passion is expressed in strong words, exactly measured, and pronounced, in a *common* voice, in just cadence, and with proper accents" (1993, p. 133). Both the intensity and message are lost here. It is to be noticed, too, that the cultural aspect embedded in the two idioms has been eradicated, which does not conform with Edgerton's assertion that Jones "used languages as a key to the culture of peoples, which was his major interest as a humanistic scholar" (1946, p. 233)².

Caussin de Perceval (1795–1871) and Johnson (1796–1876) are next in the corpus of prose translators. Both substituted the ST idioms with semantic equivalents in their TTs:

(Mais si les miens me repoussent, les étrangers me recherchent.) je me vois aimé du *pauvre sans asile*, et du *riche qui habite sous des tentes somptueuses* ([emphasis added] Caussin de Perceval, 1847, p. 357)

[But if mine reject me, strangers would look for me.] I see that I am loved by the homeless poor, and the rich who live under sumptuous tents]

I saw that the poor did not deny me, *on account of my generosity*; nor the wealthy, possessed of that spread-out leather tent, *on account of my superior character* (Johnson, 1894, p. 48)

Caussin de Perceval used the word "*pauvre*" (poor) and then modified it with a phrase of his own: "*sans asile*" (without shelter),

which shows the degree of the subjects' poverty. However, Johnson barely used the term "poor." The idiom embedded in the second hemistich of the ST is paraphrased in both translations, too. Although the ST message is conveyed in both translations, no attempt was made to achieve idiomatic usage by any means, hence the loss of contextual effects. This strategy is unusual compared to the ways Caussin de Perceval handles other idioms. For instance, when he translated 'Antara's *Mu'allaqa*, he used target-language idioms at least twice: "Bien des fois j'ai fait mordre la poussière à l'époux d'une jeune beauté" (more than once did I push a beautiful maiden's husband to kiss the ground) (1847, p. 524) and "[c]e bonheur m'est interdit; plût au ciel que je pusse y prétendre" (I am deprived of this happiness; I can just look for it in Heaven) (1847, p. 525). By searching the motives that inspired these two translators in how they handled the *Mu'allaqāt*, we find that Caussin de Perceval used this poetry as a mirror of the age from which it sprang and so was exclusively concerned with the historical and cultural information embedded in it. This is mirrored in the chapter in his book: "*Essai sur l'Histoire des Arabes Avant l'Islamisme, Pendant l'Epoque de Mahomet, et Jusqu'à la Réduction de Toutes les Tribus sous la Loi Musulmane*" (*An Essay on the History of the Arabs before Islam, During Mahomet's Era, and Until the Conversion of All the Tribes Under the Muslim Law*). This justifies his insertion of an interpolated explanatory sentence at the beginning of the translated verse (Lahiani, 2008, p. 47). Johnson, however, gave his work a didactic dimension, as he wanted it to be "nothing more than an aid to the students, and for this reason, it has been made as literal as possible" (1893, Preface). Thus, the only effort he made with the idiom appeared in the notes that followed his translation of the verse: "بنی غبراء = sons of the dust, i.e., poor people" (1893, p. 49). Obviously, such a bilingual explanation cannot be read except by those who understand Arabic. Note that Johnson endorsed a similar strategy with other idioms in his translation of the *Mu'allaqāt* (Lahiani, 2022a).

Schmidt (1939-) is the sole translator in the prose-translation corpus who attempted to modulate the ST first-hemistich idiom into a TL one, an attempt to achieve optimal relevance:

Alors, j'ai vu qu'au souvenir de mes bienfaits, ne m'avaient abandonné ni *les pauvres d'entre les pauvres* ni *les riches qui vivent sous les vastes tentes de cuir*, regrettant ma bonne et joyeuse compagnie ([emphasis added] 1978, p. 88)

[So, I saw that in recognition of my good deeds, neither the poorest of the poor nor the rich people who live under vast leather tents abandoned me; they rather miss my good and joyful company]

