Translating Cultural Context: A Pragmatic and Functional Evaluation of Moroccan Arabic Proverbs and Literary Texts

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Abdelkhalak Lahmidi Idrissi
Hassan II University, Morocco
Brahim Belhad
Hassan II University, Morocco

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Abstract: Cultural translation research attracts scholarly attention due to the need for appropriate translation approaches. Cultural context is a tangled issue in translation studies, being both pervasive and decisive in cross-cultural translation. Evaluating cultural translation demands robust semantic and pragmatic frameworks to bridge the gap between source and target language contexts. This paper investigates the impact of cultural context on translation by evaluating selected Moroccan Arabic proverbs and culture-specific literary expressions translated into English. Employing a qualitative, comparative methodology supported by functional and pragmatic translation theories, this article analyzes text samples across four distinct datasets. The findings reveal that a reliance on strict literal translation results in semantic distortion, a pragmatic loss of expressive force, and unjustified omissions that conceal the source culture's identity. Conversely, functional and covert translation strategies preserve structural fluency but frequently result in a partial loss of cultural nuances. This paper underscores the necessity for translators to serve as active cultural mediators who negotiate meaning through verified quality assessment models.

Keywords: Arabic-English translation, cultural context, culture-specific expressions, proverbs

1. Introduction

In recent years, translation research has become the interest of many researchers due to the urgent need for appropriate translations. This can only be achieved by overcoming the many complexities that hinder the translator's job. Today, translation is no longer seen as merely the replacement of a source language text with its equivalent in the target language. Rather, context is considered an essential part of the translation process. It has become a serious issue in the field of translation and is seen as a key to successful translations. The variety of contexts surrounding different languages makes translation a challenging task for translators. The purpose and characteristics of translation are to promote understanding among different countries and nations. Nida and Taber (1969:12) defined translation as "reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style". However, recreating a well-matched natural equivalent in the target language is constrained by cultural divergence. Due to differences in histories, geographic locations, local customs and religious beliefs, some

translation obstacles have emerged and brought about misunderstandings. Thus, translation involves not only the translator's or interpreter's linguistic competence, but also calls for their acquaintance with the respective cultures. In this vein, translation means more than merely translating words, sentences or articles from the source language into the target one; it is a transfer between cultures.

Currently, translation is perceived as a sophisticated phenomenon that encompasses the academic discipline of translation, the translated text, and the process or act of translating. While the prototypical model of translating a source text from a source language into a target text in a target language is acknowledged, it is important to note that this long-established pattern has to be widened to incorporate modern contexts such as multilingualism, "unstable" source texts, and indirect translation through a pivot language. In fact, translation studies is seen as a drastically different transdisciplinary entity that has shifted from its Eurocentric origins to interact directly with knowledge producers both inside and outside of academia (Munday, Ramos Pinto and Blakesley 2026:2-12)

This paper delves into the influence of the cultural context on Arabic-English translations. The act of translation cannot be done in isolation from the source text's cultural context. Language is not only a combination of lexical items, words, and utterances, but it is also linked to a set of cultural values, traditions and beliefs. Many studies approach culture and translation globally, yet there remains an underexamined link between culture and translation adequacy regarding certain regional dialects and oral traditions in the Arab world. To address this gap, this paper aims to achieve the following objectives:

Identify how translation is affected by cultural factors.

Examine the linguistic and cultural obstacles encountered when translating Moroccan culture-specific elements into English.

Analyze the efficacy of literal, functional, and pragmatic translation strategies in minimizing cultural communicative losses.

In order to achieve these objectives, this paper addresses the following primary research questions:

How does cultural context affect the translation of proverbs and culture-specific items from Arabic to English?

What are the cultural obstacles or semantic and pragmatic losses that arise when adopting literal translation for proverbs and culture-specific expressions?

How can semantic and pragmatic equivalence frameworks be used to achieve a more appropriate and faithful transfer of cultural texts?

We intend to compare selected English and Arabic translated materials and analyze them using a semantic and pragmatic approach.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Culture and translation

Culture is understood as a way of life that is an integral part of a community's history and each culture uses its own language and way of expressing thoughts (Newmark 1988:94). Newmark (1988:95) distinguished cultural language from universal and personal language. Universal language is shared across different

cultures while cultural language is specific and technical to only one culture. In the context of translation, there will be problems and overlaps if there are no exact equivalences and similarities between the two cultures. There might be several cultures within a single language which inherently creates variations of meanings and thus makes the translation process more difficult. It is easy to find such cultural terminologies because they belong to a certain language by which they are defined and explained. Yet, they cannot be translated because of the cultural variations between the languages involved. Many cultural customs are circulated using the language of a minority (variety) where literal translation will not transmit the real meaning of the text. In this case, functional equivalence becomes essential.

Cultural translation is based on some essential codes that guide the translation of cultural terms from one language to another. First, it requires the recognition of the cultural achievements referred to in the SL text with respect to all other cultures and countries. Second, translation can be achieved through procedures such as transference, which offers local color and atmosphere. In specialist texts, it enables the readership (some of whom may be more or less familiar with the SL) to identify the referent - particularly a name or a concept - in other texts (or conversations) without difficulty. Yet, transference, though it is to the point, has some constraints on comprehension because it focuses on the culture and sidelines the message; furthermore, it lacks communicative techniques. Third, there is componential analysis which is considered the most accurate translation procedure, as it excludes the culture and highlights the message (Newmark 1988:96).

In an attempt to evaluate the impact of cultural differences on the process of translation, Shaw (1987:25-29) presented models designed to deal with cultural context barriers in translation. They approach cultural problems that arise from cultural variations between the source and receptor texts. It is claimed that in order to arrive at an appropriate translation, translators should be aware of both the source and receptor languages and cultures. Shaw emphasized that specialists have to be equipped with the necessary knowledge of both the source and the target cultural contexts through cultural analysis. By understanding both world views, the role of translators as mediators becomes easier which helps the receptor audience understand that the text comes from a different context and represents a specific culture.

