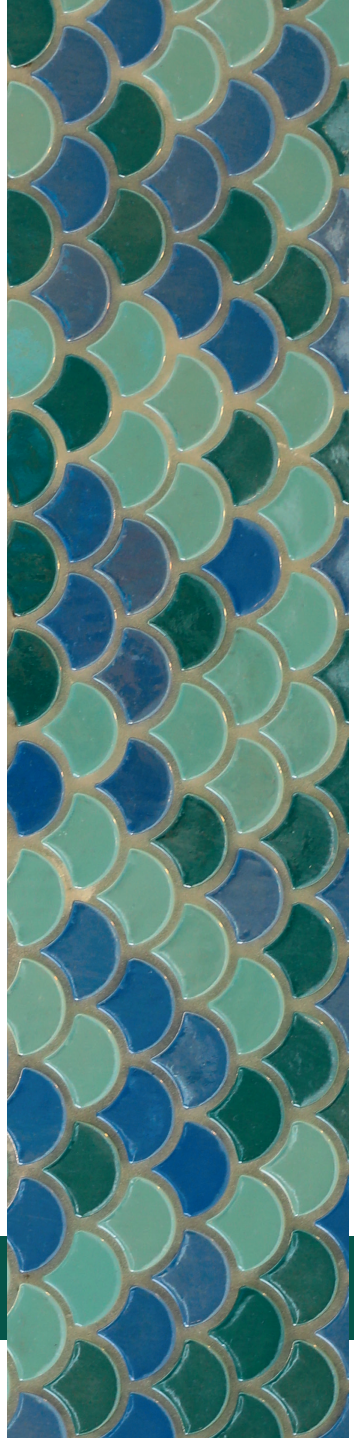


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Ibn ‘Arabī on Translation

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I would like to begin this brief inquiry with a set of observations that directly pertain in one way or another to readers and lovers of *JMIAS*: we are invested in the act and art of translation, taking one of humanity’s most profound and meaningful authors – Ibn ‘Arabī – and explaining him in English, and this for the benefit of ourselves and others. Those who do this professionally recognize that there are formal requirements for such an undertaking, including a strong command of Arabic, a thorough background in Islamic thought, intimate knowledge of the Quran and Prophetic traditions, and deep familiarity with various fields of study in the Islamic tradition, such as grammar, legal theory, logic, and cosmology.

Yet, anyone who steps into Ibn ‘Arabī’s world quickly becomes aware that translating him is not simply a matter of philology and scholarship;² there seems to be a kind of existential prerequisite that informs this task. But even before getting there, we must be able to check our own biases and assumptions about the nature of reality, language, and truth at the door. Commenting on this general requirement for all kinds of translators and scholars, Amer Latif astutely notes that it is to the degree that we are able to do this that we will faithfully convey the intentionality and worldview of the authors whom we are studying:

1. This article is based on a lecture delivered at the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society USA’s annual conference (co-sponsored by Columbia University’s Middle East Institute) in honor of Professors William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata: *Translated Desires: Translation, Ibn al-‘Arabī, and the Multilingual Islamic Past* (21 October 2023). I am grateful to the event’s organizers, particularly my dear friend Ali Karjoo-Ravary, for putting together such a memorable event.

2. Even on this level, one must come to terms with the Shaykh’s concrete (as opposed to abstract) language and worldview, and manage to translate them into commensurate, concrete language. For more on this challenge, see William C. Chittick, ‘The Translator’s Dilemmas,’ in William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany, 1998), xxxv–xl.

