

## An Analysis of Translation Methods for English Proverbs: Literal, Literary or Substitution

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### Abstract

*How to effectively translate proverbs has always been a difficulty to certain extent, due to its close relation to cultural aspects since it belongs to the genre of the traditional verbal folklore. This study provides an analysis of the translation methods to render proverbs with the minimum loss possible in the proverb connotative meaning.*

**Keywords:** proverbs, literal, literary, substitution, equivalence

### Introduction

Proverbs are 'special, fixed, unchanged phrases which have special, fixed, unchanged meanings' (Ghazala, 1995: 138). They represent the history and culture, an important component of the nation's color. The traditional function of them is didactic, as they contain 'wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views' (Mieder, 2004: 3).

Proverbs in one language may have equivalents in another language however, even if a linguistic equivalent exists, there may be still a cultural difference involved. Such a difference is likely to be translated by given a cultural equivalent. It is best to aim for equivalence between the proverb standing within the context of the source culture and the target culture. Also proverbs with some social customs should not be rendered directly. It might help to find an approximate to keep the intended message of the proverb as it shall be seen later.

### The Characteristics of Proverbs

Nida (1985) notes that 'proverbs are special metaphoric expressions and the translator should know the proverbial concepts in both source language SL/target language TL' which means to bear in mind their similarities and differences. Rowland (1926), on the other hand, states that proverbs 'stick in the mind, build up vocabulary and illustrate admirably the phraseology and

idiomatic expressions of the foreign tongue'. So they are a teaching device of encouragement, enlightenment and noble thoughts:

Opportunity knocks only once

الفرصة لا تأتي مرتين

Charity begins at home

الأقربون أولى بالمعروف

Time is gold

الوقت من ذهب, الوقت ثمين

As proverbs are universal, there are analogous proverbs in both English and Arabic, ones that have related culture patterns:

Like father, like son

الولد سر أبيه, من شابه اياه فما ظلم

Man is known by the company he keeps

المرء يعرف بأقرانه, المرء بخليته

No smoke without fire

لا دخان من دون نار

Too many cooks spoil the broth

كثرة الطباخين تحرق الطبخة, كثرة الربان تغرق السفينة

Such proverbs have no problem in rendering to another language because they share the same cultural context. English and Arabic proverbs as they sometimes share the same meaning as it is illustrated in the previous examples, they also differ in many characteristics such as religion, deep moral, metaphorical images, unique geographical and ethnic characteristics.

### 1 Cultural and Traditional Customs

Features like culture and traditional customs are very difficult to deal with in rendering from one language to another specially if we want to keep the original proverb's form and taste. In fact, culture 'will always be more productive and effective than a focus on abstract linguistic structures or cultural conventions' (Robinson, 1977: 128). Moreover, because of the religious beliefs, habits, customs, myth and culture, English and Arabic proverbs will carry different connotations. Knowing the cultural background can help to make us understand the cultural connotations to render them accurately:

A leopard never changes its spots

= الفهد لا يغير بقلعه أبدا (literal)

= الطبع غلب التطبع, من شب على شيء شاب عليه = (literary)

One man's meat is another man's poison

= لحمة شخص ما قد تكون سماً بالنسبة لشخص آخر = (literal)

= مصائب قوم عند قوم فوائد = (literary)

carrying coals to Newcastle

= يحمل الفحم الى نيوكاسل = (literally)

= يبيع الماء في حارة السقاين = (Literary/ Egyptian Colloquial Proverb)

Such proverbs cannot be rendered literally because they will lose their semantic content We have to bring a similar proverb in the other language that serves the same proverb idea. Here, the Arabic proverbs given above preserve the equivalent content.

