

Investigating Problems Related to the Translation of Idiomatic Expressions in the Arabic Novels Using Neural Machine Translation

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Abstract—NMT systems encounter many challenges and problems when rendering Arabic idiomatic expressions into English. The current research tackled some examples selected from Arabic corpora and their English translations generated by the selected NMT systems and the English versions of the selected corpora. The research presents a qualitative analysis of the selected samples from three novels (The Season of Migration to the North, the Fall of the Imam and the Girls of Riyadh). The research is mainly focusing on the problems resulted when rendering Arabic idiomatic expressions into English.

Index Terms—NMT, idiomatic expressions, Arabic novels, translation problems

I. INTRODUCTION

An idiomatic expression is defined according to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1998) as “a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understand each word separately”. Idioms, therefore, cannot be broken up into their constituent elements because they are fixed expressions (Cowie & Mackin, 1975; cited in Balfaqeh, 2009). Idiomatic expressions play a key role in human communication. They are emotive, as well as full of cultural connotations, that facilitate the expression of meaning at the linguistic, as well as cultural levels. The literal meaning of fixed expressions does not make sense on the TL if it is taken as individual words and it is hard to understand these fixed expressions unless you have learned or heard them before.

The structure of the idioms differs from the structure of normal direct language. There are two kinds of structures related to Arabic idiomatic expressions. The first structure does not have specific structural characteristics that serve as the identifying features. Normal sentences or phrases that have meaning, which is directly understood from their constituents, are included in this common category, for example, ‘Ali plays football’. The second structure cannot be directly identified; only through structural, as well as semantic characteristics (Al-Anbar, 2001), for example (عاشقني), He came back with Hunayn’s shoes, which means that his efforts came to naught). Idiomatic expressions such as (ضرب ماء وجهه) and its literal meaning is ‘his face water ran out’, which means that he is no longer ashamed of himself. Such characteristic often poses difficulties when idiomatic expressions are translated from the SL into the TL (Cowie & Mackin, 1975; Al-Qassimi, 1979; Husam Al-Din, 1985; Al-Hamzawi, 2000; Balfaqeh, 2009).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have investigated various types of idiomatic expressions in MSA (Husam Al-Din, 1985; Abu-Saad, 1987; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Quwaydar, 2000; Faied, 2003; Ghazala, 2003). Idioms are divided into two basic types: complex idioms and simple idioms (Husam Al-Din, 1985). Complex idioms comprise more than two words while simple idioms comprise two words or less. He sub-categorized the complex idioms into: verbal, nominal, and fixed, e.g., the comparative like (أكرم من حاتم), which is literally translated into ‘more generous than Hatem’, doubled (a rhyming phrase, e.g., (رحمك الله ويحك), and follow-up (in which the second word qualifies the first, for example, ملح اجاج, literally ‘salt water’). Simple idioms are classified into six types: collocation, additive, titled expressions which combine أب father or أم mother with a noun, for example, أم عوف (literally, mother of Awf meaning the locust), titled expressions combine بنت daughter or ابن son with a noun, for example, ابن أرض (literally translated into ‘son of earth’) meaning ‘a stranger’, dual expressions, for example, (التيالان) peoples and Jinn, referring to mortals and devils), expressions based on metonymy, for example, فلان لاية outstanding, which refers to someone who is skillful in his specialization (Husam Al-Din, 1985, p. 223).

Idioms are classified based on the syntactic structures into: genitive idiomatic expressions such as (مفرر لليديين) empty-handed, adjectival idiomatic expressions e.g. (مفرر لليديين) duty free, verbal idiomatic expressions (يسج الجوخ) he compliments somebody (an apple polisher), nominal idiomatic expressions, e.g., (مفرر لليديين) bottleneck, and

phrasal (prepositional and adverbial) idiomatic expressions من تحت الطاولة under the table (Faied, 2003). Some problems resulted from the translation of idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic in Reuters news agency are investigated (Khalaf, 2010). He highlighted the most appropriate method for translating idiomatic expressions. The corpus of his study consists of 50 newspaper articles that are taken from Reuters news agency. The study concluded that the level of language manipulation, retrieval of standard equivalents from the linguistic system and the level of interpreting style are appropriately used in translating the idiomatic expressions. He recommended that translators should choose a proper method when doing translation according to the levels of language manipulation, and should be fully aware of and comprehend the various aspects of the idiomatic expressions of both languages (as cited in Aued, 2012).

