# Translation of Persian Mystic Terms into English: A Case Study of *Conference of the Birds* by Attar

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*Abstract*—**Translation of mystic terms or metaphors is a very important portion of rendering a text from a source language to a target language, because some of mystic terms do not exist in the target language and this point makes the translation harder. This paper aimed at identifying the translation strategies and procedures used by Darbandi and Davis (1984) in *The Conference of the Birds* of Attar Neishabouri. To achieve the objectives, Attar's Persian original work (Shafiei Kadkani, 2010) was read carefully to extract mystical terms. Then, the translated text by Darbandi, and Davis (1984) was carefully read and the corresponding English translations of Persian mystical term were found. The original mystical terms and their Persian translation were analyzed based on Van Doorslaer's (2007) map to find out translation strategies and procedures used by the translators on the one hand and indicate the dominant strategy and procedure in the whole work of translation on the other. The result showed that literal translation strategy (72.41%) was the most frequently used strategy and direct transfer procedure (68.96%) was the most frequently used procedure. This paper may have some implications in literary translation and help translation instructors and translation trainees as well in translation classes.**

*Index Terms*—**mystic terms, translation, The Conference of the Birds, Van Doorslaer's map**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since some of a source language (SL) mystic terms may not exist in a target language (TL), translation of mystic terms or metaphors is a very important portion of rendering a source text (ST) into a target text (TT). Metaphor, a figurative trope, etymologically originating from the Greek μεταφορά (metaphorá), means "transference of a word to a new sense" (Hawkes, 1972). What metaphor does is to add a new sense or meaning to a singular word or concept.

A poet uses metaphor more often than the writers with the intention of introducing a new concept, offering more clear-cut meaning or presenting a more poetic effect in his/her poems. Therefore, translation of poetry needs something more than translating other genres of literature because of its special features. It should be noted that the main concern in translating Attar's poems, in general, and metaphor, in particular, is how best the translators been able to convey the messages and beauties of the poems. Most of the translators face challenges in translating poetry. Jakobson (2004) believes that this kind of translation is rather not possible. An important feature in poetry translation is its formal characteristics and aesthetic aspects that are hard to transfer to other languages and cultures.

A mystic term is usually classed as a metaphor that changes the sense or meaning of a word, because a metaphor is the main device in any kind of poetry as a universal system of meaning within language. The main problem, on the way of the translator of mystic terms exist is that Persian mystic terms are highly culture-bound and their translation into other languages may be difficult and sometimes even impossible.

To clarify the point, it is necessary that the images be selected according to their underlying meaning and mystical significance. The translator should comprehend the differences between various cultural and social structures in which a poem has been shaped. Therefore, this research did an attempt to find out how these problems have been solved by Darbandi and Davis (1984) as the translators of Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. In this paper, the researchers intended to compare mystical terms or metaphors in Attar's poem in *The Conference of the Birds* and its English translation by Darbandi, and Davis (1984) based on Van Doorslaer's (2007) map.

## II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Considering the translation of mystic terms as one of the main issues in poetry translation, this study pursued the following objectives: firstly, it was an attempt to find out what strategies and procedures have been used to find proper equivalents for ST mystic terms. Secondly, it was hoped that the investigation of the translations of the mystic terms in Attar's poems would further address, explore the problems in translating mystic texts by other Persian poets, and suggest instructional points for translation education. Therefore, this study dealt with the existing problems and challenges of translation of the mystic terms in Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. The study of Attar's work and its English translation can be so interesting and motivating for not only the researchers of this paper, but it is of interest to

all who are familiar with Persian and English languages and enjoy studying serious literature. The results may be of instructional value for translation trainees and professional translators, as well. On the other hand, the results would hopefully shed some lights on the applicability of Doorslaer's (2007) map of translation strategies and procedures when translating literature from Persian into English. To achieve the objectives of this study, the following four questions were posed:

**RQ1.** What strategies have been used in translation of mystical terms in *The Conference of the Birds* according to Van Doorslaer's (2007) map?

**RQ2.** Which translation strategy has been the dominant one and why?

**RQ3.** What procedures have been used in translation of mystical terms in *The Conference of the Birds* according to Van Doorslaer's (2007) map?

