

## The Translatability of Terms of Address in Najib Mahfouz's Ziqaq Al-Midaq into English

طوعية ترجمة صيغ التخاطب في رواية زقاق المدق لنجيب محفوظ إلى الإنجليزية

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### **Abstract:**

This paper investigates the problem of terms of address (social honorifics) in Arabic-English translation. In order to highlight the problem under discussion, the study uses five honorifics, identified by the researcher as comprising difficulties to translators, from Mahfouz's (1947) famous novel Ziqaq-Al-Midaq. Twenty M.A. students of translation at An-Najah National University served as the subjects in this study. They were asked to translate these address terms in the light of their original contexts. The study also looks into Trevor Le Gassick's renditions of these terms in his 1975 translation of Mahfouz's novel. The present study argues that relational terms of address are harder to translate than absolute ones due to the fact that relational honorifics have drifted extensively from their traditional usages and acquired new significations which are initiated for social purposes.

### **ملخص:**

يتناول هذا البحث مشكلة صيغ التخاطب في الترجمة من العربية إلى الإنجليزية. ولبيان أهمية المشكلة، تستخدم الدراسة خمس صيغ للتخاطب يرى الباحث أن فيها ما يشكل صعوبات للمترجم. وقد اختارها الباحث من رواية "زقاق المدق" (1947) لنجيب محفوظ. وتقوم عينة الدراسة على عشرين طالباً من طلبة ماجستير الترجمة في جامعة النجاح الوطنية، فقد أسند إليهم الباحث مهمة ترجمة عبارات من صيغ التخاطب التي أخذت من سياقاتها الأصلية في النص. كما ضمن الباحث الدراسة ما يناظر ذلك من ترجمة ليجاسك (1975) لرواية نجيب محفوظ. وبينت الدراسة أن ترجمة صيغ المجاملة أصعب بكثير من ترجمة صيغ التخاطب الموافقة للحال وذلك لأن الاستخدام التقليدي لصيغ المجاملة قد تجاوز حده المألوف على نحو ما يتجلى في الاستخدامات الجديدة التي تملئها الأغراض الاجتماعية.

## 1. Introduction:

Terms of address are “words and phrases used for addressing” (Braun 1988:7). They are words attached to the person to show his/her status, position, and/or rank in society. The use of these terms, argues Nevala (2004:2125), is “governed by the relationship between two participants the speaker and the hearer”. Moreover, the speaker’s option for using a certain term of address instead of another is highly predictable from three parameters: speaker-addressee social status, the type of relationship that holds between participants in a speech event, and the level of formality imposed by the situation. That is, social honorifics are part of the social function of any language. They give information about the interlocutors, the social status of the addressor and that of the addressee; the relation that holds between both participants as well as the attitude they both have toward one another. Daher (1987: 144) says that “terms of address are the best example of the interaction between language and society and the more we understand them, the more we understand language”. Interestingly, several recent studies have explored terms of address in light of their linguistic, social and cultural function. Levinson (1983: 63) states that “in many languages, distinctions of fine gradation between the relative ranks of speaker and addressee are systematically encoded throughout...[such terms]”.

Therefore, these terms have a significant role in any language, for they show different levels of relations, relations that might be marked with familiarity, politeness, formality, superiority, intimacy, etc. Farghal and Shaker (1994: 240) state that terms of address “have been viewed mainly in terms of power and solidarity”. Power involves relations like “older than”, “parent of”, employer of”, “richer than”, “stronger than”, “nobler than”, etc; and solidarity involves relations as “attend the same school”, “have the same parents”, “practise the same profession” etc. (cf. Palmer 1976: 62-63). Stressing the same point, Moreno (2002) maintains that address terms are usually dictated by power (authority, respect, status) or solidarity (intimacy, shared experience). Thus, these two parameters determine the choice between familiar and respectful terms of address in language. For instance, the choice, argue Farghal and Shaker,

between the first name *John* and the family name with the social honorific *Mr. Brown* when addressing or referring to the same individual is a matter of power and solidarity. That is, the more equal and intimate the speaker is to him, the more he/she would call him *John* and the less equal and more distant he/she is to him, the more he/she would call him *Mr. Brown*. Therefore, the choice between first name and honorificized family name operationally depends on the type of social relationship between the speaker and addressee or referent. Likewise, the *tu/vous* distinction (cf. Levinson 1983) in French has direct bearings on the power-solidarity parameter. Levinson explains that the use of plural “vous” to address one individual conventionally implicates the power of the addressee, i.e. the addressee is socially superior to the speaker, while the choice of “tu” minimizes the power of the addressee and at the same time promotes intimacy and solidarity between speaker and addressee. Thus, the more intimate the speaker is to the addressee, the more he/she would opt for using familiar term(s) of address, and the more distant he/she is to him, the more he/she would opt for using respectful ones. Furthermore, Halupka and Radic (2003) argue that the pragmatic transfer or use of terms of address is most often the result of the addressor’s reaction to the addressee’s behavior, such as a stupid remark or action.

