A Linguistic Analysis of Translation Shifts between English and Arabic in UN News Texts: A Catfordian Approach

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Abstract— This study examines the linguistic shifts that occur in the process of translating United Nations news texts between English and Arabic. Drawing upon Catford's (1965) theory of translation shifts, it classifies and analyses structural and semantic variations in a selected corpus of audiovisual news items translated between the two languages. The analysis identifies level shifts, structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts, intra-system shifts, and semantic shifts. Results show that structure and tense shifts are the most recurrent due to the deep grammatical contrasts between Arabic and English. Although the translations deviate from the form of the source text, they maintain meaning and communicative function, demonstrating that equivalence in translation is achieved through contextual and functional adaptation rather than formal correspondence.

Keywords— translation shifts, English–Arabic translation, Catford's theory, structural and semantic variation, audiovisual news texts

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation plays a central role in facilitating communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries, especially within international institutions such as the United Nations, where messages must be conveyed accurately and effectively to a multilingual audience. However, translation between structurally distinct languages such as Arabic and English poses significant challenges. The translator is often required to adjust not only words but also grammatical structures, syntactic order, and even semantic nuances to ensure clarity and accuracy.

This paper aims to analyse the linguistic shifts that occur in translating UN news texts from English into Arabic and vice versa. The study employs J. C. Catford's (1965) theory of translation shifts, which provides a systematic linguistic framework for identifying the types of changes that take place between a source text (ST) and a target text (TT). By focusing on grammatical and semantic transformations, this research highlights the dynamic nature of translation as both a linguistic and cultural act.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Catford's model of translation shifts remains one of the foundational approaches to translation analysis. He defines a **translation shift** as *"the departure from formal correspondence in the process of translation"* (Catford, 1965, p. 73). According to Catford, translation involves two principal types of shifts: **level shifts** (between grammar and lexis) and **category shifts**, the latter comprising structure, class, unit, and intra-system shifts. These categories provide a systematic linguistic means to describe the grammatical

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and semantic transformations that occur between source and target texts.

- **Level shifts** occur when a grammatical item in the source language (SL) is translated by a lexical item in the target language (TL) or vice versa (Catford, 1965, p. 73). For example, a tense marker in English may be rendered through a lexical verb or adverbial expression in Arabic, or the reverse.

- **Structure shifts** involve changes in grammatical arrangement, such as word order or clause hierarchy (Catford, 1965, p. 77). They are the most common type of shift because languages differ in their syntactic organization—English follows an SVO pattern, whereas Arabic frequently employs VSO structures.

- **Class shifts** occur when a lexical item changes grammatical category between the ST and the TT—for instance, a noun translated as a verb or an adjective as a noun (Catford, 1965, p. 78). Such shifts reveal differences in the syntactic and morphological resources of each language.

- **Unit shifts** (also known as rank shifts) take place when the translation equivalent operates at a different grammatical rank—such as a clause translated by a phrase, or a word rendered as a sentence (Catford, 1965, p. 79). They reflect the varying degrees of compactness in different linguistic systems.

- **Intra-system shifts** refer to changes that occur within a shared grammatical system, such as number, definiteness, or tense, where the SL and TL possess comparable systems but the translator selects a different element (Catford, 1965, p. 80). These shifts are frequent in English-Arabic translation due to contrasts in article and plural usage.

Catford's typology has been further developed and applied by later scholars, such as Nida (1964) and Delabastita (1989), who emphasize that translation shifts are natural results of structural divergence between languages rather than evidence of error. This framework therefore provides a rigorous linguistic lens through which translation can be analyzed not as mechanical substitution but as an adaptive process responsive to the grammatical and stylistic norms of each language.

III.   METHODOLOGY

The data for this study consist of bilingual news texts translated between English and Arabic, reflecting the reporting style of international organizations such as the United Nations and Al Jazeera. The selected corpus includes statements, interviews, and reports that exemplify formal institutional discourse. Each text was analysed manually to identify the grammatical and semantic shifts that occurred during translation. The analysis followed Catford's typology, focusing particularly on the following eight categories: level shifts, structure shifts, shift of agent, shift of verb tense, shift of sentence structure, class shifts, unit shifts, intra-system shifts, and semantic shifts.

Examples were extracted and compared between the source and target versions to determine how linguistic adjustments contributed to meaning preservation or transformation. The approach is qualitative and descriptive, aiming to reveal how translators negotiate equivalence across two typologically different languages.

IV.   ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Level Shifts

Level shifts represent a movement from grammatical to lexical expression or the reverse. For instance, an Arabic clause such as:

<div dir="rtl">

قد أصدر الأمين العام بيانا

</div>

may be rendered in English as: *The Secretary-General issued a statement*

where the modal قد (a grammatical particle implying completion) is expressed lexically by the past tense verb *issued*. Conversely, English modal constructions like *must be done* are often rendered in Arabic as من الضروري أن يتم, introducing a lexicalized phrase to express grammatical obligation. These shifts reflect the divergent ways the two languages encode aspect, modality, and tense.

