

The Translation of Advertising Texts in Culturally-distant Languages: the case of Spanish and Arabic

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Abstract

Translation problems can stem from the translator's lack of familiarity with lexical, terminological, and textual correspondences between two languages. The roots of these problems are often deeply embedded in culture and context. Nord (1988) makes a distinction between translation problems and translation difficulties. She claims that problems are objective and are not related to the translator's competence, whereas difficulties are subjective and depend on his/her working conditions. Translation problems can appear in the preliminary stages of translation as well as throughout the entire translation process. Initially, translators must deal with possible comprehension problems of the source text, and be able to foresee potential areas in the text where finding correspondences in the target language will be difficult. It goes without saying that translators must possess the necessary linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge to understand the text easily, extract its core meaning, and create a new text that will occupy a similar place in the target language text system and culture. Secondly, translators should know how and where to resolve their problems. This means being able to predict possible problem areas as well as being aware of which resources and search methods will provide them with precise information for text decoding and generation. Finally, translators must be sensitive to the vast array of contrasts and differences between languages and cultures since these can be the source of a wide range of translation problems. In fact, when source texts have a strong cultural component (which is often the case of advertising texts), translators are often obliged to seek creative solutions that involve adapting the translation so that its form and content will be fit into the target language culture. For all of these reasons, it is necessary for translators to be bicultural as well as bilingual. As an example of the translator's need for cultural awareness, this article describes and analyzes problems that can arise in the translation of advertising texts from Spanish to Arabic. Our conclusions reflect the fact that translators should possess background knowledge and intercultural sensitivity, which will make them aware of potential translation problems that, can arise from differences in the two language-cultures.

Key Words: Advertising translation, translation problems, intercultural communication, pragmatic context, translation acceptability.

I. Introduction:

Translation problems are diverse by nature. According to Hurtado Albir (2001: 288), such problems fall into the following categories.

- *Linguistic* problems: these problems refer to the linguistic form of the text, and are the consequence of lexical, grammatical, and textual differences in the two languages (style, cohesion, coherence, theme progression, text type, intertextuality, etc.).
- *Extralinguistic* problems: these problems concern to the meaning encoded in the text and refer to geographical, cultural, and encyclopedic aspects of the text.
- *Instrumental* problems: these problems refer to resource availability. They arise when translators do not have the necessary resources to resolve doubts concerning the form and/or content of the source text.
- *Pragmatic* problems: these problems stem from the lack of correspondences in the two languages, which are the result of the different communicative contexts in which the source and target texts are generated. A greater number of pragmatic problems evidently arise in the translation of languages that are spoken in societies with significant cultural differences.

As is well known, language use defers to the contextual norms of each society. In fact, when source texts have a strong cultural component (which is often the case of advertising texts), translators are often obliged to seek creative solutions that involve adapting the translation so that its content will be in consonance with the target language culture. For all of these reasons, it is necessary for translators to be bicultural as well as bilingual.

2. Advertising Texts in Spanish and Arabic

The proximity of Spain and North Africa as well as the ever-increasing globalization process means that multinational companies try to sell their products to potential consumer groups in widely diverse cultural contexts. Even though the resulting commercials and advertisements may market the same product, the intercultural mediator, who is in charge of creating the advertisements, must inevitably adapt product information to national contexts, languages, and cultures. Consequently, the product must be presented in such a way as to facilitate the rapid activation of the values, ideology, traditions, cultural icons, etc. of the culture where the product is going to be sold.

As an example of the translator's need for cultural awareness, this article describes and analyzes problems that can arise in the translation of advertising texts from Spanish to Arabic. As shall be seen, this analysis highlights the fact that translators should possess background knowledge and intercultural sensitivity, which will make them aware of potential translation problems that, can arise when there are salient differences in the two language-cultures.

2.1. Nike

The Spanish Nike advertisement (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Zz09NdBnT4>) is an example of a text that cannot be easily translated into Arabic because of cultural differences.

