Translations of overtones in classical Arabic poetry: Optimality theory as a quality assessment framework

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ABSTRACT

Languages possess different tools to intensify speech overtones. While the resulting effect is semantic, grammatical, phonological, or lexical devices may be used. Words can be motivated in three ways: phonetically, morphologically, and semantically. Phonological motivation is part of the fabric of classical poetry. This study is concerned with the language used in Arabic poetry, which is made sufficiently sonorant to reflect the psyche and emotional status of the poet through the intensification of speech overtones. When translated into Western languages, the speech overtones of this poetry are not always evident. This study adopts the mechanisms of optimality theory, a cognitive linguistic approach. The mechanisms of this theory are adapted into assessment tools that can be used to evaluate the acoustic overtones of translations from classical Arabic poetry into English and French. The study uses a comparative strategy to assess a corpus of 13 French and English translations of a sample verse from classical Arabic poetry.

1. Introduction

According to linguistic studies, language is not an accumulation of detached elements but a “Gestalt, which has a pattern of its own and whose components are interdependent and derive their significance from the system as a whole” (Ullmann, 1966) (4). Any feature transcending the purely referential aspect of language is within the scope of expressiveness. Poetry is known for its “overwhelmingly novel schemata” (Kenselei, 2010) (xix). As per Calfoğlou (Calfoğlou et al., 2010), poetic language is relatively “archetypal, more genuinely apocalyptic” (101). In poetry, lexical elements are used in a condensed form. Thus, “the selection of words and phrases is the most conscious, and the impact of the items is the most intricate” [92] (xviii). Koster (2021) establishes a framework within which any approach considering the context-dependency of meaning must emphasize deixis. According to Koster, deixis as a semantic–pragmatic category is concerned with the manner in which languages encode or grammaticalize the features of the context of an utterance or speech event and, thus, how the interpretation of an utterance relies on its analysis (61). Thus, a text needs to be interpreted along with its co-text and the deictic features motivating it.

Ullmann (1973) explains that words may be motivated in three ways, namely, semantically, phonetically, and morphologically, which can incur stylistic implications (42). The features to achieve this motivation include overtones, emphatic tools, rhythm, rhyme, symmetry, euphony, and register. Each language possesses specific tools to intensify the overtones of words; although the resultant effect is semantic, the devices may be lexical, phonological, or grammatical (53).

Some “overtones of meaning” may be a result of the processes of word formation (Ullmann, 1973) (51). For instance, Arabic is a non-concatenative language. Thus, it relies on a combination of radical consonantal roots representing lexical meaning with morphological patterns representing functional meaning to create words. By manipulating morphological patterns, Arabic creates morphologically related words denoting semantically related concepts and ideas. The modification of these roots by vowels specifies the main sounds of words according to the circumstances and point of view (Safadi et al., 1974) (22). Thus, the morphology of Arabic is a fertile ground that produces sonorant words that may reflect the poet’s psyche and emotional status through the intensification of speech overtones. In translations of Arabic in western languages, these overtones are not always evident. Blachère (1958) notes that whereas occidental poetry is commonly
intellectualistic, Arabic poetry is fundamentally musical and resonant (11). This difference between the languages is “the distance that the translator must be seen to travel, along dusty roads, with manifold byways and detours” (Scott, 2010) (118). The sense of this journey is the literariness of translation. Dickens et al. (2017) elucidate that “no TT [translated text] can reproduce exactly the same sequence of sound segments/letters as any ST [source text]; “this always and automatically constitutes a source of translation loss” (111). This loss becomes problematic when it represents a constraint to the reception of the ST.

Translation is defined as a “highly constrained activity” (Krein-Kühle, 2014) (16), because it leaves the translator with the will-o’-the-wisp mission of reconciling between fidelity to the ST and the idiomaticity of the TT. Quality is attested when a translator manages to successfully negotiate these constraints, which are twofold, because they are relevant to the ST and the target language (TL). House (2014) enumerates diverse equivalence frameworks such as “extra-linguistic circumstances, connotative and aesthetic values, audience design and [...] textual norms of usage” (248). As it is oriented toward form, optimality theory is founded on the notion that some constraints common to all languages exist; these are ranked and can be violated, because they are “intrinsically in conflict” with each other (Kager, 2006) (3). Kager (2006) defines a constraint as a “structural requirement that may be either satisfied or violated by an output form” (9). Tesar et al. (1999) argue that constraints assess the totality of the different organizations of the input and select the optimal input under a certain ranking (312). The interaction between these constraints controls the output, justifying the definition of optimality theory as the “optimization of viable constraints over a space of candidate representations” (316).

