Narrating Arabic Translation Online: Another Perspective on the Motivations Behind Volunteerism in the Translation Sector

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Introduction

The translation sector has seen an increase in volunteer translation thanks to crowdsourcing models and collaborative platforms. Social media and other web applications have also played a role in volunteer translation (Desjardins 2017), as has the increasing demand for content produced in other languages (Jiménez-Crespo 2017). The increasing number of volunteer translation organizations, specifically in the digital realm, has drawn attention to the motivations that drive volunteers to lend their time and effort to translation organizations without expectation of remuneration. For example, O’Brien and Schaler (2010), Dolmaya (2012), Dombek (2014), Fuente (2014), and Olohan (2012, 2014) have explored the motivations of volunteer translators from different perspectives in different collaborative translation projects.

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Most of these studies were conducted in the North American and European contexts; it is reasonable to hypothesize that volunteers from other geographic locales might be motivated by different factors. New case studies using different methodologies with different sample populations and materials add nuance and depth to extant studies, thereby resulting in a more holistic understanding of volunteer translation. This chapter examines the motivations of Arabic-speaking volunteer translators who participate in crowdsourced translation projects using a socio-narrative perspective (Baker 2006). Four different Arabic translation organizations serve as case studies: Kalima; the Arab Organization for Translation (AOT); Taghreedat; and Translation Challenge.¹ Kalima and the AOT are traditional state-run translation institutions, whereas Taghreedat and Translation Challenge are translation organizations that mainly operate online to mobilize volunteers. The fact that Translation Challenge alone has succeeded in recruiting 35,000 online volunteers (Emarat-Alyoum 2017a) to collaboratively translate content into Arabic is staggering. High volunteer engagement for crowdsourced translation on digital platforms warrants additional scrutiny.

In this chapter I explore the common discursive narratives about translation in the Arabic linguistic context. Qualitative data extracted from the study of these narratives may help in identifying motivational patterns that support or contribute to non-remunerated translation activity. Recourse to a socionarrative approach (Baker 2006) is justified by the fact that most studies analyzing the motivations of volunteer translators tend to employ surveys and/or interviews. Reliance on surveys and/or interviews exclusively can result in overlooking other fundamental factors that lead volunteers to contribute non-remunerated translation work. Such factors may not always be consciously recognized by the survey participants: what participants think their motivation is may not necessarily be their real motivation, and/or what they indicate as motivation might not be their only motivation. Factors such as activism, ideology, political agenda, and public discourse may be overlooked unconsciously, or even deliberately withheld.

¹The Translation Challenge was a temporary project and the link to the project’s page has since expired. However, information about the Project can be accessed in the 2017 annual report: https://www.almaktouminitiatives.org/en/years-in-review.
or denied. Furthermore, it can be argued that in many cases surveys only prompt a restricted number of potential responses (Oppenheim 1992, p. 114). In contrast, a narrative approach can enhance our understanding not only of emerging volunteer-driven translation projects, but also of the narratives that attract and retain volunteers. A narrative perspective also sheds light on the mission statements of these organizations.

An analysis of the Arabic narratives about translation can help to identify Arabic-speaking volunteers’ backgrounds, the contexts of the Arabic translation projects in which they are involved, and the potential motivating factors that may have driven them to contribute their translations without remuneration (on non-financial reward, cf. Desjardins 2017; Dolmaya 2011). Narratives are understood in this context as dynamic stories about Arabic translation that are not necessarily discrete texts but can be traced to many sources. Translation organizations are influenced by narratives and produce their own narratives; this is sometimes with the intent of legitimatizing their work and attracting volunteers. It is, however, worth signaling that the inclusion and exclusion of translation organizations in the case study corpus also intersects with narrative framing: a researcher’s narratives and the narratives they have been exposed to can influence what organizations they are aware of and have access to (this intersects with the idea of researcher subjectivity).

**Socionarrative Approach in Translation Studies**

The concept of *narrative* exists in many fields, and its definition varies based on the field in which the concept is used. From a literary point of view, for instance, narrative is defined as an optional type of discourse that constitutes a genre (Baker 2006, p. 9). However, for Baker (ibid.) narrative is an “inescapable mode by which we experience the world.” Similarly, Boeri (2009, p. 34) states that narratives are prisms through which we apprehend and construct our vision of ourselves and the world around us. This conceptualization of narrative theory assumes that “people are inescapably embedded in a variety of narratives, and hence that there is no possibility of assuming a totally objective stance” (ibid., p. 30).
While the notions of discourse and narrative may overlap in some contexts in common understanding, narrative is understood in this study as the vehicle to apprehend a given discourse. In order to perceive given information and respond to it, people tend to embed information in their own version of the narrative that varies based on their narrative locations (Baker 2014, p. 67).

