

## **Equivalency and Non-equivalency of Lexical Items in English Translations of *Nahj al-balagha***

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Lexical items play a key role in both language in general and translation in particular. Likewise, equivalence is a controversial concept discussed so widely in translation studies. Some theorists deem it to be fundamental in translation theory and define translation in terms of equivalence.

The aim of this study is to identify the problems of lexical gaps in two translations of *Nahj al-balagha* in order to look closely at what possible difficulties translators may undergo. It also seeks to explore the strategies applied accordingly. Some pieces of *Nahj al-balagha* and two English translations for them are selected, and religious items of the source text and also the strategies applied by the translators to transfer these items are extracted.

**Keywords:** Lexical gaps, equivalence, religious items, conceptual strategies.

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### **Introduction**

Language is a means of communication through which its speakers express their feelings and ideas. It influences the way the speakers perceive the world. This principle has a far-reaching implication for translation. Translation is an activity comprising the interpretation of meaning of a text in one language, the source text, and the production in another language of a new and equivalent text, the target text. The goal of translation is to establish a relation of equivalence of intent between the source language (SL) and target language (TL); that is to say, to ensure that both texts communicate the same message.

Catford (1965, 27) states that translation is the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language. In this definition, the most important thing is equivalent textual material. Yet, it is still vague in terms of the type of equivalence.

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In the definitions appearing in 1960s to 1970s, some similarities have been found: (1) there is a change of expression from one language to another; (2) the meaning and message are rendered in the target language; and (3) the translator has an obligation to seek for the closest equivalent in the target language. It seems that the equivalence has been a principal and indispensable concept in translation.

It is mostly the type of text that determines the type of equivalence; that is, each type of text requires its own proper type of equivalence. For example, form-focused equivalence is proper for poetry translation, whereas content-focused equivalence is preferable in translating prose. In the case study of this research, which is related to the lexical items of a religious text, particularly *Nahjul Balagha*, these problems have been indicated very clearly. Due to the religious nature of the text, no unique equivalence could be used and the translator should follow some strategies to tackle the problem of equivalence.

This general problem may be expressed more specifically in the form of the following research questions:

### **Statement of Research Questions**

This study aims at answering these questions:

1. What type of equivalence, target-oriented or source-oriented, is more proper to be produced in translating a religious text?
2. Is it possible to achieve total equivalence in translating a religious text?
3. What strategies have been most frequently applied by the translators of *Nahj al-balagha* as a religious text?

### **Statement of the Hypotheses**

In order to investigate the above-mentioned research questions, the following hypotheses are stated:

1. There is a relation between the text type and the type of the equivalence to be produced.
2. There is no total equivalence in translating a religious text.
3. Conceptual strategies have been mostly applied in the translation of religious texts.

### **Literature Review**

The comparison of texts in different languages inevitably involves a theory of equivalence. Equivalence can be said to be the central issue in translation, though its definition and applicability have caused many debates, resulting in various theories of the concept of equivalence in the past fifty years.

If a specific linguistic unit in one language carries the same meaning encoded in another specific linguistic unit, then these two units are considered to be equivalent. Hence, finding equivalence is the most problematic stage of translation.

After centuries of circular debates around literal and free translation, theoreticians, in the 1950s and 1960s, began to attempt more systematic analysis of translation. The new debate revolved around key linguistic issues, especially meaning and equivalence. Over the following twenty years, many further attempts were made to define the nature of equivalence. Below, we will review the theory of equivalence as interpreted by some of the most innovative theorists in this field, Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), Jakobson (1959), Catford (1965), Nida and Taber (1969), House (1977) and finally Baker (1992). These theorists have studied equivalence in relation to the translation process, using different approaches and providing useful ideas for further studies on this topic.

These theories can be substantially divided into three main groups. First, there are those translation scholars in favor of a linguistic approach to translation, who seem to forget that translation in itself is not merely a matter of linguistics. In fact, when a message is transferred from the source language to the target language, the translator is also dealing with two different cultures at the same time. This particular aspect seems to have been taken into consideration by the second group of theorists who regard translation equivalence as being essentially a transfer of the message from the source text to the target text. Finally, there are other translation scholars that seem to stand in the middle, such as Baker, who claims that “equivalence is used for the sake of convenience; because most translators are used to it rather than theoretical status” (Kenny 1998, 77).

Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) view equivalence-oriented translation as a procedure which replicates the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording. According to them, equivalence is therefore the ideal method when the translator has to deal with proverbs and idioms. However, later they note that glossaries and collections of idiomatic expressions can never be exhaustive. They conclude by saying that the need for creating equivalences arises from the situation and it is in the situation of the source language text that translators have to look for a solution (Munday 2008, 58).

