

Translatability and Untranslatability of Literary Texts

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Abstract This corpus based study investigated the possibility of producing a perfect translation of high grade literature, such as Bustan - e - Sadi, Rubaiyat – e - Khayyam into English and Tolkein's the Lord of The Rings into Persian . To achieve this goal, 12 examples from Bustan, 24 examples from Rubaiyat and 7 examples from the Lord of The Rings were extracted from the original texts which were compared by their corresponding translations. The results showed that translation of high grade literature from Persian into English and English to Persian is possible but to translate all literary figures like rhythm, rhyme, style, proper nouns ,sentences, etc which have cultural and ideological meaning might be done partially and not absolutely.

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1. Introduction

Every language has its own linguistic characteristics and features, and that is why there are different languages. To convey a message each language has its own wordings and forms, and these are to be changed when the same message is to be conveyed in another language, and it is this process of change which is called translation.

The main task of the translator is to transfer the message of the source-language text into the receptor languages without any addition, deletion or distortion. But the process of translation should be carried out in such a way that the content of the message and the style of the original text are retained in the receptor language as far as possible. But finding perfect equivalence is desirable task which is almost impossible to be actualized .The truth is that there are no universally accepted principles of translation because the only people who are qualified to formulate them have never agreed among themselves. Savory (1968) categorizes translation into two levels as follows : first, purely informative statements (perfect translation) and second, adequate translation. So much of the discussion about the translation arises from the impossibility of perfect translation of many kinds of writings.

Kristeva (1988) has a notion of intertextuality and sees a relationship between all texts. If readership is paid attention to and reader response theories become the center of attention, then there might be more than one interpretation of the text: and this is due to the qualities of a literary text being open to many interpretations on different levels.

There is much emphasis on the close reading of the text to work out the figures of speech with their multiple meanings which are at the service of each

other yielding in the final unified picture of the work. Therefore, the translator should first go to the underlying structure of the text, and then by finding the proper equivalents and substitutions, render the text in TL (Abrams, 1988).

Translation consists of studying of the lexicon, grammatical structure, communication situation and cultural content of the SL. text and analyzing in order to determine its meaning (Larson, 1984). The period and culture of the time have direct influence on the language, and any literary work is, no doubt , the production of its era. Bassnet (1992) states that it is so significant that “all these elements can be missed if the reading does not take into full account the overall structuring of the work and its relation to the time and place of its production.

Therefore, one of the basic issues which this study undertakes to investigate is that when translators want to translate literary texts in the original language, they find some words that are untranslatable due to the existing differences or the variety among language systems, particularly cultural systems. Because the original texts in some cultures contain some features and characteristics that a translator cannot find any equivalent for them in the target language. Therefore, when a person is involved in translation activity from one language to another, it should be taken into account that s/he is writing for the people whose cultural and historical backgrounds differ from those belonging to the alternative language audience. Therefore, S/he should try to find words, terms and expressions in his/her native language that will be able to convey the ideas of the foreign text as far as possible.

What the researcher did in this study was to concentrate mostly on some problems of literary translation such as "linguistic constraints, cultural

barriers, literary devices and poetic features". Manafi (2003,p.28) and some untranslatable literary words and phrases along with examples and practical illustrations in well-known English translations of Bustan - e - Sadi, Rubaiyat - e - Khayyam and The Lord of The Rings by Tolkein.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Literary translation is a translational species in itself dealing with language but it differs in many important respects from the kind of translation practiced in a language class (Jackson ,2003).

Accordingly one of the most crucial problems which literary translators confront is the matter of style that differs from writing to writing and genre to genre. Literary translators can not turn to any stylistic analysis they wish. Language as a code possesses features – phonological, syntactic , lexical and semantic and code features are selected to act as vehicles for the communication of meaning (Bell ,1993, p.8).

What differentiates between texts is the way words and phrases and the notion of style are organized. Not only the choice of the word ,but also syntax ,rhythm and figurative language are significant. This is what keeps the translator always wandering between the two surface and deep levels of semantic structure: what the translator has to transfer from SL. to TL, with what tone and in what mood the message is conveyed with the least change in the final effect. A very important point related to style is the level of formality of writing (Abbasi, 2005, p.36).

These characteristics makes the action of translation very difficult and from here we may come to the idea of untranslatability of literary texts in some cases.

