

**Translating with ‘differance’: The Old Testament as a case study**

الترجمة بين الاختلاف والتأجيل: العهد القديم أنموذجاً

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates the importance of deconstruction and its *differance* in the translatability of the linguistic sign represented by different Biblical versions. It is divided into six parts and a conclusion. The first part defines *differance* with particular reference to deconstruction and structuralism and their manifestations in the Biblical translations. The second part discusses the relevance of deconstruction and its practices to the linguistic and translation theory by making use of the ideas of Jacques Derrida, Kathlene Davis, Lawrence Venutti, along with the semantic and pragmatic thrust. The third part employs different Biblical passages that reflect the different assumptions put forward by the hypothesis of *differance*. The study ends with a critical account of the motivated choices of translators influenced by the metaphysics of the American context that ideologically uses the Biblical signs for dehumanizing intentions.

**Key words:** Deconstruction, *differance*, metaphysics, trace, retention, protention.

**ملخص**

تتناول هذه الورقة أهمية البعد التفكيكي وخاصة "الديفرانس" في إثراء أعمال الترجمة من خلال بلورة مفهوم الانسجام بين الأصل وترجمته في ظل التحول اللامتناهي للمكان والزمان. وتبين الدراسة ان "الديفرانس" يتتبع كينونة المعاني اللامركزية التي إما أن تكون تجديدا يحاكي الأصل وإما أن تكون ميتافيزيقية تنحرف بالنص عن مساره وتسلم العمل المترجم إلى هيمنة الواقع الثقافي الذي يعمل على تهميش وتحقير الآخر أيديولوجيا. وما الناتج المترجم الا عملية تتبع للآثار النصية بحضور ميتافيزيقي ثابت يتناول الفجوة المكانية الزمانية الناتجة عن التأجيل من معطيات السياقات الأنوية التي ربما تنسجم أو لاتنسجم مع توجهات الأصل. ولا يكتفي المنهج التفكيكي بتوضيح الفجوات النصية الناتجة عن التأجيل بل يمنح القراءات النصية المتجددة شرعية الانتماء إلى الأصل طالما انسجمت آثارها الاستباقية والتجديدية عند حدود التناغم مع الأصل لأن جاك دريدا يعتبر أن الترجمة الجيدة هي تلك التي تنسجم مع أصلها ويمكن تبريرها.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** التفكيكية، الاختلاف والتأجيل، ميتافيزيقا الحضور، الأثر، الاستبقاء والتجديد.

**Introduction**

Translating with *differance* introduces a paradigm shift in the translation studies based on a unique awareness of textual signs. *Differance* represents the corner stone in deconstruction strategies of textual reading and floods the translation theory with genuine practices of “structure, sign and play” (Derrida, 1978:351). It places itself in the heart of the modern linguistic theory through its strategic centralization of ‘the sign’ and its deconstruction. It is a continuation of the linguistic heritage that had its roots in the dyadic relation of signification followed by the pragmatic turn in linguistic studies that adopted a triadic awareness of sign relationships.

Deconstruction in its *differance* adds a quaternary characteristic that associates the signification process with a spatiotemporal dimension. On the other hand, *differance* does not only highlight the textual facts of plurality and renewability of meanings, but introduces several mechanisms for textual reading. Deconstruction dissuades the awareness of *differance* into textual traces that signify retentively and protentively in a chain of erasing and replacing presence. It opens signs for all possible suppressed meanings and at the same time questions gap

supplementing acts. *Differance* denies a transcendental signified but insists on the power of the written signs to multiply linguistically and diverse freely. "Writing is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it forever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge" (Norris, 1991: 43). It considers translation as an act of transformation that defers the original text into another original sign. *Differance* becomes a problematic translation issue because the original presence of textual codes is displaced artificially by each act of decoding. "The written signifier can then travel out on its adventures into the world, available to be interpreted in many different ways, according to many different models" (Pym, 1993: 39). These panoramic views of sign miscellaneous parameters, textual and extra-textual factors, affect the essence of the Holy Bible translations. The study centralizes *differance* and its deconstructive relationships as having the essential influence on the different translation products where meanings take different trends; reflect different intentions; and denote an effect of interpretation based on the deferred presence of contextual grids.

The traditional approaches to translation point out that "[t]ranslation is a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language" (Newmark, 1981: 7). By contrast, deconstruction considers textual meanings unstable and this refutes the claim of conveying the 'same' message in cross linguistic communication. "Translation is always an attempt at appropriation that aims to transport home, in its language, in the most appropriate way possible, in the most relevant way possible, the most proper meaning of the original text" (Derrida, 2001: 179). Meaning potential is always in continuous slippery as a result of the spatiotemporal gap and it multiplies as just as the "Oaks of Mamre" (Genesis 13: 18) which are rendered as 'sacred trees' in GNB (Good News Bible); 'great trees' in NIV (New International Version); 'plain of Mamre' in KJV (King James Version) and 'the vale of Mambre' in the Douay-Rheims Bible.

