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Translating News Texts During Wars and Conflicts: Challenges and Strategies

Abstract

This paper examines the characteristics of news translation during wars and conflicts. There is limited research available concerning the issues of English-Arabic news translation, especially during conflicts. Based on an analysis of 11 CNN news headlines and Al-Jazeera parallel translations during the 2003 Iraq War, this study discusses the mechanics of news translation and interpretation and the strategies and challenges involved. Particularly, the paper explores news translation in the context of global information flows across the boundaries of space, language and culture. Building on existing research on news translation, and employing critical discourse and framing analyses, the study shows how news coverage of the Iraq War was framed to serve the competing narratives of war chroniclers as active participants in the conflict.

Keywords: news, translation, conflict, framing, representation, Iraq War

1. Introduction

The translator's task of rendering a written or oral source text into the target text of another language is beset with challenges of which the linguistic component is the most significant. No two languages share the same features in terms of how and what they represent, and each has its structure and vocabulary (Sapir 1949). Although there are some common traits and shared backgrounds, such as cultural similarity, geographical proximity, social affinity and historical relationships between languages, this does not guarantee identical modes of representation (Al-Mohammadi 2014). As Edward Sapir explains, "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached" (Sapir 1956, 69).

The situation is more complicated with the translation of news texts because, in addition to linguistic issues, they are subject to various spatial and temporal constraints (Bielsa 2009; Mhamdi et al. 2018). The newsworthiness of a story is

determined by its subject, timing, proximity, impact and sources (Mhamdi 2017a). Further, editorial decisions regarding the timing of its release and broadcast of accompanying images affect the representation of events and how they are culturally crafted and interpreted (Salloum et al. 2017). As Hall argues, “‘news’ on television and in the Press is not self-defining. News is not ‘found’ or even ‘gathered’ so much as made. It is a creation of a journalistic process, an artefact, a commodity even” (1978, 61). Tymoczko and Gentzler explain the making of news in terms of translation as follows:

Translation thus is not simply an act of faithful reproduction but, rather, a deliberate and conscious act of selection, assemblage, structuration, and fabrication – and even, in some cases, of falsification, refusal of information, counterfeiting, and the creation of secret codes. In these ways, translators, as much as creative writers and politicians, participate in the powerful acts that create knowledge and shape culture. (2002, xxi)

The motivation for the current study is the lack of translation research concerning the coverage of the 2003 Iraq War by English and Arabic news sources. Particularly, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What ideologies are reflected by CNN source news texts during its coverage of the 2003 Iraq War?
2. Were Al-Jazeera parallel translations influenced by the translators’ institutional ideologies and cultural backgrounds? If so, how?
3. What ‘frames’ emerged as a result of the analysis of CNN source news texts and Al-Jazeera parallel translations?

The study employs discourse and framing analyses to investigate news headline translations, where, following Entman (2004), framing is “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (2004, 5). The paper proceeds with a literature review of studies examining the role of the news translator, particularly in conflicts and war, followed by a description of the methodology and a discussion of the results.

2. Literature review

2.1 Translating the news

The translation of news texts is relatively under-researched despite increasing interest in the 24/7 globalised media cycle (Khanjan et al. 2013, 88). Instant, continuous updates with “breaking news” now typify the internet, blogs and

social media (Mhamdi 2016). Further, in the case of popular uprisings across the Middle East in 2010, known as the “Arab Spring”, global reporting by the public on social media often pre-empted on-site and embedded journalists (Mhamdi 2016; 2017c). Moreover, the role of the translator in media proliferation is often viewed with suspicion. As Bielsa and Bassnett argue,

The role of the translator has been, and still is, burdened with suspicion and anxiety, for it is the translator who brings across the unfamiliar, who mediates between cultures that may well be violently antagonistic to one another and perhaps have a long history of misunderstanding between them. Translating therefore requires very special skills that go far beyond the linguistic. (2008, 5)

As Van Doorslaer notes, “until the beginning of the 21st century, scholarly publications on the position and impact of language use, let alone translation, in the media were very rare” (2012, 1047). Bielsa confirms this lacuna remains because “media sociology has neglected the study of the linguistic processes that make it possible to produce and communicate news across geographic, cultural and linguistic boundaries” (2010, 48). The process of translation is significant in global audience reaction because, as Christina Schäffner argues, many reactions to statements made in a foreign country “are actually reactions to the information as it was provided in translation” (2004, 120), which can be influenced by various technical, cultural and socio-political factors.

