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Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḍawī 300, f. 1v; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v

Lost in Translation: Some Mistranslations from the so-called Kitāb Hurūšiyūš

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to use the theoretical frame proposed by Christiane Nord in her important book *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*, in order to analyze some of the most significant mistranslations of the so-called *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, the famous Arabic version of the *Historiae adversus paganos* by the Latin historian Paulus Orosius.

In his famous essay *Dire quasi la stessa cosa*, dedicated to translation, Umberto Eco ironizes on various errors found even in excellent translations.¹ Eco's irony, however, is counterpointed by the considerations of the translators of the essay's Polish version, who have detected two mistakes made by Eco in his book: a wrong word in a quoted title ("curieuses" instead of "sérieuses") and the idea that the Trans-Siberian railway was a narrow-gauge railway.² In her turn, Justyna Łukaszewicz pointed out some misunderstandings in the version of Eco's text achieved by the Polish translators.³ Perhaps we must resign ourselves to the fact that in a vast, complex and difficult work, where different languages and cultures meet, there is always some weak point. Some mistranslation.

Surprisingly, the word 'mistake' is not one that often enters into the contemporary theorisation of translation. Also the index to Laurence Venuti's monumental anthology concerning the translation studies does not include an entry dedicated to it.⁴ Perhaps in accordance with this determination by translators themselves not to see «mistake» as a meaningful tool of theory, the word also fails to appear in the glossary to Christiane Nord's *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*,⁵ even though she devotes a section of the book to "Translation Errors and Translation Evaluation".⁶ Nord's aim is, as the book's sub-title suggests, to present a range of 'functionalist' approaches to translation. Her argument is founded on two initial premises. The first is that translation is a particular type of human action, or more strictly speaking 'interaction' between two

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¹ U. Eco, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa. Esperienze di traduzione*, Bompiani, Milano 2003, p. 266, n. 154.

² Eco, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (above, n. 1), p. 253, n. 147.

³ J. Łukaszewicz, "Tradurre un libro sulla traduzione", *Italica Wratislaviensia* 12 (2021), pp. 221-27.

⁴ L. Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader*, Routledge, London 2000.

⁵ Routledge, London – New York 2018². Cf. also H. Aveling, "Mistakes' in Translation: A Functionalist Approach", *Celts* 1 (2003), pp. 1-12.

⁶ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity* (above, n. 5), pp. 67-73.

or more agents, which is “first and foremost intended to change an existing state of affairs (minimally, the inability of certain people to communicate with each other)”,⁷ involving a source text. Secondly, the target text is “functional”, because it relates to the “expectations, needs, previous knowledge and situational conditions”⁸ of the receiver for whom it is intended.⁹ According to Nord, functional inadequacies occur in four ways. They may be:

1. Pragmatic translation errors, which can be identified by checking on the extratextual factors (sender, receiver, medium, time, place, motive, text function); since pragmatic translation problems are present in every translation task, they can be generalized regardless of the languages and cultures involved or the direction of the translation process (into or from the native language). They are thus the most important problems to deal with in the initial phases of translator training.
2. Cultural translation errors, which are due to an inadequate decision with regard to reproduction or adaptation of culture-specific conventions.
3. Linguistic translation errors, which can arise from structural differences in the vocabulary, syntax, and other features of the two languages. Some of these problems are restricted to language pairs, as might be the case of cognates or false friends (e.g. English actually vs German aktuell).
4. Text-specific translation errors, which are specifically bound to one particular source text, as may be the case for some figures of speech, neologisms, or puns.¹⁰

The purpose of this article is to use the theoretical frame proposed by Nord to analyze some of the most significant mistranslations of the so-called *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, the famous Arabic version of the *Historiae adversus paganos* by Paulus Orosius.¹¹ The data we can derive on this text from the Arabic sources are the following:

1. The Latin book of *Historiae adversus paganos* was donated to the first Andalusian caliph, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III al-Nāṣir (300/912-350/961), by the Byzantine Emperor Armāniyūs (namely Romanus) in the year 337/948.
2. The text was translated for the son of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III, al-Ḥakam II al-Mustaṣir by the *qāḍī* of the Christians of Cordoba and by Qāsim ibn Aṣḥāg al-Bayyānī, tutor of al-Ḥakam and a very well-known figure in the religious and cultural history of Muslim Spain.¹²
3. The translation of Orosius was completed by two well-known Muslims who translated books for the caliphs of Islām in Cordoba.

