# Problems of Translating Informal Greeting Expressions Used in Iraqi Arabic into English

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## ABSTRACT

Greeting expressions represent an important part of conversation and are considered a fundamental element in the Arabic culture. Arabic language has more various and colorful greeting expressions with a culture-specific nature than other languages. However, dealing with the translation of such expressions, especially the Iraqi Arabic informal ones, poses a significant problem for translators, complicating the task of translating these expressions accurately and appropriately. Therefore, this study aims to identify the problems translators face when translating informal Iraqi Arabic greetings into English. To achieve this aim, a total of (4) informal greeting expressions collected

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from the Iraqi Arabic community were used as a sample of the study. These expressions were distributed to (5) MA candidates, from the Department of Translation, College of Arts, University of Tikrit, representing the subjects of the study to translate them into English. As for the data analysis, the study employed Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) direct and oblique strategies of translation. The results showed that the study subjects face numerous problems in translating greeting expressions, mainly due to the lack of understanding the cultural contexts in which these expressions are used, in addition to the difficulty of finding a one-word equivalent to the informal greeting expressions under study.

**Keywords**: cultural context, informal greeting expressions, Iraqi community, problems, translation methods

# مشاكل ترجمة عبارات التحية غير الرسمية المستخدمة في اللهجة العربية العراقية الى اللغة الانجليزية

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**الـمستخلـص**

تمثل عبارات التحية جزءا مهما من المحادثة وتعتبر عنصرا أساسيا في الثقافة العربية. تحتوي اللغة العربية على تعابير تحية متنوعة وذات طبيعة ثقافية خاصة أكثر من اللغات الأخرى. إلا أن التعامل مع ترجمة مثل هذه التعابير، وخاصة العربية العراقية غير الرسمية، يطرح مشكلة كبيرة للمترجمين، مما يعقد مهمة ترجمتها بدقة وبشكل مناسب. لذلك، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد المشاكل التي يواجهها المترجمون عند ترجمة التحيات العربية العراقية غير الرسمية إلى اللغة الإنجليزية. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، تم استخدام (4) تعابير تحية غير رسمية تم جمعها من المجتمع العربي العراقي كعينة للدراسة. وزعت هذه التعابير على عينة الدراسة المتكونة من (5) طلبة ماجستير في قسم الترجمة, كلية الآداب, جامعة تكريت, لترجمتها إلى اللغة الإنجليزية. أما بالنسبة لتحليل البيانات ، فقد

استخدمت الدراسة استراتيجيات (1995) Vinay and Darbelnet المباشرة وغير المباشرة للترجمة. أظهرت النتائج أن عينة الدراسة تواجه العديد من المشكلات في ترجمة تعابير التحية، ويرجع ذلك أساسا إلى عدم فهم السياقات الثقافية التي تستخدم فيها هذه التعابير، بالإضافة إلى صعوبة العثور على كلمة واحدة مكافئة لتعبيرات التحية غير الرسمية قيد الدراسة .

**الكلمــات الدالــة:** السـياق الثقـافي، تعـابير التحيـة غيـر الرسمية، المجتمـع العراقـي، المشـاكل، طـرق الترجمة

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The word "greeting" means "an acknowledgment or expression of good will, especially on meeting". Greeting expressions are an important part of conversation, thus they should be uttered appropriately in terms of situation, time and place. For example, if you tell someone "I feel friendly toward you", this statement could be the beginning for a long conversation (Jucker & Taavtsainen, 2008: 165).

In Arabic culture, greeting is a fundamental element to start a conversation with any one. Arabic language contains more various and colorful greeting structures than other languages. This reflects the importance of greeting in Arabic countries. Each culture has unique ways of expressing greetings. The words and phrases expressing greeting are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and religious traditions of a linguistic community, making it challenging to find suitable equivalents when trying to translate them into another language (Raha, 2019: 62).

Due to their linguistic and cultural importance in any language and region, this study attempts to investigate the problems faced by translators when translating the greeting expressions used in Iraqi Arabic community, specifically the informal ones, into English.

