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## CHALLENGES FACING THE TRANSLATORS IN THE TRANSLATION OF TIMBUKTU MANUSCRIPTS

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### Résumé

Cette recherche qualitative se rapporte aux difficultés que rencontrent les traducteurs dans la traduction des manuscrits de Tombouctou. Les traducteurs sont généralement habitués à des documents d'autres natures et d'autres aspects que ceux de ces manuscrits, surtout quand ceux-ci sont écrits par les non-natifs de la langue. Cette étude vise à contribuer à l'accessibilité des manuscrits de Tombouctou par l'identification des obstacles qui pourraient empêcher cela. Les auteurs de la littérature que nous avons explorée ont restreint leur intérêt aux problèmes que rencontrent les traducteurs arabes, et plus particulièrement les étudiants, dans la traduction Anglais-Arabe et Arabe-Anglais. Pour collecter les données, nous avons fait recours à nos notes personnelles prises pendant notre traduction de ces manuscrits, et aux travaux de certains chercheurs pour nous imprégner des difficultés qu'ils ont relevées pour la compréhension des manuscrits de Tombouctou. Cette étude a conclu que les difficultés que les traducteurs pourraient rencontrer dans la traduction de ce genre de document sont inhérentes au niveau intellectuel des auteurs, à la nature des manuscrits, et aux manipulations artistiques ou même l'inadvertance des hommes.

**Mot clés :** langue, manuscrits, problèmes, Tombouctou, traduction.

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### Abstract

This qualitative research is about the challenges that manuscript translators face in the translation of Timbuktu manuscripts. Translators are usually used to documents of another nature and other aspects different from those of manuscripts, especially when written by non-native speakers. This paper aims to contribute to the accessibility of Timbuktu manuscripts through the identification of the obstacles that might hamper that. The authors of the literature we explored were interested more in the problems that Arab translators face in the translation of English into Arabic and vice versa. To collect data, we resorted to our personal notes taken during our translation of Timbuktu manuscripts, and then we proceeded to exploring researchers' works to see the difficulties that they have evoked in understanding Timbuktu manuscripts. This research has found that the difficulties that translators could encounter in this kind of translation are inherent to the intellectual level of the authors, the nature of the manuscripts, and the artistry mishandling of humans.

**Keywords:** language, manuscript, problems, Timbuktu, translation.

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## Introduction

This is a qualitative research about the issues surrounding the translation of Timbuktu manuscripts. These manuscripts represent an intellectual mosaic by specialists of different disciplines from different regions of the world. This procures them a status of humanity legacy and, thereby, raises an interest in their content disclosure, so that humanity could profit thereof. This study might be important in that it could raise an interest in creating a new specialization in translation practices focusing on the translation of manuscripts by non-native speakers.

The problem is that the ancient manuscripts of Timbuktu are written in Arabic and other languages spoken and used by researchers on a lesser scale. If they have to be translated, translators are not used to their different aspects and characteristics as documents. Moreover, the simple fact that some of these manuscripts are written in Arabic by non-native speakers of this language constitutes another concern. Their works are typical of some people's efforts in expressing their style of speaking, thinking, perceiving, and organizing thoughts in a foreign language. What compounds the

issue is that they are not forcibly exposed to these aspects in the language they write.

Researchers, working in the field of Arabic translation have evoked some problems that could ensnare the feasibility of a good translation. Their concerns evolve around the difficulties related to linguistic modes and cultural aspects of both Arabic and the other language. To that respect, Altarabin (2019) gives, as an example, a sentence in passive voice in English:

*She was saddened by his departure* (p.3).

To him, such a sentence should not be translated into Arabic with passive voice. Active voice would render a better meaning. The translation he proposed for the sentence is أحزنها رحيله (pp. 3-4). In addition, he pointed out the pertinence of observing equivalence in languages. He raises the issue of the inexistence, in Western culture, of some terms in Arabic and Islamic culture. He gave the word الزكاة [zakat] as an example of that. According to him, in such cases, "a description of the word accounts for the meaning" (p.4).

