

Translation as a Tool for Acculturation: Language and the Question of Identity

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Abstract:

This study seeks to shed light on the relationship between language and identity, focusing specifically on the role that the Arabic language plays as a vehicle of resistance and a means of preserving identity. It further examines translation as a mediator between language and identity—one that performs the function assigned to it: either highlighting and safeguarding identity, or erasing and distorting its features.

Accordingly, this research paper addresses the concepts of language, identity, and, in particular, cultural identity, concentrating on translation as a fundamental factor in either consolidating and clarifying identity or obliterating and dissipating it.

Through this inquiry, we seek to answer a set of questions that frame the study: What is the relationship that binds language to identity? What is the nature of the relationship that links translation to language, identity, and culture? How does linguistic translation perform its role in presenting and consolidating cultural identity on the one hand, or erasing and deforming it on the other, within the framework of acculturation between the Self and the Other?

Keywords: language; identity; translation; culture; acculturation...

Introduction:

Identity casts a spotlight on how language is constructed, for language is the identity of a people. When a language is altered or its original core becomes submerged beneath foreign vocabulary, and when its speakers are no longer able to use it correctly, the language disappears—and with it disappears identity.

The coloniser, as a primary objective, aims precisely at erasing the identity of the colonised country by replacing its language with that of the colonising power. Shattering an individual's identity turns that individual into a pliable instrument for the new identity, thereby making it easier to dominate, control, and extinguish the spirit of resistance within them: the coloniser becomes the friend rather than the stranger.

For this reason, strengthening Arab identity requires, as one of its conditions, speaking sound Arabic in order to deepen contact and interaction between the individual and the community, and teaching it correctly and properly to learners. Language is

thought, sensibility, and will; it serves the functions of thinking, expression, and communication.

Hence, the greatest challenge facing the identity of the nation lies in holding fast to the foundations of our Arab national character and to the Arabic language that unifies this nation.

It is equally important to note the role that linguistic translation plays in preserving identity, given that it is the principal agent in either publicising it or effacing it. This leads us to pose the following problematic: *To what extent does linguistic translation perform its mediating role in preserving identity, and cultural identity in particular?*

1. Language and Identity

1.1 Language

2.1.1 Language is one of the constituent elements of identity: It is the bearer of culture, thought, customs, traditions, values, and the general humanistic literature that reflects the identity of its speakers. *“Language, in the life of nations, represents their most prominent landmark and their most conspicuous feature. It is through language and its horizon that nations distinguish themselves, vie with one another, and prevail”*(al-Haqil, 2011, p.13).

Language is closely bound to identity: it is the emblem of identity’s sovereignty, its manifest expression, and an essential element of its very essence, whether that identity be national, religious, or otherwise. The relationship between language and identity is deep-rooted and intrinsic.

Identity rests upon numerous elements and has specific foundations, of which language is among the most important and stands at the forefront. It is the instrument of communication and consciousness, the tool for expressing all the other elements, and the means by which the contours of the remaining foundations are delineated and explained.

Religion, history, culture, customs, traditions, and shared destiny are all pillars of identity, and we cannot express them except through language. Language is the interpreter of meanings and their exquisite mould, the instrument of expression and communication among individuals and peoples, and the medium of cross-fertilisation between identities and cultures.

John Joseph, in his book *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*, states: “I argue that the phenomenon of identity in its totality can be understood as a linguistic phenomenon.

Moreover, a significant and influential body of research across various fields—sociolinguistics, social psychology, and social and linguistic anthropology—points to the central importance of the link between language and identity. Research on language attitudes has consistently shown how we rapidly form perceptions of one another’s identities based on the way we speak”(Joseph, 2008, p.19).

Language is thus the first line of defence and the protective shield for preserving a nation’s being, existence, and civilisation. It is the hallmark of a person’s existence and the core of their identity. The abandonment by peoples of their mother tongue is the reason behind the loss of their distinctive human civilisation and the erosion of the features of their cultural identity.

This is because language encompasses the components of identity: it is the arena in which identity manifests itself, and the principal element for expressing that identity and its authenticity.

Language is the carrier of the culture that weaves the fabric of identity, while identity is the essence, the existence, the quiddity, or the Self that is revealed through language—whether that Self be individual or collective.

In addition to the social function that language performs as a means of communication among values, beliefs, and customs, language also serves a social function in reinforcing social identity, and it is the medium through which culture and its formations—customs, traditions, art, and shared values—can be transmitted and preserved alike.

