Attributing Terror: Evidence on Authorship –
A Forensic Translation Analysis of Culturally
Divergent Clandestine Coded Messages

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the question of authorship attribution of translation-mediated texts and more specifically the messages purported to be those of Osama Bin Laden. Using a three-tier translation analysis model, the paper explores features of the original message and several translations to conclude that while Bin Laden may have been established as the communicator of these messages, he may not have been the sole author of the messages. This is a bold claim that is supported by a forensic translation analysis that proves beyond reasonable doubt that external linguistic and cultural influences have contributed to authorship.

"When fear strikes the hearts of intellectuals, all hope for humanity is lost."

INTRODUCTION
While literary studies have recently moved away from questions of attribution (Love 2002), there seems to be a forensic need to explore attribution of clandestine political texts produced in other languages, especially in the current climate of global security alertness.

Most forensic attribution relies on analysis of original texts of this nature by scholars and analysts who have knowledge of both the language and culture of the source text as well as the socio-political context of text. In situations where source language scholarship is not available, attribution of authorship is established through translations carried out to specifications by translators of varying skills and orientations. Such a route has its own set of problems, where in many instances vital clues in the original text are overlooked or even mistranslated. A case in point as this paper will argue is Bin Laden’s latest message aired by Aljazeera on 29 October 2004 and translated by various media and international studies organizations primarily into English.

From what is publicly known, evidence of authorship of these messages have focused on determining the authenticity of the tape recordings as those of Osama Bin Laden against a database of messages authenticated since his first message.
was broadcast on Aljazeera Network in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 attacks. Computer-aided voice and speech sound analysis and analysis of phonology, diction and phraseology may have been employed with varying degrees of sophistication to establish the authenticity of the voice recording as that of Osama Bin Laden. In other words, these efforts have sought to establish evidence of communication rather than authorship. Was it or was it not Bin Laden’s voice that was heard? Was he the actor of the communication? If so, evidence of communication has been established.

According to Krane (2002), analysts at the National Security Agency and CIA have measured two kinds of voice characteristics against previous recordings: (1) the acoustics that give an idea of the physical features of a person's vocal tract — the shapes of the mouth, throat and nasal passages used in speech and (2) the style of speech; the timing, speed and pitch, and other distinctive intonations.

Furthermore, statistical analysis techniques such as Principal Component Analysis (PCA), developed by Burrows (1987, 1989, 1992, cited in Grant and Baker, 2001) are likely to have been used to identify which markers discriminate between Bin Laden’s first authenticated message and subsequent messages. These techniques would have sought to establish evidence of authorship vis-à-vis an already established specimen of the author’s writing or message information content.

However, despite the authentication of Bin Laden’s voice and Bin Laden as the communicator of the taped message, one vital aspect of authorship has been completely overlooked, at least in the public domain — namely the attribution of authorship of his already authenticated messages. In other words, was Osama Bin Laden the real author of his own messages? Did he himself write them, or did someone else write them for him? Were his messages written collaboratively or influenced by external factors?

In audio recorded messages, the task of establishing authorship relies primarily on voice authentication. In broadcast video recorded messages, especially those that are believed to carry coded messages, the question of who the speaker is becomes a mooted one and the emphasis automatically shifts to establishing whether the tape is real or fake. Given the digital video filmmaking technologies available to the public these days, it is not unfeasible or inconceivable to montage a fake message from available artifacts. It is also not farfetched to suspect the producers of the tape to have embedded subliminal visual messages (frames) in real videotaped messages that can be retrieved by the intended receptors. And this is probably one of the risks that naïve broadcasters may run when broadcasting a tape of this nature straight to the public.

Attention is also diverted to the identifying markers of the content either through translation or direct access to the original text in its native form. However, relying on translation alone or on analysis of the original text in its native form to establish evidence of authorship may not yield satisfactory results, as such
analysis of text in its native form will eventually be translated into the language of intelligence authorities. Additional use of a translation-based, functional-pragmatics contrastive analysis of both the source text and several translations may give us some insights into the real author of the source, since such juxtaposition of source text and translation is bound to reveal certain linguistic and socio-cultural idiosyncrasies and discrepancies that go beyond the idiosyncrasies of voice and elocution, inter-translation variations or controversial native-form discourse analysis.

This paper investigates the problem of attribution of authorship of Bin Laden’s latest message within a Forensic Translation Framework (FTF) with focus on the linguistic content of the taped message.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Forensic linguistics has emerged as an ancillary discipline in the last decade, where linguistic knowledge is used for forensic purposes and where the application of techniques such as authorship attribution and stylometry is used to establish evidence. Authorship attribution studies have generally focused on identification of authorship and finding the real author of the work in question. Grant and Baker (2001) confirm that authorship attribution studies have generally derived from studies of literary, religious and historic texts. In forensic linguistics however, authorship attribution studies have focused on forensic evidence.

Grant and Baker (2001) have argued that many articles on authorship attribution are flawed because they do not take into account the methodological difficulties of identifying valid and reliable markers of authorship. They argue that in using methods such as Principal Component Analysis, it is only necessary to establish markers which might be useful discriminants. They assert that in using PCA the issue of reliability is accounted for within the dataset and, as the analysis is data driven.

However, using this and other statistical methods, such as stylometry, has had very little success in forensic work (Olsson, 2004). Advocating a combined approach to authorship attribution, Love (2002) attempts to mediate between computer-based work and traditional methods of attribution to examine the criteria of proof in authorship attribution. He observes that “[t]here is a tendency to assume that rhetorical methods of proof are somewhat inferior to as well as different from scientific or mathematical ones” (210). He argues that proof of authorship cannot be entirely mathematical. Supporting this view, Olsson (2004) avers that “statistical measurement of authorship markers, though interesting, has so far had little success when applied to forensic work” (61). He attributes this to two factors: inter-author variation and intra-author variation.

