

# History of Translation in the Arab World: An Overview

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Translation is quite vital for cross-cultural communication. It helps create a better understanding between different communities through the transmission of ideas and beliefs. It has played a key role in the development of world culture. Translation has been always the bridge between civilizations; indeed, throughout history, written and spoken translations have played a crucial role in interhuman communication. This paper aims at providing a brief account of how the concept of Translation Projects has developed, with particular insight into the Arab world. The study also aims at investigating the history of translation in the Arab world and in the Islamic era and describing the stages that the translation went through from the beginning of the Islamic Empire, Umayyad Period, Abbasid Period, school of Toledo, Ottoman period, and the 20th century. The paper also explains how translators played a key role in translating knowledge through the different Islamic periods. The study will look at KALIMA as an example for a translation project in the Arab World. KALIMA is an Arabic word with an English equivalent that is “word”. The paper ends with reflections on the current and future situation of the translation in the Arab world.

*Keywords:* translation, history, Islamic, Arab, world

## Introduction

Translation has always been a means of communication and interaction between languages and cultures. Had there been no translation, numerous cultures could not have flourished as they have. Indeed, some cultures have gained momentum through translation, Kelly (1979) stated that “Western Europe owes its civilization to translators. Likewise, the Arabs owe their civilization to the voluminous works of Greeks they had translated” (p. 1). Thus, translation is an act of communication between different cultures. It is also ultimately a human activity which enables human beings to exchange ideas and thoughts regardless of the different tongues used. Translation is quite vital for cross-cultural communication because it helps create a better understanding between different communities through the transmission of ideas and beliefs. It has played a key role in the development of world culture and has been always the bridge between civilizations; indeed, throughout history, written and spoken translations have played a crucial role in intersubjective communication.

As Hey-Seung (2006, p. 368) reminded us, translation is an act of communication across different cultures as well as a dynamic activity in which translators are required to make choices and decisions for the purpose of resolving problems. Translation is also ultimately a human activity which enables human beings to exchange ideas and thoughts regardless of the different tongues used.

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Translation is a question of how different languages, different cultures, and different political contexts, can be put together in such a way as to provide for mutual intelligibility but without having at the same time to sacrifice difference to the interest of blind assimilation. Translation, in this sense, is about the creation of new cultural and political maps, the establishment of shared territories, the development of a border reason, as opposed to the simple acceptance of the reason of the borders.

### **Translation in the Arab Islamic Empire**

In the Arab world, translation can be traced back to the first half of the second century AD during the times of Assyrians, who translated a huge amount of heritage into Arabic (Prince, 2002).

Arabic is a Semitic language. It belongs to the Semitic language family. Semitic languages have a recorded history going back thousands of years. The origins of the Semitic language family are currently in dispute among scholars; there is an agreement that they flourished in the Mediterranean Basin area, especially in the Tigris-Euphrates river basin.

In the Pre-Islamic period, Arabs used to travel and move from one area to another during winter and summer for trading. They used the Arabic language in everyday contexts and used a variety of languages such as Syriac and Aramaic. They had to learn those languages in order to communicate with other people during their voyages. At that time there was no Arabic writing system.

The birth of Islam in the seventh century was the turning point. This period was the most important one in the history of Arab peoples. The birth of Islam changed the political, cultural, and linguistic map of their area. Translation in the Arab world dated back to the era of the Syrians, in which an extensive heritage belonging to the era of paganism was translated into Arabic. According to Addidaoui (2000) Jarjas was one of best of Syrian translators due to his famous Syrian translation of Aristotle's book *In the World* (2000).

Indeed, the era of the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) is the most important one in the history of translation in the Arab world. In order to spread Islam, the prophet sent messages to various political rulers and non-Arabic speaking communities urging them to adopt the new religion. This pushed the prophet to look for translators to translate the messages from Arabic into other languages and encourage Muslims to learn other languages as well.

