

Transcultural Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences

Print ISSN 4239-2636 Online ISSN 4247-2636

Proceedings

of

The 2nd International Conference: Future
Contexts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives
in Literature, Language & Translation
15 & 16 October 2022

TJHSS

BUC Press House



Volume 4 Issue (1)

January 2023

Proceedings of
The 2nd International Conference: Future
Contexts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in
Literature, Language & Translation 15 & 16
October 2022



Transcultural Journal for Humanities and Social Sciences (TJHSS) is a journal committed to disseminate a new range of interdisciplinary and transcultural topics in Humanities and social sciences. It is an open access, peer reviewed and refereed journal, published by Badr University in Cairo, BUC, to provide original and updated knowledge platform of international scholars interested in multi-inter disciplinary researches in all languages and from the widest range of world cultures. It's an online academic journal that offers print on demand services.

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To promote interdisciplinary studies in the fields of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences and provide a reliable academically trusted and approved venue of publishing Language and culture research.

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| ▣ Print ISSN | 2636-4239 |
| ▣ Online ISSN | 2636-4247 |

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Ambiguity in Literary Translation: A Semantic Approach of “Ibn Arabi's Small Death” by Mohamed Hasan Alwan

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Abstract: The study focuses on semantic ambiguity in translating “Mawt Sa8er” موت صغير by Mohamed Hasan Alwan (2016) translated by William M. Hutchins (2022) into ‘Ibn Arabi's Small Death’. The study adopts connotation and denotation as the theoretical framework for the analysis using Newmark’s (1988) division of ambiguity in translation into seven types: grammatical, lexical, pragmatic, cultural, idiolectal, referential, and metaphorical. The study attempts to utilize the challenges of ambiguity faced by the translator and to what extent he/she manages to overcome them. This study looks into ambiguity by defining its sources and types, and translation decision-making patterns as well as trying to answer the following research questions: How the translator overcomes the challenges of language ambiguity in the source text? To what extent he/she manages to deliver the cultural context of the ST to the target audience? The study points out the ambiguity intended by the author and how the translator deals with it to convey the same stylistic effect.

Keywords: Ambiguity, literary translation, semantic ambiguity, lexical ambiguity

1. Introduction

Since Ambiguity is inherent in human language, it is often described as a problem, a ‘disease of language’ (Graham, 2001). Translators face the challenge of ambiguity and its resolution in their daily work and have to decide how to tackle the problem of synchronized existence of various distinct senses or different possible interpretations when rendering the meaning in the process of intralingual and interlingual translation which is a complex decision-making process. They are two principal methods of describing the meanings of words. The connotation of a word or term adds elements of emotion, attitude, or color. The meaning or use of denotation and connotation depends partially on the field of study (Rao, 2017). The study tries to define ambiguity, especially in translation about connotation and denotation in a translated historical fiction “Ibn Arabi's Small Death” (Hutchins, 2022) that chronicles the life of the great Sufi master and philosopher Ibn Arabi. Known in the West as ‘Rumi’s teacher’, he was a poet and mystic who proclaimed that love was his religion. Born in twelfth-century Spain during the Golden Age of Islam, Ibn Arabi traveled thousands of miles from Andalusia to distant Azerbaijan, passing through Morocco, Egypt, the Hijaz, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey on a journey of discovery both physical and spiritual. Witness to the wonders and cruelties of his age and being exposed to the political rule of four empires, Ibn Arabi wrote masterworks on mysticism that profoundly influenced the world. Alwan’s fictionalized first-person narrative, written from the perspective of Ibn Arabi himself, breathes vivid life into a celebrated and polarizing figure.

2. Review of Literature

Any speaker of any language has a different range of language varieties; Gumperz (1964) uses the term 'linguistic repertoire' to describe the range of styles that individuals need to fulfill their communicative needs most appropriately. The speaker's ability to

choose the appropriate variety for any particular purpose is part of his or her communicative competence; the choice is not random but is determined by aspects of the social organization of the community and the social situation where the discourse takes place. In this case, the bilingual or the multilingual is not strikingly different from the monolingual; it is simply that a speaker has to choose not only between different varieties of the same language but also between two or more different languages.

Furthermore, David (2006) argues that language choice is triggered by factors such as social status, gender, educational attainment, ethnicity, age, occupation, rural and urban origin, speakers, topic, place, media, and formality of the situation. These findings are supported by Fasold (1990). Coulmas (1997) explains that people make linguistic choices for various purposes. Individuals and groups choose words, registers, styles, and languages to suit their various needs concerning the communication of ideas, the association with and separation from others, and the establishment or defense of dominance. People are endowed with the ability to adjust their linguistic repertoires to ever-new circumstances and construct their languages for certain purposes. Ferrer and Sankoff (2004) find that the language preference of a speaker is influenced by dominant languages.

