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TRANSLATION IN THE GRIP OF IDEOLOGY: THE TRANSLATOR AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE ALGERIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This paper starts from the premise that discussing fidelity in the translation of political discourse remains incomplete unless we first ask: fidelity to which ideology? Political texts are not written in a vacuum, nor does the translator who conveys them operate in a vacuum. The first section reviews the concept of ideology in Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, van Dijk, and Laroui. The second traces the shift in Translation Studies from the question of equivalence to that of power through Lefevere, Venuti, and Spivak. The third section is devoted to political discourse, while the fifth addresses the Algerian case, with its linguistic duality, colonial memory, and contestation over identity, drawing on examples from the terminology of war, the Revolution, and the Hirak. The paper concludes that neutrality is an unattainable demand and that its alternative is not blind partisanship but the translator's ideological transparency.

KEYWORDS

Translation, Ideology, Political Discourse, Rewriting, Algeria, Bilingualism

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Introduction

When the French state continued to refer to what occurred in Algeria between 1954 and 1962 as “events” or “operations” carried out in North Africa, this was not a mere lexical error. It was a naming decision with legal and political weight. It was not until the French Parliament officially adopted the expression “the Algerian War” in Law No. 99-882 of October 18, 1999, that the terminology was formally changed (Loi n° 99-882, 1999). Every translator who encountered the term “Événements” in a document from that period therefore faced a question that dictionaries could not settle: should it be rendered as “events,” preserving the literal wording of the colonial discourse; as “war,” thereby correcting the discourse being translated; or as “revolution,” thereby entering the national narrative?

This small example encapsulates what we seek to address. We are not concerned here with the technical difficulties of political translation, such as metaphors, abbreviations, and institutions that have no equivalent in the target language, although these difficulties are real. What concerns us is the deeper layer: every political term carries a position toward the world, and when the translator transfers it, he or she chooses, willingly or otherwise, a position within, against, or at the margins of that position.

The issue is particularly acute in Algeria. The Algerian translator works in an environment in which Standard Arabic, Algerian Arabic, Amazigh, and French coexist, each with its own history, supporters, and memory, and each carrying, in public discourse, an ideological charge that is readily perceived. The question we therefore pose is the following: Can a translator, in a multilingual postcolonial context, speak of fidelity in

conveying political discourse independently of the ideologies that frame both the source and translated texts? If we accept that translation cannot be neutral, does acknowledging this fact free the translator from the illusion of neutrality, or does it provide a pretext for distortion in the name of commitment?

We assume that the answer lies neither in neutrality nor in partisanship, but in a third kind of commitment based on awareness of one's position and on making that position explicit. To demonstrate this, we proceed through seven stages: first, the concept of ideology; second, translation after the cultural turn; third, the specificity of political discourse; fourth, the history of the relationship between translation and power in the Arab tradition; fifth, the Algerian case; sixth, a methodological proposal for tracing ideological effects in translated texts; and finally, the ethical questions that follow. We also indicate from the outset the limits of the paper: the Algerian examples cited here are preliminary inductive observations, not the results of a corpus-based statistical study. They remain so deliberately, because our aim is to open the problem rather than close it.

1. Ideology: A Concept That Resists a Stable Definition

It is difficult to find a term in the humanities more heavily burdened than ideology. The term emerged in the late eighteenth century with Destutt de Tracy as a "science of ideas" concerned with their origins, but its meaning quickly changed, becoming something close to an accusation: it came to be applied to the ideas of one's opponent, while hardly anyone acknowledged that they themselves were speaking from within an ideology. This transformation alone indicates that the concept itself is a site of struggle.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels argued that the ruling ideas of every age are the ideas of its ruling class; what appears universal and neutral therefore bears the imprint of a specific social position (Marx & Engels, 1970). Mannheim subsequently broadened the scope by distinguishing between a particular conception of ideology, which is used to accuse an opponent, and a total conception that encompasses everyone's thinking, including that of the analyst (Mannheim, 1936). This was important because it removed from the researcher the privilege of standing outside the arena—a privilege that translators, perhaps more than others, need to relinquish.