### **Biblical translatability and deconstruction**

The Old Testament was translated into several languages and there are over 150 translations in English alone. All the different versions of the translated Bible claim faithfulness and loyalty to the original and so the authorized translated versions are considered holy Bibles despite the heterogeneity among different Biblical circulations. “English Bible translation was governed by the assumption that the goal of Bible translation was to translate the words of the original Hebrew and Greek texts insofar as the process of translation allows” (Ryken, 2004: 6). What the translation ‘allows’ excludes what it does not allow, whether linguistically or conceptually, and permits a translator’s supplementing ideology. “The way in which individual translations treat the underlying text may differ radically, and the legitimacy of each translation must depend upon the nature of the original text and the type of receptor for which the translation is prepared” (Nida, 1979: 52 cited in Hatim, 2001: 18). These various translations replace the original in both form and content. Religious concepts, symbolic figures, significant places and issues of faith have been established according to the semiotic potential introduced by the circulating translated versions. “For Derrida though, there is no such a thing as pure truth that is completely independent. When you read a text, you add to it an understanding of the meaning, and it is not necessarily the same sense that the author intended” (Asad, 2010: 16).

### **Biblical versions**

In its practical part, this paper compares several circulating translations of the Old Testament including the (KJV: 1611); the (ASV: 1901), Smith and Van Dyke Arabic Version (1856) and the (NIV: 2011). The KJV and the ASV are literal or word-for-word translations and carried out by tens of translators working together while the NIV is a thought-for-thought translation and carried out by “over a hundred scholars working directly from the best available Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts” (Hendrickson Publishers, 2008: xiii). Despite the collective work done in the production of these versions, *differances* of plurality

and inconsistency prevail. Moreover, *differance* highlights the ideology of the American metaphysics that decentralizes the Biblical message into saying the opposite.

### **Derrida and Saussure**

Ferdinand de Saussure emphasizes the textual entity of the sign in terms of interdependent values. For him, “The conceptual side of value is made up solely of relations and differences with respect to the other terms of language” (Saussure, 1959: 116). This point of differentiation has been dealt with differently by Derrida who provides unique dimensions in his deconstruction system. Derrida (1982) partially disagrees with Saussure concerning both sign relations and signification. He views the conceptual value of the sign in terms of *differance* which highlights both the state of difference and deferral. In other words, it proposes a spatiotemporal dimension for meaning probability. It “keeps the memory of the past, while inaugurating something absolutely new” (Caputo, 1997: 16).

Derrida’s *differance* recognizes the permanently changing nationalities of the sign conceptual values as it travels from place to place and from a reading into another.

In the language of textual analysis, Derrida is proposing that there are no fixed meanings present in the text, despite any appearance to the contrary. Rather, the apparent identities (i.e., literal meanings) present in a text also depend for their existence on something outside themselves, something which is absent and different from themselves i.e., they depend on the operation of *differance*. As a result, the meanings in a text constantly shift both in relation to the subject who works with the text, and in relation to the cultural and social world in which the text is immersed (Sweetman, 1999: 8).

For example the Biblical sig “הַמְדַּת /Hemdat” (Haggai 2:7) <http://biblehub.com/text/haggai/2-7.htm> 10/7/2013 overflows with various values as a result of its spatiotemporal journey which influences its textual dependency into situational occurrence such as “مشتهی کل الامم”

(Smith & Van Dyke Arabic Translation); “the precious things” (ASV); “the desire” (KJV); “Ahmad of all nations will come” (Benjamin, 1987: 11). The face values of the sign shifted from a materialistic semantic correspondence to hint at a prophecy of a proper name referring to the coming of a prophet.

### **Differance assumptions**

Owing to the fact of temporality, *differance* entails a chain of renewable gaps affecting the very spatial identities of signification. Textual codes attain a meaningful structure when the textual elements associate with a context cooperatively. In other words, both the spatial linguistic force and the temporal contextual force make signification possible. Gaps are the direct cause for the ever changing identity of the temporal dimension of signification. This temporal gap opens the textual message for motivated gap supplementing acts.

A translation is never quite faithful, always somewhat free, it never establishes an identity, always a lack and a supplement, and it can never be a transparent representation, only an interpretive transformation that exposes multiple and divided meanings, equally multiple and divided. (Venuti, 1992:8)

These supplementing acts play the major role in the process of meaning *differance* that allows for both the substitutive and the additive supplement to take place either intentionally or unintentionally. Translators are the product of their time linguistically and contextually and the negotiation process of meaning comprehensibility borrows much from the ruling linguistic and extra-linguistic systems. These borrowings differ and defer in their intentions making the reproduction of meaning multiple and inconsistent.

