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The Limitations of Some AI Applications in Translating Legal Texts into Arabic

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the limitations inherent in Artificial Intelligence (AI) translation tools specifically Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT when applied to the translation of legal texts from English into Arabic. Although AI technologies have advanced significantly, their capacity remains inadequate for navigating the complex requirements of legal language, especially between English common law systems and Arabic-speaking civil law jurisdictions. This research employs Christiane Nord's Functionalist Translation Theory (Skopos Theory) as the sole theoretical foundation to analyze how AI tools fail to meet the functional, legal, and stylistic standards required in Arabic legal contexts. Through an analytical approach including literature review, theoretical framework, case study, and key findings, this paper highlights the persistent deficiencies in AI-driven legal translation and concludes with recommendations underscoring the necessity of human post-editing and oversight.

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حدود بعض تطبيقات الذكاء الاصطناعي في ترجمة النصوص القانونية إلى اللغة العربية

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المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة القيود الجوهرية الكامنة في أدوات الترجمة المعتمدة على الذكاء الاصطناعي، وتحديداً Google Translate و DeepL و ChatGPT، عند تطبيقها على ترجمة النصوص القانونية من اللغة الإنجليزية إلى اللغة العربية. فعلى الرغم من التقدم الملحوظ الذي شهدته تقنيات الذكاء الاصطناعي، إلا أن قدراتها لا تزال غير كافية للتعامل مع متطلبات اللغة القانونية المعقدة، لا سيما في ظل الاختلاف الجذري بين الأنظمة القانونية الإنجليزية ذات الطابع الأنجلوساكسوني، والأنظمة القانونية العربية القائمة على القانون المدني. وتعتمد هذه الدراسة على نظرية الترجمة الوظيفية لكريستيان نور (نظرية سكوباس) كنموذج نظري وحيد لتحليل أوجه قصور أدوات الذكاء الاصطناعي في تلبية المعايير الوظيفية والقانونية والأسلوبية اللازمة في السياقات القانونية باللغة العربية. ومن خلال منهج تحليلي يشمل مراجعة الأدبيات، والإطار النظري، ودراسة حالة، والنتائج الرئيسية، تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على أوجه القصور المستمرة في الترجمة القانونية القائمة على الذكاء الاصطناعي، وتخلص إلى توصيات تؤكد على ضرورة المراجعة البشرية والمراقبة المتخصصة بعد الترجمة لضمان الدقة والملاءمة القانونية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الذكاء الاصطناعي، الترجمة القانونية، الترجمة الآلية، نظرية سكوباس ، أخطاء مصطلحية

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence technologies have had a transformative impact on the field of translation. Tools such as Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT have significantly enhanced general translation tasks (Koehn 87,2009). However, when applied to the translation of legal texts between English and Arabic, unique challenges arise due to not only linguistic differences but also the divergent structures of legal systems, rhetorical conventions, and cultural expectations. Legal translation requires accuracy and strict adherence to the target legal system's conventions, where even minor mistranslations can have severe consequences such as invalidating contracts or misguiding legal proceedings .

This research argues that, despite the progress in AI-driven linguistic models, these technologies remain fundamentally incapable of addressing the contextual, cultural, and functional intricacies of legal translation (Nord 26). Using Nord's Functionalist Translation Theory, this research highlights the necessity of purpose-driven legal translation to achieve functional adequacy within target legal systems.

Literature Review

The Nature of Legal Translation

Legal translation goes far beyond the simple act of exchanging words between two languages; it is intricately connected to the unique legal systems, traditions, and institutional frameworks that shape each jurisdiction's legal discourse (Šarčević 3,1997). The nature of legal texts is fundamentally functional they establish rights, obligations, and legal consequences. As such, translating these texts requires a deep understanding of both the source and target legal systems, as well as awareness of the socio-legal contexts that influence how legal concepts are formulated and interpreted.

Proficiency in language alone is not enough in this specialised sector. A legal translator needs to be well-versed in the legal doctrines, jargon, and rhetorical devices that characterise legal practice in both languages. Since translators must handle intricate legal concepts that frequently have no direct parallels in other systems, Cao highlights that the success of legal translation depends on this dual knowledge in language and law (Cao 45:2007).

Furthermore, as Biel points out, legal translation demands an exceptional level of precision, as ambiguity or misinterpretation could

result in significant legal risks (Biel 112: 2014). Legal texts are constructed according to specific stylistic and structural conventions intended to ensure clarity, predictability, and enforceability. These conventions must be carefully maintained or thoughtfully adapted to suit the expectations of the target legal culture.

