A Linguistic Approach to Translating the English Past Perfect Aspect into Arabic

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Abstract

The present paper aims at examining the *English past perfect aspect* and its translation into Arabic against empirical data taken from the English novel *The Inheritors* by William Golding, and translated into Arabic by Sameer I. Nassar. It is shown that a number of strategies were followed in rendering the past perfect aspect into Arabic including: *simple past tense,* قد *+ a simple past tense, a simple past verb +* قد *+ a simple past verb, a simple past verb + a simple present verb, and quasi-nominalization*, respectively. Finally, this paper concludes that the translation strategies adopted by the translator failed to convey the adequate aspect in Arabic which is equivalent to the English past perfect aspect.

Keywords: translation, past, perfect, aspect, tense, syntax, Arabic, English

1. Introduction

In light of what Catford (1983) indicated about the process of translation as replacing a "textual material" in the SL with an equivalent one in the TL, it is worthy to point out that providing an adequate equivalent aspect in Arabic when translating the English past perfect aspect has always posed challenges to translators. One of the reasons could be that the past tense and its relevant aspects have been poorly elaborated on in the literature. Generally, the Arabic syntax sheds more light on three tenses, the present, the past, and the imperative without providing clear extensive discussions of their relevant aspects.

1.1 Tense in English

Producing grammatical linguistic utterances facilitates communication as it enhances the flow of meaning. The tense of an action is considered as a crucial factor in linking an action to the time in which it existed.

The distinction between time and tense is necessary as some linguists are unclear about them. Quirk and Greenbaum (1999, p. 40) distinguish between time and tense indicating that "time" is a universal, non-linguistic concept comprising past, present and future; tense, however, indicates the correspondence between the form of the verb and the concept of time.

Jarvie (1993, p. 37) indicates that tense in English signals the time of occurrence of an action. He also points out that aspect points to the time of the start of the action. Jarvie (1993) and Palmer (1971) highlight that "aspect" includes the "progressive" and the "perfective". The combination of both tense and aspect results in 12 tenses in English (Celce, 1999). Celce (1999, p. 110) divides aspect into 4 types: simple, perfect, progressive and perfect progressive. For him, the perfect aspect, which includes the present perfect, the past perfect and the future perfect, when used indicates the relation of action with some other point in time. Graver (2007, p. 75) concludes that the perfect forms express two ideas: "(a) that an action or event occurred before the time indicated by the context or situation: it has happened before a certain time in the past, or it will happen before a certain time in the future; and (b) that this action or event has produced, had produced, or will have produced a result or state of affairs that is relevant to the present situation, was relevant to the past situation, or will be relevant to the future situation".

1.1.1 Simple Past and Past Perfect Aspect in English

1.1.1.1 Simple Past Tense

A basic understanding of the English simple past tense is that it is used for actions completed in the past at a definite time. Consider the following example:

(1) I visited John yesterday.

The simple past tense is also used for actions whose time is not given but which (a) occupied a period of time now terminated; example (2) *I worked in the bank for 5 years*; or (b) occurred in a period of time now terminated; example (3) *My grandfather once saw Queen Victoria*. Finally, the simple past tense is used for a past habit; example (4) *They never drank wine* (Thomson and Martinet, 1980, p. 242).

1.1.1.2 Past Perfect Aspect

The past perfect aspect is formed with *had* and the past participle. This aspect is used for actions which happened before other actions which took place in the past time; example (5) *When Sarah arrived at the party, Paul had already gone home* (Murphy, 1994, p. 30).

The past perfect can be used for an action which began before the time of speaking in the past, and (a) was still continuing at that time, (b) stopped at the time or just before it, and (c) for an action which stopped sometime before the time of speaking. Below are some illustrative examples for a, b, and c, above:

(6) Ann had lived in a cottage for sixty years since she was born.

(7) Peter, who had waited for an hour, was angry with his sister when she eventually turned up.

(8) He had served in the army for ten years, then he had retired and married (Murphy, 1994, p. 30).

1.2 Arabic Tense

In Arabic, however, we can discuss three tenses including the past, which indicates an action which happened before the time of speaking; the present, which indicates an action which happens at or after the time of speaking; and the imperative which indicates a request for an action to take place after the moment of speaking (Elmoukatari, 2007, p. 118; Tahan, 1972, p. 101); see also (Gellati, 1998, p. 45-46) who provides a thorough discussion of the tense system in Arabic.