The difference and variance of idiomatic expressions among languages can cause problems for translating them (Al-Shawi & Mahadi, 2012). Therefore, if the gap between the source language and the target language is big, then transferring the message from SL into TL will be more difficult. They mentioned many factors involved in translating idiomatic expressions like social and religious cultures. The study concluded that the translator's knowledge of a specific culture can contribute in many cases to detecting the meaning of the idiom, especially the one that has non-literal meaning because that idiom demands more than any other feature of language that the translator is not only accurate but highly sensitive to the rhetorical hints of the language. The study proposed some strategies that can help in translating idioms like using a parallel idiom in the TL, using similar meaning but a different form, and using notes. These strategies can offer some solutions and guidelines for translators when translating idioms (as cited in Al-Shawi, 2012).

Idioms in the Saudi press are investigated from a structural perspective by examining their structural patterns and their internal and external grammatical relations (Alqahtani, 2014). The sample of the study consists of 440 idioms that appeared in Al-Riyadh newspaper. The study focused on Arabic syntax and grammatical structures. When examining structural variations, the study used fixedness and compositional/non-compositional techniques. He applied Halliday and Hasan's model of cohesiveness during the analysis of this feature in the idiomatic expressions. The study concluded that half of the overall structures were verbal patterns. Moreover, idioms were found to display the same structural and grammatical relations as other linguistic units. The study found that verbal structures form 47.6% (nearly half) of the overall structural patterns, genitive structures 17.2%, preposition phrase patterns 8.4%, and adjectival patterns 7.7%. The findings demonstrate that the sample's idioms varied in their structure, changing from one pattern to another. There are also some difficulties which face the students when translating idiomatic expressions (Ali et al., 2016). The study showed that the differences between the Arabic and English language, i.e., syntactic structure, culture-bound idiomatic expressions, the social and religious cultures, etc. play a vital role in these difficulties. They come to the result that literal translation could sometimes convey the meaning of the idiom. This finding is not consistent with Howwar's (2013) claim that idioms can never be translated literally. In fact, a literal translation of the idiom 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours', and 'flog a dead horse' did not produce meaningless translations. The Arabic reader is still able to grasp the meaning although the effect is not the same. Nevertheless, in some cases, the literal translation was not effective as in the case of 'break the ice', 'it is raining cats and dogs', and 'kick the bucket' since it led to ambiguity. They recommended some strategies in order to handle these difficulties such as paraphrasing, literal translation and translation by omission.

