

Ahmed Ibn Fadlan and Bayard Taylor: Travel Writers or Translators?

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Abstract. In this article, two works of travel writing, *Resala* (922) by Ahmed Ibn Fadlan and *Travels in Arabia* (1889) by Bayard Taylor, are explored to show how the genre as a whole serves as one way of translating culture in order to better understand and discover it. It examines how ideology affects cultural translation in travel writing and how this leads to othering. We begin with close readings of the texts for major content themes, including religion, sex, traditions, etc. These are analyzed for instantiations of inaccurate cultural translation, ideology, and othering. The use of pronouns, nouns, and adjectives is looked at to explore their othering effect. The results show that inaccurate cultural translations are sometimes influenced by ideology and usually lead to othering. The analyzed samples of travel writing rather reveal the predominant mindsets and leanings of their authors and cultures of their origin than those they attempt to introduce to their readers.

Keywords: cultural translation, travel writing, othering, ideology, Eastern Europe, Middle East.

Ahmed'as Ibn Fadlan'as ir Bayard'as Taylor'as – kelionių literatūros kūrėjai ar vertėjai?

Santrauka. Straipsnyje, pasitelkiant du kelionių literatūros tekstus – Ahmed'o Ibn Fadlan'o knygą apie jo kelionę su misija į Rusiją *Resala* (922) bei Bayard'o Taylor'o kelionių po arabų šalis užrašus *Travels in Arabia* (1889), – gilinamasi į tai, kaip kelionių literatūros žanras funkcionuoja kaip tam tikras kultūros vertimas siekiant tą kultūrą geriau suprasti ir pristatyti skaitytojams. Keliamas tikslas išsiaiškinti, kaip kultūrinį vertimą kelionių literatūroje veikia ideologija ir kaip dėl šio poveikio pristatomoji kultūra sukutinama. Pirma tekstai atidžiai skaitomi siekiant išskirti pagrindines atsikartojančias temas: religiją, seksą, tradicijas ir kitas. Analizuojant šių temų raišką, išrenkami netikslaus kultūrinio vertimo, ideologijos raiškos ir sukutinimo pavyzdžiai. Tiriama, kokį sukutinamąjį poveikį turi įvardžių, daiktavardžių ir būdvardžių vartoseną. Tyrimas rodo, kad abiejuose tekstuose klaidingą kultūrinį vertimą kai kuriais atvejais lemia autorių ideologija – toks vertimas įtvirtina pristatomos kultūros kaip „Kito“ kultūros įvaizdį. Šie analizuojami kelionių literatūros pavyzdžiai labiau atskleidžia pačių autorių bei jų kilmės kultūrų, o ne skaitytojams pristatomų kultūrų nuostatas ir pažiūras.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: kultūrinis vertimas, kelionių literatūra, sukutinimas, ideologija, Rytų Europa, Viduriniai Rytai.

1. Introduction

At its core, the genre of travel writing entrusts itself with the task of presenting a foreign people (i.e., the ‘Other’) and their culture—thus giving rise to a cultural interaction of sorts between text and reader. Rich descriptions of cultural practices, food, traditions, and dress are intended to bridge the intercultural gap. While objectivity, or faithfulness as translation studies might put it, is naturally an essential ingredient in achieving this feat, it would be naïve to think that clear and objective observations alone suffice in generating genuine cultural understanding. For like traditional translation between languages, the enterprise of transferring the experience of one culture to another in order to guide an outsider into the inner workings of a foreign community or society requires extensive contextualization. The writer must, therefore, have intimate knowledge of their subject as well as the will and ability to make descriptions comprehensible through good use of comparisons, analogies, and other literary techniques; one misstep or disingenuous move on behalf of the travel writer can lead to serious misunderstandings of the culture under discussion; be it intentionally or unintentionally, a cultural misrepresentation is liable to further contribute to ‘othering’ (i.e., the stigmatization of a people or community) with serious political and social consequences (Staszak 2008; Abubakar, Hassan, Azmi 2021; Bhabha 1993; Brons 2015). Therefore, as André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett provocatively suggest in their essay on literary translation, *Constructing Cultures* (1998), the study of translation does not merely teach how to go about cultivating deeper cultural interactions as conventional wisdom would have it, but more importantly how translation itself often shapes them (*ibid.*: 6).

The genre of travel writing is arguably the paragon of how this occurs given that its readers are often susceptible to a host of presuppositions and biases that conceivably result from the at times arbitrary act of translation. This makes texts of this type problematic when taken as sources of objective cultural knowledge. Conversely, travel writing does offer unique insights into its writers’ own cultural reference points, how they view their subject matter, and the consequences that arise from their undertaking of cultural translation. By applying the theories of Clifford Geertz regarding cultural investigation in the social sciences and those of translation studies, travel writing takes on a new importance, namely as a potentially rich source of insight into better understanding not so much the ‘Other’ himself as the implications that translation has for cultural interactions with him. From this perspective, a new look at travel writers, Ahmed ibn Fadlan and Bayard Taylor, through their respective works *Resala* (922) and *Travels in Arabia* (1889), will be presented in this article that sidesteps the long-held debates as to their historical accuracy as narrators (Uhlman 2012; Melton 1999) in order to focus instead on their influence as cultural translators and what this cultural translation can tell us about the writers themselves and the cultures they come from. In

doing so, the role of cultural translation within the genre of travel writing as it regards cultural interactions will become more evident as well as the obstacles faced with its successful implementation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Translation: A Key Into Understanding Cultural Interaction*

In *Constructing Cultures*, Lefevere and Bassnett (1988) present several outdated translation paradigms, others more relevant than ever. According to the Horace model, the translator/interpreter is seen as a ‘fidus interpres,’ faithful not to the text *per se*, but rather vis-à-vis his “customer” (i.e., the reader) (*ibid.*: 3–4). Here, the act of translation is fraught with negotiations that must be contented with in order to reconcile between two discrepant language groups. Knowing the cultural norms and intricate connotations, a language brings with it, the task of the ‘fidus interpres’ is to convey the overall message, even when this necessitates liberal acts of infidelity toward the text in favor of respecting the sensibilities and receptibility of its readers.

