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DISCOURSES ON TRANSLATION IN THE OTTOMAN POST-TANZİMAT

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1. Introduction

In Turkey, historical-descriptive studies on translation(s) in Ottoman culture have gained a considerable momentum especially since the 1990s. We find articles, doctoral dissertations, and interdisciplinary research projects on Ottoman translation activity. Some Turkish translation scholars and turkologists working on translations both in the Ottoman and modern Turkish cultures at Boğaziçi University have emphasized the need for systemic and historical-descriptive research on translated corpora. Saliha Paker, Nedret Burçoğlu-Kuran, İşın Bengi-Öner, Suat Karantay, and Zehra Toska are pioneering scholars who call for collaboration on the translations in the Ottoman/Turkish literary and cultural history. This paper has its roots in a project on the Ottoman translation history coordinated by Saliha Paker.¹ Theoretical frameworks and research models in Paker’s project in which I participated as a member, have helped younger scholars to elaborate a critical attitude on the translation practices in the Ottoman culture and have raised some questions “unasked”.

In this paper I propose to examine of some of the discourses on translation in Ottoman Turkish in the Post-Tanzimat period, i.e. the period extending from the 1880s onwards to the beginning of the twentieth century.² I use the term “discourse” for secondary texts on translation or on the issues related to translation. I accept that such texts are forms of discourse. The main aim is to try to understand the concept of translation (tercîme/terceme) itself in Ottoman culture and literature at the end of the nineteenth century.

¹Paker’s project, *Translations and their functions in the continuity of Ottoman culture: fourteenth-nineteenth centuries*, was the first interdisciplinary project conducted by the two departments in Boğaziçi University: Translation and Interpreting, and Turkish Language and Literature Departments in 1997. This project also gave impetus to another supplementary project, *Early Ottoman translations and their functions in the formation of Ottoman literary models*, coordinated by Zehra Toska in 1999. See “Preface” in Paker 2002. Both projects were supported by the Boğaziçi University Research Fund.

²This paper is based on my Ph.D study, which is still continuing on the Ottoman Turkish discourses on literary translation in the Ottoman Post-Tanzimat at Boğaziçi University.
I will work especially on the data from the “classics debate”, which is an important debate in 1897 on translating the Western classics into Ottoman Turkish. The debate was started by Ahmet Mithat who was a significant prolific Tanzimat writer and translator, and also the chief editor of the daily newspaper Tercüman-ı Hakikat. It continued for four months in the various dailies and magazines between the significant writers of that period: Ahmet Cevdet, Cenap Şahabettin, Necib Asım, Ismail Avni, Hüseyin Daniş, Ahmet Rasim, Hüseyin Sabri, and Kemal Paşazade Sâid (Lastik Sâid) (Levend 1972: 254; Kaplan 1998: 12).

The “classics debate” is important since it marks a literary and cultural contact with the European cultures. It signifies a historical moment in which the Ottoman writers or translators deal with the problems of translating from a religiously and culturally distant source: Europe.¹ On the other hand, it also signifies not only a resistance to the “foreign” culture and literature but also the problems of surviving the current-domestic literature including the linguistic, literary and cultural elements common with the Arabic and Persian literatures for centuries. The Ottoman literature, in this sense, is not “foreign” to the Ottoman literary writers and translators at the end of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, as Necib Asım points out in the “classics debate” some literary translations from Arabic and Persian into Ottoman Turkish include non-translational aspects as a result of the linguistic, literary and cultural nearness (Necib Asım 1897).

I will also refer not only to some of the prefaces where writers or translators were associated with translating European literatures but also to definitions in some dictionaries. Therefore, the materials I will use in this paper are extra-textual sources, which are in nature secondary, and which oppose to the textual data as defined by Gideon Toury in Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond (1995). But I think they could help us to understand how translation phenomenon was perceived by the Ottoman target culture, what terms were used to define translation, and what were the functions of translations etc. In this paper, I will tackle discourses on translation regarding its aspects under two headings: definitions and strategies of translation.

¹In the titles of some articles in this debate, we find the word “problem”: “The Classics Problem” (Klasikler Meselesi) by Cenap Şahabettin; “A Literary Thought of the Classics Problem Remembers (The Past)” (Klasikler Meselesinin Verdiği Bir Fikr-i Edebi (Mâzî)) by Ahmet Rasim etc. This shows that contacting with the European cultures and literatures (especially through French) was really a problem for the Ottoman literate figures in translation.
1. Definitions of Translation

As the point of departure I take Ahmed Cevdet’s statement in his article titled “İkram-ı Aklam” (Gift from Writers) in the “classics debate”. Ahmet Cevdet wrote for the *İkdam* newspaper. He was the first person responding to Ahmet Midhat, who called for “writers” to transfer European classics into Ottoman Turkish. Ahmed Cevdet was also the first person pointing out the difference between *nâkl* (transfer) and *taklid* (imitation) in his article. He said:

But now let me say that imitating a classical work is different from transferring it into another language.

