Global Hip Hop: A Translation and Multimodal Perspective

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Abstract
Drawing on translation, paratranslation studies, and multimodality, this paper looks at the different forms that translation takes in a selected number of songs by the Syrian-American Hip Hop artist Omar Offendum. As will be shown, translation in Hip Hop lyrics goes well beyond traditional notions of a transfer from one language to another, to include a variety of textual and metatextual strategies whereby direct translation from one language into another is coupled with comments, paratextual and cultural references. These different translation strategies can thus be examined within a paratranslation and multimodal approach, whereby lyrics, and the translation and paratranslation activities inherent to them, contribute to the overall significance of Hip Hop performances, together with the music and dancing. Most important of all, translation reveals itself as a process intrinsic to the language(s) of these songs, English and Arabic, and a key component in the construction of Arab Hip Hop identity which can shed new light on the debates on globalisation and identity.

Keywords: Hip-Hop, translation, Arabic, English

Hip Hop, which has spread throughout the world, is the result of a complex interplay of globalisation and localisation processes whereby a global form of music is appropriated and interpreted according to local musical traditions and cultures and is expressed through an international language, English, also combined with local languages and dialects. Since translation plays such a key role in the coexistence of different languages and cultures, this paper examines the textual and metatextual strategies adopted by the Syrian-American Hip Hop artist Omar Offendum from a translation and multimodal perspective. More precisely, the paratranslation approach, as envisaged by José Yuste Frías (2010), is particularly useful in examining the relationship between production and reception of Hip Hop songs and their translation. As Yuste Frías

argues, the notion of paratranslation was created to examine the time and space necessary to translate any paratext surrounding the translated text. More broadly,

> The concept of paratranslation was born with the purpose of approaching and analysing the impact of the aesthetic, political, ideological, cultural and social manipulations at play in all the paratextual productions situated in and out of the margins of any translation. […] Paratranslation invites the translator – translating subjects and first paratranslating agents – to read, interpret and paratranslate any kind of semiotic code surrounding, wrapping, accompanying, extending, introducing and presenting the text at the margins and on the thresholds of translation: 'au seuil de la traduction'. (Yuste Frías 2012: 118-9)

The focus on the political, cultural and social implications involved in paratextual interventions, "in and out of the margins of translation", is one aspect of the paratranslation approach which can contribute to our understanding of the semiotic productions related to Hip Hop lyrics occurring at the threshold of translation, as in the examples that will be analysed later. Moreover, Yuste Frías' view of translation as a semiotic *continuum*, taken from Yves Gambier, confirms the validity of a multimodal approach to the study of Hip Hop:

> Admettre la possibilité de travailler aussi aux seuils de ses propres traductions comme premier agent paratraducteur, reconnaître, en fin de compte, l'existence de cette zone de transaction intersémiotique et multisémiotique que constitue ce que je veux bien appeler la paratraduction, c'est admettre la conception d'une traduction comme le passage d'un continuum sémiotique à un autre continuum sémiotique ou à plusieurs continuums sémiotiques et insérer, une fois pour toutes, la traduction intersémiotique et multisémiotique dans la recherche traductologique. C'est que 'une traduction ne s'arrête pas au texte mais à la livraison du produit… multisémiotique'. (Gambier, quoted in Yuste Frías 2010: 303)

Gambier and Yuste Frías' notion of multisemiotic translation parallels key aspects of multimodality, which promotes a view of textual production whereby different semiotic modalities, going from language to images and sound, interact and are equally significant in creating meaning (Baldry and Thibault 2006; Kress 2010). As it is commonly known, Hip Hop, more precisely

Hip Hop culture, refers to a range of cultural practices, which include Mcing (also known as rapping), Djing, break-dancing and graffiti, as well as fashion, gestures and posture. In other words, Hip Hop is intrinsically multimodal and therefore language in Hip Hop needs to be analysed through a paratranslation and a multimodal approach by taking into account how translation and paratranslation, combined with the flow of rap, the rhythm of the music, operate in Hip Hop to create meaning and to create Hip Hoppers' complex identities.