To categorize these differences, Shaw (1987:25-29) introduced "The Three Cultures" model, which splits systems into kinship, peasant, and industrial sub-systems, unifying societies that have shared cultural manifestations and world views and helping predict shared translation problems. Additionally, "The Cultural Distance" model evaluates the gap between these culture types in order to determine translation flexibility and smoothness. While these structural anthropology foundations provide a point of departure to identify cultural distances, recent scholars like Munday et al. (2026) claim that these rigid sub-systems might disregard the interactive nature of post-industrial and globalized text production. Still, measuring this distance remains highly relevant when it comes to the analysis of localized regional dialects where translation is rarely neutral. More particularly, Tisgam (2025:511-536) examines ideological manipulation in two Arabic

translations of Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* to explore how the translator's beliefs shape the target texts. It is concluded that the translators adopt contrasting ideological strategies inspired by ideological and cultural factors either by adding elements reflecting Islamic perspectives or by omitting ideologically sensitive content which brings about significant loss and distortion. Tisgam (2025:511-536) underscores that translation is rarely neutral; rather, it performs an ideological act where translators' subjectivity and socio-political contexts reshape the original text's meaning.

In particular, translating culture-specific elements from English to Arabic is, faced with several complexities. The primary challenges stem from unfamiliarity with both source and target cultures, limited knowledge of effective translation strategies, and the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic gaps between English and Arabic. Translators often struggle to find functional and pragmatic equivalents, leading to frequent literal translations and misunderstandings. The most commonly employed strategies include paraphrasing using related words, substitution with more general or neutral terms, omission, and illustration. Thus, there is a necessity to enhance academic curricula to foster cultural sensitivity and equip translators with appropriate translation techniques to bridge these linguistic and cultural divides effectively (Al-khadem 2024:341-345).

Tergui (2024:105-110) identifies three main difficulties faced by translation students when translating Arabic idioms and proverbs into English. Semantically, students struggle to grasp the meaning of idiomatic expressions and find accurate English equivalents. Syntactically, they have trouble constructing correct English sentence structures; and culturally, they lack awareness of the target culture, leading to incorrect or literal translations. Fundamentally, cultural competence is a highly crucial element in cultural translation that requires special training, workshops, the use of bilingual resources, engagement with native speakers, and the promotion of critical thinking to improve students' translation skills, enable more accurate and nuanced renditions of idiomatic expressions, and promote deeper understanding and effective translation. These approaches aim at bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, enhancing equivalence in translation, and better preparing students for the complex task of idiomatic and proverbial translation.

More importantly, the translation of Maghrebi literature is still a unique challenge because of the oral dialect embedded with localized symbolism and socio-historical realities in many works. Research on Arabic dialect translation demonstrate that domesticating Moroccan Arabic into standard English prose often causes cultural untranslatability while standardizing these cultural expressions strips the text of its sociolinguistic identity (Thawabteh, Al-Adwan and Shqair 2022). Furthermore, handling emotional intensity, taboo expressions, and street dialogue is a particularly vulnerable area in dialectal translation. Shehab and Hamamra (2026) observed that in the translation of modern Arabic fiction, translators often erase linguistic violence and culturally specific face-attacks like gendered insults and animalistic degradation. This reduces high-intensity interpersonal conflicts. Replacing localized Arabic interjections and onomatopoeic utterances with moderate target language exclamations changes the pragmatic force

intended by the author. As a result, the target reader receives a distorted version of the characters' lived experiences.

2.2 Translation as re-contextualization

Translating cultural texts, which is deemed a challenge for many translators, requires an in-depth understanding of both the textual and cultural features of the languages involved in the translation process. Many translation specialists and researchers have tried to develop approaches that can resolve cultural translation problems that arose from old theories in order to recreate texts with an appropriate equivalent in the target language. Mohammed and Al-Azzawi (2025:103-118) examine the crucial role of cultural awareness in translating English idioms into Arabic, especially within sensitive contexts where clarity and precision are important. While relying on Skopos Theory, they emphasize prioritizing the intended function and target audience's cultural context over word-for-word equivalence to achieve effective idiomatic translation. They underscore the need for creative, context-aware strategies in translation and propose integrating emerging technologies to reinforce culturally sensitive idiomatic translation.

Further, House (2006:342-355) explored the tight relationship between context and text in translation and the role it plays in the translation process. House (2006:342-355) focuses on the functional pragmatic equivalent and Halliday's systemic functional theory which is considered of crucial importance and relevance in translation. It reinforces the systemic functional approach to translation that views the text as constituents of communication used to serve social purposes. During the process of communication, speakers and writers draw on three systems of meaning construction. The first dimension, *Field*, represents the topic being discussed. The second, *Tenor*, reflects the relationship between the speaker and hearer or writer and reader. The third, *Mode*, captures the language choices whether spoken or written, formal or informal. These dimensions are used to deconstruct the text's elements and function in order to make it manageable and applicable in different contexts. House (2006:342-355) argues that an adequate translation is manifested in a semantically and pragmatically equivalent one. She emphasizes functional equivalence and its role in assuring an appropriate translation. The pragmatic functional equivalence model explains how a text can be reconstituted in different contexts. It views translation as the replacement of a source language text by a semantically and pragmatically equivalent one in the target language. In this regard, Dawood (2025) illustrates that when there is a failure in achieving pragmatic equivalence, especially during the translation of emotionally charged Arabic rhetorical devices, the result can be a significant loss of expressive force, changing the target reader's perception of tone and interpersonal dynamics.