Gramsci shifted attention from the idea to the mechanism. For him, hegemony does not rest on force alone but also on voluntary consent produced by the school, the press, the church, and other institutions of civil society (Gramsci, 1971). Althusser went further by defining ideology as an imaginary relationship between individuals and their real conditions of existence, operating through apparatuses that call upon individuals, who respond to the call while believing themselves free in their choice (Althusser, 1971). What matters to us in this idea is that ideology is present in everyday language itself, not only in party publications.

From a linguistic perspective, van Dijk offers a definition closer to analytical tools. For him, ideology is a system of social representations shared by a group that organizes its beliefs about right and wrong, good and evil, and becomes visible in discourse through lexical, syntactic, and argumentative choices that can be identified (van Dijk, 1998). This is precisely what the researcher in translation needs, because the effect of ideology then becomes something that can be compared between a source text and a translated text rather than remaining a vague impression.

The Arab context has made its own contribution to this field. In *The Concept of Ideology*, Abdallah Laroui (1980) traced the history and transformations of the concept, while in *Contemporary Arab Ideology*, he distinguished among three models of discourse—the sheikh, the liberal politician, and the technical preacher—in an attempt to show how each model reproduces an image of the West and of heritage suited to its position (Laroui, 1995). Al-Jabri (1994), in *Contemporary Arab Discourse*, offered a critical reading of the structure of revivalist, nationalist, Islamist, and liberal discourses, showing that Arab discourse often speaks the language of conflict more than the language of knowledge.

It is significant that the concept itself has posed a translation problem in Arabic. Several equivalents of "ideology" have circulated, including "ideologia," "ideolojia," and "adlūja," the latter being particularly associated with Laroui. Each choice carries a trace of a position: phonetic borrowing accepts the concept as it is, whereas Arabic coinage attempts to domesticate it and assumes that the language can accommodate it.

In this paper, we adopt a simple functional conception. Ideology is the set of representations, values, and assumptions that consciously or unconsciously guide the choices of the translator, the person or institution commissioning the translation, the institution itself, and the audience, while determining what is regarded at a given moment as sayable or unsayable. We do not define it as false consciousness opposed to true consciousness, because we do not possess a position outside ideology from which to make such a judgment.

2. From Equivalence to Power: Translation after the Cultural Turn

For a long time, translation was defined primarily as the transfer of meaning. Even when Nida developed the concept of dynamic equivalence in the 1960s, his central question was: How can the new reader receive the message as the first reader received it? (Nida, 1964). Ideology was not entirely absent from this conception. Nida worked with Bible translation organizations, and the translators with whom he worked served an explicit religious project, but this dimension remained outside the theoretical framework.

The shift occurred when attention moved from the text to the culture that receives it, a development known as the “cultural turn” in the work of Bassnett and Lefevere (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). Lefevere regarded translation as a form of rewriting governed by three factors: patronage, meaning the forces that support or constrain literature; poetics, or what counts as acceptable literature at a given time; and ideology (Lefevere, 1992). For him, ideology is not necessarily party politics but a network of opinions and attitudes regarded as acceptable by a society at a particular moment, through which readers and translators view texts. The translator thus becomes an actor in a broader cultural economy, accepting some constraints and negotiating others.

In *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Venuti (1995) criticized what he called fluent translation, that is, translation that is read as though it were an original text written in the reader’s language. Such translation conceals the act of transfer and, by concealing it, also conceals relations of power: one culture becomes highly translated while another is translated relatively little, as in the case of Anglo-American culture. In response, he proposed a strategy of foreignization that retains traces of strangeness in the text and alerts the reader to the fact that the text is translated. This strategy is related to Schleiermacher’s earlier distinction between moving the author toward the reader and moving the reader toward the author.

Spivak (1993) added another dimension by warning that translating texts by women writers from the Global South into a dominant language may erase their particularities, making them appear to have all been written in the same voice. A translator who does not know the context of the text, or does not engage with it, may turn the voice of the other into an echo of the stronger language. Tymoczko and Gentzler (2002) brought together a range of studies on translation and power, while Munday (2007) sought to bring the idea down from the level of theory to that of the text by proposing a textual approach that traces the effect of ideology in the lexical and syntactic choices of translated texts.

