

The Abbasid translation movement in context

Contemporary voices on translation

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Contextualisation

Over the decades, an enormous amount of scholarly work has been devoted to the *historical* and *literary* context of the Greek-Arabic translations. Without it, we would not be able to answer vital questions about dating and translators. Analysing the few remaining primary sources we have, it sometimes even allows us to reconstruct details such as addressees and the purpose of particular translations. Textual comparison plays a prominent role in contextualisation, often leading to judgements about a translation's quality and "faithfulness" or "equivalence" to a source text.¹ But there is another aspect of a translation's context that we need to know about before we can assess a particular text: *theories* or *concepts* of translation prevalent during the Greek-Arabic translation movement.

Looking at a translated text *qua* translation, we more or less automatically assume that the translator also understood his task as "translation"—or something we would recognise as such. The very validity of judgements about translations rests on the idea that both the medieval translator and the modern observer share a certain concept of translation. However, if the concept of translation varies between the translator and the modern observer, those judgements become problematic. In addition, we cannot be sure that the contemporary concept of translation remained stable over time: on the contrary, as we can see from extant translations, exponents of the Greek-Arabic translation tradition seem to have held different views at different times about what constituted a translation, encompassing a continuum that ranged from interlinear glosses (the extreme of "literal" or text-centred translation) via strongly reader-oriented "acculturations" (which have sometimes been labelled "free" translations) to hybrids between translation and commentary.² This is a forceful reminder that each translator and each translation has to be judged on his/its own merits. There was no "single, coherent and self-evident body of translation-theory"³ covering the entire history of the translation movement.⁴

¹EVANS (1994, p. 22) somewhat unfairly branded this approach as "the traditional formalistic emphasis on linguistic and stylistic source-comparison, with its attendant moralizing idiom of fidelity and error, word-for-word or sense-for-sense, and its normative aesthetic assumptions."

²The terms "text-oriented" or "-centred" and "reader-oriented" can help us to avoid most of the problems associated with the dichotomy between "literal" and "free" translation discussed at the end of this introduction. In the context of the Syriac translation tradition, BROCK (1983, p. 4f) emphasises the importance of translators' attitudes toward their task for the character of their products: a self-effacing, reverential attitude to a text leads to a mirror or "text-centred" translation, diligently reproducing every formal detail of the source text. If a translator believes in the importance of his role in the transference of information, he will produce an expositional, "reader-oriented" translation by using "appropriate cultural equivalents". In short, the former variety "draw[s] the reader towards the original" whereas the latter "bring[s] the source text to the [...] reader".

³ELLIS (1989, p. 7).

⁴As Jeanette BEER (1989, p. 2) reminds us, "value judgements implied by such substitute terms as 'adaptation,' 'paraphrase,' or 'imitation' must not be allowed to obscure the complexity of the translative

Therefore, before assessing the merits of a translated text, we need to find out about the contemporary understanding of translation. For that, we can turn to two main sources: the few secondary texts we possess and the translations themselves.⁵ On the following pages, I want to survey the former: secondary sources and what they tell us about contemporary concepts of translation.

Before we turn to the source texts, a few words need to be said about the categories of “literal” and “free” translation. The underlying model of translation has a long and venerable history: as Sebastian BROCK explains, it is grounded in popular antique translation theories, e.g. Cicero’s division between the *interpretes* and the *orator* and Jérôme’s distinction between *verbum e verbo*- and *sensus de sensu*-renderings. However, both these and later writers tend to ignore the continuous gradations between the two poles as well as the fact that one and the same text can display features of both categories—for the practical purpose of assessing translations, such a blunt division into two mutually exclusive translational “approaches” is unworkable.⁶ In spite of their obvious drawbacks, the binary opposition between “free” and “literal” translation enjoyed and still enjoys an immense popularity and was continually appealed to by antique and medieval writers. Ḥalīl ibn Aybak aṣ-Ṣafadī’s (d. 1363) statements are only one, albeit influential, example.⁷

In his short historical account of the “literal”/“free”-model, BROCK points out that in antiquity, there was a strict division of labour between the two “styles” of translation: the former was applied to legal, administrative and commercial material, the latter used for literary texts. With the advent of biblical translation, this distinction broke down: the Bible is both a legal and a literary text.⁸ In the Syriac tradition, the process of developing a methodology for the translation of religious texts lasted until the seventh century and ended with the adoption of a highly text-centred approach. The methodological developments in the translation of religious texts had an immediate effect on translation procedures for secular texts: the same translators often translated both logical and theological texts according to methodological conventions developed in biblical

process in the Middle Ages.”

⁵As has been pointed out by many scholars, the very history of Greek-Syriac-Arabic translation and the problems of textual transmission (most importantly the practice of revision of earlier texts and their modification at the hands of possibly several generations of translators, scribes and scholars) put almost insurmountable hurdles in our way: textual phenomena such as characteristic terms and phrases, transcriptions or certain orthographic features of a translation could have entered the text at any stage of its transmission; cf. the warnings by GÄTJE (1971, p. 32) and, among others, KRUK (1979, p. 23). These can, to a certain degree, be overcome by careful comparison of a number of texts of the same translator or by a concerted effort to track terminological and phraseological changes through several texts and translators, allowing us to pinpoint stylistic and terminological features of certain “groups” or “generations” of translations. However, in many cases, we are unable to do so and have to take a text mostly at face value without making assumptions about any underlying concept or even theory of translation.

⁶BROCK (1983, p. 5).

⁷Parallel Syriac testimonies can be found in BROCK 1983, p. 9f. Aṣ-Ṣafadī’s claims have been criticised on numerous occasions, e.g. by ENDRESS (1973, p. 154) and, most forcefully, MATTOCK (1989, p. 74f).

⁸BROCK (1979, p. 70ff).

translation.⁹

Concepts of translation

What, then, do the translators themselves think about translation? Of the few relevant sources we have, pride of place belongs to Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq's (d. 873) treatise on Galenic translations, the *Risālah*. He originally composed it in 885/6 at the age of 48. It was updated seven years later and once more after his death.¹⁰

Reading his *Risālah*, one quickly notices that Ḥunayn does not indulge in any significant amount of theorisation. His comments betray a vigorous pragmatism which is concerned with but one task: making the ideas of a source text understood in the target language.¹¹ Thus, if we were looking for a full-fledged *theory* of translation, our verdict would have to be negative: apparently even Ḥunayn, prince of translators, did not spend much time reflecting on the theoretical underpinnings of his work—at least, he does not let us in on any possible speculation in this particular text.¹²

What he does allow us, however, is to give a fairly detailed account of what he thought the translator's *task* was.

