**Applying Juliane House’s Translation Quality**

**Assessment Model on a Humorous Text:**

**A Case Study of *The Lizard***

**Abstract**

Translation quality assessment has become an important area to assess the quality of a translation. Indeed, translation as a product has to be measured by some form of quality control. As a method to evaluate the quality of a translated text, House’s revised model of translation quality assessment, is utilized in this paper to assess the quality of the English subtitled Iranian comedy movie, *The Lizard*, composed by P. QasemKhani and directed by K. Tabrizi in 2003, in order to realize two issues: first, to determine if the House’s model can be applied on humorous texts and, second, to know how much the English subtitle was successful in transferring the function, especially interpersonal function, of the source text which abounds with cultural and religious factors that do not exist in the Western societies and cultures. The result of the study implied that the humorous effect of the source language has not been recreated in the target language; it has been completely ruined. The results indicated that the mentioned model is not applicable on humorous texts because it does not take cultural and religious factors into account, but focuses only on linguistic features. The analysis has indicated that the English subtitle of the comedy is an overt translation.

**Keywords**: *Translation Quality Assessment, Function, Humorous texts, Overt Translation, Covert Translation*

# Introduction

As an evaluative area, Douglas Robinson (1977) believes that “Lefevere’s hidden polemic is directed specifically against the essentialist notion that evaluation is an objective representation of quality or value residing somehow intrinsically within a translation, and with that much I agree wholeheartedly.” One of the objective equivalence-based models of TQA is proposed by Juliana House. Her model is a pragmatic and programmatic, i.e. it looks at communicational aspects of translation and it is mostly based on Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics. This paper is to evaluate the quality of the English subtitle of an Iranian comedy drama movie named *The* *Lizard*, written by Peyman Qasem Khani, and directed by Kamal Tabrizi in 2003. The work is done through J. House’s model of the translation quality assessment. Obviously, the model has been applied on various genres such as literary, scientific, etc., but little is done on humorous texts. The main questions this study aims to answer are:

1. How much is the House’s (newly revised) model applicable to the humorous (comedy) genre?
2. How much has the selected translation (subtitle) been successful in achieving the functions of the ST?



Figure: A scheme for analyzing and comparing original and translation texts

The main reason for selecting this movie is its being comedy which means that it uses the language of humor, so it is challenging. The basic purpose of such works is to amuse the audience, an amusement which leads to laughter. Since cultures are different, what amuses the people of a society might be different for the others; something that is totally funny in a country may be just a little funny in another one or even completely unfunny. The humorous effect may not be the same due to the variety in cultural, social, and religious facts. The role of translation becomes more significant here; that is, producing the same humorous effect which is the central aim of comedies as humorous texts is not that easy. To achieve this, aim the audience must know the background of every cultural reference in the movie. *The Lizard* abounds with sentences, phrases and even words that do create laughter but are not found in the English subtitle, where explaining the mentioned backgrounds is not possible. So how does the nonnative audience judge the movie which is extremely amusing for Iranians? Indeed, the movie, due to the temporal gap, may not be completely understandable and funny even for the Iranians who belong to the next generations. Nowadays post-2000s-generations are mostly toward the western culture; consequently, the religious and socio-cultural terms and expressions used in the movie may look incomprehensible and lose their humorous aspects. How can they be comprehensible and humorous for those who are from different culture, religion, and language? There’s no shared knowledge between the ST and TT audience. Equivalence is not considered as the basis of translation, because ideational meaning isn’t the point; the focus in translating humorous texts is on the interpersonal one. According to subtitling rules, the sentences should be as short as possible, so there’s no room to give more information about the background of each sociocultural element. In order to find the amount of humor and humorous effect in the English subtitle, some marked sentences and phrases embedded with cultural references are selected to be analyzed by applying House’s revised model which is explained in the next part. The profiles of both source text and target text are presented. Then based on socio-cultural criteria they are compared to find out the quality of the work. In addition, the focus of this study is not on non-verbal elements or the visual code, but rather on the verbal elements. Errors are categorized and suggestions are provided.