This shift, however, has a price that should not be ignored. When every translation choice becomes ideological, the concept loses its discriminating power: if everything is ideology, what is gained by saying that translation is ideological? Moreover, interpreting every deviation as an intentional act commits the opposite error, because many deviations result from time constraints, insufficient competence, or prevailing professional norms (Toury, 1995). Hence the methodological caution emphasized in reviews of translation theory (Pym, 2010): ideology is a hypothesis requiring evidence, not a ready-made judgment to be imposed on every text. This is the caution we seek to maintain in the following sections.

3. Political Discourse across Borders

Political discourse is not merely one textual genre among others; it is the field in which ideology is most clearly manifested because its primary functions are not simply to inform but to persuade, mobilize, and legitimize one authority or delegitimize another. Chilton (2004) argues that analysis should not stop at vocabulary but should move to the strategies speakers use to represent reality, legitimize their position, and construct the image of an opponent. Fairclough (1989) had already pointed out that power operates covertly through language and that apparently ordinary speech may carry relations of domination.

Before them, Orwell (1946) satirized a political language that uses vague expressions to make lies appear respectable. Foucault, in his inaugural lecture *The Order of Discourse*, pointed out that the production of discourse in every society is subject to procedures that control, select, and redistribute it (Foucault, 1971). This idea is important for us because translation is one of these procedures: it decides what is transferred from another’s discourse, what is rendered, and in what form it reaches the audience.

Schäffner (2004) demonstrated that when political discourse is translated, it does not simply move from one language to another; it moves from one reception context to another. A discourse delivered to a local audience and containing references understood only by members of that society may become, after translation, a document examined by foreign readers looking for different meanings. Moreover, much political translation is institutionally anonymous, produced by offices and teams in which the translator disappears, thereby obscuring responsibility and making the translation appear to be a natural extension of the source text rather than the result of human decisions.

Baker (2006) provided tools closer to practical analysis by arguing that translation participates in constructing the narratives through which communities understand themselves. Translators do this through naming, selection, temporal and spatial framing, and the repositioning of actors in a story. A single term can reverse the meaning: calling the same person a “resister” or a “terrorist,” or describing the same land as “occupied territory” or “disputed territory,” carries different implications. This is not limited to literature or official politics. Bielsa and Bassnett (2009) showed that news translation by international agencies is not mere transfer but continuous rewriting adapted to the expectations of the new audience, making it difficult ultimately to separate the translated text from the edited text.

We may illustrate this with a single concept moving between discourses: “secularism.” When the French term *laïcité* is translated into Arabic as “‘almāniyya” (علمانية), it also carries a long Arab debate about the origin of the word—whether it derives from “knowledge” or “the world”—and about its relationship to the specific history of the conflict between the French state and the Church, a history without an exact counterpart in the Arab-Islamic experience. The Arabic term is therefore loaded with two sets of associations: the French historical associations, which most Arabic readers may not know, and the Arab debate, which many readers of the original may not know. The political translator facing this term does not merely choose an equivalent; the translator chooses which of these two sets of associations to preserve and which to attenuate. In some cases, the most appropriate option may be to retain the foreign term and explain it in a footnote.

4. Translation and Power in the Arab Tradition: An Indispensable Memory

It may seem strange to discuss the relationship between translation and ideology as though it were a recent discovery. Arab history is full of evidence that the relationship is much older. The translation movement during the Abbasid period, associated with the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) and patronage by the caliphs, was not simply a spontaneous response to a need for knowledge. In Gutas’s (1998) reading, it was part of a comprehensive political and cultural project connected to the needs of the emerging Abbasid state for knowledge of administration, medicine, and astronomy, as well as for forms of knowledge that enhanced its civilizational prestige. In Lefevere’s terms, patronage determined what was translated and what was left aside. Works of logic, medicine, and engineering were translated, while Greek poetry and theatre remained outside the main stream of translation because the prevailing cultural system neither needed them nor knew how to receive them. This is an early example of how selection, before being a choice of words, is the first ideological act in translation.