One of the prophet's translators was Zaid Ibn Thabet, who played an important role in translating the letters of the prophet from Arabic into other languages and vice versa. Later on, due to the expansion of the Islamic Empire, the new empire lay at the intersection of Eastern and Western civilizations and brought together the most sophisticated cultural traditions of the period: Greek, Indian, Persian, and Egyptian. As a result, there was a shift in Arabic from being a mainly spoken language, to a written and spoken lingua franca of a vast civilization comprising many ethnic and linguistic groups (Baker, 1998, p. 318). In the same token, Khan (1983, p. 44) mentioned prophet Mohammad assigning Zaid Bin Thabet to translate Arabic letters into Syriac, Hebrew, and Persian and vice versa.

Some early Arabic inscriptions have been found dating from at least the fourth century. The Koran, indeed, from the first half of the seventh century, and the language of Bedouin provided the basis for the codification of the Arabic language during the eighth and ninth centuries.

### **Translation of the *Koran***

The translation of the *Quran*, is one of the most important markers to the history of Arabic translation. The first official translation of the *Quran* was carried out into Persian during the Abbasids (c. 750-1258). Of course, now it has been translated into almost all languages of the world with various versions of each (Mustapha, 1998).

Another important era in the history of translation in the Arab world is that which saw the translation of the *Holy Koran* for those who did not speak Arabic. The process of translation was seen as being one involving merely a transfer of meaning. That is to say, it was just a translation of meanings to non-Muslims (and/or Muslims that did not speak Arabic) for the purpose of enabling them to know the message of Islam. All Muslims agree that the style of the *Koran* is inimitable. As the article at Islamic scholars did not oppose the translation of the meanings of the *Koran* but they all agreed that the style of the *Koran* is inimitable and that is impossible to transfer this inimitable aspect into translation. Moreover, they all agreed on the need to have access to the Arabic original as well as the translation could not serve as a substitute for the original.

As the article at [www.translationdirectory.com](http://www.translationdirectory.com) notes, Salman El Farisi, for instance, translated the meaning of Surat Al Fatiha (first seven verses on the Holy Koran) for Persian Muslims. There was a special interest in translating the *Holy Koran* at that time. During this period, the *Koran* was translated into many languages and some of these translations are still preserved in Western libraries.

The translation movement which evolved under Islamic rule was widely supported. Moreover, the translation movement was sponsored by the government, and many translation seminars were set up later to organize the flow of translation during the different periods of the Islamic Empire.

### **The Umayyad Period (661-750)**

The Umayyad period (661-750) witnessed a number of developments, which laid the long-term foundations of the Islamic Empire. Translation activity gained impetus during this period. There is a general agreement that the first translations carried out during this period were from Greek and Coptic into Arabic.

Arabs took control of previously Hellenized areas such as Egypt and Syria in the seventh century. At this point they first began to encounter Greek ideas, though from the beginning, many Arabs were hostile to classical learning. Because of this hostility, the religious Caliphs could not support scientific translations. Translators had to seek out wealthy business patrons rather than religious ones. Until Abassid rule in the eighth century, however, there was little work in translation. Most knowledge of Greek during Umayyad rule was gained from those scholars of Greek who remained from the Byzantine period, rather than through widespread translation and dissemination of texts. A few scholars argue that translation was more widespread than is thought during this period, but theirs remains the minority view (Rosenthal, 1975, pp. 3-4)

According to Baker (1998, p. 318), the most comprehensive source available to us about Arabic translation is *al-Fihrist*, (lit. The Index) which was compiled by al-Nadim in 988. *Al-Fihrist* tells us that it was Prince Khalid, son of the second Umayyad Caliph, who commissioned the first translations from Greek and Coptic, having turned to the pursuit of knowledge following his failure to secure the position of the Caliph.

Furthermore, under the reign of the king Marawan Ibn Abed Al-Malek, Arabicizing the administration naturally involved a certain amount of translation of official documents, especially in the initial stages. Baker (1998, p. 319) added that Byzantine and Persian songs began to appear in translation during this period

(661-750) and the translations were done by Said Ibn Misjah (1998).