In his book, *Translation and Identity in the Americas*, Edwin Gentzler argues that, despite the fact English is the dominant language in the USA, translation is inherent to culture in the Americas since the official languages are themselves "translated" languages, imported from Europe and imposed on local people, and most important of all, "translation is less something that happens between separate and distinct cultures and more something that is *constitutive* of those cultures" (Gentzler 2008: 5, emphasis in the original). Moreover, Genztler rightly claims that translation has a key role in identity formation to the point of subverting the notion of translation as something that happens between cultures to "something that is itself culture" (p. 7). As far as Caribbean writers are concerned, as Genztler argues drawing on Joanna Akai (1997), "in terms of identity formation, these writers are translating themselves and their own experiences into English" (p. 175) given that, as Akai puts it, the "original" is not accessible while the translation of their identity is.

This is the case of the Syrian-American Hip Hop artist Omar Offendum. As he told me during a telephone interview, one of his aims is "to create a bridge between the Western and the Arab world" and to challenge images of the Arab-American identity, as well as stereotypes about Arab people: "being an Arab and a Muslim, a lot of people are ready to tell what you are not, but it is equally important to tell them who we are, what our heritage is" (telephone interview, December 7, 2012). In other words, Omar Offendum takes on the responsibility of translating his own Arab culture challenging predominant images of Arabs in the West. According to Tory Rose DeGhett (2012), the commitment of Omar Offendum and other artists, such as the Montréal-based Iraqi-Canadian Narcicyst, to Hip Hop is both political

and intellectual and it is a form of so-called "edutainment, music that uses soul and vibe to make rhythm convey knowledge and understanding". Both Omar Offendum and the Narcicyst in fact have given seminars on Hip Hop culture at various universities, while Omar Offendum has staged with the film-maker and Hip Hop artist Nizar Wattad, and the Mexican-American poet Mark Gonzales, *Brooklyn Beats to Beirut Streets*, a performance in spoken-word and rhyme, which includes an interactive discussion with the audience on the role of Hip Hop in youth culture.

Omar Offendum's stage name sounds like 'offend them!' in English, but it also recalls the word *effendi*, a title of respect in the Arab world. In an interview with *Pulp*, Offendum (2011b) has argued: "By flipping it like that, having something mean something so respectful on one side of the world and so seemingly disrespectful on the other side of the world, I thought that kind of embodied the representation of my people that I try to battle through my lyricism." In other words, his stage name, testifying to the coexistence of English and Arabic marking his lyrics, conveys the contradictions inherent to Western stereotypical views of Arabs by showing that languages are not distinct, separate entities in the same way as representations of Other cultures are less the result of what these cultures actually are than how they are perceived by beholders.

Hip Hop culture represents another area, which adds itself to those Genztler has focused on, such as border writing relating to the Mexican-US border, confirming the validity of his challenging view of translation. Gentzler's definition of Cuban Caribbean writing as "a resistant genre" (2008: 175), independent from European forms, equally applies to Omar Offendum's music, which, together with his stage name, are a perfect example of translation as something intrinsic, rather than external, to his use of English and Arabic, as well as testifying to the vital function that translation plays in the construction of his identity. Offendum's experience confirms Homi Bhabha's view that an "original" is always open to translation (1990) as well as his notion of "translational culture" (1994). As in the case of the hybrid multilingual cultures Bhabha refers to, translation is literally and metaphorically inherent to Offendum's music and poetry. As he told me,

The point about my music and poetry is to come from an honest place and the reality of my life has always been being bilingual. One of the reasons I have translated Arabic poetry to English and English poetry to Arabic is that I wanted to show Americans why we are so proud of our cultural heritage and at the same time expose young Arabs to American poets, such as Langston Hughes, and also to Arabic poems since I noticed that many of them are not familiar with Arabic poetry. (Telephone interview, December 7, 2012)

The act of translation, initially through the transposition of Arabic poetry into English and vice versa – he has translated Langston Hughes's poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, into Arabic with the title *The Arab Speaks of Rivers* – becomes therefore extremely significant in defining and redefining Omar Offendum's multifaceted identity as a Muslim, Syrian Hip Hop artist living in the USA.

