

## **On Translating Humor and Character Delineation in Iran's War Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Translating humorous expressions in novels, especially those containing culture-bound concepts, has always caused insurmountable hurdles for translators in delineating SL characters in TL contexts. In recognition of this, the current research aimed to first study the constraints of translating humor in Iran's War Literature, as a representative of highly-culture bound texts, and second to examine the extent that the strategies used by the translator in translating humors affected character delineation in their English translations. To this end, the humorous expressions in four novels on Iran's War Literature were identified and their constraints of their translations were categorized on the basis of Attardo's (2002) adaption of the General Theory of Verbal Humor for translation. As for the first research question, the findings indicated that Script Opposition can be the most problematic factor in translating humor. As for the second research question, it was revealed that the translator translated 91.17% of the humorous expressions literally, which can cause the characters sound strange and bizarre in the target language translations. It is argued that literalist translation can be used as a means of gathering information about the would-be colonized since it provides colonizers with accurate and reliable information, free from distorting names or any other cultural attributes.

*Keywords:* humor, war literature, GTVH theory

### **Introduction**

After Iran-Iraq war a multitude number of books related to it, such as novels were written and published in Iran. Accordingly, a new genre in Persian literature known as War literature has emerged in the province of Iran's literature. An integrative feature of this genre is humor which is mostly perceptible in memories, short stories and novels belonging to this new genre (Jafarian, 2011).

Translating humor in this genre has a particular stylistic significance since it reflects the atmosphere of battlefields, on the one hand, and the morale of the fighters, on the other hand. Therefore, the translator's strategies used for translating humors in this genre can be very decisive in transmitting the image of SL (source language) characters and atmosphere of the battlefields to TL (target language) context. Provided that the role of humorous expressions be ignored in translating the genre of War Literature, the source language characters will be delineated differently in target language texts which, in turn, points to the significance of translating humor in this genre.

Considering the importance of translating humor in this genre, the current study aims to examine first the constraints of translating humorous expressions in this genre, and the ways that translating humor affected character delineation in this genre. To this end, the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) proposed by Attardo (2002) was employed.

## **Background**

### **The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)**

Attardo (2002), a well-known scholar in the field of humor translation, based on Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humor proposed the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) to present a metric for joke similarity used in translation studies. GTVH identifies six knowledge resources on the basis of which humors are created: Language, narrative strategy, target, situation, logical mechanism, and script opposition

Language Knowledge Resource covers all the information necessary for the actual wording of a text and arrangement of its functional elements. Any joke, like any other elements in the language, can be worded in many different ways (e.g., using synonyms or different grammar) without changes in its meaning. However, humorous effects of some jokes depend on the use of particular words like puns, for instance. In the following example, the word wafer sound like the phrase a way far, and this can create humorous effect.

Why did the baby cry?

Its mother had been a way for so long. [a wafer]

In other words, any reworded joke that has the same meaning of the above example is an instance of the same joke, but does not necessarily have the same humorous effect.

Narrative strategy, another element in this theory, deals with the fact that any narrative joke has to be cast in a given type of narrative, either

as a simple narrative, as a dialogue (question and answer), as a (pseudo) riddle, as an aside in conversation, etc. For example, the Narrative Strategy of the following joke is question and answer.

- 1) How many Poles does it take to wash a car? Two. One to hold the sponge and one to move the car back and forth. (Attardo, 1994; p. 220)

An important factor making the above extract humorous is the strategy used to narrate it which is in the form of dialogue.

Target is an optional parameter that selects who is the ‘butt’ of the joke. Some jokes are not aggressive and, therefore, have an empty value for this parameter. This Knowledge Resource, as Attardo (2002) states, is related to social matters and incorporates the names of groups or individuals with humorous stereotypes attached to each. According to Zhao (1987, 1988, as cited in Attardo, 1994), for example, current and recent stereotypical targets for “stupid” jokes in America is the former Vice President of America Dan Quayle.

Situation parameter is present in all the jokes; however, some jokes rely more on it and others almost entirely ignore it. This knowledge resource determines what the joke is about (changing a light bulb, crossing the road, playing golf, etc.) and includes the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc. mentioned in the text.

The situation of a joke can be considered as the ‘props’ for the joke which is provided by activating the relevant scripts in the text. In this respect, the Situation Knowledge Resource is a function shared by all humorous and non-humorous texts.

The Logical Mechanism Knowledge Resource is optional and presupposes and embodies a ‘local’ logic, i.e. a distorted, playful logic that does not necessarily hold outside of the world of the joke (Attardo, 2002).

Attardo gives an example of Logical Mechanisms as follows:  
How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five. One to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he’s standing on (p.181).

