

Loss and Gain in Translating Culture: Year of the Elephant's Novella as a Case Study

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Abstract

Loss and gain in translating culture have long been debated and continue to be debated. Transforming one culture to another is challenging and creates an obstacle to a successful translation. Considering the differences and distinctions present in each culture, it is notoriously difficult to overcome the cultural barriers in translation. However, many translation theorists propose innumerable translation strategies for rendering this issue. The general tendency of these theorists is either to domesticate or foreignize with reference to Venuti's work (1995), which uses these two opposing concepts. Visibility and invisibility are other synonyms of domestication and foreignization. When the translator uses domesticating strategies, he/she is invisible. When the translator uses foreignizing strategies, he/she is visible. The research methodology is the qualitative approach where samples of culture specific items are analyzed. Further, the research attempts to enlighten the reader on the transfer of culture from Arabic into English. Its ultimate goal is to identify the most efficient translation strategies applied to reduce loss and enhance gain.

1. INTRODUCTION

The main issue that concerns any translator of culture is creating the same impact on the target text readers. This concern makes translation more challenging due to the diversity and variety of cultures. Each culture consists of different cultural items. Tylor (1871) states that culture is a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society." (p.11). Some people associate culture with all human products, such as food, clothes, music, and literature. Other people link culture with morals, shared beliefs and social attitudes. All these elements reflect and represent human behavior in a certain community. Each community has something which sets it apart from other communities. The translator's role is then to create a bridge between these communities.

Translation can be difficult due to cultural differences. The translator has to find equivalence for cultural content to communicate easily with the target text readers. There are many cultural barriers in translation issues. However, many theorists propose innumerable translation strategies to overcome these barriers. The general tendency of these theorists is either to domesticate or foreignize the translated text with reference to Venuti's work (1995) which uses two opposing concepts; visibility and invisibility. This paper explores the cultural features of translation and lays out the challenges of translating culture. The goal of this analysis is to transfer adequately the cultural items without violating the identity construction of the source text. To do this, the majority of theorists and translators have opted either for domesticating or foreignizing strategies or both of them. This paper aims at discussing these tendencies based on Newmark's categorization of culture-specific items.

Samples are selected from the novella of Leila Abouzeid, *Year of the Elephant*. The novella includes numerous cultural elements, which will help to analyze the choices made by the translators to create fluent communication for the target text readers.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Before starting a translation career, I obtained a diploma in tourism studies and I did trainings in many travel agencies. One of the tasks I had during my training was translating trip programs in French or English that might be included in a tourism brochure. I faced many issues while translating the cultural elements of my country into a target language. Moroccan culture is rich. It is a 'melting pot' of cultures. One of the obstacles I faced was translating cultural items and preserving the same impact on the receivers/tourists. I still remember some examples as the following: زيارة مدينة سبعة رجال. I translated it into English as 'Visiting the city of seven men'. This translation is literal. There is a loss of meaning. The target reader may think of visiting a city where only 7 men live in it though it has a religious aspect that is not well expressed in the suggested translation. It violates this sacred aspect. Now, after being exposed to translation theories and techniques through translation studies, I would rather say 'Visiting the City of Seven Saints'. Saint is "one officially recognized especially through canonization as preeminent for holiness". (Meriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020). 'Saint' is more adequate because it keeps the same religious and holy aspect and has the original impact on the reader of the tourism brochure. At that time, I was not aware of translation principles and I believe it is the same case for the majority of people who work in travel agencies. Founders of Tourism agencies do not invest money in translation. Specialized translation is of great price so they give the tasks of translation to their employees, who have a degree in a certain language, but surely these agents do not have an academic background in

translation techniques and methods. Presenting Moroccan culture to English people is a great task. Both languages belong to different cultures. That is the concern for making such research and academic analysis. It is recommended to facilitate the task for every translator of cultural elements.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

This study examines culture-specific items selected from the Moroccan novella of Leila Abouzeid, *Year of the Elephant*, and analyses them based on Newmark's cultural categories (1988). Therefore, the objective is to outline the cultural challenges and provide translators with a selection of successful and practical strategies to render cultural elements. We feel bound to raise this matter which has been neglected for many reasons and ask some questions about this concern. First, what challenges can a translator face? What are the most applicable strategies for translating culture? Another pressing question: Is one strategy better than the other? Or can they all be used in parallel?