An interesting example of translation's key role are the lyrics of his song *Syria*, posted on his blog on 29 March 2012, together with the video. This is Verse 1:

"alsha3b yureed isqaa6 al-nitham (the people want to overthrow the regime)"

The purpose of these verses is to unify the masses
7oms up to 7assakeh … Banyas to Damascus
City streets to countrysides
Mountaintops to coastal tides
Muslim / Christian / women / men & children
Lets keep hope alive
Stand in solidarity with all your fellow citizens
Peacefully protesting for an end to all the militance
Torture & imprisonment
Murdering of innocence
Proving that this lying/lion leader's rule is illegitimate
Like father - like son
Mobster or president?
Censoring their people
Trying to stop the embezzlement
Heavy-handed iron fists
Dropped on the residents
Déjà vu...
'82 - '11...

We are all Deir Ezzor … We are all Dar3aa
We are all Jisr il-Shughoor … 7alab & the 2al3a's (castles)

We Are All 7amza... We Are All 7ama...
We Are All Syrian … Hands to the samaa2 (sky) saying:

"alsha3b yureed isqaa6 al-nitham" (Omar Offendum 2012)

A series of different metatextual reference and strategies are adopted here: first of all, the translation of the slogan that protesters were shouting, which is heard in the video of the song, described on the blog as "an Audio Sample taken from the largest Syrian protest to date (Hama - July 22, 2011)". Translation is present through the lyrics but not in a consistent manner. The second line, for example, is not translated, whereas partial translations of single words, such as "castles" and "sky" are provided at the end of verse one. Moreover, intertextual pathways are created through links which contextualise cultural references, such as the one to the Hama massacre dating back to February 1982, which offers a parallel with the 2011 protest and repression; and the one referring to Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb, a 13-year-old Syrian boy who died after being detained by the Syrian government in Daraa for taking part in the 2011 uprising. Another line is translated and two alternatives are provided in Verse 2:

Verse 2

I have a dream this regime will fall
And that what comes next
Will be better for us all
Alawite - Druze - Armenian - Kurdish
Equality in Parliament
"Il-Kull ilo Kursee" (Everyone gets a seat / is represented)
Envisioning a future that's brighter for the youth
Who've been fighting for the right
To shed light upon the truth
Biting bullets from the troops
Thus far a truce has proven elusive
But martyrs are tightening the noose
On corruption - Bribery - Nepotism
Tribal Disputes
Don't shoot with your mechanism
Soon come the reckoning that looms
Second guessing the protesters
Was a recipe for Assad to address his own doom...

Its been a long time coming
And there's no turning back now
Voices are the weapons
In these military crackdowns
Millions on the streets
In defiance of your gat sounds
Look who's got you shook
Doctor don't know how to act now...

"alsha3b yureed isqaa6 al-nithaam"

The two English alternatives provided for *"Il-Kull ilo Kursee"* seem to offer a translation, open to interpretation, as well as a metatextual reference to the challenging nature of all translations, which can always result in several different texts. One could argue that Omar Offendum was trying to get his readers/fans involved in making a translation choice, or at least make them aware of what translating involves, but he did not consciously do so. His aim was to "be as clear and selective as possible" which is why he has decided to make the lyrics available online: "This is particularly important for the song *Syria* to convey the power of its message." (Telephone interview, December 7, 2012)

The lyrics of another song, *Jan 25#*, produced in collaboration with other Hip Hop artists, such as the Narcycist and Freeway, were also posted by Omar Offendum on Facebook. January 25, or better, "I am January 25", is the name of a website, http://iamjan25.com/, with videos and pictures of the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, including a link to *Egypt Remembers*, "an online memorial to remember those killed in the protest for a free Egypt" (http://1ooomemories.com/egypt), providing photos and names of the revolution's victims. The website's name is a further case of identity construction whereby English is appropriated by revolutionaries when they collectively claim "I am January 25", therefore establishing an undeniable association between the uprising and their identity as free individuals. This is how Omar Offendum's verses begin:

"First they ignore you
Then they laugh at you
Then they fight you

Then you WIN"
- Ghandi

I heard em say
The revolution wont be televised
Aljazeera proved em wrong
Twitter has him paralyzed
80 million strong
And ain't no longer gonna be terrorized
Organized - Mobilized - Vocalized
On the side of TRUTH
Um il-Dunya's living proof
That its a matter of time
before the chicken is home to roost
Bouazizi lit the...

