

# On the Question of What Translation Translates: Translation in Light of Skepticism

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## Abstract

The present study aimed at sparking a discussion as to translation evaluation which is traditionally based on determinism. Translators usually translate what the author has written or what the author has said, based on the ostensible referential correspondence between words and meanings exerted by internal and external authorities without questioning these ostensible authorities- whether these authorities are in the forms of bilingual dictionaries or the translators' knowledge and experience. However, translation process, unlike language, can be based on indeterminacy which is a part of epistemological scepticism. This study, drawing on Quine' notion that reference between two languages is inscrutable and by extension translation between texts is in principle indeterminate, aims at showing that what we call translation is, in fact, a product of the translator, not the original author. As corpora of the study, *To Be or Not To Be Soliloquy* by Shakespeare, A short poem by the Turkish poet Nazım Hikmet, a perfume advertisement and some excerpts from the book *Heart of Darkness* and their translations were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results have shown that every translation is one of the infinite possible meanings of the original text.

**Keywords:** Epistemological Skepticism, Epistemological Skepticism and translation, Indeterminacy in translation evaluation

## 1. Introduction

Translation Studies (TS) has undergone a significant paradigm shift with the focus being oscillated from the source text (ST) to the target text (TT) since the introduction of three ground-breaking theories and approaches in the late 1960s: (1) *Skopos theory*, (2) *Descriptive Translation Studies* and (3) *Functional theories*. The theories and approaches have diversified in terms of their approaches to the ST and the TT. The present study classifies them into two broader categories: one is *source texts orientated theories* (STOT) and the other one is *target texts orientated theories* (TTOT) based on their approaches to the ST and the TT relation. *STOTs* mainly rest on linguistic theories advocated by some seminal translation scholars such as Jakobson ([1959] 2004), Catford (1965), Koller (1979) and to some extent Nida (1964). On the other hand, *TTOTs* are mainly based on the notion that equivalence between the ST and the TT is subordinate to all possible translation Skopos (aim) to a varying degree (see, for example, Vermeer, [1978]2004; Reiss and Vermeer, 2015; Nord, 2007; House, 2015).

As to the never-ending discussion over the concept of equivalence, some seminal translation theorists remain neutral and prefer to seek an equal value between the ST and TT (see, for example, Toury, 1995 and Pym, 2014). While *STOTs* consider equivalence as "the cardinal problem of

language and pivotal concern of linguistics” (Jakobson, 2004:139), and seek one-to-one equivalence between texts, TTOTs have a different approach to equivalence: they consider the ST as a starting point from which translators skim what is necessary and what is required from the target readers. Accordingly, for the TTOTs, the TT has overtaken the throne of the ST, and translation act is fulfilled by considering extra-linguistic, pragmatic and communicative factors of the target language and culture. Thus, a variety of the TTs can be produced out of a single text. Even the same translator can produce many target texts out of the same ST at different times. Then, the core questions arise: which translation is the correct and the best? What is equivalent to what, for whom and for when? Which authority decides on equivalency between two pairs of words or texts? These questions are closely related to epistemology-the study of the way(s) knowledge is produced and offshoot of epistemology: scepticism. Scepticism is the pivotal concern in epistemology. In epistemology, “scepticism is the view that knowledge of something is impossible. The contemporary focus on skepticism tends toward skepticism about the external world, the thesis that knowledge of the external world is impossible.” (Ranalli ,2017:1). As concluded from what is proposed here, search for certainty is a lost cause and a challenge to the issue of equivalence from epistemological scepticism arises in TS: If the ST is finite, the TT is infinite and we are not sure how and why the ST was produced, then, how can we question the degree of equivalence between the ST and the TT? If a plethora of target texts can arise out of one source text, then none of the translation can be determined totally by the ST. Thus, we have encountered the question of what translations translate? In this study, I tried to find a plausible answer to this fundamental question of translation studies by putting indeterminism concept at the centre of discussion.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### 2.1 Indeterminism and Epistemological Skepticism

