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Translation as Cross-Language Frames

A Semantic-Frame Analysis of the Translation of Cultural Elements in Sonallah Ibrahim's *Zaat*, Bahaa' Taher's *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery*, and Khaled Alkhamisi's *Taxi*

PhD Dissertation

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Summary

The present research examines the manner in which cognitive linguistics may be utilized to account for (un)translatability, namely that of cultural elements in literary texts. It is concerned with how a translator would, knowingly or otherwise, employ cognitive processes related to frame reference in the process of translation. Whether the TT frame corresponds to the ST frame plays an integral role in defining the closeness of the translation to the original. The study should, therefore, help in defining the choices made by the translators in translating such items as products of cognitive processes rather than idiosyncratic decisions. The hypothesis is based on the researcher's assumption that a translated text should evoke a similar semantic frame in the mind of the TL reader to the one that the original evokes in the mind of the SL reader, even if the SL frame in non-existent in the TL, in which case reading the TL text either becomes a learning experience involving adding new frames to the TL reader's linguistic and encyclopedic repertoires, a departure from the prevalent post-colonialist trend of domestication and translator's invisibility, or otherwise use a frame that already exists in the SL, thus domesticating the TT. The study, in the cognitive semantic sense, examines the problems that may arise from the fact that the frames involved in the two languages are essentially different. In addition, it assumes the stance that, due to the fact that each SL unit is represented by layers of frames rather than simply one single frame, it is expected that, more often than not, some of these frames may be more problematic than the others, which could be used to account for the different degrees of untranslatability exhibited by certain terms.

The frame model employed in this study is based on the one presented by Rojo (2002a), although it does attempt to reclassify and reorganize the original model in response to the larger data set. It covers four of the original five categories suggested by Rojo: SOCIAL frames, PERCEPTUAL frames (originally visual frames in Rojo 2002a), GENERIC frames, and TEXTUAL

frames (originally text type frames). SITUATIONAL frames are not part of this study due to the lack of data representing them in the data set.

The study consists of five chapters and a conclusion, which may be summarized as follows:

Chapter One: Introduction:

The introduction highlights the technical aspect of the dissertation (context of the study, scope and limitations, data collection and analysis methods, a review of relevant literature, and research questions.

Chapter Two: Social Frames:

The chapter highlights examples of the social frames found in the data collected from the three texts; the sub-frames are:

(1) Interpersonal frames

(2) Geographic frames

(3) Social status frames

(4) Institutional frames

Chapter Three: Perceptual Frames:

The chapter highlights examples of the perceptual frames found in the data collected from the three texts; the sub-frames are:

(1) Visual frames

(2) Auditory frames

Chapter Four: Generic Frames:

The chapter highlights examples of the generic frames found in the data collected from the three texts; the sub-frames are:

(1) Grammatical gender frames

(2) Jargon frames

Chapter Five: Textual Frames:

The chapter highlights examples of the textual frames found in the data collected from the three texts; the sub-frames are:

(1) Text type frames

(2) Rhetorical frames

The study reached the conclusion that the different degrees of untranslatability may be accounted for by the fact that frames overlap to the point where it is expected for any given term to be represented by multiple frame references, in which case the term becomes more translatable, in theory, the more of its frames are individually translatable. This relative translatability is reliant upon the importance of the untranslatable frames, where one must account for the differences between frames indicating literal and figurative meaning, as well as cultural discrepancies between SL and TL.

Translation as Cross-Language Frames

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Abstract

The present research examines the manner in which cognitive linguistics may be utilized to account for (un)translatability, namely that of cultural elements in literary texts. It is concerned with how a translator would, knowingly or otherwise, employ cognitive processes related to frame reference in the process of translation. The study should, therefore, help in defining the choices made by the translators in translating such items as products of cognitive processes rather than idiosyncratic decisions. The hypothesis is based on the researcher's assumption that a translated text should evoke a similar semantic frame in the mind of the TL reader to the one that the original evokes in the mind of the SL reader, even if the SL frame in non-existent in the TL, in which case reading the TL text either becomes a learning experience involving adding new frames to the TL reader's linguistic and encyclopedic repertoires or otherwise a frame that already exists in the SL is used.

The corpus consists of examples taken within their contexts from three modern Egyptian novels: *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery*, *Zaat*, and *Taxi*.