## 2. LITRATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The Concept of Greeting in Arabic

Greeting has a significant role in Islam in general and in Arabic region in particular. In the Glorious Quran, Allah Al-Mighty commands Muslims to spread "As-Salaam greeting" among them, as it is referred to in the following Ayah:

• (وَإِذَا حُيِّيتُم بِتَحِيَّة فَحَيُّوا بِأَحْسَن مِنْهَا أَو رُدُّوهَا إِن الله كَان عَلَى كُل شَيْء حَسِيب) (سورة النساء: 86)

"When you are greeted with a greeting, greet in return with what is better than it, or (at least) return it equally. Certainly, Allah is Ever a Careful, Account Taker of all things" (Al-Hilâl & Khân, 1983, An-Nisa'a: 158).

This Ayah from the Glorious Qur'an shows the importance of greeting others to spread peace and friendliness. Gulevich (2004: 189) points that the Glorious Qur'an guides believers to declaim each other with a greeting of peace: (السـلام علـيكم ورحمـة الله وبركاتـه) "peace be upon you" and replay with (وعلـيكم السـلام ورحمـة الله وبركاتـه) "peace be upon you

too", to reflect their obedience to Allah and announce the peaceful relations that should exist between them.

In Arabic culture, when greeting people, one should use either formal or informal greetings. The form of greeting is determined by whom you are speaking with, i.e., if you are greeting a stranger, you should use a formal greeting expression. Bouchentouf (2006: 49-51) states that the formal greeting in Arabic is (السلام عليكم) "As-Salaamu Alaykum", which means "May peace be upon you" and its equivalent meaning is "Hello" in English language. The greeting expression (أهلا وسهلا) "Ahlan wa Sahlan" (Welcome) is usually used in Arabic culture expressing pleasantness and kindness. (أهلا) means that you are among your family indicating friendliness. While (سهلا) indicates different meanings: reaching easily, stepped on easily, a peace place where you will not be hurt, or simply means behave as you are at your home. When someone says "Ahlan wa Sahlan", the other interlocutor can reply with "Ahlan". This greeting expression is used in both formal and informal situations.

## 2.2 Types of Greeting in Arabic

In Arabic language, there are formal and informal greetings used based on the relationship between interlocutors. The formal greetings include ( السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته)...etc. The formal greeting is followed by (كيف حالك), (مرحبا), (أهلا وسهلا). These greetings can be used in informal situations as well, and are followed by asking about one's health and concerns. For instance, the Iraqi colloquial greeting expression (أشلونك) (Shlonak) (How are you?) is always used by Iraqis when they meet each other. The normal reply to such question is (بخير الحمد لله. الله يسلمك) (bikhair alħamdulilah allah y'isalmak) (Fine praise be to Allah, may Allah protect you), then the other interlocutor will say (دمت بخير أن شاء الله) (domta bikhair inshallah) "May you always be good! If Allah will" (Jawad, 2019: 594).

In many cultures including Arabic, a gesture with hands in front of chest means "It is ok" or "I am not a threat". In Arabic society, men commonly shake hands, but when they are physically in distance they usually wave hands (Shabeeb & Jibreen, 2010: 6).

## 2.3 Functions of Greeting

Greeting is used for fulfilling certain purposes. For example, it reflects the constant relationship between interlocutors, explains the roles of participants in the conversation, defines a state of affairs that affect the conversations. It can be used to show respect to others, participate in conversations, get attention to something, and to reduce intimidation of first start talking. In addition, it is sometimes used to identify a person to others. It is used to confirm identity and enhance solidarity (Duranti, 2008).

Greeting is used to preserve the relationship between the addressee and the addressee in conversation. Greeting can express a welcoming, a wish for health, long life and respect for others, and social status under different social, cultural and political influences and changes if it is considered as a sociolinguistic unit. It is used to reflect politeness in the conversation. Greeting interchanges are used to preserve ties of unity or human relationship (Duranti, 2008).

## 2.4 Challenges of Translating Greeting Expressions

It is assumed that a good translation is the one having on its target language audience the same impact the original text has on its source language audience. It is important to have some questions related to the translation of greeting expressions, such as: What effect does the greeting in question have on the hearer addressed with it? Why this particular greeting rather than any other? What is the difference between this greeting and another? Finding answers to such questions is especially significant in relation to the Arabic language with such a complicated system of greetings, particularly the informal ones, that may seem odd to a stranger. For example, the informal Iraqi greeting expression (شلونك) can be attached to different pronouns to fit in the gender and number of individuals concerned, as in (شلونچ) where (چ) refers to singular feminine pronoun and (شلونكم) where (كم) refers to plural masculine pronoun. This diversity will not be easy to translate into English. Though it appears to be a simple problem, the context will solve it and explain the ambiguity (El-Yasin & Salih, 1995: 142-143). This represents a lexical challenge for translators when dealing with greeting expressions from other languages.

