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## **Translating Cultures Literary Texts as a Case Study\***

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### **Abstract**

Language and culture are extensively interrelated. Language, embedded in a specific cultural frame, reflects the collective experiences of the language community and its social values. Culture, on the other hand, is derived from the collective experiences of the language community and is considered as the interpretive system for our cognitive and conceptual perceptions. Thus, literary translation involves various challenges where words carry far-reaching social and cultural associations in order to enlighten us about how other peoples live, think, and believe. In this paper, our main point is to show how cultural adjustments of a target text to a specific target culture will have an active effect on the appreciation and understanding of these perceptions. To achieve this, the study hypothesizes that successful intercultural communication depends on the intercultural recognition of the cultural values in both languages. This successful cultural recognition of both languages is of great relevance in determining the translator's wide range of translation strategies. In other words, the translation's choice of each strategy is adopted according to text function and the effect on the TL reader. The paper also discusses the most frequently used translation procedures applied in translating those language-specific and culturally alluded segments from English into Arabic.

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## ترجمة الثقافات

### دراسة حالة في النصوص الأدبية\*

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#### المستخلص

تتلاقح اللغة مع الثقافة على نحو دائم، إذ إن اللغة جزء لا يتجزأ من أي إطار ثقافي معين، تعكس التجارب المتراكمة لأي مجتمع لغوي وقيمه الاجتماعية. أما الثقافة فإنها تتوالد من التجارب المتراكمة للمجموعة الناطقة بتلك اللغة وتعد النظام الذي يترجم إدراكنا وتصورنا لمفاهيم تلك المجموعة.

وعلى هذا الأساس، تنطوي الترجمة الأدبية على العديد من التحديات كون المفردات فيها تحمل إشارات بعيدة المدى من المعاني الاجتماعية والثقافية بغية إثراء بصيرتنا حول طريقة عيش الشعوب الأخرى وتفكيرهم ومعتقداتهم. وهدفنا الأساس هو أن نبين للقارئ أن إجراء تعديلات ثقافية في النص الهدف يولد أثراً بالغاً في تقدير تلك المفاهيم واستيعابها.

ولتحقيق هذه الغاية، تفترض الدراسة أن التواصل الناجح عبر الثقافات يقوم على إدراك القيم الثقافية لكلا اللغتين والذي بدوره يسهم في تحديد خيار المترجم للإستراتيجية التي يتبناها في الترجمة من بين عدة خيارات متاحة أمامه.

وبتعبير آخر، أن اختيار المترجم لأية إستراتيجية في الترجمة يتم على وفق وظيفة النص وتأثير هذه الاستراتيجية في القارئ في اللغة الهدف. كما تناقش الدراسة الطرائق الأكثر استخداماً في ترجمة النصوص الأدبية الثرية بمفردات لغوية تحدها ثقافة تلك الشعوب ولغتهم من الإنكليزية إلى العربية.

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## **1) Introduction:**

A central issue in translation studies has been always controversial: should the translation of a text be as close to the original text as possible? Or should it be considered as an individual text? When talking about translating cultures, it should be noticed that literary texts are constituted not primarily of language but in fact of culture; language being in effect a vehicle of that culture.

In every human community or group, it is well known that there is interdependency between language and culture which serves as parameters for identifying that group or community. Moreover, translation is an intercultural form of communication; however, this communication may break down where differences in behavior, values, habits...etc. arise between the two cultures in question. This problem is the point of departure in this study.

The present study aims to show that:(1) the translation of a literary text becomes a transaction not between two languages , or a somewhat mechanical sounding act of "substitution" as Catford (1965) puts it; rather, it is a more complex "negotiation" between two cultures. And (2) the unit of translation is no longer a word or a group of words rather it compromises both language and culture of which the text is constituted. This new awareness describes the role of culture in translation studies. Within this perspective, the current study comes to the surface.

To achieve these aims, the study hypothesizes that: (1) successful intercultural communication depends on the intercultural recognition of the cultural values in both languages. The aim of the translator then is to create a global culture, (2) this successful cultural recognition of both languages is of great relevance in determining the criteria of choices in the target

language (henceforth TL), and (3) among the wide range translation strategies, the translation's choice of each strategy is adopted according to text function and the effect on the TL reader.