### **Differance and metaphysics**

*Differance* in its temporality allows for intentional and motivated choices that are designed to fit into the cultural or sociopolitical paradigm. Despite the fixed forms of the textual signs, the metaphysics of

a cultural tradition would inevitably steer textuality into directions that could stand in paradox with the original orientations.

“Metaphysics in its Platonic instance consists of the posing of the Idea[1]s instituting the gap between things and their being-ness” (Sallis, 1987: 49). Text producers leave lots of unsaid signs on the bases that their readers know and readers of written texts normally insert what they know from their experience in life into textual signification. This determines the gaps and supplement that often take place in textual processing.

When Haggai addressed the people of Israel after their return from Babylon assuring them of “Hemda” coming to the restructuring of the ‘house of Jehova’, the crowds did not ask questions about that sign of ‘Hemda’ because the context, shared knowledge and presence of Haggai directed the crowds towards something/somebody shared among the Israelites.

On the other hand, the circulation of signs passes through an act of re-appropriation to match the present possibilities dictated by situational requirements. The Hebrew original scriptures speak of the renewal of “הַבַּיִת /habait”, which literally means “this house” (Haggai 2:7). In KJV (1611), the translator used “house” to match linguistic dependencies. However, at present and after the establishment of Israel, the New King James Version (NKJV) uses “temple”. This fact of *differance* exemplifies how “[t]he formal essence of the sign can only be determined in terms of presence” (Derrida, 1967: 88) which shapes the forces of the previous absence into a protentive awareness. “Heidegger doubtless would acknowledge that as a question of meaning, the question of being is already linked, at its point of departure, to the (lexical and grammatical) discourse of the metaphysics whose destruction it has undertaken” (Derrida, 1982: 52).

### **Differance and relevance**

What is most often called "relevant"? Well, whatever feels right, whatever seems pertinent, apropos, welcome, appropriate, opportune,

justified, well-suited or adjusted, coming right at the moment when you expect it-or corresponding as is necessary to the object to which the so-called relevant action relates: the relevant discourse, the relevant proposition, the relevant decision, the relevant translation. (Derrida, 2001: 177)

As a matter of deconstruction, *differance* does not only highlight gaps and supplements, but it can also judge the state of relevance between an original and its translation by means of trace. Through trace retention and protention, it analyzes meaning instability and irrelevance. “Each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element” (Derrida, 1982:13).

### **Plurality and pertinence**

The assumptions of deconstruction tackle the nature of textuality and expose how unstable a text can be and how temporality colors meaning recurrence. *Differance* emphasizes plurality and at the same time questions meanings that the translation activity fails to render, overtranslates or undertranslates.

Genesis13:18 exemplifies how the theoretical propositions of *differance* manifest themselves at every translation act. The spatiotemporal gap seems clear at every linguistic level including the variation in the mediation process.



**Table (1):** (Genesis 13:18).

Smith	فَنَقَلَ اِبْرَامُ خِيَامَهُ وَاتَى وَاقَامَ عِنْدَ بَلُوطَاتِ مَمْرَا الَّتِي فِي حَبْرُونَ وَبَنَى هُنَاكَ مَذْبَحًا لِلرَّبِّ	1865
ASV	And Abram moved his tent, and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and built there an altar unto Jehovah.	1901
GNB	So Abram moved his camp and settled near the sacred trees of Mamre at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD.	1979
KJV	Then Abram removed {cf15I his} tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which {cf15I is} in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the LORD.	1611
NIV	So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD.	2005
Douay Rheims	So Abram removing his tent came and dwelt by the vale of Mambre, which is in Hebron: and he built there an altar to the Lord.	1609

After Abram and Lot returned from Egypt, there was a fight between their shepherds, so Abram and Lot decided to separate from one another. Lot chose the Jordan Valley near Sodom and Gomorrah, while Abram lived in the land of Canaan. At that point of time God ordered Abram to walk into the directions he desires. In this scene Abram moved to Mamre.

*Differance* helps explain the claims that each reading renders a new meaning because of spatial and temporal forces that operate un/intentionally. Translation is an actualization process influenced by *differance* and affected by the availability of lots of choices in the translator's negotiation process.

