

Rendering Religious References in English: Naguib Mahfouz in the Arabic as a Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract : The transition from the advanced to the superior level of Arabic proficiency is widely known to pose considerable challenges for English speaking students of Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL). Apart from the increasing complexity of the grammar at this juncture, together with the sprawling vocabulary, to name but two of those challenges, there is also the somewhat less studied hurdle along the way to superior level proficiency, namely, the seeming opacity of many aspects of Arab/ic culture to such learners. This presentation tackles one specific dimension of such issues: religious references in literary texts. It illustrates how carefully constructed translation activities may be used to expand and deepen students' understanding and use of them. This is shown to be vital for making the leap to the desired competency, given that such elements, as reflected in customs, traditions, institutions, worldviews, and formulaic expressions lie at the very core of Arabic culture and, as such, pervade all modes and levels of Arabic discourse. A short story from the collection "Stories from Our Alley", by preeminent novelist Naguib Mahfouz is selected for use in this context, being particularly replete with such religious references, of which religious expressions will form the focus of the presentation. As a miniature literary work, it provides an organic whole, so to speak, within which to explore with the class the most precise denotation, as well as the subtlest connotation of each expression in an effort to reach the 'best' English rendering. The term 'best' refers to approximating the meaning in its full complexity from the source text, in this case Arabic, to the target text, English, according to the concept of equivalence in translation theory. The presentation will show how such a process generates the sort of thorough discussion and close text analysis which allows students to gain valuable insight into this central idiom of Arabic. A variety of translation methods will be highlighted, gleaned from the presenter's extensive work with advanced/superior students in the Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA) program at the American University in Cairo. These begin with the literal rendering of expressions, with the purpose of reinforcing vocabulary learning and practicing the rules of derivational morphology as they form each word, since the larger context remains that of an AFL class, as opposed to a translation skills program. However, departures from the literal approach are subsequently explored by degrees, moving along the spectrum of functional and pragmatic freer translations in order to transmit the 'real' meaning in readable English to the target audience- no matter how culture/religion specific the expression- while remaining faithful to the original. Samples from students' work pre and post discussion will be shared, demonstrating how class consensus is formed as to the final English rendering, proposed as the closest match to the Arabic, and shown to be the result of the above activities. Finally, a few examples of translation work which students have gone on to publish will be shared to corroborate the effectiveness of this teaching practice.

Keywords : superior level proficiency in Arabic as a foreign language, teaching Arabic as a foreign language, teaching idiomatic expressions, translation in foreign language teaching

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