(Un)translatability of (Yemeni) Arabic Oath Expressions into English

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Abstract

Oaths are mostly a culture-embedded linguistic component and this to such an extent that their translation to other languages may be questionable. This study investigates the translation potential or translatability of (Yemeni) Arabic oath expressions into English. It tries to answer whether (Yemeni) Arabic oath expressions are (un)translatable into English by examining the syntactic formula of oaths from linguistic and cultural angles in relation to (Yemeni) Arabic and their (closely translated) English oath expressions. A corpus of 1169 oath expressions was created through an online questionnaire. Findings showed that linguistically, there is a very close equivalence between English and Arabic, with respect to oath-making, in both particles and expressions. At the cultural level, there is also some equivalence, which is evident in the original effect that (Yemeni) Arabic oaths retain in their English translation.

Keywords: Arabic, culture, syntactic formula, equivalence, oaths, (Un)translatability

1. Introduction

The question of whether translatability is possible has incited a great deal of discussion and hot debate among philosophers, linguists and translation theorists. In fact, translation studies till date have been preoccupied on this question with considerable 'solicitude'. According to Catford (1965), there are two types of untranslatability: linguistic and cultural. The former exhibits when a linguistic structure, rule, etc., in the source language (SL) does not have an equivalent linguistic structure, rule, etc. in the target language (TL). The cultural type of untranslatability, however, occurs when cultures diverge. The divergence can be in a cultural feature, function, situation, concept, usage, etc., which exists in one culture, but does not in the other (Bassnett, 2002; Newmark, 1981, 1988; Shormani, 2020).

There is a universal linguistic character to any act of interpretation due to the fact that our human experience is embedded within our 'linguisticality'. Benjamin (1996) opines about translation that "to comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability" (p. 254).

Although oath expressions are common to all languages, most of these expressions are culture-specific. Every culture has its own oaths, different ways of making oaths, different entities its people are oathing by, different linguistic expressions, and so on.[1] A variety of branches of human knowledge have formed the subject matter of translation studies, but so far none have tackled the translation of oath expressions or their (un)translatability. This was established when (i) rigorous searches on many research portals failed to show studies tackling the (un)translatability of oath expressions across languages and cultures; (ii) no study investigating this aspect cross-linguistically in general, and in Arabic context in particular could be identified; (iii) no study examining whether Arabic oath expressions are translatable into English could be identified; (iv) no study on oath expressions in Yemeni Arabic and their translation into English could be identified. Therefore, the current study fills this gap as it reveals a hitherto unexplored aspect of Yemeni culture, which will be useful to those interested in the translation of oath expressions and phatic use of language, in general. Therefore, this study is justified in the field of translation and linguistics.

2. Literature Review

Oath expressions are of two types: assertory and promissory, each of which can be either positive in the sense of affirming, supporting a statement/saying we said, or negative in the sense of denying a statement/saying said to/about us. Assertory oaths are used to confirm, affirm, support or deny a past or present state of affairs, while promissory oaths are used to confirm, support or deny a future state of affairs (Conklin, 2005). Oath expressions are used as part of everyday conversations. Moreover, our daily works, duties, responsibilities,

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[1] Note that we use the term *oath* as a noun and as a verb. Oxford Living Dictionary (online) gives the term "oathing" the following origin "Late 15th century; earliest use found in Guy of Warwick. From oath + -ing" (see *https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/oathing*). We also use the verb *swear,* but in the sense "to make an oath". The term "swear" has, in fact, several senses, one of which is to use bad language such as *Whore*!, etc., (see e.g., Andersson & Trudgill, 1990; Dobao, 2006).

etc., require us to confirm, affirm, support, or deny whatever we have been saying, or is said to/about us in the past, present and/or future.

(Un)translatability

The notion of "untranslatability" has long been dealt with by a considerable number of scholars, be they linguists, philosophers or translation theorists (e.g. Jakobson, 1959; Nida, 1964; Catford, 1965; Ramat, 1987; Comrie, 1989; Ptaszyftski, 2004; Song, 2005; fdani, 2020). It arises due to the fact that there exist some pieces of language that are either not possible or very difficult to translate, the reason being either linguistic or cultural. Some scholars, on the other hand, claim that translation is possible (e.g. Ramat,1987; Song, 2005), while some others see it as impossible (e.g. Comrie, 1989). Some others, however, assert that translation is possible in some structures, but not in others (e.g. Jakobson, 1959; Catford, 1965). For example, Jakobson (1959) states that there are certain areas such as poetry where translation is not possible. Catford (1965, p. 90) argues that untranslatability arises due to "an appropriate register" in the source language (SL) that may not be available in the target language (TL). Put differently, untranslatability occurs when the SL text has no equivalent register in the TL. Catford adds that untranslatability occurs "when it is impossible to build functionally relevant features of the situation into the contextual meaning of the TL text." (p. 90). He argues that there are two types of untranslatability: linguistic and cultural. Linguistic untranslatability, Catford argues, occurs when the TL has no linguistic rule or structure equivalent to that of the SL. Cultural untranslatability, according to Catford, lies in the absence of a cultural concept in the TL equivalent to that of the SL.