This becomes abundantly clearer when considering that with increasingly more dissimilar cultures come larger linguistic disparities that cannot be merely remedied by direct translation. To help illustrate this idea, Lefevere and Bassnett (1988) employ the term, “textual grid,” which, put, describes all how a given culture/linguistic community finds it acceptable to express a given concept (*ibid.*: 5). In other words, while forthrightness might be valued by one society, it may be received in another with offense. It falls upon the ‘fidus interpres,’ therefore, to serve as cultural mediator, particularly when little to no overlap exists between languages’ textual grids.

2.2. *What is Cultural Translation?*

These considerations for translation, while vital to the ‘fidus interpres’ of texts, extend far beyond the written domain. In general, the field of anthropology in the latter half of the twentieth century, and Clifford Geertz’s culture theory in particular, were instrumental in reevaluating the methodologies employed for cultural analysis. Prior to Geertz’s seminal essays of the 1960s (Geertz 1973), the prevailing view on culture, led by scholars like Talcott Parsons, was one that saw it consisting of an amalgamation of values forged by normative patterns of behavior, the corollary of which proposed a culture capable of being broken down by anthropologists into universal models (Alexander et al. 2001: 2). Geertz took issue with this stance both for its overgeneralization of society seen as a monolith and failure to account for the “locality” and “subjectivity” of individuals in a society (*ibid.*: 2–3). In other words, he believed that without considering the societal, economic, and/or political background (ideology) of a text’s writer, the true meaning

of their words and intentions would be at best fragmentary. Instead, Geertz pointed to hermeneutics, or the careful interpretation of texts considered within their unique context, as an essential piece to meaningful analysis of a society.

This became even clearer as Geertz began to contend with his peers, notably Roland Barthes. In his work on developing the methodologies of his culture theory, Geertz problematized Barthes' assertion that culture could be analyzed through universally applicable terms (i.e., a systematic frame of reference) obtained by "objective" scholars' estrangement from their own culture and biases (Barthes 1987). That is to say, the universal code with which Barthes believed to have an objective stance in describing cultures anthropologically was a misguided approach given that it failed to acknowledge that culture itself was an ever-changing re-coding of what had come before it and/or of that with which its members were in current interaction (Alexander et al. 2001: 12). In order to avoid this anthropologic pitfall, Geertz proposed two concepts that he frequently employed throughout his subsequent work, namely "thick description" and "self-nativizing" (Geertz 1973; Geertz 1983).

Regarding the first of these terms, an important clarification should be noted. Thick description is not so much a call for increased descriptive language for a more vivid illustration of what is occurring in the society/community under study, but rather for a more contextualized framing of events so that the actors' subjective experience of and toward them are made visible to readers (Geertz 1973: 3–30). Geertz's well-known Balinese cockfight experiment helps clarify the necessity of this practice. In his observations of the Balinese, the absurd and obscenely high bets being wagered can only be properly comprehended by taking into consideration the cultural significance said high-stakes wagers had within the community, namely status-signaling. In this sense, the culture through which individuals navigate can be thought of as "webs of significance" in the words of Geertz that are uniquely formed by any given member of society (*ibid.*: 5); instead of a neat and deducible system, according to which members act, an assortment of varying webs exist from person to person depending on how one relates to and interprets their society and the entities therein (Alexander et al. 2001: 11).

Self-nativizing as an approach begins with unearthing these webs of significance so that the unsaid and unseen are foregrounded, thereby facilitating a more complete understanding on behalf of the outsider. For the observer, this often necessitates participation in, as opposed to observation of, the community being described. Conversely, the reader, whose contact with the subject under discussion almost invariably is limited to a secondhand account, i.e., via mediated experience, requires a contextualization in the form of thick description. It is, therefore, through these two concepts of Geertz that cultural translation should be assessed, which like cultural analysis attempts to situate a foreign culture within the familiar terms of its audience.

In their absence, a cultural translation of sorts occurs, but results in a rendering of poorer quality in terms of authenticity.

While the theories of Geertz and those of his successors help in establishing clear criteria for more authentic cultural translation, applicable to travel writing, they are not impervious to reservations. For instance, Georgia Warnke points out the irony of Geertz' approach of deciphering the Balinese cockfight in that his interpretations of it are orientated in significant part by references from his own literary and cultural tradition (Alexander et al. 2001: 46). In other words, the Western texts he employs in his argumentations are not merely for the sake of comparison to bridge a gap between cultures, but rather serve as a cultural frame of reference that both steers the direction of the questions he asks and implicitly ascribes its values onto the Balinese people. This would seemingly appear to undermine Geertz's emphasis on the local and subjective when determining an individual's webs of significance. Yet, Warnke's observation highlights an important insight, namely that the very act of observing what Geertz describes as webs of significance implies a re-cording of meaning, thereby reframing it in relation to one's own reference points and addressing it from new points of entry. It follows then that works like those in the genre of travel writing are simultaneously cultural translations that achieve to varying levels of efficacy to convert the experiences of foreign peoples into a new cultural context(s) all while reflecting at times more about the writer's own vision and coding of the world than the subject itself.

2.3. Othering in Travel Writing: An Ideological Vehicle Between the Lines

In the absence of contextualization—be it from lack of ability or willingness to make visible the webs of significance—the reader of travel writing has but the written events and writer's attitude toward them from which to draw his or her conclusions (cf. Todorov 1982; El Masoudi 2022). One common consequence of this is the arise of othering. One of the most foundational voices regarding this issue remains French philosopher Sartre (1965) who maintained that one needs to conceptualize the 'Other' regardless of accuracy, to understand oneself fully (*ibid.*: 190). That is to say, othering is essential in understanding ourselves, which, in turn, helps us only then to begin understanding what constitutes the 'Other' (cf. Gillespie 2007; Todorov 1982; Barth, Hobson 2021). Since then, this conceptualization has been adopted by much of the literature on the topic, including Pandey (2004), who situates the term within the context of writing as a way of “describ[ing] how social-group dichotomies are represented via language” (*ibid.*: 155). In other words, the kind of othering Sartre envisioned within the human psyche often finds its way into one's writing. For instance, through linguistic choices, a writer is prone to encoding their semantic stance by representing certain groups in a particular light that excludes them from a so-called in-group.

