

# Cultural Conceptualizations, Semantics and Translation

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**Abstract**—Cultural conceptualizations are ‘negotiated’ and ‘renegotiated’ across time and space by different generations of speakers so that the members of the group are able to think, so to speak, in one mind (Sharifian, 2008b). What helps us to go beyond the linguistic barriers and consequently incorporate cognitive and cultural conceptualizations to the study of translation is the notion of Frame Semantics Theory which itself is a nascent approach in Translation Studies. Using Rojo’s analytical model (2002b), which focuses on the frames and cultural conceptualizations activated in the humorous texts, this research investigates certain translation problems that may occur in translating cultural elements of the book; "Funny in Farsi: a Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America" by Firoozeh Dumas (2003). Furthermore, the present research considers and examines several translation challenges under six sub-frames: Visual Frames, Situational Frames, Text type frames, Social frames, Institutional frames, and Generic frames. Upon analysis of the text and its corresponding translation, 70 problematic cases were detected, analyzed and then classified according to Rojo’s model (2002).

**Index Terms**—cultural conceptualization, humorous elements, frames, frame semantics, translation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The undeniably global and multicultural world in which we live has rendered translation specifically cultural translation more and more vital both as a genuine, material practice and as a cultural phenomenon to be academically and fundamentally investigated. The relative increase in human contact across linguistic-cultural boundaries that has occurred in the early twenty-first century has generated an increased need for communication across boundaries throughout the whole world. Hence, the present research studies, describes and explains the cultural and linguistic factors in translation of humorous elements of the book; "Funny in Farsi: a Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America" by Firoozeh Dumas (2003) into Persian.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Encompassed within the theoretical framework of relevance theory is the notion of frame, which has roots in cognitive linguistics. The concept of frame was first introduced by Charles Fillmore in the 1970s. He explained frame as: “Any system of linguistic choices - the easiest cases being collections of words, but also including choices of grammatical rules or linguistic categories - that can get associated with prototypical instances of scenes” (1996, p.209).

More simply, a frame consists of a group of words as well as cultural conceptualizations and the situation it initially implies. This situation is traditionally called a prototypical scene in Cognitive Linguistics. With every utterance, the associations that we make refer to stored cognitive models and cultural conceptualizations from which we try to call up similar experiences (Fillmore, 1996, p. 49). Even if people’s “prototypes” are similar, the associations they make are often different based on their specific cultural conceptualizations. Therefore, these diverse situations will trigger different frames of knowledge and experience attributed to a certain cultural conceptualization. Overall, Frame Semantics theory provides a useful framework within which to make translation decisions with regard to various cultural conceptualizations in the context of humor translation.

To sum up, based on the principle of the Frame Semantics theory this research investigates a descriptive comparative content analysis of translation of humor in a literary humorous book.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Overview

This research was focused on the analysis of the problems posed by certain elements characteristic of a given culture when translated into another language in a different cultural context. Overall, it can be claimed that this study had two basic purposes: (1) demonstrating the contributions of the Frame Semantics theory to the translation of humor; and (2) investigating the contributions certain types of frames and cultural conceptualizations can make to the analysis of humor and its translation.

### B. Type of Research

The present study was a descriptive comparative content analysis based on the text and the relevant Persian translation from the book; "Funny in Farsi: a Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America" by Firoozeh Dumas (2003). As a theoretical framework the researcher implemented the categorization of frames for the translation of humorous elements proposed by Rojo (2002).

### C. Source Materials

The source material selected for this research was a bilingual (English-Persian) parallel one. It included a book originally written in English and its relevant Persian translation. The selected books were as follows:

Funny in Farsi: a Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America by Firoozeh Dumas (2003), published by Random House.

And its Persian translation:

عطر سنبلی عطر کاج، محمد سلیمانی نیا، (1388)، نشر قاصه.

### D. Data Collection and Analysis

In this section in order to establish a functional theoretical framework for the research, I explained three basic concepts necessary for the selection and analysis of the humorous elements of the source material: (1) translation unit, (2) functional equivalent and (3) context.

Subsequently as part of the methodology I described the collection and analysis procedures in detail and finally I elaborated Rojo's analytical method (2002) comprehensively.

