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# TRANSLATING ARABIC POETRY INTO ENGLISH RAPPING: A STUDY INTO THE FORM-BASED REQUIREMENTS

Abdelkarim Daragmeh, Ekrema Shehab, and Yasmin Radi

## Introduction

The modern views of translation look at translation as “a norm-governed behavior.”<sup>1</sup> In moving from the source text (ST) to the target text (TT), the translator may pursue either the ST linguistic norms by selecting material “to formulate the target text in,” or adhere to TT textual-linguistic norms by adopting certain material to “replace the original textual and linguistic material with the TT material.”<sup>2</sup> In either case, there are genre-specific conventions that any successful translation will have to respect.

Both poetry and rap belong to what Katharina Reiss calls the “expressive text type” in which the author/singer “exploits the expressive and associative possibilities of the language in order to communicate the thoughts in an artistic, creative way.”<sup>3</sup> In translating an expressive text like a poem, the main concern of the translator is to “try and preserve aesthetic effect alongside relevant aspects of the semantic content.”<sup>4</sup> However, any change in genre would require “stylistic appropriateness,” and this “features prominently in restructuring.”<sup>5</sup> Appropriateness is sought by “the selection of appropriate genre and type of text, appropriate language varieties or styles, choice of formal features and lexical items.”<sup>6</sup>

Poetry and rap are two different genres. Arabic poetry and English rap would even be strikingly different owing to the divergent language pairs and genre pairs. Therefore, translating Arabic poetry into rap songs necessitates form-based changes called for by target-language genre conventions. As far as Arabic poetry production is concerned, poets often give much attention to the poetic diction and prosodic building of the words. A typical Arabic poem comes out in an equal sequence of lines with the force of rhythm and rhyme. In his extensive inquiry, Gelder says that the Arabic poem manifests “coherence and unity... rather than disjunction and disunity.”<sup>7</sup> In the same vein, Jansson focuses on the form of the modern Arabic poem, arguing that the “words themselves in their own right and in combination with the other levels of text, i.e. the line, stanza and poem as a whole”<sup>8</sup> are as important as the content itself. Accordingly, “If the SL text was written because the author wished to transmit an artistically shaped creative content, then the translation should transmit this content artistically shaped in a similar way in the TL.”<sup>9</sup> However, if there is a change in the function of the text, this change in the standards of equivalence becomes a must-do in translation.

More recently, a vast number of studies have examined rap in relation to its linguistic and socio-linguistic contexts. The language of rap songs has been the site of numerous

studies that classify rap as one type of modern poetry or as an independent art in itself. Though it is not considered music by many classical musicians,<sup>10</sup> rap is the hip-hop “culture’s musical element.”<sup>11</sup> With its peculiar musical features like rhythms, rhymes, chorus, beat, flow, monologue, and many others, rap has become one of the most widespread musical arts. The textual delivery is fine-tuned naturally with music and the rest is left for the rapper who performs the song live or recorded.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study’s main goal is to identify, classify, and describe the strategies used in adapting Arabic poetic form into rap song beats. Although we realize how form and content are closely tied, we limit our study to the formal, linguistic, and musical conventions of rap that would impact translation choices and allow for significant deviations from poetry. The authors will provide examples on gains and losses as the translator works to adapt the poem into the incoherent structure, the formal conventions, and the musical features of the rap song. The authors will identify any surface aesthetic deviations from formal poetry and provide explanations/justifications for these behaviors in the rap song; the study fuses linguistic and form-based genre orientations in order to demonstrate how the translator creatively adjusts the tenor of the poet’s style to make it fit the rapper’s own style.

### **Research Methodology**

The data of the study is taken from Omar Offendum’s translation of Nizar Qabbani’s “The Damascene Poem.” With thirty-four published poetry collections in his record, Qabbani (1923–1998) is widely recognized as among the most prolific and popular contemporary Arab poets. His poetry explores the themes of love, women’s status, religion, and Arab identity in the post-colonial Arab world. Many of his collections were translated into major world languages, including English. One of his most famous poems is “The Damascene Poem” from the collection<sup>12</sup> (lit. “Matches are in my hand and your Statelets are made up of paper”). This poem deals with the themes of Arab identity, particularly the Damascene identity, which is formed jointly from tradition, originality, history, and the distinctly native Arab culture. The poet pours out his feelings of longing and love for his beloved home city, “Damascus,” for his childhood days there, for the people, and every stone, vine, and flower in Damascus.

