

The Politics of Translation: Investigating Ideology in Translating Balfour 1917

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Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the distinctive ways Balfour 1917 is referred to in Arabic and English. The source of data is a compiled comparable bilingual corpus of Arabic and English book titles referring to Balfour 1917. The titles were analysed and classified into categories carrying the reference to the historical event in question. Further quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted to find out the significance of Balfour terminology. The results show that most of the book titles written in Arabic refer to the event as a ‘promise’ whereas those written in English refer to it as a ‘declaration’. A Speech Act analysis helped clarify the different linguistic and historical connotations attached to both ‘promise’ and ‘declaration’. By using the term ‘promise’ the Arabs uncover a covert British commitment to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. The study is a manifestation that translation is not a mere “technical act of copying from one language to another” (Evri, 2016, pp. 30-31); it, in fact, implies change and transformation for various linguistic, social and ideological motivations (see Venuti, 1995).

Keywords: Balfour 1917, translation, declaration, promise, ideology.

Introduction

On 2 November 2017 and in a symposium to commemorate the centenary of Balfour Declaration held at Yarmouk University in Jordan, there was a heated debate about whether ‘Balfour 1917’ was a *taṣrīḥ* ‘declaration’ or a *waʿd* ‘promise’. The fact that the same act was translated into Arabic in different ways poses serious ideological and political questions. It seems that the question of referring to Balfour 1917 goes beyond the linguistic aspects of translation. In other words, the driving force behind translating Balfour 1917 implies ideological and political motivations related to acknowledging and/or denying the act itself. Resisting voices prefer, or it seems, to refer to it as a ‘promise’ by a colonial power to an illegitimate Zionist entity to establish a ‘national home’ in a “land that belonged neither to them nor to those who offered them the land”

(Abu Nimah, 2017), whereas realistic voices prefer to refer to it as a 'declaration' with the political affects it carries. Manipulating the term 'declaration' into 'promise' and other similar terms in Arabic takes translation beyond the basic question of loyalty and faithfulness to the original text and poses other questions related to the translator's (in)visibility. The visibility and/or the invisibility of the translator are the results of adopting either domestication or foreignization as translation methods. These two methods were first suggested by the German scholar Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1813. He argues that "[e]ither the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him" (cited in Venuti, 2012, p. 49). However, using domestication and/or foreignization moves beyond bringing the author to the reader or moving the reader to the author. In other words, adopting either of these two methods, i.e., domesticating and foreignization reflect ideological and political views of the translator, and might also reflect a state of power relations between the source and target languages and thus cultures. All of these ideas and notions are further tackled and examined in greater detail in the following sections.

Historical Background

The Ottoman Empire had control over Palestine as early as 1517 and the former remained under the Ottoman rule until the First World War (Schneer, 2010). Prior to 1908, the Jewish immigrants in Palestine were received with relative unease as they were not considered as part of the Zionist Movement (Tessler, 1994; Ismail, 1997). However, posterior to 1908, "the unease turned into full blown anti-Zionism characterized by economic and political considerations" (Ismail, 1997, p. 10). Ironically, both the (Palestinian) Arabs and the (Zionist) Jews living in Palestine during the First World War suffered immensely. They were both arrested and punished by the Ottomans for siding with the Allies. At the same time, both were manipulated by the British (Tessler, 1994). In a series of letters exchanged by Sir Henry McMahon and Sherif Hussein Ibn Ali (1915-1916), the British promised the Arabs an independent Arab State in exchange for the Arabs' revolt against the Ottomans (Rydenik, 2007). However, in 1916, France and Britain secretly agreed to divide the Arab area into zones between them in the Sykes-Picot agreement. They also agreed to place Jerusalem under international control. To complicate things even more, on 2 November 1917, the then British Foreign Secretary, Lord Arthur Balfour, sent a letter to the leader of British Jewry, Lord Rothschild, in which he writes:

