

***Translating the Autobiography as a Human Experience:  
A Case Study of Barack Obama's Autobiographical Novel  
'Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance'***

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**Abstract:**

**المُلخَص:**

The article is about the analysis of a translation into Arabic by Hiba Assayid Nadjib Maghribi and Imen Abdelghani Nadjm of President Barack Obama's autobiographical work entitled: 'Dreams from My Father.' Obama is not only a writer but also the current president of the United States of America. This analysis attempts to show point out some shortcomings in the Arabic translation and demonstrate how translators commonly tend to draw on traditional theories of translation in their works, thus neglecting to exploit their own creativity. As a result, this Arabic translation of the novel partly failed to highlight the author's own life experience that he attempted to reflect throughout his narrative. Though no translation method is ultimately perfect, one translator can, however, devise one's own technique for either communicating with readers speaking a different language, or transmitting whatever message from a source language into a target one, using one's own emotions and style to convey one's message to the readers as clearly as possible.

المقال دراسة تحليلية لترج التالي تحت عنوان تُرجمَة أسلوب السرد القصصي في السيرة الذاتية كتجربة إنسانية "دراسة السيرة الذاتية لباراك أوباما في روايته أحلام من أبي: قصة عرق وإرث" والذي ترجمها إلى العربية هبة السيد، نجيب المغربي، وإيمان عبد الغني نجم، المقال دراسة تحليلية. الترجمة الأدبية وخاصة ترجمة السير الذاتية الذين يهرع ون في أعمالهم للاستناد إلى النظريات الترجمة بدلا من اللجوء إلى القدرات والمهارات الخلاقة الموجودة فيهم أصلا بالفطرة. فبعد التطرق إلى بعض الحالات والتجارب الترجمة خرجنا بأنه لا وجود لنظرية ترجمة متكاملة وأن كل مترجم قادر على ابتكار طريقة معينة أو تقنيات محددة لنقل النصوص من لغة إلى لغة أخرى. كما أننا وجدنا أن الإنسان قادر أن يعيش تجارب الناس لأنها منبثقة من واقع الإنسانية وبذلك فهو قادر أن يلبس جلد الكاتب الأصلي للسيرة و يترجمها ترجمة فطرية فتكون قريبة جدا من السيرة الحقيقية بدل التشدد في استعمال نظريات الترجمة المقننة.

## **1. The Need for Translation**

Every translator sets for oneself more specific purposes to achieve. The most current purpose is generally to serve as a cross-cultural bilingual communication medium among peoples. In the remote past, this activity developed because of rising need notably among ancient Greeks, Arabs in the Muslim world, Persians and other nations for translating both scientific and literary books of more advanced nations. Today, international trade has increased migration, globalization, and the rapid expansion of the mass media and technology. This rapid development in various domains of human activities has conferred on the translators an important role to play as a bilingual or multi-lingual cross-cultural transmitter of a variety of texts touching upon different areas of culture, science and technology since translation is viewed as a transfer process from a foreign language—or a second language—to the mother tongue or vice-versa.

However, there are some particular problems in the translation process: problems of ambiguity, problems that originate from structural and lexical differences between languages. Another problem would be the grammar because there are several constructions of grammar poorly understood, in the sense that it is not clear how they should be represented, or what rules should be used to describe them unless the translator refers to the context for obtaining precise meaning. Undoubtedly, translation is not only a process of transposing a text or transmitting a message from a source to a target language, but also a dynamic function that aims at facilitating the transmission of the cultural and historical heritage and bridging the gap between cultures and races. It thus provides a common ground to people with different mindsets, customs and traditions, thus narrowing the language gulf separating peoples. Though the legend of "The Tower of Babel" leads us to contend that because of their different languages, human beings were compelled to communicate and exchange with one another their thoughts and emotions through the inevitable medium of translation.