Davies (2003) has labelled these strategies differently by saying that the aim of translating culture is either to globalize or localize the culture-specific items. Globalization aims at making the translated item more accessible and known worldwide, whereas localization tries to find an equivalent text that is similar to the target culture. However, it is remarkable that translators overuse one of these strategies and tend to be biased towards one of them.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Culture in Translation Studies

Many scholars have tried to define translation from different perspectives. Catford (1965) states that translation is "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)." (p.20). Nida and Taber (1982), recommended two categories of translation: dynamic and formal equivalence. This concept has played a great role in moving translation studies into a scientific era and showing the importance of linguistics for translation as a practice and research. Nida and Taber (1982) pointed out that "translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style" (p.12). The terms equivalent, message, source and receptor are key elements for Nida & Taber's approach.

According to Newmark (1988), translation is "a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language". Newmark (1988) suggests two categories of translation: communicative and semantic translation. Communicative translation focuses mainly on the

reader and on making the text more natural. Meanwhile, semantic translation tends to be more faithful. It focuses on the author so as to reproduce the exact contextual meaning.

The abovementioned scholars discuss translation from a linguistic point of view. However, it is of paramount importance to discuss translation from a cultural paradigm, which is the core of this research. Through the 1990s, there was a rise in cultural studies in parallel with translation studies. This “cultural turn” or shift in translation is primarily associated with the work of Bassnett and Lefevere. According to Bassnet and Lefevere (1998), translation is no longer restricted to the meanings of sounds, words and grammar but goes beyond that. It is influenced by cultural and values system, which make every culture different. Accordingly, every translator should take culture into consideration.

In this regard, Venuti (1995) introduces two famous categories of translation to deal with culture; domestication and foreignization. According to Venuti, domestication refers to “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bring the author back home”, while foreignization is “an ethnoveiant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad”. (p. 20). Generally speaking, domestication aims at minimizing the strangeness of any foreign element in the text, whereas foreignization keeps something of foreignness of the original text.

2.2. Defining Culture

Various definitions of ‘culture’ are provided by different scholars to comprehend its components accurately. For Duranti (1997), “Culture” is what “others” have, what makes them and keeps them different, separate from us” (p. 23). Culture is then different from one society to another. House (2018), suggests a more precise definition. She collects and divides all the definitions of culture into two categories: the humanistic and the anthropological concept. According to House, the humanistic concept refers to “cultural heritage” as a “model of refinement”. The humanistic concept is linked to all human products that cherish life in the society such as masterpieces of music, art, literature. Whereas the anthropological concept is related to “the overall way of life of a community or society” (p.46).

Hall (1976) develops the iceberg model of culture. Iceberg is a metaphor that is used to describe the different visible and invisible layers of culture. In other words, there is an external part of culture (the conscious) that is compared with the tip of the iceberg. It includes some beliefs and behaviors. The internal, (the subconscious) part of culture includes some beliefs, thought and values. Hall suggests that the only way to understand culture is to study the internal part of it. The translator then should take a deep dive into culture.

To translate culture, Newmark (1988) categorizes culture-specific items into five groups:

- 1- Ecology: geographical features, animals, plants, trees, etc.
- 2- Material culture: food, clothes, houses, artifacts and transportation.
- 3- Social culture is related to social activities of a certain society like work, game and leisure.
- 4- Organizations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts, religion.
- 5- Gestures and habits: Some people kiss their fingertips to greet or praise. They give a thumbs-up to refer to satisfaction. These gestures are specific to some cultures.

2.3. Translating Culture between Loss and Gain

The translator faces some problems due to the dissimilarity between cultures. The source text can contain foreign words that are difficult to reproduce into the target language. Davies (2003) states that translating culture tends to either be localized or globalized. The decision to opt one of these tendencies seems to be challenging and makes the task harder for the translator. Globalizing recently has gained popularity because it facilitates communication between communities; it is “the process of replacing culture-specific references with ones which are more neutral or general” (Davies, 2003, p.83). Aixelá (1996) uses the term *naturalization* and *absolute universalization* to refer to this tendency. Globalization of culture makes the target text seem natural. As an example, there is the Moroccan traditional dish ‘Couscous’ that is globalized around the world and becomes popular. On the other hand, localization aims at preserving the culture of the target audience. As an example, -the food item ‘بغريير’ ‘Baghrir’ is replaced by ‘pancakes’ and عاشوراء Ashura by Halloween- in localized translated text. Sometimes, these strategies are overused randomly and confuse the reader as well.

Translating proper names is challenging. The translators tend to retain the exact proper name without any change because it is specific. It aims to create a feeling to the reader that he/she is among foreigners, British, American names, etc. Sometimes, translators opt for localizing the names.

