



## A Cultural-Discourse Perspective through the Strategies of Subtitling of American Films from English into Persian A case study of subtitling *friends* series

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### Abstract

The research is based on the analysis of the American television series named *Friends* with the focus on the CSIs (Culture Specific Items) and how these differences have been handled by Persian translators who produced the subtitles. The analysis was based on the assumption that Iranian's culture is different from the US culture so people in these two countries may have problems in understanding CSIs if they are translated literally and if the subtitle translation is not adapted to the target audience. The research looked at the way subtitle translators involved with subtitling the American television series *Friends* had dealt with CSIs in when translating oral discourse into Persian. The main objective of this study has been to analyze different translation choices which are currently used by the translators in questions, dealing with CSIs where cultural differences between Iran and the US arise. The researcher has provided some questionnaires among university students of this field, some of the students were B.A. students of translation studies and some other were M.A. Students of linguistics. The research discovered that in the translation of CSIs, Synonymy and Naturalization are the most frequent strategies which are used and performed well, succeeding to help the Iranian audience to comprehend the cultural connotations associated with the CSIs. Also the research discovered that high efficacy is obtained in translation.

**Keywords:** Discourse, CSIs (Culture Specific Items), Subtitle, Cultural differences, Efficacy.

### Introduction

Translation has always been a central part of communication. Consequently, Translation studies (TS), as a field of research, has developed over the last two decades during which screen translation has slowly emerged as a new area. Likewise, audiovisual translation (AVT) is a new field in TS. The most widespread forms of AVT are Subtitling and Dubbing. "Subtitling is visual, involving the superimposition of a written text onto the screen. Dubbing, on the other hand, is oral; it is one of a number of translation methods which makes use of the acoustic channel in screen translation" (Baker and Hochel, 1998, p.74). Baker pointed out that the concept that has undergone greatest growth in translation is subtitling. It has many advantages; it is the quickest method and the most economical to implement. Digital technology has given us all kinds of modern equipment. The advent of DVD has meant an increase in films and television programs with subtitles. These DVDs provide options for either vertical (same language) subtitling of use to the hearing impaired or diagonal (different language) subtitling.

Dubbing has a long history in Iran; however, young people have recently favored subtitled films, This is primarily because many Iranian viewers perceive series not only as a form of entertainment but also as a tool for learning English and universities have begun to include it as a subject for study in their curricula. Subtitling is the focus of several academic conferences every year. The most important problem regarding subtitling in Iran is the lack of responsible organizations and educated professional subtitlers at work. Furthermore, many DVDs are subtitled using special soft wares without human interference. Therefore, the present study attempts to contribute to the film industry in terms of emphasizing the need for educated and learned subtitlers to achieve the required improvement in the field. This kind of practice has never reached its high standard as long as it remains outside the realm of academic investigation and research. In addition to its educational implications, the study identifies precisely the strategies that have been of great use for previous translators. This study would also call the attention of decision-makers to include subtitling in academic translation training programs. Subtitling is one of the newly growing interests in Iran, and English films are presented in the original language with either English (intra-lingual) or Persian (inter-lingual) subtitling. Since television series have become increasingly widespread in the world in recent years, which could be said that American culture is becoming something of an export commodity. The export of series to other countries which involves translation, especially in Asia, where English is not often an official language.

In Iran, subtitling has become increasingly popular. While language barriers are still a problem to many viewers, comprehension difficulty could be said to be solved by the use of subtitles. However, it remains to be seen whether subtitles are successful in solving all areas of potential cross-cultural misunderstanding, such as the misunderstanding that may be associated with scenes involving Culture differences, General references to American culture, etc.

#### *Significance of the Study*

The significance of this study may be said that until now, scholars have expressed contrasting opinions on the strengths of different strategies that can be used in translation and in dealing with Culture Specific Items (CSIs). However limited effort has been made to analyze the strategies that are favored by translators in dealing with CSIs in practice

The current research study analysis translation standards: Conservation [repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic translation and intra-textual gloss] or Substitution [synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, deletion, and autonomous creation] and will suggest what strategies might be more suitable when dealing with CSIs in English to Persian subtitle translation.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The Purpose of the study is to analyze the strategies that are used by translators in translating the subtitles of an American series into Persian. *Friends* is selected as the TV series for analysis. The study involved a season, involving Culture Specific Items (CSIs). Subtitles were analyzed in order to identify the most common strategies used by translators. This study included an overview of the literature in cross-cultural communication, especially translation of Culture Specific items. In terms of translation strategies, scholars have different perspectives on the extent to which translators should aim for preservation of the source context and strict adherence to its grammatical structure. While some scholars consider it important to preserve the source text, others prefer a flexible approach and adapt or even abandon part of the source text in an effort to help the audience to comprehend the text overall. In dealing with CSIs (Culture Specific Items), different strategies have been recommended. For example, some scholars

recommend omission, to be used in subtitles wherever CSIs cannot be comprehended easily and practical equivalents in the target text cannot be found easily (Zhao, 2009).