These hypotheses have been tested by applying Newmark's (1988) translation strategies on the data which were collected from Dan Brown's "The Davinci Code" and one version of its Arabic realizations. A discussion of each analyzed text is presented and a proposed rendering is given for cases of mismatching.

The study concludes that the translator's insufficient socio-cultural competence of both languages would lead him to run the risk of mismatching. This is due to: the close correspondence to the source text (henceforth ST) form and structure at the expense of the TL reader and the lack of conventions of TL culture.

## **2) Scholarly Views on Equivalence:**

In any account of interlinguas communication, the problem of equivalence arises. In literary translation, determining the type of equivalence is a key issue because it is influenced by a variety of linguistic and cultural factors. For this reason, different approaches can be distinguished. Some of these approaches take into consideration the original text as a starting point and we may recall Jakobson (1959) and Catford (1965) in this respect. Jakobson (1959) was interested in the linguistic approach and focused on the word or word group as a unit of translation. Catford (1965, 20) follows the same perspective and his important distinction between "formal correspondence" and "textual equivalence" discussed possibilities of equivalence between two languages in a specific translation situation.

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Other approaches proposed that target texts are individual texts and encompass consideration of various contributing factors apart from the micro linguistic structures, where a text is viewed as a message in an intercultural context. Nida's (1964) "formal and dynamic" equivalence, Koller's (1979) five types of equivalence (denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal equivalence (Cited in Baker, 1998, 77)), and Newmark's (1981) "semantic and communicative" equivalence, all fall in the same stream.

Within the area of literary translation, the translator must tackle the SL in such a way that the TL version becomes correspondent to the SL version; however, imposing the value system of the SL culture onto the TL culture is risky:

Translation involves far more than replacement of lexical and grammatical items between languages...Once the translator moves away from close linguistic equivalence, the problems of determining the exact nature of the level of equivalence aimed for begin to emerge."

(Bassnett, 1991:25)

On the other hand, Halliday's model of systemic functional grammar has come to be used in translation analysis. House (1977, 1981, 1997, and 2001) proposes that her model of translation quality assessment is based on the Hallidayan's register analysis. Also, she produces the notions of (a) 'overt' translation, where the emphasis is on the 'universal' meaning of the text, and the reader is not being specifically addressed, and (b) 'covert' translation, where the translation has the status of an original source text in the target culture, and a 'cultural filter'

focused on the target culture has been passed through the original in the process of translating.

House's covert translation, which is similar to Newmark's communicative translation and Nida's dynamic equivalence, stresses the different culture in each of the two languages, rather than the effect on the reader (Newmark, 2009, 29).

In posing such questions, many translation scholars like Baker (1992) have taken traditional register analysis to task, and the general trend has veered more towards texts seen as the minimal units of translation. This is a distinction recognized by a functionalist trend which questions the validity of the register-inspired equivalence. Baker (1992, 11) proposes a hierarchal approach to translation and looks at equivalence as a series of levels: at word, above-word, and grammar, thematic and pragmatic levels.

This role of culture in translation studies includes a range of studies being away from the purely linguistic analysis and considering the cultural differences between the original culture and the foreign one. Among them, Venuti (1995) proposes a sociocultural framework:

"Translation is a process that involves looking for similarities between language and culture-particularly similar messages and formal techniques-but it do this because it is constantly confronting dissimilarities. A translated text should be the site at which a different culture emerges, or to give a glimpse of the other culture, by reminding the reader of the gains and losses in the translation process and the

unbridgeable gap between cultures". (Venuti, 1995: 305)

Lambert (1998, 132-133) asserts that since literary translation is generally a goal-oriented activity designed to fulfill a need in the target literary culture, analyzing these needs and the strategies addressing them help to explain the dynamics of literary relationships and traditions. He points out that such type of translation is guided and shaped by such things as the norms, value scales and the models which are prevalent in a given society at a given moment in time. The study of literary translation therefore consists of the study of translation norms, models and traditions.