When power, or more precisely the imbalance thereof, is added into the equation, the issue of othering is only further aggravated (Fanon 1968: 12). The work of van Dijk (1993) reveals the close relationship between power and the ways verbal/written communication and social interaction of its holder are articulated; he maintains that with power the views of a society towards outsiders tends to be far harsher in part due to a more exaggerated sense of ethnocentrism (*ibid.*: 253). Lefevere and Bassnett (1998) echo this observation when discussing cultural capital, which they deem a prominent factor in determining the directionality of translation and the attitudes expressed therein (*ibid.*: 7).

This phenomenon has long been studied within the field of Postcolonialism and played out with exceptionally devastating consequences in the Near East. On the topic, Barry (1995) states that in Postcolonial Theory, particularly Edward Said's Orientalist approach (Said 1995), the 'Other' is, textually speaking, a homogeneous figure determined by race and without consideration for personhood or individuality. Writers now known as 'the Orientalists' tended to employ the values they deemed exclusively occidental to distance themselves from the 'Other' of the East, often based on their limited knowledge of the region (Pandey 2004: 159). What results is often the encoding of ideologies into binary terms like Us-vs-Them (*ibid.*: 159) and/or the perpetuation of already existing divisive rhetoric between in- and out-groups (Alorainy et al. 2019: 2).

Context is key, therefore, if the travel writer wishes to avoid the negative consequences of an incomplete or misconstrued cultural translation. While *Resala* (922) and *Travels in Arabia* (1889) stood out as pioneering endeavors of their time when far less communication and cultural interaction existed between East and West, the writers' respective backgrounds, motives, and ideologies at times hindered their efforts of achieving Geertz' ideal of cultural translation as will be seen in the following sections.

2.4. *Ahmed Ibn Fadlan and Bayard Taylor*

Ibn Fadlan (877–960) was an Arab explorer, diplomat, and travel writer from Baghdad. He visited various places such as Egypt, India, and China and wrote extensively about his experiences. He wrote his book *Resala* (922) during a mission he led commissioned by Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtadir to help the king of the Volga Bulgar. He started the long journey from Baghdad, passing through what is now Iran, Turkey, Eastern Europe, the Scandinavian countries, and the Balkans, ending in Russia before heading back home. During this exciting and lengthy journey, he meticulously recorded the habits, cuisine, customs, death practices, sexuality, and the concept of purity of the nations he visited. According to Toplak and Abulafia (2017), *Resala* contains a rich body of information about all the cultures that Ibn Fadlan witnessed during his journey from the perspective of a Middle Easterner (*ibid.*: 91).

Bayard Taylor (1825–1878), by contrast, was an American diplomat, journalist, and travel writer traveling far and wide to areas of Europe, Asia, and Africa (specifically Egypt and central Africa). His writing style invites readers to imagine the cultural elements of the nations/ethnic communities he visited, such as their foods, scents, and clothing, and the dangers he faced, all presented in his rich, descriptive accounts. In *Travels in Arabia* (1889), Taylor records his account of the journey to Yemen, Hadramout, Mecca and Medina, Oman, and several other regions in the Arabian Peninsula. During these journeys, he explored the Bedouin lifestyle, religious practices, traditions, and cultures. Moran (2006) states that Taylor was known as a best-selling author, lecturer (traveling around the United States to give lectures about Arab culture dressed in Arab clothes), and journalist and is considered the “Great American Traveler.” In addition, he helped shape the image of the East in the American imagination, especially about the Arab world (*ibid.*: 7).

2.5. *Literature on Ibn Fadlan’s Journey*

Many scholars, such as Bahiy (2006), introduce the historical background of Ibn Fadlan’s journey in discovering Turkey and Eastern Europe. In addition, he highlights the purpose of this critical journey that Ibn Fadlan led in accordance with the Caliph Muqtadir’s commands. Bahiy reflects on every stop in Ibn Fadlan’s journey, all the nations he has passed through, his interaction with their peoples, political regimes, traditions, religion, death, and funerals. Bahiy narrates the entire journey and makes some comments on the events. He includes quotes from Ibn Fadlan’s original text to prove his comments and justify them. In his conclusion, he states that Ibn Fadlan was honest and clear about narrating all his witnessed events. In addition, he claims that Ibn Fadlan did not judge people he had seen, which is contentious because, as I will show, Ibn Fadlan does have negative comments about people. Furthermore, his ideology (mainly religious and political) affected his linguistic choices and how he represented the ‘Other.’

2.6. *Literature on Bayard Taylor’s Travels*

The fact that Taylor grew up poor in the rural part of Pennsylvania did not stop him from discovering the world, and he embarked upon his first journey to Europe with a modest budget. His book *Travels in Arabia* (1889) was successful, and Moran (2006) highlights that Taylor’s travel material was the basis of his lectures. She adds that his lectures on “the Arabs” were highly requested by the audience (*ibid.*: 99).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Information and Materials

This study is a stylistic analysis of two classic travel writing books, *Resala* (922) by Ahmad Ibn Fadlan and *Travels in Arabia* (1889) by Bayard Taylor, to examine how ideology may cause inaccurate cultural translation that can lead to othering. I selected these two texts because they exemplify how an Arab travel writer perceived old Eastern Europe and how an American/European travel writer viewed the Middle East during the early 19th century. Furthermore, these two books were written when the authors had attained intellectual maturity after traveling to diverse locations and creating various works of literature on travel writing.¹

3.2. Research Questions

The paper aims to answer the following questions:

- R.Q.1: How do Ibn Fadlan and Taylor's ideologies cause inaccurate cultural translation?
- R.Q.2: How does inaccurate cultural translation lead to othering?