Based on this, House (2006:338-358) introduced the translation theory of re-contextualization representing the process of text reproduction that leaves the cultural background of the source text and creates a new text reflecting the cultural context of the target language. It disregards the traditional definitions of translation. That is, translation is not only a matter of finding the equivalent language item of the source text in the target language, but it is the creation of a new text with new

cultural values and conventions. The application of the textual function of the re-contextualization theory of translation depends on two types of translation. First is overt translation which intentionally keeps the cultural characteristics of the source language in which the target language readers are brought to the text. Here, the translation holds its foreign flavor as it is based only on the equivalent relationship established on the text level (register and genre), not on the individual text level. In overt translation, the translator's mission is to be as faithful as possible to the source text's form and content. Covert translation, on the other hand, functions exactly like an original text within the target culture, essentially hiding the fact it was ever translated and pretending it is unique and new. The cultural features of the source language are replaced by the target language ones through a cultural filter as if the text has been created in the target language culture. House (2006:338-358) claimed that in the re-contextualization process, the difficulty that may arise in translating overtly is in finding the adequate linguistic equivalent in the target language; however, covert translation, in which translators opt for a "cultural filter" is more practical and easier. The cultural filter, in this case, should not be a subjective choice; rather it should be based on empirical cultural research. The status of the re-contextualization approach of translation and cultural filter is, however, compromised by the dominance of global English and the spread of Anglophone values and norms. Essentially, these dimensional parameters of Field, Tenor, and Mode in addition to the selection between overt and covert re-contextualization work as the explicit analytical tools applied directly in order to evaluate the translation samples in the data analysis section of this study. Recent applications of Juliane House's functional-pragmatic model explain that when a source text dialogue is transmitted into a target language, nuanced shifts in Field, Tenor, and Mode directly changes the reader's perception of narrative tensions (Raïhani 2025).

2.3 The obstacles of cultural translation

The translation of cultural texts such as proverbs, idioms, or culture-bound terms remains a crucial step towards cross-cultural communication. Yet, this process requires deep cultural understanding to overcome the complexities that emerge due to cultural differences. In this respect, Kashoob (1995:61) remarks that most translation barriers do not stem from universal concepts that are shared by all languages. Yet, culture specific terms can be the source of complexity for all translators. That is, these terms are difficult if not impossible to translate without a deep knowledge of the two cultures and languages involved in the translation process. Kashoob (1995:134) claims that religious beliefs and rituals are the most complicated areas in the scope of translation. There are certainly huge differences between one religion and another and the things that are allowed and not offensive in a religion might be a taboo or offensive in other societies and religions. Kashoob (1995:134) argues that the translator's greatest challenge is employing explanatory translation for concepts entirely foreign to the target culture. For example, the Arabic term [ʔalʕumra] is totally foreign to English-speaking communities. Yet, to translate this term which is different from a standard pilgrimage to a TL reader who

is totally alien to the Muslim culture, the translator has to use contextual conditioning. In the same vein, social beliefs differ from one society to another, especially within societies that share different cultures. Moreover, what is perceived positive and good in one society might be negative and bad in other societies. The difficulties of cultural translation are not only concerned with lexical equivalences but also with the cultural connotative meanings that are inherently associated with the target language concepts.

Oral tradition is recognized as a fundamental aspect of cultural heritage, comprising various forms of popular arts that are transmitted orally across generations. This cultural expression plays a pivotal role in preserving cultural identity. Particularly, Moroccan oral tradition embodies this heritage but sheds light on unique challenges in translation due to dialect variation, cultural symbolism, narrative structure differences, and the performative elements integral to oral storytelling. These constraints influence the process of rendering such culturally rich narratives into English while preserving their authenticity and meaning (Ouachan, Maliki and El Heziti 2024:64-72). Translating Moroccan oral heritage requires an evaluation of both the micro-level features and macro-level pragmatic dimensions because word-for-word translation has proved its failure in retaining the emotional impact of localized oral discourse (Gdader and Sandy 2026:180–192).

In fact, there are inherent complexities in translating between Arabic and English due to linguistic, cultural, and contextual differences. Arabic's complex grammar, including verb conjugation, noun cases, and dialectal variations along with a rich vocabulary featuring terms lacking direct English equivalents, poses significant challenges. Cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions, and diverse communication styles complicate the process. Thus, accurate translation requires not only linguistic proficiency but also in-depth cultural understanding, specialized training, and the use of technological tools such as Computer-Assisted Translation (Tojiyeva and Ermatov 2024:1-9). More complexities arise from the translation of metaphorical expressions. Most metaphors involve concrete-to-abstract borrowing, with maintaining the metaphor acting as a translation strategy. Maintaining metaphors preserves both the paradigmatic and syntagmatic parameters and effectively conveys the aesthetic and creative value inherent in Arabic literary discourse. Preserving metaphors in translation is crucial for maintaining the artistic and cognitive impact of the source text, underlining the translator's role in balancing linguistic accuracy and literary aesthetics (Farghal and Mansour 2020:105-123).

Abdelaal (2020:121-135) examines the challenges posed by culture-bound terms in translation, especially between linguistically and culturally distant languages like English and Arabic. It is noted that language and culture cannot be separated from each other. Differences in cultural contexts create remarkable difficulties leading to lexical gaps where direct equivalents do not exist. These culture-bound terms, including idioms, fixed expressions, and collocations, carry connotations and evocative language rooted deeply in their source cultures, making literal translation problematic. Particularly, idioms pose unique challenges as their

meaning cannot be deduced from their constituents and may not have a precise equivalent in the target language. While translation is always possible, translators need deep cultural knowledge and must carefully choose appropriate strategies to balance accuracy and naturalness, thereby effectively bridging cultural and language barriers. As observed by Noorain and Alamin (2026), the literal translation of culturally embedded Arabic lexemes results in semantic loss. This necessitates the use of adoptive strategies like explanatory paraphrasing and context-based re-contextualization so that the cultural and spiritual essence can be preserved.

