

# Language, violence, and media: Translating Russia-Ukraine 2022–2023 war from Arabic to English

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**ABSTRACT:** Reporting a situation of war is an intricate activity that requires balance. An attempt not to uphold this balance can have an implication not only on the parties involved in the war but also on the report. This paper examines Arabic-English reports of the Russia-Ukraine 2022-2023 war, considering how the target text orients towards peace. The study has a tripartite footing in translation, media, and peace linguistics, drawing insights from Holmes/Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies. The English translation has been carried out by two purposively selected media organizations, Asharq Al-Awsat and Qatar News Agency, which primarily report in Arabic. We have chosen two media houses in order to evaluate the peace linguistic implications of target texts in private and public media houses, the result of which can draw more attention to this research area. Ten reports on the Russia-Ukraine 2022–2023 war were randomly downloaded for the study from two websites, Asharq Al-Awsat and Qatar News Agency), all in Arabic (source text) and English (target text) versions. The Source Text (ST) versions were duly screened for expressions that describe violence or peace. Such expressions constitute the focus of examination in the Target Text (TT) so that we can identify how they have been translated, which leads to their peace linguistic effect. The study finds an under-reporting (or under-translation) of a violent situation of the war in the target text via lexical omission with the intent of either promoting peace or taking sides with one of the warring parties. At other times, there is neutralization of violence in the text so that the key lexical items suggesting violence are replaced with innocuous ones. The study concludes that the TT is more interested in amplifying the statement of violence attributed to Ukraine's ally and, at the same time, backgrounding their statement of peace. On the contrary, violence attributed to Russia is often neutralized via the use of inadequate lexemes to report events.

**KEYWORDS:** war; Russia-Ukraine; translation; peace linguistics; media; translation

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## 1. Introduction

Recent research in translation studies has focused on multiple subjects, ranging from globalization (Cronin, 2010), gender in translation (Flowtow, 2010), humour (Vandaele, 2010), conflict (Baker, 2006, 2007, 2010; Munday, 2007; Maier, 2007; etc.), paratextuality (Freeth, 2023), shifting (Syed and Ali, 2023)

and metaphorical translation strategies (Liu and Yu, 2023). Such diverse subjects confirm the potency of translation (studies) in addressing limitless societal concerns. While the interdisciplinarity of language and translations is not in doubt (Kolawole, 2013), studies in translation have given little attention to the linguistic examination of translated texts in recent times. This is partly due to the fact that earlier translation studies from a linguistic perspective have centered on the subject of equivalence between the source and target texts. With heavy criticism of the inadequacy of research on equivalence, the attention of translation scholars immediately turned to other subjects such as skopos or functionalism, intentionality and agency. Studies are yet to seriously consider how language is deployed in the media in the translation of violence or peace situations, even though such research would have the tendency to reveal the role of the media as well as translation in dousing or increasing tension or violence in such a situation. In the same vein, peace studies, particularly peace linguistics, are currently engaging in how spoken or written texts may positively or negatively impact a peace situation or atmosphere. But this has not been looked at from the perspective of a secondary text, where translation belongs; even though a translated text may significantly differ from the primary text in construction and meaning. This study, therefore, bridges these two gaps in studies in translation and peace linguistics accordingly.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Media and translation**

Translation is a useful tool amongst media practitioners as events reported by one media outlet may constitute, in part or whole, the report of another. In other words, sometimes a media outlet becomes the source of news or information to several other outlets. This may be the case when journalists from an ESL country such as Nigeria or Ghana attempt to report important events in non-ESL or non-EMT countries such as China or Spain. In such a situation, journalists from ESL countries would have to adopt a translation method, which may either be a diagonal or triangular method. By a diagonal method of translation, we mean that the events have been directly translated by ESL journalists who have competence in the events of non-ESL or non-EMT countries. This is a situation when the media outlet of an ESL country has a correspondent or a branch in other countries. But where this is not obtainable, a triangular method of translation is resorted to. By this, we mean the ESL media outlet would have to rely on the reported events by another outlet for its own report. This implies that a triangular method encompasses a direct one, so that, while a diagonal translation is a translation of A to B, a triangular translation is an exercise that involves a tripartite of A to B to C translation.