#### **Pragmatic differance** “and/ف/then/so”

The verse translations are introduced by different cohesive devices that function similarly but express different connotations. These

conjunctions are all used for the same linguistic role but the usage of each conjunction renders a difference in the Biblical story. “*And*” is used to show the continuity of “a narration from a previous sentence or from implied assent to a previous question or opinion” or to “connect occurrences of the same member, expressing continuous or indefinite repetition” (Oxford Talking Dictionary, 1998). The use of “*and*” highlights the different activities that Abram carried out. It relates the idea of moving to Mamre to the idea of living in Canaan and coming from Egypt as well as parting with Lot and following God’s promise. By contrast, “*then*” serves a relatively different meaning that highlights the chronological order of events. In the first place, Abram and Lot returned from Egypt; secondly, stopped at Bethel; thirdly, their shepherds quarreled; fourthly Lot went to the Jordan Valley and Abram went to Mamre. On the other hand, the Arabic conjunction “*ف /fa*” (Ibn Manthour 1999: 165) expresses a meaning different from “*and* or *then*”. The use of the Arabic “*ف /fa*” indicates that the action was carried out immediately after the preceding action. The use of “*and* or *then*” doesn’t specify the period of time between an action and another while the use of “*ف /fa*” indicates the immediate occurrence. When God called Abram, he immediately moved his tents and went to Mamre. However, in the case of “*so*”, a relation of cause and effect is initiated. The first action took place; therefore, Abram’s moving was the result. When God promised Abram the Land, the result was that Abram could go anywhere and this time to Mamre. All the previously mentioned meanings are related textually and this validates the idea of *differance* in relation to textual signs.

In the previous example, the change in the translation product results from a pragmatic *differance*. Morris (1971) points out that the pragmatic force is an essential constituent feature in the meaning of a sign. The variation in the conjunction used reflects a variation in the speech act preceding. Attributing the narrative character to the speech act of God’s promise to Abram entails the use of “*and* or *then*” to comply with the narration. However, considering the direct words of God as a directive

speech act ordering Abram to behold in the four directions and promising him its possession, Abram immediately complied with God's words and moved his tent and this explains the use of "ف/ fa". Similarly, having in mind the nature of a directive speech act explains the use of "so" which hints at an empty category that stands for "because".

**Differance in language function "came/ went/ X"**

The use of these two verbs or their omission recalls a spatial dimension of Bible narration. It is clear that the use of "came" denotes the idea that the narrator was in Hebron or Mamre so when Abram moved he "came" to the place where the narrator stays. However, in the case of "went", a fact of narrator decentralization appears. Here the narrator was either in the first place where Abram used to stay or he was anywhere and he is providing a sequence of events concerning the movement of Abram. The omission of "went" or "came" relates to the spatial characteristic of textuality. Although the translator frees himself from the spatial commitments, he/she steers the verse into a question of genre and fidelity. The translator replaces the original narrator who could be a prophet and pushes the Biblical text towards historical narration. The translator who used "went" or "X: nothing" is telling what happened in the Biblical story rather than telling the story. The translation with "went" represents references which practice a spatial substitution between the Biblical places and those of the translator. The use of the verb "came" in the original Hebrew Scriptures is informative in its function conveying the Biblical facts while the use of "went" an expressive (expository) function where the translator is telling what he/she knows about the Biblical story. This spatial influence validates the thoughts of deconstruction for a comprehensive translation theory. Davis (2001) points out that the instability of the linguistic sign shadows textuality with unstable meanings that normalize with the reader's/translator's preferences.

**Semantic difference** “*dwelt/to live/ settled/ قلم*”

Semantically, *differance* travels through the use of synonymous entries that reflect a presence of different characteristics. *Oxford Talking Dictionary* (1998) defines the given verbs as follows:

- *dwell*: continue for a time in a place, state, or condition;
- *live*: supply oneself with food; feed, subsist. Make one's home; dwell, reside;
- *settle*: fix or establish permanently (one's abode, residence, etc.).

The semantic plurality in the translators’ choices reflects the unavoidable strategic necessity of spatiotemporal effect embodied in *differance*. Owing to the fact that the translator is another re-originator of the message, it is not clear whether Abram is going to Mamre to live permanently or temporarily. The early translations of the Bible gave Abram a temporary stay near Hebron and this act was expressed by the use of “dwell”. By contrast, a deferred meaning appeared in 1979 that gave Abram a permanent stay as he “settled” there.

**Differance due to the arbitrary nature of signification**

The arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign along with meaning conventionality constitute one basic force of meaning *differance*. “*By the oaks/ بلوطات/ near the sacred trees/ near the great trees/ by the vale/ in the plain/near the oak grove/ near oak trees*” are different faces for the same linguistic entry representing renewable presences.

There is no doubt that Abram pitched his tents in a place near Hebron, but the translators rendered different places and different views due to different decisions at different periods of time. In 1609, Abram pitched his tents in a vale and in 1611 in the plain and here the translator is describing the geographical features in relation to his own preference. A plain does not match with a vale topographically and in fact they stand in paradox, but it seems that the translators’ own areas substituted Abram’s. On the other hand, the “oaks” changed identities from time to time. In 1979, the translator endowed the trees with sacred status when

he used “sacred trees” while in 2005, they became “great trees”. Depending on the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified driven by the ideology of the translator, the spatiotemporal gap became linguistically active.

