A Comparative Analysis of Culture Specific Items in Two English Translations of *Savushun*

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Abstract

This study was conducted to identify and compare the strategies applied by two native Farsi translators in rendering the culture specific items (CSIs) of a literary text titled Savushun *in their English translations. In this study, CSIs refer to the materials, social customs, religious concepts, and traditions available in one language and culture but nonexistent in the other language and culture. Aixelá's proposed strategies of translation of CSIs (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996) were taken as the model of this study and 191 extracted CSIs from the original novel were categorized accordingly. The researchers compared the two translated versions, one of them titled* Savushun *translated by Ghanoonparvar (1990), and the other one translated by Zand (1991), titled* Persian Requiem. *The results of the comparison revealed that while the most frequently used strategy by Ghanoonparvar was extra-textual gloss, Zand was keen on using linguistic translation. Furthermore, neither of the translators used a single strategy in rendering CSIs under a specific subcategory and both had different trends towards using conservative or substitutive strategies.*

Keywords: culture, culture specific items (CSIs), translation strategies, inverse translation, literary translation, translation into non-mother tongue

Introduction

The discipline of translatology or translation studies has witnessed the emergence of a new shift of paradigm, that is, "culture-oriented translation studies", since the 1980s (Leppihalme, 1997, p. 1). In fact, as Munday (2006) states, "Linguistic theories of translation have been sidelined and attention has centered on translation as cultural transfer and the interface of translation with other growing disciplines within cultural studies" (p. 141). "How to deal with features like dialect and heteroglossia, literary allusions, culturally specific items such as food or architecture, or further-reaching differences in

the assumed contextual knowledge that surrounds the text and gives it meaning" are indeed complex technical issues raised in cultural translation (Sturge, 2009, p. 67).

Culture Specific Items

The issue of translating culture specific items (CSIs) is primarily problematized by the diversity – and even heterogeneity – of opinion when it comes to defining *culture*. From the Kantian pro-enlightenment view of culture to the mid-nineteenth century German non-positivist sociologist Georg Simmel who used the term to refer to a universal human capacity and defined it as "the cultivation of individuals through the agency of external forms which have been objectified in the course of history" (Levine, 1971, p. 6), the controversy is further amplified by Romanticist definitions of culture focusing on human refinement.

The 20th century brought with it an anthropological perspective in the study of many phenomena – culture being no exception (Murdock, 1981; Stringer & McKiew, 1996; Tomasello, 1999); Larson (1984) subscribes to this epistemological stance in defining culture as "a complex of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules which a group of people share" (p. 431). She further holds that the translator needs "to understand beliefs, attitudes, values, and the rules of the source language audience in order to adequately understand the source text and adequately translate it for people who have a different set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules" (p. 431). In line with this specific conceptualization of culture, Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996) writes that:

> In translation, a CSI does not exist of itself, but as the result of a conflict arising from any linguistically represented reference in a source text which, when transferred to a target language, poses a translation problem due to the nonexistence or to the different value of the given item in the target language culture… CSIs are those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text. (pp. 57-58).

The above demonstrates that translating these items from one language to another is a complicated and vital task and that a translator needs to be cognizant of cultural differences between the ST and the TT in literary translation. To translate CSIs, translators resort to translation strategies that

various translation scholars have presented. Lörscher (as cited in Leppihalme, 1997, p. 24) defines a translation strategy as "a potentially conscious procedure for the solution of a problem which an individual is faced with when translating a text segment from one language to another". In this regard, Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, p. 60) groups all possible strategies applied to CSIs in translation with this categorization being intended to have a "methodological usefulness in describing objectively any supposedly preexisting classes".

Literary Translation

Among different types of translation, "Literary translation is an original subjective activity at the center of a complex network of social and cultural practices" (Bush, 1998, p. 4). Therefore, "Literary translators are often seen as communicators between cultures" (Jones, 2009, p. 156). And translation of these texts "is the most testing type of translation, because the first, basic articulation of meaning (the word) is as important as the second (the sentence) and the effort to make word, sentence and text cohere requires continuous compromise and readjustment" (Newmark, 1988, p. 162).

Tymoczko (as cited in Jones, 2009, p. 153) argues that, "The focus on literary translation provides the discipline with high-quality evidence about 'interfaces' between cultures and about the linguistic challenges of translating, hence it can inform theories, models of practice and research methodologies relevant to other genres, and vice versa".

