

Exploring AI's Capability in Translating English Metaphors Into Arabic

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Abstract—This study aims to investigate ChatGPT's competence in translating metaphors in the English-Arabic language pair. A qualitative analysis method was employed using Newmark's metaphor classification and his suggested translation methods. Five metaphors' translations were analyzed using Newmark's classification. The results show that ChatGPT relied on literal translation to translate metaphors, even when more suitable, culturally appropriate equivalents were available. This AI's limitation mainly stems from its reliance on its use of literal translation. Future research could delve into other language pairs as well as a bigger set of data.

Index Terms—translation, AI translation, metaphor translation, translation assessment, metaphor translation

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation has become a more accessible and efficient process in the era of AI, specifically with the development of ChatGPT. Nevertheless, the real question lies in the effectiveness, accuracy, and consistency of ChatGPT's translations. Developed by OpenAI and released in November 2022, ChatGPT is an AI chatbot that can understand prompts and provide thorough responses (Ouyang et al., 2022). Previous research on ChatGPT's ability to translate texts from Arabic into English and vice versa has shown that this AI is capable of frequently rendering general everyday texts and communications quite accurately. Still, it has shown limitations in translating complex materials such as legal documents, medical reports, scientific studies, and literary works (Khoshafah, 2023).

Earlier investigations have explored the effectiveness of ChatGPT's ability to translate in the English-Arabic language pair; however, because ChatGPT's aptitude in translating English metaphors into Arabic has not been directly examined, there is a paucity in the research.

While ChatGPT has established its ability to translate general texts effectively, its performance with culturally rich and metaphorical language is yet to be investigated. Merriam-Webster defines metaphors as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in 'drowning in money') broadly: figurative language compare simile" (Merriam-Webster, 2025). Metaphors, be it in English or any other language, are not just linguistics; they are a window to culture, history, and the psychic collective of a society. This study aims to highlight this AI language model's propensity to precisely render English metaphors. Specifically, it intends to punctuate this chatbot's competence when provided with the appropriate prompt.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Metaphors and their translation in the Arabic-English language pair (and vice versa) present a set of unique difficulties, a result of the convoluted structures of the two languages as well as the distant cultural contexts. Recent studies have underscored the numerous strategies and approaches that can be employed in the translation of metaphors in the aforementioned language pair. Such studies have stressed the vitality of understanding both the source and target languages' metaphorical frameworks, while other studies have highlighted the translation of metaphors using machine translation. This literature review aims to fuse the findings of previous studies in order to highlight the importance of this research and its findings.

Abdelhamid (2019) came to several conclusions after writing his thesis. Firstly, he found that metaphor translation necessitates what is referred to as an "interdisciplinary approach"—an approach in which numerous sciences underwrite to deliver an answer of scientific nature to any subject of matter. Moreover, the technique referred to as "adaptation" should be a translator's fallback option to fine-tune the SL to the TL. Another important conclusion of Abdelhamid's is

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that a translator must be bilingual as well as bicultural, as the translation of metaphors divulges the importance of culture on the translator's decisions. He underscores that "culture is no less important than language in the translation process" (Abdelhamid, 2020, p. 129). Another vital point is highlighted in this valuable research: the special treatment of ordinary and poetic language, both as registers of language. Metaphor translation deals more with re-creation than with mapping, and compensation, though limited in solving all the cultural aspects, is a good technique. The Western and Arab theories vary in metaphor classification, and the common metaphors are more universal across languages than the specific ones; thus, metaphor can be considered as a cross-cultural platform for enrichment (Abdelhamid, 2020). The challenges of translating metaphors will put AI's translational ability to the test, as metaphors' cultural nuances will directly influence AI's handling of such metaphorical expressions.

