

**The Report committee for Katherine Sproul Goodin**

**Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**Translation Theory and Practice  
in the Abbasid Era**

**APPROVED BY**

**SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

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Tarek El-Ariss

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Kristen Brustad

**Translation Theory and Practice  
in the Abbasid Era**

by

**Katherine Sproul Goodin, B.A.**

**Report**

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## **Abstract**

### **Translation Theory and Practice in the Abbasid Era**

Katherine Sproul Goodin, M.A.

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SUPERVISOR: Tarek El-Ariss

This paper explores the theoretical approaches to translation and the dynamics of language politics during the Abbasid-era translation movement through the lens of three prominent figures of the Abbasid era, Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq, Mattā ibn Yūnus and al-Jāḥiẓ. In conversation with Emily Apter’s concept of untranslatability and current concerns about translation into and out of Arabic, this paper examines the cultural implications of claims to translatability and untranslatability. The Abbasid era presents a particularly useful comparison to the present because rather than being marginal, Arabic was the language of an expanding empire, and also because the Abbasid era was a kind of ‘Golden Age’ of translation. The Abbasid era was an enormously productive period, with translators rendering nearly the entire corpus of available Greek manuscripts into Arabic. This outpouring of translation activity not only provided an influx of new ideas but provoked a wide-ranging debate among the literati of the time about the possibilities and problems of translation.

Examining the figures of al-Jāḥiẓ, Mattā bin Yūnus and Ḥunayn ibn Is’hāq provides a window into this theoretical conversation. Al-Jāḥiẓ, as one of the foremost author-

ities on Arabic rhetoric, gave voice to more than one view of translation, in part defining Arabic writing as too unique to be translated while elsewhere claiming translations from other languages as the inheritance of the Arab culture. The Aristotelian translator Mattā ibn Yūnus provides an example of backlash against translation in which foreign ideas were seen as a threat to Arab identity. Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, one of most highly regarded translators of his day, reveals a pragmatic approach to translation which integrated Greek works into Arab society. These three figures reorient the poles of translatability and untranslatability, revealing the potential of both to strengthen hegemony, and show the positive and negative aspects of an Arabocentric and Islamocentric universalism.

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In the world of Abbasid letters, translation was undergoing a moment of high visibility. According to Dimitri Gutas, Arabic translators between the eighth and tenth centuries translated nearly the entire corpus of available Greek writings on “astrology and alchemy and the rest of the occult sciences; and theory of music; the entire field of Aristotelian philosophy throughout its history... all the health sciences...and various other marginal genres of writing,” (Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* 1). This was in addition to translating enormous amounts of literature, historical writings and works of astronomy and astrology from Persian into Arabic (De Blois, “Tardjama”). This enormous intellectual undertaking generated discussion among Arab men of letters about the relationship of language and cultural identity, the nature of language, and the nature of the Arabic language more specifically.

In the contemporary Arab world translation is a subject of some controversy, with both translations into and out of Arabic often seen as negotiations of identity along profoundly unequal lines. Translations into Arabic are tied to projects of cultural imperialism, while translations out of Arabic are suspect as potential cultural appropriation. The discourse surrounding translation is dominated by a narrative of lack and loss: lack refers to the idea that translations into Arabic are necessary because Arabic is lacking, and loss in the sense that translation into Arabic is a kind of loss (Jacquemond 21). In sharp contrast to the perceived

weakness of Arabic as a global language and the anxiety about its future in the present day, Arabic in the Abbasid era was the language of an expanding empire. In this context, this paper will explore how concepts of translatability and untranslatability mediated interactions with other cultures in the works of three prominent literary figures of the Abbasid era: Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, Mattā ibn Yūnus, and al-Jāḥiẓ.

In the contemporary context of debates about the idea of *Wertliteratur* or World Literature, the idea of untranslatability is promoted as a challenge to American and European cultural hegemony. Emily Apter in *Against World Literature* argues that in recent attempts at teaching World Literature, an unquestioned assumption of translatability has left out any reckoning with incommensurability or “the Untranslatable,” (4). World Literature approaches, Apter argues, failed to fulfill the promise of “challeng[ing] flaccid globalisms that paid lip service to alterity while doing little more than to buttress neoliberal “big tent” syllabi in English,” (7). In its place, Apter calls for a comparative studies that engages in “the making of worldscapes contoured by mistranslation, neologism and semantic dissonance,” (38-9) and “a practice of *Wertliteratur* that takes full measure of linguistic constraints and truth conditions in the investigation of singular modes of existing in the world’s languages,” (27). By championing

untranslatability and examining the ways in which translation fails, Apter aims to do greater justice to the uniqueness of other languages and other cultures.