## 2 Religion

The rendering process of religious proverbs would be either literary because they have a literary origin (Gopalakrishnan, 2005: 1) as in the case of the adaptation by Benjamin Franklin of Aesop's proverb *God helps those who help themselves*, or to find an Arabic equivalent proverb or phrase. Bearing in mind that the receiver of the English proverb differs from that of Arabic since there are many proverbs, which refer to God, heaven devil, hell, etc. in Christianity religion book (Bible), that differ from that found in Qur'anic contexts:

Man proposes and God disposes

= الانسان ينوي والله يقدر = (literally)

{تقدرون و تضحك الاقدار, انت تريد وانا اريد والله يفعل ما يريد,

قوله تعالى: ((ولا تقل اني فاعل ذلك غدا الا ان يشاء الله)) = (literary)

Two heads are better than one

= رأسان افضل من رأس واحد = (literally)

= قوله تعالى: ((و أمرهم شورى بينهم)), (ما خاب من استشار), (الدين نصيحة) = (literary)

Talk of the devil and he will appear

= تحدث عن الشيطان و سوف يظهر لك = (literally)

= جبنه سيرة القط جبه ينط (Egyptian colloquial proverb)

God helps those who help themselves

= الله يساعد اولئك الذين يساعدون انفسهم = (literally)

= اسع يا عبد وانا اسع معاك (Egyptian colloquial proverb)

= قوله تعالى: ((إن الله لا يغير ما بقوم حتى يغيروا ما بأنفسهم)) = (literary)

It is clear from this that, on the evaluative dimension, such literary rendering though affects the source lexical form, yet preserves a broader semantic form. And for a translator, it is this

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dimension of semantic form which is must to be sought for. For to shift from one language to another is, 'by definition, to alert the forms' (Bell, 1991: 6).

### 3 Historical Stories and Literary Works

Every nation has its own cultural and historical unique literary works. For example, in Britain, people are greatly influenced by some literary works such as Shakespeare's and many proverbs are originated from his work:

All that glitters is not gold.

[Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Act II, Scene 7]

(Functional meaning): not everything we see is what it truly appears to be

= ليس كل ما يلمع ذهباً (literally)

Beware of the Greeks bearing gifts.

(Functional meaning): a reference to the Trojan Horse

= احذر من اليونانيين الذين يحملون الهدايا (literally)

Even Homer sometimes nods.

(Functional meaning): all people are fallible

= حتى هوميروس يخطئ احيانا (literally)

= كلنا معرضون للوقوع في الخطأ، جل من لا يسهر (literary)

Don't put the cart before the horse.

[CF. Dan Michael of Northgate]

(Functional meaning): doing things in their correct order

= لا تشتري العربة قبل الحصان (literally)

= اعمل الاشياء بترتيبها الصحيح (literary)

Another proverb similar to it:

Set the plough before the oxen

يشترى المحراث قبل الثور

The translator must be aware of such historical tradition of linguistics. That is to go beyond the connotative meaning of the proverb and deal with the proverbial concepts as pragmatic meanings based on SL and TL socio-cultural similarities and differences of the two languages.

### 4 Style and Phonic Markers

Sometimes we find that the style of a proverb is melodic which reflect people's patterns of thought in a rhythmic imagery. Arora (1995: 7) has defined certain stylistic features that are applicable on proverbs which are as follow:

Alliteration: (**P**ractice makes **p**erfect)

Parallelism: (Nothing ventured, nothing gained)

Rhyme: (No **pain**, No **gain**)

Ellipsis: (Once bitten, twice shy)

She also proposed some internal features of proverbs which are as follow:

Exaggeration: (All is fair in love and war)

Paradox: (Easy **come**, Easy **go**)

Personification: (Hunger is the best cook)

These include phonic markers such as alliteration, rhyme and meter we can either render them literary or try to reproduce a similar phonic marker as that found in the original proverb:



The same issue holds true for the semantic markers such as: parallelism, irony, and paradox:

Easy come, easy go

ما يأتي بسهولة, يذهب بسهولة

The more things change, the more they stay the same

كلما حدثت تغيرات كلما بقي الحال كما هو عليه

For there to be peace there must first be war

كان لابد للسلام أن يخلق من رحم الحرب\*

Another stylistic feature can be found at the lexical marker, that is, the 'archaic words' as in the following proverb:

Owt for nowt

This was used by 'Norther English' which means:

Anything for nothing

اعطاء أي شيء مقابل لا شيء

According to Robinson (1997), the study of translation is an integral part of intercultural relations. And from all the examples that have been illustrated, we can say that a translator needs to know SL and TL cultures and its relations to their religion, customs, languages, geographical and historical places, and all aspects of cultural background of both languages. Generally speaking, all these components should be taking into consideration in rendering proverbial expressions from the SL into the TL.