Technical translation issues affect all genres of which news media is merely one instance. For example, Derbel argues that because of “the power of the story and the storyteller to evoke the past to comment on the instabilities of the present”, “history and literature shift roles intermittently” (2017b, 42). Further, translation involves a type of hidden coding where “the medium denudes its message and even loads it with multiple layers of meaning that made the decoding of its message a controversial issue” (Derbel 2019, 53). For example, describing her duties as a TV news translator, Claire Tsai distinguishes between translating for a visual medium and translating for print, observing the influence of time restraints among other factors. She argues that “TV news translators are given the freedom to restructure and reorganize messages under the one condition that the target texts should always be congruent with the source texts in meanings, nuances and facts” (2005, 149). However, she notes that the integrity of the source material is often compromised because of the numerous sources available and that translators must often deal with secondary material that is “heavily packaged”.

The challenge is not to produce what Reuters’ journalist Williams (2004) terms “translation pure and simple”, because issues concerning the veracity of any translation as an interpretation of the source text go back to antiquity. However, news-media texts have particular characteristics that differ from other more formal idioms; for example, the use of a “lead” to “create suspense or surprise, or shock or arouse emotions in the reader” (Rowland and Avery 2001, 112).

2.2 Translating news texts during wars and conflicts

The September 11 US attacks and subsequent conflicts and wars raised questions and concerns about misunderstandings between different countries and cultures. This, in turn, raised concerns about the role of translators and interpreters and hence, mistranslation. “There is always the possibility of ideological interference with the content of the news materials to be translated” (Khanjan et al. 2013, 88). For example, Sorby analysed news translations from English to Chinese looking for ways in which “complimentary and derogatory word usage can result in translation gain and loss” (2008, 20). The findings suggested that the Chinese translators’ conscious and subconscious inclinations towards the prospective translation loss could result in being misunderstood by readers.

In a 2014 study of the influence of institutional practices on Chinese translation, Pan investigated Reference News, a principal Chinese news agency. Pan examined the impact of filtering and gatekeeping strategies on the production of a “faithful translation” with a focus on reports dealing with sensitive national and local issues. The findings revealed that the Reference News was mainly a news translating service, rather than a news service per se. Further, the study revealed the role of institutional influence on news translators, especially when reporting highly sensitive domestic issues. Significantly, “the translators, though expected to be information transmitters, unavoidably apply their own beliefs and assumptions to their actual practice and thus function as part of the gatekeeping institution in the mediation between the different social contexts” (Pan 2014, 557).

Political bias by news translators and interpreters during crises and conflicts was also a common theme that emerged in a collection of studies edited by Salama-Carr, who found that translators can be agents of conflict resolution as well as conflict escalation (Salama-Carr ed. 2007, 162). Spiessens and Van Poucke (2016) investigated Western coverage of the 2014 Crimean crisis by the Russian news translation website InoSMI. Comprising a dataset of 770 original and 39 translated articles from various sources, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, the findings suggested that the Russian website was more aligned with the official views of the Kremlin than the source texts.

Narrative theory has proved useful in revealing how translation can result in biased reporting. For example, Van Doorslaer sought to “develop a framework for research dealing with translation and localization in the media” (2012, 1046). Grounded in narrative theory and imagology, the study examined the representation of neighbouring countries in Flemish TV news. The findings revealed that “in world news coverage and selection modifications are informed by existing national or cultural stereotypes” (2012, 1057).

Drawing on Van Dijk’s approach, Khanjan et al. analysed parallel news headlines in English-Persian translations. The analysis sought to highlight the various “ideological apparatuses” associated with news headline translation where

“the polarization of us and them is generally influenced by translators’/target news producers’ (dis)approval of the ideological content of the source headline in question” (2013, 87).

Baker (2006) employed narrative theory to investigate several case studies and presented a framework that included macro and micro aspects of narrative at work in translation with a focus on “dominance” and “resistance”. Further, Baker (2010) investigated the role of translators and interpreters in war zones. Her study examined how translators and interpreters elaborate war narratives circulated to the public and the way that translators and interpreters are themselves narrated by other actors in the war zone. She concludes that “translators and interpreters play a significant role in shaping the narratives, and hence the events, that define any war. Various parties need and fear them, trust or mistrust them, respect or despise them” (Baker 2010, 217).

Baker also used narrative theory and framing analysis to examine how translators and interpreters “accentuate, undermine or modify contested aspects of the narrative(s) encoded in the source text or utterance” (2014, 151). The contested aspects of the source text are always in conflict because “dominance and resistance not only shape our behaviour and discursive choices but (...) they are also always in a relationship of tension” (2014, 167). Baker’s 2014 study is a rare instance where the examples were drawn from an English-Arabic translation context during the Middle East conflict and the “War on Terror”. However, her findings were more theoretically driven to support the use of narrative theory. Baker’s insights into the creation and use of narratives by translators were useful in this study.