Let me give a few examples: at the very beginning of the *Risālah*, Ḥunayn informs us that for a judicious assessment of a translation's merits, we have to know both the amount of experience of the translator and his addressee (to understand how a text accommodated his abilities and wishes).¹³ The addressee of a translation is a key concern for Ḥunayn; throughout his list of translations, he makes a point of naming his patrons, often adding a line or two about their specific requirements and intellectual capacity to justify his translational approach to particular texts. Again, Ḥunayn's pragmatism makes itself felt: his aim was to make a text and its ideas understood to an addressee, a task that required him to accommodate the Syriac or Arabic target text to some degree to meet the needs of his patron.¹⁴ As Dimitri GUTAS has pointed out, Ḥunayn regarded the *contents* of a text and the use to which it was put as its "primary quality" rather than its *form*.¹⁵

⁹HUGONNARD-ROCHE (1990, p. 136) writes: "Sous l'influence du mouvement qui a exigé des traductions bibliques en syriaque une exactitude toujours plus grande et les a poussées à respecter la lettre même du texte grec, les traductions d'œuvres philosophiques ont elles-mêmes évolué d'un style d'abord paraphrastique vers un style très littéral, où les traducteurs cherchent à rendre le texte original jusqu'en ses moindres détails."

¹⁰BROCK (1991, p. 139).

¹¹BROCK (1991, p. 142).

¹²Cf. SALAMA-CARR (1990, p. 33).

¹³BERGSTRÄSSER (1925, p. 2/Ar.): *wa-mablaḡa quwwati kulli wāḥidin min ʿulāʿika ʿl-mutarḡimīna fī-ʿt-tarḡamati wa-li-man turḡimat wa-man-i ʿlladīna tarḡamtu ʿanā la-hum kulla wāḥidin min tilka ʿl-kutub [...] wa-fi ʿayyi ḡaddin min sinnī tarḡamtu-hū li-ʿanna ḡadāyini ʿamrayni qad yuḡtāḡu ʿilā marʿifati-himā ʿid kānat-i ʿt-tarḡamatu ʿinna-mā takūnu bi-ḡasbi quwwati ʿl-mutarḡimi li-ʿl-kitābi wa-ʿlladī turḡima la-hū; cf. SALAMA-CARR (1990, p. 58f).*

¹⁴Cf. e.g. BERGSTRÄSSER (1925, nos. 5, 7, 11, 16, 38 and esp. 56). In the first of these cases, Ḥunayn writes that he translated a text into Syriac *bi-ḡasbi mā kāna ʿalay-hi Salmawayḡi min-a ʿl-fahmi ʿt-ḡabīʿiyi wa-min-a ʿd-daryati fī qirāʿati ʿl-kutubi wa-ʿl-ʿināyati bi-hā kāna faḡlu ḡirḡī ʿalā ʿstiqḡāʿi taḡalluḡi ḡamīʿi mā tarḡamtu-hū la-hū.*

¹⁵GUTAS (1998, p. 140).

The primacy of ideas over form becomes even more obvious with the long list of texts which he summarised, sometimes in a bare-bones tabular fashion, before he translated them (the summaries) into Arabic.¹⁶ However, he does not in any way ignore the formal features of source texts: on the one hand, he took great care to establish as complete and faithful a source-text as possible by collating it from every available Greek and often also Syriac version.¹⁷ On the other, he spared no effort to arrive at a precise rendering of a text, particularly for such patrons who were capable of understanding a text without the help of an accommodating translator. On several occasions, he was asked to revise and correct older translations which he (and his patrons) regarded as inadequate. Rather than simply adjust the inferior translation, he often persuaded his patrons to let him re-translate the text from scratch.¹⁸ In such cases, his desire for precision seems to have outweighed his pragmatism. On the other hand, many translators would agree that reworking an existing translation is often more difficult and time-consuming than producing an entirely new one.

His apparent pragmatism could also explain why his verdicts about other translators lack detail and, for the most part, consist of very general labels such as “bad” or “very bad”.¹⁹ The highest accolade he could accord to a translation was not to comment on it at all. There are two possible reasons for his summary approach to other people’s work: firstly, Ḥunayn does not seem to be interested in the formal qualities of the translations he lists. He judges them on one criterion only: their ability to convey the meaning of a source in the target language. This is of course a somewhat subjective criterion and it would probably have been difficult for him to give a detailed justification in each case. However, since each of the translations in question was, according to Ḥunayn, replaced by his own or that of his collaborators, there was no need to spend any more time on

¹⁶E.g. BERGSTRÄSSER (1925, nos. 57, 72, 74, 92, 94); Ḥunayn calls these summaries *ǧumal* or *ǧawāmi‘ alā ‘t-taqṣīm*. Cf. SALAMA-CARR (1990, p. 52).

¹⁷BERGSTRÄSSER (1925, no. 3). After explaining his procedure for the text in question—*qad-i ‘ǧtamasat la-hū ‘indī ‘iddatu nusahin yūnānīyatīn fa-qābaltu tilka ba‘da-hā ba‘din ḥattā ṣaḥḥat min-hā nuṣḥatun wāḥidatun tumma qābaltu bi-tilka ‘n-nuṣḥata ‘s-suryānīyata wa-ṣaḥḥaḥtu-hū*—he adds: *wa-ka-ḍālika min ‘adatī ‘an ‘afala fī ḡamīri mā ‘utarǧimu-hū*.

¹⁸BERGSTRÄSSER (1925, nos. 15, 20). In the latter, very interesting case, Ḥunayn attempts to improve the existing translation together with its recipient, Salmawayhi. After a short time, they realise that their task is much more troublesome than expected and Salmawayhi asks Ḥunayn for a fresh translation: *wa-qad kāna Salmawayhi ‘aḍ‘ara-nī [?] ‘alā ‘an ‘aṣlaḥa la-hū ḥādā ‘l-ǧuza ‘t-tānī wa-ṭamī‘a ‘an yakūna ḍālika ‘ashala min-a ‘t-tarǧamati wa-‘aǧwada fa-qābala-nī bi-ba‘ḍi ‘l-maqālati ‘s-sābi‘ati wa-ma‘a-hū ‘s-suryānīyu wa-ma‘ī ‘l-yūnānīyu wa-huwa yaqrāu ‘alayya ‘s-suryānīyata wa-kuntu kulla-mā marra bī ṣayrun muḥālīfun li-‘l-yūnānīyi ḥabbartu-hū bi-hī fa-ǧa‘ala yuṣliḥu ḥattā kabura ‘alay-hi ‘l-amru wa-tabayyana la-hū ‘anna ‘t-tarǧamata min-a ‘r-ra‘si ‘arḥā wa-‘ablaǧu wa-‘anna ‘l-amra yakūnu fī-hā ‘ašaddu ‘ntizāman fa-sawala-nī tarǧamata tilka ‘l-maqālāt*.

¹⁹In many cases, even in connection with his own translations, Ḥunayn correlates the quality of a translation and the experience of a translator. Thus, Sergios of Rēš‘aynā is credited with flawed Syriac versions written *qabla ‘an yaqwā fī ‘t-tarǧamah* (BERGSTRÄSSER, 1925, no. 6), slightly better ones produced when he was *qawīya ba‘da ‘l-quwwati fī ‘t-tarǧamati wa-lam yabluǧ ḡāyata-hū* (no. 7). In one case, he translated parts of a book at different times, resulting in different levels of quality (no. 20). A quick look at the Syriac translators listed (and assessed) in the *Risālah* shows that Sergios fared exceptionally badly when compared to others such as Ayyūb ar-Ruhāwī. Cf. also BROCK (1991, p. 141).

them in the first place. They were simply superseded. Secondly, Ḥunayn wrote these remarks after he had lost his entire library.²⁰ He had to reconstruct the survey from memory (a remarkable achievement in itself) and, unable to consult the translations he wrote about, had to phrase his impression in very general terms.