The Abbasid figures examined in this paper show that translation can both strengthen and challenge dominant ethnocentrism. Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, the renowned and prolific translator of Greek medical works provides an example of the successful adaptation of Greek works into Arab culture according to its needs and interests without being seen as a threat to identity or sign of weakness but rather as an integrated part of scholarship. The famed debate between Greek translator Mattā ibn Yūnus and the Arabic grammarian al-Sīrāfī highlights a moment where claims to the universality of Greek thought was seen as a threat to Arab identity. The prolific man of letters al-Jāḥiẓ, ever in argument with himself, provides examples of claims of untranslatability that shore up and confine Arab identity as well as examples where translation contributes to cultural hegemony. In the latter vein, translations from the Greek into Arabic are portrayed as adding to the grandeur of the imperial language. This portrayal is linked to the Abbasid ideology that uses Arabic translations of Greek learning as proof of Arab civilizational superiority over the Byzantines. In these texts, one finds a pattern of interest in translation as Arabization, while a narrative of cultural backwardness in need of catching up to other cultures is nowhere to be found. Examining the writings of these Abbasid figures on translation, which come from an era of greater



confidence in the strength of the Arabic language and Arab cultures on a global scale, can offer alternative perspectives to the contemporary debate about the politics of translation in the Arab world. These approaches to translation demonstrate that translatability and untranslatability connect to encounters with other cultures in complex ways, that translation can be as respectful of the Other as it can be demeaning, and that an embrace of the ideas of other cultures does not have to be seen as a loss of identity.

### **Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq**

The figure of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq presents an example of translation that was integrated into Abbasid society, in which the universal value of the translated material goes without saying and without a narrative of lack. Working in the mid-ninth century when the translation movement was in full swing, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq was one of the more prolific and well known translators of the Abbasid era whose work “set the standard” for translators after him (Goodman 493). Strohmaier goes as far as to credit him entirely with the development of Arab medicine. Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq translated texts chosen by his clients and adapted the material according to their needs. This approach made translation a part of the process of developing medical knowledge. Ibn Ishāq functionally approached translation as a form of scholarship integrated into his research. He translated primarily medical texts and

he was himself a doctor (Strohmaier). In his letter to ‘Alī ibn Yaḥyā he relates that he worked to collect, collate, and edit manuscripts for all the texts he translated (Ibn Ishāq 5). According to Strohmaier, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq traveled to Syria, Palestine, and Egypt in order to obtain manuscripts for his translations, and his assessments that certain works attributed to Galen were not truly Galen’s work are consistent with the assessments of modern scholars to a large degree.

Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq translated with a commitment to the knowledge imparted rather than an exact representation of the texts. This focus on content is evident in the fact that admits that he at times omitted parts of the source text because he found them redundant or difficult to work with. As he writes in *al-Risālah*,

In the following passage Galen quotes Aristophanes. However, this Greek manuscript, from which I translated this work into Syriac, contains such a large number of mistakes and errors that it would have been impossible for me to understand the meaning of the text had I not been so familiar with and accustomed to Galen’s Greek speech and acquainted with most of his ideas from his other work. But I am not familiar with the language of Aristophanes, nor am I accustomed to it. Hence, it was not easy for me to understand the quotation, and I have, therefore, omitted it. I had an additional reason for omitting it. After I had read it, I found no more in it than

what Galen had already said elsewhere. Hence, I thought that I should not occupy myself with it any further, but rather proceed to more useful matters (Rosenthal 19).

For those who see translation as the exact representation of a source text, omitting lines that are present in the source text is utterly unthinkable, but because Ibn Ishāq was more focused on providing useful information, the fact that the words were present in the manuscript did not make him feel obligated to translate something he saw as both difficult and redundant. Another indicator that Ibn Ishāq was not strictly tied to the idea of representation is that he frequently Christianized pagan elements in the texts he translated (Strohmaier). This is not to say that Ibn Ishāq was necessarily uninterested in accuracy; the amount of attention to editing and re-editing works and collating and collecting manuscripts, and in improving his knowledge of Greek shows clearly that he was very keen on correctly understanding and translating the texts. But the deciding factor was the usefulness of the text to the scholars and medical practitioners whose demand for Greek texts in translations made his livelihood possible.

There was wide-ranging demand in Abbasid society for the texts that translators adapted. This demand shows that rather than being passive recipients of a set canon of Greek works, Arab culture in the Abbasid period played an active role in shaping the translation movement. Gutas describes an environment where

business was booming for the translation profession. Government officials, the ruling family and their advisors, wealthy courtiers, scholars and scientists paid large sums to have the most renowned and skilled translators work on the texts they chose. The way that these texts were included in and adapted for the culture is shown in Gutas's analysis:

Some of the translations were deliberately not literal because they were made for a specific purpose and to serve certain theoretical positions already held. Thus, just as certain Greek texts were selected for translation because they were expected to provide information and arguments in discussions in progress in Abbasid society, the ideological or scientific orientation of these very discussions influenced the way in which the texts were translated (146).

This passage shows that Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq was not alone in modifying aspects of the texts he translated to suit the needs of a client. The reciprocal relationship between the Greek texts and Abbasid culture relied on a fundamental assumption that Greek works are translatable and that the only question is finding the correct methodology.

