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FACULTY OF LETTERS AND HUMANITIES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

The Issue of Connotation in Literary Translation

The Case Study of Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*

By

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Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in
English Translation (Translation Studies)

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Tehran, Iran
September 2008

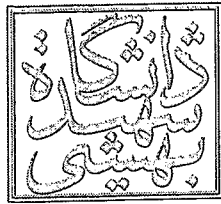
۱۳۸۷/۰۹/۰۸

۱۰۷۷۲۵

کتابخانه مرکزی
شاهید بهشتی
تهران

۸۷۱۱۱۰۵۸۴۸

۸۷/۱۰/۱۶



دانشگاه شهید بهشتی
دانشکده ادبیات و علوم انسانی
گروه زبان و ادبیات انگلیسی

مسئله معنای ضمنی در ترجمه ادبی مورد مطالعه: بوف کور صادق هدایت

پژوهشگر
نسرین صحیحی

پایان نامه
جهت دریافت درجه کارشناسی ارشد
در رشته مترجمی زبان انگلیسی (مطالعات ترجمه)

استاد راهنما: دکتر امیر علی نجومیان
استاد مشاور: دکتر ساسان بالغی زاده

۱۳۸۷ ۸۰/ ۵۵

تهران، ایران
شهریور ۱۳۸۷

۱۰۶۶۲۵

To:

*My mother
and
the soul of my father
who raised me
with love*

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Abstract

The present study investigates the issue of connotation losses taking place in translations of literary texts. The literary text selected as the case study for this research is the Persian novella - Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* - and its English translations. It aims at drawing the attention of translators to the importance of this vital part of meaning and the responsibility of its transference. Connotation is seen as the soul of language in general and of literature in particular. Moreover, it is hoped to provide a deeper understanding of the Persian literary masterpiece that enjoys a highly connotative language, through concentrating on the work's connotative words and expressions. An important issue posed in this study is the fact that connotative meanings are latent and somewhat cunning; they make the interpretation and translation of literary texts a challenge for translators; therefore uncovering them may require that the literary translators should raise the background social and cultural knowledge of the readership.

Since literary works are cultural creations, connotation is viewed from a broad perspective in this research to include not only literature and language but also culture as a base. The results obtained from the data analysis show that connotation losses are loss of hidden information mainly resulting from the lack of pragmatic equivalence. It is found out that those connotations that reflect socio-cultural norms, religious beliefs, ideological attitudes of the source text, etc. can damage the text to a large extent if overlooked and bring about serious losses. Whereas those that only disregard the aesthetic values of the source text are considered more tolerable losses, since at least they do not block the understanding of the source message. The study, in particular, stresses avoiding literal translation of connotative elements and accounting for both the semantic and pragmatic factors of the source text.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis supervisor Dr. Nojournian for his constant support, valuable input, and professional guidance which helped me to write this thesis. I am deeply indebted to him for his helpful editorial assistance on previous drafts of my thesis and his attention to details that helped me to refine my research framework.

I would also like to appreciate Dr. Baleghizadeh, my thesis reader, who contributed to the production of my final work through careful reading of my drafts and giving invaluable comments.

And my most heartfelt gratitude goes to Dr. Anani Sarab, who kindly accepted to devote time and examine my thesis for the final version.

My special thanks also go to:

Dr. Mollanazar for his precious suggestions and insightful comments, and for allowing me to use his personal library.

Professor Bashiri, the translator of *The Blind Owl*, for his helpful answers to my questions regarding the translation of the novella.

Professor Spooner, the translator of a number of Hedayat's short stories, for his valuable comments on translation of connotation and for explanation of his practical experience regarding the issue.

Mr. Ali, the Iraqi researcher in literary translation, for his constant help in finding for me the instrumental references and furnishing me with a few relevant articles.

My dear friend Miss Bahar Eshraq for her kind contribution and support.