3.3. Data Collection and Instruments

As mentioned above, the primary concern of this research is examining how ideology affects the interpretation (translation) of other cultures (cf. Verschueren 2014; Santos 2006; Augustinos 1999) and leads to othering. After thoroughly reading the texts, a detailed analysis of nouns, adjectives, and pronouns will be conducted to identify examples of ideology, cultural translation, and othering. Specifically, the content words, such as nouns and adjectives, will be examined for positive self-representation (Jeffries 2009) and negative portrayal of the 'Other.' Additionally, the usage of pronouns by both writers will be analyzed to determine if the authors distance themselves from the 'Other.'

¹ It is worth noting that originally Ibn Fadlan's *Resala* is written in the Arabic language, but in this particular study I use its translations (Fadlan & Frye 2010; Fadlan & McKeithen 1979). When I compared the English translations with the original, I found that they were both accurate at times, showing deep semantic and cultural understanding of the language, and inaccurate elsewhere. The inaccuracies often were a result of the English translations not fully expressing Ibn Fadlan's intended meaning. That said, all the examples in this paper have accurate English translations. However, further investigation of the translation of the whole text is recommended.

3.4. *Data Analysis and Procedures*

The content analysis will be completed at a lexical level, with special attention to the contextual meaning. Specifically, adjectives and nouns related to the following themes: Culture, Food, Religion, Sex, Death, and Traditions will be examined for ideology, cultural translation, and othering. To ensure accurate analysis, the meanings of the adjectives, nouns, and verbs will be cross-checked using the Oxford English Dictionary (OED 1993). Furthermore, a list of pronouns (in context) will be collected manually and analyzed to gain insights into the authors' ideologies and tendency to use negative linguistic choices when referring to the 'Other.' The advantage of examining the usage of pronouns is to explore the writers' othering strategies. Overall, this analysis method will help to uncover hidden biases and better understand the authors' ideologies.

4. *Resala* (922)

4.1. *Ibn Fadlan's Mission*

Ibn Fadlan starts his *Resala* by stating the purpose of his travel: Fulfilling a request by the Saqalibah [Arabic word for Slavic] King Almish ibn Shilki Yiltawar to build a fort and a mosque with a pulpit [minbar] to pray for the caliph in his kingdom. This fact alone shows his religious and political ideologies behind the visit. The request of the Saqalibah king, in other words, was tantamount to asking to be placed under the Abbasid Caliphate's custody. It seems that the Saqalibah king was a shrewd politician and knew how to convince the young Caliph al Muqtadir to send the money to support his kingdom. For him, the benefit was not the money since his kingdom was prosperous but rather the involvement of the Abbasid Caliphate in the conflict with his neighbor, the king of Khazars. The caliph found this an ideal opportunity to expand his caliphate to a new part of the world, as Ibn Fadlan explains at the beginning of his *Resala*.

4.2. *Ibn Fadlan's Religious Beliefs*

Despite the truth of Bahiy's study conclusions in *Resala*, Ibn Fadlan accurately described the events. Ibn Fadlan's ideology affected how he perceived and judged individuals on his journey. In this regard, Bahiy is not entirely correct. Ibn Fadlan's ideology, beliefs, and culture affected how he saw the 'Other' and their culture. As mentioned earlier, Ibn Fadlan's mission was occasioned by the request of the Volga Bulgar King Khan Almish ibn Yiltawar, who had converted to Islam with his court. Thus, it can be assumed that Ibn Fadlan's religious affiliations impacted his judgments of others during the journey.

Ibn Fadlan's religious background and assigned role in leading the mission (as the caliph messenger) made him prone to judging all that he saw and the 'Other' from a religious standpoint. "He was an honest believer in Allah and hated things Islam rejected [such as] in funerals" (Al-Dahan 1960: 26).² One of the examples of Ibn Fadlan's religious ideology is when he described the 'Other' (the Turks) with pejorative nouns like "asses" because they were not believers, reflecting Ibn Fadlan's religious ideology. He says: "They are like asses gone astray. They have no religious bound with God, nor they have recourse to reason" (Fadlan & Frye 2010: 33).

Other scholars highlight how religion occupied a big portion of Ibn Fadlan's travels. For instance, Al Dahan (1960) states that in *Resala*, Ibn Fadlan adhered to the traditions of Islam during his journey. For example, he asked the Saqalibah king to greet the Commander of the Faithful (al-Mquadir) and not to call himself the Sovereign because this is the name of Allah (*ibid.*: 27). This journey was an important opportunity for Ibn Fadlan to proselytize the people he encountered to Islam, and this appears in many parts of the text. In the following excerpt, Ibn Fadlan shows how a man called Talut accepted Islam along with his entire family. Al-Dahan notes that Ibn Fadlan taught the family several short verses from the Qur'an and that his happiness to do so was as if he had become the king of Saqalibah (*ibid.*: 27):

A man had accepted Islam at my hands whose name was Talut and named him `Abdallah. He said: "I want you to call me by your name, 'Muhammad.'" And I did. His wife, his mother, and his children also accepted Islam and were all of them called Muhammad. (Ibn Fadlan & Frye 2010: 57)

Another indication of Ibn Fadlan's ideology is his ample use of religious phrases expressing his refusal of what the 'Other' believed, which he frequently tried to change. Ibn Fadlan demonstrates how his ideological views impacted his perception of specific individuals. For instance, he rejects a group of Turks called Bashkir who shave their beards, which, according to Ibn Fadlan's interpretation of Islam, was unacceptable for men. Ibn Fadlan adds that they shave their beards and eat lice, indicating that both actions for him are equally disgusting (Ibn Fadlan & Frye 2010: 42).