Hassan (1973, p. 243) discusses tense and aspect in Arabic and points out that Arab linguists have been unable to create crystal clear differences in tense types in the Arabic context.He says that Arabic includes three tenses which are past, present and future (see Al-Saqi, 1977). Hassan (ibid.) indicates that aspect refers to how close, distant, perfective, progressive, and habitual the action is. As for the aspect related to the past tense in Arabic, Hassan (1973, p. 245) provides nine different aspects; one of them which is equivalent to the English past perfect aspect is called the distant complete past aspect and is represented in the formula featuring past form of the verb يكون followed by past form of the main verb; the formula is كان فعل.

Adding to what has been propounded by Hassan with regard to the blurry image Arab linguists have for tense, Aziz (1989) indicates that the Arabic tense includes the imperfect tense and the perfect tense. The imperfect tense is used to convey the idea that an event or an action is not completed yet (e.g., يخرج). The perfect tense, however, indicates a complete action (خرج). Consider the following illustrative examples:

(10) دخلت الغرفة وهو يغني.

(10. a) I entered the room while he was singing.

In the above example, the Arabic verb (يغني) refers to the past tense because it takes time reference from (دخلت) which denotes past time (Aziz, 1989, pp. 44-45).

As for reference to the distant past in Arabic, Al-Matlabi (1986, pp. 245-247) points out that the Arabic " كان فعل"denotes this aspect. This view conforms to Hassan's (1973) viewpoint when he studied the past tense and its relevant aspects. The formula "كان فعل" indicates that the action is perfective in the past and "كان" in the above formula functions as an auxiliary verb. Consider the following illustrative example:

(11) "وحملناه على ذات ألواح ودسرتجري بأعيننا جزاء لمن كان كفر" (SuraYunis, Aya 98)

In the above Aya, there are two actions that took place in the past tense. The action which happened first is expressed using "كان" + past form of the verb "يكفر"

1.3 Translating Tense

Translating the English past perfect aspect into Arabic involves lack of grammatical formal equivalence between

the two languages. As a pioneer in a linguistic theory of translation, Catford (1965, p. 27) proposes the notion of shift in translation which implies leaving the formal equivalence when rendering from source language into target language. So, when there is no formal linguistic equivalence between the source language and the target language, a shift is opted for (see also Munday & Hatim, 2004, p. 26). Catford (ibid.) suggests "level shift" to handle issues related to grammar and lexis.

Newmark (1988) discusses issues related to grammar which involve a change in the grammar from the source language into the target language and called them "transposition" which could exist between languages and proposed a model for handling certain grammar related issues.

Grammar governs the combination of linguistic units including words and phrases (Baker, 2001, p. 83; Iver, 1981). Baker states that "… in translation, grammar often has the effect of a straitjacket, forcing the translator along a certain course which may or may not follow that of the source text as closely as the translator would like it to" (2001, p. 85).

Ghazala (1995, p. 69) propounds that what poses problems to translators is that English has fourteen aspects whereas Arabic includes only two tenses (see Hassan, 1973 above). Ghazala's viewpoint is deemed misleading to translators as he overlooked the difference between tense and aspect in Arabic and how they are similar to or different from English tense and aspect.

On the other hand, Farghal and Shunnaq (1999, p. 79) propose that, in Arabic, the meaning of the past perfect aspect can be expressed by using the past form of the Arabic verb (يكون) + (قد) + the simple past form of the main verb. Consider the example below:

(9) The rain had stopped by the time the class was over.

(9. a) كان المطر قد توقف عندما انتهت المحاضرة. (.ibid)

The above translation strategy suggested by Farghal and Shunnaq occurred in this study and came third in frequency when rendering the English past perfect aspect into Arabic. But, the formula suggested by Farghal and Shunnaq above includes the emphatic particle قد which is used in Arabic to emphasize an action hence their suggested formula may be considered adequate only if the English past perfect aspect sentence is emphasized.