A major concern of Ḥunayn was clarity of style, a prerequisite for a translation mainly aiming for the efficient transmission of information. We often find him correcting the style and improving the clarity of translations produced by his collaborators and “students”.²¹ In a long complaint against his detractors reported by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘ah,²² Ḥunayn prides himself on his clarity which allowed even non-specialists to understand scientific matters.²³

In this (and other) respects, his approach goes against the grain of the late Syriac translation tradition, which had equated faithfulness with the minute reproduction of as many formal features of a Greek source text in Syriac as possible.²⁴ The situation of Ḥunayn and his collaborators on the one hand and the Syriac translators on the other was substantially different: firstly, the Syriac translators rendered Greek texts into a linguistic medium that for centuries had been in touch with and to a certain degree influenced by Greek terms and grammatical constructions—not least because Syriac proved to be an exceedingly malleable medium and could be manipulated in such a way. Grammatical and stylistic norms in Arabic turned out to be much more resilient against the influence of the Greek language. Secondly, Syriac translators often produced texts for the use of other scholars, who could be expected to be familiar with the genre of texts in question and perhaps even knew some features of the Greek language. The typical customer for Arabic translations, however, was a rich and influential patron, often enough an expert in the field, but unfamiliar with Greek and certainly unwilling to put up with a text that was rendered barely readable by bending the rules of Arabic for the sake of literal reproduction.²⁵ If such an approach had been feasible in the long run, we probably would not hear so often about re-translations of philosophical and scientific texts which were not on a par with the terminological and stylistic standards of Ḥunayn and later translators.

But Ḥunayn was not just the passive mouthpiece for others (chiefly Galen). An expert in Galenic medicine and philosophy, he took it on himself, where necessary, either to justify or reconstruct the contents of source texts. In one case, Ḥunayn reports that he added a text to his Syriac translation “to make excuses for Galen for what he said in

²⁰Cf. his introductory notes at the beginning of the *Risālah* (BERGSTRÄSSER, 1925, p. 1).

²¹E.g. BERGSTRÄSSER (1925, nos. 20, 49, 118).

²²MÜLLER (1884, p. 191), mentioned by SALAMA-CARR (1997, p. 392): *wa-lā naqsa fī-hā wa-lā zalala wa-lā mayla lā ḥadda min-a ’l-milālī wa-lā ’stīgrāqa wa-lā laḥna bi-’tibārī aṣḥābī ’l-balāḡati min-a ’l-’arabī ’lladī yaqūmūna bi-marīfati wuḡūhi ’n-naḥwi wa-’l-ḡarīb.*

²³SALAMA-CARR (1990, p. 58) claims that Ḥunayn understood himself as a ‘populariser’ of scientific knowledge.

²⁴This becomes particularly obvious in translations of the seventh century; cf. BROCK (1983, p. 12f).

²⁵Only at the very beginning of the translation movement, the scarcity of competent translators and the urgent need for translation forced patrons “to tolerate Arabic styles that were vastly inferior to what their contemporary grammarians and stylists were extolling as proper Arabic” (GUTAS, 1998, p. 137).

the seventh part of this book” (*fī ’l-istidāri li-Ġālīnūs fī-mā qāla-hū fī ’l-maqālati ’s-sābi’ati min hādā ’l-kitāb*).²⁶ To help readers understand another treatise, he provided a secondary commentary to explain difficult passages.²⁷ The Greek manuscript he had for another text was riddled with mistakes and lacunae. Ḥunayn “restored” it until he could write out a new Greek version, which he then translated into Syriac.²⁸ There were other flawed and partly incomplete texts. About one, Ḥunayn writes that he took every effort to make the text comprehensible, seeking as much as possible not to deviate from Galen’s ideas.²⁹ Another one had a gap at the very beginning, which Ḥunayn “added” after translating it into Syriac.³⁰ Side by side with such supposed “additions”, we find instances of intentional deletions, such as the quotes of Aristophanic verses³¹ which he could not reconstruct with any certainty and in the end removed, since they “did not add anything to what Galen had said on the matter”.³²

Another aspect of his craft that he frequently mentions is the importance of practical experience for the production of a “good” translation. In Ḥunayn’s view, translation is not an academic discipline, not even an art; there are practical criteria for good translations, even if they are somewhat vague and very much subjective,³³ and he strives to apply them in a consistent manner. It is a craft, to be learnt “on the job” and under the guidance of an experienced translator. Thus, what has variously been called Ḥunayn’s “school” of translators was probably no school as we would understand it. Rather, it seems to have been a workshop with a master craftsman and a group of students who collaborated to produce texts. Similar to the Renaissance “workshops” of painters and sculptors, the master gave the direction and left many practical tasks to his students, often only supervising and correcting their work.³⁴

Such a structure, centred as it was on the figure of its master, could not survive for long without his guidance. Thus, with Ḥunayn’s death, we do not hear of any of his prominent students, e.g. his son Iṣḥāq or his nephew Ḥubayš, formally taking over this so-called “school”. We do not hear anything at all and it would only be natural to assume that his workshop disintegrated soon after. To perpetuate the work of the “school”, some

²⁶Galen’s *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* (BERGSTRÄSSER, 1925, no. 46).

²⁷Galen’s *In Hippocratis iusiurandum commentarius* (BERGSTRÄSSER, 1925, no. 87). He writes: *wa-qad tarġamtu-hū ’anā ’ilā ’s-suryānīyati ’adaftu ’ilay-hi šarḥan ’amiltu-hū li-’l-mawāḍi’i ’l-mustaṣabati min-hū*.

²⁸Galen’s *In Hippocratis de morbis popularibus librum commentarii* (BERGSTRÄSSER, 1925, no. 95). The book was *katīra ’l-ḥaṭai munqaṭ’an munḥaliṭan*. Ḥunayn continues: *fa-taḥallaṣtu-hū ḥattā nasaḥtu-hū bi-’l-yūnānīyah*.

²⁹The text was available in a single, corrupted Greek manuscript. Ḥunayn writes: *wa-mā laḥḥaṣtu-hū ’illā bi-kaddīn šadīdīn wa-lākinna-hū qad ḥaraġa mafḥūman wa-tawaġġabtu fī-hi ’allā ’azūla ’an ma’ānī Ġālīnūs bi-mablaġi ṭaqatī*; the text in question is Galen’s *De Erasistrati anatome* (BERGSTRÄSSER, 1925, no. 28).