## Humor and its translation

Humor that is common with the concept of quality has got a complex nature, which makes it hard to define (Rojo, 2002). Despite the fact that humor is a common event that is easy to identify, the analysis of its nature is a challenge. (Meyer, 2003; Vandaele, 2002). It may be so because there is not academic research in this area. According to Robert Latta (1999), it is the lack of knowledge of the basic process of humor that prevents us from achieving a satisfactory descriptive definition. Munday (2009) argues that humor translation confronts two traditional tenets within translation studies: equivalence and translatability, in the sense that meaning needs to be transferred from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL) “without undergoing radical changes,” and this notion is clearly challenged in the translation of humor. Ana María Rojo (2002) believes that linguistic and traditional approaches to translation do not take into account social and cognitive factors embedded in humor, thus not recognizing that the semantic meaning of any instance of verbal humor is secondary to its primary intention to be humorous”. Hence, in humorous texts, fidelity to the original takes second place and “equivalence will need to be relinquished in favor of skopos” (Chiaro, 2006). As such, the common procedure for translators is either to be faithful to the ST when humor can be easily translated or, otherwise, to adapt to the norms and culture of the TT (Rojo, 2002). Delia Chiaro (2006) explains that the main strategies available to the translators of humor are substitution (partial or total) of the ST humor in the TT, replacement of ST by an idiomatic expression in the TL, and compensation in another part of the TT for ST humor not transferred in other instances. Delabastita (1996) explains that these three approaches encompass a wide variety of strategies, from paraphrasing, amplification or explication to reduction or omission as well as literal or word for word translation, amongst others, and that the use of one or another will depend on personal taste and target audience expectations. Zabalbeascoa points out that translators should use the full range of strategies available to them but that, in spite of the fact that individual items may need individual solutions, there is a need to find a common thread for coherence. Given all these factors, it is not surprising that humor translation is considered to be a specialized type of translation, qualitatively different from other types (Vandaele, 2002) that requires time, skill and knowledge as well as a high level of craftsmanship.

# Literature Review

Daniel Valles (2014), in his article “Applying Juliana House’s Translation Quality Assessment Model (1997) on a Humorous Text: A Case Study of *The Simpsons*” applied the model on Spanish translation, dubbed version, of an episode of the animated US-American TV series *The Simpsons*. The study focused on the quality of the verbal elements of the acoustic code and not on its non-verbal elements or the visual code. The model was applied on the full script not only to the parts considered to be humorous. According to Valles, “From a conceptual perspective, House’s model is able to calibrate the significance of humor within a text in order to assess the strategies followed by the translators when dealing with these types of text.” Having analyzed the text, he realized that the Genre emphasized the importance of humor in a situation comedy and an essential part of its nature. It’s considered the first priority for the translator to maintain in the TT, something that has been clearly achieved. The study also shows that the ideational function has been affected by the translation. In addition, using less expressive structures and loss of most socio-cultural references which have been translated literally has led to a loss of humor. The text has been categorized as overt translation. Finally, the study shows that the model is complex and doesn’t have a specific weight for mismatch (Shakernia, 2014; Anari, 2015)es and errors.

Shabnam Shakernia (2014) applied House’s model on the Persian translation of a short story *Grapes of Wrath*. The analysis put emphasis on lexical, syntactic and textual means. It also focused on House’s translation typology. The result was that the translator has focused on the TT addresses which means that he has tried to keep the ST and TT equivalent. Consequently, the text is a covet translation.

Salar Manafi Anari and Hamid Varmazyari (2015) used the new model to evaluate the quality of a Persian translation of Chomskey’s Media Control to estimate its visibility. The aim was to understand to what extent is House’s newly revised model applicable to the political genre and also how much has the selected translation been successful in achieving the function of the ST. The result was that the translation couldn’t fulfill the functions of the ST. It also showed that this model is practical in assessing political translations.

