An Analysis of English Subtitling of Verbal Cultural Signs in the 'A Separation' Iranian Film

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Abstract: *Communicating methods between nations, which lead to transfer the cultural entities and identify the communities, have a wide field such as movie and among them Audio Visual Translation (AVT) has the most important function for conveying cultural concepts and signs. Subtitling as a subcategory of AVT has a widespread application in communicating and issuing cultural traits. This article aims at investigating the extent that English subtitles used from the 'A Separation' Iranian film could transfer the potential concept of verbal cultural signs. The researcher has used Gottlieb's (1992) strategies of subtitling for the first part of study and the suggestions of Hatim and Mason (1990) for translation of the cultural signs for the main part of analysis of the subtitles. The results show that in translation of verbal cultural signs of the 'A Separation' Iranian film, transfer strategy happened with the highest rank among the other Gottlieb's strategies and this strategy with the most frequency could transfer the potential meaning, also most of the religious concepts were translated by using the imitation and transfer strategies. The more analysis indicate that in some cases the translator could not convey the potential meaning of verbal cultural signs from the original dialogues of the film to English subtitles.*

*Key words: Audiovisual translation (AVT), Cultural sign, Potential concept, Semiotic, Subtitlin

1. Introduction

Audiovisual translation (AVT) is a branch of translation studies concerned with the transfer of multimodal and multimedial texts into another language and/or culture. The two most widespread modalities adopted for translating products for the screen are dubbing and subtitling.

Dubbing is "a process which uses the acoustic channel for translational purposes, while subtitling is visual and involves a written translation that is superimposed on to the screen" (Chiaro, 2009, p. 141). Due to the survey is concerned with the subtitle and cross cultural sign, the researcher focuses on subtitling and the translation of intercultural communication.

Based on Gottlieb subtitles (sometimes it is referred to as **captions**) usually consist of one or two lines which usually are placed at the bottom of the picture and also he provides the following definition for subtitling: the rendering in a different language of verbal message in filmic media in the shape of one or more line of written text presented on the screen (Gottlieb 1998; 2004, p. 135). The written, subtitled text has to be shorter than the audio, simply because the viewer needs the necessary time to read the captions while at the same time remaining unaware that he or she is actually reading. The fact that the source language is not distorted is surely the most significant benefit of subtitles. However, both dubbing translators and subtitling translators have to contend with three basic categories of translational hurdles: highly culture-specific references, Language-specific features and areas of overlap between language and culture (Chiaro, 2009).

Translation typically has been used to transfer written or spoken source language texts to equivalent written or spoken target language text. However, the difference between source language and target language and the variation in their cultures make the process of translating a real challenge. As the most scholars of language have stated, Language is an expression of culture and culture is expressed through language. An audiovisual text offers a cultural representation of the world, both through language and the image (Pettit, 2009). Culture-specific items designate specific phenomena to the culture in which they are used. In films and other artifacts from non-dominant cultures, almost all such items will be known only to their original audiences (Gottlieb, 2009). With respect to the meaning of 'cultural signs' as verbal or non-verbal cultural specific information (ibid.), in this investigation the researcher explored the translation of English subtitling strategies employed when a verbal culture-specific item is used in the dialogue of 'A Separation' Iranian film and then analysis the potential concept of these subtitled cultural signs.

2. Translation problems and Audiovisual Translation

As it is generally believed, the more different the structure of SL and TL, the more difficult the translation of SL into TL will be. Difficulties may also arise in translation when the SL genre has no equivalent in the TL. In this way, it shows difficult structural characteristics since the TL genres are constructed with different norms and conventions. Because of the differences between the two languages (English and Persian) such as structural and cultural differences, these difficulties may occur in the translation between these two languages. Not having enough knowledge of each of these languages or both will make much more difficulties for the translators in the process of translating in the different areas such as subtitling.

The space and time constraints in the interlingual subtitling process usually enhance traditional translation challenges, such as grammar and word order, as well as problems related to cultural transfer.