Food items are also difficult to be translated. We can classify them into common like meals that can be translated and specific that is unique and challenges the translator. Some of them are universal like coffee, tea. The word Ryad رياض in Marrakech city is globalized. It can be borrowed and transliterated into the target culture. Many tourists bought Ryads in Marrakech and preserve the same word so it is now famous all over the world.

2.4. Translation Strategies of Culture

The cultural differences between the source and the target text may cause a notable difference between the target text 's and source text's impact on the reader of both sides. Many scholars have suggested varied strategies to solve this issue. Vinay and Darbelnet in the 1950s suggested two translation methods which are direct and oblique translation. Direct translation consists of borrowing, calque, and literal translation. Oblique translation contains transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation. Borrowing: maintains the word from the source text such as Tajin, bon appétit, Couscous. Calque: transferred literally into the target text. It is like this example: Les fleurs de la Ville = Flowers of the City. Literal translation that is labeled word for word like un beau Jardin = beautiful garden. Modulation: change semantics and point of view without changing meaning. As an example: It is difficult = Ce n'est pas facile. Transposition: change parts of speech. Example: Ahmed is happy = فرح أحمد. Equivalence: it is used, especially, in idioms and proverbs. Adaptation: it changes the cultural reference with one that conforms to the form and content of the target text, as an example: substitute *Halloween* with *Ashura*.

In 1988, Newmark suggested other translation strategies to render culture: Transference: it is a procedure that transfers a source text word to a target text. It includes transliteration and the word is considered as a loan word in the target text. Naturalization: it adapts the source text word to the normal pronunciation, then, to the normal morphology of the target text, e.g., *Djellabah*. Cultural Equivalent: it is a procedure that replaces the culture-specific item of the source text with another one in the target text though they are not accurate. Functional Equivalent: it uses a neutral cultural word. Descriptive Equivalent: in this procedure, several words are used to explain the meaning of the source text word. Componential Analysis: It means “comparing an SL word with a TL word which has a similar meaning, although not being its one-to-one equivalent, by presenting, first, their common, and then, their differing sense components” (Newmark, 1988, p.114). Synonymy: It is a “near TL equivalent word” (Newmark, 1988, p.84). Through-Translation: it is similar to calque or loan translation. Shifts or Transpositions: the translator can change the grammatical category of the source text word, e.g., change from singular to plural form. Modulation: “it occurs when the translator reproduces the message of the original text in the TL text in conformity with the current norms of the target language, since the source language and the target language may appear dissimilar in terms of perspective.” (Newmark, 1988, p.88). Recognized Translation: it happens when the translator “normally uses the official or the generally accepted translation of any institutional term”. (Newmark, 1988, p.89). Compensation: It happens when “the loss of meaning in one part of a sentence is compensated in another part” (Newmark, 1988, p.90). Reduction and Expansion: in expansion, the translator can use more words to convey the

Loss and Gain in Translating Culture: Year of the Elephant's Novella as a Case Study

meaning. In reduction, the translator can omit unimportant information. Paraphrase: In paraphrasing, the meaning of the word is explained in more details. Couplets: it is a procedure that allows the translator to use two different procedures together. Notes: they are about any kind of additional information which a translator may have to add to his/her version.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper study is based on qualitative approach where samples of culture specific items are collected and analyzed. This study involves an identification of cultural differences and translation strategies used by the translator to overcome the cultural obstacles. It is a comparison between Moroccan cultural content with the same content translated into English to measure:

How does the English translator render the challenges of translating Moroccan culture from Arabic to English?

Is one translation strategy better than the other one? Or they can all be used in parallel?

The selected samples are collected from the Moroccan novella of Leila Abouzeid, *year of the Elephant*. The novella includes numerous cultural elements which are pertinent to the present research because they include sorts of cultural items based on Newmark's categories.

3.1.Presentation of the Novella

Year of the Elephant is a Moroccan novella written by Leila Abouzeid. It was first published in 1983, and then translated into English in 1989 by Barbara Parmenter from Texas University. The story of the novella is real. It is about real-life stories of people that Abouzeid met in her country Morocco. The novella centered on a Moroccan woman's fight toward independence. The novella tackles many themes in the Moroccan society from a female viewpoint such as the role of Moroccan women in the society, the independence and the conflict between traditional and modern culture.