(Fakat şimdiden dermiyân edelim ki bir klasik eserin taklid edilmesi başka diğer bir lisana naklünunması yine başkadır.) (Cevdet 1897)\(^1\)

Following “İkram-ı Aklam”, Midhat focused on Cevdet’s statement and expanded his definition of *nâkl*:

Let us say that imitating a classical work is different from transferring it into another language. Even the difference in transferring into another language is of two kinds. Even transferring word for word is different from transferring sense for sense.

(Diyecêğiz ki ‘bir klasik eserin taklid edilmesi başka diğer bir lisana naklünunması yine başkadır’. Hatta diğer bir lisana naklindeki başkalık dañi iki türlüdür. Harfi harfine nakl etmek başka meålen nakl etmek dañi başkadır) (Midhat 1897).

Cevdet’s polarization in defining translation as *nâkl* and *taklid* was significant since it indicated that *nâkl* and *taklid* were considered in binary opposition. This fact reveals that *taklid* existed in the literary system as a translation-bound concept. Therefore, *nâkl* and *taklid* seem to be the two poles establishing a general division in the meta-discourse on translation in the Ottoman Post-Tanzimat. These were also the actual concepts demonstrating how discourses on translation were positioned at the end of the nineteenth century. I argue that *nâkl* and *taklid* were both primary notions in understanding how the Ottoman Post-Tanzimat even the Tanzimat literatures were produced. I also argue that the modernization of literature in Ottoman culture cannot be studied without understanding the translation phenomenon and its practices starting from the second half of the nineteenth century.

Let me go back to Midhat’s discourse in order to point out another aspect of *nâkl*. In Midhat’s explanation *nâkl* was overtly related to *tercüme*. Definitions in some of the dictionaries also demonstrate that *nâkl* and *tercüme* were not only principal notions of translation but that they were also interconnected concepts.

\(^1\) In this paper, I will give each quotation first in English translation and then in a Latin transcription of the original in Ottoman Turkish in the Arabic script.
Nakl was a frequently used term in circulation, which basically means “transfer” in Ottoman Turkish. However, it also had various other meanings covering transfer and translation. Şemseddin Sami, who was a famous Ottoman lexicographer, defined **nakl** in his **Kâmus-ı Türkî** (Turkish Dictionary) (1900) as transferring from one place to another, passing over to another location, changing of place, moving, transmigration, copying a writing or picture, taking a copy, story, narrative; things that can be known in an oral or written way and cannot be found out by reasoning; **passing over from one language into another, translation**. (my italics)

(bir yerden bir yere götürme, diğer mahale geçirmeye, taşıma; tebdil-i menzil ve mekân etme, taşıma, göç; yazı ve resim veseaire suretini çıkarma, alınma, kaldırma; hikâye, rivayet; âğızdan âğıza veya kitaplar vastasıyla vasîl olup bilinen ve akl ile bulunması mümkün olmayan şey; **bir lisandan diğer bir lisana geçirme, terceme**).

In this definition **nakl** was essentially associated with transmigration, moving, copying or imitating. We consider **nakl** a term to be used to represent the transmission of the texts between cultures and languages. Thus it was obviously interrelated with **terceme**, gaining a similar meaning.

The concept of **tercümé** was defined in **Kâmus-ı Türkî** (vocalized as **terceme**) as “turning from one language into another, transfer. Literal translation: without excluding any words. Free translation: expressing in other words by keeping only the sense [of the original]”


In a similar to Sami’s, Mehmet Salahi, another lexicographer in that period, defined **tercümé** (vocalized as **terceme**) in his **Kâmus-ı Osmanlı** (Ottoman [Turkish] Dictionary) (1313/1895-96) as

“to express one language in another one; to transfer words and speech belonging to one language into another one”

(Bir lisani diğer lisan ile beyan etmek; bir lisana ait kelam ve makali âher lisana nakd) (Salahi 1895-96).