### *Research Questions*

The current study will involve an analysis of subtitles in an attempt to identify:

1. Which strategies of Aixelá's model of translation theory may have been adopted by the translators of Friends Series subtitles in practice?
2. Are these strategies make the same effect or near on the target language audiences as it does on the source language audiences or not?  
In to what extent do these strategies effect?

### *Research Hypothesis*

1. The strategies of naturalization and synonymy is used more widespread and frequently in translation of subtitles in the friends series.
2. The strategies of Aixelá's model of translation theory transfer the most near efficacy of source language in to target language audience.  
The strategies of Aixelá's model would have the most near efficacy on the target language audience.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### *Overview*

The research is mainly concerned with the translation strategies used in dealing with Culture Specific Items (CSIs). Secondly, it looks at how subtitle translators dealt with any scenes involving cultural differences concerning efficacy in English to Persian translation for Iranian audience. For both types of analyses data was taken from an American television series called Friends. This literature review will therefore cover these major areas of studies: cross-cultural studies, subtitling, issues involved in the translation of Culture Specific Items, discourse. The literature review has been ordered in this manner primarily because it would help the audience of the report to understand some general and fundamental concepts, such as cultural differences before having some insight into how these concepts affect translation and subtitle writing, especially the translation of CSIs, a specific subdivision of translation theory.

### *Aixelá (1966) Model*

#### *Conservation*

#### *Repetition*

The translators keep as much as they can of the original reference. The obvious example here is the treatment of most toponyms. Paradoxically, this 'respectful' strategy involves in many cases an increase in the exotic or archaic character of the CSI, which is felt to be more alien by the target language reader because of its linguistic form and cultural distance. This reminds us of one of the paradoxes of translation and one of the great pitfalls of the traditional notion of equivalence: the fact that something absolutely identical, even in its graphic component, might be absolutely different in its collective reception (Aixelá, 1996, pp.61-65).

### *Orthographic Adaptation*

This strategy includes procedures like transcription and transliteration, which are mainly used when the original reference is expressed in a different alphabet from the one target reader's use. In the case of English into Spanish translation, it was a relatively frequent strategy until about the fifties, whereas at present there is a clear tendency toward maximum respect for English forms when there is no wish to translate them to pre-existing Spanish references. Nowadays, this procedure is reserved mainly for the integration of references from third cultures (Russian names in English works, etc.) and for the transference of Spanish words 'mis-spelt' in English texts (Aixelá,1996, pp.61-65).

### *Linguistic (non-cultural) Translation*

With the support of pre-established translations within the inter-textual corpus of the target language, or making use of the linguistic transparency of the CSI, the translator chooses in many cases a denotatively very close reference to the original, but increases its comprehensibility by offering a target language version which can still be recognized as belonging to the cultural system of the source text.

Units of measure and currencies are very frequent instances of this strategy. In the same way, objects and institutions which are alien to the receiving culture but understandable because analogous and even homologous to the native ones, usually come into the same category (Aixelá,1996, pp.61-65).

### *Intra-Textual Gloss*

This is the same as the previous case, but the translators feel they can or should include their gloss as an indistinct part of the text, usually so as not to disturb the reader's attention. This procedure offers a variation usually due to the need for solving ambiguities, which is also one of the most universal traits of translation. I am speaking of what could be described as the strategy of explicitness, which consists of making explicit something that is only partly revealed in the original text (adding, for instance, the surname to characters only mentioned by their Christian names) or appears substituted by a pronoun (Aixelá,1996, pp.61-65).