⁷ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity* (above, n. 5), p. 19.

⁸ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, p. 28.

⁹ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, p. 21.

¹⁰ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, pp. 60-2.

¹¹ For a detailed account of the studies on the *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš* cf. M. Penelas, *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš (Traducción árabe de las Historiae adversus paganos de Orosio)*, ed. M. Penelas, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas-Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, Madrid 2001; cf. also C.C. Sahner, “From Augustine to Islam. Translation and History in the Arabic Orosius”, *Speculum* 88 (2013), 905-31, and C. Sassenscheidt, *Orosius Arabus. Die Rezeption und Transformation der Historiae adversum paganos des Orosius im Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, P. Lang., Berlin 2018.

¹² On Qāsim ibn Aṣḥāg al-Bayyānī and on a possible identification of the *qāḍī* of the Christians of Cordoba as Ḥafṣ b. Albar al-Qūṭī see Penelas, *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš* (above, n. 11), pp. 27-35.

This text is the only known testimony to us of the translation into Arabic of a Latin historical work, and consequently its epistemological value is extraordinarily marked, also with regard to translation errors and the frame developed by Nord is a useful guide between them.

1. An example of pragmatic mistranslation

A typical example of ‘pragmatic translation error’ in the so-called *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš* is the non-recognition of the Latin *tria nomina*, almost always interpreted as the names of three different characters. The following is a clear example of the phenomenon:

Tria nomina

Latin text. *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. by A. Lippold, Vol. 1, Mondadori Fondazione Valla, Milano 1976, IV 9, 14-15, p. 300:

L. Caecilio Metello C. Furio Placido consulibus Hasdrubal nouus Carthaginiensium imperator cum elephantis centum triginta et equitum peditumque amplius triginta milibus Lilybaeum uenit ex Africa et continuo cum Metello consule apud Panormum pugnam conseruit.

Arabic translation. *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš (Traducción árabe de las Historiae adversus paganos de Orosio)*, ed. M. Penelas, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas-Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, Madrid 2001, IV, § 59, p. 222:

وبعد ذلك إذ كان القواد بمدينة رومة ججيليون ولوجيش ومطالش وغايش وكمذش وقورقرش ولي سلطان قرطاجنة بإفريقية ملك كان يدعى اشدريال فأقبل ومعه من الفيلة مائة وثلاثون فيلا ومن الخيل والرجال أكثر من ثلاثين ألفا حتى بلغ لبيبة مقبلا من ناحية إفريقية.

^(a) فورش: probably a copyist’s error for كمدش.

And after that, when **Caecilius and Lucius and Metellus and Gaius and Commodus and Qūrḡaraš** were commanders in the city of Rome, a king named Ašdriyāl took power at Carthage in Africa, and he came with one hundred and thirty elephants and more than thirty thousand horses and men, until he reached Libiya, approaching from the side of Africa.

In the Arabic translation of the *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš* the Roman onomastic system of the *tria nomina* is systematically misunderstood by translators. Receiver-orientation becomes relevant in the translation of culture-bound terms: in this case the transformation of the *tria nomina* of the consuls in three different characters derives from the fact that Arabic-speaking translators and readers were not familiar with the Latin habit of the *tria nomina*.

2. Some examples of cultural mistranslation

A typical example of a ‘cultural translation error’ is the simplification of the Roman political language and of its administrative terminology:

a) *Consul* / قائد

Latin text. *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, IV 10, 2, p. 302:

Alter deinde Atilius Regulus et Manlius Vulscus, **ambo bis consules**, cum classe ducentarum nauium et quattuor legionibus Lilybaeum profecti.