These constraints are markedness and faithfulness. Markedness necessitates that “output forms meet some criterion of structural well-formedness” (Kager, 2006) (9). Faithfulness limits the variety between input and output and minimizes transformation. This constraint advocates a conservative minimalist strategy. The existence of the faithfulness constraint provides evidence that all constraints are viable, which is a crucial component of optimality theory. Violability creates conflicts between constraints, and urges prioritization as a resolution (Tesar et al., 1999) (302). Thus, optimality theory pertains to interactions between constraints: “interactionism is [its] heart and soul” (296). In the framework of optimality theory, prioritization is based on “a strict domination hierarchy” (296); in other words, an “optimal form stands at the top of the competitive heap” (8). Thus, this theory is based on “strict domination optimization” (316). Kager (2006) notes that optimality “involves neither compromise nor suppressions of constraints, but instead is built on (strict) domination of constraints in a hierarchy” (italics in original:12). With the faithfulness constraint, discrepancies between input and output are accepted only in the presence of higher-ranked constraints. Since its inception, several discussions have been held about the viability of the alleged universality of constraints. The ideal output is one that breaches the fewest constraints: “only when necessary” as per optimality theory phrasing. In other words, “violation is permitted only when all alternatives either violate a higher ranked constraint or incur greater violation of the same constraint” (Tesar et al., 1999) (312). Violation must be minimalized, thus, economy is central to optimality theory. Economy lies in optimizing the choice of output while selecting from the data in the input.

Optimality theory is based on two major tenets. The first is that the limitations are universal. The second is that the grammar of every language contains limitations. According to these tenets, the only distinction between the languages of the world is constraint ranking. Thus, this theory targets optimality instead of perfection (Tesar et al., 1999) (296). Although linguistic, the scope of optimality theory may be extended to translation studies. Calfgolou (Calfgolou et al., 2010) has tested this aspect: “the rich base along with the generally rich output could accommodate the richly varied source language phenomena as well as the possibility of multiple target text outputs” (94). In this case, the input would be the ST; the output would relatively be a set of outputs, such as possibilities in the TL. Within this framework, a translator would need to determine optimal solutions after considering the constraints involved. Violations would define any departures from ST norms into TL ones.

2. Research problematic

Acoustic overtones are not rare in classical Arabic poetry. Far from being used for ornamental purposes, they largely contribute to the conveyance of messages and appeals. Arabic poetry was composed and orally transmitted, and, thus, it presumably used paralinguistic tools, such as caesuras, tempo, pitch, and others, to enhance the effects of overtones. Using sound enhancements was equally important for transmitting the appeal of the poet and ensure the empathy, engagement, and connectivity of the receiver. However, their translations are thought-provoking, because this would position translators in the challenge of, first, compensating for lost paralinguistic enhancements, second, perceiving the communicative dimensions of these acoustic overtones, and, third, optimizing the appeal that they relay. As Sullivan cites, “poetry does speak and so the translator must be a listener first” (Sullivan et al., 2019) (268). Cognitive stylistics explores iconicity when it relates linguistic selections with cognitive phenomena (Boase-Beier, 2020) (21). By discarding the functionalist ideal of arbitrariness, this theory, which is a cognate of optimality theory, posits that stylistic features are full of meaning. Boase-Beier confirms the direct link between sound and meaning and, thus, validates the notion of sound symbolism (119). In addition, literariness is by no means a stable value; instead, it is “subject to historical erosion and conventionalization” (Scott, 2010) (109). In addition, translators record what they hear, what they read, and how they read it, which justifies the increased elaboration of the same ST and retranslation. Scott (2015) even defines translation as “the process whereby [translators] register the kinaesthetics of reading” such as the sensations and empathy associated with the dynamics of reading (12). As the interest of the author is specifically oriented toward poetry, Scott (2015) describes his work as follows: “I am not describing or analyzing the piece, I am humming it. Translation provides us with the opportunity to insert our reading back into the text, our humming back into the music” (12).

Elucidating the importance of overtones in Arabic poetry and the differences among Arabic, English, and French in terms of morphological and phonological compositions, this article intends to develop a new tool in the assessment of the quality of translations of poetry, using the mechanics of optimality theory. In this case, the input is narrowed toward sonorant tools that create overtones in the ST. The resulting output would be the possibilities generated in the TLs to transmit such overtones. There are two constraints, namely, faithfulness to the ST input and consistency in conveying different overtones. Sonorous action, which motivates a constant search for appropriate words and sound patterns, underlies the focus of the majority of translations and retranslations. A translation is deemed faithful when it dynamically optimizes the transfer of ST overtones using tools that are either similar to those used in the ST or those that adhere to the TL mechanisms—“poetry works by creating effects that are reproducible” (Sullivan et al., 2019) (269). This study defines consistency in terms of interactionism. An output is deemed consistent when faithfulness to input overtones converges with the appeal of the ST. This notion renders clarity to the hierarchy between these two constraints: faithfulness is placed above consistency and, thus, violation is acceptable only when faithfulness is optimized.