Foreign Office

November 2nd, 1917

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours,

Arthur James Balfour

This letter has ever since been referred to as ‘Balfour Declaration’ in English and mainly as *waf'd Balfour* ‘Balfour Promise’ in Arabic. This declaration led to the establishment of the state of Israel in Palestine in 1948 and marked the roots of the so-called Arab-Israeli conflict. To sum up, while the British promises to the Arabs in the Hussein-McMahon correspondence (1915-1916) were secretly broken in the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), they were publicly reversed in the Balfour Declaration (1917). As most British historians agree, Palestine was a twice-promised land, i.e., the British made contradictory promises to both the Arabs and the Jews over the land of Palestine (Meyrav, 2000). As Edward Said (1992) couches it, the Balfour Declaration

was made (a) by a European power, (b) about a non-European territory, (c) in a flat disregard of both the presence and wishes of the native majority resident in that territory, and (d) it took the form of a promise about this same territory to another foreign group, so that this foreign group might, quite literally, make this territory a national home for the Jewish people. (pp. 15-16)

Literature Review

Black (2017) opens his book with ‘A Note on Terminology and Transliteration’ on the relationship between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. He rightly points to the fact that the terminology used to refer to Muslims, Christians and Jews in Palestine has dramatically changed from 1917 to 2017.

For instance, during the Ottoman rule referring to the aforementioned identities was quite straightforward, i.e., linguistically literal and free from political and ideological loadedness. Early in the 20th century, the term ‘Arab’ referring to Palestinian Muslims started to appear and after the British Mandate over Palestine the term ‘Zionist’ started to be used to refer to the Palestinian Jewish population. Black claims that prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the term ‘Palestinian’ was a neutral one and referred to the people of Palestine, i.e., it made no distinction between Arabs and Jews. The terms ‘Israel’ and ‘Israelis’ did not appear until after 1948 although the “word ‘Jews’ (Yahud) continued to be commonly used, especially in colloquial Arabic” (p. 1). The resulting refugees who had to abandon their Palestinian homes were referred to as ‘Arabs’ in the 1950s and 1960s. On the other hand, those who stayed were referred to as ‘Israeli-Arabs’ and later as ‘Palestinian Israelis’. After Oslo agreement in 1993, Black avers, Israelis started using the term ‘Palestinians’ to refer to the Muslim and Christian indigenous population of Palestine.

Pfeffer (2017) narrates that in 2015 the translation of one word in the English subtitles for a BBC2 documentary entitled ‘Children of the Gaza War’ brought a shower of complaints from Jewish and Israel-supporting viewers. In the documentary, one of the interviewed Palestinian children recites a few verses of an Arabic poem that read: *mawṭinun, xawfun, qitālun, wa ḥiṣārūn; wal yahūdu yuḍabbihūna wa yaqtulūna* ‘lit. Homeland, fear, fighting, and siege; and the Jews slaughter and kill’. The BBC2 subtitles read: ‘fear, death, and siege; Israel is massacring us’. The essence of the complaints centres on the translation of *yahūd* ‘lit. Jews’ into ‘Israelis’. Like Black (2017), the makers of the documentary argue that most consulted translators agree that Palestinians more often than not refer to Israelis as *yahūd* ‘lit. Jews’ with no anti-Semitic connotations.

Evri (2016) discusses a lecture given by Abraham Shalom Yahuda in Jerusalem in 1920 which was attended by “Muslim, Christian and Jewish Palestinian intellectuals...[about] the glory days of Arabic culture in al-Andalus” (p. 4). The lecture was controversially received in the Arab world and within the Zionist circles. Al-Rusafi, an Iraqi poet, wrote a poem in support of the lecture in which he says that the Arabs and the Jews are not enemies but cousins (see Khulusi, 2005). Later al-Rusafi “called on his fellow Arabs to differentiate between Judaism and Zionism” (Evri, 2016, p. 10).