### *Substitution*

#### *Synonymy*

This strategy is usually based on the stylistic grounds linked with recurrence I discuss in the next section. The translator resorts to some kind of synonym or parallel reference to avoid repeating the CSI. Thus, in one of the translations of *The Maltese Falcon* we will study (Casas, Gancedo, 1933), Spade appears in most cases repeated, in some omitted and in others by means of two main references: 'Samuel' (his Christian name instead of his surname) and 'El mefistofélico rubio' – 'The mephistophelian blond'. In the same translation, we find that a repetition of 'Bacardi' leads the translator to replace the second reference ('He had drunk his third glass of Bacardi') for 'Acababa de tomar su tercera libación del sabroso aguardiente de caña' (He had just had his third libation of the delicious liquor of sugar cane), and the third, some distance away from the others, becomes a simple 'ron' (rum) (Aixelá,1996, pp.61-65).

#### *Limited Universalization*

In principle, the translators feel that the CSI is too obscure for their readers or that there is another, more usual possibility and decide to replace it. Usually for the sake of credibility, they seek another reference, also belonging to the source language culture but closer to their readers another CSI, but less specific, so

to speak. [Five grand - cinco mil dólares - five thousand dollars; an American football - un balón de rugby - a ball of rugby] (Aixelá,1996, pp.61-65).

#### *Absolute Universalization*

The basic situation is identical to the previous one, but the translators do not find a better known CSI or prefer to delete any foreign connotations and choose a neutral reference for their readers. [corned beef - lonchas de jamón - slices of ham; a Chesterfield - un sofá - a sofa] (Aixelá,1996, pp.61-65).

#### *Naturalization*

The translator decides to bring the CSI into the inter-textual corpus felt as specific by the target language culture. Currently, this strategy is infrequently used in literature (with the clear exception of children's literature, where it also is beginning to decline.) [Dollar - duro (a currency denomination still in use in Spain); Brigid - Brígida].

It might be interesting to comment here that I will consider that historical persons with pre-established translations into Spanish (e.g. Queen Elizabeth - la reina Isabel) are not cases of naturalization but of linguistic (non-cultural) translation, as no Spanish reader would feel that these versions involve any sort of cultural substitution, because the name is still considered part of the source language culture (the person is still part of English culture, even if it is transcribed in Spanish terms to uphold tradition) (Aixelá,1996, pp.61-65).

#### *Deletion*

The translators consider the CSI unacceptable on ideological or stylistic grounds, or they think that it is not relevant enough for the effort of comprehension required of their readers, or that it is too obscure and they are not allowed or do not want to use procedures such as the gloss, etc. They therefore decide to omit it in the target text. [Dark Cadillac sedan - Cadillac oscuro - dark Cadillac; Casper Gutman, Esquire - Casper Gutman] (Aixelá,1996, pp.61-65).

#### *Autonomous Creation*

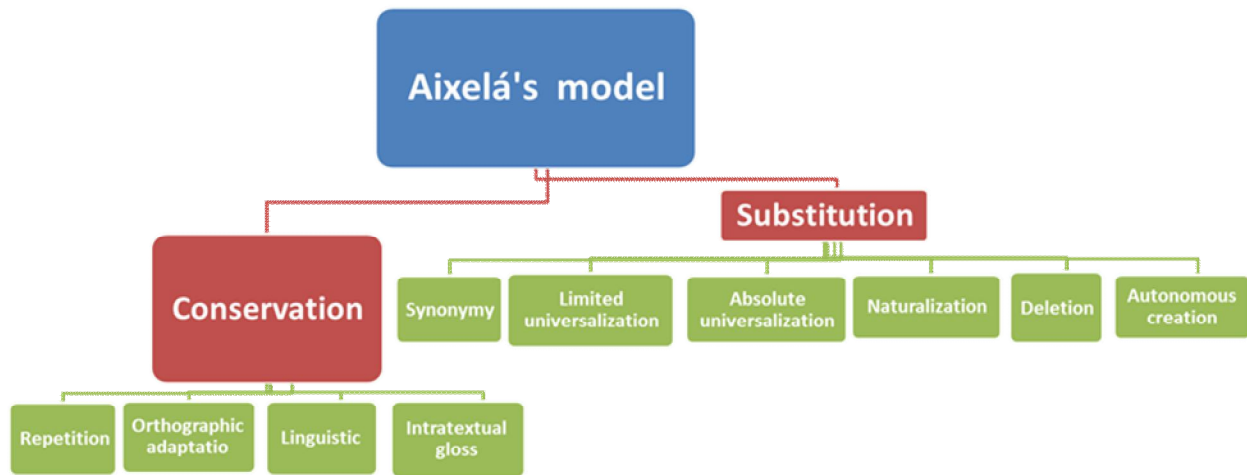
This is a very little-used strategy in which the translators (or usually their initiators) decide that it could be interesting for their readers to put in some nonexistent cultural reference in the source text. The translation of film titles in Spain seems to be one of the fields where most instances of this type of translation are to be found.