Therefore, legal translators operate not only as language professionals but also as mediators between distinct legal realities. Their task involves more than the accurate transfer of meaning; it requires the careful preservation of the legal function, intent, and force of the source text within the framework of the target jurisdiction. Mastery of this process relies on specialized legal training, continuous professional development, and an acute awareness of both linguistic and legal evolution within the relevant systems.

Challenges Between English and Arabic Legal Systems

Translation between English common law and Arabic civil law often influenced by Islamic jurisprudence poses distinctive challenges:

1. Terminological Gaps: Legal concepts like trust, equity, and tort lack precise equivalents within Arabic legal discourse (Šarčević 5).
2. Structural Differences: Arabic legal texts favor elaborate, formulaic structures, whereas English legal writing is typically concise and direct (Cao 46).
3. Cultural Embeddedness: Legal terminology is often culturally and historically grounded, complicating direct or literal translation (Biel 113: 2014).

AI in Legal Translation: Achievements and Limitations

Despite the significant strides made in the field of machine translation, particularly with the rise of neural machine translation (NMT) models, Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies continue to exhibit fundamental shortcomings when applied to the highly specialized domain of legal translation (Koehn 89). While AI-based systems such as Google Translate, DeepL, and Chat GPT have proven capable of handling a wide range of everyday texts with notable efficiency, their performance within legal contexts remains unreliable. This is largely because AI operates on the basis of probability and statistical patterns extracted from extensive datasets, rather than through genuine comprehension of legal reasoning, textual intention, or the specific functions legal texts are designed to

fulfill within different jurisdictions (García and Peña 70; Castilho et al. 2017).

AI systems are fundamentally limited by their lack of awareness of the legal, cultural, and rhetorical contexts that govern the construction of legal discourse. Unlike human legal translators, who can interpret legal texts in light of the cultural, procedural, and institutional norms of both source and target legal systems, AI remains confined to the patterns found in its training data. As a result, it struggles to produce translations that satisfy the stringent requirements of clarity, precision, and enforceability expected within legal communication (Čulo and Nitzke 2016). The challenge becomes really clear when we try to use AI to translate legal documents from English into Arabic. This isn't surprising, given how different the two languages are in their structure and style, not to mention the completely different legal systems they come from.

The real issue is that AI doesn't think. It can't use the nuanced strategies that human translators rely on to make sure a translation is both legally sound and practically functional. Tricks of the trade like adapting concepts, shifting perspectives, or spelling out implied meanings which are second nature to a professional are completely beyond its reach. In legal translation, a word-for-word approach is a recipe for disaster, often leading to serious confusion or outright errors (as Nord points out on page 24).

At first glance, an AI-generated translation might look smooth and grammatically perfect. But if you know what to look for, you'll spot that it often misses the mark. It fails to use the standard formulas, the preferred stylistic touches, and the precise legal jargon that Arabic legal documents require (as noted by Šarčević and Cao).

This isn't just an opinion; research backs it up. Studies show that AI translations frequently miss the subtle practical aspects of legal language. Things like cautious phrasing (hedging), conditional statements, and the ultra-formal tone needed for true legal certainty often get lost or botched (see work by Biel, Alrahabi and Al-Tarawneh). Too often, the AI leaves out critical legal signposts or misinterprets specialized terms. The result is a translation that doesn't just sound wrong it could be legally unusable in an Arabic-speaking court.

This whole problem connects to a core idea in translation theory, called Skopos Theory. This theory argues that the goal of a legal translation isn't just to copy words accurately, but to make the document work and achieve its purpose within a new culture (Nord, page 23). AI's fundamental inability to understand this "why" behind the translation highlights why human expertise is still absolutely essential. It takes a human to ensure a legal translation truly communicates, respects cultural nuances, and performs its correct legal function.

Theoretical Framework

Christiane Nord's Functionalist Approach Skopos Theory (1988/2005)

This study is grounded in Christiane Nord's Functionalist Approach to translation, commonly known as Skopos Theory, which serves as its sole theoretical framework. A central tenet of this theory is that the ultimate purpose, or skopos, of a translation is the paramount factor determining its success. Within the legal domain, this purpose extends beyond mere communication to encompass a critical requirement: the text's legal enforceability in the target jurisdiction (Nord 23). Consequently, a successful legal translation must effectively convey both the informational content and the functional intent of the original document in a way that is appropriate and recognizable within the recipient's legal culture.