This novella contains many samples of culture-specific items that are translated from Arabic into English. Both cultures are totally different which are relevant to the present study and contains good source of data.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Extract 1:

Source Text	Target Text
عام الفيل	<i>Year of the Elephant</i> (The title)

The title in Arabic عام الفيل Aam al-Fil is transferred literally into English text as *Year of the Elephant*. The name is taken from a true event happened in Islamic history. It is about a battle in which the king of Yemen, Abraha, went to Mecca so as to destroy Ka'ba. Yet, A flock of birds came and dropped stones on the enemy elephants. That year is called from that time, the year of the elephant. There is also in the holy book Qur'an, Surat Al-fil. The battle is compared to Moroccan people battling for independence from French colonization.

In English culture, *Year of the Elephant* does not sound natural. It is related to different culture and religion. There is not an equivalent event in English culture. Besides, the target English reader does not have any background about this battle due to the diversity of both cultural elements and religion. It seems awkward in English language. One of the solutions for a translator is to add footnotes to explain and give details about the battle in Islamic history. Alternatively, the translator opts for literal translation and transliteration. The title is kept as it is to attract the target reader. It creates curiosity for the English reader to buy the novella and understand the story behind the title and whether there is a year for an animal called Elephant or not. To render this issue, the translator adds some religious details and explanation in the introduction of the book about the battle in addition to Surat Al Fil. The translator extracts the information from the Encyclopedia of Islam (1965).

Extract 2:

Source Text	Target Text
نزلت ليلة القدر (ص.13)	I went out on the night of al-Qadr (p.5)

Laylat al-Qadr is a religious term for Muslims. It is the night in which the holy book Qur'an was first sent to Prophet Mohammed. Muslims look for this night during the last ten days of the fasting month Ramadan. Given the cultural distance between English and Arabic speaking countries, there is no equivalent of such sacred night in English culture. This night is special for Islamic culture. There is no appropriate equivalent term in the target text. However, the term is borrowed and wrapped in an acceptable style (the night of...) so it doesn't seem awkward. A foreign element is introduced into the target text in a way that seems natural.

Extract 3:

Source Text	Target Text
ينفخ مزماره (p.15)	Playing the <i>Mizmar</i> (p.07)

When translating the word كمان into English. It is translated as *violin* because the same musical instrument is used in both Arabic and English culture. However, for other instruments

Loss and Gain in Translating Culture: Year of the Elephant's Novella as a Case Study

that are specific to one culture, it is challenging to find an equivalent for them as the instruments in English disguise the precise image of the Arabic instrument. Then there will be a loss in translating the word مزمار with any similar instrument in the English target text.

In this novella, transliterating the word *Mizmar* is the chosen strategy by the translator, without explanation, to preserve the same instrument name used in the source culture. *The Mizmar* is a traditional wind instrument contains holes in which air is set while the player is blowing into it. English culture does not have an instrument with similar shape. The Arabic word is kept as an exotic one that is introduced into the English culture.

Extract 4:

Source Text	Target Text
بييع الحريرة (p.61)	Selling Harira soup (p.37)

Sometimes, the translator preserves the same form and content such as *Harira* or looks for an alternative like *soup*. Both terms use different ingredients. *Harira* in Morocco uses specific ingredients whereas *soup* includes mixed vegetables. Others suggest writing *soup* with additional text that introduces between brackets the ingredients as they are different from European or American ones. The decision upon which technique to use makes the job harder for a translator who wants to preserve his/ her culture identity. Some suggest writing *Harira soup* to create the need in the reader to taste a soup named *Harira*. The translator opts for adding information about this type of food, so the reader can have a closer image of the food. It is similar to *soup* though it contains different ingredients.

Extract 5:

Source Text	Target Text
زغردت امرأة (p. 78)	A woman began ululating (p. 47)

This example illustrates the cultural gestures of Moroccan women. It is a Moroccan gesture used by women to express their gladness in weddings ceremonies. The suggested translation for the word زغردت is *ululating*. Collins English Dictionary defines 'ululate' as 'to howl or wail, as with grief. From the context, the reader may understand the meaning. Yet, in a different context, *ululation* sounds foreign and exotic. This is considered as a translation loss because the meaning of *ululating* is different than the meaning of the Arabic word. It is accepted though it sounds inappropriate because it tries to overcome translation loss. The translator is free to

choose whether to use it on its own and accept the slight misleading connotations, or to minimize its foreignness and add more explanation.

Extract 6:

Source Text	Target Text
الأطلس (p. 23)	The Atlas Mountains (p. 12)

Transliteration is widely used for names. Many Arabic names of places, mountains, cities and countries have transliteration equivalence in English. The name is more localized. The translator adds 'mountains' to make it clear for the reader.