### **Syntactic difference**

Syntactically, it is the relationship between the sign and other signs that semiotic entity refers to (Morris, 1971). The difference in sentence structure, coordination, subordination and punctuation properties has its impact on the semiotic awareness of the target reader. Comparing the Arabic translation “ *فَنَقَلَ اِبْرَامُ خِيَامَهُ وَاَتَى وَاَقَامَ عِنْدَ بَلُوَطَاتٍ مَمْرَا الَّتِي فِي حَبْرُونَ وَبَنَى هُنَاكَ مَذْبَحًا لِلرَّبِّ* ” and the KJV translation “ *[a]nd Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and built there an altar unto Jehovah* ” reflects a syntactic *difference* of difference. The Arabic Smith and Van Dyke translation provided the four clauses of the verse equally the same in a syntactic process of coordination in which “sentences are used to express related thoughts which are more or less equal and carry the same weight”(Othman, 2004: 14). However, the translators of ASV and KJV followed a process of subordination in which “unequal ideas are expressed” (2004) and the translators provided parenthetical non-defining clause for parts of the verse. It is true that each language has its unique system in the way it partitions syntactic reality. Arabic and English are systematically different and we find one semiotic entity for the verse highlighted equally the same from initiation to end in Arabic. Such coordination isn’t a common style in English and it prefers subordination where thoughts are expressed unequally. Consequently, the semiotic image in ASV and KJV has an ebb-and-flow style and certain parts of the message are highlighted more than others. Abram and his movement are highlighted while Hebron is parenthetical and commas are used to separate it from the first level semiotic awareness to the second level. However, religious texts are considered a genre that takes care of prophets and places equally the same and they are the places that obtain holiness and remain after the death of prophets.

### **Metaphysics and motivated difference**

Plurality in textual meanings does not only spring up from a linguistic truth, but it also lends a lot of its renewable aspects to the impact of the translators’ metaphysics of presence. Lefevere (1990) points out that “language is not the problem. Ideology and poetics are, as are cultural elements that are clear, or seen as completely ‘misplaced’ in what would be the target culture version of the text to be translated” (Lefevere, 1990: 26).

Deconstruction and the strategic awareness of *différance* expose both textual signs and the effect of the reader’s textless metaphysics of presence. Being a strategy for reading and criticism, the basis of deconstruction hypothesis is that “there is nothing outside the text” (Derrida, 1974: 158) and this allows for a free play of signs but within its textual layout. Deconstruction questions the force of metaphysics that haunts the Anglo-American textual tradition and tries to redirect “[t]he violence of translation [that] resides in its very purpose and activity: the reconstruction of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs, and representations that pre-exist in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality” (Venuti, 1996: 196).

In the following data, we witness how the metaphysics of the translator’s presence transforms the textual meaning as it suppresses the textual traces through a supplementing act to serve socio-political agendas that fit in with the American paradigm. An intentional thrust usually operates along with the metaphysics of presence that steers the Biblical message into the inclusion of the socio-political nuances of the cultural context of the translator. It is the metaphysics of the American philosophy that plays a replacing act with the textual identity. Genesis (16:12) testifies how the metaphysics of presence steers the translation into a state of irrelevance when the Biblical absence is restructured by the cultural ideology of the translators’ presence.

**Table (2):** (Genesis 16:12).

NIV	He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him,	2011
ASV	And he shall be as a wild ass among men; his hand's shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him	1901
KJV	And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him;	1611
Van Dyke	وَأَنَّهُ يَكُونُ إِنْسَانًا وَحَثِييًا يَدُهُ عَلَى كُلِّ وَاحِدٍ وَيَدُ كُلِّ وَاحِدٍ عَلَيْهِ وَأَمَامَ جَمِيعِ أَخَوَاتِهِ يَسْكُنُ.	1865

**The scene of the verse**

After many years of marriage Abram and his wife Sarah did not have any children. So Sarah asked Abram to marry Hagar whom the Great Pharaoh of Egypt offered. When Hagar became pregnant, Sarah humiliated her and so she ran away into the open. At that moment the angel of God appeared to Hagar and told her the message above. He also told her that she would have a child and that she should name him “Ishmael”.

