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Challenges in Translating Modality Markers Used in the Iraqi Arabic Colloquial Expressions

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Abstract

The current paper will discuss the issues surrounding the translation of modality markers in colloquial expressions in the Iraqi Arabic language to English language, with special emphasis on the linguistic expression and translation of obligation, possibility, ability, and epistemic judgment. In contrast to the other researches that discuss modality in terms of being purely theoretical, this study relies on actual Iraqi colloquial markers like لازم/تحتاج/لا يجوز/ما يكدر/بلكت, showing how their pragmatic force is modulated in different circumstances. The data are five Iraqi Arabic sentences with modality markers which are translated by five students of MA translation in Tikrit University. Similar translation difficulties can be identified through qualitative comparative analysis and they are the choice of an adequate English modal counterpart, the preservation of the desired intensity of obligation or possibility, and the offsetting of pragmatic meanings that are not directly matched in English. The results indicate that translators tend to switch between epistemic and deontic readings, resulting in the low strength or exaggerated meanings in the target

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text. The paper has found that effective translating Iraqi Arabic modality markers must be contextually sensitive and not lexicon to lexicon.

Keywords: modality, modality markers, translation, Iraqi Arabic, pragmatics

التحديات في ترجمة العلامات الأسلوبية المستخدمة في التعبيرات العامية العربية العراقية

م. م. أنس صالح جاسم

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة تكريت، تكريت، العراق

المستخلص

تشير الأسلوبية إلى الطريقة التي يتم بها تحديد معنى الجملة بحيث تعبر عن حكم المتحدث على احتمال صحة الاقتراح الذي تعبر عنه. عملياً، يتضمن مصطلح الأسلوبية مفاهيم دلالية مختلفة مثل القدرة والإمكانية والالتزام والمعنى الأمري. ينعكس ذلك من خلال علامات مختلفة، أهمها الأفعال المساعدة الناقصة. هذه العلامات لها معاني ووظائف مختلفة. لذلك، فإنها تشكل تحدياً للمترجمين، خاصة عند استخدامها في شكلها العامي. وبالتالي، يهدف هذا البحث إلى التعرف على التحديات التي يواجهها المترجمون عند ترجمة العلامات الأسلوبية المستخدمة في التعبيرات العامية العربية العراقية. وفي هذا الصدد، تم توزيع (5) جمل تحتوي على العلامات الأسلوبية على (5) طلاب ماجستير في قسم الترجمة، كلية الآداب، جامعة تكريت، للتعرف على هذه التحديات. تكشف النتائج أن التحدي الرئيسي في ترجمة هذه العلامات يتمثل في المعاني المختلفة المتعلقة بالعلامة المستخدمة. تكشف النتائج أن التحديات الرئيسية في ترجمة هذه العلامات تتمثل في تحديد المعنى المكافئ، وتوفير طريقة أسلوبية داعمة وتعبير أكثر قوة للتعبير بشكل مكافئ عن المعنى المطلوب للأسلوبية المستخدمة. ويرجع ذلك إلى المعاني والوظائف المختلفة المتعلقة بالعلامات المستخدمة. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأسلوبية، العلامات الأسلوبية، الترجمة، التعبيرات العامية العربية العراقية، المعنى والوظيفة

1. Introduction

The modality is important in demonstrating the attitude of the speaker to a proposition, in reference to the necessity, possibility, obligation, and probability. Although the phenomenon of modality has received significant attention in standard forms of the English language and the Arabic language, its expression in colloquialisms, in particular, the Iraqi Arabic, has not been a subject of thorough investigation into translation research. The Iraqi

Arabic uses a variety of colloquial labels which bear on pragmatic meanings which are layered with some social context, attitude of the speaker and common cultural assumption. These markers can be a challenge to translate into English since the degrees of force or pragmatic subtext are not always encoded by the English modal auxiliaries. The expression of judgment, commitment, uncertainty and obligation to a proposition is the center of modality expressed by speakers. Modality is often carried in lexical forms in the Iraqi Arabic colloquialism in the form of verbs and particles instead of being expressed in modal auxiliaries and the meaning of modality is very much determined by context and common knowledge and intention of speakers. Although modality has been widely studied in Standard English and Modern Standard Arabic, the Iraqi Arabic colloquial modality has not received due attention especially in the view of translation.