Abdo and Khalefe's (2020) findings suggest that there is an elusive balance between fidelity to the source text (ST) and the necessity of stylistic coherence in the target language (TL). This research identifies numerous difficulties in preserving denotative and connotative meanings of metaphors, especially in the case of the translation of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. One difficulty, among others, is balancing literal meaning with aesthetic appeal, as shown in the provided examples "twinkling eyes", where one of the translations maintained elegance, whereas the other opted for straightforward description. Another important point mentioned is managing cultural and contextual issues that impact how the metaphors are rendered and conveyed between the English-Arabic language pair (Abdo & Khalefe, 2020). The two obstacles listed here are likely only a few of the difficulties that the authors of this research expect AI will experience while translating the provided metaphors, especially since the metaphors will not be supplied in any specific context.

In a recent study on the translation of color metaphors in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the researcher came to many important conclusions regarding the translation of such metaphors. The first of these conclusions is that the translation of Shakespeare's metaphors into Arabic, and most likely other languages, necessitates detailed consideration of such metaphors' saliency, in addition to the necessity of considering the translation's potential impact on Arabic readers. This study further stresses the limitations of translating such creative metaphors, as the newness and originality of these metaphors do not have direct equivalents in the TL (Omar, 2022). In this investigation the artistic and ingenious nature of such metaphors was emphasized, and such metaphors are not only culturally rooted but also artistically manipulated to have unique meanings, which may be the case for a lot of metaphors. Because AI depends on a huge corpus of existing language data, it might struggle with the translation of creative metaphors. The idea of underlying conceptual meaning discussed in this research begs the question of AI's ability to recognize and interpret such hidden meanings.

Dorst's (2023) investigation of the translation of metaphors in literary machine translation (MT) is incredibly relevant to this research, as it has underscored many important points regarding the translation of metaphors and machine translation. While there is certainly a difference between AI translation and machine translation, the results of this research are important as the subtitle "AI Translation is Machine Translation Evolved" in "AI Translation or Machine Translation: What's the Difference?" (n.d.) suggests. It was concluded that machine translation does not necessarily find the translation of metaphors to be a challenge, nor does it find them to be of any difficulty, even in literary texts. It is suggested that, in order to get better results from MT systems, it is better to focus on less creative metaphors rather than ones of artistic nature, whereas the creative metaphors will be more translatable, both for humans and machines, than the more complicated foregrounded and grammatical metaphors that are more challenging to render with accuracy across languages (Dorst, 2023).

Bouras (2024) examined the present shape of Arabic machine translation (MT) from and into Arabic. This investigation looked at AI as the "changing the face of translation and whether it is going to be the future of the translation profession" (Bouras, 2024, p. 2). It can be concluded from this research that the development of AI in technology, especially in Natural Language Processing (NLP), Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), TTS (Text-To-Speech), and sentiment analysis, is enhancing the AI's understanding of context, cultural sensitivity, and emotional accuracy. Such improvements will be helpful for computers to manage the complexities that come with metaphors forming part of the ideas to be relayed or expressed in speech and writing in the Arabic language.

All in all, while more recent studies have thoroughly discussed the translation of metaphors in different language pairs, none have directly looked at AI's translation of Arabic metaphors into English. This underscores the importance of the present study.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research will implement Newmark's theory on the translation of metaphors. Newmark (1988) classified metaphors into six types: dead, cliché, stock, adapted, recent, and original. Furthermore, he proposed translational options for each type of metaphor. This study uses the proposed options to assess AI's translation. Newmark also highlighted the two functions of metaphors: connotative and aesthetic. The connotative function is the ability of a metaphor to describe concrete and abstract notions in greater detail, express thoughts vividly, and characterize the quality of the described object. The aesthetic function is the ability of a metaphor to provide an aesthetic impact on the reader, that is, to interest and surprise him. This academic underscored that in a metaphor the previously mentioned functions are integrated: the unity of the form and content, cognitive and aesthetic functions (Oliyanyk, 2014).

