



## Translation of Taboos from English into Persian: A Skopos-Based Study

Sayed Younes Alavi<sup>1</sup>, Amin Karimnia<sup>2</sup> and Shahram Salehi Zadeh<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of English, Fars Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Fars, Iran.<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Fasa Branch, Islamic Azad University, Fasa, Iran.<sup>3</sup>Ministry of Education, Iran.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 14 October 2012;

Received in revised form:

10 February 2016;

Accepted: 16 February 2016;

#### Keywords

Skopos theory,  
Drama translation,  
Taboos,  
Interference.

### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the translation of taboos from English into Persian in dramas from a skopos-based view. To carry out this study, ten dramas were chosen. Five out of these ten dramas were not performed on any stage in Iran, but the remaining five dramas were performed on the stage. The researcher chose randomly thirty taboos used in current English and Persian. Then, the obtained taboos were evaluated based on the strategies proposed by Robinson (2006). So, the statistical calculations showed that the most common strategy used for translating taboos by the Persian translators was censorship; there was no difference between translations of taboos in these two categories of dramas, because skopos had no effect on them. Finally, some interference occurred through translation of taboos into Persian.

© 2016 Elixir All rights reserved.

### Introduction

This study deals with taboos in the translation of English dramas. It compares the use of taboos in original English dramas and their Persian translations. Taking into account the principles of Skopos theory of Vermeer (1984), the researcher has analyzed differences in translation of taboos in two categories of dramas. The first category is the dramas which are not performed on the stage, and the second one is that of dramas which have been performed on the stage by some actors. In fact, the researcher analyzed the translation of taboos regarding the purpose of translation. This topic was chosen because though taboos are a quite important means of expression, no direct attention has been paid to them in linguistics or translation theory. Toury (1995) stated "in translation, phenomena pertaining to the make-up of the source text tend to be transferred to the target text" (p. 275). So interference is a translation universal, and it is therefore worthy investigating which language features are most liable or permeable to it. Taboos are characteristic features of language, and in this study, the researcher has investigated that to which extent, taboos are liable to interference.

#### What is Skopos Theory?

The Greek word *Skopos* that means *aim* or *purpose* was introduced by Reiss and Vermeer (1986, p. 55). They believe that the translations vary alongside with the skopos of translation. So, for every work to be translated, the translator should at first, define a skopos in decision making process. Again they emphasize the hierarchy of ST and the translator being knowledgeable enough to identify these hierarchies. For example, a translator, who wants to translate a work of Shakespeare, must be familiar with the tiny puns which exist in his works, to be able to adapt the right strategies to translating the work for ordinary Persian readers.

#### Taboo

Taboo is a Polynesian word coming from Tongan word *tabu*. Capitan James Cook explored the Pacific Islands in the

1970s and observed the Polynesian peoples' behavior. Capitan Cook along with his fellow shipmen recorded the word taboo in the Polynesian peoples' journals as a significant local word standing for forbidden behavior when a thing is not allowed to be eaten, touched, entered or uttered. Perhaps because of this origin, taboo is easily associated with the primitive cultures; but it exists as well as in western contemporary ones (Register, 1996). These days taboo generally refers to a topic or an activity that people avoid or prohibit due to social, cultural, and religious customs. These words are considered to be offensive, rude, insulting, inappropriate or even bad language. Taboo is a moral or politic restriction that is placed on certain actions by authorities (kings, priests, shahans and etc) of people, which if ignored, will result in specific negative consequences. Examples are numerous in folklore and mythology. (Natalie, 2005)

English taboo words and expressions refer to body parts, sex acts, bodily functions and products, racist terms, verbal taboos or insults directed at people and family religion, death and unlucky matters. The examples of taboo words concerning body parts are cock, cunt, dick, prick and balls. Various examples of taboo words on sex acts are: fuck, suck, blow job, bugger and screw. Taboo words on bodily function and products are: shit, piss, crap, and fart. The examples of taboo language on racist terms are: frog, nigger, wop, and dago. The examples of taboo words directed at people are: bitch, bastard, cock sucker, mother fucker, and whore. And the examples of taboo words to do with death, religion and unlucky matters are: Jesus, goddamn, and God. (Jay, 1992, p. 124-131) Persian taboo words are the same as the English taboos except in part of racist terms.

#### Taboo and Translation

Taboo words are milder and fewer in translations than in the originals and they are strong when written than when spoken. (Gambier, 1994, p. 280)

Dewaele (2004) argue that written foul language is more offensive than actual oral usage, so the translators are usually asked to respect a certain sanctity attached to written discourse

in culture. While one of the writer’s tasks might be said to transgress certain taboos, the translators must respect norms of good usage. The author argued that in the correct translation of taboo words, the translator should bear in mind the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors in their translation into the target language. Davoodi (2007) has indicated that the task of translating taboo words is a balancing act: translators interpret the original style and message, make assumptions of reception by the target audience, and chose the translation strategy accordingly. Idiolects and personal preferences and values also play an important part in the translation of taboo words as do feedback and comments from colleagues and the readers. To translate a taboo, the translator must be familiar with the cultures of both L1 and L2 to know if the expression considered as taboo in L1, is taboo L2 too.