The correct methodology for translation as described in al-Ṣafadī's *al-Ghayth al-Musajjam* is Arabization, for which Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq is the exemplar.

Throughout al-Ṣafadī's passage on translation, he uses the word *ta'rib* or Arabization as a synonym for translation (al-Ṣafadī 79). His schema divides translation technique into the binary opposition of “word-for-word” translation and sentence-paraphrasing translation, the latter of which is the superior method of Arabization led by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq. Al-Ṣafadī observes a number of aspects of language that make word-for-word translation impractical: differences in vocabulary, differences in syntax, and metaphor (79). In this context, differences in vocabulary does not simply mean that the lexical items are different as such, but that the correspondences between a Greek and Arabic term do not line up, that there are not one-to-one relationships between Greek and Arabic words (79). The consequence, framed as a drawback of word-for-word translation, is words left in Greek: “It is impossible to find Arabic expressions corresponding to all Greek words and, therefore, through this method many Greek words remain untranslated,” (Rosenthal 17-18) انه لا يوجد في الكلمات العربية كلمات تقابل جميع الكلمات (al-Ṣafadī 79). اليونانية ولهذا وقع في خلال هذا التعريب كثير من الالفاظ اليونانية على حالها (al-Ṣafadī 79). Identifying metaphor as a problem term points to the idea of separating “literal meaning” from the specific way that it is expressed — a classic question in translation theory. The idea that one can read a sentence, isolate the meaning, and then reproduce that meaning in a different language assumes that one can meaningfully separate form from content.

This passage from *al-Ghayth al-Musajjam* highlights concern over the process of translating into a language rather than out of it, and translating into Arabic specifically. The mistakes that al-Ṣafadī attributes to word-for-word translation are mistakes in the translated Arabic text: the presence of untranslated words from Greek, Greek-looking syntax in Arabic, unfamiliar metaphors or idioms. This essentially is the same accusation that the later commentator ‘Ali ibn Yūsuf al-Qiftī levelled against the Greek translator Ibn Batrīq, who is held as an example of the wrong method of translating in al-Ṣafadī’s passage — that his translations were bad Arabic (Gutas 137). The fact that the word *ta‘rīb* was used to mean translation encapsulates the idea that the process of translation from Greek into Arabic is a process of Arabizing Greek writers, rather than Hellenizing Arabic, or creating something in between, or something else entirely. It is also an noteworthy term because it does not clarify what it might mean to Arabize a Greek word, which could mean, for example, simply transliterating Greek words into the Arabic alphabet, or could mean changing a Greek word to make it fit standard Arabic pronunciation rules and morphological patterns, or it could mean creating a word entirely from standardized Arabic roots with a similar meaning, as modern Arabic language academies have attempted to do.

In contrast to the problems of word-for-word translation, the “correct” method for Arabizing texts exemplified by Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq creates translations

that equal or exceed their source texts in al-Ṣafadī's estimation. This method is sentence-paraphrasing: "Here the translator considers a whole sentence, ascertains its full meaning, without concern for the correspondence of individual words." (Rosenthal 17-18). وهو ان يأتي الى الجملة فيحصل معناها في ذهنه ويعبر عنها من اللغة. (al-Ṣafadī 79). This approach produced translations that read well in Arabic, according to the standards of the time. It also, in al-Ṣafadī's account, led to translations that needed no corrections to be clear to their readers. In addition, al-Ṣafadī mentions a number of specific translated works that improved on their source texts, showing great confidence in the ability of translations to carry over meaning and their value as part of Arab culture. Ibn Ishāq and his cohort are credited with creating the Arabic medical terminology still used by doctors today (Strohmaier), demonstrating the lasting value of their translations and the level of their integration into Abbasid society. In this case, translatability is a recognition of the universality of scientific ideas, and as well as a belief that ideas from other cultures can be adapted for Arab society.

### **Mattā ibn Yūnus**

In contrast to the belief in translatability that made Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq's translations so well received, the work of Mattā ibn Yūnus Abū Bishr provides an example where the integration of Greek learning into Arab society breaks down. A

translator of Aristotle in the tenth century as the translation movement was waning (Endress), Mattā ibn Yūnus contended against the Arabic grammarian Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī in a famous debate recorded in Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī's *al-Imtā' wa al-Mu'ānasah*. The debate, which leans heavily in al-Sīrāfī's favor, calls into question the translatability of Greek philosophy and its place in Arab culture. Mattā ibn Yūnus's translations of Greek learning, rather than being treated as enriching, become a threat to the primacy of the Arabic language whose ideas must be publicly discredited.

