International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies
Volume 7, Issue 1, 2026
Homepage: http://ijlts.org/index.php/ijlts/index
DOI: https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v7i1.660

From Representation to Responsibility: Paul Bowles's Moroccan Translations and the Ethics of Listening

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How to cite:
Youssefi, I. (2026). From Representation to Responsibility: Paul Bowles's Moroccan Translations and the Ethics of Listening. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies* 7(1).30-38. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v7i1.660

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: *03/11/2025*
Accepted: 25/12/2025

Keywords:
Translation; Ethics; Hospitality; Authorship; Morocco

Abstract

This article re-examines Paul Bowles's translations of Moroccan oral narratives through an ethical and hermeneutic lens. Moving beyond charges of Orientalism and exploitation, it argues that Bowles's work constitutes a form of linguistic hospitality—an act of listening that welcomes the foreign without erasing its difference. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Antoine Berman, Lawrence Venuti, Paul Ricoeur, and Gayatri Spivak, the paper situates Bowles's collaborations with Mohamed Choukri, Mohammed Mrabet, and Larbi Layachi as negotiations between fidelity, authority, and affection. His insistence on rereading translations with storytellers, his preservation of Moroccan idioms and oral rhythms, and his refusal to domesticate difference reveal a translator attentive to the rhetoricity of the original rather than to fluency alone. The conflict with Choukri, as documented in Paul Bowles wa ʿUzlat Ṭanja Ṭanja and Al-Ḥiwār al-Ākhir, is reinterpreted as a moral dialogue revealing both the vulnerability and endurance of cross-cultural trust. Ultimately, Bowles's translations emerge as ethical experiments in coexistence—attempts to sustain conversation across inequality and language itself. Translation, in this view, is not the resolution of difference but its preservation through care, humility, and the courage to keep listening.

1. INTRODUCTION — FROM REPRESENTATION TO RESPONSIBILITY

Paul Bowles's literary career in Morocco has long stood at a crossroads of fascination and suspicion. To some, his translations of oral storytellers such as Larbi Layachi, Mohammed Mrabet, and Mohamed Choukri opened unprecedented paths for *subaltern* voices —those historically marginalized or excluded from literary and institutional power— to enter world literature; to others, these same acts of mediation repeated the old asymmetries of Orientalist discourse. In earlier work, I described Bowles's translations as double-edged—empowering subaltern voices and yet risking a deformation of cultural authenticity (Youssefi 2024). The present article turns that ambivalence into an explicitly ethical question. Rather than asking whether Bowles represented Morocco accurately, it asks how he responded to it—how translation, in his hands, became a moral encounter between languages, worldviews, and persons.

Situated at the intersection of postcolonial translation studies and ethical hermeneutics, this article revisits Bowles's Moroccan collaborations within the broader genealogy of translation ethics that extends from Antoine Berman and Lawrence Venuti to Paul Ricoeur and

Gayatri Spivak. By linking Bowles's practice to these debates, it moves discussions of his work beyond anthropological or Orientalist paradigms toward a relational model of authorship grounded in responsibility and listening. Methodologically, the study draws on Bowles's published translations, their Arabic sources, and paratextual documents such as interviews and correspondence to reconstruct his translation practice as both an aesthetic and ethical act.

This ethical turn comes into focus through Bowles's long and bitter dialogue with Mohamed Choukri. Their quarrel, recorded in *Paul Bowles wa ʿUzlat Ṭanja* [*Paul Bowles and the Seclusion of Tangier*] (1997) and in Bowles's replies collected by Mohammed Jadir in *Al-Ḥiwār al-Ākhir* [*The Last Conversation*] (1999), condensed decades of debate about authorship, ownership, and cultural loyalty. For Choukri, Bowles's translations embodied a "pure colonial dogma," a nostalgia for the Morocco of the 1930s and 1940s; for Bowles, they were acts of reciprocity and love—"a debt of gratitude [I] owed Morocco" (Jadir 1999, 249).[1] Reading these texts side by side reveals not merely a clash of egos but an ethical dialogue about fidelity, gratitude, and difference. Translation becomes a moral trial, poised between hospitality and appropriation, between care and control.