According to Al Sammarraie, Subramaniam and Zainal (2023:19-27), literal translation is the dominant translation approach used by translators among many other approaches though it sometimes fails to convey the cultural connotations or intended meaning appropriately. Yet, translators confront several barriers while translating culture-specific items including a lack of direct equivalents, cultural discrepancies, and deep-rooted social connotations that complicate literal or one-to-one translations. Thus, successful translation requires in-depth linguistic and cultural competence to balance faithfulness to the source text with comprehensibility and cultural appropriateness in the target text. In the same vein, Ali (2024) explains that translating culture-specific items from Arabic into English can be challenging because of cultural differences. Clearly, over-reliance on literal preservation often distorts a text's clarity unless supported by functional strategies such as contextual addition.

Unfamiliarity with cultural expressions can also result in inaccurate translations if translators are not equipped with sufficient knowledge about these expressions rooted in their own or the target culture. This can lead to a failure to produce the appropriate functional or pragmatic equivalents in the target culture which brings about cultural losses. Additionally, the use of literal translation for culturally rich expressions can cause cultural misunderstanding for it may carry substantial connotations that are not visible if translated literally. Cultural context and background knowledge of the source and target cultures are as essential as cultural interaction whereby the translators' actual engagement with other cultures if limited can affect their ability to understand cultural nuances and contexts fundamental to translation (Dweik and Suleiman 2013:48).

3. Methodological framework

This study is qualitative in nature. It employs descriptive and analytical frameworks depending on functional and cultural approaches so as to explore the cultural dimensions embedded within high-frequency lexis, idiomatic expressions and proverbial wisdom with culturally-oriented examples from Arabic and English. Particular emphasis is placed upon the cultural aspects as they have different meanings in various cultures. These items will be analyzed based on a semantic and pragmatic approach. These four analytical approaches serve as operational tools directly connected to our research questions and the theories presented in the theoretical framework.

First, semantic analysis is explicitly used for analyzing word-level translation procedures as well as mapping lexical gaps and shifts in literal translation based on Newmark's (1988) concepts of cultural translation. Second, pragmatic analysis is applied as a Translation Quality Assessment framework through the use of Juliane House's (2006) recontextualization model. The samples are broken down into the dimensions of *Field*, *Tenor*, and *Mode* in order to evaluate whether an overt or covert strategy was adopted, and if the expressive force was preserved. Third, functional analysis is used to assess the communicative effect of the translation on the target reader. It evaluates whether the chosen strategy achieves functional equivalence or results in a pragmatic loss of connotative meaning. Fourth, cultural analysis is used based on Shaw's (1987) Cultural Distance model to evaluate the socio-cultural gap between the source and target contexts. It is used to analyze how historical, religious, and social worldviews result in distinct translation problems.

3.1 Data collection

The corpus of this article is based on three works. The first one is from "Wit and Wisdom in Morocco: A study of Native Proverbs" by the Finnish philosopher and sociologist Edward Westermarck who is considered an explorer of proverbs in Morocco. The book was first published in 1930; it explores the society, culture and customs of Morocco. The selected proverbs are transliterated and translated by Edward Westermarck with the assistance of Shereef Abd-es-salam El-Baqqali.

The second is "Sardines and Oranges" by Mohamed Zafzaf translated by Mona Zaki. It was first published in Banipal No 9. *Sardeen wa burtuqal* is from the author's collection of short stories *Al-'Araba* (Dar 'Ukadh, Rabat 1993). The third is "Men Have All the Luck" by Mohamed Choukri translated by Paul Starkey. "Men Have All the Luck" [Al-Rijal Mahadhoudhoun], written in March 1967, is translated from his collection *Al-Kayma*, published by Al-Kamel Verlag, Köln, Germany, 2000. It is published in Banipal No 22. These are taken from "Sardines and oranges: short stories from North Africa: Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia" by Peter Clark.

The scripts are based entirely on the culture-specific expressions that are peculiar to the Moroccan culture. They were selected based on clear standards: first, the samples must contain high frequency culture-bound items or oral traditions that lack direct linguistic equivalents in English. Second, they have to carry deep-rooted social or religious connotations; and third, they must illustrate a clear choice made by the translator between literalism and cultural adaptation. The work of Edward Westermarck, *Wit and wisdom in Morocco: A Study of Native Proverbs* (1930), was selected because it is considered a seminal and authoritative historical record of Moroccan oral traditions. These proverbs provide a baseline for the evaluation of how traditional and long-established societal wisdom and religious values are transmitted from Moroccan Arabic to English. Moreover, Mohamed Zafzaf's *Sardines and Oranges* was selected because Zafzaf is a pioneering figure in modern Moroccan prose fiction whose narrative style heavily uses mid-to-late 20th century urban colloquialisms, idioms, and metaphors that capture post-colonial Moroccan socio-economic realities and street life. As for Mohamed Choukri's "Men Have all

the Luck", it is particularly selected for Choukri's literary discourse which is internationally recognized for its raw realism and localized linguistic violence. Choukri's work provides an ideal case study for evaluating how translators deal with extreme pragmatic expressive force, emotional intensity, and dialectal taboos.

The collected set evaluated in this qualitative analysis consists of three specific traditional proverbs and three distinct dialectal narrative expressions that are distributed across four comparative tables. By restricting the corpus to these specific samples, this paper ensures linguistic and regional precision which allows the study to properly observe how different Moroccan Arabic cultural nuances and dialectal characteristics affect translation adequacy. The translations manifest the specificity of the meanings of such Moroccan Arabic expressions which can be conceptualized differently based on the cultural awareness of the translator.

3.2 Procedures

The scripts and the proverbs selected are analyzed and compared with their translations seeking to find the potential impacts of the cultural context and the translator's cultural background and understanding on the translation process. They are analyzed within the comparative and analytical frameworks underpinned by functional and cultural approaches. This analysis gives insights into texts as reflections of culture. The analytical and comparative methods are conducted through a close analysis of the samples taking into account the pragmatic and semantic aspects and the techniques adopted by the translator. The analysis follows a precise and sequential description of procedural steps. Starting with selection and segmentation, the corpus is read closely to isolate the culture-specific expressions and proverbs. Then, the data is systematically categorized into four comparative tables by separating the traditional Moroccan proverbs and the localized passages. Furthermore, each source expression is transliterated, its literal meanings are mapped, and its underlying historical, social, or religious context is determined. Afterwards, the target texts are compared with and evaluated against the source texts by systematically applying Peter Newmark's procedures for word-level shifts and House's register parameters in order to measure semantic and pragmatic variations. Finally, data is analyzed to find out if the chosen strategy successfully transmitted the original expressive force or resulted in cultural distortion and communicative loss. It is through this analysis that cultural aspects and complexities of context can be revealed.