Most of the translation difficulties are due to cultural disparities or discrepancies between two languages. Even when the two cultures involved in any translation process are not distant, according to Gonzalez (2004, p. 1, as cited in Thawabteh, 2007, p. 1) "the difficulty in decoding cultural signs can be more problematic for the translator than semantic or syntactic difficulties". Then the sign must not only have a material form, its body, "it must also have a 'soul', that is, it must embody a recognizable message, at least potentially" (Gorlee, 1994, p. 118). Moreover, the sign can have a concept in the SL culture as it does not have the same register the TL culture does have. Then it is a hard task that optimal communication takes place in translation of a sign. Audio and visual cultural signs are an integral part of the audiovisual Message (Pettit, 2009) and the translations of cultural specifics are one of the most challenging areas of intercultural transfer. Therefore the researcher will investigate that how the subtitle strategies used for the translation of verbal cultural signs could deal with the problems of intercultural transfer in the "A Separation" Iranian film and to find out to what extent English subtitles could transfer the potential concept of verbal cultural sign.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study is eclectic. First, the researcher surveyed the strategies which have been used by subtitler based on typology of **Gottlieb** (1992). Gottlieb argued that the

difficulty in translating cultural issues goes hand in hand with the degree of their specificity and the distance between the source and the target culture.The summary of the ten strategies are showed in the following Table 1:

Table 1. Gottlieb's Typology of subtitling strategy

Types of strategy	Character of translation
1) Extension	Expanded expression, adequate rendering (culture-specific references)
2) Paraphrase	Altered expression, adequate content (non-visualized language-specific items)
3) Transfer	Full expression, adequate rendering (slow, unmarked speech)
4) Imitation	Identical expression, equivalent rendering (proper nouns, international greetings etc.)
5) Transcription	Non standard expression, adequate rendering (intended speech defects)
6) Dislocation	Differing expression, adjusted content (musical or visualized language-specific item)
7) Condensation	Condensed expression, concise rendering (mid-tempo speech with some redundancy)
8) Decimation	Abridged expression, reduced content (fast speech, low redundancy speech)
9) Deletion	Omitted expression, no verbal content (fast speech with high redundancy)
10) Resignation	Deviant expression, distorted content (incomprehensible or 'untranslatable' speech)

For the main part of analysis of the subtitles, the researcher has used the suggestions of Hatim and Mason for translation of the cultural signs. Hatim and Mason (1990, pp. 105-106) suggest four stages for translation of a semiotic entity. The first is *Identification* of a source-system semiotic entity. The second one is *informational core* (a suitable TL denotation equivalent). The Stage three is related to *explication* in detail. And final stage is the *transformation* of data. Then, they mention that the process of translating of semiotic must be adjusted to incorporate the implications of the scope of semiotics for the practical task of the translator. Semiotics deals with syntactic, semantic and/or pragmatic properties of the sign. As a result, the semiotic description of a given sign must include one or more than one of the types of relation, i.e. syntactic, semantic and pragmatic (ibid.). They mentioned that after identification of the cultural sign and relay

information content, the translator has to give an indication of connotative value to the sign so that the real potential concept of the sign is to be transferred. Due to the limitation of space and time in the screen for subtitling, this is a hard task for translator. Therefore the researcher wanted to survey to what extent the translator (subtitler) has been successful to transfer the potential concept of the Persian verbal cultural signs in the subtitle.

4. Significance of the study

Translators mediate between cultures (including ideologies, moral systems and sociocultural structures), seeking to overcome the incompatibilities which stand in the way of transfer of meaning (Hatim & Mason, 1990).

The 'screen' and 'audiovisual translation' are two major ways of transferring the specific cultural value to other languages. Some films have become popular in worldwide by using dubbing and subtitles. 'A Separation' Iranian film is one of them. The dialogues of 'A Separation' film are full of the Persian verbal cultural signs which the selection of translation strategies for these cultural signs is very important to transfer their value. The audiovisual translator deals with a complex semiotic text, a film or television programme which is composed by sings, all of which combine to form a network of codes, creating the message to be received by the viewer (Delabastita, 1989; Gottlieb, 1994 as cited in Pettit, 2009, p. 44). The message might get lost in translation of the sign. Sometimes, an idea or concept does not exist in another language. Therefore the role of translation is "fundamental in the very constitution of the sign, both verbal and nonverbal, in the very determination of its meaning" (Petrilli, 1992, p. 234).