2.1 Introduction to Ambiguity in Literary Translation

Multiple factors in language contribute to ambiguity. Personal experience and knowledge of the culture that surrounds a language assist in removing language uncertainty. The context of a word can be used to interpret it rather than its literal meaning. Similarly, depending on where it appears in a sentence, the same word can have different meanings and ambiguity leads to misunderstanding at this point. As a result, there should be enough contextual information and cultural context to avoid ambiguities. There are numerous and perplexing vocabularies associated with lexical sense variations. These variations constitute the essence of ambiguity resulting in a critical semantic property (Brinton, 2000).

According to Newmark (1981), any lexical item can be viewed in three ways: dictionary items—sense types (e.g. technical, figurative, colloquial); the four degrees of frequency (e.g. primary, collocational); and the core and peripheral meanings. These meanings may cause problems in translation if a translator is unable to distinguish between them. In translation, there are numerous manifestations of lexical and semantic issues. These issues are likely to result in a syntactic and semantic loss in translation between any two linguistic codes in general, and specifically between Arabic and English, which leads to different kinds of ambiguity.

The structure of the Arabic language makes it difficult to understand. However, it is not only sentence structure that frequently leads to ambiguity; it can also arise from multiple interpretations of a word or its metaphorical meanings. The translator's thorough study and practice may enable him to disambiguate certain aspects of linguistic ambiguity. Furthermore, syntactic ambiguity is a major issue for large-scale grammar that encompasses the representative aspects of natural language. The word order in an Arabic sentence causes several problems at all levels of analysis. When a sentence deviates from its normal order, the meaning cannot be made clear unless the sentence is disambiguated by the act of interpreting an author's intended use of a word that has multiple meanings or spellings (Rahmouna, 2008). Othman et al. (2003) discuss various reasons why Arabic is considered a difficult task "Understanding Arabic sentences is a difficult task. The difficulty comes from different sources: the length of the sentence and the complex Arabic syntax".

The translation is not only a means of collecting tasks that involves moving from one language to a different one, but it is a transfer that suggests a translator leaves

something of himself/herself behind. The translator makes the border crossing with a new dimension of themselves on the opposite side. Therefore, because the translator is in the process of making a text, that text itself creates him with all its concepts and beliefs. The concepts of ethics, identity, and beliefs remain unchanged once they are associated with interpreting as a profession. Nevertheless, they need different connotations once they are related to a nation, a bunch, or a community. The field of translation studies is considered an academic interdisciplinary that thoroughly studies the theory, description, and application of translation, interpreting, and localization. It involves and borrows much from other fields which are somehow a supporter of this discipline. In other words, we cannot analyze any translated text without using another linguistics discipline, and in the study semantics approach is the main focus.

Nida (1964) states “the nature of the message determines the types of 13 translations”. According to this theory, a translation depends on the degree of focus on the form or the content. Thus, it defines two types of translation; a formal equivalence translation in which the form and content of the original message are to be preserved, and a dynamic equivalence translation which focuses on creating an equivalence effect in TL text.

Larson (1984), divides translation methods into two major categories of translation. The first category is a form-based or literal translation while the second category is a meaning-based or idiomatic translation. He further explains these two methods to the faithful translation follow the structure of the SL, and the idiomatic translation tries to convey the meaning intended by the SL writer in a natural form of the receptor language. Newmark (1988) in Suparman (2003) explains that “the translators of literary works mainly have difficulties in translating the linguistic aspects, socio-cultural aspects, and moral aspects implicitly stated in the literary works (e.g. novels)”. In translating literary work, a translator usually has problems or difficulties in the process of translating from the ST workstyles and methods of translation to TT.

2.2 Semantics' Role in Literary Translation

Semantics is the study of the meaning of language, including the logical aspects of meaning (formal semantics), the meanings of words and their relationships (lexical semantics), and the cognitive structure of word meaning (conceptual semantics). In linguistics, semantics is the subfield that studies meaning. Semantics can deal with meaning at the level of words, phrases, sentences, or larger units of speech. One of the important questions uniting different approaches to linguistic semantics is the relationship between form and meaning (Kroeger, 2019; Betti, Igaab and Al-Ghizzi, 2018).