Epistemological Skepticism is a philosophical term which can be coined as “the general attitude of doubting how we obtain information” (Pym, 2014:88). It includes *indeterminism* which emerged as a counteract to determinism which explains everything with a reference to *cause and effect* relation. In translation context, on a macro level, the cause is the ST and the effect is the TT. However, not everything happens according to the cause-and-effect relation. In translation evaluation, relativity may prevail and on many occasions it, in fact, does. Interpretation of any event can be changed, depending on the position of the observer. Pym (2014) coined this position as *observer effect* in which the perception of our reality can be different from the accounts of the others who are positioned at a different location even though the same event has been observed. Then the same relativity of reality can be applied to the assessment of translation.

Although the term *indeterminism* was, for the first time, put forward by the distinguished linguist and philosopher Quine (2003& 1970), in fact, the impossibility of precise translation was formerly brought up by Saussure ([1916]2006), Sapir (1985), Boas (1989) and Whorf (2012). Quine ([1960]2003& 1970) brought up the idea that reference between two languages is inscrutable and by extension, translation between languages is in principle indeterminate. Quine (2003), trying to prove the impossibility of rendering any meaning in other languages, exemplified a linguist who set out into the deepest of a jungle. A native, pointing to a rabbit running past, exclaimed “Gavagai”. The linguist, being sure “Gavagai” equals to a rabbit, pinned down what he has observed. However, the linguist later comes to terms with the impossibility to choose through ostension alone what terms like “Gavagai” signify “rabbit”. The ‘Gavagai’ could have been a rabbit part. A numerous

translation of this word could have been rendered although the linguist yielded to the first thing that came to his mind.

As a reflection of this thought experiment, Quine may have concluded that point reference is veraciously ambiguous. It was evident what Quine did was a thought experiment, which can be different from actual language and translation experiments. Quine (2003), following the footsteps of Saussure ([1916]2006), Boas (1989), Whorf (2012), Sapir (1985), advocated the notion that each language has a different way of framing the same reality. In this respect, translation can be dubbed as an artificial and difficult process, a way to battle against the constitutive differences that describe a particular language. The linguists and philosophers above obviously oppose such pursuit of linguistic equivalence between languages on the grounds that speakers of different languages have a different perception of the world and they name the objects according to their perception, backing up Saussure's (2006) notion that the pairing of sound with meaning is arbitrary. Some linguists and philosophes such as Hanks & Severi (2014) and Kuhn (2000&2012) opposed severely Quine's metalinguistic approaches to translation, calling for some defects in it. For example, they question why the native speaker is not given a chance to define the word "Gavagai" and why the linguist derives an exact meaning from ostensive reference alone. Saussure (2006), Boas (1989), Whorf (2012), Sapir (1985) and Quine's (2003) attribution of translation to the equation of meaning with a reference can be contested as the actual practice of translation entails a vivid transformation between languages. However, what Quine put forth is not limited to the impossibility of equivalence between languages. Rather, what he has proposed must be discussed in terms of the plurality of variations and realities, changing with the position of the observers.

### 3. Research Method

#### 3.1 Design

To test the epistemological scepticism in translation and answer the question of what translations translate, the researcher selected some texts from different branches and analysed how the translator translated them. Another rater besides the researcher was requested to evaluate the target texts through the following checklist to test whether quality perception can change from one person to another.

**Table 1. Checklist for the evaluation of the TTs**

How satisfied are you with the translation?
<input type="radio"/> Very dissatisfied
<input type="radio"/> Not satisfied
<input type="radio"/> Neutral
<input type="radio"/> Satisfied
<input type="radio"/> Very satisfied

The data collected were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Cohen's Kappa is used for measuring agreement between the two raters. Landis and Koch (1977) presented the following table to comment on the level of agreement between the two raters:

**Table 2. Kappa coefficient and its interpretation**

< 0	No agreement
0.0 — 0.20	Poor agreement
0.21 — 0.40	Fair agreement
0.41 — 0.60	Moderate agreement
0.61 — 0.80	Good agreement
0.81 — 1.00	Very good agreement

### 3.2 Materials

The corpora of the study consist of some excerpts presented in Table 2. In the table, the original works, authors and the name of the translators are provided. Not the whole book but some excerpts from the book *Heart of Darkness* were chosen to be analysed. The main reason why these works were selected for the corpora is that they have been translated into many languages and they have become of humanity's common heritage. Except for Nazım Hikmet's poem, the other works are from English to Turkish.