Comrie (1989) sees translation as impossible. He bases his conclusions on two English varieties dubbed by him "as English-1 and English-2. Both varieties of English have productive patterns for forming number expressions; however, English-2 has an expressive restriction that prevents it from expressing the full range of natural numbers" (p. 56). Nevertheless, can we take Comrie's position that there exists no translation based only on one rule/structure that is not translatable? If Comrie's conclusion is on the right track, then how about the works in different and various fields of human knowledge that have been translated from and into many languages throughout the history of translation and human affairs? This question seems difficult to be answered.

Translation serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself but it can represent it by realizing it in an embryonic or intensive form. There is also, as Benjamin (1996, pp. 255-256) holds, a kinship between languages and so:

> languages are not strangers to one another but a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express… and if this kinship is to be demonstrated by translations, how else can this be done but by conveying the form and meaning of the original as accurately as possible. There is also a change brought by translation, in that "the original undergoes a change. Even the words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process.

Benjamin (1996, pp. 259-261) has tackled the concept of fidelity in translation saying that "fidelity in the translation of individual words can almost never fully reproduce the meaning they have in the original." It is not true that everything can be translated or rendered in the TL but rather, as Benjamin holds, there remains "something that cannot be communicated…. It is something that symbolizes or something symbolized" and so for the sake of the pure language to be released it is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another language, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his own recreation of that work.

In the present study, though occupied mainly with the translatability of (Yemeni) Arabic oath expressions into English, we show that translatability does exist on both linguistic and cultural levels. Our view thus parallels those of Ramat (1987) and Song (2005), for example. Ramat (1987, p. 10) argues that the possibility of translation between languages is due to the existence of language universals, and thus, this is the way we "understand why languages, in principle, can be translated into other languages". If oathing is universal to all human languages and cultures, as we will see shortly, then translatability does exist due to this universality. It is true that languages, as well as cultures, diverge, more than they converge, but even then, we actually find a way out and search for a possible translation, a translation that is able to convey into the TL the meaning intended in the SL (Shormani, 2020).

Approaches to (un)translatability

There are several approaches to the study of (un)translatability, and the search for finding an appropriate method is still in the process of quest. These approaches include Catford's approach to linguistic as different from cultural untranslatability, Ping's sociosemiotic approach, Toury's targetoriented approach and the universalist approach (e.g., Ptaszyftski, 2004; Ramat, 1987; Song, 2005).

The universalist approach

The universalist approach to (un)translatability "is represented by scholars such as Walter Benjamin, Roman Jakobson, Eugene Nida, and Wolfram Wilss" (Ptaszyftski 2004: 178). In fact, the universalist approach comes in line with Chomsky's (1965, 1982) conceptions of generative grammar in which he postulates the existence of a Universal Grammar. If this is so, then every language can express what other language(s) can. Hence, translatability is possible while untranslatability is not. This also comes in line with the view that languages are more similar than they are different.

Gentzler (1993, p. 50) points out that "[t]he existence of deep-seated formal universals [...] implies that all languages are cut to the same pattern, but does not imply that there is any point by point correspondence between particular languages." In Nida's (1964) views, universality of *expression* goes even beyond similarity between languages in terms of formal structures. Universality of *expression* includes also cultural concepts, pointing out that for translatability to be possible, there should be some sort of background on which we base this possibility. He argues "that which unites mankind is greater than that which divides…" (Nida, 1964, p. 2, see also Nida, 1976,

for a discussion).

Nida (1964) emphasizes that "there should be some sort of background on which we base" (p. 2) the *possibility* of translation (therefore, on which we base translatability, which is precisely *the possibility* of translation). Take the concept *time* as an example: first, the presentation of time in terms of horizons of past, present and future is a universal feature of human consciousness, reflected, we presume, in the grammatical feature of tense, and more specifically, in the fact that no language can possess only one tense (which in effect means *no tense*), but must in some way posit the difference between past, present and future. Oath expressions, are divided between those pertaining to the past and present on the one hand (assertory) and the future, on the other (promissory). To the extent that they distinguish between those two temporal horizons, they are therefore, aspects of a universal mental operation that distinguishes that which has (or has not) happened from that which may/will or will not happen.

Second, oath expressions are performative utterances which supplement an action or statement, thereby declaring, implicitly that in itself it *is not sufficient*. They point therefore, to a sense of lack within action or expression, from which the need to affirm/ascertain derives. Their addition is subtractive and it is so even more because oath expressions, though they intend to guarantee truth, are by no means synonymous with truth itself. Perjury also exists. These are pragmatic considerations, however.

Far more important from the standpoint of asserting the universality (and therefore, fundamental translatability) of oath expressions is that language is by nature equipped with the possibility of *not* stating the truth. *The capacity to not state the factual truth* is unique to human beings in exact correspondence to the uniqueness of the language faculty among humans. Or, put differently, to have a language in the proper sense, and not simply a communication system, *is to be able to lie*: computers cannot lie, nor can animals.

The ability to lie should not be seen ethically in itself: rather, it is the foundation of the very possibility of ethics, for if we were always constrained to tell the truth, there would be no choice and therefore no moral virtue in telling the truth. Rather, the ability to not state the factually true should be understood here in terms of the binarity of logical systems: a statement is or is not true—that is a universal property of statements that possess a veridical dimension, i.e. a dimension through which they can be evaluated in relation to whether they state a truth or not.