Diagonal translation is not necessarily a translation from one language to another. It may also occur as an intra-linguistic translation such as an adaptation of a news item from one context to another. This may be the case during a triangular translation so that a conveyance of meaning between B and C, for instance, takes place via one language, but in different contexts. It is imperative to mention that it is impossible for a media translator to maintain fidelity to (or remain faithful to) the primary text. According to Al-Ogali,

Media translators face the problem of finding a suitable equivalence. They should choose the most common expressions in order to make the target text understandable. They must use common words and common contractions. They have to focus on content words such as nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. They ought to transfer the whole text except in some cases when it requires a summery (sic) translation. Media translators should have special dictionaries to find the right meaning and use it. They should be adequate/natural in translating so that the translated texts become acceptable. (4–5)

While Al-Ogali's submission may be partly dismissed because of its prescriptivism, it is impossible to reject his admission of the difficulty in maintaining the contents of the primary text in the target text. This admission lends credence to the assumption of this research which seeks to examine how Russia-Ukraine war news is translated from Arabic to English, with emphasis on the peace orientation of the target text. Put differently, this paper specifically concentrates on the expressions of violence in the reportage of the war and considers the level of orientation towards peace linguistics. Following Luther as cited in (Xiachuan, 2008. p. 77), we do not expect the secondary text to have a literal reflection of the primary text. Rather, we posit that, since the reported events are about an ongoing war, certain expressions (which may be violent in nature) would form the basis of the report. It is these how expressions are handled in the target text that indicates its peace orientation.

## **2.2. Translation and conflict**

There are a number of studies on the role of translation in conflict or violent situations (Baker, 2006, 2007, 2010; Munday, 2007; Maier, 2007; etc.). There are also Palmer (2007), Tumber and Palmer (2004), Dragovic-Drouet (2007), Rafael (2010), and Inghilleri (2009, 2010) who have contributed to this line of research. Specifically, Tymoczko (2009. p. 184) once notes the importance of venturing into examining how translated discourse elevates, promote promulgate, or downgrade power or violence. This paper is one of the responses to this call. Omole and Bello (2019. p. 65) opine that “‘scholars’ attention is channeled to peacebuilding across the world, and, in the acknowledgment of the role of language in achieving peace, linguists [and translators] take a critical responsibility in this process.”

There are also scholars who have examined how the translation of conflict situations has exhibited power relations between the participants as well as how such relations result in hegemony, power asymmetry, and ideological orientations. In the words of Ayasrah (2015. p. 76), “Translation in times of conflict has become far from a linguistic exercise which brings to the fore such values as credibility and fidelity and, more precisely, makes the role of the translator more ethically taxing, to say the least”. We agree with this submission in that the translator of a violent situation such as war has a double (but symmetrical) responsibility of reflecting the main message of the source text and, at the same time, deciding on whether to worsen the situation through their choice of expression. In other words, to use Stahuljak (2009. p. 298), they cannot be considered “as mere linguistic intermediaries, as an invisible go-between,” but rather as transmitters with their peculiar voice. Since every choice of expression in translation is functional, then translating a war report would have an orientation towards maintaining the status quo or not. Maintaining the status quo would require that the target text be brought very close to the source text. This may be a huge task for the translator as they have to exhibit a psychologically passionless struggle toward the conflict. We agree with Nida (2004. p. 126) that “The total impact of a translation may be reasonably close to the original, but there can be no identity in detail” (126). With this, translating a crisis situation in a text may result in a latent function of either heightening or softening the situation or even removing this situation entirely. This may result in what Catford (141) calls “shift” This paper is primarily concerned with how the Russia-Ukraine 2023 war is translated from an Arabic-source text to an English-target text, and this further requires an examination of the extent to which the translator engages or disengage themselves from report of violence. An under-report of violence from one party indicates an orientation towards peace while an over-report of it indicates an orientation towards conflict.

## **2.3. Language, translation, and ideology**

The place of language in translation is distinctively central. This suggests that translation cannot take

place without language, and any difference between the source text and the target is actually a result of language deployment. One text may be translated in different forms within the medium of one language. A text, whether mediated or not, is a manifestation of ideology so the difference between a text and its translated version is a function of ideological difference, where language use is central. There have been numerous studies of ideology (Wodak, 1989; Weiss and Wodak, 2003; Van Dijk, 2000; etc.). There are also some scholars who have focused on the interaction of text and image to produce some ideological formations (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Lemke, 2002, 2003; Norris, 2004; etc.).

