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Cover
Māshād, Kitābḫāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Radawī 300, f. 1v; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v
Abstract
The purpose of this article is to use the theoretical frame proposed by Christiane Nord in her important book Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained, in order to analyze some of the most significant mistranslations of the so-called Kitāb Hurūšiyūş, the famous Arabic version of the Historiae adversus paganos by the Latin historian Paulus Orosius.

In his famous essay Dire quasi la stessa cosa, dedicated to translation, Umberto Eco ironizes on various errors found even in excellent translations. Eco’s irony, however, is counterpointed by the considerations of the translators of the essay’s Polish version, who have detected two mistakes made by Eco in his book: a wrong word in a quoted title (“curieuses” instead of “sérieuses”) and the idea that the Trans-Siberian railway was a narrow-gauge railway. In her turn, Justyna Łukaszewicz pointed out some misunderstandings in the version of Eco’s text achieved by the Polish translators. Perhaps we must resign ourselves to the fact that in a vast, complex and difficult work, where different languages and cultures meet, there is always some weak point. Some mistranslation.

Surprisingly, the word ‘mistake’ is not one that often enters into the contemporary theorisation of translation. Also the index to Laurence Venuti’s monumental anthology concerning the translation studies does not include an entry dedicated to it. Perhaps in accordance with this determination by translators themselves not to see «mistake» as a meaningful tool of theory, the word also fails to appear in the glossary to Christiane Nord’s Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained, even though she devotes a section of the book to “Translation Errors and Translation Evaluation”. Nord’s aim is, as the book’s sub-title suggests, to present a range of ‘functionalist’ approaches to translation. Her argument is founded on two initial premises. The first is that translation is a particular type of human action, or more strictly speaking ‘interaction’ between two

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2 Eco, Dire quasi la stessa cosa (above, n. 1), p. 253, n. 147.
6 Nord, Translating as a Purposeful Activity (above, n. 5), pp. 67-73.
or more agents, which is “first and foremost intended to change an existing state of affairs (minimally, the inability of certain people to communicate with each other)”, involving a source text. Secondly, the target text is “functional”, because it relates to the “expectations, needs, previous knowledge and situational conditions” of the receiver for whom it is intended. According to Nord, functional inadequacies occur in four ways. They may be:

1. Pragmatic translation errors, which can be identified by checking on the extratextual factors (sender, receiver, medium, time, place, motive, text function); since pragmatic translation problems are present in every translation task, they can be generalized regardless of the languages and cultures involved or the direction of the translation process (into or from the native language). They are thus the most important problems to deal with in the initial phases of translator training.

2. Cultural translation errors, which are due to an inadequate decision with regard to reproduction or adaptation of culture-specific conventions.

3. Linguistic translation errors, which can arise from structural differences in the vocabulary, syntax, and other features of the two languages. Some of these problems are restricted to language pairs, as might be the case of cognates or false friends (e.g. English actually vs German aktuell).

4. Text-specific translation errors, which are are specifically bound to one particular source text, as may be the case for some figures of speech, neologisms, or puns.

The purpose of this article is to use the theoretical frame proposed by Nord to analyze some of the most significant mistranslations of the so-called Kitāb Hurūšiyūš, the famous Arabic version of the Historiae adversus paganos by Paulus Orosius. The data we can derive on this text from the Arabic sources are the following:

1. The Latin book of Historiae adversus paganos was donated to the first Andalusian caliph, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III al-Nāṣir (300/912-350/961), by the Byzantine Emperor Armāniyūs (namely Romanus) in the year 337/948.

2. The text was translated for the son of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III, al-Ḥakam II al-Mustanṣir by the qāḍī of the Christians of Cordoba and by Qāsim ibn Aṣbaġ al-Bayyānī, tutor of al-Ḥakam and a very well-known figure in the religious and cultural history of Muslim Spain.

3. The translation of Orosius was completed by two well-known Muslims who translated books for the caliphs of Islām in Cordoba.

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7 Nord, Translating as a Purposeful Activity (above, n. 5), p. 19.
8 Nord, Translating as a Purposeful Activity, p. 28.
9 Nord, Translating as a Purposeful Activity, p. 21.
10 Nord, Translating as a Purposeful Activity, pp. 60-2.
12 On Qāsim ibn Aṣbaġ al-Bayyānī and on a possible identification of the qāḍī of the Christians of Cordoba as Hafṣ b. Albar al-Qūṭī see Penelas, Kitāb Hurūšiyūš (above, n. 11), pp. 27-35.
This text is the only known testimony to us of the translation into Arabic of a Latin historical work, and consequently its epistemological value is extraordinarily marked, also with regard to translation errors and the frame developed by Nord is a useful guide between them.

