

## Cultural and Sociolinguistic Issues in English-Arabic Translation of Collocations

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### Abstract

Collocations are words that must accompany each other. When it comes to translation, collocations usually pose problematic cultural and sociolinguistic issues. This paper attempts to shed light on some of these problems that participants of this study faced in the English-Arabic translation of collocations. In order to examine these issues, a questionnaire was given out to 40 MA students majoring in English Language at The Hashemite University, Yarmouk University, and Al-al-Bayt University: 15 males and 25 females. The results showed that translators faced these cultural and sociolinguistic problematic issues: The word order within the same collocation, the availability of acceptable equivalents in the target language (TL), and linguistic issues related to religious words. The results also revealed that participants had not enough proficiency in collocations. Data were tabulated and analyzed. In addition, this study concludes with some recommendations, including offering at least two courses related to English and Arabic collocations in order to solve the problematic issues in translating collocations in Jordanian universities.

**Key words:** Religious collocations; Translation loss; Cultural translation; Sociolinguistic issues

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### INTRODUCTION

Translation may be one of the most important tools that enable different nations to communicate with each other. Therefore, it may help in promoting cross-cultural dialogue and mutual understanding among nations. Since it is one of the ways of nations' development, there has been an increasing interest in translation over time. In the Arab history and during the reign of the Abbasi Caliph Alma'muun, the first translation institution in the world, "*Darul Hikma*" (Lit. the House of Wisdom), was founded. Alma'muun issued a decree that anybody who translates a book will be given gold that is similar to weight of the translated book.

Munday (2003, pp.4-5) pointed out that translation "can refer to the general subject field, the product (the text that has been translated) or the process (the act of producing the translation, otherwise known as translating)." Translation may also include the process of conveying meanings, ideas, and culture from one language into another. Shunnaq & Farghal (1999, p.2) defined translation as "a project of transferring meaning from one language to another." Transferring in this definition includes working with two languages: The source language (SL) is the language that a translator wants to translate from while the language translated into is usually called the target language (TL). Shunnaq (2012, p.22) pointed out "A translator has to bear in mind the fact that he should exchange ideas and messages not merely words."

### 1. THE CONCEPT OF COLLOCATION

Many researchers defined collocation in several different ways (see, for example, Dickins, Hervey, & Higgins, 2002; Baker, 2007; Nofal, 2012). Baker (2007, p.47) defined collocations as "semantically arbitrary restrictions which do not follow logically from the propositional meaning of a word." In other words, they are words

that go hand in hand with each other. This involves that meaning of the total words of the collocation may be totally different from the meaning of its components. Dickins, Hervey, and Higgins (2002, p.71) also presented the term “*to collocate*” and argued that “to collocate means to typically occur in close proximity with; hence a collocation is an occurrence of one word in close proximity with another.” Collocations have to be dealt with in a very careful way because when two or more words collocate with each other, the meaning will be totally different. Baker (2007, p.47) demonstrated, “Another way of looking at collocation would be to think of it in terms of the tendency of certain words to co-occur regularly in a given language.”

Furthermore, there are words that always come together while others occasionally co-occur with each other. On the other hand, some words never co-occur with each other. For example, Larson (1997, p.155) argued, “Knowing which words go together is an important part of understanding the meaning of a text and translating it well.” Larson also demonstrated that some words in any language can never go together combining them together would make no sense. Moreover, he provided an example of words that cannot occur with each other “we do not say the cat’s wings, but we often say the bird’s wings.”

Many cultural and sociolinguistic problems might appear when translating collocations. For example, the collocation “*cats and dogs*” in “*It rains cats and dogs*” might cause several cultural and sociolinguistic problems to the translator of this collocation because, the words “*cats and dogs*” cannot be used in Arabic language when describing the rainy weather. Instead, Arabs use many words that are capable of describing the rain (e.g. “*tumteru beghazartun*” (Lit. “*It rains abundantly*”). Accordingly, any translator has to know what words the Arabs use when talking about much rain and what words and expressions are used in the other language. As can be seen from this example, the two languages use different collocations to refer to the same concept. Finally, this study aims at examining cultural and sociolinguistic issues faced by the Jordanian participants while translating some collocations related to culture and society.

