Translation of Culture-Bound Elements in Persian Movies Subtitled Into English: A Case Study of the OSCAR Winner ‘A Segregation’

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Abstract: The translation of culture-bound elements could be a very important task due to the fact that such elements have specific meanings in the culture and language in which they arise but not necessarily in others. Regarding this, the present study showed the strategies used in translation of culture-bound elements in the English subtitles of the Iranian film ‘a segregation’ and the frequency of such strategies. These culture-bound elements were categorized based on the taxonomy presented by Pedersen (2005). The data were gathered from the Persian movie a segregation which was subtitled into English. To gather the required data, the mentioned film was viewed and its original transcript was extracted. Then, the culture-bound elements of this film were detected and were compared with their English subtitles according to mentioned taxonomy to identify the strategies used in translating them. Finally, the frequency of the employed strategies was studied in order to find which strategy has the highest potential for conveying the intended meaning.

Keywords: Culture-bound elements, translation, subtitling, Persian movie, a segregation

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been a few studies of how cultural elements are translated, from general translation studies, such as Hatim (1997), to studies dealing with culture in audio-visual translation, such as Nedegaard Larsen (1993) and Orrevall (2004). The study’s theoretical framework was based on Gottlieb’s (1992) classification of subtitling translation strategies. Translation is employed as a regularly used cognitive strategy (11.3%, as reported by Omalley et al. 1985), as an effective tool in learning (Prince, 1996) and as a beneficial help in essay writing (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992). What these researchers believe is that strategic learners can make intelligent use of their L1 skills to learn a new language (Liao, 2006). While most teachers ignore the role of translation in EFL learning, learners insist on using translation in their learning (Marti Viano & Orquin 1982). Translation has always been a
central part of communication. Consequently, Translation studies (TS), as a field of research, has developed over the last two decades during which screen translation has slowly emerged as a new area (O’Connell, 2007).

According to Baker (1998), “interest in translation is as old as human civilization” (p. 277). An increasing part of the language in the media worldwide is translated from English (Gottlieb, 2001). In fact, “The role of subtitles is to facilitate access to audiovisual products in a foreign language” (Kapsaskis, 2008, p.42).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Ivarsson (2001), there was very little literature on subtitling for a long time. Díaz Cintas (2003) pointed out that the concept that has undergone greatest growth in translation is subtitling. According to Sánchez (2004), the advent of DVD has meant an increase in films and television programs with subtitles. In Gottlieb's (2001) terms, “these DVDs provide options for either vertical (same language) subtitling of use to the hearing impaired or diagonal (different language) subtitling” (p.124). Also, there are some problems caused by subtitles. Schwarz (2003), the main problem in subtitling is caused by the difference between the speed of the spoken language and the speed in reading; both require a reduction of the text.

The subtitle is an abbreviated version of the dialogue, which is projected on the screen. It is considered a complex and challenging variant of theatrical translation. Gottlieb (2005) states that whenever affordability, dialog authenticity, acquisition of foreign-language and reading skills are prioritized in audiovisual translation, subtitling is the obvious solution.

The present study aims to investigate the problems which translators encounter in translation of culture-specific items used in Persian language films subtitled into English. In doing so, the strategies used in dealing with culture-bound elements will be identified and finally, the frequency of the applied strategies will be studied in detail.

The main challenge in the present study is to investigate cultural elements pertaining to the language and to the source text being translated. In this regard, the problems found in the subtitles of this film are studied in order to determine which translating strategies are used and how they reconstitute the cultural notion of the source text in the target text.

The culture-bound terms were classified based on the taxonomy presented by Pedersen (2005). The data were gathered from analyzing the English subtitles of the Persian film ‘a segregation’. The acquired data are analyzed on the basis of the following translation strategies: 1) retention, 2) specification, 3) direct translation, 4) generalization, 5) substitution and 6) omission.
So, the present study could gain significance as it draws attention to different strategies employed by the Persian translators to render Persian culture-specific items into their English equivalent in Persian into English subtitled films.

