Translation of Colloquial Expressions in English-into-Persian Subtitled Films

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Abstract

In this paper, efforts have been made to investigate the strategies used in translation of colloquial expressions in English language films subtitled into Persian. The question is: what specific strategies have Persian translators used in dealing with colloquial expressions in English-into-Persian subtitled films? The colloquial expressions were classified based on the combination of taxonomies presented by McCrimmon (1963) and Holmes (1992). The data was gathered from two American comedy films: Midnight Run and Liar Liar subtitled into Persian. Furthermore, their original transcripts were used. Then, the colloquial expressions of the films were detected and with regard to Persian subtitles, the strategies used in translating them were identified. The analysis of the data indicated that the following strategies were employed by Persian translators: colloquial translation or transfer, deletion, translating into expression with higher degree of formality, paraphrase, condensation or under-translation, semantic equivalent, addition or over-translation, mistranslation, and translating into expression with lower degree of formality.

Key Words: Colloquial expression, subtitle, formality, semantic equivalent
Introduction

Translation is defined as an attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another (Newmark, 1988a, p. 7), and in Nabokov's sense as quoted in Newmark (1988a), "rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allows, the exact contextual meaning of the original" (p. 11). According to these definitions, some sources of loss can be identified. The first source as Newmark (1988a) suggests is the loss of meaning, since the translator's language can only be approximate not exactly the same, "if the text describes a situation which has elements peculiar to the natural environment, institutions and culture of its language area, there is an inevitable loss of meaning" (p. 7). The second source of loss is related to the personal use of language by the author that is related to his/her style, "…the individual uses of language of the text-writer and the translator do not coincide" (Newmark, 1988a, p. 8). He believes that everybody has lexical if not grammatical idiosyncrasies, and attaches new meanings to a few words.

Regarding the close relationship of translation with language, a study of the language variety and the formality scale of the language seems in order before starting to investigate translation's language related problems, especially problems of rendering colloquial language.

Linguists suggest that languages vary on a continuum of formality: vulgar, slang, colloquial, neutral, formal and legal ceremonial. The word colloquial is defined by American College Dictionary as quoted in McCrimmon, (1963, pp. 137-8) "characteristic of or appropriate to ordinary or familiar conversation rather than formal speech or writing". A colloquialism is any word or expression, which might appropriately be used in conversation among ordinary or educated people.

Newmark (1988b) suggests a stylistic scale of formality ranging from officialese to formal, neutral, informal, colloquial, slang and taboo (p. 14). Therefore, colloquial language in definition lies between informal language and slang.

During the twentieth century, there was a new kind of material that was translated. This kind of translation was the result of the arrival of film industry and the invention of sound films in 1927. That time translation was used to convey the spoken dialogue of source language (SL) film to the target language (TL) of the audience. This new type of translation was called Audio Visual Translation (AVT). AVT is conventionally taxonomised into "subtitling" and "dubbing" which are the main forms of language transfer in television. The first one which is the focus of this paper is defined as "supplementing the original voice soundtrack by adding written text on screen " and the second one is "replacing the original voice soundtrack with another in another in another language" (O'Connell, 2000, p. 169).

When translating colloquial expressions spoken or written in source language, the translator confronts at least two problems. The first one, according to Dickins et al. (2002) is the error in register that is translating into a language more formal than the original. The translator failing, either to recognize the level of formality of the original, or to render it with the same degree of formality, is not able to fully preserve the same register. The second problem is the failure of producing the same effect on the target audiences. Newmark (1988b) points out: "whilst translation is always possible, it may for various reasons not to have the same impact as the
original" (p.6). One of the reasons might be the fact that the level of formality in target language usually differs from that of the original. In this regard, Almaghary (2002) asserts that the kind of language has a major role in translation and the best translator is the one who knows the kind of people he or she addresses (¶ 10). According to Kane (1986), the language of a text determines the purpose of the writer and guaranties communication. Thus, by accepting this claim, one can say that failure in recognition of the language causes loss of communication. Colloquial language is one of the language levels, considering the language scale of formality, that might be used by the writer for an effective characterization and making atmosphere of the story. Therefore, the proper translation of this language and finding correct equivalents by the translator in order to achieve intended goals of the writer and to provoke the same impact from the target audiences and to preserve cultural and local coloring of the original is of great importance. The present paper draws attention to the different strategies employed by Persian translators to render colloquial level of language in English-into-Persian subtitled films.