Darwish (2010) compares and contrasts between the Arabic terminology used in the Jordanian media to refer to Israel before and after the Peace Treaty between Jordan and Israel in 1994. Interestingly, the study reveals that the pre-peace treaty period has been marked by negative terminology referring to Israel that reflected the state of war between the two countries. Israel is rarely referred

to as 'Israel' but as *al-ḥadū* 'the enemy', *al-ḥadū aṣ-ṣuhyūni* 'the Zionist enemy', *al-kayān aṣ-ṣuhyūni* 'the Zionist entity', *al-kayān al-yāṣīb* 'the usurping entity' and *ad-dawla al-yahūdiyya ad-daxīla* 'the alien Jewish state'. Conversely, in the post-peace treaty period the terminology shifted towards a more natural or positive one. New terms that recognise the existence of Israel started to be used, such as *isrāʾīl* 'Israel', *dawlat isrāʾīl* 'the State of Israel', *ad-dawla al-ḥibriyya* 'the Hebrew state' and *al-jānīb al-isrāʾīli* 'the Israeli side'. However, as a recent sample from al-Rai Jordanian daily reveals, the terminology seems to shift back to a hostile one whenever a clash between the Palestinians and the Israelis occurs.

Blight (2004) argues that although the careful wording of Balfour Declaration does not blatantly declare the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, both the Israelis and the Palestinians underlyingly agree that it was the cornerstone in establishing the State of Israel. However, Blight explains, both sides label the 'declaration' differently. The West and Israel label it as 'Balfour Declaration' whereas the Arabs and Palestinians label it *waʿd Bilfōr* 'Balfour Promise'. The linguistic distinction between the two terms is obvious: "typically, a declaration refers to a unilateral move, sometimes without intention of implementing its content. A promise, on the other hand, involves commitment" (p. 20).

Ben-David and Pollack (2017) remark that Balfour Declaration is an event that "demonstrates how Jews and Arabs use different social language to refer to their history, to the extent that different terms are used for the document issued by Balfour" (p. 213). To the Jews, it is a 'declaration', but for the Arabs, it is a 'promise'. This difference in using terminology to refer to the same historical event encapsulates "different viewpoints on the British act and commitment for the future" (p. 213).

Methods

The researchers compiled a comparable bilingual corpus of Arabic and English book titles (paper and online) referring to Balfour 1917. Comparable bilingual corpora are "normally specialized collections of similar STs in the two languages and which can be 'mined' for terminology and other equivalences (Munday, 2001, p. 181).

The Arabic titles were retrieved via a title search of the Arabic term *Bilfōr* 'Balfour' in the Arabic Union Catalogue. The search results displayed 74 book titles. Further, the English titles were retrieved via a title search of the English term 'Balfour' in Amazon.com and Yarmouk University Catalogue (unified search). The search results displayed 50 book titles.

Data Analysis

The Arabic and English titles were studied thoroughly and classified into categories carrying the reference to Balfour 1917 and the frequency of occurrence. Further quantitative analysis was carried out to pinpoint the significance of the frequency of occurrence of certain key terms in the book titles referring to Balfour 1917. In addition, a meticulous qualitative analysis was performed to determine the historical, social, religious, political and ideological significance of various terms to refer to Balfour 1917 in book titles.

Questions of the study

This study intends to find answers for the following questions:

1. What Arabic terms did Arab writers utilise to refer to Balfour 1917 in their book titles and what is the frequency of each term?
2. What English terms did English writers utilise to refer to Balfour 1917 in their book titles and what is the frequency of each term?
3. Are there any political and ideological reasons behind the terminology used to refer to Balfour 1917 in Arabic and English?

Results and discussion

This section is twofold: the first discusses the Arabic titles and the second discusses the English titles used to refer to Balfour 1917. The linguistic, political and ideological implications associated with the different terminologies are also discussed.