## **2. Some Theoretical Aspects of Translation**

In this vein, Nida (1964), a pioneer in the fields of translation theory and linguistics, has introduced the theory of "Dynamic Equivalence" also known as "Functional Equivalence" as his noted contribution to translation theory. He remarks that the art of

translation has been ahead of the theory of translation. In establishing his 'science of translations', Nida distinguishes two types of equivalences which he coins "*dynamic equivalence*" and "*formal equivalence*" (later referred to as formal correspondence). He defines dynamic equivalence as the "quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors." [1]

According to this theory, which considers the process of translation as dynamic but not static, the effect of the translation on the target reader is roughly the same as the effect of the source text on the source reader. Thus, the target reader takes the meaning of the text just as the source reader would do. Together with this theory, Nida has developed in his essay "*Principles of Correspondence*" other theories of correspondence in translation, in which he holds that since "*no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence, there can be no fully exact translations.*" [2]

For some other linguists, *equivalence* is associated with language as a system. Its various manifestations are studied at the level of the general structures. For others, equivalence has to be considered at the level of discourse and seen as the result of interaction between the translator and the text to be translated. Thus, they consider translation as a dynamic process of production of meaning but not simply a mechanism for substituting linguistic structures or pre-existing units in a language with others in another language. As a matter of fact, Catford (1980) purports that translation is the substitution of "*textual materials*" of a language with "*equivalent materials*" in another language. [3]

In his theory of correspondence, Nida argues however that translation is a process which consists in producing in the target language "*the closest natural equivalent*" [4] to the original message of the source language, not only on the level of the meaning but also on the level of style. The translator has thus to look for dynamic equivalence in the receiving language. the expected effect of the translated text upon the reader would not happen unless a thorough investigation is carried out by the translator on the cultural background or context of the language which the translated

text/message is destined to. The translator would then focus on the very specificities of the receiving language and take into account the historical, geographical, social and linguistic differences that distinguish one community or social class from another. In Nida's view, the role of the translator cannot just be confined to the task of transferring and substituting linguistic symbols by others. It extends to embody the explanation or at least the dynamic mediation between the text and the reader.[5]

Steiner (1975) suggests that the translator should get in the writer's shoes in order to be able to explore his creative imagination, emotions, ideas and at best comprehend his mind. In his article "The Hermeneutic Motion," he defines translation as a fourfold motion that "*will allow us to overcome the sterile triadic model*"[6] consisting of literalism, paraphrase and free imitation. Steiner indeed did innovate when developing his triadic model for a thorough examination of his theory reveals that his fourfold model of translation is simply a repetition of previous theories but in different terms. Steiner defines translation as a hermeneutic process that consists of four parts: trust, aggression, embodiment and restitution.

Firstly, "trust" is implied in the triadic model, because trust is essential for all interpretive activities including translation. Steiner argues that "*All understanding, and the demonstrative statement of understanding which is translation, starts with an act of trust.*"[7] Since literalism, paraphrase and free imitation are merely different approaches toward translation, the element of trust is clearly present in each of them.

Secondly, "Aggression" was a concept elaborated by Steiner who was probably the first theorist to come up with it, but obviously not the only one. Others attempted to elaborate their own approaches of this concept. In his article "*On the Different Methods of Translating*," Schleiermacher refers to the notion of translation which he views as an act of invasion of the original text. He argues that paraphrase and imitation are pre-stages of translation and therefore are not true translation in their essence. According to Schleiermacher, the paraphraser "deals with mathematical symbols that can be reduced to the same value by increasing or decreasing them", "but neither the spirit of the transformed language nor that of the original can be revealed by such a procedure"[7]

Thirdly, "*embodiment*" or incorporation as included in Steiner's theory of translation, has also been noticed by other

translators. It could be identified in the triadic model. Though the triadic model succinctly lists "*literalism*" as a crucial part of translation, it does not however explain enough its deeper layer of meaning labelled "*incorporation*".