As Hatim (2005, p. 43) stated "The unit of semiotic analysis is the 'sign', a semiotic construct which has proved admirably suited for dealing with how cultures come in contact, clash, or live in harmony". By analyzing the translated signs and semiosis in the target language and comparing the potential values of translated sign with its source language, the researchers and translators can identify that to what extent the translation could transfer the maximum expression value (the potential concept) of the source sign.

The present study intends to investigate the procedures which are proposed by Gottlieb and used in the English subtitling of the 'A Separation' Iranian film and compare them with the

originals to find out how they are applicable in the process of translating in the subtitling translations and analyze them to figure out to what extent the employed strategies can transfer the potential concepts of the verbal cultural signs, because this issue is so important for us as Iranian and this movie won the Academy Award for best foreign language film in 2012, becoming the first Iranian film to win the award. It also received the Golden Bear for best film and the Silver Bears for best actress and best actor at the 61st Berlin-International Film Festival, becoming the first Iranian film to win the Golden Bear. It also won the Golden Globe for best foreign language film. The film was nominated for the best original screenplay Academy Award, making it the first non-English film in five years to achieve this. This would help improve the quality of subtitling by identifying the problematic areas and trying to eliminate them in the future subtitling of the movies.

One of the most important reasons to select 'A Separation' Iranian film is because of having verbal cultural signs and transferring them correctly is so important for us as Iranian and this movie won the Academy Award for the best foreign language film in 2012, becoming the first Iranian film to win the award, Golden Bear and Silver Bears. This would help to improve the quality of subtitling by identifying the problematic areas and trying to eliminate them in the future subtitling of the movies.

5. Methodology

5.1. Data collection procedures

The following procedures were used to answer the research Question. First, 'A Separation' film and English subtitles were watched, simultaneously the verbal cultural signs in dialogs and their subtitles were being extracted which could be recognized by expressions of customs, cultural concepts, religious, symbols, etc. Second, the source text was analyzed based on categories of customs, cultural concepts, religious, symbols, etc. Next, the extracted English subtitles were confirmed by the supervisor(s), and then the researcher categorized them based on Gottlieb's Typology of subtitling strategy. For each strategy, the researcher used two columns to show the original words or expressions with their translated ones. Finally

the researcher analyzed the used subtitles to find out to what extent the potential concept of verbal cultural signs has been transferred by the subtitles.

5.1.1. Source text analysis

To analyze the source text, the criteria of selecting the signs such as customs, cultural concepts and religious expressions were defined and next cultural signs collected in each category. According to Wikipedia:

Custom: is convention (norm), a set of agreed, stipulated or generally accepted rules, norms, standards or criteria, often taking the form of a custom or a rule that is socially enforced or a practice followed by people of a particular group or region.

Culture concept: is the product of a group's shared beliefs, values, traditions, stories, rituals, and inventions.

Religion: is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. Also Merriam Webster defines it, an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods.

5.2. Methods of data analysis

To analyze the data, the researcher used the classification of interlingual subtitling strategies are proposed by Gottlieb (1992) as the theoretical framework. Gottlieb's translation strategies for the Subtitling of Film are as follows:

1. *Expansion* is used when the original requires an explanation because of some cultural nuance not retrievable in the target language.
2. *Paraphrase* is resorted to in cases where the phraseology of the original cannot be reconstructed in the same syntactic way in the target language.
3. *Transfer* refers to the strategy of translating the source text completely and accurately.
4. *Imitation* maintains the same forms, typically with names of people and places.
5. *Transcription* is used in those cases where a term is unusual even in the source text, for example the use of a third language or nonsense language.

6. *Dislocation* is adopted when the original employs some sort of special effect, e.g. a silly song in a cartoon film, where the translation of the effect is more important than the content

7. *Condensation* would seem to be the typical strategy used, that is the shortening of the text in the least obtrusive way possible, but as we shall see later, and this is not necessarily the case.

8. *Decimation* is an extreme form of condensation where, perhaps for reasons of discourse speed, even potentially important elements are omitted.

9. *Deletion* refers to the total elimination of parts of a text.

10. *Resignation* describes the strategy adopted when no translation solution can be found and meaning is inevitably lost.