Ghazala (1995) went farther to point out a problem related to lexicology. According to him, a lexical problem occurs when the translator does not understand a word, a

phrase, or an expression clearly or directly. Sometimes, it happens that the translator has never known or seen the word or the expression, and he does not find it in a standard dictionary. This is as well what Zagula (as cited in El Kelani, 2017, p. 364) found as lexical difficulty when he said that it occurs during the process of translation when the necessity of finding the equivalents of some lexical elements points out.

El Kelani (2017) restricted the most important lexical problems to literal translation, polysemy and monosemy, collocation, idioms, and word order problems.

As for literal translation, in their analysis of Arabic translation into English, Dickens et al. (2002) explained it as taking the denotive meaning of the speech elements directly from a dictionary in a strict respect of the grammar of the language in which it is translated (Target Language). According to them, this method focuses more on the form and not on the content.

The choice of denotive meaning of speech elements from a dictionary poses another problem related to synonyms in Arabic translation. This occurs when a word or a sentence can be translated with more than one equivalent and makes students in the dilemma of which one to choose (Ghazala,

2008). This problem of synonyms is nearly similar to what is known as ‘polysemy problem’ but actually different from it. Hatim and Munday (2004) stated that polysemy problem concerns words that have more than one meaning. They gave the word “break” as an example. If you check for the meaning of this word, you will find more than one meaning: *breaking/ break of day/ break in the conversation/ break in weather*, etc. (Hornby, 1983). This is somehow related to the problem that El Kelani (2017) evoked and which is related to the meaning of the word in the context. He gave the word صوت [saut] (literally meaning ‘sound or voice’), as an example, in different contexts such as Phonetics, Geography, birds’ chirps, etc.

Another translation problem that Arabic translation specialists evoke is the translation of collocations. Baker (1992) thought it to be an occurrence of words in close approximation with others. He gave, as examples, the uses of ‘pretty’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘good-looking’ in English with nouns. It essentially means the most frequent way of words combination in a language. El Kelani (2017) thought that the main problem for students in translating collocations is to find the proper Arabic equivalent. He gave, as examples, the following adjectives that modify the following nouns: ‘*strong* wind’ and ‘*heavy* rain’. We cannot interchange

them and say ‘strong rain’ and ‘heavy wind’ even though the meaning in the context is the same.

The last problem evoked hereof consists in understanding the collocations as fixed expressions (El Kelani, 2017). The students have difficulty finding the suitable and correct equivalent collocation in Arabic. This applies to the other way as well when the translation is from Arabic into another language. Ghazala (2014) shared this viewpoint on the translation of collocations when he pointed out that it constitutes a challenge for Arab students. For Rabeh (as cited in El Kelani, 2017, p. 367), the mistakes of Arab students in this respect are due to the literal translation they adopt as the main translation method, and to the fact that they do not give enough importance to the collocations that belong to another language. Baker (1992) explained the origin of this flop by the fact that the competence of someone in using fixed expressions and idioms can hardly match that of a native speaker. He believes that most translators working in a foreign language cannot hope to have the same sensitivity that native speakers seem to have for judging when and how an idiom can be used.

In sum, the literature lacks the concerns about what we call Tripartite Translation. In fact, this is what this kind of translation is about. Translating a non-native

writer’s writing is a second-phased translation, a translation of two languages into one.

This paper is a contribution to making Timbuktu manuscripts accessible through the identification of the problems that could thwart their adequate translation. To achieve that, we designed the paper as follows:

- Our methodology in collecting data and delivering them.
- The results of our research and their discussion.
- A conclusion that synthesizes the whole procedure of this research.

### **1. Methodology**

This paper adopted a qualitative method. The pertinence of a qualitative method choice herein is related to the nature of this study. The qualitative method delves into the causes of a social phenomenon to make them more understandable. This study is reporting some characteristics about a phenomenon and a possible explanation for them. Its scope is Timbuktu manuscripts, most specifically those of Ahmad Baba Institute and Mama Haidara Library. It is mainly based on our three-year personal experience as translators of the scientific manuscripts of this scientific treasure. The steps that we adopted in collecting our data consisted firstly in going through our own target texts (translation) and the notes that

we had taken about the factors that posed problems for us during the translation process.