On the one hand, then, oath expressions arise because it is by definition always possible for a speaker to not state the truth; they are logical correlates of the capacity of human language to produce factually untrue statements, and their function is to regulate and constrain that capacity so as to minimize its impact on sociality (by minimizing suspicion among human speakers, building trust, etc.).

Strictly speaking, no statement about the future is true: as a future action has not yet taken place, it lies beyond the truth/untruth distinction. It is as yet neither true nor untrue that "I will do X, simply because there is no way of verifying something that has not happened (mind you, I may not do it without having intended to lie, because of *force majeur*—I have fallen ill, I have died, etc.).

But commitment to future action is a fundamental dimension of human sociality; it is absolutely necessary for human beings to be able to assure each other that certain things will happen for society to work properly, for otherwise there would be no trust in anything; this cannot be guaranteed without oath expressions, which make of the human being an "animal that promises" "as a "paradoxical task" (Nietzsche, 1989, cited in Brown, 1999, p. 44).

The nature of oath

Samuel Butler states that "Oaths are but words, and words but wind" (as cited in Schlesinger, 2008, p. 15). There are actually several definitions of the term *oath*.[1] Collins English Dictionary (CED) online defines it as "a ritualistic declaration, typically based on an appeal to God … or to some revered person or object, that one will speak the truth, keep a promise, remain faithful, etc." In addition, Conklin (2005, p. 1) views oath as "a solemn, formal utterance affirming the truth of one's words or expressing one's promise to do something. Oaths can be classified into assertory or promissory; both of these can be either positive or negative". Some linguists see oaths as performative utterances, whose functions are to strengthen, give power to, authenticate whatever we say or is said to us. In this sense, then, an oath expression is actually a speech act like inviting, promising, requesting, etc. (Jay, 2009).

Communication as well as human nature requires us sometimes to confirm, affirm, deny, etc., whatever we are saying or said to/about us as part of our daily life conversation. Situations we find ourselves in, people we are dealing with, our friends, family members, relatives, acquaintances, etc., are part of our daily life affairs, and communicating with them contributes to our cultural wealth. Most of the time, these situations, people, affairs, dealings, negotiations, bargaining, purchasing, selling, and all kinds of human affairs, relations and communications require us to confirm, support, strengthen the truth of whatever we say, and/or deny whatever others say about us. Furthermore, by making an oath expression we give some sort of authentication and authoritative power to whatever we are saying. An oath expression is a performative utterance; it is an expression that invokes "an entity which is sacred or precious to the swearer, the function of which is perhaps to bear witness to the utterance, or in some way to offer help or lend credence to the oath taker in fulfilling an oath." (Conklin 2005, p. 1).

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[1] See *https://www.dictionary.com/browse/oath*. The Modern English term *oath* originates from the Old English *āth* and Middle English *ooth*.

Oaths and culture

Oath expressions can be taken as examples of a type of language that is deeply embedded within culture. In other words, they are culture-based (and societal in orientation). But what is culture? It is a notion defined and tackled by a considerable number of anthropologists, linguists and translation theorists. However, we will provide only one definition, which is in line with the purpose of this article. Culture "consists of knowledge, concepts, and values shared by group members through systems of communication. Culture also consists of the shared beliefs, symbols, and interpretations within a human group". (Banks & McGee, 1989, p. 8).

In this definition (of culture), oaths lie within the "concepts, and values… shared beliefs, symbols, and interpretations" which may be universal to all languages and cultures. Oaths also lie within "the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies". Every society may have its own oaths different from those of other(s). Along these lines, Hughes (2006) argues that oath making reflects the relationship between language and society as:

> a perennial source of fascination for those interested in language and society, continuously provoking controversy and raising topical issues. An extraordinary range of style and content has evolved in oaths, profanity, foul language, and ethnic slurs over the centuries, on a scale from the most sacred utterances to the most taboo (p. xv).

In this extract, we find ourselves vis-à-vis culture-language interface, one aspect of which is manifested by oaths across languages and cultures. Several types of language are used in oaths, and that is actually based on culture. If we take oaths as speech acts, then their social functions could be parallelized with those of invitation, requesting, praying, advising, etc. An oath can be used to express anger, frustration, joy, surprise, love, dignity, closeness, dearness, pricelessness, pride, innocence, justice, injustice, loyalty, and so on, which are at the heart of culture (Austin, 1962; Lotman & Uspensky, 1978; Shirley, 1979; Spears, 1981; Baker, 1992; Hughes, 2006; Schlesinger, 2008; Jay, 2009).

Thus, if oath expressions are speech acts, and since speech acts are encoded and embedded in culture, expressing several societal functions like oaths, then oaths can be said to embody not only language, but also, culture. In this sense, then, language encodes culture semiotically, linguistically and discursively. Semiotically, language encodes culture through the symbolic system and how this system affects thought. Linguistically, language embodies culture through expressing meaning pragmatically, perhaps in terms of how "speech acts across cultures" are realized, through "culturally-inflected conversation analysis, and the use of cultural frames." Discursively, language reflects culture through "how speakers of different languages think differently when speaking, and how speakers of different discourses … have different cultural worldviews" (Kramsch, 2014, pp. 31-37; Shormani, 2020, p. 904).