Mattā ibn Yūnus's claim to the universality of Greek logic is met with a universality in untranslatability articulated by al-Sīrāfī. Mattā ibn Yūnus starts with the claim that Greek logic is universally applicable and that it is the most important tool in understanding the world: "There is no way to know truth from falsehood, sincerity from lies, good from evil, proof from vagueness and certainty from doubt except to use the logic we have acquired." لا سبيل الى معرفة الحق من الباطل والصدق من الكذب والخير من الشر والحجة من الشبهة والشك من اليقين إلا بما حوينا من المنطق (al-Tawḥīdī 108). He argues that the universality of Greek logic is like the fact that  $4 + 4 = 8$  the whole world over (al-Tawḥīdī 111). Al-Sīrāfī, on the other hand, argues that Greek logic is not universal, but rather that the specificity and untranslatability of languages and cultures is universal. He argues that knowledge is dispersed all over



the world (al-Tawḥīdī 112), and that the Greeks were fallible like all other nations (al-Tawḥīdī 113). He further argues that Greek logic is only useful to the Greeks:

If logic was created by a man from Greece in the language of her people and their idiom and the adjectives and descriptions they recognize in it, since when does this mandate that the Turks and Persians and Indians and the Arabs should learn about it and take it as a judge and ruling over them?

اذا كان المنطق وضعه رجل من يونان على لغة اهلها واصطلاحهم  
عليها وما يتعارفونه بها من رسومها وصفاتها، فمن اين يلزم التُّرك  
والهنْدَ والفرسَ والعربَ أن ينظروا فيه ويتخذوه قاضيا وحَكَمًا لهم وعليهم

(al-Tawḥīdī 110)

In this passage al-Sīrāfī asserts that language and culture are linked and both only applicable within that culture and language. In other words, he is arguing that there is nothing that can be carried over by translation. Furthermore, the untranslatability of language and culture does not just apply to Arabs, as he lists Persians and Indians as well, which suggests that the untranslatability of language and culture in his view applies to all languages and all cultures.

While espousing a universalist notion of untranslatability, al-Sīrāfī's position is largely Arabocentric. Like others, he calls for the translation to be Arabization, at least at the level of the quality of the language. Al-Sīrāfī's main point is that it is

through the Arabic language that Arabic speakers can understand the world and discern right from wrong. He argues that Mattā ibn Yūnus as a translator has “no choice” but to know a great deal about Arabic (al-Tawḥīdī 115), and in fact that “Understanding the Arabic language is more important for [him] than understanding Greek meanings,” بل أنت إلى تعرف اللغة العربية أحوج منك إلى تعرف المعاني اليونانية (al-Tawḥīdī 116). Furthermore, he accuses Mattā ibn Yūnus of “disgracing” the Arabic language even as he is using it to explain Aristotle (116).

Greek logic as presented by Mattā ibn Yūnus becomes threatening when it claims to supersede the Arabic language as means for understanding the world. In this way, Greek logic presents a challenge to the dominance of Arabic, and for the audience of this debate, this challenge had to be thoroughly discredited. The vehemence of that discrediting is a mark of how serious a threat Mattā ibn Yūnus’s claim was estimated to be. The debate reads more like a public shaming than a true debate. The presiding vizier Abū al-Faṭḥ Ja‘far ibn al-Furāt called for a volunteer from among those in attendance to disprove Mattā ibn Yūnus’ claims. Once al-Sīrāfī was chosen as the champion of Arabic, the conversation becomes dominated by al-Sīrāfī, who responds to each of Mattā ibn Yūnus’ short claims with a lengthy argument frequently starting with the word “*akhṭa’ta*”, or “you have erred,” as if al-Sīrāfī were a teacher and Mattā ibn Yūnus his erring pupil. In the midst of the debate, Ibn Furāt calls upon al-Sīrāfī to elaborate further upon his argument “so

that the benefit may be apparent to everyone present in the session, and so that remorse may do its work in Abū Bishr [Mattā ibn Yūnus]’s soul.” حتى تكون الفائدة ”. ظاهرة لاهل المجلس والتبكييت عاملا في نفس أبي بشر (al-Tawḥīdī 119). Greek logic is deemed untranslatable because to incorporate it into ‘Abbasid culture would allow the possibility that it could unseat Arabic grammar as the paradigm for understanding the world, which is unthinkable for the grammarian al-Sīrāfī. In this instance, the idea of untranslatability is used to keep outside influences out of the Arabic language and to restrict its interaction with other cultures.

### **Al-Jāḥiẓ**

In al-Jāḥiẓ’s writings, both untranslatability and translatability are used to strengthen the status and centrality of Arabic. Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr ibn Baḥr al-Fuqaymī al-Baṣrī, better known as al-Jāḥiẓ, the famed prose writer of the ninth century who won favor with the caliph al-Ma’mūn (Pellat 5), gives voice to views very skeptical of the possibility of translation as well as views that treat translation as unproblematically possible. These views are not necessarily those of al-Jāḥiẓ himself, as Kilito rightly notes, given the playful way that al-Jāḥiẓ creates Platonic dialogues and sometimes voices multiple sides of the same issue (Kilito 37). However, despite the varying stances on translation, one can discern a pattern in attitudes expressed towards language and translation that blend appreciation for the

uniqueness of the Arabic language with Arabocentrism. This worldview ties language to identity directly, and cuts through both the translatable and the untranslatable.

