

## Translation of Culture-bound Items: A Case Study of the Movie "*sensitive floor*"

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### ABSTRACT

Culture-bound elements are of great significance in translation, especially when it comes to translating popular media, such as movies. The present study investigated strategies and techniques used in translating expressions containing culture-bound elements in the English subtitle of the Iranian movie, "*طبقه حساس*" (*Sensitive Floor*), Crystal Simorgh Award winner for best actor in the Fajr Film Festival and Grand Cinema of Iran, in 2014. Based on Pedersen's (2005) taxonomy, Persian sentences and expressions which contained culture-bound items were extracted and compared with their English counterparts in the subtitles. The results of the analyses revealed that out of the 40 culture-bound items extracted, 15 used source language oriented strategies (including 4 retention, 2 specification, 9 direct translation) and 25 used target language oriented strategies (including 7 generalization, 8 substitution and 10 omission). It was also concluded that direct translation and omission of cultural expressions could result in strange meanings and consequently, misunderstanding of the message by the audience in the target language community and should be avoided whenever possible.

## INTRODUCTION

How can we translate culture bound items? This is a question which may come to one's mind whenever accosted by an expression which has no direct equivalent in the target language. Actually they have specific meanings in a culture and language from which they arise but not necessarily in others. The present movie is full of such expressions that every translator doubt if it does make sense for the target audience or does it need to be localized and replaced with a more familiar equivalent.

"For a start, films are distributed worldwide and through so many different media that some of them reach an enormous and extremely diverse audience within the very first months after their release. Film's propensity to travel means that the cultural references used to give shape to the story also travel extensively. Indeed, films continue to circulate long after their first launch and are often re-translated. Subsequent translations have greater time gaps to span. Furthermore, film semiotics is an important factor since both the visual and sound systems of a film

contribute to the way it gives shape to its source culture or cultures, and foregrounds subtitling's vulnerability. In short, cinema's cultural diversity presents translators with a world of challenges." Diaz Cintas (2007, P. 200).

Since the need for translating movies arised, the demand for cultural transmission came to fore. Most of the time it is impossible to translate a movie or even a book without paying attention to its culture-bound items. Culture-bound items have always been difficult to translate and interesting to analyze at the same time. One of the strong points of the movie which is selected to study, was the translation of culture-bound items. So it became a motivation for the present researcher to choose this issue for the study. This study was intended to identify the strategies used while translating the Movie "*Sensitive Floor*" And to analyze them to reach a conclusion to know which strategy was used for each element and which one was used more than others. As a result of doing so, the study makes a contribution to the discussion of the way that culture-bound elements should be translated.

The chosen sample is a comedy film, directed by Kamal Tabrizi. The examples are the original transcripts of the movie and the classification, based on an integral model presented by Pedersen (2005). So, the study gains significance due to its well documented facts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Culture-bound items

Culture-bound terms are extra linguistic references to items that are tied up with a country's culture, history, or geography, and tend therefore to pose serious translation challenges. They are also referred to as cultural references, realia, and, more recently, ECRs or extra linguistic cultural-bound references (Pedersen, 2011, cited in Cintas, 2007).

### Subtitle

According to Diaz Cintas (2007, p.8) "subtitling may be defined as a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavours to recount the original dialogue of the speakers, as well as the discursive elements that appear in the image (letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, placards, and the like), and the information that is contained on the soundtrack (songs, voices off)."

Newmark (1988, p.78) points out that "translation problems caused by culture-specific words arise due to the fact that they are intrinsically and uniquely bound to the culture concerned and, therefore, are related to the context of a cultural tradition." There are many ways to categorize culture-specific items, for instance Newmark (1988, p.78) " talks of five areas that cultural items may come from: (1) ecology (flora, fauna, winds, ETC.), (2) material culture (artifacts food clothes houses and towns, transport), (3) social culture (work and leisure), (4) organizations, customs, ideas (political, social, legal, religion or artistic), and (5) gestures and habits." In her article on cultural references and subtitling, Nedergaard-Larsen (1993, p.211) proposes the following main classification: "references to geography, history, society, and culture." The taxonomy given by Vandeweghe (2005, P.40-41) "focuses on three main types: geographic, ethnographic, and social-political references." In a recent article Ramière (2004) distinguishes among extra-linguistic geographical, historical and socio-cultural references. Many alternative groupings are possible and some may be more useful than others for special analyses. The rather detailed version below is largely based on Grit (1997) as discussed in Vandeweghe (2005, P.40-41). "Historically bound references could, in fact, fall under any one of these three headings: Geographical, Ethnographic, Socio-political references."

So it can be concluded that each of these scholars might have his/her own way of categorizing culture-bound elements. But what matters here is that you should choose the one which best fits your aim of study.