1. An example of pragmatic mistranslation

A typical example of ‘pragmatic translation error’ in the so-called Kitāb Hurūšiyūš is the non-recognition of the Latin tria nomina, almost always interpreted as the names of three different characters. The following is a clear example of the phenomenon:

Tria nomina
Latin text. Histories adversus paganos, ed. by A. Lippold, Vol. 1, Mondadori Fondazione Valla, Milano 1976, IV 9, 14-15, p. 300:

L. Caecilio Metello C. Furio Placido consulibus Hasdrubal nouus Carthaginiensium imperator cum elephanto centum triginta et equitum peditumque amplius triginta milibus Lilybaeum uenit ex Africa et continuo cum Metello consule apud Panormum pugnam conseruit.


((ججيليون ولوجيش ومطالش وغايش وكمذش وبعد ذلك إذ كان القواد بمدينة رومة وقورقرش ولي سلطان قرطاجنة بإفريقية ملك كان يدعى اشدريال فأقبل ومعه من الفيلة مائة وثلاثون فيلا ومن الخيل والرجال أكثر من ثلاثين ألفا حتى بلغ ليبية مقبلا من ناحية إفريقية. كمدش: probably a copyist’s error for فورش. And after that, when Caecilius and Lucius and Metellus and Gaius and Commodus and Qūrqaraš were commanders in the city of Rome, a king named Ašdriyāl took power at Carthage in Africa, and he came with one hundred and thirty elephants and more than thirty thousand horses and men, until he reached Libiya, approaching from the side of Africa.

In the Arabic translation of the Kitāb Hurūšiyūš the Roman onomastic system of the tria nomina is systematically misunderstood by translators. Receiver-orientation becomes relevant in the translation of culture-bound terms: in this case the transformation of the tria nomina of the consuls in three different characters derives from the fact that Arabic-speaking translators and readers were not familiar with the Latin habit of the tria nomina.

2. Some examples of cultural mistranslation

A typical example of a ‘cultural translation error’ is the simplification of the Roman political language and of its administrative terminology:

a) Consul / قائد

Latin text. Histories adversus paganos, ed. Lippold, 1, IV 10, 2, p. 302:

Alter deinde Atilius Regulus et Manlius Vulscus, ambo bis consules, cum classe ducentarum navium et quattuor legionibus Lilybaeum prefecti.
Arabic translation. *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, IV, § 57, p. 221:

ثم إن الرومانيين بعثوا قائدين لهما يقال لهما راغيلش بن اطيل وماليوش بن بلال شاكل بمقامين
مركب وأربع عرافات في كل عوارف سنتآ آلاف فبلغوا إلى مدينة ليبية.

Then the Romans sent two of their commanders called Regulus son of Atilius and Manlius son of Bulāšq with two hundred ships and four legions, and in each legion, there were about six thousand men; then they reached the city of Libiya.

b) Pontifices / أشراف
Decemuiri / عشرة من خيارهم

Latin text. *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, IV 13, 3, p. 312:

Tertio deinceps anno miseram ciuitatem sacrilegis sacrificiis male potentes funestauere pontifices; namque decemuiri consuetudinem priscae superstitionis egressi.


قال هروشيش: قرب أشراف رومة قربان عظيم به بلاوهم وكثير له شؤمهم وذلك أن عشرة من خيارهم خرجوا على ما كانت عليه سنتهم في جاهليتهم.

Orosius said: the nobles of Rome made a sacrificial offer to their idols, which increased their affliction and increased their misfortune; ten of their nobles abandoned their tradition in the times of their ignorance.

c) Equites et Senatores / الأشراف

Latin text: *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, IV 16, 5, p. 322:

Hannibal in testimonium uictoriae suae tres modios anulorum aureorum Carthaginem misit, quos ex manibus interfectorum equitum Romanorum senatorumque detraxerat.


وإذ ذلك بعث انيبل إلى قرطاجنة بثلاثة أمداى مجدى من خواص الذهب التي كان أصابها بأيدي الأشراف لصداقته وللذكرى إفخارا بظلمه.

At that time, Hannibal sent to Carthage three modii of the golden rings which he had taken from the hands of the nobles as proof of his victory and to boast about his triumph.

In the above examples, the Roman consuls become mere «commanders», the pontiffs, the decemviri, the knights and the senators become generically «nobles». Each culture has its own habits, norms, and political forms. In these cases, the cultural translation problems are a result of the differences in the political forms guiding verbal behaviour in the two cultures involved.

3. An example of linguistic mistranslation

A good example of an error due to language interpretation difficulties is as follows:

Latin text. *Historiae adversus paganos*, 1, II 10, 2, p. 124 Lippold:

Xerxes bis uictus in terra nauale proelium parat. sed Themistocles dux Atheniensium cum intellexisset Ionas – quibus dum auxilium superiore bello praebet, in se Persarum
impetum uerterat – in auxilium Xerxis instructam classem deducere, sollicitare
eos parti suae hostique subtrahere statuit et quia conloquendi facultas negabatur,
locis quibus Iones accessuri nauibus uidebantur proponi symbols saxisque adfigi
iubet, socios quondam et participes periculorum, nunc autem inustes desides apertae
increpatione corripiens atque ad antiquorum iura foederum religiosa adhortatione
persuadens praecipueque admonens, uti commiso proelio cedentium uice inhibeant
remos sesque bello auferant.

