

The Problems of Translating Proverbs in Arabic into Malay

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ABSTRACT

The uncritical transfer of Arabic proverbs into Malay texts persistently frustrates meaningful cross-cultural communication. Despite centuries of linguistic interplay and the apparent structural similarities between the languages, a pervasive disconnect endures; the subtle cultural load embedded within each proverb frequently dissolves during the translation process, rendering the output either inert or entirely misleading. Prior efforts, unfortunately, have often merely catalogued these missteps without truly grappling with the underlying conceptual frameworks that dictate their failure. This conceptual analysis, rooted in a painstaking review of existing scholarship, unearths the deeper theoretical fissures. Three distinct conceptual obstacles emerge: the irreparable semantic dilution inherent in literal transfer, the pragmatic chasm separating original and target audiences, and the pronounced loss of socio-cultural resonance unique to the Arabic context. Ignoring these intricacies does not merely result in linguistic awkwardness; it actively propagates a fundamental misrepresentation of cultural identity, demanding a more critical, contextual approach to translation pedagogy and practice.

Keywords: Arabic proverbs, Malay translation, cultural untranslatability, paremiology, semantic loss

INTRODUCTION

The notion that proverbs, these pithy encapsulations of collective wisdom, might simply 'translate' across cultures strikes one as rather naive. It is a persistent illusion. For all the earnest attempts to bridge linguistic divides between Arabic and Malay, particularly in academic and religious texts, a stubborn chasm remains, a cultural void that crude lexical substitution simply cannot fill. Why does this fundamental problem continue to plague scholars? Decades of translational practice have yielded an uneasy truce, where literalism often trumps meaning, leaving readers with a sense of vague familiarity rather than profound insight. This superficial treatment, which avoids confronting the true depths of cultural embeddedness, has unfortunately become rather common. Scholars, too often, have contented themselves with cataloguing errors without truly interrogating the theoretical apparatus that perpetuates them. We possess myriad examples of mistranslated proverbs—instances where a perfectly eloquent Arabic phrase becomes a clunky, bewildering Malay utterance—yet a coherent, comprehensive explanation for why this failure is so systemic seems curiously absent from the broader discourse. This paper, then, begins with a certain dissatisfaction, an intellectual unease regarding the complacency with which this complex problem has been met. The urgency lies not merely in academic precision, but in the preservation of authentic cultural expression itself.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic discourse surrounding proverb translation, particularly between culturally rich languages like Arabic and Malay, has historically presented a rather fractured front. Scholars have certainly acknowledged the

difficulties, yet their approaches often diverge, leaving more questions than answers. Some early works, such as those by Al-Jundi (1993), tended towards a largely descriptive analysis, cataloguing translational failures and proposing lexical equivalences without deeply probing the cultural underpinnings that often render such direct substitutions inadequate. This approach, while providing valuable data points, arguably skirts the more profound issue: the untranslatability of cultural semiotics. What good is a dictionary entry if it misses the entire point of the utterance? Conversely, others, including scholars like Nor Hashimah (2006), have pointed towards the inherent difficulties arising from the differing worldviews encoded within proverbs. They suggest that proverbs are not just linguistic units; they are cultural artefacts, imbued with historical, social, and even religious layers that resist simple denotative transfer. One might even argue their work implied a certain futility in aiming for perfect equivalence. Indeed, this line of reasoning, which posits proverbs as profoundly culture-bound phenomena, seems far more persuasive. The concept of 'equivalence' itself, a central pillar in translation studies, has been fiercely debated, becoming particularly contentious when applied to paremiology. Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence, while revolutionary in its time, aimed for an equivalent effect rather than a precise word-for-word match, yet even this often falls short when confronted with the sheer semantic and pragmatic density of proverbs. Can one truly achieve an 'equivalent effect' when the cultural referents are entirely alien to the target audience? Baker (1992) later introduced the idea of textual equivalence, providing a more granular taxonomy of equivalence types, but even her detailed framework struggles with proverbs, often relegating them to the 'nonequivalence at word level' category—a rather convenient sidestepping of the actual problem, one might suspect. It is not merely a 'word level' issue; it is a conceptual level problem. One might contend that the very tools we use to analyse translation are simply not sharp enough for proverbs.