In order to analyze the subtitling translations, the unit of translation as the basis for analysis should be clarified. The basic unit of a film is a frame; consequently, the unit of analysis in this study was considered to be a frame. A frame is defined as a word or a stretch of words in the form of subtitle which appeared together for a length of time on screen and disappeared together before another frame appeared. After determining the strategies used for subtitling, the researcher analyzed the potential concept of verbal cultural sign in the original dialogs and compared them with the potential concept of their subtitle. For this purpose, the researcher used the suggestion of Hatim and Mason (1990) for semiotic translation. They suggested a number of important procedures for semiotic translation as unit of translation (ibid, p. 105-106):

➢ Stage 1, Identification:

The translator identifies a source-system semiotic entity. This will be a constituent element of a certain cultural (sub) system.

➢ Stage 2, Information:

The translator identifies an informational core.

➢ Stage 3, Explication:

If the informational equivalent is not self-sufficient, the translator will seek to explicate by means of synonym, expansion, paraphrase, etc.

➢ Stage 4, Transformation:

Having retrieved the information core and carried out the necessary modification, the translator then considers what is missing in terms of intentionality and status as a sign.

After analysis of the potential concepts of signs between two languages (English and Persian), the researcher dealt with the relation between syntactic, semantic and pragmatic of the sign in the subtitle briefly. As Hatim and Mason (1990, p. 117) stated "the description of a sign would be impoverished if it restricted attention to either the syntactic, semantic or pragmatics of the sign". They believed that overlap is inevitable for analysis of the sign. Then, the frequency and the percentage of the different strategies used in subtitling and the extent of transferring of potential concept of the sign are measured and shown in tables as well as bar charts. Finally, tables are analyzed and their results are discussed.

6. The result of analyzing

After analyzing the data, the below table is presented to specify the frequency and percentage of the ten subtitling strategies based on Gottlieb's. After identification of each strategy used, the data showed that the translator used only half of the ten strategies introduced by Gottlieb. Moreover, each strategy used in the mixed strategies accounted as an independent strategy in frequency and percentage. Likewise, the wrong translation did not account in the frequency and percentage of strategies used for subtitles translation of cultural signs in the film. A table and a bar chart were prepared to show the frequencies and percentages of strategies used for subtitles translation of cultural signs in the film (see Table 4.9 and Figure 1).

Type of strategy	Frequency	Percentage
transfer	15	39.47
imitation	10	26.31
deletion	6	15.78
paraphrase	4	10.52
condensation	3	7.89

Table 4.9: Frequency and percentage of strategies used for subtitles translation of cultural signs in the film.

Analysis of the data gathered in the present study reveals that the subtitler (s) of the films under study has used different strategies to transfer the verbal cultural signs in the original films. The only 39.47% of the subtitles have been able to transfer the potential meaning of the cultural signs completely and accurately. In the next section, each of the samples and their subtitles will be discussed in detail.
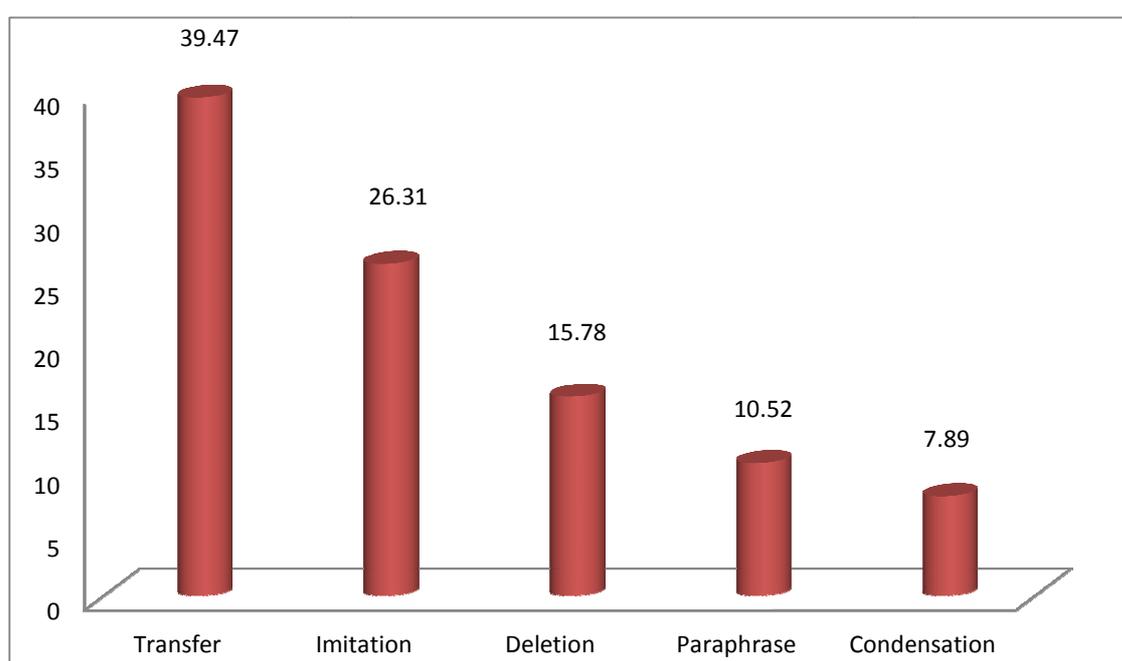