3. Methodology

The input in this study is a verse from pre-Islamic poetry that is characterized by its use of overtones. The output is a corpus of 13 translations of this verse. Five of these translations are in prose, and the rest are verse. Although this study is centered on the translations of
sonorous aspects, it does not exclude the prose translations, because prose, like verse, may capture overtones using different processes. The translation of poetry into prose “virtualizes verse […] in many re-configured forms” thus, prose is “a medium which multiplies verse” (Scott, 2010) (113).

A translation is assessed as faithful when it optimizes the appeal communicated by the overtones in the ST. Meanwhile, a translation is consistent when it uses stylistic tools to optimize the theme and appeal of the ST. Thus, an optimal translation is achieved when it is faithful and consistent to the ST and simultaneously violates the ST to the least consistent when it uses stylistic tools to optimize the theme and appeal.

The theme of this verse is expressed elsewhere in the same Muʿallaqa. Pleonasm is not uncommon in pre-Islamic poetry; it accomplishes many rhetorical communicative functions such as “the verbal phrasing of a qasida steps across its cognitive contours, leading to inklings of another sphere of meaning; this, in turn, leads to a deconcretisation of mood that, in a way, clings to cognition” (Lahiani, 2020) (97). Aesthetic features are “grounded by and based upon cognitive knowledge. Emotions are triggered by actions and, vice versa” (Kenessei, 2010) (81). The overtones rooted in this verse make the verse appealing and enforced and effectively convey its message. The music of the words “resides not in the unfolding line of speech-flow, but in isolated phonemes or phonemic clusters, gathered after reading” (Scott, 2015) (35). As the poet builds sonorous overtones using sound patterns and antithetical parallelism, he provokes readers into empathetically sharing his feelings of bitterness and rejection.

In the first hemistich, Tarafa’s defense of his innocence is communicated by his assertion that he has never done any serious wrongdoing (ḥadath). Lane defines the word ḥadath as “an innovation that is disapproved, not agreeable with custom, or usage” (Lane, 1863) (628). Al-Zawzani (2013) (125) used the same phrase to explain this word: "لاذن، إني فاحظت، كما "I denounce my being treated as an offender (muḥdithin)." Al-Tibrizi (1894) (78) and Al-Shanqīṭī Al-ʿAl (2017) (87) used the same phrase to explain this word: the root (ḥadaa) is used repeatedly with three morphological patterns in different grammatical positions, which creates a polyptoton; morphological jīnas to use Arabic terminology: hadathin, aḥdathuhu, and muḥdithin. In the Arabic tradition, morphological jīnas “serves as one of the most desired literary devices that facilitates communication and minimizes errors in receiving the intended message” (Rashwan, 2021) (189). In addition to its emphatic effect, the morphological jīnas used by Tarafa creates alliteration in the first hemistich by repeating the /th/ and /h/ sounds. These voiceless consonants are fricative obstruents. In the four-group scale of ascending hardness, fricatives are classified second, indicating that they are relatively soft consonants (Leech, 1984) (98). This softness is corrected by the lack of voice in these consonants. Leech (1984) explains that the existence of voice “tends to suggest softness” (99). This combination between softness and hardness in these alliterative sounds is demonstrably functional. It betrays the entwining feelings of discrimination and bitterness, which occupies the chief role in the polyptoton. These sound patterns motivate the words by transforming them from semantic opacity to communicative transparency. They are, thus, “referential and propositional, conventional and loaded” (Lahiani, 2022a) (173).

In the second hemistich, Tarafa enumerates the injustice that befell him. This is made remarkably sonorous due to the pattern repetition employed. He uses long vowel sounds, which goes in line with his low psyche as he describes the injustice of his tribe: hijaʾ, shakati, ḥadithi, and muṭradi. By conducting a research on semantic universals, Ullmann (1966) demonstrates the “symbolic value” of the vowel /i/ as “an expression of smallness” (69). In this verse, Tarafa complains of being demeaned by his tribesmen. The words used in this hemistich are semantically related at the macro level, but they are distinct in meaning. They refer to the punishments used by the tribe against the poet.

Despite their shared use of sound schemes and affective lexical features, these two hemistichs are diametrically opposed. First, the opening hemistich is alliterative, whereas the second is assonating. Second, the poet claims innocence in the first hemistich and rebukes injustice in the second. Third, contrary to the first hemistich that uses a morphological patterning of the same root to create the impression that the wrongdoing was rather one, the second hemistich counts three punishments, which sways the receiver to side with the poet. Pathos is at work here: these contrasts intensify the emotive and evocative effects of the verse. They draw the empathy of the receiver by narrating his experiences. This is in line with the argument of House (2014):

… the linguistic correlates of the situational dimensions are the means by which the textual function is realized, and the textual function is the result of a linguistic–pragmatic analysis along the dimensions with each dimension contributing to the two functional components, the ideational and the interpersonal (249).