Narrative theory in Translation Studies (TS) draws on Sociology to build on existing narrative theories from other fields. Baker (2006) has imported the socionarrative approach from Sociology and Communication Studies into TS. Primarily drawing on works from Fisher (1987, 1997), Bruner (1991), Somers (1994), and Somers and Gibson (1994), the approach posits that people in specific societies have their own personal narratives and they share with the public the narratives through which they understand events. According to Baker (2006, p. 19), narratives are “public and personal stories that we subscribe to and that guide our behaviour.” A narrative, thus, is a constructive instrument and a constitutive element that shapes reality rather than merely describing it. The case studies in this chapter explain how discourses about Arabic translation are narrated and how these narratives may function as one of the motivations that drive volunteers to participate in crowdsourced translation projects.

The integration of socionarrative theories has had a significant impact on translation research (see Harding 2012; Sadler 2017; Jones 2018). Baker (2006, p. 48) argues that translators are key players in any narrative they are involved in, regardless of any claim to neutrality. In other words, translators act in light of the narratives they subscribe to and may re-narrate existing narratives through the act of translation. Baker argues that “whether the motivation is commercial or ideological, translators and interpreters play a decisive role in both articulating and contesting the full range of public narratives circulating within and around any society at any moment in time” (ibid., p. 38). The dynamic aspect of narratives sheds light on the behavior of volunteer translators by conceptualizing them not as “bridges,” but as participants with active roles in producing, circulating, and responding to narratives and information in their communities (Jones 2018). Therefore, not only are translators motivated to
engage with certain narratives, but, because they are social actors, their actions can be guided by the narratives they are acquainted with and/or believe.

The link between Arabic translation narratives and the actions of Arabic-speaking volunteer translators is a compelling research area. Somers and Gibson (1994, p. 41) claim that “everything we know from making families, to coping with illness, to carrying out strikes and revolutions is at least in part a result of numerous cross-cutting story-lines in which social actors locate themselves.” Arabic literature and the discourse on Arabic translation online encompasses many recurrent stories about translation, translation organizations, and translators that are worthy of further consideration. For instance, the story of Bayt al-Hikma\(^2\) (the House of Wisdom) during the Golden Era of Translation (Baker and Hanna 2011) provides a good example of a frequently circulated story about Arabic translation. It is a story of a highly honored institution for translation in Arabic history and is perceived as a role model for contemporary Arabic translation centers and organizations. Therefore, narratives may function as a key element in understanding why people act in a certain way—for example, why they participate in volunteer translation—without expecting rewards.

Nowadays, a large part of the discourse about translation, as well as translation activity itself, takes place on the Internet through social media (Desjardins 2017) and customized crowdsourcing platforms (cf. Jiménez-Crespo 2017). Arabic translation is also narrated online, where modern translation organizations operate and volunteers are mobilized. The socionarrative approach “allows us to piece together and analyse a narrative that is not fully traceable to any specific stretch of text but has to be constructed from a range of sources” (Baker 2006, p. 4). Therefore, a narrative can be located within a single text, a statement, an image or photograph, a website, or in a combination, but the types can also transcend boundaries (Boeri 2009). This approach offers a novel way to explore and discuss translation practices in Translation Studies.

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\(^2\)A historical institution for translation established during the Golden Era of Translation in Arab-Islamic history (661–1258 CE). For further information see Baker and Hanna 2011.
Temporality and Narratives on Arabic Translation

My methodology is guided by Baker’s model (ibid.), a widely used model for narrative analysis in TS (Harding 2012). The model consists of two parts: The first part focuses on narrative typology, while the second focuses on narrative features. Baker (2006, pp. 28–48) lists four types of narratives that construct worldviews and guide the understanding of the lives individuals lead and the events in which they are embedded are: personal narratives, public narratives, disciplinary narratives, and meta-narratives. Personal narratives are the stories we tell ourselves about the world and our own lives; public narratives are the shared stories that appear within social groupings such as families, workplaces, communities, and societies; disciplinary narratives are the theoretical concepts and historical accounts that circulate in academia and fields of knowledge; and meta-narratives are the universal stories “in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history […] Progress, Decadence, Industrialization, Enlightenment, etc.” (Somers and Gibson 1994, p. 61). The second part of the model is premised upon four narrativity features that can be used in analyses. These features are: temporality, relationality, selective appropriation, and causal employment.

In a given narrative, the temporal and spatial order of the elements contribute significantly to the meaning-making process (Baker 2006, p. 50). I have chosen to focus on temporality to identify and analyze my corpus narratives for two reasons. First, time is a key element for making sense of any story, as it functions as a link between events. Furthermore, not only is temporality constitutive of narratives, it also cuts across all other narrativity features to convey meaning (ibid.). Second, translation is a topic associated with a long-lasting debate in the Arab world and has played a major role in cultural and reform movements in Arabic history. For example, Madrasat Al-alsun [School of Languages]³ was established in Egypt in the nineteenth century to train the first generation of Egyptian

³The use of square brackets around inline and displayed quotations henceforth indicates either my own translation of Arabic words and passages that I use in the text, as in this case, or my own translation of the original Arabic quotes.
translators, who were expected to contribute to the state’s modernization project (Jacquemond 2009). The focus on temporality reveals how Arabic translation is narrated as a key activity in the past, a necessary task in the present and a promising vehicle for the future.