Roman Jakobson's (1959) study of equivalence gave new perspective to the theoretical analysis of translation, since he introduced a different notion of equivalence. According to his theory, translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes. Sometimes the translator may face the problem of not finding a translation equivalent or there is non-equivalence.

Both theories stress the fact that, whenever a linguistic approach is no longer suitable to carry out a translation, the translator can rely on other procedures to do that (Munday 2008, 37).

Nida (1964) argues that there are two different types of equivalence: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. Formal equivalence consists of a target language item which represents the closest equivalent of the source language word or phrase. Nida and Taber (1969) make it clear that formal equivalents are not always found between language pairs. Dynamic equivalence is defined as a translation principle according to which a translator seeks to translate the meaning of the original in such a way that the target language wording will cause the same impact on the target language audience as the original wording did upon the source language audience. According to their theory, sometimes the transformation in the receptor language may occur because of formal non-equivalence; the message is preserved and translation is faithful (Munday 2008, 42).

Therefore, Catford's approach to translation equivalence clearly differs from that adopted by Nida, since Catford had a preference for a more linguistic-based approach to translation. His main contribution in the field of translation theory is the introduction of the concepts of types and shifts of translation, which are mostly used when there is a problem of equivalence or non-equivalence.

As translation studies gains momentum day by day, it is inclining in favor of semantic and pragmatic equivalence, because both the source text and the target text should match one another in function. This theory of equivalence in translation seems to be much more flexible than its predecessors, like that of Catford, since it relates linguistic features to the context of both the source and the target text.

An extremely interesting discussion of the notion of equivalence is provided by Baker (1992, 6), who offers a more detailed list of conditions upon which the concept of equivalence can be defined. She distinguishes between equivalence that can appear at word level and above word level: grammatical equivalence, textual equivalence, and pragmatic equivalence. Baker acknowledges that equivalence is the first element to be taken into consideration by the translator. The role of translator is to recreate the author's intention in another culture in such a way that enables the target language reader to understand it clearly.

In an attempt to transfer meaning from one language to another, the translator faces linguistic, stylistic, and even cultural problems. Untranslatability is a property of a text or of any utterance for which no equivalent text can be found in another language. There are words which are more or less hard to translate. In this regard, translators witness that this transfer is not performed directly and is not without its difficulties. This means that the act of translation can be analyzed along a range of possibilities, which brings about a number of shifts in the

linguistic, aesthetic, and intellectual values of the source text. Shifts should be redefined positively as the consequence of the translator's effort to establish translation equivalence between two different language systems: that of the source language and that of the target language.

It is clear that religious texts have a spiritual relationship with human beings. Therefore, when dealing with such texts, we must be considerate and respectful. Accordingly, the translation of religious texts requires more thought and a high degree of respectfulness. In addition, the translation of one language into another must be done both lexically and meaningfully. Therefore, translators should be extremely aware of selecting target language words that are literally and semantically equivalent to the words of the source language. This task of finding a completely equivalent word in the target language cannot always be carried out. Occasionally, we may come across words in the target language that are literally similar to the source language; however, they give a totally different meaning.

It can be concluded that the translation of religious texts has gone through a remarkable, religious, cultural, and linguistic revolution. Such a process has enhanced increasingly and peacefully the religious and cultural exchange between different nations. Linguistically, this kind of translation has dealt with the socio-culture of language through different time and/or different people. It has also handled grammatical and semantic features of language in order to correctly absorb and interpret the exact meaning of the text before and after translating.

Every dialogue, including translation, has a cultural context. The instrument of translation is a language and therefore its referents are not uniform. So it may happen that the difficulty in finding equivalence results in the impossibility of a good translation. But we should take into account that whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loanwords or loan translation, adaptation, borrowing, calque, compensation, paraphrase, neologisms or semantic shifts, translators' notes, and finally by circumlocution.

### **Case study**

In this study, a comparative and critical analysis of different English translations of a piece of *Nahj al-balagha* will be conducted. Apart from my personal interest in this book as one of the earliest and best expositions of Islam's explicit and implicit instructions concerning the government and its role in society, I chose *Nahj al-balagha* from among other important texts, because the availability of different English translations for this text makes it suitable for a comparative analysis aimed at understanding the rhetorical diversities involved in its translations.

