

## Dragomen and checkpoints

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Humanistic studies of translation have often taken for granted that translational activity produces cultural understanding, which in turn leads to deeper human sympathy. However, the history of military translation in the US occupation of Iraq suggests that this model is inadequate on a number of accounts, including the ways in which translation theory privileges literary translation over other translational activities. This essay surveys the development of Arabic–English translation within US military strategic thinking and the adjunct role played by militarised interpreters in the US occupation of Iraq. It then considers Arabic–English translation in terms of the lives of translators, as opposed to the textual products produced by their labour. It concludes by sketching the nineteenth-century history of the Levantine *dragoman* in order to draw resemblances with more recent histories of military translation.

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*The occupation translator lives in a permanent state of fear. (al-‘Iraqiyya)*

For humanists, there are few activities that inspire more hope than translation. Translation, we think, is a path to communication and thus to comprehension. Or, to quote the men who produced the King James Bible, ‘Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water’ (as quoted in Grossman, 50). By extension, humanists imagine that translation leads to sympathy and agreement. This sentiment recurs often in the theoretical literature on translation. For all their disputes and divergences, our theories of translation – from the German Romantics to the positivists and deconstructionists – agree that translation is a cornerstone of cultural understanding.

Even before 9/11, the connections between understanding and translation were axiomatic. Since then, they have come to seem not only more true than ever, but also more urgent. Nowhere was this more emphatic than in the UN Arab Human Development Report of 2003, whose authors noted correctly that ‘Relations between Arabs and the West, especially after September 11, have come under intense strain... Arabs, Muslims and Islam have since been subjected to defamation and misrepresentation, a reflection in many instances of ignorance and in some cases an expression of unjustified abuse’ (177). It is no accident that this observation was nestled within a longer argument in favour of a robust ‘knowledge society’ fuelled by cross-cultural exchange and translation: ‘The Arab

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world needs to regain its historical prowess in translation as part of opening itself to new cultures and as a prerequisite for building the knowledge society' (176).

It is tempting to say that a general sense of civilizational emergency, along with a specific call for more translation, helped spur, over the past decade, the growth of translation studies in the British and American academies. As scholars have grappled with the precarious and violent dynamics of an increasingly militarised world, translation studies have shifted from the margins to the centre of research agendas within humanistic disciplines. To note this is not to insist on a mechanically causal relationship, but rather to observe the ways in which the idea – that translation is understanding – has been conscripted into our effort to reflect critically on the conflagrations of our time.

Yet it is also more than this. For many, translation has become not just the humanistic salve for the wounds of war, but the antidote to conflict itself. In recent years, these curative and pacific suppositions about translation have sometimes been stated explicitly, especially with regard to translating along the Arabic–English borderzones. The idea might be put this way: if only we translated more things from one language to another, perhaps we would understand each other more, and perhaps we would not need to go to war. As the American novelist Andre Dubus III wrote in the foreword to a celebrated 2007 anthology of collected translated fiction:

There are theories as to how we've become so ignorant of other cultures around the world: geography and foreign languages are no longer taught in schools; U.S. media companies have cut back on world news coverage; we are isolated between two oceans and have friendly neighbors to the north and south and can afford the luxury of being provincial. The real reasons for our collective ignorance are probably more complex, but whatever the roots, the consequences are dire: we have never been less isolationist in the variety of goods and services we consume from around the world, and never have we been more ignorant of the people who produce them. This is, if nothing else, fertile territory for misunderstanding, unresolved conflict, and yes, war. The translation and publication of this volume, therefore, have never been more timely or necessary (Dubus III, xi–xii).

In arguably the most influential academic reflections on translation, Emily Apter has developed this line of thinking, albeit on her own terms. In her essay 'Translation at the checkpoint', Apter traces how a group of Palestinian visual artists (including Annemarie Jacir, Khaled Jarrar and Elia Suleiman) return to the figure of the occupation checkpoint in order to reflect on space, language and sovereignty (Apter 2014).<sup>1</sup> In this essay, as in her prominent book-length study, *The Translation Zone*, Apter returns often to the links between 'translation' and 'war', which for her do not function so much as antitheses to one another, but rather as component parts that are implicated in one another. Nevertheless, in her account, mistranslation and non-translatability lead to a breakdown in diplomacy, which in turn leads to war:

Mistranslation . . . is a concrete particular of the art of war, crucial to strategy and tactics, part and parcel of the way in which images of bodies are read, and constitutive of matériel – in its extended sense of the hard- and software of intelligence. It is also the name of diplomatic breakdown and paranoid misreading. Drawing on Carl von Clausewitz's ever-serviceable dictum 'War is a mere continuation of policy by other means,' I would maintain that war is the continuation of extreme mistranslation or disagreement by other means. War is, in other words, a condition of nontranslatability or translation failure at its most violent peak (Apter 2006, 15–16).

For all her attention to the ambiguities of translation and hermeneutic practices, in the end Apter is wholeheartedly invested in the antidotal thesis. She writes: ‘A new comparative literature based on translational pedagogies renews the psychic life of diplomacy, even as it forces an encounter with intractable alterity, with that which will not be subject to translation’ (11).

This, of course, shares quite a bit with the transcendental claims about ‘translation as understanding’ made by the King James translators cited above. As Apter’s language suggests, such an account of translation is very much attached to categories of the sacred. As such, it belongs squarely within a theology of translation that stretches from the Alexandrian collective whose labours were supposedly inspired by the Holy Spirit to major figures of the contemporary translation theory canon, such as Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, for whom translation remains an explicitly sacred practice.<sup>2</sup>

But as appealing as the theological account of translation is, it does not jibe with the dynamics of the sites where present day Arabic–English translation most often takes place. These sites are not libraries and seminar rooms, but rather checkpoints, segregated army bases and blood-splattered interrogation rooms. Places, in other words, where the angels of humanistic translation rarely tread, and where human understanding has no necessary relation to human survival. Currently, by any rubric – public investment, institutional support, professional employment and discourse production – Arabic–English translation is best described as a strategic project of full-spectrum dominance, and the vast majority of Arabic–English translators work as conscripts within conflict zones. Given the non-transparent nature of the military, it is difficult to ascertain how new this situation is. However, given the resonance with legacies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial conquest and occupation in the Arab world, it is tempting to say that this has been the norm for Arabic–English translation for quite some time. In the following pages, I will circle through moments in this history in order to argue that translation is not so much an antidote to war and dispossession, but one of its central practices.<sup>3</sup> My goal is to offer, if not a secular account of translation, then at least a profane one to counter-balance the sacred accounts of translatology: one that begins from the understanding that wars do not erupt because of linguistic and cultural misunderstandings, or because of misunderstandings that can be resolved through translation; one that acknowledges that while translation can lead to understanding and empathy, translation is also a fundamental part of the actual business of conflict; one that admits that literary translation is only one mode of translation practised in world.