And finally, I would like to thank my family for their continuous love, emotional support and encouragement.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1. Overview

The relationship between words and their meanings is not as simple as it seems, and this becomes more apparent when a text is translated from one language into another. The most difficult type of translation is probably literary translation. There are some elements in the original literary text such as rhythm, rhyme, sound effects, etc. that can never be totally transferred to the target language. One of the most important elements of literary discourse that gives vitality to texts is connotation.

Connotation can be claimed to be the most interesting phenomenon in literature. Although it can exist in non-literary texts as well, it is in literary texts that rich words with the most condensed connotations are employed to a large extent. In non-literary language, people usually use a single precise meaning of words to avoid ambiguity, but literary language often takes advantage of loaded words to suggest more than one idea with the same word.

Since connotation is the underlying idea of words and utterances, it can create serious problems in the process of translation, if ignored. Connotation is inherently associated with culture, and thus is largely relative and subject to change both synchronically across cultures and diachronically within each culture across time. Therefore the task of connotation transference into another language is a complex undertaking for translators; and the complexity may involve cases of connotation losses in translation. It is often in cross-cultural communication that connotation may give rise to several problems and lead to serious losses.

The present study investigates the nature and causes of potential connotation losses occurring in literary translations, using the Persian novella – *The Blind Owl* – and its English translations as its case study. So at the very beginning of the thesis, it is necessary first to examine the place of connotation in language, and then to go through the status of *The Blind Owl* in Persian and world literature.

1.1. Place of Connotation in Language

The term “connotation” derives from the Medieval Latin *connotare* meaning “to mark with”. In theorizing about the nature of meaning, the terms connotation and denotation were used by the twentieth century critics to show distinctions in the semantic values of words. Connotation and denotation are two contrasting terms, and the distinction between them has been long recognized in different disciplines.

Connotation can be viewed as the soul of any language. According to Leech (1974), “the communicative value of an expression lies in its connotative meaning” (qtd. in Al-Masri 88). Margherita Ulrych (1992) also stresses that “we judge and react to words at the level of connotative meaning, [that is,] the culturally or socially determined value judgments that are implicit in the semantics of a word” (qtd. in Katan 46).

Connotation is considered particularly useful when language is used for emotive purposes. Denotation can name feelings, but it cannot express or evoke them with fullness and intensity. Connotation is the language of indirection. It reflects the complexities of various kinds of human experience and provides passages to understanding them. Above all, we can claim that connotation is the means by which human intuition finds way to the transcendental realms of being, when the mind is engaged in analyzing and capturing the whole meaning.

By choosing words according to their connotative meanings, writers can increase or decrease their influence on their audience. Poets use connotations to develop or complicate a poem's meaning. Connotation contributes to the imagery of the text and adds depth to the work, especially literary works. In addition to providing deep meaning, "it is rather the verbal aesthetics that makes connotation one of the most interesting phenomena in literary texts" (Ali 21).

Readers will be able to infer a great deal about writers' ideas from the words they use; and the word choice is primarily based on the connotation rather than the denotation of a word. There is a strong remark on the importance of connotation in human life saying, "living in the world as one of the animals who speaks depends far more on the connotations of words than on their denotation. And it is precisely in this respect that language – and therefore texts – is sensitive" (Simmes 2). Connotation makes language enjoyable and interesting. It leads the imaginative and creative readers to new interpretations and therefore takes them to new worlds.

1.2. Place of Hedayat's The Blind Owl in Literature

Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951) is regarded as one of the most distinguished modern writers in Iran. He is known by most of his readers as the author of *The Blind Owl*; but, he was

a notable scholar, a translator, a thinker and a literary critic as well. He studied the ancient Iranian languages such as Pahlavi, and translated some Pahlavi texts into modern Persian. He also wrote essays about archaeology, anthropology and linguistics. Persian folklore was a major interest for Hedayat. Indeed, he was the first person to conduct serious research on the folklore of Iran. His works may be classified into critical realist, nationalist, satirical and psychological stories.