**Culture-Bound Terms**

Culture-bound terms or as some call them cultural-specific items refer to those which have no equivalents or different positions in target reader’s cultural system, thus causing difficulties of translation of their functions and meanings in the source text into target text. According to Hatim and Mason (1990, pp. 223-4) “it is certainly true that in recent years the translator has increasingly come to be seen as a cultural mediator rather than a mere linguistic broker. It is also true that, in any form of translation, translators tend to apply a general strategy that will favor either an SL-oriented approach, or a TL-oriented approach.”

Newmark (1988, p.78) maintains that translation problems caused by culture-specific words arise due to the fact that they are intrinsically and uniquely bound to the culture concerned and, therefore, are related to the “context of a cultural tradition”. There are many ways to categorize culture-specific items, for instance Newmark (1988) points out five areas that cultural items may come from: (1) ecology (flora, fauna, winds, etc), (2) material culture (artifacts food clothes houses and towns, transport), (3) social culture (work and leisure), (4) organizations, customs, ideas (political, social, legal, religion or artistic), and (5) gestures and habits.

**Theoretical Model for Analysis**

In order to analyze the extracted data from the dialogue and transcripts of the film under study, the researcher has used the classification proposed by Pedersen (2005). He classifies culture-bound terms into two categories, namely intralinguistic and extralinguistic culture-bound references; the former category consists of idioms, proverbs, slang and dialects, while the later refers to the expressions pertaining to cultural items which are not part of a language system.

As Pedersen (2005) states extralinguistic culture-bound references consist of two categories, the first one is labeled source language oriented which includes retention, specification and direct translation, whereas the second category, labeled target language oriented, includes generalization, substitution and omission.

The purpose of this study was to find the strategies employed in translation of Persian culture-bound terms in the English subtitles of the abovementioned Iranian film and to investigate the frequency of the used strategies to determine which one has the highest potential for conveying the intended meaning.
3. MATERIALS

This study is mainly descriptive. In the present study, English subtitles of the before mentioned Persian film as research samples have been compared with the original samples’ script in order to find culture-bound terms and to investigate in details the translation strategies adopted by the translators in dealing with these terms.

The data will be gathered from analyzing the English subtitles of the Persian film,

A Segregation (2011) which is a 2011 Iranian social movie directed by Asghar Farhadi. This movie informally discusses about the cultural pathology of Iranian lifestyle. This cultural pathology attracts the perspective of all the world directors and cinema experts. It created a big challenge between humanity and Iranian law. It simultaneously showed the poverty of many Iranian social classes. This film broke all Iranian movie box office records and was the top grossing Iranian movie of all time.

Procedure

The Procedure for obtaining required information had four stages which are as follows:

1) Viewing the film in order to get the overall idea of it and to find instances of the Persian culture-bound terms in the aforementioned Persian film.

2) Using the transcripts and focusing on the English subtitles of this film.

3) Estimating the correctness of the applied translation strategy and determining the degree to which the translations were close to the original samples.

4) Tabulating the translation strategies according to the taxonomy proposed by Pedersen (2005).

Framework of the Study

Subtitling is intended “to retain and reflect in the subtitles the equilibrium between the image, sound and text of the original” (Georgakopoulou 2009: 30). The first comprehensive taxonomy of translation strategies was presented by Vinay and Darbelnet in the late 1950s (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958) and has since then been reproduced and modified several times. One of its most recent reworkings is that by Pedersen (2007), which constitutes the foundation of the taxonomy applied in the present study.

One of the most revealing translation crisis points is when some reference to the Source Culture is made, and there is no obvious official equivalent. According to Pedersen (2005) culture-bound
terms are of two main types, namely intralinguistic and extralinguistic culture-bound references.

The strategies to render extralinguistic culture-bound elements as Pedersen (2005) proposed include two categories, namely SL oriented and TL oriented.