Recent translation theories help re-hear this dialogue in ethical rather than purely cultural terms. Lawrence Venuti's critique of the "illusion of transparency" reminds us that fluency conceals mediation; he calls instead for a foreignizing translation that resists ethnocentric violence (Venuti 2008, 1). In a similar spirit, Paul Ricoeur—drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity—conceives translation as a practice of *linguistic hospitality*, "in which the language of the other is welcomed into one's own." As Scott Davidson explains, this model provides "a normative framework for all sorts of encounters between what is one's own and what is foreign" (Davidson 2012, 2). Gayatri Spivak urges that the translator "surrender herself to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original" (Spivak 1993, 189), while Tejaswini Niranjana shows how colonial translation can fix the colonized as static and voiceless (Niranjana 1992, 3). Read through these lenses, Bowles's Moroccan corpus ceases to be a problem of anthropology and becomes a field of ethical negotiation—an imperfect yet persistent attempt to welcome other voices into English without erasing their strangeness.

The discussion that follows examines Bowles's work on two interconnected levels. First, it reads the ʿUzlat Ṭanja / *Al-Ḥiwār al-Ākhir* exchange as an ethical case study—a drama of accusation and defense that exposes the translator's vulnerability. Second, it situates this debate within the broader ecology of Bowles's collaborations: his rereading of drafts to Mrabet, his literal rendering of Moroccan idioms ("holes in my pockets," "seven faces"), his glossing of untranslatable words, and his repeated insistence that translation was not careerism but moral duty. Taken together, these gestures reveal a translator guided less by mastery than by what Ricoeur calls solicitude—a form of attentive care toward the other's voice that "develops its implicit dialogic structure on the plane of obligation" (Ricoeur 1994, 218).

This approach does not absolve Bowles of error. His position as a Western expatriate inevitably entailed privilege and asymmetry; his translations circulated within publishing networks shaped by exoticism. Yet to judge them solely through those structures is to overlook the ethical labor that sustained them—the slow, human work of listening, arguing, and rewriting across difference. Morocco was never merely the backdrop of Bowles's fiction; it was the space where

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations of quotations from *Al-Ḥiwār al-Ākhir* and *Paul Bowles wa ʿUzlat Ṭanja* are my own.

the translator himself was continually translated, decentered, and redefined. Reading his work through the prism of translation ethics moves us beyond the binary of exploitation versus celebration toward a more nuanced understanding of cross-cultural responsibility. It is within this ethical framework—grounded in listening, reciprocity, and shared vulnerability—that Bowles's collaborations must be read not as abstract theoretical gestures, but as lived practices of translation. Within this moral horizon, Bowles's encounters with Mrabet, Layachi, and Choukri emerge not simply as literary collaborations but as experiments in ethical reciprocity—spaces where authorship itself becomes shared, unstable, and profoundly human. The following section turns to these collaborations as concrete sites where the ethics of listening takes narrative and material form.

2. THE TRANSLATOR AND THE STORYTELLER: AUTHORSHIP, AGENCY, AND RECIPROCITY

The question of authorship lies at the heart of Paul Bowles's Moroccan project. His work with illiterate storytellers blurred the boundary between translator and author, between mediation and creation. For Bowles, translation was never a mere technical transfer but an encounter in which voice and meaning were negotiated through listening, persuasion, and trust. That dialogue was often tense. Mohammed Mrabet once reduced Bowles to a mere "translating machine" (Bowles 1994, 473), yet Bowles maintained that the process was reciprocal: "Once I finish translating a text, I reread its content to him to ensure accuracy and to hear any suggestions he might have … That's how we always worked" (Jadir 1999, 242). Against accusations of exploitation, this reframes translation as an ongoing conversation in which the storyteller remains present as a corrective voice and where mutual listening, not linguistic mastery, sustains collaboration.