To use Dickins et al.'s terminology, one would ascertain that Schmidt produced here "an idiomising translation" as he preserved the ST message content and at the same time prioritized the "TL 'naturalness' over faithfulness to ST details" (2017, p. 15). The first-hemistich idiom is modulated into a hyperbolic statement: "*les pauvres d'entre les pauvres*" (the poorest of the poor). This hyperbole resides at the core of a French idiomatic structure typically employed to stress the magnitude of an assertion. Thus, Schmidt deftly transitioned from transposing the idiom itself to transposing the overarching idiomatic structure. This target-oriented approach retains the source idiom's communicative import and affective overtones, as hyperbole is wont to do. Thus, Schmidt reached optimal relevance by preserving both the idiom's cultural essence and amplified impact. This oscillation between form and function, lexicon and structure, underscores the intricacy of successfully conveying idioms cross-culturally. Schmidt's translation, thus, interpretively resembles its Arabic original in resonating through a shared idiomatic cadence that intensifies professed penury.

The function of the second-hemistich idiom is preserved, too, but by means of Schmidt's use of the techniques of paraphrasing and interpolating. Schmidt added the phrase "regrettant ma bonne et joyeuse compagnie" (regretting my good and delightful company) to explicate the message of the ST idiom. It is to be noticed that Schmidt used the same strategy and reached similar idiomatic effects in his translations of other verses in this same *Mu'allaqa* (Lahiani, 2020b). This is in line with Sharkas' assumption that additions (and omissions) are considered necessary when they are prompted by "systemic differences between the SL and TL, including differences in grammar, collocations, idiomatic expressions and patterns of cohesion." Sharkas also considers additions and omissions "necessary when they aim to avoid redundancy in meaning or to clarify an otherwise vague idea" (2013, p. 58).

Barring Schmidt, most prose translators narrowly clung to literalism and paraphrasing, neglecting the verse's literary eloquence. Verse translations might be expected to wield literary artistry and resonance more dexterously to transport the ST's communicative essence. Unexpectedly, the Blunts (Anne Blunt 1837–1917; Wilfrid Blunt 1840–1922) followed the same strategy as William Jones long before them in their translation, which comes first in the corpus of the verse works:

Natheless the poor showed pity, *the sons of earth's particles*,

These and *the alien tent-lords*, the far chiefs befriended me
([emphasis added] 1903, p. 13)

In this translation, the first idiom is paraphrased as "the poor," and then it is rendered *literally* into "the sons of Earth's particles." This reflects the Blunts' attempt to reach an interpretive use of the ST idiom by explaining its communicative function and thus placing it in its larger context. However, the claim that the poor "showed pity" destroys what the ST idiom communicates, as in this case, one would erroneously understand that the poet's position is so inferior that even the poor, who deserve to be pitied, pitied him. In addition, this translation narrows the image of the original idiom by referring to the poor, mistakenly, as "the sons of Earth's particles." It is noticeable in the Blunts' decision that the poor should be the sons of the earth's "particles," and not simply the sons of the earth; this is an attempt to produce rhyming lines, as in the original text. The word "particles" rhymes with the words "fellows" and "philosophers" in neighboring lines (1903, p. 13), which fits the Blunts' declaration in the introduction to their work that "advantage has been taken of all convenient occasions of conforming to [terminal syllables]." This is despite their awareness of the impossibility of maintaining the Arabic mono-rhymes, hence their decision "to attempt neither the rhyme nor the terminal syllable" (1903, p. xxvi). The outcome, in this case, is doggerel verse lines and the loss of both the idiom's meaning and function. The same losses are incurred in the Blunts' translation of the second-hemistich idiom because of their reference to "alien tent-lords," which runs counter to what is intended in the ST³. In this case, it would have been preferable that the Blunts produced less intensive verses and opted for a more prosaically extensive style, which would have enabled them to optimize semantic and textual relevance.

