Linguistic vs. Cultural Untranslatability: A Comparative Study with English–Arabic Perspective

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Published on: 19 August 2025

Abstract

This paper examines the difference between linguistic untranslatability, which results from the lack of grammatical or lexical equivalents, and cultural untranslatability, which occurs when concepts are deeply rooted in cultural norms unfamiliar to the target audience. Untranslatability occurs when meaning in a source language cannot be fully conveyed in a target language due to structural or cultural differences.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks by Catford, Baker, and Newman, and using illustrative English–Arabic examples, the study demonstrates how each type manifests in practice. It further analyzes the implications for translators working between languages with distinct linguistic structures and cultural worldviews. According to the paper, recognizing untranslatability is necessary for accurate and ethical translation, and it discusses methods like paraphrasing, cultural adaptation, and functional equivalence to bridge gaps in meaning.

Key words: untranslatability, linguistic, cultural, English and Arabic.

* Introduction

Translation involves a negotiation between linguistic systems and cultural contexts and goes beyond simple word substitution. Many terms and ideas are easily translated between languages, but some are difficult to

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do so because of structural variations or strong cultural connotations. This resistance falls under the categories of cultural and linguistic untranslatable. Two linguistically and culturally different languages that offer excellent examples of both kinds are Arabic and English. It is essential to comprehend their differences in order to translate in an ethical and accurate manner.

Catford (1965) distinguishes between two types of untranslatability: linguistic and cultural. Linguistic untranslatability occurs when the TL has no formally corresponding feature. This type of untranslatability occurs typically in cases where an ambiguity peculiar to the SL text is a functionally relevant feature, for example in SL puns. Cultural untranslatability, on the other hand, is not due to differences between two languages, but arises when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the SL text, is completely absent from the culture of the TL. Catford admits that in many cases, what provokes untranslatability is the impossibility of finding an equivalent collocation in the TL. (Catford 1965: 93-103).

Newmark states that any operation of translation entails a loss of meaning that he classifies in four groups (Newmark, 1981: 7-8): -

1- If the text describes a situation which has elements peculiar to the natural environment, institution and culture of its language area, there is an inevitable loss of meaning, since the transference to or rather the substitution or replacement by the translator's language can only be approximate.

2- Two languages, both in their basic character (langue) and their social varieties (parole) in context have different lexical, grammatical and sound systems, and segment many physical objects and all intellectual concepts differently.

3- The individual uses of language of the text writer and the translator do not coincide. Everybody has lexical if not grammatical idiosyncrasies, and attaches "private" meanings to a few words.

4- The translator and the text writer have different theories of meaning and different values. The translator may look for symbolism where realism was intended, for different emphasis.

If we agree that the translator's task is to produce as nearly as possible the same effect on his readers as was produced on the readers of the original, we will meet a whole range of instances where this effect cannot be achieved. This happens due to the peculiarity of the

language, to the existence of puns, etc.

* Linguistic vs. Cultural Untranslatability

According to Mona Baker in her influential book "In Other Words: A Course book on Translation", linguistic and cultural untranslatability represent two major challenges that translators face: -

1- Linguistic Untranslatability: Linguistic untranslatability arises when a target language lacks a direct grammatical or lexical equivalent for a word, phrase, or expression in the source language. Such cases typically occur due to structural differences between languages, including variations in syntax, morphology, or idiomatic usage.

* English–Arabic Example

Source: She is blue (meaning "She is sad")

Literal Arabic translation: هي زرقاء

This translation is problematic because the metaphorical association between the color blue and the emotion of sadness exists in English but not in Arabic. In Arabic, the literal phrase conveys only the physical color description without the intended emotional meaning.

2- Cultural Untranslatability: Cultural untranslatability occurs when a concept in the source language refers to an object, event, practice, or belief that does not exist—or lacks cultural significance—in the target culture. In such cases, the term may be translated literally, but its social, emotional, or symbolic meaning may be lost without additional explanation.

* English–Arabic Example

Source: Christmas dinner

Literal Arabic translation: عشاء عيد الميلاد

In many Arab Muslim cultures, Christmas is not a widely celebrated tradition. Therefore, the phrase does not evoke the same cultural associations, family rituals, or emotional resonance as it does for English-speaking audiences. To convey the intended meaning, a translator might need to provide supplementary cultural context or employ an adaptation strategy.

Mona Baker (1992) emphasizes that no language or culture is entirely untranslatable. Instead, translators employ various strategies to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, including: -

1- Paraphrasing: Restating the idea in different words.

2- Modulation: Changing the form of the message while preserving meaning.

3- Cultural substitution: Replacing the source concept with a culturally familiar equivalent.

4- Adaptation: Modifying the content to fit the cultural norms of the target audience.