3.3 Data analysis

Table 1. The translation of selected Moroccan proverbs from Westermarck (1930)

Proverb number	The target text	The source text
Proverb 166	Give birth to a male and throw him into the sea (A boy will save himself even though he is thrown into the sea). (Westermarck 1930:90)	ولدو دكر وصيبوا فالبحر [waldu dkar u sˁajbu: f-al-baħr] (Westermarck 1930:90)
Proverb 291	The friend of a little handful of food will not remain {a friend} for ever. (Westermarck 1930:106)	لحبيب د للقيمة ما يدوم ديما [l-ħbi:b d-al-qi:ma ma: jdu:m di:ma] (Westermarck 1930:106)
Proverb 1085	If people are standing at the door of your house, don't shut your den for them. (Westermarck 1930:207)	إدا وقفو ناس فباب دارك لا تسد عليهوم غارك [ʔida: waqfu na:s f-ba:b da:rak la: tsadd ʕli:hum ɣa:rak] (Westermarck 1930:207)

Table 1 shows some Moroccan proverbs selected for their deep cultural meanings and insights into local traditions. In the first proverb [waldu dkar u sˁajbu: f-al-baħr], the translator opted for a literal translation which is "Give birth to a male and throw him into the sea" (Westermarck 1930:90). The meaning of the proverb is not derived from the constituents of the sentence but rather is implied and can only be understood from its metaphorical and cultural context. Here, literal translation preserves the original linguistic features and keeps the text foreignized which causes ambiguity and confusion for readers of the receptor language as they are not familiar with its cultural implication.

To overcome the confusion, the translator added an explanatory note "(A boy will save himself even though he is thrown into the sea)" (Westermarck 1930:90). This addition serves as an explicitation in the second sentence as the descriptive premise does not exist in the source text. The proverb is used to mean that a boy is strong enough to survive on his own. In this case, a literal translation is insufficient since the meaning is not clear and the target reader lacks familiarity with the underlying social context. A translator may opt for an equivalent proverb in the target culture such as "He must learn to swim on his own". Still, the cultural features may disappear and the original text may lose its foreign flavor. Based on Newmark's (1988) translation approach, this strict literalism fails to achieve communicative equivalence, bringing about a partial loss of cultural meaning. The target reader may find the proverb bizarre and probably violent. The proverb holds the cultural value that men are expected to be strong in difficult times and can overcome the harshness of life. In the end, the translator's role as a cultural mediator

ought to balance semantic fidelity with functional adaptation to reduce meaning loss and, at the same time, preserve localized heritage.

For the second proverb [l-ħbiːb d-al-qiːma maː jduːm diːma], the translator used a literal translation "The friend of a little handful of food will not remain {a friend} forever". This proverb entails a metaphor for materialistic gain or the benefits of friends. The translator kept the original imagery, but still it can be understood differently and might seem comical to an English native speaker who might inquire how an amount of food can be the central focus. These translation choices involve an obligatory explicitation as the translator adds the bracketed word "a friend" to explain the syntax and meaning more clearly. In fact, the translator could have opted for an equivalent proverb from the English culture such as "A friend in need is a friend indeed" or "Fair-weather friends don't last". Yet, by doing so, the original proverb would lose its cultural essence and identity. The role of the translator as a cultural mediator should clarify the symbolic meaning of 'food' without damaging its cultural status.

The third proverb [ʔidaː waqfu naːs f-baːb daːrak laː tsadd ʕliːhum ɣaːrak] was translated as "If people are standing at the door of your house, don't shut your den for them" which is clearly a direct translation that demonstrates the proverb's word-for-word meaning. In the Moroccan Islamic tradition, guests are highly valued and welcomed. Guests are to be welcomed for three days and offered food and shelter as part of generosity and hospitality. The proverb emphasizes an important cultural value: hospitality. In fact, the proverb is not about leaving your door open treating doors as objects, but rather about welcoming those in need of shelter and food like travellers or those who have lost their way. Literal translation in this context doesn't represent the true cultural value of the proverb. While it serves as a direct translation, it involves a simple cultural adaptation by opting for the word "den" rather than a literal rendering for غار (cave). Using a functional equivalent may convey the intended meaning of the proverb, yet it may lose its cultural identity and context. The use of the word "den" as the translation for [ɣaːrak] may confuse the target reader due to the fact that it may have different connotations in the target culture. The word [ɣaːrak] is used here as a metaphor to represent generosity and hospitality. There are proverbs in the target culture that can be used as equivalents such as "Always be a welcoming host" or "Don't turn your back on people in need". The use of domestication as a translation strategy conveys the meaning of the proverb but gets rid of the cultural features and context of the original one especially if the languages involved in the translation belong to different religious groups.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of source and target texts in Zafzaf's "Sardines and Oranges"[1]

The translation	The original passage
He explained that it was because of his illicit food. Oh, my God! How much better it is that person can eat rotten sardines and oranges from a hole in the ground than to have an illicit gut! All consumers of unlawful food are rejected among the living first and then by God. (Zafzaf 2005:77)	وعلَّق بعد ذلك: «إنه كرش الحرام». يا إلهي! ما أحسن أن يأكل الإنسان سردين‌اً وبرتقالاً فاسدين من حفرة دون أن تكون له كرش الحرام. لأن صاحب كرش الحرام منبوذ من عند العبد قبل الرب... (Zafzaf 1993:32)

Furthermore, the extract in Table 2 includes a sample of Moroccan cultural expressions embedded in literary text. The translator has changed most of the original words and replaced them with functional equivalents. This change from direct into indirect speech led the translator to make some essential alterations to the original text such as the translation of [ʔinnahu karsˤ al-ħraːm] which has been translated into three different versions: "illicit food", "illicit gut", and "unlawful food", respectively.

