

Revisiting Arabic-Malay Translation Experience in Malaysia: A Historical and Contemporary Account

Azman Che Mat

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

Academy of Language Study, Dungun Campus 23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia

Tel: 60-1-3981-8980 E-mail: azman531@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Abstract

This article argues the importance of translation study from the Arabic language into the Malay language. To support this statement, the paper sheds some light on translation activities as found in the Malay society and Arabic civilization as a comparison. The translation has a major role in the development of education for Malay citizens especially in the Muslim community. Then, the temporary development of Arabic-Malay translation is discussed to draw a conclusion on the need of expanding Arabic-Malay translation as a discipline.

Keywords: Translation, Arabic, Malay, Civilization

1. Introduction

Malay civilization had been indebted to the Arabic civilization as clearly in culture, religion and language. During five centuries, five centers of excellence had been established in this region from Samudera Pasai (1280-1400M), Melaka (1400-1650M), Aceh (1511-1650M), Pattani (1564-1782M), to Johor-Riau (1650-1800M) (Syed Muhammad & Halim, 229: 2008). Scholars from these centers had made huge contributions through their writing, adaptation and translation works. Although there was a strong relationship with the Arabs, it was rare to find an Arabic writing from Malay scholars. In contrast, most of their writings were in Malay using the Arabic script known as Jawi. (Note 1)

Translation as defined by most scholars could be summarized as “a process of content (information) and form (language) transfers”. The works of translation to this extent is to transfer a sum of knowledge from one source to the other. Translation as mentioned by most scholars is a process of civilization exchange. After all, almost all civilizations were indebted to each others. Arabs transferred technology, philosophy and astronomy from several civilizations around them especially Greek, Chinese and India. Europe, after the “Dark Ages” had actively been working on translating books from the Arab civilization. This is clear in the statement noted by Edward Grant (1996):

Because of the importance of the translated works, the civilization of Islam must be allotted a considerable share of the glory for the Western in science.

On the other hand, for Muslim, the translation is done on the efforts of invitation-which is the responsibility between a Muslim and a Muslim-where the religious books have to reflect the information into the local language. At the same time, this profession will also increase the treasury of language. Translation is only a means of access to the supplier who does not have the capacity, as Mohamed Jaber (2005:54) has said:

The translation, however, as such the pot that served those who is unable to reach the spring for drinking.

2. Translation in the Arab and Malay Civilizations

Mustafa (1973) in his book "Arab Literature and History" mentioned that translation had begun before the Abbasid era which was at the hands of Khalid bin Yazid Ibn Muawiya who transferred some of the books to Islamic civilization. He was specifically fond of looking at books in chemistry, medicine and astronomy. Al-Jahiz had said about him (that he was the first who translated in astronomy, medicine and chemistry). (Note 2)

The Abbasid era known as “Golden Age” witnessed the rapid development of translation works. The distinguished library “*Bayt al-Hikmah*” was the center for academic activities including translation, teaching, research and publications. The movement of knowledge transfer had been centered at this library. This denoted

the importance of translation in the construction of ideas, cultures and literatures besides enriching the targeted language, and in this context was Arabic language.

Accordingly, in the Malay Archipelago, the translation movement had just begun when the Malaccan ruler ordered someone to send the book, “*Durr al-Manzum*” for interpretation to Pasai (Abdul Jalil, 1996:280). In fact, there was a book which had been translated on common belief (*aqidah*), entitled “Mother of the Evidence” (*Ummu al-Barahin*) at the hands of Sanusi Zain bin Mohamed Jalaluddin in 1575. The translation then was named “The Beginning of Guidance” (*Bidayah al-Hidayah*). On the other hand, Mohammed Zainuddin bin Muhammad Badawi Asambawi continued this work and gave a new title; the “Sacrificial Siraj” (*Siraj al-Huda*) in 1886. The responsibility of the third translation was undertaken by Zainal Abidin bin Mohamed al-Fatani and called it the “Doctrine of The Survivors” (*Aqidah al-Najiiin*) (Mohammed Nor, 1980:10). There was also a book known as “The body of grammar”, (*Matan al-Ujrumiyyah*) translated by Sheikh Abdel Qader bin Abdullah Hashim Mandaylin and copied by Abdul Majid Mendahilun, year 1314 H/1896 (Wan Muhamad Shaghir, 2001:vi). (Note 3)