The same story was repeated in different forms in the modern period. Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi, who recorded his impressions of Paris in *Takhlīs al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīs Bārīz* (1834) and later supervised the School of Languages under Muhammad Ali, was part of a translation project linked to the construction of a modern state. What was selected for translation—military, engineering, and legal knowledge—clearly reflected the state’s conception of its needs more than the personal interests of translators. This formation imposed a question on modern Arabic translation that has remained ever since: Do we translate in order to learn from the other or to confront the other? Laroui (1995) discussed this tension when he described the way Arab discourse treats the West as both a model and a competitor.

The picture is incomplete without discussing Orientalism, that is, the discourse written by the other about us and subsequently returned to us through translation. In his well-known book, Said (1978) demonstrated that Western knowledge of the East was not innocent of relations of power and that description itself could function as an exercise of power by representing the East and speaking on its behalf. The book was translated into Arabic by Kamal Abu Deeb as *Orientalism: Knowledge, Power, Creation* (1981). It is worth reflecting on the paradox that a book exposing the power of representation itself required an Arabic translation that negotiated with Arab readers over their image. In contrast, Hassan Hanafi (1991) sought to reverse the direction through what he called “Occidentalism,” making the West an object of study just as the East had been made an object of study. The project shows that translation and ideological critique can proceed in both directions.

Two points may be drawn from this brief review. First, the Arab translator has never occupied a genuinely neutral position, and the contemporary crisis surrounding “fidelity” and “betrayal,” when reduced to a purely moral issue, overlooks the fact that translation in our context has often been a project decided, funded, and directed by an institution. Second, this historical memory helps explain some of the sensitivity surrounding political translation today, where fear of dependency and the desire for openness coexist—and are particularly visible in Algeria for the reasons discussed in the next section.

5. Algeria: Contested Languages and a Multi-Referential Discourse

The Algerian context should not be understood as an exceptional case. On the contrary, it is an intensified example of a situation experienced by many societies that emerged from colonialism without fully escaping its language. Yet its specific features make it particularly suitable for analysis. The French colonial administration made French the language of administration and education, going so far as to classify Arabic as a foreign language in Algeria under the Chautemps instruction of 1938 (Benrabah, 1999, 2013). After independence, Arabization became an ideological pillar of nation-building, reflected in the 1976 National Charter and in the 1991 law on the generalization of the use of Arabic. Grandguillaume (1983) interpreted these policies in the Maghreb as political decisions before they were linguistic decisions, while Benrabah (1999) argued that Algeria experienced something resembling a linguistic trauma whose effects remain visible in public discourse.

At the same time, Khaoula Taleb-Ibrahimi (1995) showed that actual Algerian linguistic practices are more diverse than official discourse suggests: Algerian Arabic, Amazigh, Standard Arabic, and French intersect in everyday communication, the media, and institutions. The Constitution recognized Amazigh as a national language in 2002 and then as an official language in 2016, a transformation that cannot be separated from the struggle over the representation of identity. Consequently, the Algerian translator does not merely translate from one language into another but moves among competing linguistic ideologies: a monolingual ideology that views a single language as a pillar of the nation; a pluralist ideology that sees value in diversity; and an openness-oriented ideology that treats French or English as windows onto the world. The Official Gazette is issued in Arabic and French, and anyone who compares the two versions can see that translation here is an exercise of sovereignty that determines what is read as law.

Writers expressed this tension before researchers did. Scholars have often cited Kateb Yacine's description of French as a "war booty," meaning that the Algerian writes in the colonizer's language without owing the colonizer anything. Malek Haddad moved toward the opposite position, viewing French as an exile from which the writer could not find the language in which to write. Assia Djébar (1985) expressed a similar tension between the language of writing and the mother tongue. In these three positions, translation, in a sense, precedes every translation: the writer translates himself or herself before writing.

At the level of thought, Malek Bennabi approached colonialism from an unusual perspective, arguing that colonialism relies not only on force but also on the "colonizability" embedded in the colonized society (Bennabi, 1954). This idea makes the reception and translation of imported ideas a matter of civilizational security rather than simply a matter of general culture. Muhammad Arkoun wrote in French and was translated into Arabic by Hashim Saleh. Notably, the title of his French book *Pour une critique de la raison islamique* (1984) became *Tārīkhiyyat al-fikr al-ʿarabī al-islāmī* (Historicity of Arab-Islamic Thought) in the Arabic translation (1986): critique became historicity, reason became thought, and Islamic became Arab-Islamic. We do not claim that this constitutes betrayal, because the translator may have had reasons unknown to us. We argue only that it is a clear example of how a title alone can carry an entire ideological project.