Among the texts studied for this paper, the best example surprisingly a double example we have is also the justification of the title of the book in Spanish (El halcón del rey de España – ‘The Falcon of the King of Spain’): [‘Shall we stand here and shed tears and call each other names? Or shall we he paused and his smile was a cherub's'go to Constantinople?’ -¿Que nos quedemos aquí derramando lágrimas como Magdalenas o que vayamos a Constantinopla en busca del verdadero halcón del rey de España - Shall we stay here shedding tears like Magdalens or shall we go to Constantinople in search of the real falcon of the king of Spain)?

There are other potential strategies like compensation (deletion + autonomous creation at another point of the text with a similar effect), dislocation (displacement in the text of the same reference), or attenuation (replacement, on ideological grounds, of something 'too strong' or in any way unacceptable, by something 'softer', more adequate to target pole written tradition or to what could, in theory, be expected by

readers). Attenuation seems to be the most promising strategy of those left out of my classification, and it is obviously used in the translation both of slang into Spanish and of secondary genres like children's literature in several countries. In any case, the methodological usefulness of including these strategies in the scale will have to be determined by further study of real texts (Aixelá, 1996, pp.61-65).

Figure 2.2.1. Aixelá's Model of Translation.



### *Davies's Cultural-Specific References Taxonomy*

In 2003, Davies carried out research into the cultural-specific references in the Harry Potter books. She demonstrated that the translation of cultural-specific references can be divided into two procedures: the micro-level procedures and the macro-level procedures (Davies, 2003, pp.65-100). With regard to micro-level procedures, Davies provided seven strategies: preservation, addition, omission, globalization, localization, transformation and creation. In comparison to Aixelá's taxonomy, Davies did not order them according to intercultural manipulation. Davies assumed that any strategies could be superior or inferior depends on the text type, the nature of the target readers, and the relationship between SL and TL. Even though Davies' taxonomy may be similar to Aixelá's strategies, she claimed she was unlikely to adopt any strategies from Aixelá. Davies created her own taxonomy by carrying out research of translations of the Harry Potter books around different countries. In the following table, I will discuss the seven strategies from micro-level procedures, and also compare them with Aixelá's (1966):

#### *Micro-level procedures*

1. *Preservation*: This one is similar to the “repetition” strategy from Aixelá. It borrows the vocabulary from SL .

2. *Addition*: This one is similar to the “intratextual gloss” strategy from Aixelá. It tends to use the original CSIs, and add more information as necessary.



3. *Omission*: This one is regarded as the “deletion” strategy from Aixelá. However, Davies disagreed with Aixelá that this strategy is an inferior strategy to adopt. Davies suggested this strategy was good for keeping a uniform tone within the ST.

4. *Globalization*: This strategy adapted the limited universalization and absolute universalization from Aixelá. Davies judged his globalization strategy as less extreme than Aixelá’s. She suggested that globalization tends to use neutral or general culture-specific references, which are more accessible and intelligible for the target audience.

5. *Localization*: This strategy is equal to Aixelá’s naturalization. However, Davies suggested localization is a more suitable term than naturalization, as localization is the antonym of globalization.

6. *Transformations*: Translators translate a text which has a specific meaning in the TL, but may not be found to have the same meaning in the SL. Davies regarded this strategy as an alteration or distortion of the original that goes beyond globalization or localization.

7. *Creation*: This is a similar strategy to Aixelá’s autonomous recreation. Translators create a text which does not exist in the SL, but it makes the TL text become more attractive and intelligible for target readers.

Additionally, Davies (Davies, 2003, pp.65-100) suggested that in macro-level procedures, translator may delete information which may not be necessary for target readers, and compensate with other CSIs strategies at the same time.

Overall, Davies suggests there is no absolute rule for translators to adopt certain strategies as it will depend on the translation conventions of the target country. For example, she discovered that in China translators use more footnotes in explaining the problematic CSIs. Whereas in France, translators tend to omit the problematic CSIs as they regard to use the extra explanation will interfere with the readers’ attention. Also, she proposed it is important to consider the gap of the cultural background between source country and target country. For instance, CSIs may occur more in translation between Asian countries and Western countries, while CSIs may be less obscure when translating from Western to Western countries, since they may share more cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

For the purpose of this research, a new categorization will be established in Chapter Three, and it will be based on Aixelá and Davies’ taxonomies, since both are beneficial in terms of CSIs.