### The post-9/11 translation boom

Recent wars have generated a boom in the Arabic–English translation industry. Even as many of us bemoaned a lack of support for Arabic–English literary translation over the past decade, there was also huge, probably unprecedented growth in the field. In the wake of 9/11, the US began to invest roughly \$1 billion/year in various Arabic–English translation projects, amounting to a total of more than \$10 billion over the next decade.<sup>4</sup> Almost all of this funding has been channelled through the military and intelligence services rather than, say, diplomatic agencies or educational institutions. Much of it has been outsourced to a network of private firms with seemingly innocuous names such as KMS Solutions, S.O.S. International, Mission Essential Personnel, Invizion, Northrop Gruman Technical Services, Shee Atika Languages and Tiger Swan. Complaints about corruption and poor management have been rife (see Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan 2009;

CorpWatch 2008). For the first decade of the twenty-first century, the most successful corporation in the niche market of Arabic translation was Global Linguist Solutions and its subsidiaries, such as L-3, which at one point held a \$4.5 billion contract to supply the US Army with ‘language workers’ (see ‘L-3 Out’ 2007). The US military refers to all such workers as ‘linguists,’ although it distinguishes between two kinds: translators, who work with texts and transmissions; and interpreters (more derogatively, patronisingly and/or intimately known as ‘terps’ among US soldiers), who work with the spoken word and are primarily deployed in combat operations and field support (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations 2008b).

Soon after 9/11, the US military, like many other government agencies, claimed that they lacked sufficient numbers of personnel with expert knowledge of Arabic language and culture, or ‘regional proficiency’.<sup>5</sup> The problem remained chronic over the next decade, despite massive recruitment campaigns. (“Gov’t Struggles to Find Arabic Speakers.” 2003).<sup>6</sup> They also began to admit that they had never been able to effectively train non-native speakers of Arabic to an adequate level. ‘We’ve found it’s easier to train a linguist to be a soldier than to train a soldier to be a linguist’, said Brigadier General Richard C. Longo, who oversaw training programmes within the Army’s Office of Operations, Plans and Training, eliding ‘linguist’ with *native speaker* and ‘soldier’ with *American citizen* (as quoted in Kruzel 2008). ‘It is easier to train someone to fly an F-14 than it is to speak Arabic’ was how another spokesman put it shortly after the invasion of Iraq (Superville 2003). Already in 2004, the Department of Defense began to pivot away from its focus on language instruction of the officer corps, moving instead to recruit native ‘heritage’ Arabic speakers, offering them a variety of incentives: extraordinary salaries to Arab citizens of the USA and, to Arabs in the Arab world, decent salaries combined with the possibility of emigration and naturalisation in the United States (U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics 2004b, 142–145). At the same time, from the earliest days of the US invasion of Iraq, Iraqis were hired locally – also with promises of citizenship. For US citizens, salaries reached upwards of \$200,000/year.<sup>7</sup> For local hires in Iraq, salaries were much lower, at about \$15,000/year (“Lend Me Your Ears: US Military Turns to Contractor Linguists” 2013). According to published sources, the number of these interpreters employed by defence contractors was quite large: in Iraq (and within supporting units in neighbouring Gulf States), there were more than 9000 interpreters working for Global Linguist Solutions in 2009: about a third of them were Arab Americans; the majority were Arabs recruited from third countries (Houck 2009; Schwartz 2010). The figures for local hires and career linguists within the US Army are not public, but they are likely to be much larger than for those employed by private subcontractors.

The work of a military interpreter in Iraq was dangerous for a number of reasons. During assaults on checkpoints, interpreters were often the first targets because insurgents correctly understood that without them US units were ineffective and more prone to making mistakes. Iraqi interpreters faced death threats from within their families, just as the families of translators faced death threats from insurgents of all stripes. It was not for nothing that they wore black hoods at work and kept their identities hidden.<sup>8</sup> The benefits and risks of this work are captured in an interview with Wissam al-Rashied, an Iraqi who worked as an interpreter with US forces:

The income was very good, I have to admit, it was more than \$1000 per month, and that’s good pay in Iraq. Also, I felt like I was doing something good. But the work was very dangerous. My

worst nightmare was that killers would come for my family because of my work. If I die, okay, that's the job. But I worried for my family. I took a lot of precautions to conceal my work. I wore a mask when going on patrols and raids. I wore sunglasses with my mask so no one could see even my eyes. If you were ever caught, you knew you would be killed in some savage way, because you would be considered a traitor. (As quoted in Kukis 2011, 132)

By 2008, more than 280 interpreter–employees of L-3/Titan had been killed and several hundred more had been wounded (CorpWatch 2008, 16). These losses were greater than those suffered by any country within the Coalition (other than the USA), and far more than any other category of military contractors. Figures for interpreters in the direct employ of the US military are not available, but they may be comparable. To correctly measure the violence in the lives of these combat and support translators, we would also need to add the relatives who were also killed, injured or kidnapped, as part of a ruthless campaign to ‘punish’ known or suspected collaborators and to discourage others from working with the US occupation (see e.g. Brinkley 2004; Tuskowski 2004; Seely 2008). Standard compensation (*solatia*) for the resulting deaths was around \$5000 (Hedges and Al-Arian 2008, 44).

Besides these dangers, there were other difficulties. We have many accounts of the racism and abuse Arab interpreters faced within their units – this was true for Arabs born and raised in the USA and also for local Iraqis (see, e.g., Glionna and Khalil 2005). Similar stories were reported in Afghanistan (see e.g. Foust 2009), suggesting that the problem was chronic throughout regional deployments. Despite the military's efforts to educate troops, there were many accounts of persistent suspicion among soldiers that Arab interpreters were not trustworthy, or that they were lending aid to the enemy (see e.g. Levinson 2006). Although incidents of insurgency infiltration and armed interpreters turning on US soldiers were rare, the suspicions were not entirely baseless. (see e.g. Moss 2010, 3). This sense of deep unease and insecurity is captured in an essay posted on a Baathist website, denouncing the Iraqi translators working for the US military:

Who is an occupation translator? Off the base, people consider them traitors to their country, and apostates from their religion. On the base, the Americans eye them with suspicion on the grounds that they might be terrorists. On some bases they are not allowed to use cell phones, the internet, email, computers, video games or cameras, and they are denied access to restrooms and swimming pools. These translators are the only ones to ever be searched when they enter the mess hall. At some bases, they take away the translators' IDs to prevent them from leaving. The occupation translator lives in a permanent state of fear. He must constantly lie. He must keep on changing his name, how he dresses, and the things that make him who he is so that those closest to him never find out his real story (Al-'Iraqiyya 2009, translation mine).

Interpreters are only one class of linguist translating between Arabic and English. In intelligence and military parlance, a ‘translator’ is another kind of language worker – one who works with texts, which are primarily written, but also can be live (or recorded) transmissions. Translators often work far from the battlefield, living supposedly civilian lives in cities like Washington, DC, even as they perform real-time interpretive tasks electronically. They translate newspaper articles and academic books. They translate manifestos and captured documents. They are also the ones who listen in on telephone and electronic conversations. The key distinction here is between ‘human intelligence’ and ‘signals intelligence’ work for translators. In the former, the context of the text is usually well known: the speaker is known, the addressee is known, and so on. In the latter, the translator is trawling through large amounts of material, looking primarily for key

words. The famous ‘Tiger Teams’ which interrogate prisoners at military prisons like Guantánamo are always composed of an interrogator, an analyst and a linguist – who is sometimes an interpreter, sometimes a translator (U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) 2004a, 9).