2.1. 1. Macrocontext

As shown in Figures 1-4, this commercial begins with the sound of Flamenco rhythmic handclapping to capture the spectators' attention. The sports fans of the following three athletes are then shown: (i) Rafael Nadal, the world-famous Spanish tennis player; (ii) Ronaldo de Assis Moreira (Ronaldinho), a Brazilian soccer player, who was a former star on the Barcelona football team; (iii) Pau Gasol, the well-known Spanish basketball player, who now plays for the Los Angeles Lakers.



Figure 1. *Applause.*



Figure 2. *Spanish basketball player (Pau Gasol).*



Figure 3. *Spanish tennis player (Nadal).*



Figure 4. *Soccer player (Ronaldinho).*

This commercial uses these three athletes to advertise Nike sports clothes. Each athlete takes turns showing off his talent in tennis, soccer, and basketball on a Flamenco tablao as though he were a Flamenco dancer. The athletes are dressed in Nike sports apparel, thus establishing coherence between the message of the text, and its context. The commercial is for a Spanish-speaking audience, living in Spain, a country where the three athletes are held in high-esteem and regarded as national icons. It also explicitly evokes Spanish culture through Flamenco rhythms and handclapping heard throughout the entire commercial.

The cultural reference to Flamenco here is an example of *realia*, a textual element that denotes local and historical color. *Realia* can be geographic, ethnographic, folkloric and mythological. They can be everyday objects as well as socio-historical elements (Vlakhov & Florin 1970 in Hurtado Albir, 2001: 608). In this case, Flamenco is music typical of the southern Spain, where it is deeply embedded in the culture, reality, and ideology of the region. The commercial links this cultural manifestation to the brand name, Nike, which appears on the T-shirts of the athletes.

The meaning of the text is quite simple. However, the difficulty lies in how to adapt it to the target language culture (i.e. Arabic). Evidently, Nike chose a context typical of a cultural manifestation (a Flamenco dance tablao) that is highly representative of, Spain. The commercial is meant for a national audience that is closely linked to a context, where Flamenco evokes a feeling of pride and a positive emotional reaction. This same effect is almost impossible to emulate in Arabic. In a possible adaptation of the text for a North African audience, the translator must recognize the cultural values in the source text and try to find their parallel in the target language culture. Of course, Flamenco music and dancing is known and enjoyed in many Arabic countries, but it is a foreign cultural manifestation that is not part of the Arabic world. This means that it is necessary to select a type of music that is typical of the country or

region where the commercial will be aired. In this regard, there is no cultural genre of music that is typical of all North African countries since the tastes of the public vary, depending on the region where they live. Consequently, the commercial will have a more reduced scope because the music selected will be culturally significant for a smaller group of potential receivers.

For example, between Algiers, the capital of Algeria, and Oran, the country's second-largest city, the musical rhythms and tastes differ considerably. The only possible choice of music that would fit a larger and more varied audience in the Arab world would be Arabic Pop Music, which crosses regional boundaries. Similarly, the translator or intercultural mediator will also have to search for athletes in the Arabic world that will strike a chord in the hearts of viewers in the target language culture. The mutual reinforcement of visual perception (human cultural icons wearing Nike sports apparel) and auditory perception (music representative of the target language culture) is the basis for creating an acceptable target language text.

2. 1. 1. *Microcontext*

This commercial has little or no text. Throughout its duration, rhythmic handclapping is heard, which is typical of Flamenco. The only word uttered is the pronoun, "you", which is repeated various times as the athletes sequentially go on stage to show off their moves. First, Pau Gasol points to Rafael Nadal and says "you". This is a signal for Nadal to show off his athletic abilities in front of the enthusiastic clapping spectators. He then goes on stage wearing Nike clothes and swings his racket as though he were on the tennis court. When he is finished, he points to Ronaldinho, and says, "you" so that he will go on stage. This sequence follows the same pattern as the sequence of dancers in Flamenco tablaos, who stand up one after the other to dance in front of the audience. After Ronaldinho has finished, he looks at the camera and says, "you", addressing the television spectators as though they were the next champion athletes/flamenco dancers to perform. The symbiosis between Flamenco dancing and sports is evident and very successful.

This lexical repetition can be translated simply to Arabic as «أنت» and does not cause any problems for the target television audience because in this case, the viewer feels personally addressed. The problem resides in the fact that an adaptation to Arab pop music causes an inevitable loss of meaning because it is not linked to any type of culturally-embedded sequential performance.