Bello and Alrefaee (2022) have shown how verbal lexis may play an important role in the ideological construction of a written text. Granted that a news item is often influenced by one ideology or the other, translating such an item involves retention of the ideology or an introduction of a new one, depending on the learning and motives of the translator. In Liaio's (2023) "Translation as a Practice of Resemiotization", there is an acknowledgment of the fact that translating a text from one language to another may involve a decontextualization or recontextualization of meaning, depending on the motive of the translator. We agree with this position since, as earlier noted, the difference in the meaning of two related texts is a function of the difference in ideology created by language use. In essence, where an ST and a TT exhibit a significant difference, there is a need to engage in the descriptive analysis of language deployed for the TT as well as the motive behind the use of such a language. This constitutes the focus of this study as the expressions of violence and peace in the ST are specifically compared with their translated versions in TT so that the level of orientation towards peace or violence can be understudied.

#### **2.4. Theoretical framework**

This research draws an insight from Holmes/Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies. This framework is basically on the examination of the translation of the target text, but with a linguistic comparison with the source text. This helps to determine and explain patterns of behaviour in a course of translation, and the significance of that pattern. Such an explanation helps to build a guide or choice for future translation exercises. The present paper adopts this theory so that the target text (English text) is the primary focus of the research, but the source text plays a significant role so that its linguistic features are compared with the target text, with a view to examining the peace linguistic value of the translation. We contend that the translation exercise is an exhibition of an ideology, such that every linguistic choice made in the course of a translation is motivated by a kind of ideology. Since we are interested in the media reportage of a violent situation, every language choice can be geared toward the sustenance, intensification, or downplaying of the war. We, therefore, discern, examine and explain the recurring ideology by concentrating, largely, on the target text, comparing it with the linguistic features of the source text.

### **3. Methods**

This research is a DTS (Descriptive Translation Studies) approach to the analysis of a translated report of the Russia-Ukraine 2022-2023 war from Arabic to English. The translation has been carried out by the two media organizations, *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Qatar News Agency*, which primarily report in Arabic. They have been purposively selected for this study. We have chosen two media houses in order to evaluate the peace linguistic implications of target texts in private and public media houses, the result of which can draw more attention to this research area. Data for the study are, therefore, downloaded from the two websites, *aawsat.com* and *qna.org.qa*. Ten reports on the Russia-Ukraine 2022–2023 war were randomly downloaded for the study, all in Arabic (source text) and English (target text) versions. The ST versions were duly screened for expressions that describe violence or peace. Such expressions constitute

the focus of examination in the TT so that we can identify how they have been translated, which leads to their peace linguistic value.

The choice of *Asharq Al-Awsat* was motivated by the fact that, in addition to its international coverage, it is a pioneer offshore Arabic press. Although it is said to have a Saudi government backing, it is solely a private organization. On the other hand, *Qatar News Agency* has been selected because it is a publicly owned organization. Both of these organizations, in addition to maintaining quality and creating a positive image for themselves by ensuring good translations of their news items from Arabic to English, possess ideologies that are consciously or subconsciously maintained in the choice of representation of events.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Semantic restriction

It is common to have an under-reporting of a violent situation via omission with the intent of keeping up with peace. In a report entitled: “الاستخبارات الأوكرانية: لا مؤشر على أن الصين تعزم إمداد روسيا بأسلحة” (English version: “Ukraine Intel Chief Sees No Signs China Plans to Arm Russia”—Tuesday, 28 February 2023), there is an account of a rumored China armed assistance to Russia, which the Ukrainian intelligence chief denies while confirming the involvement of Serbia and Myanmar. The TT is, however, a gross omission of the involvement of the two countries in the arms support to Russia. This appears to be deliberate. The focus of the ST news is whether China has a strong link in sending arms to Russia or not. The TT, therefore, concentrates on this focus and ignores the secondary issue in order to reduce the intensity of the charged atmosphere about the Russia-Ukraine war.

In another report that signals the United States’ commitment to justice and peace, the source text clearly indicates Biden’s submission of his non-involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war since Russians are not the enemies per se, and they are at liberty to live in peace with their neighbors: «الغرب لا يتأمر لمهاجمة روسيا كما قال (الرئيس الروسي فلاديمير) بوتين اليوم. ملايين المواطنين الروس الذين يريدون العيش بسلام مع جيرانهم «ليسوا العدو»».