4.2. Structure Shifts

Structure shifts occur when the grammatical organization of the sentence changes during translation. English typically follows a Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) structure, whereas Arabic frequently employs Verb–Subject–Object (VSO). For example:

The UN Security Council condemned the attack becomes.   أدان مجلس الأمن الهجوم

reversing the word order. This shift preserves meaning while adhering to the natural syntactic pattern of Arabic. Such structural flexibility underscores the translator's need to align form with the grammatical conventions of the target language.

4.3. Shift of Agent

A shift of agent occurs when the subject performing the action changes in translation. For instance, the English passive sentence:

The resolution was adopted by the Assembly may appear in Arabic as اعتمدت الجمعية القرار, where the grammatical agent becomes explicit and active. Arabic tends to favour explicit agency, while English often uses passivation for formality or thematic focus. This demonstrates a functional adaptation rather than literal equivalence.

4.4. Shift of Verb Tense

Verb tense shifts are among the most frequent changes observed between English and Arabic. English employs a rich tense system with distinct forms for past, present, and future, while Arabic relies more heavily on context and auxiliary markers. For example, *The Secretary-General will meet the delegation tomorrow* becomes يلتقي الأمين العام بالوفد غداً., using the present tense to indicate future action. This temporal adaptation is a natural consequence of Arabic's aspectual system, which conveys futurity through adverbials or context rather than morphological tense.

4.5. Shift of Sentence Structure

Shifts in sentence structure often arise due to stylistic and pragmatic factors. English sentences can be long and information-dense, whereas Arabic prefers concise clauses connected by coordination. For example: *The report, which was published after several consultations, emphasizes the need for immediate action* may be translated as يؤكد التقرير الصادر بعد مشاورات عدة على ضرورة التحرك الفوري. The English relative clause is transformed into a participial phrase in Arabic, demonstrating a structural condensation that preserves meaning while improving readability.

4.6. Class Shifts

A class shift occurs when a word in the source text changes grammatical category in the target text. For instance, the English adjective *necessary* becomes the Arabic noun ضرورة, as in *It is necessary to act immediately* → من الضروري التحرك فوراً. Such shifts are frequent due to differences in word formation and syntactic distribution between the two languages. They reveal how translators re-categorize lexical items to fit the morphological and syntactic norms of Arabic.

4.7. Unit Shifts

Unit shifts refer to changes in the rank of translation units. For example, the English word *internationally* may be rendered as على الصعيد الدولي, transforming a single adverb into a prepositional phrase. Similarly, Arabic compounds often expand into full clauses in English translation. This reflects the different degrees of compactness and syntactic hierarchy in the two linguistic systems.

4.8. Intra-System Shifts

Intra-system shifts occur within grammatical systems that differ cross-linguistically, such as definiteness, number, and gender. English articles (*the, a, an*) have no exact counterparts in Arabic, which marks definiteness morphologically. Thus, *a meeting* is translated as اجتماع (indefinite) or الاجتماع (definite) depending on context. Another example involves pluralization: English collective nouns often remain singular in Arabic. These variations demonstrate how translators navigate systemic asymmetries between the two grammatical systems.

4.9. Semantic Shifts

Semantic shifts occur when the translator adapts or compresses meaning due to the absence of direct lexical equivalence. For instance, *resolution* in UN discourse may be rendered as مشروع قرار or قرار depending on whether the text refers to an adopted or proposed text. Similarly, idiomatic expressions such as *to hold talks* are translated as يجري محادثات, maintaining meaning through contextual substitution rather than literal rendering. These examples highlight the translator's role in negotiating semantic proximity rather than exact correspondence.

V. FINDINGS

The analysis reveals that translation shifts are inevitable and systematic in Arabic-English translation. Structure and tense shifts are the most frequent, reflecting fundamental grammatical differences between the two languages. Level, unit, and class shifts occur regularly as translators move between analytic English and synthetic Arabic forms. Intra-system and semantic shifts show how translators balance precision with readability in formal discourse.

Overall, the findings confirm that **translation equivalence** is functional and dynamic rather than formal. The translator's goal is to preserve the communicative intent and stylistic appropriateness of the text, not to replicate its structure verbatim. This aligns with Catford's assertion that translation involves "substitution of a text in one language by a text in another" rather than one-to-one correspondence.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that translating between English and Arabic within the context of UN news texts requires complex linguistic and cultural negotiation. Catford's framework provides a useful lens for identifying and categorizing the various shifts that occur in this process. The

research confirms that translation shifts—whether grammatical or semantic—are not signs of distortion but essential mechanisms for achieving equivalence across languages.

The dominance of structure and tense shifts underscores the translator's need to reconcile the differing grammatical systems of English and Arabic. Semantic and class shifts, meanwhile, reveal the creative flexibility required to convey nuanced meanings in institutional discourse.

Ultimately, translation in this context is not a matter of mechanical substitution but of **functional adaptation**. The translator acts as a linguistic mediator, ensuring that each shift, whether structural or semantic, contributes to maintaining meaning, tone, and communicative purpose. This reinforces the view that translation is both a linguistic science and an art of cross-cultural negotiation.

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