Semantics is concerned with deconstructing words, signals, and sentence structures. It affects our reading comprehension as well as our understanding of other people's words in everyday conversation. Semantics play an important role in our everyday communication, understanding, and learning languages without us even realizing it (Betti and Mahdi, 2021; Palmer, 1997). Semantic studies deal with denotation and connotation which is considered relevant in the study of ambiguity in literary translation. Denotation is when you mean what you say literally while connotation is generated when it means something else, something that may be hidden at first. In other words, denotation characterizes the main aspect of a word's meaning, which is agreed on by everyone while Connotation differs according to the experience of the individual and the emotional associations that the word arouses nevertheless since people have common experiences, some words have shared connotations. Since the meaning of words is not independent but associated by the relation with other words in context; denotation and connotation in semantics are important concepts in analyzing any translated text (Lyons,

1977). Newmark(1988) explains how connotation comments on society and reveals the factors related to society.

The basic standard of translation is that the translated textual content needs to precisely reflect the means of the authentic text. Nothing needs to be arbitrarily added or removed, even though from time to time a section of the meaning can be transposed, that is, translated with a distinctive order (Duff, 2003). Translators frequently hotel to bilingual dictionaries seeing translational equivalents all through the manner of translating texts throughout languages. This is unsatisfactory in the case of English and Arabic as these bilingual dictionaries are used as a substitute and useless in managing semantic fields in a massive variety of cases that lack accuracy. Looking intently at a wide variety of semantic fields in English and Arabic, we shall be amazed at the degree of confusion with which English-Arabic dictionaries take care of the similarities and variations between the English and Arabic field members.

It is a working speculation in linguistics and translation that each language has its semantic shape simply as it has its personal phonological and grammatical structure to the extent that the meanings of the language can't be brought into a one-to-one correspondence with each other. The two languages are semantically non-isomorphic, that is, they have exceptional semantic constructions. The degree of semantic isomorphism between two languages is commonly taken to be established upon the quantity of overlap of the cultures of the two societies.

2.3 Sufism Concept and Believe

Some Sufism concepts can be ambiguous or changeable which may cause difficulties in interpreting them during the translation process. For example, one of the key concepts of Sufism is the concept of "Nafs" which can be translated as either the self, psyche, ego, or soul. In English, there is a similar degree of ambiguity surrounding the term "self," with some people using it to refer to the psychological concept of the self (the definition of which varies), while others simply refer to the conscious "I" or ego. Let me clarify that I use the term "self" in the psychological sense that includes the unconscious mind (Cotterill, 2012). Sufism is a mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through the direct personal experience of God. It consists of a variety of mystical paths that are designed to ascertain the nature of humanity and God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world.

Schimmel (2022) states that Islamic mysticism is called *taṣawwuf* (literally “to dress in the wool”) in Arabic, but it has been called Sufism in Western languages since the early 19th century. An abstract word, Sufism derives from the Arabic term for a mystic, *ṣūfī*, which is in turn derived from *ṣūf*, “wool,” plausibly a reference to the woolen garment of early Islamic ascetics. The Sufis are also generally known as “the poor,” *fuqarā'*, plural of the Arabic *faqīr*, in Persian *darvīsh*, whence the English words *fakir* and *dervish*. Ibn Arabi is recognized among practitioners of Sufism by the name *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* ("the Greatest Shaykh"; from here the Akbariyya or Akbarian school derives its name), Muḥyiddin ibn Arabi, and was considered a saint. He is also known as *Shaikh-e-Akbar Mohi-ud-Din Ibn-e-Arabi* throughout the Middle East. In medieval Europe, he was known as Doctor Maximus (Greatest Teacher). (Ullah, 2022)

3.1 Research Questions

How does the translator overcome language ambiguity from the source text to the target language?

To what extent he manages to deliver the cultural context of the ST to the TT?

3.2 Methodology

One of the problems that may occur in translation is the improper selection of what seem to be equivalents of the ST words when they may not be true equivalents. This may result from ambiguities in the ST lexemes or syntax. In this regard, Newmark (1988) defines ambiguity as a word or a syntactic structure that has more than one meaning, even in its context. 'In its context' here indicates that a word cannot be considered ambiguous without referring to the context, as each word may be ambiguous out of context. Newmark divides ambiguity into seven types: grammatical, lexical, pragmatic, cultural, idiolectal, referential, and metaphorical.