1.3. Research Questions

As the purpose of this research is to find an answer to the question of translatability and untranslatability of literary texts, the following questions were taken into account:

Q1: Is literary texts translatable or untranslatable?

Q2: Which translation strategies have been more prevailing in translation of literature?

1.4. Research Hypotheses

H01: It is not possible to produce a perfect translation of literary texts.

H02: No strategy of translation is more prevailing than the others.

2.1.Equivalence in Literary Translation

Should be considered that the order of words in a literary text plays s significant role because that makes unity among all elements of a literary text. Therefore, it is very difficult for a translator to find

appropriate equivalence to create the same effect in the TL. Maybe for this reason literary translators believe in the impossibility of full equivalence. Since a metaphor in the SL. is, by definition, a new piece of performance, a semantic novelty, it can clearly have no existing equivalence in the TL. Here the translator's bilingual competence is of help to him only in the negative sense of telling him that any equivalence in this case cannot be found but will have to be created. The notion of equivalence proposed by Toury differs from current concept of it. It has little importance in itself. It is considered as a means, to be used as a basis for the establishment of the overall concept of translation underlying the corpus under study (Hatim and Mason,1997, p. 37). It is considered as functional – relational concept that distinguishes between translation and non – translation in certain specific socio – cultural circumstances of the target language. (ibid, p. 36)

Meaning of words and sentences should be discovered in the context of the SL and appropriate equivalence should be determined with regard to the content of TL. As Larson (1984) says searching a one – word equivalent may not always be successful, for languages combine meanings differently (p. 55). Similarly, Bell (1993) states proper lexical equivalence as the one strategy preferred is representative of the translator's fidelity to the original text, for literary translation is the expression, in TL, of what has been expressed in SL presenting semantic and stylistics equivalence (p.5)

Above all, this concept shall be indubitably regarded as one of the most problematic and disputable areas in the field of translation which still leads to more controversies and is approached from varying perspectives.

2.2. Untranslatability vs. Translatability

The concept of untranslatability has been the most challengeable once during the history of translation, especially, in literary translation. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly due to the ideological reasons and the expansion in the concept of translation, the debates on untranslatability versus translatability loses some part of their popularity. Since the various strategies that translators can resort to when confronted with a gap between two languages or two cultures are acknowledged as sound translation mechanisms has made this fact.

Nida and Taber (1969) point out, anything can be said in one language can said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the message. (p. 4) Although Nida (2000) believes there can be no absolute correspondence between two languages because no two languages are identical.

Hence, there can be no fully enacting translations. (pp. 126-40)

Larson (1984) has a similar point of view about the source language which does not have lexical equivalents in the target language; he says in these cases, the translator attempts to look for a way to express a concept which is new to the speakers of that language. (p. 163)

According to Pym and Turk (1998), translatability is the mostly understood as the capacity for some kind of meaning to be transferred from one language to another without undergoing radical change (p. 273). Some scholars believe that all meaning are somehow translatable. Jakobson (2003) is among those who are in favor of translatability because considers translation as an act between languages as well as within them (p. 275). By referring to his famous example, the word *cheese* would seem to be untranslatable into a language that has no experience of *cheese*. Yet, as Jakobson believes, the word can be rendered as coagulated milk curds (Pym and Turk, *ibid*) it is understood that the explaining the meaning is of course a way of conveying the concept. Regarding this perspective, as it mentioned above, translatability is considered as a dynamic category in which paraphrase is replaced where the strict translation is not available. Pym and Turk sees translatability as a dynamic category and state that if something is not translatable here and now, in the particular translation situation we are looking at, it may nevertheless be quite translatable in another time and place, in a past or future state of the target language and culture. (*ibid*, p. 276) Translatability in literary translation, especially, in poetry translation has been a major debate. As we see during the last few decades, much time has been devoted to this domain.

Some scholars in this field like Robert Frost believe that poetry is what is lost in translation. Others like Jakobson considers it untranslatable and Shelly believes the impossibility of poetic translation. At the same way, as Connolly (2001) says Nabokov firmly believes in the impossibility of poetical translation and claims that translation should have copious footnotes. Both Frost and Nabokov believe that poetry can only be rendered literary.

While there are some groups of scholars who believe in the possibility of poetry translation provided that the meaning and the style of the original text are both conveyed in the TL.