**RQ4.** Which translation procedure has been the dominant one and why?

In order to handle and monitor this study, the researchers have decided to narrow down their subject as much as possible. Therefore, the researchers narrowed the topic to a comparative investigation of mystical terms of *The Conference of The Birds* of Attar based on Van Doorslaer's (2007) map and the English translation of Darbandi, and Davis (1984). As a result, other aspects of the book were not paid attention to. It is noteworthy that the researchers have no real contact with the translators (i.e., Darbandi, and Davis). Therefore, finding their main intentions (whether they translated the book for money, entertainment, or other reasons) for translating this book was almost impossible. It is clear that finding their strategies and procedures needs more study.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The present study aimed to find the differences between mystic terms and their meaning in TL. To achieving this purpose, a Persian book – *Mœnteq-o Teyr* [literally The Conference of The Birds] – by Attar and edited by Shafiei Kadkani (2010) was chosen. In addition, this book was translated by Darbandi, and Davis (1984) into English. The translators' strategies and procedures in terms of choosing the mystical items were investigated and compared between two languages (English – Persian). The research method of this paper can be comparative and descriptive, because a corpus of mystical terms was chosen from the Persian text and their corresponding English translation were identified for data collection and analysis.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the study was to explore the differences between mystical items in ST and their translation in the TL. In order to do the research, the researchers followed a systematic procedure. After selecting the book and its English translation, the researchers listed the mystical terms and its translation.

In this comparative study, mystical terms were examined in two ways. In the first step, the researchers found the Persian meaning of each mystic term in Moein (1985), Mousavi Sirjani (2002), and Mousavi (2009) and extracted the exact meaning of the Persian mystic terms. In the second step, the researchers found the English translation of each of the mystic terms (those that were translated by translators) and found their exact meaning(s) in *American Heritage Dictionary* (Morris, 1969), and extracted their meaning(s). Then, they compared two meanings to see if they are close to each other or not. After that, the researchers investigated why some differences exist at all. The researchers investigated the translation strategies and procedures based on Van Doorslaer's (2007) map, to understand under what condition such strategies and procedures were used. In addition, both source language and target language cultures in original text and target text were investigated in this paper. Since it was possible that some words or sentences be eliminated or changed completely in the translation, the whole process from collecting data, grouping them, to their analysis was done manually. It is noteworthy that word level was the unit of the analysis. The researchers utilized the Van Doorslaer's (2007) map as well as his translation strategies and translation procedures.

It is noteworthy that the researchers to achieve the objectives of the study utilized Van Doorslaer's (2007) map. In such maps, a distinction is drawn between 'translation' and 'translation studies', reflecting the different centers of interest of research. 'Translation' looks at the act of translating and, in the new map (Van Doorslaer, 2007, p. 223), is subdivided:

- Lingual mode (interlingual, intralingual);
- Media (printed, audiovisual, electronic);
- Mode (convert, overt translation, direst/ indirect translation, mother tongue/ other tongue translation, pseudo-translation, retranslation, self- translation, sight translation, etc.);
- Field (political, journalistic, technical, literary, religious, scientific, and commercial).

Translation studies (ibid: 228-31) is subdivided into:
- Approaches (e.g. cultural approach, linguistic approach);
- Theories (e.g. general translation theory, Polysystem theory)
- Research methods (e.g. descriptive, empirical);
- Applied translation studies (criticism, didactics, and institutional environment).

Linguistic transfer of course still occurs within a sociocultural and historical context and institutional environment that place his or her own constraints on the process.

To achieve the objectives of the study, the researchers chose the following sets of Van Doorslaer's (2007) strategies and procedures. In this research, the following four strategies were chosen to see which strategy has been the most frequently utilized strategy in English translation of *Mæ nteq-o Teyr* [Literally the Conference of Birds]:

1. Free Translation: This strategy produces the TL text without the style, form, or content of the original. As an example, Darbandi, and Davis (1984) have translated the Persian word "mæ refæ t" into the English word "insight". Therefore, they have utilized free translation strategy in this instance extracted from *The Conference of the Birds.*

2. Foreignizing: Foreignization is the strategy of retaining information from the source text, and involves deliberately breaking the conventions of the target language to preserve its meaning (Gile, 2009). As an example, Darbandi, and Davis (1984) have translated the Persian word "ʔeblis" into the English word "Eblis". Therefore, they have utilized Foreignizing strategy in this instance extracted from *The Conference of the Birds.*