To this end, the literature on forensic linguistics has focused mainly on two major categories of evidence: evidence on communication and evidence on authorship. Gibbons (2003:284) makes a useful distinction between the two
types of linguistic evidence. Evidence on communication is concerned with establishing whether communication took place with respect to three critical elements: linguistic form, the situation of communication, and what Gibbons terms, “behind the eye” knowledge of the participants in the communication transaction. Evidence on authorship on the other hand is concerned with whether a particular person produced a particular text.

On the question of questioned authorship, McMenamin (2002:163) establishes that forensic authorship identification is accomplished through the analysis of style in written language. This assertion is based on the singularity principle that “no two writers of a language write in exactly the same way and no individual writer writes the same way all the time”. Writers make certain conscious and subconscious choices in the process of developing a piece of writing and adapting their style to suit the message.

Crystal and Davy (1969:76-77), distinguish between two dimensions of style: *singularity* where personal traits are short, temporary, manipulable and deliberately introduced into a situation to make a specific linguistic contrast, and *individuality* where personal traits are relatively continuous, permanent, and nonlinguistic unselfconscious idiosyncratic features. Individuality features are “not normally altering over a period of time in adults”, such as a person’s voice quality or handwriting, which provide the basis for that person’s recognizability (66) and evidence of communication. However, they caution that the distinction is not always clear-cut. “There comes a time when what has been taken as a singularity feature, in our sense, turns out in fact to be an individuality feature: this point is not always easy to detect, however” (76).

Under this distinction, idiosyncratic linguistic features that appear regularly in a person’s usage can be regarded as evidence of authorship. Since clandestine manifestos, such as those of Bin Laden’s messages, are usually scripted, premeditated writings, singularity features play a crucial role in establishing authorship.

**Translation-Forensic Evidence**

The question that the above distinction raises in our present study is the validity of such analysis if carried out through translation-mediation. How can the author's singularity of style be determined through translation? How can inter-author and intra-author variations, if present, be determined through another language system that has different norms and standards and operates under different constraints in a different geopolitical-cultural space?

Translation is at best a process of approximation where two systems of approximates—individual and general—coexist and sometimes compete. On the individual level, these approximates; lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic, are dependent on the individual’s own competence and system of classification. On the general level, a speech community may choose by convention to adopt a system of approximates that filters through to the individual system of
approximates. Sometimes, there are irreconcilable differences between the two systems. In cross-lingual mediated communication, the translation act is always an act of intervention to reconcile these two systems of approximates. Excluding individual difference among translators in terms of competence and performance, the process is subject to the laws of relativity, optimality and approximation.

Furthermore, while translation is an attempt to communicate aspects of the original message in another language, it is not immune to the translator-writer idiosyncratic features of style, diction and convictions which are brought to bear on any rendition, motivated or otherwise. The uniqueness and individuality (rather singularity) of style of the translator is a factor in determining the extent of loss, interference and perspective of the translation, as we shall see later in this paper.

Translation has increasingly played a crucial role in forensic analysis in legal cases. Yet it has so far occupied a miniscule area in the literature. Listing a handful of studies investigating translation-oriented forensic work as evidence, McMenamin (2002:80) reports that forensic and academic scholars are now giving more and more attention to the theory and practice of translation and interpreting in forensic analysis. Nonetheless, the attention of these studies has so far largely focused more on interpreting rather than on translation. Translation-driven forensic analysis of video-taped messages brings together the audible and scripted texts, and although features of elocution, enunciation and intonation play an important part in determining meanings and intentions of the discourse and in establishing evidence of communication, they play a rather secondary role in establishing evidence of authorship. Therefore, it is important to turn to those features of discourse that contribute to author attribution as we shall explore in the following paragraphs.

External versus Internal Evidence

Love (2002:51) confirms that attribution studies have conventionally distinguished between two types of evidence: internal and external, where internal evidence is derived from the work itself and external evidence from the social world within which the work is created. Quoting Samuel Schoenbaum (1966), Love also points out that until recently external evidence has been given a higher status than internal evidence “as it can and often does provide incontestable proof” while “internal evidence can only support hypotheses or corroborate external evidence” (53). These two often overlapping types are important in determining the factors that have influenced messages of clandestine nature. In the case of the Bin Laden videotaped messages, external evidence is derived from the biographical history of the author while internal evidence is derived from stylistic features, thought patterns and information organization of the message. The author’s biographical history should also include the geopolitical space—in this case perhaps Afghanistan and its surrounding region. This is an important factor in long-term exposure to
different speech communities and cultures that may have indirect influence on the internal evidence.

**Evidence on Authorship**

An important task in establishing evidence of authorship is to determine the presence of textual duality within the message. Olsson (2004) defines textual duality as “a number of different phenomena which can occur in text, and which are often found in single-text investigations” (72). These phenomena include duality of mode, authorship, register and chronicity. Olsson observes that when duality of whatever kind occurs in the text’s composition, that text may exhibit noticeable differences between the various parts of text, in some systematic and structural way. These features will help us in determining attribution of authorship across different sections of text.

Several authors have examined Bin Laden’s messages without paying much attention to the phenomenon of duality of authorship, except perhaps Cole (2004), who for instance attributes the fluctuation in Bin Laden’s diction to Bin Laden’s having “steeped himself in ancient, Koranic Arabic and the sayings of the Prophet, and he and his fellow cultists in Qandahar had developed a peculiar subculture that rejected much of modernity”. This fluctuation may be seen as a shift in register and subsequently as a feature of textual duality. However, the fluctuation does not account for the use of certain key words in the speech under examination.