Theorists such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Walter Benjamin attempted to provide a clearer description of literalism (Steiner, 1994). Schleiermacher holds that literalism is the appropriate method for translation in most practical cases due to its integrative nature. He argues that, because the original text is limited by certain unique historical and cultural conditions, an exact correspondence of language elements in the target language is almost impossible to find. Schleiermacher's theory has dealt with foreignizing and domestication. Benjamin examines *incorporation* from a slightly different perspective as he writes: "*The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. He must expand and deepen his language by means of foreign language*" [8] At this level, Benjamin and Steiner both agree on the possibility and even the necessity for the target language to be influenced by some features of the foreign language. For them, "*whatever the degree of 'naturalization,' the act of importation can potentially dislocate or relocate the native structure*" [9] While the effect of this act can seemingly disrupt translation, it may, however, infuse the target language with richness imbued with foreign flavour which would not have been possible were it not for the power of embodiment.

Fourthly, *restitution* as particularly emphasized by Steiner, makes previous models incomplete for restitution, in fact, attempts at restoring the balance that *invasion* has disrupted. In other words, the translator needs to enliven the original to compensate for the pitfall he has fallen into during the importation process. Considering the need of restoring balance is to consider translation as a two-way interaction between the translator and the original text. This relationship of *invasion* and *compensation* is indeed not clearly described in pre-existing theories. However, both Benjamin and Paz (1992) have examined closely this relationship and suggested some clues. Paz states that translation is in most cases indistinguishable from creation and is therefore in mutual enrichment with the original. Every translation, in this sense, becomes a new original on its own. As a result, there will be no original per se. Both theorists share the original

author's ideas but they deviate where the translator's unique understanding is imbued. Each version of a text has its own distinctive character insofar as it becomes a combination of the author's intentions and the reader's unique comprehension. This view of translation as an independent creation of originals elevates the traditionally subordinate position of translation, implying the possibility that translation outperforms or enlarges the stature of the original. It also admits that the reader or the translator, plays an equally indispensable part as the author does.[10]

Finally, translation, as part of the humanities, involves both the human mind and emotions and relies on perception, impression, and personal experience but not experiment. Obviously, translation is not an exact science requiring objectivity and accuracy. Often assimilated to art, translation is largely subjective though aspiring to maintain quality and excellence. It is not blindly imitative but seeks to be dynamic and creative to achieve originality so as to win a new public for the translated literary work. The reproduction of the author's artistic and also life experience through a new perception and representation actually requires some craft on the part of the translator. The more the translator's personal experience is near to that of the author, the more the translation will be near to the original.

### **3. Barack Obama's Autobiography as a Human Experience**

An autobiography is certainly not a fictional narrative that focuses on the separation of Obama's parents, his childhood moving from Honolulu to Indonesia and then to Kenya, his education in Chicago, have left some stigmas on his memory and shaped his personality. These events which are part of a common human experience have cultivated in Obama the confessional culture that ultimately led him to produce this biography. These events in his life worked as a contributory factors which have provided both context and explanation for the appeal of his life experience, often traumatic, as a subject for him as a writer and his readers of autobiography. They significantly influenced the ideological tone of his autobiography.

A detailed scrutiny of the narrative landscapes found in Obama's "Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance" (1995), we can suggest that as a writer, he was likely attempting to satisfy "multiple allegiances:" to his publisher, to his novel's subject-matter, to his Party's "political agenda" as he was preparing to launch his political career in a campaign for Illinois Senate, and to himself and his family. Obama has been both a democratic politician and a

black American torn between two contrastive and often antagonistic cultures. Born to a white American mother (Ann Dunham) and a black Kenyan father (Barack Hussein Obama Sr.), he had to face various prejudices tinged with the traditional racial black and white colours. These social and psychological factors have hampered his full integration into the arguably “*melting pot*”. Yet, they have rendered his personality exceptional though the events he lived and narrated in his novel were common human experiences with which readers can sympathize. His exceptional experience as a human being then as an educated and active black politician has made him both unique and representative. He could turn his life into story as much as a seafarer could turn his eventful journey into experience. Obama’s experience is compelling because it describes real characters— Hasan Chandoo as *Hasan*, Frank Marshall Davis as *Frank*, Parl Eldredge as *Mr Pal*, Mabel Hefty as *Miss Mabel*, etc.— and real events, often joyful and dramatic forming a set of crises. In fact, he could persuasively describe the phenomenon of belonging to two different worlds expressing their differences and idiosyncrasies, but belonging to neither.

