BOOK REVIEW


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In today’s politically interconnected and global conflict-ridden world, narratives and their translations contribute to enacting power, doing politics and reinforcing ideologies. Narratives and translated narratives are primarily shared and distributed through the media: immense numbers of mediatised narratives in numerous languages surround us. Researching the ever-broadening scope and functioning of translation as a means of enacting power, doing politics and reinforcing ideologies constitutes a prolific field in Translation Studies. Original narratives and their variations that evolve through translation, potentially involving changes in genre, constitute a specific field of research in Translation Studies, aiming to explore the ways in which translation brings about changes in environments associated with mediatised narratives. It is in this framework that the book under review examines mediatised narratives and their changes through translation and presents case studies of extremist political and religious narratives for dissection.

The monograph under review was written by Balsam Mustafa, who currently works at the University of Warwick’s Department of Politics and International Studies as a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow. Her research interests lie in translating terror narratives in mass and social media, including cyberfeminism in Iraq and in the Persian Gulf. The author lived in Iraq for over 30 years and has personal experience of recent events there, including the 2003 war and the subsequent political instability and chaos that led to the emergence of the Islamic State (IS), whose narratives are at the centre of attention of the book.

In examining the phenomenon of IS, this monograph explores how complex and abstract narratives undergo a process of fragmentation in digital media environments. Typically, narratives are not translated in full and translation does not operate through languages and cultures alone: it operates through the multiple modes of media that reproduce the narrative and, at the same time, contribute to the construction of a new version of the narrative and a new reality.

In this contextual frame, the book examines the translation of an extremist political movement: the translation of IS narratives. IS used to be a radical rebel group: it was initially based in Iraq and – after capturing some more territories – it operated in Western Iraq and Eastern Syria in 2015, establishing a caliphate there. Later, militant groups in several other countries declared their allegiance to the caliphate, which thus extended control beyond its initial territory both administratively and influence-wise. In the book under review, IS is defined as an extremist

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ideology-based organization, a “‘mutation’ of the global al-Qaeda movement” (p. 2), which was set up to establish a single Islamist state for all Muslims.

IS developed its own narrative based on religion, politics and a shared identity, thus creating a reality that was attractive for their followers but divisive for all others. In doing so, IS relied on textual messages and visualizations aired by mainstream media, which were then translated into many languages for diverse media outlets. Mustafa (2022) book examines the role that translation assumes in contributing to the construction of such media presence through narratives.

For this endeavour, the book offers a new approach, based on several disciplines, including translation studies, media and communication studies, sociology and politics. Specifically, the book sets out to investigate in what ways narratives can undergo fragmentation in media outlets through changes in relationality, temporality, causal emplotment, and selective appropriation, how fragmented narratives lend themselves to multiple interpretations afforded by translation, and how this can be exploited for the purpose of various communicative agendas.

Taking the reader back a few years in history and relying on a contemporary corpus, the volume investigates how IS narratives were altered in various media outlets worldwide through re-narration and translation. The corpus of the analysis is composed of three sources: 1) IS’s written, spoken, visual and multimodal texts in Arabic and English; 2) translations of IS’s texts presented in influential Western and Arabic media; and 3) survivors’ personal narratives of the events and the translations of the narratives.

In addition to the Conclusion, the book comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the theoretical foundations of the research, while each of the other four chapters (Chapters 2-5) presents a case study. Every chapter focuses on one specific IS narrative and the changes it underwent in various media outlets. Topic-wise the IS narratives discussed in the monograph are the following: the Speicher massacre, the enslavement and captivity of women by IS, execution videos, and the destruction of pre-Islamic cultural artefacts and monuments. Below, the individual chapters are introduced and described in more detail.

The theoretical chapter (Chapter 1) deals with narratives and narrows down its investigation to narratives of violent events. Violent events are studied with the help of narratological approaches based on the presumption that narratives are persuasive and compelling enough to present and organize events in a credible, convincing and appealing way for their audiences. As opposed to the narratological approach, commonly employed in Translation Studies, Chapter 1 is based on the sociological approach to narrative. Building on this theoretical foundation, the chapter looks at narratives not as representations but as constructions of reality. It follows from this that the sociological approach to narratives refuses the notion of there being one single narrative of an event with one truth, and assumes that there are multiple narratives with multiple truths – depending on who is recounting the events. With respect to IS’s narratives, the author suggests that narration serves as a strategic tool to speak to IS’s proponents, challenge its opponents and legitimize its acts. Thus, IS narratives construct and reconstruct a certain reality, presenting it so that it suits the intended audiences and the purpose of constructing this reality. In this activity, translation plays a key role, just as it does in the case of challenging and undermining narratives created by IS.