**Table 3. The corpora of the study**

ST <sub>1</sub>	TT <sub>1</sub>
<i>Bir Cezaevinde, Tecritteki Adamın Mektupları</i>	<i>Letter from A Man in Solitary</i>
Bugün pazar.	Today Sunday.
Bugün beni ilk defa güneşe çıkardılar.	Today they took me out in the sun for the first time.
Ve ben ömrümde ilk defa gökyüzünün bu kadar benden uzak	And I just stood there, struct for the first time in my life
bu kadar mavi	By how far away the sky is
bu kadar geniş olduğuna şaşarak	how blue
kımıldanmadan durdum.	and how wide.
Sonra saygıyla toprağa oturdum,	Then I respectfully sat down on the earth.
dayadım sırtımı duvara.	I leaned against the wall.
Bu anda ne düşmek dalgalara,	For this moment no trap to fall into,
bu anda ne kavga, ne hürriyet, ne karım.	no struggle, no freedom, no wife.
Toprak, güneş ve ben...	Only earth, sun, and me...
Bahtiyarım... (Hikmet [1939] 2020)	I am lucky... (Hikmet, 2002:74-78)

<b>ST<sub>2</sub></b> Life, it's a great game. (Aramis Life Perfume Advertisement)	<b>TT<sub>2</sub></b> Hayat Mükemmel Bir Oyun
<b>ST<sub>3</sub></b> <i>To be, or not to be, that is the question</i> (Shakespeare's 66. Sonnet)	<b>TT<sub>3</sub></b> Bir ihtimal daha var, o da ölmek mi dersin? (Shakespeare 1997)
<b>ST<sub>4</sub></b> Therefore, he whacked the <i>old nigger</i> mercilessly, while a big crowd of his people watched him (Conrad [1899]2016 :15)  They <i>howled</i> and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces (Conrad[1899]2016 :56)	<b>TT<sub>4</sub></b> <i>Bu yüzden halkının önünde hepsi seyrederken o yaşlı yerliyi merhametsizce dövmüş</i> (Conrad 2015:13)  Bağırıyorlar, zıplıyor oldukları yerde dönüyorlar ve korkunç suratlar yapıyorlar(Conrad,2015 :51)

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the findings as to each question on the checklist are presented in tables. The results were discussed in light of the findings. The findings as to the accuracy of the TTs' is presented below.

##### 4.1 Qualitative analysis of the findings

The researcher and the other rater, who is proficient in English and Turkish, evaluated the translations through the checklist. The results were analyzed to test whether a significant agreement existed between the raters. The results were presented in Table 4 and Table 5 as follows: The following qualitative analysis may support the findings of quantitative analysis.

**Table4. Descriptive statistics of the raters' evaluations of the translations**

		Rater2				
			Very dissatisfied	Neutral	Very satisfied	Total
Rater1	Very dissatisfied	Count	1	0	1	2
		% within r1	50,0%	0,0%	50,0%	100,0%
	Not satisfied	Count	1	1	0	2
		% within r1	50,0%	50,0%	0,0%	100,0%
Total		Count	2	1	1	4

% within r1                      50,0%    25,0%    25,0%    100,0%

**Table 5. Correlation coefficient between the two raters**

	Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal Kendall's tau-b	-,224	,490	-,447	,655
Measure of Agreement Kappa	0,000	,167	0,000	1,000
N of Valid Cases	4			

In statistics, Kendall's tau-b analysis is used to measure the strength of association between two variables. The correlation coefficient value -,224 indicates a weak relation between the scores of the raters. In addition, the Kappa value 0,000 indicates a weak agreement between the raters, as well. The findings showed that the raters' evaluations of the target texts were completely different. We can conclude that translation is possible from one language to another; however, it is comparatively incommensurable in terms of accuracy, adequacy and satisfaction with the translations.