**Data Collection and Analytical Method**

For this study, I selected four prominent Arabic translation organizations to analyze recurrent Arabic translation narratives. The dataset includes content about these organizations published on their websites, Wikipedia entries, press content published by Aljazeera.net and Alarabiya.net, and public opinion by way of comments published in newspapers, personal blogs, or on other websites. This data includes content from institutional, individual, and collective agents, which provides a holistic view of public narratives on Arabic translation.

Four organizations were chosen for the role they play in shaping the discourse and narratives around translation in the Arabic world. All four organizations mobilize translators; however, two focus more specifically on a crowdsourced model, while the other two are premised upon a more traditional model, with an in-house translation team. Other criteria that determined the selection of these four organizations include the following:

• volume of translation work,
• availability of source material (data retrieval),
• recourse to volunteer engagement and volunteer labor.

Only high-volume translation organizations were selected because they are more likely to be influential in constructing and/or promoting Arabic translation narratives. The included organizations have consistently published millions of words in the form of books, texts, and audio-visual content. This criterion rules out dozens of translation projects that operate inconsistently, such as university student initiatives, or organizations that do not produce translation output, such as translation awards given to translators by Arab countries. These translation organizations were excluded even though they contribute to the Arabic public narrative
on translation. Based on these criteria, the organizations examined here are:

- Kalima Project
- Arab Organization for Translation (AOT)
- Taghreedat Initiative
- Translation Challenge

Four different types of source content were analyzed. First, each organization’s “About Us” web page, a public narrative; second, Wikipedia entries about the organizations were included as publicly constituted narratives too (although a Wikipedia entry might be published by the organizations’ participants or leadership, it is subject to negotiations with or even contestations by online editors and other users (Jones 2018)); third, textual posts and news reports from Aljazeera.net and Alarabiya.net (chosen because they are considered the largest Arabic news outlets (DPC 2018)). The extracted texts were exported in PDF format to the software I used for the analysis (details will be given below).

Because personal narratives contribute to public narratives and vice versa, it was important to include content produced by individuals. This content was taken from personal online blogs and opinion pieces published in Arabic online newspapers. Each piece was downloaded separately and documented in Atlas.ti. These types of texts were expected to support the analysis, and function as complementary material to explain how Arabic translation is narrated. Disciplinary narratives and metanarratives were not included in the data, simply because I am not dealing with an established concept in a specific domain of knowledge such as Darwin’s theory of natural selection, nor with a universal event such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Restricting the selection criteria to these four sources was practical for this study in order to create manageable, inclusive data from various sources. The data is stored locally in my computer but can be accessed by anyone through the original sources.

Data collection and triaging took place between February 23 and March 28, 2018. I used the internal search tool of the websites as well as
Google’s search engine to collect data (issues related to this method will be addressed momentarily). The search was conducted in Arabic using as many relevant keywords as possible to obtain more results. For example, when searching Kalima Project, I used words and phrases like “مشروع كلمة” [Kalima Project], “كلمة للترجمة” [Kalima for translation], and “ترجمات كلمة” [Kalima translations].

The data-collection process presented a few methodological limitations. For instance, the geographic location (geolocation; IP address) of where Google searches are conducted can impact on search query results. Search engines tend to show the results most relevant to the user’s location. For instance, this research was conducted in the UK, and the results were influenced accordingly. Even though geographic location can be toggled off, there is no guarantee that it will not interfere with search results. Similarly, the internal search tools might vary in terms of quality, and algorithms vary from one website to another. More importantly, search engine results are usually commercially driven (e.g., sponsored content or advertising), and this makes some content more salient in search results compared to other hits. The effects of geolocation, search engine optimization, and paid content were not thoroughly examined, although this would constitute a worthwhile avenue for future research. The type of content also posed a limitation. Though multimedia content (such as video) could have supplemented the data, the scope of the project and its timeline did not allow for this.

The collected data consisted of 23 documents (17,495 words): five documents for each organization, except Taghreedat, for which eight documents were extracted. Table 1 presents an overview of the data.

This data represents a relatively small sample, so generalizations cannot necessarily be made. However, these organizations do represent some of the leading online “voices” in translation in the Arab world; hence in this sense the sample can be thought to be representative.

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4 Since the texts are publicly available, I did not need to gain permission for obtaining data for the research. Also, from an ethical point of view, I ensured that my use of the data does not violate any copyrights and/or restrictions.
Atlas.ti software was used to document the data and analyze the common narratives about Arabic translation. This software is a helpful tool for qualitative analysis and voluminous datasets. It helps in arranging, reassembling, and managing material in systematic ways. Also, it allows the user to code data and perform fully automated searches across one or many documents. The software’s coding feature helped me to group recurrent themes in the fragmented texts in order to piece the narratives together. Once the three recurrent themes on Arabic translation were identified, I traced each thematic narrative using temporality features. This allowed me to organize the narratives into coherent wholes across independent sources.

**Findings**

The data showed that three narratives are the most recurrent in the Arabic discourse on translation: the Golden Era of Translation, the Bridge to Knowledge, and the dearth of Arabic content online.

