

Element-for-Element Replacement? Beware! There Might Be a "No-Entry" Sign

Kazem Lotfipour-Saedi

Volume 45, Number 4, décembre 2000

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/003519ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/003519ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Lotfipour-Saedi, K. (2000). Element-for-Element Replacement? Beware! There Might Be a "No-Entry" Sign. *Meta*, 45(4), 622–627.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/003519ar>

Article abstract

Various definitions have been offered for translation, each assuming a different orientation to the nature of meaning and language but all sharing the notion of replacement of one sort or another. The commonsensically perceived framework of translation operation is also basically founded upon the notion of replacement, mostly leading to the illusion that translation is just a matter of replacing SL elements by TL ones. But due to the uniqueness of each language system on the one hand and the non-isomorphic nature of the relationship between form and meaning across language on the other, this replacement operation faces challenging problems. This paper argues that there is no direct route in this operation and the replacement becomes possible only through the determination of the value of the elements to be replaced.

Element-for-Element Replacement? Beware! There might be a 'No-Entry' Sign

K. LOTFIPOUR-SAEDI

University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran

RÉSUMÉ

Chacune des diverses définitions proposées jusqu'à ce jour pour la traduction adoptent une perspective différente à l'égard de la nature du sens et de la langue. Cependant, elles ont toutes en commun et à des degrés variables la notion de « substitution ». De plus, le cadre dans lequel la traduction s'effectue — cadre déduit par le bon sens — s'appuie essentiellement sur la notion de substitution, ce qui laisse généralement croire, à tort, que la traduction ne consiste qu'à remplacer les éléments de la L1 par des éléments de la L2. Toutefois, étant donné l'unicité de chaque système linguistique, d'une part, et, d'autre part, la nature non isomorphique de la relation entre forme et sens dans la langue, cette opération de substitution se heurte à des problèmes de taille. Dans cet article, nous démontrons que cette opération ne peut suivre une ligne directe et que la substitution n'est possible qu'à travers la détermination de la valeur des éléments à substituer.

ABSTRACT

Various definitions have been offered for translation, each assuming a different orientation to the nature of meaning and language but all sharing the notion of *replacement* of one sort or another. The commonsensically perceived framework of translation operation is also basically founded upon the notion of replacement, mostly leading to the illusion that translation is just a matter of replacing SL elements by TL ones. But due to the uniqueness of each language system on the one hand and the non-isomorphic nature of the relationship between form and meaning across language on the other, this replacement operation faces challenging problems. This paper argues that there is no direct route in this operation and the replacement becomes possible only through the determination of the value of the elements to be replaced.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

replacement, form-meaning relationship, translation process, relaying, indeterminacy

1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to characterize the true nature of the translation process. It first discusses why the commonsensically established view of translation as an element-for-element replacement should be revisited in terms of both its theoretical acceptability and practical feasibility. It then argues for a discoursally-founded definition of translation process and offers a few examples to support its argument.

2. Translation process vs. views on language

The commonsensical understanding of translation, which is mainly conditioned by the traditional orientation to language, views translation in terms of a replacement of one sort or another. This orientation considers different languages to be of some-

