Reading between the Lines

A World of Interlinear Translation

Ronit Ricci*

Australian National University

ronit.ricci@anu.edu.au

Abstract

Interlinear translations from Arabic into Malay and Javanese have been produced in Southeast Asia since at least the sixteenth century. Such translations included an Arabic original with its lines spaced out on the page and a word for word translation appearing between the lines, attempting to replicate the Arabic down to the smallest detail. This essay engages with the theme of World Literature and translation by (1) considering the interlinear text as microcosm: a world of intent and priorities, of a transfer of meaning, of grammar and syntax in translation, of choices and debates, and (2) by thinking of Arabic writing during an earlier period as a world literature sought after in many regions, whose translation in diverse forms and tongues had a vast impact on languages and literary cultures.

Keywords

interlinear translation – Malay – Javanese – Arabic – translation metaphors – literary culture – van Ronkel – Southeast Asia

Introduction

In this essay I consider interlinear translation from Arabic to Malay and Javanese of the kind produced in Southeast Asia, common across the regions now making up the nation states of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, as well

* I thank Mr. B.D.K. Saldin of Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, for generously allowing me access to the Malay Compendium.

as parts of Thailand and the Philippines. Interlinear translation provides the reader with a word for word rendering of an Arabic text, with Malay or Javanese “equivalents” appearing in between the Arabic lines on the page. Originating in the translation of religious texts, a realm in which precision and accuracy were highly valued, this translation paradigm tells us more than any other about the mechanics of translation and the unavoidable choices inherent in every translation act.

What in fact transpires between the lines? The question of untranslatability has been all too often ignored or sidelined in debates in Translation Studies and World Literature (Apter 8–9) but is one that should be integrated into discussions of all forms of translation, interlinear ones included.¹ Interlinear translation does not contradict the idea that “perfect” translation is utopian. It does, however, come closer to “success” than other translation models in its attempts to overcome the problem of untranslatability, to find equivalents for even small grammatical particles like prepositions or suffixes, an attempt that can go so far in trying to replicate the original text’s syntax that the translated sentence compromises its semantic meaning.

Although the earliest surviving manuscript testifying to interlinear translation in Muslim Southeast Asia dates from the sixteenth century, it is likely that such translation was practiced even earlier. The indefinite article “a” in the subtitle of this essay, “a world of interlinear translation,” implies that my discussion is of a particular tradition of interlinear translation and is in no way exhaustive in dealing with this practice, diverse as it is and known from different parts of the world. I seek to address the question of what this tradition of interlinear translation encompasses and conveys; and to highlight the idea of a world unfolding as we explore such translations closely: a microcosm in which two languages meet, mix and divulge in and between the page’s alternating lines. Finally, I suggest that the practice of interlinear translation—limited as it seems in theme and context and bound by quite rigid and consistent rules—was a trigger for wide ranging linguistic and cultural change. Despite the specificity of the case presented I suggest that the patterns and insights emerging from it can be useful in exploring additional translation contexts.

1 On the question of untranslatability in a non-European context, see Ricci “Untranslatability”.

Background

Interlinear translation had a long history in the Muslim world before its adoption by translators in Southeast Asia. It originated in the practice of interlinear translation of the Qur'an in the early translations from Arabic to Persian which, according to the Hanafi school, were permitted only if the Persian was accompanied by the Arabic original, with a word for word translation (a *tarjamah musawiyah*, "equivalent translation"). Later translations by Muslims into other languages tended to follow this pattern (Tibawi 16).

In a brief essay on interlinear translation in the Indonesian-Malay world Azyumardi Azra (2009) noted that the earliest known Arabic-Malay exemplar is found in a manuscript of *'Aqā'id* by al-Nasafi from the late sixteenth century. He also listed the three main writing categories for which such translations were employed in the region: *tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Qur'anic interpretation), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *tassawuf* (Islamic mysticism). Interlinear translation became very popular in the region, as testified by a range of examples in a variety of local languages including Sundanese, Javanese, Malay and others. Such translations, despite the wealth of information they can offer, have been little studied. The work of the Dutch scholar van Ronkel, who published a pioneering article on the topic in 1899, provides an exception to the general silence on the subject. Van Ronkel's main claim, based on a wealth of examples, was that there was a striking uniformity in the way Malay scholars and scribes translated Arabic words, idioms and grammatical particles such as prepositions into Malay. He showed how they also tended to standardize the way in which markers of gender, number and tense—omnipresent in Arabic but not in Malay—were rendered in a manner that could be understood and internalized by the texts' audiences. Further, he claimed that interlinear translation not only impacted content appropriated or adapted in a new language and culture, but also linguistic structures, including syntax at the sentence level (498–528).²