In the above mentioned definitions, **terceme** tends to be defined as an interlingual notion. However, it also needs to be considered a culture-bound concept. Sami’s definition draws our attention to the term **çevirme** (turning over) which was derived from the verb “çevirmek” (to turn over). Here **çevirme** appears as a Turkish term used to explain the Arabic-loan word **terceme**. But **çevirme** did not exist actually as a lexical item corresponding to **tercümé** in the dictionaries of that period. Paker says, “This term would gain importance after the Turkish language reform movement for purism in the
1930s as a result of a certain ideological attitude towards Ottoman culture and literature” (Paker 2002: 123). Furthermore, terceme would gradually be replaced by çevir in the late 1940s (Gürcağlar-Tahir 2001: 207). This change in the terms between two different political attitudes or in the intralingual translation as a result of change from empire to a nation-state points out the cultural context of translation which needs to be reconstructed with its current terms and concepts. This point would change our understanding of translation in the Ottoman culture.

Saliha Paker is the first Turkish translation scholar considering terceme in the Ottoman translation practices a culture-specific concept on the basis of translation studies. She problematizes the concept of terceme extending from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, and questions the translational terms and concepts used in the republican scholarly discourse. Her framework is significant in terms of providing an awareness towards the culture-specific aspects of translation in the Ottoman culture (Paker 2002).

In an early translated dictionary in the 19th century known as El-Okyanús el-basît fi tercemet'īl-kâmûs el-muhît (1810) (El-Okyanûs, The Simplified Translation of Kâmûs el-Muhaft) by Mütercim Asım, terceme was defined as “This is in the dehrece meter, which means to comment and explain a language by another one” (italics mine)

(Dehrece ve beyan eylemek manasindadır) (Asım 1820).

Mütercim Asım was a significant lexicographer, historian and poet. He also defined nakl quite briefly in his El-Okyanús as “it means to carry over something from its place to another”

(Bir nesneyi yerinden áher yere geçirmek manasindadır) (ibid).

It is interesting that the way Mütercim Asım thought of terceme was enriched with tefsir (commentary) and beyan (explanation). In other words, he points out that additions made for the sake of expansion in translation would be possible and expected. El-Okyanûs was a bilingual version of the Arabic dictionary compiled by Firuzabadi. Though it was meant to be as translation, it also had the critical editions of some Arabic words providing Turkish equivalents (Aksoy 1962: 21; Paker 1998: 581).

Asım’s definition of terceme demonstrates the actual meaning of the term in the Arabic culture. Terceme covering both commentary and explanation in Asım’s discourse also reflects the “traditional Ottoman conception of translation” in the 19th century. Commentary and explanation seem to have had its roots in the Arabic system and they had been practised as a means of transferring texts between the Islamic cultures for centuries.
Therefore, *tercüme* really needs to be considered a culture-bound concept as Paker discussed in her article and it should be considered within a greater scope and context in the Ottoman case.

In his famous work, *Galatât-ı Tercüme* (Translation Errors) (1888), Kemal Paşaçade Said defined translation in a rather different way. Said, also known as *Lastik* Said, was a very significant cultural and literary figure. He thought constitutional law, rhetoric and translation at *Mekteb-i Sultanî* and *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* (School of Political Economy). He also wrote in the *Vakit* newspaper. He defined *tercüme* referring to a Persian metaphor in the second fascicle of his *Galatât-ı Tercüme* as follows:

Translation is to carry over in the sense assumed of water in accordance with ‘harf zarfeste ve meâni hemçü ăb’ [the word is a cover and the sense is like water] from the words of a language into the covering words of another language. The recommended ornaments are like adding some chemicals in case of the possibility that the new style has spoilt the water.

Tercüme demek ‘harf zarfeste ve meâni hemçü ăb’ [harf kulûfur ve mana su gibidir] medîlunca ăb makamında olan manayı, bir lisânın elifzî tarafından diğer lisânın zurûf-ı elifâzma nakî etmek demek olup tecvîz olunan tezûyênî, zarf-ı cedîdin suyî bozması ihtimaline menebî muhafazaten bazı eczâ-yî kimyenîye katmak kabîlîndendir.” (Said 1888, 2nd fascicle)

In his metaphor, translation is described only as the “replacement of words” between languages by keeping the sense of the original. Thus, Said assumed that the sense was the water, which is an “invariant element”. He believed that water would never lose its essential properties even when it was poured into a new cup. In principle, translation in his mind was only a kind of rewording the text with a strong emphasis on keeping the invariant meaning of the original.

Interestingly, Said used this metaphor to explain why he attempted to write *Galatât-ı Tercüme*. His aim was to demonstrate translation errors and to offer “adequate” Turkish equivalents to some French words and phrases. In this context, *Galatât-ı Tercüme* was accepted as a valuable book establishing the ground for the literal translation in the Ottoman Post-Tanzimat literature. Ahmet Midhat was a good example, for he considered Said an authority who opened ways how to make proper translations from French in *Galatât-ı Tercüme*. Ahmet Midhat wrote:

If *Galatât-ı Tercüme* by our dear brother Said is read in detail, it will be understood that what the master has been working is to establish a ground that will subsequently help for the literal translation.

