

## **The Increasing Role of Translation in Libyan Politics and Business Activities**

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### 1. Introduction

Like many other countries of the world, Libya has always depended on translation<sup>1</sup> in conducting many political and business activities. During the past few years, and especially following the suspension of the UN sanctions, imposed on the country in 1992 following the air crash on Lockerbie, the demand for translation in Libya has increased considerably making translation an effective tool in conducting business and politics, and not just a means of normal interlingual and intercultural communication. The employment of translation in this way may prompt us to re-consider common definitions of the concept of translation.

The increase in demand for translation in Libya during the last four years is due to a number of reasons related to new political and business orientations. This increase in demand has resulted in a number of implications for the situation of translation and translators in Libya. This paper deals with the increasing role of translation in Libya during the past few years, focusing on the reasons behind this increase and their implications for the status of translation/interpreting and translators/interpreters, current problems and future expectations.

The study results are based on experiences and observations of professional translators, interpreters and translation-related individuals, such as translation consumers, translation teachers, and translation students. The experiences and observations of these types of people are expressed in a questionnaire distributed to representative samples.

### 2. Reasons behind the Increasing Demand for Translation

According to those covered by the questionnaire, the increase in demand for translation in Libya is attributed to a number of reasons. These reasons can be divided into two groups: politics-related and business-related reasons. This classification of reasons does not ignore the interdependence and interaction between politics and business.

#### 2.1. Politics-related reasons

##### 2.1.1. Shift in emphasis from internal to external political discourse

The emphasis in the political discourse in Libya before 1998 was on internal rather than external issues. Some of the internal issues which were prominent in Libyan politics include inter alia (1) implementation of the *Green Book* theses, (2) the unstable relations with the west, (3) military training, (4) construction of the great-man-made river, (5) Libya's role in achieving Arab unity, (6) agrarian reform, (7) industrial development, (8) nationalization of oil companies, banks and other businesses, and (9) woman's emancipation.

After 1998 and following the achievement of some progress in the Lockerbie case, Libya started to search for a better role in international politics. As a result, the emphasis in political discourse shifted from internal to external issues. This shift meant the direction of the discourse towards the other, especially the west. Linguistically speaking, addressing the other in this context meant the use of the other's language, either directly or through translation. Some of the external issues which received some emphasis in the Libyan political discourse include (1) Libya's role in international politics, (2) peace-making, (3), African unity, (4) globalisation, and (5) international cooperation.

The promotion of such issues as these necessitated the intensive use of translation and interpreting as a means of communication. Thus translation and interpreting were used in (1) communicating Libya's views to the world through the press, radio and television, (2) holding international conferences, (3) organizing special meetings between Libyan and non-Libyan politicians, and (4) communicating with other governments and international bodies.

### 2.1.2. Shift in emphasis in political orientation from Arab nationalism to Africanism.

Following a move by some African states in support of the rejection of the UN sanctions against Libya, a step which the Arab states failed to take, Libya declared a politically motivated shift in emphasis in its national and regional affiliation from Arab nationalism to Africanism. This politically motivated shift first manifested in the establishment of the Sahelo-Saharan Community (*Tajammu' Duwal al-Sahil wa al-Sahraa*), which is a regional gathering consisting of a number of North African and sub-Saharan states. The shift also resulted in an emphasis on some African issues such as African unity, development, political reconciliation and peace, and AIDS. For the promotion of this new trend towards Africa, many specially prepared meetings, conferences, gatherings, and events were held. *The Voice of the Arab Home-Land*, a radio station transmitting in Arabic and promoting Arab nationalist issues, was also converted into *The Voice of Africa*, which transmits in Arabic, English and French to promote the African orientation.

In communicating with Africans and promoting this African orientation, translation and interpreting from Arabic into English and French and vice versa became a constant necessity for the Libyan officials conducting any sort of activity related to this new trend. Translation and interpreting were needed for holding meetings and conferences, organizing events, publishing printed

materials, preparing broadcasting programmes, and communicating with African governments and organizations.

## 2.2. Business-related reasons

### 2.2.1. Promotion of foreign investment

During the last thirty years, the Libyan economy has been mainly dependant on oil revenues in financing various development projects throughout the country. During that period, public expenditure on development programmes amounted to hundreds of billions of dollars spent on aspects of the infrastructure (water networks, roads, air and sea ports, power, health, education, etc) and some strategic industries and projects, such as steel and iron, petrochemicals and the great man-made river.