This study will fill this gap because it will specifically discuss colloquiality markers of modality in the Arabic dialect of Iraq and the difficulties in the translation of it. The paper does not indulge in long theoretical discussion but instead connects theory with practice through analysis of real pieces of translation done by the trainee translators. The focus point here has been to determine the location and reasons as to why meaning changes when the Iraqi colloquial modality is translated to English.

2. Literature Review

Earlier studies on modality have tended to focus on formal or standard forms of language, with the focus on such classifications as epistemic and deontic modality (Declerck, 2011). Although these frameworks still prove useful, they do not provide much guidance when

used with the colloquial Arabic language where the modality markers often require both obligation, advise and probability, as well as speaker stance in a form of one structure.

Research based on translation and modality. Abdulla, 2016) points to the ambiguous nature of English modal auxiliaries and the dangers of a direct translation. Nevertheless, these works mainly study legal or official literature, and they are not concerned with the spoken dialects. Studies about the Iraq Arabic (Abbas and Mugair, 2018) refer to the structural difference of the dialects without analyzing the translation results. This generates a distinct gap in the research: absence of empirical researches that relate Iraqi colloquial markers of the modality with tangible translation difficulty.

2.1 The Meaning of Modality

Modality is a linguistic way through which speakers convey their judgment, attitude or commitment of the uttering proposition. Instead of stating whether an event merely happens or not, modality positions place an event on a continuum of necessity, possibility, certainty, obligation or desirability. Plungian (2011) argues that modality deals with the state of the proposition, in other words, how the speaker judges the probability or the need of the proposition. The same message is echoed by Abutiheen et al. (2020) who conclude that modality is simply an indication of the likelihood or bindingness with which the speaker considers the clause. Halliday (2014) thinks about modality as art of working between positive and negative polarity, so that the speakers are able to rate their words with the degree of certainty and responsibility.

When modality is studied in colloquial terms, especially in the Iraqi Arabic, its role is not restricted to the abstract semantic categories, but is profoundly referred to in daily

communication. Colloquial modality signals are not simply direct encoding of logical meanings, like necessity or possibility, but also indicate social position, advice, warning, hope or inference, based on the context. As an example, the mark لازم can be strict obligation within the institution, but strong advice or expectation in everyday speech. On the same note, the meaning of تحتاج is frequently practical need based on the actual circumstances on the ground more than dictatorial need. In a more realistic view, modality produces alternative possible worlds with which the proposition could be true. According to Declerck (2011), modal expressions are used to place the events in non-factual or hypothetical domains. This non-factuality in the Iraqi Arabic colloquial speech is actively negotiated concerning shared knowledge and situational cues, as opposed to being negotiated directly as the form. Examples of this are markers like بلكت and ايجوز: بلكت can be used to indicate hopeful possibility that is determined by factors that are out of the control of the speaker, whereas ايجوز can tend to indicate an epistemic judgment determined by observable evidence.

Thus, the phenomenon of modality in the colloquial Iraqi Arabic phrases cannot be comprehensible without taking into account the way speakers utilize modal markers to control interactions between people and demonstrate attitudes and negotiating uncertainties. This functional-pragmatic aspect of modality is why straightforward lexical replacement in the case of translation can fail to render the intended meaning which supports the necessity of context-based and pragmatically-guided translation techniques.

The label modality is used to refer to actualization of a scenario in a non-modeled universe that is not the real world. It is pigeonholed of any kind of modality, whether the modality

marker is an adverb, an auxiliary, a lexical verb, a conditional clause, a morphological process, such as conditionalization or modal back shifting, etc. Taking into consideration the above definition we can say that modality is the fact that a situation occupies a nonfactual reality. What this implies is that the sentence on which the assertion has been based is true of a modal world, which implies that the residue scenario is represented as true in a nonfactual reality. The non-factual world in question can be linked to the factual world in many ways. As an illustration:

- John might be deceased.

Might in this case is a modality marker that indicates to a present state of things: It is possible...