Sonia Ghafourpour and Razie Eslamieh (2018) evaluated two English translations of Rubaiate of Omar Khayyam done by two translators: Edward Fitzgerald and Saeed Saeedpour. The study aimed at investigating the frequency of errors in the translation rendered by the SL native speaker and those rendered by TL native speaker; and the quality of Persian-English translations of Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. They found out that the Iranian translator’s errors were fewer than the other’s. Furthermore, they realized that House’s model is applicable and useful in the field of translation of poetry.

Atefeh Zekri and Zahra Shahsavar (2016) worked on the Persian translation of English pharmaceutical leaflets based on House’s model (Ghafourpour, 2018; Shahsavar, 2016). They randomly selected 30 drug leaflets of 2015. The researchers found out that out of 90 selected sentences, 47 were overtly erroneous and 43 were error-free. The errors consisted of mistranslation, grammatical mistakes, addition, omission, and substitution. In addition, the only covert error was tenor mismatch.

# Methodology

In this part, an overview of the important elements of House’s TQA model is presented.   
Then the dialogues and the subtitles are reviewed. Finally, it’ll be explained how the selection of dialogues, comparison, and the analysis of the findings were carried out. Since this movie abounds with cultural and religious factors which are absent in the target culture, so most of the translations done are towards overt translation. As House (1997, p. 30) puts it, overt vs. covert distinction is a cline not an "either-or". Besides, the function and the purpose of a translation, the text and the translator's understanding of it, "the implied readers" and "publishing policies" determine its being overt vs. covert or translation vs. version (House, 1997).

## Framework

What House’s model proposes is a comparison between the ST and TT on three levels which are Language/Text, Register (field, tenor, and mode), and Genre. House explains the relation between the three levels in a representation in which “generic choices are realized by register choices, which in turn are realized by linguistic choices that make up linguistics structures in the

instantiation of a text" (House, 1997). In this study, the first part contains the stages, second is the analysis of the ST at the mentioned three levels to make the textual profile of the ST and then comparing the ST and the TT using the same three-level analysis.

## Materials

The movie used in the paper comprises:

### On the ST Author

Peyman Ghasem Khani is an Iranian film screenwriter, director and actor who has written great works such as Shabhaye Barare, Khoob Bad Jelf, Saint Petersburg.

### On the Translation/the Translator

No information has been found regarding the translator.

## Procedure

Basically, two hundred and seven segments (sentence, phrase, word) were selected to be compared with the English subtitles. In addition, about fifty-seven segments of the Persian version were not translated. There are also translations which are the equivalence of three segments of the Persian scenario. The textual profile of the ST was made. Then the comparison of the two profiles were carried out.

# Result and discussion

## Analysis of the ST and Statement of Function

### Field

*The Lizard* (مارمولک) is a 2004 Iranian comedy drama film directed by Kamal Tabrizi, written by Peyman Ghasem Khani and starring Parviz Parastui as Reza "the lizard" Mesghali, a small-time thief who disguises as a Mullah in succeeds in escaping, and he stays in his role to achieve his aim. Furthermore, he is not a totally bad guy. The film satirizes the clergy, religion, Iranian society, and life in general. The movie had problem to be released, because many critics had found it offensive. In addition, the movie doesn’t claim to show the Iranian religious community; i.e. it states that such conditions exist in parts of the community. Moreover, it’s also said that the movie is somehow a copy of the American movie, We’re No Angels, made in 1989, since the plot is to some extent the same.

**Lexical Means**

Sentences, phrases, and words are mostly simple; however, in some cases it appears to be complex, especially when it comes to the Persian proverbs and idioms. The author’s tone is comic.

**Lexical Field**

Religion, culture, beliefs.