Arabic book titles

This section tackles the Arabic book titles referring to Balfour 1917. As mentioned previously the reference in Arabic to Balfour 1917 is not a straightforward translation of the English source text, i.e., the word ‘declaration’ has been avoided in Arabic in favour of other terms due to some ideological and political reasons. The majority of Arab writers tend to use terms other than ‘declaration’ in an attempt to voice their viewpoints on the event itself. The Arabic terms used to refer to Balfour 1917 in the collected corpus of Arabic book titles are classified and analysed in table 1.

Table 1: The Arabic terminology used to refer to Balfour 1917

Reference in the titles	Frequency of occurrence	Percentage
<i>waʿd</i> ‘promise’	45	61%
<i>Bilfōr</i> ‘Balfour’	11	15%
<i>taṣrīḥ</i> ‘Declaration’	7	9.5%
<i>muḏāmara</i> ‘conspiracy’	6	8%
<i>ṣahd</i> ‘vow’	4	5.5%
<i>waḥīqa</i> ‘document’	1	1%
Total	74	11%

Most of the writers (61%) of the Arabic books prefer to use the term *waʿd* ‘promise’ in their titles instead of the direct translation *taṣrīḥ* ‘declaration’. Some writers (15%) detach themselves from the declaration/promise chasm via deleting the second part of the noun phrase and keeping only the first, i.e., *Bilfōr* ‘Balfour’. The direct term *taṣrīḥ* ‘declaration’ was only used seven times (9.5%) in the Arabic book titles. A few writers chose to refer to Balfour Declaration by description voicing their opinions and feelings as they described it as *muḏāmara* ‘conspiracy’. Translating the English source ‘declaration’ into Arabic as *muḏāmara* ‘conspiracy’ or *waʿd* ‘promise’ can be seen as an act of resistance by the translators. This resistance is manifested by the act of condemning Balfour 1917 by using *muḏāmara* ‘conspiracy’. It goes without saying that the word conveys negative connotations as well as denotations. The act of resistance is also predicted in using *waʿd* ‘promise’ to translate the English source ‘declaration’. The term *waʿd* ‘promise’ suggests that Arabs accuse the British government of promising the Jews and thus supporting them in establishing their national home in the Palestinian land. Tymoczko (2010) in her forward to “Translation, Resistance, Activism” builds on Venuti’s calls to consider translation as a mode of resistance. She emphasises that translation and translation movements play an important role in shaping and changing societies and “have participated in ideological and political dialogue and struggle in their own times and places” (p. 1). In other words, “[m]ore than merely linguistic transposition, translation is a vector of power, resistance, rebellion, and even revolution.” (Tymoczko, 2010, p.1).

Using *waʿd* ‘promise’ and/or *muḏāmara* ‘conspiracy’ to translate the English source ‘declaration’ deviates from the faithful translation of the English source ‘declaration’, i.e., it does not respect the referential meaning (dictionary meaning) of the source. Functionalist approaches to translation can further explain these usages to refer to Balfour 1917 by some translators and writers. First, it is crucial to explain that the core focus of the functionalist approaches to translation is the purpose of the translation. These approaches consider translation as a purposeful activity (Nord, 1997). That is to say, these approaches

demonstrate that translators translate for a specific purpose; this purpose is governed by the target readership and the place and time of disseminating the translation. In the context at hand, translators who adopted *waʿd* ‘promise’ and/or *muḍāmarā* ‘conspiracy’ to translate the English source ‘declaration’ did consider Arabs as their target readership. This target readership who backs the Palestinian cause and rejects Balfour 1917 will, of course, welcome the suggested two translations *waʿd* ‘promise’ and *muḍāmarā* ‘conspiracy’ as they suit their ideological expectations.

A small number of Arabic writers use synonymous terms with ‘promise’ as four writers (5.5%) refer to Balfour as *ṣahd* ‘vow’. One of the writers employs the general term *waḥīqa* ‘document’ to refer to the event in question. To a certain degree, the terms *ṣahd* ‘vow’ and *waʿd* ‘promise’ are synonymous and entail the same linguistic consequences; therefore, they can be merged into one that comprises (66%) of all occurrences. Similarly, *waḥīqa* ‘document’ can merge with *Bilfōr* ‘Balfour’ as two neutral terms comprising (16%) of all occurrences.

