

## Translating the Algerian Dialect: Examples from *حطب سراييفو*, Rendered into English

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### Abstract:

Our contribution aims to explore some dialectal expressions found in the novel entitled « حطب سراييفو », written by the Algerian author Saïd Khatibi and how their pragmatic and cultural values are rendered into English, by Paul Starkey. Going beyond the linguistic level, we will deal with the concept of the dialect as a tool for constructing an identity rather than a simple device of local communication between the speaker and the listener. Our study will be focused on finding out the reasons leading to mistranslating dialectal expressions and then, suggest ways to be followed by the translator in order to succeed in his challenge.

**Keywords:** dialect; Sarajevo Firewood; translation.



### Introduction:

Beyond its basic communicative function, the dialect is considered, in modern and contemporary literature, as one of the most effective tools, used by novelists, to carry out different tasks such as assuring a part of authenticity in their works and giving them a recognized specific identity.

In general, the role of dialect in a novel is defined according to the writer's intentions and the reasons for which he decides to imply it with the standard language variety: showing different manners of speaking, specifying geographic origins, social classes as well as education:

*«Dialect can be a potent tool to assist novel writers to present the characters they have created to life. It can be employed to demonstrate diverse ways of speaking indicating different geographical origins, cultural backgrounds, or social classes, ethnic, regional or racial group, education levels»* (Kusuma, 2020)

It contributes also to create emotion and curiosity among the readers:

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«The use of dialects in literary works can make people's images more vivid and effectively highlight regional cultural characteristics. At the same time, it can stimulate readers' emotions and arouse their resonance. The use of dialect will help reproduce the local culture and lifestyles». (Xinyu Zhang, 2021)

However, when it comes to translation, this useful and multifunctional element becomes a real challenge and a tricky task for the translator. Almost all the scholars agree that finding a correct dialect reproduction is, and will always be, one of the most formidable obstacles to literary translators, «an ultimate impossibility», especially when the translator doesn't share the same cultural and linguistic background with the source text writer:

*“The translation of literary texts, as well as the original writing, is an undertaking with great value from the content and from the stylistic point of view but it is always considered a risky undertaking, limited and achieving a relative success. This can be applied, too, to one type of literary texts which contain an added difficulty: the use of dialect» (Sanchez, 1996)*

In addition to difficulties resulting from linguistic and cultural boundaries, the translator can face problems with the ways in which the author chooses to present the dialect in his work:

*«Even if the translator succeeds in identifying the ST dialect, this dialect may simply be , wholly or partially, unintelligible to the translator due to the manner employed in its representation by the original writer on the various linguistic levels» (Alia Al-Robai, 2004)*

As a matter of fact, such a problematic situation can easily affect all the functions of the dialect in the target text and create a gap in the whole communication chain.

In order to face the problems of rendering the dialect, the translator has to succeed in going through some obligatory steps:

*«The translator will have, first of all, to decide how important the passages in dialect are in the ST - for which, of course, he will have to be very familiar with the ST language and culture. Then he will have to make the decision whether dialectal speech is to be used in the TL version. Finally, if the decision has been in the affirmative, another delicate decision will have to be made in respect of which form of TL dialect is to be used - for which, it will also be necessary for the translator to have a good knowledge of the various TL dialectal variants (Sanchez, 1996)*

This means that, in presence of dialectal utterances in a novel, the translator has to deal not only with the meaning of the words, but also with the significance of their use in a certain space and time. He has to consider the relevance of each word and expression within the communicative and pragmatic source context.

Nevertheless, it seems impossible for a translator to carry out such a task without achieving at least two primordial conditions: first: to have a complete and a sufficient linguistic and cultural knowledge of different language variants found in the source text, then to find out which communicative and semantic role the dialectal utterance plays within the source context.