In order to make the present discussion less abstract, I turn to examine a brief example taken from an early nineteenth century Malay compendium of various texts inscribed in colonial Ceylon.³ The discussion will

2 More recently the influence of Arabic on Malay was taken up by Skinner.

3 Malay was employed in colonial Ceylon by members of a small minority brought to Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) by the Dutch and later British colonizers of the island from across the Indonesian archipelago. For an introduction to their history and literary culture, see Ricci "Asian and Islamic."

highlight a few of the core principles followed in interlinear translations of religious texts in the Indonesian-Malay world.

The Caliphs' Words: from Arabic to Malay

The following example records the well-known replies offered by the Prophet Muhammad's four Companions and first four Caliphs when asked about God (Arabic in bold, with Malay beneath it, see figure 1):

Mā rāitu	shay'ān	illā wa rāitu	Allāh qablahu	Abu Bakar
Tiada melihat aku di dalam satu2		tetapi aku melihat Allah di dalam badan		satuz
Mā rāitu	shay'ān	illā wa rāitu	Allāh ba'dahu	'Umar
Tiada melihat aku di dalam satu2		tetapi aku melihat Allah di dalam		sesudahnya satuz
Mā rāitu	shay' ān	illā wa rāitu	Allāh	'Uthmān
Tiada melihat aku di dalam satu2		tetapi aku melihat Allah di dalam sarata		satuz
Mā rāitu	shay' ān	illā wa rāitu	Allāh fihi	'Alī
Tiada melihat aku di dalam satu2		tetapi aku melihat Allah di dalam qalbu		satuz

The Arabic can be translated into English as:

I see nothing without seeing God before it Abu Bakar
 I see nothing without seeing God behind it 'Umar
 I see nothing without seeing God along with it 'Uthmān⁴
 I see nothing without seeing God within it 'Alī⁵

-
- 4 An Arabic word (*ma'ahu*—with it, along with it) is missing in the original and I have filled it in based on the traditional citation of 'Uthmān's words.
 - 5 At the risk of stating the obvious I will add here that the translation into English introduces an additional level of complexity and distance from the Arabic source. The translation here attempts to be idiomatic rather than literal (thus "I see nothing" rather than the more literal "I do not see a thing") whereas the Malay interlinear translation tradition constitutes precisely

The four Caliphs, Abu Bakar, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and 'Alī, are listed in chronological order and their names appear in red at the end of the Arabic lines. Their identity is thus highlighted and it is clear that their names do not form part of the quotations. The names appear only once and so can be understood as “belonging” to both languages concurrently. Taken together, the Caliphs’ definitions complement one another and map the physical world as entirely pervaded by God, who is palpable to his believers in and from all angles of any given object. The Malay translation is an attempt to conform as literally as possible to the Arabic. It also reflects a context of at least partial orality in which such texts were transmitted in person from teacher to disciple, a practice that could explain certain omissions and mistakes.⁶

Let us look more closely at the first line, presenting the words of Abu Bakar:

Mā rāitu	shay'ān	illā wa rāitu	Allāh qablahu	
				Abu Bakar
Tiada melihat aku di dalam satu2 tetapi aku melihat Allah di dalam badan				
				satu2

The Malay is rendered according to the verb-subject order of the Arabic verb form, thus *tiada melihat aku* rather than the expected *tiada kulihat* or, even more conventionally, *aku tidak melihat*. Malay *aku* (“I”) here stands for the Arabic suffix “tu” indicating first person singular in the present tense (*rāitu*—I see), even though Malay verbs remain uninflected (i.e. *melihat* can be used with any person, number or tense to indicate “see” or “look”); Arabic *shay'ān*—a thing, here “anything”—is rendered by several words: *di dalam* means “in, inside,” and *satu*, a variant of *suatu*, refers to “one, any, a single thing,” with its repetition (*suatu-suatu*) indicating emphasis: “anything.” Thus the first part of the Malay sentence can be translated as “I do not see in anything,” or “I do not look at anything.”