Khawam's (1917–2004) French translation indicates unawareness that these phrases constitute idioms. This impedes capturing full cognitive effects and cultural resonance:

J'ai vu *les étrangers* m'accueillir sans me renier,

À l'instar de *ceux dont les tentes de cuir sont ouvertes*
([emphasis added] 1960, p. 50)

[I have seen that the strangers would host me without rejecting me,

Following the steps of those who live in open leather-covered tents]

The ST idiomatic reference to the poor is modulated here to foreigners: "les étrangers." In addition, and similar to the Blunts, Khawam's *Ṭarafa* infers his delight that the foreigners do not deny him, which misses the ST poet's pride that the poor know him because he is always generous to them. The chaos within this first idiom grows worse in the second one, as Khawam's use of the phrase "À l'instar" (following the steps of) validates the same erroneous interpretation that is attributed to the first idiom. The idea communicated here is that, *literally*, the people who live in open leather-covered tents would not ignore him. Thus, this translation communicates a very different message. To be noticed here, however, Khawam approximates the ST verse internal rhyme in the pairs "étrangers" / "renier" and "tentes" / "ouvertes." Regrettably, no benefit results from this, much like the doggerel verse lines created by the Blunts long before Khawam.

Arberry (1905–1969) made no attempt to clarify the ST idioms, which he rendered *literally*:

yet I saw *the sons of the dust* did not deny me

nor *the grand ones who dwell in those fine, wide-spread tents*
([emphasis added] 1957, p. 86)

The use of the expression "the sons of the dust" is traceable to the *Holy Bible's* reference to Adam and extrapolated to humankind. Not only is the associative meaning of the religious allusion misplaced here, but its connotation of all humankind does not align with the ST poet's specific reference to the poor. It follows that in this translation, the ST's message, meaning, and cultural function are abrogated. The second line of Arberry's couplet also paraphrases the second ST idiom, with no attempt to adopt any TT-oriented strategy. It is rather disappointing that Arberry offers nothing at the idiomatic level, and thus he loses most of the ST communicative features. Arberry familiarized himself with Arabic when he lived in the Middle East for several years to perfect his skills in the language, and he was also a professor of Arabic at Cambridge University until his death in 1969 (Mohammed, 2005, p. 61). He translated the *Holy Qur'an* (1955), a text that is marked by its use of an undeniably idiomatic language, and that is also chronologically quite close to the composition of the *Mu'allaqāt*.

Berque's (1910–1995) and Sells' (1949-) translations follow the allusion that Arberry previously used:

pourvu que ne m'en aient doléance

ni *les fils de la poussière* ni *les hôtes*

de ce vaste pavillon de cuir ([emphasis added] 1979, p. 154)

[In condition that no one complains about me

Neither the sons of the dust

Nor the host in this vast leather pavilion]

Yet I see *the sons of dust*

Will not deny me,

Not the *tent people*

Under their widespreading flaps of hide ([emphasis added] 1986, p. 28)

The allusive statements “fils de la poussière” and “sons of dust” are used in the translations quoted above to produce rather bare *literal* translations. Whereas Sells attempts no explanation or paraphrasing, Berque even misses the message of the ST idiom by claiming that neither the poor nor the rich complain about the poet (“ne m’en aient doléance”). This inappropriate choice dates back to the Blunts’ translation (1903). Lack of interpretive resemblance is extended to Berque’s translation of the second idiom in which not only is the communicative function lost, but also the choice of the lexical item “pavillon” (annexed habitation), which weakens the message and even gives it a cultural orientation that is alien to the ST. Just as with Arberry, Berque is known for his translation of the *Holy Quran*, and thus he is expected to be much more proficient in discerning Arabic idioms. The motivation behind Berque’s translation of the *Mu’allaqāt* is basically the achievement of “transculturation” (Berque, 1979, p. 15), transporting the poems in their poetic reality from one culture to another, which would also be, although paradoxically as he sees it, the most sociological (1979, p. 48). Note that Berque was a sociologist, an ethnographer, a linguist, and a historian (Lahiani, 2008, p. 64).