³⁰Galen’s treatise *De iis quae medice scripta sunt in Platonis Timaeo* (BERGSTRÄSSER, 1925, no. 122). This is another fascinating example of Ḥunayn’s “activist” understanding of his task: *tarġamtu-hū min ba’dū ’ilā ’s-suryānīyati wa-tammamtu naqṣāna ’awwali-hī*.

³¹In Galen’s *De nominibus medicinalibus*, listed as BERGSTRÄSSER (1925, no. 114).

³²ROSENTHAL (1975, p. 19), quoting MEYERHOF and SCHACHT (1931, p. 17f/Ar., 32/transl.).

³³Cf. SALAMA-CARR (1990, p. 106).

³⁴Cf. SALAMA-CARR (1990, p. 42f).

degree of theorisation would have been a prerequisite, leading to a body of ideas about translation and language that could be taught to future generations of translators.³⁵ To sustain the “school” even after his death, Ḥunayn’s ideas would have to be made “intersubjective” and accessible to other translators on a more sophisticated level than mere apprenticeship. This never occurred.

Why? One is tempted to speculate that the pragmatic streak pervading Ḥunayn’s *Risālah* characterised the “school” as a whole: its only rationale was to make a particular body of philosophical, scientific and medical knowledge available in Syriac and Arabic. Once the bulk of the relevant texts was translated, what would have been the point of an elaborate school structure? In a way, Ḥunayn’s “school” might be said to have translated itself out of existence.

One important later source for the approach of translators (and collators/editors) are the marginal notes we find in the Paris *Organon* manuscript.³⁶ Some of them were made by the translators of the texts, some by later copyists, some by the redactor, Ibn Suwār (d. 1017). A prominent example is the introductory note to the *Rhetoric*, penned by its collator and close contemporary of Ibn Suwār, Ibn as-Samḥ (d. 1027). Since, according to his own admission, the text was deemed far from central for the study of Aristotelian logic, it had reached him only in the form of one Syriac and two Arabic versions, both more or less unreliable.³⁷ Even though Ibn as-Samḥ shares the view that the *Rhetoric* is not particularly useful for the study of logic, he thoroughly prepared as precise a text as possible. As laudable as his intentions were, the resulting text shows that he could not make much of it. Without any knowledge of Greek or access to a Greek source text, he could only rely on his philosophical training and his common sense to understand what he found. He approached the text as a collator, not a translator. Interesting in his comments is the fact that, however bad the translations he had to work with, he must have believed in the potential of translation to transmit Aristotle’s ideas; otherwise, he would not have invested so much time in collating the text of the *Rhetoric* we find in the Paris manuscript.

Ibn Suwār comments on his own procedure in the section containing the *Sophistical Refutations*.³⁸ Uniquely among the texts collected in the manuscript, it was included in three separate versions. To justify his unusual approach, he explains that he wanted to find out what each of the available versions made of the text: they are to be studied together, so that they jointly help the reader to grasp Aristotle’s meaning.³⁹

³⁵SALAMA-CARR (1990, p. 106f).

³⁶Bibliothèque Nationale ar. 2346. A detailed description of the manuscript together with the most important notes in Arabic and French translation can be found in GEORR (1948, p. 183–200); cf. also HUGONNARD-ROCHE (1993, p. 19f).

³⁷GEORR (1948, p. 188f): *hādā ’l-kitābu laysa yaşluḥu katīr [...] şinā’ah al-manṭiqi ’ilā darsi-hī wa-lam yunzar fī-hi ’ayḍan nazaran şāfiyan fa-li-dālika laysa yūğadu la-hū nuşḥatun şaḥīḥatun ’aw ma’nā bi-taşḥīhi-hā.*

³⁸GEORR (1948, p. 198ff).

³⁹*Fa-li-’annā aḥbabnā ’l-wuqūfa ’alā mā waqa’a li-kulli wāḥidin min-hum katabnā ğam’ā ’n-nuqūli ’llatī waqasat ’ilay-nā li-yaqā’a ’t-tammulu bi-kulli wāḥidin min-hā wa-yusta’ānu bi-ba’ḍi-hā ’alā ba’ḍin fī ’idrāki ’l-ma’nā* (GEORR, 1948, p. 198).

Even though the translations were produced by experts in the field—the oldest one by Ibn Nā‘imah al-Ḥimṣī (fl. at the end of the eighth/beginning of the ninth century), the other two by Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī (d. 974) and his student Ibn Zur‘ah (d. 1008), both renowned logical authorities—Ibn Suwār is not sufficiently confident in the merits of any one of the texts to present it alone. Our editor is not a mean scholar himself; in fact, he also studied under Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī and was highly praised by Ibn an-Nadīm.⁴⁰ The *Organon* manuscript in itself is a remarkable achievement. Still, he does not trust the texts *as translations*—Ibn Suwār reports that they were all based on a defective Syriac text produced by Athanasius of Balad, which each of the translators had to modify to a certain degree in order to make sense of it.⁴¹ Since the Syriac was not available to him to choose the most appropriate Arabic version and collate it with the Syriac, he decided to present all three Arabic translations side by side, inviting his readers to form their own opinion.⁴² Like Ibn as-Samḥ, he identifies flawed translations as the problem, not any possible inconsistencies in the source: if Athanasius’ Syriac text had not been so bad, the Arabic versions would presumably fully deserve our trust. The obstacle for the transfer of Aristotle’s ideas was therefore not any incompatibility between Greek thought and the Arabic language, nor any problem arising out of the transmission history of this particular text: it was *bad translation*.

Between Books 2 and 3 of the *Topics*, Ibn Suwār preserves a note by the translator himself, in this case Abū ‘Uṭmān ad-Dimašqī (d. 914), to the effect that he had difficulties understanding certain passages of the text, forcing him to translate them literally (*‘alā mā ‘awǧaba-hū zāhiru lafẓi-hā*).⁴³ At least for Abū ‘Uṭmān, literal translation does not seem to be a legitimate translational approach on a par with other procedures⁴⁴—it is, at least at this stage of the Greek-Arabic translation movement, not more than a last resort when comprehension fails. His emergency procedure could be called an “interlinear gloss” of the source text. Ḥunayn’s *Risālah* already seems to indicate a change of mind of translators toward “literal” translation. There are numerous examples of such translations which are clearly born out of incomprehension rather than any conscious decision by the translator to favour one “style” of translation over another. In addition, the Greek-Arabic translation movement as a whole did not replicate the step toward exclusive and mechanic formal equivalence we find in the Syriac tradition.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Cf. FLÜGEL (1871–1872, vol. 1, p. 250).

⁴¹Ibn Suwār does not mince his words when it comes to the quality of Athanasius’ translation: *wa-kāna ‘atānas ar-rāhibu ǧayra fahmī bi-ma‘ānī ‘Aristūṭālis fī-hi dāhila naqli-hī ‘l-ḥalalu lā muḥālatan* (GEORR, 1948, p. 198).

⁴²Cf. ROSENTHAL (1975, p. 22).

⁴³GEORR (1948, p. 196).