Translation theorists who have interest in literature started theorizing about 'translation' in a different way. This brings us to Eco's (2000) notion of cultural equivalence, in which the translator has the freedom to radically change the literal and referential meaning in order to preserve the sense of a text, and at the same time to adjust a text to the referential frames of the target culture for better understanding:

"Should the translator lead the reader to understand the linguistic and cultural universe of the ST, or adapting it to the reader's culture? The choice depends on the text function. A good translation must generate the same effect aimed by the original." (Eco, 2000, 44)

Translation, then, is an activity that is undertaken within the realm of culture. It is a social practice constituted by various other practices. It belongs to the totality of a society and as a cultural form it represents certain forms of social relationships.

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Hence, we can never separate translation practice from society and discuss it as an autonomous discipline, and an independent activity. Language and culture may, thus, be seen as being closely related and considering the translation of cultural words and notions leads us to the following question: what is meant by "culture"?

### **3) The Concept of Culture:**

Evidently, the concept of culture is essential in literary translation. Many translation theorists have dealt with the definition of culture. A very supporting interpretation of the term culture is given by Goodenough (1964) in which:

" ... A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior or emotion. It is rather an organization of all these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them. (Goodenough, 1964, 36)

Larson (1984:431) defines culture as "a complex of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules which a group of people share". This means that the translator of a literary work should understand these norms, beliefs and values of the SL culture in order to translate the literary work effectively to the TL reader who has no idea or experience about them. However, when the two cultures are similar, there is less difficulty in translating. This is because both languages will probably have terms that are more or less equivalent for the various aspects of the culture. When the

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cultures are very different, it is often difficult to find equivalent lexical items (Larson, 1984, 95, 6).

This is so because each language group has its own culturally specific features. With this regard, one may recall Newmark (1988) who remarks that culture is "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" (Newmark, 1988, 94). Hence, a few general considerations govern the translation of all cultural words. First, the ultimate consideration should be the recognition of the cultural achievements referred to in the SL text, and respect for all foreign countries and their cultures. Two translation procedures which are at opposite ends of the scale are normally available; transference, which usually in literary texts, offers local color and atmosphere, and in specialist texts enables the readership to identify the referent in other texts without difficulty. However, transference, though it is brief and concise, blocks comprehension. It emphasizes the culture and excludes the message, does not communicate; some would say it is not a translation procedure at all (Newmark, 1988, 96).

Baker (1992) points out that the SL words may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. She points out that the concept in question may be "abstract or concrete, it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or even a type of food." Baker then, calls such concepts 'culture-specific items' (Baker, 1992, 21). Nord uses the term 'cultureme' to refer to these culture specific items. He defines cultureme as "a cultural phenomenon that is present in culture X but not present (in the same way) in culture Y" (Nord, 1997, 34, Cited in Baker, 1998).

To sum up, Culture is a complex collection of experiences which condition daily life. Thus, in literary translation,

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transmitting cultural elements is complicated and risky task. Cultural expressions connote different aspects of everyday life such as education, politics, history, social structure, religion, traditional customs, legal systems, and even names of places, herbs, sports and drinks & foods.

#### **4) Newmark's Translation Procedures:**

In his discussion of translation and culture, (Newmark, 1988, 94-103) suggests two translation strategies in literary translation: transference which offers local color and enables the TL reader to identify the SL concepts without difficulties. However, this strategy blocks communication since it emphasizes culture and excludes the message. The other strategy is componential analysis, though not economic, but it excludes culture and highlights the message. We attempt in this study to examine the application of these two translation strategies in addition to other seven strategies. The following is an illustration of each translation strategy and its application in English-Arabic translation:

##### **4.1. Transference:**

The process of transferring a SL word to a TL text, it includes transliteration on which relates to the conversion of different alphabets in SL in to TL. The word then becomes a "Loan word", which is unfamiliar in the TL. Generally, only cultural "objects" or "concepts" related to a small group or cult should be transferred.

##### **Consider:**

- "Opus Dei" Langdon whispered, recalling recent coverage of several prominent Boston businessmen who were members of Opus Dei.
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- أوبوس داي: همس لانغدون وقد استعاد في ذاكرته الضجة الإعلامية التي أثّرت حول عدد من رجال الأعمال البارزين في بوسطن الذين كانوا أعضاء في أوبوس داي.

