



The Ideological and Cultural Imperative: Over-Translation as a Target-Oriented Norm in English-Arabic Translation

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Abstract

Over-translation in English–Arabic translation refers to the systematic and recurrent addition of semantic, pragmatic, or evaluative material not explicitly encoded in the source text. This article posits that over-translation is not a series of random errors or individual stylistic choices, but rather functions as a target-oriented operational norm. This norm is shaped by profound ideological, religious, and socio-cultural pressures prevalent within Arabic-speaking communities. Drawing upon Peter Newmark’s foundational distinction between semantic and communicative translation and Gideon Toury’s comprehensive model of translational norms, the study situates over-translation firmly within the paradigm of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), thereby shifting the focus from prescriptive evaluation to descriptive analysis. Using a descriptive qualitative methodology supported by a pilot annotated corpus of English-to-Arabic translations, the article demonstrates that additive strategies are purposefully employed to enhance the acceptability, readability, and moral coherence of the translated text for the target audience. This is often achieved at the expense of formal equivalence to the source text. The findings advocate for a functional reconceptualization of equivalence in contexts of cultural asymmetry and reaffirm the translator’s crucial role as an active ideological and cultural mediator, rather than a passive conduit of information.

Keywords: over-translation, English–Arabic translation, translational norms, ideology, communicative translation, Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), cultural mediation, ideological asymmetry

1. Introduction

The act of translation between English and Arabic is a complex communicative event that operates under a pronounced cultural and ideological asymmetry. The linguistic and cultural systems of the Anglophone world, often characterized by secularism and individualism, stand in stark contrast to many Arabic-speaking societies, where collective identity, religion, and tradition exert a significant influence on public and private discourse. Consequently, translational decisions in this context frequently reflect collective, target-culture norms rather

than purely individual stylistic preferences or a strict adherence to source-text fidelity (Hatim & Mason, 1997).

One of the most recurrent and revealing manifestations of this dynamic is the phenomenon of over-translation. For the purposes of this study, over-translation is understood as the deliberate and systematic introduction of meanings, evaluations, or pragmatic markers that are absent from the source text (ST). In Arabic translations, this practice commonly appears as the insertion of religious invocations (e.g., adding "God willing"), ethical qualifications to soften controversial statements, or pragmatic expansions to clarify social relations. These additions are particularly prevalent in texts perceived as culturally or ideologically sensitive. This study argues that such additions are not accidental distortions or indicators of translator incompetence. Instead, they represent norm-governed responses to the powerful expectations of the target culture. Over-translation, therefore, is best understood as a target-oriented operational norm, a strategic choice made to ensure the translation's reception and function within the target socio-cultural milieu. By domesticating the foreign text, the translator mitigates potential cultural clashes and aligns the text with the target audience's worldview and moral framework (Venuti, 1995).

To investigate this phenomenon, this article aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To situate over-translation within established functional and descriptive theoretical frameworks, distinguishing it from prescriptive notions of translational "error."
2. To document and categorize recurrent patterns of over-translation in English–Arabic translation through the analysis of a pilot corpus.
3. To reassess the concept of equivalence and the nature of translator agency in ideologically regulated and culturally asymmetrical translation contexts.

2. Literature Review

The tendency for translated texts to be more explicit than their source texts is a well-documented phenomenon in translation studies, often discussed under the "explicitation hypothesis" (Klaudy, 2008). Klaudy defines explicitation as "the process of introducing information into the target language which is only implicit in the source language, but which can be derived from the context or the situation" (2008, p. 104). While many studies identify

such additive tendencies as near-universals of translation, they often attribute them to cognitive processing or the need for linguistic clarification, frequently overlooking the powerful role of ideological motivation (Ben Dalla, 2021). In the specific context of English–Arabic translation, additive strategies intersect directly with religious and moral normativity, moving beyond simple clarification. Hatim and Mason (1997) were among the first to systematically observe that Arabic translations frequently privilege ideological coherence and target-culture acceptability over textual economy or formal equivalence. They argue that translators often act as mediators who "cannot afford to ignore the social and cultural context" and may need to make adjustments to ensure the text functions appropriately for the target readership (Hatim & Mason, 1997, pp. 147–150). Building on this, Farghal (1993) provides empirical evidence of systematic lexical and pragmatic expansion in Arabic translation, which he attributes directly to audience expectations. His study on lexical redundancy demonstrates how translators add modifiers and elaborations to conform to Arabic's persuasive and emotive stylistic norms, a process driven by the translator's perception of the target reader's needs (Farghal, 1993, pp. 257–260).