#### 1. Translation Unit

According to Rojo (2002, p.313) "the definition of the unit of translation has ranged between the tendency to atomize of those seeking lexical equivalence and the more holistic attitude of those looking for textual equivalence." She believes that the former often leads to somehow an "artificial translation" and the latter to a translation which is "too vague and not very practical to work with the whole text." To solve these problems, Rojo (2002) clarifies that the translation scholars have tried to establish units of analytical nature by comparing ST and TT after the translation process which are defined as posteriori. Santoyo (1986) and Rabadan (1991) call these units 'translemas' and define them as units of a relational nature that do not exist a priori, since they are only valid for the compared texts.

As Rojo (2002, p.313) proposed in her model "the hypothesis that acts as an intermediating instrument between ST and TT is the notion of frame." She defines frames "as structure of knowledge that represent the world view of a particular society, that is, its beliefs, values and emotions, prototypes of people and things, of sequences of situations and events, social scenarios and the metaphorical and metonymical structure of thoughts."

In Rojo's model (2002, p.313) "these units have been labeled cultural elements and include any word, expression or textual segment that activates a frame because it denotes, implies or symbolizes any cultural aspect of human life, its environment, its relationships or its products."

Therefore, it seems inevitable to give a definition of cultural words in this part of the research. Newmark (1988, p.95) believes that 'cultural words' mainly refer to aspects of the so called 'material culture'; however, for the purpose of this research based on Rojo's (2002) ideas the definition of 'cultural element' also comprises all those linguistic categories that need to be interpreted in the cultural environment of the ST, even if they do not refer directly to a cultural dimension. They are mostly contextualized stylistic resources whose interpretation depends on the reader's ability to activate certain cultural frames; which means numerous cases of idioms, colloquial and taboo expressions, play on words and even metaphors and metonymies.

#### 2. Functional Equivalence

For the purpose of this research from the Frame Semantics perspective I presented the notion of equivalence based on the concept of frame and the function carried out by each cultural element. As Gutt points out (1991), the function of text or textual fragment has surely been one of the criteria most frequently used to define translation equivalence. Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997, p.64) define 'functional equivalence' as "a term used to refer to the type of equivalence reflected in a TT which seeks to adapt the function of the original to suit the specific context in and for which it was produced".

Therefore, the type of equivalence which is meant in this research is not that of "total equivalence", but rather "correspondence" that may or may not be 'acceptable' by the target audience within the target language and culture. Then, what is crucial here is to focus on whether the translation's textual function as activators of knowledge is equivalent to that of the original ST elements or not, rather than focusing on mere lexical or holistic textual equivalence between ST and TT.

Therefore, considering the above mentioned criteria and based on Rojo's (2002) ideas the cultural elements of the TT are considered as functional equivalents of the ST elements if only they comply with the textual function carried out and if there is a high degree of correspondence between the semantic, pragmatic and stylistic loads of the source and target texts' frames.

#### 3. The Context

Translation unit proposed in this research was interpreted within its relevant context. The definition of context proposed in this study was in accordance with Martin's (1995) observation. He believes that the context is 'the mental

contribution of the person who interprets an utterance.’ Therefore, from the cognitive point of view of Frame Semantics proposed here, the context is a psychological conceptualization that exists in the speakers’ mind. More precisely based on Rojo’s (2002, p.315) ideas, we may claim that “the cognitive context includes information from the physical environment, information that can be retrieved from our mental stores and information that can be inferred from other domains of cultural conceptualizations.” In this way, the ‘cognitive profile’ of the ST cultural element constitutes a norm which serves as a framework to determine the adequacy of the TT element based on the frames and conceptualizations it activates.

#### *E. Collection Procedure*

Before proceeding to data analysis section, the cultural elements that appear in Dumas’s book were extracted and compared with its Persian translation. The selected issues were examples of translations which illustrated some problems according to the frames and conceptualizations they activated in the target language and culture in comparison with the original ones.

All the analyzed examples were presented in three separate parts: The first paragraph contained the ST with the cultural element in italics. The source was indicated with the related initials and the number of the page where the example was found. The second paragraph showed the translation with the analyzed element again in italics. In this paragraph the source was also indicated with the related initials and the number of the page where the example was found. Finally, in the third paragraph I described why the translation of the humorous element in italics was not considered an adequate functional translation and why it failed to reproduce and activate the same frames in the target language and culture as the originals.

To sum up, translation of humor in Dumas’s book was studied under six general frames: Visual, Situational, Text-Type, Social, Institutional and Generic frames.