These translations as mentioned earlier were plentiful. There were also a number of translations which were unnamed for the publication. The fact was, most translators were not known and that, in certain cases, the translated version did not come on behalf of the translators. Thus, it was believed that the act of translation was carried out just for the sake of education. Therefore, dissemination of knowledge in seminars using these translations is to facilitate the understanding of the lessons on the different levels of religious knowledge. Indeed, these translations had attracted the communities, where they were reprinted several times and distributed to all libraries in Malaysia.

This was obviously different from the statement by Adewuni Salawu (2007:30) when he mentioned the Arabic situation in Africa:

The spread of Islam did not favor the development of local languages as such, but rather it encouraged the mastery of Arabic, considered a sacred language.

In Malaysia translation was the main factor in developing Malay civilization at that time. Even Arabic language is recognized as a sacred language, local language is sustained by the government for the sake of the nation.

At that time, the translation movement in Malaysia had initiated the establishment of a translation office in writing at the Sultan Idris Teachers Training Institute in the state of Perak in 1924 (Abd. al-Baqir, 2005). This office was a positive initiative in the printing and publication of books and education decisions and the texts translated into Malay. It was then temporarily stopped during the colonial period and its operations resumed in 1954.

Presently, the Translation Section of the Malaysian National Institute of Translation (ITNMB) was established by the government. ITNMB was the only one of its kind to assist in the work of translation and interpretation. One of the objectives of this institution is to translate literary and religious materials (Wan Hashim, 2007:10). There are also other institutions, governmental and non-governmental, which allocated a special budget for the translation of selected Arabic books to be translated into the Malay language, such as the Islamic Foundation of Terengganu and others.

3. The Need to Develop Studies in the Field of Arabic Translation into the Malay Language

As noted earlier, there have been copies translated into the Malay language since the days when Islamic teachings were conducted by the *ulama* (religious teachers). All these efforts, as we have noted, appear to be the work of an individual. There were no fixed documents to show the titles of books that were translated during that period. The treasuries of knowledge were discovered through an advanced study by the scholars of these latecomers.

At the moment, there are publications observed in translation from Arabic into the Indonesian language, which is common in the Malaysian market. Most readers turn to these sources to fulfill their need in knowledge and religious ideas and culture. This tendency is expected to give a negative impact to the development of the national language, the Malay language. On the other hand, there was also a digression in some compilations, such as religion and additional illegal practices (*bid'ah*). This is the result of the lack of coordination and control of the government or authorized institutions.

The translations in Malaysia, of course, as compared to Indonesia were lagging far behind in terms of quantity (M. Bukhari, 2004:2). He noted from the numerous number of books translated in Malaysia, only about 720 copies were published in the period between August 1957-April 1992 (M. Bukhari, 1994). This number indicates a lack of desire and enthusiasm of the staff in the field of printing and publishing. It is presumed that the

weakness of activities in translation may be due to the payment (Mashudi, 1988) and considered translation as only part time efforts (M. Bukhari, 2004).

This phenomenon does not fit the Islamic teachings in Malaysia that Malay people are in dire need of new knowledge in the *fiqh*, *Sharia* law and literature, and other sources in the Arabic language. In addition, the number of arrivals to the Middle East to study Arabic is increasing. Those who have received a variety of knowledge resources in the Arabic language were commissioned to spread among the Malaysian society in general and Muslims in particular.