Ibn Fadlan ridicules another group of people's appearance after shaving their beards, as can be seen in the following lines: "All of the Turks pluck out their beards except for the moustache... a man to see him from a distance, he would have no doubt that he was a billy goat" (Ibn Fadan & McKeithen 1979: 16). It is clear that, unlike the people he saw, Ibn Fadlan himself had a beard, as presumably, all the others in his circle had. The religious practice related to facial hair may account for at least one reason why Ibn Fadlan found the 'Other' appearance strange and undesirable. The following quote

² All translations of Al-Dahan are done by the author of the article.

confirms this claim and shows that Ibn Fadlan had a beard: “When I used to come out of the public bath and enter my house, I would look at my beard and find it to have been frozen into a [solid] piece of ice, which made me bring it close to the fire” (Ibn Fadan & McKeithen 1979: 7).

Another point that shows Ibn Fadlan’s religious beliefs is when he uses religious phrases before starting any action. For instance, he mentions that before commencing their journey, they must place their reliance on God—an expression used to date within Muslim communities upon starting any task by saying a prayer:

The outfitting of the caravan was in good order, and we hired a guide named Qulwas from among the residents of Jurjaniyah. We then placed our reliance in God—Might and Majesty be His—and committed our affair to him. (Ibn Fadan & McKeithen 1979: 9)

One of the most interesting conversations in Ibn Fadlan’s *Resala* that reveals the writer’s ideology is the one that takes place between Tekin (Ibn Fadlan’s Turkish interpreter) and a Turkish man. Tekin speaks Turkish and translates a question from the man to Ibn Fadlan, a complaint about the cold that Ibn Fadlan himself has remarked with displeasure. Ibn Fadlan’s reply to the man is that God wants them to become Muslims by saying *La ilaha illa Allah* (“There is no God but Allah”). Ibn Fadlan’s answer did not address the man’s question about the weather. One thing we can notice about Ibn Fadlan’s typical attitude in his *Resala* is that he does not answer questions that may need deep philosophical explanations related to religion:

This Turk says to you, ‘What is it that our Lord wants from us? Here He is killing us with cold, and if we knew what He wanted, we would certainly give it to Him.’” And I said to him: “Tell him, ‘He wants you to say: *La ilaha illa Allah* [There is no God but God].” He laughed and said: “If we knew how, we would do it.” (Ibn Fadlan & McKeithen 1979: 9)

On another occasion, a man asked Ibn Fadlan if God had a wife, and Ibn Fadlan’s reaction was the same. As we can notice, Ibn Fadlan prefers to reject what he hears by uttering religious phrases and does not continue the conversation as indicated in the previous quotes. However, it is worth noting that Ibn Fadlan may have answered these questions and continued the conversation but did not report that in *Resala*.

4.3. *Ibn Fadlan’s Linguistic Choices: Pronouns*

Ibn Fadlan used pronouns to create distance between “Us³” and “Them” as well as “I” and “He,” as suggested by the scholar of othering, van Dijk (1984) calls these pronouns “demonstratives of distance” (*ibid.*: 125). In the following excerpt, Ibn Fadlan distances

³ Pronouns and words are italicized in some quotations to emphasize the examples of othering.

himself from the ‘Other’ group by emphasizing the difference between “Us,”—who are more civilized from his point of view—and “Them,”—who are less civilized. For instance, when Ibn Fadlan talks about the Bashkirs, he mentions a situation with a man who accepts Islam. We can notice Ibn Fadlan’s othering with the usage of pronouns when he grinds the louse and eats it:

One of *them* who had accepted Islam was with *us* and used to serve *us*. I saw *him* find a louse in *his* clothing. *He* crushed it between *his* fingernails and licked it, and *he* said when *he* saw me: “Good!” (Ibn Faḍlan & Frye 2010: 43)

Ibn Fadlan also used pronouns—*they*, *them*, *their*, *themselves*—associated with negative traits or practices in his othering of the groups he encountered. Ibn Fadlan’s condescension is most likely a result of his different socio-cultural background from all the ‘Others’ he observed; in contrast to his luxurious, civilized life in his capital city, he tended to portray the people he met as poor, less civilized, and inferior. “He looked down upon all the nations he visited” (Al-Dahan 1960: 22). Consequently, his cultural translation and the representation of the ‘Other’ linguistically were generally associated with a feeling of disgust and refusal, as can be seen in the following excerpts: “The men and women go down to the river and bathe together naked, without covering themselves one from the other. They do not commit fornication in any manner whatsoever” (Ibn Fadlan & McKeithen 1979: 32). Put concretely, his interpretations of people’s cultures were based on judgments of what he found acceptable and unacceptable in his culture.

The socioeconomic differences between societies can result in a gap in the level of education. As Ibn Fadlan came from a society that was advanced in sciences and appreciated scientists when he describes in the following two quotes how the Saqalibah killed the people who had knowledge or were brilliant, the contrast between his and the Volga Bulgars’ societies is clear; he aims to shock the people in Baghdad with this strange and horrifying act. Ibn Fadlan’s following quote highlights Volga Bulgars’ attitude towards knowledgeable people and how they believed that these people should serve their god:

When they see a man who is possessed of a certain [mental] agility and knowledge of things, they say: “It is fitting for this man that he should serve our Lord.” They then seize him, put a rope around his neck, and hang him on a tree until he disintegrates. (Ibn Fadlan & McKeithen 1979: 32)

Apart from socio-economic factors, Lippi-Green (1997) claims that accents can be used as another way of excluding and refusing to recognize the ‘Other’ (*ibid.*: 64). While Ibn Fadlan did not reject the ‘Other’ because of their accents, he often observed

their language phonological sounds and associated them with negative descriptions. “*Resala* shows us that Ibn Fadlan lacked knowledge of any other foreign language, evidenced by the fact that he needed to recruit interpreters on the journey” (Al-Dahan 1960: 24). Because of the lack of direct communication with and ignorance of the languages of whom he observed, Ibn Fadlan may have reacted negatively through his linguistic choices in describing some features of their languages. Additionally, he may have misinterpreted some of the events he witnessed. In the following quotes, we can see Ibn Fadlan’s othering of the people in Jurjaniyah when he moved from Khwarizm. First, he highlights that the dirhams of Khwarizm (currency) were faked, which indicates that the people of Jurjaniyah were counterfeiters. Second, he negatively describes their languages’ phonological sounds. It is worth mentioning that Ibn Fadlan was not a travel writer; he freely expressed his emotions throughout the text with no limitations. This made Ibn Fadlan’s ideology and cultural translation more explicit:

I saw the dirhams of Khwarizm which are debased, made of lead, counterfeit, and brass. (Ibn Fadlan & McKeithen 1979: 6)

They are the most *vulgar* of people in speech and by nature. Their speech is mostly, like the *chatter of starlings*. Their tongue is mostly like the *croaking of frogs*. They repudiate the Commander of the Faithful `Ali ibn Abi Talib—May God be pleased with him at the conclusion of every prayer. (Ibn Fadlan & Frye 2010: 30)

Ibn Fadlan’s othering makes him question people’s religious beliefs. For instance, he talks about a group of Turks called al-Ghuzziyah and states that they pretend to be Muslims to curry favor with the Muslims who pass by them. He does not mention the reason, but it might be to get money from them. Even if this was the reason, it is still socio-economic othering instead of othering based on religion:

I heard them say: “La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad Rasul Allah,” to curry favor by this statement with whomsoever of the Muslims happens to pass by them, and not because they believe it. (Ibn Fadlan & McKeithen 1979: 10)

It is worth mentioning that many historians have documented a significant shift in the societal structure of the Abbasid Caliphate from a tribal to an urban setting, unlike the former Umayyad Caliphate (El Hibri 2021; Lombard 2004). Ibn Fadlan, who was used to an urban lifestyle, found the tribal societies unusual and exotic. In the following quote, Ibn Fadlan employs othering through pronouns to describe al-Ghuzziyah’s nomadic way of life and socio-cultural status. This technique aims to distance himself from the ‘Other’ as he viewed their lifestyle as different from his own. Moreover, as mentioned above, he judges people believes and practices according to his beliefs:

We came to a tribe of Turks who are known as Ghuzz [al-Ghuzziyah]. *They* turned out to be nomads, who have tents made of hair... And, indeed, *they* lead a miserable existence. *They* are moreover, like *stray asses*, and are not bound to God by religion, nor do *they* have recourse to reason. *They* do not worship anything, rather *they* call *their* chief men lords. (Ibn Fadlan & McKeithen 1979: 10)

Ibn Fadlan's ideology affected his cultural translation. In more concrete terms, his ideology controlled his cultural interpretation based on his judgment of what was acceptable in his culture. He used some religious phrases to show rejection of the 'Other's' actions. His linguistic choices, namely nouns and adjectives, negatively described the 'Other.'

5. *Travels in Arabia* (1889)

5.1. *Taylor's Comparisons*

Taylor uses comparisons to stress the differences between his observations abroad and his experiences in his home country or previous travels. Through these comparisons, he describes the tastes, smells, and architectural styles of the cities he visited. In the following quotes, he compares the newly encountered things to his previous experiences. In the first quote, he describes the coffee and fruit trees in Yemen that the locals irrigate, yielding two crops annually. Taylor compares both crops and mentions that the former is always better. In the second quote, he compares the dates from the gardens of Djowf with those from Nedjed and Hasa:

We were told that those trees, thus artificially watered, yielded ripe fruit twice in the year; but the fruit becomes not fully ripe the second time, and the coffee of this crop is always inferior to that of the first. (Taylor 2013: 13)

5.2. *Taylor's Religious Beliefs*

Edward Said declares that many Orientalists, namely Silvestre de Sacy, Ernest Renan, Richard Burton, and Edward Lane [who existed before Taylor], played a role in familiarizing their societies with the East and the Arab cultures (Said 2012). Said draws attention to the fact that in the 18th century, Orientalists perpetuated stereotypical imagery of Arabs entrenched in the Western collective psyche (Said 1993). These images illustrated Arab women as sensual objects of male pleasure and the East as a realm surrounded by mysteries and populated by mythical monsters. Said argues that some of these stereotypes continued to the 20th century, with scholars such as Edward Lane perpetuating the same narratives established in the 19th century.

Moran (2006) elaborates on what Said mentions by saying that the previous Orientalists influenced Western perceptions and generalizations about the Orient (*ibid.*: 200). That's to say, these Orientalists, especially Edward Lane, may have contributed to shaping Taylor's ideas about the East, which may have led to inaccurate cultural translation. It can also be inferred from the topics he covers, affecting his linguistic choices. Religion is covered in a large amount of Taylor's narrative in *Travels of Arabia*, and this may happen because Taylor knew the book would be published in the newspaper. A fact always told in the journalism industry is that the three major topics that always attract readers are politics, religion, and sex. The emphasis on religion would attract more readers and help his travel writing books become popular. In the following quote, Moran (2006) explains how stereotypes influenced Taylor's characterization of the Orient. Moreover, his critique represented the Christian critique of Islam, which can be seen as an inaccurate cultural translation as well:

Taylor's characterization of the Orient embodied the traditional Christian critique of Islam itself: The home of the religion of wish fulfillment became the location of wish fulfillment. Here, released from American puritan prudery with its proscriptive social norms and behaviors, the individual could pursue the sensual exotic, and sexual. (Moran 2006: 205)

Taylor's narration refers to Europe and the United States as the "Christian world" to ideologically differentiate "Us" (i.e., Europe and the United States) from the "Them" (the Arabs/ Muslims), which will be explained in detail later. As mentioned in the literature review, othering includes "'Positive self-representation," which is often accomplished by othering practices in which linguistic contrasts and qualifications are proffered [to] qualify semantic propositions" (Pandey 2004: 168). As, unlike Ibn Fadlan, Taylor was a travel writer and aimed to publish his work in newspapers, his ideology and cultural translation were more implicit than those of Ibn Fadlan.