Baker (1998) also stated that a great deal of Greek gnomologia (or, “wisdom literature”) was translated into Arabic towards the end of the Umayyad period, including virtually all gnomologia connected with Aristotle. These translations were to have a strong influence on Arabic poetry in the ninth and 10th centuries. Two of the most celebrated Arab poets of the periods, abu al-Atahiya and Al-Mutanabbi used gnomonic material in their poems (Baker, 1998, p. 319).

The translations also included treaties on medicine and astrology during this period. The Umayyad Caliphs, no doubt, contributed towards progress in science, arts, and translations and laid down the foundation for the great cultural, scientific and material progress of the Abbasid period.

### **The Abbasid Period**

The Abbasids were a dynasty of Caliphs who ruled the Islamic Empire from 750 until the Mongol conquest of the Middle East in 1258. The name derives from Al-Abbas, the uncle of the Prophet Mohammad. The Abbasid period is known for its rich cultural and intellectual life (Faiq, 2006; Al-Kasimi, 2006). The main period of translation was during Abbasid rule. The second Abbasid Caliph Al-Mansur moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad. Here found the great Persian Library with texts containing both Greek Classical texts as well as texts from ancient India. Al-Mansur ordered this rich funds of world literature translated into Arabic (Lindberg, 1978, p. 55). Under al-Mansur and by his orders, translations were made from Greek, Syriac, and Persian, the Syriac and Persian books being themselves translations from Greek or Sanskrit (Lindberg, 1978, p. 55).

Delisle and Woodsworth (1995) told us that: “there was intense translation activity in the Abbasid period (750-1250), centered on the translation into Arabic of Greek scientific and philosophical material, often with Syriac as an intermediary language” (p. 112).

This Period witnessed important developments in Arab translation, which was encouraged and enhanced by the Caliphs. During this period, translators focused on Greek Philosophy, Indian science, and Persian literature.

Throughout this period, as the article at [www.muslimphilosophy.com](http://www.muslimphilosophy.com) remarks, a new impetus was given to the translation movement thanks to the enlightened patronage of three of the early Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad, Al-Mansur, Harun, and his son Al-Mamun who founded the “House of Wisdom” in Baghdad to serve as a library and institute of translation. It was during the reign of Al-Mamun that the translation of medical, scientific, and philosophical texts, chiefly from Greek or Syriac, was placed on an official footing. According to Delisle and Woodsworth (1995), the major translators who flourished during Al-Mamun’s reign include Yaha Ibn Al-Bitriq, who was credited with translating into Arabic Plato’s *Timaeus*, Aristotle’s *On the soul*, *On the Heavens* and *Prior Analytics* as well as the *Secret of Secrets*.

According to Baker (1998, p. 320), the Arabs translated essentially scientific and philosophical material from Greek and showed little interest in Greek drama and poetry. India was also an important source of wisdom literature and mathematics. One of the most important works in the literature of Arabic is the *Thousand and One Nights* which is based on a translation from Middle Persian, which is in turn based on Sanskrit sources.

A large number of translators were active during this period. One of the most outstanding among them is

Hunayn Ibn Ishaq, who was paid by Al-Mamun in gold, matching the weight of the books he translated (Baker, 1998, p. 320).

Baker (1998) described the two translation methods that were adopted during that period: “[...] the first method, associated with Yuhanna Ibn al-Batriq and Ibn Naima al-Himsi, was highly literal and consisted of translating each Greek word with an equivalent Arabic word and, where none existed, borrowing the Greek word into Arabic” (p. 321).

As can be seen, the first method is word-for-word translation. The second method described by Baker is the sense-for-sense method. She (1998) stated: “the second method, associated with Ibn Ishaq and al-Jawahari, consisted of translating sense-for-sense, creating fluent target texts which conveyed the meaning of the original without distorting the target language” (p. 321).