Arabic translation. *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, IV, § 57, p. 221:

ثم إن الرومانيين بعثوا قائدين لهم يقال لهما راغلش بن اطليل وماليوش بن بلا شك بمائتي مركب وأربع عرافات في كل عرافة ستة آلاف فبلغوا إلى مدينة لبية .

Then the Romans sent **two of their commanders** called Regulus son of Atilius and Manlius son of Bulāšq with two hundred ships and four legions, and in each legion, there were about six thousand men; then they reached the city of Libiya.

b) *Pontifices* / أشرف
Decemviri / عشرة من خيارهم

Latin text. *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, IV 13, 3, p. 312:

Tertio deinceps anno miseram ciuitatem sacrilegis sacrificiis male potentes funestauere **pontifices**; namque **decemviri** consuetudinem priscae superstitionis egressi.

Arabic translation. *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, IV, § 79, p. 226:

قال هروشيش: قرب أشرف رومة لأوثانهم قربانا عظم به بلاؤهم وكثر له شؤمهم وذلك أن عشرة من خيارهم خرجوا على ما كانت عليه سنتهم في جاهليتهم .

Orosius said: **the nobles of Rome** made a sacrificial offer to their idols, which increased their affliction and increased their misfortune; **ten of their nobles** abandoned their tradition in the times of their ignorance.

c) *Equites et Senatores* / الأشراف

Latin text: *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, IV 16, 5, p. 322:

Hannibal in testimonium uictoriae suae tres modios anulorum aureorum Carthaginem misit, quos ex manibus interfectorum **equitum Romanorum senatorumque** detraxerat.

Arabic translation: *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, IV, § 99, p. 232:

وإذ ذلك بعث انبيل إلى قرطاجنة بثلاثة أمداء من خواتم الذهب التي كان أصابها بأيدي الأشراف تصديقا لغلبته وافتخارا بظفره .

At that time, Hannibal sent to Carthage three modii of the golden rings which he had taken from the hands of **the nobles** as proof of his victory and to boast about his triumph.

In the above examples, the Roman consuls become mere «commanders», the pontiffs, the decemviri, the knights and the senators become generically «nobles». Each culture has its own habits, norms, and political forms. In these cases, the cultural translation problems are a result of the differences in the political forms guiding verbal behaviour in the two cultures involved.

3. An example of linguistic mistranslation

A good example of an error due to language interpretation difficulties is as follows:

Latin text. *Historiae adversus paganos*, 1, II 10, 2, p. 124 Lippold:

Xerxes bis uictus in terra nauale proelium parat. sed Themistocles dux Atheniensium cum intellexisset Ionas – quibus dum auxilium superiore bello praebet, in se Persarum

impetum uerterat – in auxilium Xerxis instructam classem deducere, sollicitare eos parti suae hostique subtrahere statuit et quia conloquendi facultas negabatur, locis quibus Iones accessuri nauibus uidebantur proponi **symbolos saxisque adfigi iubet**, socios quondam et participes periculorum, nunc autem iniuste desides apta increpatione corripuens atque ad antiquorum iura foederum religiosa adhortatione persuadens praecipueque admonens, uti commisso proelio cedentium uice inhibeat remos seseque bello auferant.

Arabic translation. *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, II, § 67, p. 142:

فلما رأى شخشان ذلك من فعلهم وعزمهم وفهم أن قد غلب مرتين في البر عباً لمقاتلتهم في البحر بالمراكب. وكان الرئيس الاثنياسيين يسمى طمشتقلان فأوصى إلى قبائل اليونانيين الذين قد كانوا استغاثوا بالاثنياسيين في الحرب الأولى وكلهم من قبائل الروم الغريقيين بأن يبعثوا مراكبهم ويظهروا لشخشان أنهم أعوان لهم على الاثنياسيين ليكون مذهبهم جر الهزيمة عليهم. وكانت الأمانة بينهم أن يعلقوا الحجارة في مراكبهم لتمتاز بذلك من غيرها.