Sells’ goal behind the translations of some pre-Islamic poems was a “rendition of the poems in a natural, idiomatic, and contemporary American verse” (1989, p. 8). He wanted his translation to have cognitive effects by appealing to the modern American reader and not alienating them (1989, p. 9). In the case of specifically translating Ṭarafa’s *Mu’allaqa*, he highlights that his “goal is a translation that is natural, idiomatic, and poetic” (p. 21). This exclusively TT-oriented strategy lost not only the idioms of the ST but also their communicative functions. Note that the case study handled here is not an isolated case. Sells’ translation of a verse from the same *Mu’allaqa* does not lend itself to any better idiomaticity (Lahiani et al. 2023).

Desmond O’Grady’s (1935–2014) motive is the same as Sells’. For this poet-translator, the *Mu’allaqāt* needed to be rendered into “readable modern English” (1990, p. 8). O’Grady had no interest in the register or versification of these poems (Lahiani, 2008, p. 70). Thus, as explained in his translation Foreword, he transferred the *Mu’allaqāt* from the oral form to the literary form: “I took as much license in writing my page as any Arab [...] reciter would have done with his recitation” (1990, p. 8). It follows that in dealing with this fully idiomatic verse, O’Grady effaced all traces of the original idioms with no compensation sought: “And the poor showed pity/And those far away chiefs live in broad tents took me in” (p. 28). Like the Blunts and Berque, O’Grady refers to the poor showing pity because of the poet’s situation, which subverts the ST’s communicative function. In contrast, and despite the fact that he paraphrased the second-hemistich idiom, O’Grady preserved the intended message as he referred to “chiefs” that “took [the poet] in.”

Christopher Nouryeh (1940-) produced a translation that interpretively resembles its original, by optimizing its message and creating a compensation by means of hyperbole and synecdochical modulation:

Yet the poor of the

earth know my generous hand and the rich

my glorious deeds (1993, p. 86)

Nouryeh’s reference to “the poor of the earth” can be traced back to the *Holy Bible* (Isaiah 11:4)⁴. Arberry had made a similar choice when he copied the phrase “the sons of the dust” from the *Holy Bible* too. What makes Nouryeh’s allusion more optimally relevant as a translation choice is that the phrase “the poor of the earth” was part of the English idiom and had no religious connotations. Furthermore, this phrase is hyperbolic, and in the same vein as the ST, which helps preserve the original overtones. Such

an allusive idiomatic rendering is backed up by the phrase “my generous hand.” This infers the kind of relationship between the poet and the poor that is based on him as the giving agent. Clearly, this breaks with such earlier renderings as those made by the Blunts and O’Grady (“showed pity”) and also Berque (“ne m’en aient doléance”). Nouryeh’s translation of the second-hemistich idiom is more relevant, as it paraphrases the ST idiom and preserves both its meaning and function. Thus, the parallelism that ties both ST hemistichs is preserved in this translation. Nouryeh’s attentiveness to the idioms and the cultural message communicated in them, together with the overtones in which these are phrased, complies with what originally attracted him to the *Mu’allaqāt*: “namely courage, ethics, nobility” (personal communication, cited in Lahiani (2008, p. 73). Additionally, Nouryeh embraced a rather special attitude towards the strategy of translating a text that is as remote in time, place and cultural background as the *Mu’allaqāt*: “Before one does any actual translating, one must translate oneself to what an original says, what it is thinking; one must first arrive on its foreign shores and stop to contemplate before one can return with some fitting mementos of it to the land of one’s own language” (1993, p. 3).

