Paragraphing and Punctuation in Translation from Arabic into English

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the notion of paraphrasing and punctuation in Arabic discourse. It attempts to show how Arabic represents paragraph cues and considers how readers can identify paragraph boundaries if, as it is often claimed Arabic discourse has no overt cues. It then proceeds to investigate and highlight the effect of "loose" paragraph marking or the absence of paragraph boundaries on comprehension and translation.

ملخص

تحاول هـذه المقالـة دراسـة مفهـوم إعـادة الصـياغة و نظـام الترقـيم في الخطـاب العـربي. كـما تحـاول إبـراز طريقـة اللغـة العربيـة في الإشـارة إلى الفقـرات و كيـف يـتمكن القـارئ مـن تحديـد الفقـرات. فلقـد اِدّعـي الكثـير أن الخطـاب العـربي لـيس لـه مـؤشرات واضـحة لحـدود الفقـرات. لـذا سـنحاول تسـليط الضـوء عـلى أثر الفقـرات "الحـرة" التـي تبـدو في الظـاهر مفكوكة، أو انعدام حدود لها على الفهم والترجمة.

While there are various notions and perceptions of what paragraphs are, or ought to be (Bond and Hayes 1984; Longacre 1979; Stark 1988; Mehamsadji 1993, 2003; …etc.), it can be argued that in written discourse, the term paraphrasing is understood to mean a notion-based section, each with a central idea. The division into distinct paragraphs, however, remains to a certain extent subjective simply because the paragraph being notion-based, eludes precise grammatical characterization. As Bond and Hayes (1984: 47) state:

We would consider paragraph boundaries artificial if people could find them only with the help of paragraphing marks.

Similarly, Stark (1988:277) states:

At one extreme is the possibility that paragraph cues are unpredictable, their location cannot be determined on the basis of unparagraphed text. A cue that is unpredictable is maximally informative, in information-theoretic terms.

Therefore the predictability of paragraph cues is not necessarily an index of how natural or useful they are. Paragraph cues might be informative precisely because they are unpredictable.

Of course it is also conceivable that paragraph boundaries are useless as well as unpredictable. The effectiveness of cues has no clear necessary relation to their informativeness.

The nature of Arabic paragraphing is generally more flexible and unpredictable than it is in English. In other words, Arabic shows greater tolerance for paragraphs of long sentences and for a series of subordinate clauses preceding a main clause. In fact, the Arabic paragraph can stretch to anything from several lines to several pages, even to the whole piece of writing. In terms of both cohesion and coherence in translation production, this requires major "surgery" in breaking up the long, connected strings of words and clause sequences typical of the style of Arabic discourse, and

restructuring them in a manner more consistent and compatible with the norms of English discourse, where there is a stronger need for clarity and a higher degree of precision.

The translator's task is a dual-operation process when faced with the imposed constraints of long, unlimited, vague stretches of discourse. First, he needs to understand and translate all parts of the discourse, and second, in order to make it intelligible and communicative in English, to organize the information and set it into coherent sequences of events and concepts, before paragraphs more stylistically acceptable in English. A literal translation which may contain unusual words or rare combinations of words in addition to the occurrence of long, conjoined sentences would otherwise create a very heavy communication load.

Since the discourse structure of any language is different from any other in terms of grammar, norms of usage, word order, etc. , it follows that translating a piece of Arabic discourse into English involves changes in the internal organization of that discourse. Although it is difficult to ascertain that the display of paragraphing cues of written discourse reflects the perception of external reality of a particular community, it can be argued that the Arabic writer often seems to perceive the events as more closely interwoven, more continuous sequences and thus an uninterrupted flow of discourse. This style of writing stems from textual traditions and cultural settings of the author. Conversely, English is more aware of dividing lines in the flow of events and as a result, breaks up the English discourse into a large number of separate paragraphs, each consisting of a conceptual or temporal unit.

