

In the Name of God,

the Almighty

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Teacher Training University
Department of Foreign Languages

**A Corpus-based Study of Units of Translation in
English-Persian Literary Translations**

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in
Translation Studies**

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*To the endless sources of love
and generosity,
My Dear Parents,
Who made it all possible.*

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with descriptive approach in translation studies. In this study, the notion of 'unit of translation' as a challenging issue in Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) is addressed. Considering this notion from a product-oriented point of view as "the TT unit that can be mapped onto a ST unit" (Baker, 2001: 286), the researcher's main concern has been to investigate a hierarchy of units of translation (UTs) proposed by Newmark (1991: 66-68) including word, phrase, clause, sentence, and paragraph. At the preliminary stage, two questions were raised to detect the most frequent UT adopted by the professional literary translators, and to explore the relationship between the UTs and the free-literal dichotomy in terms of the occurrence of unit/rank shifts or changes in the UTs in the move from the ST to the TT. To this end, a corpus of three famous English novels (originally written in English by the renowned authors) and two best-selling translations of each (done by professional translators) were chosen to be analyzed. Through a contrastive analysis, two hundred and ten coupled pairs of ST-TT segments were extracted from the first ten pages of each novel and its two translations based on establishing relations of equivalence between the ST-TT segments and adopting sentence as the major unit of analysis. The UTs adopted in the ST-TT segments were then identified. The obtained results of the UT categories demonstrated that the most frequent UT adopted by the professional literary translators was sentence. The unit-shifts applied in the UTs were also signified. The statistical calculation of frequency of unit-shifts in each translator's UTs proved that the more frequent the occurrence of unit-shifts in the UTs of the translator is, the more deviated is his translation from the formal correspondence, the more different the size of his UTs is, and finally the freer his translation will be.

Key Words: *Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), units of translation, free-literal dichotomy, unit/rank shifts, equivalence, formal correspondence.*

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CD. S:** Compound Sentence
- CD-CX. S:** Compound-Complex Sentence
- CX. S:** Complex Sentence
- DE:** Dynamic Equivalence
- DTS:** Descriptive Translation Studies
- FE:** Formal Equivalence
- S. S:** Simple Sentence
- SL:** Source Language
- SLT:** Source Language Text
- ST:** Source Text
- TE:** Translation Equivalence
- TL:** Target Language
- TLT:** Target Language Text
- TT:** Target Text
- UTs:** Units of Translation

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

"Without translation, our world would narrow mercilessly" (Chute, 1978).

"A good translation fulfils its intention" (Newmark, 1988: 192).

1.1 Background

It is widely agreed to be the case that translation and translation studies have never had it so good. Over the last two or three decades, translation has become a more prolific, more visible and more respectable activity than perhaps ever before. And alongside translation itself, a new field of academic study has come into existence, initially called Translatology (but not for long) which is now changed into Translation Studies, and it has gathered remarkable academic momentum. There has of course always been translation, for almost as long as there has been literature.

Translation Studies is therefore a new discipline which is concerned with the study of theory and phenomena of translation. A classical concern for translation theory which is frequently mentioned in older literature on the subject is the level at which equivalence should be established, i.e. what units of translation one should choose during the translation process.

The concept of UT (unit of translation) has been an essential issue not only in translation theory over the last years, but also in modern translation studies and there is hardly any other concept in translation theory which has produced as many contradictory statements and has set off as many attempts at an adequate, comprehensive definition as the notion of UT between SLT (source language text) and TLT (target language text).

In this light, Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/95) maintain that for any science, one of the essential and often the most controversial preliminary steps is defining the units with

which to operate (cited in Hatim and Munday, 2004: 137). This is equally true of translation, where until recently attention was concentrated on words, as if these segments of the utterance were so obvious that they did not require definition. It is axiomatic that, despite its apparent convenience, the word on its own is unsuitable for consideration as the basis for a unit of translation. It is unlikely, however, that this concept can be discarded altogether: after all, in written language, utterances are divided into words by blank spaces and dictionaries are compiled on the principle of such units as words (ibid).

We are henceforth faced with the problem of defining units, something de Saussure spent a lot of time searching. In fact, in the first discussing of the word as a possible unit of translation, Viny and Darbelnet (1958/1995) draw on Saussure's key concepts of the linguistic sign, defined by the signifier (sound-image or word) and signified (concept). They define the unit of translation as "the smallest segment of an utterance whose cohesion of signs is such that they must not be separately translated – in other words, the minimal stretch of language that has to be translated together, as one unit" (cited in Newmark, 1988: 5). According to Hatim and Munday (2004: 137), what makes us hesitate about adopting the word as a unit of translation is that the double structure of the sign no longer seems clear to us, and the signifier takes on a more important role than the signified.

Translators start from the meaning and carry out all translation procedures within the semantic field. They therefore need a unit which is not merely defined by formal criteria, since their work involves form only at the beginning and the end of their task. In this light, the unit that has to be identified is a unit of thought and lexicological unit, taking into account that translators do not translate words, but

ideas and feelings (Vinay and Darbelnet 1958/1995, cited in Hatim and Munday 2004: 18).