In contrast, the slogan *Just do it*, is easily recognizable in North African countries in its English form because of Nike's international reputation. Even though the target receivers may not be aware of the precise meaning of the phrase, this does not necessarily affect the success of the commercial because of the inherent prestige of foreign language phrases in this part of the world.

2. 2. Disneyland Paris

The translation of the advertisement for Euro Disney from Spanish to Arabic creates a different cultural problem. Figure 5 depicts a Spanish advertisement for *Disneyland Paris* (Euro Disney), which shows Mickey Mouse and Goofy at Christmas time.



Figure 5. Advertisement published in *La Vanguardia* (p. 74, 14/11/2010).

The special offer of a trip to Disneyland Paris is described by images as well as text. The following section analyzes the problems that occur if this text were to be translated into Arabic.

2.2.1. Macrocontext

Figure 5 shows Christmas images and cartoon characters that advertise vacations to Disneyland Paris. The advertisement transmits the message that families from European countries can enjoy their Christmas vacation at this amusement park. This is made explicit in the following text: “Para celebrar los Reyes Magos, Disneyland Paris te hace... EL REGALO MAS GRANDE!” [In order to celebrate the day of the Three Kings, Disneyland Paris offers you... THE BIGGEST GIFT].

When adapting this text to a target audience in a North African country, the first problem that arises involves the images. Of course, Arabic audiences are familiar with Mickey Mouse and Goofy, but neither Christmas nor Christmas trees are part of the holidays or festivities in Arab countries. Therefore, they must be modified in the translation and replaced with a meaningful image for the target audience. The source text is appropriate for Spain, where Christmas is an important religious holiday, and is associated with vacation, family celebrations, and gift-giving, all of which are depicted in the advertisement. The translator, however, must find a way to adapt the advertisement to North African countries where most of the population is Moslem and where Christmas is not celebrated.

Also problematic is the translation of the text because of the cultural reference to the Three Kings: “Para celebrar los Reyes Magos, Disneyland Paris te hace el regalo mas grande!” The Three Kings are a specific reference to January 6th, the day when children traditionally receive their Christmas presents in Spain. This is the day when Jesus was said to have received gifts in the manger. Since in other European countries gifts are generally given on December 25th, it is evident that the advertisement specifically targets a Spanish audience. This reference is difficult, if not impossible,

to translate into Arabic at least with the same effect because the Three Kings, are not a part of the Moslem religious tradition, and the target audience may not even be aware of their existence.

2.2.2. Microcontext

EuroDisney has obviously chosen Christmas for the advertisement because it is an important holiday when Spanish children do not have school. It is also a time for gift-giving when parents can give their children a trip to the amusement park as a Christmas present. It is thus the best time for such an offer. The translator must strive to transmit this same message to an Arabic audience, and thus cannot opt for a literal translation. The only way to overcome extralinguistic obstacles is to adapt the text to the target culture. The translator must therefore replace Christmas and the celebration of the Epiphany (when the Three Kings gave gifts to Jesus) with a holiday of corresponding importance in the Arab world.

Because the Christmas and the Epiphany lack cultural significance in the Arabic language, the target text must refer to a different kind of festivity. Even though the “Reyes Magos” [Three Kings] can be translated as *المجوس الثلاثة* [three magicians], *الأملاك الثلاثة* [three kings], or *الحكماء الثلاثة* [three wise men], all in their non-specific sense, such a translation would not be meaningful because, as previously mentioned, Christianity is a religion that is not widely practiced in North African countries. The Three Kings (as biblical figures) are unknown there. This is a cultural distance that inevitably brings loss of meaning for the target audience if the translator opts for a literal translation. The translator should thus seek another holiday that has many of the same aspects of Christmas in the Arabic culture.

“Para celebrar los Reyes Magos, *Disneyland Paris* te hace el regalo mas grande!”, which is the text in the advertisement, would be translated into Arabic as follows: «بمناسبة العيد، ديزني لاند باريس يقدم لكم أكبر هدية!». Instead of Christmas, the translator can replace it with a Moslem holiday that has more meaning for the target audience. In this case, *Aid* has been chosen because it is a religious holiday that is celebrated at the end of Ramadan, and has certain similarities to Christmas in that it is a festivity that is greatly appreciated and valued in the target language culture.

