

Mustansiriyah University

College of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

Lecture 2

Literary Translation

4th stage

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What is Literary Translation?

Translation of artistic texts: novels, short stories, plays, poetry. The focus in this kind of translation is not only on meaning but also on:

- Style (formal, informal, poetic).
- Tone and mood.
- Imagery and symbolism.
- Cultural resonance.

Main Approaches in Literary Translation

1. Literal translation: staying very close to words (but may lose style).
2. Free translation (sense-for-sense): preserving the effect, not the words.
3. Communicative translation: ensuring the reader in the target language feels the same impact.
4. Adaptation: adjusting references, metaphors, or cultural items to be understood.

Common Problems in Literary Translation

1. Metaphors and Similes (الاستعارات والتشبيهات)

EN Example: “Her eyes were oceans of sorrow.”

1. Literal AR: كانت عيناها محيطين من الحزن.
2. Better AR: كانت عيناها غارقتين في الحزن.

Explanation:

The phrase “oceans of sorrow” is a metaphor in English. In Arabic, saying “محيطين من الحزن” sounds unnatural because Arabic literature uses metaphors differently (we say “غارقة في الحزن”). The translator here must adapt the metaphor to sound natural in Arabic literary style.

AR Example: “وجهه كالبدر.”

1. Literal EN: “His face is like the full moon.”
2. Better EN: “His face shone like the full moon.” or “He had a radiant face.”

Explanation:

In Arabic poetry, the moon is a common metaphor for beauty. In English, “moon-faced” can mean “round-faced” (not beautiful). Cultural adaptation in this kind is required.

2. Wordplay and Puns (التلاعب بالألفاظ والجناس)

EN Example: Shakespeare: “Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man.”

1. Literal AR: اطلبني غداً، وستجدني رجلاً قَبْرًا ✗ (nonsense)
2. Better AR: اطلبني غداً، وستجدني رجلاً جاداً... أو في القبر ✓

Explanation:

“Grave” in English = (1) serious, (2) tomb. Arabic doesn’t have the same double meaning, so the translator must explain or add a note.

AR Example: “رمضان شهر الصيام، شهر القيام، شهر السلام.”

1. Literal EN: “Ramadan is the month of fasting, the month of praying, the month of peace.” (loses rhyme)
2. Better EN: “Ramadan: a month of fasting, praying, and peace.” (still simple, rhythmical).

Explanation: Arabic uses rhyme and rhythm as beauty (صيام / قيام / سلام). English rarely uses rhyme in prose, so translator must keep balance between clarity and musicality.

3. Rhythm and Sound in Poetry (الإيقاع والقافية)

EN Example (Robert Frost): “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both.”

1. Literal AR: طريقان افترقا في غابة صفراء، وأسفت أنني لم أستطع أن أسلكهما معًا.
2. Better AR: افترق طريقان في غابة صفراء، وحزنت أنني لم أستطع أن أسلك كليهما.

Explanation:

The challenge is to keep both meaning + rhythm. The Arabic translation must flow naturally, even if rhythm is partly lost.

AR Example (Al-Mutanabbi):

إذا غامرت في شرفٍ مروم ... فلا تقنع بما دونَ النجوم

1. Literal EN: “If you risk in seeking honor, do not be satisfied with less than the stars.”
2. Better EN: “If you strive for noble honor, be content with nothing less than the stars.”

Explanation:

The rhyme (مروم / النجوم) is impossible to keep in English. The translator conveys the meaning and tone but loses rhyme.

4. Cultural References (الإشارات الثقافية)

EN Example: “He met his Waterloo.”

1. Literal AR: قابل واترلو الخاص به. ✗ (confusing).
2. Better AR: واجه هزيمته الساحقة. ✓

Explanation: “Waterloo” is a historical reference (Napoleon’s defeat). Arabic readers may not understand, so translator adapts to general meaning.

AR Example: “ألقى عصاه واستقرّ به النوى.”

1. Literal EN: “He threw his staff and settled.” ❌ (unclear).
2. Better EN: “He finally settled down.” ✓

Explanation:

Original Arabic refers to travelers laying down their staff after a long journey. In English, this cultural image is unknown, so the translator simplifies.

5. Ambiguity (الغموض الدلالي)

EN Example: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

AR: الروح راغبة، لكن الجسد ضعيف.

Explanation:

This biblical phrase has both literal and spiritual interpretations. A translator must keep the double meaning.

AR Example: From Sufi poetry: “رأيتُ ربّي بعين قلبي.”

Literal EN: “I saw my Lord with the eye of my heart.”

Explanation: English may take it literally, but in Arabic it’s a mystical metaphor. Translator may need a footnote.

Exercises in Literary Translation:

1. *Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul.*” (Emily Dickinson)
2. *“The world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”* (Shakespeare)
3. (شعر معاصر) “قلبي مدينة لا يدخلها سوى أنت”
4. *“Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.”* (humorous wordplay)
5. (محمود درويش) “البحر يضحك إذ تلوح موجة”
6. Robert Frost: *“The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / But I have promises to keep.”*
7. *“A boiled egg is hard to beat.”*
8. “سكت دهرأ ونطق كفراً”
9. Edgar Allan Poe (*The Raven*): *“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary.”*
10. قم للمعلم وقله التبرجلا ... كاد المعلم أن يكون رسولا :أحمد شوقي
11. *“He opened Pandora’s box.”*
12. “بلغ السيل الزبى”
13. *“I am nobody! Who are you?”* (Emily Dickinson)

14. ”أدركت أنني هو، وأنه أنا“ :ابن عربي

15. مقتبس من رواية (موت صغير – محمد حسن علوان)

الرحلة طويلة يا محيي الدين. سنسير في طرقٍ لم نمشها من قبل، وننزل في منازل لم نألفها، ونجالس أناسًا لم نعرفهم. لكنك لن تكون وحدك. كل خطوة تخطوها ستحملك إلى قدرٍ جديد، وكل كلمة تنطقها ستصير عبئًا أو نجاة. إنك لست حرًّا كما تظن، لكنك لست مقيدًا كما يخيل إليك. بين الحرية والقيود مسافة يسكنها القلب، ومن عرف قلبه عرف الطريق. فاجعل قلبك دليلك، فلن يضل بك أبدًا.

16. From The Midnight Library – Matt Haig

“Between life and death there is a library, and within that library, the shelves go on forever. Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived. To see how things would be if you had made other choices... if you had done anything differently. Would you have done the same things, loved the same people, made the same mistakes? Each life contains infinite possibilities, and each possibility whispers that it could have been yours.”

17. T.S. Eliot (The Waste Land, 1922)
April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

18. بدر شاكر السياب (أنشودة المطر, 1960)

عيناك غابتا نخيل ساعة السحر،
أو شرفتان راح ينأى عنهما القمر
عيناك حين تبسمان ثورق الكروم،
وترقص الأضواء ... كالأقمار في نهر
يرجّه المجداف وهناً ساعة السحر
كأنما تنبض في غوريهما، النجوم
وتغرقان في ضباب من أسى شفيف