More recent scholarship, particularly within the last decade, has started to push beyond mere identification of problems towards proposing more nuanced theoretical frameworks. For example, some argue for an approach rooted in cognitive linguistics, suggesting that the mental models activated by proverbs in the source language must somehow be replicated or approximated in the target language (e.g., Kovecses, 2005). This is a promising avenue, certainly, though the practical application remains elusive. How does one 'replicate' a cognitive model across vastly different cultural schemas? Meanwhile, scholars focusing on Arabic-Malay translation specifically have highlighted the role of Islamic traditions and shared cultural heritage (e.g., Abdullah & Omar, 2018). While acknowledging this shared substratum is important, it arguably oversimplifies the distinctions. The sheer diversity within Arabic-speaking cultures, from the Levant to North Africa, means that 'Arabic' proverbs themselves are not monolithic, and their transplantation into the Malay context, despite shared religious beliefs, is rarely seamless. The assumption of a smooth transition based on religious affinity is, perhaps, a romanticised view. The pragmatic dimension also presents a considerable challenge, often overlooked in more linguistically-focused studies. Johnstone (2018) and other pragmaticists would argue that proverbs are performative utterances, deployed for specific social functions: to advise, to warn, to criticise, or to affirm. The success of a proverb's translation, therefore, hinges not just on semantic fidelity, but on its ability to perform a similar function and evoke a similar response within the target culture. This is often where translations spectacularly fail. A proverb that carries gravitas and authority in its original Arabic might sound trite or nonsensical in Malay, stripped of its performative power. This particular aspect, the social work of proverbs, seems to be a glaring omission in much of the existing Arabic-Malay translation literature, which tends to prioritise lexical and semantic issues.

The existing literature, then, offers a scattered yet undeniably important foundation. It convincingly establishes the inherent complexity of proverb translation, moving from simple lexical hurdles to profound cultural and pragmatic chasms. What it largely fails to provide, however, is a cohesive, theoretically grounded methodology for predicting and mitigating these failures, rather than merely observing them post-factum. There is a perceptible lack of a critical synthesis that synthesises these disparate insights into a coherent, actionable framework. We know the problem exists; the question is, what precisely are we to do about it?

METHODOLOGY

This inquiry, concerned as it is with the enduring conceptual quandaries of proverb translation, necessitates a methodological approach capable of dissecting intricate theoretical constructs rather than generating new empirical data. Thus, a rigorous conceptual analysis, founded squarely on a comprehensive library-based review, forms the bedrock of this study. This was not a passive accumulation of texts, mind you; it was a deliberate, almost forensic, examination of the intellectual history surrounding this specific translational problem. We did not conduct surveys. There were no interviews. The focus rested entirely on the intellectual scaffolding of prior research.

The process began with an exhaustive identification of relevant academic literature, spanning

seminal works in paremiology, general translation theory, and, crucially, specific studies addressing Arabic-Malay linguistic transfer. Initial searches employed a broad array of keywords—'proverb translation,' 'Arabic Malay proverbs,' 'cultural equivalence,' 'untranslatability'—across major academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and various university library catalogues. A crucial, perhaps even ruthless, filtering mechanism was applied to this initial deluge of material: only texts that grappled conceptually with the mechanisms of translational failure, rather than merely cataloguing examples, were retained. We discarded outdated theories that offered simplistic one-to-one equivalences as largely irrelevant to the deeper conceptual issues at hand. Once a core corpus of pertinent studies was assembled, the analysis proceeded through several iterative stages. Each text was subjected to intense critical scrutiny. This involved not just reading for content, but for underlying assumptions, theoretical biases, and the implicit philosophical stances of the authors. We asked: what theoretical lens is being applied here? How does this author define 'proverb' or 'culture' in relation to translation? Crucially, we looked for points of intellectual friction, areas where scholars disagreed or where one theory offered a more compelling explanation for observed phenomena than another. This wasn't about agreement; it was about sharpening the critical edge. The conceptual framework began to take shape as recurrent themes and persistent obstacles in Arabic-Malay proverb translation were systematically extracted and cross-referenced. This involved a painstaking process of thematic coding, where common conceptual threads—such as semantic dilution, pragmatic failure, and loss of cultural resonance—were identified and refined. These themes were not predetermined but emerged organically from the literature itself, a testament to the inductive nature of true conceptual work. We were, in essence, piecing together a complex mosaic from fragmented insights. Each identified theme then became a node in a broader theoretical synthesis, allowing for the construction of a coherent narrative about the inherent challenges. Ultimately, the methodology aimed to move beyond superficial observations to construct a robust, nuanced theoretical understanding of why Arabic proverbs so often resist faithful translation into Malay. It was an exercise in intellectual architecture, building a more solid explanatory structure from the scattered bricks of previous scholarship. The rigour lay in the depth of engagement with the texts, the relentless pursuit of underlying mechanisms, and the critical synthesis of disparate academic voices into a singular, more authoritative argument about the problem's true nature. This method, while not generating new data, creates new knowledge by reconfiguring and re-evaluating existing insights, forging a path towards a more sophisticated theoretical model of proverb translation.

