

The Issue of Translating Culture: A Literary Case in Focus

Azizollah Dabaghi

Department of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran
Email: azizollahd@hotmail.com

Mohammad Bagheri

Department of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Iran
Email: mohammadbagheri2020@yahoo.com

Abstract—Translation is a social practice which inevitably involves at least two languages and two different cultural identities. There are some cultural concepts and cultural phenomena that are present in one language but not present (in the same way) in another. Nord (1997: 34) uses the term ‘cultureme’ to refer to these culture-specific items. The problem of how to render culture-specific items (especially in literary translation) implied in the source text (ST) and finding the appropriate equivalence conveying these cultural aspects successfully in the target language (TL) can be the most challenging task for the translator. This paper attempts at exploring the problems involved in the transferring of ‘cultureme’ in translation of a literary text (Blind Owl) from Persian into English. In this regard, instances of culture-specific items were compared by their translations. After analyzing data, it was observed that the strategies used in dealing with culture-specific items in the process of translation by D. P. Costello were ‘Cultural Equivalence’, ‘Generic word with a descriptive phrase (paraphrasing)’ and in rare cases ‘domesticating’ translation.

Index Terms—literary translation, culture-specific items, cultural equivalence, domestication, source language, target language

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation always occurs at a multi-level process and a broad interpretation that it can be understood in many different ways. Therefore, many different definitions have been offered by scholars, each one reflecting a particular aspect and theoretical model of translation. On the issue of translation and culture, different views have been emerged; Newmark, (1988) argues that language is not a component or feature of culture (p. 95). If it were so, translation would be Impossible. Language does however contain all kinds of cultural deposits, in grammar, forms of address as well as the lexis. The more specific a language becomes for natural phenomena the more it becomes specific in cultural features, and therefore create translation problems. More cultural overlap between the source and the target language, there will be less translation problems.

Discussing the problems of correspondence in translation, Nida (2000) confers equal importance to both linguistic and cultural differences between the SL and the TL and concludes that “differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure”. Thus, the cultural implications play a pivotal role in translation as well as lexical concerns.

Lotman’s theory states that “no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language”. Bassnett (1980) emphasizes the importance of this issue and states that language is “the heart within the body of culture”, that is, they are both dependent to each other (pp. 13-14). Linguistic notions of transferring meaning are seen as being only part of translation process and a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria such as cultural ones must also be considered. In this regard, Bassnett further points out, “the translator must tackle the SL text in such a way that the TL version will correspond to the SL version [...]. To attempt to impose the value system of the SL culture onto the TL culture is dangerous ground” (Bassnett, 1980: 23). Therefore, in translation, not only the lexical impact on the reader is important and should be taken into account, but also the way in which cultural aspects may be perceived and affect translators choices.

A further point should be pointed here regarding the various translation strategies, or methods. According to Schleiermacher, what he has called “the roads open to the translator” throughout the history of translation, the different strategies can be divided into two categories: ‘domesticating’ and ‘foreignizing’ strategies (cf. Venuti, 1998).

According to Venuti (1995, p. 18) the aim of translation is:

To bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text, often in highly self conscious projects, where translation serves an appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, and political.

Elaborating more on domestication and foreignization, Venuti sees that the predominant trend in Anglo-American translations has been 'domestication'. He disapproves the phenomenon of domestication since it involves "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to [Anglo-American] target-language cultural values". This produces a translation in a fluent and invisible style in order to minimize the foreignness of the TT. Venuti associates it with Schleiermacher's description of translation that "leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him" (cited in Munday, 2001: 146). In Hatim and Mason's words, the result of applying such a strategy by English translators has been "depriving source text producers of their voice and re-expressing foreign cultural values in terms of what is familiar to the dominant culture" that is, the Anglo-Saxon culture (Hatim & Mason, 1997, p. 145).

According to the above framework, this paper will present a selective sample of culture-specific items (culturemes) which have been rendered from Persian into English by different strategies such as 'cultural equivalence', 'paraphrasing' and in some rare cases 'domestication' strategy in the English translation of Hedayat's *Blind Owl* by D. P. Costello.

II. RESEARCH QUESTION

Translating culture-specific items in literary translation is one of the most delicate situations in which the translator would encounter with. The foremost concern of the translator is how successfully recreate these situations from SL to the TL. Taking into consideration this fact that not all cultures express the same cultural phenomenon in the same way, this paper attempts to determine which solution(s) is used by translator to handle cultural problems in translation of *Blind Owl* (*Bouf-e kour*) from Persian into English.