Co-creation also moved in the opposite direction. Mrabet himself describes the compositional blend behind his dictated narratives: "some were tales I heard in the cafés, some were dreams, some were inventions I made as I was recording, and some were about things that had actually happened to me" (Mrabet 1976, 91). The "author" of record speaks, but the translator shapes; the storyteller invents, but the translation situates those inventions for another audience. Bowles was fully aware of that mediating role. Reflecting on his work with Moroccan narrators, he explained:

> Maybe. But if there was a section that I didn't think belonged, I would tell the Moroccan: So, what does this mean? Or: Let's cut that out and go from here straight to there. That I did do. Or sometimes I would say: No one's going to understand this, you have to explain why, what it is. A Moroccan would understand, but a European won't know what's *sous-entendu* [between the lines]. It has to be explained! (Bishop 1994, 245)

Such remarks reveal translation as negotiation rather than control—a process of questioning and clarification in which meaning is jointly constructed across linguistic and cultural difference. Editorial intervention, in this sense, becomes not ownership but responsibility: the translator's effort to render meaning without erasing the other's voice. Bowles's awareness of mediation thus underscores his dual role as editor and listener, charged with making Moroccan speech intelligible without smoothing away its texture.

One telling example of this interpretive care emerges in Bowles's collaboration with Larbi Layachi. When Layachi completed recording his life story and wished to omit a passage, Bowles insisted on retaining it, believing it revealed something essential about the persistence of pre-Islamic beliefs—even if it seemed tangential to the main narrative (Charhadi 1964, 12). Such moments show a translator attentive not only to accuracy but to cultural memory, determined to preserve traces that the storyteller himself might consider insignificant. As Maria Tymoczko reminds us, translators "do not stand in a neutral space … all are positioned politically, ideologically, and ethically" (Tymoczko 2007, 316). Bowles's position—as an American expatriate mediating marginal Moroccan voices—was inevitably marked by asymmetry. Yet the record of collaboration—rereading drafts aloud, inviting corrections, clarifying the *sous-entendu*—reveals a translator exercising agency in service of audibility rather than appropriation. Within these encounters, authorship becomes a negotiated territory where meaning is co-produced rather than claimed.

Taken together, these practices point to a translator guided by reciprocal care rather than mastery—one who keeps the storyteller in the room, so to speak, and accepts the obligations that follow from that closeness. This ethos of responsibility provides the hinge to the next section, where Bowles's own language of a "debt of gratitude" reframes collaboration not as technique alone but as a sustained moral posture toward those whose voices he helped carry across languages.

3. ETHICAL HOSPITALITY AND THE DEBT OF GRATITUDE

If Section 2 highlighted translation as shared authorship, the next step is to see how Bowles transformed that reciprocity into an ethics of care. In *Al-Ḥiwār al-Ākhir*, near the end of his life, Bowles looked back on his Moroccan work not as literary achievement but as moral repayment:

> I consider that work—translation—which I regard as the most important achievement of my life, a debt of gratitude I owed to Morocco and wished to repay. My recording of Moroccan music was another part of that debt… Whenever I listen to or read a copy of these texts, I envy myself and their owners, for these translations were not in vain: they give pleasure to readers around the world. (Jadir 1999, 249)

This confession reframes translation as reparation rather than authorship. Bowles's "debt of gratitude" suggests that living in Morocco had imposed an ethical duty—to give back, through words and sound, what hospitality had given him. Translation thus becomes an act of reciprocity: the return of a voice to those who first lent it.