It is important to note that terms of address come under two types: absolute and relational (Levinson 1983). Absolute terms are “forms reserved for authorized speakers and authorized recipients” (ibid: 90). So, in absolute usages, the addressee earns the right to receive one title of address over another. Put differently, a term of address is issued in light of real present qualities assigned to the addressee (at the time of speaking). Accordingly, in Arabic, “دكتور” (doctor) is absolutely used (in Levinson’s sense) provided that the addressee has a Ph.D or a medical doctor.

On the other hand, relational terms of address are not used to mark the real present qualities ascribed to the addressee, but rather, they are used merely for social purposes. More importantly, relational terms of address have drifted from their denotational signification and acquired a new connotational signification, which is initiated for social purposes (cf.

Farghal and Shaker 1994). For example, in Arabic, the use of the term “أستاذ” (professor) by, say, waiters or salesmen to customers, as an expression of respect is relational, whereas the use of the same term by a student to his/her teacher in a school is absolute. Hence, relational terms of address are much harder to translate than absolute ones since they drift from their traditional usages, and their content cannot be understood from their literal meanings.

To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, little research has been conducted on problems involved in translating relational Arabic address terms into English. My interest in this specific area has been influenced by the realization that there is always a need for more comparative research in the field of translating cultural expressions from one language into another. It is hoped that the present study will help overcome this shortage and further contribute to existing research on Arabic-English translation problems.

## **2. Research Methodology:**

### **2.1 Research Design:**

This paper uses 5 social honorifics identified by the researcher as posing difficulties to translators of Arabic texts into English. These terms of address were taken from Najeeb Mahfouz’s (1947) novel Ziqaq Al-Midaq, which was translated by Trevor Le Gassick (1975) into Midaq Alley. The study was conducted by means of a translation task. The task, which included 5 underlined Arabic honorifics in their original contexts, was given to 20 students in the M.A. translation program at An-Najah National University. The students were asked to translate only the underlined terms (see Appendix) and to take enough time to do so. The subjects’ translations along with Le Gassick’s (1975) renditions were analyzed and discussed.

### **2.2 Subjects:**

In order to shed light on the problem in question, a translation task was distributed among 20 M.A. students of translation. The subjects were randomly chosen. The researcher gave the task to the first MA students

he met on the day of the task distribution. All of these students were native speakers of Arabic. They hold a B.A. degree in English Language and Literature. During their study for the M.A. degree in translation, the subjects took courses in translating Arabic texts into English, and vice versa. The researcher went through some of their term papers and found out that they produced decent work in both languages. In their second year they were already exposed to a combination of theory and practice oriented syllabi and curricula. Therefore, all of them were expected to have a good command of both English and Arabic. I should add that the students had no background information about Mahfouz's novel, but all of them were engaged in translating similar literary texts from Arabic into English throughout their MA study.

### **3. Limitations of the study:**

The present study addresses itself basically to emphasizing the problem of terms of address in Arabic –English translation in an attempt to make the translators aware of the fact that relational terms of address have undergone drastic changes in terms of their semantic import. It should be pointed out that this study is not meant to put forward proposed translations of the address terms discussed below since I believe that attending to the problem at large would be of more use. Thus, the data of the study is viewed as a representative sample used to highlight the problem in question.

### **4. Results:**

The translations of 5 Arabic terms of address by Le Gassick and the subjects in this research have been analyzed and discussed in light of some theoretical considerations. Table 1.a. summarizes the results by giving the percentage of students' inappropriate renditions of each term of address. Table 1.b. provides model made translations of these terms. The second table shows Le Gassick's inappropriate renditions.

**Table (1.a.):** Percentages of inappropriate renditions of each term of address by MA students.

No.	Arabic term of address	Percentage
1.	معلم	60%
2.	استاذ	70%
3.	أوسطة	100%
4.	أفندي	70%
5.	سي السيد	70%

**Table (1.b.):** Model (made) translations

No.	Arabic term of address	Model translation
1.	معلم	Boss
2.	استاذ	Past master
3.	أوسطة	Craftsman
4.	أفندي	Gentleman
5.	سي السيد	Reverend lord

**Table (2):** Le Gassick’s inappropriate renditions.

No.	Arabic term of address	Le Gassick’s renditions
1.	معلم	Mr.Kirsha
2.	استاذ	Reverend sir
3.	أوسطة	Middle-class
4.	أفندي	He must wear a suit
5.	سي السيد	Mr.Hussainy

## 5. Analysis and Discussion:

This section presents an analysis and discussion of the data of the study. It emphasizes some of the problems translators may encounter when they render Arabic social honorifics into English.