Untranslatability is considered as a fact in poetry translation. Nida (2000, p. 127) believes in the impossibility of finding total equivalence in translating poetry. He says, a translation may reproduce the conceptual content, but it falls far short of reproducing the emotional intensity and flavor.

3. Methodology

3.1. Instrumentation

In this study the researcher tried to find translatability and untranslatability of literary texts and the strategies employed by translators in translating them. The necessary data for the present research was obtained through using the sentences of literary masterpieces Bustan -e- Sadi , Rubaiyyat -e- Khayyam and The Lord of the Rings of Tolkein.

3.3. Procedure

In order to find answers to the research questions concerning the perfect translations of literary texts, first the researcher studied Khayyam, Sadi, Tolkein carefully. Afterwards, their translations were scrutinized carefully based on Newmark translation strategies. In this study the researcher tried to show which strategies were employed by translators in translation of literary texts and how they were translated.

About 42 different sentences were extracted and were compared with their translations and then the strategies employed by the translator were specified.

3.3. Data collection

Examples of collected data from Bustan were as follows:

خداوند بخشنده دستگیر کریم خطا بخش پوزش پذیر

Clarke: The Lord, the giver, hand-seizing! Merciful, sin - forgiving, excuse-accepting!

Wickens: Lord forgiving, apt to help, Generous, fault-forgiving, excuse-accepting!

In the second translation, Wickens suggested 'apt to help' for 'دستگیر'. It is a descriptive equivalence of lexical expansion.

A descriptive equivalence in the target language is longer than the corresponding original in the source language, because it requires more lexical items to describe the meaning of the original in such a way that it will be intelligible to the potential readers in the receptor language.

In the second poem, there is a filling out of ellipses of syntactic expansion because there is not an exact equivalence in target language to convey meaning completely. The other part of meaning which is hidden in the style of poet is rhyme and rhythm which have not been transferred. These translators have not translated the line satisfactorily.

وگر خشم گیرد ز کردار زشت چو باز آمدی ماجرا در نوشت

Clarke: And, though He becomes angry at bad conduct When thou didst return, He cancelled the past circumstance. (in the book of sins).

Wickens: Does He wax wrath at ugly deeds? If you relent, He crosses out what's gone.

The first translator used 'in the book of sins' in the second line of his translation to complete the meaning in the target language. It is an identification of objects or events with abstracts of syntactic expansion. Here, the problem is

in transferring the rhythm and style and using a range of words to translate ملجرا

گلستان کند آتشی بر خلیل گروهی بر آتش برد ز آب نیل

Clarke: He makes a fire, a rose-garden, for Ibrahim;

He takes a crowd, from the waters of the Nile, to the fire (of Hell).

Wickens: A rose-garden He makes of the fire for His Friend, But some

He carries to the Fire from Nile waters.

Clarke added 'of Hell' in the second line of the first translation. He tries to clear the meaning of the original text (to the fire). It is an identification of objects or events with abstracts of syntactic expansion. In this translation if translator does not be familiar with this Quran tale, then can not transfer meaning. For example here has used friend as prophet. There is another problem of rhyme transferring from SL. language to TL.

Example from Rubaiyyate of Khayyam

این چرخ فلک که ما در او حیران فانوس خیال از او مثالی دان
خورشید چراغ دان و عالم فانوس ما چون صوریم کاندرا او حیرانیم

Emami:

This great carousel on which we ride

Has the Rotating Lantern for its model;

The sun is the Lamp, the world its outer shade

And we are the images on it, aimlessly floating by the significant part of this translation which is also suggestive of translator's deep familiarity with the Iranian culture is related to translation of 'فانوس خیال'. As researched, this concept refers to a game in the previous centuries of Iranian history. In such a game some figures stand in a definite distance of the lantern and through some techniques, the shapes of the figures seem to moving on the curtain of the lantern made a thorough study about this game.

This phrase ('magic shadow show') seems to be kind of coinage by FitzGerald. Let's have a brief review about this art. With Friar Roger Bacon, born in 1214, the art-science of light and shadow reached a point at which magic shadow entertainment devices could be built. Of course, the eighteenth century saw the birth of 'Phantasmagoria'. This was a type of light and shadow show, popular immediately after the French Revolution in Paris in the Late 1790's. It was the throwback to the medieval use of light and shadow to trick and deceive audiences. Then, the strategy for transferring the phrase 'فانوس خیال' could be named as cultural equivalent.