Obama was born into a cultural milieu that apparently made for perfect social and racial diversity. Yet, he grew disillusioned when he found some real difficulty in living such an ideal life in the United States traditionally referred to as the “American Dream”. As a result of his own appreciation of the value of diversity, he came to realize, like any other black American, that the famed idea of “melting pot” of cultural and ethnic particularities— one of the strongest images of America— is continually challenged by a general tendency for uniformity. Originally, this image was built around the motto of the American republic, *E Pluribus Unum*, i.e. “Out of Many, One.” Instead of encouraging more understanding and tolerance as implied in the term “diversity,” modern American culture is driving people apart, a sentiment Obama has shared since his early youth. In effect, the melting pot paradigm has become illusory insofar as the people with power and privilege tend to impose a segregationist system that protects their lifestyle from the criticism of the oppressed groups struggling for a voice in society. Thus, as a young boy, Obama could not enjoy the advantages of diversity and get his share of the American dream.

Because of racial prejudices that were ghettoizing the blacks, and family instability due to his father’s absence and several

relocations in and out of the country, and the duality of his culture, he could not overcome the pain of never feeling completely a part of one people or one place. As an adult now, he could write colourful stories from the world of his imagination, especially this biography where he confronts the shadow of his absent father, a figure he knows more as a myth. Indeed, biographies often draw upon a series of archetypal dimensions that reflect human experience. In his compelling narrative, he undertakes a lonely voyage to racial identity as he lived some tensions in school. In the preface to the 2004 edition of his autobiographical novel, Obama wrote: *“In the wake of some modest publicity, I received an advance from a publisher and went to work with the belief that the story of my family and my efforts to understand that story, might speak in some way to the fissures of race that have characterized the American experience, as well as the fluid state of identity—the leaps through time, the collision of cultures, that mark our modern life.”*

His narrative appeals to the readers because it gives shape to their deepest hopes and anxieties about such existing tensions. Nevertheless, he manages to construct a practical meaning to his life as a black American. He began his adult life as a civil-rights lawyer, university teacher and author of several books. Also, he pursued a political career in the Democratic Party. He served as Illinois Senator from 1997 to 2004. Four years later, he won the presidential elections in 2008 and was inaugurated and was inaugurated as the 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. President, on January 20, 2009. He was also re-elected for a second term in 2012.

Obama’s biographical novel had a good reception among the readership both at home and abroad. In a commentary on *“Dreams from My Father,”* Toni Morrison, a Nobel Laureate novelist, has called Obama *“a writer in my high esteem”* and the book *“quite extraordinary.”* She praised *“his ability to reflect on this extraordinary mesh of experiences that he has had, some familiar and some not, and to really meditate on that the way he does, and to set up scenes in narrative structure, dialogue, conversation—all of these things that you don’t often see, obviously, in the routine political memoir biography. ... It’s unique. It’s his. There are no other ones like that.”*[11]

#### 4. Current Difficulties in the Translation of Obama's biography into Arabic.

Obama's autobiography has been translated into many languages including Arabic, entitled: "*Ahlam min abi: Qissat Irq wa Irth*," by Hibah Najīb al-Sayyid Maghrabi and Īman Abd al-Ghani Najm (2009). Let us examine some excerpts so as to demonstrate the pitfalls contained in this translation:

##### First excerpt:

*"It must have been a month or so later, on a cold, dreary November morning, the sun faint behind gauze of clouds, that the other call came. I was in the middle of making my self breakfast, with coffee on the stove and two eggs in the skillet, when my roommate handed me the phone. The line was thick with static."*(p7)

In this paragraph, the author uses a series of dots and commas to describe the scenery and introduce an important event. Punctuation enables him to avoid the repetition of connectives to relate sentences, such as "*and, also, besides, further, moreover, in addition, then ....*" In the Arabic version, the text is rendered like:

“بعد ذلك يشهر أو أكثر على ما أظن، في صباح يوم بارد و كئيب من أيام شهر نوفمبر/ تشرين الثاني، كانت الشمس باهتة خلف ضباب السحب؛ جاءت المكالمة الهاتفية. كنت أعد الفطور لنفسي و القهوة على الموقد و بيضتين في المقلاة، عندما ناولني رفيقي الهاتف كان الصوت بعيدا و مشوشا.” (ص23).