3. Research Question

Broadly, this study weaves around the possibility of Translatability of Arabic oath expressions and the following section answers the central question of this study: Are (Yemeni) Arabic oath expressions translatable into English?

4. Methods

Research design

We adopt the universalist approach in the analysis of oath expressions to examine oaths in this study. The following section discusses this approach in greater detail.

Instruments

This study used a survey to create a corpus of oaths to include in the analysis. The data were collected via an online questionnaire designed on Google Forms as an instrument open for access from January 8, 2020 at 2:36 am to 28 May, 2020 at 10: 13 pm. Invitation for inputs was posted on social networks including Facebook as well as via WhatsApp and email. The language used in the questionnaire was Arabic. The questionnaire comprised three items/questions: i) Why do people oath? ii) State one or more oaths in Arabic/Yemeni Arabic; and iii) State the situation of these oath(s). The final data contained 1169 oaths in Arabic/Yemeni Arabic, with another 1500 oaths being excluded as they were repetitions.

5. Results and Discussion

Linguistic translatability

Linguistically, an oath has a syntactic formula which represents the structure of the oath. We will start by addressing the formulae of oaths in English and return to those of Arabic.

In English, an oath can take one of the following forms:

(1)   a. by + noun/relative

         b. on + noun/relative

         c. verb + a.

In (1), there are two oath formulae starting with a preposition, specifically *by* and *on*, and a verbal formula. The oathing verb in English is 'swear'. The formulae in (1) can be exemplified by the English oaths *By God, On my father's life* and, *I swear by God* in (1a-c), respectively (cf. Abdel-Jawad, 2000).

In Arabic, on the other hand, an oath may take one of (2a-e) formulae.

(2) a. wa + noun/relative

   b. bi- + noun/relative

   c. fauq + noun

   d. ta- + Allah

   e. verb + bi- + a.

In both formulae, in English and Arabic, we find that an oath expression consists of a particle plus a complement, irrespective of what word class the particle belongs to. In the Arabic formula, we have two prepositions, namely *bi-* and *fauq* and, two particles namely *wa* and *ta-*.[1] *bi-* and *ta-* can be taken as prefixes, because they are always attached to their complements (i.e., the nouns sworn by). The formula in (2e) has a verb, which is *ʔaqsim* (/*ʔuqsimu*, in Standard Arabic). Note, however, that the formula in (2c) is a Yemeni Arabic-specific one while the formula in (2d) is specific to Classical Arabic, always cooccurring with *Allah*.[2] These formulae can be instantiated by: *wa ʔallah*!, *bišarafak*!*, fauq l-muṣḥaf*!, *tallah!* and *ʔaqsim billah*!, respectively.

Comparing the oath formulae in (1) and (2) in English and Arabic, respectively, it seems that there is a possible equivalence between English and Arabic at the level of linguistics: particles and expressions, i.e., the words representing the entities sworn by.

As for oathing particles, be they prepositions or else, in Arabic, it seems that they do have the same equivalents in English. Both Arabic and English use the prepositions "by" and "on", and the verb "swear". Arabic, in addition*,* uses the particles: *wa* and *ta-*. But these two particles can be "equalized" with the English *by*, simply because they share the same function and express the same meaning. The verbal formula in Arabic seems also to have an equivalence in English (cf. Newmark, 1981, 1988; Baker, 1992; Bassnett, 2002).

As for the entity sworn by, let us examine the Arabic oaths in the following examples, which are used in almost all Arabic varieties, including Yemeni Arabic:

(3) a. wa   ʔallah!

     'By   God'

   b. wakitāb ʔallah!

     by.book God

     '(I swear) by the Qur'an!'

   c. wa   šarafi!

     by   honor.my

     '(I swear) by my honor!'

   d. billah   ʕalayk!

     by.God   upon.you

     'Swear me!'

   e. ʔaqsim   billah!

     I.swear   by.God

     'I swear by God!'

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[1] Note that in Arabic the term *wa* used in oathing is different from that of the conjunction *wa*. The latter's function is to conjunct a word, phrase or sentence to another while the former is used only for oathing.

[2] Note that the formula in (2d) is used in Classical Arabic (a variety mostly represented by the Holy Qur'an) (see also Testen, 1998). It is also used in Yemeni Arabic, but in combination with *wa* and *bi-* as in *wa ʔallah, wa billah, wa tallah*. There are also other formulae specific to Yemeni Arabic, and perhaps across modern Arabic vernaculars:

(i)   a. ʔallah   šāhid

        God   witnessing

    b. yašhad   ʔallah

       witnesses   God

The oath sentence in (ia) is nonverbal, i.e., a nominal sentence in Arabic. It can be translated as *God is my witness* or *God is witnessing me*! In (ib), the oath is verbal, but the verb is not *ʔaqsim* 'swear'*;* it is rather *yašhad* 'witness'.