Hedayat possesses an important position in Persian literature in that he is the father of Persian modern fiction. Having chosen to write in the form of a novel, which is a part of Western literary tradition, demonstrates this innovation. It can be claimed that modern fiction in Iran owes its richness to Hedayat's unique style and approach to Persian language, life and tradition and especially ordinary people. Hedayat's stories are true representations of cultural beliefs, social customs and historical facts. Such features are manifested in his writings through employing artistic literary devices, and connotative and figurative language including proverbs, metaphors, and idioms.

In addition, Hedayat contributed much to the simplification of the language of fictional prose. He tried to bridge the gap between colloquial and written Persian, which was almost unprecedented in Iranian literature history. He picked up colloquial words and phrases for their effects and put them in sentence patterns which were those of written language in order to bring the literary and spoken languages closer together. This characteristic of Hedayat's works is often a considerable challenge to translation.

The Blind Owl is regarded as Hedayat's masterpiece. This psychological novella took him almost a decade to write and finally appeared as a mimeographed publication in India in 1937. It appeared for the first time in Iran in 1941. *The Blind Owl* is so well-known and celebrated outside the borders of Iran that so far it has been translated into several languages, and a few English interpretations and criticisms have been published

on it. According to Michael Beard - the author of *Hedayat's Blind Owl as a Western Novel* - this work, even in its translated version, is one of the literary masterpieces of the world despite the fact that the translation lacks the elegance and subtlety of the original.

The most significant feature of *The Blind Owl* is that it is the first Persian novel using modernist techniques of fiction writing. (By modernity it is meant the sum of Western European developments, social, cultural, literary, etc. since the sixteenth century). In this work, there is a series of allusions to western works from Poe, Rilke, and also Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. As such, *The Blind Owl* is a turning point both in modern Persian literature and Hedayat's life. Through this novella, Hedayat's writing reached its peak so that according to Bashiri, the author's life can be divided into two distinct periods: pre-Owl and post-Owl.

In this psycho-fiction, Hedayat digs up the human's thoughts and feelings without paying much attention to the issue of time and narrative sequence, since the emphasis is not so much on the external events as it is on the character's thought-events at a single moment. This aspect makes the novella difficult to understand, interpret, and translate.

According to Mohammad Ali Homayoon Katoozian, Hedayat's prose enjoys a special diversity, depth and vivacity because of his particular use of treasury of words. His writing style gives life to Persian language, and it is this originality and local colour that makes the translation of *The Blind Owl* difficult (Katoozian 19). To be concise, "*The Blind Owl* is a flower whose roots are in the soil of Iran; and just for this reason, decoding its mysterious content is not the job of outsiders. They praise its elegant structure, but have never penetrated into its castle of meaning (Ghiasi 8).

2. Statement of the Problem

Words mean different things to different people. They can be variably interpreted by people from different cultural backgrounds. Many words may even possess contradictory associations across cultures. Some animals and colours are good examples in this respect.

In translation, many of the most obvious changes or losses of meaning have to do with the connotations of words and utterances. Connotative meanings are developed by the community and do not represent the innate qualities of the thing or concept originally signified as the denotative meaning. The addition of such implicit and latent meanings introduces complexity into the coding system. While one might assume that a word's denotation is fully intended, whether a word's connotations are intended is much more difficult to determine and is often a matter of uncertainty. Connotation of a given word may, in many cases, stand further apart from the literal meaning of the word; rather, there are instances where the connotation of a given word even stands in opposition to its denotation.

Since connotation covers the more secondary and subjective aspects of meaning, it cannot be definite; as such, it leaves the interpretation somewhat open-ended, for which cultural and ideological knowledge is required. Therefore the source writer and the target reader (and thus, the translator as the first reader of target language as well) do not necessarily agree on a definite point of reference. The translator might be seeing something not intended, or the writer may be intending something the translator does not see. As a result, the primary source of misunderstanding between the author of the original literary text and the reader of the target text might lie in connotation.