3. Naturalization: This strategy adapts the SL word first to the normal pronunciation, then to the normal morphology of the TL (Newmark, 1988b, p.82). As an example, Darbandi, and Davis (1984) have translated the Persian word "qæbz" into the English word "Despair". Therefore, they have utilized Naturalization strategy in this instance extracted from *The Conference of the Birds.*

4. Literal Translation: In this strategy, the translator retains the forms of source text as much as possible. In this type of translation strategy, the SL grammatical structures are converted to their nearest TL equivalents, but the lexical words are again translated singly, out of context (Newmark, 1988b, p.81). As an example, Darbandi, and Davis (1984) have translated the Persian word "cofr" into the English word "Blasphemy". Therefore, they have utilized Literal Translation strategy in this instance extracted from *The Conference of the Birds.*

In addition, the following four procedures were chosen to see which procedure has been the most frequently utilized procedure in English translation of Mæ nteq-o Teyr [Literally the Conference of Birds]:

1. Expansion: It refers to the case where the translator exceeds the number of words of the SLT in translation. Expansion procedure also occurs when the translator tries to shift from the implicit to the explicit (Zakhir, 2008). If the French phrase "Homme noir" is translated into "Dark skinned man" in English. It can be stated that Expansion procedure has been used by the translator, because there is a shift from n+adj in French to adj+ptp (compound adj) +noun.

2. Borrowing: According to Harding & Riley (1986), borrowing is reproducing or, where necessary, transliterating the original term. An example of Borrowing is the verb 'mailer,' which is used in Canadian-French utterance. Here, the French suffix-er is added to the English verb 'mail' to conform to the French rules of verb-formation.

3. Adaption: As the freest form of translation, and is used mainly for plays (comedies) and poetry; the themes, characters, plots are usually preserved, the SL culture is converted to the TL culture and the text is rewritten (Newmark, 1988b, p.81). As previously mentioned, Darbandi, and Davis (1984) have translated the Persian word "qæbz" into the English word "Despair". Therefore, they have utilized Naturalization strategy in this instance extracted from *The Conference of the Birds.* Accordingly, it can be said that they have used Adaption procedure.

4. Direct Transfer: According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1997), in the strategy of Direct Transfer (also known as Borrowing), a source language (SL) item is transferred directly to the target language (TL). As an example, Darbandi, and Davis (1984) have translated the Persian word "tælæb" into the English word "quest-search-seek". Therefore, they have utilized Direct Transfer procedure in this instance extracted from *The Conference of the Birds.*

## IV. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

In this study, the researchers tried to compare mystic terms and their meanings in a book entitled *The Conference of the Birds*. The purpose of the researchers was to find the differences between the main meaning of the mystic terms and their translation by Darbandi, and Davis (1984) in English language.

According to Van Doorslaer's (2007) translation strategies, data collection and analysis carried out in a comparative descriptive framework. In other words, each mystic term was interpreted in its own language (Persian) and then its English translation by Darbandi, and Davis, 1984was interpreted again in target language (English) and these two interpretations were compared by using Van Doorslaer's (2007) translation strategies and procedures. Finally, the researchers categorized these strategies and procedures, and calculated their frequencies.

In the following sections, the analysis and its results are presented and discussed. According to Table 1 and Figure 1, from 29 examples extracted from the book *The Conference of the Birds* in the part "the Seven Valleys", according to Van Doorslaer's (2007) strategies, there were 20 instances of Literal Translation, 6 instances of Naturalization, 1 instance for Foreignizing, and 1 instance for Free Translation. It is noteworthy that no instance was found for Van Doorslaer's (2007) other strategies.

TABLE 1.
APPLIED TRANSLATION STRATEGIES IN *THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS*

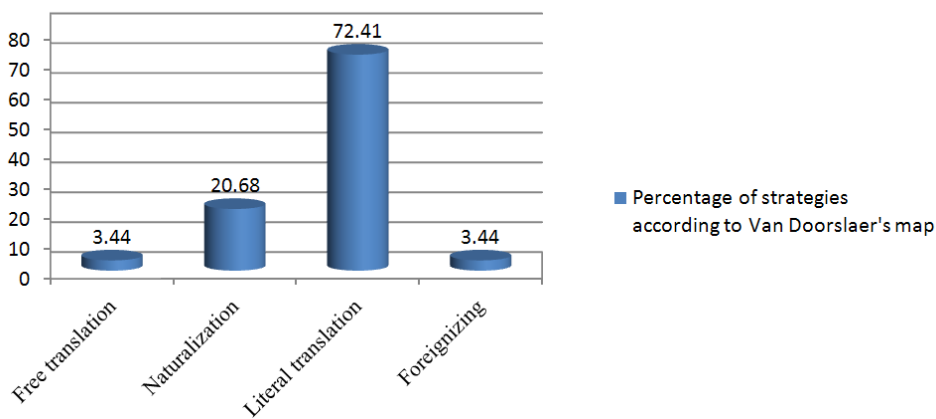| Strategies | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Free translation | 1 | 3.44 % |
| Literal translation | 21 | 72.41 % |
| Foreignizing | 1 | 3.44 % |
| Naturalization | 6 | 20.68 % |
| Total number | 29 | 100 % |