Figure 1. Subtitling strategies' percentages

7. Some samples

7.1. Transfer

a) In translation of the word of حرام, the translator used the word of *sin*. Ḥarām (حَرَام) is an Arabic term meaning *sinful*. In Islamic Jurisprudence, haram is used to refer to any act that is forbidden by Allah, and is one of five al-ahkam al-khamsah (الأحكام الخمسة) that defines the morality of human action. Acts that are haram are typically prohibited in the religious texts of the Quran and the Sunnah. In Abrahamic contexts, **sin** is the act of violating God's will. Sin can also

be viewed as anything that violates the ideal relationship between an individual and God. Therefore the translator used the word of sin for translation of حرام accurately even so the cases of Haram or sin are different between religions.

b) The word of *blood money* was used for translation of ديه or Diyya. Blood money is money or some sort of compensation paid by an offender (usually a murderer) or his/her family group to the family or kin group of the victim (online Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). In Islamic terms, Qisas can in some cases result in blood money being paid out to the family of victims. The amount varies from country to country and from case to case. In the Christian Bible, the term is used to refer to the thirty pieces of silver Judas Iscariot receives in exchange for revealing the identity of Jesus Christ to the forces sent by the Pharisees and/or the Sanhedrin. After the crucifixion of Christ, Judas returns the payment to the chief priests, who took the silver pieces and said, "It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood'' (the bible Matthew 27:6). Due to the same function of the *blood money* and *Diyya*, the translation has transferred the potential meaning of the original. However there are differences between two concepts in performance in Islam and Christianity.

7.2. Imitation

In the current study the translator used the *soiled* and *dirty* for translation of نجس. The translator has tried to present a suitable TL denotation equivalent for the sign (informational core). But the potential meaning of the نجس has not been conveyed. In Islamic law, **najis** (نجس) are things or persons regarded as ritually unclean. According to Islam, there are two kinds of najis: the essential najis which cannot be cleaned and the unessential najis which become najis while in contact with another najis. The following things are some of *najis* in view of Islam : wine and other spirituous drinks, dogs, swine, dead animals that were not ritually slaughtered, blood, excrements. Likewise Shi'a jurists traditionally add dead bodies and non-believers to the list of *najis*. In the second chapter (Surah of *AL-TAWBA, BARA'AH*, "REPENTANCE") Ayah 28, the Noble Quran says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُواْ إِنَّمَا الْمُشْرِكُونَ نَجَسٌ فَلاَ يَقْرَبُواْ الْمَسْجِدَ الْحَرَامَ بَعْدَ عَامِهِمْ هَذَا وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ عَيْلَةً فَسَوْفَ يُغْنِيكُمُ اللّهُ مِن فَضْلِهِ إِن شَاء إِنَّ اللّهَ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ

ای کسانی که ایمان آورده‌اید حقیقت این است که مشرکان <u>ناپاکند</u> پس نباید از سال آینده به مسجدالحرام نزدیک شوند و اگر [در این قطع رابطه] از فقر بیمناکید پس به زودی خدا اگر بخواهد شما را به فضل خویش بی‌نیاز می‌گرداند که خدا دانای حکیم است (ترجمه فولادوند).