If an attentive bilingual reader analyzes literary works along with their translations through comparative method, he/she will come across some serious problems in change

or loss of semantic elements that definitely include examples of connotation changes or losses. The problem is due to the fact that the source language is basically foreign to the target audience who may or may not be familiar with the source culture. Even worse, providing cultural information does not guarantee transferring connotations, because connotative meanings vary from person to person even with a common culture. The reason behind this subjectivity is that each individual has his/her own personal experiences through life. Therefore connotation can bring about problems in communication and translation.

3. Significance of the Study

Literature usually enjoys a connotative language. A good literary work is particularly capable of representing the richness of a country's culture through the powerful connotations the author applies. As such, if connotations are taken for granted in translation, the original literary work will lose its power and impressive vigor.

This topic is worth studying for several reasons: first, connotation is the soul of all literary texts. In fact the difference between great writing and ordinary writing lies in the connotative meaning. Connotation acts as a literary tool for writers, and provides them with new, fresh, and powerful figures of speech. As such, it usually poses deep problems to translators, and therefore deserves special attention. Perhaps the legendary clumsiness of machine translation results from its total failure to cope with connotative meanings.

Second, few studies have been made on the issue of connotation in translation, probably due to the fact that connotation is highly subjective, and this subjectivity may bring about less valid and less reliable results. Moreover, to the best the researcher's

knowledge, so far no study has dealt with the translation of Persian literature from a purely connotational perspective.

Third, this study is particularly significant to readers and researchers who are non-native speakers of Persian, but interested in Persian literature. It is directed towards target readers who are unfamiliar with the Persian language and culture. *The Blind Owl*, compared to many other Persian literary works, enjoys a celebrity status in the world literature, yet it is still marginal compared to the European and American novels. This study can be significant in that it introduces a remarkable novella coming from a rich, but marginalized literature, i.e. Persian literature.

It must also be noted that part of the significance of the present study comes from the right choice of the corpus, *The Blind Owl*. The language of this novella is intensely connotative. Hedayat, in *Zand and Humenyesen*, stipulates that in ancient Iran, for each concept there were two kinds of words or expressions: “*to pass away* was used for the righteous, and *to die* for the sinful” (qtd. in Ghiasi 148). This demonstrates that the author of *The Blind Owl* has employed connotative words and expressions quite consciously and deliberately.

4. Purpose of the Study

As the topic of the research suggests, the present study is concerned with the problem of connotation loss in literary translation. Literary translation is a hard task due to the intricate nature of literary language. One of the purposes of this research is to discuss the fact that literary language is generally hard to translate, and a major part of this complicity is related to the hidden and tricky meanings in the texts, i.e. connotations.

Transferring connotative meanings from the source text to the target text is a heavy burden on the shoulders of translators. Unfortunately, many translators trust the literal

meanings while translating, and leave the implicit ones untranslated. Connotation is an essential part of meaning; nevertheless, since connotative meanings are latent, many translators do not pay sufficient attention to them. Therefore another objective of this study is to draw the attention of translators to the significance of various shades and layers of meaning and to emphasize the role of connotations in the overall perception of literary texts.

Interpretation of connotative meanings is sometimes very difficult because of the cultural gaps between the source and target languages. Acquiring cultural background knowledge of the original language and transferring it to the target audience is a vital responsibility on the part of translators; as such, the third objective of the study is to highlight the role of culture in interpretation of connotative meanings.

Finally, this study is hoped to provide a better appreciation of the aesthetic values of Persian literature for non-Iranian readers, and to make them more familiar with the beliefs, attitudes, and ways of thinking of the Persian culture expressed through connotations.

5. Research Questions

Connotations are difficult to interpret. Thus they may be a source of problem in translation, particularly literary translation. This study is intended to examine the nature of connotative meanings and their difficulty through the process of literary translation between two distant languages, i.e. Persian and English. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) Does the difficulty of literary translation have anything to do with connotation?
- 2) Can connotation be considered a barrier in translation?