III. METHODOLOGY

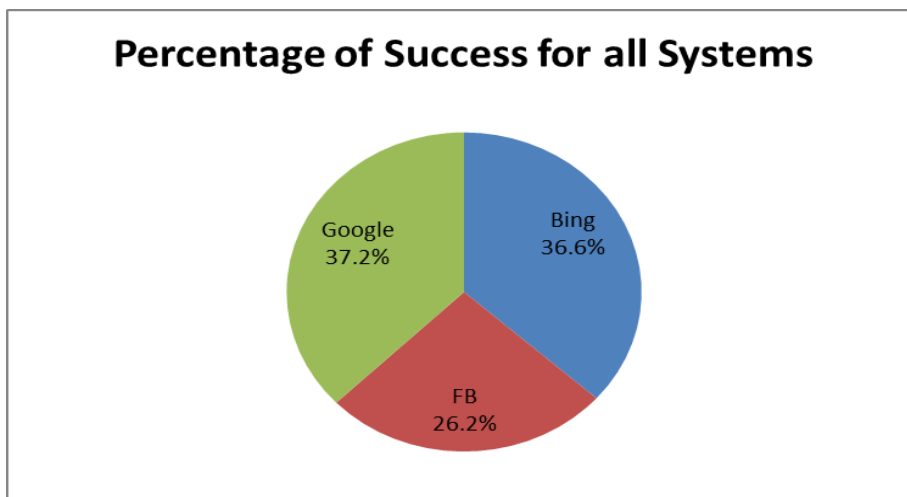
The sample of the current study consists of 158 Arabic idiomatic expressions extracted from three literary texts *Mawsim al-Hijrah ilâ al-Shamâl* (Season of Migration to the North) by Tayeb Saleh, *Banat AlRiyadh* (Girls of AlRiyadh) by Rajaa Alsanea and *Suqut Al-Imam* (The Fall of the Imam) by Nawal El Saadawi. This study is unidirectional study and, therefore, the data will be translated from Arabic into English using three NMT platforms including Bing (Microsoft translator), Facebook and Google translate. These systems generate 474 translations which will be compared with human translation, which is provided by three English versions of the selected novels. The purposeful sampling strategy is used in order to select the most relevant examples, which reflect the problems. Black box evaluation approach is followed which means that only the input and outputs of the NMT software are subject to assessment while the internal mechanisms of NMT process are ignored. This leads us to evaluate the machine translation output as any user or professional translator would experience the situation.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the translation process was performed using the selected systems for the study, it was found that among 474 translations of the idiomatic expressions, NMT systems have successfully rendered 156 idioms into English. On the other hand, they failed to render 318 idioms. The following table represents the number and percentage of successful and failed translations of the idiomatic expressions extracted from the selected novels which form the corpus of the study.

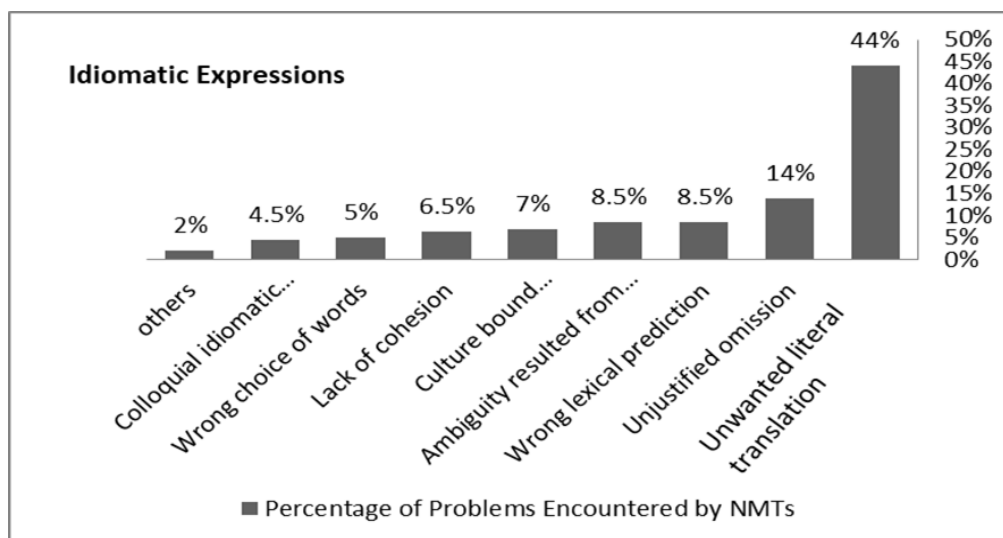
Validity of translation	Frequency	Percentage
Successful translations	156	33%
Failed translations	318	67%
Total	474	100%

The success percentage is approximately close between Bing and Google, whereas FB translator achieves low percentage compared to the other two systems. The following chart shows the success percentage for all systems.