Sound patterns in poetry are not “artificially isolated for the purposes of identifying patterns, structure, acoustic hierarchy”; these are “sounds

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1 Interpretations of this verse are based on commentaries by Al-Tibrizi (1894), Al-Zawzani (2013), Al-Nabhās (Al-Nabhās Al-ʿAl, 1973), and Al-Shanqīṭī Al-ʿAl (2017).

2 The present article uses the terms polyptoton and morphological jīnas intermittently with the definition presented above.
isolated by a kind of psycho-phonetic attentiveness, aural neurosis” (Scott, 2010) (115). Subject to translation, such associative fields and constraints may not always be in evidence. In this case, translation is expected to “multiply obstructions to a fluent, linear, recapitulative kind of reading, and pass on its own constructivist persuasions to its readers, by various processes of linguistic provocation” (Scott, 2015) (15). Scott calls this a “psycho-sensory response to the mechanics of language” (15).

5. Discussion: comparative assessment

Of the verse translations, two omitted the verse presented in this study, namely, those by Khawam (1917–2004) (Khawam, 1960) and O’Grady (1935–2014) (O’Grady, 1990). This is likely because this input rephrases an idea that is already expressed in the Mu‘allaqat; thus, the violation may have been committed to prioritize semantic condensation. Contrary to Arabic, which considerably “tolerates repetition in its different forms […] rhetorical and stylistic norms in English [and French] do not tolerate as much repetition” (Labiani, 2020) (99). This case is particularly observed when the translator does not perceive the communicative and stylistic values of such repetition. Languages have different linguistic and literary characters; such “differences are what generate the uniqueness of each piece of literature, and these differences,” Rashwan argues, “are not usually reflected in poor translations that overlook these […] differences” (Rashwan, 2020) (363). To use the terminology of the optimality theory, breaching the only-when-necessary tenet results in violating the faithfulness constraint.

Done into prose, the translation by William Jones (1746–1794) is the first in the corpus (Jones, 1782):

Yet without having committed any offence, I am treated like the worst offender – am censured, insulted, upbraided, rejected (24).

Jones adheres to the input of the ST polyptoton; he only shifts it into a binary rather than the original ternary dimension: “offence” and “offender.” As he prioritizes the emphatic function of the morphological jinās, Jones adds the superlative form (“worst offender”). This optimizes the contrast between the proclaimed guiltlessness of Tarafa and the injustice of his tribesmen. The punctuation used to split the translations of the two hemistichs heightens the reader’s perception of this disparity and the poet’s state of mind. Thus, Jones transposes the text a step further from its oral sonorous dimension by providing a niche in the English environment that uses punctuation as part of the discourse. Each language has its limitations; however, each language has its potential as well. In this scenario, the translator optimized the ST input and the TL repertoire of the potential choices.

Jones’ translation lends itself to the input of the second hemistich by preserving the enumeration embedded in it. Nevertheless, the output conflicts with certain details. Jones’ Tarafa enumerates four punishments, rather than three as per the original; this case is not a detrimental violation. Indeed, he modulates the actions by referring to pleonastic deeds: the words “censured,” “upbraided,” and “rejection” convey the same idea, whereas “qadhf bil shakat” is unheeded. Jones’ transmission of the ST appeal is thus consistent. The use of the last participles intensifies the overtones in the ST and conveys the poet’s feelings. Sells (1986) would later adopt the same choice.

Contrary to that of Jones, the translation by Armand Pierre Causin de Perceval (1795–1871) violates the ST constraints at multiple levels (Causin de Perceval, 1847):

Je n’ai point commis de crime, et cependant l’on m’outrage, l’on m’accuse, l’on se plaint amèrement de moi, l’on me repousse comme un coupable. (1847: 359)

[I have not committed a crime, and yet they outrage me, they accuse me, they bitterly complain of me, they push me back like a convict.]

In contrast to the ST use of intensive lexical aspects, this translation uses neutral aspects with the words “accuse,” “se plaint,” “repousse,” and “coupable.” This violation entails the non-prioritization and, thus, the loss of the original overtones. Causin de Perceval uses the same strategy when manipulating the first hemistich and the antithetical parallelism that links the two hemistichs. The polyptoton is repealed without compensation. The conjunction “cependant” lacks enough emphasis to communicate the poet’s appeal. However, it could have gained emphasis if the translator gave due attentiveness to the sound effects used in the input. This is not enough to give tribute to the principle of interactionism between constraints that is one of the pillars of the optimality theory?

The difference between these early translations may be justified with reference to their motifs. Aesthetics is one of the main features that stimulated Jones (1993) to translate the Mu‘allaqat. He specifically appreciated that “vehement passion is expressed in strong words, exactly measured, and pronounced, in a common voice, in just cadence, and with proper accents” (133). However, Causin de Perceval translated these poems to illustrate the historical information covered in his book. His chief objective was to present “une idée, par une traduction aussi fidèle que le permet la difference du génie des langues” [an idea, by means of a translation that is as faithful as allowed by the difference of the languages’ genius] (Causin de Perceval, 1847) (325–326). The outcome of his translation of this verse is that he violated both constraints, namely, faithfulness and consistency.

