Lost in translation of modality – some problems of transfer between Arabic and English modal systems

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In several contributions (1988, 1991, 1999, 2004), Nadia Anghelescu has provided us with detailed presentation and sophisticated analysis of categories and functions of aspect and modalities in standard Arabic. She has, like myself, also been involved in issues of translation. In this paper I shall combine these shared points of interest to reflect on observed problems concerning the transfer of modal meaning in translation between Arabic and English.

Modality is considered a complex semantic field in most languages, involving subtle interplay of context with grammar, lexicon and pragmatics: “The expression of modal meanings can vary widely from language to language and has to be handled sensitively and carefully in translation. Modality or modal meanings have to do with the attitude of the speaker to the hearer or to what is being said, with such things as certainty, possibility, and obligation” (Baker 1992:109). To serve the purpose of this paper, I apply a simplified model of modality, but with Palmer’s Mood and Modality (2001) as my main general reference. Examples are taken from various bilingual/translated texts, some with English as a source language and Arabic as the target, others with an Arabic source and English as the target. My notes are tentative in the sense that they are not based on a systematic study of bilingual translated corpora – which would be a next step. I shall first discuss differences in marking, or grammaticalization, of modality in written English and Arabic, thereafter present samples of mismatch in three sets of cases: one syntactic/pragmatic ((rhetorical) questions); one functional (hedging); one related to text type/genre (constitutions and diplomatic documents).

Markers of modality in English and Arabic

A basic distinction of modality is the distinction between a factual and a non-factual/modal meaning of the verbal proposition. In English the distinction is primarily expressed by grammatical means through the use or not of modal
auxiliaries. "Firstly, English uses a modal verb to distinguish a judgment about a proposition from a categorical statement" (Palmer 2006:2, my italics and parenthesis):

Mary is at home (factual)
Mary may be at home (modal, proposition judged possible)
Mary must be at home (modal, proposition judged highly probable)

These modal functions are generally referred to as 'epistemic', having to do with the speaker’s judgment of the truth value of the proposition - the other main functions being 'deontic', which involve the meanings of obligation, necessity, ability, or permission of the verbal event. In English, however, the two main functions are served by many of the same modal (auxiliary) verbs like can, shall, will, could, should, would, may and must; interpreted as a case of deontic modality, the sentence Mary must be at home, means that the poor girl is obliged to be at home.

Standard Arabic has, I will claim, less grammaticalized means of modal distinction. The most obvious are 1) the use of qad + imperfect verb to express epistemic uncertainty, judgment of possibility, and 2) the use of the imperfect of the 'copula' yakūnu for similar function, as in: ʿakūnu saʿīdan bi-liqāʿ ʾika ”I would be happy to meet you” as opposed to ʿana saʿīdun bi-liqāʿ ʾi-ka ”I am happy to meet you” (Fassi Fehri 1993:205). Often the two combine:

qad yakūnu hādāh mawqifan ḥadāṭhiyyan ”this might well be a modernist stand” (Badawi/Carter/Gully 2004:403)

xaṭara lī ʿanna l-qādima qad yakūnu liṣṣan ”it occurred to me that the man approaching could be a thief” (Cantarino I:70)

xāṣa mā qad yakūnu bil-ghār ”he was afraid of what might be in the cave” (ibid.)
only qad:

wal-munāqasha qad tunīru l-mawḍūʿ ”and the discussion may throw light on the issue” (Mejdell 2006, 2:49)
only yakūnu:

bi-ḥayyhu takūnu ”in such a way that she would [still be in my reach]”
inna l-dīna lä yakūnu dīnā ʿilla ʿidhā [...] "religion will not be religion unless [...]" (Badawi/Carter/Gully 2004:404)

There is also, I would claim, a grammaticalized modal distinction in noun clauses ("that-clauses"): a factual meaning of the proposition in the clause is introduced by complementizer ʿanna, while the non-factual meaning is introduced by the variant ʿan (+ verb in the subjunctive1), typically min al-maʿrūf ʿannahu yaqūlu dhālik vs. min al-mumkin ʿan yaqūla dhālika: "it is (well) known that he says that" vs. "it is possible that/he may say that" (this and alternative views are discussed in Mejdell 2006:92-95).