**Constraints of subtitling**

All types of translation have their specific set of constraints, which makes perfect conveyance of meaning impossible. Gottlieb (1992, p. 164) claims that these constraints "may be caused by a host of different agents in the communicative process from production of the original to reception of the translated version". For sure, screen translation is not an exception. What makes subtitling different from other types of translation is the fact that it involves both technical and contextual constraint. Gottlieb (1992) uses a bit different terminology and explains that subtitler is faced with formal (quantitative) and textual (qualitative) constraints. Textual constraints are those imposed on the subtitles by the visual context of the film, whereas formal constraints are the space factors (a maximum of two lines are allowed, with some 35 character each) and the time factor. The duration of a subtitle depends on the quality and complexity of the text, the speed of the dialogue; the average viewer's reading speed (150 to 180 words per minute) and the necessity intervals between subtitles.

In this regard, Kovacic (1998) says on the whole subtitling is a specific form of translating in which additional constraints has to be taken into consideration (limited space, synchronization with the image). He asserts that apart from that, it may be regarded in the same way as any other translation: its objective is to render a source language text into a form that will make its meaning potential[ly] accessible to target audience (Hatim and Mason, 1990, pp. 10-11 cited in Kovacic, 1998, p. 75).

Schowarz (2002) says that the main problem in subtitling as caused by the difference between the speed of the spoken language and the speed in reading. A complete transcription of the film dialogue is not possible. Both the physical limitation of space on the screen and the pace of the spoken word require a reduction of the text. The experience for the audience is considerably different from those who see the original film. Viewers are asked to do a lot of extra work by reading subtitles while still coping with all the other visual and oral channels of the film.

Furthermore, Delabastita (1989) asserts that subtitles are constrained forms of translation since the aural text must be rendered as segments of usually not more than two lines. In addition, due to the fact that people read more slowly than they speak, most subtitles represent
summaries rather than verbatim accounts of what are said on screen. So, omissions are virtually unavoidable. He states that "the constraints of space and time lead into the problem of selection as the translator has to analyze the source text material carefully to describe what should be transferred to the target text and what can or must be left out" (p. 200).

Colloquial English

In the scale of formality, colloquial language is a higher style than slang and it differs from the formal standard language in pronunciation, choice of word, and sentence structure. Holmes (1992, p. 265) suggests pronunciation and grammatical features as two linguistic features of colloquial style in English:

1. pronunciation features

[h]- dropping, e.g. Oh well, 'e said, 'I suppose you can 'ave it. [in] (vs. formal [ing], e.g. We was up there cuttin'.

2. grammatical features

Was with plural subject we, e.g. we was up there cutting. Come (vs. came): Frazer come on to us

McCrimmon (1963) describes colloquial English in this way:

1. relatively short simple sentences, often grammatically incomplete, with few rhetorical devices;

2. a generous use of contractions (I'll, we've, didn't, can't), clipped words (cab, exam, phone), and the omission of relative pronouns (who, which, that) which would be retained in a formal style;

3. a vocabulary marked by general avoidance of learned words and by inclusion of some less objectionable slang terms;

4. a simplified grammatical structure which leans heavily on idiomatic constructions and sometimes ignores the fine distinctions of formal grammar and;

5. a personal or familiar tone, which tries to create the impression of speaking intimately to the reader.

Methodology

The data was gathered by analyzing the Persian subtitles of two following American comedy films: 1) Liar Liar directed in 1997 by Tom Shadyac and featuring Jim Carrey and 2) Midnight Run directed in 1988 by Martin Brest and featuring Robert De Niro and Charlis Grodin. The reason for choosing these two films from among available movies was twofold. First, the researcher could find more instances of colloquial expressions in the mentioned
films. Secondly, according to Morgan (2001), there is a relationship between film and subtitles, i.e. "the better the film the easier it is to translate it well" (p. 164).

To avoid the effect of any probable problem in the hearing of the dialogue of the films, which can be the result of actors' actresses' accents, the fast mode of speaking or the existence of shortened sentences in the oral language of the film and to be completely sure that no instance of colloquialisms is left out in the dialogue of the film, the researcher got access to the transcript of the chosen films through Internet.

**Theoretical Framework of Analysis**

In order to analyze the extracted data from the dialogue and transcripts of the films under study, the researcher has used a combination of two classifications of colloquial expressions proposed by Holmes (1992) and McCrimmon (1963) as the theoretical framework. The model is as follows:

1. Contraction and clipped words (C)
2. Idiomatic expressions (I.E)
3. Pronunciation features (P.F)
4. Grammatically incomplete sentences (G.I.S)
5. Personal or familiar tone (F.T)

**Procedure**

The procedure for obtaining the required information consisted of three parts; viewing the films, using the transcript and focusing on the Persian subtitles of each film. Since there was no transcript of subtitles, the researcher wrote down the Persian subtitles of the chosen films in front of each English counterpart while viewing the films. In order to have a clear understanding of the dialogue of the film, the researcher has used the English transcript of each film while watching the film. It should be stated that after reading the transcripts, the researcher identified some differences between the provided transcripts and the shooting transcripts, so he wrote down and corrected the differences between them and provided full transcripts. Furthermore, the Persian subtitles of films were used to compare the SL dialogue regarding colloquial expressions of the films with their given translation.