2.1.2 Language as a Means of Affirming Identity

Language plays a decisive role in shaping and consolidating social identity, being the fundamental component in the structure of the national identity of any society. It signals membership in various and multiple social groups and communities. Our manner of speaking, our dialect, and our choice of words allow us to convey a picture of our background, our education, and our social standing. Language is thus “a means of expressing feelings, emotions, and needs, in addition to being the vessel of thought.

Language is also one of the most important features that distinguish one nation from others; it is like a passport or a document that an individual carries wherever they travel and settle.

A person is known not only through their clothing or their food, but through the most important component of identity: the tongue”(al-Badayrat & al-Batayneh, n.d., p.30).

When we speak of the Arabic language in particular, it has a profound impact on rooting Arab and Islamic identity in the face of the challenges of globalisation.

Every nation and every people has bonds that form the link among its members, and perhaps the most important of these is language—or rather, language stands at the forefront of the foundations and ties that constitute the identity of the members of a single people.

Consequently, the element of language is the element of identity most exposed to danger. It is “an existential issue for the future of Arab culture and societies (...) the advancement and modernisation of the language through its use in media and other forms of communication, and through teaching and scientific research, is among the most important elements of renaissance”(Baraka et al., 2013, p.15).

2.2 Identity

Thinkers and scholars have put forward a multiplicity of concepts and definitions of identity across different fields of inquiry (sociological, psychological, religious, cultural, philosophical, and others), which space does not permit us to enumerate in full. We have, however, chosen to cite a selection of them in summary form.

The American consultant Alex Mucchielli, in his book *Identity*, defined several models of the concept of identity, including: objective identity, subjective identity, meta-

identity, present identity, social identity, and then negative and differential identities (Mucchielli, 1993, p.11).

In this work, the author discusses the concept from social, cultural, psychological, individual, and collective angles, together with everything connected to identity in terms of its concept, multiplicity, overlaps, crises, and the studies devoted to it. His analysis focuses on cultural identity in particular.

The author observes that there is a difficulty in pinning down the concept of identity, especially in the humanities, unlike in the natural sciences. “The difficulty of definition stems from the great diversity in the primary elements that make up social issues, most of which are concepts that arise from lived experience and from the fabric of diverse perceptions and behavioural patterns” (Mucchielli, 1993, p.16).

Burhan Raziq cited the ancient definition of identity in Arab civilisation as “the absolute truth that encompasses truths, just as the seed encompasses the tree in the realm of the absolute unseen” (Raziq, 2012, p.60), and also the definition provided by the Arabic Language Academy as “*the absolute truth of a thing or a person, encompassing their essential attributes that distinguish them from others*” (as cited in Raziq, 2012, p.60). He likens it to “a fingerprint: openness to other civilisations and engagement with all intellectual currents does not erase the distinctiveness of the fingerprint. It is one of the constants; it is eternal across the ages.

Some development occurs within it, but over a very long span, and the influences upon this identity are limited” (Raziq, 2012, p.60). In the Al-Ma’ani dictionary, identity is defined as “an individual’s sense of selfhood and individuality, and their preservation of their integrity, values, behaviours, and ideas across different situations. A person’s identity: their absolute truth and essential attributes” (Al-Ma’ani Dictionary, n.d.).

For Jenkins, “identity is an integral part of social life. It is formed only through differentiation among the identities of different groups, which can be linked to other people” (Halmes & Holborn, 2010, p.93).

Thus, “identity is proper to human beings and society, to the individual and the group. It is a purely human subject (...); it is a psychological problem and an emotional experience. A person may coincide with themselves or deviate from themselves into something else (...). Identity is the human being’s being themselves—coinciding with their own self” (Hassanein, 2012, pp.11-12).

3. Identity between Westernisation and Alienation: The Role of Translation

3.1 Linguistic Translation as a Means of Preserving Identity

Translation has always been, and remains, a source for achieving communication among peoples and cultures. It is the channel through which cultures, civilisations, and peoples transmit and exchange their knowledge and their legacies by means of dialogue (dialogues of cultures), contact, and acculturation. In this way they develop, renew themselves, change, and adapt in accordance with the level of influence and mutual impact among them.

Yet in fulfilling this function of intercultural communication, translation finds itself facing considerable challenges, and the translator finds themselves

embarking on a difficult, arduous, and perilous linguistic adventure. This is because language is the bearer of the markers of identity for every human group or people.