Given the linguistic equivalence (cf. Catford, 1965; Newmark, 1981; Baker, 1992), it seems that all the oath expressions in this category are translatable into English. They all pattern with the formulae in (2). For example, the oath expression in (3a) can be translated as *By God*!, which is an oath equivalent. Note that this oath is a phrase, and its English equivalent is also a phrase. The complement of the oath particle is a noun, i.e., *God*. In (3b), we find another oath expression in which the complement of the particle is a phrase, i.e., *kitāb ʔallah*!, a construct state. It can be translated as *By the book of God*! The book here refers to *the Hole Qur'an*![1]

(3d) and (3e) are sentential oath expressions. The latter patterns with the formula in (2e). It is a verbal oath sentence with the verb *ʔaqsim*: the verbal root of which is *q-s-m* 'to swear'. It has been used in the form of first person singular pronominal prefix *ʔa-* in *ʔaqsim* 'I swear', the particle *bi-* and the noun *ʔallah,* which is sworn by. It can thus, be translated as *I swear by God!*

What can mostly be said about the oath expressions in (3) is that they have do oath equivalents in English. In other words, the oath expression in Arabic has an oath equivalent in English, having the same oath force. This is so because of the culturally similar concepts, and the mutually performative acts that these oath expressions have in both languages. Thus, we can say that Arabic and English have the same ways of expressing or taking oaths, and therefore, no problem arises as far as linguistic translatability is concerned.

Cultural translatability

Our discussion in the previous section shows that the linguistic translatability of (Yemeni) Arabic oaths into English is obtained. However, there are oaths which are culture-based, i.e., they are said only in (Yemeni) Arabic language and culture. The question, then, is: Does a possible equivalence exist at the level of culture? In what follows, we will try to answer this question. We will examine data from Yemeni Arabic, consider the following examples:

(4) a. bijāh ʔallah!

      by.majesty God

      'For God's sake!'

  b. biħajr ʔallah!

      by.affliction God

      'For God's sake!'

  c. ʕalyya ṭ-ṭallāq!

      on.me the-divorce

      'By the Sacredness of Marriage!'

  d. fauq l-xitmeh!

     on the-xitmeh

     'By the Qur'an!'

  e. wa rabb l-bayt!

     by Lord the-house

     'By the Lord of kaʕbah!'

  f. ʕaddamni ʕiūni!

      lose.me eyes.my

     'God blind me!'

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[1] Relative oaths in Arabic can be illustrated in (i).

(i)   a. wa llaði xalaqak!

      by who created.you

   b. bi man xalaqak!

      by who created.you

   c. ʔaqsim billaði xalaqak!

     I.swear by.who created you

(ia) is an oath without the verb "swear". The complement of the oath particle *wa* is *a relative clause*, i.e., *llaði xalaqak* 'Who created you'. It can be translated as *By Who created you*! The same thing can be said regarding (ib). The difference, however, is with respect to the oath particle and the relative pronoun. In (ia) the particle is *wa,* but in (ib) it is *bi-,* and the relative pronoun in (ia) is *llaði* while it is *man* in (ib). In (ic), the swearing verb *ʔaqsim* is used, but the relative clause is the same like (ia).

g. ʕaddamni Qur'anni!

    lose.me   Qur'an.my

    'By (my memorization of) the Qur'an!'

h. fauq   rukbati!

    on   knee.my

    'By my health!'

i. fauq mā   ʔaslak   wa   mā   ʔamlak!

    on   what I.work   and   what I.possess

    'By my wealth!'

j. wa   rās   ʕiyāli!

    By   head   children.my

    'On the lives of my children!'

An appropriate translation, as held by translation theorists, is one that is able to render into the TL the original effect of the expression in the SL (e.g., Baker 1992; Bassnett 2002, 2012; Catford 1965; Nida 1964; Newmark 1981, 1988). The expressions in (4) are oaths, but are very much embedded in Yemeni culture. Their translation thus requires taking the cultural aspects into consideration. For example, (4a) is said when the speaker wants the hearer (not) to do something at his disposal, but he does not want to do it, or vice versa. It is said, for instance, by a person telling a guest that it is necessary to come to his house, a house owner wanting the renter to go out of an apartment, a father telling his son (not) to stop talking about something in his presence, a husband telling his wife (not) to do/say something, among other uses and situations. Each of these cases has its own meaning and social function(s). In the case of the guest, for instance, the oath expresses hospitality/willingness of the speaker to invite the hearer. In the case of the house owner, however, it expresses the speaker's impatience. Taking these aspects into account, translating this expression seems to be possible. Thus, the best rendering of (4a) into English would be *For God's sake*! Although *By the great Majesty of God* may be a possibility of rendering, but it may not have the same effect the English oath *For God's sake* has on English people.

We have also another example of difficulty in translating the oath expression in (4b), i.e., *biħajr ʔallah*! The meaning of the term *ħajr* is 'confiscation', and if we translate it into English as *By confiscation of God!*, it will be nonsensical, because we never expect someone, of English origin, of course, to say this phrase as an oath. It is just like the English oath *By God's wounds*!; if we translate it into Arabic as *wa jurūħ ʔallah*!, no Arab would be able to understand it, because the concept carried by the expression *God's wounds* is Christianity-specific. Therefore, we need to see what the oath *biħajr ʔallah* means and when it is used. In fact, this oath is said in Yemeni culture when there is a situation in which the speaker is angry, and he wants his listener *to leave him alone*. It seems, then, that this oath has actually the sense of *For God's sake*![1] We have come across several native speakers (in literature or movies) saying and using this oath as in *For God's sake leave me alone*! or *I do not want to speak about this matter for God's sake*!, etc.