As was mentioned before, translating culture-bound elements has always been a challenging issue. Some subtitlers tend to omit the word or expressions when there is no way to convey the meaning in the target culture. For example Diaz Cintas (2007) names a situation in which the expression has a humorous sense and the translator might prefer to simply omit it but as he puts it, "respecting the culture-bound references does not mean that faithfulness to the ST must be complete and the degree to which subtitlers expect their audiences to know culture-bound items varies considerably from country to country." Diaz Cintas (2007, p.217)

Based on the previous studies and as a result of watching several Persian movies, subtitled into English, it seems that in dealing with culture specific items most of the time the exact meaning of the expressions doesn't actually exist and translators tend to omit the SL word or expression in the target text. As Diaz Cintas states (2007, p.162) "omissions or deletions are unavoidable in subtitling but before deciding to omit, subtitlers must ask themselves: will the viewers still be able to understand the message or scene without too much of an effort, and will they not misunderstand it? Subtitlers must become experts in distinguishing what is essential from what is ancillary. The results of the study will identify the correctness of the presuppositions. "

## METHODOLOGY

The sample is a case study of an Iranian movie, subtitled into English. As was mentioned, the study was aimed at extracting culture-bound items of the movie above-mentioned and identifying the strategies used by the translator in the subtitle of the movie based on the theoretical model presented by Pedersen (2005) Based on this model, culture-bound elements are divided into two major types: extralinguistic and intralinguistic. Extralinguistic culture bound elements is subdivided into two parts, source oriented and target oriented.

Source language-oriented strategy consists of three subcategories:

1. **Retention:** retention is the most source-oriented strategy, as it allows an element from the SC to enter the TT. Sometimes the retained ECR is

marked off from the rest of the TT by quotes and occasionally by italics. The ECR can also be adjusted slightly to meet TL conventions, for instance by adjusting the spelling or dropping an article.

**2. Specification:** Specification means retaining the ECR in its untranslated form, but adding information that is not present in the ST, making the TT ECR more specific than the ST ECR. This is done in one of two ways: either through Completion or Addition. I have chosen to name this category Specification to show its relation to its sister category, Generalization. Another common term for this type of strategy is explicitation (which I used in the first versions of this taxonomy (Pedersen 2003a)). Many translation scholars use explicitation in a broader way, however, and apply it to all categories that are used to intervene and explain an ST item. I have therefore avoided that term as a label for a specific strategy, as many scholars (e.g. Chesterman 1997, p.71) tend to use it more generally. In that usage, Specification would certainly be explicitation, but so would certain instances of e.g. Generalization.

**2.1. Explicitation:** this strategy involves making the cultural word or expression explicit or spelling out anything that is implicit in the source text.

**2.2. Addition:** By using this strategy, the translator gives guidance to the target audience by adding some extra information.

**3. Direct translation:** The strategy of Direct Translation could hardly be applied to most proper names, but it is not uncommon for rendering the names that are constructed of common nouns, and which thus have compositional sense which can be translated. Examples of these are the names of companies, official institutions, technical gadgetry etc. Chesterman (1997, p. 94) has two strategies called strategies "calque" and "literal translation". The term Direct Translation is used here to cover both their levels of literalness. Target language-oriented strategy consists of three subcategories:

**1. Generalization:** Replacing the specific with the general. The strategy of Generalization entails replacing an ECR referring to something specific by something more general. This is done in one of two ways. It can be done by exploiting sense relations in the form of hyponymy and thus replacing the ST ECR with a Superordinate Term. Alternatively, it can be done through the use of a Paraphrase, where the ST ECR is replaced by a phrase which is generally longer, but more or less synonymic, apart from being less specific

**2. Substitution:** Replacing culture (with culture) This strategy involves removing the ST ECR and replacing it with something else, either a different ECR from the SC or the TC (Cultural Substitution), or something completely different that fits the situation (Situational Substitution).

**2.1. Cultural substitution:** There is still a link between the ST ECR and its TT rendering. In a more marked form, the ST ECR is replaced by a TC ECR. This is the most domesticating (cf. Venuti 1995, p. 19–20) of all strategies for rendering ECRs, in that it completely removes a foreign element and replaces it with a domestic one.

**2.2. Situational:** When using this strategy, every sense of the ST ECR is removed, and replaced by something that fits the situation, regardless of the sense of the SC ECR. This strategy could thus be considered a quasi-omission strategy, and it is similar to Gottlieb's "resignation" (1997, p. 75). So there is no connection between the ST ECR and its TT rendering.