Indeed, the achieved economic and social accomplishments were not problem-free. During that period, a number of hurdles faced the Libyan economy, which undoubtedly have undermined some of its capabilities to realize faster and more sustained rates of growth. The hurdles include (1) the drastic drop in oil prices after the mid 1980s and the imposition of preserved OPEC quotas on member countries and (2) the imposition of economic sanctions by the UN Security Council in 1992 (LFIBGD 2000). Aware of the effects of these two factors, economic policy planners in Libya became alert to the idea that the reconstruction of the Libyan economy should accommodate new measures aimed at reactivating existing capabilities and incorporating potential capabilities such as foreign investment. Consequently, more attention began to be given to (1) the encouragement of foreign capital to be invested in Libya to increase trading and boost international cooperation, (2) the establishment of joint-venture investment projects between local and foreign partners, and (3) the encouragement and promotion of private business.

In pursuit of this idea, a number of laws and regulations were issued to facilitate the flow of foreign capital and establishment of partnership investment projects. The process of foreign investment legislation culminated in 1997 in issuing Law no. 5 for the encouragement of foreign capital investment, which was issued by the General People's Congress to be implemented by the Libyan Foreign Investment Board (L.F.I.B). Articles 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 of this law provide encouraging incentives to both foreign investors and local partners (GPC 1997). An international conference on development and investment in Libya was also held in Tripoli during the period from 14-15 November 2000 under the auspices of The General People's Committee for Foreign Liaison and International Co-operation, Union of the Libyan Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture, and The Libyan Investment Board<sup>2</sup>.

In executing all these measures and activities translation and interpreting were at the forefront because of the involvement of people from different parts of the world who could only communicate in English or French. In the meantime, and as a result of these measures and activities, foreign investors began contacting the Libyan Investment Board and other Libyan authorities,

organizations, and partners for processing procedures and applications. Almost all procedures and applications required documentation in Arabic, which meant translation of non-Arabic documents into Arabic. Most of the translation work was and still is done by translation agencies in Tripoli and other main cities.

Following some progress in investment activities, many businesses such as companies and agencies began to flourish through the provision of specialized services (administrative, legal and technical services) the majority of which require translation for documentation and processing.

### 2.2.2. Encouragement of private business activities

This was the other move aimed at reactivating the Libyan economy following years of sanctions. Many of the emerging private businesses depend on importation and/or exportation of goods. In Libya, importation and exportation procedures require a lot of documentation, which involves translation in most cases. Translations of licences, certificates, specifications, and quality assessment reports, for example, are usually needed for importation and exportation procedures. This is in addition to the translation of correspondence documents such as telexes, faxes and letters.

## 3. Implications for Translation and Translators

As a result of the above political and economic developments, the demand for translation has increased considerably giving prominence to the significance of translation and translators. Interest in foreign language learning has also stepped up, especially the interest in English. In what follows, some of the implications for translation and translators will be dealt with.

### 3.1. Translated languages

The most commonly translated language other than Arabic is English, being an international language used in business and politics worldwide. French has also re-gained some importance especially following the promotion of the new African orientation in Libyan politics as many African countries use French as their official language or language of international communication. Other occasionally translated languages include Italian, Spanish and German.

The prominence of English as a language of business and politics has given rise to an increased interest in the learning of this language. As an indication for this increased interest in learning English, the number of undergraduate students at the Department of English of Al-Fateh University during the academic year 2000-2001 was around one thousand students. Departments of English in other Libyan universities also have hundreds of students. This is in addition to other hundreds who learn English in private schools and language centres.

### 3.2. Fields of practice and quality of translation

According to those covered by the study, translation in Libya is practiced in almost all fields of life. These include politics, administration and management, mass media, business, technology, education, trade, tourism, law, and medicine. The degree of dependency on translation varies from one field to another and from one time to another.

In terms of quality of translation/interpreting, the majority of those covered by the questionnaire indicate that it varies from 'good' to 'very good' depending on the translated subject, situation, quality of the translator/interpreter, and time stress. For any person with basic knowledge of the differences between written translation and interpreting it is obvious that it is always possible to achieve a higher quality in translation than in interpreting.

### 3.3. Translators/interpreters: types, income and status

The study shows that with the exception of in-house translators, such as those working in oil companies and some government organisations and offices, the vast majority of translators are part-timers. Almost all conference interpreters are also part-timers. Conference translators and interpreters usually belong to translation and interpreting teams based mainly in Tripoli. Members of these teams are usually university lecturers and/or professional in-house translators working in oil companies and some government offices. Most of those translators/interpreters do not hold any specialized degree in translation or interpreting.

In terms of nationality, the vast majority of in-house translators and conference translators and interpreters are Libyans while the majority of part-time translators working in translation agencies are non-Libyans being Sudanese, Iraqis, Palestinians or Egyptians. All owners of translation agencies are expected to be Libyans.