It establishes this fictional world where John is being actualized in death that is, in this world, John can die at the same time as the real world. Declerck (2011) deciphers this sample by indicating that there is a possibility that John is dead.

Due to the malleability of the notion of modality, it is unanimously accepted among the primarily linguists that there does not shape out to an absolute conceptual pivot of modality. But there are two common concepts, which bind the modality zone, the first is centered on the attitude which the speaker has towards a situation (i.e. how he evaluates it) and the second one is centered on how the situation is placed in the real world (irreality). Plungian (2011) adds that the diverse modal interpretations always will have a linkage with one or both ideas. Halliday (2014) defines modality to mean the judgments of probabilities or obligation of what s/he is saying.

2.2 Types of Modality Markers

Abutiheen et al. (2020) differentiated two of modality such as deontic and epistemic. In his opinion, the deontic modality is connected with the said issues relating to the necessity of the possibility of the acts of morally responsible actors, and the epistemic modality is connected with the said issues relating to knowledge, belief or opinion as opposed to fact. Aristotle defined the concepts of possibility and reality discussing the classification of everything into two large groups: those that exist and those that exist in possibility. He had displayed numerous needs and opportunities and possibilities that, according to him, are linked to each other. In exploring the connection between what is possible and what is necessary, the philosopher recognized two primary varieties of modality, namely unilateral, or unconditional, modality and bilateral, or conditional, modality. Being referred to unconditional modality whereas being in possibility referred to conditional modality. Given that subjective modality in the language derives out of the former and objective modality derives out of the later, it is essential that linguistics should talk about the two agencies of modality. The other achievement of Aristotle is the development of a new field of study called modal logic that is the concurrent exercise of modalities and logical operations (Simatova, 2020).

According to Plungian, there are two types of modality markers (2011). The former is the evaluative modality which is linked to the subjective outlook of speaker on a particular situation. Different types of evaluative meanings are possible, depending on the parameter of a situation and the scale that the speaker would be assessing whether it is more appropriate to either of the two (Plungian, 2011:318). In other words, ethical appraisal is

a process of realizing the right or the wrong, the good or the terrible as per the moral standards already existing.

The primary meaning of evaluation is epistemic modality or epistemic assessment (Plungian, 2011:319). These are two kinds of assessments; the first one involves the possibility of a given situation and the speaker was not given reliable information on the situation and the second is post factum, which is assessing a situation by the speaker whose veracity was known to him (Plungian, 2011:320). In this case, what the speaker is saying is whether the results are consistent with his theory of epistemology on the situation that was presented.

Plungian (2011) asserts that the problem of irreal modality refers to the situation that does not exist. Aristotle states that the most common definitions of irreal modality are necessity and possibility. These two categories may be further sub-divided into external necessity/possibility and internal necessity/possibility. The latter is due to the characteristic of the actor to the given phenomenon, and the former is due to the influence of external sources and has nothing in common with them. Accordingly, the internal need is associated with demands and, eventually, with personal features of the subject in question whereas internal possibility harbors conceptualizations such as (physical or otherwise) ability and aptitude (Plungian, 2011).

2.3 Iraqi Arabic

The Iraqi Arabic today is affected by a great number of various languages which are Persian, Turkish (due to the presence of the countries of the former Soviet Union, Iran and Turkey respectively) and English (due to the invasion in the previous century and the usage of English in the world of technologies and the internet, respectively). Other effects of

dialects spawned through interaction with the surrounding Arab countries, including those of the South and South West (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, etc.) and West and North West (Jordan, Syria, etc.). Historical influence on the Iraqi Arabic includes the Persian, Turkish, and English, and the surrounding Arabic dialects. Iraqi Arabic tends to achieve modality by the use of lexical verbs and particles instead of inflectional lexicon. Pragmatic meanings like لازم (necessity/obligation), تحتاج (practical necessity), ما يكدّر (inability), بلكت (hopeful possibility) and ايجوز (probability) have a pragmatic meaning that is culturally rooted and dependent on context. An example is that بلكت does not only imply that something is possible but a wish of a speaker based on circumstances that are not within his power. Likewise, often ايجوز is used to refer to a reasoned conclusion made using observable evidence, which puts it much nearer to the epistemic assessment as compared to its counterpart, neutral possibility. Abdulla (2016). The vocabulary of IA speakers dates to the Sumer and the Akkad that were the language of ancient Mesopotamian civilizations (Al-Musawi et al., 2019).

