



Abstract Diplomatic Translation the History, Principles, Roles and Challenges

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Abstract.

This study deals with the history, principles, roles and problems related to the Arabic translation of political texts at the diplomatic circles inside the country as well as in embassies. Arabic diplomatic translation is one of many types of translations which have a history back to the time of Prophet Mohammad (PBAH) who started communication with non-Arab kings around Arab Peninsula. The activity of diplomatic translation was widened farther after the Prophet and reached its peak at the time of Abbasid Caliphate.

Diplomatic translation is carried out within diplomatic missions, office of prime minister and ministry of foreign affairs. It has its own rules and peculiarities with flexibility. Diplomatic translators must have a wide scope of knowledge, honesty and confidentiality, understanding of a context is crucially important in addition to faithfulness, comprehensibility and Elegance. [Translations](#) have important roles to play in maintaining cordial diplomatic relations between nations throughout the history.

The conclusions are intended to highlight the fact that there are no recipes for translating diplomatic text or a political speech, because translation is not only a technical process that uses translation procedures and applies transfer operations, but also a matter of understanding cultural, historical and political situations and their significance with faithfulness in what doing. Diplomatic translation requires a hard working personality to do the perfect job.

Introduction

Translation is defined as the communication of the [meaning](#) of a source-language text by means of an [equivalent](#) target-language text. A translator's role is to convert text from the source language into the target language.

The world of translation generally appears to us in one of three facets: academic, research and finally, there is professional translation, the primary and fundamental pillar, but also, sadly and shamefully, a great



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unknown, constantly questioned by all those who, from their theoretical ivory towers, continue to ignore it[1].

There are many fields in translation, almost as many as there are adventurers of this noble and challenging field;

- Economic translation—not too profitable,
- Legal translation—sometimes very biased,
- Scientific translation, whose chemistry often escapes our understanding; and
- Technical translation, which makes us hate the cosmic synergy of a car or the reflection of a computer screen. The latter is probably the best known, as it accounts for some 90% of the translation workload around the world. Obviously, what we have in mind here is software translation.

Apart from these, there are others, perhaps just as important and unfortunately equally unknown, like

- Translation in international bodies or agencies;
- Translation of advertising,
- Community translation (with services offered to the immigrant community in countries such as Australia or Canada, it fulfills a very important social function).
- Audiovisual translation is sure to become the most booming one in the next few years, but it is also the one where the most atrocious mistakes are found.
- Diplomatic translation, something very few have ever heard about [1].

[Translation](#) and interpretation have important roles to play in maintaining friendly diplomatic relations between countries. Many documents like memorandum of understanding (MOU) whether for cultural or technical cooperation that are signed between sovereign countries need to be accurately translated leaving no scope for ambiguities or misinterpretation. Any error can become costly later in the form of failed MOUs or strained relationship between warring countries. Similarly interpreters are in high demand when heads of state or other dignitaries meet their counterparts of other countries during state visits. In the last few decades, the contact between countries has been on the rise as more countries are taking active role in international affairs. At the same time diverse ethnic groups have become more conscious of their identity and rights. This has led to an understanding of linguistic rights as human rights. Thus attendees at international conferences whether it is a WTO meeting or a climate conference like to give speeches and conduct

negotiation in their native language. At the end of the meeting the final documents need to be accurately translated into the languages of the conference attendees. These documents often are used as baseline for future negotiations and meetings. Hence there is no scope for ambiguities or misunderstanding due to [translation](#) [2]. Looking briefly at the history of languages used in diplomacy, documents exchanged between countries in Europe used to be in a single language dominant at that time. Before 18th century it was Latin but French became the accepted language of diplomacy from then on. But in the 20th century English emerged as the dominant diplomatic language. Since the formation of United Nations, 5 languages viz. Chinese, French, English, Spanish and Russian have been accepted for diplomatic correspondence. Arabic was informally added to the list later. In the European Union all the 12 languages of the members who joined initially were recognized as official languages but the list is bound to grow as more member countries join the Union. But in general, the dominant role of a particular language is a consequence of the political, economic, strategic, cultural or other domination of one country over other countries in international relations. The importance of language in diplomacy is so significant, that would be diplomats are given special language training before being posted on their job. Many universities in Europe, Asia and America conduct post graduate courses leading to MA degree in Interpreting [3].