## Methodology

### *Overview*

The aim of the current study was to investigate the strategies used by translators involved in subtitling the *Friends*, focusing in particular on subtitle translations involving scenes which featured Culture Specific Items (CSIs). The literature review chapter covered a number of aspects that might affect the choices translators make when producing subtitles and when translating between different cultures in particular. The literature review looked at cross-cultural differences and presented a brief overview of translation studies, followed by a brief look at some recent taxonomy for categorizing different approaches to the translation of Culture Specific Items.

### *Instrumentation*

The research is mainly qualitative and involved an analysis of subtitles which was based on screen translation theories and the work of researchers in the area of CSI translation. But it has some figures that make this work quantitative too. The researchers have provided for some

questionnaire among 124 university students of this field, but 112 of the questionnaire were acceptable for getting in to analysis. Some of the students were translation students of BA in Islamic Azad University of Tabriz and some other were Linguistic students of MA in Islamic Azad University of Ahar.

### *3.3. Sampling*

Sampling in the current study is purposeful and those samples are collected that are problematic in translating CSI. The samples are selected based on discourse level and since the way of expressing ideas in different contexts are different in languages that have their own features, structures and the way of conveying meanings so it has been tried to take in to consideration all of these issues.

## **Results and Discussions**

### *Overview*

In this part, the research discusses the subtitle translations chosen by the Persian subtitle writers for Friends. The researchers provided a comment analyzing the translation strategy for each of the Persian subtitle translations followed by an assessment of the subtitle's effectiveness in terms of several parameters.

### *Discussions*

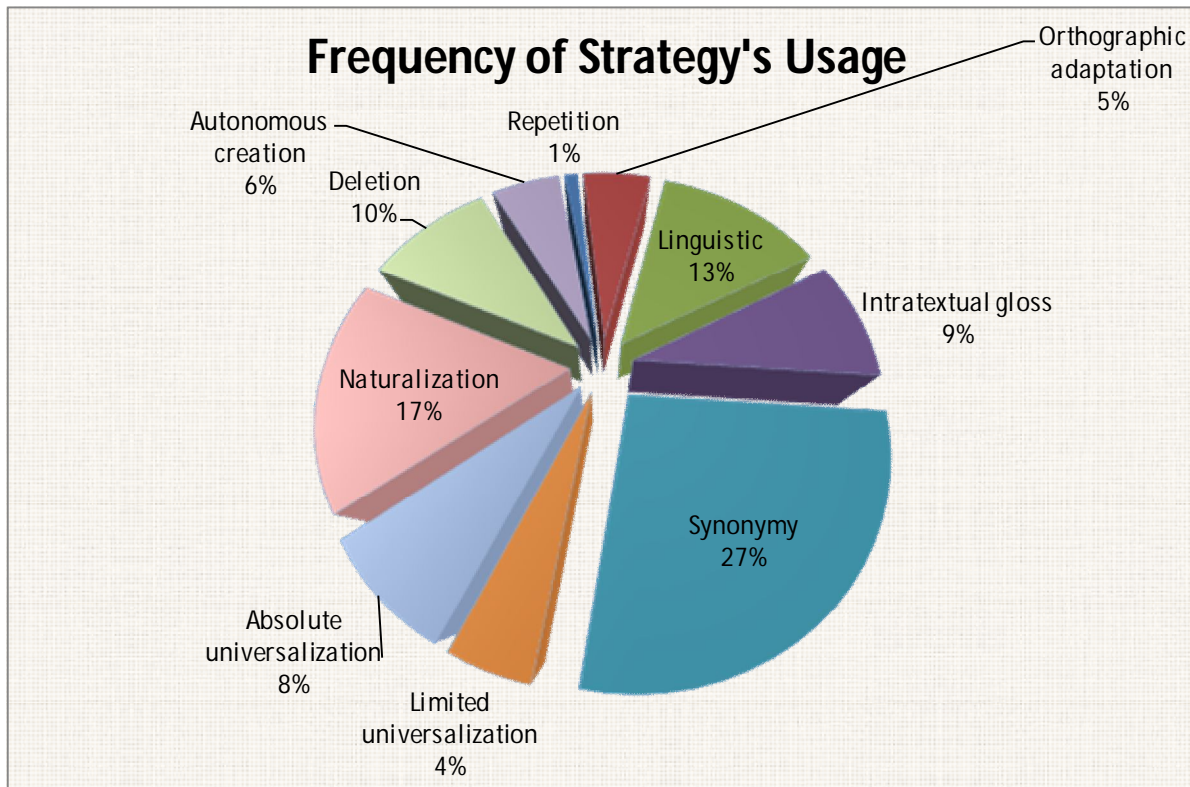
In this section, we will discuss the subtitle translations from English in to Persian in Friends series. The researchers will provide an efficacy for each of the Persian subtitle translations followed by comments analyzing the translation strategy, followed by an assessment of the subtitle's effectiveness in terms of several parameters. Added to this will be the extent of the each strategies usage.