This first step was overlapped with a tour into Timbuktu manuscripts at Ahmad Baba Institute and Mama Haidara Library and the researchers' efforts in authenticating and studying them. These two phases allowed us to make a synthesis and a categorization of the difficulties that we encountered during the three years of our manuscript translation. It also allowed us to build up a scope of the hitches that the researchers have pointed out, and which could affect the understanding and translation of Timbuktu manuscripts. Our last step consisted in reading the literature about the problems that surround the translation of Arabic into another language and vice versa. This last step allowed us to understand the nature of what we had found as difficulties and to identify the difficulties that are proper to the Arabic-English translation.

## **2. Results and Discussion**

As indicated above, the results displayed below are the outcome of our exploration through our personal notes as translators, and through the issues that some researchers have pointed out in the course of their studies of Timbuktu manuscripts.

### **2.1. Translation of Timbuktu**

#### **Manuscripts**

Scholars and researchers' efforts in restoring Timbuktu manuscripts' value and usability go around two major scientific activities, authentication and translation.

As for authentication, some laudable efforts have been exerted so far by some Arabist researchers, even if very far from reaching the target. The realm of these curious researchers comprises teachers of different educational levels, senior university students, and candidates of scientific contests. The researchers of manuscript libraries of Timbuktu are also of the lot. The researchers of Ahmad Baba Institute and Mama Haidara manuscript libraries have deployed tremendous efforts in ancient manuscript authentication. Many technical operations preceded their authentication to make it easier and credible. Some of these technical procedures are environmental conditioning, manuscript restoration, cataloguing, and digitalization. However, the authentication need is still pressing, because, to date, the authenticated manuscripts do not represent more than 3 % of the huge lot of Timbuktu ancient manuscripts.

As for translation, so far, Timbuktu manuscripts have not attracted the interest of specialized translators. It is also worth mentioning that rare are those translators

who are specialized in manuscript translation. So far, only researchers are interested in the translation of the manuscripts. They manage that by paying the service of some Arabists who are not forcibly translation practitioners. Some of the researchers who were interested in Timbuktu manuscript translation were Octave Houdas who translated *Tarikh al-Fattash* in French, John Hunwick who translated some manuscripts in English, and the South-African *Project on the Scientific Contents of Timbuktu Manuscripts*. The efforts of the first two researchers focused on Humanities, more specifically History, but the South-African project had an interest in the scientific contents of Timbuktu manuscripts, more specifically Astronomy. As we indicated above, some candidates of the scientific contests of Ahmad Baba Institute attempted to participate therein by translating some manuscripts. The truth is that the translation works submitted to the contests of this kind are of poor quality, and are not always useable. This raises a question related to the translation problems and difficulties of Timbuktu manuscripts.

### **2.1.1. Problems Related to the Translation of Timbuktu Manuscripts**

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<sup>1</sup> See Adama Coulibaly, about the characteristics of Timbuktu manuscripts in

Owing to the characteristics of Timbuktu manuscripts<sup>1</sup>, it is, somehow, natural that translators encounter some problems translating these precious documents. Manuscripts are not always the same as the documents with which translators are familiar.

Generally, the translation problems that translators encounter in the translation of Timbuktu manuscripts are either endogenous factors related to the nature of the documents, or exogenous factors related to human mishandling. We are broaching some of these factors in the coming lines.

#### **2.1.1.1. Problems Related to Translators' Specialization**

The problems herein are mostly perceptible in the translation of scientific and specialized manuscripts. In most cases, translators are literature-majored. Their science culture cannot allow them to translate manuscripts of pure science, such as manuscripts of Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, and Medicine. Moreover, both science and literature majored translators might find difficulty translating occult sciences, such as Geomancy and Chiromancy. Sometimes, with the help of specialized dictionaries, translators succeed

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in transmitting the gist of some science manuscripts, but not the manuscripts strictly specialized to a certain extent.