This distinction also runs through a number of collocations, lexicalised phrases, involving modal meaning2: the expression with ʿan apparently corresponds to deontic modality while ʿanna gives the (factual) meaning of epistemic necessity or probability3, e.g.:

- impersonal verbs:
  - yajibu ʿan "it is necessary that/to" > "must/be obliged to" (deontic obligation)
  - yajibu ʿannahu ”must be so and so”(epistemic necessity)
  - yajūzu ʿan > "it is permissible that/to” > ”may” (deontic permission)
  - yajūzu ʿanna > "it is possible/conceivable that” (epistemic probability)
    e.g. yajūzu ʿanna-ni kuntu ḥuṇu:ka ʿamsi
    "it is conceivable that I was there yesterday” >
    "I may (in fact) have been there yesterday”
  - yumkin ʿan "it is possible that/to” (deontic ability, possibility)
    - yumkinuḥu ʿan "it is possible for him to”, "he can”
  - yumkin ʿannahu "it is possible that, it may in fact be so and so”
    (epistemic possibility)
  - yanbaghī ʿan "it is best/appropriate that/to”, "should” (deontic weak obligation)

- other modal expressions:

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1 Subjunctive mood only occurs in Standard Arabic dependent on a function word which motivates/gives it a modal or subordinate value.
2 Cf. Anghelescu 1991 for a treatment of such expressions as elements in the process of grammaticalization.
lā badda (min) ʿan (deontic obligation)
lā badda (min) ʿanna ("must be the fact that", epistemic necessity)
ʿalayhi ʿan "it is for him to", "he must" (deontic strong obligation)
rubbamā "perhaps", "may, might" (epistemic possibility)
in addition to a long list of other lexicalised modalities, frequent collocations such as min al-muʿakkad ʿanna "it is certain that" vs. min al-muḥtamal ʿan "it is probable that" (listed in Anghelescu 1999:138, 132).

Lack of correspondence between Arabic and English modal marking
Teaching and practising translation from standard Arabic into English (and Norwegian), one frequently comes across the need to add modal auxiliaries when translating the Arabic imperfect verb, in order to achieve an appropriate, idiomatic target text. The insertion of e.g. "can", "will", "may", "would", "should" (or its Norwegian equivalents, which are similar, but not identical in usage) depends on the interpretation of the Arabic verb in context. Such interpretation is related to the interpretation of tense and aspect - "la relation temps-aspect-modalisation" (Anghelescu 1988:350) of the Arabic imperfect verb (cf. the discussion of this issue in Anghelescu 1988, 2004), which will often be rendered by an English past, or past continuous, tense of the verb, if the context indicates past time reference. Most grammars and text books will account for the latter phenomenon, while the "modal" interpretation is rarely explicitly mentioned, although sometimes to be inferred from samples. Some vague reference to it is found in Blachère/Gaudefroy-Demombynes' Grammaire de l’arabe classique (1975:251), which mentions "nuances ajoutées par le contexte" and that "cette localisation de l’inacc. indic. dans le futur paraît parfois s’accompagner de nuances secondaires, d’ailleurs assez fuyantes", providing the following example:

kayfa taqālu dhālika "comment dis-tu cela, comment peux-tu dire cela"

Similarly, Beeston (1970:79) mentions the use of the prefix set to convey "a notional concept such as may have to be rendered in English by the use of an auxiliary like ‘may’, ‘might’, ‘would’, ‘could’, etc.”, and according to Badawi, Carter and Gully (2004:364) "[t]he unmarked imperfect. is capable of a wide range of nuances, according
to context, hence translation may often be subjective”, giving examples of modal interpretations translated by modal verbs. These interpretations, no doubt, spring from the aspectual value of the imperfect verb, as not completed, open-ended, including “l’idée de capacité, de possibilité, donc un potentiel” (Anghelescu 1988:349).

The rendering of the unmarked imperfect verb of the Arabic source text into a construction with modal verbs in the English target text is no doubt a common translation strategy. Based on observations and unsystematic collection of samples, however, I came to suspect that certain contexts seem especially to favour such modal rendering. In the following, I shall present samples from three different kinds of linguistic, pragmatic and textual contexts: (rhetorical) questions, academic hedging, and conventions of constitutions and diplomatic texts.