**Models of Analysis**

McMenamin (2002) identifies three major models of analysis used in authorship studies: resemblance, consistency and population. These models, which have been advanced by Wachal (1996, cited in McMenamin 2002), have been used in varying degrees and combinations, with the appropriate model “frequently dictated by factors unknown to, or not under the control of, the linguist” (118). An added complexity to this condition is the role of translation and the translation specialist in translation-mediated analysis. Here, choosing the appropriate model of analysis becomes crucial for establishing evidence, and a translation forensic model along the lines proposed in this paper may be required to ensure that translated corroborating evidence is based on an informed translation analysis that guards against internal and external factors of intervention and interference.

**THE PRESENT STUDY: FRAMING THE MESSAGE**

Translating between two linguistically and culturally divergent languages, such as English and Arabic, is not always a straightforward task. Different syntactical structures, incongruent lexical fields, dissonant rhetorical techniques and dissimilar metaphorical representations—all contribute to the complexity of transfer. Let us consider one representative example (also discussed in Darwish, 2006:74) (suspected terrorists) that reveals how English and Arabic (in certain
contexts) handle adjective-noun constructions and how the linguistic knowledge of “native speakers” deals with adjective-noun constructions when heavily influenced by the source language in translation.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice defended the unlimited detention of suspected terrorists saying, in an interview that it benefited the United States and the entire world.

In the construction suspected terrorists, the adjective (suspected) qualifies and delimits the noun (terrorists). In other words, the terrorists are not yet terrorists. In contrast, the adjective in the Arabic noun + adjective construction (obligatory syntactic transposition) describes and does not qualify or delimit. Nonetheless, the phrase suspected terrorists is almost invariably translated into Arabic as “terrorists suspected in them” (obligatory transposition and anaphoric pronoun”), despite the fact that the Arabic post-modifier (suspected in them) is a descriptive permanent attribute, in this case producing an oxymoron. How can they be terrorists and suspected of being terrorists at the same time? This is how the noun + adjective construction works in Arabic, and the standard-compliant rendition of (suspected terrorists) in Arabic is a phrase meaning (persons suspected of being terrorists).

The task becomes more complex when the subject matter and the rhetorical techniques are so intertwined and the message is overloaded with cultural and religious references that are alien to the culture of the target audience. Texts and discourses of this nature present tension between preserving the style and intentions of the original and producing a natural sounding translation. The result is discrepancy and dissonance and in more ways than one, incremental loss of vital information, especially when the translated text is purported to carry coded messages. Content analysis of original text based purely on discrepant translations presents a real dilemma for forensic analysts trying to establish evidence of authorship, in this case textual duality, and to detect and decipher the code, and for news broadcasters trying to observe the code of ethics and public security. The translations of Bin Laden’s Arabic messages, broadcast by Aljazeera news channel since September 11, 2001, fall into this category.

To illustrate these problems, this paper examines excerpts from Bin Laden’s message that was aired by Aljazeera on 29 October 2004, through a comparison of several English translations of this message to one another and to the original text within the three-tier model outlined in this paper. Several controversial translations of important parts of this message clearly illustrate the point that relying on translation, no matter how skilled and competent the translator, is bound to produce problems. One such problem appears in the translation of the word “wilaya” in this latest message into nation, state and mandate.

The original text in its native form reads as follows:

إن أنتمكم ليس بيد كبير أو بوع أو القاعدة، إن أنتمكم هو في أيديكم وإن كل ولاية لا تعبت بأمننا فهي تلقيناها قد أمننا أمننا.

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This text literally translates into:

[emphasis opening article usually translated into verily in ancient texts],
your [in the plural sense] security is not in the hand of Kerry or Bush or
al Qaeda. Indeed, your [plural sense] security is in your [plural] hands
and that every [in the sense of any] state that does not mess with our
security has readily secured its [own] security.

Translations provided by various sources:

Your security is not in the hands of (Democratic presidential candidate
John) Kerry, Bush or al-Qaeda. Your security is in your own hands.
Any (presidential) mandate which does not play havoc with our security
would automatically ensure its own security. [The Herald Sun]

Your security is not in the hands of [Democratic presidential nominee
John] Kerry or Bush or al-Qaeda. Your security is in your own hands.
Any nation that does not attack us will not be attacked. [CNN]

Your security is not in the hands of Kerry or Bush or al-Qa'ida. Your
security is in your hands. Each state that doesn't mess with our security
has automatically secured their security. [World Net Daily]

Your security is in your own hands. And every state that doesn’t play
with our security has automatically guaranteed its own security. [Aljazeera]

Your security is not in the hands of Kerry or Bush or Al-Qa'ida. Your
security is in your own hands, and any U.S. state that does not toy with
our security automatically guarantees its own security. [MEMRI]

These different translations raise several questions about what Bin Laden did
really say in the original text and about whether the text lends itself to several
interpretations or manipulations. Was the translation variance caused by the text
itself or by translational intervention or interference? Was it the result of the
chosen translation approach and strategy or editorial policy? More importantly,
how can these translations serve in establishing forensic evidence of authorship?

METHOD

A Forensic Translation analysis Model

The problem of discrepancy and variance across different translation versions of
the same text may be analyzed and accounted for within a three-tier model of
translation (Darwish, 2003:81). This model consists of three levels of operation
that vary in intensity and salience within the same text and across translations.
The primary level relies heavily on literal and lexical meanings derived from
dictionary-based data at three structural levels: word, sentence and paragraph.
The dilemma that faces forensic translators is the state of tension that exists
between two divergent languages and the quest to convey both intentions of the
original text: the communicative and informative. Working around constraints
while trying to represent the internal structures of the text, becomes a daunting
task in the absence of a structured translation framework. The problem is further complicated by the lexical field and range of possible alternatives and synonyms at word level, as it is illustrated in the preceding example ("wilaya" = nation, state and mandate).

The operative level is concerned with functional meanings derived from the communicative intention of the text and functional-pragmatic application of the language. For example, the original text literally says: “your security is not in the hand of Kerry or Bush or al Qaeda”. Here, the functional or pragmatic meaning must be conveyed idiomatically into the target language (in the hands of Kerry, Bush or al Qaeda).