## Translation Methods

Before we can establish the legitimacy of the translation process, we must identify the goal of translation which is to transfer the meaning of a text from one language to another language. It has been clarified that if the translator does not master the English cultural backgrounds, he/she will not be able to understand the proverbs' true meanings and connotations. So according to the different characteristics of proverbs in both languages, three translation methods are to be adopted:

### 1 Literal Translation Method

The goal of a literal translation is to reproduce the form of the source text as much as possible into the target text since no translation is 'ever too literal or too close to the original' (Newmark, 1988: 137). In other words, the translator stays with one-to-one correspondence until it is necessary to alter this for the sake of meaning (Strauss, 2005: 156). Some English and Arabic proverbs have the same meaning and do not have a specific cultural reference. That is why they can be rendered literally:

A bird in the hand worthies two in the bush

عصفور في اليد خير من اثنين عشرة على الشجرة

Out of sight, out of mind

البعيد عن العين, بعيد عن (البال) القلب

A thief thinks everyone steals

الاص يرى الكل لصوصا

The calm comes before the storm

الهدوء الذي يسبق العاصفة

Love is blind

الحب اعمى

No smoke without fire

لا دخان من دون نار

Make a mountain out of a molehill

يخلق من الحبة قبة

This method retains the original image of the proverb by adding the appropriate translation in a way that does not give the reader an error in receiving the message of the proverb.

## 2 Literary (Free) Translation Method

Landers (2001: 55) states that the goal behind translation is not to render what the SL author writes but what he/she meant. Some proverbs cannot be rendered literally because they tend to have a figurative image meaning and in order to render it literary, the translator must understand this figurative meaning:

Patience is virtue

= الصبر فضيلة (Literal)

= الصبر مفتاح الفرج (Literary)

Actions speak louder than words

= الاقوال تتحدث اعلى من الافعال (literal)

= لا خير في الاقوال دون افعال (literary)

A good enemy is better than a false friend

= العدو الجيد احسن من الصديق المدعي (literal)

= احذر عدوك مرة و صديقك ألف مرة .. فإن انقلب الصديق فهو أعلم بالمضرة (literary)

Don't cross the bridge before you come to it

- = لا تعبر الجسر قبل ان تصل اليه (literal)  
= لكل حادث حديث, لكل مقام مقال (literary)

Forbidden fruit is sweet

- = الفاكهة المحرمة حلوة (literal)  
= أحب شيء الى الانسان ما منع عنه, كل ما هو ممنوع مرغوب (literary)

Green leaves and brown leaves fall from the same tree

- = الاوراق الخضراء و البنية تقعان من نفس الشجرة (literal)

Or It takes both rain and sunshine to make rainbows

- = قوس القزح يتطلب وجود المطر و الشمس معا حتى يحدث (literal)  
= قوله تعالى: (( ان مع العسر يسرا)), فأن تصاريف الزمان عجيبة .. يوما ترى يسرا و يوما ترى عسرا (literary)

Prevention is better than cure

- = الحرمان افضل من العلاج (literal)  
= درهم وقاية خير من ألف علاج, الوقاية خير من العلاج (literary)

Time flies

- = الوقت يطير (literal)  
= الوقت كالسيف ان لم تقطعه قطعك (literary)

Two heads are better than one

- = رأسان افضل من رأس واحد (literal)  
= اذا صدأ الرأي, أصقلته المشورة (literary)

Money talks

- = النقود تتكلم (literal)  
= الدراهم مراهم, رأيت الناس قد مالو .. الى من عنده مال (literary)

The beauty is in the eye of the beholder

- = الجمال في عين ناظره (literal)  
= القرد في عين أمه غزال (literary)