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## 2. CULTURE AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS

There is no one specific agreed upon definition of culture among researchers (see, for example, Newmark, 1989; Kohls, 1996; Foley, 1997). Newmark (1989, p.142) defined culture as “The way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression.” Thus, the life aspects that some people are unfamiliar with may be considered as a part of culture. In addition, Kohls (1996, p.23) argued, “Culture refers to the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does and makes—its

systems of attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation.” Moreover, Foley (1997, p.108), on the other hand, stated, A culture is a mental system which generates all and only the proper cultural behavior.” According to Faqi (2004, p.1), “Culture involves the totality of attitudes towards the world, towards events, other cultures and peoples and the manner in which the attitudes are mediated.” Therefore, it is argued that culture includes everything, including religious expressions. Finally, it seems that theorists have not agreed upon one definition of culture, and Newmarks’ definition is a clear-cut one. It can also be concluded that language and religion are an integral part of the culture of any society.

Because the concept of culture is very comprehensive, this paper deals specifically with cultural and sociolinguistic differences found and encountered during the process of translating collocations. Such differences have a great impact on any translator and on the translation process by the difficulties such differences make; therefore, they are more important than the differences in language structure (Nida, 1964). Furthermore, Shunnaq (2012) explained that a translator should exchange not only words but also the messages and ideas of the SL, and a translator should be familiar with the culture of the SL.

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## 3. EMPIRICAL STUDIES ABOUT TRANSLATING COLLOCATIONS

Studies conducted so far in the field of translating collocations have focused on different issues. For example, Nofal (2012) compared between collocations in Arabic and English, and attempts to study collocations as a habitual association between words. On the other hand, other studies have focused only on problems in translating collocations (e.g. Dweik & Abu Shakra, 2011). Similarly and Rabeih (2010) shed light on the different kinds of problems students faced when translating collocations. In addition, he described the problems in general and concludes that collocation translation includes both linguistic and cultural issues. However, Dweik and Abu Shakra (2011) investigated problems translators face in translating collocations mainly in three religious texts in the Holy Quran, the Hadith, and the Bible. They focused on the cultural problems in the translation of religious texts only from Arabic into English.

Other studies (see, for instance, Al-Kharabsheh & Gorgis, 2009) examined the extent to which translation students can translate Arabic contextualized collocations into English properly with and without using dictionaries. In addition, after comparing the output of two translation tasks, the results defeated the claim that not using dictionaries in tests may save time and help in producing better translation. On the other hand, some studies have

investigated the issue of familiarity of collocations. For example, Boussalia (2010) wondered if difficulties faced by students in translating collocations come from their unfamiliarity with English language and its culture. He conducted two tests in which the results revealed that students were unfamiliar with English language and its culture. In other words, the students' inability to master the target language may cause several problems and may bring difficulties in the process of translation. Similarly, other studies have addressed the issue of students' proficiency in translating collocations. For instance, Abdul-Fattah (2011) assessed the advanced students' proficiency in translating lexical collocations from English into Arabic. He scrutinized a number of different texts translated by nine MA students majoring in translation. Findings showed that the proficiency was inadequate and that there was a scale of difficulty in the acquisition of collocation forms. Other studies have examined collocations in linguistic and cultural aspects. For instance, Mustafa (2010) explained the linguistic and cultural patterns of collocations. His study also highlighted the link between collocations and culture in translation. Nevertheless, he did not point out the cultural issues translators face while translating collocations and suggest solutions to these problems. In addition, the structure of words which is different in the SL and TL might pose several difficulties for translators. Larson (1997, p.156) reports that "There are certain combinations of words in any language which are **fixed combinations**. They always occur in a certain order, or they always occur together."

To conclude, many studies have been conducted about collocations and the process of translating them, but to the researchers' best knowledge, none of these studies has addressed issues in translating collocations from English into Arabic, specifically from cultural and sociolinguistic aspects in Jordan, a goal to be achieved in this study. Therefore, this study aims at bridging the gap in this field. In this paper, some cultural and sociolinguistic problematic issues participants encountered were examined and tackled.