Mabry (1998) indicated that in this case there are three possibilities; a) The taboo term in L1 is not taboo in L2. b) The taboo term in L1 is taboo in L2 too. c) The term which is not taboo in L1 is considered as taboo in L2. Facing these situations, in part (a), the translator has no problem and can translate the word easily, but in parts (b) &(c) there are some choices to render the taboo word in a way that it would give the reader if not exact but similar and acceptable meaning and feeling of the word into the second language.

Harris (2003) stated that choice of translation strategies is affected by some contextual factors such as translation commission, stylistic norms ,policy of the text, the readership and the translator’s own ideology. It is said that the translators seek to the message of the taboo words by some other means than by using taboo words. Some suspect that taboo words do not usually contain the kind of meaning that would need rendering (Dewaele, 2004, p. 207). Based on Robinson (2006) generally, there are four strategies used to translation of taboo words: a) censorship b) substitution c) taboo for taboo d) applying euphemism

**Methodology**

The material of this study was 30 commonly used taboos which the researcher randomly chose from ten dramas five of which were performed on the stage and the remaining were not performed on the stage. These taboos were evaluated based on Robinsn’s strategy of translation: a) censorship, b) substitution of taboo term with non taboo term, c) taboo for taboo, d) applying euphemism. The researcher loaded the downloaded files (dramas) from the internet, in *adobe acrobat reader*™ and *wordsmith*®, in order to find the 30 commonly used taboos. These samples were compared to their Persian equivalents which were either printed (in paper) or in electronic version, to see what strategies have been used for translating them.

**Findings and Results**

**Table 2. Frequency of Four Strategies in Both Categories of Dramas**

| Strategy | Performed drama | Unperformed drama | Total frequency |
|----------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| a        | 118             | 111               | 229             |
| b        | 49              | 47                | 96              |
| c        | 25              | 55                | 80              |
| d        | 68              | 47                | 115             |

The data represented so far, was just some raw information which needed to be analyzed and processed by a statistical value. The best scientific statistical procedure for hypothesis testing of this study was *Chi-Square*. Chi-Square was employed to see if there was any significant difference between the mentioned strategies and to see which strategy has the greatest statistical value, which is directly related to the hypothesis.

**Table 3. Chi –Square Results**

| strategy | Observed N | Expected N | Residual |
|----------|------------|------------|----------|
| 1        | 229        | 125.0      | 104.0    |
| 2        | 96         | 125.0      | -29.0    |
| 3        | 60         | 125.0      | -65.0    |
| 4        | 115        | 125.0      | -10.0    |
| Total    | 500        |            |          |

| Test Statistics | strategy |
|-----------------|----------|
| Chi-Square      | 129/89   |
| df              | 3        |
| Asymp. Sig.     | .831     |

As the analysis above shows, and regarding the Chi-Square calculated, there is a significant difference between the first strategy (which was censorship) and the remaining three strategies which stand approximately level. This huge difference in Chi-Square value indicates that the strategy a (censorship) was the most frequently used strategy by the Persian translators for translating taboos.

**Table 4. Chi-Square from the Output of Descriptive Statistics of Four Strategies in Both Categories of Dramas drama \* strategy Crosstabulation**

| Count | strategy |    |    |     |       |
|-------|----------|----|----|-----|-------|
|       | 1        | 2  | 3  | 4   | Total |
| drama | 1 118    | 49 | 25 | 68  | 260   |
|       | 2 111    | 47 | 35 | 47  | 240   |
| Total | 229      | 96 | 60 | 115 | 500   |

**Table 5. Chi-Square Results**

**Chi-Square Tests**

|                              | Value              | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 4.965 <sup>a</sup> | 3  | .174                  |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 4.986              | 3  | .173                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .686               | 1  | .408                  |
| N of Valid Cases             | 500                |    |                       |

Table 5 is mostly concerned with the column indicating the level of significance. In this table, the reported significance was .174. But the obtained value of 4.965 was smaller than this tabled value and was therefore not significant. This meant that the difference is accidental and there is no relationship between variables (skopos theory and strategies of translation in both categories of dramas), so the null hypothesis can not be rejected. There was no difference between the translations of taboos in dramas based on the skopos theory.