Science manuscripts are not the only conundrum in this matter. One can fall on some words wrongfully translated in Humanities, and completely out of context and discipline of the source text because the translator is not a specialist in the discipline. These problems could affect the translation works at all levels. It is common to see a scientific term translated with an ordinary or literary word. Sometimes, specialized dictionaries cannot solve the problem if the translator picks up the wrong word for his translation of the scientific term. An example of that is the word ‘retention’ to translate the Arabic word [huqnu] that has ‘retention’ as one of its meanings. This word means ‘injection’ in some contexts in Medicine. Another example is the English word ‘finger’ to translate the Arabic word [usbu-u] that has ‘finger’ as one of its meanings. However, in some contexts in Astronomy, it means ‘digitigrade’. A last example is the English word ‘nuclear’ to translate the Arabic word [nawawi]. Actually, this is the translation of the word, but in some texts of Hadith science, it denotes merely the belonging of an Imam to a village called [nawa]. A word-for-word translation of [imam nawawi] would be

‘nuclear Imam’, whereas it is the proper name of one of the greatest scholars of Hadith.

The weirdest aspect of this matter is when the word of translation disfigures the meaning or utters it totally in some domains of law or legislation. The Arabic word البناء [al-binaa-u] literally means ‘construction’. When it is used in Islamic jurisprudence in the chapter of wedding, it means ‘first copulation (sexual intercourse) after wedding’. Translating it with ‘construction’ in this context surely undermines the meaning. This is obvious in manuscript 36186 of Mama Haidara Library when the author writes “ويولم بما وجد من الوليمة بعد البناء”، colloquially meaning in English “*He gives a banquet with what he could afford after the first copulation*”<sup>2</sup> (Dedeou, 2021, p.30). If we replace ‘*the first copulation*’ with ‘*construction*’, the sentence will have another meaning that may pertain to another domain.

#### **2.1.1.2. Problems Related to Equivalence in the Target Language**

The general context of Timbuktu manuscripts is the Islamic culture. This entails that one may meet some words that have no equivalents in the language of translation. Such words can be explained

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<sup>2</sup> Translation ours.



when translating, because no exact words in the language of translation can render their meaning. An example of that is the Arabic-Islamic word *يحنك* [yuhanik] in manuscript 36186 of Mama Haidra Library. This word designates an Islamic tradition consisting in offering the first food (a date in most cases) to a newborn. Translating such a word necessitates some in-text explanation in the translation or in footnotes. When the author writes, (Dedeou, 2021, p. 36) ‘ و ينبغي لولي ‘، ’المولود أن يأتيه لمن يرجى بركاته فيحنكه’, this nearly means, ‘*The parent of the newborn should bring him to someone whose blessing is wished, so that this one could bless him by putting the first food in his mouth*’.<sup>3</sup>

Another word is the Arabic one *عقيقة* [’Aqqa]. The implication of this word has no equivalent in English culture. It literally means “carnelian-red” in English (Wehr, 1994, p. 732), whereas it means in Islamic culture ‘*Animal to be slaughtered for the newborn*’. This is what it means in manuscript 36186 when the author writes, (Dedeou, 2021, p. 40) مع أن الكبش هو الأفضل (مع أن الكبش هو الأفضل) ، في العقيقة , meaning ‘*though ram is the best animal to be slaughtered for (the birth of) a newborn*’.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1.1.3. Problems Related to the Author’s Intellectual Proficiency

The intellectual personality of an author appears in the different aspects of his work. The choice of words, wording order, and document organization are some parameters that have an essential role in making a scientific work comprehensible for a researcher and a translator. For a translator, these factors are more critical. *Tarikh al-Fattash* by Mahmoud Ka-at is one of the most enlightening examples in this case. The proficiency level of the author affects not only his diction in many compartments of the book but also his choice of words. For instance, the author puts the translator in the dilemma of terminology choice when he interchangeably uses some terms for some social and political organizations, such as Mali, Ghana, and Songhai (Ahmad Baba Institute, 2014). He alternately uses, for these political organizations, ‘kingdom’, ‘State’, and ‘sultanate’. The translator has only one alternative. He either follows the author in his terms and translates them as they mean because of loyalty to the source text, or translates them according to the social and scientific realities that these organizations represent. The latter is what Houdas adopted in his translation of *Tarikh al-Fattash* when he translated these terms with ‘Empire’, and many other words in the book according to their modern implication (Houdas, 1900, chapter titles II, III, IV).