The problem with translating CSIs in literary texts is perhaps related to the lexical and cognitive gaps between the SL and the TL. This is why Leppihalme (1997, p. 19) conceives the translator as a "cultural mediator" and "decision-maker" who is "competent" and "responsible". He points out that, those reading the TT texts enjoy a "different cognitive environment from ST readers, which means that the translator will need to consider also the implicit part of the massage, the contextual and referential part, and to decide whether it needs to be explicated in the TT" (1997, p. 20).

Translation into a Non-Mother Tongue

Although most translation theoreticians do not discuss openly the possibility of choosing one's TL in translation, they do covertly express their conviction that only translation into one's mother tongue guarantees a good translation (Pokorn, 2005). According to Pokorn (2005), this hidden assumption can be

found in contemporary theories of Snell-Hornby's integrated approach, Steiner's hermeneutic work on translation theory, and Venuti's terminologies.

Pokorn (2005) points out that contrary to common belief, the principle that translation should always be done into one's mother tongue does not have a long history. He notes that translating into a tongue other than one's L1 "can also be found in the ancient world, when the native language of the translator was not an issue, or at least not one of the criteria according to which the quality of the translation was assessed" (p. 34).

In the 20th century, too, translation out of one's mother tongue was not such a rare occurrence. According to Pokorn, "It was and still is a common translation practice in communities which use a language of restricted distribution or limited diffusion and which are forced to translate into foreign languages if they want their works to be translated at all" (p. 35).

Pokorn (2005) goes on to argue that there is no scientific proof to the claim that translation into a mother tongue is superior to translation into a non-mother tongue and continues that:

> *The stigma of inappropriateness given to inverse translation by the majority of Western translation theorists stems from a post-Romantic, aprioristic, scientifically-unproven and sometimes ethnocentric conviction of theorists coming from major and central linguistic communities, since inverse translation is mainly practiced in peripheral and minor linguistic cultures*. (p. 122).

In line with what has been discussed so far, the present study was conducted to address the following research questions:

- What strategies have been used by Ghanoonparvar in rendering the CSIs of *Savushun* according to Aixelá's model?
- What strategies have been used by Zand in rendering the CSIs of *Savushun* according to Aixelá's model?

Method

Corpus

Savushun (سَووشُن) is the number one best-selling novel by an Iranian woman published inside the country (16 printings since 1969). Few works of Iranian fiction deal with the World War II occupation of Iran by British and Russian forces, a period of immense historical significance for Iran. The writer, Simin Daneshvar (born in 1921 in Shiraz), is an academic, renowned novelist, fiction writer, and translator of literary works from English, German,

Italian, and Russian into Farsi. Daneshvar has used folklore and myths in writing *Savushun* and illustrates an era of growing nationalism prior to the emergence of the 1979 Revolution.

Savushun was deliberately chosen for this study based on two reasons. Firstly, this literary text contains profound Farsi CSIs such as religious concepts, social customs, and kinds of foods, clothes, and many proper names. It evokes images of shrines and Sufis, of the tombs of the great poets, of Persepolis and the great monuments of pre-Islamic Iran, and, of the hinterland of the nomadic (Qashqai) tribes. Secondly, there are two different translations of this novel into English thereby allowing a comparative analysis. One is by Mohammad-Reza Ghanoonparvar in 1990 titled *Savushun: A novel about modern Iran.* This translation includes a useful glossary and a thoughtful introduction by Brian Spooner.

The second translation is by Roxane Zand in 1991 titled *A Persian Requiem*. Both translators are native speakers of Farsi and have translated an L1 text into an L2 text while it is commonly believed that translators have better performance in translating an L2 foreign text into their native language and "inverse translation, especially of literary texts, has always been frowned upon within translation studies in Western cultures with a dominant language" (Pokorn, 2005, p. ix).

Theoretical Framework

The researchers adopted Aixelá's comprehensive taxonomy of CSIs (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996) into account in order to identify the strategies applied by the two translators in rendering the CSIs of *Savushun.* In this study, the researchers categorized the extracted CSIs from the original 304-page *Savushun.* Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996) points out that, "The scale, from a lesser to a greater degree of intercultural manipulation, is divided in two major groups separated by their conservative or substitutive nature" (p. 61).