5.3. Taylor's Linguistic Choices: Adjectives and Nouns

As mentioned, othering occurs when the writers distinguish themselves from the 'Other.' This othering always has a positive self-representation and a negative characterization of people in the out-group. Taylor often uses negative adjectives to describe some Arabs, especially the Bedouins and some Europeans. He uses pronouns to reinforce cultural differences and distance himself from the locals. For instance, the following quote highlights the negative representation of the 'Other:' a nomadic group and the Irish people. He reports Palgrave's travels crossing the Nefood to the southeast, describing a nomadic group with negative terms such as "barbarous" and "savage." Moreover, he describes them as being "uncivilized" and "sans-culottes." Surprisingly,

there is another instance of othering, this time against a European group, namely the Irish. He describes this nomadic group of men as ugly and weak, like a “scarecrow” or an Irishman. Given that Taylor is an American, during his time, American society considered the Irish people who migrated to the United States a lower class. Mainly because most of them worked in agriculture, presented as not part of the urban society nor receiving a good education, that might be why Taylor used the scarecrow and the Irish reference when describing the nomadic group:

They were *barbarous*, nay, almost *savage*, fellows, like most Sherarat, whether chiefs or people; but they had been somewhat awed by the grandeurs of Hamood, and yet more so by the prospect of coming so soon before the terrible majesty of Telal himself. All were duly armed and had put on their best suits of apparel, a piece of equipment worthy of a *scarecrow* or of an *Irishman* at a wake. Tattered red overalls; cloaks with more patches than original substance, or, worse yet, which opened large mouths to cry for patching, but had not got it; little broken tobacco pipes, and *no trousers* soever (by the way, all genuine Arabs are *sans-culottes*); faces meagre with habitual hunger, and black with dirt and weather stains—such were the high-born chiefs of Azzam, on their way to the king’s levee. (Taylor 2013: 54)

Another point is that the Arabs do not wear pants; it might not be considered othering, but it is a wrong interpretation of the culture from Taylor’s side. Historically, in Europe, especially in France, *sans-culottes* were the poor who could not afford to purchase pants. The Arabs did not wear pants—it was not part of their traditional costume. Taylor wants to introduce a surprising fact to the readers by stating that all Arabs are *sans-culottes*, and this causes wrong translation of the Arab culture.

One more example of Taylor’s othering is describing some local nomadic people. In the following quote, Taylor describes his guide with negative linguistic choices, such as being submissive and acting like a dog. His choice of the word “dog” to describe the man emphasizes his submissive character to others, as dogs are submissive to their masters:

Suddenly several horsemen appeared on the opposite cliff, and one of them, a handsome youth, with long, curling hair, well-armed and well-mounted (we shall make his more special acquaintance in the next chapter), called out to our guide to halt, and answer in his own behalf and ours. This Suleyman did, not without those marks of timidity in his voice and gesture which a Bedouin seldom fails to show on his approach to a town, for, when once in it, he is apt to sneak about much like a *dog* who has just received a beating for theft. On his answer, delivered in a most *submissive* tone, the horsemen held a brief consultation, and we then saw two of them turn their horses’ heads and gallop off in the direction of the Djowf, while our original interlocutor called out to Suleyman, ‘All right, go on, and fear nothing,’ and then disappeared after the rest of the band behind the verge of the upland. (Taylor 2013: 45)

5.4. *Christian-Muslim Distinctions*

When Taylor reports about the expedition of the Danish government in 1760 to Arabia, and India led by the civil engineer Carsten Niebuhr, his linguistic choices include othering. Taylor explains how Niebuhr and his group expected to be treated destructively when they entered Jeddah; they were *surprised* that the people treated them nicely. Taylor justifies that the local people in Jeddah *were used to* seeing “Christian merchants” in referring to Niebuhr’s group. Taylor’s religious beliefs may affect his linguistic choices, and he uses the adjective “Christian” to refer to foreign merchants, especially Europeans. The way Taylor uses the adjectives emphasizes the differences between the out-group (Muslims) and the in-group (Christians). Additionally, the first sentence of the quote gives the impression that they were expecting to be treated in an unacceptable way as Christian merchants, but it did not happen because people were used to seeing them in their town. This sentence contains othering and unclear information that gives an impression to the readers that the people were generally not friendly. Still, they were just used to seeing the Christian merchants:

The people, it seemed, were already *accustomed* to the sight of Christian merchants in their town, and took no particular notice of the strangers, who went freely to the coffee houses and markets, and felt themselves safe so long as they did not attempt to pass through the gate leading to Mecca. The Turkish Pasha of the city received them kindly, and they were allowed to hire a house for their temporary residence. (Taylor 2013: 9)

One of the journeys that Taylor reports is Burckhardt’s. Taylor highlights how Burckhardt tried to disguise himself not to be recognized by the locals as a foreigner. Taylor’s linguistic choice of the adjective to describe Burckhardt’s new character shows his othering. For instance, he does not use *Arab* to describe his new character but *Muslim* to show the separation between the *new* (fake) and *old* (real) identity. This confirms my claim about how Taylor always emphasizes religious differences throughout the text:

By this time his *Moslem* character had been so completely acquired that he felt himself free from suspicion. Accordingly, he decided to remain and take part in the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, which was to take place that year, in November. His funds, however, were nearly exhausted, and the Jeddah merchants refused to honor an old letter of credit upon Cairo, which he still carried with him. (Taylor 2013: 15)

It is worth mentioning that the reason for Taylor stressing the Muslim character may be because there were some areas where only Muslims were allowed to enter. The European travelers wanted access to all the regions with no restrictions. The following quote by Taylor supports this claim when he refers to Burckhardt’s stay in Mecca:

Burckhardt performed all the remaining ceremonies required of a pilgrim, but these have been more recently described and with greater minuteness by Captain Burton. He remained in Mecca for another month, unsuspected and unmolested, and completed his observations of a place the Arabs believed they had safely sealed against all Christian travelers. (Taylor 2013: 15)

Taylor was no exception; just as Ibn Fadlan's ideology affected his cultural translation, so too did Taylor's. He applied the Christian-Muslim distinction throughout the text and often used negative nouns and adjectives to refer to the 'Other.' Additionally, he used pronouns to distance himself from the 'Other.'