Successful representation of others hinges around the degree to which researchers or translators allow the voices of their sources to come through, which is based on an awareness of the degree to which their own biases and agendas are refracting the source material.³

Focusing on the more particular need for a commensurate worldview between the translator of Sufi metaphysical texts and the authors of these texts, Mukhtar Ali summarizes the problem well:

As Sufi metaphysical texts primarily describe realities attained through spiritual experience, they use symbolic language to express something only their authors and their likes perceive. This then is the great challenge for the contemporary translator: to come to terms with a vision, perspective, and experience of reality that is commensurate with the worldview of the author whose work is being translated, despite the many confines of our contemporary languages.⁴

With respect to Ibn ‘Arabī in particular, the ‘vision, perspective, and experience of reality’ referred to in the text just cited becomes more apparent when we understand not only his complex worldview and language, but also what emerges as his own theory of translation. In other words, we may have a lot to say about translating Ibn ‘Arabī, but what does Ibn ‘Arabī himself have to say about translation? Perhaps if we understand our situation as translators in light of Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective on translation, we will be in a better position to discern what he is doing as a translator and, consequently, what we are doing as translators of his writings and as readers of these translations.

While my concern is with the details of Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory of translation, it can easily be argued that this perspective informs the entire Sufi tradition before and after him. This explains why, in his

3. Amer Latif, ‘Observations on Embodiment and Cross-Cultural Translation,’ in Mohammed Rustom (ed.), *Islamic Thought and the Art of Translation: Texts and Studies in Honor of William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata* (Leiden, 2023), 422. See also Chittick’s pertinent remarks in his essay, ‘Rūmī and the Wooden Leg of Reason,’ in William C. Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (Albany, 2012), 201–2.

4. Mukhtar H. Ali, ‘Translating Islamic Metaphysical Texts: Some Reflections on Knowledge Transmission,’ in Rustom (ed.), *Islamic Thought and the Art of Translation*, 437.

Lawā'ih (*Gleams*), 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī – a major follower of Ibn 'Arabī – says, 'The author has no share save the post of translator, and no portion but the trade of speaker.'⁵ It is with this context in mind that Mukhtar Ali aptly notes that translation is fundamentally concerned with transmitting the truths from the divine order to lower orders of reality.⁶

For Ibn 'Arabī, there are, as expected, multiple levels to translation (*tarjama*). *Tarjumān* most commonly means 'translator' or 'interpreter,' and it also carries the sense of being an intermediary (*wāsiṭa*), as in a famous Prophetic tradition that tells us God will speak directly to human beings on the final day without a *tarjumān* to communicate His statements to them.⁷ My focus will specifically be on *tarjama* and *tarjumān* as they pertain to divine speech and words. The classical Arabic dictionaries, such as Ibn Manẓūr's *Lisān al-'Arab*, tell us that a *tarjumān* is someone who clarifies (*mufassir*) words or statements.⁸ It is in this sense that Ibn 'Abbās, the Prophet's cousin and master of Quranic interpretation, has the honorific title *tarjumān al-Quran* or 'clarifier of the Quran.'

Ibn 'Arabī refers to the Prophet himself as a *tarjumān*, namely, the 'Translator of the Real' (*tarjumān al-ḥaqq*), who conveys God's words and 'does not speak out of caprice' (Q.53:3).⁹ In fact, Ibn 'Arabī states that the expression 'Translator of the Real' applies more broadly to: the angel Gabriel, who conveys God's Words to the Prophet's heart;¹⁰ the prayer leader when he declares, 'God hears those who praise Him';¹¹ and the beggar (*sā'il*) who asks on behalf of God in accordance with Q.2:245, 'Who is the one that will lend to God

5. From the preface of 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī, *Lawā'ih*, trans. William C. Chittick, in Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai-yü's Great Learning of the Pure and Real and Liu Chih's Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm* (Albany, 2000), 134.

6. Ali, 'Translating Islamic Metaphysical Texts,' 434.

7. Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Beirut, 1968), I.574. See also *Fut.III.56* and *Fut.IV.496*.

8. See *The Arabic Lexicon*, <http://arabiclexicon.hawramani.com/%d8%aa%d8%b1%d8%ac%d9%85/?book=3>, accessed 5 April 2024.

9. *Fut.I.683*.

10. *Fut.III.526*.