Viewed as an overarching set of trained practices, institutional investments and organisational strategies, military translation is not just an instrumentalised project; it is also rooted in a *weaponised* understanding of language and culture. In the business-school parlance of military brass, translation is part of an effort to cultivate a ‘Total Force’ based in a ‘human capital strategy’, designed to create forms of soft power that augment the deployment of hard power.<sup>9</sup> But one paradox needs to be highlighted. For all their differences, the language spoken by the US military is not essentially different from that spoken by humanists. Like humanists, the US military views translation as an activity that ‘bridges’ human cultures and leads to communication and understanding. The Department of Defense touted the recruitment of ‘heritage speakers’ both as an indication of the vibrant multiculturalism of immigrants to the USA and as bridges for cross-cultural understanding in conflict zones.<sup>10</sup>

This was certainly the idiom of advertisement campaigns commissioned by the US Army and broadcast on Arabic-language media in the US and abroad. In one such commercial from 2006, we see a clean-shaven Arab man wearing sunglasses and an American military uniform. Standing by his side is a bearded Arab man wearing a dishdasha, *ghutra* and *agal*. Over their chests are the words, in Arabic, ‘I am a bridge between two civilizations’.<sup>11</sup> As a plaintive melody plays, we see a montage of images of Arab and Arab-American military interpreters involved in a series of dignified, non-conflictual interactions with grateful civilians. The images fade into an image of the translator surrounded by smiling Iraqi children. In Modern Standard Arabic, a voice says, ‘I am a bridge between two civilizations. I am an American soldier and an Arab translator. I build schools and help supply water. . .’ In another commercial from the same campaign, a dove flies over the earth as a voice asks, ‘If there were no translators in this world, who would speak on behalf of peace?’

While it is doubtful whether the Iraqi public thought these translators were performing critical tasks of cultural bridging, it is clear that many of the translators felt exactly this (see e.g. ElKhamri 2007). Eventually, many interpreters were held in high esteem by the American soldiers with whom they were deployed. Stories of friendship and understanding with unit terps are common features in American writing about the occupation (see, e.g., Breen 2008; Johnson 2013). The theme of this intimate (though never conflict-free) friendship dominates the blogs of Iraqi interpreters as well.<sup>12</sup> This theme became more urgent during the years in which the US reduced its military presence in Iraq, and local interpreters began to find themselves unemployed, unprotected and exposed to violent reprisal. By the last years of the US occupation there were multiple efforts from US veterans working to secure the lives of the interpreters they served with in Iraq – lobbying to facilitate legal emigration for Iraqis who collaborated with US forces, and volunteering to help resettle them within their own communities (see, e.g., Carrol 2008; Packer 2007; Ron 2013). Thus the longer story of combat translation in Iraq includes not just suspicion, fear and the threat of violence, but also genuine affection and acts of solidarity. In other words, there are plenty of stories of how translation led to human understanding and empathy even within this more ambiguous and violent history of military occupation.

Is it shocking to find that US military and intelligence services employ the same language that humanists use? Perhaps. Admittedly, humanist notions of culture diverge from the military’s conceptualisation of culture as a form of soft power in the service of hard power. Nonetheless, the shared idiom should prod us to revise our theoretical and



explanations of translation in order to account for the actual history of translation in our times – and it is a history dominated not by literary questions or philosophical discussions about the possibility of meaning, but by military strategy, investment, training and use. It suggests that we should expand our view of translation to include the fact that translation activities are part of armed conflict, dispossession and mass human rights abuses. It means creating more room at the table of translation so that the masked figure of the interpreter might take her place next to the bookish translator.

### Armed worlds, armed words

[Iraqi] Woman: Makoo shee elkoom ehna! Roohoo!  
 Kev [American soldier]: What are you telling him?  
 Woman: Me sawaine shee ghalatt. Roohoo!  
 Musa [Iraqi translator]: I'm telling him what you said!  
 Kev: What the fuck?  
 Musa: I'm translating! (Joseph 2012, 18–19).

Vincent Rafael has argued that 'translation historically has served as an instrument of domination under colonial rule', in part by overwriting native languages and compelling the colonised to 'speak up' toward 'an overarching official language' (Rafael 2007, 241). But, he insists, 'translation not only erects hierarchy; it can also overcome its distinctions'. In his account, these highly ambivalent contexts create an unsettled and unsettling image of the terp as a target and terrorist, a figure as dangerous as she is vulnerable:

Faced with the need to depend on such an other, one responds with ever intensifying suspicions. Such suspicions repeatedly trigger racial insults, often escalating into violence and, in some cases, murder, thereby stroking even more suspicions. Iraqis see in the translator one of their own used against them, a double agent who bears their native language now loaded like a weapon with alien demands. For the U.S. soldier, the indispensability of interpreters is also the source of the latter's duplicity, making them potential insurgents. 'Terps' appear as enemies disguised as friends whose linguistic virtuosity masks their real selves and their true intentions (Rafael 2007, 245).

Rafael goes on to conclude, 'The task of the translator is thus mired in a series of intractable and irresolvable contradictions. It begins with the fact that translation itself is a highly volatile act'.

'Volatile' aptly describes the drama that arises between the characters of the American soldiers and their Iraqi interpreter, Musa, in Rajiv Joseph's remarkable 2009 play, *The Bengal Tiger in the Baghdad Zoo*. The impossibility of 'full translation' is one of the major themes of the play, and major passages of dialogue take place wholly in Iraqi Arabic, without the aid of subtitles. In other scenes, Joseph explores the untranslatability of non-semantic aspects of communication – how, in embodied usage, the meaning of words and phrases cannot be rendered as a solely linguistic text, or without reference to the social context of interpersonal communication and address. In this scene, Musa attempts to use the word 'bitch':

MUSA: 'Knock knock.' 'Who's there?' 'Operation Iraqi Free-dom.' 'Operation Iraqi Freedom who?' 'Operation Iraqi Freedom ... bitch.'  
 (Musa stares at the words, shakes his head, frustrated, confused. He flips through the dictionary.)  
 'Bitch' ... 'Bitch' ... 'Operation Iraqi Freedom, bitch'

(He finds the word. Reads it. Frowns and shakes his head and puts the book aside. Kev enters carrying a huge amount of combat gear. He puts it down and catches his breath. Musa stares at him. Kev stares back.)

What is ‘bitch’?

KEV: What?

MUSA: ‘Bitch.’ What is ‘bitch’?

KEV: Are you calling me a bitch?

MUSA: No. I am asking you what ‘bitch’ means.

KEV: So why you calling me a bitch, bitch?

MUSA: I want to know what it means. ‘Bitch.’ The word. I look it up in the dictionary.  
(Kev starts donning his gear.)

KEV: You’re the terp. (Joseph 2012, 13)

The scene hinges on the translatability/untranslatability of an aggressively misogynistic American idiom. For the knock-knock joke to seem funny, the listener must be willing to identify with a position of uncontested dominance, with the notion that the knocker will blow down the door whether or not the person inside likes it. ‘Bitch’ is the name of the one on the receiving end of this relation; it is to be dominated, occupied and, most of all, a woman. Importantly, it does not matter if the person on the inside understands the joke or not, since the door is going to open anyway. As Musa struggles to grasp the meaning of the words, most of the communication in the scene takes place on an extra linguistic level, in the fidgeting, embodied discomfort of the actors on stage. It is only when Musa and the American soldier begin to talk about *The Fast and the Furious* that they communicate. The culture of Hollywood car movies is the real language they share. Through such interactions, the playwright explores the mix of intimacy, dependence, admiration and resentment that arises between the American soldiers, their Iraqi collaborators, and the Iraqi civilians they encounter.