Moreover, *Disneyland Paris* should be transcribed so that it can be easily decoded by the target audience. However, given the widespread use of foreign languages in Arabic communities, it can also be left in its original version. In this case, because of the renown of Disneyland, the transcription of the term has been accepted in Arabic, and translation is not necessary.

Another factor to consider has to do with register, which must be adapted to North African cultural and linguistic preferences. The Arabic text addresses the audience formally in the plural whereas the Spanish text addresses the receiver informally in the singular: “Te hace el regalo mas grande” [Disneyland gives you the biggest gift]. The corresponding tone in Arabic is *أنتَ* [formal second person plural].

2.3. Dolce & Gabbana

Another example of intercultural differences is reflected in male and female roles. Generally speaking, texts are made up of verbal and non-verbal signs, which correspond to a specific social context. Compatibilities and incompatibilities exist in the perception of these signs, depending on the relationship between the source and target cultures. As has been observed, translations of advertisements from Spanish to Arabic can pose a various problems, given that the two

societies have different cultural realities. The following analysis offers yet another example of this phenomenon.

The most common translation problems between the two cultures are reflected in the macrostructure of the text: images, speech acts, colors, and sounds must come together coherently so as to be easily interpreted by the target audience. In aligning these with the ideology, education, religion and background knowledge of the target language culture, the message becomes acceptable and achieves its objective, which is to persuade the receivers to buy the product.

In the case of the Dolce & Gabbana advertisement (Figure 6), the image of the beautiful and elegant woman is appealing to receivers within a European cultural context, but unacceptable to those in an Arabic culture for religious, educational, cultural, ideological and political reasons.



Figure 6. *Dolce & Gabbana advertisement, photographed in June 2010.*

Religion is a cultural element that affects the daily lives of many people, and can influence their way of acting and thinking. In translation, it is an important cultural factor that must be taken into account, especially in advertising texts, which are very culturally sensitive and directed to large audiences within a specific culture. In the translation of advertisements, the target text must respect the cultural context of the receiver group and strive to produce the same effect in its audience as the source text did.

Evidently, the advertisement in Figure 6 cannot be directly transferred to an Arabic context without adaptation. In Moslem societies, provocative images of women in public places are considered inappropriate. For this reason, Dolce & Gabbana advertisements in Arabic countries use elegant male models to sell its products. Since the message that the company wishes to transmit is not gender-specific, namely, the elegance acquired by those using Dolce & Gabbana products, a similar effect is achieved by replacing the female model with a male model, who is also chic and attractive (see Figure 7). This adaptation also avoids the cultural clash that would have been produced if a female model had been used for the advertisement.



Figure 7. *Advertisement, photographed in April, 2011 (Algeria).*

In this case, microcontextual elements do not pose problems, given that the only written text in the advertisement is the brand name, Dolce & Gabanna. Because of the multilingualism in Arabic culture, this name can be transcribed using the Latin characters.

2.4. Fenosa Gas Company

Cultural references are not only a question of ideology and religion. They are also linked to shared wisdom derived from folk tales, legends, and stories. These are reflected in proverbs. Certain proverbs are common to Spanish and Arab cultures, stemming from shared historical traditions. However, they can be problematic for translators who must try to seek the nearest correspondence in the target languages. It is also important for the translator to be versed in colloquial Arabic, which is commonly used in North African advertisements.



Figure 8. Advertisement published in *La Vanguardia* (p. 11, 3/12/2010).

In Figure 8, the Spanish advertisement of the Fenosa Natural Gas Company contains the following text: “Esto no es una lámpara. Es un teletransportador al ‘fueron felices y comieron perdices’” [This is not a lamp, but a teletransporter to the land of ‘happily ever after’]. The literal translation for the Spanish phrase “fueron felices y comieron perdices” is “they were happy and ate partridges”.