Because of the increased demand for translation/interpreting services, translation/interpreting became a rewarding source of income for its practitioners. According to the study, the salary of in-house translators varies from Libyan Dinar (LD) 300 to LD 400 while the monthly allowance of a part-time translator in a well-established business varies from LD 200 to LD 300. The rate of payment for conference translators and interpreters varies from LD 300 to LD 500 per day. The charging rate for translating documents varies from LD 5 to LD 15 per page depending on the type and density of text. As the figures indicate, the most rewarding is conference translation/interpreting, but this is not as frequent as other translation activities. Conference interpreting also requires special skills and experience. Being a rewarding source of income, conference translation and interpreting became areas of competition among translation and interpreting teams.

In terms of social status, translators and interpreters are respected for their linguistic competence and undisputed significance in business and politics. Because of their rewarding jobs translators and interpreters also achieve higher living standards than many others, which can also boost their social status.

#### 4. Current Problems

##### 4.1. Lack of laws to regulate translation activities

The progress and prosperity of any activity depend, to a great extent, on the laws that regulate the activity. In the case of translation/interpreting activities, laws are needed to specify, through some sort of criteria and/or licensing, the following:

- a. Qualities of a professional translator/interpreter
- b. Lists of legally registered translators/interpreters and their specialities
- c. Translator/interpreter payment rates
- d. Translation/interpreting quality standards
- e. Translation/interpreting contracts.

In Libya, of the above legal aspects of translation/interpreting activities only lists of legally registered translators are available in regional departments of law. However, these lists do not include all those who actually practice translation or interpreting. The lack of laws to regulate translation/interpreting activities has resulted in many problems. These include:

- a. The intrusion of incompetent translators/interpreters into the profession
- b. Lack of fixed and/or objective payment rates
- c. Lack of payment security
- d. Emergence of illegal competition between translation/interpreting teams
- e. Lack of translation/interpreting quality control

##### 4.2. Lack of professional translator/interpreter-training institutions

Until the year 2000, and with the exception of Garyounis and Khaliij Al\_Tahaddi universities, which have separate departments for translation, all Libyan universities teach translation as a subject within the departments of English and French. It goes without saying that teaching translation as a subject within departments of foreign languages does not qualify students to be translators. Students graduating from the Department of Translation and Arabization of Khaliij Al-Tahaddi University can only become reliable translators and interpreters after many years of real experience. Another problem related to the teaching of translation in Libyan universities is that only few of those teaching translation hold specialized degrees in translation and/or interpreting.

During the second half of the year 2000, an MA programme in translation and interpreting was started at the Academy of Graduate Studies in Tripoli.<sup>3</sup> The aim of the programme was to produce qualified translators/interpreters (English-Arabic/Arabic-English) and translation specialists. The programme consists of courses and a dissertation. The courses are taken in three academic terms. Following the completion of courses, students are expected to submit dissertations to qualify for MA degrees in translation and interpreting. Success and continuity of this programme depend to a large extent

on the availability of high calibre graduates, which became scarce due to the sharp decrease in the quality of graduates following the deterioration of the financial situations of Libyan universities as a result of the sanctions and enrolment of huge numbers of students.

#### 4.3. Scarcity of specialized translators and interpreters

Most practicing translators and interpreters are not professionally specialized because the majority of them are either university lecturers of English or French, or university graduates with some practical experience in translation/interpreting. These usually carry out any sort of translation task whether general or highly specialized provided it is financially rewarding. The lack of enough practical training, specialization, and laws to regulate translation/interpreting activities has resulted in poor performance by some translators and interpreters.

#### 4.4. Non-existence of translators/interpreters' societies

Because translation as an academic specialization in Libya is still in its infancy<sup>4</sup>, and because of the above-mentioned problems no societies exist for the promotion and development of the discipline and profession of translation. This is so despite the fact that there are special laws, which permit the formation of academic and professional societies to promote general and specialized knowledge (NBSR 1990: 109-123). An attempt was made by the author of this paper in 1995 to form a society for promoting translation and interpreting issues, and looking after translators/interpreters' interests, but the attempt failed due to the lack of awareness of the importance of such a society among many translators, interpreters and translation teachers at that time.

The absence of an academic/professional society has contributed to the severity of the above-mentioned problems because any profession or academic discipline needs a tribune through which its practitioners and specialists can promote specialized knowledge and make their voices heard and their demands met.

### 5. Future Expectations

In view of the increased demand for translation/interpreting in Libya, we may speak of the following expectations:

- Increase in the number of translators
- Increase in translators/interpreters' income
- Emergence of translators/interpreters' societies
- Set up of more translator-training centres
- Formulation of laws regulating translation activities
- Increase in competition among translators/interpreters
- Increase in foreign language learning

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Translation here is used in its general sense including interpreting.

<sup>2</sup> The conference was organized by the CWC Group in Association with Sahara Tours Libya.

<sup>3</sup> The programme was designed and coordinated by the author of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> The first postgraduate degree in translation studies ever awarded by any Libyan university was the degree of MA in Translation Studies obtained by the author of this paper in 1993 from the Faculty of Languages of Al-Fateh University.