(4c) is another example of culture-based oath. The expression *ʕalyya ṭ-ṭallāq*! is a Yemeni culture-based oath, and perhaps across the Arab World, especially in modern Arabic vernaculars. Therefore, to translate this oath into English, we must transfer the original effect from Arabic into English. But since no oath equivalent exists in English, our task seems to be rather difficult. Literally, it means *the divorce (is) on me*. In Yemen, the concept of this oath is that by swearing *ʕalyya ṭ-ṭallāq* the swearer is intending to prove, confirm, etc., something he said or did. But we cannot translate it as *The divorce (is) on me*!, because it does not qualify as an oath in English. In Yemeni culture also if the swearer is lying in his oath, his wife will be religiously and socially divorced. There is a ritually followed method for the man to divorce his wife in Islam. If the man says to his wife: "You are divorced" three times in three different occasions/situations, his wife is religiously and socially divorced, a "complete divorce" (in the sense of Spears, 1981). If he divorces her once or twice, they can be reconciled and the divorce breaks down, or, say, it is a limited divorce (Spears 1981). If, however, he divorces her three times, they can never be reconciled, unless she marries another man. Further, they can be reconciled (after enacting divorce by repeating the word three times) only if this "another man" divorces her.

Marriage is sacred in all religions and cultures. So is the marital life. Marriage in all cultures is the only way of legally and religiously preserving human species, and hence community. It follows that the status marriage enjoys in Yemen is almost the same in England, and

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[1] Yemeni people use a similar form of this oath to swear by the (power of) ruler or governor:

(i)   biħajr   l-ħākim/l-muħafiz!

    By the-ruler/governor

    'By the ruler/governor!'

What the speaker means here is that if the addressee does not stop doing something, he would complain to the ruler of the district.

other English-speaking countries like America and Australia. Bearing in mind all these factors, the best rendering of this oath into English is thus *By the Sacredness of Marriage*! We cannot say *By the divorce*!, or *The divorce* (*is*) *on me!,* as noted above, simply because it is not an oath in the target culture. We swear by sacred entities, things, places, but not by entities, things, places that are considered bad by all people. Divorce is a case in point here; divorce is considered bad in all religions/cultures and by all peoples. In Islam, for instance, divorce is the "last resort" both spouses, or their families, could take.[1]

The oath expression in (4d), *fauq l-xitmeh*!, is used in Yemen to authenticate an oath by saying *By the Holy Qur'an*! This is so because the term *xitmeh* is another word for the Qur'an, as a culture-specific term in Yemeni Arabic.[2] English people swear by the Bible, the Holy Book, the Sacred Book, etc. The terms *Holy Book* and *Sacred Book* refer to the Bible. Jewish people oath by the Torah, the (Old) Testament (see e.g., Conklin 2005). In fact, Holy Books are sworn by across cultures and languages. In our narrative, then, the best rendering of the oath *fauq l-xitmeh*! is *By the Qur'an*! English people know what the Qur'an, but not *xitmeh,* is and so *By the Qur'an*! will have the same effect on them as it has on Yemeni people.

The expression *wa rabb l-bayt*! in (4e) is another Yemeni culture-based oath. Literally, it means *By the Lord of the house*! If we render it into English as such, then the meaning of the oath is distorted, and will be of no sense to English people. English people do not swear by "the house" but they swear by holy places, holy soil, seed-land, etc. (Spears 1981). In fact, the term *l-bayt* in the oath does not refer to an ordinary "house" but to *kaʕbah,* a very holy place to all Muslims; *kaʕbah* is the place where all Muslims do the pilgrimage. It is situated in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and all English people are likely familiar with this fact. Therefore, if we render the oath *wa rabb l-bayt*! into English as *By the Lord of kaʕbah*!, the same effect that the oath has on Yemenis (and perhaps all Arabs) is, thus, transferred into English. Note that in oaths like *wa rabb l-bayt*!, and *wa rās ʕiyāli!*, the complement of *wa* is a Construct State, which is a structure common to Arabic language (see e.g. Shormani, 2016).

The expression in (4f) *ʕaddamni ʕiūni*! is a Yemeni culture-specific oath. Literally, it means *I lose my eyes*. Thus, if we render it as such into English, it will be unnatural, simply because we cannot swear in such a way. We swear by *eyes,* because they are so precious to humans, and no one would want to lose one's eyes. In other words, no one would, for instance, stink his/her eyes. Figuratively, however, the oath in question means *A nonhuman force makes me lose my eyes* (*that I am saying the truth*, for example). This "nonhuman force" is referred to as God. If this concept is known to, say, a translator, and if this translator is very aware of English culture, specifically with regard to oathing, then he would translate it into English as *God blind me*![3] A very interesting case in support of this is the English oath: *I cross my heart and hope to die*![4] This oath was said by one of the two robbers, namely Harry, in the movie *Home alone 2* when Kevin, a ten-year old child, asks them not to hurt him.