⁴⁴Cf. also SALAMA-CARR (1993, p. 21); the author explains this change in attitudes with the growth of translation experience and the increasing flexibility of the Arabic language as a medium for scientific and philosophical discourse.

⁴⁵Our interpretation of the marginal notes discussed above only depend to a small degree on the ongoing dispute concerning the purpose of the notes. In his 1953 survey of newly published editions and translations of Arabic translations of Aristotelian texts, Richard WALZER (1962, p. 65f) emphasises the high philological standards of the Christian philosophical school of Baghdad with which the *Organon* collection originated and which is illustrated in the marginal notes. This implies that the purpose of the notes was mainly philological.

The next potential source for contemporary views on translation is the famous “debate” between Abū Bišr Mattā ibn Yūnus (d. 940) and Abū Sa‘īd as-Sīrāfī (d. 979), reported by Abū Ḥayyān at-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023).⁴⁶ Even a cursory examination of the text shows that the exchange between the grammarian and the translator/philosopher is highly polemical and seems to be the result of biased reporting or editing. Still, it is a significant source for contemporary ideas about translation—not those of Abū Bišr, however, who hardly gets to speak at all⁴⁷—but those of as-Sīrāfī, who is clearly familiar with the process of translation and skillfully uses his knowledge of translation problems and differences between languages to portray it as an ultimately futile attempt to bridge what he sees as an insurmountable chasm between languages.

The debate itself revolves around the respective merits of universal logic and the grammar of a particular language, in this case Arabic, to distinguish between right and wrong in a proposition. As-Sīrāfī strongly criticises Abū Bišr’s belief that language is a transparent vehicle of extralinguistic and universal logical concepts.⁴⁸ His view is that different languages have different means to determine the truth of a statement.⁴⁹ As-Sīrāfī claims that logic depends on the particular language it is formulated in, i.e. the logic propounded by the logicians is first and foremost a Greek logic, not a universal one.⁵⁰ He addresses this problem in the context of translation—a significant move in view of the fact that Abū Bišr, according to his own testimony, strongly believes in the transparency of the translation process. As-Sīrāfī on the other hand strongly opposes the very possibility of exact translation: due to the nature of languages and the variety (and variability) of meanings, it is impossible.⁵¹

Basing himself on the Aristotelian concept of language, which argues for the linear

Henri HUGONNARD-ROCHE (1993, p. 27f) on the other hand maintains that Ibn Suwār and later readers were more concerned about doctrinal issues than philological correctness. His main argument is that the Tādārī translation of the *Prior Analytics* we find in the manuscript would have offered ample opportunity for textual criticism. The number of marginal notes for this text, however, is relatively small.

⁴⁶Cf. AMĪN and AZ ZAYN (1939–1942, vol. 1, p. 107–129); translation in MARGOLIOUTH (1905) (English), TAHA (1979) (French) and ENDRESS (1986) (German); cf. also ABED (1991, p. xiv–xvi).

⁴⁷His ideas, at least as far as they can be gleaned from the interchange, can be summed up as follows: Abū Bišr, very much like his student al-Fārābī (d. 950), wholeheartedly espoused universal translatability, at least in the field of logic. For him, logical concepts are, irrespective of the language they are formulated in, universal: *wa-’n-nāsu fī ’l-maṣqūlāti sawā’un a-lā tarā ’anna ’arba’atan wa-’arba’atan [tamāniyatun] sawā’un ’inda ḡamā’i ’l-’umami, wa-ka-dālika mā ’ašbaha-hū* (AMĪN and AZ ZAYN, 1939–1942, vol. 1, p. 111)—and therefore open to translation into any linguistic medium.

⁴⁸Abū Bišr’s unconditional trust in translation—as conveyed by our text—indeed seems to border on the naive; Abū Ḥayyān credits him with the claim that *at-tarḡamata ḡafīzat-i ’l-’aḡrāda wa-’addat-i ’l-ma’ānī, wa-’ahlaṣat-i ’l-ḡaḡā’iq* (AMĪN and AZ ZAYN, 1939–1942, vol. 1, p. 111).

⁴⁹ABED (1991, p. xv).

⁵⁰ABED (1991, p. xv, 167f). As-Sīrāfī makes his “linguistic relativism” very explicit: *’idā kāna ’l-manṭiqu waḡa’a-hū raḡulun min-a ’l-yūnāna ’alā luḡati ’ahli-hā wa-’šṭilāḡi-him ’alay-hā wa-mā yata-’arāfūna-hū bi-hā min rusūmi-hā wa-ṣifāti-hā, fa-min ’ayna yalzamu ’t-turka wa-’l-hinda wa-’l-fursa wa-’l-’araba ’an yanzurū fī-hi wa-yattaḡidū qāḡīyan wa-ḡakaman la-hum wa-’alay-him* (AMĪN and AZ ZAYN, 1939–1942, vol. 1, p. 110).

⁵¹*Wa-laysa huwa fī ṭabā’i ’l-luḡāti wa-lā fī maqādīri ’l-ma’ānī* (AMĪN and AZ ZAYN, 1939–1942, vol. 1, p. 112); cf. KÜHN (1986, p. 343).

substitution of signs with underlying, “trans-linguistic” concepts and vice versa, Abū Bišr claims that he only needs the nouns, verbs and particles of the Arabic language to express the ideas of the Greeks.⁵² Abū Bišr speaks less as a translator than as a commentator and teacher of Aristotelian thought—in his own translations, he applies much more complex methods than the word-for-word procedure he seems to advocate at this point.⁵³ Not only this statement but his performance as a whole strongly suggest that it represents an edited version of the debate with a strong anti-philosophical bias. Interestingly enough, while otherwise sympathetic to philosophical ideas, Abū Ḥayyān seems to have decided either to retain any pre-existing partisan tone of the debate which he quotes on the authority of the philologist ‘Alī ibn ‘Īsā ar-Rummānī (d. 994) or, perhaps less likely, introduced its biased tone himself. The discussion between Abū Bišr and as-Sīrāfi is part of the eighth “nightly talk”, introduced by a critique by the Jewish philosopher Wahb in Ya‘īš of certain philosophers who exploit their knowledge for commercial purposes; Abū Bišr in particular is portrayed as a cynical and greedy purveyor of philosophical and scientific goods.⁵⁴ The setting of the debate thus serves thoroughly to disqualify Abū Bišr from the very beginning.

As-Sīrāfi stresses the importance of the grammatical and syntactic aspects of language in translation, aspects that Abū Bišr does not mention. He then presents a list of prerequisites for exact translation which, by implication, are not met by Abū Bišr’s simplistic understanding of language and translation;⁵⁵ together with another list of points illustrating possible differences between languages, he arrives at the conclusion that exact translation is impossible. Among the possible differences between languages, as-Sīrāfi cites the vocabulary, the distribution of regular and irregular grammatical forms, syntax and word order in sentences. To these, he adds a number of other aspects such as the metaphorical use of language, poetic forms and differences in the expressiveness of languages.⁵⁶

Confronting his criteria with Abū Bišr’s seemingly simplistic assumption of universal

⁵² AMĪN and AZ ZAYN (1939–1942, vol. 1, p. 115): *yakfī-nā min luġati-kum hādihī ‘l-ismu wa-‘l-fi‘lu wa-‘l-ḥarfū, fa-innī ataballaġu bi-hādā ‘l-qadri ‘ilā ‘agrāḍin qad haddabat-hā yūnān.*

⁵³ KÜHN (1986, p. 343f).