Arabic *illā*—without—is translated by Malay *tetapi*: “but, however, nevertheless.” Interestingly in the second appearance in Abu Bakr’s words of Arabic *rāitu*—“I see”—we find a much more idiomatic Malay phrase: *aku melihat*, following its typical subject-verb order. God’s name is left as is.

Finally, Arabic *qablahu*—“before it, in front of it, preceding it” indicating both a temporal and spatial dimension when God is concerned appears in

the opposite: an attempt to record the Arabic as closely as possible, at times not just at the cost of being non-idiomatic but also unclear.

6 I thank Professor Emeritus Anthony Johns of the Australian National University for discussing this Arabic passage and its Malay translation with me.

FIGURE 1 Malay Compendium, Ceylon, 1803

COURTESY OF MR. B.D.K. SALDIN, DEHIWALA, SRI LANKA

Malay as *di dalam badan satu-satu*: “in any body, or object” (*badan*).⁷ This could be an error, as the translator may have written *di dalam* (“in, inside”) rather than *di depan* (“in front of”) with *badan* translating Arabic *hu*, indicating “it”

⁷ I thank Anwar Ben-Badis for discussing the Arabic terms and their meanings with me.

("in front of it"). However, since the phrase *di dalam* appears very consistently in all four lines, it may also be that the translator selected it—with its various meanings having to do with that which is inner, deep, profound—to emphasize God's all-pervading nature, the text's theme. In this (more likely) case, *depan* ("in front") may have been mistakenly replaced by *badan*, as the latter appears in the sentence where the positional term should be. We can thus translate the second part of the Malay sentence as "without seeing God in front of anything, that thing, it," and the full sentence as: I do not look at anything without seeing God in front of it.

Such close readings, and one could go further and deeper than the brief analysis presented above, are of little interest to those unfamiliar with the languages examined, and I will therefore not proceed to the next three lines. It may just be mentioned that even such a small text reveals both accurate translation strategies as well as misunderstandings and expansions of meaning. In the second line 'Umar is quoted as saying he sees nothing without seeing God behind, or after it (*ba'dahu*), rendered in Malay as *sesudahnya* (after it), a temporal rather than a spatial designation indicating positionality; the third Arabic line, citing 'Uthman, is missing its positional term which, according to tradition should be *ma'ahu* ("with it"), yet the Malay fills in the gap with *sarata*: "all, all over," so that the sentence means "I do not see anything without seeing God all over it," a certain variation. Another variation, or rather expansion likely based on a teacher's guiding words appears in the final line where the Arabic *fihī* ("in it") is rendered as *di dalam qalbu satu-satu*: "in that thing, [its] heart." These are the words of 'Ali, the last Caliph and one whose words and deeds provide special inspiration to the Sufis. And so, fittingly, it seems the Malay teacher or disciple understood the within-ness in his words as relating to the heart, God as residing in all hearts, God as the heart of everything.⁸

Beyond Translation

The example of the Caliphs' Arabic words rendered in Malay highlights changes in word order, subject verb position, tense and emphasis that transpired through the act of word for word translation. Although it includes elements that remain unclear and open to speculation, certainly when explored through

8 The four lines of this small Arabic text have been widely interpreted and are viewed as offering a profound truth whose explication is obviously beyond the scope of my discussion. I have limited myself to the linguistic and grammatical aspects and the basic content.

time and without the guidance of a learned teacher familiar with contemporary translation conventions, it offers a sense of attempts made at precision and duplication of the Arabic that shaped Malay significantly in new ways.