3. Data collection and methodology

Eleven news texts, mainly news headlines from CNN, were selected as source texts to represent the reporting case study of the 2003 Iraq War. The war received substantial coverage by national international and regional media, but as noted above, research concerning the role of translation is lacking. The translations of these texts by the Qatar-based Channel, Al-Jazeera (the target texts) are analysed and discussed to reveal the characteristics of English-Arabic translation of news texts during wars and conflicts and the role of translators/interpreters. CNN and Al-Jazeera were chosen for their influential roles in reporting the war globally. The sample texts, which represent the data of the case study, were downloaded from the CNN website, War Tracker-CNN.com. The translations of the source texts were downloaded from Al-Jazeera’s official website, www.aljazeera.net. A self-selection process was used to collect data based on critical stages of the war.

The study employed a qualitative methodology using critical discourse analysis and framing to examine the complex inter-relations between the source and target news texts and the socio-economic and political contexts in which they

were produced. Critical discourse analysis assumes that language use is inherently social and that discourse both “reflects and constructs the social world” (Rogers ed. 2011, 1). Further, discourses “are always socially, politically, racially and economically loaded” (Rogers 2004, 6). Critical discourse analysis is relevant to the current conflict case study because, as Van Dijk argues, social and institutional restraints “are enacted or translated at the micro level of news discourse and its processing” (1988, 182-183) and the representation of social groups is mainly based on ideology and a binary stance of “us” against “them” (1998, 69).

Reporting of events is subject to a complex process of selection and framing, which Entman describes as the selection of some aspects of perceived reality to make them salient (1993, 47). Mhamdi (2017b) has previously described how Entman builds on the existing framing research by a “model of cascading activation which suggests a larger system of communication that links presidents, elites and foreign leaders, journalists, news texts, and citizens” (2004, 5). As noted in the introduction to this paper, Entman defines framing as the selection and highlighting of certain aspects to promote a particular interpretation of events (2004, 5).

To investigate the role of translators in framing the coverage of the Iraq War, the researcher applied the methodology to test the following hypotheses:

- H1: The CNN source news texts during the 2003 Iraq War reflected US military supremacy and served the US narrative of freeing the Iraqi people and ousting an authoritarian regime.
- H2: The Al-Jazeera target texts of the 2003 Iraq War were influenced by the translators’/journalists’ institutional, ideological background and socio-political views.
- H3: The CNN source news texts and their Al-Jazeera parallel translations produced different frames that served their respective institutional and ideological stances.

4. Findings and discussion

The function of news headlines is to provide audiences with a summary that expresses the semantic macrostructure of the information (Van Dijk 1985, 77). According to Reah, “the headline has a range of functions that specifically dictate its shape, content and structure, and operates within a range of restrictions that limit the freedom of the writer” (2002, 13). The condensed heading or title indicate these restrictions to attract the audience and is often used in advertising (Derbel 2017a). To this end, “writers use a wide range of devices to create a very specific style, which is sometimes called headlines” (Verdonk 2002, 4). This was the case with the CNN headline on 19 March 2003 that signalled the start of the 2003 Iraq War when global audiences read “War in Iraq”.

However, Al-Jazeera translated the CNN headline as الحرب على العراق. [‘war on Iraq’] The use of the preposition على. [‘on’] instead of في. [‘in’] changed the intended meaning. It revealed Al-Jazeera’s ideological stance of Iraq being attacked by an aggressor. From Al-Jazeera’s perspective, this meant that from the outset, the war was “on” and “against” Iraq and not for the sake of its people. The use of the preposition “in” is purportedly more neutral because it simply refers to the geographical location of the conflict.

The second data sample concerns the CNN headlines that framed the first US attack as a “Decapitation Strike” and “Decapitation Attack”. A decapitation strike is a military operation intended to oust a hostile regime. Hence, from the outset, the US identified Iraq’s regime as a hostile rival and the war was framed in terms of liberating the Iraqi people from a dictatorship. However, Al-Jazeera played a key role in undermining these strategies and countering them with a radically different discourse from various war zones in Iraq. For example, the “Decapitation Strike” headline was interpreted as محاولة اغتيال. [‘an assassination attempt’] targeting the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein rather than his dictatorial regime. Further examples of Al-Jazeera interpretations of CNN terminology are “liberation troops” as قوات الاحتلال. [‘occupying troops’]; “Operation Iraqi Freedom” as احتلال العراق. [‘Invasion of Iraq’]; and the infamous “Shock and Awe” as الصدمة و الترويع. [‘shock and terrify’]. The latter phrase was a more emotionally charged message implying that the US military was not respecting humanitarian principles, and images of civilians being bombed, including women and children, reinforced this trope.