The Syrian-American rapper Omar Offendum has translated Qabbani’s “The Damascene Poem” himself, a translation that he used to record his own rap song “Damascus.”<sup>13</sup> Offendum was born in Saudi Arabia in 1989 and studied architecture in the United States. He is considered a prominent rapper and hip-hop artist. His songs address the themes of love, justice, war, family, and civil rights; most recently, he showed much sympathy with uprisings in the Arab World.<sup>14</sup> In 2011, he released his first album, “SyrianAmericanA.”<sup>15</sup>

### **From Coherence into Fragmentation**

Initially, we try to inspect the degree of discrepancy between the original Arabic poem and the target rap song in relation to coherence at verse and sentence levels. We then provide

the textual analysis for the TTs by paying close attention to the rap's conventional textual norms. Coherence will be examined both in the STs and TTs to see whether the coherence relations found in the poem remain constant in the song; where they do not, then, we shall see what norms and conventions in rap call for such dissimilarity between the text pairs.

De Beaugrande and Dressler define coherence as “the ways in which the components of the textual world, i.e., the configuration of concepts and relations which underlie the surface text, are mutually accessible and relevant.”<sup>16</sup> Coherence then refers to the network of logical and conceptual relations within a text. These relations must be made accessible if the text is to be considered coherent.

In translation, as Hatim and Mason put it, “it seems safe to assume that the sequence of coherence relations would, under normal circumstances, remain constant in translation from ST to TT.”<sup>17</sup> However, they go on to argue that, “a network of relations which makes sense in a given text may not be constant in another text of another genre.”<sup>18</sup> The translator therefore will have to consider the needs of the target reader when deciding on whether to maintain the coherence relations in translation; “a translator has to take into account the range of knowledge available to his/her target readers and of the expectations they are likely to have...”<sup>19</sup>

When we apply these coherence principles to the original Arabic poem, “The Damascene Poem,” we can safely say that the source readers will be able to make sense of the poem and understand the relations between events and characters in the text; however, the same does not hold true for the target rap song readers. We claim that if the coherence relations were to be maintained literally in the rap version, the result would be an “excluded receiver” who would show no genuine participation or response to the text,<sup>20</sup> and whose background knowledge would not help him interpret the poem or recognize its cultural references. Interestingly, the rap genre itself requires splitting and restructuring of verses to achieve an incoherence level that is normative in rapping.

### Fragmentation at Verse Level

In this part, we give attention to the verse as a whole unit. “The Damascene Poem” consists of four content parts covering four related subjects (see Appendix A for the Arabic poem). In translation, the twenty-line poem, four verses, 197 words, was rendered into three main verses, well above four-hundred words, and with code switching between Arabic, Spanish, and English (see Appendix B for the English rap song). The first verse is quite personal: the poet portrays Damascus as a female beloved and admits that his deep love for her caused this drink-to-forget habit that he has (lines 1–4, verse 1). He describes (in Table 1) a heart heavy with the pain of separation:

TABLE 1  
The Damascene Poem: Verse 1

<i>“The Damascene Poem”: Verse 1</i>	
إني أحبُّ وبعضُ الحبِّ ذبَّاح	1- هذي دمشقي و هذي الكأس و الزَّاح
لسألُ منه عناقيدَ و تَفاح	2- أنا الدمشقي لو شرحتم جسدي
سمعتُ في دمي أصوات من راحوا	3- و لو فتحتم شراييني بمديتكم
وما لقلبي -إذا أحببت- جزاخ	4- زراعة القلب تشفي بعض من عشقوا

In the second verse (see Table 2 below), the poet recalls some cherished objects, places, and figures who/that make up his memory of life in Damascus: the crying minarets of Damascus; the fragrance of jasmine flowers; the crackle of coffee grinders; the mewing of the relaxing house cat; and the father sitting in his usual chair looking at the smiling face of his wife. Each image is sensually carved into the speaker's memory. These memories unite (lines 5–10, verse 2) under one theme: recollecting childhood days in Damascus alleys.

TABLE 2  
The Damascene Poem: Verse 2

<i>"The Damascene Poem": Verse 2</i>	
فالنهدي مستنفر و الكحل صبّاح	5- الا تزال بخير دار فاطمة
فهل عيون نساء الشام أقداح	6- ان النبيذ هنا نار معطرة
و للماذن كالأشجار أرواح	7- ماذن الشام تبكي إذ تعانقني
وقطة البيت تغفو حيث ترتاح	8- للياسمين حقول في منازلنا
فكيف أنسى؟ و عطر الهيل فواخ	9- طاحونة النّ جزء من طفولتنا
ووجهه "فانز؟" حلّو و لمّاخ	10- هذا مكان "أبي المعترّ" منتظر

This flow from personal loss to recollection of childhood memories is interrupted by the rapper; the images have been rearranged in the target song; the coffee grinders and the image of the father are relocated in verse two. The rapper ends verse one with the image of jasmine flowers and the house cat; he then code switches to Spanish; the chorus takes over and the rapper then completes the rest of the related images in verse two, which begins with the coffee grinders and the image of the father. So verse one in the TT comes as a mixture of personal memories and the sense of deep loss. Yet, the two main themes: love of Damascus and identity of Damascus are preserved but with a few formal changes and reordering in the target song.