**The Golden Era of Translation**

Historically, Arabs are credited with establishing the first organized large-scale translation activity, starting during the Umayyad era (661–750 CE) and reaching its peak during the Abbasid era (750–1258 CE), a period known as the Golden Era of Translation (Baker and Hanna 2011). This celebrated period witnessed the establishment of Bayt al-Hikma (the

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**Table 1** Data-collection results, showing number of documents for each source

| Organization | Official Publications | Aljazeera.net | Alarabiya.net | Individual Opinion | Total |
|--------------|-----------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------|-------|
| Kalima       | 1                     | 1            | 2             | None               | 5     |
| AOT          | 1                     | 1            | 2             | None               | 5     |
| Taghreedat   | None                  | 1            | 5             | 1                  | 8     |
| Translation Challenge | 2 None | None | None | 1 | 2 | 5 |
House of Wisdom), the first known and the most important translation institution in Arabic history (ibid.). Data from this study shows that narratives relating to this Golden Era are common. This narrative has been circulated in different ways, with temporality employed for emphasis. In an interview with the director of the AOT about the organization’s 17th anniversary, a journalist acknowledges the Golden Era of Translation:

[These publications may remind us of the Golden Age of Arabic culture when Baghdad and Damascus, in the Umayyad and Abbasid eras, were pioneering capitals in translation from different languages, especially Syriac, Greek, and classical Latin; and when the Arabic and Latin languages were prerequisites for students who wanted to join Oxford University until 1908.] (Khoury 2017)

The interview concludes with the following statement:

[Despite the challenges faced, the organization won Arabic and international prizes that prove its success in the mission to bring back Arabic translation to its golden ages.] (Khoury 2017)

The interview establishes a logical relation between the AOT and what is known as the Golden Era of [Arabic] Translation. The spatial position of the relationship at the beginning and the end of the interview creates a narrative that introduces the AOT as an organization that continues the historic success of Arabic translation. Interestingly, while the narrative links the AOT with a romanticized version of a translation movement that occurred in the eighth century, there have been many successful Arabic translation organizations and initiatives more recently (e.g. in the nineteenth century). Also, what is said about the University of Oxford in support of the narrative is arguably incorrect. Although Arabic was taught at the University of Oxford by English orientalists in the nineteenth century, it is unlikely to have been a “prerequisite” to join the university. However, historical time has been employed here to support the narrative and over-evaluate the contribution of the AOT.
In an article published on Aljazeera.net (Mohammad 2018), the narrative of the Golden Era of Translation was employed again to legitimize AOT projects. The article is about the issues and challenges that Arabic translation and translators face. There are some interesting aspects to note as to how temporality features were utilized to promote this narrative. First, the spatial organization of content is a key element to present the topic effectively. The order of the content prepares the reader to receive the narrative. For instance, the narrative was preceded by a pessimistic view of the status of Arabic translation today compared to what it was during the Abbasid era. Then, the article concludes with an optimistic view of the AOT’s role. The journalist paraphrases Fayez Al-Sayegh, saying:

[He [Al-Sayegh] describes the translation movement in the Arabic nation as deficient, referring to the report of Human Development that states that what has been translated since the Abbasid era until today is five times less than what Spain translates in a year; but what makes one optimistic is that some Arabic institutions, such as the AOT, are considering translation issues …] (Mohammad 2018)

In the quote above, Al-Sayegh was introduced as the head of the Jordan Center for Strategic Studies, and his comment was placed under the subheading “Crisis and Chaos.” This position under a subheading with a negative connotation is supposed to add value to the narrative Al-Sayegh promotes. Time is important in this quote by presenting the positive impact of the AOT using the narrative of the Golden Era of Translation. Regardless of the accuracy of information, Al-Sayegh justifies his opinion using statistics from the Abbasid era. Embedding the Golden Era of Translation in the argument overstates the contemporary low volume of translation and presents it as an enduring problem. Moreover, by using that date as a point of comparison with Spain he further strengthens his argument.

The narrative of the Golden Era of Translation can also be found in the data associated with Kalima, a relatively recent but reputable translation organization. Like the AOT, Kalima uses the narrative of the Golden Era
of Translation to validate its work. Kalima’s “About” page introduces the organization as follows:

[When Europe was drowning in the Dark Ages, the old Arabic civilization was undertaking a pioneering role in translation and publication and introduced translations in all realms of knowledge, because of which humanity has flourished and advanced.] (Kalima n.d.)

[Kalima Project wants to revive that Golden Era of Translation again and reunite the Arabic book industry. This goal will be achieved by bringing together publishers, literary agents, authors, translators, and distributors in order to increase the number of books and choices for Arab readers.] (Kalima n.d.)