What is most striking about Rafael and Joseph’s accounts of Arabic–English translation is that they both approach the problem by way of the figure of the *interpreter*. In this sense, they diverge somewhat from contemporary scholarship on Arabic–English translation, where discussion has long revolved around textual histories of Orientalism, imperialism and censorship (see e.g. Aboul-Ela 2001; Booth 2008, 2010; Clark 2000; Dallal 1998; Elmarsafy 2009; Jacquemond 2004; Said 1990). Given that as a topic translation has largely belonged to literary studies, contemporary academic conversations about Arabic–English translation approach it from literary concerns. In this regard, we might consider Shaden Tageldin’s *Disarming Words*, which explores the intricate affective investments of Egyptian writers and translators operating in the shadow of European empires. Tageldin captures the tangles of civilizational desire and cultural regard in colonial Egypt, and charts how these produced psychic ties that permeated the translational public spheres where colonisers and colonised mixed and mingled. Her account effectively picks apart the borders of East and West, Egypt and Europe, Self and Other in order to complicate the narrative of literary cultural exchange taking place within a rubric of asymmetrical colonial power. In doing so, she places translation at the very heart of the colonial encounter. As she puts it:

My efforts in this book to reimagine cultural imperialism as a dynamic of translational seduction rather than unilateral imposition, then, in no way neutralize either the cultural or the corporeal violence that domination has visited upon the colonized. Both violences are



very real, and both continue to haunt (post)colonial consciousness. Nor does the seduction of the colonized foreclose the possibility of resistance (Tageldin 2011, 288).

Tageldin develops the metaphor of seduction in order to conceptualise how translation and cultural exchange help to create Egyptian colonial modernity and thus moves us beyond well-worn colonial and nationalist oppositions so as to conceive of domination and resistance in a more complex fashion. And yet, despite fleeting gestures to ‘violence’ and ‘domination’, these terms perform little work in her analysis, neither as themes nor as critical categories. Given that the focus of Tageldin’s project is on the literary rather than social history of colonisation, this is understandable. Moreover, ‘desire’ and ‘love’ are genuinely apt categories for exploring the topic of translation in *belles-lettres*. Nonetheless, the resulting account glosses over the brutality and fragility of the lives lived by most Egyptian translators during the period she explores.

Reflecting on the contemporary Iraqi context, we are compelled, I think, to look again at the colonial history of Arabic–English translation, this time not shying away so quickly from the violences within it. To do this, we only need to recall that in the case of colonial Egypt (as elsewhere), book translation represented only part of a broader spectrum of translational practices, and bookish men were only a fraction of those who found employment in colonial translation enterprises. Evoking the French Occupation of Egypt, for instance, we remember that there were certainly dozens (probably many scores) of Arab interpreters who, after collaboration with the French occupation, were compelled to join the retreating Republican army as it returned to France.<sup>13</sup> In the years that followed, these same translators lived as semi-pensioned veterans and refugees in squalid quarters of Marseilles, eking out their living as language workers and native informants for Orientalist scholars. Many were recruited again to serve in new wars of conquest in Spain, Russia and Algeria. And then, throughout the Ottoman period, there were the dragomen of the Levant and Mediterranean world, a shifting class of language workers whose negotiation skills, local ties and geographical and political knowledge gained them employment around port cities, embassies and tourist sites. Ubiquitous in travel accounts and consular reports, dragomen were wholly ambiguous characters: they were loved and feared and denounced as apostates and renegades. Importantly, dragomen often drifted into translation work by way of military experience and were frequently heavily armed (see e.g. Lewis 2004; Lonni 2011). These histories recommend that to Tageldin’s metaphor of translational ‘seduction’ we add others, such as ‘precarity’ and ‘conscription’.

### Etymological suggestions

The Arabic idiom of translation – *tarjama* – suggests that when considering translation it is fitting to think of lived lives. To appreciate this, we might contrast it to the basic conceptual figure of translation as it has come down to us from the western traditions: *transport* – to ferry something across a distance. Friedrich Schleiermacher famously described translation as a kinetic form of *delivery* – bringing to the reader to the foreign author, or bringing the foreign author to the reader (Schleiermacher 2000). To the extent that we recognise the Latin *trans* (across) + *latus* (carried) in ‘translation’, we imagine translation to be the task of fetching from or carrying to, or more simply as movement back and forth from source to target. So developed is this trope of movement that some describe translation as a form of endless migration, and a permanent state of motion. In this way, translation becomes a privileged metaphor for modernity, cosmopolitanism and exile.

Idiomatically, translation also has the broader meaning of interpretation, whether this takes place between languages or registers or speakers. Indeed, long before the word ‘translation’ was used, one discussed the conversion of tongues in the language of ‘interpretation’. To translate in this sense means to rephrase, to explain or to say things again, but in another way, so that they might be better understood. When speaking of interpreting between aesthetic media or instruments, it is the performative, contingent aspect of the action that is emphasised: a song as rendered in painting, for example, or a composition for the cello as played on the oud. The root trope of *interpretation*, also given to us through the western traditions, suggests the *spreading of something between* source and target, perhaps the advancing of a loan between author and audience, between text and context. To interpret is to serve as intermediary – as go-between, disseminator or pawnbroker – someone who gets between this and that. As translator, the interpreter is chiefly a meddler, albeit one who meddles in such a way as to create more meaning, not less.

‘Translation’ means a lot of things, all having to do with the production of meaning through exchange between (or within) languages (and dialects and registers), even if the goals, methods and standards of such exchange have themselves changed over the centuries. While it is now conventional and correct to translate the Arabic word *tarjama* as ‘translation’, that choice fails to render the ways these two words diverge from one another, both in terms of their histories and in terms of their respective semantic fields. First, it has only been during the last hundred years that *tarjama* became the predominant Arabic word for translation, since in earlier periods, words such as *naqal* (to render, transmit, transcribe) and *hawwal* (to transform, transfer, transcribe) were widely used in this sense. Classical dictionaries, such as *Lisan al-‘Arab*, link the noun *tarjama* and verb (*tarjam*) with another noun, *turjuman* (also *tarjaman*) – an interpreter of speech, or one who renders speech from one language to another. From here, cognates of the Arabic root ‘t-r-j-m’ entered the lexicons of other Muslim tongues – Persian, Turkish and Urdu. More broadly, *turjuman* connotes a guide, as in Ibn ‘Arabi’s collection of poems, *Turjuman al-ashwaq* (Interpreter of Desires), which guides the reader through various shades and levels of Sufi love for the divine. With special reference to the possibility of translating between liturgical and civilization languages, we might dwell on a translation of famous lines from the eleventh poem of this collection:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim’s Ka‘ba and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Qur’an

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my religion and my faith (Ibn al-‘Arabi 1978, 67).