As just mentioned, there are proposed translational methods for each type of metaphor (Al-Ghammaz et al., 2022; Qutami, 2022). Dead metaphors (metaphors without figurative meaning) are not perceived as metaphors anymore, as they

have been entrenched in language for so long that literal translation may be used. These dead metaphors usually translate quite easily. Still, to make them work in the target language, close attention needs to be paid to the context, as often a direct translation is not possible.

The second classification is cliché metaphors, defined by Newmark as follows: “I define cliché metaphors as metaphors that have perhaps temporarily outlived their usefulness, that are used as a substitute for clear thought, often emotively, but without corresponding to the facts of the matter” (Newmark, 1988, p. 101). In other words, cliché metaphors are “metaphors that lost their aesthetic sense and are used only in a connotative function in order to express thoughts more clearly, often with a larger share of emotions” (Oliylyk, 2014, p. 124). Newmark advances the idea that the cliché metaphors are to be treated according to context and purpose. Such a metaphor retains its emotional or rhetorical function when serving such a function. In other cases, when serving a functional or merely informational role, simplification or its replacement with something clearer should be performed.

The third metaphor is the stock or standard metaphor, a well-known metaphor that, used informally, is an effective referentially and pragmatically short-cut way of talking about a physical or mental problem. It also possesses emotional warmth that is not worn off by frequent usage. Stock metaphors can be translated in one of four ways: reproduce a similar image if it exists in the target language; replace it with a culturally appropriate equivalent or adapt it to the cultural context; reduce to sense, where the meaning remains but the metaphorical element is lost; or retain it with a parenthesis explaining it. In other cases, a compromise can manage to maintain a balance between retaining the metaphor and guaranteeing comprehension. The strength of the metaphor might also be tuned in to the emotional tone of the target language.

“Newmark considered adapted metaphors to be author’s metaphorical occasionalisms,” (Oliylyk, 2014, p. 125). While translating such structures, Newmark advised transferring the metaphor into the habit of expression of a target language, taking into consideration how it would have been naturally expressed by a native speaker. In the given example, a speech by U.S. President Ronald Reagan was translated literally. It would make little sense if it had been translated directly into other languages. The translator must try to retain both the form and meaning of the metaphor. However, if it is not possible, then retaining meaning is much better, particularly in journalistic texts.

Newmark explained that by recent metaphors he meant metaphorical neologisms, which are most often “anonymously” coined, and such metaphors have spread rather quickly in the SL. A number of these metaphorical neologisms represent new concepts, and their translation should be steered by the principle of the translation of such neologisms.

The last type of metaphor on Newman’s list is the original metaphor, which he defined as being metaphors original to the author of the SL text. In expressive or authoritative texts, such metaphors should be rendered through the use of verbatim translation. However, if the translator feels that a metaphor contains cultural references that the target audience may not understand, then the translation must be revised by replacing the unknown image with an image that is much more familiar to the reader (Oliylyk, 2014). By adopting this understanding of metaphors and the suggested translational methods of each type of metaphor, AI’s translational ability will be assessed.


Gao et al. (2023) engaged with ChatGPT translation, stating that their “experimental results show that ChatGPT with designed translation prompts can achieve comparable or better performance over commercial translation systems for high-resource language translations” (Gao et al., 2023, p. 1). The findings of Gao et al. (2023) demonstrate that ChatGPT’s performance may be greatly improved when it is given precise information about the input text, such as the translation task and contextual domain, through the prompt. Cable (2024) suggests that the best way to get the most out of ChatGPT is to feed it with a good and clear prompt. Instruct the AI with the source and target language, such as “Translate this into Arabic from English,” and it will help in framing the translation more accurately. If the text requires a certain tone, for example, formal or informal, be sure to specify that, too. For example, you can ask for a “formal translation” or “casual translation.” Cable also suggests that a context is to be provided for better accuracy. Based on all of that, the prompt that will be used is “Translate the following metaphors from English into Arabic while maintaining the aesthetic and metaphorical aspects”.