All scenes chosen for analysis contained Culture Specific Items (CSIs). Many CSIs referred to American institutions, food choices or to people or characters well-known in American culture, either because they appeared in television shows or movies or in politics. Some of the CSIs referred to shops or places which are well-known in the USA such as the "Tappan Zee Bridge". American television audiences will have associations with all these; however it is likely that the Persian subtitle translators were not always aware of these associations. An attempt was made to present this discussion in a logical order by grouping CSIs together according to the type of translation strategies of CSI involved.

Below is charts and figures to discuss the results.

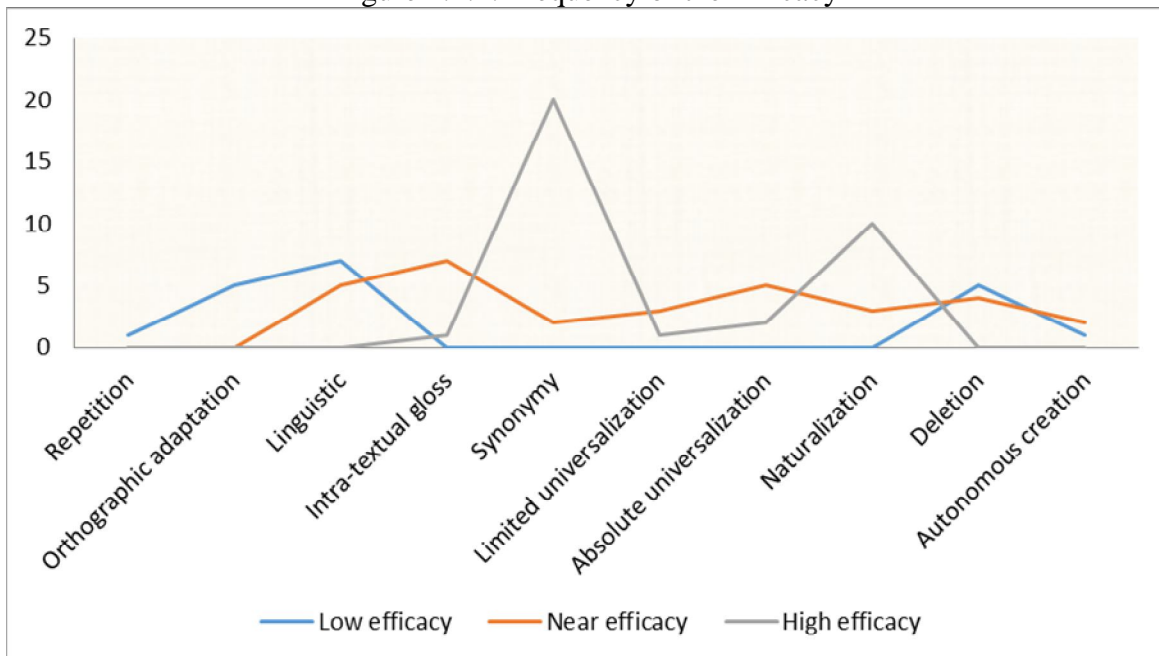


Figure 4.2.1. Frequency of Strategy's Usage



As the chart shows, it's divided in to ten parts. And among the strategies its synonymy that has the more usage in dealing with CSI's translations, and after that its naturalization that has the most usage. And among rest of the strategies there is no more significant difference based in the usage in the translation of CSI and they sequence based on the usage is as following: 13% linguistic, 10% deletion, 9% Intra-textual gloss, 8% absolute universalization, 6% autonomous creation, 5% orthographic adaptation, 4% limited universalization, and only 1% repetition.

Figure 4.2.2. Frequency of the Efficacy



This chart shows the extent of efficacy which is analyzed based on a questionnaire, its consist of three element and as its represented the green one is for high efficacy, red one is for near efficacy and the last one is for low efficacy.