**Results**

After analyzing the data, two tables are presented respectively. The first one specifies the frequency and percentage of the five different categories of colloquial expressions based on the above-mentioned model. And the second table is provided to show the frequency and percentage of the strategies employed by Persian translators in dealing with colloquial expressions in the subtitled films.

**Table 1**

*Frequency and percentage of different categories of colloquial expressions appearing in the two films*

Article Source: www.translationdirectory.ir
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Films</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>P.F</th>
<th>I.E</th>
<th>G.I.S</th>
<th>F.T</th>
<th>Total No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midnight Run</td>
<td>Frequency 801</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>1242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage 64.49%</td>
<td>13.04%</td>
<td>10.46%</td>
<td>6.11%</td>
<td>5.87%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liar Liar</td>
<td>Frequency 433</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage 66.3%</td>
<td>4.13%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>5.67%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Frequency 1234</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>1895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage 65.11%</td>
<td>9.97%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>5.96%</td>
<td>7.33%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C = Contractions and Clipped Words

I.E = Idiomatic Expressions

F.T = Familiar or Personal Tone

PF = Pronunciation Features

G.I.S = Grammatically Incomplete Sentences

Table 2

**Frequency and percentage of strategies used in the two films**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Strategy</th>
<th>Total No.</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colloquial Translation or Transfer</td>
<td>1148</td>
<td>60.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deletion</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>8.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Degree of Formality</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>7.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>6.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantic Equivalent</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>6.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condensation</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>4.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistranslation</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>2.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Degree of Formality</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be stated that translating into expressions with higher or lower degree of formality is shown as "higher degree of formality" and "lower degree of formality" in the presented table.

Paraphrasing is a strategy in which the meaning of the SL colloquial expression is paraphrased into TL. According to Baker (1992), in this strategy the given meaning would not
be an exact equivalent or semantic equivalent of the SL idiomatic expression as a kind of colloquial expression. Furthermore, by using this strategy the impact of the colloquial expression especially the idiomatic one and its cultural significance have been lost. According to Baker (1992), semantic equivalent is used in cases where the lexical constituency of a colloquial expression especially an idiomatic one in the SL may differ from its counterpart in the TL, but the semantic content of it is identical across the two languages. In other words, the translator transfers the semantic content of the SL colloquial expressions but does not convey their form in the TL.

Summary of the Findings

Analysis of the data gathered in the present paper reveals that the subtitlers of the films under study have applied different strategies to transfer the colloquial expressions of the original films. These strategies are as follows:

1) Transfer or colloquial translation constitutes the main part, i.e. 60.58% of the strategies identified in this study. In fact, the translators could successfully render most of the colloquial expressions into expressions with the same level of formality in the Persian subtitle. In other words, regarding colloquialisms, one can transfer the same level of formality of the SL into the TL subtitle without any great problem.

2) Deletion only forms 8.54% of the translation strategies. This shows that regardless of the internal characteristic of subtitling as a form of condensed translation in which parts of the original dialogue are omitted, the translators tried to keep colloquial expressions of the films, maybe because they recognized their importance in the context of the films.

3) Translating into expression with higher degree of formality accounted for 7.96% of the strategies applied by the translators.

4) Paraphrasing forms 6.86% of the translation strategies in this study. By using this strategy the impact of the colloquial expression especially the idiomatic one and its cultural significance have been lost.

5) Semantic equivalent constitutes 6.86% of the overall strategies used in this study. By using this strategy, the translators have rendered the semantic content but not the forms of the SL colloquial expressions into their Persian counterparts.

6) Condensation or under-translation only forms 4.96% of the strategies used in this study. According to some translation scholars such as Delabastita (1989), Kovacic (1998), Schowarz (2002), condensation is the important peculiarity of subtitling. This may lead readers of this study to expect a large number of under-translation strategy in the findings of the study. This low percentage (4.96%) can indicate a conflict between theory and the practical findings of the study. But, it does not seem to be the case. Although the percentage of condensation is very low, it does not mean that it is used very little in the study. Rather, some of the other strategies such as: mistranslation, omission, and paraphrasing were used to make the colloquialisms condensed, although they resulted in an inappropriate rendering of the colloquial expressions.
7) Mistranslation forms 2.95% of the overall strategies used in this study.

8) Addition or over-translation forms 1.42% of the overall strategies, because of its conflicting nature with subtitling.

9) Translating into expression with lower degree of formality accounted for 0.26% of the strategies applied by the translators. This means that the translators have not had tendency toward translating into expression with lower degree of formality in subtitling.

Works Cited


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