ChatGPT (the AI tool in question) will be provided with six different metaphors (the six different classifications as provided by Newmark) and will be asked to translate the metaphors using the aforementioned prompt. ChatGPT’s translation will be evaluated on the basis of the method it used to translate the metaphors in accordance with the methods proposed by Newmark for each type of metaphor, as well as the viability of each translation in comparison to the ideal translation of each metaphor.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers selected random metaphors that fit Newmark’s classification. Below are screenshots of ChatGPT’s response to the aforementioned prompt. ChatGPT’s responses are all to the same prompt: “Translate the following metaphors from English into Arabic while maintaining the aesthetic and metaphorical aspects”.

1. 1. "Time is money"

 The metaphor "Time is money" can be translated into Arabic as:

الوقت كالمال

(Al-waqt kal-māl)

This maintains the metaphorical comparison between time and money, suggesting that both are valuable and should be used wisely.



Figure 1. The Metaphor "Time is Money" Translated From English to Arabic by ChatGPT

2. "A bull in a china shop"

ثور في متجر الخزف

(Literal translation: A bull in a porcelain shop.)

Figure 2. The Metaphor "A Bull in a china Shop" Translated From English to Arabic by ChatGPT

All the world's a stage"

 The metaphor "All the world's a stage" from Shakespeare can be translated into Arabic as:

الدنيا مسرح كبير

(Al-dunya masrah kabeer)

This translation maintains the metaphor of life being a stage and the world being a place where people play different roles, suggesting that life itself is like a theatrical performance.



Figure 3. The Metaphor "All the World's a Stage" Translated From English to Arabic by ChatGPT

5. "The digital wave"

موجة الرقمية

(Literal translation: The digital wave.)

6. "The foot of the mountain"

قدم الجبل

(Literal translation: The foot of the mountain.)

These translations maintain the figurative meanings of the original expressions while adapting them to standard Arabic usage.



Figure 4. The Metaphors "The Digital Wave" and "The Foot of the Mountain" Translated From English to Arabic by ChatGPT

V. DISCUSSION

The first metaphor, "time is money," is considered both a metaphor (it compares time and money to suggest that time, like money, has value and should not be wasted) and an idiom. It can be defined as follows: "used to say that a person's time is as valuable as money" (Cambridge, 2024a). The expected translation of such a metaphor in Arabic is "الوقت من ذهب" / "alwaqt min dhahab" ("time is golden"). This metaphor can be classified as a cliché metaphor because it has been so highly overused, creating a staleness of the metaphor (Al-Shahwan, 2024; Abd-Rabbo et al., 2023; Alenazy et al., 2024). It has been applied so often that it would be entirely unsurprising in any context whatsoever and is, in some contexts, rather lazy or lacking in creativity. Therefore, it carries little of the emotional or intellectual weight that it originally did. For this very reason, it meets the definition of a cliché metaphor. According to Newmark, when the metaphor is not in a certain context, the translator (AI in this case) should avoid literal translation and offer a less figurative translation. When asked to translate this metaphor, using the aforementioned prompt, the result, as shown in Figure 1, was the following translation: "الوقت كالمال" / "alwaqt kalmaal" ("time is like money"). As noted previously, ChatGPT opted for a literal

translation while maintaining the metaphorical sense of the original English metaphor in Arabic, as it added the preposition “ك”/“k” (“as, like”) used to liken words in Arabic. The use of this preposition almost maintained the metaphorical element by turning the metaphor into a simile in Arabic in the sense that “ك”/“k” (“as”) functions as the Arabic equivalent of the English “like” or “as” when forming similes. The resulting translation made the researchers question the viability of the provided prompt, so the prompt “Translate the following metaphors into Arabic” was used instead, and the results did not change, as AI maintained the use of literal translation. All in all, AI chose literal translation as its preferred method, which Newmark opposed. Newmark believed that in anonymous text, a translator should avoid literal translation of metaphors and clichés. In this case, “a translator must either remove all imagery of the translated metaphors or offer a less figurative metaphor” (Oliynyk, 2014, p. 124). The AI provided the following commentary on its translation: “This maintains the metaphorical comparison between time and money, suggesting that both are valuable and should be used wisely”.