As the war progressed, further examples emerged revealing bias on both sides. The CNN news headline “U.S. launches cruise missiles at Saddam” was translated on Al-Jazeera as تواصل قوات الاحتلال القصف بالطائرات و الصواريخ و تستهدف الرئيس العراقي. [‘The occupying troops keep bombarding using attack aircraft and missiles and target the Iraqi president’]. The CNN headline framed the war in terms of the US against an individual, “Saddam”, who was implicitly stripped of his legitimate title as president. However, Al-Jazeera framed the US as an occupying force in pursuit of the country’s president.

Other examples of CNN headlines framed the progress of the war in terms of US military supremacy, which was echoed by presidential speeches and military briefings. These headlines and texts included “A day of sirens, bombs, smoke and fires”, “bombs falling across Baghdad” and “shots being fired over Baghdad”. However, Al-Jazeera focused on the devastation and human cost of the US bombing. A two-word Arabic noun phrase produced a counter frame بغداد تحترق. [‘Baghdad is burning’]. This was accompanied by images of immense collateral damage to create the perception of the US as an aggressor of innocent people.

On the few occasions CNN reported US casualties, there was a tendency to minimise the impact by using the passive voice and omitting the role of Iraqi troops, for example, “U.S. soldier killed”. However, Al-Jazeera translated this headline as مصرع جنود أمريكيين في هجمات للمقاومة العراقية. [‘American soldiers

were killed by the Iraqi resistance troops’]. This translation is characterised by some additions as well as a shift in the grammar. First, the passive voice was maintained, but the agent of the action, “the Iraqi resistance troops” was identified. This shift framed the headline in terms of the capability of Iraqi troops to hit American targets and, thereby, implicitly communicated to the Iraqi people and Al-Jazeera audiences that US soldiers were not invincible. This strategy served as a counter-discourse to CNN’s focus on the US military supremacy. The second modification to the CNN source text was changing the singular noun جندي [‘soldier’] to the plural جنود [‘soldiers’]. This simple change was significant because it implied that US casualties were considerable. It raised the profile of Iraqi troops and highlighted their military strength, thereby motivating them to continue fighting.

These findings echo previous studies of wars and conflicts which show that journalists, translators and interpreters, as the chroniclers of war, are active players, albeit invisible, rather than passive observers. Baker observes that “translation is part of the institution of war and that translators and interpreters participate in circulating as well as resisting the narratives that create the intellectual and moral environment for violent conflict” (2006, 3). These conflicting narratives were exemplified by Al-Jazeera’s resistance to CNN reports during the 2003 Iraq War. As Baker explains, “It is local translators and interpreters who help piece the narrative together for the next group of military personnel, journalists, charity workers or peace keepers” (2010, 213).

An analysis of the 11 headlines and texts identified various frames and counter frames, which are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. CNN frames and Al-Jazeera counter frames

CNN frames	Al-Jazeera counter frames
The military might frame	The victim frame
The invincibility frame	The resistance frame
The liberation frame	The occupation frame

These frames and counter frames reveal a broader narrative pursued by CNN and Al-Jazeera in support of opposing political agendas. Baker explains the role of narrative construction as follows:

Narratives... are stories that we come to subscribe to – believe in or at least contemplate as potentially valid – and that therefore shape our behaviour towards other people and the events in which we are embedded. As used here, narratives are not chronologies, not undifferentiated lists of happenings: they are stories that are temporally and causally constituted in such a way as to allow us to make moral decisions and act in the real world. (2014, 154-155)

CNN's framing of the Iraq War as a narrative emphasised the necessity of the liberation of the Iraqi people by invincible military strength. However, Al-Jazeera created a narrative of unjustified occupation, victimisation and suffering. These differing accounts of events by translators and interpreters show they were active agents in the conflict and, hence, the sample data support the hypotheses of the study presented in section 3 above. It also supports the findings of previous studies of conflict and war reporting.

The study also reveals the various challenges that face English-Arabic translators especially in conflicts arising since the "Arab Spring". There are new idioms and phrases in the Arabic language and culture, which some translators might find unfamiliar. Some aspects of this new register are specific to individual countries and cultures and could pose a challenge to translators. The historical context is also important because some terms are directly linked to national and regional issues, which could be very specific to the context of the source language.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigated aspects of news translation during times of conflict focusing on the mechanics of translation and the role played by translators as interpreters of events. To achieve its objectives and test its three hypotheses, this paper employed a critical discourse and framing analyses methodology. The dataset comprised 11 CNN news headlines and texts and their parallel translations into Arabic by Al-Jazeera. The findings confirmed the three hypotheses and highlighted the paramount role played by translators and interpreters during the 2003 Iraq War. Given the rapid pace of globalisation, further studies on the role of translators and interpreters of news coverage, especially in times of conflict, would contribute to understanding how news is created and interpreted across cultures.

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