3) To what extent connotative meanings of words and expressions are lost in literary translation?

4) What is the role of connotation in creation of the texture and structure of *The Blind Owl*?

5) Which type of connotation is more prevalent in *The Blind Owl*?

6) Which translator is more successful in transferring connotations of *The Blind Owl*: a native speaker of the source language or a native speaker of the target language?

6. Research Hypothesis

Although losses in literary translation can be minimized by raising cultural and social knowledge on both the source and target languages, in reality, they continually occur in translation and never decrease to zero. This is because of the fact that languages differ linguistically and culturally. Sometimes the distance between languages is so remarkably far that losses are inevitable, no matter how much expert and skillful the translator is in his job.

Connotative meanings are subject to different interpretations both within and among languages, and there is less agreement on them; this can increase the degree of connotation losses among other types of losses in translation. Since in this study, the languages involved are Persian and English – two very distant languages - it is hypothesized that it is impossible to maintain all connotative meanings in translation of literary works from Persian into English and vice versa.

7. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that underlies this study is taken from Lesley Jeffries' (1998) categories of connotation presented in his book *Meaning in English*. In this book,

Jeffries first makes a distinction between *literal* and *actual* meanings at a number of linguistic levels such as vocabulary and discourse. He states that many times, the less central and even optional parts of meaning are exploited to bring about certain connotations. Thus much of what is powerful in discourse is what is implied or left uninterpreted.

Jeffries argues that when we compare words with identical denotation, it is necessary to distinguish them in some other way, i.e. connotation. Connotation, according to him, does not merely refer to the emotions and feelings a word may evoke; instead, it has a broader application that usually arises from the situational context and typical conditions of a word's use (Jeffries 109). Based on Jeffries' theory, there are many types of connotation among which the most important ones are connotation of register, connotation of association, connotation of attitude, connotation of era, and connotation of dialect. These categories will be fully discussed in chapter three of this study - Theory and Methodology.

The reason behind choosing the aforementioned theoretical framework for this research is that Jeffries's theory of connotation is more comprehensive than other definitions and classifications presented for connotation. It goes beyond the old negative-neutral-positive scale of connotation. Based on this theory, connotation is very pervasive; it can exist everywhere, in the word, in the sentence, in the text, in the discourse, in literary devices, in cultural notions, and even in dialectal expressions. In other words, connotation somehow emerges from all signifying units, and its realm is broader than what most of us simply assume. In this research, the connotation losses in the translated versions of *The Blind Owl* will be discussed within the five categories of connotation mentioned above.

8. Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The discussion of connotation losses in the present study is based on the analysis of Hedayat's famous novella *The Blind Owl* along with its two different translations into English. The title of this novella is transliterated from Persian as "*Buf-e Kur*". Although this work is not very long, it enjoys a highly connotative language, which makes it very appropriate for this study. The language of this novella is a combination of standard Persian, colloquial and slang language, and *Tehrani* dialect. *The Blind Owl* has been translated by D. P. Costello (a native speaker of English) and Iraj Bashiri (a native speaker of Persian).

A good point to this study is the collaboration between the researcher and one of the translators, Bashiri. Since Bashiri's contribution was too helpful to this study, the absence of such collaboration with the other translator is considered a limitation. Unfortunately, this outstanding Persian literary work has not been translated by other English-speaking translators. If there were more translated versions, the results would be more valid and generalizable.

9. Thesis Outline

The research is an attempt to study the problematic issue of connotation in literary translation in general and in English translation of Hedayat's famous novella, *The Blind Owl*, in particular. It is comprised of five chapters, the first being the introduction.

Chapter Two of this study is devoted to the study of connotation in translation. In the first section of this chapter, literary translation and its complexities are discussed. The second section is concerned with the notion of *meaning* and its aspects – denotation and connotation. In the third section of chapter two, the researcher tries to give a thorough knowledge on "connotation" including different definitions by different