The frame model employed in this study is based on the one presented by Rojo (2002a), although it does attempt to reclassify and reorganize the original model in response to the larger data set. It covers four of the original five categories suggested by Rojo: SOCIAL frames, PERCEPTUAL frames (originally VISUAL frames in Rojo 2002a), GENERIC frames, and TEXTUAL

frames (originally TEXT TYPE frames). Situational frames are not part of this study due to the lack of data representing them in the data set. In this sense, the study aims to answer three main research questions: (a) How can the link between cognitive linguistics and translation provide a tool for the analysis of translatability? (b) What are the cognitive properties associated with the translation of culturally-motivated terms from Arabic into English? (c) How do semantic frame overlaps account for the existence of multiple levels of translatability?

The study reached the conclusion that the different degrees of untranslatability may be accounted for by the fact that frames overlap to the point where it is expected for any given term to be represented by multiple frame references, in which case the term becomes more translatable, in theory, the more of its frames are individually translatable. This relative translatability is reliant upon the importance of the untranslatable frames, where one must account for the differences between frames indicating literal and figurative meaning, as well as cultural discrepancies between SL and TL.

Key terms:

Frame semantics, translatability, cultural terms, language and culture, cognitive linguistics, cognition and translation

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However, none of the above could have become a reality if it were not for my parents; you are my heroes and everything I am is because of you. Thank you for supporting my choice of a theoretically unemployable major and seeing it through until I had three degrees in it. The world may never thank you for it, but I definitely do.

This is, first and foremost, dedicated to the memory of my father, Tarek Zakaria (1955-2017), who would have loved nothing more than to be there but nevertheless had more alluring prospects to pursue.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.   **Context of the Study**

The translation of cultural elements, expressions denoting concepts, entities, or properties that are unique to a certain culture and its manner of expression, presents an issue that seems to almost constantly yield opinions tending toward the conclusion that cultural elements are, to various degrees and for various reasons, untranslatable. However, the absolute untranslatability of cultural elements is disproved by the existence of hundreds of translated texts full of such elements, even though the subjective success rate of these translations may vary. Though quality might be disputed, the fact that they are indeed translations is indisputable. Any text has a degree of untranslatability to it, whether it is cultural or linguistic; it can be claimed, however, that certain elements can never be translated adequately due to the limited existence of equivalent or, less ambitiously, similar semantic frames in the Source Language (SL), although adequacy remains relative. This study aims at analyzing the translation of cultural elements in three modern Egyptian novels: Sunallah Ibrahim's *Zaat,* Khaled Alkhamissi's *Taxi*, and Baha'a Taher's *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery,* within a frame-semantic model, which sheds some light on the manner in which Frame Semantics contributes to translation. The study is, therefore, based on two premises: that cultural elements carry a certain degree of untranslatability, and that cognitive linguistics, namely frame semantics, can be reconciled with translation studies in order to analyze the cognitive processes involved in interpreting and translating such elements. Its potential contribution to the fields of translation studies and cognitive semantics is an alternative view of the concepts of equivalence and translatability, where frame reference equivalence at the cognitive level could provide an explanation of why and how a certain concept is (un)translatable, and where

(un)translatability falls on an adjustable spectrum rather than being one impossible to translate block of meaning.

2. Scope and Limitations

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined in order to provide further explanation of the scope of the research:

- **Source Language (SL):** SL is defined as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and/or Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA).

- **Target Language (TL):** TL is defined as English.

- **Source Culture (SC):** The culture against which the text is set, i.e. Egyptian culture.

- **Target Culture (TC):** The culture into which the text is transferred, i.e. that of the English-speaking reader [in the case of this study Western culture, as opposed to Egyptian culture].

This study focuses on commercially-published translations, thus facing the need to account for business considerations related to marketability and audience in terms of publishing requirements, and the dearth of the niche market normally targeted by highly technical, complex literary translations. It is, therefore, expected that the decisions made by the translators whose work has been examined for the purpose of this study have been influenced by editor and market views on readability; placed in a commercial setting, the translator and the editor both have much to consider before deciding on the work to be translated and the strategy to translate it, especially in the case of literary translation. Professionally, translators and editors alike should be aware of the needs and limitations of their readers, assessing the

type of expected readership based on such factors in the original text as length, language and literary essence. This poses a considerable problem when it comes to translating culture-specific terms in literary texts. Using footnotes and transliteration produces a longer, more complicated publication. Academically-oriented readers, prepared to pore over detail-laden pages, are far outnumbered by those who are not. As a result, many works end up never being translated to avoid unprofitable publications.