Like Causin de Perceval, Johnson (1796–1876) did not target literary aspects; he translated the Mu’allaqat for didactic purposes; e. i., he wanted it to support his students of Arabic (np; preface) Johnson (1894):

Without any occurrence which I caused to happen I am blamed and reproached with complaints and banished, and I am regarded as if I have caused my own defamation, my own reproach with complaint, and my own banishment (56)

Clearly, Johnson’s translation prioritizes the syntactic units of the ST. This constraint is in conflict with the faithfulness constraint. Although the ST polyptoton is not sacrificed, the accompanying overtones are lost. Undeniably, Johnson targeted the optimization of the input; the outcome is that his output violated it. The notes accompanying Johnson’s translation are centered on the syntactic composition of the verses. They transcribe words in Arabic, then provide commentary in English. Johnson intended his work to help students in the journey of understanding the Mu‘allaqat. Thus, that he may have intended his translation to be literal but not necessarily sonorant, because the readers had access to the ST, which was appended to the translation in Arabic script.

Jean Jacques Schmidt’s (1939–) translation is the last prose translation in this corpus (Schmidt, 1978). He paid special interest to the literariness of the text. The following excerpt is his translation of Tarafa’s verse:

Quel mal ai-je donc fait pour mériter tant d’injures, pour que l’on se plaigne ainsi de moi au point de me chasser? (91)

[What harm did I do, then, to deserve so many insults, so that people complain about me to the point of chasing me away?]

Schmidt relocates the input overtones as he sacrifices the ST polyptoton to a rhetorical question; however, he stays faithful to the appeal of the speaker. However, the appeal created in this translation is not as overwhelming as the original because of the violation exercised at the lexical level. The words “mal,” “injures,” and “se plaigne” do not completely convey the intense overtones in the ST. Regrettably, Schmidt does not optimize his insertion of the rhetorical question; thus, the constraint that he chooses is inconsistent with the ST constraints. To borrow Scott’s phrasing (Scott, 2015), this translation is neither “multilingual” nor “multi-sensory”; it is relatively limited in terms of its use of textual arrangement and projection (15).

Backward in chronology, the Blunts’ (Anne Blunt, 1837–1917; Wilfrid Blunt, 1840–1922) translation is the first ever translation of this ST
into verse (Blunt and Blunt, 1903):

They rail at and revile me, who know me no ill-doer;
me, who have borne their burdens, cast would they out from them
(131–132)

The Blunts proceeded with economy by optimizing their choices while selecting from the input data. They prioritized at least two ST stylistic features: the alliterative tones and antithetical parallelism of the first hemistich. Modulation was implemented in the process of translation, which resulted in the embodiment of new dimensions in the couplet. The antithetical parallelism is extended to both lines, which is faithful to the ST appeal and is consistent with its overtones. To render the ST enumeration, the Blunts redistributed the occurrences of the punishments: they convey two (“rail” and “revile”) at the beginning of the first line and one at the end of the couplet (“cast”). The alliterating /r/ sound in the verbs “rail” and “revile” not only replicates the input alliteration but also evokes the roaring of the tribe toward the poet. In the output, this optimizes the disparity between the worth of the speaker and the unjust treatment of his tribe by prioritizing this disparity. The Blunts bring the overtones into due dimension through the alliteration embedded in the phrase “borne their burdens.” Leech (1984) classifies the /b/ sound as among the hardest consonant sounds (98). In addition, the homophones “know” and “no” intensify the rejection that the poet reviles, which is akin to the negation used by Ṭaraфа.

Thus, the Blunts clearly used the mechanics of the output language and poetics by optimizing their choices and ensuring the interaction between all constraints used to convey the ST overtones. Notably, the objective of the Blunts for translating the Muʿallaqat targeted the overtones. They wanted that while reciting them “aloud,” the English reader would feel “the thrill of a sudden and unexpected pleasure caused by the cadence, independently perhaps of the meaning, as of something stronger than he is accustomed to, fiercer yet as tender, musical while still, while defiant of the common rules of art” (xxii). Specifically, in their introduction of Ṭaraفا’s Muʿallaqat, the Blunts (Blunt and Blunt, 1903) note that it was a “difficult task to give it a readable English form” due to its overtones (9). This example is sufficient for resisting the argument by Scott (2010) that seeking compensation in translation for the loss of sound patterns is a “ludicrous policy” and a “naive belief” (114).