Fittingly, when the allegorical aspects of his *ghazls* upset religious scholars, Ibn ‘Arabi was compelled to write a commentary – a *turjuman* to the *Turjuman*.

Yet *tarjama* connotes something unhinted at by the Latinate traditions: a genre of writing about important individuals – religious leaders, political figures and scholars. More than being a linguistic interpretation, a *tarjama* signifies the biography of a person (‘Tardjama’). In the classical period, this genre of writing was composed in the third person and, importantly, did not inquire explicitly into the inner life of the person. Rather, what was emphasised were the deeds and words of the figure, with special attention to

how they revealed the moral character of the subject of the *tarjama* – something that could only be reflected in the judgments of his or her peers, students and community. Accordingly, the function of the moral character of *sources* within *tarjama* writing is paramount. With its explicit formal foregrounding of sourcing techniques, the *tarjama* strove to present *verifiable* examples of virtuous (or at least influential) lives as attested to by witnesses who themselves were morally credible. Put differently, of the various genres of biographical writing in Arabic, *tarjama* signals its veracity by way of explicit, known conventions – a faithfulness toward the subject of the account, toward the rules governing historical evidence and toward the understanding that when all is said and done, the moral value of an individual life will be determined by the judgment of one's community, not one's self. As a result, when autobiographical writing – self-*tarjama* – emerged in the Arabic literary tradition, it was in relation to these standards of moral judgment (Reynolds 2001, 42–3).

For some reason, this meaning of *tarjama* – the appraisal or interpretation of a moral life – has become somewhat obscured in the modern era. While in the classical period, a *mutarjim* (the active participle of the word) referred to a biographer, at some point during the colonial era it chiefly came to mean 'translator'. Whereas in the classical period, *mutarjam* (the passive participle) indicated, mainly, someone whose life has been the subject of this genre of writing, in contemporary usage it refers merely to something that has been translated. This modern lexical shift should recall for us the words of one classical commentator on al-Hariri's *Maqamat*, who, according to the lexicon *Muḥit al-muḥit*, insisted that *mutarjam* means 'confused' (Lane 1863, 302).

Speaking of confusion, there is some disagreement about the provenance of the word itself. Ibn Manzur's thirteenth-century lexicon argued that the 'ta' in *tarjama* was not part of its root. Al-Azhari's lexicon, *Tahdhib al-lughā*, asserted that it was a prefix added onto the root 'r-j-m'. As is well known, *rajam* means, primarily, to throw stones in a certain way so as to injure or kill the one struck by them. And the Devil earned the epithet *al-Rajim* precisely because he is the one cursed to be smitten by stones. *Lisan yarjum* suggests a tongue that is chaste (or copious), but *rajam bi-l-ghayb* (or *bi-l-zunn*) means to cast about for what is missing, or for a thought that is not manifest. In other words, it means to conjecture or guess. Here, we return to interpretation from an unexpected side door: *tarjama* might refer to the rendering into language that which is either not in language, or that which is not yet intelligible.

However, these explanations were not universally accepted. In his fourteenth-century lexicon, *al-Misbah al-munir*, Ahmad bin Ali al-Muqri al-Fayyumi disputed this, noting that the word was a quadrilateral one. Modern scholars of Semitic languages agree, telling us that *tarjama* is borrowed from the Aramaic (or Syriac) *targm*, meaning 'to interpret'. *Targumim* are the canon of post-Exilic translations, interpretations, and rephrasings of the Hebrew Bible in Aramaic, mainly from Mesopotamia (Lewis 2004, 19).

Is it significant that, whether in English and Arabic, the vocabulary of translation/*tarjama* is borrowed from other languages? In that borrowing, to maintain an image of the word in its original, is in a sense to *decline* to perform the act of translation most narrowly defined, it does seem so. In both cases, the very vocabulary for domesticating foreign words marks a refusal to do just that. There is more to it, of course. In both cases, the vocabulary around the concepts of translation and *tarjama* developed around a fixed, shared point of reference spanning across languages. Translation, like *tarjama*, becomes a lexical site of shared value, of rough equivalence, between otherwise incommensurate languages.

As it turns out, *tarjama* and translation are linked by more than the fact that each represents an unwillingness (or inability) in both English and Arabic to translate foreign words that have to do with translation. In fact, it is not fully clear whether *tarjama* is itself completely foreign to the English language. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word has been a rich source for wholesome English words, and its cognates have entered the language no less than three times since the last Crusade:

- (1) c. 1300. The first time *turjuman* steals across the Anglo-Saxon border, it is in the guise of **dragoman** (plural: dragomans or dragomen) and its many variants: druggerman, drogueman, drogeman, drug-man, etc. This word refers to an interpreter, translator or guide who works specifically in Arabic-, Turkish- or Persian-speaking countries. Dragoman comes from Old French and Spanish variants – dragoman, dragomanno – of the medieval Latin dragumannus. In the late seventeenth century, Dryden refers to a ‘druggerman of heaven’ in *Don Sebastian*. Later, in the nineteenth century, Sydney Smith talks about an ‘ostentatious drogueman.’ As these last citations suggest, the homophonic possibilities of this borrowing might give rise to an understanding of translation as a pharmakon – that is, a poison or cure – or a consciousness-altering substance. By this token, translators are pushers.
- (2) 1485. The second moment of infiltration was in the guise of the word **truchman** and its variants: tourcheman, trunchmen, trouchman, troocheman, trudgeman, truch-man, etc. This time, it meant an interpreter in the general sense, and derived from another medieval Latin rendering, turchemannus, which comes into Spanish as trujaman. In French, it first appears as trucheman, though now the conventional spelling is truchement. William Caxton, who established the first printing press in England, uses the word in his 1485 work, *Paris and Vienna*: ‘Thenne sayd parys vnderstondeth he mouryshe and they sayd nay but..yf he wold speke to hym they should find tourchemen ynough.’ (Translation from the English: ‘Paris then asked: “Does he understand Moorish?”’ And they answered, ‘No, but speak to him and he will interpret sufficiently.’) Related words: a female interpreter is a truchwoman, and a truch sprite is a spirit that acts as a messenger.
- (3) 1587. The third time the English borrowed the word, they reached past the Arabic word to the Aramaic root from which it derives: targm. Targum is also a verb, denoting the act of interpreting or summarising Scriptures in the manner of the Targums. To restate, a targum is a paraphrase.

The history of *tarjama*’s second life in English confirms that it is easy for translators to borrow and transpose words from other languages, especially when it comes to translating words about language and translation itself. What does this teach us about the people who put *tarjama* into English circulation? It suggests at least two things: either they were lazy or they were mischievous, passing off foreign currency as if it were legal tender. The truth is, though, they were doing what translators have always done. This brings us to the crux of the issue: when we speak of translation, we are speaking of translators and their lives. The word *tarjama* reminds us of this, just as the English borrowings underscore the crossings and recrossings of borders entailed in the life of the dragoman.

## Dragomen

A study of the condition of the language-working class in the eastern Mediterranean in the nineteenth century would definitely begin under the shadow of the Italian linguistic accident, *traduttore, traditore*. Among the many kinds of translators we might consider, three stand out – collaborators, renegades and invisible men – and each of them raises its own set of concerns about fidelity and betrayal.