That same spirit shaped his working method. Bowles often noted that before publication he would reread each translated story aloud to its teller, inviting corrections and suggestions to ensure accuracy and shared understanding (Jadir 1999, 242). This simple practice embodies what Antoine Berman calls the ethical essence of translation: "to open up in writing a certain relation with the Other, to fertilize what is one's Own through the mediation of what is Foreign" (Berman 1992, 4). In Bowles's case, rereading drafts was not a mere technical routine but a gesture of reciprocity—a way of allowing Moroccan speech patterns and idioms to shape the English text rather than be subdued by it. By testing his renderings against the storyteller's ear, he turned translation sessions into moments of shared authorship, where English momentarily

yielded to Moroccan rhythm and cadence. The storyteller ceased to be a source to be mined and became a guest whose voice transformed the host language.

Berman further defines the ethics of translation as the defense of strangeness—the refusal to domesticate the foreign under the pretext of clarity. Measured by this principle, Bowles's work often succeeds in preserving difference. Expressions such as "holes in my pockets," "seven faces," or "would not even dare disturb a sitting hen" keep Moroccan idioms alive rather than replacing them with Western clichés. When literalness risked confusion, Bowles chose transparency over concealment: he explained his adjustments, added short clarifications like "for a long time," or included glossaries for dialect and Spanish words. Such gestures protect what Berman calls "the foreign presence" inside the translation instead of polishing it away beneath a fluent surface (Berman 1992, 5). In this sense, Bowles's practice moves toward what Paul Ricoeur, following Emmanuel Levinas, describes as *linguistic hospitality*: an ethical openness that allows the foreign to inhabit one's language rather than be absorbed by it. As Scott Davidson explains, such translation "disappropriates the reader from his or her own language and culture by taking the reader to the author" (Davidson 2012, 7). Bowles's literal choices thus perform this ethics of hospitality—welcoming Moroccan idioms into English while unsettling the comfort of its readers.

Yet hospitality, as Ricoeur reminds us, always implies asymmetry. The translator remains the host—the one who selects, edits, and mediates publication. Bowles was aware of that privilege when he affirmed, "I can't love Morocco without loving Moroccans; for what is Morocco without Moroccans?" (Jadir 1999, 62). Affection thus becomes his ethical answer to hierarchy: not equality, but responsibility. His love is moral rather than sentimental—it binds him to those he translates by obligation, not possession.

Seen in this light, Bowles's Moroccan corpus becomes an ongoing experiment in ethical relation. It does not erase inequality but re-imagines it through attentiveness and gratitude. His rereadings with Mrabet turn fidelity into dialogue; his glossaries perform respect for difference; and his lifelong acknowledgment of debt transforms cultural mediation into moral exchange. Translation, for Bowles, is where aesthetic craft and ethical duty meet—the place where listening itself becomes a form of justice.

4. CONFLICT AND THE ETHICS OF LISTENING

If Bowles's collaborative method embodied hospitality, his conflict with Mohamed Choukri revealed how fragile that ethic could become in practice. Their exchange—recorded in *Paul Bowles wa-ʿUzlat Ṭanja* and revisited in *Al-Ḥiwār al-Ākhir*—turns translation from a literary craft into a moral battleground where affection, pride, and authorship collide.

In *ʿUzlat Ṭanja*, Choukri accuses Bowles of clinging to colonial nostalgia, declaring that "if Bowles wanted Morocco to remain as it was in the thirties and forties, that must be pure colonial dogma" (Choukri 1997, 12). He continues, "Bowles loved Morocco—but the Morocco he first encountered in 1931. He never loved Moroccans; and if that is so, why should they make any effort to love him?" (118). His indignation soon turns economic as he laments that "innocence is violated under the banner of discovering unknown talents" (126).

Bowles's replies in *Al-Ḥiwār al-Ākhir* reframe this bitterness within an ethic of gratitude: "I've never felt that Moroccans were hostile to me. And if it were so, I wouldn't stay among them this long … I honestly feel that Moroccans are my friends" (Jadir 1999, 142). His words transform accusation into dialogue, recasting hostility as misunderstanding and

reaffirming his moral bond with those he translated. In this light, his oft-cited declaration—"I can't love Morocco without loving Moroccans; for what is Morocco without Moroccans?" (62)—acquires renewed force as an ethical statement rather than mere sentimentality. It signals not possession but reciprocity, an acknowledgment that the translator's craft depends on affection disciplined by responsibility.