and it slowly ignited the fire
within Arab people to fight it (Omar Offendum 2011a)

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, as the system of value people draw on in different cultural contexts, is particularly relevant here. Mike Moore (2007) combines Bourdieu's theory with Michael Gardiner's notion of counterpublic to show the power of translation in creating and challenging culture boundaries in Hip Hop. The counterpublic, as opposed to the public sphere, represents an opportunity to express individuality and is a place where differences and the complexities of language are recognised and appreciated in the confrontation with institutionalised power and authorities. Moore rightly argues that this is particularly true of Hip Hop, given that Hip Hop artists create solidarity by celebrating their difference.

The above reference to Gil Scott-Heron's poem and song *The Revolution Will not Be Televised* is one evident example of Hip Hop cultural capital legitimising Omar Offendum's discourse as a Hip Hopper, and a political activist. Moreover, as Moore states, "the process of defining cultural borders becomes one of linguistic translation" and "culture creates solidarity through shared understanding of historical narratives and imagery. Boundaries of culture, therefore, are boundaries of language. Cultural language, moreover, is controlled by individuals invested with cultural capital" (Moore 2007: 17). Omar Offendum legitimises his identity as a

Hip Hop artist by making use of Hip Hop's cultural capital, while challenging and changing those same boundaries by constantly defining and redefining new cultural spaces. He appropriates Gill Scott-Heron's call to action and turns it upside down by celebrating the power of online communication that has allowed revolutionaries to be "Organized - Mobilized - Vocalized / On the side of TRUTH". Through language amplification, Offendum translates the notion of revolution – a recurrent trope in Hip Hop[1] – as originally conceived by Gil Scott-Heron, into the Egyptian, and more broadly Arab, context by conveying the image of millions of people who acquire a voice and narrate the "truth" of their experience. In other words, translation, or, better, in this case nontranslation, becomes a tool for Omar Offendum to challenge geographical, as well as cultural boundaries. He does not provide a translation of the Arabic word in the lines: "communally removing the tumors of rotten *7ukoomas*", meaning government, nor of the sentence "bawwabit il-thawra maft007a 00 ma ba2an sid'ha" (the gate of revolution has been opened... and we will no longer shut it)[2]. The same applies to the Arabic words included in the song dedication, "This song is dedicated to the brave, beautiful souls that made this Egyptian revolution possible... *Inna li-Allah, wa-Inna Ilayhee Raji3oon*" (http://1000memories.com/egypt), which mean 'We belong to God and we go back to God'.

The strategy of nontranslation is an interesting example of the previously mentioned political and cultural implications involved in paratextual interventions in that it testifies to the complex negotiation of meaning inherent to the reception of Hip Hop music by worldwide fans. As Elaine Richardson puts it, "one of the issues that arises with the digital flow of Hiphop across the globe is the internationalization and recontextualization of Hiphop discourse" (2006: 75). Although she focuses on German-speaking Hip Hop

[1] Since its origins in the 1970s, when Hip Hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa launched the Muslim-influenced Zulu Nation in the US, social change and political activism have been key factors in Hip Hop music. However, while mainstream Hip Hop in the USA, particularly gangsta rap, has been politically irrelevant since the late 1990s (see Mitchell 2001), the role of Hip Hop as a vehicle of political resistance has become prominent in other parts of the world, such as Egypt and other Arab countries.

[2] This is how Omar Offendum told me that he would translate it.

artists' online discourse, written mainly in German with examples of language borrowing from African American Language (AAL), what she argues in terms of the relationship between production and reception of those online discourses is similarly valid in the cases analysed here. While German-speaking Hip Hoppers assume that their audiences will be proficient in German, by the same token, and with due differences, Omar Offendum believes that his fans will recognise revolution as a recurrent Hip Hop trope, both in its general meaning and with the connotations acquired in Arab countries, even though not all of them might necessarily decipher the Arabic words and lines intertwined with the English lyrics. In any case, these artists envision their audiences "to have a level of Hiphop literacy, which includes a heightened consciousness of Hiphop orality" (Richardson 2006: 75).