The poet then (see Table 3 below) emphasizes his Damascene identity (lines 11–14, verse 3). His roots, language, and heart are Damascene. He is a lover and a poet who is proud of his origin; yet he is a wanderer who has been forced to live the grief of exile for fifty years. The translation of this part is split over verses two and three (see Appendix B). For example, the rapper includes the TT line, "my parts been scattered across coasts for years," in verse two, and the twinning line, "tossed around in shoreless oceans," is kept for verse three.

TABLE 3  
The Damascene Poem: Verse 3

<i>"The Damascene Poem": Verse 3</i>	
فكيف أوضخ؟ هل في العشق إيضاح؟	11- هنا جذوري هنا قلبي هنا لغتي
حتّى أغازلها والشعر مقتاح	12- كم من دمشقية باعت أساورها
فهل تسلمخ هيفاء ووضّاح؟	13- أتيتّ يا شجر الصفصاف معتذراً
فوق المحيط وما في الأفق مصباح	14- خمسون عاماً وأجزائي مبعثرة

Verse four in the poem (lines 16–19; see Table 4 below) comes in the form of four rhetorical questions that cast doubt about the state of Arabism today and the future of Arabic poetry, which is threatened by the body of false poets. This was rendered in the TT in verse three.

TABLE 4

The Damascene Poem: Verse 4

<i>“The Damascene Poem”: Verse 4</i>	
16- ما للعروبة تبدو مثل أرملة	أليس في كتب التاريخ أفرأخ؟
17- والشعرُ ماذا سيقى من أصلته؟	إذا تولاة نصابٌ ومدأخ؟
18- وكيف نكتب والأفقال في فمنا؟	وكل ثانيةً بأتيك سفاخ؟
19- حملت شعري على ظهري فأتعيني	ماذا من الشعر يبقى حين يرتأخ؟

Evidently, the poem runs neatly moving from one topic to another without any kind of form or sense fragmentation. It has a well-organized structure consisting of coherent themes and concepts. This is customary in Arabic poetry; the Arabic poem manifests “coherence and unity rather than disjunction and disunity.”<sup>21</sup> However, the rap song lacks coherence and unity in that meanings have been mixed, cut, and scattered as shown above. In fact, cutting is a characteristic of rapping, as Shusterman describes it: “in contrast to the aesthetic of organic unity, rap’s cutting and sampling reflects the schizophrenic fragmentation.”<sup>22</sup> This fragmentation would not be surprising in light of the fact that rap is supposed to “energize and empower the audience”; such audience-empowering drive will require loose structures.<sup>23</sup> Edwards points out that the rule for rapping goes like this: “the more syllables, the faster the rap.”<sup>24</sup> By the same token, the more words, phrases, and verses, the faster the rap. Therefore, any strictly literal translation of the original poem will not afford this much splitting and reordering or such an abundance of words and phrases: 480 words for 197 in the original.

These many fragmentations may create the feeling that each verse, on its own, does not cohere well with the other verses; this incoherent style goes well with rap song norms. For example, Edwards maintains that rap songs “tackle a huge range of content,”<sup>25</sup> such as real-life experiences, controversial issues, quality and creativity, political and social issues. The rapper/translator has found it convenient to refer to such divergent subjects because this is rather conventional in rap songs. As we will note in the next section, the song will become all the more captivating because of the insertion of liberation, civil rights, and stereotyping rap song themes.

### Fragmentation at Sentence Level

While the previous section demonstrated the fragmentation at text and verse level, here we will examine incoherence at the sentential level. For an example, we use these two lines, which refer to some distinctive spatial features of the poet’s home city, Damascus (see Appendix A):

2- و للمآذن كالأشجار أرواح  
4- وقطة البيت تغفو حيث ترتاح

1- مآذن الشام تبكي إذ تعانقني  
3- للباسمين حقول في منازلنا

The lines consist of four related sentences:

1. The minarets weep as they embrace me.
2. And like trees, the minarets have souls.
3. There are fields for jasmine flowers in our houses.
4. And the house cat takes naps relaxing where it suits her.

Each constituent clearly makes a coherent, well-structured line, and discernibly connects with the other lines in the verse. Such a natural flow of words and lines has been disrupted in the target rap song; the four lines are split into seven as in the following:

1. minarets cryin tears of absence
2. and like trees their souls speak
3. years have passed them
4. (you can hear them askin)
5. for civil rights to live amongst
6. tiers of jasmine
7. as house cats take naps—relaxin

The inserted line about civil rights renders all the Damascus landmarks in the original disconnected. The crying minarets, the tiers of jasmine, and the relaxing cat when attached to calls for civil rights are no longer physical features, but they become signs for missing liberty and equality. Situating the song in the civil rights context of the United States will make it both thematically and formally distinct from the original poem. The singer is protesting the absence of civil rights for the Muslim population in post-9/11 America. Apparently, the rapper/translator adds these images to make the text reflect more of the rap genre identity. Such protests against social and political injustice work well within the liberationist pulse of rap songs. The text now looks more rap than translation of formal poetry.