Together these statements and accusations dramatize what Gayatri Spivak calls the *politics of translation*—the translator's need to surrender to the rhetoricity of the original while resisting the impulse to domesticate it (Spivak 1993, 189). Bowles's handling of Moroccan idioms in *For Bread Alone* captures this tension between fidelity and fluency:

(Choukri 1982, 100) « من يوم خرج من السجن وهو يهشّ على الذباب في ساحة الفدان »

Bowles: "He hasn't worked since he got out of jail." (Choukri 1973, 91)[2]

The Arabic literally means "Since the day he got out of prison, he's been shooing flies in *El Feddan* square," an image of total idleness. Bowles's version flattens the figurative richness into a plain statement of unemployment—an instance where fluency erases metaphor.

(170) « كن مطمئناً على صديقك، ليس لنا سبعة وجوه، وجهنا واحد مع الجميع »

Bowles: "Don't worry about your friend. I haven't got seven faces. Just same face for everyone." (162)

Here Bowles preserves the moral imagery of "seven faces," a metaphor for hypocrisy. By refusing the smoother English "two-faced," he allows the plural exaggeration—and the moral weight it carries—to resonate in English.

(180) « أعرف أنه لا يستطيع الاقتراب من دجاجة تحضن بيضها »

Bowles: "I knew that he was the sort who would not even dare disturb a sitting hen." (171)

The proverb mocks cowardice, and Bowles's rendering keeps both tone and humor intact. These idioms trace the ethical frontier between readability and alterity. Fidelity, in Bowles's sense, was never mechanical exactness but a form of listening—allowing Moroccan voices to pass into English while preserving their rhythm and worldview.

A similar attentiveness shapes *A Life Full of Holes*, where Bowles retains the oral repetitions of Moroccan Arabic—"walking, walking, walking," "today and tomorrow, today and tomorrow." In Moroccan speech such reiteration expresses persistence or emotional intensity, not redundancy. By keeping these rhythms, Bowles resists the editorial urge to polish away orality's texture, letting the reader hear the pulse of storytelling itself. His ear for cadence thus enacts what might be called an *ethics of listening*: a translator responsive not only to meaning but to the life within language (Charhadi 1964, 12).

Yet, as Tejaswini Niranjana warns, translation can also "fix colonized cultures, making them seem static and unchanging" (Niranjana 1992, 3). Bowles's recordings of oral tales risk such musealization, but his foreignizing gestures—his glossaries, repetitions, and preserved idioms—work against it. Rather than erasing difference, he practices what Lawrence Venuti terms *visible translation*, a method that restrains the ethnocentric violence of domestication (Venuti 2008, 14).

Even humor enters this ethical dialogue. Jadir recalls Bowles joking that he "would not like to be a father to a *meskhout* (disobedient son)," clearly referring to Choukri (Jadir 1999, 130). The quip blends affection and reproach, casting their fractured bond in familial terms—Bowles the reluctant father, Choukri the rebellious son. The metaphor exposes the unequal yet

[2] *Page numbers following Arabic quotations refer to Mohamed Choukri's Al-Khubz al-Ḥāfī (1982 edition); those following English quotations refer to Paul Bowles's translation, For Bread Alone (1973 edition).*

emotionally charged dynamics of their collaboration: the translator as mentor who nurtures but cannot control the voice he helped bring into being.

Ultimately, the Choukri–Bowles dispute shows that ethical translation is not harmony but endurance—an ability to sustain dialogue despite misunderstanding. Bowles's choice to meet reproach with explanation, resentment with listening, transforms antagonism into testimony. His *ethics of listening* endures precisely because it does not demand agreement, only the shared space of words.