Apart from English and French, a number of other languages are used in our days for diplomatic purposes, especially as working languages in the international organizations that assume multilateral diplomatic activity. These international organizations include a number of member states. As an example for this kind of multilateral cooperation we can mention the Danube Commission, where working languages are French, German and Russian. Another example can be the OPEC which uses Arabic, English and Spanish as its working languages. At the high-level meetings of non-aligned countries, Arabic, English, French and Spanish are used. In the United Nations, beside the two previously mentioned languages, also Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish are considered to be official languages; however, at the plenary meetings, the participants have their choice even to use their own vernacular language. In this case, of course, the translation of the speech should be provided in at least one of the working languages of the organization [4].

The aims of this work are to highlight the important of diplomatic translation in the Arab world as there is little works have done in this field of translation outside Arab world but not within as much as the authors know.



History of Arabic Diplomatic Translation

The history of diplomatic relation of Arabs with foreigners can be traced to the time of Prophet Mohammad (PBOH) when he sent messengers to the states around the Arabian Peninsula. He established a method of communication with other state leaders surrounding Hijaz through [letters](#) or assigned [envoys](#). Instances of written correspondence include letters to [Heraclius](#) the emperor of [Byzantium](#), the [Negus](#) the King of [Abyssinia](#), or [Khosrau](#) of Persia And a Letter to Muqawqis of Egypt [5]. The Prophet received various responses from the rulers who received his letters. Some accepted the letters in good faith and voluntarily embraced Islam. This positive response was shown by King Negus Al-Asham.

There were also others who did not embrace Islam, but yet treated the Prophet's special envoys with great respect and sent gifts of goodwill to the Prophet. This was done by Muqawqis of Egypt.

Regardless of the responses that the Prophet received, he continued to establish diplomatic relations with other leaders, as the Prophet believed that stability in Hijaz was very crucial in ensuring peace and harmony [6]. After the Prophet, the Caliphs were busy with internal problems or with fighting external enemies. There are little report about Umayyad Caliph Omar Ben Abdul Aziz had a diplomatic communications with Byzantine Emperor of his time [7].

Abbasid Caliphate which established after Umayyad Caliphate had initiated the diplomatic relation with Byzantine although the fighting between them continues. Some historian referred to exchange of embassies between Abbasid and Byzantine in the period of Al-Mansur (754-775 AC), stressing the cultural implication of embassies. This lead to the Graeco-Arabic translation movement initiated by Al-Mansur as Abbasid aspiration to claim the heritage of civilizations of the past. These diplomatic activities were continued through the period of Harun Al-Rashid, Al- Ma'amun , Al- Muatasim and Al- Muqtadir [7].

These diplomatic communications with non-Arabs countries required a translation from Arabic to the other languages. It is certain that the Prophet wrote his letters in Arabic languages, most of those Kings and leaders did not know Arabic. This situation required that the letters be translated to the language of the foreign leader received the letter of Prophet. This would be the first diplomatic translation in the Arabic history. Some author reported that Prophet companion Zaid Ben Thabet and Omrro Aben Ala'ssare well-known Translators of Greek and Parisian to Arabic [8]. Those two men probably they acted as diplomatic

translators at the time of Prophet for the letters sent by the foreign leaders.

In the Abbasid Caliphate period the diplomatic communications /translation widen farther with Byzantine to include arrange temporary truces and to exchange prisoners and signing truces in addition to letters sent to each other's. Diplomatic activity increased from the ninth century, becoming a court affair. It reached a form of maturity in the tenth century when competition over the pageantry of the ceremonies and rituals of power led to the development of a diplomatic culture based on an agreed framework of principles and values [7]. The increasing of Darul Hikmah activity during Al-Rasheed and Al-Ma'amun for translation of books and other scientific letters with large number of translators may contributed effectively to wider diplomatic communications /translation. Ibn Khaldun in his *The Muqaddimaj*, account of the embassy to the emperor Constantine V in 766 to request translation of mathematical books [7]. Ibn Miskawayh in his *Tajarib Al-Umam* reported accounts of the Byzantine embassies of 917,924 and 927 addressing a letter to the *wazir* Ali Ben Isa requesting a truce[7].