Likewise, Kalima’s Wikipedia page also shares traits related to the narrative of the Golden Era (Kalima 2017, para. 2). The page was created in 2012 (five years after Kalima was established) and has since been updated 60 times by Wikipedia users:

[It was launched in 2007 with a core objective to revive the translation movement in the Arab world through translating, publishing, and distributing wide varieties of chosen books from many international languages in different domains.] (Kalima 2017)

This extract was placed under the subheading “History,” and the narrative is again touched upon under the subheading “Background” that was preceded by a nostalgic memory of Arabic translation. The subheadings emphasize the association between a contemporary translation organization, Kalima, and the golden days of the Arabic translation movement. The following quote, however, contextualizes the role of Kalima, which aims to maintain the achievements of Arabic translators:

[Arab scholars contributed remarkably to the Renaissance in Europe through their translations and by preserving the classics of the Roman, the Greek, and the Persian civilizations. However, the Arabic translation movement declined during the beginning of the 11th century.] (Kalima 2017)
The focus here is on the decline at a specific time in history, disregarding later efforts by contemporary translation organizations. The temporal linkage between Kalima and a historic translation movement makes the narrative more effective in legitimizing Kalima’s mission.

Elaph, an online newspaper, published an article about Kalima entitled [“Kalima: A Project to Revive Translation in the Arab World”] (Masad 2007). In spite of slight differences, the article opened with the Golden Era narrative yet again:

[The Abbasid era was truly the time when translation flourished and became prevalent due to the Caliphs’ support. Translators and translation were given a respected status crowned with the establishment of the House of Wisdom…. The same happened to the European civilization when the books of Averroes, al-Khwarizmi, and other figures of the Arabic-Islamic culture were translated. Because translation is considered as key for development and prosperity, Arabs have been trying to bring translation back to its position since the Nahda “renaissance” era either by the translation school established in 1826 or by what the Arab League is doing now.] (Masad 2007)

This excerpt contains references to times and places that contextualize Kalima’s mission. Unlike the other texts that were analyzed in the corpus, it acknowledges other Arabic translation organizations from the nineteenth century onward.

The most recent Arabic translation organization is the Translation Challenge, which was initiated by the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (Emarat-Alyoum 2017a). The organization recruits volunteers to translate texts (with a target of 11 million words) in science and mathematics into Arabic. The analysis shows, here again, implicit recourse to the narrative of the Golden Era in the way that the past and Arabic-Islamic civilization are honored:

[We look forward to forming a team of Arabs who are ambitious to create a better future for education in the Arab World and to bring the Arab World closer to resuming our civilization.] (Translation Challenge 2017)
The call for action in this invitation is built on nostalgia. Reference to past civilization contextualizes the organization as another attempt inspired by the Golden Era. Alatar (2017) posted a blog on the Arageek website urging Arab readers to join the Translation Challenge. In her post, she started by praising the efforts carried out by Arabs in the past:

[The translation movement conducted by Arab Muslims in the seventh century during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods was the first step towards knowledge …] (Alatar 2017)

This narrative is common in Arabic translation discourse. For example, Emarat-Alyoum, a newspaper based in Dubai, published a press release (Emarat-Alyoum 2017b) about the Translation Challenge with an explicit reference to the past to explain how scientific translation is significant for Arabs, hence the Translation Challenge is said to be crucial for a new scientific revolution:

[Today, we celebrate the great legacy that the Islamic civilization left for the whole of humanity … during its golden time that is known for a dynamic and active translation movement…. Thus, the Arabic translation movement led a scientific revolution that enhanced the power and presence of the Islamic civilization.] (Emarat-Alyoum 2017b)

The previous excerpts all reference the Golden Era narrative to talk about translation. Recourse to this narrative seems to act as a form of legitimization, to reinforce the significance and importance of translation, and as a way to entice volunteers who want to be part of the mission of “reviving the Golden Era” and “resuming civilization” as in the narratives employed by Kalima and Translation Challenge organizations respectively.

**Translation as a Bridge to Knowledge**

The second recurrent narrative was that of translation acting as a bridge; as a means to achieve literacy and accrue knowledge in the Arab world. The AOT’s “About” section illustrates this:
It is a result of what the Arab intellectuals have always called a necessary project since translation is a core activity for renaissance…. The establishment of AOT was undertaken after surveying the status of translation in the Arab nation.] (AOT n.d.)

According to this quote, the AOT was created as a result of surveys undertaken by Arab intellectuals. Temporality is indicated by the repeated calls over time for large translation projects that would bridge the knowledge and literacy gaps in the Arab world. Similarly, the data includes an article published on Aljazeera.net in which translation is considered as an essential but unmaintained activity in the Arab world. The article consists of three subheadings: [the status of translation], [lack of cooperation], and [reasons and solutions]. While the tone of the article is negative in general, the role of the AOT seems to be deliberately stated under the third headline, “Solutions,” that concludes the article:

[but the professor of linguistics at Lebanon University disagrees with this [negative] reading [of translation status] and confirms that the movement of Arabic translation is witnessing a renaissance in terms of content, translated titles, and institutional work. He gives an example of AOT that has translated about a hundred titles over six years] (Ashqar 2009)

Despite highlighting the contribution and translation efforts carried out by the AOT, this quote suggests that Arabic translation is recovering from a period of inactivity. In the same article, Alshamy, a language expert in the UN, states:

[Greece with its population of 11 million translates annually five times more than what the Arabic region translates in all domains from all languages] (Ashqar 2009)

Presenting statistics in a time frame, as in the quote above, strengthens the claim of the long-lasting crisis in Arabic translation. In contrast, there is no reference to a specific decade and/or century in which the comparison holds true.