We would also do well to remember that there is no empire that has not relied on the service of translators (see e.g. Rafael 1993). Such collaboration was central to the modern colonisation of the Arab world, in nineteenth-century Egypt and Algeria as in twenty-first-century Iraq. As nationalists like to remind us, collaboration is another word for betrayal and treachery – not only of languages and texts, but of *communities*. But, should we really let them have the last word on the matter? Anthropologists Talal Asad and David Scott have developed the concept of conscription to describe the confined range of options available to those on the receiving end of western imperial projects (Asad 1992; Scott 2004). As Asad and Scott show, the language of ‘choice’ is too crude to describe the context presented by colonial modernity, where the colonised are given the option of accepting a new calculus of power or dying in the attempt to resist it. Those who work for colonial enterprises make their decisions under extreme duress. Yet their labour is so necessary. Translators – that is, dragomen – have thus always occupied the centre of the colonial and postcolonial Arab world.

Yet there have been times in history when translators were considered not just treacherous, but also dangerous. During the nineteenth century, for instance, many Europeans hired the dragomen of the Ottoman Empire not just for their knowledge of language and local custom, but also because they were heavily armed and had a reputation for knowing how to throw their weight around in dangerous situations. Illustrations and photographs of the era show bandoliered translator-guides, bristling with rifles, pistols and knives as they offer their services in the markets of Sarajevo, Istanbul, Damascus, Jerusalem and Cairo.

If travel accounts and consular reports of this period are to be trusted, this generation of translators-for-hire struck fear not only in the hearts of bandits and unruly natives, but also in the hearts of those Europeans who hired them. To take one example from the early 1800s, the French Consul in Alexandria, Bernardino Drovetti, complained bitterly about an unruly dragoman named Joseph (also known as Yusuf).<sup>14</sup> Drovetti was a Piedmontese to whom the French colonisation of Italy had been kind. While working as mediator between the French government and Egypt, Joseph had been playing each side off the other, and enriching himself in the process. At some point, his employers began to suspect this. Presumably, it was not a simple thing to fire a dragoman such as Joseph. He was not only connected through his work as middleman to powerful figures in the local country, but also had a reputation for settling disputes in a rough fashion. These were difficult times. France, in turmoil, was attempting to rebuild relations with the country it had just tried, but failed, to colonise. Egypt itself was in turmoil, in no small part because of the bloody catastrophe of being subjected to French revolutionary violence. In any case, the French mission, headed by the Piedmontese, had no choice but to use intermediaries sensitive to local custom. In such conditions, free-agent translators such as Joseph enjoyed a distinct advantage for a while. Indeed, he was not the only translator European consuls had such complaints about. But this balance was about to change for good. By 1806, a French national, the Orientalist scholar Asseline de Cherville, was employed as official dragoman at the

French Consulate in Alexandria. Soon, other European powers would follow suit when it came to diplomatic missions, appointing trained nationals for positions of translation on the assumption that only they were trustworthy enough for the job.

Where did translators like Joseph/Yusuf come from? Some dragomen were born into the job. In the Ottoman court, certain Armenian, Jewish and Greek families produced more than their fair share of official translators. It is no accident that the corps of official translators in the nineteenth century tended to come, almost entirely, from these ethnic and religious minorities. Rarely does a European account describe a meeting with the Sublime Porte, Mehmed Ali or other nineteenth-century potentates without some mention of the wily Levantine translators attending the interview.

Other dragomen were not born, but self-made. Hundreds of the French republican conscripts who had deserted the army stayed behind in Egypt, converted to Islam, married locally and learned Arabic and Turkish. More than a few, after serving in the Ottoman and Egyptian armies, began to offer their interpretive services to the court, the new armies or European visitors. Here the account of an Italian from Ferrara is germane (*Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Giovanni Finati* 1830). Conscripted by the French Army, Giovanni Finati attempts desertion a number of times. Finally, while serving on the Dalmatian coast, Finati walks over Ottoman lines and surrenders to the local Pasha. After converting to Islam, he flees the Balkans to Egypt, where he serves in Mehmed Ali's army in a number of campaigns. After tiring of this work in the 1810s, he eventually comes into the employ of European travellers – including Giovanni Belzoni, another Piedmontese remaking himself in Egypt – who prize him for his knowledge of languages, local custom and geography. He eventually returns to England, where he settles with his last patron, William John Banks. Finati tells a story of shifting identities – from Piedmontese peasant to Republican soldier to Egyptian mercenary, from Christian to Muslim and back again. Historically, European renegades – named so for having *renounced* Christianity to live as Muslims – had few paths to choose from: piracy, mercenary work and, of course, translation. Finati's story shows how entangled these various careers could be. It seems fitting that we do not have the original Italian text of Finati's account, but rather only its English translation, which Banks admits is a paraphrase, or *targum*.

What made non-Muslim Ottoman subjects and European renegades uniquely qualified to dominate the mediation between an expansive, imperial Europe and a shrinking Ottoman Empire? Each group had autonomous interests that allowed them to be seen as neutral. Europeans and Ottoman elites alike assumed that Greeks, Jews and Armenians had ambitions that diverged both from those of Muslim Ottomans and those of Christian Europeans. These translators were feared and resented not because they were seen as working for the enemy, but rather because they did not hide the fact that they were working *for themselves*. Here we arrive at the core of the problem posed by translators, and what strikes fear in the hearts of those who have to depend on their services during fraught times. It is the terror of knowing that there is no such thing as neutral mediation. It is the knowledge that the agent standing between you and the source language has an agenda that is not your own. Add to this anxiety a second created by the knowledge that the translator works for a wage and that he has a professional interest in making sure his services are indispensable to all parties concerned. In other words, though he is paid to help people communicate, the dragoman has a direct interest in making sure that different parties are never able to communicate without him.

When it comes to books, the most ubiquitous translator is the one who is never there because he has been disappeared. By this, I am referring to how – in colonial-era travel accounts, contemporary media coverage or even academic writing on the Middle



East – the role played by the translator is so often obscured. For instance, rarely did Grand Tourists in the nineteenth century Levant learn enough Turkish, Modern Greek or Arabic to get by independently. Yet, relying on their published accounts, you might easily assume they conversed with natives without the aid of intermediaries.

This is not an issue of past history either. With notable exceptions, American journalists based in the Middle East do not know the languages of the countries on which and from which they report – and this is considered *normal*. The many local stringers on whose interpreting skills they rely were, until recently, very rarely acknowledged. While the career paths of journalists might explain their lack of linguistic skills, there are no explanations for the fact that more than a few western scholars have spent their entire careers studying the Middle East but have poor grasp of the languages there. Again, you might not realise this fact because it is largely hidden. In hiding it, they also have to hide their complete reliance on translations. The translator vanishes (Venuti 1995).