Figure 1. Percentage of Translation strategies applied in in the Conference of the Birds

According to Table 2 and Figure 2, from 29 examples, derived from the book *The Conference of the Birds* in the part "the Seven Valleys", according to Van Doorslaer's (2007) procedures, there are 20 instances for Direct Transfer, 7 instances for Adaption, and one instance for Borrowing and Expansion. It is noteworthy that no instance was found for Van Doorslaer's (2007) other procedures.

TABLE 2.
APPLIED TRANSLATION PROCEDURES IN THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

| Procedures | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Adaption | 7 | 24.13 % |
| Borrowing | 1 | 3.44 % |
| Direct transfer | 20 | 68.96 % |
| Expansion | 1 | 3.44 % |
| Total number | 29 | 100 % |

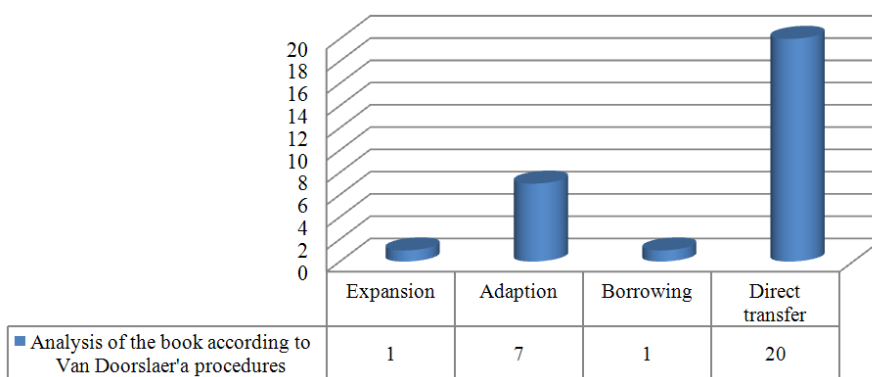| | Expansion | Adaption | Borrowing | Direct transfer |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Analysis of the book according to Van Doorslaer'a procedures | 1 | 7 | 1 | 20 |

Figure 2. Percentage of Translation procedures applied in in the Conference of the Birds

Based on the findings of this study, the dominant strategy used in translating this book was Literal Translation that had 72.41% of whole percent. After that, Naturalization was ranked with 20.68% of whole percent. Finally, Free Translation and Foreignizing were ranked with 3.44% of whole percent. It was interesting that the rest of strategies were nothing. On the other hand, the dominant procedure in translating this book was Direct Transfer that had 68.96% of whole percent. After that, Adaption was ranked with 24.13% of whole percent. Finally, Borrowing and Expansion were ranked with 3.44% of whole percent. Accordingly, the researchers may conclude that the mystic terms can be transferred to the TL with their almost exact content of the SL, if the translator has a good choice for any term, and that is what the translators (i.e., Darbandi, and Davis, 1984) had done by using Literal Translation as a dominant strategy of translation and Direct Transfer as a main procedure of translation.

V. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To conclude what has been assumed and has been done from the beginning to the end of this research, it is needed to start once more with restatement of the purpose and research questions. The purpose of this study was to find out what strategies and procedures have been used to find an effective equivalence for each of the ST mystic terms.

Based on the comparison made between the original Persian text and its English translation, the researchers found the following results for each of the four research questions:

**RQ1.** What strategies have been used in translation of mystical terms in *The Conference of the Birds* according to Van Doorslaer's (2007) map?

