



The Impact of Text Difficulty on Translation Naturalness at Micro- and Macro Levels

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ABSTRACT

Naturalness as a main inseparable feature of literary texts may be exposed to some mistranslations or misunderstandings from the part of the translators during the act of translation. A major issue is probably the level of the difficulty of the source text. There is a severe lack of research on the impact of text difficulty on translation naturalness at the micro level with regard to the formal and dynamic equivalents. Accordingly, the current study as an initial attempt in Iran aimed at examining the common elements of word and sentence pertinent to text difficulty and translation naturalness. To this end, the researcher aimed at finding out the relationship between formal and dynamic equivalents for simple and difficult texts. A pool of 86 students participated in the study to serve as the source of data. Having assessed the students' performances on the tests based on Nida's criteria, the researcher found a moderate correlation for formal and dynamic equivalents with regard to the simple texts and a strong correlation for formal and dynamic equivalents with regard to the difficult texts. Finally, some implications for translator teachers and syllabus designers were recommended.

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Introduction

How a reader finds out a translation is good would be a simple question that lies at the heart of all concerns with translation criticism and evaluation. To assess the quality of a translation one should employ the intended theories of translation embedded in the nature of translation or, more specifically, the nature of the relationship between a ST and TT (House, 2001). In fact, translation quality assessment (TQA) among the various translation topics has been the main concern of many professionals and scholars that gave rise to build and develop their models as a yardstick for evaluation of a TT.

William (2009) expands, "TQA is a type of evaluation that can be quantitative or qualitative. It can be based on mathematical and statistical measurement or on reader-response, interviews and questionnaires; moreover, it can be diagnostic, formative and summative" (p.4). According to House (1997), one of the most controversial topics concerning TQA is the criteria to be used, and TQA is in fact based on the approach and the theory selected for evaluation. The study aimed at answering the following research questions: 1) *Is there any relationship between formal and dynamic equivalents in translations of simple texts at the micro levels of words and sentences?*, And 2) *Is there any relationship between formal and dynamic equivalents in translations of difficult texts at the micro levels of words and sentences?*

Literature Review

Nida (1964) defines translation as the exercise of producing a text in the target language as closely equivalent as possible to the original text in the source language in the form, the style and the meaning. The role and the function of translation have become very vital and curtail day by day as a means of communication between nations with different languages. Therefore, translation is not just viewed as an activity of changing a piece of text from one language to another, but the

remarkable trait of it resides in the fact that it should result in communication. In the present globalized world, translation is the key issue to understanding and learning foreign cultures. Therefore, the effect of translation on linking different beliefs, languages, religions, thoughts, and cultures is inevitable.

Translation Naturalness

Nida as an eminent figure in translation studies emphasized more on naturalness in translation. Nida (1964, as cited in Munday, 2008) defines "the goal of dynamic equivalence as seeking the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message" (p.42). Also, he declares that naturalness deals with adaptation of grammar, of lexicon and of cultural references. He regards the concept as parallel to dynamic equivalence. According to Nida, criteria such as General efficiency of the communicative process, comprehension of the intent, and equivalence of response are felt for an optimal translation. To him, a good translation is the one that affects the readers and provides a response in them.

Points taken, when formal equivalence is applied to a large extent, we would expect a production that is more artificial, and so the more it approaches the formal loyalty while staying away from the natural translation. On the contrary, departing from the form to apply the dynamic equivalents will lead to natural translation. By naturalness, the present study implies how natural and artificial the translation sounds in the target language. It may happen for any reader that, while reading a translated text, he feels it is very artificial and therefore tedious to read, and on the other hand, there are translated texts that are most likely natural in the target language and thus enjoyable to read.

Text Difficulty

When translators call a text difficult, they usually mean a number of different things that contribute in such a difficulty. Hale and Campbell (1999) believe that the level of difficulty of

a passage is indicated by a number of characteristics, such as the requirement for conceptual understanding, syntactical complexity, the use of subordination over co-ordination, the register, style and tone, idiomatic expressions, lexical sophistication, the need for charged format from one language to another (pp.3-5). Nord (1991) divides translation problems into four categories: 1) text-specific translation problems (e.g. a play on words), 2) pragmatic translation problems (e.g., the recipient orientation of a text), 3) cultural translation problems (e.g. text-type conventions), and 4) linguistic translation problems (e.g. the translation of the English gerund into another language). Hill (1997, cited in Hale and Campbell, 1999), identifies five difficulty indicators, which she has labeled as thematic, formal, stylistic, linguistic and syntactic.