6. Conclusion

In the paper, I examined how ideology can influence cultural translation and lead to othering. First, it is essential to mention that Ibn Fadlan and Taylor came from more rich and powerful cultures than the places they visited. They tried to integrate into the cultures of the locals and speak with them to know more about their customs and everyday life practices. However, there are significant differences between them; for instance, Ibn Fadlan did not try to hide his real identity as the messenger of the caliph. He used this position on many occasions to threaten people or gain benefits. This may be because his delegation included many people, providing him with protection that Taylor lacked. It appears on many occasions in the text that Ibn Fadlan wore the same clothes he used to wear back home. He mentioned adding more layers of clothing when the weather was cold, which he was not used to. He lacked knowledge of foreign languages, so he hired interpreters in his groups to help him communicate with people. This might be why he sometimes inaccurately interpreted other cultures, disliked the phonological sounds of some languages he heard, and described them with negative phrases, such as the "chatter of starlings" and the "croaking of frogs." Lacking knowledge of foreign languages made it difficult for him to hide his identity as a foreigner.

Unlike Fadlan, Taylor attempted to hide his identity by dressing up as an Arab to be unrecognized. The text shows that he deliberately tried to avoid being identified as a foreigner by the locals to have more access to their cities and villages. He spoke Arabic fluently and deeply understood the locals' traditions. Although he hired some helpers to help him in his journey, he did not need to hire interpreters. From the differences between Ibn Fadlan's and Taylor's travelers' characters, we can infer that Taylor was more open to new cultures than Ibn Fadlan. This also might be because his profession as a journalist allowed him to interact with more diverse people.

Ibn Fadlan commented on other cultures both positively and negatively. For example, he was amazed by the Rus clothing style and enjoyed the taste of some apples

he ate, describing them as sweet as honey. Nevertheless, his interpretation of practices in other cultures was biased and based on his own culture. For instance, he disliked how the Turks killed their animals, which did not follow Islamic rituals. As Ibn Fadlan did not identify himself as a travel writer, he tended to narrate his feelings towards what he saw freely without any restrictions.

In contrast, Taylor often avoided commenting on cultural aspects and people's practices; given that he aimed to publish his work in newspapers, he avoided expressing any evaluation in his descriptions. He wanted his readers to be inspired by his rich, detailed narratives and make judgments for themselves based on his descriptions. For instance, he described how the Bedouins used unwashed hands, dirty water, and dried camel dung to cook their food, leaving it up to the reader to form their view, which mostly will be negative based on his description. We can notice the difference between Ibn Fadlan and Taylor's cultural translations, which was more implicit with the latter.

Ibn Fadlan and Taylor's religious beliefs influenced their linguistic choices and interpretations of other cultures. Beliefs in texts can be stated intentionally or unintentionally. In the case of Ibn Fadlan, he uses religious phrases when commenting on people's actions to express his objection; in other words, he is explicit about his religious beliefs, which sometimes influence his interpretations of other cultures. As already known, Ibn Fadlan launched his mission to assist the Volga Bulgar king and build a mosque. He frequently employed religious expressions and phrases before beginning tasks as a religious man leading the mission.

On the other hand, Taylor expressed his religious beliefs more implicitly. He did not use religious phrases to comment on people's actions or describe those who do not follow a religion with negative descriptors as Ibn Fadlan did. Instead, his religious beliefs were not directly revealed in the text; for instance, he refers to Europe and America as the "Christian World" and the Middle East and North Africa as the "Muslim World." Although this may have occurred unintentionally, it revealed his religious beliefs and inaccurate cultural translation.

In their translation of other cultures, travel writers often compare what they are familiar with to their novel experiences while traveling abroad. This comparison leads to a separation between themselves and the 'Other.' The travel writers use various techniques, such as using negative adjectives or nouns to describe the out-group. For instance, Ibn Fadlan describes people as "stray asses" because they are not believers, and Taylor describes some Bedouins as "wildcats" to show their dangerous attitude. Another strategy used in othering is the usage of specific pronouns to differentiate between the in-group (the travel writers) and the out-group (others) while associating negative characteristics to this out-group. As my analysis shows, Ibn Fadlan uses negative adjectives such as "ugly," "dirty," "wicked," and "audacious" when describing

the ‘Other.’ Additionally, he employs pronouns that create a contradiction between “Us” (i.e., his more civilized group) and “Them” (i.e., those who are less civilized). Similarly, Taylor uses linguistic choices to positively represent himself and his group while negatively describing the ‘Other’ and their cultures. For example, he describes his group using positive adjectives like “handsome” while describing some other people with negative adjectives such as “barbarous” and “savage.”

For travel writers to have an accurate cultural translation, they must refrain from using their cultures as the standard. When this fails to occur, the consequence is often a misunderstanding and/or misrepresentation of the culture being portrayed to the detriment of its people, who often fall victim to othering and the negative ramifications mentioned in the article. Geertz’s seminal work in social science reveals several necessary requirements for any true cultural translation, which include an attempt to not only separate from one’s own cultural norms and ways of looking at practices, but more importantly a deconstruction of the culture and its individuals in order to understand the web of significances that shape their decisions and motivate their actions. Bassnett and Lefevere help contextualize this sociological framework into the practice of translation and how literary works like Ibn Fadlan and Taylor’s serve as textual acts of cultural translation and stress the importance of having the translator be faithful not to the text but to their audience. This means reframing the written text to help guide the reader to the intended meaning of what is being translated rather than the literal meaning. With these perspectives in mind, it becomes clear that Ibn Fadlan and Taylor fail to a certain degree in cultural translating “faithfully” as their own ideologies and normative views on cultures distort the cultures under observation. However, their work illustrates the importance of the genre of travel writing in serving as a bridge between cultures that has the potential to either connect disparate peoples or add to further misunderstanding between them.

It is recommended to examine other works by Ibn Fadlan and Taylor to see if inaccurate cultural translations are shared patterns among the works. By doing so, more information on how the genre of travel writing works serves as a cultural translation, effectively or ineffectively, can be determined as well as whether or not their other works have a more accurate cultural translation using the criteria put forth by Geertz.

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