This golden Era of translation under early Abbasid rule was then followed by a rich period of original writing in many fields, including astronomy, alchemy, geography, linguistics, theology, and philosophy.

As Baker (1998, p. 321) remarked, the Arabs were mostly interested in medicine and philosophy, but astronomy, too, was popular, reflecting contacts and trade in India. While the choice of texts to translate was often dictated by the state (for the purpose of Arabization, for example), the personal interest of individual Caliphs and courtiers was an important factor in the decision-making process as well. During this period, translation and creation were closely linked insofar as translation helped establish a new system of thought that was to become the foundation of Arabic-Islamic culture—both on the conceptual and terminological levels.

In summary, the foundation of the “House of Wisdom” school in 830 was a decisive factor in bringing about the Arab assimilation of the cultural treasures of China, India, Persia and, above all, Greece. Intense translation activity continued throughout the empire until it fell in the 13th century. Or as Delisle and Woodsworth (1995) put it:

[...] the translated works acted as raw material which nourished the creative talents of Arab translators and furthered the development of science before being passed on to the Western world. The next significant step in the transmission of knowledge occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as the hub of translation moved from Baghdad to Toledo. (p. 115)

### **School of Toledo**

According to Delisle and Woodsworth (1995, p. 115), the term “School of Toledo” has been used to designate the flourishing translation activity that took place during the 12th and 13th centuries in Spain, mainly around Toledo. The school was fundamental to the transmission of scientific and philosophical knowledge to medieval Europe. The activity was centered on the philosophical and scientific achievements of the Arab world in medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and astrology.

Moreover, Delisle and Woodsworth (1995, p. 116) maintained that the introduction of key words of Arabic scholarship to Europe brought with it increased breadth of knowledge and a more comprehensive view of the world. The Western world became acquainted with the Arabic system of numeration, algebra, the Ptolemaic world system and the works of Hippocrates and Galen, along with an important body of Greek and Arabic medical knowledge. The impact of this movement in creating a kind of renaissance was great.

In the 12th century, translations were essentially from Arabic to Latin, whereas in the 13th century they

were from Arabic into the Spanish.

As can be seen, the Arabs undoubtedly are credited with initiating the first organized, large-scale translation activity in history. This activity started during the reign of the Umayyad and reached its peak under the Abbasid.

Further, the flowering of knowledge in the Arab World during the 10th and 11th centuries later provided impetus for the development of all aspects of knowledge in the West, including natural sciences and philosophy. It could not have happened without the implementation of the intense program of translation carried out under the Abbasid Caliphs.

### **The Ottoman Period**

Regarding this period, Baker (1998) said

Starting with the late tenth/early eleventh century, the Islamic Empire began to experience a long period of gradual disintegration, resulting in the establishment of rival Caliphates in Egypt and Spain and endless petty dynasties in various parts of the empire. (p. 322)

Baker (1998) also said: “under this new political power, Arabic continued to be the language of learning and law. Arabic continued to play a major role in the translation movement, though now it had to share this role with Turkish” (p. 322).

As far as we know, during this period, the Arab World underwent great suffering. Turkish was the dominant language and Arabs were not allowed even to use their language even in everyday contexts. Those who lived through this period testify that even the language of teaching in the schools of the Arab World was Turkish.

Moreover, the Arab world was largely isolated and deprived of cultural contact during the first few centuries of Ottoman rule. The first contact with Europe was with the French when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798.

Most of the translation activity under the French focused on official and legal documents. However, a few interesting texts were also translated during this period, among them a grammar of spoken Arabic (Baker, 1998, p. 322).

### **Translation Under Mohammad Ali**

According to Baker (1998, p. 322), in 1805, Mohammad Ali, an Ottoman soldier who was originally sent to take control of Egypt on behalf of the Caliph, managed to establish himself as the governor of Egypt and later also of Syria and Sudan. He set up professional schools, sponsored groups of students to study in Europe and, on their return, instructed them to translate the texts he required for modernizing his army and administration. Among the most active translators during this period were the Maronite Christian of Lebanon and Syria, who translated or adapted various works of Catholic theology.

