

Cultural Research and the Development of Translation Competence: A comparative analysis of Arabic translations of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

البحث الثقافي وتطوير الكفاءة الترجمة: تحليل مقارن للترجمات العربية لـ "أليس في بلاد العجائب"

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Abstract:

In an increasingly globalized world, translation extends beyond language transfer to require deep cultural competence. This study explores how cultural research enhances translational competence, drawing on theories by Byram, Deardorff, Venuti, and Vermeer. Through a comparative case study of Arabic translations of a key passage from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, it analyzes the impact of cultural mediation on humor, rhythm, and poetic nuance.

Findings reveal that culturally-informed strategies—such as creative adaptation and functional equivalence—are essential for effective literary translation. The study argues for integrating cultural research into translator training to ensure meaningful cross-cultural communication.

Keywords; literary translation; cultural competence; intercultural competence; cultural research; Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

الملخص:

لم تعد الترجمة في عصر العولمة مجرد نقل لغوي، بل أصبحت نشاطاً ثقافياً يتطلب كفاءة ثقافية بينية. يستعرض هذا المقال دور البحث الثقافي في تطوير الكفاءة الترجمة، وذلك من خلال إطار نظري يستند إلى أعمال بايرام، دياردورف، فينوتي وفيرمير، وتحليل ترجمات عربية لنموذج من مغامرات أليس في بلاد العجائب.

أظهرت المقارنة بين الترجمات الحرفية والترجمات التي اعتمدت على البحث الثقافي أهمية الوعي الثقافي في الحفاظ على روح النص بما فيه من دعابة وإيقاع، ومعنى ضمني. ويخلص المقال إلى أهمية الوساطة الثقافية والتكيف الإبداعي في تكوين المترجم وممارسته الترجمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة الأدبية، الكفاءة الثقافية، الوساطة الثقافية، البحث الثقافي، مغامرات أليس في بلاد العجائب.

1. Introduction:

In an era of globalization, translation finds itself at the intersection of cultures that are ever more interwoven and in constant dialogue. The act of translation is no longer confined to the mere transfer of language—it has become a process of intercultural mediation that requires attention to the contexts, value systems, and symbolic representations of the cultures involved. This evolution has made expectations more complex: today, it's not just about conveying a message but about ensuring its intelligibility, relevance, and acceptability within the target culture (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006).

Linguistic proficiency alone can no longer meet these demands; mastery of intercultural competence has become a *sine qua non* for successful translation (Alenezi, 2021). This competence, which goes far beyond a knowledge of source and target languages, equips the translator with the ability to identify, decipher, and negotiate cultural nuances and implicit meanings, thus avoiding misunderstandings, anachronisms, or inaccuracies (Olalla-Soler, 2015).

From this perspective, cultural research is not simply a matter of gathering encyclopedic information—it fundamentally shapes translation competence. As Olalla-Soler (2015) points out, cultural competence is an essential extralinguistic sub-competence within the broader spectrum of translation skills. It plays a key role not only in understanding “culturemes”—elements loaded with cultural significance—but also in guiding strategic decision-making throughout the translation process.

This study aims to demonstrate—through both theoretical reflection and a comparative textual analysis—how cultural research, understood as the set of approaches that help translators understand and integrate cultural references, structures and enhances translation competence. The analysis combines a critical review of the literature, a conceptual framework, and a case study that highlights the concrete contribution of cultural competence to the training of university students in translation, particularly in the field of literary translation. In this context, the specific challenges of translating literary texts underscore the importance of developing advanced cultural competence skills as a core component of translator education.

2. Cultural and Intercultural Competence: An Essential Prerequisite for the Translator

2.1 Defining Cultural and Intercultural Competence

In the field of translation, cultural competence refers to the ability to understand, integrate, and interpret the norms, values, practices, and knowledge specific to a given society or social group (Deardorff, 2006). This competence goes beyond mere mastery of the language—a skill typically considered as linguistic competence—and differs from intercultural competence, which Byram (1997) defines as the ability to navigate, compare, and negotiate between multiple cultural worlds.

While cultural competence refers to the mastery of the internal codes of a given culture, intercultural competence takes this further: it involves comparison, negotiation, and active mediation between multiple cultural worlds (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006).

- **Linguistic competence:** The ability to handle language at grammatical, textual, and

pragmatic levels (Byram, 1997).

- **Cultural competence:** The capacity to recognize and draw upon the cultural references unique to a linguistic community (Byram, 1997).
- **Intercultural competence:** The ability to build bridges between cultures, understand differences, and negotiate meaning (Byram, 1997).