At first sight, a breathless page of Arabic print is daunting, with no punctuation of the form used by perhaps a French or English text to reduce the effect of unparagraphed text. It can be argued, however, that paragraph cues are used by Arabic to act as

landmarks. Arabic units of discourse are often explicitly linked to each other by a set of cohesive devices. **wa** (واو) as a cohesive device is multi-functional :

a. it can coordinate sentences linking a tremendous variety of semantic relations.

b. the syntactically non-connective **wa**, assuming first position in the sentence, signals the beginning of a new sentence.

This function of **wa** has been considered by some as a "quasi punctuation device" (stetkevych 1970:94), but the fact that punctuation has finally become an established convention in Arabic has led to the belief that the over-used **wa** is being dropped and that it tends to be used in modern Arabic only "were actual copulative clauses exist. No longer is it customary to resort to it as a quasi punctuation device in a narrative sentence-sequence." (stetkevych 1970:93-94).

Arabic discourse on the whole is expressed in a series of clauses ties together in a variety of ways. The cohesive marker **wa**, however, cannot be equated simply with the English conjunction **and** because **wa** is of an ambivalent nature; formally, it marks the division between sentences, but semantically, it relates or coordinates between them. Such an ambivalence may be said to be lacking in English cohesive marker **and**. It can be argued, that the cohesive marker **wa** represents a pause i.e. a graphological mark of punctuation like the full-stop, thus preserving the divisive value of **wa** but ignoring its conjoining, coordinating one.

Consider the following Arabic text which lacks punctuation:

من واقع انطلاق القطاع الخاص في تحمل مسؤوليته نحو الاقتصاد الوطني وتحقيقا لهدف خطة التنمية واستكمال لبرنامج الاقتصاد الذي بدأته حكومتنا الرشيدة في ظل قيادة خادم الحرمين الشريفين و المتمثل في البنية الأساسية للقاعدة الصناعية التي اكتمل تنفيذها في زمن قياسي و تكاملا مع القاعدة الصناعية التي تنتج ثمارها سلعا قابلة للتصدير دخلنا معترك التسويق الدولي

وحيث أن هذه الفترة في الاقتصاد الدولي هي فترة الركود فإن على القطـاع الخـاص
تدبر أموره ليساهم في التنمية التي تحرك عجلة النمو الاقتصادي بعون الله.

(صحيفة عكاظ *Okad – newspaper 30/05/89*)

This entire paragraph is made up of one sentence consisting of subordinate clauses compressed together with no apparent punctuation. The subordinate clauses are linked with the cohesive marker **wa**. There are instances of repetition, mainly as a form of clarification. Translated into English, this paragraph does not appear natural and lacks precision in English, such sentences are stylistically awkward, so the translator's task is to break the discourse down into manageable chunks and reconstruct it to make it stylistically acceptable and more compatible with the norms of English.

Consider a rough translation of the above passage:

Considering realistically the role which the private sector can play in the national economy and in order to realize the development plans and in order to achieve fully the economic programme which our discerning government launched under the leadership of the custodian of the two holy places and the fundamental structure for an industrial base which has been implemented in record time and in complimentarity with the industrial base which produces exportable goods we have entered the era of international export and in this period of international economic recession. The private sector must organize itself to contribute to the development which turns the wheel of economic growth God willing.

Looking critically at the above translation we are tempted to agree with Allen (1970:94) who states that:

Arabic organization is circular and cumulative. Arabic writers come to the same point two or three times from different angles so that a native English reader has the curious feeling that nothing is happening.

However the translator must free himself from the surface constraints of Arabic discourse and strive to secure a natural habitat for an alien culture which has to be imported into a different tongue and culture. The "essence" of what the above Arabic text is saying can be rendered as follows:

In order to play an active role in the international economy, the private sector must organize itself to contribute effectively to the economic growth. The pragmatic Saudi government has already established an industrial base and is producing exportable goods despite the global economic recession.