Some of the translations which appeared during this period were done by Europeans, among whom the French consul Basili Fakhr translated several French books on astronomy and natural science into Arabic. In 1826, one of Mohammad Ali's student missions to France was accompanied by a religious guide, a graduate of Cairo's famous al-Azhar, whose mission included the propagation of Islamic religion and culture. This guide,

Rifaa Al-Tahtawi, was to become one of the most important figures in translation during this period and a leading educator of his time. He spent five years in Paris, where he acquired an excellent command of French. On his return, he worked as a translator in one of Mohammad Ali's new specialist schools and later headed the school of translation.

Baker (1998, p. 223) told us that teaching in the various schools set up by Mohammad Ali was initially conducted by foreign instructors in French or Italian. These instructors relied on interpreters in the classroom to communicate with their students. Thus, the use of interpreters in the educational context seems to have been fairly common practice at the time.

### **The Twentieth Century**

France, Britain, and Italy had their designs on various parts of the Arab World beginning with the early 19th century, and the Ottoman Empire was growing too weak to defend its territories. By the early part of the 20th century, most of the Arab World was under foreign occupation. During the last century, efforts to develop a coherent pan-Arab programme of translation began.

Today, translation training programmes exist in various parts of the Arab World, either in the form of independent institutions (as in the case of the King Fahd School of Translation in Tangier) or university departments (for example in Yarmouk University, Jordan).

At present, Arab translation is undergoing many changes. The large number of studies in the domain is helping both in the development of translation activity and the beginning of new theories. Translation in the Arab world also benefits today from the use of computers, digital materials, and the spread of databases of terminologies that offer translators a considerable number of dictionaries.

This has led to the creation of many associations of translators, like "The Committee of Arab Translators" in Saudi-Arabia and many others. One of the most important organizations specialized in translation is the "World Arab Translator's Association" (WATA). WATA is a professional non-profit organization that is registered in Belgium. Its major interest is in linguistics and translation from and into Arabic. WATA members are mostly experienced, well qualified, highly educated, and specialized linguists, translators, and professors of translation. Moreover, one of its ongoing projects is the "KALIMA Project": a translation project in the United Arab Emirates sponsored by the government. Recently they have announced that they will translate, publish, and distribute hundreds of books throughout the Middle East. Establishing an institution such as KALIMA stems from the need to fill a gap in translation in the Arab World, where translated literary and scientific works are only available in the native language. It, therefore, aims at allowing Arabic readers to have wider access to more varied works. KALIMA has established its reputation in the UAE, as well as the Arab World to revive translation as a movement in the Arab World.

KALIMA is indeed very prominent and active in promoting the movement of translation in the Arab world and ensuring quality translation. This was done through, among other activities, the organization of seminars and conferences on translation, such as the Abu Dhabi International Conference on translating, held in February 2012 and organized by KALIMA in conjunction with the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. Dr Ali Bin Tamim, project manager of KALIMA, insisted that KALIMA exerted maximum efforts in order to provide distinct translation books for Arab readers so as to enable them to benefit from them and equally enjoy them.

## Conclusion

However, in comparing the number of translated books by Arab translators with those of Westerners, we feel that the gap between them is still wide, since the translations used by Arabs since the time of Al-Ma'moun up to now do not exceed 10,000 books, which is less than what Spain today translates in one year.

The current situation of translation in the Arab World is disappointing and far from the golden years of the Abbasids era. It is certainly true that there is a lack of translated books into Arabic compared to the huge translated publications in the West. Nevertheless, a breeze of revival has been sensed recently through a number of initiatives and projects that has boosted translation movements and publications in the Arab World such as The KALIMA Project. This project bridges the gap between local and regional Arabic cultures and guarantees access to global culture in order to improve understanding of all cultures in a globalised world and to recognize the specific and unique nature of other societies and cultures.

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