The first original phrase is a Moroccan Arabic quote used in the Moroccan culture to mean a person who obtained his livelihood through unethical and unlawful means such as bribery or corruption. The first translation "illicit food" denotes the illegal use of products involving smuggling or fraud. The second translation "illicit gut" is a literal translation which may seem ambiguous to an audience who is not familiar with such a quote. The use of the term "gut" is confusing. One might ask how a gut can be illicit? This brings to attention the word "belly" which is a more familiar word to use here. The third translation "unlawful food", not different from the first, is understood as concrete food being sold or bought illegally while it is, in fact, used to refer to people who earn their livelihood illegally. Overall, it is highly important to evaluate why the translator produced multiple variations of the same expression. The act of moving between these three variations reflects the translator's attempt to navigate different narrative registers by balancing literal terms with conceptual ones. Yet, these translations reflect a process of simplification and inadequate or inconsistent equivalence instead of active cultural preservation. This choice fails to capture the core connotative meanings which are central elements of cultural meaning. In English society, there is an equivalent idiom that represents the meaning of the above phrase even if it hides the cultural status of the words and its connotative meaning: "He has a belly full of ill-gotten gains". This suggestion reflects a clear awareness of achieving appropriate equivalence. Yet, it is important to note that the original phrase is more powerful. The cultural context of the phrase is still a challenge to recuperate in the target culture and language.

Table 3. Translation strategies in Mona Zaki's English rendering of Zafzaf's narrative[2]

The translation	The original passage
Are prison lice larger than the lice outside prison, ones that stick to our shorts? Often, we would go near the railway tracks, take our shorts off and remove the lice. (Zafzaf 2005:74)	لكن هل يكون قمل السجن أكبر من القمل الذي يلتصق بشراوطنا خارج السجن؟ فكثيراً ما كنا نذهب قرب السكة الحديد ونتخلص من شراوطنا ونفلّي القمل منها. (Zafzaf 1993:32)

In Table 3, the translator maintained a literal translation by preserving the original structure but failed to capture the real meaning of the phrase. The translator opted for "shorts" as the translation for [b-ʃraːwtˁnaː]. In fact, the translation is a cultural misunderstanding. In Morocco, the word [b-ʃraːwtˁnaː] doesn't mean "shorts"; it is used to refer to old clothes that are usually tattered. It is the plural form of [ʃarwiːtˁa], a Moroccan Arabic term that corresponds to a dirty and tattered cloth. The cultural specificity of the Moroccan Arabic lexis represents a rich repertoire of culturally coined words and a linguistic landscape that is evolving over time. This particular example directly explains Newmark's conceptions of cultural equivalency, mistranslation, and the problem of total non-equivalence. By changing tattered clothes into "shorts", the translator obscures the extreme socio-economic context of poverty and displacement experienced by the characters.

Table 4. The transfer of Moroccan cultural expressions in Choukri's "Men Have All the Luck"[3]

The translation	The original passage
"Coward! Huh... are you a man? You're not a man. The daughter of a bitch carries on shaking me, kicking me, pulling the blanket off me and hitting me until I get up. In bed, she turns her back on me. The bitch always turns her back on me. (Choukri 2005:109)	.جبان! تفو! أنت رجل؟ إنك لست رجلاً بنت الكلبة تظل تهزني تلكزني، تزيح الغطاء عني، تلكمني حتى أنهض… في السرير توليني ظهرها دائماً توليني «بنت الجروة» ظهرها. (Choukri 2000:6)

The example in Table 4 represents one of these cases where the translator's choices bring about a pragmatic loss or loss of expressive force that was unable to create the same effect on the target audience as that of the original text on the source audience. The translation of the word [tuffuː] as "Huh", while this expression can mean anger and scorn, it can also mean surprise. The expression "Ugh" is more effective in this case. It is used to express disgust which partially conveys the literal

meaning of the action but not an equivalent action. In reality, the effect of [tuffuː] is more powerful, disgusting and aggressive than “Ugh” which seems more like a cold reaction. [tuffuː] is an onomatopoeia for spitting and a near synonym to the action can be "ptoo" or "Ptooey" as they better represent the actual act of spitting and its effect in the Moroccan cultural context. In fact, by substituting a violent spitting insult with a confused questioning sound, the translator completely drains the anger, contempt and physical aggression from the dialogue because the word “Huh” is a weak and passive interjection that is used to express confusion, hesitation, or a casual question. This translation has a clear impact on readers; the characters no longer sound like they are in a vicious and abusive fight. Yet, the conflict is softened to sound like a mild and verbal disagreement.

Furthermore, it is important to look at another instance of linguistic violence in the translation of gendered, animalistic insults like "بنت الكلبة" [bint al-kalba] and "بنت الجروة" [bint al-jarwa]. The translation of [bint al-kalba] as “the daughter of a bitch” maintains the gendered target of the abuse while the translation of the localized dialectal insult [bint al-jarwa] is, in fact, flattened to the generic English expletive “the bitch”. In Moroccan Arabic, [bint al-jarwa] – the daughter of the female puppy- serves to compound the insult which varies the animalistic degradation in order to spotlight deep seated contempt. The translator reduced the phrase to a standard expletive which flattened the lexical cadence and cleared the street realism of the dialogue. Thus, the translator softened the level of linguistic violence in the target text by reducing the emotional effect on the target reader and weakening Choukri’s raw portrayal of characters enduring systemic dehumanization. The violent and hostile interaction captured in this passage reflects Choukri’s literary method of portraying violence as an effect of the oppressive social conditions endured by the marginalized. As Elbousty and Allen (2025) explain, Choukri frames violence not simply as an individual moral failure but as an inevitable and charged response shaped by poverty and systemic dehumanization, imbuing his characters and their interactions with complex social meaning and emotional depth.