However, there are ongoing studies at the Masters and PhD levels in the Malay and Arabic languages in universities. It is clear that these studies in the perspective of the researcher are to develop a good start for translation in Arabic-Malay-Arabic. The trend is becoming more active to build the area of comparative studies or contrastive studies between the languages. The number of studies conducted in the science of translation between Arabic and Malay at the PhD level was not more than ten; such as Maheram Mohamed (National University of Malaysia) and Muhammad Fauzi Jumingan (University of Putra Malaysia), Azman Che Mat (Universiti Teknologi MARA).

This reveals a void in the hands of those who wish to specialize in the translation between Arabic and Malay. There is a need for advanced studies in the field including modern theories of translation, application of appropriate techniques, effectiveness and evaluation. It has been reported by Ishaam and Wan (1995:159) that there is less in-depth in a few theories to accommodate the translation process, leading to problems of translation.

4. Approaches in Translation

As found in early scholars' writings, most of the translations of Arabic to Malay were done literally. It was believed that those scholars or translators were desired to transfer knowledge from the sources carefully and loyalty. Most of the time, target language was spoiled by the translation.

Considering the fast development in translation theories and practices, the Arabic-Malay translation must keep abreast with these theories and practices. As far as a contemporary translator concerned for translating English to Malay, there are two prominent principles, Dynamic Equivalence (Nida,1964) and Communicative (Newmark, 1994).

Dynamic Equivalence immersed within efforts of translating Bible. Therefore the emphasize is given to the effect of the message on the readers or audiences. Dynamic translation stresses on text language and target language whereas the effect of translation must be equivalence to readers just like when they read the original text (Abdul Sahib, 2002). In case of Arabic-Malays translation, texts in religious sources are expected to apply this principle into practice. Since most of the Arabic terms can be found and created in Malay respectively, the Dynamic translation is believed to be suitable.

Texts in social-economic like branding, entertainment, advertisement, promotion etc., will tend to send the message to the audiences comprehensively. Therefore the translation of these texts must fully focus on the message and the audience. In this regards, Communicative translation is proposed which its basic principles are the accuracy and economy of translation (Abdul Sahib, 2007). Looking at the growing number of tourists and students from Arab countries to Malaysia, the effective communication will help the nation to understand their cultures, expectations, needs and so on.

These two approaches are not meant the limitation to the use of the other approaches. Some others approaches and principles are applicable to the translation practices. Thus, this responsibility will back to the researcher to carry out a study on various approaches and principles in translation.

5. Conclusion

From the discussion above, we can conclude that the translation practices also affect the use of national language respectively in different perspectives. In Malaysia, this is in line with the desire to maintain the national language. Thus, it helps the local language to interact with the colonial language of English for the interests of capital, culture, ideology and politics. Furthermore, translation unites the way in which the culture and traditions remain to uphold the legacy of the language and inculcate the spirit of self-defense of national identities.

Besides, developing the study in Arabic-Malay translation discipline is an actual initiative. Looking beyond the future, Arabic courses and subject in Malaysia are offered in the most higher learning institutions. Translation as a part of language acquisition process should be taken into consideration. Therefore study in Arabic-Malay translation must be promoted and strengthened by young scholars in this field.

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Notes

Note 1. The term of **Jawi** is one of the two official scripts in Brunei and Malaysia as the script for the Malay language. Usage wise, it was the standard script for the Malay language but has since been replaced by the Roman script, and Jawi has since been relegated to a script used for religious and cultural purposes (Wikipedia, 2009).

Note 2. He was a famous Afro-Arab **scholar** of East African descent.

Note 3. The **Malay Archipelago** and **Maritime Southeast Asia** are names given to the archipelago located between mainland Southeastern Asia and Australia. Located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the group of

20,000 islands is the world's largest archipelago by area. It includes the countries of Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia (only East), East Timor, and most of Papua New Guinea. The island of New Guinea is not always included in the Malay Archipelago, while Peninsular Malaysia also is included within Maritime Southeast Asia (Wikipedia, 2009).