بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

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تم رفع هذه الرسالة بواسطة / مني مغربي أحمد

بقسم التوثيق الإلكتروني بمركز الشبكات وتكنولوجيا المعلومات دون أدنى

مسئولية عن محتوى هذه الرسالة.

ملاحظات: لا يوجد

Ain Shams University

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A Corpus-Based Analysis of Connotations in the English Translation of 20 Short Stories by Naguib Mahfouz (1962–1988)

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of M.A. in Translation

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2020

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Connotative meaning has been discussed in many cross-linguistic studies. However, there is no adequate information on the real extent and nature of connotative differences between languages. This thesis explored connotative differences between Arabic and English, through analyzing the words connoting the three themes prevalent in the selected corpus – dejection, violence, and spirituality. This was carried out by means of combining translation studies and corpus linguistics within a framework of systemic functional linguistics – the framework of attitude set in Martin and White's appraisal theory – for an integrated, interdisciplinary study. A corpus-based, quantitative analysis was conducted. Afterward, a complementary, qualitative analysis was carried out. The analysis revealed that the connotative difference between Arabic and English – though indeed big – is not as big as what is normally thought. This should undermine such unrealistic image that might discourage translation practitioners and thus hinder the dissemination of knowledge. Whereas most of such connotative differences were of a cultural nature, the linguistic nuances, which could have gone unnoticed if corpus analysis tools were not used, showed that cultural untranslatability – though more dominant than linguistic untranslatability – is not as dominant as expected, drawing more attention to the significance of linguistic untranslatability.

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Introduction

This introduction establishes the territory for the present study. The study aims at exploring connotative differences between Arabic and English through analyzing a corpus comprising 20 Arabic short stories written by Naguib Mahfouz and translated into English by Denys Johnson-Davies. The translator selected these stories from eight of the author's short story collections that were published in the period from 1962 to 1988, and the translations were compiled in a single collection that was published in 1995. The analysis is conducted using a quantitative-qualitative methodology within the framework of attitude set in Martin and White's appraisal theory. The rest of the introduction will elaborate on the concept of connotation; the objectives of the study; the corpus; and the methodology, in addition to providing a glimpse on the chapterization.

The Concept of Connotation

Connotation is a feeling that gives color to plain words. Unlike denotation, which is the explicit dictionary meaning, connotation is an implied meaning that differs according to contextual factors. Despite being a crucial component of meaning, connotation was labeled by some scholars as "an extralinguistic feature, referring rather to the real world than to any linguistic analysis" (Bullon, 1988, p. 29). It is likewise stated that connotations were not given due attention because "they are often considered to be subjective" (Ranua, 2009, p. 1).

The fact that connotation refers to the "real world" does not make it an "extralinguistic feature." That is because the "real world" means context – and without context, there is no meaning. For this reason, Me'ayesh (2009) says, in his exploration of connotative meaning, that translators must be vigilant to "the relationship between the text and the reality in which it was produced, as well as the reality to which it is being transferred" (Introduction, para. 2).

Moreover, that connotations are "subjective" makes them worthy of attention. According to Lyons, subjectivity means "self-expression in the use of language" (as cited in Bombelli, Soler, & Waasaf, 2013, p. 268). Online product reviews, for example, involve some kind of subjective language that marketers need to scrutinize in order to attain consumer satisfaction and increase their profits. The issue of subjectivity has its weight in translation as well, due to the cultural and linguistic differences between languages, not to mention the cases of mistranslation and bias.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims at exploring connotative differences between Arabic and English in the selected corpus, and testing the hypothesis that cultural untranslatability is the most dominant source of connotative differences. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- How far are the connotations of the source text retained in the target text?
- What are the most significant connotative differences between the source text and the target text?
- What is the reason behind connotative differences (e.g., a cultural pattern or a linguistic pattern)?

And at some stage through the analysis, the selected corpus will be treated as a sample, with the population being both Arabic and English in general, regardless of genre, in order to generalize the findings to the greatest extent possible.

Corpus

In the present study, the English translation of 20 Arabic short stories was chosen for the analysis. The stories were written by Naguib Mahfouz and translated into English by Denys

Johnson-Davies. The translator selected these stories from eight of the author's short story

collections (Mahfouz, 1988/2006, 1969/2007a, 1962/2007b, 1984/2008a, 1982/2008b,

1979/2009a, 1969/2009b, 1965/n.d.) and the translations were compiled in a single collection

entitled *The Time and the Place and Other Stories* (Mahfouz, 1995). The metadata for this

corpus is displayed in Table 1 below.

This corpus serves the objectives of the study for a number of reasons. Newmark

(1988/2003) points out that outside the realm of literature denotative meaning is usually

prioritized over connotative meaning (p.16). Literature is a fertile linguistic environment full of

feelings in general and implicit feelings, or connotations, in particular. And the fact that there is

more than one piece provides a greater diversity of connotative meanings. This is in addition to

the privilege specific to the selected corpus, which is being a product of Naguib Mahfouz and

Denys Johnson-Davies.

The privilege of the Arabic part of the corpus lies in the characteristic features of the

works of Mahfouz. The events of a literary work by Mahfouz normally take place in an Egyptian

setting. Through his depiction of the Egyptian environment, he tackles a variety of themes and

portrays characters from different walks of life. Moreover, Mahfouz's writing style is

characterized by heavily depending on Modern Standard Arabic rather than the Egyptian dialect.

But, meanwhile, his language is not that formal. In an interview published on the YouTube

channel of the American University in Cairo (2011), Johnson-Davies says that Mahfouz is not

one of those writers who like to show off their skills and use complicated vocabulary and that his

language is close to the colloquial language, which is his privilege. This should further enhance

the connotative diversity of the corpus, and make it easier to generalize the findings to genres

other than literature.