**Source language oriented strategy consists of three subcategories:**

1. **Retention:** It is the most source language oriented strategy, as it allows an element from the source language to enter the target text. Sometimes the retained culture-bound term is marked off from the rest of the target text by quotes and occasionally by italics. This strategy consists of two parts, namely complete and target language adjusts.

2. **Specification:** It means leaving the culture-bound term in its un-translated form, but adding information that is not present in the source text, making the target culture-bound term more specific than the source culture-bound term. This is done in one of two ways: either through Explicitation or Addition.

   2.1. **Explicitation:** Explicitation could be seen as any strategy involving expansion of the text, or spelling out anything that is implicit in the source text.

   2.2. **Addition:** This means that the added material is latent in the source culture-bound term, as part of the sense or connotations of the term. By using this strategy, the translator intervenes to give guidance to the target audience.

3. **Direct translation:** This strategy is like literal translation and it could hardly be used on proper names, but it is not uncommon for rendering the names of companies, official institutions, technical gadgetry etc. based on the outcome of translation, it has two subgroups; the first one is claqué which is not familiar to target audience and it may sound odd to them, and the second one is shifted direct translation which refers to those terms that are common in target culture so the audience are familiar with them.

The Calque strategy is presented in Vinay & Darbelnet (2000) as a sort of borrowing, and its importance is recognized in this statement “As with borrowings, there are many fixed calques which, after a period of time, become an integral part of the language” (2000: 85). So this strategy is a potential source of vocabulary enrichment between languages. Newmark refers to this strategy by the name “Through-translation (‘loan-translation’, calque)” (Newmark 1988b: 76).

**Target language oriented strategy consists of three subcategories:**
1. **Generalization**: This strategy means replacing a culture-bound term referring to something specific by something more general. Typically, this may involve hyponymy or not.

2. **Substitution**: This strategy involves removing the source culture-bound term and replacing it with something else, either a different term or some sort of paraphrase, which does not necessarily involve a cultural term. This strategy consists of two subgroups: cultural substitution and paraphrase.

   2.1. **Cultural substitution**: This strategy means that the source culture-specific item is removed, and replaced by a different cultural term.

   2.2. **Paraphrase**: This strategy involves rephrasing the source culture-specific item, either through reduction to sense, or by completely removing all trace of the cultural term and instead using a paraphrase that fits the context.

3. **Omission**: As Toury (1995, p. 82), has pointed out Omission is a valid translation strategy, and in the present model it simply means replacing the ST ECR with nothing.

4. **DATA ANALYSIS**

Since the strategies to transfer culture-bound terms are of two main groups, namely SL oriented and TL oriented which are further divided into three salient subcategories, first the culture-bound terms of the before-mentioned film are presented in their context followed by giving necessary explanation and analysis, Then two tables are offered which specified different types of culture-bound terms with respect to the taxonomy proposed by Pedersen (2005) in this film. Furthermore, the frequency of each strategy used by the translators will be mentioned in charts.

**Analysis of Culture-Bound Elements of the Chosen Film**

In the following parts the collected data will be analyzed after being classified on the basis of the before mentioned framework. It should be added that although the emphasis of this study is culture-bound elements, but in the following sections some of the culture-bound elements will be offered in their contexts, i.e. the entire sentence or sentences to help the reader have a clear understanding of culture-bound elements and their meaning in context.

**Analysis of “A segregation”**

In this part, the summary of the mentioned source and target language strategies are depicted in the table 1. The data of this study were elicited form descriptive analysis of some of the instances of culture-bound terms and were examined against six major translation strategies proposed by Pedersen, namely (1) Retention, (2) Specification, (3) Direct Translation, (4) Generalization, (5)
Substitution, and (6) Omission; The first three strategies are source language oriented while the other three strategies are target language oriented.

1. **SL Oriented strategies**

This film contains 36 instances of SL oriented strategies to render culture-bound terms, some of which are discussed below.

1.1. **Retention**

There are 8 instances of complete and 3 instances of TL adjust retention in this film, some of which are analyzed below.