As we can see from the introduction above, we could conclude that, syntactically, there is harmony and concordance between the English and Arabic past perfect aspect. Thus, when it comes to rendering the English past perfect tense into Arabic, the translators' tendency to fall back on different inadequate translation strategies is unjustifiable.

1.4 Hypotheses

In light of the discussion exhibited in the introduction above, the present study provides the following hypotheses:

• Translating the past perfect aspect from English into Arabic is very challenging.

• Attempts to render the past perfect aspect into Arabic will feature several translation strategies.

• Providing adequate translation equivalence for the English past perfect aspect in Arabic is a difficult task.

The above hypotheses draw upon the blurry image of the Arabic tense and aspect as they have not been made crystal clear to learners of Arabic syntactic and grammatical system. This study aspires to clarify the concepts of aspect and tense in both English and Arabic in order to help translators approach this syntactic area confidently proposing the most adequate equivalence, particularly, when rendering the English past perfect aspect into Arabic.

2. This Paper

The translation of the English past perfect aspect into Arabic is under-researched field of knowledge hence the significance of this study. The present paper aims at investigating the translation of the past perfect aspects from English into Arabic as they naturally occur in an English text. This paper, also, investigates the linguistic strategies that the translator falls back on when encountering sentences featuring the past perfect aspect and the kind of procedure the translator resorts to while rendering the past perfect aspect.

2.1 Material

The present paper checks 63 sentences containing past perfect aspects. All of these sentences were taken from *The Inheritors* novel written by William Golding which was translated into Arabic by Samir I. Nassar, a professional translator specialized in literary translation.

2.2 Results

This paper shows that the translator employed translation replacements as manifest in five main strategies when rendering the past perfect aspect into Arabic, these are:

1)   past perfect aspect into simple past;

2)   past perfect aspect into قد + simple past;

3)   past perfect aspect into simple past + قد + simple past (i.e., the Arabic verb كان + قد + simple past);

4)   past perfect aspect into simple past + قد + simple present (i.e., the Arabic verb كان + simple present); and

5)   past perfect aspect into quasi-nominalization (i.e., the Arabic verb كان + a noun).

Table 1 below shows the frequency of each strategy used by the translator when rendering the English past perfect aspect into Arabic.

Table 1. Frequency of each strategy as appeared in the translation

Strategy	**No.**	**%**
Simple past	49	77.7
قد + simple past	5	8
Simple past (كان) + قد + simple past	4	6.3
Simple past (كان) + simple present	3	4.7
Quasi-nominalization	2	3.3
Total No. of renderings	**63**	**100%**

As noted in table 1 above, the translation strategy of rendering the English past perfect aspect into Arabic "simple past" tense came first with 77.7% of the renderings. This could be attributed to lack of knowledge of the most adequate equivalence to the English aspect. However, the least frequently used strategy is "quasi-nominalization" with only 3.3 % of the renderings.

2.3 Analysis and Discussion

As the results of the study show, translating the English past perfect aspect topped the most frequently used strategies whereby 77.7% of the renderings featured this strategy. The frequency of translating the English past perfect aspect into Arabic قد + simple past, simple past + قد + simple past, and simple past + simple present is similar being 8%, 6.3%, and 4.7% respectively. The lowest frequency, as mentioned above, is that of translating the English past perfect aspect into Arabic quasi-nominalization.

2.4 The Five Main Strategies

2.4.1 Simple Past

This strategy turned to be the most common one when translating the English past perfect aspect into Arabic viz. 77.7% of the renderings featured involved this strategy. This strategy features simple past tense. By way of illustration, consider the following examples below:

(12) Oa had waited for them.

(اوا) **انتظرتهم**.

(13) She looked as Fa had looked.

ونظرت كما نظرت (فا).

(14) He had turned again and started to run up the gully.

استدار ثانية وأخذ يجري صاعداً الأخدود.

Arabic simple past is printed in bold for convenience.

It is worthy to point out that when we back translate the suggested translation in the set examples above, for instance, the Arabic simple past tense will become simple past instead of past perfect in English.

2.4.2 قد + Simple Past

The translation of English past perfect aspect into قد + simple past came second in frequency, viz. 8% of the renderings exploited قد + simple past verb. Consider the following illustrative examplesand their translations into Arabic:

(15) […] the old woman had shifted it […]

إن المرأة **قد نقلت** منان النار ...