**Spatiotemporal renderings**

The verse exposes a textual identification for Ishmael. It describes his identity and future entity among his brethren. In describing Ishmael, the Hebrew Old Testament uses the word “*pere*” and this word has been dealt with differently at different stages and different periods of time. The KJV, which dates back to 1611 and whose translators “tried to ensure that every word in the original (Greek and Hebrew) had an English equivalent” (Ryken 2004: 6), uses the equivalent word “wild” in reference to Ishmael’s character. Following that and after the American revision of the KJV was made, ASV uses “wild ass among men” despite its irrelevance to the linguistic and pragmatic scene of the verse. Very much recently, the NIV uses a dehumanizing description of Ishmael by using “wild donkey of a man”. These different meanings do not only fail

at the retentive-protentive level, but they barely match the linguistic entries of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Taking a look at the speech act sequence of the verse clarifies the degree of irrelevance and the hegemonic intentions of the translators’ choice of “ass” or “donkey”.

10 And the angel of the LORD said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. 11. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Behold, thou {cf15I art} with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the LORD hath heard thy affliction. 12. And he will be a wild man; his hand {cf15I will be} against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren. (Gen. 16: 10-12)

10 .. وَقَالَ لَهَا مَلَاكُ الرَّبِّ: «تَكْثِيرًا كَثِيرًا نَسَلُكَ فَلَا بُعْدَ مِنَ الْكَثْرَةِ». 11. وَقَالَ لَهَا مَلَاكُ الرَّبِّ: «هَا أَنْتِ حُبْلَى فَتَلِدِينَ ابْنًا وَتَدْعِينَ اسْمَهُ اسْمَاعِيلَ لِأَنَّ الرَّبَّ قَدْ سَمِعَ لِمَدْلَنِكَ. 12. وَأَنَّهُ يَكُونُ إِنْسَانًا وَحَشِيًّا يَدُهُ عَلَى كُلِّ وَاحِدٍ وَيَدُ كُلِّ وَاحِدٍ عَلَيْهِ وَأَمَامَ جَمِيعِ أَخَوْتِهِ يَسْكُنُ» (سميث وفاندايك)

The use of the word “*pere/wild*” in its traditional context serves favorable characteristics of plentiful and strong personality that survives the wilderness of Abraham’s days and the wilderness of the desert. It is clear that Hagar is satisfied by the message of the angel who tells her that the “LORD hath heard thy affliction”. It is a situation of glory and high Heavenly regard along with this form of covenant concerning Ishmael. The whole scene is in favor of Ishmael and so a “relevant” translation needs to spring up from the source text orientation regardless of any semantic choices.

Nida & Taber (1969), the leading figures in the modern translations of the Bible, point out that the word “ass” in general should not be used in the spoken ceremonies at churches because it has “unfavorable connotations” (1969: 29), while it can be retained in the written forms. Knowing the fact that “ass” carries unfavorable connotations makes the translation a version of paradox to the original scene which is a scene that honors Ishmael whose name is mingled with God’s and whose mother is the first Biblical woman to have the honor of speaking to the angel of



God. The semiotic failure between the original scene and the ASV scene provide a completely dehumanizing and totally irrelevant message.

### Irrelevant differance

Ferdinand de Saussure points out the fact of the first component of *differance* which tackles the spatial dimension of the message on the bases that meanings are the cause of relations and differences. The Hebrew word “*pere*” has no root in the Hebrew Bible and this fact is put forward by Clark’s Commentary <http://clarke.biblecommenter.com/genesis/16.htm> 17/7/2013. “As the root of this word does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, it is probably found in the Arabic *farra*, to run away, to run wild; and hence the wild ass, from its fleetness and its untamable nature”. The Commentary highlights two distinct points; the first is that “*pere*” does not have a Hebrew root and that it probably has an Arabic root. The first fact poses the deconstructive question: where do the translations come from if all translations depend on Hebrew and Hebrew lacks the word’s root? The second point is that the word has its origin in Arabic and it requires us to think in a two-sided probability: What can the Arabic root for the Hebrew “*pere*” be? And how does the Arabic context classify it? The closest Arabic word to the Hebrew “*pere*” is “*بريّ* *perre*” and it has an Arabic root which is “*برر* / *برّ*” (Ibn Manthour, 1999) which constitutes a group of related words such as:

ابّر الرجل اي كثر ولده؛  
 برّ ومنها بريّة وهي الصحراء؛  
 ابّرهم اي ابعدهم في البر ويقال افصح العرب ابّرهم؛  
 ويقال ابّر فلان على اصحابه اي علاهم؛  
 وكذلك برّ والده اي اطاعه والبرّ فعل كل خير من اي ضرب كان.