The same mechanism could also be utilized to translate the oath *ʕaddamni Qur'ani*! in (4g). There is, however, some sort of difference here. The verbal constituent in *ʕaddamni* does not mean 'lose' but rather 'forget'. This oath is *always* said by those who memorize the Holy Qur'an, and specifically women and children. It literally means *God makes me forget my Qur'an* (which I memorized)! In fact, memorizing the Holy Qur'an is considered a very highly appreciated act a Muslim can do, not only in Yemeni culture, but also in all Muslim cultures. Bearing in mind these aspects, the best rendering of this oath is thus, *By my memorization of the Holy Qur'an*! It is known to English people that memorizing a Holy Book like Bible is something extraordinary a Christian can do, and so he may swear by such a memorization (see Spears, 1981). In this sense, then the oath, *By my memorization of the Holy Qur'an*! will have the same effect on English people as it does (4g) on Yemeni people.

The oath in (4h) *fauq rukbati*! 'on my knee' is also a Yemeni-culture specific expression. In this oath the oath maker is swearing by his knee. In Yemeni culture, the term *rukbah* 'knee' is a symbol of health and strength; one whose *rukbah* is strong, is able to work hard and earn money to spend on his family's needs. However, one whose *rukbah* is weak or who has no *rukbah* (say, he lost it by accident or in the battle) he will not be able to work hard. We cannot translate this oath as *I swear by my knee*! or simply *By my knee*! because this expression does not qualify for an oath in English, and hence, may not be effective on a native English speaker. In this way, the meaning, usage and concept of this oath are now clear, and since English people swear by health and wealth (e.g., Gray, 2013; Hughes, 2006; Schlesinger, 2008; Spears, 1981), the best rendering is *I swear by my health*! or simply *By my health*!, as it sounds a natural rendering.

The oath in (4i), *fauq mā Ɂaslak wa mā Ɂamlak*! 'on what I work and possess' is also a Yemeni-specific swearing expression. If we render it as *On/by what I work*!*,* it seems to be unnatural. However, if we render it as *By what I possess*!, or alternatively, *By my wealth*!, it

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[1] In Islam, divorce is a bad step to be taken by a husband. There is a Hadith (Prophet Mohammed's saying) which is" إن ابغض الحلال عند الله الطلاق *Ɂinna Ɂabgad l-ḥalaal ʕinda Ɂallah l-ṭallāq* 'divorce is the worst of halal'.

[2] The Qur'an has several other names and all these names are sworn by in all Yemen. One of these names is المصحف *muṣḥaf* and the oath is *fauq l-muṣḥaf* 'On the Qur'an!'

[3] *God blind me*! has a minced form in English. The term "minced" simply means "a reduced form". It is *Gor blimey!* (and even *blimey!*, see Hughes 2006; Gray 2013).

[4] See *https://www.quotes.net/mquote/43810*, for instance, for the full dialogue between Kevin and Harry in which the oath in question was said.

sounds English. If we swear by everything precious to us, then the oath *By what I possess*!, or, *By my property*! sounds English, because the property we have is precious to us (cf. also Schlesinger, 2008).

The last oath in (4j) is *wa rās ʕiyāli*!, which is also a culture-specific oath used in Yemeni culture. If we render it as *By head of my children,* it would not be effective on an English person. The meaning of this oath is one in which the term 'head' symbolizes/stands for 'life', and so 'life' could replace 'head' in our rendering, which seems almost closer to English culture. The matching, in fact, ensues from a somehow equivalent oath in English *On the lives of my children*! (Schlesinger, 2008; Shirley, 1979;). A child is considered a precious entity to a father, for instance, and by swearing by his life, a father puts his child's life in danger to prove that what he has said is fully true (Conklin, 2005). Thus, the English oath, *On the lives of my children!* would be the best rendering.

From a communication perspective, oath expressions are said as part of a conversation between two (or more) people, usually referred to as interlocutors. In a conversation, an interlocutor needs to verify, confirm, or support what he is saying, or deny what others are saying about him to the addressee(s). All these are "performed" by the oath expressions, as speech acts, which are, in turn, common to all languages, though there are differences between cultures.

All the oath expressions discussed so far are, however, uttered by the speaker. To look at the other side of the coin, and naturally enough, a speaker may want the addressee to verify, confirm, support what he is saying, or deny what others are saying about him to the addressee(s). In this case, in Arabic, the speaker begins his oath expression by the imperative verbs *ʔiħlif* or *ʔiqsim* meaning 'swear (to) me' and in Yemeni Arabic *qul* meaning 'say'. These are illustrated in the following: [1]

(5) a. ʔiħlif   yamīn!

        swear   oath

         'Swear me!'

      b. ʔiqsim billah!

        swear   by.God

        'Swear me!'

      c. qul   wallah!

        say   by.allah

        'Swear me!'

The oath in (5a), for instance, can be rendered into English as *Make an oath*! (for instance), but it does not qualify as an oath in English. A natural rendering would be *Swear (to) me*! The oath in (5b) can be rendered into English as *Swear (to) me by God*! Or alternatively, *Swear (to) me*!   The oath in (5c) means *say by God*; again it does not qualify as an oath in English. A natural translation would be *Swear (to) me*! The naturalness of this oath lies in being an oath equivalent in English.

This type of swearing provides us with an extra formula of oathing, which is formed by the imperative form of the verb *ʔasʔal* 'ask' plus the second person accusative/genitive pronominal suffix *–ak*, which is, in turn, followed by the entity sworn by, be it in the form of a single word like *Allah,* or a clause such as *llaði xalaq-ak* 'who created you'. This is illustrated in (6).