Based the applied strategies by Darbandi, and Davis (1984) in *The Conference of the Birds*, the result confirmed the logicality and comprehensiveness of Van Doorslaer's (2007) map on the one hand, and the conscious choice of the natural and proper translation strategies by Darbandi, and Davis (1984). Another point that was of interest, for the research and maybe those who enjoy a sense of feeling poetry and its hardship of translating poetry from one language into another was that cultural distance and linguistic gap as to main problems on the way of translating poetry. Some scholars and some translators like Darbandi, and Davis (1984) have been successful to some extend to provide acceptable translation, even for such difficult matter as a translation of Persian mystic terms into English.

**RQ2.** Which translation strategy has been the dominant one and why?

To give reason why literal translation has been the dominant strategy in *The Conference of the Birds* by Darbandi, and Davis (1984), it is quite the right time to refer to idea and theories presented by some scholars about translation of poetry. For example, Jakobson (2004) believes translation of poetry is in poetry and literal strategy is mostly used. Following a same way, Nabokov (2004) believes that translation of poetry is almost impossible and the only way that he suggests is literal translation.

To think logically we may come to conclusion that the safest way to translate elements of poetry is to stick to literalness and leave the feeling of poetry to the reader himself/herself. Of course, here, by reader we do not mean general reader but a reader who is in the field of literature and especially mystic poetry. Therefore, Darbandi, and Davis (1984) again by innate ability and natural experience has shown the literal translation strategy as the dominant one.

**RQ3.** What procedures have been used in translation of mystical terms in *The Conference of the Birds* according to Van Doorslaer's (2007) map?

Translation procedures have been used are Adaption, Borrowing, Direct Transfer and Expansion. The findings showed that these strategies were in line with Doorslaer's (2007) map. Here again, Doorslaer's logicality of his theory of translation procedures were confirmed. On the other hand, it showed that the natural feeling of Darbandi and Davis (1984) in choosing procedures that is closely referring the related strategies.

**RQ4.** Which translation procedure has been the dominant one and why?

To answer question four, results showed that the dominant procedure was direct transfer. This result was also compatible with the literal translation that has been the dominant strategy. In other words, literal translation and direct transfer support each other as closeness of a particular strategy and its corresponding procedures.

According to the information provided in Table 1 and Figure 1, the total amount of literal translation enjoys the highest frequency (72.41%) in the translation strategies. As illustrated in Figure 2 and Table 2, the total amount of Direct Transfer enjoys the highest frequency (68.96%) among the translation procedures of Van Doorslaer's (2007) map.

As it is clear and worth to noting, according to Van Doorslaer's map, the dominant strategy used in translation of Darbandi, and Davis (1984) was literal translation and the dominant procedure used in their translation was direct transfer.

The results of this research may have some instructional implications. Although translation is not a new field of study but much research can be done in this field. The new technologies and movements of the world have changed the traditional face of research. Therefore, these movements intensify the need to accept and emphasize that poetry translation can be studied as a course in Translation Studies. What has been found in this research can also be used in translation training program. Translators can use the results of the study to do research about mystical translation in other genres, fields and even enjoy the results of this study.

Translators must be aware of the fact that the heart of their tasks is not to translate texts, but to translate cultures. They should know that misinterpretation occurs when they do not consider culture. If they translate the cultural words literally, since the meaning would be distorted, the target language readers or audiences will be culturally shocked.

Besides, each language has unique characteristics and one of the main translation problems is to find possible strategies/procedures and analyze specific translations. Hence, it would be helpful for translators to find the norms that govern the choice of translation strategy. In other words, they would be more successful if they know which strategies/procedures are used more and are accepted by competent translators.

In addition, it seems so necessary to make translation students aware of the importance of preserving cultural and linguistic diversities of any language. What is more important is the awareness of the translators in selecting a text, the genre, its author and in adopting translation procedures and strategies. Making use of Van Doorslaer's (2007) map is strongly recommended. The results of this work may help teachers of translation and material developers in the field to review their methods and concepts on translation trainings.

It is hoped that this research can pave the way for other pieces of research. In this regard, the following suggestions were proposed:

1. One may replicate the same or almost the same topic to verify or diversify the found results.

2. The researchers of this study limited themselves only to "Seven valleys of Love". Others may choose different parts of the book.

3. In this research, Van Doorslaer's map was chosen as the framework. Others may choose different strategies selected from the frameworks suggested by other scholars such as Newmark (1988a), Baker (1992), and Chesterman (1997).

4. Since Persian culture enjoys vast literature in mysticism, some other researchers may choose a variety of translated texts from Persian into English by other translators.

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