The interpretive level is concerned with the informative intention of the source text and the function of the translation in the target language. At this level, without safeguards, the risk of distorting the message is a real one. Consider the following example,

You, the American people, I talk to you today about the best way to avoid another catastrophe and about war, its reasons and its consequences. [CNN]

In the original message, the vocative (ayyuha ash-ah’bu al-ameriki) is a standard way of addressing the public in political speeches. It literally means (O the people the American)—that is (O American people) or simply (American people!). In rendering this unmarked standard Arabic vocative format as “You, the American people”, the translation has marked the message inadvertently and introduced a condescending vocative that the original message does not contain.

The three-tier model stipulates that a shift from one level to the next is justifiable only in the presence of constraints in order to remove or satisfy the constraints. Constraint satisfaction may result in either intervention or interference. In this instance, there is clear interference. Forensically, this departure from the unmarked construction raises the following question: Was that shift to the interpretive level warranted?

**Intervention versus Interference**

As noted in Darwish (2003:89), to satisfy the constraints, the translator might find it necessary to intervene in the original text in order to complement and make whole the meaning of the intended message and to provide the adequate context. Such translatorial intervention is legitimate if a natural equivalent is not available in the target language. However, the translator might inadvertently or intentionally interfere with the text thus compromising the information integrity of the original text and distorting or obscuring its intentions. Such translatorial interference is not acceptable at all, since it forces the translation outside the parameters of the original text and fails to preserve the integrity of the original. A competent translator is expected to be able to distinguish between the two types of mediation.
Here we identify two types of interference in translation: active and passive. “Active interference occurs when the translator intentionally modifies the text to meet specific extra-textual requirements. Passive interference occurs when the translator unintentionally distorts the intentions of the original text” (Darwish, 2003:82-83).

The rationale for this model is derived from the notion that translation is a process of approximation driven by constraints and that “the ultimate goal of any translation strategy is to solve the underlying problem of translation-mediated communication and to remove the external and internal constraints imposed on the translation process in order to unlock potential alternatives” (Darwish, 1999, 2003: 117-118) and “to achieve optimal approximation between the source and target versions of text in terms of utility and appeal” (Darwish, 2003: 112). The model should enable us to address the question of which of the different translations produced of the Bin Laden message is optimally approximated to the source in terms of its informative and communicative intents. The optimally approximated translation will be subsequently used as a baseline for the analysis of authorship attribution of the original message and determine translation-induced interference.

**MODEL RULES**

The model is anchored in optimality theory and regards translation as a temporary system of conflicting forces that are embodied by constraints. Following Kager (1999) each translation constraint makes a requirement about some aspect of equivalent output. “Constraints are typically conflicting, in the sense that to satisfy one constraint implies the violation of another” (4). Empirical and anecdotal evidence has shown that no translation form can satisfy all constraints simultaneously. Therefore, there must be a mechanism of selecting [translation] forms that incur ‘lesser’ constraint violations from others that incur ‘more serious’ ones (after Kager 1999:4). To manage these conflicting constraints, the model provides explicit rules for translation production and analysis. These rules include the following.

1. The point of departure is the closest point between source and target languages, with Closest Natural Equivalent (CNE) the first choice. This means the most direct translation is the primary option.

2. If this fails to preserve the informative and communicative intentions of the source, a shift to the operative level is warranted.

3. To make explicit in the translation what is implicit in the source so long as what is implicit in the source is readily accessible to the intended reader of the source.

In the contrastive analysis of text and translations, the model also integrates functional pragmatics, which is based on the notion of action-centred understanding of text, where “pragmatic aspects are not simple added to non-pragmatically understood linguistic forms” (Titscher et al 2000:171). This
integrates thought and logical pattern analysis to identify the structural and reasoning schemas in the message.

The findings should shed some light on the idiosyncratic features of these translations and peculiarities of the original text through contrastive analysis of translation segments of the original.

ABOUT THE MESSAGE

The message is purported to have been addressed to the American people in the last week of the US presidential race, allegedly with the aim to influence the American voters. It shows how in the absence of a clear translation framework, and in the presence of a high level of uncertainty about the text, the translators of this message have compromised vital clues in the original message that effectively cast doubt on authorship. The discrepant translations of this message have generated a great deal of public debate in the media and on the Internet. Much of the work lacks scholarship and intimate knowledge of the Arabic language beyond individual dictionary-based lexical definitions, and the discussion has essentially been politically motivated, again highlighting the need for a structured, rational approach to translation assessment and analysis.

POSITING THE QUESTION

This paper makes the claim that the source text itself is suspected to have been in parts translated from or heavily influenced by English. This claim is based on an analysis of the syntactic structures, semantic features and rhetorical-pragmatic usage of segments of the message under examination. The paper boldly seeks to establish evidence on authorship of Bin Laden’s message by attempting to answer the following questions:

1. Is Bin Laden the author of his message?
2. What are the intrinsic determinants of his authorship?
3. What are the extrinsic determinants of his authorship?
4. Was the message written originally in the language of the source?
5. Was the message translated from other languages, and specifically from English?
6. If the message was translated from another language, who translated it into Arabic?
7. Was the message influenced by external language sources other than the language of the final text of the message?
8. Is Bin Laden the sole author of his message, or was the message written collaboratively?
The Question of Uniqueness

The question of whether Bin Laden is the author of the message purported to be his own creative invention must find reliable and valid answers in the identifying markers in the message as those of Osama Bin Laden’s. According to Grant and Baker (2001), “identifying markers which can be used to resolve authorship attribution questions is a quest with a long history. The concept of what constitutes a good authorship marker and how it might be identified is less well discussed and requires serious thought”. Far less discussed is the concept of translation-mediated identification of authorship. The topic occupies a very small space in the literature of translation studies and far less in forensic linguistics. As alluded to earlier, most of the work in this area has focused on interpreting rather than translation in courts, police stations and prisons (Gibbons, 2003), inter-lingual communication and the problems of turning oral testimony into an authoritative record in the language of the legal system in operation (Tiersma, 1999).