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1 *Galatât-ı Tercüme* consists of eighteen fascicles published between 1888 and 1906.
(Biraderimiz saadetli Sa’d Beyefendi Hazretlerinin ‘Galatât-ı Tercüme’leri im’ân ile okunur ise görülür ki üstad-ı müşarünileyhin çalıştıkları şey bilahare şu tercümә-i ayniyeve vasil olacak yolу tehidеn ibaretтır.) (Midhat 1897)

Sa’d also draws attention to the function of translators. He defines the task of a translator as transferring the sense of the original by only exchanging words between the two languages without causing any loss in meaning. Consequently, Sa’d’s translation metaphor is associated with quite mystic connotations. I consider his definition to be reflecting a kind of perception of the Islamic epistemology on translation. We see clearly that keeping the sense without attempting any exegesis, explanation, interpretation or paraphrase has been a central notion in the Qur’ân translation for centuries (Mustapha 1998: 201).

2. Strategies of Translation or Tarîk and Tarz

Lawrence Venuti defines translation strategy as “basic tasks of choosing the foreign text to be translated and developing a method to translate it” (Venuti 1998: 240). In Venuti’s definition “Developing a method” seems to be meaningful in the case of Ottoman practice of translation. Each strategy in Ottoman translation practice was, in fact, associated with a translation method. For this reason, strategies would have the same meaning as methods. Discourses reveal that writers and/or translators adopted various translation strategies ranging from harfiyyen/aynen (literal) to mealen (free) or tevysien (expanded). There were also some other strategies in the system such as hülasa (summary), taklîd (imitation), and tahvîl (formal transfer between verse and prose). Therefore, translation strategies in that period include a multi-divisional aspect since each term, in fact, also represents one of the translation methods. In this part, I will focus briefly on the strategies such as harfiyyen versus serbest in discourses adopted by Necib Aşım and Ahmet Midhat.

Necib Aşım, in his The Book (1893), mentioned that free translation was used in translating scientific works rather than in translating literature. According to him, technical or scientific texts were translated freely since these texts were fundamentally intended to serve as communication in the target system:

Translation is made in two ways: One is to translate freely, in which a translator renders the sense of a book into his/her language with his/her pleasure. Translating scientific works in this way not only makes them understandable but also helps to save time. Thus, many of our translators prefer this way. However, literary works require to be translated literally. Therefore, people who want to translate literally should be extraordinarily skillful in having a good knowledge in both languages.
Asım’s views demonstrate that understandability was a pragmatic purpose and also a primary initial goal in the translation of scientific works. This was due to the exigencies of communication as a result of encountering the European cultures. However, Asım offers literal strategy for the translation of literary works. Thus, his conception of literary translation seems to be translation proper, i.e. faithful translation.

Muallim Naci who opposed Asım’s views on translation strategies, offers sense for sense translation when translating literary works. Naci, like Ahmet Midhat, was one of the significant literary figures in the making of Ottoman translated literature in the Post-Tanzimat period. He suggested normative views on the translation of literary texts in his Şöyle Boyle (1885), which included his own translations from French literature:

“Therefore, many of our translations should be [made] freely” regarding literary translations

(Binaenaleyh tercümelerrimizin çoğu mealen olmak lazımdır gelir) (Naci 1885: 98).

Naci’s view demonstrates that free translation was also used in translating literature. In other words, understandability required in translating scientific works was also a primary notion in the field of literature. This would mean violating the artistic and aesthetic norms in translations for the sake of public readership. Understandability seems to have its roots in journalism activity for not only the original but also the translated literature meant for public readership required a standard-communicative dialect, terminology, and immediate intelligibility.