English has inflections for singular and plural only, while Arabic has inflections for singular, dual and plural. This represents another lexical challenge for translators when translating greeting expressions into the target language. Each culture has unique ways of expressing greetings. These ways are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and religious traditions of a specific community, making it challenging to find appropriate equivalents to them in the target language (Raha, 2019: 62).

## 2.5 Strategies for Overcoming Cultural Gaps

The translation of greeting expressions extends beyond linguistic considerations, as it also involves navigating between two distinct cultures. Therefore, a translator must address cultural elements in the source text and find effective ways to convey them in the target language. This is because cultural differences significantly influence the translation process (Ahmed, 2024). This, in turn, necessitates the translator to delve into the background of the text to fully comprehend its nuances (Mohammed & Abduljabbar, 2024).

To overcome the cultural challenge in translation, Ivir (1987) identified two types of cultural references. The first type pertains to differences in the real-world context beyond language. While the second type relates to language-specific issues where cultural differences make translation difficult. To bridge these cultural gaps, Ivir (1987) proposed seven strategies with the aim of facilitating the translation of culture-specific expressions like those of greeting. These strategies are clarified in table 1 below.

Table 1: Ivir's strategies for overcoming cultural gaps

| Strategy | Definition |
|---|---|
| Borrowing | It happens when a translator takes a term from the source language and uses it in the target language, e.g., Haj, Mufti, and Jihad. |
| Definition | It involves the translator introducing and explaining a new term or concept in detail, based on their understanding of the target audience's knowledge, e.g., "Mufti" is rendered as: he is an Islamic scholar who |

| | |
|---|---|
| | interprets Sharia (or the Islamic law). |
| Literal translation | It preserves the original expression accuracy from the source language and ensuring clarity in the target language, e.g., "Gone with the wind" is translated as "ذهب مع الريح" . |
| Substitution | It is used when there is a blending rather than a clear distinction between elements of different cultures, e.g., "a cat has nine lives" is translated as (القط بسبع ارواح). |
| Lexical creation | It involves translators coming up with new words like "mobile" (جوال) and "telephone" (هاتف). |
| Omission | It is needed for the cultural element and the context in which it appears, e.g., "صـبحكم الله بلخيـر" its English equivalence is "good morning". |
| Addition | Adding cultural information helps translate cultural elements that are implied rather than stated explicitly, e.g., when translating "MOD" from English into Arabic, the explanation (وزارة الـدفاع البريطانيـة) is added because Arabic readers may not understand the abbreviation. |

## 3. PREVIOUS STUDY AND RESEARCH GAP

Greeting expressions have been the subject of a wider range of previous studies. It is clear that there are many studies dealing with greetings and their translation in different languages and from different perspectives. In this regard, some of these studies dealt with greetings linguistically, particularly in relation to speech act theory with a pragmatic perspective (Shleykina, 2019). Other studies related them to sociolinguistics (Meiirbekov et al., 2015). Moreover, other studies investigated the effect of gender on the use of greetings (Almushayqih, 2020). While some studies showed the differences between Arabic and English in relation to greetings (Khalaf, 2016). As for the translation of greetings, only few studies dealt with it (El-Yasin & Salih, 1995). In this concern, El-Yasin and Salih (1995) investigated the translatability of the polite expressions of greetings used in Standard Arabic into English. Through this review of some studies on greetings and their translation, it is evident that none of these studies dealt with the Iraqi informal greetings, nor did they deal with challenges in translating them into English from a semantic perspective. This, in turn, supports the problem of this study and its novelty.

## 4. RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, a total of (4) informal greeting expressions used by the Iraqi Arabic community were collected and distributed to (5) subjects to translate them into English. Concerning the subjects of this study, they were MA candidates in the Department of Translation, College of Arts, University of Tikrit. Concerning the analysis of text translations, Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) strategies of translation were employed in this study. These strategies are clarified in table (2) below.