The study does not aspire to judge the stylistic aspects of the translation, but rather restricts its efforts to the examination of the cognitive processes involved in the interpretation of cultural elements through the analysis of the frames involved in both ST and TT. Hence, this study is predominantly concerned with the translator as the producer rather than the translation as a product; it aims to focus on how the human brain interprets texts in order to produce a translation. Similarly, it does not aim at providing a prescriptive framework within which a translator is expected to function, as this would involve the formulation of various overgeneralizations that will, more often than not, be incompatible with most texts.

Another limitation exists due to the properties of the texts from which the data was extracted: of the five frames of reference in the Rojo model, only four are represented in this study. This is due to the fact that the fifth, SITUATIONAL frames, was not adequately represented in the data and, therefore, would not warrant the same research volume as the other four. In addition, the data is, expectedly, not uniformly distributed across the three texts; in some instances, a certain category is represented in one or two texts only, as opposed to being equally represented in all three texts. This is an expected outcome, since the three texts were written by different authors and cover different themes, in which case the three texts complement each other in providing a comprehensive set of data as a whole and not individually. The researcher hopes the present study will lead to further investigation of

SITUATIONAL frames in Arabic-English translation, which would offer a more holistic view of the cognitive processes involved in the translation of literary works.

3. Statement of the Problem

The study is concerned with how a translator would, knowingly or otherwise, employ cognitive processes related to frame reference in the process of translation. Whether the TT frame corresponds to the ST frame plays an integral role in defining the closeness of the translation to the original. The study should, therefore, help in defining the choices made by the translators in translating such items as products of cognitive processes rather than idiosyncratic decisions, albeit based on business considerations and socio-political agendas. The hypothesis is based on the researcher's assumption that a translated text should evoke a similar semantic frame in the mind of the TL reader to the one that the original evokes in the mind of the SL reader, even if the SL frame in non-existent in the TL, in which case reading the TL text either becomes a learning experience involving adding new frames to the TL reader's linguistic and encyclopedic repertoires, a departure from the prevalent post-colonialist trend of domestication and translator's invisibility, or otherwise use a frame that already exists in the SL, hence domesticating the TT. The study, in the cognitive semantic sense, examines the problems that may arise from the fact that the frames involved in the two languages are essentially different. In addition, the study assumes the stance that, due to the fact that each SL unit is represented by layers of frames rather than simply one single frame, it is expected that, more often than not, some of these frames may be more problematic than the others, which could be used to account for the different degrees of untranslatability exhibited by certain terms.

4.   Research Methodology

4.1. The Research Model

The research method adopted in the study is based on Rojo's frame model (2002a and 2002b) which, in turn, was adapted from de Vega's frame reference model (1984). The study employs the same strategy used by Rojo in the aforementioned studies, where frame semantics is utilized to analyze the translation of cultural elements and humor from Spanish into English through dividing the concepts in the ST into a frame typology and comparing it to the frames in the TT. Even though it is the method used in the present study, this study uses a slightly different typology due to the differences between the SLs involved in the two studies and the data sample size, which allowed for an expansion and more detailed classification of the categories involved in the original model. The frame typology modification utilized in this study reflects a similar modification in Rojo's model, where the frame typology used is a modified version of de Vega's typology, resulting in the following frame development:

• **De Vega:**	• **Rojo:**	• **The present study:**
(1) SOCIAL	(1) SOCIAL	(1) SOCIAL
(2) VISUAL	(2) VISUAL	(2) PERCEPTUAL
(3) SELF-CONCEPT	(3) GENERIC	(3) GENERIC
(4) DOMAIN	(4) TEXT TYPE	(4) TEXTUAL
(5) SITUATIONAL	(5) SITUATIONAL	(5) SITUATIONAL

De Vega's frame typology (1984) is one of many models based on frame semantics. De Vega identifies the five most basic frames as VISUAL (frames decoding visual perception, such