The four English translation of the Ayah:

QARIB: believers, the idolaters are <u>unclean</u>. Do not let them approach the sacred mosque after this year. if you fear poverty, Allah, if he wills, will enrich you through his bounty. He is knowing, wise.

SHAKIR: o you who believe! the idolaters are nothing but <u>unclean</u>, so they shall not approach the sacred mosque after this year; and if you fear poverty then Allah will enrich you out of his grace if he please; surely Allah is knowing wise

PICKTHAL: o ye who believe! The idolaters only are <u>unclean</u>. So let them not come near the inviolable place of worship after this their year. If ye fear poverty (from the loss of their merchandise) Allah shall preserve you of his bounty if he will. Lo! Allah is knower, wise.

YUSUFALI: o ye who believe! Truly the pagans are <u>unclean</u>; so let them not, after this year of theirs, approach the sacred mosque. And if ye fear poverty, soon will Allah enrich you, if he wills, out of his bounty, for Allah is all-knowing, all-wise.

7.3. Deletion

The translator deletes the cultural sign آدم چشم پاک of یول حرام (s)he could use *he is not a man's ogling* or *he is a chaste look* for conveying the nearest meaning of it.

7.4. Paraphrase

In the current study, the translator use the sentence of *But I don't have the money to pay for extortion* for translation of ولی یول ناحق نه دارم□ه بدم نه میدم Someone's behavior can be described as extortion if he is trying to obtain more money for something than it is worth. But there is main difference between potential meaning of یول ناحق and *extortion.* یول ناحق means unlawful money. In the belief of Muslims, if someone earns unlawful money, he will lose the money easily. While extortion is the crime of obtaining money by using force or threats. Then unlawful money could be already earned by someone and now that person loses it again by extortion. But

the word of extortion talks about the receiver of the money while unlawful money (پول ناحق) is related to both receiver and sender in this sentence. In some cases, this strategy was used together with other strategies like condensation, imitation or even deletion (see part of 5.7).

7.4. Condensation

In translation of چقدر هم شما اهل خدا و پیغمبرید, the subtitler used *like you believe in God* for the translation. As Hatim and Mason (1990) stated the semiotic entity should be considered as a unit of translation. Then translator has identified the informational core of the sign and considered the two words of خدا and پیغمبر as a semiotic entity with a same function and used just the word of *God*.

8. Conclusion

In this study, the researcher investigated that how the subtitle strategies used for the translation of verbal cultural signs could deal with the problems of intercultural transfer in the 'A Separation' Iranian film. The findings indicated that half of the strategies proposed by Gottlieb were mainly used to Persian-English subtitling of verbal cultural signs of the film with some degree of variation in the distribution of strategies. Having mentioned that sometimes more than one strategy was used to translate a stretch of words in a frame, Transfer was the most frequently used strategy (39.47%) in the film. Most of the religious concepts were translated by using the imitation and transfer strategies.

The more analysis showed that in some cases the translator could not convey the potential meaning of verbal cultural signs from the original dialogues of the film to English subtitles. The researcher concludes that the limitation of time and place in screen, the absence of a real equivalent in TL, different norms and conventions between two languages as well as insufficient knowledge from the potential meaning of the cultural signs of the Source are the main reasons of some problems in the subtitles.

As translation scholars say, translating only the linguistic component without taking into account the value of the other semiotic dimensions of film would certainly be a recipe for disaster. Culture plays a main role here. Regarding this subject, Diaz Cintas (2009, P. 9) stated:

Culture, cultural identity and pragmatic functioning in their more or less explicitly localized forms ooze from all the film or programme's semiotic systems and pragmatic. The translation of humor, dialect, compliments, swearing or taboo language must be considered within this context and they are only a few examples of the areas discussed in the present volume posing formidable challenges. Not only for their very localized meaning, both in time and space, but also for being always embedded in the source audiovisual text with a pragmatic and semiotic significance that goes well beyond the purely linguistic dimension.

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