Walser has stated that, “coherence and complexity are precisely what have been denied to hip-hop.”<sup>26</sup> However, one may argue that although the song seems less organized and less coherent on the formal level, it certainly shows signs of thematic continuity within the youth culture. In other words, if we approach coherence in terms of the well-organized, coherent, and self-contained Arabic poem, we may be led to think that the translation is not coherent. But if we call on the stock of themes from rap youth culture in which the TT is localized, then the TT would sound more or less coherent. Besides, this shift from coherence in the Arabic poem to fragmentation in the target rap song is necessary to fit the formal structure of the target genre. It is also necessary to energize the audience, to break the monotony, and to fire the stage—all features that rap triggers in

the mind of its audience. Rap, after all, is the music of noisiness; “strange sounds piled up into a chaotic, assaultive texture.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, fragmentation is the thing that gives rap its unique musical identity within the rap youth culture and among the rap young audience.

### Code Switching in Rap

Code switching is commonly defined as the “alternating use of two or more languages within one conversation.”<sup>28</sup> Alternating languages is common not only in conversations but also in popular songs such as hip-hop. “Language shifts...having a line in Spanish and a line in English” is one of the most interesting traditions of “bilingual raps.”<sup>29</sup> The “fusion of Spanish and English in rhymes has a rich spoken word tradition.”<sup>30</sup> This common rap linguistic phenomenon is practiced in the translation of the source Arabic poem as shown in the following:

Instances of code switching in the target song “Damascus”:

#### 1. Code switching into Arabic

هذي دمشق... وهذي الكأس والراح  
إني أحب... وبعض الحب ذبايح

#### 2. Code switching into Spanish

“Es la cosa mas triste de este mundo  
Y así me siento yo por ti, solo por ti”

In fact, Arabic has been code switched to in five places (see Appendix B): at the beginning of the song, at the end, and between the verses as chorus. Code switching to Spanish is also used at the end of each verse followed by the English translation “and this is how I feel for you.”

In practice, “[R]ap is a genre used to express diverse sociolinguistic and cultural backgrounds.”<sup>31</sup> In analyzing code switching in French rap, for example, Terkourafi found that mixing languages is concerned with “the rappers’ multi-cultural and multi-lingual ethnicity and also with the genre itself.”<sup>32</sup> For Androutsopoulos, code switching “serves Hip Hop’s signifying and representing functions.”<sup>33</sup> To clarify the function of code switching, Androutsopoulos adds that code switching is practiced in order to produce appropriate alignments and stances or positionings. These positionings and alignments would be in relation to identity values.

In line with this interpretation, Offendum code switched to Arabic and Spanish to position his song within particular socio-linguistic and cultural backgrounds that are certainly non-mainstream. This interpretation fits with the rapper’s purpose, who thought to translate Qabbani’s poem “to make it more a part of the hip-hop experience.”<sup>34</sup> To customize the target song for youth audience from the margin, the rapper code-switches to Spanish three times after each verse. An English literal translation of the Spanish lines is: “It’s the saddest thing in this world, and this is the way I feel for you, just for you.” But the rapper provides a translation of the second line only (“& this is how i feel for you”). Spanish code switching admits in a new audience from among marginalized groups.

The code switching can then be associated either with the rapper's own identity—Arab American—or with other marginal groups—Latinos. The rapper/translator has switched languages to position himself among the minority population and to include other marginalized ethnic groups into his own experience of resisting molding and stereotyping. Accordingly, this practice of code switching is justified in rap translation because it better matches with the target genre's norms of positioning and/or repositioning members of the audience.

### The Rap Musical Norms

While a poem is written to be recited, a song is written to be sung and performed. Pharoahe Monch, a New Yorker rapper, provides important insights into the relation between rap and poetry: "Rapping is writing poetry but writing more musically, riding the beat; poetry, however, is the same but without music at all."<sup>35</sup> Monch cites music as a point of difference between the two arts. Accordingly, translating into rapping will require attending to the musical elements in rap, which include a network of sound effects: rhythm, rhymes, alliteration, assonance, consonance, syllable count, line length, and dubbing. Attention must also be paid to singer and chorus performance. A song's meaning "can only be analyzed and translated in close interrelation with the non-verbal dimensions of the song text."<sup>36</sup> Criteria such as performability, singability, musicality, and functionality will apply to the translation into rap songs.

The rest of this article is devoted to examining the extent to which the musical system of the rap song will require compromising the structure and content of the source Arabic poem. It also will attend to a number of genre-typical forms such as tempo, rhyme, and chorus to show that significant portions of the content and form are sacrificed in order to maintain these rap-specific features.