Repetition is the first strategy in this char from the left side and since it has just 1% of the usage in translation of CSI's so the lowest efficacy as a whole belongs to it however both high efficacy and near efficacy are zero and just low efficacy is obtain by using this strategy.

He next one is orthographic adaptation and it's similar to the repetition based on the high and near efficacy and jus the extent of the low efficacy is different and a little low efficacy is obtained.

The next one is linguistic and since the translator chooses in many cases a denotatively very close reference to the original so high efficacy in any of samples is not obtained and just low and near efficacy obtained.

Intra textual gloss is he next strategy which in this strategy the translator provide extra information for the reader of the target language however approximately no high and low efficacy is seen and most of the samples of which the intra textual gloss is used just has obtain near efficacy.

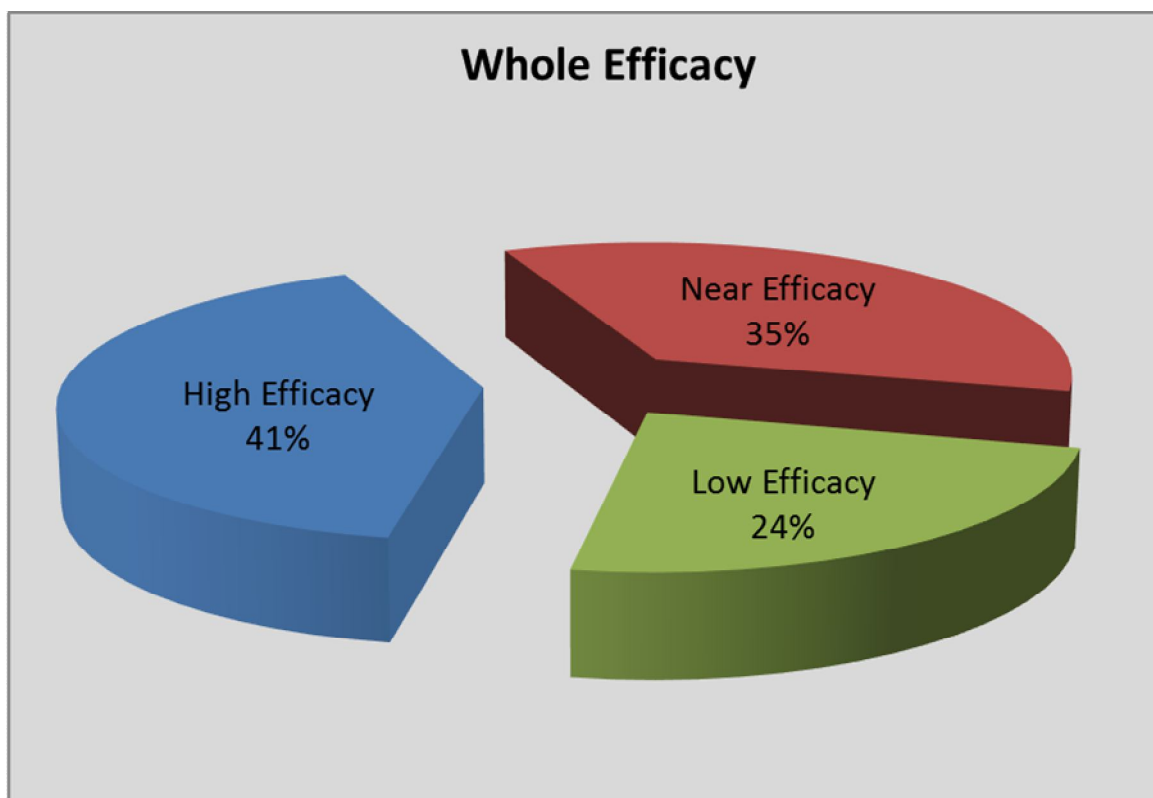
Another strategy which has a significant difference with the rest of the strategy is synonymy, not only it has the most usage among the strategies which is used in the translation of CSI's, but also in the most if the samples I has obtained high efficacy.

Limited universalization and Absolute universalization have similar characteristic and position in the chart. None of the samples of them has obtained low efficacy and they have just near and high efficacy.

The next strategy is the Naturalization which has the characteristic similar to the synonymy. The number of samples which has obtained low and near efficacy is approximately the same as synonymy but synonymy has obtained a little high efficacy than Naturalization.

Deletion and is the one which has obtained no high efficacy and that's maybe for the nature of this strategy and has obtained near and low efficacy a little and the last one is Autonomous creation which has the characteristic similar o deletion but just the number of samples which has obtained low and near efficacy is lower.