### Tenor

Author’s Temporal, Social, and Geographical Provenance

Unmarked, contemporary, standard Persian

**Author’s Personal (Emotional and Intellectual) Stance**

The author criticizes some part of the Iranian religious community, specially the clergy ones who have power over people. He shows it by expressing the main character as a hypocritical clergy man. In addition, he expresses a more hypocritical character, the Hajii in the train, who is supposed to be a true religious believer but he is trying to find a proviso to have deadlocked marriages with ladies overseas. Qasem Khani aims mostly at criticizing these people.

**Lexical Means**

Characters use common idioms, proverbs, and expressions. The main character’s intonation, which slow and smooth as the clergy men talk, makes it much more humorous. His diction is both formal and informal; when he faces people, who don’t know his real personality, he talks totally formal and religious, but when he encounters people of his own personality, he speaks informal and even vulgar. There are also situations when he uses a formal speech to insult, which can’t be understood by other languages and cultures. Here are some examples below:

* من دهنتون رو ...
* بزنید خواهر و مادرشان را با هم ... پیوند دهید
* شیطان شخصا دهن او را مورد عنایت قرار می دهد
* ای تو اون روحت
* انگار خواهر و مادر آدم را باهاش وصلت می کند

**Syntactic Means**

Obviously, most sentences used in the movie are simple and compound. The number of the complex ones are few. There are no passive structures in the original text since it’s not common in Persian language.

**Social Role Relationship**

The relationship between the author and the audience is symmetrical and the author tries to make the audience comprehend the story. He also tries to persuade the audience that many Iranians have his ideas regarding the religious community in Iran. He emphasizes on the hypocritical dimension of the clergy. Sympathy and empathy are seen between the author and both the characters and the audience.

**Lexical/Syntactic Means**

Words and phrases denoting the common comprehensible language, e.g.

قربون شما، مخلصم، دستبوس ان، مراحم ان، الهی بمیرم، ازش شکایت کردم، برا هفت پشتم بس بود، دستاشو قلم کرد، تشریف داشته باشین، صاب تشریف باشین، مگه خودم چلاغم، منو شما نداریم، ...

**Participation**

Complex: it’s full of monologues and dialogues.

**Syntactic Means**

Frequent use of short simple and compound sentences which are completely comprehensible for the audience. There are also some long some long sentences which are not seen as obstacles

### Mode

**Medium and connectivity**

It’s complex: the work is written to be heard as all movies are.

**Lexical Means**

There are high frequency of metaphors, proverbs, and routine idioms. For example :

گور پدرش، ساملیک، نامه اعمالت که حسابی سیاهه، توی این خراب شده.

**Syntactic Means**

Use of short informative, declarative, and interrogative sentences.

کارش درسته؟

بنده امین ناموس هستم

**Textual Means**

Use of emphasize in the intonation of characters specially the main one to refer to a meaning beyond what is said and heard, the formal structure. E.g.

* شما شنیدین که دستم بگرفت و پا به پا برد **مادر**؟!

### Genre

The text, scenario, is comedy and satirical, as the author criticizes some religious people.

### Statement of Function

The function of the text is both interpersonal and ideational, although what is very significant in comedies, and comic genre in general, is their interpersonal function which is to affect the audience and achieve a response that is laughing. These two functions, interpersonal and ideational, are interrelated because the expected response is to be achieved provided that the audience get the ideational meaning of the sentences. The field of the work is in domain religion and culture, so it is ideational. The function of tenor of the text is interpersonal as the author himself is interested in affecting the audience.

## Comparison of Source and then Subtitle

### Field

**Lexical differences**

The translator may have tried to keep close to the original author, but s/he hasn’t succeeded. There are situations that the function changes due to the change of the ideational meaning. The use of words with meanings and connotations which are different from the original work.

### Tenor

**Translator’s Personal Stance**

**Lexical Differences**

The translator has distanced himself too far of the author’s stance. Sentences s/he used in the subtitle are not as satirical as the original text. In addition, some of the offensive remarks have been either removed from the subtitle, or translated in a more polite way.