Table 2: Vinay and Darbelnet's strategies of translation

| Direct strategy | Oblique strategy |
|---|---|
| **Borrowing** indicates transferring the source language word directly to the target language without formal or semantic modification, e.g., (hijab) is borrowed from Arabic language (حجاب). | **Transposition** reflects substituting a word type with another type without changing the message. For example, (She is a creative painter) is translated as (ترسم بابداع). |
| **Calque** is a type of borrowing where the source language expression or structure is transferred in a literal translation. For example, (Fast food restaurants) is translated into Arabic as (مطاعم الوجبات السريعه). | **Modulation** indicates a change in the point of view. It has two types: obligatory and optional, that happen on a lexical and syntactic structures. For example, (The Scarlet letter) is translated as (الشاره القرمزيه). |
| **Literal** translation is a word-for-word translation with no lexical word or structure change, focusing on rendering the same syntactic structure of the target languages. For example, (Ahmed is a student) is translated into Arabic as (احمد يكون طالب). | **Equivalence** refers to the use of a quite different structure with different meaning. For example, (Open the door) is translated as (الطقس حار جدا). |
| | **Adaptation** involves changing the cultural reference of a situation of the source text because of socio cultural differences between the source language and the target language communities. For example, (I am frightened) is translated as (ابق معنا), which literally means (stay with us). |

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data started with presenting the SL greeting expression followed by its translations. Then, these translations were analyzed according to translation model adopted in this study. After that, the greeting expressions and their translations were discussed in order to clarify the appropriateness of translations in relation to their source meaning.

ST1: كل الهله بيكم يا مرحبا وچثير الهله

TTs:

T1: Welcome to you all with many greetings.

T2: A warm welcome to you all, welcome a thousand times over.

T3: Welcome.

T4: Welcome. Welcome.

T5: The deepest hello we could say ever is yours, you're so welcome.

Concerning translation, the translators employed different strategies and procedures to translate it. Firstly, T (1) used literal procedure of direct translation strategy and translated it as (Welcome to you all with many greetings). Though this translation is

considered grammatically correct, but it is inappropriate in the TL context. While T (2 and 5) used modulation procedure to translate it as (A warm welcome to you all, welcome a thousand times over) and (The deepest hello we could say ever is yours, you're so welcome), respectively, through changing the syntactic structure of the ST greeting expression. Similarly, their translations also considered inappropriate in the TL context. Concerning the translations of T (3 and 4), the translators employed adaptation procedure, which is a kind of equivalence, and translated it as (Welcome) and (Welcome. Welcome), respectively, reflecting appropriate translation for the expression concerned. The failure of most of translators to provide appropriate translation for this expression lies in its cultural nature with no specific equivalent rendering its real meaning in the TL.

ST2: حي الله من جانا شنو هالغيبة من طول الغيبات جاب الغنايم

TTs:

T1: What is the absence?

T2: Welcome, welcome here you are.

T3: Long time no see.

T4: Welcome, what's with this absence? And from prolonged absences come gains.

T5: Welcome. Long time no sees.

As far as the translation is concerned, the translators employed different strategies and procedures to translate it. T (1) did not employ any of these translation strategies with ambiguous rendering for the expression concerned as (What is the absence?), providing inappropriate translation for it. While T (2) employed adaptation and translated it as (Welcome, welcome here you are), providing partially appropriate translation for this expression, as it did not fully express the ST meaning. Similarly, T (3 and 5) provided a partial equivalence to the expression concerned and translated it as (Long time no see) and (Welcome. Long time no sees), respectively, as they did not cover its meaning in full. While T (4) employed literal procedure and translated it as (Welcome, what's with this absence? And from prolonged absences come gains), providing inappropriate translation for it, this denoting in understanding the vocabulary and cultural context of the TL.

ST3: الله بالخير

TTs:

T1: God is good.

T2: May Allah bless you.

T3: Allah is the cause of well-being.

T4: Welcome.

T5: God wills.

In terms of translation, the translators employed different strategies and procedures to translate it. T (1) used literal procedure of direct translation strategy and translated it

inappropriately as (God is good). T (2) employed transposition and translated it as (May Allah bless you), providing inappropriate translation for this expression. While T (3) employed calque procedure of direct strategy and translated it inappropriately as (Allah is the cause of well-being). T (4) employed equivalence procedure and translated it appropriately as (Welcome). Whereas T (5) did not employ any strategy and translated it as (God wills), providing inappropriate translation which has no relation to the ST concerned. Most translators struggle to accurately translate this expression because it is deeply rooted in culture and lacks a direct equivalent in the target language.

ST4: يا ساعة الحلوة الشفناك/چ بيها

TTs:

T1: What a beautiful moment when I saw you.

T2: Long life who saw you.

T3: It is a great moment when I met you.

T4: What a pleasant time to see you.