Method

Since the focus of the study was to explore the role of text difficulty on translation naturalness, the study set out to employ both a qualitative and a quantitative approach to analyze the data. However, it was “the dominant-less dominant design” (Dörnyei, 2007) in which the study was conducted within a quantitative paradigm with a small component of qualitative methods. In the quantitative phase of the study, the researcher employed Correlation Matrix using Pearson Correlation to find out the significant differences and the relationship between formal and dynamic equivalents with regard to both simple texts and difficult texts.

Participants

The participants in this study were 64 male and female EFL students majoring in English Translation at Islamic Azad University of Quchan and at Payam Noor University of Chenaran. The classes were mixed classes, and the students having participated in the research project were taking their Translation Courses including Literary Translation and Advanced Translation. 4 students were also interviewed.

Instrumentation

The researcher designed four sample tests taken from the story books to elicit students’ responses regarding the use of both formal and dynamic equivalent. The tests measured students’ knowledge at two micro levels of word and sentence. The tests included 1) Test of Formal Translation for Simple Texts, 2) Test of Dynamic Translation for Simple Texts, 3) Test of Formal Translation for Difficult Texts, and 4) Test of Dynamic Translation for Difficult Texts. To interview students, 3 open-ended questions were constructed.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher initially designed four tests to meet the goals of the study. The first two tests measured students’ performance on simple texts at the micro levels of word and sentence. The second two tests measured students’ performance on difficult texts at the micro levels of word and sentence. Moreover, the researcher used Semi-structured interviews as the instrument to collect the qualitative data.

Results

Research Question One

To find an answer for the first question of the study: “Is there any relationship between formal and dynamic equivalents in the translation of simple texts at the micro levels of words and sentences?” the researcher administered the correlation analysis in order to find out the relationship between the variables.

Table 4.1 showed the mean and standard deviation of the scores and Table 4.2 displayed Pearson *r* correlation coefficients between each pair of variables.

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics for simple texts

| Descriptive Statistics | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------|----------------|----|
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | N |
| Formal score for simple texts | 16.13 | 2.957 | 64 |
| Dynamic score for simple texts | 13.76 | 3.021 | 64 |

Table 4.2: Correlation coefficient for simple texts

| Correlations | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| | Formal score for simple text | Dynamic score for simple text | |
| Formal scores for simple texts | 1 | .437* | |
| Pearson Correlation | | | |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 | |
| N | 64 | 64 | |
| Dynamic scores for simple texts | .437* | 1 | |
| Pearson Correlation | | | |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | | |
| N | 64 | 64 | |

/*: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results obtained in Table 4.2 indicated that the relationship between formal scores for simple texts and Dynamic scores for simple texts was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a **positive moderate correlation** between the two variables [$r = .43$, $n = 64$, $p < .05$], with higher scores of formal equivalence associated with higher scores of dynamic equivalence based on the guideline proposed by Cohen (1988) .

Research Question Two

To find an answer for the second question of the study: “Is there any relationship between formal and dynamic equivalents in the translation of difficult texts at the micro levels of words and sentences?” , having generated a scatter-plot, first the researcher performed a correlation analysis. He also analyzed the scatter-plots to give a better idea of the nature of the relationship between the variables.

Table 4.3: Descriptive statistics for difficult texts

| Descriptive Statistics | | | |
|----------------------------------|-------|----------------|----|
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | N |
| Formal score for difficult text | 15.31 | 2.474 | 64 |
| Dynamic score for difficult text | 14.44 | 3.668 | 64 |

Table 4.4 Correlation coefficient for difficult texts

| Correlations | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| | Formal score for difficult text | Dynamic score for difficult text | |
| Formal score for difficult text | 1 | .516** | |
| Pearson Correlation | | | |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 | |
| N | 64 | 64 | |
| Dynamic score for difficult text | .516** | 1 | |
| Pearson Correlation | | | |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | | |
| N | 64 | 64 | |

/**: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4.3 showed the mean and standard deviation of the scores and Table 4.4 showed Pearson *r* correlation coefficients between each pair of the variables. The results obtained in Table 4.4 indicated that the relationship between formal scores for difficult texts and Dynamic scores for difficult texts was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a **positive strong correlation** between the two variables [$r = .64$, $n = 64$, $p < .05$], with higher scores of formal equivalence associated with higher scores of dynamic equivalence.