III. METHOD

Material and Procedure

A Persian novel written by Sadegh Hedayat, *The blind owl* [*Bouf-e kour*] has been selected as a literary source text (ST) to be compared with its corresponding translated target text (TT) in English by D. P. Costello (1957). Two texts were compared sentence by sentence and instances of culture-specific items were selected to find an appropriate answer to the research question.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The following sample of instances has been selected according to socio-textual and socio-cultural features of the original text. They are cultural concepts existing in the source language but lacking in the target language (in the same way). In addition, some idioms have been chosen, because they are mostly culture-bound expressions and very language specific. In some instances translator has resorted to 'Cultural Equivalence', 'Paraphrasing' and in others neutralizes specific socio-cultural elements present in the source text; therefore, they might be considered as 'domestication' instances of the translated text.

(1) ST: ..., bæraye inke *væght ra bekoshæm* (p.12).

TT: ..., in order somehow or other to kill time. (p. 12)

Since idioms, are culture-bound, the translation takes us a stage further in considering the question of meaning and equivalence. When two languages have corresponding idiomatic expressions, in the process of interlingual translation one idiom is substituted for another. That substitution is made not on the basis of the linguistic elements in the phrase, nor on the basis of a corresponding or similar image contained in the phrase, but on the function of the idiom. The SL expression is replaced by a TL expression that serves the same function in the TL culture.

In translating idioms and culture-specific items translator must look for the natural equivalent to express the intended meaning. Here expression 'kill time' in English and '*væght koshtan*' in Persian have almost the same meaning and a 'Cultural Equivalence' strategy is used by translator to transfer the meaning.

(2) ST: ..., bæraye inke *sær faregh næghashi bekonæm*, ... (p. 13).

TT: ... in order to be able to concentrate on my painting. (p. 15)

Translating idioms needs great care since they are figurative use of language. The translator needs to find out and recognize the idioms and other figures of speech of the source text. The real jeopardy comes in translating an idiom literally, since the result will usually be nonsense in the receptor language; in other words, a literal translation of idioms will usually result in nonsense convey of meaning. The translator must first be sure of the meaning of the idiom and then look for a natural equivalence to transfer the meaning of the idiom correctly. Sometimes a good idiom in the target language may be used but some times it will be necessary to translate it with a nonfigurative expression (cf. Larson, 1984, p. 116). In the above example, a nonfigurative translation is used to convey the meaning. The expression '*sær faregh*' imply the meaning of 'without disruption' and a better translation can be as follows:

[... in order to be able to paint without disruption.]

(3) ST: ..., mesle inke ækse mæn rooye *aieneye degh_oftade bashæd* (p. 14).

TT: ... like a reflection in a distorting mirror. (p. 15)

The Persian expression '*aieneye degh*' is figurative and as a socio-cultural element conveys the meaning of grief, misery and frustration. But this meaning is not being transferred into the TT. As Larson (1984, p. 116) asserts, in some

cases, it is necessary to translate an idiom with a nonfigurative expression. In above case, a more accurate translation of this expression can be a literal one as ‘a sorrowful mirror’ or ‘a depressing mirror’.

(4) ST: *æsayesh be man hæram shode bud* (p. 19).

TT: Repose was utterly denied me. (p. 23)

Sometimes a figurative expression may not be used in the TT to render the ST cultural item or idiom; rather a more ‘Generic word’ may be used to convey the intended meaning, and in this example, translator have used this strategy for Persian expression ‘*hæram shode bud*’. Here ‘deny’ as a more generic word is used in TT.

(5) ST: *Mæn be dæræk...* (p. 30).

TT: Not that I mattered. (p. 37)

The Persian expression ‘*be dæræk*’ is used by people when they are so angry about something or with somebody and in fact it is a curse and swear. The target text does not convey such a meaning and it lacks any emotion and excitement of the original expression. Here also a more generic expression is used by the translator.

(6) ST: ... *æz hærkæte kaleskeye na’sh kesh ab to delæm tekan nemikhord* (p. 31).

TT: ... the movement of the hearse *did not import itself in any degree to my body* (p. 40).

“When words found in the source language, it may be especially helpful to analyze the source language word to discover its generic component, the contrastive components and the function of the word in its context” (Larson, 1984: 166). Accordingly, by using a generic term and stating the other meaning components, i.e. ‘paraphrasing’ an adequate equivalence may be found in the target language. In translation of this expression, a generic word with a descriptive phrase (paraphrasing) is used in the TT.

(7) ST: *migoft: “binamazæm”* (p. 57).

TT: ... would only say, “*It’s the wrong time of the month.*” (p. 78)

This sentence has an expression involving socio-cultural and religious values, that is to say, a Muslim woman is not allowed to say her prayers during her monthly period and implying that she can not have sexual relationships. The translator has selected a rather neutral expression that is denying its socio-cultural and religious values and reducing it to the target cultural values by the expression ‘the wrong time of the month’; therefore, it may be considered as a ‘domesticating’ translation (cf. Ghazanfari, 2005).

(8) ST: *ba æmameye shiro shekæri va se ghæbze rish vared shod* (p. 63).