For the second underlined case FitzGerald has represented a box in which there is a candle. Candle is taken as sun ('خورشید') and box is indicative of this universe ('عالم') or its metaphor, 'فانوس'; the strategy is descriptive equivalent that is the translator

has explained a *magic shadow show*.

Emami has translated the underlined cases as below:

Rotating lantern: فانوس خیال outer shade: عالم چراغدان: چراغدان

For the first concept that is 'rotating lantern', Emami has used a descriptive equivalent; the lantern is described as *rotating*. For the second item regarding the above information of Emami's translation, the translator has paraphrased it through a new image. The important in this poem is the phrase 'فانوس خیال' because Khayyam has made clear his idea through the image of such a game. Emami has translated this phrase as 'rotating lantern' which seems that he has created a new image here white similar meaning of the original: consider a dark room; the lantern is rotating, our shade will be on the wall when the light of the lantern in a moment (in his rotation) becomes in it is nearest to us. Anyway the main idea of Khayyam that is portraying the idea of human's wandering in this world is being transferred in Emami's translation, although it may be concluded that such a classic game does not exist in this translation.

Myth

Out of the east the biting wind was blowing. To his right there loomed against the westward stars a dark black shape. A great barrow stood there.

رضا علیزاده: از سمت شرق بادی گزنده می وزید. در طرف راستش، مقابل ستارگان سایه ی تاریک سیاه با هیبتی نمودار شد. گورپشته ای بزرگ آنجا قد برافراشته بود.

پرویز امینی: بادی سخت و سوزان از طرف شرق شروع به وزیدن گرفت. در سمت راستش، روبروی ستارگان غربی، هیبتی سیاه و تیره ظاهر شد. برآمدگی بزرگی در آنجا قد علم کرده بود.

Here Frodo encounters one of the story's mythic beasts, a "Barrow". As it was mentioned before "Barrow wrights" are creatures dwelling in a barrow which means grave – mound Barrow" as a place – name is an invented name; therefore an equivalent should be invented by the translator. There is the translator's inadequate culture knowledge that has led to an inadequacy in rendering this sense.

4. Results and Discussion

Here the researcher gathered 36 examples extracted from the corpus as some mentioned above. Then, two translations of translators and some explanations about the strategies applied by translator in TL translation followed. Therefore the comparison and analysis of the TL text is a relevant part of translation studies.

As Toury (1985) states, any text comparison is indirect; it is always a comparison of categories selected by the scholar, in a contrast which is purely hypothetical. In the present study, the unit of translation is the sentence. But, in the process of the

analysis, this unit of comparison is not limited only to sentence. Actually, the linguistic and cultural concepts and complex notions which exist in the source text are the basis of the analysis.

In order to lead a more practical and clearer study in separated parts, the TL and SL texts cultural and linguistic related titles, equivalents, the cultural concepts and styles were analyzed.

The main goal was to demonstrate the lexical and cultural gap between the two languages and the translator's inadequate knowledge of cultural and linguistic background which leads to imperfection, inadequacy or untranslatability of them. Thus, a kind of qualitative analysis was done to seek answers to aforementioned research questions. The answers to the questions provide the corpus for presenting a critical analysis of how it is possible to produce a perfect translation (choosing linguistic cultural, and religious equivalent) for a literary texts? Thus, our aim is to answer the following questions?

The following table shows 16 extracted examples of Bustan – e - Saadi and strategies used through translation of these examples.

Table 1. Translation strategies of Bustan- e - Saadi

Items in SL	Items in TL	Translation Strategy
دستگیر	Apt to help for	Descriptive equivalence
تضرع کنان	Distressed	Descriptive equivalence
فروماندگان	Supplication making for	Descriptive equivalence
ماجرا درنوشت	Cancelled the past circumstance	Syntactic expansion
احوال نابوده	Circumstance not yet come to pass	Lexical expansion
بالاوشیب	Sky (object)/earth (event)	Syntactic expansion
روز حسیب	The day of reckoning (judgment day)	Syntactic expansion
ماورای جلالش	Beyond his grandeur	Descriptive equivalence
فردا	Tomorrow	Descriptive equivalence
آتش	To the fire(hell)	Syntactic expansion
روزی	Daily food	Descriptive equivalence
روز محشر	The day of place assembling for	Descriptive equivalence
عرش	God	Descriptive equivalence
مال و ملک بی زوال	Property and country without decline	Syntactic expansion
اگر شکر کردی	Thanks to god	Syntactic expansion

Regarding the strategies used through translation of Rubaiyyat – e - Khayyam extracted examples, table 2 indicates the results of data analysis.