4. Discussion and findings

As the discussion on translation as an act of mediation between two different languages serving communicative purposes prevails, the practice of translation in different domains brings to light tangled issues concerning appropriateness, accuracy and faithfulness especially when dealing with expressions and terms that represent the language, tradition and culture of a specific society that is totally alien to the target reader. In this regard, the need for cultural awareness becomes a priority for translators to maintain the cultural context of the source text in the target culture. This study unveiled complexities of cultural context faced by translators during their endeavor to translate culturally specific terms and proverbs which are deemed a barrier toward cross-cultural communication. By evaluating the translation of Moroccan proverbs and dialectal literary expressions, this study discloses apparent empirical patterns concerning the impact of cultural context on translation quality across four samples:

Traditional Proverbs (Table 1): The cultural context of the source text proved itself as an indispensable element in the process of translation as it directly affects the intended meaning of the source, as is the case in Table 1. The translation of proverbs is such a challenge for translators when direct equivalents do not exist in the target culture. In this respect, literal translation would fail to capture the intended metaphorical meaning. For example, in the first proverb *[waldu dkar u sˁajbuː f-al-baħr]*, the translator used a literal translation which follows the forms of the source text as closely as possible where the target audience is left puzzled without looking at the explanation. Using a functional equivalence that transcends the message clearly leaving the structure aside can be more appropriate, though it destroys the cultural identity of the proverb by sidelining the cultural flavor of the source proverb's imagery. Under Newmark's (1988) equivalence framework, this literalism results in a partial loss of cultural meaning. Moreover, the act of translating [ɣaːrak] (cave) as "den" reflects simple cultural adaptation rather than strict literalism. The cultural context of these proverbs can highly be damaged and affected during the process of translation. These proverbs highlight the cultural values of Moroccan society as they reflect the traditional society's wisdom and profound human relationships. Furthermore, translation could be done through deconstructing the meanings and recreating a totally different text in the target language which conveys the meaning of the proverb regardless of its structure, tone and rhyme. This strategy, defined by House (2006) as covert translation, sidelines the cultural flavor of the text and emphasizes the message.

Culture-specific items (Table 2): Not only proverbs but literary texts are also full of culture-specific expressions that represent the culture of a specific community. This includes historical events, mythology, folklore and social customs. In Table 2, the translation of [ʔinnahu karsˁ al-ħraːm] into three inconsistent variations clearly explains how translators struggle with socio-cultural idioms. In fact, these variations reflect simplification and inadequate equivalence where the translator shifts the focus from human corrupt practice to commercial contraband while failing to capture the full connotative meaning.

In this case, translators must act as decision-makers to either explain the text, omit it if it doesn't affect the flow of the text or look for a cultural equivalent, as is the case in Table 2. Yet, using a domesticating strategy to deal with culture-specific expressions can trespass the cultural identity of the source text, which is deemed an unethical act of translation. Preserving the cultural identity of the text compels the target reader to stop and think about its meaning leading them to immediate contact with the original cultural context which is, in fact, the purpose of translation i.e., increasing cross-cultural understanding.

Dialectal Lexis (Table 3): There are also cases where the meaning of the sentence has been distorted and changed because of dialectal misinterpretation as seen in Table 3. The translation of the Moroccan Arabic term [b-ʃraːwtˁnaː] as "shorts" represents a clear lexical mistranslation which replaces the raw street

realism and socio-economic poverty of Zafzaf's narrative with an inaccurate term of modern clothing that misrepresents the original context. Cultural differences, framed by Shaw's (1987) cultural distance model, represent a core challenge here. The two culture types in this example are different where variations in meaning prevailed leading to misunderstandings and misrepresentations. Translators ought to identify the cultural elements involved in the translation process as well as that of the translator's own culture to establish a shared cultural background. Deconstructing the original text's meanings through Juliane House's (2006) model of *Field*, *Tenor* and *Mode* can be a crucial strategy to transmit the text's intended meaning accurately. Yet, the translator's ambition to arrive at naturalness and fluency can be faced with obstacles such as a lack of equivalence, cultural differences and linguistic constraints.

Emotional Intensity and Linguistic Violence (Table 4): In Table 4, the evaluation of the translation of Mohamed Choukri's prose reveals that word-for-word translation or weak interjection choices were not able to transmit emotional intensity and expressive force. Rendering the spitting vocalization [tuffuː] as *"Huh..."* causes a severe pragmatic loss which is turning a powerful act of disgust and contempt into a cold, confused sound. Moreover, concerning the translation of the gendered animalistic insult [bint al-kalba] and [bint al-jarwa], the level of linguistic violence is softened in the target text by decreasing the instinctive impact on the English reader. Thus, word-for-word translation in this case may sound unusual for the target reader. Opting for a cultural equivalent may not achieve the same effect in the target context but conveys the action. For example, an insult in the Moroccan context that can lead to a fight may not do the same in the target context where it may seem very usual, be accepted, and have a less intense effect on the hearer.

Linguistic equivalence alone is insufficient because of the entrenched cultural particularities such as historical, religious, and social nuances that affect meaning in both languages. To overcome these differences, it is time for translators to act as cultural mediators equipped with strong cultural competence because effective translation requires not just language proficiency but also a deep cultural awareness to ensure accurate and meaningful cross-cultural communication (AL-Hemyari 2023: e245-e246). The dilemma of cultural context can still be negotiated and compromised since it is a substantial element in translation. A translation cannot be done at this level without a deep cultural understanding of the cultural context of both languages involved in translation.