Numerous kinds of dialects and speech patterns are available because the geographic area of Iraq is large and covered with different areas. Although the dialects of the Iraqi people are diverse and divergent, there are some general characteristics of the Iraqi entities (Abutiheen et al., 2020).

2.4 Challenges in Translating Modality Markers

The concept of modality is not comparable even across all languages; therefore, it is extremely difficult to provide the meaning of modality as per the orientation of one

approach. The modal auxiliaries in Arabic to English translations and vice versa pose many challenges to a translator since they are as follows:

1. The meaning of dedication and not the future is referred to in a special sense under the verb (shall), particularly in the language of the law. In order to cope with it, shall means is to be used on all law English texts. Moreover, the use is also applied in the sense of must when what is ought to be applied is normally the past tense of shall. So that we can solve this, must is always translated as should Alanazi (2024) . A case in point: in the subsequent line (We should listen to our parents) is translated to the subsequent (يجب علينا ان نصغي الى ابائنا).

2. The verb phrases (must leave and may leave) in these examples (You must leave now) and (You may leave now) to be read as deontic necessity of obligation and permission respectively. This is evident, but when the subject (you) is interchanged the sense of modals will be unclear with (he). Hence, it puts a challenge of making decisions, assessing the potential, competence and consent (Abdel-Fattah, n.d., p. 3).

The two major problems encountered with the translation of modals according to Alanazi (2024) include: first, the ambiguous words may, can and would are taken to be the past tense of the words may, can and will when used in presentation simple, but with different meanings. Both of them contain the meaning of (may) as they both are used to convey permission, possibility, and politeness or request. As an illustration, he could spend her time blaming herself, he would spend her time blaming herself, and he would spend her

time blaming herself. They cannot be translated to be used as past tense verbs since these are grammatical statements of possibility, permission, and polite request. Second, (can, will, may) are equal to (could, would, and might) in meaning of (may) and can be used interchangeably, that is why in most instances the misunderstanding will occur. The generally otherwise meaning of (will) is, however, the future tense, though they may equally be used to represent polite request, and (can) is a sign of capacity. As an illustration, Can you open the door? Will you open the door? May you open the door? We also have the words can and may to show permission or possibility such as You may open the door and You can open the door.

2.5 Research gap and Past Studies on the problem of Modality and Translation.

The past research on the subject of modality and translation was some of the most insightful to date with respect to the semantic ambiguity and functional complexity of modal expressions; nonetheless, they were also constrained by the lack of scope in as far as colloquial language and pragmatic analysis are concerned. An example of such studies is Abdulla (2016), who focuses on translation and reflection of the English modal auxiliaries into Arabic in legal writing and shows that modals may and must indicate specialized meaning in the institutional speech. Although the work is valuable, it pays too much attention to formal legal language not taking into consideration the idea of modality being flexible and context-related in spoken dialects.

On the same note, Abutiheen et al. (2020) explains the polysemy of English modal auxiliaries and the pitfalls that usually occur during translation due to literalness. Despite the fact that tAbutiheen et al. presents a substantial theoretical framework, it fails to

investigate the role of modality in the Arabic colloquial speech empirically and how the conveyance of pragmatic meaning by translators in the products of actual translation is negotiated.

Investigations on the dynamics of the Iraqi Arabic including those of Abbas and Mugair (2018) characterize the differences in modal use and structural variation among the different Iraqi dialects. Nevertheless, these research works are more or less descriptive and linguistic instead. They neither explore the translation processes of Iraqi colloquial markers of modality into the English language, nor do they determine the effectiveness of modal decisions used by the translators. Similarly, Mohammad and Jawad (2019) center their analysis on the problem of learners using English modals when they are being translated into another language but do not discuss the issue of Arabic-English translation and colloquialism.