Turning to our data, two informal honorifics were used “أستاذ” (professor) and “معلم” (teacher), (see Appendix). Whereas “أستاذ” is

relationally used (again in Levinson's sense) for it does not denote its traditional usage, "معلم" is absolutely used where the speaker addresses an owner of a café house (called Kirsha) to show respect and superiority of the addressee. The term "معلم" in Egyptian Arabic is usually used to address a foreman, a driver, a work supervisor, a chief of workers, etc. The term "أستاذ" can be used in Arabic to address a person who is superior to the speaker. Thus, the two terms, more often than not, conventionally implicate the superiority of the addressee and the relative inferiority of the speaker. Moreover, they are used to show respect and/or politeness toward the addressee.

It should be noted that the term "معلم" occurred many times throughout the novel. Le Gassick (1975) adopted three strategies in his attempt to convey this title in English. He resorted to paraphrasing it into (Café owner), using a conventional title of address (Mr.) which can be used for any person irrespective of his/her job, and skipping it. Such inconsistency in the translation of the same form of address obliges us to investigate the context in which this term was used as it might be acceptable to have all these translations in different contexts and for variation purposes e.g., stylistic reasons.

In his rendering of "معلم" in our data, Le Gassick (1975) resorted to the second strategy, i.e. he provided a formal and conventional title of address (Mr. Kirsha). By so doing, Le Gassick does not reflect the intimate relationship that holds between the speaker and addressee, for "Mr." plus a proper name marks a formal and distant relationship in English and does not necessarily show that there is a personal relation holding between the speaker and the addressee. Similarly, most of the student translators (60%) used the title "Mr." as an equivalent to "معلم". A point that must be made clear here is that Le Gassick's inappropriate renderings are much more blamed than the students', because unlike the students, Le Gassick has an access to the whole novel. However, the term

"معلم", which refers to (Kirsha), who is the manager of a café house and supervises the workmen in it, can be best translated into "boss".

As for the term "أستاذ", the analysis of the data demonstrated that Le Gassick as well as all respondents seemed to be aware of the fact that the term "أستاذ" was not used in its traditional sense, i.e., in an absolute sense. But surprisingly, only some of them provided reasonable renderings. Notice the renderings below by Le Gassick and some of the students (40%). All these translations do not fit the context in which the term was used.\*

*Reverend Sir (Le Gassick)*

*Sir*

*Master*

The use of "reverend" by Le Gassick is meant to highlight the speaker's polite attitude toward the addressee as well as his deference. Other students (30%), however, rendered the term inappropriately into "Mr." and "man". But the use of "Mr." alone as a title of address reflects the speaker's lower position relative to the addressee and shows offence towards the addressee; hence the inappropriateness of the students' renderings. As for "man", it is inappropriate since it may not show respect toward the addressee.

Parkinson (1985:131) says that there are three typical uses of the term "أستاذ" in Egyptian Arabic. The first usage "involves the use of any high term to attack an addressee who does not deserve to receive it". Hence sarcasm arises. The second usage, however, involves the name-calling mode, as opposed to the strict vocative mode. In the vocative mode, Parkinson argues, the term "أستاذ" has some pragmatic discourse function such as getting attention, making turn changes, indicating who the addressee is, etc. In the name-calling mode, no such pragmatic functions exist. The term is only used to imply that the addressee has the

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\* These translations are permissible in other contexts



qualities associated with the word, that is, the term is used in the name-calling mode whenever the speaker thinks that the addressee is doing something masterly. For example, “أستاذ” can be used to address a Sheikh (old religious man) who recites the Quran masterly. Finally, the third usage is meant for secondary and elementary school teachers. In Levinson’s (1983) system, the first two usages are relational, whereas the last (third) one is absolute.

With all this in mind, we can argue that “أستاذ” can be best translated into “past master”, since the addressee (called Zaita) is a past master at his job (deforming people by cutting their limbs). However, I should add that “أستاذ” as a relational term of address may furnish a possible ironical interpretation. Going back to the larger context, one can assume that the speaker (a man seeking to deform his body in order to be able to work as a beggar) is being ironic by relaying an impolite illocutionary act (insulting) in a seemingly polite way. This is what Leech (1983) calls being offensive in an apparently friendly way. That is the speaker is using a high term “أستاذ” to attack the addressee (Zaita) who does not deserve to receive it (see parkinson 1985). This is why the addressee became angry for being called “أستاذ” (see Appendix). According to Larson (1984), the total context will usually show the inappropriateness of interpreting the ironic statement directly and show that the opposite is meant. Emphasizing the same point, Mateo (1995:172) maintains that “irony depends on context since it springs from the relationships of a word, expression or action with the whole text or situation.” Translators, therefore, should examine carefully the wider context of relational terms of address in order to figure out that an ironical interpretation is meant and then come up with a proper rendering.