In this example, the logical way of solving the problem stated violates our expectations for solving the problem. This is what makes the above extract a joke.

Script opposition is another feature of Attardo’s GTVH. According to this theory, a text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying-text if both of the following conditions are satisfied:

- i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
- ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite...

The two scripts with which a text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part in this text (Raskin 1985; p. 99)

Finally, Attardo (2002; p.181) states that “A script or frame is an organized complex of information about something in the broadest sense: an object, an event, an action, ...”. What can cause problem is that each culture and individual will have a certain number of scripts that are not available for humor. Therefore, obviously any attempt to create humor using one of the scripts about which it is inappropriate to joke in TL, will fail, or be marked.

Based on this metric, Attardo (2002, p. 183) proposes a mini-theory of joke translation, which can be used as a practical advice for translating humorous texts. In this respect, he suggests that in translating humorous texts, if possible, all six Knowledge Resources should be maintained, but if necessary, some parts should be changed in order to maintain the pragmatic effect of the humor. In other words, translation that respects all six Knowledge Resources may be ideal; however, translation that respects none is no longer translation, and may be either the translator’s failure to understand or render the humorous text in TL, or the creation of humor in TL that does not exist in SL.

### **Studies Related to Theories of Humor Translation**

Different scholars applied the GTVH to humor translation in literary texts. For instance, Triesenberg (2004) claims that the formal Knowledge Resources of the GTVH are not sufficient to describe the humor of any literary text. She states that literary texts are considered as artistic texts; therefore, they cannot be interpreted and described by a purely formal theory such as the GTVH. Finally, she concludes that the conditions for humor in the GTVH are necessary for humor, but they are not sufficient. She does not agree with Attardo (2002) in that one can make a joke by simply filling each of the Knowledge Resources. However, she believes that life and literature are too complicated to be accounted for by six knowledge resources, the joke must still be crafted....Nevertheless, she believes that the methods of GTVH can be extended by some means to account for most of the humors.

Shipley Young (2007) provided translation students with a checklist for translating humor. In so doing, he briefly introduced Attardo’s(2001) adaption of the GTVH which, to him, is the most relevant theory of humor translation. He added four extra linguistic factors to this theory, namely, time frame considerations, social-class and educational considerations, cultural awareness decisions and publication background information which bring into awareness issues that are outside both the source and target texts.

In a nutshell, as the review of literature indicates, the number of studies using the GTVH framework in different genres is scant, and despite the importance of the role of humor in Iran's literature, no study has been subject to studying the way humorous expressions were translated to English. Accordingly, considering the importance of this point, the current study intends to investigate the way the humorous expressions were translated into Farsi and the impact of applying these translation strategies on character delineation of this genre.

## Method

### Corpus

Two short stories and two novels formed the corpus of this study. The short stories *An Umbrella for the Director* (*Chatri Baraye Kargardan*) and *The Fleeing of the Warrior* (*Farar-e Mard-e Jangi*) from the book *A City under Siege* (*Dastanhaye Shahr-e Jangi*) by Ahmadzadeh (1997) and translated by Sprachman (2011), as well as two novels entitled *Chess with The Doomsday Machine* (*Shatranj ba Mashin-e Ghiamat*) by Ahmadzadeh (2005) and translated by Sprachman (2008); and *Journey to Heading 270 Degrees* (*Safar be Geraye 270 Darajeh*) written by Ahmad Dehghan (1996) and translated by Sprachman (2009) were used as the corpus of this study.

*A City under Siege* is a collection of short stories about Iran-Iraq war from which the two short stories *An Umbrella for the Director* and *The Fleeing of the Warrior* were selected. The rationale behind selecting these two stories from this book stemmed from the circumstance that these two stories were the only ones containing humorous elements. This book was written by Ahmadzadeh who, according to Razi and Abdollahian (2011), was present in the war breaking out in his homeland. According to Baroonian (2008), this book has been a successful and popular representative of War short stories and the winner of the prize for the best short story of *War year book* for 1999 and the owner of the first grade of *20-year story-writing of the War* in 2000.

*Chess with The Doomsday Machine* was written in 1996, but was not published until 2005. This novel, as Sprachman (2008, p. 7) stated, "is based on the author's experiences as a Basiji (paramilitary volunteer), defending Abadan, the city where he was born". According to Razi and Abdollahian (2011), a large number of criticisms have been written on it, and won a number of literary awards such as the *Literary award of Isfahan* as the best year novel for 2006, the *Martyr Habib Qanipoor*

*Year Book award* for 2006, the only appreciated novel of the *War year book* in 2006, etc. Furthermore, this novel was translated to several languages including English, Albanian, Arabic and French.