Similarly, Kalima employs the same narrative of translation as a bridge:
Kalima Project was launched to tackle a persistent problem that has endured over 1000 years. It is the shortage of production that the translation movement in the Arab world suffers from. Such a shortage has led to depriving Arab readers of enjoying the works of the greatest authors and intellectuals in history. (Kalima n.d.)

This quote indicates translation is a much-needed resource for obtaining up-to-date information. Translation is considered as a key strategy to access knowledge; without translation, Arabs may fall behind. Furthermore, Kalima’s narrative underestimates the efforts and attempts made during the last thousand years concerning translation. In fact, disregarding preceding projects makes the Bridge to Knowledge narrative sound more appealing. A similar narrative can be found in Kalima’s Wikipedia entry:

The Arabic translation movement declined at the beginning of the 11th century. And since then, only a few valuable books have been translated into Arabic, whereas other countries have enjoyed a bounty of translated and originally written books. Therefore, Kalima attempts to bridge the gap that goes back a 1000 years by financing the translation of many outstanding books from many languages into Arabic. (Kalima 2017)

Although the Wikipedia entry is apparently influenced by the original text published on Kalima’s website, to which it shows remarkable similarity, the page’s history shows that other users have edited the entry. As a result, another temporal dimension can be noticed in the quote above: highlighting the eleventh century as the downturn point for Arabic translation. Moreover, there is a comparison between the Arab world and other countries in terms of translation. This comparison with other places serves the narrative eventually by presenting Arabs as disadvantaged as far as access to knowledge is concerned. The paragraph concludes with the role Kalima has played in changing the status of Arabic translation. The temporal aspects in the entry emphasize the importance of Kalima and justify its work.

The Translation Challenge organization circulates the same narrative when calling volunteers to translate educational content. The open
invitation letter repeatedly states that the organization aims to provide accessible knowledge for Arabs by translating scientific material for educational purposes. This is an excerpt from the letter’s conclusion:

[We look forward to forming a team of Arabs who are ambitious to create a better future for education in the Arab World and to bring the Arab World closer to restoring our civilization.] (Translation Challenge website 2017)

The organization presents translation as a solution that will guarantee a bright educational future for Arabs. Similarly, Alatar (2017) posted an article that begins with an appreciation of the Arabic translation movement during the Golden Era and how it contributed massively to advancing modern science in Europe and the United States. Here is an excerpt from the Translation Challenge’s descriptive content:

[He who is interested in participating in this huge work must not be hesitant and should contribute to this platform that I think will be a transformative change in knowledge and education in the Arab world.] (Alatar 2017)

This excerpt evokes the Bridge to Knowledge narrative in which translation is aggrandized and constructed as a panacea for problems related to education. When the Golden Era and Bridge to Knowledge narratives are juxtaposed, a temporal relation emerges between the past and the present. In this vein, a press release published in Emarat-Alyoum (2017b) focuses on the vitality of translation for Arabic communities. Here is an example of this juxtaposition:

[Through the Translation Challenge we will create hope that is most needed in our Arabic nation and lay the foundation stone for a bright Arabic future.] (Emarat-Alyoum 2017b)

This conclusion promotes the Bridge to Knowledge narrative and assumes that translation is essential for the future as it was in the past. A hypothesis could be made that by invoking the past to create a stronger...
future, volunteers may view these narratives as an invitation to participate in translation projects.

**The Dearth of Arabic Content Online**

The third narrative focuses on the dearth of Arabic content online. This narrative is leveraged by translation organizations that mainly operate online. Like previous narratives that emphasized the need for translation, the following excerpts underscore the perceived dearth of Arabic content online. Temporal features are once again used to construct a narrative that argues in favor of translation as the solution for the Arabic Internet and as a means to engage potential volunteers. For instance, Taghreedat, a volunteer-based translation organization, became a focal point in the conversation about Arabic content online, with Aljazeera.net reporting on the subject. The report could have focused on attempts and efforts to improve the Arabic content online other than translation (e.g. creating original content). However, because the narrative attributes the problem of Arabic content online to the lack of translations, the spatial organization of the report highlights the contribution of Taghreedat that relies on its force of volunteer translators to translate content into Arabic. The introduction presents Taghreedat and what it has achieved in the previous two years, and then the subheadings [Production Culture] and [Huge Gap] are used to construct the narrative.

Taghreedat aims to motivate Arabs to be content producers rather than content consumers: translation is a type of content creation. The section “Production Culture” states:

[volunteers work to translate and Arabize good content from Wikipedia and numerous websites; and they have Arabized at least a million words during the last period.] (Aydaros 2013)

The need for more Arabic content online is highlighted under the subheading “Huge Gap.” Maha Abouelenein, Google’s PR manager in the MENA region, claims:
[there is a huge gap between the Arabic-speaking population and the Arabic content online. According to the latest statistics, the Arabic online content is not more than 3% from the total web content despite the Arabic-speaking population being more than 356 million people.] (ibid.)