11. *Fut.I.454*.

a beautiful loan?¹² A fortiori, the expression applies to the Friends of God (*awliyā* 'Allāh); hence, Ibn 'Arabī is also a 'Translator of the Real.' This is why he refers to himself as a *tarjumān* in the introduction to his *Kitāb al-'Abādila* (*Book of Godservants*),¹³ and why he asks God in his introduction to the *Fuṣūṣ* to fortify him so that he can be a 'translator' (*mutarjim*) and not a 'controller' (*mutaḥḥakim*) of the truths that have been given to him.¹⁴

What makes human beings Translators of the Real is ultimately their state of nothingness before God, which is exemplified in the emptiness and purity of their hearts, since, as Ibn 'Arabī says, the tongue is an indicator (*dalīl*) of what is in the heart: 'The tongue is the translator of the heart (*al-lisān tarjumān al-janān*) ... and the heart is the hearer of the All-Merciful.'¹⁵ This calls to mind one of my favorite passages in Sufi literature, which goes back to the great Persian Sufi philosopher 'Ayn al-Quḍāt, who died some thirty years before Ibn 'Arabī was born. He tells his students that whatever divine mysteries they have heard from him, 'you have not heard from my tongue – you have heard it from my heart; you have heard it from the spirit of Muṣṭafā. And whatever you have heard from the spirit of Muṣṭafā, you have heard from God.'¹⁶

Let us go back to the Prophet as a Translator of the Real. Ibn 'Arabī insists that in conveying the Quran in particular, the Prophet is its translator in the deepest sense possible, although the speaker is God. The Prophet is specifically a translator by being the most capacious container for the Word of God. Yet with respect to the Quran, as reciters, we are also translators. In chapter sixty-eight of the *Futūḥāt*, which is on the 'Mysteries of Purity' (*Asrār al-ṭahāra*), Ibn 'Arabī

12. *Fut.*I.547. One may also profitably consult Ali, 'Translating Islamic Metaphysical Texts,' 434, where the author explains how even God is a 'translator.'

13. See Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, 397 n.31. Of course, Ibn 'Arabī also announces himself as a *tarjumān* in the title of his famous book of love poetry *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, recently translated by Michael Sells as *The Translator of Desires* (Princeton, 2021).

14. Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Mahmud Erol Kiliç and Abdurrahim Alkiş (Istanbul, 2016), 26.

15. *Fut.*IV.363. The Shaykh then goes on to call the heart itself the 'Translator of the Real.'

16. Translated in Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt* (Albany, 2023), 126.

states that there are two levels of purity required to approach the Quran: purity of the body is required to physically touch the Quran, and purity of the heart is required to be touched by the Quran, thereby enabling one to effectively translate its meanings to others:

The Quran-reciter is the deputy (*nā'ib*) of the Real in translating for Him through his speech. One of God's names is the All-Holy (*al-Quddūs*), which means 'pure.' It is thus fitting for the servant that when he acts as the deputy of the Real in his speech and through his recitation that he be holy, that is, outwardly pure with the ablution as laid down in the Shari'a; and that he be inwardly pure with faith, presence, pondering, and the like, from the beginning giving priority to the recitation of the Real and then following it – acting as a translator for what the Real recites to him and says to him.¹⁷

The Shaykh goes on to note that two types of translation are involved when the Quran-reciter acts as the deputy of the Real: there is a kind of translation that causes the one present with the reciter to be reminded of the divine word through the state of the recitation itself (which is akin to the eyes beholding the written text of the Quran); and then there is translation proper, which comes through the speech of the Quran-reciter and causes the one present to hear the Word of God.¹⁸

A key insight in Islamic theology is that God is the Speaker (*al-mutakallim*). This means that all things in the cosmos are simultaneously spoken to and are themselves manifestations as words of the Speaker.¹⁹ God's speech in the Islamic metaphysical universe is in other words self-reflexive and ontologically productive. For Ibn 'Arabī, all of the elements in the cosmos account for discrete dimensions or aspects of God's speech: each element emerges within the Breath of the All-Merciful (*nafas al-rahīmān*), which is the divine creative breath that brought about the cosmic order.²⁰ Like the famous

17. *Fut.*I.358.