*Journey to Heading 270 Degrees*, according to Sprachman (2009), is one of the most popular novels written on Iran-Iraq war that lots of criticisms have been written on that in many Persian journals and received several literary awards including *20 Years of Fictional Writing award*, and the *20 Years of Resistance Book award*.

According to Abrams (2009), usually writers delineate characters in two ways: Showing and telling. In showing, the author simply presents the characters talking and acting, and leaves it entirely up to the reader to infer the motives and features that lie behind what they say and do. The author may show not only external speech and actions, but also character's inner thoughts, feelings and responsiveness to events. However, in telling, the author intervenes authoritatively in order to describe and often to evaluate the motives and the qualities of the characters.

As Parsinezhad (2005) believes, the characters in this novel are delineated through showing, i.e., through conversations containing tinges of humor exchanged between them.

### **Procedure**

To address the first research question concerning the constraints of translating humor in War Literature, 283 humorous expressions in two short stories *An Umbrella for the Director* and *The Fleeing of the Warrior*; and two novels *Chess with the Doomsday Machine* and *Journey to Heading 270 degrees* were identified and categorized on the basis of the GTVH explained in background, identifying the humors was based on Kostovcik' (2009, p.132) definition of humor believing that "humor is whatever intended to be amusing, even if it is not".

Since assuming an expression as humorous or non-humorous is considered to be very subjective, another rater was asked to judge if the extracted expressions were humorous or not. To compute inter-rater reliability, Pearson alpha coefficient was used which showed the inter-rater reliability of 0.87.

Next, the changed Knowledge Resources in translated novels and short stories, as specified in the GTVH, were identified. Finally, to address the second research question concerning the extent that strategies used by the translator affected character delineation, the data was analyzed qualitatively to examine the possible changes that elimination of each of the elements of the GTVH has caused in character delineation.

### Data Analysis

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the changed and unchanged knowledge Resources in 283 translated humorous expressions derived from all of the translated works used as the corpus of this study.

Table 1. The frequency and percentage of the Knowledge Resources in humorous expressions

Knowledge resources	Frequency		Percentage	
	Changed	Unchanged	Changed	Unchanged
Narrative strategy	1	281	0.35%	99.65%
Target	3	279	1.06%	98.94%
Situation	1	281	0.35%	99.65%
Logical Mechanism	19	263	6.74%	93.26%
Script Opposition	25	257	8.87%	91.13%

As Table 1 indicates, Narrative strategy and situation of humors were changed in 0.35% of cases, Target was changed in 1.06% of cases, situation in 0.35% of cases, Logical Mechanism in 6.74% of cases and script Opposition in 8.87% of all cases.

### Discussion

Translation of 282 humors were investigated. As the analysis of the data revealed, the Knowledge Resources of humors have remained unchanged in most of the translations. This shows that the translator has translated a large number of the humorous expressions in the works in question literally.

Although only few of the Knowledge Resources were changed in the translated works, some of the changes immensely affected character delineation in TL. According to Munday (2001; pp. 139-140), in *The Last Flicker*, the translation of Gurdial Singh's Punjabi novel *Marhi Da Deeva* Lexis such as *Goddam, bullshit, fucking God*, etc., clearly points to a cultural context very different to the one within which the novel was conceived, uprooting the characters from rural Punjab and giving them the speech accents of street-smart urban North America.

Like the above example, using some English words and expressions such as *son of a bitch, my ass*, etc., in the translation of the investigated novels which changed the SO (Script Opposition) Knowledge Resource (and consequently has manipulated the humors) caused important

changes in the characters of Ali and Mirza in *Journey to Heading 270 Degrees* and the character of Musa in *Chess with The Doomsday Machine*. The following examples demonstrate these changes in character delineation. Example 1 and 2 were derived from *Journey to Heading 270 Degrees* and example 3 is from *Chess with The Doomsday Machine*.

(۱) علی می گوید: "آی قربونت میرزا، سه چار تا فانوسم جور کن!"

Ali says may I bethy ransom Mirza, take three to four lanterns too.

میرزا با ناراحتی می گوید: "آز س سر قبر با... بابام بی بیارم؟"

Mirza says angrily should I take them from the grave of my father?

علی تند می گوید: "تو بیار، از هر جا دوست داری بیار..."

Ali says you take from wherever that you like.

1) Ali says, "Mister Mirza, how about bringing three or four lanterns!"

Mirza says angrily, "Wh...wh...where am I s... su...sup...supposed to get them, from my a...s...ass?"

Ali yells, "Bring them, from whatever the hell you like..."

In example 1, the translator has replaced from the grave of my father with ass which is an impolite word and changed the character to a rude one.

(۲) (علی) به خنده میگوید: "لامصب، تو هم بد سنگری رو انتخاب نکرده بودیها!"