Conservative Strategies

The conservative strategies are considered to include:

1. *Repetition*: According to Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996), by applying this strategy "translators keep as much as they can of the original reference" (p. 61). The obvious example can be the treatment of names especially in annotations [*Seattle → Seattle*].

2. *Orthographic adaptation*: Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996) states, "This strategy includes procedures like transcription and transliteration which are mainly used when the original reference is expressed in a different alphabet from the one target readers use" (p. 61). Example: حمام خانی ← *Khani Hammam*.

3. *Linguistic (non-cultural) translation*: In this case, Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996, p. 62) states that the translator "chooses in many cases a denotatively very close reference to the original, but increases its comprehensibility by offering a target language version which can still be recognized as belonging to the cultural system of the source text". Example: مسجد نُ ← *New Mosque*

4. *Extra-textual gloss*: According to Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996), by applying this strategy, the translator uses one of the abovementioned procedures but considers it necessary to offer some explanation of the meaning or implications of the CSI in an annotation or glossary.

5. *Intra-textual gloss:* This is when "translators feel they can or should include their gloss as an indistinct part of the text, usually so as not to disturb the reader's attention" (Aixelá, as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996, p. 62). Example: نماز آیات ← *the prayer that is said during the solar and lunar eclipses or earthquakes.*

Substitutive Strategies

The substitutive strategies, on the other hand, are mentioned to encompass the following:

1. *Synonymy*: "The translator resorts to some kind of synonym or parallel reference to avoid repeating the CSI" (Aixelá, as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996, p. 63). Example: لباس رُ حانیت ← *clerical garb.*

2. *Limited universalization*: In principle, as Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996) states, by applying this strategy "translators feel that the CSI is too obscure for their readers or that there is another, more usual possibility and decide to replace it" (p. 63). He points out that "Usually for the sake of credibility, translators seek another reference, also belonging to the source language culture but closer to their readers another CSI, but less specific, so to speak" (p. 63). Example: کشکول قلندر ← *the dervish's drinking bowl.*

3. *Absolute universalization*: "The basic situation is identical to the previous one, but translators do not find a better known CSI or prefer to delete any foreign connotations and choose a neutral reference for their

readers" (Aixelá, as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996, p. 63). Example: نان بﭙادرازی ← *bread.*

4. *Naturalization*: In the words of Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996, p. 63), "the translator decides to bring the CSI into the intertextual corpus felt as specific by the target language culture". He also mentions that currently, this strategy is infrequently used in literature (with the clear exception of children's literature, where it also is beginning to decline). Example: نان خانگی تنک ← *homemade bread is as sweet as rose petals.*

5. *Deletion*: By applying this strategy, translators "consider the CSI unacceptable on ideological or stylistic grounds, or they think that it is not relevant enough for the effort of comprehension required of their readers (Aixelá, as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996, p. 64). Therefore, they decide to omit it in the target text. Example: آخُی اشی برطِش در آرده بُنکوبلی شده یی ر رَز می رﱡدبازارشمشهگری ایران → the mullahs in town even spread a rumor that he had turned into a heretic and a Babi.

6. *Autonomous creation:* Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996) points out that, "This is a very little-used strategy in which the translators decide that it could be interesting for their readers to put in some nonexistent cultural reference in the source text" (p. 64).

In addition to the above two categories of conservative and substitutive strategies, Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996) proposed some other potential strategies such as:

- Compensation (deletion + autonomous creation at another point of the text with a similar effect);

- Dislocation (displacement in the text of the same reference); and

- Attenuation (replacement, on ideological grounds, of something 'too strong' or in any way unacceptable, by something 'softer', more adequate to target pole written tradition or to what could, in theory, be expected by readers).

Procedure

This descriptive study was completed through several steps described in detail in this section. As the first step, the CSIs in the original Farsi *Savushun* comprising 23 chapters were extracted. These CSIs which totaled 191 in number were then categorized according to the theoretical framework of the study. Next, the English equivalents of these 191 CSIs were extracted from both English translated versions of the original novel and placed alongside

the Farsi item in two separate tables according to their cultural categories. The reason behind this alignment is that according to Piao (2002, p. 210), "For a parallel corpus to be useful, an essential step is to align the source texts and their translations, i.e. to produce a link between the two, at the sentence or word level".