⁵⁴ AMĪN and AZ ZAYN (1939–1942, vol. 1, p. 104, 107); cf. ENDRESS (1986, p. 236f). The remarks on Abū Bišr are at least as devastating as the later portrayal of his “performance” debating as-Sīrāfi: *fa-inna Mattā kāna yumli waraqatan bi-dirhamin Muqtadirīyin wa-huwa sakrānu lā yaqilu, wa-yatahakkamu, wa-‘inda-hū ‘anna-hū fi ribḥin, wa-huwa min-a ‘l-‘aḥsarīna ‘amālan, al-‘asfalīna ‘ahwālan.*

⁵⁵ AMĪN and AZ ZAYN (1939–1942, vol. 1, p. 112): *‘anna ‘t-tarġamata šadaqat wa-mā kaḍabat, wa-qawwamat wa-mā ḥarrafat, wa-wazanat wa-mā ġazafat, wa-‘anna-hā [mā] ‘ltātat wa-lā ḥāfat, wa-lā naqaṣat wa-lā zādat, wa-lā qaddamat wa-lā ‘aḥḥarat, wa-mā ‘aḥallat bi-ma‘nā ‘l-ḥāṣṣi, wa-‘l-‘āmmi wa-lā [bi-‘aḥṣṣi ‘l-ḥāṣṣi wa-lā] bi-‘ammī ‘l-‘āmm.* What as-Sīrāfi demands is complete formal and semantic equivalence. What Abū Bišr claims to be able to deliver, however, is only *semantic* equivalence. Even without the added burden of formal equivalence, Abū Bišr has put himself in an untenable position; not intervening against as-Sīrāfi’s transparent rhetorical move shows him to be as incompetent in debate as he is in translation, at least according to his own standards.

⁵⁶ AMĪN and AZ ZAYN (1939–1942, vol. 1, p. 115f): *wa-huwa ‘an ta‘lama ‘anna luġatan min-a ‘l-luġati lā tuṭābiqū luġatan ‘uḥrā min ġamrī ġihāti-hā bi-ḥudūdi šifāti-hā, fī ‘asmāi-hā wa-‘afāli-hā wa-ḥurūfi-hā wa-taḥfīfi-hā wa-taqḍimi-hā wa-taḥīri-hā, wa-‘sti‘ārati-hā wa-taḥqīqi-hā, wa-tašḍidi-hā wa-taḥfīfi-hā, wa-sa‘ati-hā wa-ḍiqi-hā wa-naḥmi-hā wa-natri-hā wa-saġri-hā, wa-wazni-hā wa-mayli-hā, wa-ġayri ḍālika mimma yaṭūlu dikru-hā; cf. KÜHN (1986, p. 344f).*

translatability, as-Sīrāfi’s verdict cannot be but negative: the differences in character between languages and the range of meaning contained in particular texts effectively exclude the possibility of exact translation. With this result, as-Sīrāfi has come full circle from his starting point, i.e. that translation into another language changes the meaning of a text.⁵⁷

The texts surveyed above mostly represent the views of translators. What, then, about their addressees and later readers of their products?

Islamic philosophers are among the most prominent readers of translated texts. We learn of al-Kindī (d. 873) that he was in regular contact with translators, commissioning translations of certain philosophical and scientific works and proof-reading texts in matters of style.

Al-Fārābī (d. 950) studied logic with scholars such as Abū Bišr. His case is particularly intriguing for two reasons: firstly, he was a native speaker of a Turkic language and might therefore have been in a better position to appreciate the problem of translating between different, even unrelated languages; and secondly, one of his main philosophical concerns was the relation between grammar and logic, an issue that had been thrown in such sharp relief by the debate between his teacher and the grammarian as-Sīrāfi discussed above. Even though he apparently did not devise a full-fledged theory of translation, he had certainly given some thought to the issue.

As a commentator of Aristotelian texts, al-Fārābī’s intention was to make Aristotle’s ideas accessible to his audience—thus, he finished a task the translators had begun by “re-translating” their products, which were often obscure and formulated in an unfamiliar language, and rendering them into “well-known expressions in the Arabic language” (*bi-ʾalfāzin mašhūratin ʿinda ʾahli ʾl-lisāni ʾl-ʿarabi*).⁵⁸ Very much like Ḥunayn before him, he was interested in the meaning of a text rather than its formal features. For al-Fārābī, antique philosophical texts contained a message that, in principle, could be extracted and rendered into Arabic—he saw the linguistic shape any given text might take as an accidental feature without any bearing on its meaning. A central, though implicit, tenet of his was therefore the idea of universal translatability.⁵⁹

With this optimistic view, however, he was bound to run into trouble. The Arabic verbal system, in particular its lack of a copula, resisted his efforts to create a transparent idiom to replicate Aristotelian logical ideas. To make up for what he saw as a defect of the Arabic language, al-Fārābī went as far as proposing far-reaching changes to the language itself.⁶⁰ Throughout his discussion of these issues, which he chiefly conducted in the *Kitāb al-ḥurūf*⁶¹ and some of his logical commentaries,⁶² he used a number of examples drawn

⁵⁷KÜHN (1986, p. 346).

⁵⁸ABED (1991, p. xix), quoting al-Fārābī’s *Kitāb al-qiyās as-saḡīr*. It was edited al TÜRKER KÜYEL (1958).

⁵⁹ABED (1991, p. xx).

⁶⁰ABED (1991, p. 119–122).

⁶¹Most of his examples drawn from foreign languages occur in the chapter on “being”, *al-mawḡūd* (MAHDI, 1969, p. 110–128).

⁶²Unsurprisingly, most examples can be found in his commentary on *De interpretatione* (ZIMMERMANN, 1981), a work very much bound up with the structure of the Greek language.

from Greek, Persian and Soghdian, a Turkic language. His most likely source for these examples were translators, among them his teacher Abū Bišr. Still, we do not find any theoretical statements on the process of translation, which is somewhat of a surprise, given that al-Fārābī spent so much time dealing with some of the most intractable *problems* involved in translating from Greek (and other languages) into Arabic.