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## 4. HYPOTHESIS

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It is hypothesized that cultural and sociolinguistic differences between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) will affect the process of translating collocations. It is also hypothesized that translators in general, and specifically MA students in three Jordanian universities: The Hashemite University, Yarmouk University, and Al- al-Bayt University will face many cultural and sociolinguistic issues in translating collocations, including the word order of the components within the same collocation, the appropriate equivalent in the TL, and the effect or role of religion.

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## 5. METHOD

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### 5.1 Participants

In order to find out the problems and issues that may arise when translating collocations, a questionnaire was given out to MA students majoring in English language at three public universities in Jordan. They were students in English Language at The Hashemite University, Yarmouk University, and Al-al-Bait University. They were 40 MA students: 25 females and 15 males. These students are in their first year in their English Language master program. Moreover, they were of three tracks: English Literature, Translation, and Linguistics.

The collocations used in the study are among the most common ones in English. A questionnaire was given to the subjects to fill in and try to answer the listed questions. The questionnaire has two main questions, each of which has been subdivided into sub-questions. The first question is about the types of dictionary they usually use when translating collocation: monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual. Moreover, they were asked to provide the Arabic translation of some English collocations in the second question.

### 5.2 Procedure

The participants were told that the questionnaire is to identify the problems and issues that may arise when translating collocations from English Language into Arabic Language based on analyzing their answers. They were also told that the information provided would only be used for research purposes, and they agreed to participate in the study. Furthermore, they were given a week before submitting the questionnaire. In addition, they were asked not to write their names in order to avoid any embarrassment in case they provide wrong answers.

### 5.3 Data Analysis

After participants had submitted back the questionnaire, their answers were carefully observed and tabulated in order to reach conclusions about the kinds of problematic issues they had to deal with through translating collocations and suggest solutions to them. Not surprisingly, the problematic issues they encountered in translating collocations were cultural and sociolinguistic ones. That is to say, three major issues appeared that participants suffered from based on analyzing their translation of collocation. These problematic issues were categorized as follows:

#### 5.3.1 Word Order in Collocations

As hypothesized, one of the issues faced by participants while trying to translate collocations in the questionnaire was the order of words inside collocations because word order within the same collocation may differ across cultures and languages. There are certain collocations that have certain fixed word order in English and Arabic. For instance, the collocation "*blind trust*" should be translated

into “*thiqatun amia’a*” because the Arabic one includes two words that collocate with each other in a fixed word order that cannot be switched. When talking about fixed-order combinations, Larson (1997, p.156) reported, “If the order is changed, the result will sound unnatural to the native speaker of the language.” Fortunately, English collocation “*blind tru*” has the same order in Arabic “*thiqatun amia’a*”. Moreover, some participants translated the English collocation “*day and night*” as “*alnnaharu wallailu*”; this might be because they wanted to stick to the English order. However, there is another order of this collocation in Arabic, i.e. the native speakers of Arabic tend to say “*allailu wannaharu*”. Translators of collocations should always be alert to their order in both SL and TL. This difference in ordering words may stem from the importance and priority that one culture gives to the first word in a collocation, or it may refer to some cultural incidents or events which the order has come from. It is worth mentioning that some cultures focus on the first word in a collocation while others focus on another word within the same collocation, instead.

Furthermore, if “*give and take*” is translated as *a’atiwa khud* instead of *khudwa a’ati*, it will not serve the same function native speakers of Arabic expect it to. Therefore, not using the expressions in the same order native speakers use will make the loss in translation inevitable. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the accuracy shall be sacrificed. Without doubt, accuracy is a crucial element in translation, but as Baker (2007, p.47) suggested that it is important to “bear in mind that the use of common target-language patterns which are familiar to the target reader plays an important role in keeping the communication channels open.” Therefore, the best solution to the problematic issue of order is that a translator has to acquaint himself/herself with what is used as an appropriate order in both source and target languages.