* Linguistic and Cultural Dimensions of Untranslatability in English–Arabic Translation

1- Linguistic Untranslatability

a- The Arabic Dual Form: Arabic possesses a distinct grammatical category for dual number (مثنى, muthannā), used to denote precisely two entities, as in قلمان ("two pens"). English lacks an equivalent morphological marker and instead relies on quantifiers ("two pens"). This results in the loss of the morphological economy and stylistic elegance inherent in the Arabic dual.

b- The Arabic Root System: Arabic is characterized by a nonconcatenative morphology based on triliteral roots, such as كـتـب (k–t–b), which encodes the core semantic field of "writing." Through patterned derivations, this root generates a network of semantically related terms, enabling compact and conceptually rich expression. English lacks an analogous morphological system, often requiring periphrastic constructions that dilute or fragment the original semantic cohesion.

c- The English Progressive Aspect: English distinguishes ongoing actions through the progressive aspect ("I am eating"), whereas Arabic typically employs the simple present (أنا آكل) without explicitly marking continuity. To convey the progressive meaning, Arabic may require temporal adverbs or contextual clarification (e.g., أنا آكل الآن – "I am eating now"), which can shift the original nuance or emphasis.

* Cultural Untranslatability

Cultural untranslatability occurs when a term or expression is embedded in a sociocultural or religious framework that is absent or unfamiliar in the target culture, making literal translation insufficient to convey its full pragmatic and symbolic force.

a- InshAllah (إن شاء الله)

Literally "if God wills," InshAllah permeates Arabic discourse as an expression of faith, destiny, and social politeness. While English equivalents such as "hopefully" or "God willing" capture aspects of the meaning, they lack the same depth of theological reference and frequency of use in everyday interaction.

B -Arabic Morning Greeting: صباح الخير / صباح النور

This call-and-response formula ("Good morning" /

"Morning of light") is a ritualized exchange that blends politeness with poetic imagery. A literal translation into English conveys the informational content but omits the relational warmth and metaphorical resonance intrinsic to the Arabic original.

c- Wallah (والله)

Meaning "By God," Wallah functions as a religiously grounded oath, used to affirm truthfulness or emphasize sincerity. The English equivalents "I swear" or "I promise" approximate the intention but lack the religious gravity and immediate cultural recognition associated with the Arabic term.

* Strategies for Translation

1- Paraphrasing: For untranslatable religious or cultural terms (e.g., إن شاء الله), translators may include a footnote or explanation.

2- Domestication vs. Foreignization: The translator should adapt the concept for familiarity or preserve its foreignness to highlight cultural distance.

3- Functional Equivalence: Sometimes, replacing the term with a culturally appropriate one in the target language is more effective than literal translation.

* Implications

Understanding these two forms of untranslatability helps translators:
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1- To preserve meaning without distorting it.

2- To recognize the limits of equivalence.

3- To respect cultural specificity while maintaining readability.

* Main Findings

1- Untranslatability has two main forms—linguistic and cultural—as defined by theorists like Catford and Baker.

2- Linguistic untranslatability occurs when structural elements of a language (e.g., grammar, morphology, or metaphor) lack an equivalent in the target language.

3- Cultural untranslatability emerges when source language expressions are deeply rooted in cultural practices, values, or traditions that are absent in the target culture.

4- Through English–Arabic examples, the paper shows that linguistic untranslatability includes cases like Arabic's dual form or the metaphorical use of color in English, while cultural untranslatability is seen in terms like "Inshallah" or "Christmas dinner."

5- Translation strategies such as paraphrasing, cultural substitution, foreignization vs. domestication, and

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functional equivalence can help address untranslatable elements.

6- Recognizing untranslatability is not a limitation but rather a gateway to a more nuanced, respectful, and ethically sound translation practice.

* Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the significance of distinguishing between linguistic and cultural untranslatability in the context of English–Arabic translation. Linguistic untranslatability arises from structural disparities—such as grammatical categories or idiomatic expressions—while cultural untranslatability stems from concepts and values that are unique to a given culture. These two forms, though distinct, often overlap in practice, presenting complex challenges for translators.

The comparative examples discussed in this paper demonstrate that translation is far more than a mechanical act of substitution; it is a form of intercultural negotiation that requires sensitivity, creativity, and contextual awareness. While some elements may resist direct translation, they are not beyond understanding. By adopting informed strategies—such as paraphrasing, cultural adaptation, or strategic foreignization—translators can preserve meaning while maintaining cultural integrity.

Ultimately, untranslatability should not be seen as a failure, but as a reflection of the rich diversity of human thought and language. It reminds us that perfect equivalence is not always possible—or even desirable. In English–Arabic translation, where cultural and religious nuances run deep, embracing untranslatability is a sign of respect, depth, and ethical commitment. Future research might explore how these challenges evolve in audiovisual or AI-assisted translation contexts, or how readers from different cultural backgrounds receive and interpret these untranslatable elements.

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