(Rhetorical) questions

It struck me that samples in the literature of Arabic unmarked modal function, or functions requiring modal verbs when translated into English (or French, or Norwegian) often involved questions (and again, often of a rhetorical kind), as we saw in Blachère and Gaudefroy-Demombynes above: *kayfa taqīlu dhālika* ”comment dis-tu cela, comment peux-tu dire cela”. Also Badawi/Carter/Gully: *mādhā `af`alu* "what should I do?" (and other examples p.364). Hassan Gadalla, looking at how Arabic imperfect verbs are rendered in literary translation into Arabic, reports two instances involving modal verbs, both (direct or indirect) questions:

\[ A: li-mādhā yaqtulu Tahiya > E: "why would he kill Tahiya" (2006:56, "hypothetical") \]

\[ A: turā kayfa yufakkiru hādhā sh-shaykh > E: "I wondered ... what this old man would be thinking” (ibid.:57,”continuous future in the past”). \]

For translation, this represents ”a source of occasional ambiguity”, such as is more often claimed for temporal and aspectual references of the verb \(^4\). A good example is

\(^4\) "[…] a source of occasional ambiguity” […] It is the aspectual rather than the temporal reference of an Arabic verb, that can lead to difficulties in translation.” (N. Shamaa (1978) quoted in Gadalla 2006:52)
the title and subtitles found in Adonis’ (ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd) call for a broader Arabic translation programme (li-mādhā nutarjim, Al-quds al-ʿarabi, London, Nov. 5, 2007):

li-mādhā nutarjim, mādhā nutarjim, kayfa nutarjim?

which in English translation may be rendered ”why do we translate? what do we translate? how do we translate?” – but more appropriately begs a modal interpretation and a recourse to a modal verb in translation: ”why/what/how should we translate?”

In bilingual Tawāṣul we find for instance hal naḥfam min ḥādhā ʿanna (A:49) translated as ”Can we say that” (E:47), and fa-kayfa nufassir […] (A:50) = ”so how should we explain […]”.

Moving in the opposite direction, the (lack of) correspondence is properly taken care of in the following Arabic translation of the English modal construction > imperfect verb: Shall I help you? > hal ʿusāʿidu-ka ⁵. Less fortunate is the following request in English from an Arabic speaker: ”i am an Arabic teacher in Cairo, i wounder if someone helps me to find universities in US or Europe [who offer scholarships etc.]” (Arabic-L 02.10.2006, my italics) - reflecting underlying Arabic hal yusāʿidunī ʿahad, imperfect verb > present tense English verb. It may of course also reflect the writer’s Egyptian vernacular yisaʿidni, in which the ’bare’ imperfect verb does have a modal meaning, in contrast with non-modal bi-imperfect – as illustrated in Brustad 2000:235:

\[
tishrabi shāy ? ("potential") \quad \text{vs.} \quad \text{bitishrabi shāy ? ("actual")}
\]

”Would you like to drink some tea?” ”Do you drink tea?”

and

ʿaʾmil ʿahwa walla shāy ? ”Shall I make coffee or tea?” (ibid.: 238)

Let me add, that I believe this lack of modal distinction in standard Arabic is the motivation behind the frequent use of vernacular particle bi- with standard Arabic verbs in semi-formal to formal spoken Arabic (amply attested e.g.Diem 1974, Doss 1985, Bassiouney 2006, Mejdell 2006).

⁵ From a Norwegian childrens’ book (Nattfuglene/The Night Birds) translated from English by Waļid Abū Bakr (Ogarit foundation, Ramallah).
Modality and hedging

The notion of "hedging" is variously defined, but in general terms it represents "a certain kind of communication strategy, […] qualification and toning-down of utterances and statements […] in order to reduce the riskiness of what one says", (Markkanen and Schröder 1997:4). Other terms used are "mitigation" and "attenuation" (ibid.). Hedges serve to modify "the speaker’s commitment to the truth value of a whole proposition", and in scientific texts, one can see them "as modifiers of the writer’s responsibility of the truth value of the propositions expressed" (ibid.: 4-5).

Hedging is considered a characteristic of academic writing and discourse, and is seen as lending an air of careful argumentation and objectivity, adding to the convincingness of the text. While the use of hedges "is clearly part of a language user’s pragmatic competence” (Meyer 1999:13), using them skilfully and appropriately may cause problems even to the native speaker/writer. As conventions of writing and rules of stylistic appropriateness vary across cultures, hedges typically represent an area of possible communicative mismatches: "pragmatic errors […] make the foreign language user sound, in the case of hedging, more impolite or aggressive, more tentative or assertive than he/she intends to be" (ibid.)