Arabic translation. Kitāb Hurūšiyūš, ed. Penelas, II, § 67, p. 142:
فلما رأى شخشار ذلك من فعلهم وعزمهم وفهم أن قد غلب مرتين في البر عبأ لمقاتلتهم في
البحر بالtraîکب، وكان الرئيس الآثنياشيين يسمى طمشتقلان فأوصى إلى قبائل اليونانيين
الذين قد كانوا استغاثوا بالآثنياشيين في الحرب الأولى وكلهم من قبائل الروم الغريقيين
بان يبعثوا مراكبهم وظهروا لشخشار أنهم أعوان لهم على الآثنياشيين ليكون مذهبهم
جر الهزيمة عليهم. وكانت الأمارة بينهم أن يعلقوا الحجارة في مراكبهم لتمتاز بذلك
من غيرها.

When Šaḫšār (Xerxes) saw their action and determination and realized that he had been
defeated twice on land, he prepared to fight them at sea with ships. The Athenian leader
was called Themistocles and he sent embassies to the Ionian tribes, and he asked the
Athenians for relief in the first war, and they were all part of the Greek Rūm tribes, and
he asked them to send their ships and to show to Šaḫšār that they were his allies against
the Athenians, in order to drag the Persians into defeat. And the sign between them was
that they would attach stones to their ships to distinguish them from the others.

The translators do not understand the complex grammatical and syntactic structure of the
Latin phrase, which they render completely incorrectly.

4. Some examples of text-specific mistranslation

As Nord states, “since solutions to the text-specific problems cannot be generalized and
applied to similar cases, the translator must be prepared to act creatively”.13 In the Kitāb
Hurūšiyūš there are various examples of mistranslations of this type, derived from the
specificity of the Latin text.

a) Legio/

| Arabic translation: Kitāb Hurūšiyūš, ed. Penelas, IV, § 8, p. 206: |
| وقد كان منوجيه بن شبین قائد العرافه الرابع من الرومانيين ضرب بد الفيل فقطيعها. |

And Minucius son of Sabinus, the commander of the fourth legion, struck the elephant’s
foot and cut it off.

13 Nord, Translating as a Purposeful Activity (above, n. 5), p. 62.
b) Regem / الخلافة

Latin text: *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, III 23, 40, p. 248:  
Hac uictoria elatus Antigonus, regem cum Demetrio filio appellari iubet: quod exemplum omnes securi *regium sibi nomen dignitatemque sumpserunt*.

Arabic translation: *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, III, § 137, p. 198:  
فلما ... ذلك الظفر لانطغون زهى به وأنى أن يدعى له ولأباه بالخلافة.

And when... that victory to Antigonus, he became arrogant as a result of it and ordered that a prayer be made on his behalf and his father’s behalf as caliphs.

c) Miles / أهل ديوانهم

Latin text: *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, IV 16, 19, p. 268:  
Quis credat eo tempore, quo aerarium populi Romani egenam stipem priuata conlatione poscebat, miles in castris non nisi aut puer aut seruus aut sceleratus aut debitor et ne sic quidem numero idoneus erat, senatus in curia omnis paene nouicius uidebatur, postremo cum ita inminutis fractisque omnibus desperabatur, ut consilium de relinquenda Italia subiretur.

Arabic translation: *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, IV, § 106, p. 233:  
فبلغ الأمر من الرومانيين يومئذ أن صار جل أهل ديوانهم إما عبدا معتقا وإما سارقا مطلقا وإما مجترما معفوا عنه وإمام صغيرا سلك به مسلك الكبير. وفي كل ذلك ما كان يتم عسكرهم ولا يجمع لهم عدد ديو.

The Romans thus reached the point, on that day, that all *their army* was made up either of freed slaves or freed thieves or of pardoned delinquents or of little men who by means of it acted like great men. Yet with everything, their army was not complete and the number of *their soldiers* was not reached.

In fact, in the cases mentioned above and on many other occasions the translators seem to choose terms strangely inappropriate to the Latin words they have to render in Arabic. If in the case of the term *legio*, which is a technical term, this can be understandable, the use of the concept of caliphate applied to Hellenistic kingship is really remarkable and the choice of the word *diwān* applied to the military context remains in some way enigmatic.

In any case, one cannot fail to appreciate the extraordinary effort of the translators: the Arabic translation of the Orosian *Historiae* was the product of Christian and Muslim authors working together: a new gateway to the Graeco-Roman world for the Medieval Islamic culture.