Given the geopolitical, social context of the message, the question of uniqueness of authorship in this instance may be addressed through detection of translationese or foreign language influence in the original message. Moreover, the identifying markers in Bin Laden’s message may include: the style of negation, paired or stacked adjectives, hendiadys, stacked clauses and nested sentences.

The Social Context of Bin Laden’s Speech

On the face of it, Bin Laden’s message falls into the category of political religious sermons. The message opens with a traditional religious cliché, normally used in religious sermons. This opening sets the tone and register of the speech.

The original language of Bin Laden’s messages is Arabic. The message is purported to address the American people using Aljazeera as a platform. Aljazeera has been the primary source of statements from Bin Laden since the September 11 attacks, and has criticized US broadcasters’ decision to limit the broadcast of Bin Laden’s statements, which were shown in the US without being screened first by US broadcasters. Aljazeera’s chief editor is quoted as saying to the Associated Press, “I don't think the United States, which taught the world about freedom of expression, should now begin to limit it.”

Fearing Bin Laden’s statements could contain anything from incitement to coded messages, the five major US television networks reached an unprecedented agreement in October 2001 to limit broadcasts of statements by Osama Bin Laden and his associates. The decision came after a conference call between US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and the heads of the networks.

Bowing to recent pressure and sharp criticism from the US State Department, Aljazeera gradually began to limit broadcasts of Bin Laden’s videotaped messages. The latest videotaped message was heavily edited and was broadcast...
in excerpts during a special newscast interspersed with alternating commentaries by two news anchors, although the full Arabic transcript and English translation were published on Aljazeera’s website. The reason for the US concern over the broadcast may be understood in terms of the social contexts of the message, which according to the US analysis plays two functions, as depicted in the illustration in Figure 1—Contexts of Bin Laden’s Message.

In this video-taped message, Bin Laden addresses the American people in Arabic, probably in the hope that his message will be aired with an English translation in America and the rest of the Western world. In some respects, this is what actually happened. However, unlike his previous statements, only selected excerpts from this statement were broadcast. In forensic analysis, knowing the intended audience of the message may explain the apparent change in style across the messages. In the absence of any explicit extratextual statements, attention must turn to the text itself, which as we shall see in the following section, offers an implicit cultural clue as to who the audience is intended to be.

Sources of Influence

Cole (2004) argues that Bin Laden has lived most of the past 25 years in Farsi, Pashto, and Urdu-speaking environments and that he occasionally lapses into nonstandard usage. While this claim is unfounded as the reason for the so-called non-standard usage of Arabic, it cannot be completely discounted as an influential factor in determining which features of the message are non-standard and in what way. However, there are numerous instances of comparable or even
longer lengths of stay by Arabic speakers in non-Arabic speaking environment where they have managed to maintain their native tongue, and more so standard Arabic. Length of stay and exposure to Farsi, Pashto and Urdu, which are not related to Arabic but which have been heavily influenced by Arabic, do not seem to have affected his fluency or diction. As the examples later will show, Bin Laden seems to have kept up with the changes of modern Arabic, particularly the language of the media. However, the analysis will also reveal that the message seems to be influenced by at least three strong linguistics sources:

1. Religious formula
2. Foreign language
3. Translation

**Religious Formula**

The message follows a religious formula. It opens with the following sentence “Peace be upon those who follow the Guidance”, which sets the scene for the message, and it signs off with the same sentence. The message is also punctuated with religious post markers. Religious post markers are insertions that serve to describe or invoke; they are always expressed in standard Arabic and are usually derived from the Quran or other ancient text. Ten religious references occur in the text. These references fall into the following categories: prefatory, invocative, descriptive, benedictory and thanksgiving.

Bin Laden’s Islamic religious diction includes theological concepts, military terminology, and Quranic parables. In contrast to his earlier messages, Bin Laden’s latest message contained markedly fewer religious words.

It is important to note that when Bin Laden’s messages address the general Muslim populace, they begin with the religious preamble that approximately translates into English as “Praise be to God alone. We seek His forgiveness and beseech Him from the evils of our souls and the ills of our deeds. I bear witness that there is no deity but God, the only, who has no partner, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His createe and His messenger.”

However, when Bin Laden addresses the general population of non-Muslims, especially the Western world, as in the message under examination, he uses the following preamble: “Peace be upon those who follow the Guidance”, thus discreetly withholding his greetings from those ostensibly intended by his message, since “the Guidance” here refers strictly to Islam and to the people of the Holy Book (the Quran), by extension. He also sometimes signs off with the same statement. In the message under examination, this cliché is used both as an opener and a signoff. This rather furtive approach is a significant identifying marker of intra-author style variation since it signals a shift in the pattern of information presentation and rhetoric from message to message.
While it is difficult in this instance to distinguish between foreign language influences due to long-term exposure to the immediate social environment and foreign language influences that are found in contemporary Arabic in the Arab world at large, there is evidence of foreignness in the message. For example, the expression (ala khalfiyya), is a claque translation of the English phrase (on the back of) or (against the backdrop of...), as in the following excerpt.

The text in its native form:

وعلى خلفية تلك الصور وأمثالها جاءت أحداث الحادي عشر رداً على تلك المظالم العظم...

This translates as:

(And) on the back of these and similar images the events of the eleventh [of September] came as a response to these grave injustices...