what the same substance and form, and maintains that different languages have the potentiality of expressing not only the same thing but also more or less in the same manner. With the advent of Saussurean structuralism, which considers every language as a unique system, this sameness is believed to be limited only to the substance level; and the same substance, it is maintained, may be given different forms in different languages (cf. Saussure 1916; Lyons 1977). Generativism, which in essence seeks to investigate the common and ‘universal’ features across languages cannot be opposed to the structuralist notion of ‘differences’ because universality for them can only be spoken of at ‘principles’ level for which different ‘parameters’ may be set in different language (cf. Chomsky 1981). Despite this recognition of ‘differences’ in and rejection of ‘sameness’ of languages, the replacement view of translation would still hold. One would think this may be because of the conventionality and arbitrariness of the relationship between form and meaning advocated by structuralism. This view helps the persistence of the replacement outlook in translation (studies) because despite possible differences across languages, structuralists would argue, source language (SL) meaning rendition would always be possible in target language (TL) because different ways of saying the same thing would not have any effect on what is said. But functionalism and discursal views of language consider the relationship between form and meaning not so much arbitrary but quite ‘motivated’. In other words, according to this viewpoint, not only do languages differ from one another but also the difference in language structures open up different resources for saying the same thing in different languages. In a discursal view of language, scholars do not speak of meaning as something ready-made to be carried by the language structural resources (i.e. language form). They rather speak of ‘situated’ meaning (cf. Cicourel 1973) or ‘meaning potentials’ which become *actualised* in a process affected by a host of factors, the way of saying being one among them. By reiterating the ‘way of saying’ factor, we do not, of course, intend to depreciate the value of other more important discursal factors in communication and to sound as if we would subscribe to the linguistic relativistic view and as such believe in untranslatability across languages. Rather, we want to indicate that ‘translating’ as a matter of replacing the way of saying by another is not applicable and that among many other things, changes in the ‘ways of saying’ itself can affect the equilibrium intended in the translation process.

In a discursal view of language, where meaning potentials are actualized with reference to all the socio-semiotic factors involved in the communication process (cf. Halliday 1978), we cannot refer to translation as a ‘replacement’ because such factors are not always isomorphic in languages. For the sake of the argument in this paper, we choose to highlight non-isomorphism in ways of saying, which due to the effect it can have on ‘what is said’ discredits the direct ‘replacement’ view of translation and poses major problems for a 100% translatability view especially in certain text types. Discursal view of language would, thus, tend not to disagree with, if not practically subscribe to, some very mild versions of linguistic relativity.

The translator’s task should thus be characterized as a **strategic relaying of the SL text socio-semiotic factors through the TL socio-semiotic resources**. Here we stress the two terms ‘relaying’ and ‘strategic’.

3. Translation as 'relaying'

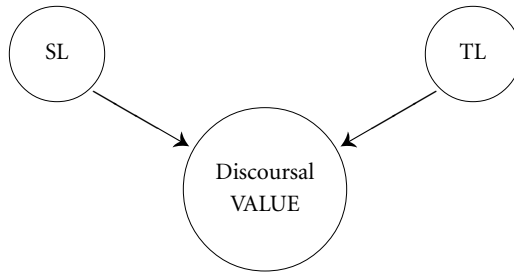
The term 'relaying' is used here to imply the indeterminate nature of the message to be negotiated in any verbal transaction. According to the discursual view of language, meaning and message is not carried by the text in its ready-made form; it is rather negotiated by the addressee on the basis of his background knowledge. The text operates indexically to set the comprehension discourse-process in motion. And since the addressee's background knowledge may be somehow different from what the addressor has presumed it to be, the message negotiated by the addressee may not always be exactly what is originally intended by the addressor; and there is always an element of **indeterminacy** in the discourse. This 'indeterminacy' is thus a property of any type of verbal interaction, especially certain text types like literature. In our characterization of the process of translation, if we speak of 'replacement', we are in fact subscribing to the traditional outlook of meaning considering it as something pre-tailored which is translocated by the translator. Even when a 'negotiation' position is adopted, the translator is thought to have the authority of 'negotiating' the meaning *the way he sees it* and convey his understanding of the SL text indeterminacy originally intended by the SL author and disregards the TL reader options to take the meaning as he pleases. By using the term 'relaying' we intend to avoid such unwanted and undesirable implications and highlight the fact that the translator, rather than imposing his understanding and interpretation of the SL text on the TL reader, should relay the SL discourse factors to the TL reader, allowing him to interact with the SL writer and negotiate the 'message' his cognitive system would allow.