4.1 Juliane House's translation quality assessment

Juliane House's (2006) functional-pragmatic model gives a procedural breakdown of how these translations recontextualize the source texts across three dimensions:

Field: The misidentification of dialectal concepts resulted in *Field* shifts. In Table 3, the *Field* changes from an act of survival (the act of picking lice from tattered clothes) to a simple everyday action (taking off shorts). Moreover, in Table 2, *Field*

shifts from describing a person's corrupt character (*karsˁ al-ħraːm)* to describing illegal food trade (unlawful food).

Tenor: In Table 4, Choukri's source text creates a high-intensity and hostile *Tenor* characterized by verbal violence. In fact, the translator alters the *Tenor* by presenting the interaction as a gentle squabble instead of an abusive and desperate confrontation. *Tenor* captures the interpersonal dynamics between characters.

Mode: All the examples highlight the tension in *Mode* during the transfer of oral Moroccan Arabic dialect into written standard English prose. In fact, dialectal expressions are rich in spoken performance features and regional symbolism that the English language struggles to capture without the need for explanatory notes or covert re-contextualization.

4.2 Shaw's cultural distance model

According to Shaw's (1987) Cultural Distance Model, cultural differences represent a core challenge. The cultural distance between the localized and peasant tradition of Moroccan Arabic and the post-industrial Anglophone readership causes substantial semantic and pragmatic gaps. As a result, when translators try to bridge this distance through unsupervised domesticating strategies, differences in meaning prevail which cause misunderstanding. As an example, in Table 3, the substitution of the word [ʃarwiːtˁa] with "shorts" is clearly an uncalculated attempt to reduce cultural distance which resulted in semantic misrepresentation. Thus, translators have to identify the cultural items in both the source text and their own background in order to create a shared cultural framework.

Overall, cultural context dictates the connotative and pragmatic force of localized Moroccan expressions. The translation of culture-specific expressions – especially those rooted in local tradition or dialectal realism- without accounting for contextual assumptions results in register shifts and semantic distortion. Moreover, word-for-word translation of proverbs produces strange imagery for target readers. In literary dialogue, literal translation strips the text of its expressive force and softens the portrayal of linguistic violence. However, by applying House's recontextualization framework, translators can evaluate whether an overt or covert approach is required. Depending on a systematic analysis of *Field*, *Tenor*, and *Mode,* they can select functional equivalents that preserve interpersonal relationships, emotional intensity, and sociocultural context without damaging the source text.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, a successful translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but an act of pragmatic negotiation where translators have to navigate the different cultural contexts and linguistic elements of the source text and build strong cultural awareness. This will allow them to deconstruct the underlying meanings and arrive at an appropriate and accurate translation. The knowledge about the different translation strategies along with a good mastery of the languages involved isn't enough for accurate translation, especially when dealing with cultural texts that are

full of culturally specific expressions and proverbs that require an in-depth understanding of their contextual uses. This study evaluated the translation of some Moroccan Arabic proverbs and dialectal expressions into English. It demonstrates how cultural differences form essential barriers to translation adequacy.

Through a descriptive-analytical approach relying on close textual analysis of the translation of some proverbs and cultural-specific expressions that are inherent in the Moroccan culture, the findings demonstrate that depending strictly on the word level alone causes semantic distortion and a partial loss of cultural meaning. Moreover, random attempts at functional equivalence or domestication bring about cultural erasure. As shown earlier, the substitution of culture-specific terms with generic target-language equivalents flattens the register, changes the interpersonal *Tenor*, and weakens the portrayal of socio-economic reality. Therefore, translators must have a deep cultural competence in order to act as active mediators by using validated models like House's re-contextualization approach to assess semantic and pragmatic shifts. This article has developed the kind of functions that context plays in the translation of cultural texts and their implications in the real world. In fact, without cultural context being emphasised, translation can be a total distortion of the cultural meanings, norms and values of the source text. Cultural context has proven itself to be an inextricable element in the act of translation. It plays a vital role in the success of cultural translation in the sense that it directs translators and target language recipients to fully comprehend the source text's implications. It is, thus, essential to note that translators should be equipped with the necessary cultural awareness and be able to make decisions about the type of translation that would help them facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

Overall, these insights provide translators with a clear rationale for the negotiation of meaning between fidelity in the source culture and comprehensibility in the target one. Further research could expand these theoretical models by applying House's *Field-Tenor-Mode* model across other regional Arabic dialects such as Egyptian or Algerian in order to see if similar pragmatic losses occur during re-contextualization. Furthermore, this analytical framework could be extended to subtitling and dubbing Moroccan dialectal cinema or digital media. It would provide valuable results into how time and spatial barriers impact the transmission of oral cultural expressions. Most importantly, researchers could conduct empirical studies to compare how native English readers and bilingual Arabic readers perceive the emotional weight and character dynamics of covert and overt translation of dialectal text.

Endnotes

1. The source text is from 'Al-Sardin wa al-Burtuqal' [Sardines and oranges], in Al-ʿAraba (Zafzaf 1993:32); the target text is from 'Sardines and Oranges' (Zaki Trans 2005) in Sardines and Oranges: Short Stories from North Africa (Clark Ed 2005:77). Both are reprinted for translation analysis.

2. The Source Text is taken from the Arabic collection Al-ʿAraba (Zafzaf 1993:32). The Target Text is from the English translation by Mona Zaki (Zafzaf 2005:74). Transliteration and emphasis are the author's own.

3. The source text is from the collection Al-Khayma (Choukri 2000:6); the target text is from 'Men Have All the Luck' (Starkey Trans 2005) in Sardines and Oranges (Clark Ed 2005:109).

Abdelkhalak Lahmidi Idrissi (PhD Researcher) -Corresponding Author
Language, Literature, and Translation Laboratory, Hassan II University, Morocco
ORCID Number: 0009-0009-2634-4665
Email: abdelkhalaklahmidi@gmail.com

Brahim Belhad (Professor)
Language, Literature, and Translation Laboratory, Hassan II University, Morocco
ORCID Number: 0009-0002-9512-8447
Email: brahimbelhad@gmail.com

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