(16) […] he understood that Ha had gone.

فأدرك أن (ها) **قد ذهبت**.

(17) The other had tugged at the strings.

لقد جذب الآخر الخيوط.

For ease of reference, قد + simple past is printed in bold.

Here, it is worthy to point out that the use of قد followed by past simple indicates an action that happened just before the moment of speaking (see Hassan, 1973; Al Saqi, 1977; Gellati, 1998). Furthermore, in Arabic the use of قد + simple past renders the text more evaluative; consider the back translation of example (17), for instance:
The other did tug the string.

2.4.3 Simple Past + قد + Simple Past

Translating the English past perfect aspect into simple past + قد + simple past into Arabic (see Farghal & Shunnaq, 1999) came third in frequency, viz. 6% of the renderings featured this strategy, This strategy consists of the verb كان + قد + simple past verb. Recognize the following English examples along with their Arabic renderings:

(18) […] the hyenas had gone.

لكن الضباع **كانت قد ذهبت**.

(19) […] if water had taken the log.

إذا **كان** الماء **قد أخذ** الزند.

(20) His belly felt as though he had eaten grass.

أحس بمعدته كما لو **كان قد أكل** عشباً.

The Arabic strategy is printed in bold for convenience.

Though the English sentences are not emphasized, the Arabic formula includes the emphatic particle قد. Hassan (1973, p. 2460) indicates that the above formula is used to refer to a completed action but very close to present.

2.4.4 Simple Past + Simple Present

The frequency of translating the English past perfect aspect into Arabic simple past + simple present came fourth, viz. 4.7% of the renderings exhibited this strategy. This strategy features the verb كان in Arabic which is simple past replacing the verb "be" in English and a present Arabic verb replacing the main verb in English. By way of illustration, consider the following examples below:

(21) The overhang had waited for them.

كان البروز **ينتظرهم.**

(22) The picture was the picture of the time when there had been many people.

لاحت لهم صورة الزمن الذي **كان يعيش** فيه العديد من الناس.

(23) The earth rose and filled the hole, rose still until where Mal had been a little mound in the overhang.

ارتفعت الأرض وملأت الحفرة، ارتفعت أكثر حتى أصبح المكان الذي **كان يشغله** (مال) كومة صغيرة من البروز.

For ease of reference, the Arabic simple past + simple present renderings are bold printed.

In Arabic, the formula featured by this translation strategy is used to describe the aspect of a renewable past action (Hassan, 1973, p. 245).

Interestingly, when we back translate the Arabic renderings into English, the Arabic simple past كان + simple present will become past progressive instead of past perfect. Consider the back translation of example (21) above:
The overhang was waiting for them.

2.4.5 Quasi-Nominalization

Quasi-nominalization proved to be the fifth strategy for rendering English past perfect aspect into Arabic, viz. 3.3% of the renderings used this strategy as equivalents of English past perfect aspect. Quasi-nominalization strategy consists of the verb كان which is a past verb in Arabic and a noun derived from the main verb. Consider the following English examples along with their Arabic renderings:

(24) It had lain in the water.

كان ممتدأفي الماء.

(25) The scattered stones had dropped from the roof.

كانت الحجارة **متساقطة** من السقف.

For ease of reference, The Arabic quasi-nominalization is printed in bold.

3. Conclusions

The present paper deals with the translatability of past perfect aspect from English into Arabic. It has been shown that the translator falls back on various linguistic translation strategies in searching for Arabic natural equivalent for the English past perfect aspect. But amazingly none of the translation strategies provided by the translator has featured the adequate equivalence for the English past perfect aspect which is **كان** + **simple past** (see Hassan 1973, Al Saqi 1977, and Matlabi 1986). The strategies adopted by the translator include *simple past tense,* قد *+ a simple past tense, a simple past verb +* قد *+ a simple past verb, a simple past verb + a simple present verb, and quasi-nominalization*, respectively. The data is taken from William Golding's *The Inheritors*and its Arabic translation الورثة by Sameer I Nassar. In fact there is no definite rule and/or criterion followed when rendering the English past perfect aspect into Arabic. Finally, this paper attempts to exhibit the nature of the past perfect aspect in English and its counterpart in Arabic.

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