RESULTS

The systematic conceptual analysis unearthed a trinity of pervasive, interlocking issues that fundamentally compromise the translation of Arabic proverbs into Malay, extending far beyond mere lexical inadequacy. Each problem, while distinct, feeds into a larger narrative of cultural untranslatability. \n \n First among these is the inescapable issue of semantic dilution. Proverbs, by their very nature, are semantically dense; they compress layers of meaning, often metaphorical or allegorical, into concise linguistic packages. The original Arabic proverb frequently carries specific historical allusions, religious connotations, or even archaic linguistic structures that simply have no direct equivalent in Malay. To force a direct translation is to strip away these layers, leaving only a hollow shell. Imagine attempting to render 'مثل الجمل بالبرج' (like a camel in a tower) purely literally; the Malay equivalent 'seperti unta di menara' loses all its implied absurdity, its subtle jab at incongruity, becoming merely a bizarre image rather than a sharp critique. The richness, the very point of the proverb, evaporates entirely in this process. Moving beyond individual word meanings, the problem deepens with pragmatic failure. Proverbs are not just statements; they are social actions. They instruct, they warn, they console, and they subtly critique. An Arabic proverb's force often derives from its specific context of use, its implied audience, and the shared cultural knowledge that allows it to land effectively. When translated into Malay, even if the semantic content is somewhat preserved, the pragmatic effect is frequently lost. The cultural cues that trigger understanding or emotional resonance in an Arab context are simply absent for a Malay speaker, leading to a profound disconnect. A proverb intended as a gentle piece of advice might, in its new linguistic garb, sound harsh or irrelevant, failing to achieve its original communicative purpose. The social utility, a defining characteristic of a proverb, vanishes. Finally, and arguably most profoundly, there is the loss of socio-cultural resonance. This goes beyond specific semantics or pragmatic function, touching upon the very soul of the proverb. Arabic proverbs are deeply interwoven with Arab and Islamic cultural narratives, historical events, and a particular communal sensibility. They evoke shared memories, common struggles, and a collective heritage. Translating these into Malay, even with careful cultural adaptation, often leaves a perceptible vacuum. The profound echo of tradition, the sense of an ancient voice speaking, is diminished, replaced by something that

feels manufactured rather than organic. It is an alienation of the proverb from its essential cultural soil. The Malay iteration, however carefully crafted, seldom carries the same historical weight or communal recognition. These three conceptual themes—semantic dilution, pragmatic failure, and the erosion of socio-cultural resonance—do not operate in isolation. Rather, they form a cascading sequence of loss, each compounding the other to create an almost insurmountable barrier to truly faithful translation. The challenge, then, is not merely linguistic; it is profoundly epistemic and cultural, demanding a radical re-evaluation of what 'translation' even means in the context of such deeply embedded cultural artefacts. It calls for a more nuanced understanding of the delicate interplay between language, culture, and meaning, a relationship far more intricate than often assumed.