In contrast to the Blunts, Arthur J. Arberry (1905–1969) violated the ST constraints by prioritizing elements that are not optimized in the input (Arberry, 1957):

There’s nothing amiss I’ve occasioned; yet it’s just as if I were cause of my own defamation, and being complained of, and made an outcast (87)

The sonorous tools of the ST (polyptoton and alliterations) are abrogated in this translation with no compensation sought. Thus, the output of Arberry (1957) is faithful neither to tone nor to tempo. In addition, this translation does not lend itself to the original overtones because of its use of a colloquial register. Arberry used such a register, because he perceived in Ṭaraفا’s Muʿallaqat “a casualness [that is] unusual even for the poetry of the ancient Arabs” (82). Although such a “modern register facilitates the reception of the TT in its milieu, it deprives the ST of one of its communicational priorities, i.e., its temporal deixis” (Lahiani, 2008) (131–132); one would add here the loss of overtones.

The constraint violation in the translation by Arberry is due to his use of semantic distancing in his choice of words and their lexical aspects. To quote an example, the adjective “amiss” is very weak to transmit the strength of the Arabic verb ḥadath and the relevant polyptoton. In addition, as Arberry renders the enumerative hemistich into phrases, he weakens the tempo; thus, again, the overtones are not evident. These violations points back to definition of Scott (2015) of poetry reading as a “complex dynamic of perception and consciousness of language” (17). Using an enjambed quatrain, Michael Sells (1949–) shortens the lines and, thus, hastens their tempo; this should contribute to conveying the original overtones (Sells, 1986):

I brought on no misfortune,
as if I were the cause
of my being abused,
disparaged, put aside! (30)

Sells’ quatrain is shaped; the lines are indented intermittently between expansions and retreats. This indentation is visual instead of metrical. Such a violation is not minimal; it does not optimize the contradiction between the feeling of innocence of the poet and the prejudice that he vindicates, which does not satisfy the consistency constraint. In addition, sonorous overtones are not in evidence. Sells’ translation (Sells, 1986) of this verse is not in harmony with his motives, because his goal is a “translation that is natural, idiomatic, and poetic” (21). He even justifies his choice of Ṭaraفا’s Muʿallaqat by its being “commensurate with our poetic concerns and poetic values” (21). As such and to use the parameters of optimality theory, Sells does not settle conflicts between constraints. No phonological or prosodic work backed the form that he implemented, which brings back the only-when-necessary constraint to the surface.

Similar to Sells’ translation, Christopher Nouryeh’s (1940–) translation does not prioritize the ST overtones (Nouryeh, 1993). To Nouryeh, a translation needs to be “faithful, not literal” (3). The following TT does not adhere to this claim:

Yet still be flouted me for nothing, even blames me as if I had been an outcast (88)

The use of the active voice shifts the bias of the verse from the subjection of the speaker to the might of the person being referred to. This use deviates from the faithfulness constraint, which adheres to neither form nor prosody or appeal. The phrase “for nothing” is insufficient for conveying the overtones embedded in the ST polyptoton and alliteration. Similarly, the verb “flout” does not convey the intensity embedded in the ST “ḥija,” that is, “to defame.” Neither does the verb “to blame” relay the intensive message of the ST “qadhiḥ fi l-shakati.”

Moreover, this translation deviates from the ST meaning. The clause “as if I had been an outcast” signifies that Ṭaraفا was not an outcast in reality, which does not conform with the ST claim. Similar to Sells’ translation, this translation does not optimize the input constraints; thus, it violates faithfulness and consistency.

Contrary to Nouryeh, Jacques Berque (1910–1995) improved his previous translation by producing a more economic output:

Et sans rien avoir commis, comme si j’eusse commis j’essouerais, moi, diatribe, calomnie, éviction? [43] (156)
[And without having committed anything, as if I had committed, I would suffer, me, diatribe, calumny, eviction?]
sans avoir commis de saleté, bien que je sois comme un sale calomniate, satirisé, dénoncé, chassé … [44] (36)
[without having committed any dirt, although I am like a dirty slandered, satirized, denounced, chased away …]

In the earlier work (Berque, 1979), Berque optimized his choices by undertaking a few maneuvers to prioritize sonorous overtones, as in the ST. The repetition of the word “commis” (place) compensates for the original polyptoton. The sonorous effect produced by place matches the /k/ and /o/ sounds in the conjunction “comme,” which is juxtaposed with “commis.” In addition, alliteration is manifested with the repetition of /s/ in the words “sans,” “eusses,” and “essouerais.” As in the input as
well, Berque preserved assonance by repeating the /i/ sound. In the 1995 revision (Berque, 1995), Berque preserved the ST polyptoton not at the triple level but at a dual one. Referring to dirt using different morphological patterns (“saleté” and “sale”) is constructive not only in creating sound patterns but also in modifying the event (“commis”) and the speaker (“comme”). The clause “sans rien avoir commis” (Berque, 1979) lacks sufficient concreteness to reveal the message that is originally intended. Notably, French is classified as “a highly ‘abstract’ medium” (Ullmann, 1966) (71). French uses derivatives, whereas English uses more specific compounds (72). Berque’s use of the phrase “de saleté” (Berque, 1995) moves the expression toward a more concrete level of expression, which is also closer to the ST. Berque re-potentiates the language. As these schemes interact in his translation, his translation demonstrates faithfulness and consistency in which the only-when-necessary ideal is endorsed, and the original sonorous overtones are optimized. In the introduction of his work, Berque (1979) reflects his awareness of sonorous overtones in the Mu’ allaqa: “la quête que rythme, rime, sonorités, parallélismes de tournures, répétitions de mots concourent à refermer sur elle-même, pourrait-elle évoquer une figure concentrique et centripète” (17).