Although NMTs have successfully rendered some idioms into the TL, they faced some problems that can be summarized as follows:

Problems	Season of migration to the north	The fall of imam	Girls of AlRiaydh	Total	Percentage
Unwanted literal translation	44	53	42	139	44%
Unjustified omission	12	15	18	45	14%
Wrong lexical prediction	12	8	7	27	8.5%
Ambiguity resulted from H and P	9	6	12	27	8.5%
Culture bound expressions	9	3	10	22	7%
Lack of cohesion	6	7	8	21	6.5%
Wrong choice of words	7	4	6	17	5%
Colloquial idiomatic expressions	1	0	14	15	4.5%
Others	2	1	2	5	2%
Total	102	97	119	318	100%



A. Unwanted Literal Translation

Literal translation is referred to in Cambridge Online Dictionary as "a text is done by translating each word separately, without looking at how the words are used together in a phrase or sentence." Although literal translation is described as a useful procedure by many scholars such as Nida (1964, 1969, 1989) and Newmark (1988) who asserts that "literal translation is correct and must not be avoided, if it secures referential and pragmatic equivalence to the original" (Newmark, 1988, p. 68).

Thus, literal translation in many cases –as in the current study- produces a translation for the meaning out of its context which will confuse the TL readers at the end of the day. Unwanted literal translation is the translation that is rendered a word for word and strive to stay formally (lexically and syntactically) close to the source text as much as possible (Arffman, 2012). There are certain expressions should not be taken literally. For instance, an idiomatic expression "snake in the grass" means a traitor. As a translator, you can either look for an appropriate idiomatic expression in the TL or just translate the actual meaning and not the idiom itself. Otherwise, it will sound awkward and won't make any sense. In literal translation, the words and phrases of the SL are translated taking no account of the context but respecting the syntactic structure of TL. Therefore, many examples of literal translation can be meaningless to TL readers. The following examples will illustrate how unwanted literal translation hinders the SL AFEs:

الدنيا تسير بختيارنا او رغم انوفنا

Ad-dunya tasīr bixtiyārīna aw raġma aunūfīna

Bing: The world is going by our choice or despite our noses.

FB: The world is going by our choice or despite our noses.

Google: The world goes by choosing us or despite our noses.

HT: The world goes on whether we choose for it to do so or in defiance of us.

Nearly, all NMT systems translated the idiomatic expression literally. In other words, the phrase "despite our noses" means nothing in English, whereas the idiomatic expression "raġma aunūfīna" which means "by force" is meaningfully used in the Arabic text. In one way or another, it could be said that the human translation renders the idiomatic expression successfully and equivalently into English. Another idiomatic expression *خلصت منه القديم والجديد* is rendered into English by the three systems as:

Bin: I got rid of it old and new.

FB: Finished it old and new.

Google: I got rid of it old and new.

It is clearly appeared that the three systems translate the idiomatic expression word for word while the HT for the same idiomatic expression is "Paid him in full". Such rendering of the idiomatic expression literally from Arabic into English without conveying the sense of the original text is misleading. In addition, the generated translations lack cohesion and coherence.

B. Unjustified Omission

Omission may be used frequently by translators in a justified way to avoid ambiguity, taboo, and repetition, but it may sometimes lead to incomplete ideas in the original text if it is used in an unjustified way. Newmark argues that there are cases where the omission may be inevitable due to the different claims in each language (Newmark, 1981, pp. 7-8). Omission helps in submitting the information in a more concise way as well as in focusing on essential information and avoiding unrequired culture, time and space bumps (Dimitriu, 2004).

Unjustified omission in NMT leads to a loss and shortage in the meaning. As deleting some words or phrases may ignore important messages which are necessary for the text in order to be communicative. In these cases, the readers in the TL may be deprived of many details that might help them understand the original text correctly. The following examples illustrate this idea:

لئن اننا فلكان في السماء شبكنا فوساع من حرس

ka'anana fulkan fi alsama' ashtabaka Fi sā'at an-naḥas

Bing: It's like we were in the sky.

FB: It's like we were in the sky.