One of the words that currently exist in source language culture and it lacks in the target language is [چادر] chador which is pronounced /chādor/. This word indicates a kind of special covering usually is used for Muslim women particularly in Iran. Another word is [کثافت] Kesafat which is pronounced /kesāfat/ that means ‘you trash’ and is almost used when someone is called with an insultation.

1.2. **Specification**

There are 3 instances of addition and 6 instances of explicitation strategy in this movie.

1.2.1. **Addition**

The instances of this strategy are as follows:

1) "Any legal ID is ok."

Since the SL word “[شناشنه، کارت ملی، هر چی باشه خوبه]” /shenāsnāmeh, kārte melli, har chi bāshe khubeh/ are referring to the same thing in Iran, it may not be known to the English viewers of the film, thus the subtitler added the word “ID” in order that the audience know what this word refers to, more easily.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source language-oriented strategies</th>
<th>Target language-oriented strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Retention</td>
<td>1) Generalization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: the target and source language strategies in one look
1.2.2. Explicitation

Some of the instances of this strategy are presented below.

"به امام زمان قسم می خورم."

/be emāme zamān ghasam mikhoram/

“I swear to our savior.”

This word which is the name of one of our Imams is probably unknown in target culture, therefore the subtitler instead of using retention strategy, resorted to explicitation in order to help the audience know why this person is important.

1.3. Direct Translation

There are 9 instances of calque and 7 instances of shifted direct translation in this movie.

1.3.1. Calque

"دیه" 

/diyeh/

1) “blood money”

The subtitler has translated the SL words literally regardless of the fact that the outcome seems strange and unusual to the target viewers since they cannot make head or tail of such word.

"داره همه چی رو می پیچونه."

(2)
2) “He is twisting everything.”

In the above example, the SL word “ﻣﯽ ﭘﻴﭽﻮﻧﻪ” [mipichuneh] is rendered word for word as “twisting” which is awkward and meaningless and as a result it sounds odd to the target audience. The subtitler should have resorted to shifted direct translation and rendered this word as “twisting” which is its appropriate equivalent.

1.3.2. Shifted

“اگه بميره خونيش گردن شماست.”

“If she dies, her blood will be on your hands.”

This refers to an idiom which shows that if something happens another person is responsible for this. The subtitler has correctly translated this phrase as “If she dies, her blood will be on your hands” which shares the same meaning in the target culture as the source phrase.

2. TL Oriented strategies

This film contains 41 instances of TL oriented strategies to render culture-bound terms, some of which are discussed below.

2.1. Generalization

There are 7 instances of generalization strategy in this movie, 3 of them are hyponymy and the rest are not.

2.1.1. Hyponymy

“پاشو كيف و كتاب متاباتو جم کن”

“Get your stuff”
There are many kinds of stuff, but since they do not exist in the target culture, the subtitler has decided to use hyponymy strategy by replacing this culture-specific term with a more general term.

2.1.2. Other

"محرم و رمضان و صفر سرقت تعطيل"

/moharramo ramezuno safar serghat ta’tileh/

“No stealing in the holly months”

Since the Arabic months “محرم” [moharram], “رمضان” [ramezān] and “صفر” [safar] might be unknown to target language viewers, the subtitler chose not to retain the names of these months and instead s/he employed a more general term to render them.

2.2. Substitution

There are 24 instances of paraphrase and 2 instances of cultural substitution strategy in this movie.

2.2.1. Paraphrase

"من نميخوام برگردم تو اون خرابشده"

/man nemikhām bargardam tu un kharāb-shodeh/

“I don’t wanna go back to that hell-hole”

In this example, the subtitler substitutes the SL word “خرابشده” [kharāb-shodeh] with the word “Hell-hole” which means a very unpleasant place. Not only the TL word conveys the same sense as does the SL word, but also it carries the same semantic loads.

2.2.2. Cultural

"قربونت برم"

/ghorbunet beram/

“my angel”
Since the SL word “ﻗﺮﺑﻮﻧﺖ ﺑﺮﻡ” cannot be translated literally, the subtitler has correctly decided to substitute the cultural word “my angel” for it that makes the same effect on the TL audience.

