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## The translator is a traitor: translation in humanitarian response

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*Translation has often been regarded as an act of ‘betrayal’, for the impossibility of transferring the exact same messages between different languages. Yet, if seen for what it really is – the road to cross-cultural understanding and communication – translation can be valued for bridging the gaps between human beings. Translation as part of humanitarian response plays a crucial role in identifying and responding to the needs of affected populations. A ‘faithful’ translator to the humanitarian mission contributes to acceptance and humanitarian access.*

*In this post, Rasha Mahmoud Abdel Fattah, Head of Arabic Translation at the ICRC Regional Communication Center in Cairo, challenges the claims of betrayal and infidelity of translators and examines the process of translating into Arabic in a conflict-stricken region that poses linguistic, communicative, and cultural challenges.*

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The historic rivalry between Italy and France has not been confined to battlefields. Beyond the invasions and military confrontations, the cultural rivalry between the two countries dates back to before the Renaissance. Philosophers, writers, artists, and scholars on both sides were competing to be at the forefront of the European ‘rebirth’. Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* influenced the Renaissance and became universally considered one of world literature’s greatest poems. When French translators translated Dante into their own language, the Italians were infuriated, claiming that French translations ‘betrayed’ the original text, failing to convey its lexical and phonological beauty.



aware of the impact of their linguistic decisions on the perception of the ICRC, its role and mandate, and the necessity of maintaining access through remaining neutral and impartial. Not only did this awareness inform the translators' decisions about the *Arabic version of the news release*, it also gave way – through exchanges with ICRC spokespersons and PR officers – to editing the English ST accordingly before it was released.

Arabic poses another challenge with dialects; each region of the Middle East and North Africa has developed its own set of dialects to the extent that any two countries can easily become lost in translation, both in written and spoken communication. With this in mind, the translator identifies his/her target audience and which dialect to use as per the context he is communicating on/to, then he/she makes decisions on local subtleties and vocabulary. While the word 'jerrycan' – an item that is frequently used in communication on activities and humanitarian assistance and response – can be translated into Arabic targeting Yemeni audience as 'دبة ماء' ('dubāta mā'i'), this translation choice won't be made outside Yemen context. In global or regional communication, the translator would rather opt for a choice that is comprehensible to almost all Arabic speaking audience in the region, translating the word 'jerrycan' into 'صفيحة مياه' ('ṣafīḥaṭu mīāhi').

Another challenge has to do with institutional approaches to certain sensitive issues, which requires critical decisions on the side of the translator. Displacement, a major area of humanitarian work, is one example of how different humanitarian organizations 'perceive' certain notions and concepts. While UN organs, particularly United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), translate 'IDPs' (Internally displaced persons) as 'المشردين داخلياً' ('al-mušharīdīna dākḥilīā'), the ICRC chooses to translate 'displaced' as 'النازحين' ('al-nāziḥīna'), granting agency to IDPs by opting for a structure in Arabic that qualifies them as 'doers' by using 'اسم الفاعل' ('aṣma al-fā'ili' – the participle as a grammatical subject) instead of using 'اسم المفعول' ('aṣma al-ma'ūli' – the participle as a grammatical object). 'Mental health' translated as 'الصحة العقلية' ('al-ṣiḥa al-ʿaqliyya') is rather translated in the ICRC as 'الصحة النفسية' ('al-ṣiḥa al-nafsiyya') to avoid the negative connotation and stigmatization accompanying mental health issues in some cultures. Similarly, an ICRC translator would always translate 'detainee' as 'محتجز' ('muḥtajiza') except for very specific contexts and target audience where he/she would rather translate it as 'معتقل' ('mu'taqala'). These conscious decisions made by humanitarian translators are no signs of their *infidelity*; they are – on the contrary – part of their commitment to the organizational mission that holds high the principles of humanity and universality.

Translating as part of humanitarian response is essentially an act of communication and cultural mediation. Aiming to bridge gaps and build trust, translators are allies to humanitarian actors responding to the needs of affected populations. Whether *faithful* or not to the text/author/reader, the humanitarian translator remains *faithful* to his mission; ensuring effective communication that alleviates suffering and saves lives. Based on my own personal and professional experience, I have no doubt – in today's context – that Italians have had second thoughts about their proverb '*Traduttore, traditore!*'

[1] Venuti, L. (2008). *The Translator's Invisibility*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge

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