**Discussion**

This study sought to investigate the taboo translation through two categories of dramas (those were performed on the stage and those were not performed on the stage) based on skopos theory. It was intended to know whether skopos of translation of dramas (performing on stage or not performing on stage) affected the strategies employed by the translators in translation of taboo words or expressions. These strategies were: a) censorship /omission b) Substitution c) Taboo for taboo d) applying euphemism. At last these were the results of the study: The commonest strategy that the translators have used in translation of taboo words and expressions in both categories of

dramas was omission or censorship, and there wasn't any major difference in translation of both categories of dramas based on their skopos /purpose, so the skopos did not have any effect on translation of taboos in these dramas. Interference occurred during the process of translation in a way or the other, and this interference is more of linguistic type. The ST patterns were directly copied into the TL (here Persian) patterns by literal translation (taboo for taboo translation). This interference occurred in linguistic level (i.e., syntactic and lexical levels) as well as the pragmatic level.

According to Jacobson (1959), there are three kinds of translation: intra-lingual (the translation of form in to another form within one language); inter-lingual (the translation of one form in to another form between two languages); and inter-semiotic (translation of one form or symbol into another symbol). (Miremedi, 2003, p.125) Translation of taboo terms also may be beyond one of these three mentioned types of translation. To do inter-semiotic translation of taboo symbols, the translator should be very careful. When translating taboo words, both linguistic and ethical aspects should be taken into account. If the taboos are offensive, they should be censored, omitted, or substituted, if they aren't they should be translated. (Erel, I., & Funda, R., 2005). Davoodi (2007) says that taboos are cultural and religious issues, so the translator should be aware of the culture to translate them correctly. She says taboo translation isn't easy task, so it requires the translator to have a complete knowledge of T and S language cultures. In a study of emotions, taboo, and profane language (Zsuzsanna, 2004) concluded that the taboo (profanity language) was an integrated part of human being because of his nature. In the paper of taboo and translator, Varney (1945/2005) demonstrated that the

specificity of culture was gradually losing and moving towards the development of intercultural homogeneity. So, the translators can contribute to this homogeneity. There are some points that should be considered in translation of taboo words:

- 1: Situation
- 2: Subject matter
- 3: Religion
- 4: Reader's age
- 5: Reader's social class

### Conclusions

Considering social, cultural, and religious factors, translators tried to censor the taboos in drama translation. And there was not a major difference between translation strategies in translation of taboos in dramas, so the skopos did not have any effect on the employed strategies. But there is a fact; new taboos have been transferred from a more prestigious language (in this case English) through translation of literary works of the great English writers such as Shakespeare, Miller, Doyle and etc. This new trend has been powered and promoted by the growing number of translations from English into Persian, which is a rich language regarding literature. And translation could lead to transfer of ST pattern into linguistic levels of TL, both in syntactic and lexical patterns. So, more and more new taboos are introduced into Persian. As every one may hear a Persian user, the youths, are saying *gay, shit, fuck, suck, bastard or shut up* in their daily conversation.

There has occurred a *domestication* process about taboos in Persian. These taboos that are transferred through taboo for taboo translation are now uttered by Persian users specially youths; they accepted these forms as correct and clear.

During the search for the taboos and by close reading of the Shakespeare's dramas, the researcher came across taboos of racist terms which are now archaic and no longer used in the current English.

**Table 1. Thirty Used Taboos in English and Their Communicative Functions**

| Taboo          | Its Communicative Function   |
|----------------|--|
| hell           | Expressing annoyance, surprising, or emphasizing sth   |
| bloody         | Vulgarity a swear word that many people find offensive that is used to emphasize a comment or angry statement                    |
| slut           | Vulgarity/ expressing disapproving / a woman who has many sexual partners  |
| bitch          | Directed at people expressing offensive, unpleasant, or unkind things about others   |
| bastard        | Directed at people/using to insult sb, especially a man who has been rude, unpleasant , or cruel                                 |
| asshole        | anus/ a stupid or unpleasant person used to express annoyance or insult  |
| shit           | Used to express exclamation /anger and annoyance   |
| In prison      | Related to unlucky matter  |
| wank           | Related to sex /an act of masturbation   |
| suck           | Related to sex and used to say that something is very bad/to keep something in the mouth and pull on it with the lips and tongue |
| queer          | Expressing offensiveness/ homosexual, especially a man   |
| crap           | Related to bodily function and products that used to say badness and nonsense  |
| tits           | Concerning bodily parts / a woman's breast or nipple   |
| balls          | Concerning bodily parts that used to say badness of and nonsense   |
| goddamn        | Dealing with religion or unlucky matters that used to show being angry or annoyance  |
| Cock sucker    | Directed at people used to insult to show anger and dislike  |
| Mother fucker  | Directed at people used to insult to show anger and dislike  |
| harlot         | Directed at people used to insult  |
| devil          | Related to religion and unlucky matters  |
| Shut up        | Used to show anger and annoyance   |
| For god's sake | Expressing impatience, annoyance, or desperation   |
| fool           | Expressing offensiveness /a silly person   |
| whore          | Directed at people to show offensiveness that refers to a woman who has sex with a lot of men.                                   |
| Piss           | Concerning bodily function and products/to urinates  |
| gay            | Related to sex / homosexual  |
| ass            | Vulgarity /expressing annoyance  |
| pig            | Vulgarity/ used to show offensiveness and sth. unpleasant  |
| cock           | Concerning bodily parts and sex  |
| cum            | Related to sex   |
| fuck           | Related to sex used to express anger, disgust ,or surprise   |