T5: Oh, a nice moment when we saw you.

With respect to translation, translators employed different procedures and strategies of translation. To start with, T (1, 3, 4 and 5) employed modulation procedure and appropriately translated this expression as (What a beautiful moment when I saw you), (It is a great moment when I met you), (What a pleasant time to see you), and (Oh, a nice moment when we saw you), respectively. While T (2) employed adaptation procedure and translated it as (Long life who saw you). This translation was inappropriate for referring to other meanings that reflect a wish for having a good health and an eagerness for meeting someone in the coming days or weeks. The difficulty that most translators face in accurately translating this expression stems from its cultural significance and the absence of a precise counterpart in the target language.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study dealt with the problems faced by translators when translating informal greeting expressions used in the Iraqi Arabic contexts into English. The study revealed that such expressions are of culture-specific nature that has no one word to one-word equivalent meaning in the TL, making their translation a difficult task for translators. This in turn requires translators to comprehend the meaning of the source text and the context in which it is used in order to find an appropriate translation for it. It can be said that the failure of most of translators to provide appropriate translation for such expressions lies in their cultural nature with no specific equivalent rendering its real meaning in the TL. In addition, the lexicons used in these expressions denote different meanings with different contexts. This affects translators' understanding of which meaning is concerned in the expression, especially if the translator is not familiar with such expressions.

Statistically, table (3) shows the frequency and percentage of translation strategies and procedures applied by the subjects under study to translate informal greeting expressions used by the Iraqi Arabic community into English.

Table 3: The frequency and percentage of translation strategies

| No. | Translation strategy | Translation procedure | Frequency of use | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Direct** | **Borrowing** | 0 | 0% |
| 2 | | **Calque** | 1 | 5% |
| 3 | | **Literal** | 3 | 15% |
| 4 | **Oblique** | **Transposition** | 1 | 5% |
| 5 | | **Modulation** | 6 | 30% |
| 6 | | **Equivalence** | 3 | 15% |
| 7 | | **Adaptation** | 4 | 20% |
| 8 | **None** | | 2 | 10% |

The above table clarifies the frequency and percentage of using translation procedures to translate the Iraqi informal greeting expressions. It is clear that the subjects prefer employing oblique strategy with its procedures for translating these expressions. Concerning the numbers and percentages of use, modulation and adaptation are the highly used procedures, with having (6) and (4) occurrences, respectively, representing 30% and 20%, ranking the first and second among other procedures. Then, equivalence and literal are ranked the third, with having (3) occurrences represented by (15%). They are followed by no procedure occurring (2) times, occupying the fourth rank among other procedures and by (10%) of the total translations. As for calque, it is in the fifth rank with (1) occurrence, represented by (1%), while borrowing is in the last rank among other procedures with no occurrence at all represented by (0%).

Finally, table (4) shows the frequency and percentage of appropriateness for each translation procedure, to determine which procedure is highly used as it fits the translation of such type of expressions.

Table 4: The frequency and percentage of translation procedures appropriateness

| No. | Translation procedure | Appropriate translations | | Inappropriate translations | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No. | % | No. | % |
| 1 | **Borrowing** | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2 | **Calque** | 0 | 0% | 1 | 5% |
| 3 | **Literal** | 0 | 0% | 3 | 15% |
| 4 | **Transposition** | 0 | 0% | 1 | 5% |
| 5 | **Modulation** | 4 | 20% | 2 | 10% |
| 6 | **Equivalence** | 3 | 15% | 0 | 0% |
| 7 | **Adaptation** | 3 | 15% | 1 | 5% |

Table (4) clarifies that modulation procedure is the most appropriate for translating informal greeting expressions with having (4) appropriate translations, outperforming other procedures of translation, followed by equivalence and adaptation with (3) appropriate translations for each. On the contrary, the remaining procedures have a rate

of (0%) for appropriateness, represented by (0) for each of them, with literal procedure recording the highest occurrence of inappropriate translation (3) represented by (15%). This indicates that these procedures are not preferred for translating greeting expressions with a culture-specific nature.

It can be said that the failure of most translators to provide appropriate translation for these expressions lies in their cultural nature with no specific equivalent rendering their real meaning in the TL. In addition, some translators use the literal meaning of expressions in their translations. This could be considered odd when used as a greeting expression in the TL context, even if the translator used the correct procedure to translate the expression considered. This would reflect inconsistency in terms of semantic structure.

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