18. *Fut.*I.358.

19. For a profound inquiry into divine speech and the proper human response to it, see William C. Chittick, 'The Sound of Silence,' <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/the-sound-of-silence>, accessed 5 April 2024.

20. See Mohammed Rustom, 'On Listening: Hearing God's Voice in the Face of Suffering,' *Sacred Web*, 45 (2020), 39–40.

Illuminationist philosopher Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, we can also speak of each entity that makes up the cosmos as being a reverberation of a primordial sound.²¹ These entities, seen as manifestations of the Breath of the All-Merciful or as reverberations of a primordial sound, emerge from God's creative command (*amr*) 'Be!' (*kun*). Seen as an articulated book then, the cosmos contains words and sounds that contain messages that are to be read, understood, and followed.

The most important Quranic verse that informs this view is Q.41:53: 'We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in their souls, until they know that He is the Real.' Just as the Quran, as the Speech of God, contains signs (*āyāt*), so too does the cosmos, as God's articulated speech, contain signs. In other words, reading the signs as parts of God's speech is tantamount to translating them. There thus needs to be speech, and hence words, for translation to occur. And since the cosmos is nothing but divine words, our interaction with these words always entails translation. The signs are also found in us, which means that translation has both exterior and interior dimensions – translation is therefore as much about reading what is without as it is about reading what is within.

As already alluded to, translation for Ibn 'Arabī is not just an act of reading and conveying – it also entails careful and patient listening, specifically listening to the existentiating divine command 'Be!' Proper listening will be obstructed by all the deafening noise surrounding us. But if people can rend these phenomenal veils and hear the eternal divine address, they will come to know and thus translate to themselves the divine mercy and compassion that pervades all things, both in this life and the next life. Consider this statement by the Shaykh:

The hearing needs to rend all causal veils until it hears the word 'Be!' (Q.36:82 and passim). God created the strength of faith in the faithful. This power pervades his hearing, so he perceives the word 'Be!' Then this strength pervades his seeing, so he witnesses the Engenderer of the

21. On this point, one can consult Suhrawardī's beautiful Persian symbolic tale *Āvāz-i par-i Jibrā'il* (*The Reverberation of Gabriel's Wing*), studied in Mohammed Rustom, 'Storytelling as Philosophical Pedagogy: The Case of Suhrawardī, in Sebastian Günther (ed.), *Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam: Religious Learning between Continuity and Change* (Leiden, 2020), 1:404–16.

causes. God does all of this from the Breath of the All-Merciful so that, through it, He can be merciful towards whoever worshipped other than Him when He exacts the rightful dues of the associators who declare themselves quit of Him on the Day of Standing.

When He fully exacts their rightful dues through punishment and vengeance, the affair will return to Him alone, and the days in which the associators merited their rightful dues will expire. When the command returns to Him alone, He will show them mercy in what is the rightful due for Him through these veils which we mentioned, because of His knowledge of what He has laid down, and because He made their tongues speak what they spoke and created in their souls what they imagined. So, glory to He who is wise, just, gentle, and aware – He does what is fitting, as it is fitting, and for what is fitting. There is no god but He, '*Doer of what He desires*' (Q.11:107; 85:16).²²

The act of translation, as reading, hearing, and conveying, is therefore a continuous process and fundamentally our existential situation. Since God never ceases speaking, we never cease translating. But not all translations are equal. This is where Ibn 'Arabī's insistence on the purity of the receptacle of divine speech comes in: only in being unsullied by distance from God can we properly convey suprasensory realities in delimited and particularized ways, thereby translating through forms the meanings that derive from the world of the formless.

22. *Fut.*II.414. Thanks go to Professor Chittick for his help in translating this passage.



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