According to Gentzler, in his work the United States-Mexican border writer Rudolfo Anaya translates from the oral traditions of pre-Hispanic cultures belonging to his past, therefore bridging a gap between the orality of those cultures, whose traces are both present and not present (as argued by Gentzler following Derrida), and Spanish-American written traditions. By the same token, Hip Hop listeners cross a bridge between the orality of Hip Hop traditions and written meaning creating something new, such as song lyrics. Moreover, in Gentzler's opinion, translation is "less translation of written texts than it is a form of remembering and historicizing that extends beyond the constraints of language" (2008: 149). Reading the historical markers present in these novels is like interpreting "a secret code" revealing "a kind of underground culture" (p. 149), in the same way as Hip Hop fans decipher the Hip Hop code and interact with its underground culture.

It becomes clear how complex the negotiation of meaning in Hip Hop can be. As I have argued elsewhere (Taviano 2012), the Sudanese Hip Hopper and political activist Zoulcolm X refers to what James Boyd White (1995) defined as "the virtues of not understanding", when he argues that the English of his Hip Hop songs is difficult to understand for English speakers who are not familiar with Sudanese cultural references, while at the same time claiming that fans relate to his music, even though they might have a partial understanding of his texts because, in his opinion, "it's a chance to seek knowledge" (personal interview, 2012). This might

explain why Hip Hop artists do not always provide an English translation of Arabic lines. Again similarities between border writing and Hip Hop are striking. Gentzler has shown that nontranslation, as a deliberate choice of "leaving a part of the text non translated in order to marginalize the monolingual reader is emphasized by border writers, thereby undermining definitions of separate and homogenous cultures" (2008: 143). He argues that border writers constantly create "polyvalent hybrid forms" (p. 145) by appropriating elements from both sides and by deconstructing binary oppositions between original and translation, source and target, home and foreign. Similarly, the different forms that translation takes in Hip Hop, including nontranslation, is closely related to the complex and fluid negotiation of meaning that goes on with fans listening to Hip Hop music. While, on the one hand, as previously argued, Hip Hoppers rely on the fact that their audiences are familiar with Hip Hop language and concepts, on the other hand they are also aware that specific local references might be not accessible to people who are not familiar with the social and political events and/or contexts they draw upon. The variety of paratranslation strategies adopted indicates that there are clearly no general rules, valid for all songs, but that, on the contrary, this is something to be negotiated case by case.

Another interesting element testifying to the reciprocal influence of the two languages, English and Arabic, and their role in deconstructing cultural limits and exclusions, is the transliteration of Arabic words, such as "*7ukoomas*", with Latin characters, based on abbreviated language used to communicate in Arabic on the internet and in text messaging, known as Arabizi, which here includes the addition of the plural ending -s to the Arabic word *hukoom*. As Mohammad Ali Yaghan (2008: 39) points out, Arabizi is "a slang term describing a system of writing in Arabic using English characters. This term comes from two words 'arabi' (Arabic) and 'englizi' (English)." According to Mariam Aboelezz, Arabizi, also known as LA (Latinised Arabic), is becoming widespread in Arabic countries, particularly Egypt, where it is used in a variety of contexts, including graffiti, movie billboards, food products such as chocolate bars, in a number of magazines, and even in literary works published by Malamih publishing house. Her research shows that Egyptian magazines use LA particularly when referring to objects or concepts

belonging to the local culture but, above all, that LA is acquiring a commercial value since the advertising industry uses it to attract young customers: "Like English, LA has become a commodity that has symbolic and commercial power, and their value appears to be maximized when combined" (Aboelezz 2012: 69). Yet, other studies show that Arabic speakers use LA to express very personal ideas and feelings when they have difficulties in expressing them in English. Most important of all, a survey carried out by Abdel-Ghaffar *et al.* (2011) indicates that Arabizi represents a special code users share as a common tool to communicate through online communities, which, according to the participants, "does not affect their identity as Arabs" (quoted in Attawa 2012: 18), confirming Moore's view that "cultural limits are written and redrawn as individuals control and shape language" (Moore 2007: 17).