### 1- The objectives of the study:

Many are the research writings consecrated to deal with the problem of translating dialect in the novel. Though, those devoted to the Algerian dialect in Arabic expression novels translated into English, are still rare. Exception could be made for papers which include the element of the dialect inside studies, initially conducted on the object of identity. Djeflal (to mention but this one), has introduced some dialectal words and expressions found in Yasmina Khadra's novel «*The Angels Die*», and considered the strategies used by the translator to transfer them into English. (Djeflal, 2020)

Taking Paul Starkey's <sup>†</sup> English version of «*حطب سراييفو*» (Starkey, 2022) as the research object, this paper comes to fill such a gap, by seeking to identify and analyse problems occurring, while translating some Algerian dialectal utterances, and find convenient answers to the following questions:

- How the dialect was used in «*حطب سراييفو*»?
- What kind of problems the translator has encountered, and how successful has he been in his attempt to translate the dialectal utterances found in the novel?

### 2- Which role for the dialect in Saïd Khatibi's work?

In a world becoming increasingly globalized, the language in the novel have acquired other roles, rather than being a simple instrument of communication, and, the dialect as a local language, is no longer just a tool of presenting the characters or indicating their ways of speaking, but a powerful tool of protecting cultural and social identity from disappearance and obliteration.

Algerian novelists, as for them, have, since the independence, instrumentalized this valuable oral expression heritage in their worldwide

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<sup>†</sup> Paul Starkey is a British scholar and translator of Arabic literature.

works by implying the different dialectal varieties along with the standard Arabic.

In his Sarajevo Firewood (2019), which was short listed for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction Award, in 2020; Said Khatibi explores the legacy of the recent histories of two countries, Algeria and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both of which, experienced civil wars in the 1990s. In this novel, there are two main characters, Salim, an Algerian journalist and Ivana, a young Bosnian woman.

The Algerian dialect in Khatibi's work is relatively not very abundant<sup>‡</sup>, and essentially consisting in fixed phrases, idioms and proverbs. What makes the use of the dialect exclusive in this novel is that the author has adapted constant parts of the spoken Algerian language in tow different ways: while some expressions have preserved their original dialectal form, other ones have been modified and levelled up to the standard Arabic. That being so, we could classify the dialectal utterances in two types:

A)- dialectal expressions: are those which are employed in their basic form, without any grammatical, syntactic or lexical modification. This type of expressions appears essentially inside the dialogue, initiated between local uneducated speakers in the novel.

Considering their nature and the context in which they appear inside the work, the reader would notice that Khatibi inserted them, just because any of the standard Arabic expressions could undertake their role in the discourse.

It should be noted here, that some of the aforementioned expressions are hard to be recognized as such, by a non Algerian Arab reader of the source text. This is due to their standard graphic transcription (in terms of lexical units and syntactic constructions). Only their phonetic transcription can unveil their dialectal identity.<sup>§</sup> Below, are some examples:

**Table-01:- examples of dialectal expressions with standard graphic transcription in «Sarajevo Firewood»**

The dialectal expression standard graphic transcription	The dialectal expression phonetic transcription
البركة في القليل	البار اكا فلقليل
الكلام يجيب الكلام	لكلام بيحيب لكلام
يا جماعة الخير	يا جماعة لخير

<sup>‡</sup> Through a total of 320 pages, we could find about 50 dialectal word and /or utterances.

<sup>§</sup> This is one of the specific features of Arabic that we don't find in European languages.

While other expressions are, lexically and syntactically, embedded in the dialect variety, like in the following examples:

Table-02-: examples of dialectal expressions in Sarajevo Firewood.

The dialectal expression	Its standard equivalent form
ضَيْفٌ بِلَا عَرَضَةٍ	ضيف بدون دعوة
اللي فات مات	الذي فات مات
عَمَرٌ بِيهَا جِيْبِكْ	املا بها جيبك

B)- Standardized expressions: these are expressions which are basically dialectal but, being subject to some lexical, grammatical or syntactic modifications, in order to move them from the vernacular variety to the standard language. This strategy aimed seemingly to «*create a distinct dialect literature and give to a local form of speech the standing of a literary language*» To cite the words of Sanchez (1996).