Nord suggests four main factors that should be used to guide this evaluation:

1. **Functionality:** Does the translated text achieve its intended legal purpose within the framework of the target legal system?
2. **Loyalty to the Source Text:** Is the original legal function and intent of the source text faithfully preserved?
3. **Target Audience Adaptation:** Is the formulation of the translation appropriately tailored to meet the expectations and conventions of its legal readership?
4. **Cultural Adaptation:** Does the translation adequately reflect the specific cultural and normative conventions of the target legal environment? (Nord 24). This framework guides the evaluation of AI outputs in this study.

Model Adopted: Application of Skopos Theory Only

The research applies Nord's Skopos Theory to evaluate AI-based legal translations from English into Arabic through the following structured stages in the table (1)

Table (1)Application of Skopos Theory

Stage	Objective	Skopos Relevance
AI Translation	Generate initial translations	Assess whether the output fulfills legal function
Evaluation	Analyze outputs through legal functionality & adequacy	Measure alignment with legal audience expectations
Human Review	Compare outputs with certified human translations	Validate adherence to cultural/legal norms

This model ensures that all analysis focuses on whether AI translations achieve the intended legal purpose within Arabic jurisdictions.

Case Study

The data for this research was drawn from AI-generated translations produced by three widely used platforms: Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT. The source materials consisted of genuine legal documents, specifically contracts, statutory texts, and court rulings. The outputs from these AI systems were then meticulously compared against benchmark translations performed by certified human translators. This comparison paid special attention to clauses carrying significant legal weight and to precise statutory provisions where accuracy is paramount. The primary objective of this comparative analysis was to evaluate the ability of AI-generated translations to consistently and accurately replicate the specialized terminology, adhere to the expected stylistic conventions, and ultimately fulfill the functional objectives essential for effective Arabic legal texts.

Analysis and Discussion

Terminological Errors and Skopos Failure

One of the most prominent shortcomings observed in AI translations of legal texts lies in the inaccurate rendering of legal terminology. AI systems frequently substitute imprecise or misleading Arabic equivalents for established legal terms in English. These mistranslations arise from AI's reliance on general linguistic datasets rather than specialized legal corpora. Such failures directly violate Skopos Theory because the translation cannot achieve its intended legal function in the target culture.

Table (2) illustrates how AI failed in choosing appropriate equivalence.

Table (2) AI failed in choosing appropriate equivalence.

English Legal Term	AI Output (Arabic)	Appropriate Equivalence (Arabic Legal Term)	Notes
Consideration	الاعتبار	المقابل في العقود	AI confuses legal "consideration" with generic "consideration".
Equity	الأسهم	الإنصاف العدالة	AI misinterprets legal equity as "justice" or "shares".
Tort	الأذى / العذاب	المسؤولية التقصيرية	AI fails to recognize tort as a specific legal doctrine.

Structural and Stylistic Inadequacies in Light of Skopos

Arabic legal writing adheres to rigid, formulaic structures to ensure legal certainty. AI outputs often omit these elements, which undermines the legal validity of their translations. Examples show AI outputs lacking legal hedging, proper phrasing, and formulaic clarity. Table (3) illustrates how AI failed in choosing appropriate equivalence.

Table (3) AI failed in choosing appropriate equivalence.

Source Text	AI Target Text (Arabic)	HTarget Text (Arabic)	Analysis
The second party shall pay the amount directly.	على الطرف الثاني دفع المبلغ مباشرةً	يلتزم الطرف الثاني بدفع المبلغ المستحق وفقاً للأحكام والشروط المتفق عليها	AI lacks legal formulae.
This contract shall be governed by the laws of	يخضع هذا العقد لقوانين ...	يكون هذا العقد خاضعاً لأحكام وقوانين ... حسبما هو متفق عليه بين الطرفين	AI omits necessary structures.

Functional and Cultural Misalignment

AI-generated translations frequently exhibit significant shortcomings in fulfilling the primary functional requirements expected of legal texts. One of the most critical aspects of legal translation is achieving functional adequacy—ensuring that the translated text serves its intended legal purpose with clarity, precision, and enforceability in the target legal system. However, AI tools often produce outputs that suffer from ambiguity, inconsistency, and the omission of essential legal formulas, such as standard contractual clauses or statutory expressions commonly employed in Arabic legal practice (Cao 48). These omissions compromise the legal certainty of the translation and can lead to serious consequences, such as the misinterpretation of rights and obligations or the invalidation of contractual agreements.