### Fast Beat and Rapid Flow

Joseph Schloss divides rap music into two main components: "rhythmic poetry or rapping and the beats."<sup>37</sup> He defines the beats as "musical collages composed of brief segments of recorded sound"<sup>38</sup>; these are achieved by the use of contemporary technology such as "records and turntables, amplifiers and mixers."<sup>39</sup> The rapper's voice follows the beat rhythmically to create the desired effect. It is the beat that marks the rap song as it defines "the song's tempo, contributes to the rapper's flow, and typically holds the song together."<sup>40</sup>

This relation between the voice and the beat is known as the flow, which according to Woods is "the rhythmic activity of the vocal line."<sup>41</sup> The parameters that define the nature of rap's flow include "tempo," "timing," and prosodic elements such as accent, pitch, timber, and intonation.<sup>42</sup> Other elements may include "the number of syllables, which decides the flow's rhythm."<sup>43</sup> In rap songs, the flow is more frequently given priority over the song's content.

The tempo of a rap song is the "pace of the song, how fast or slow the rhythmic/metric organization flows through real or clock-time."<sup>44</sup> It is an important aspect of rap

performance and is a “marker of style and competence.”<sup>45</sup> In matching the tempo of the songs, rappers do their best to “make a smooth transition without violently disrupting the flow of dancing.”<sup>46</sup> One last important note on the likely tension between performance and lyric forms is aptly given by Kellner when he says, “Rap is usually delivered in a fast, staccato style and the often complex patterns of rhyme and rhythm can create tensions between spontaneity of the performance and the fixity of the lyrics.”<sup>47</sup>

Following these rap stylistic and performance features, “The Damascene” has been delivered at a relatively fast speed, and the rapper’s style of “rapid flow” has been achieved not only structurally but also semantically. The rapper/translator rendered the sentence ‘أقاتلُ القبح في شعري وفي أدبي’ (lit. “I fight ugliness through my poetry and through my literature”) into “i battle garbage rap with prose & (rapid) flows” adding the rap’s term “flows” modified by the adjective “rapid,” which marks Offendum’s style as “rapid flow.” In fact, the poem was translated in a manner suitable to this “rapid flow.” Some adaptations were also introduced at the levels of word, phrase, and verse to achieve rapid flow in the target song. The following example includes some additional words that do not exist in the original poem:

ST: هذي دمشقٌ وهذي الكأسُ والزَّاحُ \\إتي أحبُّ وبعضُ الحبِّ ذبَّاحُ (lit. “This is Damascus and this is the glass and the comfort//I Love and some of the love is slaughtering”)

TT: This is Damascus \\& this is a glass of spirit (comfort)\\i love—but im aware of the fact that\\certain kinds of love\\can slaughter you in their wrath.

Several words were added here; the ST verse, which consists of ten words, was replaced by thirty words. Structurally, this technique of addition is prompted by the musical context of rap, where more words are needed to match the song’s fast flow. For the translator, this would imply that a semi-literal translation can be a bad choice since it would not fit this fast flow in rap; the rapper would end up with a lyric that will be delivered in only two minutes, whereas most rap songs end quite close to four minutes. Indeed, the “Damascus” song has been performed in four minutes and twenty-two seconds altogether. Actually, in order to fit the typical length of a rap, the translator added both words and phrases in the three verses to account for the rapid flow, as illustrated in the following table. For readers’ convenience, additions have been italicized in Appendix B to mark them out in the semi-literal translation.

TABLE 5

Additions for tempo concerns

<i>Verse 1</i>	<i>Verse 2</i>	<i>Verse 3</i>
years have passed them (you can hear them askin) for civil rights to live amongst tiers of jasmine as house cats take naps – relaxin	saddened eyes had lost their hopes to see her...)	(the saddest thing in this world— my lady’s—is knowin that we were meant to be from the very start but that we’ll never be...)

Qabbani's recitation of the original poem is delivered quietly and slowly, with the poet stressing every word in the poem. Such delivery is not ignored in the target song. Whenever the singer shifts to the couplets from Qabbani's "The Damascene Poem," the rapid flow is replaced by a slower tempo. As the recitation in Arabic stops, the rapper immediately rushes into fast delivery of the English verses. This fast-slow alternation in performance has to do with rap's "crazed beat"<sup>48</sup> and with the genre differences, i.e., poetry is different from rap in terms of speed of delivery.

Clearly, the rap song requires a structure that fits with the fast speed of lyric delivery. Therefore, Offendum took the liberty of adding hundreds of words to fit the new genre's fast beats.