Biden’s statement absorbs him from any blame, even though he is in support of Ukraine’s sovereignty and against Russia’s annexation of any part of Ukraine. In the target text of the report, however, this statement has been watered down by the technique of semantic restriction. Biden’s dismissal of the rumor of impending participation is reported, but the key statement that underlies peace—“millions of Russian citizens living in peace with their neighbors are not enemies”—Has been clearly ignored or omitted. That point has been translated thus:

Biden proclaimed “unwavering” support for Kyiv and a commitment to bolstering NATO’s eastern flank facing Russia while rejecting Moscow’s contention that the West was plotting to attack Russia. (aaswat.com)

This translation has, indeed, weakened Biden’s peace disposition, and therefore, oriented towards violence. In other words, the media organization (or rather its translator(s)) appears to have a bias against one side of warring parties (and another bias for another). Put differently, the translation is more interested in amplifying the statement of violence attributed to Ukraine’s ally while backgrounding their statement of peace.

## 4.2. Neutralization of violence

Neutralization of violence often takes place via an English translation of the headline of the source text. For instance, in one of the headlines, “روسيا تسقط مسيرتين أوكرانيتين استهدفتا موسكو” (English version: *Drone Crashes in Failed Attack Southeast of Moscow, Regional Governor Says—February 26 (QNA)*), the key lexical items suggesting violence here are **تسقط** and **استهدفتا**, which literally translate as “fell” (or “brought down”) and “attacked” respectively. These two items have indicated violent action by two sides of the war; one being an attack and the other being a defense. In other words, the corresponding translation of the headline could be “Russia fell two Ukrainian drones that attacked Moscow.” Such a translation, however, has no peace value as it sustains and promotes the ongoing war between the two sides. Thus, in the Asharq Al-awsat English translation of this event, the two lexical items have been downplayed with respect to peace function, so that what should actually appear as “fell” is now presented as “crashes”, and “attacked” now as “failed attack.” The lexis in the source text indicates the culpability of Russia in the air crash. This is made possible by the use of an active verb, “fell” or “brought down.” The violence in this text has been neutralized in the target text by doing away with the agency verb “fell” (or “brought down”) so that an ergative verb, “crash” is deployed such that the headline reads as: “Drone Crashes in Failed Attack Southeast of Moscow, Regional Governor Says.” Without having recourse to the source text, this headline leaves an impression that the drone simply had a systemic fault on air.

In addition, the first paragraph of the report also upholds neutralization of violence:

**ST:** أكّدت موسكو اليوم (الثلاثاء)، أنها أسقطت، اليوم الثلاثاء، مسيرتين أوكرانيتين خلال الليل كانتا تستهدفان بنى تحتية مدنية: جنوب روسيا، فيما قال عمدة موسكو إن طائرة مسيرة أوكرانية سقطت قرب محطة لتوزيع الغاز قرب مقاطعة كولومنا بالعاصمة الروسية

**TT:** A drone crashed near a natural gas distribution station southeast of Moscow on Tuesday in an apparent failed attack 110 km (68 miles) from the center of the Russian capital, the regional governor said.

Whereas the ST opening paragraph clearly confirms and reports Russia’s admission of involvement in the crash, the TT, on the other hand, with what appears to be a peace linguistic move, douses this tension by setting the event without reference to the key actor in the event. While the ST mentions that “Moscow confirmed today (Monday) that it brought down two Ukrainian drones on Monday...” (the researchers’ translation), the TT maintains a variant of the lexical item in the headline, “crashed.” Thus, the TT tilts more towards a peace situation while the ST sustains it by reporting the situation exactly the way it is.

## 4.3. Sustenance of weakness

Often, reports of the Russia-Ukraine war depict Ukraine as a weak party, presenting it as a party fighting hard not to succumb to the ‘ruthlessness’ of Ukraine. Such reports present the country as a party in need of military support, and at other times, as one soliciting military aid from other countries. The Arabic version of QNA reports has not substantially deviated from this norm, and the translated version, admittedly, has also upheld this presentation in many of the reports. While such translations may appear as fair, they are nonetheless an ideological statement about the leaning of the newspaper to Russia. In other words, any attempt that puts Ukraine in a disadvantageous position is an advantage to Russia, which, as shown in our earlier discussion, has been regularly shielded from blame in some of the English versions of the reports considered.

طوكيو في 21 مايو /قنا/ كشف الرئيس الأمريكي جو بايدن اليوم، عن حزمة جديدة من المساعدات العسكرية لأوكرانيا، متعهدا للرئيس **ST** الأوكراني فولوديمير زيلينسكي خلال اجتماع في اليابان بأن تبذل الولايات المتحدة كل ما في وسعها لتعزيز قدرات كييف الدفاعية في الحرب مع روسيا.

