

Chapter 3

The Role of Translation in Forming Interdisciplinarity in Arab Medieval Times: A Historiographical Review

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ABSTRACT

Medieval Arabic translation (MedAT) played a crucial role in the formulation of the Islamic and Arab civilization. For the first time in the history of medieval Arabs, materials related to an array of multi-disciplinary fields were translated, allowing the Arabs to import and master disciplines they did not have or never bothered about, and to subsequently become exporters of knowledge and their language, Arabic, the global donor of such knowledge for centuries. The glorious history of Arabic translation at medieval times put translation at the heart of society, but there is little written about the role translation in forming an interdisciplinary unique Arab culture, bringing various disciplines together. This chapter investigates the role of translation in the formation of the interdisciplinary role of translation in the Arab culture during its medieval times, particularly the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. It examines the position medieval Arabic translation had in transferring and diffusing new disciplines and in creating an interdisciplinary environment which nurtured the production of native knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The term Medieval Arabic translation (MedAT) generally refers to translation activity that took place in the Arab world during the eighth and ninth centuries. Within the cultural history of Islam, the emergence of MedAT started in the eighth century A. D. during the times of the Umayyads and Abbasids under the rule of very influential Caliphs. It is linked to what has become known as the glorious Arab translation

history in medieval times, especially after the successful spread of Islam and the move of the centre of power from Arabia to Damascus and later to Baghdad.

It is also generally agreed that the spread of Islam to regions beyond the confines of the Arabian Peninsula allowed the Arabs and Arabic language to embrace new sciences and attract scholars from different countries with different scholarly and cultural backgrounds. MedAT was seen as an awakening move as the Arabs came into contact with new disciplines which were beyond their basic intellectual genres. MedAT was considered, within this context, as an interdisciplinary base from which intellectual, social and economic activities took off and continued prospering for the years to come. Although MedAT started in Damascus, it spread further to other countries, such as Iraq.

The Caliph Khalid bin Yazid bin Mu'awiyah, a leading ruler during the times of Umayyad dynasty, became the first ruler to officially sponsor translation and make it one of the goals the state with the objective of domesticating different Greek disciplines into the Arab-Islamic world and import the knowledge the Arabs needed at that time. His move was seen as the beginning of an activity that later reached its golden era in the history of the Arabs. Some researchers argue that had translation not been initiated by the Caliph Khalid bin Yazid bin Mu'awiyah, his successors, Umayyad and later Abbasid rulers, might not have had the solid basis on which translation stood since subsequent efforts were built upon the success story of achievements in bringing new disciplines through translation by him. In other words, they had to follow his footsteps (Al-Jumaily, 1986).

Within this period of Arab history, MedAT, according to Al-Ma'ani (2011:25), covered various dominant scholarly works of the time, which the Arabs and their scholars needed to boost a culture of importing multidisciplinary knowledge and creating an interdisciplinary intellectual environment. Through translation, the acquisition of knowledge provided a genuine understanding of foreign materials, and offered at the same time a very valuable contribution to the development of the field of knowledge into the hosting Arab culture. Translations from Greek, Syriac into Arabic on topics ranging from sociology and history to military were made possible, triggering what researchers call nowadays the greatest translation activity that ever happened in the Arab world.

The areas targeted by MedAT were new to the Arab culture. This is evident from the fact that less weight and attention were given to other areas since a few, if not rare, cases of Greek literary works were translated into Arabic then. The books translated by medieval Arab translators were not of a poetic and religious nature, but of a scientific and technical one and not only from one language or culture but rather from all great cultures, Greek, Syriac, Farsi, and Hindi. Translation was a great contributor to the development of knowledge disciplines such as chemistry, astronomy, and others in Arabic and later in other languages, particularly Latin

The importance accorded to MedAT by the Caliphs in how translators were treated. They were considered as both translators and scholars at the same time, in the sense that they were not mere transferors, but also educators and researchers. The outcome was that medieval translation generated a unique inter- and multi-disciplinary culture that involved the transfer of sciences; new to the host Arabic culture, encouraged learning beyond the traditional Arab poetic and religious spheres and boosted the culture of research investigation and innovation (Faiq, 2000).

To this end, a number of schools were set up during the medieval times but the most important of which was a school-cum-translation bureau called *bait al hikma* (the House of wisdom). It was the firm belief in the contribution of translation to the development of various disciplines in the Arab-Muslim world that such schools were established, attracting scholars from different countries to translate sciences and transfer them to Arabic, but also to produce native Arab-Islamic knowledge in Arabic (Al-Namla, 1991).

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