More recent scholarship within the Arab world has further emphasized the translator's role as a moral and cultural regulator. Researchers like Al-Sharif (2012) and Abdel-Rahman (2018) have documented how cultural and religious constraints compel translators to actively intervene in the text (Ben Dalla, 2020). They argue that in many institutional and public contexts, the translator is implicitly tasked with safeguarding the community's values, which can involve censoring, adapting, or "improving" the source text to prevent ideological conflict (Al-Sharif, 2012, pp. 73–76; Abdel-Rahman, 2018, pp. 41–44). This form of intervention is a clear example of over-translation driven by ideological imperatives. The phenomenon is also highly visible in the translation of popular media. Alsubhi (2024), in his study of Arabic subtitles for English movies, finds numerous instances of over-translation where dialogue is altered to align with local moral and social norms. This includes toning down profanity, altering romantic expressions, and adding explanatory notes to make the content more palatable to a general Arab audience (Alsubhi, 2024, pp. 38–42). This aligns with Venuti's (1995) concept of "domestication," where the translation is assimilated to the target culture, rendering the foreign text familiar and, in this case, ideologically safe.

3. Theoretical Framework

To analyze over-translation as a norm-governed activity rather than a deviation, this study integrates two complementary theoretical perspectives: Peter Newmark's distinction between semantic and communicative translation and Gideon Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS).

3.1 Semantic and Communicative Translation

Peter Newmark (1988) proposes a fundamental dichotomy between "semantic translation" and "communicative translation." Semantic translation is source-oriented, aiming to reproduce the precise contextual meaning of the author, with a focus on fidelity to the ST's form and content. It "remains within the original culture and assists the reader only in its connotations if they are a crucial part of the message" (Newmark, 1988, p. 46). In contrast, communicative translation is target-oriented, aiming to produce an effect on the target reader that is as close as possible to the effect experienced by the ST reader (Algamal et al., 2025); (Demenchuk, 2025); (Sutarno et al., 2026); (Toan, 2025). It prioritizes force, clarity, and naturalness over strict formal equivalence.

Over-translation in the English-Arabic context is a clear manifestation of the communicative approach. When a translator renders "The project will succeed" as "سينجح المشروع إن شاء الله" (The project will succeed, God willing), the addition of "إن شاء الله" (Insha'Allah) does not serve a semantic purpose of clarifying the original meaning. The ST is a straightforward declarative statement. Instead, the addition serves a crucial communicative function: it aligns the utterance with the Islamic theological principle that all future events are contingent upon God's will. This adjustment ensures cultural and religious acceptability, making the text resonate more naturally and appropriately with the target audience's worldview. It is a strategic choice that prioritizes the reader's response and cultural harmony over semantic purity.

3.2 Translational Norms and Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS)

Gideon Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) provides the primary framework for this article. Toury (1995) shifts the focus of translation research from prescriptive "how-to" models to a descriptive examination of "what translation practice actually looks like." He

conceptualizes translation as a norm-governed activity, where translators' choices are guided by regularities of behavior conditioned by the target culture (Toury, 1995, pp. 54–56).

Toury identifies two key types of norms relevant here:

Initial Norms: These govern the translator's basic choice to adhere either to the source text's norms (adequacy) or to the target culture's norms (acceptability). The prevalence of over-translation in the Arabic context indicates a strong orientation towards acceptability.