Figure4.2.3. Whole Efficacy



As whole the analysis of the strategies and the questionnaire result shows that 41% of the samples of the CSIs which are translated from English in to Persian have obtained high efficacy after that it's near efficacy by 35% efficacy and then low efficacy by 24% of the whole samples.

## Conclusions

### *Review of the Original Aim of the Study*

The original aim of the study was to analyze the strategies used by translators when dealing with CSIs in US-produced TV series. The television series chosen was *Friends*, a US-made TV series that shows the life of six young, white adults living in New York. *Friends* was chosen primarily because it used the daily life of young Americans as its basic material. *Friends* seemed a good choice for a research study of this nature, firstly because of its popularity in Iran and secondly because it contains many scenes involving different types of Culture Specific Items (CSIs). *Friends* enjoys enormous popularity with young Iranian audiences, who watch it on TV or on the Internet. Many websites are recommending *Friends* as effective material for English language study, not only because its lines show the daily discourse of American people but also because it

is thought to provide some insight into American culture. A secondary aim of the study was to analyze any scenes involving efficacy. In other words, the researcher was interested to see whether the translators had made any attempt to achieve a cross-cultural translation in terms of Nida's (Nida and Taber, 1969, p.14) "dynamic equivalence" or whether they had adhered to the original discourse and basically left it in place.

#### *Review of Methodological Approaches*

Strategies such as Synonymy and Naturalization were found more effective than strategies such as repetition of CSIs. This is consistent with Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence, which can help achieve the same response in intended viewers as the response in viewers from the source culture (Nida and Taber, 1969, p.14). The use of these strategies is also consistent with the ideology advocated by Baker, who believes that pragmatic translation can be used in translation. The TV series includes a wide range of real life contexts, from the office or workplace to the home environment, however Iranian viewers probably did not realize they were watching a sitcom.

Central to the methodology chosen for this dissertation was the analysis of the strategies used by translators in dealing with CSIs in *Friends*. These strategies were analyzed based on the literature review of translation approaches recommended by Aixelá (Aixelá, 1996, pp.61-65) for the translation of CSIs. This resulted in a method of analysis which helped to identify the strategies most favored by translators. However, one of the weaknesses of this methodology is that the researcher might focus on the subtitles involving CSIs in which the strategies used were inappropriate, when in fact this does not mean that such strategies are inherently inappropriate. For example, in the analysis, repetition was found to be ineffective in many cases, but this does not take away from the fact that it might still be useful on other occasions.

The Possible advantage of the methodological approach was that it investigates translation students' opinion about the efficacy of the translation of CSIs by means of a questionnaire.

#### *Findings in the Framework of Studies*

The main aim of the study, obviously, was to analyze the strategies used to arrive at the subtitle translations and whether these were effective in terms of dynamic equivalence. My analyses did include some assumptions as to how the Iranian audience might have responded to perceived cross-cultural differences in terms of efficacy issues. Obviously, my comments were subjective to some extent, but the study included another translation student to confirm my assumptions that were shared. The fact that *Friends* is a sitcom, where exaggerated social behavior was used to elicit a laugh from the American audience also means that the data could not totally be relied upon to present a true picture of such cross-cultural differences.

The analysis of the a season from *Friends* appeared to indicate that repetition was the strategy that is most likely to achieve less than satisfactory outcomes in terms of what Nida (Nida and Taber, 1969, p.14) describes as "dynamic equivalence".

#### *Concluding and Answers to Research Questions*

"The only constant is change". There is not a one-size-fit-all approach in the world for dealing with any issue, and subtitling is no exception to this maxim.

The findings of the research appear to suggest that Synonymy and Naturalization as translation strategies for dealing with CSIs, most of the times lead to the most effective translation equivalents.

The findings of the research also show that most of the samples of the synonymy has high efficacy, a few near efficacy and no low efficacy.

As whole the analysis of the strategies and the questionnaire result shows that 41% of the samples of the CSIs which are translated from English into Persian have obtained high efficacy after that it's near efficacy by 35% efficacy and then low efficacy by 24% of the whole samples.

In researchers opinion movie series are one of the tools that transfer the socio-cultural features of a nation worldwide. Through this study, this mentality came to the researcher's mind that if it would be worked on dubbing aspects of translating this series, it would be better to broaden this study and to analyze better the culture specific items of the source language and theorize the transferring options of them into target language audience.

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