2) Ali laughingly says you irreligious one, you had not chosen a bad trench for yourself!

میپرسم: "چه طور؟"

I ask How?

میگوید: "سنگر علم و دانش رو میگم! این جا رو بین و با سنگر خودت مقایسه کن، الانه باید

خواب باشی، مگه نه!؟"

He says "I mean the trench of science and knowledge! Look here and compare it with your trench. You must be asleep, am I right?"

Smiling he says, "Son-of-a-bitch, you haven't picked such a bad foxhole for yourself, have you?"

"Meaning what?" I ask.

He says, "I'm talking about the foxhole of 'knowledge and learning,' boy! Compare this miraculous hole with your own- it's bedtime for you, isn't it?"



In example 2, the translator replaced the word irreligious with son of a bith in TL and the word trench has been replaced with foxhole in TL which can immensely change the characters in TL.

(3) من نمیدونم شما چرا این طور میگویین ؛ ولی آقا پرویز پسر ماهیس.

3) I don't know why you are saying that but Parveez is like the moon.

ارواح عمه اش!

"The spirits of his aunt

"I don't know why you're sayin' that but Parveez is a saint..."

"Saint, my ass!"

As it can be observed, the expression the spirits of his aunt was replaced with Saint, my ass in TL.

According to Parsinezhad (2005) the authors writing about War, including the writer of *Journey to Heading 270 Degree*, use humor to show the friendly atmosphere of war. Therefore, the writers of *Journey to Heading 270 Degrees* and *Chess with The Doomsday Machine* used humor in the speech of some characters to depict the spirit of hope and vivacity that was usually profluent in the front even in tough situations. However, as these examples show, the character of Ali, Mirza and Musa were changed from sprightly and blithesome characters to discourteous ones.

In many cases, the translator used literalism to translate highly culture-bound expressions. For instance, in example 4 below, the expression To saint Abass which is considered as an oath was translated literally to By saint Abbas in TL. And the expression with difficulty was translated metaphorically to working like a dog which can change the personality of the TL character to an impolite one.

(4) علی لیوان چای را تو دستش گرفته و از جایش جم نمیخورد. وقتی می بیند به راستی دارم

سرنیزه را فرو میکنم تو شکمش، لحظهای به چایش خیره میشود و یکهو آن را میپاشد طرفم و

میگریزد. میرزا جان میکند و میگوید: "ف ف فرو کن تو تو شکمش. به به به حضرت

عباس... خو خو خوشن حلاله گ گ گ گردن من!"

Ali, holding a cup of tea in his hand, does not move. When he sees that I am really penetrating the spear to his stomach, for a moment, he stares at his tea and suddenly throws it at me and escapes. Mirza with difficulty says: Penetrate it to his stomach. I swear by God that his blood is Halal.

4) Holding a cup of tea, Ali does not move an inch. When he realizes that I am actually going to bury it in his stomach, he stares at his tea for a moment and then suddenly throws it at me and escapes.

Working like a dog, Mirza says “St...sti...stick him in the gut. B...b...by S...saint Abbas...it’s o...o...k....kay to shed his blood. Bl...bl...ame me!”

As noted above, most of the humorous expressions in the translated short stories and novels were translated either literally or by as Munday (2001; , p.140) asserts replacing them with the register of “street-smart Urban North America. . In this respect, for instance the strategies that translators employed for translating *Arabian Nights* varied according to the purpose for which they translated it. For instance, Galland (1704), translating *Arabian Nights* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, domesticated the tales into the acceptable literary styles of the time. Galland (1704) glossed over any custom that sounded alien to his readers. It was due to the fact that Galland (1704) was translating for an audience who resented any bizarre culture. However, with the emergence of British colonial interest in Egypt, Lane’s literal and foreignized translation of the *Arabian Nights* (1839) was considered as a means of collecting information about the prospective colonies. Lane tried to preserve the content and style of the ST to the most possible extent because his criterion was the “illustrative” value of the *Arabian Nights*. As Shamma (2009; p. 30) stated, Lane’s literalism gives the expressions in the *Arabian Nights* a “curiously quaint character that could well have been exotic if it had not been for his grave tone and his all too serious anthropological pretensions”.

In a nutshell, literalism can make the ST strange for the TT readers and can make natives sound as queer as the translator wants. This is because literalism is one of the ways through which the translator deliberately foregrounds the foreignness of the original text that is called for by some postcolonial theorists (Quin, 1960 as cited in Sturrok, 2010). According to Shamma (2009), literalist translation can serve imperialist agendas by gathering accurate and reliable information free from distorting names or any other cultural attributes about the would-be colonized.

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