The Arabic counterpart of (against the backdrop of) is so widespread in Arabic media today (the Internet search engine Google has returned 148,000 instances of this Arabic expression), which leads one to believe that the author of the message has had continual access to Arabic satellite television at the very least. Language maintenance becomes a serious issue of forensic interest only in the absence of contact with the language in its native habitat. Where contact is maintained through satellite television, picking up new expressions, terms and styles and incorporating them into one’s own language stock become a natural unconscious process. The elliptical form of the eleventh [of September] occurs five times in the message without prior reference to the full form. This also suggests the author has adopted the form and style that are in current use in the Arabic media, where the context of the message compensates for the ellipsis. These features should put to bed the theory that Bin Laden has been cut off from modern Arabic usage for the past twenty-five years.

More crucial to forensic translation and attribution of authorship is the feature of negative transfer from one language to another that leads to an error, inappropriate or odd usage through violation of a convention or a norm. This is largely due to literal translations.

The Bin Laden’s message in question seems to be heavily influenced by translation from other language sources, particularly English. Furthermore, a detectable feature of Bin Laden’s message is translationese. While the term translationese is used in translation studies to refer to the influence of the source language on the target language, it may also denote negative transfer from a source language in a text that is not necessarily a translation. This usually happens in bilingual contexts, where the writer’s habitual language is not his first language, or when the writer heavily relies on readings and sources of information in a language other than his first language. Translationese may
affect the lexical, grammatical, syntactical and/or rhetorical choices of the speaker or writer.

Literal borrowings from English and French are a common occurrence in modern Arabic. As noted by Darwish (2004), modern Arabic suffers from Westernism and alienation of language and thought patterns. “It is only slightly exaggerated to say that the Arabs today speak a foreign language with Arabic sounds. However, it is not far from the truth that a large proportion of the daily language of the educated Arabs is foreign and imported from dominant languages, primarily English, which has stamped its authority as the unrivalled language of international communication, technology, culture, politics and contemporary thought”. Consequently, it is not surprising to find traces of foreignness and translationese in Bin Laden’s message. However, when his message is compared to his earlier messages, the stark differences in style denote unusual heavy influence from English of the type that is not normally seen in the literal borrowings in modern Arabic. To illustrate, let us examine the following segment and its translations by various sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>السلام على من اتبع الهدى. أيها الشعب الأميركي، حديثي هذا لكم عن الطريق المكاني لتجنب مأنهات أخرى، عن الحرب وأسبابها ونتائجها.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aljazeera</td>
<td>Peace be upon he who follows the guidance: People of America this talk of mine is for you and concerns the ideal way to prevent another Manhattan, and deals with the war and its causes and results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Net</td>
<td>You American people, my speech to you is the best way to avoid another conflict about the war and its reasons and results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>O American people, this is what I have to say about the causes and results (of the September 11, 2001 attacks) and the way to avoid another Manhattan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>You, the American people, I talk to you today about the best way to avoid another catastrophe and about war, its reasons and its consequences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>People of America this talk of mine is for you and concerns the ideal way to prevent another Manhattan and deals with the war and its causes and results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMRI³</td>
<td>O American people, I address these words to you regarding the best way of avoiding another Manhattan, and regarding the war, its causes and its consequences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is unusual about this segment is the use of descriptive backing in (another Manhattan). Descriptive backing is defined as the conversion of proper noun
into an adjective as in “She is a Thatcher” instead of saying “She is as tough as Margaret Thatcher”. This kind of construction is not naturally found in Arabic and is an extreme case of direct negative transfer from English. Arabic expresses the same notion by saying “another disaster [or any other qualifying noun] such as Manhattan”. It is highly irregular in Arabic to use descriptive backing or attributive names in this manner. Yet this instance of descriptive backing is clear evidence of translation-induced negative transfer in Bin Laden’s message.

This leads to the conclusion that the original message was written in another language, most likely English as evidenced by the preceding examples, by Bin Laden himself, one of his associates or a third party, and was translated into Arabic and adorned with religious clichés by Bin Laden himself or someone else.

Interestingly, the World Net and CNN versions opted for (another conflict) and (another catastrophe) despite the fact that the expression (another Manhattan) is a valid English usage and the reference to Manhattan is all too clear to the American reader/viewer. For an Arabic audience, the reference to the attacks on the twin towers is not easily derived from the expression in Arabic.

Another example, which has eluded the translators of this message, is to be found in the following segment, which was translated by Aljazeera and Washington Post only. The Herald Sun and CNN translations omitted it altogether, probably because it was deemed improper or nonsensical.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Aljazeera</th>
<th>World Net</th>
<th>Heral Sun</th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>Washington Post</th>
<th>MEMRI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ومن يعبث بأمن الآخرين ثم يتوهم بأنه سيبقى آمنا إلا النفس الأحمق؟</td>
<td>No-one except a dumb thief plays with the security of others and then makes himself believe he will be secure.</td>
<td>…as you spoil our security, we spill your security [omitted].</td>
<td>…If you play havoc with our security, we play havoc with yours [omitted].</td>
<td>… As you spoil our security, we will do so to you [omitted].</td>
<td>No one except a dumb thief plays with the security of others and then makes himself believe he will be secure whereas thinking people when disaster strikes make it their priority to look for its causes in order to prevent it happening again.</td>
<td>Just as you violate our security, we violate yours. Whoever toys with the security of others, deluding himself that he will remain secure, is nothing but a foolish thief.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of significance here is the expression (dumb thief). Here traces of translation on the operative level are found. The expression (dumb thief) is unusual in English. However, the expression (a thieving fool) is to be found. All translations under
examination failed to make that connection. Such conversion of modifier and modified is a translation technique used by seasoned Arabic translators in order to satisfy grammatical and rhetorical constraints. It is highly unusual to say (*thief dumb) in Arabic as a direct translation of (thieving fool) and by extension (thieving bastard), and conversion is therefore necessary to satisfy the constraint. In other words, within the three-tier model described in this paper, this conversion denotes a shift from the primary level to the operative level is detected.