فحش → curse

**Syntactic Differences**

Differences in the structures are seen which has changed the ideational meaning of that part. Furthermore, changes of the active sentences to passive are natural, due to the structure of the English language.

ما هم میخوایم **از امشب** باهاتون بیایم we can accompany you **tonight**

**Social Role Relationship**

the social class to which the translator belongs to is symmetrical since it’s the same as that of the audience.

**Lexical Means**

The frequency use of the personal pronouns (I, you)………….

**Syntactic Means**

No use of modals which show the distance between the translator and the audience.

**Social Attitude**

The subtitle is informal as the original text is.

**Participation**

The subtitle use as many as the personal pronouns as are found in the text, although there are some situations in which pronouns are deleted from the translation and also situations in which the pronouns which are implied in the ST are made explicit in the TT.

### Mode

**Medium**

Simple since it’s written to be read. The subtitle doesn’t contain references to outside of the text opposite to the original text, so it’s assumed to be emic.

**Syntactic Differences**

Deleting the personal pronouns, the agency, in some parts and using impersonal pronouns.

**Textual Differences**

Basically, the subtitle is less cohesive than the ST; cohesion is left out in most parts which make the reader/audience a little confused.

### Genre

The humorous effect of the comedy hasn’t been preserved, in opposite to the original text which is fully comic.

### Statement of Quality

The English subtitle seem to have the function opposite to that of the original text which is humorous. The cultural elements are mostly deleted from the subtitle or translated literally which has made the work overt. Lexical, syntactic and textual differences are observed in the translation compared with the original, which affect both interpersonal and ideational functions of the text, hence, the quality of the translation is lowered as a result of such covertly erroneous errors.

**Overtly Erroneous Errors**

The errors in the English subtitle show the incapability of the translator to convey both the content and function and the effect. Obviously, s/he might not be familiar with the English idiom s which are to some extent the equivalences of the Persian ones”

* May filth pour on your head

الهی به زمین گرم بخوری

The error is overt since the formal and the figurative meaning of the idiom is not conveyed. The Persian curse is uttered to wish a bad event happen to the addressee in a way that s/he may not be able to walk and therefore stay in bed for a long time. But the English subtitle is totally different.

* I have to find some water

باید دستی به آب برسونم

It’s obviously overt; the formal structure and meaning of the Persian expression is conveyed literally. However, its meaning and function in the ST is to go bathroom.

* God bless cows

بلانسبت گاو

The meaning of the expression: it’s said to those who are not careful specially when they’re walking and don’t pay attention to the front view until they bump into other people or things. The animal, cow, is recognized as an animal which doesn’t look the front, it’s only looking at the ground. In the Iranian culture, if one wants to insult careless person by this expression but a little bit worse, one will say بلانسبت گاو to say that cows are much better or careful than the cursed person. So, the translation is overt error.

* Guest is the host’s dog

مهمون سگ صابخونست

It’s an overt translation and error, since it transfers exactly the formal meaning of the ST idiom. The meaning of the original is that whatever the host says the guest follows. As it’s not in the English language, the formal translation doesn’t have any sense.

# Conclusion

Obviously, by applying House’s newly revised model of translation quality assessment, this paper aimed at testing the practical aspects of it on the English subtitle of the Iranian comedy The Lizard. The questions of this paper can be answered as: House’s newly revised model, to some extent, can be applied to assess humorous texts; however, it cannot do it thoroughly, because it doesn’t include cultural and religious factors. The English subtitle has not been successful in conveying both the meaning and the function of the ST, i.e. the ideational function, which has to remain in the TT, is not the same. In addition, the most important function, interpersonal function, has been mostly left out in the subtitle. Consequently, the whole translation, except few segments, may be categorized as overt translation. Furthermore, the selected segments are overtly erroneous errors.

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