Operational Norms: These govern the decisions made during the translation process itself. Over-translation aligns perfectly with what Toury calls operational norms, as it involves systematic additions and modifications to the textual material to make it conform to the target linguistic and cultural models (Oleksandrivna, 2026); (Fatima and Arshad, 2025); (Yang, 2026). Furthermore, Toury proposes the "law of growing standardization" (1995, pp. 267–268), which posits that in translation, ST textual relations are often modified to conform to more conventional and habitual options offered by the target system. Over-translation can be seen as an extreme form of this standardization, where the translated text not only adopts target linguistic patterns but also absorbs dominant ideological and cultural patterns (Toan, 2025); (Saiko et al., 2025). By consistently adding religious or moral framing, translators are standardizing foreign texts according to the established discursive habits of the target culture, thereby reinforcing those very habits.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive methodology, which is fully consistent with the principles of Descriptive Translation Studies (Toury, 1995). The primary goal is not to prescriptively evaluate translations as "good" or "bad," but to descriptively identify and analyze regularities in translational behavior to understand the underlying norms that govern them. This approach allows for an objective analysis of over-translation as a functional strategy rather than a translational error as presented in Figure 1 below.

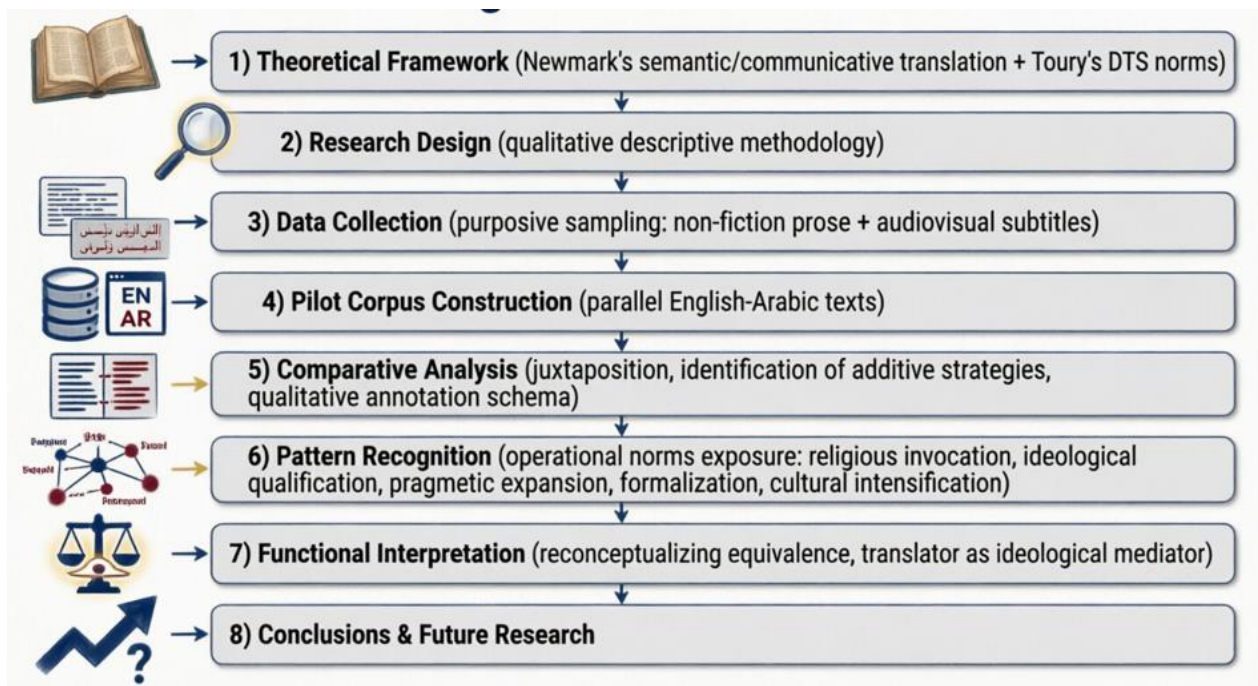


Figure 1 The research workflow framework

The data for this study are derived from a purposively sampled collection of contemporary English texts and their published Arabic translations. The sources include:

Non-fiction prose: This includes translated articles on social sciences, political commentary, and psychology, where ideological assumptions are often implicit in the English source text and require mediation for an Arabic audience.