At the third stage, the strategies adopted by each translator in rendering the CSIs of the original novel were identified according to the strategies presented by Aixelá (as cited in Alvarez & Vidal, 1996). Subsequently, the frequencies of applications of strategies adopted by each translator were calculated and then the percentages were shown in Table 2.

The next stage was comparing the given percentages in order to identify the most frequently used procedure by each translator. The sixth and last step was assessing whether the two translators have used a single strategy in rendering all the cultural items classified under a specific category.

Results

To start with, Table 1 below represents the number of CSIs within the Farsi novel under each subcategory.

Table 1 – Classification of 191 CSIs of *Savushun*

Cultural category	Classification	Number of items
Material culture	Food	26
	Clothes	26
	Houses	2
	Transport	1
	Objects	3
	Measurement	1
	Places	56
Social culture	Work and leisure	18
Organizations, customs, ideas	Social customs	11
	Legal ideas	5
	Religious concepts	42

As is evident in Table 1, the most frequent subcategory of CSIs was places and next, religious concepts while the least frequent were the two subcategories of transport and measurement.

Table 2 below displays the frequencies and percentages of the different strategies used by the two translators in rendering the CSIs in *Savushun* in order of frequency.

Table 2 – Frequencies and percentages of strategies used by the two translators in rendering the CSIs in *Savushun*

Ghanoonparvar			Zand		
Type of strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Type of strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Extra-textual gloss	51	26.7	Linguistic translation	43	22.513
Naturalization	42	22	Naturalization	34	17.801
Linguistic translation	42	22	Synonymy	31	16.230
Synonymy	34	17.8	Absolute Universalization	24	12.565
Absolute universalization	13	6.8	Extra-textual Gloss	19	9.947
Intra-textual Gloss	6	3.1	Orthographic adaptation	9	4.712
Orthographic adaptation	2	1	Intra-textual Gloss	9	4.712
Limited universalization	1	.5	Limited Universalization	9	4.712
Dislocation	-	-	Dislocation	6	3.141
Deletion	-	-	Deletion	5	2.617
Attenuation	-	-	Attenuation	2	1.047
Repetition	-	-	Repetition	-	-
Compensation	-	-	Compensation	-	-
Autonomous creation	-	-	Autonomous creation	-	-
Total	**191**	**100%**	**Total**	**191**	**100%**

The data in the above table could be used to respond to the two research questions raised in this study. The first one was concerning the strategies used by Ghanoonparvar in rendering the CSIs of *Savushun*; as is evident, he has used the eight strategies of (in order of frequency) extra-textual gloss,

naturalization, linguistic translation, synonymy, absolute universalization, intra-textual gloss, orthographic adaptation, and limited universalization. Accordingly, Ghanoonparvar did not use the strategies of repetition, deletion, autonomous creation, compensation, dislocation, and attenuation.

As for the second question which focused on the strategies used by Zand in her translation of *Savushun*, as is evident in Table 2 above, she has used 11 strategies which (in order of frequency) include linguistic translation, naturalization, synonymy, absolute universalization, extra-textual gloss, orthographic adaptation, intra-textual gloss, limited universalization, dislocation, deletion, and attenuation. Zand has thus not used the strategies of repetition, autonomous creation, and compensation.

While linguistic translation is the most frequently used strategy by Zand, Ghanoonparvar has used it as his third most frequently used strategy in translation. Naturalization is both translators' second most frequently used strategy. The least frequently used strategy by both translators is limited universalization.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to compare the strategies used by two Iranian translators in rendering the CSIs of *Savushun* in English. The findings showed that in the translation of the CSIs of *Savushun*, Ghanoonparvar had a greater tendency towards conveying the sense of cultural terms outside the text by giving extra-textual explanations for 120 items (together with the proper names used in *Savushun*), whereas Zand has explained 35 items (together with proper names), extra-textually.

In addition, linguistic translation has been actively used by both translators in case of many items under the subcategory of places. This means that the translators had kept the name and translated the function of the place. Also in the subcategory of social customs, the translators have preserved the referential meanings of the expected items and have not explained the symbolic meanings of those CSIs under these subcategories.

Furthermore, this study showed that neither of the translators has adhered to a single strategy in the process of translating Farsi CSIs of a certain subcategory into English. Therefore, they have both subscribed to the practice of employing a diversity of strategies in translating CSIs.

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