5. CONCLUSION: TRANSLATION AS ETHICAL RELATION

Paul Bowles's translational practice emerges not as linguistic appropriation but as a sustained ethics of mediation—an attempt to bridge radically different worlds through storytelling. His insistence on collaboration, rereading translations aloud with his narrators, and verifying every nuance exemplifies what Paul Ricoeur calls *linguistic hospitality*, the ethical openness that welcomes the foreign voice into one's own language. By foregrounding Moroccan idioms, preserving oral repetitions such as "walking, walking, walking," and resisting the flattening of local imagery into Western equivalents, Bowles fulfills what Antoine Berman identifies as the pure aim of translation: the defense of the foreign work's strangeness against ethnocentric assimilation (Berman 1992, 5).

As Berman reminds us, translation exists in tension with every culture's desire for purity and self-sufficiency:

> Every culture resists translation, even if it has an essential need for it. The very aim of translation—to open up in writing a certain relation with the Other, to fertilize what is one's Own through the mediation of what is Foreign—is diametrically opposed to the ethnocentric structure of every culture. … The essence of translation is to be an opening, a dialogue, a cross-breeding, a decentering. Translation is 'a putting in touch with,' or it is nothing. (Berman 1992, 4)

Bowles's Moroccan practice embodies precisely this opening and decentering. By translating voices rooted in oral and dialectal traditions, he turns translation into an encounter rather than an extraction. His rereading sessions with storytellers—acts of mutual listening—transform translation into what Ricoeur calls a "dialogic structure on the plane of obligation," where responsibility precedes understanding. In this light, Bowles's work is not a bridge across distance but a dwelling within difference, built from patience, attention, and care.

Seen through Lawrence Venuti's hermeneutic lens, Bowles's translations function as interpretive mediations rather than neutral transfers. They re-create Moroccan voices so they can be comprehended in English without being domesticated by it. Venuti's hermeneutic model views translation not as the mechanical transfer of meaning but as a creative and interpretive act embedded within the cultural and social institutions that shape human life. Bowles's practice thus emerges as both scholarly and ethical—a form of mediation that accepts its own situatedness and the moral obligations it entails. His balance between readability and resistance exemplifies what Venuti calls the translator's "ethical responsibilities and political commitments": the task of making the foreign understandable without making it the same. Translation, in this sense, becomes a living negotiation between empathy and alterity—an interpretive encounter that discloses rather than erases difference (Venuti 2019, 6).

From a broader literary-historical perspective, Bowles's Moroccan collaborations also anticipate what Rebecca Walkowitz calls *born-translated literature*—works "written for

translation … that present translation as a spur to literary innovation" (Walkowitz 2015, 3–4). While Walkowitz's concept emerges from a 21st-century context of globalized publishing, Bowles's projects developed within a markedly different, pre-digital ecology of oral storytelling and unequal cultural exchange. Yet despite these differences, his collaborations reveal a comparable translingual awareness: a recognition that narrative itself can exist *between* languages rather than originate securely within one. His bilingual projects with Mrabet, Layachi, and Choukri thus complicate the category of the "born-translated," suggesting an earlier, ethically grounded form of translational writing in which the boundaries between "original" and "translation" are deliberately unsettled. Cross-cultural collaboration becomes not merely a condition of circulation, but a creative method in its own right.

Bowles's ethics of listening therefore remains deeply relevant to the present. In an age of machine translation and accelerated cultural exchange, his example reminds us that translation is not merely the transfer of meaning but an act of moral attention—an acknowledgment of the other's presence within language. To translate ethically, as Bowles's Moroccan years demonstrate, is to cultivate patience, humility, and the courage to keep listening even when understanding falters. Translation, in this sense, becomes less a bridge across difference than a dwelling built within it—a space where languages meet, argue, and coexist without erasing one another. By reframing Bowles's Moroccan collaborations as practices of ethical listening rather than acts of cultural appropriation, this article offers a model for rethinking translation not only as a literary technique, but as a shared moral responsibility in asymmetrical cultural encounters.

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