In addition to Abbasid-Byzantine diplomatic communications and diplomatic activities, there were similar activities between Abbasid and other rulers in Europe areas. In addition other Muslim rulers in different parts of Islamic word([Cairo](#), Cordova and others) also had diplomatic activities and communications with foreign kings closed to them.

Sometimes also there was a case in correspondence between distance rulers, as the letter and embassy sent by Bertha, queen of Tuscany, in 906, to the Caliph Al-Muktafi Billah in Baghdad proves. This well-known letter, details the gifts sent by the queen and the reasons for this contact. She wants to establish peaceful relation with Baghdad in order to confront their mutual neighbors, notably Byzantium [9]

Throughout the history of the Fatimid Empire (909–1176/296–566), Byzantine sources support the idea that contact was kept to a minimum for trade. However, Arab historians reveal that in fact Caliph Al-Mustansir Bi'llah, 1036-1094, engaged in correspondence, gift exchanges and embassies with several emperors. Descriptions of these mutual relations in the reign of al- Mustansir are a political mirror to the international effects of events such as the arrival of the Seljuk Turks, uprisings and civil war, and are also a fascinating insight into the diplomacy of Muslims and Christians banding together at a time of significant crisis for both [9-10].

The [Umayyad's](#) caliphate enjoyed increased prosperity during the 10th century. Abd-ar-Rahman III united [al-Andalus](#) and brought the Christian



kingdoms of the north under control by force and through diplomacy. This period of prosperity was marked by increasing diplomatic relations with Berber tribes in North Africa, Christian kings from the north, and with France, Germany and Constantinople. In early 950s, a letter sent by the Caliph of Cordova, Abd Al-Rahman III, to the Emperor Otto I of Germany, appears to have contained blasphemies against Christ. Otto response, conveyed to the Caliph of Cordova by the monk John of Gorze, rebutted the Caliph errors [9]. Córdoba was the intellectual centre of al-Andalus, with translations of ancient Greek texts into Arabic, Latin and Hebrew. The library of Al-Hakam II was one of the largest libraries in the world, housing at least 400,000 volumes [11].

As B. Z. Kedar has recently shown, Pope Gregory VII was meticulous in his choice of words in his official letter to the Berber ruler Al-Nasir Ibn Alennas in 1076. He wrote that it was " God, the creator of all" who inspired Al-Nasir to release his Christian captives and stated that charity was central in relation between Christian and Muslim.[9].

The above examples of diplomatic contacts surely involved diplomatic translations of letters as well as during the meetings. Translation of peace treaties or truces between Muslim Arab Caliphs and foreigner kings is more complicated diplomatic translations. Al-Mas'udi in his book *Tanbihwa 'l -Ishraf* lists twelve meetings between 805 and 946. These meetings between Abbasid and Byzantine involve exchange of prisoners and paying ransoms. These meetings mostly took place in September or October. The venue was always the plain where the river Lamis flowed into Mediterranean, the Muslim being on the east bank, the Byzantines on the west. Usually the two sides met for between seven and ten days but first meeting in 805 lasted forty days. In the account of the first (805) meeting Al-Mas'udi claims that 500,000 or more people from the frontier provinces attended the meeting. In 921 and 946 there is mention of an intermediary between Muslim and Byzantines, Abu Umayer Adi Ben Ahmed Al-Tamimi from Adana. Abu Umayer is said to have been full of understanding about the affairs of the Greek kings and the Byzantines Empire and their philosophers and knowledgeable about their thought. While they continued, these meetings were probably the closest Byzantines and Muslim came to regular diplomatic activity and we can see in figures as Muslim Ben Abi Muslim and Abu Umayer the nearest thing to a professional diplomat and probably translator in that age [12].