Let us reexamine the various translations of the example (against the backdrop of) discussed earlier.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>وعلى خلفية تلك الصور وأمثالها جاءت أحداث ١١٠١ ردًا على تلك المظلمات العظام، فهل يلام المرء في النذور عن حماها؟</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aljazeera</td>
<td>So with these images and their like as their background, the events of September 11th came as a reply to those great wrongs, should a man be blamed for defending his sanctuary?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Net</td>
<td>[omitted]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heral Sun</td>
<td>[omitted]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>[omitted]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>So with these images and their like as their background, the events of September 11th came as a reply to those great wrongs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMRI</td>
<td>It was against the backdrop of these and similar images that 9/11 came in response to these terrible iniquities. Should a man be blamed for protecting his own?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here again we detect negative interference from English in the phrase (against the backdrop of these and similar images...). While the Arabic phrase is widely used in the Arabic media today, it is a loan translation from English and it is unusual for someone like Bin Laden who has allegedly embraced Fourth Century Islamic discourse to use a modern media expression. This raises the question of whether Bin Laden has access to Arabic satellite television such as Aljazeera and whether such exposure has had some influence on his style of writing, assuming that he is the author of his own speeches.

In the next example, there is also detectable influence from English.
The expression *inqadaha fi thihni* (انقذ في ذهني) is an extremely unusual expression in Arabic. While all eight translations have attempted to express the same meaning more or less on the operative or interpretive level, they failed to preserve the communicative intention of the original message (it triggered in my mind to...). Such Arabic expression could not have obtained without influence from English either through direct translation or negative transfer. However, to satisfy the constraints, the passive/active, transitive/intransitive forms have been manipulated.

Let us look at another example of translation-induced expressions in Bin Laden’s message.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>And as I looked at those demolished towers in Lebanon, it entered my mind that we should punish the oppressor in kind...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aljazeera</td>
<td>While I was looking at the destroyed towers in Lebanon, it came to my mind to punish the oppressor the same way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Net</td>
<td>As I watched the destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me that the unjust should suffer the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heral Sun</td>
<td>And as I was looking at those towers that were destroyed in Lebanon, it occurred to me that we have to punish the transgressor with the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>And as I looked at those demolished towers in Lebanon, it entered my mind that we should punish the oppressor in kind...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>And as I was looking at those destroyed towers in Lebanon, it entered my mind that we should punish the oppressor in kind...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMRI</td>
<td>As I was looking at those destroyed towers in Lebanon, I was struck by the idea of punishing the oppressor in the same manner...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>While I was looking at those destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me to punish the unjust one in a similar manner...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>This is the message which I sought to communicate to you in word and deed, repeatedly, for years before September 11th.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aljazeera</td>
<td>[omitted]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Net</td>
<td>[omitted]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heral Sun</td>
<td>[omitted]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>[omitted]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is the message which I sought to communicate to you in word and deed repeatedly for years before September 11th.

The odd use of the adverb (*qawliyyan*) in the construction (*qawliyyan wa amaliyyan*), meaning (in word and deed) is another feature of translation-induced negative transfer. The natural Arabic construction is (*qawlan wa amalan*), especially for someone who is supposed to be using pure “traditional” Arabic.

Furthermore, the term is derived from (*al-qawliyyah*), which is an old word meaning demagogy. So why would Bin Laden use a derivative of an old word to refer to (in word and deed)? Had he been influenced solely by Qur’anic and archaic Arabic as Cole has argued, he would not have used (*qawliyan*) in this sense. It is obvious that the word is a poor translation of the English expression “in word and deed”.

The other controversial example, which has attracted the greatest attention, pertains to the translation of the word *wilyah*. Etymologically, the word *wilayah* is derived from the verb *waliya*, which means (to govern, rule).

Yigal Carmon (2004) president of The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) for example, published a statement on 1 November 2004 explaining the reasons for its translation of *wilayah* into state in the sense of administrative division.

The tape of Osama bin Laden that was aired on Al-Jazeera on Friday, October 29th included a specific threat to "each U.S. state," designed to influence the outcome of the upcoming election against George W. Bush. The U.S. media in general mistranslated the words "ay wilaya" (which means "each U.S. state") [2] to mean a "country" or "nation" other than the U.S., while in fact the threat was directed specifically at each individual U.S. state. This suggests some knowledge by bin Laden of the U.S. electoral college system. In a section of his speech in which he harshly criticized George W. Bush, bin Laden stated: "Any U.S. state that does not toy with our security automatically guarantees its own security."[10]

Cole (2004) however disputes MEMRI’s assertion and vehemently argues that the word refers to nation or country and not state as an administrative division, as the MEMRI translation has conveyed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>إن أمنكم ليس بيد كبري أو بوش أو القاعدة. إن أمنكم هو في أيديكم وإن كل ولاية لا تعني بأنمنا فهي تلقاننا قد أمننت أمننا.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aljazeera</td>
<td>Your security is in your own hands. And every state that doesn’t play with our security has automatically guaranteed its own security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Net</td>
<td>Your security is not in the hands of Kerry or Bush or al-Qaida. Your security is in your hands. Each state that doesn't mess with our security has automatically secured their security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heral Sun</td>
<td>Your security is not in the hands of (Democratic presidential candidate John) Kerry, Bush or al-Qaeda. Your security is in your own hands. Any (presidential) mandate which does not play havoc with our security would automatically ensure its own security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>Your security is not in the hands of [Democratic presidential nominee John] Kerry or Bush or al Qaeda. Your security is in your own hands. Any nation that does not attack us will not be attacked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>In conclusion, I tell you in all truth that your security is not in the hands of Kerry, nor Bush, nor al-Qa'id. No, your security is in your own hands. And every state that doesn't play with our security, has automatically guaranteed its own security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMRI</td>
<td>Your security is not in the hands of Kerry or Bush or Al-Qa'ida. Your security is in your own hands, and any [U.S.] state [wilaya] that does not toy with our security automatically guarantees its own security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>Your security does not lie in the hands of Kerry, Bush, or al-Qaeda. Your security is in your own hands. Each and every state that does not tamper with our security will have automatically assured its own security.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cole claims that the way Bin Laden uses *wilayah* is strange if he meant a Rhode Island kind of state. Coles dictates that Bin Lade should have said "*ayy wilayah min al-wilayaat,*" that is "any state among [or of] the states" or some such diction. Should his assumption be correct, it is further evidence that the Arabic text was influence by English since it is natural in English to say “any state” rather than “any state of the states”, as Cole suggests. Cole argues that there are two possible explanations for Bin Laden's use of the word *wilayah* in the sense of nation or country. “The first is that he regularly uses archaisms. He has steeped himself in ancient, Koranic Arabic and the sayings of the Prophet, and he and his fellow cultists in Kandahar developed a peculiar subculture that rejected much of modernity”. However, Cole’s conclusions are incorrect and are dictionary based. His argument quickly collapses under the weight of evidence from Bin Laden’s previous messages in which he used the word *dawlah* and *duwal* (in the plural) in the sense of country or statehood as illustrated in the following excerpt from his message broadcast on Aljazeera on 27 December 2001.
In the following excerpt from his message dated 12 November 2002, Bin Laden uses the word (duwal) alongside “archaic” words such as (ghazwah) for “incursion”.