In the translation of the second metaphor, “a bull in a China shop,” ChatGPT again opted for verbatim translation for the provided standard metaphor. This metaphor can be defined as follows: “a person who breaks things or who often makes mistakes or causes damage in situations that require careful thinking or behavior” (Merriam-Webster, 2025). The researchers expected AI to provide the following descriptive translation: “شخص أخرق”/“*shakhs 'akhraq*” (“lubber”). However, ChatGPT once again opted for an exact translation, “ثور في متجر خزف”/“*thawr fi matjar khazaf*” (“a bull in a porcelain shop”), as seen in Figure 2. When the researchers asked the AI why it chose this method, it explained itself by saying that “in some cases, literal translation can work well when the metaphor is relatively universal or the target language (in this case, Arabic) can understand the reference. ‘A bull in a China shop’ is a fairly vivid image in English, so using the same imagery in Arabic could still make sense, particularly in contexts where the audience is familiar with the English phrase or where the metaphor is commonly understood. However, this depends on the context and audience.” ChatGPT’s translation would have been appropriate if the imagery in the provided metaphor was common or widely understood in both the source and target cultures. The above explanation shows that the decision of the chatbot might be appropriate when the imagery of the metaphor is universally recognized or if the intended audience may be familiar with the English expression. However, for the metaphor “a bull in a China shop,” it may not be quite familiar in the Arabic-speaking world. Additionally, the imagery of a bull wreaking havoc in a fragile environment probably doesn't have the same force in Arabic, in particular without the cultural background of a “China shop,” which may not bear the same cultural weight in Arab cultures, where such a metaphor might not be as universally grasped. The best solution would have been to use an equivalent in the target language with a similar image. However, in this case it is not possible to do so. So, instead, ChatGPT could have opted for a descriptive translation where it would focus on the meaning of the metaphor rather than its imagery.

The next metaphor that was provided to ChatGPT, Shakespeare’s “All the world's a stage,” is an original metaphor (according to Newmark) because it is original to the writer of the SL text. In the monologue from “All the world's a stage,” Shakespeare looks at life as a dramatization on the stage. Each stage of life represents an act in the play (What Does “All the World’s a Stage” Mean?, n.d.). As shown in Figure 3, ChatGPT provided the following translation: “الدنيا مسرح كبير”/“*aldunya masrah kabir*” (“The world is a big stage”). Newmark suggests that the translator try to maintain the author’s style in an authoritative or expressive text. The translator may also modify a metaphor to a familiar image if cultural elements of metaphor are unclear. As you can see in the provided images of ChatGPT’s answers, it immediately recognized the metaphor to be Shakespeare’s. In its own words “this translation maintains the metaphor of life being a stage and the world being a place where people play different roles, suggesting that life itself is like a theatrical performance.” ChatGPT’s use of literal translation in the case of this metaphor is suitable as it maintained the author’s style and metaphorical elements of the original metaphors.

The next metaphor provided is a recent metaphor. Newmark explained that, by recent metaphors, he meant metaphorical neologisms, which are most often “anonymously” coined. Such metaphors have spread rather quickly in the SL. The specified metaphor in this case was “digital wave,” which is at times used to describe the rapid and transformative spread of digital technology in the case of the Internet, smartphones, social media, and all the other forms of technological innovations that are changing society, economies, and cultures. Newmark suggested that such a metaphor be translated using descriptive translation. However, ChatGPT’s reliance on literal translation proves to be of no use once again. ChatGPT translated the “digital wave” as “موجة رقمية”/“*mawjat raqmia*” (“digital wave”), as seen in Figure 4. However, in Arabic, this sounds unnatural. The unnaturalness of it may stem from the newness of such metaphors. ChatGPT could have employed descriptive translation and provided one like “موجة من التغيير التكنولوجي”/“*mawjat min altaghyir altiknuluji*” (“a wave of technological change”). ChatGPT’s translation has implications; its use in everyday conversation might stop one to ponder about the meaning of “موجة رقمية”/“*mawjat raqmia*” (“digital wave”) because of its foreignness and newness.