2.3. Omission

There are 8 instances omission strategy which some of them are as follows:

1) “ﺍﻟﺎﻥ ﺳﻮﺳﮑﺸﻮﻥ ﻣﯽ ﮐﻨﻴﻢ”

The SL word “ﺍﻟﺎﻥ ﺳﻮﺳﮑﺸﻮﻥ ﻣﯽ ﮐﻨﻴﻢ” is left untranslated which may be due to the subtitling constraints that force the subtitler to omit it in order to shorten the TL utterance.

2) “ﻧﺎﻣﻮﺱ”

The subtitler has left the SL word “ﻧﺎﻣﻮﺱ” untranslated which may be due to his or her inability to find an appropriate Persian equivalent for it.

5. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Frequency of the Employed Strategies by the Translators

So far, some of the examples of culture-bound elements have been mentioned. In the following section, the frequency of each strategy will be tabulated in order to show which strategy has the highest potential for conveying the intended meaning.

In doing so, first two tables are presented to show the number of different strategies of translation according to Pedersen’s model, then the frequency of the strategies used by translators for rendering culture-specific items will be shown in four charts, and finally After the indication of the frequency of the strategies employed by translators, the percentage of the overall employed strategies are shown in a pie chart.

Table 2. Number of different categories of SL oriented strategies that appeared in a segregation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>SL Oriented Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complete</td>
<td>TL Adjust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Number of different categories of TL oriented strategies that appeared in a segregation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies Title</th>
<th>Generalization</th>
<th>Substitution</th>
<th>Omission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hyponymy</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A segregation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chart 2: Percentage of the overall employed strategies in a segregation

Chart 3: Frequency of the overall six major strategies in a segregation
6. DISCUSSION

Strategies Adopted For Rendering Culture-bound Elements

There were 77 instances of culture-specific elements in this film. As it was clear in most of the examples, the most common strategy adopted by the subtitlers of this film was paraphrase.

As it was stated earlier, the data of this study were elicited from descriptive analysis of some of the instances of culture-bound terms and were examined against six major translation strategies proposed by Pedersen, namely (1) Retention, (2) Specification, (3) Direct Translation, (4) Generalization, (5) Substitution, and (6) Omission; The first three strategies are source language oriented while the other three strategies are target language oriented.

There were 36 instances of SL oriented strategies and 41 instances of TL oriented strategies to render culture-specific elements in this film.

7. CONCLUSION

As the results showed substitution strategy and more specifically paraphrase with sense transfer which is employed 26 times by the subtitlers in this film, is the most common strategy to render cultural elements in subtitling. Since most of the Persian culture-bound elements do not exist in target culture, the subtitler preferred to replace them with some sort of paraphrase which does not necessarily involves a target culture-bound term in order to transfer the intended meaning. Although paraphrase is used frequently in subtitling, it has its shortcomings; for instance there is conflicting nature between subtitling and paraphrase, because paraphrase involves replacing one
SL cultural term with a TL phrase or sentence that conveys the same sense while subtitling is a condensed form of translation in which parts of the original dialogue are usually omitted.

The next most common strategy is direct translation which is used 16 times. As the chart 1 showed, 9 instances out of these 16 instances belong to calque which is the second most frequently used strategy after paraphrase.

The next strategy which consists of 11 instances is retention strategy. 8 instances of this strategy are either marked or unmarked complete retention and the other 3 instances are TL adjust retention.

The next strategy is specification which includes 9 instances that can be further divided into 6 instances of explicitation and only 3 instances of addition strategy.

The next strategy which is used 8 times is omission. One of the reasons of employing this strategy may be due to the subtitling constraints.

As it was shown in charts 1 and 4, generalization strategy and more specifically hyponymy which is adopted only 3 times in this film is the least common strategy for rendering culture-bound elements in subtitling.

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Reference