However, as pointed by (Newmark, 1988, 96), translation by transference transfers cultures but excludes the message. It is quite vague for the TL reader to understand what is meant by "أوبوس داي" and hence does not communicate. This is a cultural specific term which is related to a secret cult organization, we suggest: "منظمة دينية سرية"

#### 4.2. Literal Translation:

The process of translating a SL item by a TL item while observing the TL norms and conveying the SL content unchanged. This notion corresponds to Nida's (1946) formal equivalence, while Viney & Darbelnet (1977) categorize it as a type of direct translation.

#### Consider:

- The Church may no longer employ crusaders to slaughter *non-believers*, but their influence is no less persuasive, no less insidious.

- واليوم قد لا تستخدم الكنيسة جنوداً يعملون في الكفار ذبحاً وتقتيلاً. لكن ثقي تماماً أن الوسائل التي سيستخدمونها لن تكون أقل إقناعاً أو أقل مكرّاً.

The area of mismatching occurs within the real time realization which is not similar because the ST item "non-believers" is related to a certain group of people at the time of Prophet Jesus, while its realization in Arabic "الكفار" recalls those people at the days of the prophet Mohammad. We propose "غير المؤمنين" instead.

### 4.3. Couplet:

Sometimes, when transferring a SL cultural item which is unfamiliar in the TL, the translator usually completes it with a second translation procedure. The two procedures, then, are referred as "couplet".

#### Consider:

- He was wearing *a cilice*, "Teabing explained".

- لقد كان يضع سيليساً "الحزام ذو المسامير". فسر تيبنج.

In this example, the SL item "cilice" has been doubly translated: first as transference, and second as literal translation. Couplets are common particularly for cultural words and has been described by (Newmark, 1988, 91) as "two or more bites at one cherry"

Couplet then is a combination of two translation procedures for one unit.

### 4.4. Cultural equivalence:

It is an approximate translation where a SL cultural word is translated by TL cultural word.

#### Consider:

John the Baptist: (for the Christians) يوحنا المعمدان

In the Christian culture, John the Baptist means "يوحنا المعمدان", as for the Muslim culture, it means "يحيى".

### 4.5. Neutralization (descriptive or Functional equivalence):

While literal translation would distort the meaning, a translation may include an appropriate descriptive-functional equivalence. This is called Neutralization (Newmark, 1988, 103), as a common procedure applied to cultural words.

**Consider:**

- Closed for renovation:

*Pyx Chamber*  
St. Faith's Chapel  
*Chapter House*

- مغلق لأجراء إصلاحات:

غرفة القربان المقدس

كنيسة سانت فيث

قاعة الاجتماعات

Since the two cultures are not identical, literal translation is not workable. In this example, the translator took into consideration the dictionary meaning ignoring its religious value in Christianity. The lexical items "غرفة" and "قاعة الاجتماعات" fail to approach the closest meaning of the SL item "Chamber" and "Chapter House" respectively, which lead to the completely distortion of original meaning. The TL reader of the concept of "غرفة" is a location which sizes as this current room; however, the case is different. Chamber means a hole being made in one of the church's walls where the pyx is preserved. At least, there should be an illustration to explain this cultural meaning.

As for "قاعة الاجتماعات", it could resemble any ordinary place for meeting, in a company, a university, or a constitution, and does not carry any religious shade as witnessed by the SL readers. In such a case, the translator has to make a "cultural componential analysis" as Newmark (1988, 83) puts it: the most accurate way of translating, i.e. deculturalising a cultural word. Thus, in our case, description and function are essential elements in explaining these two cultural terms.

We sugges:

- بيت القربان المقدس (بيت تعني مكان محفور في احد جدران الكنيسة يحفظ فيه القربان وهو الكأس المقدس).
- القاعة السرية الخاصة باجتماعات رهبان الفاتيكان.

#### 4.6. Transposition:

It is the only translation procedure concerned with grammar. This term which is related to Vinay & Darbelnet (1977, 36) among other seven translation procedures. It is "the replacing of one word" class with another without changing the meaning of the message.