When Šaḥšār (Xerxes) saw their action and determination and realized that he had been defeated twice on land, he prepared to fight them at sea with ships. The Athenian leader was called Themistocles and he sent embassies to the Ionian tribes, and he asked the Athenians for relief in the first war, and they were all part of the Greek Rūm tribes, and he asked them to send their ships and to show to Šaḥšār that they were his allies against the Athenians, in order to drag the Persians into defeat. **And the sign between them was that they would attach stones to their ships to distinguish them from the others.**

The translators do not understand the complex grammatical and syntactic structure of the Latin phrase, which they render completely incorrectly.

4. Some examples of text-specific mistranslation

As Nord states, “since solutions to the text-specific problems cannot be generalized and applied to similar cases, the translator must be prepared to act creatively”.¹³ In the *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš* there are various examples of mistranslations of this type, derived from the specificity of the Latin text.

a) *Legio*/ العرافة

Latin text: *Historiae aduersus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, IV 1, 10, p. 262:

Sed postquam Minucius **quartae legionis** primus hastatus protentam in se manum beluae gladio desecuit.

Arabic translation: *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, IV, § 8, p. 206:

وقد كان منوجيه بن شبين قائد العرافة الرابع من الرومانيين ضرب يد الفيل فقطعها.

And Minucius son of Sabinus, the commander of **the fourth legion**, struck the elephant’s foot and cut it off.

¹³ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity* (above, n. 5), p. 62.

b) Regem/ الخلافة

Latin text: *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, III 23, 40, p. 248:

Hac uictoria elatus Antigonus, regem cum Demetrio filio appellari iubet: quod exemplum omnes secuti **regium sibi nomen dignitatemque sumpserunt**.

Arabic translation: *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, III, § 137, p. 198:

فلما ... ذلك الظفر لانظغون زهى به وأمر أن يدعى له ولأبيه بالخلافة .

And when... that victory to Antigonus, he became arrogant as a result of it and ordered **that a prayer be made on his behalf and his father's behalf as caliphs**.

c) Miles/ أهل ديوانهم

Latin text: *Historiae adversus paganos*, ed. Lippold, 1, IV 16, 19, p. 268:

Quis credat eo tempore, quo aerarium populi Romani egenam stipem priuata conlacione poscebat, **miles** in castris non nisi aut puer aut seruus aut sceleratus aut debitor et ne sic quidem numero idoneus erat, senatus in curia omnis paene nouicius uidebatur, postremo cum ita in minutis fractisque omnibus desperabatur, ut consilium de relinquenda Italia subiretur.

Arabic translation: *Kitāb Hurūšiyūš*, ed. Penelas, IV, § 106, p. 233:

فبلغ الأمر من الرومانيين يومئذ أن صار جل أهل ديوانهم إما عبدا معتقا وإما سارقا مطلقا وإما مجترما معفوا عنه وإمام صغيرا سلك به مسلك الكبير. وفي كل ذلك ما كان يتم عسكريهم ولا يجتمع لهم عدد ديو .

The Romans thus reached the point, on that day, that all *their army* was made up either of freed slaves or freed thieves or of pardoned delinquents or of little men who by means of it acted like great men. Yet with everything, their army was not complete and the number of **their soldiers** was not reached.

In fact, in the cases mentioned above and on many other occasions the translators seem to choose terms strangely inappropriate to the Latin words they have to render in Arabic. If in the case of the term *legio*, which is a technical term, this can be understandable, the use of the concept of caliphate applied to Hellenistic kingship is really remarkable and the choice of the word *diwān* applied to the military context remains in some way enigmatic.

In any case, one cannot fail to appreciate the extraordinary effort of the translators: the Arabic translation of the Orosian *Historiae* was the product of Christian and Muslim authors working together: a new gateway to the Graeco-Roman world for the Medieval Islamic culture.