The translators have used the same stylistic devices (punctuation signs) in an attempt to interpret the text in regard to its linguistic and tonal style. By reproducing the same technique used in the source text, the target text has failed to convey both the mood, rhythm and sophistication of the poetic language used in the source text. The Arab reader is prone to miss here, some of the meaning of the message conveyed by the American writer. Let us examine this phrase: "*The other call came*," with the word "*other*" implying "another". The focus, thus, is on the call itself but not the caller who informed him of the dramatic death of his dear neighbour. The use of the word "*other*" adds a sad tone and suspense to the narrative as it reveals the impact of the news of the tragic event upon the narrator. Also, the words "*other call*" brings up in Obama's memory, a similar experience he had lived when he was informed through a call, of his

father's death in a car crash in 1982. However, the translators missed this detail and confined themselves to translating the previous sentence (*the telephone call came*) only, dropping thus the group of words "another call". Also, the word "my roommate" translated "رفيقي" is not accurate for the literal arabic equivalent of the term "roommate" should be rendered as "شريك في الغرفة" which means a "the person who shares the room with me," but not a "my companion/fellow/friend" as suggested in the arabic version. In the source text, the narrator mentions a person who shares the same room with him but not a friend or a companion. Instead, we propose the following translation for this short passage:

كان قد مر شهر أو أكثر على تلك الحادثة، وفي صباح يوم كئيب من أيام شهر نوفمبر/تشرين الثاني كانت الشمس فيه باهتة متخفية وراء ضباب السحب، إذا بخبر ثاني ينزل علي. كنت وقتها اعد فطوري واضعا القهوة على الموقد و بيضيتين في المقلاة، عندما ناولني شريكي في الغرفة الهاتف و كان الصوت بعيدا و مشوشا (ص23).

### Second excerpt:

Let us see how the narrative style of the source text in this excerpt has been translated into Arabic:

"It was an uninviting block, treeless and barren, lined with soot-colored walk-ups that cast heavy shadows for most of the day. The apartment was small, with slanting floors and irregular heat and buzzer downstairs that didn't work, so that visitors had to call ahead from a pay phone at the corner gas station, where a black Doberman the size of wolf paced through the night in vigilant patrol, its jaws clamped around an empty beer bottle."

This passage is rendered into Arabic as follows:

كان شكل المجمع السكني غير جذاب و يخلو من الأشجار و النباتات، تصطف على جانبيه مبان سكنية طلاؤها أسود و بلا مصاعد تلقي بظلال كئيبة معظم أوقات اليوم. كانت الشقة صغيرة و أرضيتها مائلة و درجة حرارتها غير مستقرة و لها جرس كهربائي اسفل المبنى لا يعمل ، ومن ثم كان على أي زائر أن يتصل قبل مجيئه من هاتف عمومي في محطة البنزين في زاوية الشارع ، حيث كان يوجد كلب أسود من نوع دوبرمان في حجم ذئب يقطع المكان جينة و ذهابا طوال الليل في دورة حراسة يقظة، يقبض بكفيه على زجاجة جعة فارغة.