- **Grammatical ambiguity:** This may occur when sentences have been poorly written, or due to the effect of the use of grammatical and functional words. Prepositions, phrasal verbs, and pronouns can also cause ambiguity.
- **Lexical ambiguity:** This is more common and more difficult to resolve than grammatical ambiguity. Many words have more than one sense (i.e. polysemous) or have literal and metaphorical meanings. Homonymy is also one of the causes of lexical ambiguity.
- **Pragmatic ambiguity:** This arises when the tone or emphasis in an SL sentence is not clear.
- **Cultural ambiguity:** This arises if 'the function or the substance of a cultural feature changes at a point of time and the term remains whilst the period background is not clear in the SL text' (Newmark, 1988). In addition, certain concepts are 'near-internationalisms'; these concepts, however, may have different uses in different languages. For example, the word 'king' in Saudi Arabia does not have the same sense as that of a 'king' in the United Kingdom.
- **Idiolectal ambiguity:** This arises from people perceiving words differently from one another.
- **Referential ambiguity:** All types of ambiguity can be referential; however, Newmark states that he means the ambiguous use of proper names in SL text.
- **Metaphorical ambiguity:** Most sentences can have metaphorical meaning and literal meanings. However, typically only one specific meaning is intended. For example, 'kick the bucket' can refer to the literal meaning of the expression, or to its metaphorical meaning, which is 'to die'.

All these types of ambiguities can be referred to as linguistic ambiguity. Linguistic ambiguity in translation can arise from ambiguity in the ST. If a translator fails to identify and resolve such ambiguity, or due to a lack of full understanding of the ST and the context of its situation, a translator may create an ambiguous translation. Among the various linguistic ambiguities mentioned by Newmark, lexical ambiguity is the most problematic. Lexical ambiguity can be divided into two main categories; one holds that words have lexical ambiguity before their semantic occurrence in a text; the other considers that lexical ambiguity is context-dependent, which means that it occurs due to the effect of the text (Simpson, 1981). Lexical ambiguity can result from either homonymy or polysemy (Newmark, 1988). Examples of problems in translating polysemous and homonymous words are discussed in the following sections.

4. Analysis

This chapter analyses parts of the novel that highlight different types of ambiguity to determine the most prominent type. The analysis is conducted on the novel and the translated book and some examples are selected for this paper.

4.1 Data Description

4.1.1 The Author

Mohammed Hasan Alwan is a Saudi Arabian novelist, born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1979. He graduated with a doctorate in International Marketing from the

University of Carleton, Canada. Alwan has published five novels to date. Mohammad Hassan Alwan's novel, *A Small Death*, won the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) on April 25 at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair.

4.1.2 The Translator

William Maynard Hutchins (born October 11, 1944) is an American academic, author, and translator of contemporary Arabic literature. He was formerly a professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. As a translator, Hutchins's best-known work is his translation of the Cairo Trilogy by Egyptian Nobel Prize-winner Naguib Mahfouz. This trio of novels is widely regarded as one of the finest works of fiction in Arabic literature. In 2005–2006, Hutchins received a US National Endowment for the Arts grant in literary translation.

4.1.3 Background of the Novel

Ibn Arabi Small Death is one of the important masterpieces of historical fiction that follows the life of the great Sufi master and philosopher Ibn Arabi. He was a poet and mystic who declared that love was his religion. He was known in the West as "Rumi's teacher." Ibn Arabi, who was born in twelfth-century Spain during the Golden Age of Islam, traveled thousands of miles from Andalusia to distant Azerbaijan, passing through Morocco, Egypt, the Hijaz, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey on a physical and spiritual journey of discovery. Ibn Arabi wrote masterworks on mysticism that profoundly influenced the world while witnessing the wonders and cruelties of his age and being subjected to the political rule of four empires. Alwan's fictionalized first-person narrative is written from Ibn Arabi's point of view.

4.2 Findings and Discussions

Ambiguity can be perceived or unperceived. In other words, the translator or the recipient may be unaware of the presence of ambiguity. When creating a text, the author selects words based on his/her communicative intentions and the translator tries to interpret the message intended by the author. What distinguishes literary texts is that they are not straightforward; there are always hidden meanings between the lines. As a result, translating literary texts is a difficult task. According to Bassnett (2005), to produce coherent and accepted translations, translators must be able to correctly interpret literary texts "It is therefore quite foolish to argue that the task of the translator is to translate but not to interpret as if the two were separate exercises". The following are some examples of ambiguity in the Source and Target Text.

4.2.1 Example 1

موت صغي

Ibn Arabi's Small Death

Referential ambiguity: Newmark defines referential ambiguity as the ambiguous use of proper names in an SL text. The translator chose to add the name "Ibn Arabi" to the title of the novel as a way to explain to the target reader what the novel is about, however, he left the idea of small death as ambiguous as the original author wants it to be. The question here is whether leaving the concept ambiguous confuses the reader or not.