None of this can be separated from the translator's institutional position. In Algeria, as elsewhere, translators often work for a ministry, a news agency, a publishing house, a newspaper, or a university department, and each institution has its own reference language, sensitivities, and boundaries that should not be crossed. This produces a form of self-censorship of which the translator may be unaware because it is acquired through habit rather than imposed by an explicit order. Perhaps the most dangerous feature of ideology is that it does not need someone to impose it once the translator has internalized it and begins to exclude by himself or herself what is known not to be acceptable. This is not an accusation against anyone; it is a condition of any profession linked to an institution. Awareness of it is nevertheless essential to any serious discussion of professional independence.

Another equally important level concerns oral discourse. Political discourse in Algeria is often delivered in a mixture of Standard Arabic, Algerian Arabic, and perhaps some French, then published in writing exclusively in Standard Arabic and subsequently translated into French or English from that written version. This means that a first translation takes place within the country itself—from speech to writing and from dialect to Standard Arabic—before interlingual translation begins. What is lost in this journey is not merely dialectal flavor but also the speaker's tone, proximity to the audience, and what may be said between the lines, all of which carry a position. This general observation itself requires field verification, but it is sufficient to draw attention to the fact that the Algerian translator often begins with a text that has already undergone an ideological editing process.

Let us turn to political terminology. The designation “events” with which we began is contrasted in official Algerian discourse with the term “Liberation Revolution,” which refers not merely to a war but also carries a political judgment concerning its nature and legitimacy. The colonial term “fellagha” is translated into “mujahideen” in the national discourse, while “martyr” is used in French and English for the Arabic “shahīd.” The latter evokes, in a Western ear, Christian connotations for which there is no exact counterpart in the Islamic conception, and it is not equivalent to the French republican expression “mort pour la patrie.” Similarly, the official figure of “one and a half million martyrs” attributed to the Revolution differs substantially from historians’ estimates; translations may transmit the figure as a fact or as a claim depending on the translator’s position toward the national memory. Nor should the national narrative itself be treated as a single block. Harbi (1980), in his study of the FLN, showed that proclaimed unity concealed sharp ideological differences, meaning that the term “revolution” has multiple meanings within Algeria itself before it becomes differentiated across borders.

The popular movement of 2019 raised the same questions in another form. The slogan “A civil state, not a military one” (“Dawla madaniyya, machi ‘askariyya”) placed translators before a genuine difficulty: should “madaniyya” be translated as civil, civilian, or laïque? This is not a technical choice, because the word itself was contested in Algerian debate, with some understanding it as opposition to the military and others as opposition to Islamists. Translating it as “secular” would favor one interpretation over another. The term “Hirak” itself remained untranslated in most foreign coverage, functioning as a proper name rather than as a translated concept; this too is a naming decision. Similarly, the slogan “Yetnahaw ga’” has been translated in forms that range from expressions carrying the meaning of completely removing the ruling class to milder formulations. The difference is the same as that between conveying anger and conveying what was literally said. We reiterate that these observations require corpus-based study; here they are presented as indicators of a possible research trajectory.

6. How Can Ideological Effects Be Traced? A Methodological Proposal

If we have warned against interpreting every deviation as an intention, we must propose a method capable of distinguishing innocent deviation from directed deviation. We therefore suggest a three-level scale. The first level is parallel comparison: placing the source text and the translated text side by side and recording what has changed in terms of omission, addition, foregrounding, and reordering. This level is necessary but insufficient because many changes can be explained simply by differences between languages.