In one vein, al-Jāhiz presents translation of prose genres as virtually impossible, which, as in al-Sīrāfi's argument, serves to keep foreign elements out of Arabic. In his *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, one speaker claims that translation demands skills that he doubts that anyone can truly have. According to this passage, a translator needs literary ability and knowledge and a perfect command of both the source and target language (*al-Ḥayawān* 76-77). The translator must also be a specialist in the field at the same level of learnedness as the author of the source text, but “no translator can ever be the equal of one of these scholars,” (Pellat 133) *ولن تجد البئنة مترجماً يفي بواحدٍ من هؤلاء العلماء* (*al-Ḥayawān* 77). Making a more specific comparison in reference to a series of well-known translators of Aristotle and Plato, a speaker asks rhetorically “When was Ibn Batrīq, God rest his soul, or Ibn Na‘mah, Ibn Qurrah, Ibn Fihriẓ, Thīfīl, Ibn Wahīlī or Ibn al-Muquffa‘ like Aristotle? And when was Khaled [ibn Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiyah] like Plato?” *فمتى كان رحمه الله تعالى ابنُ البَطْرِيقِ، وابنِ ناعمة، وابنِ قُرَّة، وابنِ فِهْرِيْز، وثَيْفِيْل، وابنِ وهيلي، وابنِ المَقْفَع، مثلُ أرسطاطاليس؟ ومتى كان خالدٌ مثلُ أفلاطون؟* (*al-Ḥayawān* 76).

One of the greatest barriers to translatability in al-Jāhiz's text is the impossibility of true bilingualism. This facet of untranslatability is universally

applicable, as it is for al-Sīrāfī. According to this text, bilingualism is impossible because the two languages “influence each other, borrow from each other and distort each other,” (Pellat 133) لأن كل واحدة من اللغتين تجذب الأخرى وتأخذ منها، وتعرضُ عليها (*al-Ḥayawān* 76-77). In addition, bilingualism is impossible because human beings have only one faculty for language, which would have to be split up for two or more languages (*al-Ḥayawān* 76-77). Al-Jāhiz’s speaker makes one exception in the case of Mūsa al-Aswārī whose eloquence in both Persian and Arabic he calls a “wonder of the world” (*Bayān*, 1992, 293-294), afterwards reiterating that bilingualism does damage to both languages in all cases besides this miraculous exception. In *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, after explaining why bilingualism is impossible, the speaker states that what has been said about bilingualism applies to all languages, making the untranslatable a universal phenomenon (77).

Part of the argument for untranslatability in al-Jāhiz’s texts is the recognition of the nuances and uniqueness of language; or perhaps the uniqueness of the Arabic language alone, as the text only explores Arabic. One of the aspects of language that al-Jāhiz attends to is the different registers of Arabic. In discussing language variety and *lahn* (language error), al-Jāhiz’s speaker warns readers that when relating stories told in formal or informal language, one should not alter the register. If one should hear a story told by a Bedouin who speaks a more formal register of Arabic, he writes, one must retell it in exactly the same register. Likewise, if one should

hear a low-class joke or witticism, one should tell it in exactly the same slang they heard it in, or else be condemned to “spoil the whole point of it, destroy the effect and rob it of spice and flavor,” (Pellat 105) *يفسد الامتاع بها ويخرجها من صورتها ومن الذي* (Pellat 105) *أريدت له ويذهب استطابتهم اياها واستملاحهم لها* (*Bayān* 145-146). This passage shows that for al-Jāhiz, the correctness and class association of language is a facet of language that makes language what it is, which cannot be “translated” into another register without losing something fundamental to the utterance.

Al-Jāhiz explores further aspects of language that make texts difficult if not impossible to translate in the discussion of translation of religious texts. In this section, al-Jāhiz’s speaker runs through a litany of nuanced aspects of language that the translator would have to understand in order to translate. The translator would need to know which parts of a text were true or false, “how many meanings [a word] contained, the loss of any of which would overturn the meaning of the word” *وعلى كم معنى يشتمل ويجتمع، وعند فقد أيّ معنى ينقلب ذلك الاسم* and how to interpret the absurd or impossible, (*al-Hayawān* 77). The translator would also need to know:

...metaphor in prose and poetry, revelation and metonymy, and the difference between prattle and babble, and the shortened, the laid open, and abbreviation, the structures of speech, the customs of the

people, the means of their mutual understanding - and what we have mentioned is only the beginning.