Understandability was generally foregrounded in discourses in order to legitimate free translation, summary or imitation. This reveals that it functioned as a primary norm in adapting foreign texts to the target system. Moreover, it seems to be important to serve the taste of public readership reading translated popular literature. Ahmet Midhat clearly emphasized the importance of understandability in translation. Thus, he argued that literal translation would distort the reader’s understanding of the original:
Because these [literal] translations were not understood while they were being read, summary translation was made again in pure French and given on the right page below. Since literal translation is made to grasp the linguistic beauty of that language problems [appearing] in literal translation can be solved in that way. (my italics)

(Bu tercüme [harfiyyen tercüme] okunsu letafetini bulmak şöyle dursun, anlaşılmak bile kabil olamayacağını, hülasa-i tercüme halis Fransızca ile bir daha kaleme alınarak o da sağı sayfannın aşağıdaki nüfuna derc olunmuştur. Teracim-i aynıyı, o lisannın hakayık ve dekayık letafetine vusul için olduğu cihete bu yoldaki müşkilat işte bu surette bertaraf edilmiştir.) (Midhat 1897)

Midhat in his discourse seems to have used hülasa for adaptation-transfer strategy. He believed that acceptable translations in the form of rewrites were also expected by the Ottoman readership of literature. His conception of acceptable translation was closely associated not only with adapting but also with imitating foreign texts in his discourse. Üç Yüzü Bir Kari (A Woman with Three Faces), translated by both Midhat and Ebüzziya Tevfik from Paul de Kock, was a case in point.1 Midhat and Tevfik explain their adaptation-transfer strategy in the preface:

This story is not a literal translation of the original writer’s story with the same title.... We did not translate it freely... Therefore, we rewrote sense of the original in Turkish. We confess to our inability. The ability that we have right to mention is our skill to reflect the creative nature [of the original] which is colorful and coquettish in mankind, without ever distorting the style and manner of the incidents in the way Pol dö Kok wished to describe.

(Bu hikâye müsellifin bu isimdeki hikâyesinin harfiyyen tercümesi değildir... Mealen dahi tercüme etmedik... Binaenaleyh biz hikâyenin hâkmünü Türkçe yeniden kaleme aldık. Aczimizi itiraf ederiz. Dava eyleyebilmekte selahyetimizi kâil olduğumuz maharet, azâ-yı vak’annın tavr ve mışvarlarını asla bozmayıp ebna-yı beşerde renk renk cilveger olan tecelliylât-ı fitrati ... Pol dö Kok’un göstermek istedığı yolda gösterebilmişizinden ibaretir) (Midhat and Tevfik 1877)

The above statement shows that neither literal nor free translation was used in translating literature. As explained in the preface, translators rendered the original not only by rewriting it but also by examining/reading (müotalaa) and purchasing/borrowing (iştîra). These concepts, of course, imply the process of translation.

1 For a refreshing examination of Ahmet Midhat’s translation norms see (Bengi-Öner 1999). In this article, Bengi-Öner focuses on Midhat’s discourse on literary translations and his translation strategies.
Another translation by Midhat *Nedamet mi? Heyhat!*, (Guilty? Alas!) from Emile Aufer, also illuminates his concept of adaptation-transfer strategy. He mentions the initial norm in the preface:

Our approach to translation is well known by our readers! (...) We are not in favour of literal translation. We read a sentence or a word or even a page written in French, then rewrite it in Ottoman Turkish independently as we understand it. Thus, our translations would become [texts] as if they were written directly in Ottoman Turkish.

(Tercüme hususundaki mesleğimiz de kari’lerimizin malûmunudur ya? (...) biz tercüme-i ayniyye taraftan değiliz. Fransızca bir cümleyi, bir kelami, hatta bir sahifeyi okuruz; ne anlar isek anı müstakillen, yani yeniden Osmanlıca yazらず. İşte bunun için bizim tercümelerimiz re’sen Osmanlıca yazılmış gibi olur.) (Midhat 1888)

It is clear that in his discourse Midhat was opposed to literal translation. The various strategies he adopted to use for adapting foreign texts from European literature would be well suited for literature planning (see Toury 2002: 148-163). Such policies in transferring foreign culture and literature seem to be related to the needs of the current target literary system, which is in the process of formation since the Tanzimat period.

Conclusion

The historical period extending from the 1880s to the beginning of the twentieth century marks the social, political and cultural transformations made on the basis of “Europenization”. In fact, it also marks the historical period in which we could clearly observe that translations played significant roles in the formation and evaluation of a new domestic literature.

The manipulation of culture and literature through translations indicates that the translation phonemenon should be taken as primary rather than secondary in the evaluation of so called “modern Turkish literature”. The Post-Tanzimat period provides rich materials to scholars who aim at studying the relationship between translation and domestic literature. However, at this point, translation and its practices in the Ottoman culture need to be considered within its current terms, concepts, and contexts. I think that this point of departure could help us to be aware of two things in the study of Ottoman translation history: first, in the process of transition from empire to a nation-state there might have occurred synchronic or diachronic shifts in the meanings of the terms and concepts due to ideological-cultural changes. Secondly, these terms and concepts could be expanded or restricted in meaning. They could also be replaced by some contemporary terms and definitions having slightly different contents and contextual aspects.
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