### 5.3.2 Acceptable Equivalents in the TL

According to Armstrong (2005) argued that recognizing SL collocations is not difficult but finding an appropriate TL equivalent is where the difficulty lies. It has been long argued that rendering any suitable equivalent that is culturally acceptable in the target society’s language might, most often, be problematic. Specifically, if the term which is chosen as an equivalent in the TL has, totally or partially, a different way of use from that of the SL. In other words, a translator may succeed in choosing an appropriate TL collocation; however, the function of the translated collocation may not be one hundred per cent exactly the same as its original function in the SL. Consequently, choosing an appropriate equivalent may sometimes be at the expense of the accuracy of the meaning.

Moreover, it is also necessary to avoid any collocative clashes that may arise when trying to render similar

or semi-similar equivalents. Participants of this study committed some of collocative mistakes. For example, the English collocation “*hot potato*” would cause an inevitable cultural clash especially if it is rendered as “*batatatum sakhenatun*” (Lit. hot potato) as many participants did in this study. This cultural clash arises because “*batatatum sakhenatun*” in Arabic refers to a kind of food instead of referring to a problem that is difficult to deal with □*Mushkelatun sa’abatun*□.

In addition, “strong tea” was incorrectly translated as “*Shaeun qawiun*” (Lit. powerful tea). In Arabic Language, “*Rajulun qawiun*” (Lit. a strong man) is always used, but “*Shaeun qawiun*” (Lit. powerful tea) is not used because the word “*Shaeun*” (Lit. tea) does not collocate with the word “*qawiun*” (Lit. strong). Instead, it collocates with the word “*Thakeel*” (Lit. heavy). Similarly, the translator who is not well acquainted with the Arabic culture will mistranslate the English collocation “*weak coffee*” (Lit. kahwa da’eifa) as is the case in the questionnaire. In this case, the right translation is *kahwatun khafefatun*” not “*kahwa da’eifa*” because the Arabic word “*kahwatun*” does not collocate with the word “*da’eifa*”, but it collocates with the word “*khafefatun*” i.e. this is the way the native Arabs use this collocation. The word ‘*weak*’ describes “a drink that contains a lot of water compared to its other contents, so that it does not have a strong flavour” (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2008, p.1644).

### 5.3.3 Problematic Issues Related to Religion

Because societies of both SL and TL do not share the same religion, problematic issues were observed in participants’ translation of some collocations that were derived from a religion of a culture or society. For instance, most participants translated “*Life and death*” literally as “*Alhayattu wal moutu*”, which is not acceptable to the Arab native speakers. “*Almauta walhayata*” ( Lit. the death and life) is acceptable because this collocation came from the Qur’anic verse {*Allathi khalakal mauta walhayata leabluakom*} (Quran, Almulk, p.2). Such religion-related issues are related to the word order in collocations as well because the order is different in both languages.

Similarly, the same issue arose when some participants rendered “*day and night*” as “*Alnahar walleil*” which is not acceptable at all to Arab readers. The fault of this translation comes from the fact that there is another suitable Arabic collocation that came from the Holy Quran. This suitable translation should be “*allailu wannahar*” as it is existent in the Quran. It is taken from the religion of the Arab societies. Furthermore, some translators tend to translate “*fine*” as “*Alhamdullah*”. Though this translation is somewhat acceptable, it fails to render the exact meaning it has in the Arabic collocation. Boussalia (2010, p.5) argued that these two phrases “are not totally equivalent” because the Arabic translation has

religious implication which is not found in the English phrase. Therefore, the equivalent here is not apt culturally and religiously.

## 6. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Translators are to cope with many issues when translating a piece of work. However, when they translate a text with collocations, they have to deal with problems and issues that have cultural and sociolinguistic dimensions. These issues come to be existing simply because translators deal with two different languages i.e. SL and TL. Consequently there are two different cultures involved in the translation process. This paper intends to shed light on these issues that translators face while translating collocations.

## 7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first question in the questionnaire is to investigate participants' use of different kinds of dictionaries (monolingual, bilingual, and trilingual) while translation in general, and when they translate collocations in particular. Table 1 shows the frequency counts and percentage of students' usages of dictionaries and machine translation systems while translating collocations in the questionnaire, and their counterparts who translate without using dictionaries.