وحتى يعرف المثلَّ والبديع، والوحي والكناية، وفصل ما بين الخطلِ  
والهذر، والمقص والمبسوط والاختصار، وحتى يعرف أبنية الكلام،  
وعادات القوم، وأسباب تفاهمهم، والذي ذكرنا قليلاً من كثير (al-Jāhiz،)

(*al-Hayawān* 77-78)

This passage highlights precisely the issue of nuances in word choice, showing off the breadth of al-Jāhiz's vocabulary, as well as recognizing the importance of culture to language. All of the elements of a text that al-Jāhiz's speaker presents as obstacles to translation in this section on translating religious texts are the elements that make reading and understanding difficult: subtle differences between words, cultural references, metaphor. This is a further extension of his doubts in the possibility of any one person knowing enough to translate, rather than defining the text as inherently untranslatable.

While prose genres are deemed untranslatable because no translator could possess the necessary skills, poetry is declared untranslatable because poetry itself is fundamentally untranslatable. This definition is based in a worldview centered on Arabic that does not reckon with other cultures and languages. Al-Jāhiz's speaker frames his comment in Arabocentric terms, writing that "The virtue of poetry is limited to Arabs and those who speak their language," *وفضيلة الشعر مقصورة*

على العرب، وعلى من تكلم بلسان العرب (*al-Ḥayawān* 74). At first glance this claim appears to be a straightforward example of chauvinism. However, Kilito makes a convincing case that in the context of a debate about the value of books, monuments and other records of civilizational greatness this statement is actually an argument against the value of poetry, because it can't be appreciated by other cultures that do not speak Arabic (Kilito 39). Even with that caveat, however, the use of the word poetry when what is meant is Arabic poetry shows a degree of Arabocentrism, suggesting as it does that Arabic poetry is the only poetry worthy of note. Given this elision, it is not clear when the speaker declares that poetry cannot be translated whether it is meant that Arabic poetry specifically is untranslatable or the poetry of all languages.

The reasons cited for the untranslatability of poetry are that construction and meter would be lost, and with them the beauty of the poem (*al-Ḥayawān* 74). Because poetry is so structured by the rhythm and sounds of the language, it cannot be translated. This position does not take into consideration that other languages have their own beautiful rhythms and sounds which could be used to create a translation. The untranslatability of poetry is particularly significant because of the importance of poetry in Arabic culture. As the saying goes, poetry is the treasury of the Arabs, الشعر ديوان العرب. Poetry is frequently used as a measure of the power of expression, hence the existence of a word like *ash 'ar*, a comparative



adjective meaning more skilled in poetry or better at appreciating poetry. Poetry works as a site for defining Arab identity and as a site for defining what refined Arabic language should look like. The idea of the untranslatability of Arabic poetry keeps it out of contact with other cultures.

Al-Jāhiz's writing on what makes good poetry, like his assertion that poetry cannot be translated, does not take other languages and cultures into consideration. He writes that the best quality of poetry he has seen is poetry "whose internal components are interconnected, and which is easy to pronounce," متلاحم الاجزاء سهل "as if flowingly constructed, light on the tongue" سلسلة النظام خفيفة على اللسان "the whole verse were a single word, and as if the whole word were a single letter" كأني البيت بأسره كلمة واحدة وحتى كأن الكلمة بأسرها حرف واحد (Bayān 67), and its opposite is disjointed, difficult to pronounce and dispersed in a disorganized manner "like donkey feces," (al-Jāhiz, Bayān 67). This vision of poetic beauty — of smooth, flowing lines that roll off the tongue — treats "easy to pronounce" as if it were a universally recognizable quality, when actually what a given person considers easy to pronounce depends in great part on the kinds of sounds that person is used to pronouncing, which varies widely within and between languages.

A similarly elitist tendency can be found in al-Jāhiz's writings about language and identity. His speaker ranks generalized groups of people according to the level of refinement of their speech, drawing a direct link between language

register and identity: “Uncouth language is understood only by uncouth people, just as the common people only understands its own vernacular. Language, like people, is of many types: lofty and trivial, beautiful and ugly, good and bad,” (Pellat 104) فان الوحشي من الكلام يفهمه الوحشي من الناس كما يفهم السوقي رطانة السوقي (Bayān 104) وكلام الناس في طبقات كما ان الناس أنفسهم في طبقات فمن الكلام الجزل وال سخيّف والملح والحسن والقبيح والسميح والخفيّف والثقيّل (Bayān 144). This passage defines people by the way that they speak. Those that speak “better” Arabic are better people, those that speak “bad” Arabic are bad people. This kind of ranking is similar to the way al-Jāhiz describes the use of pronunciation tests as a way of testing Arab identity (*Bayān* 71), as if cultural or ethnic identity were located in the ability to produce specific phonemes, which is never far from the idea that the ability to produce the kind of Arabic that al-Jāhiz considers correct and beautiful is a test of identity. Al-Jāhiz’s consideration of which tribes are comparatively more eloquent at the beginning of *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn* is further evidence that his writings promote the idea that some groups of people are fundamentally better at expressing themselves than others. This belief that some groups of people are linguistically superior to others among Arabic speakers parallels the idea that Arabic speakers are linguistically superior to speakers of other languages. In this view, Arabic expression is unique and superior, and thus untranslatable.