4. Strategic relaying

The term strategic is meant to highlight that since every language is a unique system and as such languages may not share the same resources, and since seemingly parallel forms may have different values in different languages, in relaying the SL discourse process through the TL linguistic resources, the translator faces many possible problems for the removal of which he has to make strategic decisions. Such decisions may amount to using TL forms which are not even associated with the intended values in normal circumstances but can be argued to perform functions similar to those intended by the addressor under the given discursual factors. In an earlier paper, we have placed such translator strategies in contrast to the underlying translation principles arguing that such strategies should, of course, be in line with translation principles, but the translator can maneuver around them if differences between the SL and TL require it (cf. Lotfipour-Saedi 1996).

5. Determination of value

Our definition of translation as the strategic relaying of the SL discourse would require that the translator should first determine the discursual values of the SL textual indices and then try to find appropriate TL textual indices to represent them. This may be represented in a triangular format as follows:



As the attribute ‘discoursal’ in the above statement would imply, for determining the value of an index, one should see it within the framework of the overall text in which it is located, bearing in mind all the factors in the discourse process. Hatim and Mason (1997: 111), who also consider the translator as a ‘mediator’, emphasize this discoursal value as follows:

In their role as mediators translators deal with elements of meaning that can and often will lie above the level of the sentence. As we have seen, meanings of this kind emanate from a variety of sources including the register membership of the text, intentionality and intertextuality. Domains of contextual activity such as these have been shown to relate, in subtle and intricate ways, to aspects of text structure and texture.

In an earlier work, we have named a few of such factors (i.e. vocabulary, structure, texture, degree of indirection, language variety, cognitive effect, and aesthetic effect) arguing that all of these factors should be taken care of by the translator (cf. Lotfipour-Saedi 1992).

One more point should be clarified. The term ‘relaying’ would apply not only to the discoursal value but also to the ‘way of saying’ or SL textualization strategies, especially in literary genre because the special aesthetic or literary effect which is said to distinguish literature from non-literature is achieved only through the special ‘patterning of language patterns’ or textualization strategies (cf. Mukarovsky 1977, and Hasan 1985); and in order to take care of the SL literary effect, the translator of such texts should relay such special strategies into TL too. This ‘relaying’ of the textual strategies is, of course, again different from ‘replacement’ because of differences in language systems. The special literary effect in literature has been characterized in terms of three mega-discoursal strategies of dehabitualization, indeterminacy, and indirection (cf. Lotfipour-Saedi 1992); and the special paterings of language patterns achieve their literary effect by manipulating these three mega-discoursal strategies. Thus, in the translation of literature, where direct replacement of the SL special patterns is not possible, due to the differences in the two systems, the translator can employ other possible TL special paterings for the implementation of the SL mega-discoursal strategies.

6. Further illustration of the point

To further illustrate the position argued for above, a few practical examples are given below:

6.1. *Double-negative in English*

Double-negative is a 'marked' form in English which signals the user's lower social-class membership. This is, of course, a discursal value which should certainly be relayed to the TL reader. But it cannot be achieved by direct replacement because 'double-negative' is an unmarked form in Farsi. Thus, rather than replacing the English double-negative by Farsi double-negative, the translator, having determined the discursal value of the SL form, should try to explore other textual indices to relay that value to a Farsi reader. For example this may be achieved through the lexical choices he makes to represent the concept of, say, money in the following example:

SL: I ain't got no money.

TL: /ye shâ'i-am nadâram/

6.2. *Idioms and expressions*

Idioms and expressions are lexical collocations which execute their discursal function by resorting to mostly culturally and intertextually loaded 'images' and thus their discursal value has no direct relationship with the words contained in them, this indirection contributing to their special literary value, of course. Translation of idioms and expressions cannot, thus, be accounted for in terms of 'replacement', but rather 'relaying'. What the translator should do here is 'relaying' the SL value and way of saying through the TL images and intertextual devices. For example:

SL: (/âb dar hâran kubidan/)
to beat the water

TL: (to plough the seas)

6.3. *Parallel grammatical structures with different values*

Comparing and contrasting of parallel grammatical elements across languages in terms of their discursal value would offer interesting examples which support the relaying and not replacement view of translation.