Among the manifold devices for hedging, the ones which concern us here are expressions of epistemic modality, especially modal verbs such as can, could, may and might. The one explicit reference I have found to hedging in Arabic, an article by El-Arousy (2004), points to the close link between hedges and modality: "Modality covers verb phrases in English such as "must be", "could be", "ought to be", and "might have"; in ECA [Egyptian Colloquial Arabic] /lāzim yikūn/, /yimkin yikūn/, /mumkin yikūn/; or in MSA /lā budda wa ‘an yakūn/, /rubbamā yakūn/, /qad yakūn/” (ibid.:197). Mostly, however, it accounts for modal adverbs and various kinds of adjuncts in the Arabic varieties and their functions as hedges compared to English.

Khuwaileh (2006) compares English and Arabic medical research texts for "rhetorical use of tense and voice”, and one of his findings is that there is a wide difference in the usage level of the modal verbs may, might, can, must, should and could in the English texts (56%) and the modals qad and rubama [sic] in the Arabic texts (23.6%) – this level still being reportedly higher than in other texts not related
Khuwaileh has an interesting interpretation/hypothesis of his findings, very much in line with the perceived effects of hedging mentioned above: "A suitable explanation for the frequent use of modals in English is that the author could be more experienced or cautious, as opposed to Arab authors, who tend to generalize and avoid caution" (ibid.41-42). And with regard to the relatively higher frequency of modals in medical texts, he concludes: "This supports our hypothesis concerning the caution and awareness medical writers have in both languages".

I looked at random excerpts from Egyptian cultural historian Nelly Hanna’s fascinating account of premodern, middle class literate culture in Egypt (Hanna 2003) in its English source text English (NHE) and its Arabic translation (NHA), searched for modal verbs can, could and may with a hedging function in the source text, and found them transferred to the Arabic target text as variously:

a) can/could > yumkin:
NHE: 2 "could be traced" > NHA:24 yumkin tatabbu’uhu = it/which is possible to follow”
ibid.: "could be identified” > yumkin wasfuhum = it is possible to describe them
NHE: 107 ”The changing relationship […] can also be observed” > NHA: 172 wa-yumkinunā mulāḥazat hādhā al-taghyīr = it is possible for us to observe this change

b) modal verb > perfect; that is from hedging to categorical statement:
NHE:25 ”the kind of person that the educational conditions of the period could produce” > NHA: naw’iyyat al-`afrād alladhīna `akhrajathum `zurāf al-ta’līm ‘inda `idhin = the kind of persons whom the educational conditions at that time produced
NHE:51 ”Their erudition could suggest […] a hierarchy” > NHA:92 wa-qad `awjada dhālikā naw’an min al-tarātub al-ta’līmī = that created a kind of educational hierarchy
NHE:55 ”which may have had an important bearing” > NHA:98 wa-kāna lahā ‘atharuhā `alā

c) modal can /could > imperfect verb with possible modal interpretation:
Conventional formula of constitutions and diplomatic texts

Constitutional texts in the modern world are considered a genre having its own conventions of language form. Dickens et al. 2002 provide examples from constitutions of Levantine states, supposedly formed on Western models, and with official translations in English. Many constitutional articles are constructed as obligations the state is committed to undertake. In English, the typical modal of obligation shall (or the variant for weaker obligation should) is variously reflected in the Arabic versions:

- with ‘alayhi ‘an:
  
  […] wa-‘alā al-dawla ‘an tuwaffirahu = ” […] and the State shall provide opportunities to work” (Dickens et al. 201-2)

- with negation: lā yajūz + verbal noun or ‘an + subj.:
  
  lā yajūz ‘ib’ād ‘urdunnī min diyār al-mamlaka = ”No Jordanian shall be exiled from the territory of the Kingdom” (ibid.:201)

while ”yajūz on its own in the positive, however, is typically translated as ’may’”:

  yajūz […] ‘an yufriḍ al-qanūn = ”may be imposed by law” [<”law may impose”] (ibid. 202-3)

However, we also find the simple imperfect serving in the same modal senses:
**tahmī al-dawla al-ʿamal wa tadaʾ lahu tashrīʿan = ”The State shall protect labour and enact a legislation therefore” (ibid.:202)**