Interlinear translation in the Indonesian-Malay world can and should be studied in its own right, with attention paid to texts selected for translation, methods employed and outcomes produced. No less important and in some ways even more intriguing, is considering the process of linguistic and cultural change initiated and facilitated by such translation practices and the far reaching, even dramatic transformations they produced.

Van Ronkel, already mentioned above, concluded that such translations had a powerful influence in reshaping not only Malay vocabulary (a fact that is easily noticeable to any Malay, Indonesian or Javanese speaker familiar with Arabic) but also in recasting the more subtle realm of Malay syntax. For example, he found that the Arabic preposition *bi* was consistently translated as *dengan*, and so the phrase *bismillah* ("in the name of God") was translated into Malay as *dengan nama*, rather than the more conventional *atas nama* (van Ronkel 23–25). Such patterns were then gradually assimilated into texts that were not interlinear translations, generalized and incorporated into the Malay language, gaining a life of their own that was no longer dependent on a detailed translation strategy. Using Arabic syntax to write Malay thus gradually became more habitual, so much so that it is clearly visible in examples taken from the *hikayat* genre, often recounting tales of love, adventure and travel that have little to do with religion (van Ronkel 20–31).⁹

More recently, in his study of the writings of the Javanese religious scholar Muhammad Salih Darat, Saiful Umam showed a similar tendency of Arabic syntactical influence in the context of nineteenth century Java. Salih was well versed in the tradition of the Islamic *pesantren* schools where Arabic to Javanese interlinear translations were used on a regular basis. And so, when he composed commentaries on Arabic texts, he used a form of Javanese highly influenced by that tradition of religious learning. Similar to van Ronkel's findings for Malay, Umam detected a clearly Arabic structure to Salih's Javanese sentences, both nominal and verbal. For example, he often began a sentence with a verb as predicate followed by a noun in the subject position, rather than the idiomatic Javanese which tends to begin with a subject followed by a verb as predicate (Umam 256–257).

9 Van Ronkel showed also how various irregular constructions in Malay can be understood if retranslated (i.e. "translated backwards") into Arabic.

What emerges from both studies is how language worlds were irrevocably altered by the practice of interlinear translation. Such changes encompassed grammatical and syntactical structures, sounds pronounced, vocabulary added and lost and the inclusion of hitherto unfamiliar idioms, images and concepts that shaped new ways of thinking. In this process movement can be detected in more than one direction: translation moved the Arabic text away from its place of origin, the physical book (or memorized text) carried by travelers or traders across land and sea to a faraway site, to be re-inscribed in very different natural and social environments that offered new frames of reference and interpretation; translation also “moved” the Austronesian and local Malay and Javanese languages closer to a Semitic and sanctified Arabic and pointed them in the direction of change, expansion and new possibilities, so that all these languages were more “out in the world” than they had previously been, exposed and influential concurrently.

Interestingly, both studies also underscore how interlinear translation from Arabic into Javanese and Malay seems to have consisted, at least to a degree, of Malay (or Javanese) vocabulary “glued together” by Arabic grammar. This is in marked contrast, I would suggest, to an earlier, pre-Islamic phase of translation (albeit not interlinear) in the Indonesian archipelago (circa ninth to fourteenth centuries) when many works of Indian origin were translated and adapted into Old Javanese. In those earlier works much of the vocabulary derived from Sanskrit while the grammatical cohesion for the most part remained Javanese (Becker and Hunter 94). The contrast (local grammar, foreign words in the Sanskrit-Indian case; local words, foreign-inflected grammar in the Arabic-Islamic one) raises questions about how and why two such different models developed for translations made into the same language, in this case Javanese?

Metaphors of Translation

Exploring an interlinear translation is about reading between the lines, concretely and metaphorically. After presenting the former—a concrete reading—in the previous section, I turn now to a consideration of several metaphors as a way to better understand how this particular form of translation has been conceptualized and imagined.