6.3.1. Passive in English need not always be replaced by its parallel structure in Farsi (i.e. /majhul/) (cf. Lotfipour-Saedi 1993). If, for example, passive in English is used with 'an impersonal' value, that can be translated into 'an impersonal active voice' in Farsi, a translation strategy which is more like 'relaying' than 'replacement':

SL: It is said that...

TL: /miguyand/
they say

6.3.2. Some English modals like 'would' have no counterpart in Farsi. So in translating such elements, the translator should first determine their value and then 'relay' it through any possible TL linguistic devices. For example:

SL: Would you please come over here?

TL: /momken ast lotfan tashrif biâvarid injâ/

Here the discursal value of 'politeness' indicated through 'would' in English is relayed through a special lexical choice for the word 'come'.

6.4. *Special literary patterns*

As we argued above (see section 5), special aesthetic effect in a literary text is achieved through special language patterns and for this reason such special patterns should be taken care of in the translation process. But due to differences in the SL and TL systems, this cannot always be done through replacement. The translator should rather determine the mega-discoursal value executed by the SL patterns and relay it through any possible TL literary patterns. For example, SL rhyming patterns, metaphors, intertextual elements, structural patterns etc. cannot always be translated through ‘replacement’ by their counterparts in TL but through a ‘strategic relaying’, i.e. ‘relaying’ their aesthetic, literary and cognitive values through any special TL patterns.

6.5. *Relaying a pun*

I would like to end this paper by quoting an example from a well-known Iranian translator, which I consider a striking example of strategic relaying. Ghazi (1994) notes that in translating a novel by Gorki from its French version into Farsi, he came across a partial pun as follows: The protagonist is asked about how a specific event occurred and he answers “C’est déterminé” which means “It is fate.” The speaker says “I didn’t like this response because it reminded me of “déterrer,” which means “digging up and dishumation.” Ghazi says he felt he should, as a translator, preserve this pun and the ‘joke’ therein. For this purpose, he says, after a long mental struggle, he translated the interaction as follows:

/taraf az Kelim Samgin porsid ke in mâjarâ cherâ be in surat darâmâd. Kelim Samgin javâb dâd che konam ke naghsh-e-jabr ast.
taraf dar javâb miguyad: man as in naghsh-e-jabr-e to khosham nayamâd. chon marâ be yâde nabsh-e-ghabr miandâzad./

Here, we note that both the SL way of saying, i.e. ‘pun’, and its intended literary value is ‘relayed’ into TL.

RÉFÉRENCES

- CHOMSKY, N. (1981): *Lectures on Government and Binding*, Dordrecht, Foris Publications.
 CICOUREL, A. V. (1973): *Cognitive Sociology*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.
 GHAZI, M. (1994): “Interview with a translator,” *Motarjem*, 3-9.
 HALLIDAY, M. A. K. (1978): *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*, London, Edward Arnolds.
 HASAN, R. (1985): *Linguistics, Language, and Verbal Art*, Victoria, Deakin University Press.
 HATIM, B. and I. MASON (1997): *The translator as Communicator*, London, Routledge Publishers.
 LOTFIPOUR-SAEDI, K. (1992): “Analysing literary discourse: Implications for literary translation,” *Meta*, 37-2, pp. 193-203.
 — (1993): *An Introduction to Principles of Translation*, Tehran, Iran University Press.
 — (1996): “Translation principles vs. translator strategies,” *Meta*, 41-3, pp. 389-392 .
 MUKAROVSKY, J. (1977): *The Word and Verbal Art*, transl. J. Burbank and P. Steiner, New York, Yale University Press.
 SAUSSURE, F. de. (1916): *Cours de linguistique générale*, éd. C. Bally, A. Sechehaye et A. Riedlinger, Paris, Payot.