**TT:** US President Joe Biden announced a new package of military aid to Ukraine on Sunday and told President Volodymyr Zelensky during a meeting in Japan that the United States was doing all it could to strengthen Ukraine's defense for the war with Russia.

The extract above shows that a group of powerful countries have taken it upon themselves to aid Ukraine. What is surprising in most of the comments by the group is that it has always announced that its actions are usually motivated by the need to "strengthen Ukraine's defense." This has, at least, two implications. One is that Ukraine's defense cannot withstand Russia's proper offensives. In other words, the latter country has a military advantage over the other. It is this reality that calls for military support from the group. In other to also weaken the stronger side of the warring parties, the group activates a number of economic sanctions to suffocate Russia and bring her to a halt in prosecuting the ongoing war.

The second implication is that all the support given to Ukraine might not be enough to win the war. It is rather to sustain the war for a longer time until Russia gets tired or loses interest in it or even becomes frustrated by Ukraine's resilience. By and large, this second implication still points to Ukraine's loss, whether it succumbs to Russia's demands or not. There is loss of lives and livelihood, economic and social infrastructures, and political and religious monuments. There is ample evidence from original and translated reports as shown below:

أكد الرئيس الأميركي جو بايدن، الثلاثاء، أن الدعم لأوكرانيا «لن يضعف» وأوكرانيا «تبقى حرة»، وذلك خلال إلقائه خطابا في بولندا قبيل الذكرى السنوية الأولى للغزو الروسي Asharq AL-awsat (aawsat.com).

US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday Ukraine "stands strong" a year after the Russian invasion and that Moscow would never defeat its neighbor after the Kremlin suspended a landmark nuclear arms control treaty over the West's support for Kyiv.

In another similar report: طوكيو في 21 مايو /قنا/ كشف الرئيس الأمريكي جو بايدن اليوم، عن حزمة جديدة من المساعدات العسكرية لأوكرانيا، متعهدا للرئيس الأوكراني فولوديمير زيلينسكي خلال اجتماع في اليابان بأن تبذل الولايات المتحدة كل ما في وسعها لتعزيز قدرات كييف الدفاعية في الحرب مع روسيا.

Tokyo, May 21 (QNA)—US President Joe Biden announced a new package of military aid to Ukraine on Sunday and told President Volodymyr Zelensky during a meeting in Japan that the United States was doing all it could to strengthen Ukraine's defense for the war with Russia.

This, more or less, makes it appear that the war is beyond Russia and Ukraine per se, as the former looks toward meeting some objectives by invading the latter. Indeed, achieving those objectives does not only affect Ukraine but also the interests of some of its allies. Thus, in all of these, while the lexical items, *لن يضعف* and *المساعدات العسكرية لتعزيز قدرات كييف الدفاعية* have their corresponding translations as in the excerpts above ("stands strong", "military aid" and "strengthen Ukraine's defense"), they have nonetheless, albeit indirectly, portrayed Ukraine as a weaker party.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examines how expressions of violence or peace are translated from Arabic reports of the Russia-Ukraine 2023 war to English, drawing insights from Holmes/Toury DTS. The study is done based on the realization that a secondary text may not necessarily have a full reflection of the primary text. Thus, in the reported events about an ongoing war, certain expressions (which may be violent in nature)

would form the basis of the report. How expressions are handled in the target text constitutes the focus of the study.

Findings show an under-reporting of a violent situation via omission with the intent of keeping up with peace, particularly when this violence comes from the Russian side. This shows that, whenever the central message of the report in the ST is not about a violent event per se, the TT ignores the statement of violence, considering it a secondary issue in order to, perhaps, reduce the intensity of the already charged atmosphere about the Russia-Ukraine war. In the same vein, where an ally of Ukraine makes a statement of peace, this is often downplayed in the TT.

At other times, violence is completely neutralized in the TT. This often takes place by using a lexical item of lower semantic significance to report an event. Where the ST clearly confirms and reports Russia's admission of involvement in violence, the TT, in what appears to be a peace linguistic move, douses this tension by setting the event without reference to the key actor. We, therefore, conclude that the TT is more interested in amplifying the statement of violence attributed to Ukraine's ally and, at the same time, backgrounding their statement of peace. On the contrary, violence attributed to Russia is often neutralized via the use of inadequate lexemes to report events.

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## **Conflict of interest**

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