Unlike Schmidt who used a French idiomatic structure, and unlike Nouryeh who used a Biblical expression that had filtered into the English language, Larcher (1948-) created an idiom:

J’ai vu fils de la cendrée ne pas me renier

Non plus que gens de cette vaste tente de cuir... ([emphasis added] 2000, p. 66)

[I have seen that the sons of the ashes do not deny me

Nor the people of this vast leather tent]

This idiomising translation is justified in an endnote as follows: “cendrée” traduit littéralement l’arabe *ghabrā’*, épithète de la terre, qu’elle décrit comme “couleur de cendre.” Les fils de la cendrée sont les pauvres, par opposition aux riches que sont les ‘gens de la vaste tente de cuir’ (“cendrée” literally translates the Arabic *ghabrā’*, an epithet for the earth that it describes as “color of ashes.” The sons of ashes are the poor, as opposed to the rich who are here “the people of this vast leather tent”) (2000, p. 73). The idiom that Larcher coined would not have been clear if he had not explained it in the endnote. The fact that Larcher highlighted the contrast between the ideas expressed in both ST hemistichs also contributes to the positive reception garnered by his translation. Just like the ST poet, Larcher created an internal rhyme in the first line of the couplet as the words “cendrée” and “renier” terminate with the same diphthong. In addition, assonance is built in the second line across the words “gens” and “tente.” Larcher also maintained the complementarity established between both ST hemistichs by means of contextual effects as he used family-based collocations: the word “fils” (son) in the first line and “gens” (people) in the second.

Larcher considers the poetic dimension as the most important aspect that needs to be preserved in a TT. To him, verse urges condensation; this condensation encompasses ST lexical and syntactic density, which is characteristic of the “langage poétique” that he strives as a translator to retain (1994, pp. 149–150). This justifies his labeling of the translation as a translation that is new rather than as a new translation (2000, p. 13) since it appeals to the modern reader with its poetic feel, and, at the same time, it is idiomatic. In the context of her general evaluation of Larcher’s translation of the *Mu’allaqāt*, Lahiani notes that “Larcher is one of the few translators that managed to produce a complementarity between the semantics of his text and the sonorous tools it employs” (Lahiani, 2008, p. 318).

Conclusion

The pleasure in dealing with idioms in translation is that not only are they linguistic phenomena but are also literary, rhetorical, and cultural tools. At the same time that this article diverges from Parks' view that "local detail and conventional idiomatic expressions are sources simultaneously of pleasure and frustration" (2014, p. 184), it lines up with Abdou's argument that as "examples of indirect language, idioms may [...] help the speaker or writer with creating and/or reinforcing solidarity with their hearers or readers" (2011, p. 89). As demonstrated in the comparative work above and Figs. 1 and 2 below, this solidarity is abrogated in the works that adopted the *literal* translation technique.

The literal translations by Jones and Berque overlook encoded cultural assumptions, failing to infer the idioms' full intended relevance, namely cognitive effects and cultural resonance. Khawam's translation indicates unawareness of the idiomatic status of these expressions. His superficial reading does not capture, thus, the cultural implications necessary to achieve optimal relevance. For all three translators, overlooking idiomaticity precluded accessing relevant contextual clues to intended connotations. By not construing the idioms as relevance-yielding stimuli, the translations fall short in communicating intended cognitive effects. Interpolation could compensate for this deficit in inferential decoding.

Caussin de Perceval and Johnson's paraphrasing provides semantic equivalents but overlooks idiomatic nuances. Though overt meanings are maintained, the idioms' cultural resonance and cognitive effects are attenuated. Caussin de Perceval interpolates the function via parenthetical commentary, partially compensating for unoptimized relevance. However, neither translation fully conveys the intensity and implications of the idioms. Similarly, the paraphrasing by the Blunts, Berque, and O'Grady fails to capture encoded assumptions. Their misinterpretations preclude inferring intended connotations, further hindering relevance. Without decoding idioms as stimuli optimized for relevance, these translations do not recreate cultural associations or reader responses. Though transparent, such renditions obscure the cultural perspectives originally encoded. Optimal translation would entail conveying not just denotation but also the idioms' contextual effect and cultural significance.