Conversely, those travellers, journalists and academics who do know the languages of the Middle East often prominently advertise that fact. Bernard Lewis, the most prominent contemporary academic champion of military intervention throughout the Muslim world, is famous for this. Virtually everything Lewis has written begins with the etymological discussion of a key word or concept. As Edward Said astutely observed, Lewis often reduces complex historical and cultural scenes into words that he defines by static, root meanings.<sup>15</sup> But the more obvious point, Said notes, is how the claim of language command serves to augment Lewis's authority as a cultural and political commentator. Indeed, Lewis has always gone out of his way to show his mastery of the language – from his first publication, a lexicon of Arabic political language commissioned while he was serving in the British military occupation of Mandate Palestine, until his recent *From Babel to Dragomans* – precisely to suggest that, steeped in the original, he has no need of translators. Fouad Ajami is equally emphatic on this subject. In a note on translation that prefaces his *Dream Palaces of the Arabs*, he rightly boasts about the heightened sensitivities that native speakers have to the nuances of Arabic. For this reason, Ajami writes in this preface, he relies on himself for translations. 'It is a cliché', he admits, 'that translation is always a betrayal, and I tried to be true to the intent and textual integrity of my sources' (Ajami 1999, xix). In theory, this sounds authoritative, but in practice Ajami fell short. In this same title, Ajami borrowed passages from a translated interview and passed them off as his own.<sup>16</sup>

Why repress the fact of reliance on translators? Some obvious answers present themselves. To admit that we rely on the work of others may be a source of disappointment, especially for those who ascribe to the belief that there is no substitute for working with the original. It is also possible that such anxiety has to do with a sensitivity about the destabilising mediatory role played by translators.

Thus, we return to resentment – that corrosive affect that produced within relationships characterised by a complex blend of intimacy and antagonism, dependence and competition, trust and fear. The conscripted translator, the renegade free-agent translator, the native informant, the terp, the stringer – each is resented because of the confusion they pose to claims of self-reliance, and to neat divisions of identity and interest. The invisible translator is consequently the purest expression of our resentment for translators – the one whose services are begrudged because they are so necessary, because they remind us of the fact that our understanding is borrowed from others.

In the pages above, I have argued that if we seek to make sense of the actual dominant translational practices of our present – practices that suggest translation is not just a means of understanding but also of domination – then we need to open up beyond questions of the text

to consider also the *lives* of translators and interpreters. Even so, there are many examples of a more purely textual nature that show how translations – even literary translations – have a corrosive, rather than empathic effect on people's lives. But perhaps no story is better than how, during the first weeks following the collapse of the Baathist state in Iraq, US soldiers – steeped in Hollywood and Disney traditions of the Arab world – began referring to Iraqi looters as 'Ali Babas'. We should emphasise what was strange about this designation: Ali Baba, the protagonist of that story, discovers the secret hideout of a murderous gang of 40 Arab thieves, steals from them and then is saved by the help of his slave girl, Murjana. In the original, Ali Baba is presented as if he were not himself a thief; in this US military redeployment of the story, all the other thieves are apparently forgotten, leaving only Ali Baba as the figure of the thief.<sup>17</sup> We might condemn the cliché, invented by occupation soldiers who, in the early months of the war, referred to Iraqi men as 'Ali Babas' and 'Hajjis', and women as 'Hajji girls'. But we cannot fail to notice that they mark an intercultural, translational *attempt* to take words from Arabic and to redeploy them in order to communicate with native Iraqis. The soldiers who talked this way may not have cared whether occupied Iraqis liked being called these names, but they knew – or they imagined – that these expressions would resonate with Iraqis because they knew – or they imagined – that their origin was Arab. The epithet of 'Ali Baba' thus serves to articulate something profound about the confusion among US troops while conducting military policing operations in a civilian population about whose culture and history they knew little. In this context of ignorance, US soldiers might have been commended as they reached for reference points assumed to be shared with the Arab society under their boot. To their credit, Iraqis wasted little time in adopting the same phrase to refer to the Americans, who had, after all, invaded their country in order to steal its oil. Thus, Ali Baba became, for some time, a key part of the language in which Americans and Iraqis spoke to one another about the legitimacy and goals of the US occupation.

It is not an accident that this contemporary topic of conversation would have been distilled from the *Arabian Nights*, for that text has long served as the most important cultural reference work of apparent indigenous Arab authorship informing American understandings of the Arab and Muslim world. One cannot speak of Ali Baba, or the *Arabian Nights* in general, with recalling that these stories, long circulating in the Arab world, took on a new life of their own in Europe through translation. This particular story begins in 1704 with the French Orientalist Antoine Galland who translated stories from an incomplete manuscript known as *Alf layla wa-layla*. The title, of course, refers to 'one thousand and one', a number Galland and others interpreted literally – though we now suppose it was meant figuratively, meaning simply 'very, very many'. This, and the fact that this manuscript contains only 282 nights, led Galland and others after him to go looking for the lost 719 nights. As in the case of *Aladdin et la lampe merveilleuse* and *Ali Baba et les quarante voleurs*, it also led Galland to insert stories of his own probable invention into the text, passing them off as translations from an authentic original (Mahdi 1995). Indeed, as Muhsin Mahdi persuasively argued, so forceful and successful was Galland's project – with original French texts presented as translations alongside French translations of Arabic originals – that it effectively usurped our certainty about what was source and what was target. Once word got out that European readers wanted more *Nights*, it was not hard for booksellers in the Arab world to produce them. Richard Burton, the nineteenth-century English translator of the *Nights*, seems to have found a full 1001's worth, though where and how he found so many we are not yet certain. In time, this vast collection and translation venture in Europe had effectively rejumbeled whatever place the Arabic texts of *Alf layla wa-layla* ever had in Arab culture.

To targum, or recap: when American soldiers and Iraqi civilians refer to one another as Ali Babas, they are recirculating a translational figure whose origins lie not in Abbasid Baghdad, but eighteenth-century France. By way of translation and literary invention, Galland creates a living legacy for Arab-European cultural relations, redeployed over and over – so that, in 2003, it would inevitably become an organic part of the language that Americans and Iraqis spoke to one another. It is difficult, but possible, to see how this language was rooted in a desire to understand. It is much easier to see how it enabled conflict.

And this is the point. Translation may be a path to communication and comprehension, and hence to sympathy and agreement. But these examples from the colonial present imply that translation is also how war is conducted on the ground and how empires dehumanise and despoil. Galland's *Mille et une nuits*, for example, has been at times something like a weapon, an IED with a very long fuse. Like any improvised device, it goes off in many ways, none of them perfect, none fully anticipated. For 300 years, Galland's work has inspired some of the best of Europe's most imaginative humanistic impulses (Warner 2013), and for just as long provided fuel for the vilification of Arab and Muslim Others (Kabbani 2009).

Galland was only one bookish language worker employed along the East/West border. For each Galland, there are many others, some labouring in libraries, but most working in consulates, interrogation rooms and army bases. Too often, we imagine translation to be a lofty enterprise, and we consider only those institutions of the translation landscape—convention centres, universities and museums—that gleam in the sun of understanding. We admire translation when it happens in these venues – and our ears delight at the sound of the world's flags snapping together in the clear breeze. The reality is that most parts of this territory are marked instead by dusty checkpoints where we meet one another in black hoods – dragomen all, doing what dragomen do: cleaning weapons, talking, communicating, understanding. Or perhaps not understanding at all.