The theoretical chapter differentiates between four types of narratives: local, personal, public and meta-narratives. Based on Harding (2012), local narratives are related to specific events taking place at a certain time and place, and they serve as raw material for future narratives.
Personal narratives are about the self and are narrated by the self, and relate – in line with Baker’s (2006) notion – to one’s place in the world and to one’s personal history. Public narratives are “collective stories shaped and disseminated by groups or institutions” (p. 16), and therefore belong to bodies larger than an individual, typically to institutions and organizations. Public narratives may also become master narratives that are deeply rooted in and shared by members of an ethnic, social or religious group. On the other hand, meta-narratives are even larger than master narratives: they represent those larger social structures in which individuals are encased at a given time in history (e.g., communism vs. capitalism). Furthermore, meta-narratives extend to “multiple historical and cultural settings and involve diverse actors and groups of people” (p. 19). Such narratives influence the lives of huge numbers of persons, and typically achieve, or contribute to, an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ division (whether purposefully or not).

According to the social approach to narratives, this genre exhibits four essential features: relationality, temporality, causal emplotment, and selective appropriation. These are understood as follows: 1. relationality is the connection between a narrative and other narratives, 2. temporality is the temporal and spatial sequencing of events in the narrative, 3. causal emplotment constitutes the reasons why certain events in the narrative take place, and 4. selective appropriation is “the inclusion or exclusion of certain events, or aspects of narratives according to how narrators evaluate them and the context in which they position themselves” (p. 20). In this sense, the social approach to narratives sees the genre of narrative and linearity (or its lack) as inseparable.

Basing her investigation on the works of Whitebrook (2001), Harding (2012), Manovich (2001) and Sadler (2018, 2021), Mustafa’s book discusses the issue of linearity and fragmentation of narratives. When linearity is not present in narratives they become fragmented, failing to connect the events in the narrative in a meaningful way. This is the case when narratives, typically in small and/or randomised chunks, are presented in new media, including social media platforms. Inevitably, the audience will try to develop a connected and coherent narrative out of these fragments.

It is in this context, the context of linearity vs. fragmentation of narratives, that the book redefines translation in the digital age, arguing that translation is inseparable from the media where translated meanings are shared. The author interprets translation as a multidirectional process potentially causing the emergence of fragmented texts, and the blurring of boundaries between source and target texts. In its quest to explore the practice of translation in the digital age, the book presents four case studies. Below, these case studies are described.

The first case study (Chapter 2) focuses on IS’s atrocities against newly recruited Muslim soldiers: this part demonstrates that a well-planned and structured presentation of an intact narrative may eventually result in a fragmented narrative in the digital media through failure to share the full narrative or a purposeful decision not to distribute it. The chapter also explores the presence of different perspectives in the narratives and their translations. Topic-wise, the case study focuses on the massacre of civilians and soldiers by IS and the images and videos posted of the killings aimed to intimidate and provoke IS’s enemies. The images and videos were to be framed so that they would support IS’s ethnic, religious and political sectarian purposes. Eventually, for technical reasons, IS was not able to post all of the images, and this failure resulted in a scattered presentation of the events, thus producing a fragmented narrative. This fragmented narrative was recontextualised and supplemented with missing information by media agencies, and relevant information was also adapted from social media, in line with institutionalised mass
media practices. In the course of this process, different media used different characterisations and terms associated with the events and participants, and applied different framing techniques.

Some time later, the massacre was also narrated by survivors, whose stories were translated. Therefore, the originally devised IS narrative and its media coverage narratives were confronted with the narratives of the survivors. These latter narratives were translated into foreign languages for global media consumption. In the process, these narratives got co-authored by the media in order to produce larger narratives and discourses deemed and likely to be digestible and shareable by the audiences of the media outlets in question. As the original narratives were fragmented, the production of media contents either resulted in the production of more coherent and more easily understandable stories through explanatory textual or cultural additions, due to the use of regular translation shifts, or reduced narratives with losses of meaning, due to textual or cultural deletions. This process yielded texts with competing narratives, or narratives with originally accentuated or dominant parts missing or altered. Chapter 2 sheds light on and discusses the potential contribution of translation to the presentation of fragmented narratives.