Extract 7:

Source Text	Target Text
مرض أبي رحمه الله عندما كنت اسكن البلدة. (p. 96)	My father had taken ill while I was still living in the town (p. 58)

This is a translation loss at the meaning level. In the target text, the expression “رحمه الله” is omitted. It is not mentioned in the target text. However, the translator uses the past perfect. The tense is modified to compensate the loss of meaning. The death of the father happened before the narrator lived in the town. In the source text, the expression indicates the required meaning. There is no equivalent word for this expression in English. The past perfect is used to indicate an action that happened before another action in the past. Even if the target text is closer but this difference indicates translation loss.

The Arabic sentence is neglected and omitted as it is a religious expression. The translator could not find an equivalent to render the same religious impression.

Extract 8:

Source Text	Target Text
اذان المغرب (p. 96)	Call for sunset prayer (p. 58)

Paraphrasing strategy is used to render the meaning of this word Adhan Al-maghrib. It is “[. . .] amplification or explanation of the meaning of a segment of the text” (Newmark, 1988, p. 90). Most of the time, it is transliterated in different texts as “Azan Maghreb” or “Adhan Al-maghrib”, because it is specific for Islamic world. Yet, in this novella, the translator uses the target language to explain the meaning and the timing of the Islamic prayer. The term

Loss and Gain in Translating Culture: Year of the Elephant's Novella as a Case Study

is not introduced as a foreign element within the target text. The translator tries to look for an appropriate word that is closer to the meaning of the original text.

Extract 9:

Source Text	Target Text
جلبابي (p. 28)	My Djellabah (p. 26)

The Djellabah is an Arabic word. It is a type of clothes that becomes so famous at the international level. The word is globalized and introduced to others cultures through translation. It is introduced into the English language and added to dictionaries. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary (2022), Djellabah is “a long loose garment with full sleeves and a hood. The word ‘Djellabah’ sounds natural and English because the possessive adjective “my” is added. Some types of clothes and food are globalized (such as couscous, Pastilla, Kaftan...) because they become known all over the world. The translator uses borrowing to render the meaning. The translator does not need to look for an equivalent in the target text. Once the purpose is achieved, there is no need to look for an alternative.

Extract 10:

Source Text	Target Text
العين (p. 19)	The evil eye (p. 09)

Both Arabic and English cultures believe in the negative energy and cursed power that makes human beings weak. It has been passed through cultures many decades and still exists today. It is called in Arabic culture "العين". The job of the translator is not challenging because both cultures share the same idea and belief. When both cultures share same beliefs, the translator feels comfortable. The translator should not use literal translation. He/she adds the word “evil” to refer to the exact reference of the word "عين" and make it natural for the reader.

5. CONCLUSION

The translator is an intercultural mediator. His/her role is to transmit the message of the source text with precise attention to cultural content. The translator of Leila Abouzeid’s novella uses different strategies to render meaning and compensate translation loss, such as translation by cultural substitution and translation by a loan word like the word “المصحف” that is translated into “the holy book”, “العين” into “the evil eye” and "الاطلس" into the “Atlas”, in the word “Harira Soup”, there is an addition. The soup is an additional explanation to make the word closer to the target reader. The translation loss here does not affect the meaning. The foreign

word *Harira* is introduced with an explanatory word “soup” that gives a clear and closer image of the food. It is integrated within the target language to make it natural for the target reader.

“الفقيه”, “الشيخ”, and “المحراب” are transliterated into the target text. They are considered as loan words “the faqih”, “the sheikh”, and “the mihrab”. They are specific terms related to Arabic culture. The translator selects these strategies to familiarize the reader with the source culture. These terms characterize the Arabo-islamic culture and are not shared with other cultures. Therefore, it is a useful strategy to know and discover the “other” to preserve its cultural elements. Thus, the translation gain outweighs the translation loss. The translator strives to make the text natural and fluent and not excessively use one strategy or one tendency.

Noticeably, specific terms are foreignized, whereas common terms are domesticated. Selecting strategies for translating culture depend upon the purpose of the translator. Sometimes translators make great efforts to find all possible target culture equivalents through different techniques and strategies. The purpose is to bring the author to the reader and make the source text easily read. It is also a way to hide the dominance of the foreign culture. Some translators bring the reader to the author to export the culture of the source text, but consistently, other translators are impelled to use one strategy each time he/she can not find an equivalent in the target text, especially for specific terms that distinguish each source culture.

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Loss and Gain in Translating Culture: Year of the Elephant's Novella as a Case Study

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