Table-03-: examples of standardized expressions in «Sarajevo Firewood»

The dialectal basic form	The standardized form used in the novel
نَسَخْنُ كَرَشِي	أدقني معدتي
طاحوا من كرش وحنة	سقطوا من كرش واحدة
كي باطة زلميت	غرفة مثل علبه كبريت
ولى لعوايدو	عاد على طباعه

Reading these created forms of speech, an Algerian native speaker would directly perceive their dialectal origin. For his part, a non Algerian Arab reader would immediately notice that they are not standard expressions either.

### 1- How the dialect is (mis) translated in Sarajevo firewood?

Let's move now, to the main topic of our study, and try to answer the question about which problems are encountered by the translator of dialectal expressions and led him to mistranslation.

Reading our sub-title, one could ask: why to put the prefix «mis» in parenthesis? So, I would answer: because all is about it, and the parenthesis, here, is not used to express exception or probability but, to draw the attention of the reader to the fact that any transfer act on the dialect, would necessarily

or frequently, either wholly or partially, turn into a mistranslation, especially, as it's the case in our research, when it's about rendering a novel from a foreign language into his own language.

We will limit our study to three examples, which represent, in our view, relevant cases of mistranslation. The first showing a case of lexical confusion, the second revealing a case of grammatical confusion, and the third, based on a case of an under-translation due to an omission.

However, a last case will be dedicated to show how the translator has succeeded in restoring a dialectal expression's value in the target text.

Example one:

The source text	the target text
«وجود الشر، لا رحمة ولا شفقة» <sup>1</sup>	« <i>faces of evil, no mercy</i> »

This expression was uttered by the narrator, who is the main character in the novel, to express his anger when he found that the water was cut off. It's a combination of two original collocations: «وجود الشر» and «لا رحمة ولا شفقة»<sup>1</sup>, but we will consider only the first one.

It's a typical Algerian dialectal expression. This means that its semantic and pragmatic role in the discourse cannot be easily recognized by someone who doesn't belong to the same cultural and societal area, as it was the case for our translator, who mistakenly, took the dialectal meaning of the word «الشر» for its literary or standard meaning. He didn't make the difference between the two uses.<sup>\*\*</sup>

<sup>\*\*</sup> By the way, the same word has another meaning when introduced in other Algerian dialectal idioms: the collocation: عام الشر which covers a historical value it refers to the war years when Algerians didn't find what to ease their hunger. We have also, the collocation: ميت بالشر which is used to describe someone who is, "starving".

In the literary Arabic	In the Algerian dialect
الشر # الخير ↓ the good # the evil	وجه الخير # وجه الشر ↓      ↓ Good luck # bad luck

As it's shown in the table above, in standard or literary Arabic, the word «الشر» which is the opposite of the word «الخير», is the exact equivalent of the word «evil» when it's the opposite of «the good» in English. However, once implied in some Algerian dialectal idioms, it changes the meaning, to refer, as in this one, to someone (a person) who brings bad luck or misfortune. Yet, this meaning is not attributed the English word «evil» in such a context.

We can conclude that the mistranslation, here, is due to the fact that the translator didn't take the whole meaning of the idiomatic expression into account and he considered every word separately. This led him to confuse the two uses of the word «الشر» between the Algerian Arab dialect and the standard Arabic.

Instead of word by word translation, and since he opted for a non ethnocentric translation, the translator should simply think to look for an expression which renders, faithfully the semantic meaning: like: «*faces of bad luck*».