In the original narrative, the writer describes the street and the apartment he lived in, using some adjectives in sequential form (targeted words are underlined in the paragraph). This descriptive method provides vivid pictures of his place of residence. This excites the reader's imagination and enhances his ability to grasp and comprehend the suggested pictures. This imagery increases the potential of influence upon him. Yet, the translation, once again, has not been not free from pitfalls. Indeed, the translators have failed to render the narrative style of the novel while using mostly verbal instead of noun phrases as in the source text. Obviously, the translators may have figured out that description generally involves some dynamics found in verbal phrases. The translators have inevitably over-ruled this important aspect, breaking thus the harmonious flow of the description in the source text. Besides, there are far more adjectives in the source narrative than in the Arabic version (13 to 7). The description in the latter lacks vividness and appeal because the harmony of the rhythm and music of the locutions is broken. Thus, we suggest the following translation that sounds more appropriate:

لم يكن شكل المجمع السكني جذاباً و لا مشجراً، و إنما محطاً بمياني سكنية على جانبيه سوداء الطلاء، خالية من المصاعد، ملقبة بظلال كئيبة معظم أوقات اليوم. و كانت الشقة صغيرة و أرضيتها مائلة و درجة حرارتها متذبذبة، و لها جرس كهربائي في اسفل البناية معطل. و من ثم كان على أي زائر أن يتصل قبل مجيئه من هاتف عمومي في محطة البنزين في زاوية الشارع ، حيث كان يوجد كلب إسود من نوع دوبرمان في حجم ذئب يقطع المكان جيئة و ذهاباً طوال الليل في دورة حراسة بقطعة، يقبض بكفيه على زجاجة جعة فارغة.

In this proposed translation, there are as many adjectives as in the original text (13 to 13), keeping, thus, faithfully the harmony, consistency and music of the narrative style.

In conclusion, a critical reading of the Arabic translation under study, has enabled us to identify some difficulties that the translators have likely encountered during their work. Thus, we have noted several semantic and stylistic errors that have affected the meaning of

the translated text. These pitfalls are essentially to be found in the transposition of the narrative style. The Arabic translation has been, at times, quite literal. As a result, the translators have failed to handle properly the particularities of the autobiographical narrative as generally identified by linguists. Also, they could not grasp, as it seems, the essence, dimensions, and purposes of Obama's autobiographical work. This is due, in fact, to the lack of both creativity and innovation during the translation process that was a mere literary exercise of poor quality, rather superficial and definitely unsatisfactory.

As a matter of fact, the Arabic version of the original autobiography has not accurately rendered the narrative style of the American novel. Obama's style is highly stamped by a remarkable rhetoric which is central to his autobiography. This failure was probably due to the fact that the translators have produced a work in haste as they sought to publish the first Arabic version of "*Dreams from my Father*" in 2009, the first of its kind, and win therefore the lead in this literary exercise. It is true that Barack Obama is doubly famous for he enjoys the dual status of a writer from African American origin and President of the United States, still in office. This has been a sufficient motive to induce the Arabic translators to produce their work without considering carefully the fundamental principles of translation described earlier in this article. These pitfalls have inevitably affected the stylistic beauty and content of the original narrative.

Obviously, no translation is perfect and therefore cannot escape from pitfalls due to some language difficulties. The latter may arise in the translator's attempt to provide adequate equivalents to certain words or expressions, particularly when translating English texts into Arabic which is a Semitic language rather than an Indo-European one, supposedly closer to English such as Dutch. These difficulties are often related to grammar, lexis, meaning, style, and imagery that differ between the two languages. A translator may try to solve these difficulties using literal translation only. However, this could cause misunderstanding due to metaphorical or descriptive linguistic units, allusions, culture-specific items, foreign words, collocations, idioms, and proverbs. It is often possible that a word or a term in the source language has several meanings in the selected target language and correspondingly has to be translated in a different manner. The translator's inability to comprehend clearly a word, a

phrase or an expression may result in inaccuracy, ambiguity or nonsense. The translator has then to convert not only structures but also ideas expressed in one language (the source language) into another language (the target language) as smoothly and idiomatically.

One of the best ways to overcome these translation difficulties is to read thoroughly the source text and grasp the meaning of the ideas it conveys then find equivalent structures between the two languages. Because of the cultural differences, the translator may have to operate some adjustment when addition of information that is originally not in the source language, is necessary to make up for the loss of accuracy or information in the target one. Ways of applying adjustment as addition are either to include the extra information between brackets or in a footnote.

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