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Participants' Use of Dictionaries**

Kinds of dictionaries	Frequency	%
Bilingual dictionary	46	65
machine translation systems	16	22
Monolingual	9	13
Total	71	100

Table 1 shows that participants depended heavily on dictionaries to look up the meanings of collocations, suggesting that they are unfamiliar with the SL collocations. Dictionaries cannot give the appropriate cultural translation in all language contexts, which might cause culturally inconvenient translation if dictionaries are taken as the only means of translation. In addition, the usage of bilingual dictionaries outperformed all other types of dictionary, indicating that they might understand the surface meaning or literal meaning of collocations because monolingual dictionaries should be consulted in SL and TL as well in order to better understand the cultural and sociolinguistic background of collocations.

Table 2 presents kinds of cultural and sociolinguistic issues found in participants' translation of collocations in question two in the questionnaire.

**Table 2**  
**Distribution of the Problematic Issues in Participants' Translation**

Types of cultural and sociolinguistic issues	%
Word order	28
Equivalent	59
Religion-specific collocations	13
Total	100

Participants' answers were classified into three categories of problems as shown in Table 2. It is clear from the table above the most prevalent problematic issue is finding an acceptable equivalent. Moreover, there were a good number of participants who even did not answer the question, suggesting that they had no ideas about how to translate such collocations which means that they are not familiar with collocations as some of them stated.

Table 3 shows the evaluation of translation. This table classifies participants' translation as appropriate and inappropriate translation. The translation that did not contain any kind of cultural and sociolinguistic problems is considered appropriate.

**Table 3**  
**Evaluation of Participants' Translation**

Rating translation	%
Appropriate translation	38
Inappropriate translation	62
Total	100

Table 3 reveals that 62% of collocations were wrongly translated, demonstrating that participants suffered from serious cultural and sociolinguistic problems while translating the selected collocations. Another point that is worth mentioning is that some students were confused when they had seen unfamiliar expressions for the first time such as "spick and span" and "hot potatoes".

The results in all tables above clearly indicate that participants in this study were unfamiliar with and had difficulties in translating collocations that have cultural and sociolinguistic background. This may be attributed to the fact that the SL has different cultural and societal norms from the TL. In addition, some students were unfamiliar with some collocations as there are no courses in most universities for teaching English collocations. The findings are in line with many studies that reported that Arab students are not familiar with collocations and their proficiency might be not adequate (see, Boussalia, 2010; Abdul-Fattah, 2011). Moreover, the participants were affected by their Arabic-mother tongue, and the influence of Arabic resulted in mistranslating some collocations (transliteration) especially with the order of words. The

findings of this study are also in agreement with Larson (1997) who concluded that word order in languages is crucial and that there are sets of words that always go together in a certain specific order.

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## CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

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Prominent cultural and sociolinguistic issues that might arise during the course of translating collocations from English into Arabic have been explored in this paper. A detailed description of these issues has been provided in the body of this study. More specifically, these issues found in participants' translations include the order of collocations, availability of cultural and sociolinguistic equivalent, and issues related to religious words. Forty MA students in English Language from three public universities in Jordan were taken as a case study. Consequently, the results were analyzed statistically in tables. As predicted, the results have shown that translators faced cultural and sociolinguistic problems in translating collocations and had not enough knowledge and proficiency of collocations. The results were in line with findings of other studies that as long as there are different cultures involved in translation, the loss is unavoidable.

Moreover, the findings also revealed that some MA students participating in this study were not familiar with collocations. Therefore, it is recommended that universities offer at least two courses that teach collocations in order to acquaint students with collocations, which might enable them to overcome such translational problems. However, there are limitations regarding this study. The findings of this paper should be interpreted cautiously as they are limited to issues related to the culture and society of the SL and TL. The subjects who were given out the questionnaire are MA students from only three Jordanian universities. Finally, the findings of this paper may motivate other studies related to other issues in translating collocations, including linguistic issues.

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