Another philosopher coming from a non-Arabic background was Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037). He did not think of translation as a “transparent” activity of semantic transference. On the contrary, he was aware not only of the difficulties caused by the source texts and their complex subject matter, but also of the advantages and shortcomings of different languages in expressing such content. The references to Greek grammatical features we find in the *Šifā* show that he had an informant in such matters, most likely his friend, the Christian philosopher al-Masīhī, who gave him some insight into the workings of the Greek language.⁶³

His criticisms focus in particular on the “established” terminology, i.e. (in all likelihood) that introduced by the translators, which subsequently gained wide acceptance. His concerns, however, are more general: he is often less than confident about the understanding of Plato, Aristotle and others reflected in the translated texts. We find him frequently complaining about the opacity of the translations he knew.⁶⁴ Not only that, he is keenly aware of the linguistic limitations of Arabic in conveying the precise meaning of the text: “We do not have the terms for such notions except those words. He who finds them inappropriate may use others.”⁶⁵ Thus, Ibn Sīnā, like his predecessor al-Fārābī, was not a passive recipient of translated texts, but showed a remarkable awareness of the issues of translation. Still, neither he nor al-Fārābī left us a “theory” of translation.

Translators and philosophers were not the only people who reflected on translation. Living and writing in an atmosphere suffused with a veritable “culture of translation”,⁶⁶ no less a literary authority than al-Ġāḥiẓ (d. 868) gave a detailed account of his views on translation in his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*.

Al-Ġāḥiẓ sets the tone for his discussion with a few remarks on the impossibility of translating Arabic poetry. On this basis, he maintains that, irrespective of its genre or contents, no translator can grasp and transmit the full range of ideas embodied in a source text—least of all some of the more prominent exponents of the Greek-Arabic translation movement which he mentions by name. Who are they compared to the sages of antiquity?⁶⁷

To support his thoroughly negative stance on translation, he lists a number of qualifications a translator has to possess and some of the problems he has to deal with. Al-Ġāḥiẓ requires that a translator is to be equally competent in the subject of the

⁶³ AFNAN (1964, p. 41).

⁶⁴ SALAMA-CARR (1997, p. 390), quoting LIPPERT (1903, p. 415).

⁶⁵ AFNAN (1964, p. 40ff); Ibn Sīnā’s remark is taken from the *Šifā* manuscript Cambridge Or. 1245, f. 131.

⁶⁶ GUTAS (1998, p. 26).

⁶⁷ HĀRŪN (1965, vol. 1, p. 75f): *fa-matā kāna raḥḥama-hū ’llāhu ta’ālā ’bnu ’l-Biṭriqi, wa-’bnu Nāsimati, wa-’bnu Qurṛati, wa-’bnu Fihriẓi, wa-Tiyufīl, wa-’bnu Wahīlī, wa-’bnu ’l-Muqaffari, miṭla ’Aristūṭālīs?*

source text and in both the source- and the target-language.⁶⁸ Even if a translator turns out to be such an expert, he faces the prospect of introducing inaccuracies through linguistic interference between the source- and the target-language:⁶⁹ in al-Ġāhiz’s opinion, it is virtually impossible to master two languages to an equal degree and to keep them cleanly apart in the process of translation—and at the same time to be as much of an expert in the subject of the source text as its original author himself.⁷⁰

As if this was not enough, he goes on to elaborate on the special case of translations of religious texts. Clearly, this is his main concern: according to al-Ġāhiz, there is much more at stake in translating religious texts than “secular” ones.⁷¹ Not only do the subtleties of the subject hold a much greater danger of misrepresentation. The consequences of mistranslation would be much more severe than in the case of “merely” scientific and literary material. The problems he sees in translating scripture are not simply caused by inaccuracies and mistranslations, which beset “secular” translations as well. They also touch on the matter of Islamic revelation and its relation to the Arabic language.⁷² Compared to this issue, other considerations he subsequently mentions such as the unreliability of scribes and, again, the translators’ lack of qualifications and the vagaries of textual transmission, pale by comparison.⁷³

Al-Ġāhiz’s reservations are rooted in his position as a scholar and his personal linguistic and theological concerns, e.g. about the development of Arabic in contact with other languages and its growing use by non-native speakers or about the implications of a translation of the Qur’ān.⁷⁴ Whatever his personal reasons, his account embodies a deeply ideological view of translation: “When advancing practical objections to translation, al-Jāhiz is, in fact, expressing fundamental reservations about the very nature of this activity.”⁷⁵ The issues he highlights to argue for the impossibility of exact translation show that he was well acquainted with the practical side of the process of translation. His knowledge of the milieu, the methods and, most probably, some of the exponents of the translation movement provide him with sufficient evidence to deliver a

⁶⁸As he says, *wa-lā budda li-’t-tarġumāni min ’an yakūna bayānu-hū fi nafsi ’t-tarġamati, fi wazni ’ilmi-hī fi nafsi ’l-marīfati, wa-yanbaġi ’an yakūna ’aṣlama ’n-nāsi bi-’l-luġati ’l-manqūlati wa-’l-manqūli ’ilay-hā, ḥattā yakūnu fi-himā sawā’an wa-ġāyatan* (HĀRŪN, 1965, vol. 1, p. 76).

⁶⁹The degree of awareness of translation problems al-Ġāhiz displays is not surprising for such an acute observer who moves in circles that included translators and people of different linguistic background: *wa-matā waġadnā-hu ’ayḍan qad takallama bi-lisānayni, ’alimnā ’anna-hū qad ’adhala ’d-ḍayma ’alay-himā; li-’anna kulla wāḥidatin min-a ’l-luġatayni taġḍibu ’l-’uḥrā wa-taḥyudu min-hā, wa-tastariḍu ’alay-hā* (HĀRŪN, 1965, vol. 1, p. 76).

⁷⁰HĀRŪN (1965, vol. 1, p. 76f).

⁷¹For a simple reason: *wa-yakūna ḍālīka mutadammīnan bi-mā yaġūzu ’alā ’llāhi ta’ālā, mimmā lā yaġūzu, wa-bi-mā yaġūzu ’alā ’n-nāsi mimmā lā yaġūz.* (HĀRŪN, 1965, vol. 1, p. 77).

⁷²Concluding a long list of details and subtleties a translator has to understand fully in his task to render religious texts competently, HĀRŪN (1965, vol. 1, p. 78) writes: *wa-matā lam yarīf ḍālīka ’l-mutarġimu ’aḥṭa fi ta’wīli kalāmi ’d-dīn. wa-’l-ḥaṭa fi ’d-dīni ’aḍarru min-a ’l-ḥaṭa fi ’r-riyādati wa-’ṣ-ṣinā’ati, wa-’l-falsafati wa-’l-kīmīyā’i, wa fi ba’ḍi ’l-marīṣati ’llatī yu’ṣu bi-hā banū ’ādam.*

⁷³HĀRŪN (1965, vol. 1, p. 77ff).

⁷⁴In spite of his particular wariness of the influence of Greek philosophy on Islamic culture, this and his other books are studded with references to it.