Principles and Rules of Diplomatic Translations

Diplomatic translation represents one of the most complicated, advanced, and toughest translation activities in the modern world. It differs from other translations in that it concerns national interests and foreign

relations, is politically sensitive and therefore highly demanding, so the general translation criterion is not suitable for diplomatic translation. Diplomatic translation is carried out within diplomatic setting, diplomatic missions, embassies or consulates. In certain aspects, we could relate this type of translation to that carried out within international bodies, in terms of the type of texts translated and the conventions established. In addition to translations which carry on at the centers of diplomacy such office of prime minister and ministry of foreign affairs. However, diplomatic translation has its own rules and peculiarities.

1-Diplomatic translators must have a wide scope of knowledge and be very familiar with international affairs and in particular with the political, social and economic situation of their own countries [1].

2-Security and confidentiality are always crucial in professional translation, and in particular with regards to the client. Diplomatic translation is no exception to this. Furthermore, confidentiality is probably much more important and compromising in this field than in any other field of translation, as it involves the security of one or several countries. We are not saying here that the translator becomes a sort of James Bond—no, that only happens in the movies. Today, most confidential issues have to do with such "top secret" matters as farming or agriculture. Curious, isn't it? In any case, several degrees of confidentiality of diplomatic documents in English can be established:

- Unclassified: available to anyone or Classified.
- In confidence or confidential.
- Secret or top secret.

Also, it is worth mentioning, concerning confidentiality, is the question of professional incompatibilities. Can a translator in an embassy engage in other translation-related jobs? In principle, the answer is yes, provided that the nature of the job and its development do not incur a conflict of interest. In any case, it is highly advisable to seek permission and clearly state that it will not interfere with diplomatic tasks in any way[1].

3-Understanding of a context is crucially important: only so and no other way it is possible to make adequately sense of translated phrases that translation of documents has turned out the most authentic. Along with as much as possible exact equivalent translation other objective is important also: translation should be simple and easy-to-read. As a rule, texts of official style difficult in itself, therefore in addition to complicate them, translating





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documents, the expert simply has no right. There is universal rule of perception here: the easier the text, the easier to read and listen to it, so that more effectively he achieves the object. Only then it is possible to speak about a full exchange of juridical data [13].

Sometimes experts while translating documents, nevertheless face the phenomena of full untranslatability when with the best will in the world to find an equivalent for the concept is impossible. In this case we face such phenomenon as a conceptual blank, or a lacuna. However the competent translator performing translation of documents is obliged to find a way out in this case.

In his theory of political equivalence, Yang formulates four principles to achieve political equivalence, and for each he refers back to real case where misquotes, misinterpretations and mistranslations have sparked political events. The four principles are as follows [14]:

- 1) Fully understanding the political context of the speaker and accurately communicating the connotation of time in the diplomatic source language. For this, he claims that the meanings of words and their connotations change with time and environment and explains that even the same idiom or literary illusions may have different meanings within different contexts or in a specific political environment.
- 2) Conveying political meanings to the recipients in popular language form by highly integrating the policy information availability of the translation version with the effect of the original version.
- 3) Working towards dynamic, rather than formal, political equivalence.
- 4) Paying attention to balancing the source language and the targeted language, the context of the source language and the context of the audience, and the speaker and the audience, without bias to either side (what he calls “dual identification”).

While a Chinese translator and translation theorist Yan Fu put the translation principles on three bases;

- ❖ *Faithfulness*, the quality of being faithful in translating the original text and presenting the same ideas.
- ❖ *Comprehensibility*, the translation being easy and clear to be able for understanding.
- ❖ *Elegance*, the quality of being graceful and stylish in appearance or manner; style as well as being pleasingly ingenious and simple.