Google: As if we were in the sky clashed in an hour jinx.

The whole idiomatic expression is omitted by Bing and FB. On the other hand, it is translated literally by Google. The idiomatic expression which means in evil hour is rendered professionally in the English version of the novel "We were two celestial bodies that had merged in an ill-omened moment of time". Furthermore, dropping the SL idiomatic expression "Fi sā'at an-naḥas" by the NMT systems is not justified. Another example where omission is committed by NMTs is the following idiomatic expression from "Girls of Riyadh":

سمع من الجيران كلاماً ليلتشاط له غريباً

Bing: He heard from the neighbors talking about his son.

FB: He heard from the neighbors about his son.

Google: He heard from his neighbors talk about his son, who angered him.

The idiomatic expression "ليلتشاط له غريباً" in the Arabic version is totally omitted in the translations provided by Bing and FB. Such omission of the idiomatic expression is considered as betrayal for the Arabic text and by doing so, NMT

deprived the English readers from an important part of the Arabic text; which is the strong feeling of displeasure, hostility or antagonism of the father towards his family. Such idiom is well and fully rendered in the HT as: The father heard things by way of the neighbors, though, and what he heard put him into a fury.

C. Culture Bound Expressions

Linguists have fully discussed the problems related to culture in various linguistic aspects. Also, many dealt with translating the cultural specific expressions from either Arabic into English or vice versa. Cultural specific expressions can be challenging to translate; even professional translators occasionally face some difficulties to translate them equivalently. This is due to the fact that the cultural context is too vague, and it represents the world view of a society, its beliefs, emotions and values. Cultural specific expressions are “the words, terms or expressions which refer for concrete objects or abstract aspects that may be related to religious beliefs, social habits, customs and traditions or social situations” (Nida, 1964, p. 90). Thus, context plays a very important role in translating cultural idiomatic expressions. The selected corpus is rich by cultural specific idiomatic expressions, especially those which are related to religious beliefs, social habits, and traditions. Among these expressions are the followings:

بأيدينا *bāya' nāh*

This idiomatic expression is translated by the three NMT systems as follows:

Bing: By our way.

FB: Seller it.

Google: Meaning it.

The failure of NMT systems appeared clearly in the renditions of the above idiom. They provide translations which have no meaning or even any relevance to the SL idiom. Moreover, the idiom is rendered equivalently and functionally as "we have sworn eternal loyalty for him" which is the human translation in the English version of the novel. Another example which shows the problem which faced NMT systems when translating cultural specific expression is the idiomatic expression *ثلثنا و غدا لشر* *iltna w-ğada aš-šarr* which was translated by the three systems as follow:

Bing: One-third of us are evil bastards.

FB: Like and tomorrow evil.

Google: A third of us, tomorrow is evil.

The above idiomatic expression is used when something happened for the third time. The number in that idiomatic expression is very important since it refers to something that happened peacefully for the third time and become a source of optimism in the Arabic culture. This idiomatic expression could be replaced by an equivalent idiomatic expression like a third time lucky in English. Unfortunately, NMT systems do not translate the above idiomatic expression appropriately which may confuse the readers of the TL and make them perplexed about the content of the target text. Therefore, relying on NMT systems in translating idioms which had cultural concepts into another language would be problematic as most people are not familiar with these concepts. Thus, if there is a lexical gap, i.e. if words or phrases are not known or if lexical equivalents do not exist in the target culture and language, such culture-specific items cause serious challenge for NMT systems.

D. Lack of Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the text-internal relationship of linguistic elements that are overtly linked via lexico-grammatical devices across sentences in order to be understood as a text, and it occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the text is dependent on that of another (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Thus, if such grammatical and linguistic links between the sentence elements are missing, the text will no longer be a text at all. In this study there are many examples which illustrate this problem in the NMT product, such as the following examples:

جرعته للمهانات

jarra' athu al-mahanāt

Bing: His insults.

FB: His dose of dishonored.

Google: His dose of humiliations.