The second case study (Chapter 3) is about the theologically underpinned as well as politically and ethnically motivated sexual abuse and torture of sabi women (i.e., female captives of war) held captive by IS. The chapter discusses how narratives about sabi women developed, the ways these narratives changed in translation, and how one narrative became prevalent eventually. The story of sabi women appeared as a fragmented narrative composed of many individual stories, as the women involved and ready to speak about their ordeal were not in the position to offer one single full narrative. These single stories were inevitably translated in a non-neutral way, since the narratives could only be translated through explicitation, which entails the inclusion of extra information.

In fact, the translations of these events challenged these narratives. As the Arabic meaning of sabi is contested by IS, this very contestation inevitably appears in different translated narratives and has given rise to such reductionist English translations of 'sabi' as 'rape', 'slavery', 'sex slavery', 'sex trafficking', 'sexual assault', 'forced marriage', 'kidnapping', 'abduction' and 'human trafficking'. Even if some of the terms used in English and other foreign languages are reductionist, they were ultimately successfully used to delegitimise the practice of taking women sabi in the context of IS's religious, political and ethnically-based actions. Western media, which typically used domesticating strategies in its description of the incidents in an attempt to bring the actual events closer to their Western audiences, presented a culturally more readily and easily understandable and accessible narrative to their audiences, thereby simplifying the atrocities to some extent.

Later, a survivor, who was willing to testify as a sabi victim before the UN Security Council in 2015, described the events in the context of a much larger narrative, framing the sabi events as genocide. Interestingly, this narrative has become dominant in both the Arabic and English versions, since it communicated to both language communities simultaneously: for Arabs, it was about the religiously motivated extermination of Ezidi minorities, while for Western audiences it was about the need for action and justice. The chapter describes very graphically the debate between narratives and the emergence of a dominant narrative through translation.

The third case study (Chapter 4) deals with IS’s execution videos, which IS used to establish their authority. The chapter investigates how translation impacted this genre, what effects Western media’s censorship of these videos had on the broadcasted narratives, and what narratives of
this theme were highlighted or undermined by the media. IS created a new genre through its execution videos both in respect of the topic and distribution: it produced a depiction of human suffering for political purposes, and the events were filmed and shared using a new technology that offered rapid reach of a wide multimedia audience. In its coverage of the videos, Western media refrained from translating these videos as videos and instead used stills to present the events. It follows from this type of portrayal that through this act Western media altered the genre of the videos and focussed certain photos from the videos in its reports. The news items aired by Western media presented iconic images for viewers, offering a new interpretation of the events and thus creating a broader narrative: this broader narrative showed IS’s revenge for US intervention. In addition, this narrative also raised the issue of growing concerns over global security and the clash of civilisations – topics whose coverage was very much in line with Western political interests.

On the other hand, the Arab media censored the execution videos much less harshly and aired the films uncut in their translated coverage of the events. In fact, it was only in the coverage of the killing of Al-Kasasbeh, an Arab person, that some Arab media began to portray IS as separate from Muslims and to present the executions and IS’s later actions as barbaric acts. In a targeted counter-measure to undermine the IS narrative through translation, Western media focused on the personal qualities of the victims of the execution videos, their heroism and humanity, thus highlighting aspects of the narratives that Westerners valued. At the same time, some of the Arab media, in an attempt to undermine the videos, condemned the killings on religious and ideological grounds. Overall, while Western media defied the execution videos from the very start, Arab media attacked them less until the killing of Al-Kasasbeh, at which turning point the latter media created a religious counter-narrative, isolating IS through discourse. Ultimately, this chapter shows that translation caused changes in the original genre of the videos, and was used to wage an ideological, religious and cultural battle against the IS narrative.

The fourth case study (Chapter 5) discusses three IS-shot videos released in 2015. The videos show the wilful destruction of religious shrines and pre-Islamic cultural artefacts in Iraq’s Niniveh province at a proposed UNESCO world heritage site. The barbaric acts took place in 2014. Chapter 5 discusses and compares the translations of these videos, which were produced for Western and Arabic discourses. They show that, through targeting Christian, Shia and Sunni culture in Iraq, IS in fact attacked Iraqi cultural identity by demolishing religious and pre-Islamic monuments. In doing so, IS intended to create a theological narrative out of the videos and portray the destruction as a religious duty. In fact, the videos in question do not constitute a specific filmed genre as they lack the unifying elements of genre construction: some show demolition scenes in their naked visuality, while later videos are staged and scripted narratives. Yet, the videos are similar in that they portray iconoclastic acts of destruction, which are propelled by the assertive rejection of commonly or traditionally held beliefs and institutions. In line with their theological narrative, IS justified this destruction on religious grounds, and claimed that the artefacts were to be destroyed as they were idols worshipped by the unfaithful. Even though the videos were contextualised as fundamentalist religious acts, IS’s narrative was not received well by most Muslims or the Iraqis as they deemed the destroyed statues part of their own cultural heritage.