The message that the company wishes to convey is that Fenosa provides the best natural gas services. The phrase “Fueron felices y comieron perdices” is placed at the end of all fairy tales that finish happily. The translator, therefore, must be familiar with target language idioms and story conventions, recognize their underlying meaning, and be aware of their Arabic equivalent, given that a literal translation here is meaningless. The text alludes to the excellent service provided by Fenosa, and its translation must convey a comparable intertextuality to the target Arab audience. The idiomatic phrase in Arabic that conveys a similar meaning is the following:

عاش الناس في ثبات و نبات، و أنجبوا أولادا و بناتا.
عاش الناس أياما في مرح و فرح و إنتهت المغامرة في جو من السعادة و الهناء.

1. [People lived in stability, surrounded by lush vegetation and many children].

2. [People lived in joy, spending days of fun, their adventure ending in feelings of happiness and well being].

2.5. Allianz Insurance

Another advertisement based on shared cultural folklore is shown in Figure 9. The Allianz Insurance advertisement in Figure 9 states: “Un consejo: más vale ser hormiga que cigarra” [A piece of advice: it is better to be an ant than a grasshopper]. This is a direct reference to the benefits that come from retirement funds. The message in the text obviously draws a parallel between people who save up for their future retirement (ants) and those who prefer to spend all their money and have a good time in the present (grasshoppers). Of course, this is an allusion to Aesop’s fable in which the ant works all summer to save food for the winter while the grasshopper does nothing but play and lie around in the sun. When the winter comes, the grasshopper has nothing to eat, and has to beg the ant for food in order not to starve to death.



Figure 9. Advertisement for Allianz Insurance published in *La Vanguardia*, (p. 12, 22/11/2010).

The moral of Aesop's fable is used as a tool of persuasion in this advertisement. Because the fable is well-known in North African communities, النملة و الصرصور , and is often used to distinguish motivated people from those who have no ambition or wish to succeed, the proverb does not have to be adapted. This time, intertextuality is not problematic because the story has been translated into Arabic and has the same connotation in the target language culture. The translator must, however, know the exact translation of the title so that the target audience will immediately recognize the cultural reference.

Cultural references are social elements that must be analyzed before a text can be translated. Culture is a mix of beliefs and both tangible and intangible ways of life that represent a collective whole, which is passed on from one

generation to the next (Malinowski, 1981: 76; Valdes Rodriguez, 2004: 69). People who do not share the same culture have different interpretations of what is just, relevant, clear, precise, etc.

By definition, culture is multi-faceted and is composed of a wide range of elements (Ortega Arjonilla 2007: 102-103):

1. The shared knowledge of a community.
2. The set of shared or accepted beliefs within a society.
3. Dominant aesthetic perceptions in a specific society.
4. The set of moral and legal guidelines in a society.
5. The set of customs, abilities, acquired habits of the members of society, which are also rules for social behavior.

These considerations can be applied in the advertising texts previously analyzed:

Table 1. *Analysis of cultural elements in the advertisements.*

Advertisements		
Nike 		▪ Shared cultural knowledge: type of music and dance that is a cultural manifestation of Spain (flamenco) to advertise Nike sports apparel. ▪ Shared customs and abilities: The actors wear sports clothes and show off sports moves, but act in sequence as though they belonged to a troupe of flamenco dancers. ▪ Aesthetic perceptions: the music and handclapping represent Andalusian customs, which are highly valued.
Disneyland Paris 		▪ Shared cultural knowledge: Mickey Mouse and Goofy, two famous Disney cartoon characters. ▪ Shared beliefs: images of Christmas, an important religious holiday in Spain. ▪ Shared knowledge and beliefs: the advertisement refers to the Three Kings, important gift-givers in Spanish society. ▪ Shared knowledge: Euro Disney is a place to take children. ▪ Shared customs: The advertisement appears during the Christmas holiday in order to entice Spaniards to enjoy their holiday vacation at the amusement park.
Dolce Gabbana (Europe)	Dolce Gabbana (North)	▪ Moral guidelines: Dolce & Gabbana is advertised with the