The lack of Arabic content online is narrated as a problem that Taghreedat’s team and its volunteer translators can potentially solve. Placing important information under demonstrative subheadings shows how the order of the textual elements builds this narrative. Spatial organization was also used in another article published on Aljazeera.net one year earlier, this time under the subheading [Social Responsibility] to call for investment:

[Businessmen are urged to invest more in developing Arabic content and to consider these investments not only from the profit perspective but also as social responsibility toward their people.] (Afzaz 2012, para. 8)

The spatial organization of this article promotes the narrative of the dearth of Arabic online content through subheadings. The article begins with [Investors’ View] toward Arabic online content to introduce the issue. Then, it peaks with [Social Responsibility] to emotionally address the audience as shown above. Finally, it ends with [Virgin Industry] to convince prospective investors about the promising opportunities to invest in the Arabic web.

The same narrative about Arabic online content exists in the discourse of the Translation Challenge. Alatar (2017) published a post about the project to encourage volunteers to join. Developing Arabic online content is a key element in her post:

[Arabic content on the Internet is underdeveloped and miserably insubstantial. Try to search on YouTube for a scientific subject … in Arabic and then in English and notice the difference.] (ibid.)

Translation Challenge is presented as the largest project of its kind in the Arab world; Translation Challenge aims to translate 5000 videos with more than 11 million words over the span of a year. Then, in the second
part of the article, Alatar (ibid.) answers the question [Are we Arabs unable to produce good quality content?]. She confirms that Arabs do not lack the skills or the knowledge, but rather the institutional support to produce quality content on the Internet. Therefore, Translation Challenge presents a worthwhile mission for volunteers. Interestingly, the narrative is used to introduce the project in different ways within the article. The article begins by using the narrative of the Golden Era and proceeds to a similar juxtaposition between past and present as that described earlier.

The analysis indicates the presence of three overarching narratives related to translation in the Arabic world. There is partial congruence between these narratives, and some are used in juxtaposition to further engage volunteer participation. Temporality features are utilized to construct the narratives. The “Golden Era” celebrates the past of Arabic translation; the “dearth of Arabic content online” deprecates the present status; and the “Bridge to Knowledge” hopes for a bright future.

Discussion

Because these narratives are considered public, they can be found in the discourse of almost any Arabic translation organization. In fact, many Arabic translation organizations appeal to their Arabic audience by establishing relationships with powerful and widely circulated narratives in Arabic discourse about translation. For instance, the story about the House of Wisdom and its role in the translation movement during the Golden Era is frequently repeated in various settings related to translation. The focus of the narrative, be it on status or remuneration or contribution to knowledge, will largely depend on what the organization is trying to achieve. If volunteers are most likely to come forward because they want to be respected (status), then the narrative will focus on cues related to status.

The United Nations Development Programme (2003) published a report stating that translators of the Abbasid era, the Golden Era of Translation (the first narrative in the study), were the pioneers of the scientific revolution. This acknowledgment highlights the role of
translators in the promotion of knowledge and, subsequently, in assuring a prosperous future. Fehri (2013), an Arabic linguist, claims that the House of Wisdom promoted science and knowledge in the Islamic and Arabic communities by leveraging translation. The narrative is also present in the prominent *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (Baker and Saldanha 2011). The entry on Arabic translation highlights the narrative of the Golden Era of Translation (Baker and Hanna 2011); that is, the narrative is circulated not only within Arabic societies but also at the international academic level, and precisely in the field of TS.

The second narrative identified in the analysis is the Bridge to Knowledge, urging governments and institutions to initiate translation projects and/or justify their investments in translation. Advocates of translation as a knowledge bridge usually refer to the examples of Japan and Israel, with inaccurate statistics in most cases (see Ali 2001 and Arab Human Development Report (AHDR; United Nations Development Programme 2003)). Referring to these two countries implies comparing the Arab world to the situations of Japan and Israel, which arguably had to start from scratch to become developed countries in a relatively short time. Furthermore, the AHDR of 2003 states that translation in the Arab world is stagnant and chaotic and the number of books translated per person is very low compared to countries like Hungary, which translates 519 books for every million people. The comparison with Hungary is frequently cited to support the narrative, without mentioning that, for instance, the 2003 AHDR indicates that the Hungarian number is only for the first five years of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the report primarily attributes the flourishing of knowledge during the Abbasid era to translation, which is considered as the activity that caused science to thrive.

Jacquemond (2009), however, says that this report publicizes the deficiency of contemporary translation and overvalues the contribution of the translation movement in the House of Wisdom. He argues that the report is misleading and based on outdated data from 1985, and on archives and databases of variable quality and consistency. It has led to

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5 Now in its third edition (2020). The section on translation history and traditions has been dropped from the new edition, as explained in its Introduction. My citation is of the second edition.
the Bridge to Knowledge narrative finding its way into many translation publications and projects, demonstrating that a narrative can be a provoking factor regardless of accuracy and truth.