This triptych is fundamental: while linguistic competence guarantees the form, it is cultural competence that ensures the meaning—especially implicit and contextual meaning, which often constitutes the true essence and subtlety of a text, particularly in literary or institutional translation (Olalla-Soler, 2015).

2.2 Components of Intercultural Competence

According to the work of Deardorff (2006), Byram (1997), Alenezi (2021), and the PICT project (2012), intercultural competence is structured around several complementary axes:

2.2.1. Attitudes: Openness and Respect towards Otherness

Adopting a posture of constructive curiosity, active listening, and mutual respect, without ethnocentrism. Qualitative studies show that a high level of interest in learning about other cultures greatly facilitates the development of strong translation competence (Byram, 1997; as cited in Alenezi, 2021).

2.2.2. Knowledge: Genuine Knowledge of Diverse Practices and Worldviews

This knowledge encompasses history, literature, law, social customs, dress codes, symbolism, and more. In university programs, specific modules are dedicated to exploring language-culture relationships (Byram, 1997; as cited in Alenezi, 2021).

2.2.3. Interpretation skills: Analytical and Decision-Making Skills

The capacity to interpret, problematize, and resolve cultural challenges through suitable strategies (such as paraphrasing, borrowing, explanation, and so forth). (Byram, 1997; as cited in Alenezi, 2021).

2.2.4. Interactive skills: Skills in Intercultural Communication and Meaning Negotiation

The ability to adapt communicative strategies, identify implicit meanings, and manage misunderstandings. (Byram, 1997; as cited in Alenezi, 2021).

The capacity to choose the appropriate approach—adaptation, explanation, localization, domestication etc.—is crucial when addressing issues related to “culturemes,” or culturally loaded textual elements (Olalla-Soler, 2015). This also includes the aptitude to serve as a bridge between two cultures without erasing one in favor of the other (House, 2015; Venuti, 2012).

2.2.5. Critical cultural awareness: Awareness of One's Own Cultural Background

Recognizing how one's own value system influences the interpretation of a text or utterance. In training contexts, this aspect is widely recognized as essential by most students surveyed (Byram, 1997; as cited in Alenezi, 2021).

Empirical models, such as PACTE Group model, confirm that cultural competence is not a monolithic block: it is declarative (knowledge) and procedural (know-how), but also attitudinal (mindset and openness to otherness).

2.3 Theoretical Contributions to Translation Studies

2.3.1. Translation Studies perspectives

Skopos Theory (Vermeer, 1978; Nord, 1997) places the function of the target text at the center of the translation process. This means the translator must adapt not just linguistically, but also to the norms, expectations, and cultural references of the receiving culture. Nord's concept of "loyalty" (1997) frames the translator as an ethical mediator, tasked with negotiating between formal fidelity to the source and necessary cultural adaptation.

2.3.2. Cultural Studies approaches

Venuti (2012), in the tradition of cultural studies, explores questions of power, ideology, and the positioning of both author and translator in the publishing landscape. Translation is seen as a process of (re)constructing meaning deeply influenced by power relations, cultural legitimacy, and the contexts in which texts are received. Translators are not simply rendering words, but are also transferring stories, values, and entire worldviews.

In line with this view, Sahraoui (2025) emphasizes that the socio-cultural dimension of translation represents not only a background context but an active shaping force that determines how meaning is negotiated between cultures. According to him, understanding translation as a "social and cultural act" invites scholars to integrate sociological and cultural theories into translation studies, thereby reinforcing the idea that translators operate within networks of cultural production and reception.

2.3.3. Intercultural Communication framework

Juliane House (2015) highlights the ways intercultural communication provides translators with a framework for decoding, encoding, and recoding messages. Translators must anticipate potential misunderstandings and perceptual conflicts, employing flexibility, creativity, and self-reflexivity throughout the process.

2.3.4. Empirical Research evidence

Recent studies (Olalla-Soler, 2015) using experimental methods have confirmed that increased cultural competence leads to more effective identification and resolution of translation problems with significant cultural stakes (such as culturemes, historical references, symbolism, and idiomatic expressions). As translators' competence grows, their solutions become more acceptable to target audiences.

2.3.5. Training and pedagogical implications

University programs that explicitly incorporate the development of cultural competence—through targeted courses, reflective activities, and case studies focused on solving specific problems—allow students to measure their progress and identify areas for improvement (Alenezi, 2021). Utilizing self-assessment tools and knowledge/attitude metrics (such as the Cultural Intelligence Scale and the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire), educators can track student growth and refine teaching methods accordingly (Olalla-Soler, 2015).