4.2.2 Example 2

كانت الأرحام أوطاننا فاعتربنا عنها بالولادة
ابن عربي

"Wombs are homelands we quit at birth"

ABN ARABI

Lexical ambiguity: Wombs are homeland we exile by birth not quit. Quit has the denotation of the will to leave it, however, humans have no will or knowledge of when or where they are born or die. The main concept of Sufism that the author needs to convey is

lost in translation. He wants to emphasize the fact that we do not have the choice of when to be born or die.

4.2.3 Example 3

أعطاني الله برزخين: برزخ قبل ولادتي و آخر بعد مماتي.
و في الثاني رأيت ابني وهو يدفني. في الأول رأيت أمي وهي تلدني

God granted me two barzakhs. The first liminal period preceded my birth and the second followed my death.

During the initial one, I witnessed my mother give birth to me. During the second, I watched my son bury me.

Lexical ambiguity: The word “Barzakh” has an equivalent in the TT which is “limbo”, but the translator chooses to transliterate the expression, which may cause difficulties for the target reader. The author uses “Barzakh” as a known expression for the source text reader as is mentioned in the Holy Quran.

ومنه قوله -تعالى-: (وَمِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ بَرْزَخٌ إِلَى يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ)
The target reader faces difficulties in understanding what the translator means especially if he does not explain it or even adds a footnote to explain the expression that would have been useful to the target reader.

4.2.4 Example 4

"كل مكان لا يؤنث لا يعول عليه"

ابن عربي

"Any place that is not feminine in gender is untrustworthy"

IBN ARABI

Lexical ambiguity: مؤنث مكان "مكانة" بمعنى To have a position

The translator lost the deep meaning of Ibn Arabi's quotation in the process of translation and translated the quote literally, causing misunderstanding to the target audience. مكان لا يؤنث the intended meaning of Ibn Arabi is grammatical gender, not biological gender. What is your position in this place (life) in worshipping God? If you are in place and you do not know your position and it connotes your mission in life then you are lost.

4.2.5 Example 5

لأني في المرة الأولى قبضت يدي و انت تقرأ فاستعصت عليك القراءة ، و الان بسطتها فقرأت.
- و كيف يمنعي قبضك و يرسلني بسطك يا شيخ؟
- لأنني شيخك. جعلني الله مرادك و أنت مردي أقبضك و أبسطك بأمر الله...ثم أرسلك بعد أن تضع قدميك على أول الطريق

"The first time I clenched my fist as you read, and that made it almost impossible for you to read. Now that my fist isn't clenched, you can read."

"How can your clenched fist block me and your open palm set me free, Shaykh?"

"That's because I am your shaykh. God has destined me to be your novice master and for you to be my novice. By God's command, I can clench you tight and spread you wide open.... Once you have set your feet on the beginning of the path, I will send you forth."

Metaphorical ambiguity: the content of metaphorical ambiguity is due to the words having multiple senses or meanings and the particular intention behind the sentence is not made clear. The author intended the ambiguity in this part of the novel to emphasize the importance of the shaykh in the Sufism belief. The shaykh is capable of deciding to whom to deliver the religious knowledge. The translator keeps the same intended ambiguity of the author to keep the readers anxious to find out what the shaykh is capable of.

4.2.6 Example 6

نقرأ رسالة القشيري
حمل الشيخ الرسالة و على وجهه ابتسامه طفيفه وناولها للأحمد ...

“We will read al- Qushayri’s Epistle”

The Shaykh picked up al-Risala with a slight smile and handed it to Ahmed...

Lexical ambiguity: The translator uses loan words and sometimes transliteration of expressions from the ST to TT, however, it confuses the reader when he uses Epistle and then al-Risala when referring to the same book. Referential ambiguity is created here by the translator and not the author.

5. Conclusion

This study attempts to present the importance of being aware of ambiguity as a phenomenon in the language that affects the process of translation decision-making. This ambiguity is related to the semantic denotation and connotation of words in context especially when it deals with the intended meaning of the author about religious and spiritual beliefs. Translating a text from the source language to the target language is not easy. It requires great linguistics and non-linguistics knowledge for the translator to convey the religious and spiritual concepts of the source text. The most dominant type of ambiguity found in this translation is lexical ambiguity. The paper highlights the fact that the causes of ambiguity in the translation are mainly due to the lack of the translators’ knowledge of Sufism concepts and beliefs which is revealed especially when trying to translate Ibn Arabi quotations. The translator uses literal translation most of the time which results in a gap between the ST and TT and this gap leads to ambiguity in the target language.

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