We notice that there are no connections between the words, on one hand, and NMT systems do not differentiate whether the text refers for a male or female addressee on the other hand. Another issue in the translations is the overlap related to the word *jarra' athu* which used to mean "She had made him swallow such degradations", but NMT systems translate it as a noun "His dose" in the second and third translations.

مس اليين يقطعون القلب

masākūn ygaṭ'ūn al-galb

Bing: Poor cut heart.

FB: Poor cut heart.

Google: Poor people cut the heart.

HT: They are pitiful and they make you feel sorry for them.

The three translations provided by the three systems need ties in order to make the idea clear and comprehensible to the reader. Comparing the first and second translations offered by Bing and Facebook translators, there are instances of repetition and missing articles. Google translation also misses some important details about the meaning. Such

translations are deemed to be failed following the seven standards of textuality set forth by de Beaugrande and Dressler in their seminal work introduction to Text Linguistics.

E. Ambiguity Resulted From Homonymy and Polysemy

Homonyms are “lexical items that are identical in spelling and pronunciations but have different meanings,” (Yule, 2006, p. 107). The word bank for example might mean the river side or a financial institution or even a seat. While polysemy is defined as a “situation” in which the same word has two or more different meanings, like the word 'head' which could be a part of the body, a leading position in an institution or something else (Ullman, 1967, p. 159). They are ambiguous words whose different senses or meanings are far apart from each other and not obviously related to each other in any way (Farghal, 1998). Polysemy is closely connected to homonymy and it occurs when a word has more than one meaning (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989). Making the distinction between polysemy and homonymy is not an easy process, according to many academics. Finch is one of them who said “it is difficult for linguists to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy” (Finch, 2000, p. 165). Homonymy and polysemy are described as “a major source of ambiguity which hinder the translation process” (Salim, 2013, p. 75). As a matter of fact, homonymy and polysemy could pose a serious problem for human translator as well as NMT systems. The following examples illustrate this problem minutely:

حفاظاً على العيش والملح
ḥfāzān 'lā āl'yš wāmlḥ

Bing: For the sake of living and salt.

FB: To keep living and salt.

Google: In order to save life and salt.

The three systems translate the word "العيش" as living, living and life respectively. The idea of the SL idiomatic expression is totally managed and misleading in the TL. All systems understand only one meaning of the polysemic word and neglect the other one which is the intended meaning. The concept of "bread and salt" (عيش وملح) in Arabic culture symbolizes the rapprochement and alliance between two persons when eating together. Eating bread and salt create a moral obligation which should not be betrayed. This attitude is also expressed by Arabic phrases such as "there are bread and salt between us". It is worth noting that such polysemic words might create a sort of difficulty even for Human translation. For this expression, there was no translation provided for this expression in the English version of the novel.

Another example which serves the same idea is the idiomatic expression "milḥ wa qublah" (إمشاء الله ملح وقبله) which translated by the three systems as:

Bing: God willing, salt and accept it.

FB: What Allah wished salt and before him.

Google: God wills salt and before him.

The above example shows how polysemy plays a major role in the ambiguity of the SL idiomatic expression. The word which is being in polysemy is the word "قبله". The word "قبله" denotes three ideas which are: before him (sequence), kiss and pretty (the degree of beauty). Unfortunately, the NMT systems were able to catch two of the meanings stated in the SL expression, and eliminate the third meaning which is the intended one in this regard. However, HT renders that idiomatic expression successfully and eliminates the ambiguity when translating it as: Ma shaa Allah, she is so pretty into the TL.

F. Wrong Choice of Words

Words are powerful tools when used correctly. Thus, it is important in translation to choose the right word which convinces your TL audience. However, words can also be dangerous weapons which results in significant differences between the SL and TL. It's important to learn how to spot problematic words and replace them with clear, powerful ones so that your translation can be as effective as possible. In many cases NMT uses words which mean something different because they sound similar to the systems' stored data. The following is one of the most common mistakes that NMT committed while rendering AFEs into English:

وغيره من احاديث التتبيش ير الى انثسقلج قتلفسر

Bing: And other conversations that suggest that there's snow could break.