2.3.6. Empirical Models

The PACTE model (2003, 2009), which underpins Olalla-Soler's experimental study (2015), recognizes cultural competence as a concrete and measurable component and defined it as an extra-linguistic sub-competence, which includes bicultural knowledge (about the source and target culture), Encyclopedic knowledge (about the world in general) and subject knowledge (in specific areas).

PACTE Group in its empirical studies stressed on defining it as of overall translation competence, interacting dynamically and inter-related with the other sub-competences (bilingual, knowledge about translation, instrumental, strategic) adding to that the psycho-physiological components.

3. Analytical Case Study: The Impact of Cultural Research on Arabic translations of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

The translation into Arabic of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* — a masterpiece of Victorian literature — perfectly illustrates the complexity inherent in literary transfer between distant languages and cultures. One of the main challenges lies in passages that are deeply rooted in the English children's imagination, teeming with parodies, wordplay, and popular songs. These features make translation especially demanding, notably when it comes to recreating the humor, rhythm, and parody that are intrinsically linked to the source culture, particularly when the target language is Arabic, which is culturally and linguistically distant from English.

3.1. Analytical Framework

3.1.1. Research design

Qualitative analytical study using comparative textual analysis.

3.1.2. Data sources

Published Arabic translations of Carroll's work and researcher-generated literal translation.

3.1.3. Analytical approach

Systematic comparison using predetermined evaluation criteria.

- Evaluation criteria:
 - Musical and rhythmic preservation.
 - Humor and parody reproduction.
 - Target reader reception effect.

3.1.4. Case selection rationale

The poem opening "Will you walk a little faster?" from The Lobster Quadrille chapter, which the full original passage is reproduced in Appendix A, was selected for analysis due to the combination of rhyme, musicality, and the deliberate English nursery rhyme parody.

This passage relies on absurd humor and incongruous imagery that echo the quintessential nonsense of Carroll's world. Though it appears to be a simple children's song, the couplet is in fact a playful and parodic reimagining of traditional English nursery rhymes, with a highly codified metric and rhythmic structure.

3.2 Comparative translations analysis

3.2.1. Approach A: Literal Translation Without Cultural Research

This analytical approach examines word-for-word translation, without prior investigation into the parodic nature of the text, and without any adaptation of rhythm or tone for the target readership. The resulting version maintains lexical fidelity but neglects the poetic register, humor, and cultural context of the source text.

Complete Literal Arabic Translation

"هل ستمشي أسرع قليلاً؟" قال سمك أبيض لحلزون.

"هناك دلفين قريب خلفنا، وهو يدوس على ذيلي.

انظر كيف يتقدم الكركند والسلاحف جميعهم بشغف!

إنهم ينتظرون على الحصى — هل ستأتي وتنضم إلى الرقصة؟

هل ستفعل، لن تفعل، هل ستفعل، لن تفعل، هل ستنضم إلى الرقصة؟"

3.2.2. Approach B: Translation Following In-Depth Cultural Research

This approach begins with systematic study of the original English nursery rhymes being parodied and their significance within Victorian tradition, drawing on best practices observed in existing translations (such as those by Nadia El-Khouly). The aim is not merely to transpose, but to recreate an Arabic nursery rhyme, restoring the rhythm, musicality, humor, and playful quality of the original—sometimes through the creative invention of imitation children's rhymes.

Example of a cultural research-informed adaptation (original creation)

لن نذهب للماء بعد الآن

إن لم تُسرّع يا حلزون، الآن

فالدلفين وراءنا يسير بلا هوان

ويدوس على ذيلي بلا أمان

أنظر كيف الاستاكوزا والسلاحف يتقدمون فرحين

ينتظرون على الشاطئ، فهل تلتحق بنا في الرقص مع الباقيين؟

هيا، ألا ترقص؟ هيا، ألا ترقص؟ هل سترقص وترقص كالجميع؟

Example of a Professional Translation (Nadia El-Khouly)

قال السمك الأبيض للحلزون:

"ياللا امشي بسرعة شوية"

قالت له السمكة البيضاء:

فيه درفيلة جايه عليه

وفوق ديلي دايسة بقوة
بص وشوف الإستاكوزا
بص وشوف الرنيلا
جربوا بسرعة عننا
ووصلوا الشط قبلنا"
ياله تعالى وارقص هنا
ح ترقص اه، ح ترقص لا
ياله ارقص عندنا
لما نوصل ح يشيلونا
وفي الهوا ح يطيرونا

3.3. Analysis and Results

3.3.1. Analysis of approach A (Literal Translation)

Systematic analysis reveals that strict lexical transfer, while preserving the informational content, completely sacrifices the poetic and playful dimensions of the text. The passage above, though accurate in terms of factual meaning, loses all of its original humor, rhyme, and rhythm — leaving the Arabic reader with a sense of strangeness, irrelevance, or outright nonsense. As highlighted by Hatim & Mason (1997), this shortcoming confirms that a strictly literal translation fails precisely where aesthetic, humorous, and interactive effects should take precedence. Carroll's world of childhood is rendered banal, or even betrayed.