Collectively, the researches identify three obvious gaps in the literature. To begin with, there are no empirical studies that investigate the Iraqi Arabic colloquial markers of modality in actual translation exercises. Second, the available literature seldom provides a critical examination of how pragmatic meanings, including advice, hope, inference and contextual obligation are changed or lost in translation. Third, the way theoretical classifications of modality correlate with actual performance by the translator is not very closely integrated.

The current research fills these gaps as its results give a qualitative study of authentic translation products created by MA students, who are engaged in the process of translation. This study, through the application of the most commonly applied Iraqi Arabic colloquial modality during usage and the evaluation of the translators in terms of perfect modal force

and pragmatic equivalent will provide a connection between theoretical explanations of modality and practical translation issues. By so doing, it adds empirical data to a field under-researched and directly addresses the situation in which the translation of colloquial modality is required to be context-sensitive.

3.The Research Method

In this study, the qualitative descriptive research approach will be used to analyze the translation of Iraqi Arabic colloquial modal markers into the English language, the issues associated with translation as a trainee translator. The data available is five colloquial Arabic Iraqi sentences that had typical modality markers (لازم، تحتاج، ما يكدّر، بلكت، ايجوز) translated to English by five students of Translation Department at Tikrit University. To make sure of systematic comparison and anonymity, each source sentence (SS1 -SS5) was coded, and the translation (T1 -T5) of the source sentence was coded as well. In the analysis, the approach of the translators to modality was considered through taking notes of the movement modalities of the translators in relation to the intended meaning of the source markers. Namely, the various translations were assessed to find out the manner in which the kind of modality (epistemic or deontic), the strength of modal force, and the pragmatic role were translated into the English language. The results of the translators were examined vertically (in terms of the parallels made between the target sentence and the source sentence) as well as horizontally (in terms of the parallels made between the choices made by different translators on a single sentence). In this way, they could determine the tendencies of equivalence, change of interpretation and weakened or strengthened modality. Even though the size in this case is small; it fits a qualitative study with an

exploratory nature where the researcher intends to arrive at an in-depth analysis of decision making by translators and not in statistical generalization.

4. Results and Discussion

Qualitative analysis of the data in this part is carried out to determine the key problems of the process of translating the markers of modality into the colloquial expressions in the Iraqi Arabic language into English. The argument associates the decisions made by the translators with the theoretical difference between epistemic and deontic modality Mustafa and Ali (2024) as well as earlier research on translation studies that identify the ambiguity and pragmatic sensitivity of English modal auxiliaries (Abdulla, 2016).

SS1: لازم ندرس زين لامتحان

The meanings of لازم when translated vary in the level of obligation. Whilst translators T1 and T4 had to, T2 and T5 adopted must and T3 adopted should. Even though these modals are or are related to one another in terms of their semantics, they are very different in terms of modal force. Mustafa and Ali (2024) argues that deontic modality captures the obligation that is subjected through the necessity in the external or contextual factors. The setting of this line represents a rather strong compulsion rather than a suggestion made by preparing to an examination.

Due to weakened obligation that is typically presented in English modal as equivalent to stronger Arabic markers, appendages of English modal are expected to be infrequent as Abdel-Fatah (n.d) indicated. This is the reason why translation of T3 is under-representation of the force of لازم. Instead, must is a more fitting description of the high necessity suggested by the situation. This observation confirms the fact that deontic modality remains sensitive to contextual strength as argued by Palmer (2001) as opposed

to the presence of a lexical similarity. The main difficulty that would be observed in this process is the proper degree of commitment in the choice of an English modal equivalent.

SS2: تحتاج تسوي فحص حتى تعرف شنو مرضك

The marker *تحتاج* in this sentence was translated as the need to, must, and ought to. Translators T1, T4 and T5 need to, T2 must and T3 ought to. Although all these modals convey the necessity, they have different pragmatic meanings. The marker *تحتاج* normally provides utilitarian need in a situation and not the mandate.

As argued in the literature review, according to Palmer (2001), such cases take a mid ground between deontic and advisory necessity. The need translators had to were more pragmatically equivalent, but must imposed a more directive tone. This outcome is similar to the finding of Abdulla (2016), who concluded that the appeal to the necessity made by the translator is overly intense due to excessive usage of the word must. The difficulty in this situation is to choose a modal that fails to express automatism but at the same time is not exaggerated confrontation.