*milluhā là yatajazzaʿ wa-lā yunzal ʿan shayʿ minhā = ” It [the Kingdom´s territory] is indivisible and no part of it may be ceded” (D:201)*

In the Arabic and English versions of United Nations diplomatic texts studied by Lutz Edzard (1998) the most typical modal verbs in the English texts also are shall and should (in general expressing weaker obligation than shall). A common translation of deontic shall into Arabic is yanbaghī ʿan /verbal noun, e.g.: ”due regard shall be paid” > yanbaghī ʿilā u l-iʿtibār l-wāgibi (ibid.: 142-3).

With personal obligation by external force, however, Arabic often favours a construction with ”something imposing on somone”, being translated into shall/should in English, e.g.:

‘anna ʿähkāma sh-sharīʿati l-ʿislāmiyyati tafriḍu ʿalā z-zawji […] > ”The provisions of the Sharia lay down that the husband shall […] (ibid.:137-8)

A clear case of a categorical statement (perfect verb) in Arabic being mitigated by a modal hedge in the English text is:

wa-mina l-muʾsifi ʿanna duwalan […] qad ʿashamat […] > ”It is unfortunate that states […] should have contributed […] (ibid.:102-3).

A borderline case of hedging and use of imperfect verb for modal meaning, is:

ʿinnanā ʿidh narfiḍu […] nushīru ʿilā > ”in rejecting the letter […] we should like to point out” (ibid.:44-45)

while a clear case of Arabic imperfect rendering an English modal meaning, is:

”States shall ensure […]” > taḍmanu d-duwalu […] (ibid.: 142-3)

Lost in translation?
A final note concerns the interpretation of English modals, which besides being auxiliaries, also can have the function of full verbs. I have observed translators lost in translation producing the following kind of mismatches:
"can" as modal vs. full verb "be able to":

"It was so silent behind the door that he could tell something was there" >
ka:na al-ṣamt tāmman khalfā l-bāb, mā yajʿalu-hu yastaṭīʿu l-qawla ʿinna shayʾan mā yahduthu hunāka = "the silence behind the door was complete, which made him able to say that something was happening there" (In this case the idiomatic expression "could tell" is misunderstood)

or, the English verb "will" which can be a verb of volition (= want to) or a future marker:

E: (Arnholm): For your whole life, Bolette. If you will⁶ be my wife.
A: mā ḥayyayti yā Bolette. ʿin kunti sawfa takūnīna zawjatī (= future tense)

or, the English "should", when expressing a weak obligation/proposal, interpreted as a strong obligation ("must, have to"):  

E: you should ask for new ears for Christmas >
A: ʿalayka ʿan taṭlub(a) ʿudhnayn jadīdatayn li-ʿid il-mīlād

Summary

Arabic has a variety of linguistic means to express modalities corresponding to the use of modal verbs in English. One of them is the use of unmarked imperfect, when the context provides the clue for proper interpretation. This unmarked modal function of the imperfect verb is rarely brought to attention, unlike other challenges related to translation of the verb, such as temporal and aspectual interpretations. I have provided examples which I have happened to observe and gather from various sources. In translations both ways between Arabic and English, we have seen the Arabic imperfect verb alternate with more explicit modals for much of the same (modal) functions. A more systematic study, and based on larger bilingual corpora, would be needed to establish patterns of usages. Even then, however, the expression of modality and its translation, due to the subtle interplay of context and diverse linguistic means, will to a large extent be a matter of subjectivity.

⁶ Henrik Ibsen: The Lady from the sea/Ḥūriyyat al-bahr; the Norwegian has "vil" = want to. From Nora's sisters/ʿAkhawāt Nūrā. (An Ibsen performance 2006)
One of the problems I have drawn attention to, is the issue of hedging in academic texts in English and Arabic. One aspect of this issue relates to different cultural conventions regarding academic style in writing, and more generally in academic discourse, in which Arabic writers may seem to favour more direct and assertive argumentation than their English counterparts. This would be the case when the Arabic translation transfers an English verb with modal auxiliary into a perfect verb, or the English translation attentuates the unhedged Arabic with a modal hedge. However, the possible modal interpretation of many occurrences of the imperfect verb could mitigate the categorical impression of non-hedged statements.

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