Example 2:

the source text	the target text
«و راس يما العزيمة، غير عام الصفراء و الكحلا»	«It will <u>not</u> be the yellow and the black year»

In this utterance, the character is swearing, in the name of his cheered mother, that his favourite football team will win this year, using the word «غير», according to the meaning covered by this particle in the Algerian dialect when it's used within a swearing expression: to express a certitude that something is true or will take place in the future<sup>††</sup>, and not an exception or a negation as in the standard Arabic.

<sup>††</sup> It can also be used to express a determination to do something in the future, as in: والله غير نروح

The aforementioned expression was mistranslated in a negative form, and we suppose that is due, again, to its dialectal nature. This confusion misled the translator to commit a heavy mistake, which is called a misinterpretation or an opposite meaning.

Example3:

the source text	the target text
«الله غالب، سليج، الطريق زحمة»	« [Ø], the road is jammed, Salim»

The expression «الله غالب», found in the source text, is one of the most used everyday expressions in Algeria. It's uttered by everyone, everywhere. It can be used just to emit a general statement as in: «الله غالب، هذه هي الدنيا», as it can play a significant pragmatic and communicative role in the discourse, when it expresses a feeling of desolation or an apology and introduces, even indirectly, a justification, as it was the case in the example above, where the character was giving reasons of being late in a such emergency situation.

As for its translation, it can be seen that it was totally omitted and it had no equivalent in the target text. Doing so, The translator has seemingly put the sequence in question among these phrases which appear to have a meaning so embedded in the source culture that, whatever substitute might be found in the target language may never fully render the actual meaning.

But, if we have to comment this choice, we would say that the translator has chosen the wrong expression to abandon, because, in spite of being so rooted in the source text, its omission has brought about the obliteration of a whole part of the meaning and created a communicative gap in the discourse chain, since it affected the effectiveness of the utterance and its pragmatic and a communicative role.

An effective strategy is possible to render the meaning of the expression: establish a translation by explicitation: «I am sorry» or «it's not my fault», the road is jammed»

#### 1- A case of restitution:

The use of dialect in the novel in question is proven to be not systematic, even where it should be normally used, as in the following passage:

«يوم تلقت رسالة تهديد من نواطير الأرواح، هكذا دأبنا على تسمية الجماعات المسلحة»



The underlined expression is used in a standard form, but it's basically inspired from a dialectal one: « قَبَاضُ لُرُوَاخْ » which refers to the angel of death in Arab tradition and used, by extension, to describe a killing person. However, the author has apparently made an unfortunate choice, when he put the word « ناطور », which has « عَسَّاسٌ » ( *a guard* ) as a dialectal equivalent, instead of « قابض » ( *a reaper* ) which is the standard equivalent of « قَبَاضُ ». The difference between the two words is such that even an Algerian native speaker would probably have a difficulty to identify the original expression to which the new standardized one refers.

In turn, the translator has chosen to restore the original expression by translating the word « ناطور », not by its linguistic equivalent: « *guard* » but by its original referent: « *reaper* », which is the exact equivalent of the word « قَبَاضُ » when it's used in the aforementioned expression.

The source text	The target text
« يوم تلقت رسالة تهديد من نواطير الأرواح »	« <i>When she received a threatening letter from the <u>soul reapers</u> .</i> ».

For this case, we can say that the translator had fully rendered the meaning of the expression. Its cultural value, having been absent in the source text, was successfully restored in the target text.

- To conclude:

This short case study has reaffirmed, once again, that almost all the problems a translator could encounter in rendering the dialect are due to his unfamiliarity with the source text language varieties, which means that the more familiar is the translator with the original dialect, the more roles he can recognize.

In his attempt to well translate a dialectal utterance, the translator has to respect the following steps: first, to recognize the utterance as a dialectal one, then, to decide how important the utterance in the source text is, and, to manage to capture its role, by finding out its pragmatic function and discursive value. Finally, he must determine if the utterance can be omitted, translated literally, or by applying different strategies, such as explicit translation, semantic equivalence (by asking the question: is there, any dialectal expression which could depict the same purpose targeted by the use of the original utterance?).

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