#### 4.2 Qualitative analysis of the source text 1 and its translated version

The ST 1 is the work by *Nazım Hikmet*, who is one of the most renowned Turkish poets in the world. Because of his political views, he was severely criticized in Turkey. He spent most of his life in prison and exile. While some people see him as a traitor, others consider him as a patriot in Turkey. His works have been translated into many languages. He mostly articulates his own and tormented soul of ordinary people in his poems. The ST<sub>1</sub> is the poem as to a day of an inmate in prison. The Turkish title is as follows:

Bir Cezaevinde, Tecritteki Adamın Mektupları (ST<sub>1</sub>)

A letter from a man in lockdown in Prison (Back translation)

Letter from A Man in Solitary (TT<sub>1</sub>)

The translator translated the word *tecrit* as *solitary* as (s)he resorted to sense for sense translation. Word for word rendering was not preferred for this word as this kind of rendering risks infelicities and interfering the conveyance of the author's message given that languages differ in lexis and syntax. Therefore, sense for sense type of translation was preferred as it allows a flexible comment on the ST. However, the connotation of the word *tecrit* is loneliness, torture, physical and mental torment in Turkish. The indeterminacy is apparent in the following example, as well:

Bugün beni ilk defa güneşe çıkardılar. (ST<sub>1</sub>)

Today they took me out in the sun for the first time. (Back translation)

Today they took me out in the sun for the first time. (TT<sub>1</sub>)

As in the source text, in the target text, we do not have any slight idea who took the inmate out: the friends or the guards? Then how can we discuss the quality of the translation even in the case of the source text the point reference is veraciously ambiguous.

### 4.3 Qualitative analysis of the source text 2 and its translated version

In the case of the translation of advertisement, the content is usually based on culturally dependent elements such as idioms, puns, wordplay, subtext, or rhymes in the source language. One of these elements or all the elements can be found in a single advertisement. In literal translation, all these figurative elements of the source text risk being lost in the target text. The following advertisement in English was translated as follows:

Life, it's a great game. (ST)

Hayat Mükemmel Bir Oyun (TT)

Life is a great game. (Back translation)

In the original sentence, what is meant by *Life* is a perfume product and but what is meant by pronoun it is life itself. In short, antanaclasis, a repeated use of the same word or phrase, but with a different meaning each time, was resorted. However, this obvious point reference has been lost in the target text. Even though the translation is adequate in terms quality, it is far away from being acceptable.

### 4.4 Qualitative analysis of the source text 3 and its translated version

Hamlet's *to Be or Not To Be Soliloquy* (ST 3) by William Shakespeare and its translation (TT<sub>3</sub>) by Yücel (1997), were compared and contrasted. Hamlet's soliloquy includes probably the most quoted lines in all languages: 'to be or not to be'. In translating these lines, it could be better to consider why and how Hamlet utters these lines. Hamlet seems to phrase the issue of death and life and he underlines the struggle between the choice of life and death. Hamlet is wavering between the two extremes: life and death. He is considering committing suicide, hoping that it would offer him solace. In respect to translation, as well as its linguistic difficulty to comprehend, the referential meanings of the words offer many interpretations changing from one person to another. The first line and its rendition into Turkish could be an example of it:

To be, or not to be, that is the question (ST<sub>3</sub>)

Bir ihtimal daha var, o da ölmek mi dersin? (TT 3)

There is one more possibility; and do you think it is death? (back translation)