**3. Omission:** Deleting the ECR. As Toury has pointed out (1995, p. 82), Omission is a valid translation strategy, and in the present model it simply means replacing the ST ECR with nothing. There are circumstances that make Omission the only viable option, but it may also be opted for out of laziness. The sample is a 2013 Iranian comedy, directed by Kamal Tabrizi. The movie, though a comedy, makes serious points about the Iranian society with all its particular beliefs. The story is about a bigoted man that becomes anxious, depressed and even violent after knowing what has become of his wife's corpse. Its initial release on March 6, 2014 attracted so much attention that in the Fajr film festival (2014) it won the Crystal Simorgh and was nominated for three awards. As was mentioned before, culture-bound items have always been a challenging issue for translators and different strategies based on different models are employed to deal with. That is the reason why this sample was chosen to study.

According to Hatim and Mason (1990, pp. 223-4) "it is certainly true that in recent years the translator has increasingly come to be seen as a cultural mediator rather than a mere linguistic broker. It is also true that, in any form of translation, translators tend to apply a general strategy that will favor either an SL-oriented approach, or a TL-oriented approach."

The method for collecting required information followed four major steps:

1. Watching the subtitled version of the movie for two times to find the instances of culture-bound items.
2. Extracting these sentences and expressions,

English subtitle	Persian equivalent
<b>I have even gone to Ibne Baboyueh and bought a family plot.</b>	من حتی رفتم ابن بابویه و یه آرامگاه خانوادگی خریدم

using their original transcripts.

3. Comparing the English subtitles with their Persian equivalents
4. And finally identifying the strategies used for translating culture-bound items based on the theoretical model presented by Pedersen (2005).

For the reliability and creditability of the study, official English subtitle of the movie was used for data analysis. After data collection, original scripts of the movie were compared with their equivalents in Persian and the strategies were recognized. The frequency of each strategy is shown in numerical data. They are illustrated in the following part.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Now results of the data analysis are brought into consideration. In order to have a better understanding of the strategies used by the translator, instances of culture-bound elements are presented in their context, i.e. the full sentences or expressions are brought.

First, SL oriented strategies will be provided with their examples of the movie and it will be analyzed why they have been chosen to render the meaning. Persian expressions will be presented with their English subtitle side by side.

The collected data will be analyzed based on the model presented by Pedersen (2005)

### Analysis of "the sensitive floor"

Frequency of culture-bound items

Sample	Duration	Frequency of culture-bound items
<b>Sensitive floor</b>	90 minutes	40

### 1. SL Oriented strategies

There are 15 examples of SL oriented strategies in this movie.

### 1.1. Retention

There are 4 examples of retention in this movie.

English subtitle	Persian equivalent
<b>Please can you give me a Fetwa?</b>	حاج اقا همیشه یه فتوا مخصوص من بدین؟

Here the translator has retained the word فتوا completely as fetwa. Because it has no exact equivalent in English and the audience probably doesn't know anything as فتوا

**Ibne Baboyueh** is a proper name for a geographical place, so it is clear that such names are specific to that area and shouldn't be translated.

### 1.2. Specification

#### 1.2.1. Addition

There are 2 examples of addition in this movie.

English subtitle	Persian equivalent
<b>Hassan wedding will have to wait until the ceremony after the 40<sup>th</sup> day of passing right?</b>	عروسی حسن اقا میفته بعد از چهلم دیگه ها؟

Since there are differences in the two languages about the funeral and its certain ceremonies, the translator has added some additional words to convey the expression better.

#### 1.2.2. Explication

There is no instance of explication in this movie.

### 1.3. Direct Translation

#### 1.3.1. Calque

There are 6 examples of calque in this movie.

English subtitle	Persian equivalent
<b>Zari honey... bring some sugar water</b>	زری چون باشو قربونت آب قند بیار

The subtitler has translated the word زری چون directly into "Zari honey" to show the strong kinship among Persian families. Also the word قند آب is translated literally into "sugar water" because in English there is no such things to drink.

English subtitle	Persian equivalent
It is green stew...	قورمه سبزیه

As it is shown here, this food is specific to Iranian culture, so there is no equivalent for it. The translator has literally translated this word into English.

English subtitle	Persian equivalent
God forbid something may happen to you dad	خدایی نکرده زبونم لال بلایی سرتون میاد آقا جون

This is another example of literally translating an expression. Regardless of the fact that it might seem definitely unusual and bizarre to the target audience.

### 1.3.2. Shifted

There are 3 examples of shifted in this movie.

English subtitle	Persian equivalent
I think there is a reason for everything	بنظرم هر چیزی حکمتی داره

Here the subtitler has literally translated the word حکمت which is a completely cultural word, into reason. But it doesn't look odd to the eye of the viewer because the sentence can be used in every culture in every situation that something happens beyond our expectations. So it can be used in the target culture.