### The Clash of Rattling Rhymes

One of the most essential phonetic features in poetry is "rhyme." It occurs "where the last stressed vowel, and all the sounds that follow it, are identical and occur in the same order."<sup>49</sup> Rhyme guarantees a sense of harmony that satisfies the listener's musical expectations and simultaneously contributes to the coherence of the poem. The pattern of repeated rhymes is referred to as the rhyme scheme.<sup>50</sup>

Rhyme is a very essential feature in Arabic poetry. It is found variably inside the lines of the Arabic poem in different forms such as assonance, consonance, and alliteration. However, the "essential part"<sup>51</sup> of the rhyme in the Arabic poem is achieved by repeating the same end-word sounds at each line. Structurally, the classical poem is built up of lines in even length, making one stretch of well-organized text. The modern poets break this overly neat layout by introducing lines that are uneven in length. However, whether old or modern, the main structure in the Arabic poem remains stable through "the organization of a poem into lines."<sup>52</sup>

"The Damascene Poem" came in nineteen lines, which have one sound identity that is made by repeating the sounds / / (a) and / / (h)/at the end-rhyming words; hence, this design contributes to the musical coherence and harmony of the poem (See Appendix B). The poem adheres to the fixed pattern of "symmetry, which is observed in the mono-rhyme and the two-hemistich layout."<sup>53</sup> The mono-rhyming final words of each line in the poem are:

ذَبَّاح- تَفَّاح- جَرَّاح- صَبَّاح- أَقْداح- أرواح- تَرْتاح- فَوَّاح- لَمَّاح- ابْضاح  
مَفْتاح- وَضَّاح- مَصْبَاح- أَشْبَاح- قَدَّاح- أَفْرَاح- مَدَّاح- سَفَّاح- يَرْتاح

When translating into rapping, there can be no hard and fast rule regarding rhyme rendition; the translator is guided by one important rule that has to do with how rap conventions govern the use of rhyme. Rhyme in rap is employed in different forms and at different places "in full and slant, monosyllabic and multisyllabic forms at the end of and in the midst of the line."<sup>54</sup> However, it is less strictly used than in Arabic poetry, where rhyme dominates the structure of the poem. One other fact that helps illuminate the treatment of rhymes in rap is the way in which the rap song is delivered. Unlike the Arabic

poem, which is recited with pauses marking finality of each hemistich, the rap song is delivered in such a way that a number of lines run on rapidly and continuously without pausing to emphasize the end of each line. Such a musical phenomenon is called “rattling rhymes.” Shusterman describes rapping rhymes as “raucous, repetitive, and frequently raunchy.”<sup>55</sup>

Once again, the translator shows more respect to rhyming norms in the song than to the rhyme scheme in the poem. In practice, the rapper/translator disposes of the mono-rhymed scheme in “The Damascene Poem” and replaces it with irregular end-rhyming words that are distributed in a disorderly manner in different parts of the song. Thus, the resulting rhyme scheme is different in terms of type and location. In fact, the rapper constantly changes rhythms and rhymes to make the flow unpredictable and surprising.<sup>56</sup> The following table shows the end-rhyming words in the song:

TABLE 6  
End-rhymes in the song

<i>“Damascus”</i>		
Verse 1	Verse 2	Verse 3
wrath\path askin\jasmin\relaxin	reaction\attraction cracklin\askin here\clear\dear\fear\here\hear	though\show\so grieved\relieved

The translator has introduced a lot of changes in the TT to create sound connections between the lines through rhyming words. These changes can be classified into deletion, addition, or restructuring. A clear example of translation by addition for rhyme concerns is the rhyming words “here//clear//dear//fear//here//hear” as shown in the extract below (See Appendix B, verse 2). These are added without causing any harm to the meaning in the song:

if my roots—heart—& language are *here*  
 how am i supposed to make myself  
 any more *clear?*  
 is clarification necessary  
 with love so *dear?*  
 (...so much so that there was no *fear*)  
 how many damascene bracelets were  
 sold for this poetry *here?*  
 apologizin to the willow  
 wonderin' if my little siblings can *hear*

One leading rule in composing rap songs is that the rapper should not “confuse meaning to find rhyme.”<sup>57</sup> Evidently, the rapper observed this rule, since he showed due respect to the rhyming norms of the target song while maintaining the love and identity themes in the SL poem.

## Verse–Chorus Alternation

In this last section, we will consider how the target song’s specific musical form impacts the translation in line with it. The song’s form is made up of segments of the same type such as verse, chorus, intro, etc.<sup>58</sup> There are as many musical forms as there are song genres. As far as rap songs are concerned, Miyakawa gives a brief description of the musical scheme of rap songs: “Modern rap (that is rap of the 1990s and beyond) relies heavily on verse chorus form, a form common to American popular music of many genres.”<sup>59</sup> Miyakawa describes the typical form of rap songs at length:

Songs which do fall into verse/chorus form often begin with a brief introduction, typically of four, eight, twelve, or sixteen measures. The first verse or the first chorus follows the introduction. Verses are nearly always rapped and verse lengths typically range from sixteen to thirty-six measures. Likewise, choruses (or refrains) are usually four to eight measures long, but need not be standardized even within a single song... Verses and choruses alternate throughout the songs, and most songs end with either a final chorus or a coda. Finally, codas —called “outros” in hip-hop speak, since they lead out from the song in the same way that “intros” lead in....<sup>60</sup>