Furthermore, AI systems largely operate without a genuine understanding of the deep cultural and institutional factors that shape legal discourse. Legal language is not merely technical but also culturally and historically embedded, reflecting the values, structures, and procedures of specific legal systems. The Arabic legal tradition, influenced by both civil law principles and Islamic jurisprudence, adheres to specific stylistic conventions, formal registers, and formulaic expressions designed to ensure clarity, authority, and legal enforceability. Often, AI-generated translations miss these deeply embedded cultural and stylistic elements. They tend to default to direct or literal translations that

might seem correct on a superficial grammatical level but ultimately fail to align with what legal experts in Arabic-speaking regions expect to see (Nord 26).

This kind of cultural mismatch significantly worsens the functional shortcomings mentioned earlier. A legal document that doesn't sound right one that ignores the expected rhetoric and style is unlikely to be taken seriously or even accepted as legitimate within its intended legal environment. This failure runs directly counter to the core tenets of Skopos Theory, which argues that a translation's success is measured by its ability to perform its intended function for its target audience.

Therefore, because they consistently overlook these critical functional and cultural requirements, AI translations remain unreliable for high-stakes legal use without extensive editing and cultural adaptation by human experts.

Findings

1. Terminology: AI systems struggle to accurately interpret sophisticated legal terminology. This error substantially undermines the translation's ability to serve its intended legal purpose inside the target jurisdiction.
2. Structure: The formal language and conventional format seen in authentic Arabic legal documents are typically overlooked in the outputs. The result is texts that are devoid of the necessary professional formality, legal tone, and clarity.
3. Functionality: First and foremost, in Arabic-speaking legal environments, AI translations often fail to meet the requirements for being valid and enforceable. Because of this flaw, they are useless and could even be dangerous for actual legal applications.
4. Cultural Intelligence: The technology doesn't do a good job of understanding the rules and laws that are specific to each country. As a result, the Arabic legal environment's tacit expectations and explicit obligations are frequently at odds with the translations it creates.

These considerations substantiate Nord's assertion that AI cannot generate legally viable translations without human involvement (Nord 28).

Conclusion

Even if AI translation technologies are unquestionably faster and more convenient, they are still unable to meet the complex requirements of translating legal documents between Arabic and English. This profession involves more than mere word translation; it requires precise terminology, strict compliance with formal legal frameworks, and a deep understanding of many legal and cultural traditions.

A fundamental limitation of contemporary AI systems is their propensity to misconstrue specialised legal terminology. This happens as a result of their primary usage of general linguistic models as opposed to databases of specific legal knowledge. Inaccurate translations of key terminology could lead to serious misunderstandings and, more significantly, render the entire document legally void.

The formal structure and stylistic traditions that distinguish authentic Arabic law documents are often disregarded by AI outputs. The document's clarity and, in the long run, its enforceability are affected by this improper lack of formality. These tools only translate words without understanding the legal intent, which is important for the translation to function effectively in the destination jurisdiction. If there is one fundamental issue with legal documents, it is this.

Ultimately, AI fundamentally lacks the cultural and institutional awareness necessary to tailor a text to the specific customs of Arabic legal systems. The inability to traverse complex cultural contexts leads to AI-generated translations frequently failing to have their intended legal impact. Therefore, despite technological advancements, the oversight of a skilled human expert is essential for guaranteeing the accuracy, effectiveness, and legal validity of translated legal documents.

Recommendations

1. Enhance Training Data: By including extensive, superior collections of authentic Arabic legal documents, you can significantly expand and diversify the datasets used to train AI models. This includes scholarly literature, contracts, legislation, and case law to further ground AI in the particular terminology of Arab legal systems.
2. Develop Hybrid Workflows: Formulate and institutionalise frameworks for integrated human-AI collaboration. AI generates the initial drafts in these workflows for efficiency, but human experts

strategically supervise the final output to ensure it meets its intended legal purpose (Skopos), functionality, and cultural relevance.

3. Make it mandatory for all legal translations produced by AI to go through expert post-editing by qualified translators with relevant experience. This step is crucial for fixing typographical errors, guaranteeing structural conformance, and confirming the enforcement of the law.

4. Incorporate Legal Knowledge Into Development: Make it easier for AI programmers to communicate directly with legal experts (judges, translators, attorneys) throughout the training and tool design processes. This ensures that the legal principles and actual jurisdictional duties are well considered during the development of the technology.

5. Formulate and implement explicit ethical principles and quality assurance requirements especially regulating the application of AI in legal translation. These requirements must encompass essential matters like as accountability, secrecy, and the constraints of autonomous AI output.

6. Encourage Interdisciplinary Research: Support further empirical and comparative studies that integrate comparative law, translation studies, and computational linguistics. To find and fix systemic issues, this study should concentrate on examining AI outputs across various language pairs and legal systems.

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