In addition to sonorous overtones, this translation also optimizes meaning. Berque formulated the punishments enumerated by Tarafa into a rhetorical question. This conflicts with no constraints, because a rhetorical question may be used to denounce a situation, and it remains a tool that is frequently used to produce overtones. Schmidt previously used a rhetorical question. However, Berque’s work is more optimal, because it reflects economy by optimizing all choices and ensuring no conflicts exist between the different constraints used. Notably, Berque (1979) shows a special interest in the interplay between sounds and meanings in this poetry:

cette poésie, tributaire de la nécessité par la contrainte des mètres et les retours de la rime, ménagère de la contingence par l’aventure humaine et l’aubaine des mots, témoigne d’une vitalité qui semble aller à la rencontre de celle des auditeurs

[This poetry, dependent on necessity by the constraint of the meters and the returns of the rhyme, keeper of the contingency by the human adventure and the windfall of the words, testifies to a vitality which seems to go to meet that of the listeners] (25–26).

Berque omitted the rhetorical question when he revised his translation in 1995. He shifted the enumeration to past participles, which is a choice that dates back to the works of Jones and Sells. This remains consistent with the ST, because it highlights the presentation of the speaker of himself as helpless. Note also the three dots that end the revised translation of Berque. Conveying a visual effect, these dots translate the speaker’s feeling of coercion, as he enumerates the punishment with four participles, which, thus, suggests that the list of punishments is open-ended.

While handling the antithetical parallelism of the ST, Berque adopts the conjunctive locations “comme si” (Berque, 1979) and “bien que” (Berque, 1995). In the first translation, the contrast is made clear as the first-person persona is highlighted. This is confirmed by “moi,” which is the embedded pronoun. Furthermore, the use of the imparfait du subjonctif tense in “eusse” intensifies the contradiction between two situations, namely, the assumed innocence of the speaker and his denunciation. Regrettably, this is retracted when the translation was revised: the subject that is modified by the participles is not made clear: “je” or “un sale.” The enjambment does not help the reader of the 1995 version (Berque, 1995) disambiguate the limit between the syntactic elements.

The couplet below by Pierre Larcher (1948–) concludes the corpus of the translations (Larcher, 2000):

Sans avoir commis de crime, comme un criminel,
On me calomnie, se plaint de moi, me bannit ! (68)

[Without having committed a crime, like a criminal,
They slander me, complain about me, banish me!]

Larcher (2000) used the alexandrine “déniaisé” (23), that is, literally de-naïved, to versify this couplet. His objective was to oralize his translation by echoing the declamation of the Bedouin poet in the text using a very oratorical style (24). Larcher uses caesuras in this alexandrine couplet. A para linguistic tool, the caesura of the first line reflects antithetical parallelism. The pause in the middle of this self-contained line compels the reader to perceive its communicative function. The communicative function is given a further boost through the delicate handling that Larcher reserved for sonorous overtones. Similar to Berque (1995), Larcher opts for a concrete level of expression. However, this concreteness is more transparent than that of Berque: “crime” is definitely more concrete than “saleté.” It also collocates with the penalties enumerated in the second line. Larcher’s reference to crime is optimal: it helps him preserve the original polyptoton, similar to Berque, at the dual level. Moreover, the elements of Larcher’s polyptoton “crime” and “criminal” are alliterating with the words “commis,” “comme,” and “calomnie.” A voiceless plosive, Leech (1984) places the /k/ sound at the top of hard sounds (98). This hardiness is fortified by the lack of voice in this sound.

The second line in this TT includes two caesuras, which is optimal. This tool helps reflect the depressed psyche of the speaker; when he starts enumerating the punishments, Larcher’s Tarafa feels extremely bitter and unable to express himself in long clauses. The pauses cut the line into 5, 4, and then 3 feet, resulting in a descending tempo. This mirrors the psyche of the speaker. In addition, the caesuras give the impression that the speaker did not premeditate his speech; thus, pauses were needed to give him space to think. The caesuras also give each part of the line the importance that it deserves. Additionally, the Alexandrine renders it possible for Larcher to highlight the first-person persona as the receiver of the punishments. By repeating the pronouns “me” and “moi,” Larcher disambiguates his translation, unlike Berque. This enables him to bring the speaker to the fore the speaker, the presumed victim. The resulting alliteration repeats the voiced nasal sound /m/, the reverse of the hard /k/ sound, which is alliterated in the first line. According to Leech’s (1987) scale, nasals feature low hardness (98). The voice in the sound adds to its softness. Larcher echoes the contrast between the two lines in terms of sounds and lexical elements, matching the contradiction between the advocated guiltlessness of the speaker and the punishments that befall him.