Modern Arabic, however, often uses paragraph breaks. Consider the following paragraph in which punctuation is "overdone":

السياسة جعلت الناس، في جميـع الأزمـان, مجـانين أو متوحشـين أو خطيرين، وبكلمة واحـدة، فاقـدي العقـل. هـذا مـا يقولـه الـرأي الشـائع. و الحـق أن لكـل انحراف عقل سببه و لا شيء يتم بلا علة. هذا ما يقوله الحس السليم.

(الأدب Jan – March 1986)

Despite European influence, Arabic prose does not normally exhibit such breaks. As a result the text above does not read like Arabic. It can be roughly translated as:

Politics makes people, at any point in history, mad or wild or dangerous, in one word, mindless. This is a widespread opinion. But in fact, there is a cause for every mental aberration, and nothing happens without a reason. This is common sense.

Instead it gives the impression of a poor translation into Arabic. Take for instance the phrase وبكلمـة واحـدة borrowed from the English expression "in one word", or the unusual expression الحـس السـليم, which is presumed to mean "common sense". It can be argued, that on the whole, the above text exhibits punctuation and wording alien to Arabic discourse and as such it is likely to cause more problems if translated back into the language of origin.

Consider another extract from the literary magazine الأدب (Al-Adab) (Jan- March 1986) :

شهد القرن العشرون, و خاصة بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية, في الظـاهر, حركـات استقلال معظم الأقطار العربية, والكثير من الدول الآسيوية والإفريقيـة, كـما شـهد انحصار دور بريطانيا وفرنسا في المسيرة الاستعمارية, ولكن ظهور الولايات المتحـدة كقوة استعمارية, بما عندها من إمكانيات مادية وتقنية, قـد أدخـل شـكلا جديـدا من أشكال الهيمنة والغزو على الشرق , وعلى الدول الضعيفة , وإذا كان ...

The above text may be said to reflect the modern trend of Arabic writing as it exhibits regular punctuation marks. It may be translated as follows :

It seems that the twentieth century has witnessed, particularly since the world war, movements towards independence by most Arab countries and many Asian and African countries. It has also witnessed the curtailment of the British and French domination and colonization, yet at the same time the emergence of the United States as a colonizing power with all its material and technical capabilities has introduced a new form of dominance and aggression against the East and the poor countries, and …

There is no underlying principle that can be adopted by the translator of Arabic discourse as to what method to follow on splitting the long stretches of discourse into intelligible paragraphs in English. It must simply be discourse division with regards to the requirements of the target language reader. The main concern of the translator is the production of a communicative target text which presents an optimum degree of acceptability in the native textual system and culture. As for punctuation, the main function of its system is to remove ambiguity and to clarify the construction of discourse. In Arabic discourse, the frequency of punctuation fluctuates considerably from one author to another and is sometimes completely absent. This has led some linguists to argue that apart from the full-stop, Arabic has no system of punctuation. This view is to a certain extent true, since the expression of an idea can stretch for the whole text without any punctuation marks.

In terms of translation, a sentence that seems endless causes confusion and ambiguity. The use of commas or semi-colons to indicate a break, possible changes of direction, simultaneous events, etc... are important cues which help the translator's comprehension of a particular discourse. As Newmark (1983: 119) points out:

Punctuation can be potent, but is so easily overlooked that I'd advise translators to make a separate comparative punctuation check on their version of the original.

The translator of Arabic has no punctuation in the original to aid or distract him, but this means, however, more trouble in rendering it, for, he must adopt a punctuation suitable to English discourse.

It can be concluded that the adoption by some Arabic authors of explicitly overt punctuation and paragraph cues in the style of the European language can both effective and informative as they ease comprehension particularly with regard to translation. However, if punctuation and paragraphing criteria used for Indo-European languages are overdone in Arabic, this could be misleading because it becomes "homeless". As individuals view reality in a different ways it would be impossible to expect two different languages to express thoughts in a similar manner because each one uses its particular mode of expression and respective linguistic devices.

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