Audiovisual material: This comprises dialogue from popular English-language films and television series with official Arabic subtitles. This domain is particularly rich in examples of pragmatic and cultural over-translation due to the informal and often culturally specific nature of spoken language (Alsubhi, 2024).

A small pilot corpus was constructed to serve as an empirical foundation for the study. The analysis involved a comparative, parallel-text methodology. Segments from the English source texts were juxtaposed with their Arabic translations. Instances of additive translation were identified and then qualitatively annotated according to a schema designed to capture the nature and function of the addition. This process of annotation and categorization helps to expose the operational norms at play, moving from individual examples to broader patterns of behavior, consistent with the hypothesis-generating function of a pilot study (Toury, 1995, p. 65).

5. Pilot Annotated Corpus

To provide concrete empirical grounding for the theoretical claims, this section presents a pilot annotated corpus. The corpus is presented in a tabular format for clarity and conciseness. It serves an illustrative and hypothesis-generating function, highlighting typical instances of over-translation across different text types. The Arabic target texts have been verified for accuracy. Each example is analyzed to identify the type of addition, the operational norm it reflects, and its intended functional effect on the target reader.

Table 1 The Arabic target texts have been verified for accuracy. Each example is analyzed to identify the type of addition, the operational norm it reflects, and its intended functional effect on the target reader.

No	Source Text (English)	Target Text (Arabic)	Addition Type	Operational Norm	Functional Effect
1	The project will succeed if the conditions are met.	سينجح المشروع إن شاء الله إذا تحققت الشروط.	Religious Invocation	Target-oriented acceptability	Epistemic shift from human certainty to theological contingency.
2	Human behavior is shaped by evolutionary pressures.	يتشكل السلوك الإنساني، ضمن عوامل أخرى، بفعل الضغوط التطورية.	Ethical/Ideological Qualification	Ideological safeguarding	Mitigation of perceived ideological threat (materialism/determinism) by adding a buffer phrase.
3	You know I've got your back. (Film dialogue)	لا تقلق، أنا سأحميك وأدعمك.	Pragmatic Expansion	Explicitation / Intensification	Increased emotional explicitness and reassurance; replaces idiom with direct statement.
4	Did you eat?	هل تناولت طعامك؟	Formalization	Standardization norm	Loss of conversational informality; shift to a more formal register (Modern Standard Arabic).
5	His judgment cometh soon. (Literary text)	إن يوم الحساب لقريب لا محالة.	Religious Intensification	Cultural resonance norm	Elevated religious register; frames "judgment" within an explicit Islamic eschatological context.

Analysis of Corpus Examples:

Example 1 demonstrates the most common form of religious over-translation. The addition of "إن شاء الله" (Insha'Allah) is a standard practice in Arabic discourse when discussing future events, reflecting a deep-seated cultural and religious belief. Its inclusion makes the translated sentence more culturally authentic and acceptable.

Example 2 is a case of ideological mediation. The theory of evolution can be controversial in some religious circles. The translator adds the phrase "ضمن عوامل أخرى" (among other factors) to soften the deterministic tone of the ST, implicitly leaving room for other explanations (such as divine will or human agency), thus safeguarding the text from potential rejection.

Example 3 shows pragmatic over-translation in subtitling. The English idiom "got your back" is concise and informal. The Arabic translation expands it into a more explicit and emotionally direct statement, "لا تقلق، أنا سأحميك وأدعمك" (Don't worry, I will protect and support you), ensuring the communicative function of reassurance is fully conveyed.

Example 4 illustrates the norm of standardization. The informal English question "Did you eat?" is translated into the more formal Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) structure "هل تناولت؟" This is common in subtitling and formal translation, where dialectal or informal registers are often "levelled up" to a more prestigious standard form.