DISCUSSION

The findings—the pervasive semantic dilution, the regrettable pragmatic failure, and the profound erosion of socio-cultural resonance—point towards a much darker truth: the conventional models of proverb translation are simply inadequate. So what does this mean for the practicalities of inter-linguistic communication? It suggests that our current methods, perhaps too reliant on a simplistic notion of linguistic transfer, are actively contributing to a fundamental misrepresentation of cultural identity. When a proverb loses its soul in translation, it is not merely a linguistic error; it is a cultural betrayal. This failure, repeated across countless texts, arguably perpetuates a superficial understanding of both Arabic and Malay cultures, hindering genuine cross-cultural empathy and intellectual exchange. We are, in effect, constructing bridges that cannot bear the weight of true meaning. One might argue that the very expectation of 'equivalent' proverb translation is a theoretical misstep. If a proverb is truly a distillation of a unique cultural experience, then a 'perfect' translation might be a chimera, an unattainable ideal. The semantic dilution, for instance, challenges the very notion that meaning can be seamlessly transported across such disparate conceptual landscapes. It is entirely possible that some proverbs are simply 'untranslatable' in any truly meaningful sense, demanding instead a form of cultural exegesis or contextual explanation rather than a direct linguistic substitute. This hints at a deeper issue within translation theory itself, compelling us to reconsider the boundaries of what language can, and cannot, convey. The prevailing assumption that all wisdom is universally transferable, neatly packaged into another tongue, seems rather naive now. The pragmatic failures observed also carry significant implications, particularly for fields like religious studies, diplomacy, and international relations. If a translated proverb fails to achieve its intended social function—if a warning sounds like a pleasantry, or a piece of advice comes across as an insult—then serious misunderstandings are not just probable, but inevitable. This is not merely an academic quibble. Consider the potential for misinterpretation in crucial diplomatic exchanges, or in the dissemination of religious texts where the nuanced intent of a proverb is paramount. Such blunders can have real-world consequences, eroding trust and fostering animosity, all because we neglected the performative power of these compact linguistic units. The notion that cultural context can be safely discarded in the pursuit of lexical fidelity has demonstrably failed. Furthermore, the consistent loss of socio-cultural resonance poses a profound challenge to the preservation of cultural heritage itself. Proverbs are living archives; they carry the echoes of generations, embodying a collective memory and a particular way of seeing the world. When these are translated in a way that strips them of this resonance, they become decontextualised relics, devoid of their original power. For Malay speakers encountering Arabic proverbs, or vice versa, the translated versions often present a flat, unengaging facade that fails to convey the richness and depth of the source culture. This is not just an academic concern; it is a matter of cultural vitality, of ensuring that these ancient voices continue to speak with authority and meaning in new linguistic homes. Perhaps we are inadvertently contributing to the cultural flattening of the world. The current approach, arguably, renders these invaluable cultural markers inert. What emerges from this analysis is a forceful argument for a more radical approach to proverb translation. It necessitates moving beyond mere linguistic competence to a profound cultural literacy, one that acknowledges the inherent limitations of direct transfer. The very idea of finding a 'Malay equivalent' for a deeply Arabic proverb might need to be abandoned in favour of a more interpretive, explanatory, or even an adaptational approach (Awang et al., 2016). This would demand, of course, a more demanding skillset from translators and a greater openness from readers to engage with nuanced, context-rich explanations rather than expecting instant, effortless comprehension. The old theoretical models, with their emphasis on straightforward equivalence, have proven demonstrably insufficient when faced with the enigmatic power of proverbs. It is time for a new theoretical framework, one that embraces complexity and resists the seductive simplicity of literalism.

CONCLUSION

The journey through the intricate challenges of translating Arabic proverbs into Malay has revealed a deeply entrenched problem, far more complex than simple lexical matching. We have seen how semantic layers are relentlessly stripped away, how vital pragmatic functions are nullified, and how the very cultural essence—the unique resonance—of these profound utterances dissolves in the crucible of translation. This is not a trivial matter. The pervasive misrepresentation of proverbs carries a significant cost, affecting not only academic rigour but also the authenticity of cultural exchange and the integrity of shared understanding. The illusion of seamless transfer has proven to be a persistent and damaging one. The existing literature, while certainly highlighting the difficulties, has arguably shied away from confronting the full implications of these failures. My analysis suggests that much of translation theory, particularly regarding proverbs, needs a radical overhaul, moving away from an uncritical pursuit of 'equivalence' towards an acknowledgement of inherent untranslatability in many instances. It is not enough to identify that problems exist; we must fundamentally re-evaluate the theoretical underpinnings that guide translation practice. The current approach, it seems, serves neither the source nor the target culture particularly well. For future scholarship, this demands a shift in focus. A compelling next step would involve a focused empirical study: an in-depth, qualitative analysis of how Malay native speakers interpret a corpus of commonly translated Arabic proverbs, compared to the interpretations of native Arabic speakers. Such a study, employing ethnographic methods and perhaps cognitive linguistic tools, could precisely quantify the extent of semantic dilution and pragmatic failure in real-world reception. This would move the discussion from conceptual critique to concrete, measurable impact. Ultimately, if we continue to ignore the profound cultural and pragmatic chasms that separate Arabic and Malay proverbs, we risk not only perpetuating linguistic inaccuracies but also fostering a diluted, anemic version of cultural dialogue. The richness of collective wisdom, the very heart of these linguistic jewels, will remain locked behind an impenetrable barrier, or worse, be presented in a form so distorted as to be meaningless. The time for a more honest, perhaps even humbling, appraisal of our translational capabilities is long overdue; the cost of inaction is a continued erosion of authentic cultural expression.

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