	Africa) 	image of an attractive woman or man, thus adhering to moral guidelines in Europe/North Africa. ▪ Aesthetic perceptions: The brand, Dolce & Gabbana, has the trademark of using elegant men or women to sell their products.
Fenosa Gas Company 	▪ Shared knowledge and beliefs: Children need to receive warmth and care to develop into happy adults. ▪ Shared knowledge: The images of the lamp and house suggest a need for trustworthy energy resources. ▪ Shared knowledge and customs: The saying, “fueron felices y comieron perdices” (the ending of Spanish fairy tales) conveys the message that consumers who use Fenosa gas will never regret doing so.	
Allianz Insurance Company 	▪ Shared knowledge: The proverb from Aesop’s fable that suggests the advantages of buying Allianz insurance policies. ▪ Shared beliefs and moral guidelines: The reference to the benefits of responsibly saving money for a more secure future.	

Newmark (1995: 133) considers culture to be a community’s way of life, and given that this varies from society to society, these elements must be carefully analyzed and translated. In the case of Spanish-Arabic translation, this is especially important, since each respective culture determines its public’s interpretation of the symbols, images, sounds, and behaviors within the advertising texts (Valdes Rodriguez, 2004: 70). For these reasons, it is necessary that the translator employ creative strategies to create a message that is acceptable to his/her target audience.

3. Method

The choice of translation method is inevitably guided by the objectives of the translator, who must consider the text as a whole (Hurtado Albir, 2001: 54). Before beginning the translation, the translator must decide on the function or functions of the text as well as the contextual parameters of the translation job. In advertising texts, the main function is conative or appellative since the purpose of the text is to persuade the readers to act in a certain way or to do something (i.e. buy the product). As previously mentioned, a literal translation rarely produces an adequate text in the target culture since acceptability lies in adapting the translation to the target culture.

En publicité, être fidele á la lettre du texte ne pourrait aboutir au mieux qu’á un message médiocre, au pire á un échec lamentable de la communication (Guidère, 2000: 67).

In this case, translation equivalence cannot be achieved by literally translating the original text, but instead must be functional, dynamic, and flexible (Hurtado Albir 2001: 223). In the translation of advertising texts, contextual and cultural factors are the most decisive.

Coherence must exist between the message of the advertisement, its format, and the target culture. All of the cultural and contextual elements discussed in this article come together in the text. In an ideal scenario, the addressees in the target culture, who are also part of the polysystem, process the message, and are positively influenced by its content. Translators, therefore, must act as cultural mediators. They are the text senders in the target culture, who must know how to create a text that will achieve the same effect as the source text.

In Spanish-Arabic translation, an in-depth knowledge of the culture, religion, and ideology of both countries is a key factor in creating an acceptable text. Obviously, the text receivers in North Africa live in a world whose politics, religion, education, and ideology are vastly different from those in European countries, such as Spain. This cultural distance means that translators must be able to identify potential problem areas and be aware of adaptation strategies, which can be applied so that the readers will not perceive the text as a translation, but rather as part of the text system in the target culture. Such strategies largely involve being aware of the main cultural areas (religion, ideology, moral values, history, etc.) in both the source and target communities, and being able to recognize correspondences. This is the only way that the target text can possess the same connotations as the source text.

4. Conclusion

Advertising texts can be the source of a wide range of translation problems that are inevitably related to intercultural aspects of linguistic, extralinguistic, and pragmatic meaning. The source language advertisement and its adaptation to the target language culture must follow the cultural and contextual norms of their respective text systems. As has been shown, cultural distance generates problems in the Spanish-Arabic translation of commercials and advertisements because of factors, such as differences in religion, folklore, holidays, and cultural manifestations.

For example, it was found that the different religious practices in the source and target communities constituted one of the cultural areas that most often made it necessary to create a radically different target text. Religion has a strong impact on the North African target audience, and for that reason, advertising texts must often be adapted. The cultural references in the source text must be replaced by corresponding cultural references in the Arab world (i.e. holidays, folklore, music, moral values, etc.), which will produce a positive emotional response in the target language community.

Consequently, translators must have an in-depth knowledge of political, economic and social changes in both countries. They must also be aware of the cultural and contextual norms in each community in order to be able to create a target text that is acceptable, informative, coherent and cohesive within the political, cultural and religious context of the target culture (De Beaugrande & Dressler, 1997).

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