The claims to the untranslatability of Arabic prose genres and poetry in al-Jāḥiẓ's writings, as well as the language elitism, serve to isolate Arabic and prevent it from interacting with other languages. The underlying claim is that Arabic is too unique and special to be translated, a kind of linguistic exceptionalism that places Arabic above and outside the rest of the world's language. This is the first major current in al-Jāḥiẓ's works, the second is one of translatability, which paradoxically also contributes to the centrality of Arabic.

In a section in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, al-Jāḥiẓ's speaker articulates an Arabocentric view of the successful translation of works from other cultures into Arabic. This passage demonstrates the notion of translation as a sign of Arab civilizational greatness:

The books of the Indians have been construed, the [wisdom] of the Greeks have been translated, and the rules of conduct of the Persians have been rendered into Arabic. Some of these translations are superior to the originals, and others have lost nothing in the process, but if the wisdom of the Arabs were to be translated, the marvelous rhythm would completely disappear. Besides, the ideas would all be ideas already expressed by the Persians in their books on wise and sensible living. These books were transmitted from one country to another, from one generation

to another, and from one language to another until they [reached] us: we are the latest to inherit them and study them.” (Pellat 133, modifications in brackets).

وقد نُقِلَتْ كُتُبُ الهند، وتُرجمتُ حكم اليونانيَّة، وحُولتُ آدابُ الفرس،  
فبعضها ازدادَ حُسناً، وبعضها ما انتقصَ، شيئاً، ولو حُولتُ حكمة  
العرب، لبطل ذلك المعجزُ الذي هو الوزن، مع أنهم لو حوّلوا لم يجدوا  
في معانيها شيئاً لم تذكره العجم في كتبهم، التي وضعت لمعاشهم وفطنهم  
وحكمهم، وقد نُقِلتُ هذه الكتبُ من أمةٍ إلى أمةٍ، ومن قرنٍ إلى قرنٍ، ومن  
لسانٍ إلى لسانٍ، حتى انتهت إلينا، وكنا آخرَ مَنْ ورثها ونظرَ فيها. (AI-

(*al-Hayawān* 75)

In this assessment, not only are the Arabic versions of Indian, Greek and Persian works either equal to or better than the texts they are based on, but also translating wisdom out of Arabic is impossible. The choice of the phrase *intahat ila* or “reached” after a series of transfers gives a sense that Arabs are the endpoint of the line of transmission, as though the Arabs are the last great inheritors of the masterworks of human culture. This Arabocentric assertion is tied to the political ideology of the day, in which translation played a crucial role. The translation and appropriation of Sasanian political astrology, or the legitimization of the state according to fate as read in the stars, was an important facet of the ideology of the Abbasid rulers. The Abbasids used this political astrology to “inculcate[] the view

of the Abbasid state as the legitimate and only successor, in the grand scheme of things governed by the stars, of the ancient empires in Mesopotamia and Iran, and most immediately of the Sasanians,” (Gutas 46).

The idea of Arab culture as the inheritor of world culture expressed in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* is part of a universalizing worldview that placed Arabo-Islamic culture at the center prevalent in the Abbasid era. Tarek Shamma describes an environment in which all knowledge is seen as the right of the believer, quoting the prophetic *ḥadīth*, “The word of wisdom is the lost property of the believer. Wherever he finds it, he has a better right to it,” (Timidhi, no. 2611, Ibn Majah, no. 4159)” (Shamma 82). This statement simultaneously opens up the Arabo-Islamic world to knowledge from all over the world while privileging the Muslim believer above others. Furthermore, Shamma describes an Islamization of important figures in the history of human thought:

The wisdom of foreign sages was not only couched in Islamic terms (a standard practice in the work of Muslim translators) these sages were themselves Islamicized, placed in a long line of wise men, philosophers and prophets (who expressed in different forms the same eternal truths), running through many cultures and culminating in Islam and its prophet. It was not anachronistic, therefore, in this world of “Islamic universalism” (Hanafi 2000 I:

319) to have a Greek philosopher or a Persian sage articulate some of the basic teachings of Islam (Shamma 82).

According to this Arabizing/Islamicizing universalism that informs al-Jāhiz's statements in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, Arabo-Islamic culture can take in many kinds of influences while still maintaining its dominance and centrality. This type of universalism which brings foreign philosophers into the fold of Arabo-Islamic culture is at play in the mythical beginning of the translation movement, in which the caliph al-Ma'mūn has a dream vision of conversing with Aristotle which confirms the importance of reason (Gutas 97-8). The figure of Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor who lived in the era of Muḥammad provides another prominent example of this phenomenon. As Nadia El-Cheikh describes, "Muslim sources made Heraclius a character of the Muslim sacred history" (El-Cheikh 21). In this history, Heraclius is sent a letter inviting him to convert to Islam, and he responds by accepting Muḥammad as a prophet foretold by Jesus, decrying the refusal of his people to accept Islam, and stating that he wished he could be there to wash Muḥammad's feet (El-Cheikh 12). This embrace of Islam is interpreted as the reason for the survival of the Byzantine empire, while some of the Byzantine military defeats are attributed to the "injustice and shameful deeds" of the Byzantines (El-Cheikh 12).