As Schmidt sought to optimize relevance by creating interpretive resemblance, he modulated the idioms from the lexical level to the structural level. Moreover, he rendered the intensity conveyed by the ST idioms into a hyperbolic idiomatic structure. The outcome of this choice is that the communicative function of the ST idiom and its implicatures are preserved. Arberry and Sells used another TT-oriented technique, allusion, by using an expression from the *Holy Bible*. Although this communicates the ST meaning, the communicative effect is weakened, as these translators did not convey the intensity of the original idioms. Like Arberry and Sells, Nouryeh attempted compensation in kind by modulating the first ST idiom into an allusion. As this is filtered in the TL, it is considered more of an idiom than a biblical allusion. In addition, Nouryeh's rendering retains the ST's implicatures, and thus preserves both the communicative function of the ST idioms and their implicatures. Larcher used a unique technique: he created an idiom and made valuable attempts at versification. These are particularly successful not only because Larcher's translation has a poetic quality, but more so because it captures the ST's implicatures, mood, and tone. Table 1 below summarizes the corpus handles in this study⁵.

An idiomizing translation is one that seeks dynamic equivalence, as it is based on the communicative principle of equivalent effect. The

translation of idioms is, in fact, to be defined in terms of its comprehensibility and thus recreation so as to convey the same message and also a similar effect as in the ST. Thus viewed, "the majority of translators working in a foreign language cannot hope to achieve the same sensitivity that native speakers seem to have for judging when and how an idiom can be manipulated" (Baker, 2018, p. 70). Translating an idiom is not solely and simply a matter of finding an equivalent idiom in the TL. It also involves checking the connotative meaning of the lexical items that make up the idiom by verifying if they are manipulated in the rest of the text. This is functional equivalence, and it is considered by House as "a condition for intercultural understanding," which is defined as "the success with which intercultural communication is made to function through the provision of 'common ground'" (2014, p. 4). The evaluative, affective component in an idiom may arise from its informational content, the imagery conveying this content, the collocations familiar to the audience, and the habitual contexts that are valid over space and time. An idiom, as seen in the comparative work above, is also to be read in conjunction with register, rhetorical effect, and overall style. In addition, a translator's unconditional adherence to rules of versification and ST verse characteristics may lead to the flouting of communicative function. Recalling the doggerel verse lines created by the Blunts and the internal rhymes in Khawam's translation, this point is illustrated. Larcher managed to use sound patterns because he sought TL-oriented procedures, and he avoided a detriment to meaning and communicative effect. Let us conclude with a "culinary" metaphor by Scott: "translation is a recipe in which source text is the main ingredient, the meat. Other ingredients, the translator's ways of reading and processing the source text, are designed to infuse the meat with particular flavors and accompaniments" (2010, p. 120). This point holds particularly true for the translatability of idioms.

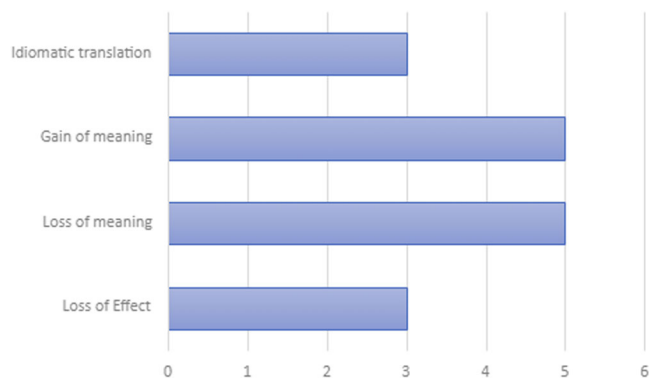


Fig. 1 Summary of translation strategies used.

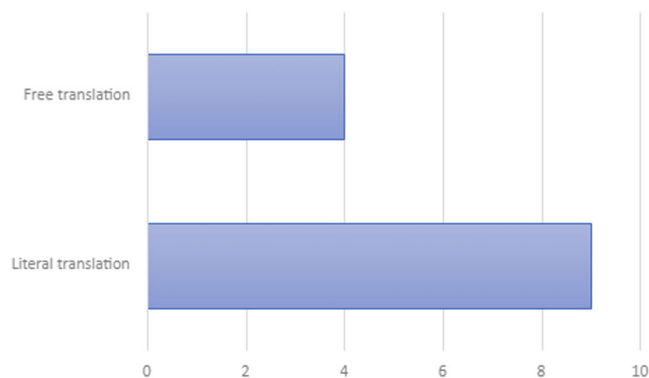


Fig. 2 Summary of translation output.