Other titles of address which present much difficulty in translation for both Le Gassick and the students are “أوسطة” and “أفندي”. In fact, these two terms are hardly translatable, for they have no direct equivalents in English. The term “أوسطة” (colloquial for استاذ) is used in Arabic as a title

for some artificers. It means master; foreman; overseer; also it is a form of address for those in lower callings, e.g., to a cab driver, coachman, etc. Parkinson (1985:141) says that “أوسطة” means “master” (in the master/apprentice relationship) and refers specifically to those professions related to some craft or mechanical (usually hand) skill.

In their attempt to render this term, the respondents used different strategies: omission, paraphrasing, transliteration and providing a conventional term of address. Indeed, all the students (100%) failed to come up with an appropriate rendering of this term. Consider the following renderings by some students:

*Master of many professions (paraphrase).*

*Usta (transliteration)*

*Mr. (conventional)*

Le Gassick’s rendering showed that he misread the term and then provided a nonsensical translation, which distorted the source text. His translation reads as “middle-class”. However, the term “أوسطة” can be simply translated into “a craftsman”.

Unlike “أوسطة”, which is used in absolute sense in our data, “أفندي” is used relationally to designate the speaker’s social rank and position. This term means gentleman when referring to non-Europeans wearing western clothes and tarboosh. It is also used nowadays in military jargon to refer to officials whose ranks are either a “first lieutenant” or “second lieutenant”. Such traditional usage is not applied in our example because address forms are always “culturally dependent and change in the course of time as old criteria become obsolete and come to be replaced by new criteria” (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2003: 4). So, the term “أفندي” is used to conventionally implicate the addressee’s respectable position and/or rank. The respondents’ (70%) renderings of this term ranged from omission to transliteration. As for Le Gassick, he rendered what the term means according to his own understanding by saying “he must wear a suit”, which is awkward and funny in English. A good translation of this term might be “gentleman”.

Likewise, the honorific term “سي السيد” is hard to render because of the title of respect “سي”, which might be a short form of “سيد”. It is important to note that “سيد” in the above term might be ambiguous. It might be understood as a name of a person, thus referring to a low-class addressee or as a title of address meaning “Lord”, thus referring to an old male addressee or to one who is generally equal to the addressor. The term in our example merits the second interpretation, thus used as a title of address to refer politely to an old religious man (called Radwan Al-Hussainy). Interestingly, the term “سي السيد” is doubly marked for politeness since it involves two titles of respect “سي” plus “سيد”.

In our analysis of the data, we noticed that (40%) of the students used “Mister” as an equivalent to “سي السيد”, but again, using only “Mr.” as a title of address shows offence towards the addressee and does not reflect the intimate relationship that holds between speaker and addressee. To quote Parkinson (1985: 157) “it appears that a translator would often be ill-advised to translate English “Mr.” into “Sayyid” in Egypt, unless the goal is to offend the addressee”. On the other hand, other students (30%) fell in the trap of ambiguous reading and then considered “سيد” as a proper name. As for Le Gassick, he undertranslated the term by using the addressee’s family name prefixed by the title “Mr.” (Mr. Hussainy). The failure of the students as well as Le Gassick in providing a proper rendering of this term shows how difficult it is to gloss “سي السيد” into English. An appropriate rendering of the term might be something like “reverend Lord”.

#### 4. Conclusion:

In dealing with Arabic honorifics, translators should differentiate between two usages: absolute and relational. Translators should be aware of the fact that, unlike absolute usages, relational terms of address are used merely for social purposes, and they have drifted from their denotational significations and acquired new connotational ones. Such a



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- 12) Nevala, M. (2004). "Accessing Politeness Axes: Forms of Address and Terms of Reference in Early English Correspondence". Journal of Pragmatics. 36. 2125-2160.
- 13) Palmer, F. (1976) Semantics. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
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### Translation Task (Appendix)

ترجم ما تحته خط إلى الانجليزية:

١. ثم ومضت عيناه البرا قتان بغتة وصاح:  
الوقار أنفس عاهة!  
فسأله الرجل متحيراً:  
ماذا تعني يا أستاذ؟!  
فانكفأ وجه زيطة غضباً وصاح به محتداً:  
أستاذ؟ أسمعتني أقرأ على القبور؟
٢. قد قرأ السيد الحسيني في عينيه نصف المغمضتين الطمأنينة فقال له بهدوء مبتسماً:  
شرفت دارنا يا معلم  
شرف الله قدرك يا سي السيد
٣. قد سألتها يوماً عن الشاب الذي رأيناه معها فقالت:  
خطيبي... صاحب صالون حلاقة!  
وقالت لنفسها أن أية واحدة منهن لتعد نفسها سعيدة إذا خطبها صبي قهوة أو حداد  
وهذا صاحب دكان، أو سطره و أفندي أيضاً!