Western media presented the above videos together with their condemnation by cultural institutions, academics and archaeologists, but in this way they were actually republished, which
means that, despite the disapproving framing, Western media failed to undermine IS’s narrative. In addition to contributing to the sharing of the videos, Western media foregrounded IS’s religious justification for the destruction. This even further promoted IS’s narrative, and also pictured the destruction of the artefacts as part of a religious war between IS and Christians. This way of presentation removed the Iraqis from the narrative and stressed the religious motives behind the obliteration and destruction of objects of historical and religious relevance.

Contrary to the practice of Western media, Iraqi media did undermine the destruction narrative by showing stills from the videos rather than moving images: it considered stills less explicit, therefore less poignant. Also, different Arab channels exhibited different attitudes to IS’s videos: some downplayed the destruction, whereas some practically endorsed the acts by focusing on the destruction of objects they called idols. Some media even contested the identity of the destroyed sites and sculptures, referring to the places and objects affected as Mesopotamian, Arabic or Iraqi, depending on the target audiences addressed. At the same time, some Arabic and Iraqi media focused on the looting of the sites rather than on the religious motives IS had intended to foreground. Overall, it may be concluded that Western media initially did not have a strategy to counter the visuality of IS’s videos: they re-posted the videos and thereby contributed to the videos’ reaching a wider audience. On the other hand, Arabic and Iranian media resisted IS’s religious narrative, and highlighted the connections between the destroyed artefacts and the identity of Iraqi people, while other Arabic and Iraqi media outlets highlighted acts of looting the artefacts. Overall, it seems that by focusing on the above topics Arabic and Iraqi media were more efficient in countering IS’s narrative than Western media through translation.

The last chapter of this monograph (Conclusions) clarifies that the author had two purposes in writing the book. On the one hand, she wished to understand the religious motives IS used to justify its atrocities, which it committed mainly for religious and political purposes. On the other hand, as far as the media coverage of such events and the resulting narratives are concerned, the author sees the role of translation as a means of undermining and countering or, alternatively, promoting and legitimising narratives. When distributing narratives, media outlets can choose to make narratives fragmented, which appears to be an as yet undiscovered and underexplored field of translation. Mustafa claims and proves that translation is no longer about the rendering of meaning; translation has become a multimodal process. The author also argues that fragmentation can potentially result in either undermining or reinforcing narratives, both of which can be strategically employed through translation for various purposes.

It is emphasised that IS’s narrative, just like numerous political and other narratives, is built on the exploitation of the division between ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. In order to reduce or counter the effects of such narratives, media should disseminate competing narratives and ought to show that there are or could be multiple narratives to describe a series of events. Translation, the writer of the monograph suggests, could constitute a way of developing such narratives through a kind of activism that observes religious, political, social and cultural values. Moreover, translation can serve the purpose of fostering dialogue among diverse groups, and could ultimately foster the inclusion of persons previously regarded out-of-group.

In my understanding, ‘Islamic State’ in Translation and its case studies have enriched Translation Studies by describing and exemplifying that, in addition to the translation of narratives, the fragmentation of translated narratives can also serve and function as a means of exercising power and doing politics. The book also reveals how certain fragmented narratives can
ultimately become dominant narratives and can function as parts of larger meta-narratives. It is also demonstrated that a change in the genre of translated narratives may also function as a means to resist the communication of what the narratives in their original genres intended to share with their audiences. Furthermore, the monograph shows that, without a deep understanding of the cultural context of narratives for translation, rendering into other languages can inadvertently contribute to the reproduction of the original narratives even if their translations actually intended to counter the narratives in question.

It is my conviction that academics will appreciate primarily the theoretical foundations of the book and its proposed theoretical approach. I also believe that readers will find the case studies revealing and inspirational for their own research. At the same time, I feel certain that translation scholars, especially those dealing with narratives, will value the book for its analytically well-grounded and methodologically sound approach, which readily lends itself for use in further analyses.

REFERENCES


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