#### *F. Analysis Procedure*

Rojo cites Nash (1985, p.12), who believes that, “humor characterizes the interaction of persons in situations of cultures, and our response to it must be understood in that broad context” (2002, p.34). This follows her idea that we need to use both cognitive and interactional frames. She states that prototype plays an important role in humor because, to understand a certain concept, we need to be able to access what she refers to as our “stored repertoire of prototypes in our memory” (2002, p.35).

According to Rothbart (2009), bearing in mind the assumption that the translation of a cultural element should be compared to the ‘cognitive profile’ of the ST cultural element (that is, to the cultural conceptualizations and frames it activates), then the crucial step is the analysis of the function carried out by such cultural element in the ST. In this way the ‘cognitive profile’ of the ST cultural element constitutes the norm which serves to determine the adequacy of the TT element based on the cultural frames it activates. For this purpose I used Rojo’s (2002) typology of frames for the translation of humor as the theoretical framework. She outlines six types of frames:

1. Situational frame, which refers to “information chunks related to conventional situations” (2002, p.320). Rojo provides the example of a commercial transaction (2002, p.36). Words like “buyer”, “seller”, “goods” and “money” all activate that particular frame. The stereotypical nature of the frame triggers the entire process associated with that frame. Therefore, in a transaction example, the mere description of a man walking into a shop (the initial frame) triggers a number of subsequent frames: the client picking an item up from the shelf; the owner standing behind the counter; the process of the client handing over money in exchange for the item; the owner giving the client a receipt, and packing the item into a plastic bag etc.

In this way, we can see that one frame triggers a cognitive process in which we use one image from our “repertoire” to create a chain of actions related to that event. It is the reader’s ability to access those frames that is important, and those frames include idioms, colloquial and taboo expressions, metaphors, puns and metonymies. In addition to situational frames, Rojo draws on five other types of frames: visual, text-type, social, institutional and generic (2002, p.318).

2. Visual frames refer to frames that evoke a series of images, such as that of a farm: we respond with related images like a barn, a farmhouse, a chicken-coop, farmyard animals and grazing fields. Visual frames also refer to words used to describe gestures, or movement, where the audience is able to build up subsequent frames describing sentiments and attitudes, based on the initial word.

3. Text-type refers to a reader’s implicit knowledge of the way a text is structured in her mother-tongue, and the frames within the text that activate this. Examples of this would be limericks and knock-knock jokes, where the form of the text activates the type of joke (“Knock-knock”), and the kind of response that should be given (“who’s there?”). Text-type frames are the equivalent of Raskin’s Narrative Strategy, which deals with the organization of humor.

4. Social frames are those that “describe the cognitive structures that organize our social knowledge” (2002, p.326). This is important because it includes knowledge of the type of register that is appropriate to different types of roles and interpersonal relationships. For example, dialect, geographical position and relationships are all elements of social frames that will govern how people respond to each other: how an employer addresses an employee; how a peasant addresses an aristocrat; or even how a parent addresses her child. Different social norms will govern interpersonal relationships, and the frames that are activated by each type of interaction.

5. Institutional frames refer to ‘material culture’ and ‘institutional systems’ which relate to both public and domestic life and to a particular political, legal, economic and educational system (Rojo, 2002). ‘Material culture’ conjures up things such as house objects, food habits, clothes, means of transport, mass media, etc. Firoozeh Dumas uses many of these terms in her book to activate the cultural conceptualizations she shares with her readers and to create certain humorous effects. So these frames play an important role in the process of translation.

6. Finally, Rojo describes generic frames as “prototypes of people” (2002, p.343), such as an evil person, or an innocent one. These frames are particular types of social frames and refer to the type of knowledge an individual has about people in society. This includes things like behavior, physical features, manner or commonly used expressions. Each aspect activates a specific frame, with a net which leads us to have a character sketch of the person in question.