In addition to appropriating cultural figures, the Islamic empire created an ideology of superiority over the Byzantines centered around translation. As Gutas writes,

The Byzantines were portrayed as deserving of Muslim attacks not only because they were infidels - this was the theme already present in Muḥammad's alleged letter to Heraclius - but because they were also culturally benighted and inferior not only to Muslims but also to their own ancestors, the ancient Greeks. The Muslims, by contradistinction, in addition to being superior because of Islam, were also superior because they appreciated ancient Greek science and wisdom and had translated their books into Arabic.

... Anti-Byzantinism thus becomes philhellenism. The translation movement was providing the Muslims with ideological tools to fight against the Byzantines; in the process, the translation movement and all that it stood for gained further in valorization within Islamic society (Gutas 84-85).

In this context, the statement that the Abbasids are the rightful inheritors of the wisdom of other world cultures is recognizable as a part of a larger pattern of claiming and appropriating the products of other cultures and a narrative of Arab superiority.

Furthermore, beyond the Arabocentrism of the statement in the *Ḥayawān* that Indian and Greek works were equal to or improved upon by their translation while Arabic wisdom would suffer loss in translation, this statement identifies *wazn* (meter) as the aspect of Arabic wisdom that cannot be translated. This is similar to the claim expressed in al-Jāḥiẓ’s work that poetry cannot be translated because of meter and other sound qualities. The idea is that the particular rhythms of Arabic make Arabic texts impossible to translate. The flaw in these ideas about language and consequently about translation is that they are not just concerned with the richness of detail in language and identifying such details as a fundamental part of language, but with placing one type of language variety and one language above others, and disregarding the rest. Perhaps this is why al-Jāḥiẓ’s speaker in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* presents translation from Indian, Greek and Persian into Arabic as easier than translating out of Arabic: there is no room in such a worldview to contemplate the possibility that Indian, Greek and Persian have their own “marvelous rhythms.”

### **Conclusion**

These selections from and about Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq, Mattā ibn Yūnus and al-Jāḥiẓ shed light on the way that dynamics of Arabic translatability played out in an era of Arabic civilization largely unburdened by language anxiety and geopolitical disempowerment. The narrative of translation as a sign that Arab culture is lacking



and as a kind of loss is nowhere to be found. Instead, Arabic was the language of a powerful empire, a language understood to be significant. In these texts, untranslatability was at times a rejection of interaction with other cultures as well as a recognition of the uniqueness of language. Al-Jāhiz's writings on the untranslatability of poetry and prose genres, for example, meant cutting Arabic literature off from encounters with other languages and literatures. Al-Sīrāfī's position of the untranslatability of Greek logic was part of a defensive Arabocentrism aimed at keeping the Other out. These texts show that the idea of untranslatability can be a tool of exclusion as much as a form of recognizing differences between cultures.

On the other hand, translatability was also capable of reinforcing the centrality of Arabic, through the process of Arabization and the rhetoric of translation as restoring knowledge to its rightful inheritors. Al-Ṣafadī's synopsis as well as the critiques of translation in al-Jāhiz's writings and al-Sīrāfī's criticism of Mattā ibn Yūnus show a demand for Arabization of texts, that is for translations that read well in Arabic. The remarks penned by al-Jāhiz claiming wisdom literature from Greece and India as the rightful inheritance of Arab culture show an embrace of translatability. Instead of seeing translation into Arabic as a sign of weakness, al-Jāhiz's speaker treats translation into Arabic as a sign of civilizational strength, and as a kind of repatriating wisdom to its rightful owners that folds it

into existing frameworks in Abbasid society. The process of Arabization meant losing some aspects of the source texts, but also helped bring in new information and ideas from other cultures, from the scientific texts of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq to the philosophers mentioned by al-Jāḥiẓ.

Reading these Abbasid texts on translations offers the contemporary reader alternative ways of seeing translation into and out of Arabic, showing that Arabic can absorb influences from other cultures without losing itself and that in fact, contact with other cultures has shaped the language from its earliest days. The kind of universalizing embrace of translation found in some of these texts has the same flaws as many universalisms, that of treating one culture as the center of the world, but it also helped to open up space for encounters with other cultures that greatly enriched Arab culture. The Abbasid translation movement brought Greek knowledge into Arabic culture, creating a base of scientific learning and philosophical inquiry that Arab thinkers would continue to develop and advance for centuries.

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