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This study starts with a semantic analysis of the target text to provide the reader with a way of checking on the real meaning. For this purpose, the following translations of Letter 53 by William C. Chittick and Ali Reza will be compared and analyzed:

Infuse your heart with mercy, love and kindness for your subjects. Be not in face of them a voracious animal, counting them as easy prey, for they are of two kinds: either they are your brothers in religion or your equals in creation Error catches them unaware, deficiencies overcome them, (evil deeds) are committed by them intentionally and by mistake. (Chittick 1981, 69)

Habituate your heart to mercy for the subjects and to affection and kindness for them. Do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them, since they are of two kinds: either your brother in religion or one like you in creation. They will commit slips and encounter mistakes, they may act wrongly, willfully or by neglect. (Reza 2005, 566)

We can see the differences in equivalents chosen by the two translators in the following table:

| <b>First translation</b>    | <b>Second translation</b>   |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| infuse                      | habituate                   |
| love                        | affection                   |
| animal                      | beast                       |
| voracious                   | greedy                      |
| be not in the face of them  | do not stand over them      |
| count as easy prey          | feel it is enough to devour |
| equal                       | like                        |
| error catches               | commit slips                |
| deficiencies                | mistakes                    |
| overcome                    | encounter                   |
| intentionally               | willfully                   |
| by mistake                  | by neglect                  |
| evil deeds are committed by | act wrongly                 |

In the process of transfer in translation, the translator must preserve the content of the message at any cost, because it is the meaning which is of prime importance. Therefore, a translator may often be obliged to transform the form in order to preserve the content, though it is much better if one can convey the same meaning in the target language. Nida and Taber (1969) say that in any translation, there will be a “loss” of semantic content, but the process should be so designed as to keep this to a minimum. Considering the two translations of the original text here,

we see that in the first translation, the translator limits himself just to the words which come to his mind first; he focuses on the form more than the content, and also the words are used in their general meaning. But the translator of a religious text should consider the words and equivalences, which are suitable and specific to this field.

If a translator attempts to preserve the linguistic features of the source language in the process of transfer, it may result either in unnaturalness or in obscurity. Therefore, some structural adjustments are necessary in translating in order to avoid unintelligibility and awkwardness.

According to Nida and Taber (1969), the structural adjustments affect the entire range of linguistic structure. It is obvious that the first translation is more structure-oriented than the second one. The second translator uses precise equivalents and is semantic-oriented. In order to elaborate more on this point, it is better to have a look at the other aspects of this matter. Consider the following translations of Quran 4:59:

O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you (Arberry 1964, 87).

O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the prophet and those vested with authority from among you (Ali Reza 2005, 571).

In the second translation, the translator has used redundant words or compensation to make the meaning clear for the reader.

Consider also the following translations of another part of Letter 53:

For each of them God has designated a portion, and commensurate with each portion He has established obligatory acts (*faridah*) in His book and the *Sunnah* Of His prophet—may God bless him and his household and give them peace—as a covenant from Him. (Chittick 1981, 72)

Allah has fixed the share of every one of them and laid down His precepts about the limits of each in His book (the Koran) and the *sunnah* of His prophet by way of a settlement which is preserved with us. (Ali Reza 2005, 569)

As we can see, both translators use certain strategies to transfer the meaning; strategies such as borrowing in the case of the words *sunnah* and *faridah*, and compensation as in the addition of “the Koran” after the expression “His book” to make the meaning more clear.

Another case is the following translations of saying 1 in Nahjul Balaghah:

During civil disturbance be like an adolescent camel who has neither a back strong enough for riding nor udders for milking (Ali Reza 2005, 604).

During civil disturbance adopt such an attitude that people do not attach any importance to you - they neither burden you with complicated affairs, nor try to derive any advantage out of you. (Sayings of Imam Ali [A.S.], n.d., #1)

As can be seen, the second translator renders the passage more verbosely. He prefers to explain more by over-translating the text under question (e.g., “adopt such an attitude that people do not attach any importance to you,” instead of simply “be like an adolescent camel” in the first translation and the original Arabic).

### **Conclusion**

Each translator has undoubtedly a specific approach to lexical items in the field of translation studies. For a successful translation, one should analyze, evaluate, and extensively discuss the notion of equivalence. Finding equivalence, specially for religious texts, causes difficulties for translators. Hence, conceptual strategies come into play when translating.

The first category that translators must take into consideration is the type of text. Then, they should think about its relationship with the type of equivalence to be produced. The second category is that the type of strategies that translators should utilize in order to grapple with the problem of non-equivalency of lexical items in religious texts. They consist of loan translation, adaptation, borrowing, calque, compensation, paraphrase, neologism or semantic shifts, translators' notes, and circumlocution.

Based on the findings of the present study, although the translation of religious texts in general and that of *Nahj al-balagha* in particular seems a far-fetched challenge and, in some cases, only possible with partial semantic and stylistic loss, it is by no means totally impossible. The evidence of other achievements indicates that a skilled translator with a religious taste can achieve this end with the necessary and related device of the source text kept intact.

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