English “interlinear” is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as that which is (1) inserted between lines already written or printed or (2) written or printed in different languages or texts in alternate lines (Merriam-Webster). In the Malay and Javanese traditions this definition refers to an Arabic text written on the page, often with wide spacing and in dark ink, with a word-for-

word Malay translation written between the Arabic lines. As seen in figure 1, the Malay in such volumes is written in jawi, a modified form of the Arabic script that to the untrained eye can look identical to Arabic although unvocalized, with the script often smaller and written in lighter ink. In such cases, which are many, the authority of the Arabic text is highlighted visually on the page through size and color. Its lines can be seen as framing each Malay line on both its sides or, depending on the eye of the beholder, the lines may be viewed as alternating between the two languages, flowing from and into each other by way of their shared script. The visual aspect of such interlinear translations is not, I would suggest, marginal, but rather makes up one of several dimensions that take us beyond the initial tendency to consider, above all, the content-categories of text and translation.

The English word “interlinear” describes a central, yet particular aspect of the translation texts, while also shaping what we see as we approach the page: a set of lines (dark, light, with writing of various sizes, with or without vocalization, straight or tilted) that can be viewed as separate, linked, merged, in dialogue, or all of the above. Turning to other ways of naming the phenomenon offers additional entry points. For example, Malay and Javanese manuscripts containing interlinear translations were often referred to as *Kitab Jenggotan*: “bearded books.” In fact, the *Masā’il al-ta’līm*, one of the oldest extant Javanese manuscripts now preserved in the British Library, is such a book, in which the “beard” refers to the Malay or Javanese translation appearing between the Arabic lines and at times also spreading beyond them and onto the page’s margins (Arps and Gallop 100). The image of the beard offers a visual metaphor but also a tactile one that can imply softness, smoothness, prickliness or roughness and invites us to imagine the stroking of the text while deep in thought, moving fingers across it as it was studied with a guru and recited repeatedly. In the educational and ritual contexts in which most religiously-oriented *kitab*s were written, copied and read the beard could also hint at the image of an old, knowledgeable and pious religious scholar. In the Malay speaking regions, where indigenous men tend to have little facial hair, it may also suggest the figure of a foreign teacher of Islam, likely an Arab.

Another Javanese term used is *makna gandhul*. *Makna* translates as “meaning” or “significance” while *gandhul* can mean “hanging on,” “clinging or depending on something.” This metaphor offers the image of the text’s Javanese meaning hanging onto the Arabic lines, dependent on them: another visual and tactile metaphor of proximity and touch as the lines cling and connect, the Javanese leaning on the Arabic original for their explication and significance. Because of the active nature of the verb the Javanese words hanging

onto or between the Arabic lines also offer a less than static image of the writing in which the translation can be conceived as stretching toward the Arabic, holding on tightly, perhaps almost slipping at times. This image suggests dedication and determination but also the possibility of instability and risk.

The Javanese verb *ngesahi* is also employed to describe the act of translating between the lines. Deriving from the word *sah*—its semantic field encompassing “valid, legitimate, legal, authoritative, genuine, real, true”—it refers to the traditional method of disciples studying the Arabic text with their teachers—word by word, line by line—and writing down the teacher’s words of wisdom and truth as the lessons progressed. Here the metaphor is one hinting at the central relationship of any seeker of religious knowledge, as entry into the world of the Arabic language and, more broadly, Islamic knowledge required an experienced, pious and learned teacher to guide the way. Thus the connections, dependency and proximity found on the page are not between languages, scripts or teachings alone but between teacher and disciple, knower and seeker, across generations in the long chain of transmission that moves slowly but consistently from past to present to future.

As even this brief discussion suggests, metaphors of interlinear translation relate to various realms: visual, tactile, spatial, kinetic and relational. They point to engagement with languages, ideas, values and beliefs; and they imply an in-between-ness through which the translation can be understood as enclosed, enveloped, present in its own right, dependent and clingy or expanding. Different terms represent different perspectives on what such translation meant to individuals and communities and, together, they coalesce into a far more nuanced vision of the practice than that suggested by the English term “interlinearity” alone.

Concluding Thoughts

Even a very partial discussion of the Arabic to Malay interlinear translation model hints at the wealth of information its more in-depth study can offer. Examining and comparing interlinear translations reveals how particular Arabic words, including many important religious concepts, were understood; it clarifies which Arabic words were borrowed wholesale into Malay and incorporated into that language; it divulges the detailed mechanisms of translating prepositions, markers of gender, case, and tense into a very different linguistic context. And it underscores how all this intellectual and linguistic work was accomplished with great brevity, in the spaces between the lines. The seem-

ingly small scale of the translation, at the word and sometimes even the prefix or preposition level, easily veils the large scale and significant impact such translation practices have wrought.