The last metaphor provided, the dead metaphor “the foot of the mountain,” means where an uplift of a mountain range has also risen to the plains beyond it. The area at the foot of the mountain range on the side opposite to where subduction occurs is termed an “altiplano.” The only universal term that could replace “the foot of the mountain” in all situations is “the base of the mountain” (What Is the Area Called at the Foot of a Mountain?, n.d.). As seen in Figure 4, “قدم الجبل”/“*qadam aljabal*” (“The foot of the mountain”) was the translation AI presented. Once again, it is noticed that AI relied on literal translation, and as Newmark noted in the case of dead metaphors, literal translation may not always work. It is clear that “قدم الجبل”/“*qadam aljabal*” (“The foot of the mountain”) is an overly literal translation that sounds rather

absurd. Alternate, more suitable translations could have been “سفح الجبل”/“*safh aljabal*” (“mountainside”) or “أسفل الجبل”/“*asfal aljabal*” (“down the mountain”). For this reason, “قدم الجبل”/“*qadam aljabal*” represents a literal translation of the phrase “the foot of the mountain,” although the meaning in terms of its geographical as well as metaphorical implication is not communicated with appropriateness in Arabic. Employing a culturally more relevant term, such as “سفح الجبل”/“*safh aljabal*” (“mountainside”) or “أسفل الجبل”/“*asfal aljabal*” (“down the mountain”), one would make sure the intended meaning is communicated both accurately and naturally. Newmark’s comments about dead metaphors bring us back to the fact that the success of translation often relies on the art of balancing linguistic accuracy against cultural relevance. Here, as elsewhere, reflection on metaphors and conventions in the target language is essential in order not to obscure clarity and intention in the original text.

VI. CONCLUSION

Rendering the previous data and discussion, we can conclude that AI’s limitation in translation comes from its reliance on literal translation. AI defaults to literal translation to translate the previous metaphors, even when a more contextually appropriate, non-literal translation would be more desirable, like, for instance, the first two examples, “time is money” and “a bull in a China shop.” One of AI’s limitations is its inability to take cultural context into its translations, as some of these metaphors are deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts (e.g., “a bull in a China shop”). Its literal translation supposes that the imagery in this metaphor is universally understood when it is not. However, when it came to translating an original metaphor, in which literal translation is effective, AI’s translation was effective because it preserves the metaphorical comparison. The metaphor by Shakespeare has a universally acknowledged literary and philosophical resonance, the literal translation retaining much of its original power. In that respect, AI is well within its rights to conserve the metaphor. According to Newmark, while translating original works, it is best to conserve the style and metaphor of the author.

The reliance on literal translations by AI might hamper natural, culturally appropriate translations of metaphors. It may work quite effectively for metaphors universally recognized, such as Shakespeare’s, but might not work as effectively with metaphors that are culture-specific or unknown to the translation tool. Less common or culturally specific metaphors require descriptive translations. New metaphors cannot be translated with their meaning by their literal translation and also could not manage to be metaphorically conveyed appropriately across cultures. AI must be more flexible and not adopt a “one-size-fits-all” approach, taking meaning and communicative effectiveness as the main criteria rather than the form of the source text.

To sum up, the translation of metaphors is a tough task that requires an understanding of both languages as well as cultures. While this research highlighted the translation of metaphors without providing AI with context, future research may test AI’s ability with provided context.

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