#### IV. FINDINGS

This part presents the research findings as well as the relevant data analysis and discussions according to six general categories including: (1) Visual Frames, (2) Situational Frames, (3) Text- Type Frames, (4) Social Frames, (5) Institutional Frames and (6) Generic Frames. In the following parts the Persian translations were given according to UN system of transliteration. Due to the space limitations of this article, only three examples, one for each top three frames with the highest frequency have been presented here. Those interested in this research may contact the author for the full version of the research. Moreover, for the purpose of brevity the names of the books were abbreviated as follows:

F.I.F.: Funny in Farsi

ع.س.ع.ک.: عطر سنبل عطر کاج

##### Social Frame

DEES EEZ FROM MY COUNTAY-REE. ES-PAY-SHAY-LEY FOR YOU

“*Dees eez from my countay-ree. Es-pay-shay-ley for you.*” She would explain. (F.I.F., p.35)

Barāyeshān tūzih mīdād: “*Dees eez from my countay-ree. Es-pay-shay-ley for you.*” (ع.س.ع.ک، ص.42)

As a marker of the character’s origin, the narrator has embarked upon the use of phonetic markers such as ‘Dees’ instead of ‘this’, ‘countay-ree’ instead of ‘country’ and so on. Throughout the book this sort of pronunciation activates in the reader, a prototype of speaking English with an Iranian accent. However, in almost all the cases the prototype is not successfully transferred into TL.

##### Visual Frame

RECEDING HAIRLINES

We circled the perimeters of the casino, looking for my father’s signature *receding hairlines*. (F.I.F., p.52)

Kāzīno ro dor mīzādīm va donbāle moshakhaseye pedaram *yek sare kam mū* mīgashīm. (ع.س.ع.ک، ص.52)

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, recede (of hair) means to stop growing at the front of the head. This frame represents a man whose hair has receded but the Persian equivalent reflects the visual frame and cultural conceptualization of a man who doesn’t have much hair on all over the head. Therefore, it can be concluded that the frame is distorted in the TT translation.

##### Institutional Frame

CHAMPAGNE

Unwilling to abandon his *champagne* wishes and caviar dreams, my father dreamed of ways to get rich that required neither hard work nor further education. (F.I.F., p.14)

Ū ke nemikhāst az ārezūhāye *shāmpāyn* va khāvīyārash dast bekeshad, barāye pūldār shodan dar ārezūye rāhī būd ke na be kāre zīād ehtiyāj dāshat va na be tahsīlāte bishtar. (ع.س.ع.ک، ص.21)

The ST author has made use of the word ‘champagne’ which activates the frame and cultural conceptualization of something ideal, luxurious and of course expensive for the ST reader. However, due to restrictions in the TT culture, the TT reader has no access to such a frame. Nevertheless, this loss is partially compensated by the other word ‘Caviar’ which reflects the frame of expensiveness to the reader.

#### V. DISCUSSION

Based on the comparative analysis of the data and their translations into Persian, it was revealed that Social Frames category ranked the first, with 29 cases out of a total of 70 examples, which approximately included %41 of the whole data. Generally, it could be concluded that the translators’ failure to render Social Frames of the ST into equivalent ones in TT results in an imbalance in the level of formality of TT in comparison with that of the ST. The next category was related to Visual Frames with 25 instances accounting for approximately %35 of all the examples found. The translators’ failure in this case led to a poor mental image of the visual information incorporated in the text, i.e. the gestures, movements, scenes, images etc. The third category went to Institutional Frames with 9(≈%11) instances, in most cases of which the distortion of the frames resulted in blockage of the TT readers’ access to ST frames and consequently incomprehension of the text. The next category was that of Situational Frames with 3(≈%4) instances, the wrong translation of which resulted in a confusion or misunderstanding of the text. Generic Frames comprised 2 (≈%3) general instances, the distortion of which prevented the translator to achieve similar prototypes similar to the ones created by the ST narrator. And finally, Text Type Frames with 1(≈%1) instance. Although other frames outnumbered

this type of frame, it is significant to consider that ignorance of their existence distorts the humorous effect to a great extent. The study implicates that, since the Frame Semantics goes beyond the word level and the linguistic limitations of the formal linguistics traditional theories; it can be regarded as a very useful framework in translation and analysis of humorous texts.

To sum up, the notion of frame over and beyond the word and sentence level can help us understand the interaction between the textual information and the stored cultural conceptualizations. The Frame Semantics teaches translators and translation students to focus on the process of translation rather than merely the final product. Hence, in the light of the theoretical model of Frame Semantics adopted in this study which focuses on the cultural conceptualizations in both source and target texts' readers' mind, a higher degree of success in producing functional translations can be expected. Moreover, the framework implemented in this research can help translators and translation students to distinguish between the frames that organize our cultural conceptualizations and the linguistic expressions that activate such frames, which consequently lead to a more systematic and functional translation of cultural and humorous elements.

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