The third narrative noted in the analysis is the dearth of Arabic online content; this has recently become more popular. Many conferences, events, and reports have been dedicated to the issue of Arabic online content over the last few years. Most, if not all, are driven by the belief that Arabic Web content makes up only 3% of Internet content. Interestingly, the source for this assertion is usually a report published by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), a UN commission, in 2012. However, the report itself does not provide statistics based on scholarly research but merely offers a prediction about the amount of Arabic online content, a figure that still needs to be officially verified by appropriate measures. This could indicate that the accuracy of information does not matter in promoting a narrative: Arabic online content, in most cases, is discussed using unreliable comparisons that make it seem poor and inadequate.

In response to this narrative, the Arabic Web has seen more projects designed to bridge the gap between the number of Arabic users and the volume of online and digital Arabic content. One of these projects is Arabic Web Days, which has been launched in partnership with Google. One of their early works is a short film about the “story” of Arabic content (Arabic Web Days 2012). This project builds upon the narrative of the dearth of Arabic online content. The goal of enriching Arabic content online has become a cliché for many Arabic crowdsourcing platforms that rely on volunteer translators, such as Ollemna and Athra.

Clearly, the online sphere plays a significant role in publicizing narratives, as well as reaching and engaging audiences. This study’s findings show how the three narratives about translation are spread in the online sphere to legitimize translation organizations and to attract volunteers. The narratives are constructed by traditional translation institutions and modern crowdsourcing organizations alike, but digital platforms make it easier for crowdsourcing organizations to attract thousands of volunteers and translate millions of words over a span of a single year, as in the case of Translation Challenge. Wikipedia data shows how digital tools give agency to individual users to contribute to a particular narrative.
One might argue that the use of these narratives in the case study data is unintentional and that their presence is over-interpreted. However, the intention of the narrator is not important in this context simply because it is unlikely to be knowable. Further, whether a narrative is constructed or used intentionally or unknowingly makes no significant difference from the audience’s perspective. As reception theory suggests, for an audience to apprehend a given message, it has to process it through its members’ everyday experiences and knowledge (D’Egidio 2015); the last thing they need to know is whether a narrative is intended or not.

A motivating narrative is not necessarily a presentation of reality; therefore, it could be argued that sometimes Arabic translation is narrated based on misleading data. For instance, a reference to the 2003 AHDR may state that [what has been translated since the Abbasid era until today is five times less than what Spain translates in a year] (Mohammad 2018). The mentioned report reveals something different: it states that “the aggregate total of translated books from the Al-Ma’moon era to the present day amounts to 10,000 books—equivalent to what Spain translates in a single year” (United Nations Development Programme 2003, p. 67). However, this reported statistic is not based on actual surveys but rather quoted from a book written by Jalal (1999). Surprisingly, the third edition of Jalal’s book, published in 2010, narrates the status of contemporary translation using the same figures, although a 10-year period should have changed something. Moreover, for this specific statistic he refers to an AHDR publication in 1996, without providing an appropriate citation. In fact, he concedes that any attempt to explore contemporary translation production will be handicapped by the lack of adequate statistics and insufficient archival systems (Jalal 2010, p. 102).

This case study shows how a narrative can be publicly promoted even when based on deceptive and/or outdated figures. It is not only the numbers that publicize this narrative about Arabic translation; temporal association with the widely honored history of the House of Wisdom, symbol of the Golden Era of Translation, and the use of digital media as well as the availability of social media that enables sharing and viral
dissemination play their part. Moreover, with features such as “Like” and “Retweet,” digital platforms may trigger a users’ desire to join in. In other words, a narrative’s effect relies not on truth or falsity but on how information is embedded in a form that appeals to recipients.

**Conclusion**

This analysis has been conducted to identify the common narratives associated with Arabic translation. It has shown that three narratives are commonly circulated online about contemporary Arabic translation: the Golden Era of Translation, the Bridge to Knowledge, and the dearth of Arabic content online. The popularity of these narratives demonstrates how important they seem to be in motivating volunteers to take action (e.g., to join translation projects) beside the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations explored in other studies.

The key features of this chapter can be summarized in three points. First, it highlights the lack of research within TS regarding the narratives of Arabic translation and, particularly, in relation to volunteer translation. Second, it draws attention to the influence of discourse, an area that is usually overlooked by translation scholars when studying volunteer translators’ motives. Third, and most importantly, this chapter identifies the common narratives about Arabic translation. This identification helps us to realize another noteworthy dimension of motivations as far as volunteer translation is concerned: the narratives that drive volunteers and guide their behavior. This is something that volunteers do not necessarily reveal when interviewed or answering questionnaires.

The results of the analysis make a case for expanding the nascent research efforts regarding the emerging volunteer translation projects online that promote certain narratives to legitimize their missions. Also, the results prepare the ground for much-needed large-scale studies that could trace back those narratives to understand when and how they appeared and what influence they might have on translation activity in the Arabic context, which is growing significantly online.
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