However, to Newmark (1988: 54-55), there is at present a confusing tendency for translation theorists to regard the whole text as the unit of translation (UT), which is the opposite of Vinay and Darbelnet's original concept. He further asserts that the text can rather be described as the ultimate court of appeal. Besides, for Lotman (1975: 47), text is the basic unit of translation; he indicates that we all seem to agree that the text as an 'isolated, self-contained semiotic formation' is the basic unit of translation.

Very broadly speaking, translation is a process of extracting the meaning of a source text (ST), and rendering it by means of the language units and structures of a target language (TL), preserving (ideally) its message/communicative goal. Hence, extracting the meaning and identifying the message of a text are two aspects of understanding it, of making sense of it. This ability builds upon the ability to decode its linguistic structure and comprises a basic prerequisite for coping with the task of rendering it into another language. But understanding a text does not automatically result in an ability to recreate it in a different language. The process of understanding and creative thinking itself involves translation (Lotman, 1975: 37).

So we are faced with a situation where translation is impossible. For the results are not precise translations, but approximate equivalences determined by the cultural-psychological and semiotic context common to both systems, this kind of "illegitimate", imprecise, but approximate translation is one of the most important features of any creative thinking (ibid).

As far as Baker (2001: 286) is concerned, the clause seems a sensible structure to be

regarded as translation unit, because it tends to be at clause level that language represents events, and because the differences between languages are more marked at the lower levels (Catford 1965, Toury 1986, cited in Baker, 2001: 286). In addition, the clause is a manageable unit of attentional focus, and it is the "smallest linguistic structure realizing propositions" (Isham and Lane 1993, cited in *ibid*). It is therefore at clause level that translation 'sense for sense' is most likely to relate to translation 'structure by structure' (*ibid*). Yet, she claims that target texts in which the units are larger appear more acceptable than those in which the units are smaller (*ibid*).

According to Newmark (1988: 30-31), normally you translate sentence by sentence (not breath-group by breath-group), running the risk of not paying enough attention to the sentence-join. If the translation of a sentence has no problems, it is based firmly on literal translation, plus virtually automatic and spontaneous transpositions and shifts, changes in word order, etc. He further argues that "since the sentence is the basic unit of thought, presenting an object and what it does, is, or is affected by, so the sentence is, in the first instance, your unit of translation, even though you may later find many SL and TL correspondences within that sentence" (31).

To investigate unit(s) of translation that the translator chooses during the translation process, one needs to establish a relation of equivalence between the ST and the TT. The concept of equivalence has been one of the key words in translation studies. In earlier work on translation equivalence, Catford (1965: 20) defines translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)". He distinguishes textual equivalence from formal correspondence. The former is "any TL text or portion of text which is

observed on a particular occasion to be the equivalent of a given SL text or portion of text" and the latter is "any TL category (unit, class, structure, element of structure, etc.) which can be said to occupy, as nearly as possible, the same place in the economy of the TL as the given SL category occupies in the SL"(Catford, 1965: 27).

It is worth mentioning, however, that departures from formal correspondence between the source and target texts denote Translation Shifts (ibid: 73), the investigation of which has a long-standing tradition in translation studies. In other words, shifts are deviations or changes that occur at every level during the translation process as a result of the systemic differences between the source and target languages.

Despite major shifts of viewpoint on translation, one of the oldest as well as the most decried conflicts in translation has been the concept of literal versus free translation, or the distinction between word-for-word translation and sense-for-sense translation. The controversy over "literal" versus "free" translation has a long history, with convincing supporters on each side. There is nothing wrong in any of these stances. When translators emphasize free translation they never deny the possibility of literal translation, and vice versa. Problems only arise when the discussion turns to units of translation and equivalent translations.

Literalism, in brief, refers to the translation of the primary meaning of each individual word while retaining all the syntactic features of the source-language text. It ranges from morpheme-for-morpheme translation, word-for-word translation, phrase-for-phrase translation, to clause-for-clause translation. The smaller the unit, the greater the literalness. Free translation, on the other hand, simply reproduces the content without the form of the original. It ranges from paraphrase, adaptation, to

rewriting.

This study sets out, amid above-mentioned points, a method for the comparison of ST and TT pairs: identifying the relationships between the coupled pairs of ST and TT segments and establishing equivalence and attempting generalizations about the underlying concept of unit of translation to explore what UT is most frequently adopted by the professional literary translators and to argue the relationship between the UTs and the free-literal dichotomy in terms of the occurrence of unit/rank shifts or changes in the UTs in the move from the ST to the TT.

1.2 Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

One of the recurring problems in translation studies is the definition of the notion of "translation unit", the magic text segment that every translator instinctively chooses as the right length for such a complex mental and verbal elaboration. Kirsten Malmkjær, in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (Baker, 2001: 286-288), summarizes the situation: the length of the text segment used as a working unit varies according to the degree of linguistic competence of the actualizer, spanning from the single word to whole sentences. And the readability of a translated text depends on the length of the translation unit used: the shorter it is, the less readable the resulting text. Stated by Luo (1999: 5), the unit in translation is a hard nut to crack, and without solving this problem no research in translation studies will ever be sufficient. To date, very few people have focused their research on this area (ibid). In this study, the notion of "Translation Unit" refers to the TT unit that can be mapped onto a ST unit (Baker, 2001: 286). To W. Haas, it is "as short as possible, as long as necessary" (cited in Newmark, 1988:54).