(Ibn Manthour, 1999: 253-254)

The English equivalent “wild” and the Arabic rendering “*برّيّ*” share only one part which is living in the wilderness “*بريّة*”, and stand in counterpart in the rest of their disseminations. Living in the wilderness is

a spatial fact very much relevant to Ishmael’s place of living which is the wilderness of Paran; the cultural ‘other’, however, associates “wild” with negative structure that semiotically shadows the whole Biblical scene. In Arabic “بَرَّ”, is the root out of which several values overflow harmoniously with the textual dependencies. This Arabic root is a reference to the state of living in the desert, having a large number of children, being eloquent, benevolent and a philanthropist. By contrast, the English equivalent “wild” has got a group of different negative traces in addition to “living in a state of nature” (Webster’s, 1987). It also means feral, savage, unbroken, undomesticated, untamed, crazy, fanciful, foolish, insane, nonsensical, barbarian, heathen, rude, uncivilized and uncultivated.

### **Irrelevant structure**

The ASV is a word-for-word translation of the word of God as it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, but in the case of Ishmael two words are provided to replace the Hebrew “*pere*”. By doing so, a subversive impact operates and shifts the Ishmaelitish favorable scene into a dehumanizing picture with very “unfavorable connotation” (Nida & Taber 1969: 29). It is a translation that takes much of its diction from the creed of antipathy and conflict along with biased views against Ishmael associating him to an act of “sin”.

Abram did what Sarai suggested. Abram had faith that God would give him descendants, **but then he took the work on himself**. He did not wait for God to do something miraculous..... Abram did not ask God if marrying Hagar was the right thing to do. If he had asked, God would have given him the wisdom he needed. Abram sinned by doing things his own way and this caused much trouble” (Retrieved from <https://bible.org/seriespage/abram-hagar-and-ishmael-genesis-15-16>) 15/7/2013. [highlights from the original].

Actually, this negative dehumanizing thrust is used by many exegeses of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century which fail at the semiotic level. The Pulpit Commentary originally published in 1881

(<http://biblehub.com/genesis/16-12.htm> 1/9/2013) provides that sort of negative characteristics “in the turbulent and lawless character of the Bedouin Arabs and Saracens for upwards of thirty centuries. The Bedouins are the outlaws among the nations. Plunder is legitimate gain, and daring robbery is praised as valor”. Similarly, Gill’s Exposition <http://biblehub.com/genesis/16-12.htm> sticks the characteristics of an “ass” to Ishmael and his descendents. It points out that the sign of Ishmael resembles “the wild ass of a man ... wild, fierce, untamed, not subject to a yoke, and impatient of it, such was Ishmael, and such are his posterity.” These exegetical traces of “ass” replaced the Biblical sense of “*pere*” not only at the level of interpretation and exegetical work, but at the level of the holy scripture of modern days.

The conflict between the positive Biblical scene and the negative translated versions made some Christians revolt against the irrelevantly translated versions of the Bible. It is true that plurality in Biblical translation is legitimate as long as there is relevance between the source and its translation; however, what cannot be approved of deconstructively is the injection of the metaphysics of the situation into reproducing an opposite semiotic structure. It is apparent that the translators’ metaphysics of presence is the jarring tune in the anthem of relevance. The previously mentioned negative description of Ishmael has no Biblical basis according to other Christian scholars such as David Benjamin (1987) who was a catholic priest of the Uniate-Chaldean sect and part of the French Mission in Urmia. He points out the irrelevant translation of Ishmael’s status at the linguistic and Biblical context. At the linguistic level, Benjamin (1987) points out that the Christian translation of the Hebrew word “*pere*” as “wild” or “wild ass” is semantically inaccurate. “the Christians have translated the same Hebrew word, which means "fruitful" or "plentiful" from the verb “*para*” - identical with the Arabic “*wefera*” - in their versions "a wild ass" (Benjamin, 1987: 17). These textual facts speak at the tongue of Calvin’s Commentary:

“12. And he will be a wild man. The angel declares what kind of person Ishmael will be. The simple meaning is, (in my judgment,)

that he will be a warlike man, and so formidable to his enemies, that none shall injure him with impunity. Some expound the word ‘phr’ (pereh) to mean a forester, and one addicted to the hunting of wild beasts. But the explanation must not, it seems, be sought elsewhere than in the context.” Retrieved from <http://calvin.biblecommenter.com/genesis/16.htm>. 1/7/2013.

When the positive original presence (Hagar and the angel of the Lord) is replaced by the American metaphysics of presence, Ishmael appears negatively in the American version and the anthem of “relevance” is totally destroyed. The simplest explanation for this is that the American context of the early 1900s was the continuation of ancient Occidental impact against the Arab world. “Thus we will find it commonly believed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that Arabia was on the fringe of the Christian world, a natural asylum for heretical outlaws, and that Mohammed was a cunning apostate, whereas in the twentieth century an Orientalist scholar, an erudite specialist, will be the one to point out how Islam is really no more than second-order Arian heresy” (Said, 1978: 63-64). So it is part of the western philosophy that often tries to exterminate one end of a binary in which it (the West) represents the superior end: Isaac versus Ishmael; the Occident versus the Orient; Westerners versus Arabs and Israelis versus Palestinians. It is textually obvious that the diction and linguistic forms used to present “the other” meant to dehumanize or at least marginalize in order to subject “the other” for the western superiority. Edward Said (1978) sites Massignon’s remarks of marginalization when he speaks about “the three Abrahamic religions, of which Islam is the religion of Ishmael, the monotheism of a people excluded from the divine promise made to Isaac” (Said, 1978: 268).