This tripartite model is widely esteemed in China as logical and sophisticated extension of tenets evolved from ancient Buddhist scriptural translation, which emphasized both faithfulness of content and intelligibility of expression [13]. The general consensus in china is that Yan Fu's triad-transferring the source text faithfully incomprehensible



language and appropriate style, offers a perfect match of the past translation principles and an evergreen translation paradigm.

Although some of these rules are general or put for literature translation, but it can be applied to the diplomatic translation. In general all these principles are going to ward one aim which directing the translator to produce clear, understandable and not deviated from the original text. In the same time these rules are not rigid and the translator has the flexibility to manoeuvre within its boundary.

Roles of Diplomatic Translation;

Translation and interpretation have important roles to play in maintaining cordial diplomatic relations between nations throughout the history.

In deed translators are tasked with general professional translation work and ambassadorial translation services via fulfilling the roles of educated grammarians, competent writers, cultural researchers, and amateur diplomats. Also, human translation remains the best way to go about translation in the diplomatic front for the simple reason that cultural quirks are better handled by people instead of mere computer programs.

Roles of a Translator

As grammarians, translators must show competence in distinguishing nuances and subtleties in the language they're fluent in, investigating colloquialisms and terminology while taking care of new linguistic developments. As writers, they must be used to working for hours as a time alone on subjects that few people read about and in a language few people around them know. As cultural researchers, they must envelop themselves into the heritage and history of the country they're translating documents and correspondences from, in order to give proper context to their translation. Finally, as amateur diplomats, they need to integrate all of the above roles together such that each specialty has a designated task [2].

After the fall of Soviet Russia, the entire political equation changed. No country excelled in every field and Inter-dependence became the order of the day. During the last decade and half, diplomatic discussions, relations, agreements, treaties etc. have paved the way for strong, solid relations between various countries.

As economic exchange becomes a determining factor in global synergy, and supersedes military power, communication has become critical in forging and maintaining international relations. This is where translators and interpreters come into the picture. At any international level discussion, bureaucrats, interpreters and translators form the basic core team which assists the country in arriving at fruitful negotiations, where the basic ground work is already done before the talks. Except for



translators and interpreters of both the countries, very few persons taking part in the discussions might be aware of the spoken language of both the sides and their written contexts. Here, a very vital role is played by the translator. The Interpreter translates the spoken word, whereas the translator works on written language. Words expressed can be changed, meaning can be interpreted in different manners, but the translated word text remains the same with base and authority. Hence, Diplomatic Translators must have a vast wealth of knowledge and be familiar with international affairs and in particular with political, social and economic situation of their own as well as partner countries. Diplomatic translation is carried out within diplomatic discussions, Missions, Embassies or consulates. So, the translator has enough background when he attends the discussions, meetings at international levels.

Translators follow certain set of procedures in their work. They begin with reading the text, taking careful notes on what they do not understand. To translate questionable passages, they lookup words and terms in specialized dictionaries and glossaries. They may also do additional reading on the subject to arrive at a better understanding. Finally, they write translated drafts in the target language. After the completion of the draft, they generally review and scrutinize documents before finally submitting the same. Needless to say, if the world is shrinking, language experts, interpreters and translators have their share of credit in the same [15].

While Roger Chriss, a professional translator, describes the role of the translator: Translators are language professionals. They are applied linguists, competent writers, diplomats, and educated amateurs. Like linguists, translators have to be capable of discerning subtleties and nuances in their languages, researching terminology and colloquialisms, and handling new developments in their languages[3].

On other word, translators have to be a multi-professional in many disciplines and have the ability to use all of their knowledge to produce very clear and interesting text when it heard or read by others.

The challenges and difficulties in diplomatic translation

We have to admit that not all of the participants of the conversations had an equally wide knowledge concerning the above-mentioned topics. However, it was essential that the interpreters could convey the meaning of the speaker in each case. Thus for the sake of success, interpreters or translator need to possess both a wide knowledge of the world in general, and the linguistic register expressing the details of the most various fields. Sometimes it is the interpreter who needs to help out the speaker (even a head of state) in expressing his thoughts in a more exact way [4].