Typically, the rap song has four main formal components. These are the “intro,” “verses,” “choruses or refrains,” and the “outros or codas.” Normally, there are three verses. The chorus is an integral part of the song; “in a verse-chorus song, the focus of the song is squarely on the chorus,”<sup>61</sup> as it communicates the main theme of the song. It may be repeated two, three, four times or more, and thus it unifies the whole song and creates a melodic and harmonic sense in the listener. “Choruses may be rapped, sung, or instrumental, but they share repeated musical or textual material with each statement, thereby unifying the song through repetition.”<sup>62</sup> The intro gives a glance into the topic of the song, and the outro reminds of this topic again at the end of the song.

These conventional musical schemes are well accounted for in the translation of the Arabic poem into rap song. The following chart illustrates the conventional rap scheme in the target song and demonstrates how the original Arabic poem has been profoundly cut and changed to suit the musical style of the rap song.

**TABLE 7**  
The musical form in the target song

<i>“Damascus”</i>
● Chorus
● Verse 1
● Chorus
● Verse 2
● Chorus
● Verse 3
● Chorus

The target song consists of three main verses, with lengths of 22, 25, and 18 measures, respectively (See Appendix B). The chorus in the song is the Arabic recitation of the first couplets from the original “Damascene Poem,” and it has been repeated four times. Even though the song has no intro or outro, the chorus at the beginning and end carries out these same functions. It indicates the main theme of the song; that is, the Damascene identity and love of the homeland.

## Conclusion

Using Offendum’s translation of Qabani’s “The Damascene Poem,” the study has tackled the form-based requirements that should be accounted for when translating Arabic poetry into English rapping. The first requirement has to do with replacing the poem’s coherent structure with the rap song’s conventionally fragmented style. If we compare the song with the original poem, the insertions may make the translation look loose and fragmented, but, by rap standards, they sound appropriately coherent. The free and rather loose structuring of the translated text can be attributed to the specific nature of hip-hop art in which excitement, creativity, and the energizing beats are much more valued than any neatly structured and perhaps monotonous verses.

This article has also noted code switching as an important practice in rap translation. Rappers usually alternate between various languages and language varieties to confirm their own identities and/or to emphasize their own peculiar styles. Offendum conforms to this tradition when he code switches into Arabic and Spanish to position himself in the periphery and, most likely, to include other minority groups among the song’s audience.

The last major formal convention has to do with the musical forms. Since the target song is translated to be performed in fast beat, the prosodic features would, in our view, have the most impact on the translation outcome. We therefore have argued that literal or semi-literal translation would be a bad choice in translating into the rap song genre. It may very well result in genre violation, where the translated song would sound more like poetry than hip-hop music. Offendum has successfully used strategies like word addition, loosening up of the strict mono-rhyming, and rhyme redistribution to produce his natural, conventional, and communicative rap song. The translator has added some words and phrases to account for the rapid rhythmic flow of the rapping. In addition, a whole verse has been added to the song to cater to the crazed flow of the rap song. And finally, the translator has followed the genre’s specific musical scheme by applying the verse-chorus alternation scheme to the translation.

In closing, and upon reflection on the thematic implications of Offendum’s adaptation of Qabani’s poem, it is only fair to say that Offendum “appropriated”—exploiting the rap genre conventions—Qabani’s protest against political oppression and corruption in the Arab world into a protest against the violations of civil rights of minorities in the United States. The song has been appropriately localized within rap minority culture by inserting themes like freedom, liberty, civil rights, and adventurous love. Such theme-based analysis, which connects formal changes to thematic concerns in minority culture, will be addressed by the authors as a topic for further research.

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## Appendix A

### SL Poem: The Damascene

هذي دمشقٌ وهذي الكأسُ والرَّاحُ  
 أنا الممشقُ لو شرحتُم جسدي  
 و لو فتحتمُ شرابي يني بمديتكم  
 زراعة القلب تشفي بعض من عشقوا  
 الا تزال بخير دار فاطمة  
 ان النبيذ هنا نار معطرة  
 ماذنُ الشَّامِ تبكي إذ تعانقني  
 للباسمين حقولٌ في منازلنا  
 طاحونة البين جزءٌ من طفولتنا  
 هذا مكانٌ "أبي المعتز" منتظرٌ  
 هنا جذوري هنا قلبي هنا لغتي  
 كم من دمشقية باعت أساورها  
 أتيتُ يا شجر الصفاصاف معتذراً  
 خمسون عاماً وأجزائي مبعثرة  
 تقاذفتني بحارٍ لا ضفاف لها  
 أقاتل القيقح في شعري وفي أدبي  
 ما للعروبة تبدو مثل أرملة؟  
 والشعرُ ماذا سيقى من أصلته؟  
 وكيف نكتبُ والأفقال في فننا؟  
 حملت شعري على ظهري فاتعيني