Discussion and Implications

Translation at the micro level with regard to the simple texts

Having analyzed the students’ performance on the Test of Formal Translation for Simple Texts at the level of word and

sentence, the researcher came to the conclusion that since the mean score of students' formal score was 16.13 (Table 4.1), they had fewer problems in using formal equivalences in comparison to dynamic scores (mean= 13.76) for the simple texts. It indicates that students were able to look up the words to choose the appropriate formal equivalents.

Having evaluated the students' performance on the Test of Dynamic Translation for Simple Texts at the level of word and sentence, the researcher came to the conclusion that there were more mistranslations in using dynamic equivalents in comparison to the formal equivalents. This shows that students were not qualified enough to choose the appropriate dynamic equivalents. They could not use their translation competence and their imagination power to convey the ST message as effectively as possible to the TT receptors. Some examples stand for this claim.

In contrast to the formal sentential equivalents, dynamic sentential equivalents showed an increase in the mistakes of students' translation performance as it was represented in the mean scores of the students explained above. It revealed that students' lack of syntactic knowledge leads to mistranslation. Modarresi (2009) proved that Iranian students have major problems with collocations with respect to syntactic knowledge.

Translation at the micro level with regard to the difficult text

Having analyzed the students' performance on the Test of Formal Translation for difficult Texts at the level of word and sentence, the researcher came to the conclusion that students' scores for formal equivalents (mean= 15.31) were rather the same as students' scores for dynamic equivalents (mean= 14.44). This shows that when a text becomes more difficult, students suffer not only from inadequate knowledge of dynamic equivalents (as it was documented for simple texts) but also from insufficient skills to use appropriate formal equivalents.

Interviews

An interview was designed and the students were asked to answer the questions in Persian language because they are mastered on their mother language and can assert themselves more and declare their ideas as well as possible. The researcher started the interview with demographic questions and immediately asked the first question already constructed to follow a semi-structured interview. 1) *Have you ever been familiar with terms like formal equivalent and dynamic equivalent so far? If yes, how much have you applied them in your works of translations?*

To answer to the first question, as an example, Amir declared that the professors introduced these terms and taught the theory to students in class, but in practice they did not exemplify them and practically they did not do anything special in classes. Nasrin added in classes such as translation of simple texts, translation of literary texts, advanced translation number one and number two, these terms would be to the benefit of students and students through applying them would produce a more effective and beautiful translation. Students believed that their translations were not fluent and their stumbling rooted in their unfamiliarity with choosing the appropriate dynamic equivalents. Then, the researcher asked his second question as follows: 2. *Does the simplicity or the difficulty of a text from the linguistics and psychology aspects have any impact on your translation or not?*

Masoud in response to the second question pointed out that the more complicated the vocabulary, the sentence structure, the length of the sentences, and the text structure, the more stressful he became. He added the comprehension of them at the first

time would be time taking and the translator's mind would be filled with anxiety.

And finally, the last question asking about naturalness: 3. *Your professors have already taught theoretically that the translation should be natural in practice. What is your definition of naturalness in practice?*

Farzaneh answered to the third question that dynamic translation, idiomatic translation, meaning-based translation, functional translation, thought-for-thought translation results in natural translation, and the target text should not sound foreign or smell translation. In sum, the students claim that the translator should have deep studies about the TT culture and even the skill to convey the message to the readers. They said that in theory they knew the naturalness but in practice they were not skillful enough and it was because of the lack of practical classes related to this issue.

Practical implications for translator teachers

Teachers who are teaching translation not only should introduce the concept of naturalness and terms such as formal and dynamic equivalents in theory but also should teach them how to use them in practice through exemplifications and contextualization of dynamic equivalents to make the translation natural. In classes such as translation of simple texts, translation of literary texts, advanced translation number one and number two, natural translation will produce a more effective on TT readers. They should teach them that occasionally applying formal equivalents does not convey the ST message as clearly as possible with regard to both simple and difficult texts and it is better to think about dynamic equivalents. Specially, when students face a difficult text, it is better for them to read the ST several times to get its message, then using some other strategies such as sentence fractions, imagination, reference to the TT culture expressions and idioms, even activating their translation competence and taking benefits out of their knowledge, which all together will result in producing a more natural product.

Suggestions for further research

Since the focus of the current study was on the literary texts, further research is needed to replicate the study in other genres such as political texts, and press texts. Another research is needed to find out the type of equivalents used by interpreters and find out the relationship between the difficulty of speech used by the native speaker and the type of equivalent used by the interpreter as the mediator.

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