This is again the dichotomy of synchronic/diachronic translation studies which matters. The researcher found out that some taboos such as *bloody*, *pregnant*, and the religious words have been more common in old English than current English. On the other hand, some taboos such as *cock*, *cunt*, *penis*, and *motherfucker* and *cock sucker* are widely used in current English rather than old English.

This study showed that due to the nature of language, some taboos disappeared from the lexicon of a given language and some other new taboos have been introduced, over the time. So interference occurred through translation of taboos into Persian.

#### References

- Davoodi, Z. (2007). On the translation of the taboos. *Translation Studies*, 21, 130-137. Retrieved September 18, 2010, from Translation Directory.
- Dewaele, J.M. (2004). The emotional force of swearwords and taboo words in the speech of multilingual. *Multicultural Development* 25, 283.
- Erel, I., & Funda, R. (2005). A CDA approach to the translation of taboos in literary text, within the historical and socio-political context. *Applied Psycholinguistic*, 22, 321-5.
- Gambier, Y. (1994). *Language transfer and audiovisual communication*. Turku: University of Turku.
- Harris, C. (2003). Taboo words and reprimands elicit greater autonomic reactivity in a first language than in a second language: *Applied psycholinguistics*, 24, 561-5.
- Jacobson, R. (1959/2000). On linguistic aspect of translation in L. Venuti (ed.) (2000), pp. 113-118.
- Jay, T. (1992). *Cursing in America*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Mabry, E. (1998). Translation and different dimensions of Profanity. *Psychological Reports*, 35, 387-391.
- Marber, P. (1984). *The closer*. Translated by A. Baresgheyan. Tehran: Elmi Press.
- Miller, A. (1915). *A view from the bridge*. Translated by H. Maleki. Tehran: Tajrobe press.
- Miller, A. (1991). *Death of a salesman*. Translated by H. Maleki. Tehran: Tajrobe Press.
- Miremadi, A. (2003). *Theories of translation and interpretation*. Tehran: The Center of Studying and Compiling University Books in Humanities (SAMT).
- Natalie, K. (2005, September 25). *Cursing is a normal function of human Language*. Retrieved from [http:// articles. Sfgate. Com](http://articles.Sfgate.Com).
- Pinter, H. (1912). *The room*. Translated by H. Maleki. Tehran: tajrobe Press.
- Register, N. (1996). Second – language learners and taboo words in American English. *English Today*, 12, 122-8.
- Reiss, K. and Vermeer, H.J. (1986). *Text types, translation types, and translation assessment*, in A. Chester man (ed.) (1986), pp. 105-15.
- Robinson, D. (2006). *Translation and taboo*. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Roger, E. (1990). Profanity and taboos around the world. *Journal of Translation*. 23, 123-9.
- Shakespear, W. (1564/1616). *Antony and Cleopatra*. Translated by A. Pazargardi. Tehran: Elmi and Farhangi Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1564/1616). *Hamlet*. Translated by. M. Farzad. Tehran: Elmi Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1564/1616). *The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Translated by A. Pazargardi. Tehran: Elmi and Farhangi Press.
- Stone, O. (1893). *Platoon*. Translated by B. Turani. Tehran: Parsian Press.
- Strindberg, A. (1840). *Miss Julie*. Translated by A. Rastgar. Tehran: Rahravan Puyesh Press.
- Strindberg, A. (1849). *The father*. Translated by F. Mohamadi. Tehran: Rahravan puyesh Press.
- Toury, G. (1995). *Descriptive translation studies*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Varney, J. (1945/2005). *Taboo and the translator*. Retrieved September 10, 2011 from the World Wide Web: Translation Directory.com.
- Wachoaski, A.L. (Director). (1999). *The Matrix* [Film].
- Vermeer, H. J. (1984). *Skopos and Commission in translational action* in L. Venuti (ed.), (2000), pp. 221-32.
- Zsuzsanna, A., (2004). *Emotion, Taboo and Profane Language*. Retrieved June 11, 2008, from translation directory.com.