SS3: هو ما يكدر يسوق السيارة لان ما عنده اجازة سوق

Every translator has translated *ما يكدر* in negatives of can (cannot / could not), and managed to pass a semantics meaning of impossibility. This consistency indicates that the ability-related modality presents less translation challenges as compared to either obligation or possibility (Halliday, 2014). According to Al Musawi , et al. (2019), can and cannot are prototypical English markers of ability and inability and as a result reason the Swedish agreement of translators.

When the difference in present (cannot) and past (could not) is applied, it does not influence the message intended in the context much. This result supports the fact that in case there

are direct functional equivalents between the Iraqi Arabic and the English, the translators will have greater chances to attain pragmatic equivalence.

SS4: بلكت يتأجل الامتحان لأن ما قارين زين

The 42 translations of بلكت are quite diverse, and this is due to its practical complexity. Translators T1 and T5 applied maybe... will, T2 applied hope... may and T3 and T4 applied may only. As opposed to neutral markers of epistemics, بلكت is a hopeful possibility which is contingent on conditions outside of the control of the speaker.

Plungian (2011) also argues that these meanings to be handled usually demand pragmatic reinforcement, other than merely modal replacement. The mix of maybe and will showcases a more precise idea about translations and the likelihood to bring out the aspect of hope and anticipation in translation but when used alone of may, it has a muting effect on the sense of maybe to be likely. This observation confirms the claim by Mohammed (n.d) that English modal auxiliaries are not always able to reflect stratified pragmatic meanings coded in Arabic colloquial markers. The problem in this context is balancing the pragmatic meaning by including other markers of modality.

SS5: ايجوز اليوم تمطر لان مغيمة

Ayjuza in the last statement was translated as may, maybe, will and will. Although all these forms represent a possibility, they vary in levels of power and evidential investment (Hazem and Kamil, 2022). This fact that there is observable evidence (it is cloudy) implies that there is strong levels of epistemic likelihood as opposed to weak possibility.

By degrees of inference based on evidence, as argued by Mustafa et al (2024), epistemic modality is likely to show the level of inference based on evidence. The favorable possibility suggested in the original sentence was better translated when translated as will

or reinforced possibility with maybe... will. May on the other hand does not reflect the evidence on the assertion. This finding is in harmony with the fact pointed out by Abdulla (2016) when he acknowledged that mismatches are often present in cases of translation of Arabic epistemic markers into English because of the difference in modal strength.

Generally, the results have shown that the key issues in the translation of Iraqi Arabic colloquial markers of modalities are related to the evaluation of modal force, the difference between epistemic and deontic senses, and correction of pragmatic nuances that are not represented by single English modal auxiliaries. These findings are in line with previous outcomes in the literature and expand on them by demonstrating how these difficulties are instantiated in the context of the Iraqi Arabic colloquial discourse.

Summary of Findings

Iraqi Marker	Dominant Role	Primary translation difficulty.
لازم	Strong obligation	Under/over-strengthening
Förniglig skal (Ts)	Practical requirement	Modal suitability.
ما يكدّر	Inability	Tense selection
بلكت	Possible optimism	Hopeful compensation.
لاوت	Rational possibility	Grade of concreteness.

It was found that to a large extent, translators used literal equivalents; this resulted in the changes of modal force. Translators in various situations moved between epistemic and deontic meanings proving the fact that modal ambiguity is valid (Alanazi, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This study has indicated how difficult it is to translate colloquial modality markers used in Iraqi Arabic to English, especially in determining modal force and the difference between modal force between epistemic and deontic. Markers of strong obligation such as لازم were not strengthened in all cases, and those of practical necessity such as تحتاج needed special attention so as not to accentuate obligation. Markers related to ability such as ما يكدر were translated definitively, as it is simple to translate verbal equivalents of overt functional fulfilment. Conversely, all anticipatory or speculative evidences of possibility e.g. بلكت, ايوجيز required practical compensation so as not to lose finer details. Generally, the use of literal equivalents by translators created the need to change modal force or ambiguity, with the emphasis of the contextual and pragmatic sensitivity in creating successful and functionally equivalent translations.

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