<sup>3</sup> Translation ours.

<sup>4</sup> Translation ours.

The recourse of some local authors to their mother tongue when they are short of words in Arabic constitute another source of problem for manuscript translators. Sometimes, their reference to local languages is of their conviction that only the local term is the best fit for the object in question. Some examples of that are the Songhai word [kulbat] written in *Tarikh al-Fattash* as قليات for a special kind of container; the Songhai word [bulanga] written as بلنغا for *shea butter*; and the Songhai word [goro] written as غورو for *kola nut* (Ahmad Baba Institute, 2014, p. 80).

Sometimes, a manuscript author might have low proficiency in grammar. His writing would be teemed with grammatical mistakes that could muddle comprehension and lead to mistranslation. An example of that is manuscript 17 34 p.1 at Ahmad Baba Institute about undoing magical mischiefs. The author writes, 'و من كتب هذه الآيات مع أسماء ، و علقها و اغتسلها و شربها حفظ الله من صائب كلها مصيبة و اليمين و الشمال'. The grammatical problems are obvious in noun definition and the status of verbs as transitive and intransitive.

The intellectual proficiency level of a manuscript author sometimes affects his wording in the language of writing. For instance, Songhai language sometimes influences Mahmoud Ka-at's wording order in *Tarikh al-Fattash*. This is patent when he wants to say that Askia sent one of his

people. He builds the sentence according to Songhai wording [ana bora tunandi nga borai ra] when he writes, 'ثم أقام انسانا من أناسه' (Ahmad Baba Institute, 2014: 161). This literary means, '*he raised somebody among his people*', which essentially means, '*he sent somebody*'.

For sure, these trying intellectual blundering in a language makes it difficult for readers and translators to understand. Not only do they require some familiarity with the culture, but also some knowledge of the language reflected, which is not forcibly a translator's strong point. The translator may think that the loanword is a mistake and try to straighten it tooth and nail. The way a sentence is laid out may mislead him in his guess of the meaning. In other words, what is true in one culture is not necessarily true in another culture. Different people with different cultures.

#### **2.1.1.4. Problems Related to Local Language Interference**

This problem may be related to the one discussed above. The focus here is on the use of local language words by authors either to replace some vocabulary that they ignore in Arabic or to designate something that does not exist in Arabic culture. Sometimes such manuscripts are studded with grammatical mistakes as well. Manuscript 1330, p. 1 of Ahmad Baba Institute is a patent example of that. It is a

manuscript about the virtue of some invocations, Koranic verses and chapters used with some trees indicated in the manuscript with Bambara names of the trees. An example of that is his words, 'السورة الصف الطنبول برل اذا غسل بها فانه لا يضره' 'شيء من خلق الله. probably meaning 'if you use the water solution of] the Koranic chapter Soff with cola nut [b....?] and you bathe yourself with it, nothing among Allah's creatures can harm you'. This sentence is an evidence of local language interference with the word برل. This local language word, probably a Bambara one, is not legible, as Arabic cannot write the vowels, the deflections and inflections of the local language. The sentence also bears evidence of grammar problems in the writings of Timbuktu manuscripts.

### 2.1.1.5. Problems Related to Copyists'

#### Mistakes and Mishandling

Arabic language, which is the language of Timbuktu manuscripts, depends in its vocalization on some dotes called [nuqat] and some short sticks called [harakat]. The placement of [nuqat] and [harakat] over or under letters determines not only their vocal sounds, but also the meaning of the word they compose.