Larcher’s translation conveys the evocative and emotive overtones of the input because it metrically and acoustically explores and conveys the ST. Simultaneously, it is sufficiently well-rooted in its TL literary tradition. This output reflects Larcher’s commitment to the faithfulness and consistency constraints. He optimized the constraints of the French language and prosody to create a couplet that bears the same appeal as its original. Larcher is a linguist, philologist, and translator (Lahiani, 2008) (317–320). In the introduction of his translation, he expresses his intention to optimize any trace of orality in the input. Moreover, in the case that he finds that transferring the rhyme scheme is difficult, he seeks compensation in other constraints, such as alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme (Larcher, 2000) (1). The only-when-necessary constraint is at work here.

6. Conclusions

Let us summarize the function of optimality theory in the poetry translation paradigm. Each input generates a set of potential outputs in the TL. The translator’s task is to determine which of these is the optimal solution. The choice is based on their consideration and prioritization of the constraints involved in the input. The optimality theory discards differences and targets identity within the most economical framework possible. The context of the only-when-necessary tenet, which is closely relevant to the faithfulness constraint, applies to this case. Necessity is
constrained by hierarchy, that is, a violation is acceptable only when a higher-ranked constraint is in action and needs to be prioritized—“violation must be minimal” (Kager, 2006) (12).

The comparative work in this study adapts the tools relevant to optimality theory. Faithfulness and consistency are the two main constraints implemented to assess the quality of the translations of input. As the overtones represent the cornerstone of the appeal and message of the ST, this study estimated that these two constraints provided sufficient room for the transfer of ST overtones. Any output that satisfies both constraints is postulated as optimal. The overtones complement the expression of the poet’s feelings and thoughts; they are not ornamental. Thus, retaining “the specific form (rhythm, metre, devices like epizeuxis, anaphora, simile, alliteration, oxymoron, etc.) is a task as important as to maintain the thoughts in poetry” (Keneski, 2010) (86). To cite an example from the corpus, using caesuras was not necessary for Larcher; but in doing so he added value to his output. Similarly, the Blunts translation thoroughly explores the acoustics of the ST and implements the ways in which it invites its reader to invest the text with their idi-osynocrasies. Thus, both translations use sound deixes that provoke empathetic experiences from the reader, as in the ST’s Baker’s point of view would be relevant in this respect—translation needs to be understood as a form that “constructs rather than represents” (Baker, 2014) (emphasis in original, 159). The task of the translator is not to execute but perform.

In terms of translating overtones in poetry, this study validates the optimal output approximation strategy. Poetic overtones may be shifted from the sonorous to the rhetorical, lexical, or visual levels of expression. Let us recall how the different translations addressed the input jinās. Morphologically, Arabic is radically different from English and French. As “words in Arabic are typically made up of roots along with patterns,” which smoothly uses “[s]ystem-intrinsic root repetition,” English and French typically avoid such repetitions (Dickins et al., 2017) (135). Consequently, a translation needs to “individualize, in the here and now, the translator as reader, and to feed that individuation, that individual voice, back into the ST” (Scott, 2015) (32). The present study argues that discourse in poetry may change its mode of motivation without necessarily losing it. Thus, it may preserve its communicative function and emotive appeal through the use of analogous features. Translators may move from a hearing environment, where the literary acoustic is dependent on the transformation of individual sounds, into rhetorical devices. Translational hermeneutics endorses this view, extending that “literariness is culturally and historically variable; so are translation strategies, techniques and norms” (Lahiani, 2022b) (3). The statement about literariness can be extended to sonorous overtones, which occupy a high rank in poetry. Thus, optimality theory’s consideration of the hierarchical ranking of constraints validates it as an assessment tool for the translation of poetic overtones.

A scholar and a translator of classical Arabic poetry, Silvestre de Sacy (1861) was not optimistic about translating Arabic optimally: “qui-conque ne lira les compositions des poètes les plus célèbres de l’Arabe que dans des traductions latines ou françaises, sera bien loin de pouvoir les apprécier à leur juste valeur” [Whoever reads only Latin or French translations of the most famous poets of Arabia will be far from being able to appreciate them at their fair value] (113). He recommends reading the translations as supplementary texts rather than equivalents or replacements of the originals. Clearly, de Sacy did not perceive reading as a dynamic process. Notably, Scott (2015) perceives a literary text as a “mobilisation of the kinaestheticity of reading […] as an awakening of what is multi-sensory and synaesthetic in language” (9). As this study hopes to have demonstrated, a translation of poetic overtones may speak for the original when it optimizes its constraints and accommodates their hierarchical ranking.

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