إني أحبُّ وبعضُ الحبِّ ذبَّاحُ  
 لسأل منه عنقيذٌ ونفاحُ  
 سمعتم في دمي أصواتٌ من راحوا  
 وما لقلبي—إذا أحببت—جراحُ  
 فالنهد مستنفرٌ والكحل صبحاحُ  
 فهل عيون نساء الشام أقداحُ  
 و للماذن كالأشجار أرواحُ  
 وقطعة البيت تغفو حيثُ ترتاحُ  
 فكيف أنسى؟ وعطرُ الهيل فواحُ  
 ووجهٌ "فانزة" حلٌّ و لِمَاحُ  
 فكيف أوضخُ؟ هل في العشق إيضاحُ؟  
 حتَّى أغارلها والشعرُ مفتاحُ  
 فهل تسامخ هيفاءٌ ووضاحُ؟  
 فوق المحيط وما في الأفق مصباحُ  
 وطاردتني شياطينٌ وأشباحُ  
 حتى يفتح نوارٌ وقذاحُ  
 أليس في كتب التاريخ أفراخُ؟  
 إذا تولاة نصائبٌ ومداخُ؟  
 وكل ثانية يأتيك سفاخُ؟  
 ماذا من الشعر يبقى حين يرتاحُ؟

## Appendix B

### Target Song: Damascus

Chorus:

Arabic recitation of the first couplets from Nizar Qabbani's "Damascene Poem"

هذي دمشقٌ.. وهذي الكأسُ والرَّاحُ  
 إني أحبُّ... وبعضُ الحبِّ ذبَّاحُ

Verse 1:

This is Damascus

&this is a glass of spirit (comfort)

i love—but im aware of the fact that

certain kinds of love

can slaughter you in their wrath

I'm a Damascene being dissect me into halves

&have not but grapes & apples fall in your path

open my veins with scalpels

hear ancestral chants

if heart—transplants can

cure some of the passionate

why does mine stay torn in half then?

minarets cryin tears of absence

and like trees their souls speak

years have passed them

(you can hear them askin)  
 for civil rights to live amongst  
 tiers of jasmine  
 as house cats take naps—relaxin  
 “Es la cosa mas triste de este mundo  
 Y así me siento yo por ti solo por ti”  
 (& this is how i feel for you)

Chorus:

Arabic recitation of the first couplets from Nizar Qabbani’s “Damascene Poem”

هذي دمشق.. وهذي الكأس والراح  
 إني أحب... وبعض الحب نباح

Verse 2:

coffee grinders cracklin  
 childhood reminders—back when  
 how can i forget?  
 when my reaction...  
 to cardemom’s strong fragrance  
 yet & still finds attraction  
 as proud fathers wait  
 for a sweet daughter’s face  
 im askin...  
 if my roots—heart—& language are here  
 how am i supposed to make myself  
 any more clear?  
 is clarification necessary  
 with love so dear?  
 (so much so that there was no fear...)  
 how many damascene bracelets were  
 sold for this poetry here?  
 apologizin to the willow  
 wonderin’ if my little siblings can hear  
 my parts been scattered across coasts for years  
 lanterns on horizons (*floatin saddened eyes had lost their hopes to see her*) ...  
 “Es la cosa mas triste de este mundo  
 Y así me siento yo por ti solo por ti”  
 (& this is how i feel for you)

Chorus:

Arabic recitation of the first couplets from Nizar Qabbani’s “Damascene Poem”

هذي دمشق.. وهذي الكأس والراح  
 إني أحب... وبعض الحب نباح

Verse 3:

tossed around in shoreless oceans

only to be hunted down by devils & demonic ghosts  
 i battle garbage rap with prose & (rapid) flows  
 thats apropos until nawar is open to em  
 (that's fa sho!)  
 identity of Arabness resemblin a widow though  
 is there no festivus for the rest of us history books can show?  
 what will remain of poetry's originality if so  
 many a brown-nosing liar gets to have complete control?  
 how we gonna ever write a verse to spit  
 when killers still approach?  
 i bore the burden of my words upon my back until i grieved...  
 what shall remain of poetry when it is finally relieved...  
 (*the saddest thing in this world—my lady's—is knowin that we  
 were meant to be from the very start but that we'll never be...*)  
 “Es la cosa mas triste de este mundo  
 Y así me siento yo por ti solo por ti”  
 (& this is how i feel for you)

Chorus:

Arabic recitation of the first couplets from Nizar Qabbani's “Damascene Poem”

هذي دمشق.. وهذي الكأس والزأخ  
 إني أحبُّ... وبعضُ الحبِّ نَبأخ