#### Consider:

- The Priory believes that Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that *demonized* the sacred feminine.
- تعتقد الاخويه ان قسطنطين وخلفاءه الذكور نجحوا في تحويل العالم من الوثنية الى المسيحية الذكورية وذلك بإطلاق حملة تشهير حولت الأنثى المقدسة الى شيطان مريد.

The lexical SL verb "demonized" is translated into "شيطان مريد" which is Qura'nic collocation noun phrase. The translator's other form of shift is the one from a normal SL style into highly stylized one in order create a TT intersexuality.

This is a case where literal translation is grammatically possible but may not accord with the natural usage in the TL. So, a SL verb is rendered as TL noun phrase.

#### 4.7. Expansion (Addition):

The translator may add an element to the TT which originally does not exist in the ST as a procedure of explicitness.

**Consider:**

- The Catholic Inquisition publishes the book that arguably could be called the most blood soaked publication in human history. *Mlleus Maleficarum*-or The Witches' Hammer-indoctrinated the world to "the dangers of *"freethinking women"* and instructed the clergy how to locate, torture, and destroy them.

- وقد كانت محكمة التفتيش الكاثوليكية تنشر الكتاب الذي يمكن ان يصنف على انه اكثر منشور دموي عرفة تاريخ البشرية على الإطلاق وهو مالوس مالفيكاروم أو مطرقة الساحرات هذا الكتاب الذي لقن العام فكرة: خطر النساء الملحيدات ذوات الأفكار المتحررة وعلمت الالكيروس كيفية العثور عليهن وتعذيبهم وقتلهن.

The addition of "الملحيدات" in the TT has been done to make the idea explicit about the type of those women to be destroyed, a case which is quite implicit in the ST. This is another case:

- Indeed, *Noah* of the Ark. An albino like you, he had skin white like an angel. Consider this. Noah saved all of life on the planet.'

- نعم سيدنا نوح ذاته صاحب السفينة. كان أبيضاً مثلك تماماً. كان يتمتع ببشرة بيضاء كالملائكة. خذ ما سأقوله لك الآن بعين الاعتبار لقد أنقذ نوح كل من في الأرض.

The addition of the word "سيدنا" is done because the image would not be accessible to TL readers. The use of such honorific expression is quite familiar because we highly venerate and respect all the prophets.

**4.8. Omission:**

It is used when there is no harm to omit translating a word or expression in some SL contexts.

**Consider:**

- Splinters of pain tore up Silas's body as the crutch made perfect contact with his cilice, crushing the barbs into his *already* raw flesh.

- مزق الألم جسد سيلاس حيث أن العكاز ضرب ساقه مباشرة على حزامه فدخلت مسامير الحزام في لحمه الذي كان أصلاً ينزف بغزارة.

It is clear that the translator's literal rendition of "already" as "أصلاً" is redundant and there is no harm if it is left translated.

**4.9. Paraphrase:**

This is a process of replacing the meaning of a SL segment by an explanation in the TL. The main advantage of this strategy is to achieve precision in conveying original meaning. For this reason, a one item slot is filled with an explanation consisting of several items.

**Consider:**

- "A Discipline belt. He wore it on his thigh. *"I took careful aim."*

- انه حزام تأديب النفس وكان يضعه حول فخذه، لقد كنت دقيقاً عن ضربته على فخذه.

**5) Concluding Remarks:**

The first challenge in this study is to test the validity of the hypotheses. In the light of the analyzed texts, different problems are likely to occur in literary translation. We have come up with the following concluding remarks:

1. Translation, as a form of intercultural communication , requires the translator to be a bilingual and bicultural, i.e., to be a member of each socio-linguistic community for the SL



& TL in order to defeat the difficulties he would face when translating literary texts.

2. Being a bicultural means being aware of the conceptual differences which would distance (or link) the SL & TL communities. If not, the translator runs the risk of not matching and the message is distorted in the TL.
3. Finally, inadequacy in conveying the SL message results from the lack of linguistic and socio-cultural competence of the SL community.

To sum up, it is hoped that the current study could help translation teachers and translator trainees to increase their awareness of their serious profession. The adoption of any translation strategy and excluding the other is risky and of great relevance to show how different languages, different cultures, represent the same meaning.

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