(6) a. ʔasʔalak   billah!

      I.ask.you   by.God

    'Swear me by God!'

    b. ʔasʔalak   billaði   xalaq-ak!

      I.ask.you   by.who created-you

    'Swear me by God!'

Bearing in mind our discussion so far, it seems that these oath expressions are translatable into English. The best rendering would be *Swear (to) me by God*!, or alternatively, *Swear (to) me*! The latter is better because it sounds English. Again, the Englishness lies in being an oath in English.[2]

In Yemeni culture, people use "curse" expressions as oaths. Yemeni Arabic, language and culture, "meets" English in this type of oathing (e.g.Gray, 2013; Schlesinger, 2008; Spears, 1981). One such curse expression is (7).

(7) ʔallah   yilʕanni!

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[1] In this use of the verb *ʔiħlif* or *ʔiqsim*, the second person singular pronoun is realized as *ʔi-* prefixed to it.

[2] This oath is mentioned in *Prison Break* series. See *https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0678483/quotes, for the full dialogue, where this oath was said.*

    God   curses.me

     'God curse me!'

There is an English equivalent to this oath, which is *God curse me*!, and so no problem arises here.

As part of Yemeni culture, there are some oaths that are most of the time said by women and children.

(8) a. jiʕlli   maṣībeh!

    may.I get   woe

    'God curse me!'

   b. jiʕlli   baraṣ!

    may.I.get leprosy

    'God curse me!'

   c. jiʕlli   maut!

    may.I get death

    'I hope to die!'

In all the oaths in (8), the swearer is hoping for something bad to befall him/her if he/she is lying. In (8a), for instance, the swearer hopes for woe. The oath means *May I have woe*. If we render it into English as such, it may not be effective on English people. But if we translate it as *God curse me*!, it would sound English, because it is actually an oath in English. The same thing could be said about the oath in (8b). However, the oath in (8c) may not be rendered in the same way. The swearer here hopes to die. Therefore, the best rendering of this oath would be *I hope to die*!, which qualifies as an oath in English. It is, in fact, similar to the oath said by Harry, in the movie *Home Alone 2*, alluded to above.

5. Conclusions

In this study we examined the translatability of Arabic oath expressions into English. We utilized data from two dialects of Arabic, namely Standard Arabic and Yemeni Arabic. We utilized two types of data: i) oath expressions in Arabic having equivalents in English, and ii) oath expressions specific to Yemeni culture. We concluded that all oath expressions under study are translatable into English.

If oathing is universal to all human languages and cultures, the translator's task then becomes easier if he is fully aware of this universality of oathing. However, since cultures diverge, in that, there are certain oaths specific to a particular culture, as this study shows, which are different from those of other culture(s), he/she should then focus more on the cultural aspects of oaths, where cultures diverge. Thus, the literal translation of Yemeni Arabic culture-based oaths seems ridiculous, and most of the time, nonsensical. However, translation becomes successful if the culture-specific aspects (say, concept, usage, context, meaning, intention, etc.,) of an oath, for instance, are known to/by the translator; the translator's task will be successful, and translation of this oath will transfer the original effect the oath has in the SL into the TL. In this sense, then, the translator's "load" in his/her task is reduced.

In this context, thus, one may ask: Is there any untranslatable oath? Based on the results of this study, it seems that all the (Yemeni) Arabic oaths are translatable into English. We found oath equivalents linguistically and culturally in this language pair. The latter, however, requires us to "translate" the cultural aspects of the oath in question, to understand its concept, situation/context, meaning, word usage, background, etc.

One implication of the study at hand is questioning whether the notion "untranslatability" really exists. Along the history of translation, profession and study, several and varied methods have been utilized in translating a text. These methods actually vary in use and application. If a text is difficult to translate by a word-for-word/literal method, for instance, we look for another suitable method depending on the nature of the text. We translate by linguistic and/or cultural borrowing. If this borrowing is not enough, we provide an explanation (in the form of footnotes, for instance). Moreover, we can also translate also by explanation only, employing cultural cognates, omission or addition, cultural reference suppression, amplification or compression. In addition, we can translate by providing pictures, among other methods (Nida, 1964; Newmark, 1981; Baker, 1992; Katan, 1999; Mur Duenas, 2003, 1988; Guerra, 2012).

If, however, the SL text is impossible to translate by any of the methods stated above, we can translate by transcription and/or transliteration. Other methods can be to arabicize, frenchize, englishize, etc., which points out to the great efforts of linguists in finding a suitable method to translate a text from one language into another. In fact, there are several centers for arabicization in the Arab world, for instance: Arabicization Centers in Morocco and Algeria are just an example of the vigorous arabicization activity in the region. Finally, we can translate by translating culture (Shormani, 2020), as this study strives to prove. It is true that there is no 100% or perfect translation (cf. Nida, 1964), specifically culturally, but, on the other side of the coin, it may be said that there is no scope for zero translation either.

6. Recommendations

Translation can be a frustrating endeavour for translators at times, but the reasons for this lie more in their training than the ability to translate. Linear thinking in translation can be a safe method of training, but applying any of the other possible techniques can make any

text translatable. Towards this end, this study recommends including the alternative approaches in the translation courses curricula and encouraging innovative thinking amongst translation students.

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