Even though Timbuktu manuscripts lack harakat, because, contrary to nuqat, we do not need them at a certain intellectual level, copyists mistakenly identify some letters

and write them wrong. They may double nuqats when not permissible or undouble them when not possible. This results in disfiguring letters and, consequently, distorting words' meaning. An example of this is the word [falaq] فلق, meaning 'dawn'. Only one nuqat is required on the first syllable. When it is doubled it is pronounced [qalaq] فلق , meaning 'worry'. Naturally, when an inappropriate word intrudes a sentence, it alters its meaning. This is well illustrated in some Timbuktu manuscripts. In a manuscript by al-Maghili authenticated by Karambe (2021), the word حملها [himluha] is copied جهلها [djahluha]. The first word means 'its weight', and the second means 'ignoring it' (Karambe, 202, p.118). With such sentences, a translator translates without conviction or is misled in his translation.

In another case, the copyist could drop out a letter or replace it with another. This transforms, de facto, the meaning. An example of this can be perceptible in the following كل ما [kulu ma], meaning 'everything that...'. When the copyist drops out the vowel [i] and replace it with consonant [ن], the words will read [kulu man], meaning 'everybody who/that ...' (Dedeou, 202, 135).

Sometimes, the copyist would completely replace a word inadvertently. This is detectable only when two or many

copies of the same manuscripts are compared to one another. An example of that is the name of one of Askia Ishaq's sons in *Tarikh al-Fattash*. Three manuscript copies spell it [abdulmalik], whereas another one spells it [abdulah] (Ahmad Baba Institute, 2014, p.150).

#### **2.1.1.6. Problems Related to Calligraphic Styles**

The last translation problem in this paper is linked to calligraphy. Translators are used to the calligraphic styles of modern printing. These styles are different from the calligraphic styles in Timbuktu manuscripts. We can distinguish four major calligraphic styles in Timbuktu manuscripts: Sudanese Calligraphy, Suqi Calligraphy, Saharawi Calligraphy, and Maghrebi Calligraphy (Coulibaly, 2022).

The calligraphic format can make a word illegible and call for conjecture to figure it out. Thereupon, the translation becomes a guesswork. Sometimes, the translator fails in figuring out something for the illegible word. He would, then, leave a hiatus, or put another word or another sentence to complete the meaning. This can prove that, the difficulties of translation are not related only to the inherent intellectual qualities of a manuscript. A manuscript of good intellectual quality could be badly translated because of the mishandling and the misapprehension of copyists.

## **Conclusion**

As forwarded above, most of Arabic translation problems evoked in the literature are perceivable in the manuscripts of Timbuktu. In fact, such documents are a translation of facts, impressions, feelings, and attitudes of some people into Arabic. In this mission of transmission, the authors of Timbuktu manuscripts, more particularly the non-Arabs, encountered most of the problems mentioned in the literature above: cultural issues, equivalent problems, collocation difficulties, literal rendering of the meaning, polysemy, idioms, and word order distortions.

In the translation of these transmissions, the translators could encounter the same problems as enumerated in the literature. Moreover, this research has found some other problems that are not evoked in the literature about translation problems into or from Arabic.

The additional problems found therein are mostly linked to the nature of some Timbuktu manuscripts because they are, sometimes, written by non-Arabs. Even if they are written by competent Arab scholars, the mishandling of copyists and, maybe, common people could make Timbuktu manuscripts difficult to translate.

Finally, we may be able to conclude that Timbuktu manuscripts represent a

participatory effort of thousands of scholars of the Islamic world to a tremendous intellectual treasure. This massive participation has given a scientific singularity to this intellectual wealth, and a universal status that bestows upon them a humanity legacy standing. The complexity of Arabic language in grammar, morphology, lexicology, etc., in addition to the local hue of these manuscripts and the characteristics that ensue from this universality constitute sometimes a source of problem to the easy exploitation of these manuscripts. The translation of these manuscripts, a primeval phase of their exploitation, is every so often warped by these inherent difficulties. Not only does this require training professional translators, but it also necessitates the involvement of multidisciplinary translators and, more importantly, the local scholars and translators, in the process of translation.

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