The second level concerns patterns. Ideology does not appear in a single isolated deviation but in repeated deviations moving in the same direction: an action may be softened when its agent belongs to “our group” and intensified when the agent belongs to “their group”; the passive voice may be used when the explicit agent is inconvenient; or figures and dates that embarrass the dominant narrative may be omitted. This corresponds to what van Dijk (1998) describes as the polarization strategy between “us” and “them.” When the same pattern recurs across texts and different translators, an ideological explanation becomes more plausible than an explanation based on coincidence.

The third level concerns the textual environment and conditions of production: Who commissioned the translation? Which institution published the text? Who is the intended audience? Was the translation accompanied by a preface or footnotes revealing the translator’s position? Here the descriptive school is useful in reminding us that translation should be studied as an event occurring in the receiving culture before it is studied as a copy of the original (Toury, 1995). The question is therefore not simply whether a translation is correct, but what the translation did in the culture that received it and why that became possible.

We do not claim that this scale can be applied mechanically. It requires the researcher’s judgment and a deep knowledge of both languages and the historical context. It nevertheless protects us from two extremes: the hasty accusation that sees ideology everywhere and the artificial innocence that sees nothing anywhere. The most important question, in our view, remains what the researcher might call directionality: Do the translator’s choices consistently move in one direction, and in whose interest?

7. The Translator between Impossible Neutrality and Possible Responsibility

If we accept what has been established above, what remains of fidelity? Our answer is that fidelity does not disappear, but it loses its innocence. Fidelity understood as literal correspondence to a text that can only be read within its context is an illusion. Fidelity understood as an obligation toward the reader not to deceive the reader about what he or she is reading, however, remains a valid demand. This is what Berman's (1984) ethics of the foreign seeks to capture: a good translation is one that accepts the foreignness of the text and bears its effects in the target language.

We should not fall into the opposite simplification. Foreignization in Venuti's sense is not necessarily politically innocent, and Berman himself pointed out that German Romantic translation, a historical example of foreignization, served a German nationalist project. Thus, a translation choice does not carry an ideology in itself; rather, its ideological significance depends on what it serves within its context.

What, then, is the alternative? We propose what may be called "ideological transparency": the translator should disclose major translation choices in the same way that an author discloses sources. In practical terms, this can be achieved through a preface explaining how sensitive terms were translated and why, through footnotes that retain the original term when no neutral equivalent exists, and through documentation of decisions in institutional translation rather than allowing them to disappear into anonymous collective work. Chesterman (2001) proposed a professional oath for translators based on explicitly stated ethical commitments. The idea may seem idealistic, but it draws attention to the fact that a profession involved in shaping collective awareness cannot function without a code governing it.

This also requires the incorporation of critical discourse analysis tools into translator-training curricula in Algerian departments, not as a theoretical luxury but as part of professional competence. The issue becomes even more urgent with neural machine translation. When a system translates a political text, no single individual decides exactly what it does, yet the output remains saturated with positions embedded in the data on which the system was trained. Prates et al. (2020), for example, showed that machine-translation systems can reproduce gender biases present in their training data. If this is true for gender, it is reasonable to investigate whether it also applies to political terminology. Such a claim, however, requires empirical research, which we do not claim to have conducted here.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to move ideology from the status of a secondary topic in Translation Studies to that of a primary question. We have seen that the concept itself is unstable and that its greatest value lies in reminding the researcher that no one speaks from outside the arena. We have also seen that Translation Studies, through Lefevere, Venuti, Spivak, and others, moved from the question of equivalence to the question of power. This shift, important as it is, requires methodological caution so that every deviation does not become an accusation. Political discourse is the field in which this relationship is most visible because its very function is ideological, while the Algerian case—with its linguistic plurality, colonial memory, and contestation over the representation of identity—makes the relationship particularly apparent.

For the translator, the consequence is that neutrality is a promise that cannot be fulfilled, and its alternative is neither abandonment of fidelity nor surrender to partisanship, but awareness of one's position and disclosure of it. This does not solve the problem once and for all. A translator who openly declares a position may still be biased, but disclosure gives the reader the right to hold the translator accountable. Many questions therefore remain open, including the effects of publishing institutions and the state on the decisions of Algerian translators; systematic comparison of actual translations of Algerian political discourse into French and English; and the implications of machine translation. These are all areas that we hope future research will subject to testing through methods capable of being falsified as well as confirmed.

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