The discussion presented here strove to engage with questions of translation and the field of World Literature in at least two ways. First, by considering the interlinear text as a microcosm: a world of intent and priorities, of a transfer of meaning, of grammar and syntax in translation, of choices and debates. Second, by thinking of Arabic writing during an earlier period as a world literature sought after in many regions, whose translation in diverse forms and tongues had a vast impact on languages and literary cultures.

Interlinearity was just one model of translation, in some ways unusual, as its focus tended to be on sanctified texts for which precise wording was of critical importance. And yet, exploring this sub-genre of works in a literature of an earlier period can help us understand and map also the broader phenomenon of how the world of Islamic Arabic was transmitted and taught as a building block for cultural change. Although in interlinear translations the rules were more set and rigid and there was less room for imagination and flexibility than in other forms of translation and adaptation, the initial rigidity and consistency somewhat paradoxically then allowed for change which was also consistent and thus widespread, opening the door to much creativity and variation as the language inflected by translation was used for a range of purposes. The resulting shifts in vocabulary, syntax and grammar documented by van Ronkel in non-religious writing were not limited to texts and continued their journey into spoken language. Thus what at first glance seems like a narrow, limited, and contained realm of strictly religious language-use expanded with time to affect the non-religious and the oral: reading between the lines we can detect the hints of wide ranging linguistic and cultural change.

Works Cited

- Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Arps, Bernard and Gallop, Annabel Teh. *Golden Letters: Writing Traditions of Indonesia/Surat Emas: Budaya Tulis di Indonesia*. London: The British Library; Jakarta: Yayasan Lontar, 1991.
- Azra, Azyumardi. "Naskah Terjemahan Antarbaris: kontribusi kreatif dunia Islam Melayu-Indonesia." In *Sadur: Sejarah Terjemahan di Indonesia dan Malaysia*, ed. Henri Chamber-Loir. Jakarta: Gramedia, 2009, 435–43.
- Becker, Alton L., and Thomas Hunter. "Binding Wild Words: Cohesion in Old Javanese

- Prose." In *Beyond Translation: Essays toward a Modern Philology*, ed. Alton L. Becker. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995, 89–108.
- Malay Compendium*. Private collection of B.D.K. Saldin, Sri Lanka, 1803.
- Merriam-Webster On-line Dictionary. www.merriam-webster.com [accessed May 15, 2015]
- Ricci, Ronit. "On the Untranslatability of 'Translation:' Considerations from Java, Indonesia." *Translation Studies* 3:3 (2010), 287–301.
- Ricci, Ronit. "Asian and Islamic Crossings: Malay Writing in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka." *South Asia History and Culture* 5:2 (2014), 179–94.
- Robson, Stewart and Wibisono. *Javanese-English Dictionary*. Hong Kong: Periplus, 2002.
- Skinner, Cyril. "The Influence of Arabic on Modern Malay (with particular reference to spoken Malay)." In *Cyril Skinner 1924–1986: Orientalist, Linguist, Historian, Scholar: A Collection of Essays and Reviews*, ed. Justin Corfield. Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1996, 3–20.
- Tibawi, A.L. "Is the Qur'an Translatable?" *The Muslim World* 52 (1962), 4–16.
- Umam, Saiful. "God's Mercy is Not Limited to Arabic Speakers: Reading the Intellectual Biography of Muhammad Salih Darat and his Pegon Islamic Texts." *Studia Islamika* 20:2 (2013), 243–69.
- Van Ronkel, Ph.S. *Mengenai Pengaruh Tatakalimat Arab Terhadap Tatakalimat Melayu*, tr. A. Ikram. Jakarta: Bhratara, 1977. Originally as "Over de Invloed der Arabische Syntaxis op de Maleische." *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal- Land- en Volkenkunde* 41 (1899), 498–528.