FB: And other conversations that indicate that snow may be broken.

Google: And other hadiths indicating that there is snow has broken.

The right HT rendition for this expression is “the conversation indicates that problems between them are overcome and things went in ease”.

G. Wrong Lexical Prediction

The process of lexical prediction is “the pre-activation of upcoming words -their meaning, and to some extent, their form- during online sentence comprehension” (Kochari & Flecken, 2018, p. 1). Several examples related to this problem have been investigated in the current study, among them are the following examples:

The idiomatic expression Zēr an-nisā? (زيرالنساء) extracted from the season of migration to the north is rendered by Bing, FB and Google respectively as woman's minster, woman minster and womanizer. The only one which can be

considered as correct translation is the third one (Google translation). Whereas, translations provided by Bing and FB are far from the purpose of the SL expression. Such failure is resulted due to the system wrong lexical prediction that might happen in the aforementioned example due to the interference between two Arabic words زير Zēr and وزير which have a similar spelling or pronunciation except for omitting the first letter in وزير. Another example from the same novel, is the idiomatic expression 'išna w-raʔēna *ورئين اللسان اعت خطب الرجال* which is translated by FB as 'we lived behind women engaged men'. The system possessed the word 'ورئين' *w-raʔēna* ' as if it is a preposition (وراء). In fact, the word 'ورئين' consists of a coordination conjunction, a verb and an attached plural pronoun (ورئينا and we saw). Accordingly, the translation is not accurate and is misleading as a result of the system wrong lexical prediction.

Additionally, Bing and FB committed the same error when rendering the Arabic idiom "Gargarat lhātha baḍ-ḍiḥik *قارقرت لعات هاب الضحك*" she gave out throaty, gurgling laughs". The two systems translated the idiomatic expression respectively, as "I read to her with laughter, and I read her with laughter". The two translations do not convey the meaning of the Arabic idiom. The action of laughing is rendered as if it is reading action. This is might be due to the interference between the two words "قارقر" and "قرأ"; which causes such wrong lexical prediction.

H. Colloquial Expressions

Colloquial expressions refer to any informal word or expression used soundly in conversations among ordinary or educated people (Nofalli, 2012). Conveying the SL meaning is really a very important matter in the translation process. Unfortunately, misunderstanding of the colloquial expressions by NMT leads to catastrophic outputs that lead to bad and sometimes awful translations that could not meet the expectations of the TL readers. There are many colloquial expressions in the selected novels especially in the Girls of Riyadh *بنات الرياض* which is rich with these colloquial expressions, for instance: "يمفلكي نأبي أعرس *المسماجة، الصالة الثقاله الطينة، الرمش*". NMT systems were unable to render such colloquial idiomatic expressions from Arabic into English. Let us consider the following example and how all systems translate it:

ه تيفكفي نأبي أعرس

takfīn abi a'ras

Bing: Yamit is enough for my father to get weddings.

FB: mother shrouds my father's wedding.

Google: Blind shroud Abi wedding.

This idiomatic expression is all about "a guy appeal to his mother to get married". This idea is totally missed in the translation provided not only by NMT systems, but also by human translation which omit the whole idioms.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The translation of idiomatic expressions using NMT systems is not an easy task for these platforms, since rendering these idiomatic expressions from SL to the TL should sound natural. In other words, the translation of idiomatic expressions in literary texts is not just disposition or replacing of words from one language into another; and it should not be a word for word translation. It is worth mentioning that Google and Bing translators significantly outperformed the Facebook translator in translating idioms. Generally, although NMTs have successfully rendered some idioms into the TL, but they still face some problems such as: unwanted literal translation, unjustified omission, culture bound expressions, wrong lexical prediction, Lack of cohesion, Ambiguity resulted from homonymy and polysemy, wrong choice of words, and colloquial idiomatic expressions.

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