While intra-author variation of style and diction is detectable in long term exposure to second language environments, it is arguable that in his earlier messages, Bin Laden combines both narrowcast and broadcast diction, and the conclusion that he may have lapsed into “archaism” is not supported. The world “wilaya” is neither ancient nor archaic.

Smith (2004)\textsuperscript{11} asserts that the translation of the word wilayah into state (in the sense of country or nation) “makes a big difference in the bin Laden excerpt central to the group's argument”. It is also important as an identifying marker of attribution. It can be argued that the source of ambiguity in the Arabic text is translation-induced. In other words, the Arabic text must have been translated in part from English in the first place. It is an English language feature to say “any state” or “any of the states” rather than “any state of the states” to refer to the administrative division rather than the body of politic constituting a nation. This would lead to the conclusion that Bin Laden was influenced by an external language source other than his native language.
DISCUSSION

There is a clear departure in Bin Laden’s latest message from the style of his earlier messages, especially his long speech broadcast by Aljazeera on 27 December 2001. This departure has been seen as an attempt on Bin Laden’s part to portray himself as a statesman appealing to the American public. Bin Laden appeared without his usual AK-47 rifle and without his usual fatigue bomber jacket.

Fandy (2004) notes that “Bin Laden appears in regular robes and not in a military uniform with a rifle on his side. Bin Laden has relinquished his military [character] and his arms. This, of course, is intentional on the part of the public relations administration within Al-Qa’ida and outside it […]. The tape is devoid of religious manifestations…”.

Newmark (1991) reports that “politicians and diplomats often make speeches with their translated impact in mind as being of more importance to them than their actual words in their own language” (18). It may be argued then that Bin Laden wrote his speech with translation in mind. This raises the question of whether he possesses the skills required to make his religiously laden style translation-ready.

It is not true to say that Bin Laden has entrenched himself in ancient Quranic Arabic. To the contrary, as the preceding analysis has demonstrated, Bin Ladin’s Arabic is current. One example is his use of the phrase “ala khalfiyat”, which means “on the back of/to the backdrop or against the backdrop/background of”. This expression is far from archaic. It is in fact a modern translation-induced neologism in Arabic that is widely used in the Arabic media. Such usage can only occur if the speaker is kept abreast of the language or is working from a scripted translation. Compared to his previous statements, this statement, which consists of about 1400 words, contains only nine religious phrases.

Descriptive backing of the kind described in this paper (another Manhattan) is alien to Arabic in all of its forms (so-called archaic, standard and colloquial). This is another piece of evidence that lays to rest the controversial interpretation of “wilayah” as (nation) and further consolidates the claim that contemporary external influences are brought to bear on Bin Laden’s latest message.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The question of authorship of foreign texts is beset by problems of scholarship in the language of the source and problems of skills in translation. As the preceding discussion has illustrated, attribution of authorship through translation cannot rely solely on individual interpretations outside a clearly defined and structured translation analysis model.

This paper has raised some serious doubts about the originality of Bin Laden’s message. It has shown that the original Arabic message has been heavily influenced by external linguistic factors that vary between translationese and
direct borrowing from English. These factors also point to the real possibility that the message was originally written, at least in part, in English. The message seems to have been influenced by external language sources. These influences are not detectable in the English translations. The question remains whether Bin Laden was the sole author of his message or the message was written collaboratively.

WORKS CITED


NOTES

1 Sound analysis techniques may have included fundamental frequency, articulation, voice quality, prosody, timing, intonation patterns, intensity, dialect, speech impediments, idiosyncratic pronunciation, idiosyncratic language patterns, and unusual use of stress or emphasis.


4 Source: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1593275.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1593275.stm)

5 Source: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1593275.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1593275.stm)

6 Admittedly, this is an unusual rendition of the Arabic word “abd”, but it best captures the intended meaning. The word “abd” in its pristine form means “human being”. The following additional meanings have been loaded onto it over time: worshipper, servant and slave. The plural of “abd” meaning (salves) is “abíd” and the plural meaning (creatures, created or createes) is “ibaad”. Many translators fail to make this distinction and automatically translate “abd” into “slave”, “servant” or “worshipper”. These renditions are also influenced by their interpretive frameworks of Islam.

7 Some fundamentalist Christian Arabs use a similar ploy by greeting their non-Christian compatriots with the salutation “Peace be upon those who believe in Him [meaning Jesus], thus excluding the nonbelievers and avoiding cognitive dissonance.

8 Also “against the backdrop of”.

9 [http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Area=jihad&ID=SP81104](http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Area=jihad&ID=SP81104)

10 Reported by News Hounds.


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