TT: He came into the room in *an embroidered turban*... (p.83)

The Persian term ‘*shiro shekæri*’ refers to the color of the turban. This term has the meaning of a yellowish color, not the embroidery of the turban.

(9) ST: *be yek cheshm be hæm zædæn...* (p. 66).

TT: In the course of a single second ... (p. 87)

The Persian expression ‘*be yek cheshm behæm zædæn*’ is an idiomatic expression and has a figurative meaning. One way of transferring the meaning of the idioms to the target language is ‘Functional Equivalence’ or ‘Cultural Equivalence’. In this way, the target readers of translated text receive the same impression that the source reader would receive reading the text in the original language. Here translator has chosen this strategy to convey the meaning.

(10) ST: ... *yek ketabe do’a bærayæm aværdeh bood ke ruyæsh yek vajab khak neshæsteh bud* (p. 81).

TT: she brought me a prayer book with *half-an-inch of dust* on it. (p. 109)

In this case also the translator has opted for a cultural equivalence to convey the intended meaning of the source text. He has substituted an idiom of the source text with an idiom in the target text.

(11) ST: *sedaye naleye sægi æz labelaye æzan-e sobh shenideh mishod* (p. 83).

TT: Mingled with *the cry* was the sound of a dog howling. (p. 112)

In translation of this sentence, ‘the cry’ in the TT does not refer to ‘the call for pray’. In this specific case ‘the call for morning prayer’ is being rendered as ‘the cry’ that not only fails to convey the intended meaning of the author, but also it entails a reduction of the socio-cultural framework and religious values of the source text and in the expression ‘the cry’ there is nothing to do with religion in TT.

(12) ST: ... *va ba khodash zekr mikærd* (p. 89)

TT: ... was muttering some *formula* to herself. (p. 119)

In this sentence, while the source expression conveys a religious meaning, the translation has been reduced to a more neutral one, i.e. ‘formula’, and does not include a religious connotation.

(13) ST: *mokhtæsær ba hæft ghælæm arayesh varede otaghe mæn shod* (p. 100).

TT: In a word, she was *turn out to perfection*. (p. 135)

The Persian expression ‘*hæft ghælæm arayesh*’ conveys a socio-cultural sense of exaggeration in wearing make-up by a woman. Although in the translated text, this sense of exaggeration is being denied, a cultural item of the source text is being substituted by a cultural equivalence of the target text.

(14) ST: *vali ægær khoon rah mioftad mæn hazer næbudæm ke pirhæn ra ræd konæm* (p. 107)

TT: I would not have given it back to her *to save my life*. (p. 144)

In this case the meaning of the source sentence seems to be different from what has been rendered in the target text. The Persian term ‘*khooon rah oftadæn*’ has nothing to do with ‘saving one’s life’. The intended meaning by the author is ‘strong insistence’ or ‘determination’ in the ST, but the translated text conveys a different meaning from the original.

V. CONCLUSION

In most societies literature is being considered as the product of the dominant ideology. For Lefevere (1992a: 41, cited in Munday, J. 2001: 146) this ideology and the dominant poetics of the TT determine the translation strategy and the solution to specific problems. Translator as a mediator has different choices in the process of translation and may exert an intervention in this process producing a text that is more compatible to the socio-cultural framework and norms of the target language. This was observed in some of the above cases and they may be considered as domestication translation.

Paraphrasing was another observed strategy in the above instances. According to House (2001) in covert translation, the translator reproduces the source text function by applying a 'cultural filter', modifying cultural elements and adapts the target text to the preferences of the target receivers. On the other hand, in overt translation, the translator attempts to reproduce the function of the source text to the target text by staying close to the original text.

In some cases, based on the above findings, the translator has resorted to paraphrasing as a middle ground which is neither source-oriented nor target-oriented but the one that goes between these two extremes of a cline. This strategy reproduces the text through taking the generic term from the SL and describing it in the TL to be comprehensible for the reader. Therefore, paraphrasing will be helpful when these two extremes cannot be used in specific cases especially translation of culture-specific items.

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Azizollah Dabaghi completed his doctoral studies in language learning and teaching at the University of Auckland after being awarded with the University's prestigious Doctoral Scholarship.

He has been involved in translation field for the last thirty years most which was spent in practical works as a Spontaneous Oral Translator in international relations. He also spent some years working as a Translator of official and legal deeds at the University of Isfahan, Iran. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor at the University of Isfahan, teaching and researching language acquisition and translation courses at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels. His main interests include translation and culture, legal translation, sociolinguistics, and second language acquisition.

Mohammad Bagheri: For the time being, he is a post graduate student of English translation at the University of Isfahan, Iran and a part-time English teacher in University of Isfahan Language Center. He has presented articles in the National Conference of Translation Studies, and Translation Criticism. His areas of research interest include Translation and Culture, Translation Quality Assessment, Localization, and Translation Universals. He has been translating as a freelance translator for 5 years.