Table 1 Corpus of the translations, their strategies, and output.

#	Translators	Date	Idiom	Translation strategy	Output
W. Jones		1782	Yet even now I perceive that the sons of the earth (<i>the most indigent men</i>) acknowledge my bounty, and the rich inhabitants of yon extended camp <i>confess my glory</i> .	Literal translation Interpolation	Meaning gained Loss of effect
Caussin de Perceval		1847	(Mais si les miens me repoussent, les étrangers me recherchent.) je me vois aimé du pauvre sans asile, et du riche qui habite sous des tentes somptueuses.	Paraphrasing Semantic equivalents	Meaning gained Loss of effect
Johnson		1894	I saw that the poor did not deny me, <i>on account of my generosity</i> ; nor the wealthy, possessed of that spread-out leather tent, <i>on account of my superior character</i> .	Paraphrasing Semantic equivalents	Meaning gained Loss of effect
Blunts		1903	Natheless the poor showed pity, the sons of Earth's particles, These and the alien tent-lords, the far chiefs befriended me.	Literal translation Doggerel rhymes	Loss of message
Arberry		1957	Yet I saw the sons of the dust did not deny me Nor the grand ones who dwell in those fine, wide-spread tents.	Literal translation	Meaning gained
Khawam		1960	J'ai vu les étrangers m'accueillir sans me renier, A l'instar de ceux dont les tentes de cuir sont ouvertes.	Literal translation Misperception of the idioms	Loss of message
Schmidt		1978	Alors, j'ai vu qu'au souvenir de mes bienfaits, ne m'avaient abandonné ni les pauvres d'entre les pauvres ni les riches qui vivent sous les vastes tentes de cuir, regrettant ma bonne et joyeuse compagnie.	Free translation Modulation Compensation	Idiomising translation Meaning gained Effect maintained
Berque		1979	Pourvu que ne m'en aient doléance Ni les fils de la poussière ni les hôtes De ce vaste pavillon de cuir	Literal translation	Loss of message
Sells		1986	Yet I see the sons of dust Will not deny me, Not the tent people Under their widespreading flaps of hide.	Literal translation	Loss of message
O'Grady		1990	And the poor showed pity And those far away chiefs live in broad tents took me in.	Literal translation	Loss of message
Nouryeh		1993	Yet the poor of the Earth know my generous hand and the rich My glorious deeds	Modulation Free translation	Use of an English idiom
Larcher		2000	J'ai vu fils de la cendrée ne pas me renier Non plus que gens de cette vaste tente de cuir ...	Modulation Free translation	Idiomatic wording Creative translation
Smith		2012	Yet, even now I see that the sons of earth acknowledge my bounty, and wealthy inhabitants of that extended camp my glory declare	Copied Jones' translation	-

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analyzed.

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Notes

- The interpretation of this verse line is synthesized from Abd al-Rahman, 2015, p. 119, Al-Zawzani, 2013, p. 84 Al-Tibrizi, 1894, p. 86.
- William Jones' translation was copied by a modern translator with very minor changes: Yet, even now I see that the sons of earth acknowledge my bounty, and wealthy inhabitants of that extended camp my glory declare (Smith, 2012, p. 53) This is the reason why this translation is included in the corpus but not discussed in the core of the comparative work above. Jones' translation, in addition to some other translations, is included in this translator's references (2012, p. 43).
- This brings to mind the problem of whether the verse is preferably translated into verse or prose (Lahiani, 2008, pp. 94–96; Scott, 2010, p. 113).

- "With righteousness he will judge the needy; with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked" (Isaiah, 11:4).
- Lahiani (2008, p 321–324) summarizes information about the translations and translators of the *Mu'allaqât*.

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Author contributions

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Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

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No consent was necessary for this study.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Raja Lahiani.

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