⁷⁵Cf. SALAMA-CARR (1997, p. 389f).

damning verdict against both its products and its tacit assumptions.⁷⁶

Scepticism against the possibility of correctly translating religious material was not an exclusively Islamic concern. Objections similar to those of al-Ġāhiz's prompted Syriac translators to adopt an increasingly text-centred approach to translation as a result of the christological conflicts of late antiquity.⁷⁷ Sebastian BROCK writes:

Translators could—and did—interpolate their translations of orthodox writers and so pass off heterodox opinions under the auspices of some revered authority. Likewise, exact translations of works suspected of heterodoxy were required for the consideration of synods and councils

and adds:

Literal translation has thus become a double safeguard: for the reader, against the introduction of false or heretical views by the translator, and for the translator, against accusations by the reader of falsification of the thought of the original.⁷⁸

A second, interrelated factor in the rise of text-centred translation was the high prestige accorded to Greek as the language of learning: Syriac translators operated at a time when this prestige had reached its zenith.⁷⁹ For their later counterparts, Arabic was the paramount language and Greek unable to impose its grammatical and stylistic norms on the target language.⁸⁰

⁷⁶This passage is not the only occasion on which al-Ġāhiz speaks out against the people involved in the translation movement. Cf. also HĀRŪN (1965, vol. 6, p. 19 and 280), quoted by ENDRESS (1987, vol. 3, p. 4).

⁷⁷BROCK (1983, p. 10–13).

⁷⁸BROCK (1979, p. 78).

⁷⁹The importance of prestige of a source and target language was brought out most emphatically by BROCK (1983, p. 4), who observes: “The character of a translation will always depend very much on the attitude of the translator (and his readers) to the source text, and this in turn will depend, in a general way, on the respective prestige of the two languages involved, and, in particular, on the nature and authority of the text in question.”

These remarks, geared towards the Greek-Syriac translation tradition, touch on a point that has not yet been sufficiently explored in connection with Greek-Arabic translations. Whereas there is a clear prestige differential between Greek and Syriac at the time—the Greek language served as the vehicle of Christian revelation, other important theological texts and a wealth of highly regarded secular authors, Aristotle among them—we are dealing with a much more complicated situation on the Greek-Arabic side. Firstly, Arabic itself was the language of revelation and a long and venerable tradition of theological and scientific writing. Secondly, the cultural prestige Greek might have enjoyed at the time was not backed by any comparable political or military power, it was the language of a conquered people and an enemy that was regarded as inferior in both military and cultural terms (cf. GUTAS, 1998, p. 84f). On the other hand, Greek scientific and philosophical *literature* was obviously held in very high esteem among a section of the political and intellectual élite of the Islamic centres of learning during the course of the Greek-Arabic translation movement. In sum, the prestige Greek as a language might have enjoyed among Islamic thinkers seems to be nowhere near as high as that it held for Syriac translators and writers.

⁸⁰BROCK (1979, p. 75).

Conclusions

Our short survey has shown that of the few commentators we have discussed, almost all seem to fall on opposite ends of the possible range of opinions one might hold about translation. Unsurprisingly, the practitioners themselves are fully convinced that translation is sufficient to get a “message” across linguistic barriers. Not only that, Abū Bišr (as long as we accept at-Tawḥīdī’s portrayal at face value) also firmly believes in the transparency of translation: the contents of a text can be expressed in *any* language, irrespective of the specific characteristics these languages might display. As we have seen above, the apparent simplicity of his view could have been brought about by either unsympathetic editing or the fact that he participated in the debate less as a translator rather than an Aristotelian philosopher who felt obliged to defend Aristotle’s concept of language along with the rest of his thought.

Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq’s position seems to be much more nuanced. On the one hand, he leaves no doubt that he also believed in universal translatability. His experience, however, has taught him that in order to convey the meaning of a text, one often has to go through a process of revision and improvement. In addition, he stresses the importance of factors such as the purpose and the addressee of a translation. To return to the terminology introduced at the beginning of this paper, Ḥunayn is “reader-oriented” without, however, ignoring the importance of philological accuracy. Making a text understood depends in his opinion as much on the abilities and needs of the reader as on the text itself.⁸¹

Ibn as-Samḥ and Ibn Suwār, the collector and editor of the Paris *Organon* manuscript, faced a different set of challenges. On the surface, their task is the same: to make a group of texts understood to an Arabic reader. Unfortunately, they are not translators themselves. Their textual basis consisted of translations of varying quality and age, some of which had already gone through a lengthy process of transmission and revision. Thus, their perspective on translation was different from that of the translators: they were the (sometimes frustrated) recipients of translated texts. Their pronouncements do not contain any trace of a specific concept or theory of translation—except for the fact that, by the very act of collating and editing the translations of Aristotle’s logical works, they documented their ultimate belief in the potential of translation to transmit ideas.

On the other side of the spectrum, we find as-Sīrāfī and al-Ġāḥiẓ. In at-Tawḥīdī’s report, as-Sīrāfī is portrayed as the standard bearer of the Islamic sciences, particularly grammar, defending his subject against the competing claims of logicians and philosophers. Abū Bišr proves to be a willing victim; his apparent incompetence only underlines the vacuity of his claims and allows as-Sīrāfī to demolish translation along with the subject of Greek logic. In modern terms, his position can be summed up as linguistic relativity: he maintains that each language embodies specific structures of argumentation, an individual “logic”. With each language expressing slightly different structures of thought, the very possibility of translation, at least to the degree of exactitude demanded by as-Sīrāfī, appears remote. Much more than in the case of al-Ġāḥiẓ, scepticism regarding the viability of exact translation seems to go hand in hand with scepticism regarding the value of Greek science and philosophy. If we take at-Tawḥīdī’s account se-

⁸¹Cf. also BROCK (1991, p. 142).

riously, especially his description of Abū Bišr's claims and performance, we might even infer that as-Sīrāfi's insistence on the sufficiency of Arabic grammar was prompted as much by his opponent's lack of debating skills as by the sheer arrogance of his sweeping claims.

Al-Ġāḥiẓ approaches the issue of translation from a different angle. His thoroughly negative stance, while supported by a variety of arguments, is mainly born out of theological considerations. The implications of mistranslating scripture, however forbidding in itself, are only discussed after al-Ġāḥiẓ has already demonstrated the impossibility of exact translation on different grounds, most prominently the lack of suitable linguistic and scientific qualifications on the part of the translator and the ever-present danger of linguistic interference. Like as-Sīrāfi, al-Ġāḥiẓ demands a standard of exactitude in translation which he does not define. Both end up rejecting translation, but while as-Sīrāfi also rejects the idea that translators and, through them, the ancients have anything to contribute to Islamic culture in the first place, al-Ġāḥiẓ only doubts the efficacy of translation, not the value of the source texts themselves.

None of the authors surveyed above provides us with anything approaching a "theory" of translation. What we find are numerous statements about the practical side of translation and, from the exponents of the Islamic sciences, sophisticated polemical arguments against its very possibility. Whatever their source and motivation, these pronouncements forcefully attest to the variety and flexibility of contemporary concepts of translation. Therefore, translation analysis cannot operate on a single concept of translation for different products of the Greek-Arabic translation movement and for the claims we find in the secondary literature. Also, we have to keep in mind that the discussion of translation, its possibility and procedures, was not the exclusive domain of its practitioners and customers. It was one of the battlefields in the war between the exponents of Greek thought and those of the Islamic sciences.

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