The translator completely rendered it differently from the ST by employing free translation techniques, which is an example of acceptable translation. The translator seems to have had a different insight into the ST. In fact, these lines have been translated into Turkish in scores of different ways. Then, which translation is correct and accurate? Our judgement about them can vary just like that of the translators. Our quality judgement is nothing but sensory evidence of what is happening. Understanding and comprehending are vital in translation. However, nobody comprehends and understands any text in the same way. Steiner (2004) underlines the importance

of understanding and comprehension in translation and coined this process as *Hermeneutic motion*- a term borrowed from Heidegger. However, each translator's stance and his/ her elicitation and appropriative transfer of comprehension is different. While some translation theorists deem this elicitation acceptable shifts (see, for example, Levefere,1992), others take a severe reaction to them and call them as, "ethnocentric and annexationist" (Berman, 2004:278). However, all these discussions result from the translation theorists' common notion to see the translation as a determinate action. However, more than any other science, translation is related to philosophy as it rests on thought and every translation is one of many possibilities. Without landing on the deepest sides of the author's mind, which is impossible, every translation is a possibility. The translator(s) can employ their own discursive strategies such as explicitness, repetition, redundancy, explanation, and explication. As the translator cannot fully comprehend the ostensible relationship between the word and meaning that the author created in the ST, he could not render them into Turkish. We are not sure what Shakespeare mean by uttering that 'to be or not be'. Then, how can we be sure whether all the translations reflect the true meaning of *Hamlet's Soliloquy*?

#### 4.5 Qualitative analysis of the source text 4 and its translated version

Some excerpts from *Heart of Darkness* were chosen to analyse as the book and its content have been controversial since Achebe (1977: 788) initiated his stark claim that "Conrad was a bloody racist", and *Heart of Darkness* is a novel "which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race," (Achebe, 1977, 788). Accordingly, the translators conceptualized Conrad's utterances differently. Some examples are provided as follows:

Therefore, he whacked the old nigger mercilessly, while a big crowd of his people watched him (p, 15)

Bu yüzden halkının önünde hepsi seyrederken o yaşlı yerliyi merhametsizce dövmüş. (p,13)

Therefore, he whacked the old native while a big crowd of his people watched him

(back translation)

In the ST, the word *nigger* was used to degrade the native people of Africa. In the TT, it was translated as *yaşlı yerli* which can be translated back as *old native*. In the TT, it was mitigated. However, the question is whether Conrad used this term to look down on the natives or today's derogatory terms had no such implications in the days when the novel was penned. Another controversial translation is as follows:

They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces (p,56)

Bağırıyorlar, zıplıyor oldukları yerde dönüyorlar ve korkunç suratlar yapıyorlar (p,51)

They shouted and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces (back translation)

In the ST, Conrad is describing some native people. He used the verb *howl* which is generally used to utter a loud, prolonged, mournful cry, as that of a dog or wolf. However, in the TT, it was rendered as *bağırıyorlardı* which can be translated back as *shouting*. Thus, the word had a different effect on the translators and the readers.

## 5. Conclusion

This present study has carried out to show that translation and by extension, the concept of



equivalence is not a static but an active interpretation of the ST, being affected by the observer effect. The qualitative and quantitative results showed that the translators translated the texts differently and the raters evaluated the translations differently, which means that both the translators and the readers have their own active nature of interpretations. The different interpretation of words and sentences has enabled us to come to the conclusion that every translation is an interpretation, considering how words have accumulated different meanings in the ST. The words and sentences have evolved and languages are bound to a kind of linguistic evolution. Thus, it is no surprise that the translators had a different insight into the meanings, as the translators were not completely sure why the authors used these words. As the translators conceptualized the STs differently, it was concluded that there is no purely objective translation quality assessment. The satisfaction that the raters got from the translations changed considerably, which could prove that the readers' attitude to the translations grossly depend on how they interpret the TTs independent of the ST and TT relevance. According to the study since the translators are not sure about the ostensible referential equivalence between the words in the ST, they, through discursive strategies such as explicitness, repetition, redundancy, explanation, and explication, rendered the meaning of the ST into the TT. Since we do not know completely the intention behind any utterance in the ST, it is natural that the translation is indeterminate which makes the TT enrich. In light of the findings, it can be concluded that as a result of indeterminacy, translation turns into a transformative process. It is suggested that since both translation and philosophy entail transformation and promote thinking behind any utterance, more research must be carried out to exhibit the unbending bond between philosophy and translation studies.

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### Author's Bio-note

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