It is noteworthy to mention that this whole game of naming and referring is a reflection of a bigger notion that has marked the Arab ideology towards the West and the Israelis, i.e., the conspiracy theory. Within this notion of ‘conspiracy’, the Arabs, in general, and the Palestinians, in particular, doubt almost all Western words and/or acts in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arabs have always believed that the Jews have conspired with the West to usurp the land of Palestine. This alleged Western favourism of the Jews has influenced Arab political, social and linguistic behavior during the last few decades; the declaration/promise chasm is no exception.

English book titles

This section deals with the English book titles referring to Balfour 1917. In English the document under investigation is called ‘Balfour Declaration’; therefore, it is expected that most of the English book titles will have the exact terminology, i.e., ‘declaration’ in referring to Balfour 1917. Indeed, as table 2 shows, the term ‘declaration’ is the most frequent term (76%) used to refer to Balfour 1917 in the English book titles. However, some writers use neutral terms to refer to the event, such as ‘Balfour’ (14%) and 1917 (2%). The most frequent term in the Arabic book titles, i.e., ‘promise’, occurs only once in the English book titles (2%). Surprisingly, a number of terms with negative connotations are used to refer to the event in the English book titles, such as ‘burden’ (2%), ‘conspiracy’ (2%), and ‘shadow’ (2%). The English terms used to refer to Balfour 1917 in the collected corpus of English book titles are presented in table 2.

Table 2: The English terminology used to refer to Balfour 1917

Reference in the title	Frequency of occurrence	Percentage
Declaration	38	76%
Balfour	7	14%
Burden	1	2%
Conspiracy	1	2%
1917	1	2%
Promise	1	2%
Shadow	1	2%
Total	50	100%

In order to understand why English and Arabic book titles differ in referring to Balfour 1917, both linguistic and non-linguistic analyses are necessary. Since the terms ‘declaration’ and ‘promise’ are two speech acts with different illocutionary forces, a speech act analysis at this point is vital. Before we indulge into analysing the terms within Speech Act theory, a brief introduction of the theory is in order.

Austin’s (1962) Speech Act theory is rooted in the assumption that “to say something is to do something” (Austin, 1962, p. 12). He argues that some speech acts cannot be judged on the basis of their truth or falsity but have performative properties. Austin (1962, p. 13) avers that when a bride utters ‘I do’ in a marriage ceremony, she does not merely ‘say’; in fact, she does commit herself to marrying the groom; i.e., she ‘does’ an act. Austin (1962) divides the speech actions into three main acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. The first refers to merely uttering the words, the second refers to the speaker’s intended meaning and the third refers to the effect of the utterance on the interlocutors. Searle (1975) further divides the illocutionary act into five different categories:

1. Representatives or assertives: they include assertions, conclusions, statements, complaints and claims.
2. Expressives: they include thanks, apologies, congratulations, condolences and exclamations.
3. Directives: they include requests, questions, advice, commands and orders.
4. Commissives: they include promises, threats and vows.
5. Declarations: they include declarations, resignations, sackings, marriages, christenings and criminal sentences.

Searle’s classification is helpful in explaining why Arabs most frequently refer to Balfour 1917 as a ‘promise’ rather than a ‘declaration’. Promising and vowing are ‘commissive’ speech acts that “commit the speaker to some future course of action” (Balck, 2006, p. 22). Declarations, on the other hand, are “a

unique form of speech act, in that their successful performance depends upon the status of the speaker, and the precise circumstances surrounding the event (Black, 2006, p. 22).