Let bygones be bygones

- = دع ما مضى يكون مضى (literal)  
= عفا الله عما سلف, ما فات مات (literary)

Half a loaf is better than no bread

- = نصف رغيف افضل من لا خبز (literal)  
= الرمد خير من العمى (literary)



Better to be safe than sorry

= (literal) الافضل ان تكون سالما من ان تندم

= (literary) وفي التآني السلامة و في العجلة الندامة, من اسرع كثر عثاره

When in Rome, do as the Romans do

= (literal) عندما تكون في روما افعل كما يفعل الرومانيون

= (literary) أهل مكة ادرى بشعابها

Those who live in glass houses should not throw people with stones

= (literal) من يعيش في بيت زجاجي يجب ان لا يرمي الناس بالحجارة

اذا كان بيتك من زجاج فلا ترمي الناس بالحجارة,

= (literary) ارى كل انسان يرى عيب غيره .. و يعمى عن العيب الذي هو فيه

Silence is golden

= (literal) السكوت ذهب

السكوت من ذهب, خير الكلام ما قل و دل, اذا تم العقل نقص الكلام,

اذا كان الكلام من فضة فالسكوت من ذهب,

أحمد البلاغة الصمت حين لا يحسن الكلام,

= (literary) رحم الله امرأ تكلم فغنم و سكت فسلم

The best method to be used for such proverbs is this method because it seizes the meaning of the proverb and recreate another figurative image and hence help readers to better understand the original proverb.

### 3 Substitution (Equivalence) Translation Method

This method can be considered a subdivision of the free translation method. It is frequently adopted when the content of the proverb is related to a SL cultural or lexical reference and has no equivalent in another language yet can be substituted with a cultural or lexical items that have, as close as possible, the same meaning as that found in the source proverb. According to Catford (1965), when the lexical substitutes are unavailable in the TL, equivalence is not achieved at all. When the translator comes across such a problem of not finding a corresponding TL equivalent to the source proverb, the best method to be followed is to resort to a non-corresponding equivalent function in the TL culture:

As wise as an owl

حكيم كلقمان

To sell coals to Newcastle

بييع الماء في حارة السفايين

According to Robinson (1997: 128), 'culture will always be more productive and effective than a focus on abstract linguistic structures or cultural conventions'. Nord (1991: 7), on the other hand,

believes in 'cultural-bound linguistic signs' and notes that 'both the source and target texts are determined by the communicative situation in which they serve to convey a message': 'as wise as an owl'

It is noticed from this example that there is a gap between the two languages regarding the cultural aspect of the proverb. The proverb, in English the word 'owl' stands for wisdom indicating a positive connotation while in Arabic culture it indicates a negative connotation referring to a 'bad omen'. In this case the translator seeks to substitute the word 'owl' with a symbol of wisdom that has the same impact in Arabic culture:

(حكيم كلقمان)

As for the example of 'Newcastle' which is a city full of coal, so it is useless to carry coal to it. We can substitute this proverb with a similar proverb that holds the same meaning since there is a shared concept between the proverb equivalents in SL and TL:

بيبع الماء في حارة السقايبين (حارة يبيعون فيها الماء) = يحمل الفحم الى نيوكاسل (مدينة تحتوي على الفحم)

Such rendering not only provides a complete transmission of the idea of the proverb, but also it functions the same effect on the TL receivers as it did on the SL ones.

## Conclusion

Proverbs are the transmission of people's linguistic phrases and cultural manners from one generation into another. That's why the treatment of rendering proverbs must be careful, precise, and not to be expected literally. Not to forget to take into account the proverb cultural, religious, historical background to use the appropriate translation method, hence, achieving a balance between form and content, and also rendering the information the proverb wants to give successfully into the other language without losing the essence of the its meaning.

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**Notes:**

1. \* The researcher's own poetry.
2. The Arabic poetry examples are taken from:  
- جليس المتأمل, د. شوقي ناجي, (2000), الجزء الاول.  
- قاموس الامثال الانجليزية و العربية, دار و مكتبة الهلال, بيروت, (1987).