In Arjun Appadurai's framework identifying five dimensions of global cultural flow – (*a*) ethnoscapes; (*b*) mediascapes; (*c*) technoscapes; (*d*) finanscapes; and (*e*) ideoscapes – the notion of mediascapes is particularly useful in trying to explain the identity dynamics involved in globalisation processes. In Appadurai's opinion, mediascapes are "image-centered, narrative based accounts of strips of reality", repertoires of images of the world we live in, produced by a variety of electronic means, out of which imagined lives and narratives of the other are created. These images vary according to a number of factors, particularly their mode and the audience they address, whether it is local, national and translational. However, as Appadurai claims, many people live in such "imagined 'worlds' and not just in imagined communities, as defined by Anderson, and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the 'imagined worlds' of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them" (Appadurai 1990: 295). The use of Arabizi by Hop Hop artists plays a key role in negotiating their belonging to the global "imagined world" of Hip Hop as individuals who want to make their voice heard throughout the world, while remaining physically on the local political and social scenes.

Arabizi and the role of translation in Hip Hop lyrics, however, should always be considered within the overall meaning-making activity of Hip Hop performances through a multimodal approach since a supposedly limited comprehension of the lyrics is often compensated by the resource integration principle, whereby

different semiotic resources, such as music, gestures, dance, contribute to the meaning and overall textual organisation. In this sense, the rhythm and flow of Hip Hop, together with the visual images of the video, play a key role in conveying the message of the song *Jan 25#*. This is even more so during a live show since the lyrics constitute only the verbal genre of the overall performance text. From this perspective, a paratranslation approach fits in well with performance and drama translation as aspects of a theatrical work which goes beyond the written page (Pavis 1992: 32). In other words, the translation of dramatic texts is combined with paratextual translations by paratranslators, such as the staging by the director and actors, and the lighting strategy adopted by the lighting designer. Similarly, the lyrics constitute only one modality of the overall Hip Hop performance. This explains why fans often appreciate Hip Hop, like any other form of music, even when they do not understand the language of the lyrics. Furthermore, in the case of paratranslations related to Hip Hop lyrics paratextual, as well as metatextual, factors come into play. Yuste Frías' view on what lies outside a text and its consumption, particularly in relation to open and semi-open places of public and private space is revealing when it comes to the translation of Hip Hop lyrics posted on the web:

> non seulement tout ce qui n'a jamais été compris dans la pagination d'une publication quelconque (livre, livre électronique, CD-ROM, CD-I, DVD, Page Web, Jeu vidéo, etc.), mais aussi, et surtout, tout ce qui étant à l'extérieur du texte reste affiché, vis-à-vis de l'extérieur, dans des lieux ouverts ou semi-ouverts des espaces publics et privés. (Yuste Frías 2010: 304)

Arabizi, and its related code-switching between Arabic and English, together with the variety of paratranslation approaches examined so far reflect challenging views of translation, which go well beyond a definite rendering of a source text based on a perfect correspondence between one text and another, or, even better, between two languages. Within Hip Hop, where languages have a symbiotic relationship, translation does not necessarily involve providing the English equivalent of an Arabic word or expression. It can and it does at times but, most important of all, it has a metatextual function whereby it makes the fluidity of languages

and their role in identity construction apparent. Drawing audiences' attention to the coexistence of English and Arabic by making translation explicit, or through the use of nontranslation, as well as Arabizi, means signalling that Hip Hop English is not simply a passive reproduction of a language of international communication, rather it is a language which cannot be separated from the other language(s), first and foremost Arabic, as well as any other local language involved, and the cultural contexts in which it is embedded.

In a previous article, I have shown how translation, as a key process in globalisation practices and as a critical perspective, can shed light on how English is appropriated and reinterpreted by Sudanese Hip Hop artists in the performance of their identity. Omar Offendum's music and poetry indicate that translation can acquire an even more evident and crucial significance in Arab-American Hip Hop, which constitutes a bridge between Hip Hop in the USA and Hip Hop in the Arab world, in constantly deconstructing and redefining cultural boundaries and identities. Further research on polylingual practices and texts, a product of the global age we live in, from a translation and multimodal perspective needs to be carried out to examine the role that translation, as well as nontranslation, plays in the creation of identity. Analysing identity formation in translation and multimodal terms can contribute to reveal the multiple and complex layers of language and culture composing hybrid identities in global contexts.

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