3.3.2. Analysis of approach B (Adapted Translation After Cultural Research)

Systematic analysis of the culturally - informed approach demonstrates successful poetic recreation through several mechanisms:

- **Rhythmic and Rhymic Recovery:** Rhythm and rhyme are restored through adaptation or creative invention using Arabic poetry and nursery rhyme structures familiar to target audiences.
- **Humor and Playfulness Transfer:** Humor and playfulness are successfully transferred or compensated through poetic techniques unique to the target language.
- **Cultural Rapport Establishment:** Arabic-speaking children and adult readers develop emotional connections enhancing reading enjoyment and memorization.
- **Textual Transformation:** The passage ceases appearing as strange, incomprehensible statements, becoming genuinely poetic and comic moments comparable to the original English text.

3.3.2. Comparative Analysis of three translations

Dimension	Literal translation	Nadia El-Khouly (2002)	Culturally researched translation (researcher translation)
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Style	Word-for-word, literal meaning without rhythm .	Colloquial register with a semi-lyrical, folk-song feel.	Classical arabic poetic form drawing on traditional children's verse patterns.
Rhythm & Rhyme	Absent	Simplified rhyme pairs (e.g. شوية-قوة، قبلنا-هنا، يشيلونا-يكيرونا) relying on spoken familiar patterns	Consistent Rijz رجز meter with internal rhymes (e.g. الآن-الأمان، فرحين-باقين) Reflecting nursery rhyme conventions.
Humor	Lost-text reads flats	Partially restored through playful colloquialisms (e.g. درفيلة)	Fully recreated with wordplay rhythmic repetition, and culturally absurd imagery
Cultural adaptation	None, it remains foreign to the Arabic reader.	Localized via colloquial terms grounding the scene in arabic cultural content.	Integrates Arabic children's verse conventions, using formulaic openings and refrains.
Accessibility	Difficult, lacks poetic or humorous cues	Highly accessible to general readers, fostering warmth and engagement	appeals to readers familiar with classical Arabic literature while preserving childlike wonder.

4. Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

This analytical study reveals several crucial insights for literary translation pedagogy

- Cultural Element Identification

Systematic cultural research enables translators to detect implicit humor, intertextuality, and poetic value embedded within source texts, skills essential for literary translation competence.

- Functional Equivalence Prioritization

Achieving similar effects rather than maintaining strict word-for-word fidelity produces vibrant texts that genuinely resonate with target audiences, representing fundamental literary translation principles.

- Aesthetic Effect Preservation

Respecting rhythm, playfulness, and musicality enhances reading experiences and fosters reader engagement, crucial for literary work success across cultures.

- Advanced Translational Skill Development

Students acquire abilities to function as cultural mediators, practice contrastive analysis, and provide professional justification for translation choices (Katan, 2014; Snell-Hornby, 2006).

The comparative analysis of various Arabic translations demonstrates that cultural research represents not a luxury, but a fundamental requirement for successfully conveying literary works' humor, style, and spirit across cultures.

This case study provides an exemplary illustration of cultural research's decisive role, enriching translation acts while underpinning pedagogical approaches where cultural competence, creativity, and mediation remain central to the translator's craft.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that effective translation in our globalized era transcends linguistic competence to require comprehensive cultural and intercultural awareness. Through comparative analysis of literal and culturally-informed Arabic translations of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, the research confirms that cultural research is indispensable for preserving humor, rhythm, and literary essence across linguistic boundaries. The findings reveal that literal approaches sacrifice aesthetic and cultural richness, while culturally - mediated strategies successfully recreate textual spirit and enhance reader engagement. These results underscore the imperative to position cultural competence, creativity, and functional adaptation at the core of translator education and professional practice.

The analysis confirms that successful literary translation requires systematic cultural investigation rather than superficial linguistic conversion. Ultimately, this research advocates for integrating comprehensive cultural research methodologies into translator training curricula, establishing cultural competence as the cornerstone of nuanced, culturally intelligible translation practice in contemporary cross-cultural communication.

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7. Appendix

Source Text - "The Lobster Quadrille" Passage