Consequently, translation—and the translator in particular—must take into account, when carrying out the translation of texts from the source language into the target language (first language – second language), the full set of textual components that constitute the identity of the text and the identity of the culture from which it emerges.

Faced with this challenge that confronts translation as a mediator between language and identity, we find ourselves before two types of translation:

(1)- faithful linguistic translation that contributes to preserving identity within the environment that produced the text; and

(2)- unfaithful translation based on erasing identity by introducing alterations into the textual structures that carry identitarian elements from the source culture and the environment in which the text was born, including changes in textual meaning, so that the new text becomes a betrayal of the original text in its textual structures and identitarian elements.

When we say that language is the bearer of the features of identity, this assertion may admit exceptions: a language other than the original language can carry some of the features of identity. An example of this is found in the writings of Algerian thinkers, authors, and novelists such as Malek Bennabi, Mouloud Feraoun, Malek Haddad, Mohammed Dib, Assia Djebar, Kateb Yacine, Mouloud Mammeri, Yasmina Khadra, and others, who wrote in a language other than their mother tongue—the language of the colonising Other (French)—because they found themselves compelled to write in the language they had been taught in schools during the colonial period. Colonialism had striven vigorously to efface the features of national identity (language and religion).

These writers found themselves in a kind of psychological and intellectual estrangement: they belonged to an Algerian identity and expressed their lived reality and their inner worlds in a language foreign to their sense of belonging.

The reader of these works finds them teeming with symbols and significations that carry the elements of Algerian identity, even though critics and scholars of these works have tended to dismiss them as French literature aimed at a French audience.

And yet these Algerian writers expressed their thought in a language other than their own—the language of the Other—reluctantly, not willingly. Their writings thus came to bear and incorporate identitarian elements and fragments that express their belonging to their Arab-Islamic Algerian culture, by virtue of the factor of subjectivity that is present in these texts.

For a text carries the ideas of its author, and carries their feelings and experiences. Translation “does not stop at translating language—i.e., signifiers and signifieds—as though they were two sides of a single coin; it extends to the symbols that refer to the meta-linguistic data surrounding language (...) It conveys the cultural charge that language contains, and it also conveys the subjective dimension of the text, because a literary text is not merely an idea; it encompasses the author’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences”(Ben Tayeb, 2021, p.86).

This datum prompts us to investigate the relationship between language and identity in these texts.

The writers we have referred to “adopted the French language as a powerful weapon for resistance and for defending the homeland and identity in particular (...). Adopting a foreign language is not always antithetical to identity; we may defend our Arab identity through a foreign language”(Wassam, 2020, p.446).

There is no better evidence of this than works such as Mouloud Feraoun’s celebrated trilogy *The Poor Man’s Son*, *The Earth and the Blood*, and *The Steep Paths*; Mohammed Dib’s famous trilogy *L’Incendie*, *La Grande Maison*, and *Le Métier à tisser*; and Kateb Yacine’s novel *Nedjma*.

Consequently, translating such a novel confronts the translator with linguistic difficulties on the one hand and cultural difficulties on the other. This difficulty stems from the fact that each language has its own specificities and mechanisms, as well as all the matters that lie outside the linguistic system. It can therefore be said that language is the bearer of the features of identity and the instrument for expressing the cultural identity of any people or any culture. Nevertheless,

in some instances, the language of the Other may be the weapon that the writer uses to defend and preserve their identity when that language is the only means available to them and the only option before them for expressing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Translation retains its role in restoring these texts to their original language by translating them professionally—by finding suitable cultural equivalents for the original words or expressions that carry a cultural dimension.

“When a text is translated, it is as though it undergoes a linguistic movement and transformation from its language into another language. At this point the text has inaugurated a new life or a new cognitive world, even though it often retains its original language, with all its authority, its references, its norms, and the system of its production and governance” (Karbiya, 2020, p.232).

3.2 Linguistic Translation as a Negative Factor in Erasing Identity

While we note that the translated text retains its linguistic identity, its authority, and its references despite its transfer from one language to another and its entry into a new cognitive world.

it nonetheless resists relinquishing its identitarian features and its symbolic formations deeply rooted in the original environment that produced it and in the cultural identity it expresses—because the text is a world in which the full set of intellectual, cognitive, cultural, identitarian, emotional, experiential, and all axiological and cognitive elements that the author carries are interwoven.