### **Retentive irrelevance**

Deconstruction establishes its hypothesis of signification not on the signifier and the signified but on the retentive and protentive trace identities. The trace is not a static point of analysis, but it “marks the weave, or textile, of differences” (Davis, 2001: 16). Relevance in translation lends itself to the historical existence of the sign and its

representation in the future. “Deconstructing the subject, if there is such a thing, would mean first to analyze historically, in a genealogical way, the formation and different layers which have built, so to speak, the concept”(Derrida, 1996b videotape; cited in Davis, 2001). The status of Ishmael and the meaning of “*pere*” cannot be viewed dyadically in relation to its semantic correspondence. The sense of the word is to be viewed with its traces and their retentive-protentive features all throughout the structure. Each presence of a sign, which may resemble or contradict its absence, embodies absent traces that play a part in the signification process. The American Biblical translations of “wild” are hardly relevant in relation to retentive-protentive Biblical structure of Ishmael.

At the retentive level which refers to a sign’s past relations, Ishmael was introduced by different touches that anticipate the coming of a dignified figure. It is the Angel of God who is speaking to Hagar and this is the first Biblical incident in which the Angel of God speaks to a woman and establishes a covenant with her. It is also the first Biblical incident in which a name of a prophet is set by God and before his birth. Mathew Henry Commentary points out how God “names her child, which was an honor both to her and it: Call him Ishmael, God will hear; and the reason is, because the Lord has heard; he has, and therefore he will” <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/16-12.htm>1/11/2013).

It is a name that is associated with “*ael*”, God’s name in Hebrew, very much similar to Jacob’s second name, *Israel*. Ishmael was the first son of Abraham and the first name of Abraham’s descendents to be connected with the name of God and it was directly after his birth that Abram acquired his new name ‘Abraham’. Another retentive trace is evident in (Genesis 15: 4) when Abram complained about his heir; God assured him that “he that shall come forth out of your own body shall be your heir.” Similarly, in the same retentive thrust, a covenant of Ishmael’s greatness is also established with Hagar in Genesis 16: 10 “And the angel of the LORD said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude.” And this promise is typical of that made with Abram earlier in Genesis 12:2. All

these retentive characteristics are marks of glory in which Ishmael is the fundamental part. Some religious authorities like Aben Ezra were aware of these Biblical facts and so rendered /pere/ as “free”. *Gill’s exposition of the Entire Bible* (<http://biblehub.com/genesis/16-12.htm>) points out that “Aben Ezra translates the word rendered “wild”, or “wild ass”, by “free”, and refers to the passage in Job 39:5.” The whole retentive Biblical traces question the American negative use of “donkey or ass” which springs from a hegemonic paradigm of metaphysics which shakes not only semantic truth but violates the whole state of relevance and subverts the message into its opposite.

### **Protentive irrelevance**

At the protentive level, the character of Ishmael gets deeper and greater. Genesis 21:13-18 is a promise made to Abraham concerning the coming glory of Ishmael. “And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, (a great nation) because he *is* thy seed” (KJV). A great nation testifies the unity of different social components such as language, religion, homeland and cultural commonness. This part of the promise proves that Ishmael is going to be a spiritual father like Abraham for the nation that will be great and blessed and this textual protention denies the American dehumanizing thrust in translation which describes Ishmael as “ass” or “donkey”.

Moreover, the great nation can’t be achieved by chance, but there are requirements, mainly spiritual, that are needed. Ishmael has been present in the Bible; before his birth during his life and after his death. The Bible did not overlook Ishmael’s presence and either God or the prophets in the Bible shed light on the coming of the great nation. God foretells Moses in Deuteronomy (18:18) that “I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.” The whole scene traces back to Ishmael and his descendents to fulfill the promise of a great nation. “Brethren: اخوتهم” is an explicit reference to a Prophet who will be from the Israelites’ brothers and this is a reference to the Ishmaelites.

## Conclusion

“Translation is writing; that is, it is not translation only in the sense of transcription. It is a productive writing called forth by the original text” (Derrida, 1985b: 153) ‘*Differance*’ adds additional awareness to the linguistic sign that participates genuinely in the process of signification. It highlights the temporal dimension along with the dyadic relation put forward by structuralism and the triadic hierarchy introduced by pragmatism. It can also serve as a frame for translation criticism by making use of the trace and its retentive and protentive dimensions.

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