The US Army seized Babel in 2003, but by then the archaeological site had become a mass grave. That did not stop us from buying into the Tower's myth, and dreaming of universal language and of mastery through regional (linguistic-cultural) competence. This effort was only the last, most spectacular effort in a series of colonial efforts to rebuild the Tower – here as frontier outpost, border control, there as *aduana* and *douane*, and there again as *hajiz* or *machsom*. Enter the checkpoint, present your papers and see this hall of mirrors we live in, this *mise en abyme* of the dragoman's making, where original faces copy, source meets target, Self encounters Other and the recto folds into the verso. Or is it the Other encountering Self? Such is the truth sprite of colonial history.

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## Notes

1. Despite the promise of the title, Apter's essay does not seriously explore the actual practices of translation at Israeli checkpoints, a topic which deserves study in its own right. Indeed, while the Israel military has a long history of developing networks of collaborators, it has historically avoided using them in public operations (see e.g. Cohen 2008). On the use of Druze translators within the Israeli Army, see Kanaaneh (2009).
2. According to St. Augustine, the 70 interpreters who produced the Septagint translation Hebrew Bible were 'so inspired by the Holy Spirit that many men spoke as if with the mouth of one' (Augustine 1958, 49). In 'Des tours de Babel', Jacques Derrida writes: 'The sacred surrenders itself to translation, which devotes itself to the sacred. The sacred would be nothing without translation, and translation would not take place without the sacred; the one and the other are inseparable' (Derrida 2002, 133).
3. The notion that language is a weapon is often acknowledged by way of contorted 'war-is-peace' language, as in this statement from Representative Todd Akins before the US House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations (2008a): 'As we are seeing on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan today, the skills such as language and cultural awareness are key in reducing violence and establishing the rule of law. For example, the troop surge in Iraq would not have been successful without our troops' effectiveness in implementing counterinsurgency tactics which, at their heart, require the force to understand and respond to the local populace's concerns'.
4. These figures are based on conservative estimates: see e.g. 'Lend Me Your Ears' (2013).
5. The Cold War framework for thinking about language, translation and conflict was unmistakable. Commenting at a military-academic 'conference' on languages, Department of Defense Undersecretary for Personnel and Readiness David S. C. Chu compared 9/11 to the Soviet launch of Sputnik, then went on: 'The terrorist attacks of September 11th, the Global War on Terrorism, and the continued threat to our Homeland have defined the critical need to take action to improve the foreign language and cultural capabilities of the Nation. We must act now to improve the gathering and analysis of information, advance international diplomacy, and support military operations. We must act to retain our global market leadership and succeed against increasingly sophisticated competitors whose workforces possess potent combinations of professional skills, knowledge of other cultures, and multiple language proficiencies' (U.S. Department of Defense, The National Language Conference 2005, ii).
6. The criticism came from within the Department of Defense and from without. For DoD administrators, the shortfall of linguists (across many languages) remained a vexing, massive problem even in late 2008 – that is, many years after the Department began its high-profile recruitment campaigns of linguists: 'The Department appears to suffer from "unfilled needs" for linguists. On the "demand" side, the Department of Defense has identified approximately 33,000 billets that have been "coded" as requiring some degree of foreign language proficiency' (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations 2008b, 23). Also see the US Government Accountability Office Report (2009).
7. Consider the terms of one such job, advertised in 2007:  
Our company, Aegis MEP, is currently hiring individuals fluent in Arabic and English for overseas linguist positions. This position pays from \$144,820-\$186,000 a year. It includes a full Aetna Global Benefits Package, full health insurance for you and your family, a 401 k retirement plan, and preferred status concerning future employment with our company... Requirements: Must be a U.S. citizen or a green card holder. Must be willing to obtain a security clearance. Must be proficient in reading, writing, listening and speaking in Arabic and English. Must be willing to travel overseas, in this case, Iraq. Duties: Provide operational contract linguist support to U.S. Army operations in Iraq. Provide general linguistic support for military operations and interpret during interviews, meetings, and conferences. Interpret and translate written and spoken communications. Transcribe and analyze communications. Perform document exploitation. Scan, research, and analyze foreign language documents for key information. Translate foreign language documents. Identify and extract information components meeting military information requirements. Provide input to reports.  
(<http://www.alliraqjobs.com/job-1064.html> accessed 21 May 2015)

8. For this reason, a 2008 military order banning masks caused panic among the ranks of Iraqi translators (see e.g. Londoño 2008).
9. Again, the rhetoric is one of linguistic and cultural mastery, based explicitly on models developed during the Cold War: 'Developing broader linguistic capability and cultural understanding is also critical to prevail in the long war and to meet 21st century challenges. The Department [of Defense] must dramatically increase the number of personnel proficient in key languages such as Arabic, Farsi and Chinese and make these languages available at all levels of action and decision – from the strategic to the tactical. The Department must foster a level of understanding and cultural intelligence about the Middle East and Asia comparable to that developed about the Soviet Union during the Cold War' (U.S. Department of Defense 2006, 78).
10. A photo from the 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* shows the back of an Arab-American translator with the following caption: 'The U.S. Army is harnessing the diversity of American society by recruiting heritage speakers of priority languages to serve as translators and interpreters' (U.S. Department of Defense 2006, 11).
11. This commercial, along with other recruitment advertisement materials, can be found at: [http://www.allied-media.com/Arab-American/Arabic\\_linguist\\_recruiting\\_services.html](http://www.allied-media.com/Arab-American/Arabic_linguist_recruiting_services.html) (visited 21 May 2015).
12. See, for example, the posts of 'Sam' from Baghdad, whose blog 'Interpreters [sic] Life in Iraq War' is filled with stories of friendship (<http://interps-life.blogspot.com>, accessed 21 May 2015); and 'Iraqi Translator's Life in Iraq and His Experiance [sic] With U.S. Army and Iraqi People' (<http://iraqi-translator.blogspot.com>, accessed 21 May 2015);
13. On the tangled accounts of translators such as Ellious Bocthor, Youhanna Chiftichi, Elias Pharaon, Lotfi Nemr, Gabriel Taouil and Rufa'il Zakhur, the 1801 evacuation of the 'Egyptian Legation' and the 1815 massacre of Marseilles' Egyptian community, see Collier (2011), 46–139. On the Egyptian 'mamelouks' of Napoleonic France, see Grigsby (2002).
14. This story can be found in the archives of the French Foreign Ministry 1804–1812.
15. See Edward Said's comments on Bernard Lewis's etymological method regarding 'revolution' (thawra) and its root (th-w-r) in Arabic, which Lewis associates with 'excitement', 'sedition' and a 'camel rising up': *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 314–5.
16. Compare Ajami's discussion of the Egyptian intellectual Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (213), based on unnamed original Arabic sources, with identical language from an interview conducted by Ayman Bakr and myself: 'Silencing is at the Heart of my Case', *Middle East Report* (November–December 1993), 27–29.
17. During March and April 2003, reports began to surface in the mainstream US press that American GIs were egregiously failing to prevent the widespread looting of Iraqi state ministries and museums, with the notable exception of course of the petroleum ministry, which was immediately secured by US troops and never allowed to be looted. US soldiers were accused at the time as encouraging the looting of some buildings closely associated with Baathist rule, and were even quoted in news sources as telling Iraqis who were looting the national museum, 'Go in Ali Babas, it's yours!' See e.g. Sommerfeld (2003).

### Notes on contributor

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