On this basis, unprofessional and unfaithful translation may strip the text of its identity and obliterate its features, making the text produced from the translated work alien, distant, and a dishonest, different, and distorted copy of the original.

Language thus becomes an instrument for erasing or deforming identity when the translator lacks the requisite linguistic competence and the deep understanding of both

the culture that produced the source text and the culture that receives the target or new text.

This situation places translation and the translator before a major challenge: to develop and cultivate their abilities and linguistic competences in both languages (source language – target language) in order to accomplish the required translation and achieve a sound linguistic transfer that carries all the textual dimensions—linguistic, cognitive, identitarian, cultural, artistic, axiological, and aesthetic.

This demands that those working on the Arabic language and those concerned with cultural and translational affairs establish linguistic institutions akin to the Supreme Council of the Arabic Language and the Arabic Language Academy in Algeria.

Such institutions work to develop, renew, and elevate the Arabic language so that it keeps pace with the advances occurring in the world's other languages—and so that Arabic may be an instrument of resistance and of preserving identity amid the struggle and competition among languages for primacy.

The challenge confronting the Arabic language, replete as it is with rules and components, is immense. It merely requires that we devote care and attention to it by teaching it properly to learners and developing centres of linguistic research in cultural and academic institutions and bodies.

Thus, may our Arabic language be the sheath that protects our Arab-Islamic identity and culture, and the decisive sword in the face of any attempt to efface, distort, and alienate our youth from their origin and their fixed, authentic identity, deep-rooted in their venerable history.

3.3 The Translator's Competence in Protecting the Identity of the Text

The translator possesses a critical awareness that enables them to read a text consciously in order to transfer it from its source language into the target language while safeguarding its identity from dissolving and melting into the dominant culture.

The translator is not a mere conduit but a creative agent endowed with high competence and professionalism, which allow them to convey civilisational, identitarian, and cultural terms in a manner that guarantees the identity of the source text. The translator is regarded as a cultural mediator entrusted with the mission of preserving the cultural identity of the environment that produced the text.

As Paul Ricœur observes, the translator “undertakes to transmit the discourse, to convey the message in its entirety from one language to another. It is thus within this uncomfortable position of the mediator that the problem of the “ordeal” lies (...) because the translator finds themselves caught between two fires: the desire for fidelity and the suspicion of betrayal”(Ricœur, 2008, p. 16).

Here the translator must strike a careful and balanced equilibrium between the source text in its language and the text translated into the target language. The successful, competent translator is the one who can surmount the ordeal of literal translation and its obstacles.

The successful translator is tasked with conveying the cultural context—customs, emotions, linguistic patterns, and identitarian terms—that distinguishes one language

from another. Every language has its own cultural and identitarian specificities that cannot correspond literally and completely with those of another.

Moreover, while carrying out the act of translation, the translator is required to produce a text endowed with a dual identity (the identity of the Self and the understanding of the Other).

This necessitates mastery of both cultures and both languages (source language and target language) so as to create a translated text that neither dissolve into the culture of the source text nor deforms its own mother tongue. In this way, the translator becomes a positive agent in the process of acculturation among peoples and civilisations—conveying meaning and achieving understanding in the eyes of the Other.

Conclusion:

In light of what we have examined in the course of this study concerning language and the question of identity—with translation as a mediator between language and identity—it becomes clear that there is a firm bond linking language, identity, and translation as a significant factor that plays a role in preserving identity and consolidating its foundations, or, conversely, in erasing it, dissipating its features, and domesticating it.

We arrive at the following results:

1. Language is the instrument of identitarian and cultural resistance.
2. The original language is the bearer of the features of identity; exceptionally, the language of the Other may serve as a means of resistance and of preserving identity.
3. Translation plays an active role in presenting the cultural identity of the translated text, or in obliterating the cultural identity of the translated text.
4. For language to be an effective instrument of resistance and of preserving identity, it must be developed and renewed so as to acquire the vitality needed to keep pace with the advances occurring in the world's other languages. This can be achieved through the establishment of institutions charged with this mission.
5. Given that translation is a mediator between language and identity and is the fundamental factor in identitarian resistance and preservation, as well as in undertaking the promotion, development, and renewal of language and the transmission of cultures and knowledge, it is necessary to assume the role of the translator and to train competent translators in order to achieve the desired goal: namely, the presentation of identity and culture between the Self and the Other within the framework of acculturation.

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