## 2. TL Oriented strategies

There are 25 examples of TL oriented strategies in this movie

### 2.1. Generalization

#### 2.1.1. Hyponymy

There are 6 examples of hyponymy in this movie.

English subtitle	Persian equivalent
I will take a stroll, have some breakfast and come home.	یه گشتی میزنم به کله پاچه میخورم میام خونه

Here because the culture-bound term "کله پاچه" is a kind of unique Persian food and English people might not be familiar with this food, so the subtitler replaced the SL word with its superordinate, **breakfast**.

English subtitle	Persian equivalent
He heard it from the baker.	خودش از نونوایی سنگی شنیده

In Persian there are several kinds of bread such as لواش، تافتون، and ETC.

There is no such variation for English culture and they might not know نان سنگک

So the subtitler preferred to replace the SL word with its superordinate, **bakery**.

### 2.1.2. Other

English subtitle	Persian equivalence
Sir, I always pay my aims on time.	حاج اقا من همیشه خمس و زکاتم رو دادم. کفارم رو بجا اوردم.

Since the words زکات و کفاره، خمس are not familiar to the target audience, the subtitler chose not to retain the names of these religious terms, instead used a more general term to convey the meaning.

## 2.2. Substitution

### 2.2.1. Paraphrase

There are 4 examples of paraphrase in this movie.

English subtitle	Persian equivalence
Do you want some green tea?	یکم گل گاو زبون میخوای؟

Here the subtitler has used the word green tea which is more common for the target audience because the TL word conveys the same sense as does the SL word. Both are kinds of herbal tea.

English subtitle	Persian equivalence
Bye	با اجازتون قربان شما خدا به همراهات

The translator has used the word bye as an equivalent for these three expressions:

### 2.2.2. Cultural

There are 4 example of cultural in this movie.

English subtitle	Persian equivalence
A prayer for the recently passed	نثار روح تازه گذشتگان، فاتحه مع الصلوات

Because the Persian expression contains an Arabic phrase and is completely cultural, the translator has used the words prayer and the recently passed to substitute the cultural words.

### 2.3. Omission

There are 10 examples of omission in this movie.

English subtitle	Persian equivalence
	چشمتو درویش کن حواستم باشه
	تو فوق العاده ای حاج خانوم
	یا الله...
	اون خدا بیامرز
	نوکرتم رسول
	ایشالا تو اسفل السافلین
	رحم الله من یقرا فاتحه مع الصلوات

Due to limitation of space, only some examples were mentioned. In the above examples, because of cultural differences between pair of languages, proper equivalent is not easily obtainable. So the subtitler has replaced these expressions with nothing. It is important to mention that due to cultural differences, these strategies might have some overlaps. It means that there is no exact boundary between them, no exact strategy used for a kind of expressions and some sentences might have several strategies at the same time. As it was shown there were 40 instances of culture-specific items in this movie. Some of them were selected, the strategies and techniques were analyzed and it was concluded that the most strategy used by the translator was omission. Data collection was done based on the theoretical model presented by Pedersen (2005), namely (1) Retention, (2) Specification, (3) Direct Translation, (4) Generalization, (5) Substitution, and (6) Omission; the first three strategies are source language oriented while the other three strategies are target language oriented. According to data analysis it is found that omission was the preferred strategy used by the translator and it shows the authenticity of the presupposition. As the studies have shown the inevitability of this strategy, the present study proved this claim to an extent, as a sample.

### CONCLUSION

As was said earlier, the study is aimed at making a contribution towards the issue of translating culture-bound items. Analyzing the examples of the movie based on the theoretical model proposed by Pedersen (2005) showed that based on the findings of analysis, 40 culture bound items were found. 15 of which were source language oriented strategies (including 4 retention, 2 specification, 9 direct translation.) and 25 of which were target language oriented (including 7 generalization, 8 substitution and 10 omission.) so the translator has preferred TL oriented strategies and omission is the most used strategy in the translation of this movie. as the analysis of the instances have shown, some strategies, in spite of their high frequency of occurrence might not result in the expected impact.

For example, direct translation of cultural words or expressions, results in a strange word for target language audience most of the time and consequently, might not make sense. So it should be avoided to have a better understanding of the subtitle, whenever possible. Another one which is of great importance is the use of omission to a great extent. It should not be the case. Some times as a result of omission, the audience will not be able to get the message. So care should be taken. The results of the present study mean that subtitling culture-bound items is not an easy task and subtitlers should be conscious of the sensitivity of these elements.

The present researcher studied on culture bound items in this movie. There are so many idioms, political items and other expressions of different languages in many other movies which have a great potential to be analyzed in the future.

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