Table 2. Translation strategies of Rubaiyyat – e - Khayyam

Item in SL	Item in TL	Item in SL	Item in TL
اهو	Gazelle	دوزخ	Shadow of soul on fire
روبه	Fox	همچون کف دست	Empty ground
گور	Wild ass(animal)	زبان پهلوی	Pahlavi
بهرام	The great hunter	گل زرد	Rose flower
جمشید	The shah Jamshid	می خوردن	Carousing time
فانوس خیال	Outershade	کوزه گری	Master potter
شمع اصحاب	Prophet's burnd	اهو	Gazelle

Finally, table 3 indicates the results of data analysis by regarding the strategies used through translation of the Lord of the Rings extracted examples.

Table 3. Translation strategies of the Lord of the Rings

Item in SL	Item in TL	Strategy percentage
Barrow	Goor poshte	16.67%
Old man willow	Bid mard Pir	
Cavalry	Savare zerehi	
White riders	Savarane sefid	
Irresponsible	Gheire masool /gheire mokallaf	
Semials	Semialha	

5.1. Conclusion

The result derived from this research proved that focusing merely on syntax, semantics is not sufficient to translate literary texts. The researcher concluded that those who are involved in translation affairs take the role of mediator between different cultures, ideologies, moral systems and social structures. The translator in this way should enjoy not only a bilingual ability but also a bicultural vision. Translators who have to mediate between cultures should try to overcome those inconsistencies or weaknesses which obstruct translation. What has value in one cultural community may have no significance in another and it is the translator who should identify the shortcoming and attempt to resolve it.

In rendering texts, translators are encountered with a number of problems which are to be tackled consciously, consistently and accurately.

The first problem is how to get access adequate comprehending of the original text with all its complexities. Languages vary in their superficial representation as well as the realization of the referents to which the surface representations refer. Thus in order for the translator to capture the image of the original text, a thorough survey of the text, its intention, its power act is to be conducted. The translator has to postulate and to fully capture a

model of translational competence based on which a perfect understanding of the text with the totality of complexities of semantic, syntactic morphological, phonological and lexicon of the source languages as well as the target language styles and registers is attained.

The second problem concerns the inefficiency of the translator's mastery of the target language and how that language is to be manipulated. Being a native speaker of a certain language is by no means enough to make one illegible for a translating task. It is false to assume that anyone can translate equally well from one language into another by simply being a native speaker of that language. A thorough knowledge of the target style, dialectal variations, cultural diversifications of the related community is the basic requirement for anyone to claim being in this field (Miremadi, 2004)

In this study, the researcher came to this conclusion that translators of Bustan, Rubaiyat, The Lord of The Rings have used the strategies in rendering the extracted examples and having great knowledge about the characteristics of two cultures would make the translator's excellent.

5.2. Pedagogical implications

By taking the results of this study into account, the following implications can be raised:

- The results of this study can help translators to become more careful in translation of literature as literature introduces language and also culture of a nation.
- Translation teachers can emphasize points of translatability and un translatability through examples presented in this study.
- Material developer in translation can get benefit from this research and include what fit their goals and learning objectives from this study.

5.3. Suggestions for Further Research

Translatability and un translatability of literary texts was investigated in this study. Other similar works can be carried out on different characteristics of literary translation. Those who are interested in this area can take some projects about the following subjects:

First, this study can be duplicated using some other high – grade literature of Persian sources translated into English.

Second, other genres of literature like novels

,dramas, fictions, fantasy and legends can be investigated to find translatability and un translatability

Third, researches also can be done on such plays, speeches and conversations.

Fourth, the focus of this thesis is on the linguistic and culture related problems of translation. Thus the study can be replicated based on other problematic areas of translation such as terminology, area of lexical choice, idiomatic expressions, tone and punctuation.

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