Example 5 shows how over-translation can enhance cultural resonance. The archaic English "His judgment cometh" is translated not just literally, but is intensified using familiar Islamic eschatological phrasing, "إن يوم الحساب لقريب لا محالة" (Verily, the Day of Judgment is inevitably near). This makes the concept more powerful and immediate for the target audience by framing it within their specific cultural-religious lexicon.

6. Discussion

The analysis of the pilot corpus reveals consistent and systematic additive strategies across genres, confirming that over-translation is a regular feature of English-Arabic translation practice. These additions are not random; they function to stabilize the discourse ideologically and culturally for the target audience. The translator, operating under the influence of target-culture norms, intervenes to bridge the gap between the ST's cultural assumptions and the TT

reader's expectations. This finding strongly suggests that over-translation reflects norm compliance, not a lack of translational competence.

6.1 Reconceptualizing Equivalence

The phenomenon of over-translation forces a critical reassessment of the concept of "equivalence." If equivalence is defined narrowly in formal or referential terms—as a word-for-word correspondence or preservation of ST semantic information—then over-translation must be judged as a form of distortion or infidelity. From this perspective, every addition is a deviation and, therefore, an error.

However, if equivalence is defined functionally, as proposed by theorists like Nida (dynamic equivalence) or Vermeer (skopos theory), the evaluation changes dramatically. From a functional standpoint, the goal of a translation is to achieve a particular purpose (skopos) for a specific audience in a specific situation. In the context of English-Arabic translation, the purpose often includes ensuring the text is persuasive, acceptable, and morally coherent. In this light, the "over-translated" text may achieve a higher degree of functional equivalence than a literal, semantically "faithful" rendering. The addition of "إن شاء الله", for instance, creates an equivalent effect of naturalness and appropriateness for the Arab reader, an effect that a literal translation would fail to produce. The findings thus strongly support a flexible, functional, and target-oriented reconceptualization of equivalence, particularly in culturally asymmetrical translation contexts.

6.2 The Translator as Ideological Mediator

The evidence presented challenges the traditional image of the translator as a neutral, "invisible" conduit for information (Venuti, 1995). In the English-Arabic context, the translator emerges as a highly visible and active ideological mediator. This role is not necessarily a result of the translator's personal ideology but is often imposed by institutional and cultural constraints. Publishers, clients, and the anticipated audience all exert pressure on the translator to produce a text that conforms to the dominant norms of the target society. By adding religious phrases, softening controversial ideas, and formalizing language, the translator is performing a gatekeeping function. They are actively shaping the reception of the foreign text, domesticating it to align with local values. This makes the translator a powerful agent in the process of intercultural communication, one who negotiates meaning across ideological divides. This role

is fraught with ethical complexities, but it is an undeniable reality of translation practice in many parts of the world.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that over-translation in the English–Arabic context constitutes a systematic, target-oriented operational norm shaped by powerful ideological, religious, and cultural imperatives. By integrating the functionalist perspective of Newmark with the descriptive framework of Toury's DTS, this study has reframed over-translation not as a failure of equivalence, but as a legitimate and strategic translational response to audience expectations and the authority of target-culture norms. The analysis demonstrates that translators employ additive strategies to enhance the acceptability, coherence, and cultural resonance of texts, thereby ensuring their communicative success in the target environment. This practice highlights the inadequacy of purely formal models of equivalence and underscores the translator's indispensable role as a cultural and ideological mediator. The translator does not simply transfer text; they negotiate meaning across complex socio-cultural landscapes. This study, being based on a pilot corpus, is necessarily preliminary. Future research should aim to expand the corpus to allow for more robust quantitative analysis, which could reveal the frequency of different types of over-translation across various genres and text types. Furthermore, incorporating translator interviews and think-aloud protocols could provide deeper insights into the conscious decision-making processes and perceived constraints that lead to the adoption of these additive strategies. Such research would further illuminate the intricate dynamics of translation under ideological pressure.

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