In 1917 and after the Balfour document went public, the main point of contention between the Arabs on the one hand, and the West and Israelis, on the other, was whether the British were committed to establishing a Jewish state in Palestine or not (Blight, 2004). While the Israelis and the West saw Balfour as a unilateral 'declaration' by the British "without intention of implementing its content" (Blight, 2004, p. 20), the Arabs understood Balfour as a 'promise' with future commitment by the British to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. In other words, by labelling the event as a 'promise', the Arabs wanted to tell the world that they understood the covert intentions of the British and the Zionists. The West and the Israelis labelled it as a 'declaration' to mitigate its future political and social consequences on the Arab people of Palestine. Ben-David and Pollack (2017) rightly state that the different terminology used by the Arabs and the Israelis to refer to Balfour 1917 encapsulates "different viewpoints on the British act and commitment for the future" (p. 213).

Finally, the explanation for the usage of the terms with negative connotations to refer to the event in the English book titles, such as 'burden' (2%), 'conspiracy' (2%), and 'shadow' (2%) can be referred to the ideological and political views of the authors of these books. This aspect is beyond the scope of this study as a paratextual analysis is needed to identify the ideological backgrounds of these authors.

Conclusion

Using different terms to refer to the same historical event, i.e., Balfour 1917 has many linguistic, social and political implications. Ever since the letter sent from Lord Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, to Lord Rothschild, the leader of British Jewry, have gone public, the West and the Israelis have tried to mitigate the social and political consequences inflicted on the Arab population of Palestine by labelling the event a 'declaration', i.e., an announcement with no British commitment to implement its content. The Arabs, on the other hand, thought that they have understood clearly what it really meant and what the British were committed to establishing for the Zionists; therefore, they insisted on labelling it 'promise'. In addition, the Arabs frequently premodify the term 'promise' by the adjective 'ominous' which means "Giving the worrying impression that something bad is going to happen" (Oxford Dictionary). Moreover, they sometimes postmodify by adding a description after the word 'promise' that reads: a 'promise' by the British to the Zionists to give them a land they did not own!

تسييس الترجمة: تأويلات الإيديولوجيا في ترجمة بلفور 1917

إبراهيم درويش وبلال الصياحين، قسم الترجمة، جامعة اليرموك، إربد، الأردن.

ملخص

حاولت الدراسة البحث في المصطلحات التي تم استخدامها للإشارة إلى بلفور 1917 باللغتين العربية والإنجليزية. أعد الباحثان قائمة تشمل عناوين الكتب التي تناقش بلفور 1917 وقاما بتحليلها كمًا ونوعًا. وأشارت النتائج إلى تباين واضح في الإشارة إلى بلفور 1917 بين عناوين الكتب المنشورة باللغة العربية وتلك المنشورة باللغة الإنجليزية؛ فمعظم الكتب المنشورة باللغة العربية استخدمت كلمة "وعد" بينما معظم الكتب المنشورة باللغة الإنجليزية استخدمت كلمة "تصريح" للإشارة إلى بلفور 1917. وقد بين الباحثان بالاعتماد على تحليل "الأفعال اللغوية" أن الإشارة إلى بلفور 1917 تتعدى الترجمة الحرفية لمعنى المصطلح باللغة الإنجليزية ليتضمن دوافع فكرية وسياسية بحتة. وتؤكد نتائج هذا البحث أن عملية الترجمة لا تنطوي على البعد اللغوي حسب، بل تتعداه إلى المحاور التاريخية والفكرية للمترجم والنص. حيث إن تصميم العرب على استخدام مصطلح "وعد" يساعدهم على كشف الإلتزام البريطاني المبطن بإقامة دولة يهودية في فلسطين. وعلى ذلك فإن للترجمة دورًا بالغ الأهمية، ليس فقط في "نقل المصطلحات من لغة إلى أخرى" (إيفري، 2016، 31-30) بل في تغييرها لدوافع لغوية واجتماعية وإيديولوجية متنوعة (انظر فنوتي 1995).

كلمات مفتاحية: بلفور 1917، ترجمة، تصريح، وعد، إيديولوجيا.

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