The difficulties of interpretations

The difficulties of interpreting might be the result of various factors. The speaker might not be a talented orator and in case he's not well prepared for his speech, he might struggle with the ways of expression himself, which also might cause hardships for the interpreter. Especially when the speaker has a tendency of accumulating negatives used within the same sentence, the interpreter might lose count on these and finally he won't know whether it should be expressed in the negative or in the positive. It's quite awkward and not always possible to ask a question to the speaker to clarify his meaning. Sometimes the obscure way of expressing the thoughts gives hard times to the diplomatic interpreters, as in this case they need to decide within a moment, whether it was the speaker's intention to formulate his thoughts in such an obscure way, in which case the translation should reflect the same obscure character, or whether it was accidental, when the interpreter shall make a clear expression of what the speaker wished to share with his audience. Some of the speakers might have a heavy accent, especially if they deliver their speeches in a second language. But even if we consider the various accents of English spoken in India, Pakistan, in the Arabic countries or by French speakers, we can realize that interpreters can have a lot of hardships when they are not used to these language variations. It's another difficult moment when the interpreter finds a mistake in the content of the speech, as he has to decide immediately, whether it is to be corrected which might mean losing face of the speaker or not.

In the history of diplomacy, many intentional mistranslations are also well-known. The reason behind these had varied from provocation to the correction of the text in order to avoid diplomatic conflicts. An instance where the effect of the original text has been modified in order to moderate and to make it acceptable for the receiver was the diplomatic correspondence between the Sultan of the Turkish Empire and Queen Elizabeth I of England which gives account of the fact that the Turkish emperor didn't consider the queen as equal in rank; however, the Italian translation of the sultan's letters reflects the required relationship of a vassal as a true friendship. When speakers use quotations and references during their speech – especially in simultaneous interpretation –, it is always a source of difficulty for interpreters, all the more so if they haven't been provided with the required reference material in advance, so that they can find the documents from which the orators draw their quotations.

The translation of culturally unique phenomena is also something which might be a source of difficulty when they turn up during a speech. This

can be true when translating a word which has no equivalent probably in the translated language.

In some occasions and to overcome the difficulties of translation, diplomats try to use single language. Due to the widespread use of the English language in diplomatic context, George Bush, then President of the United States, even questioned the necessity of his speech's interpretation into German, and interrupted the interpreter saying "Everyone speaks English, right?" It was Chancellor Merkel who asked his patience so that his speech can also be heard in German translation. It can also be a nightmare for interpreters, when speakers read out their speeches, as in this case they don't need to think what they say, thus they speak faster, time their pauses in a different way, and usually use a more formal, more bureaucratic way of expression [4].

While translation in diplomatic settings include national institutions (Ministries, Prime minister Office, Presidential Offices, Houses of Parliament), have its peculiar challenges which differ from that at diplomatic missions. Translation and/or interpreting in diplomatic settings involve not only language but a broad range of elements and factors that make communication possible. Interpreters and translators in this field need to have broad knowledge and keep up to date with world political, social and economic affairs. Keeping abreast of international developments and being conversant with the issues at stake is essential for interpreters and translators working in any language mediation setting [18].

Conclusion

The post-WWII advent of an internationalized and globalized society resulting from the entry of multiple state and non-state actors into the external relationships of countries has led to a sort of "democratization" the diplomatic process, enhancing the importance of communicating between countries. This rapidly evolving international context has similarly affected the practice of translation, with the consequence that the activity has shifted from being a means of communication restricted to men of letters and educated readerships, as it was in the past, into a full and multi-faceted profession.

Within diplomatic translation at the level of diplomatic settings, is a faithful one that respects the rules and techniques of legal translation, though repetition may sometimes spoil the aesthetic value of the style of the text. Some translators do not take enough time to understand the source text; therefore, they often end up with a word-for-word and ambiguous translations. Good translators should transfer ideas, taking into consideration different elements such as the target audience and its

culture; the more they respect such principles, the better their translations would be. The perfect diplomatic translation will give a better reputation for the country within the diplomatic community.

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