Translation between Untranslatability and Appropriation

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Abstract

This paper delves into the complexities of translation by examining the interplay between untranslatability and appropriation. Using the theoretical frameworks of scholars such as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Roman Jakobson, it highlights the inherent challenges of conveying linguistic, cultural, and contextual nuances from a source text into a target language. Simultaneously, it explores the notion of translation as appropriation, guided by the critical perspectives of Lawrence Venuti, André Lefevere, and Gayatri Spivak. The analysis is contextualized through Moroccan cinema, focusing on Moumen Smihi's El Chergui (1975) and Abdelkader Lagtaa's Hubb fi al-Dar al-Baida (Love in Casablanca, 1991). These films illustrate how untranslatability and appropriation manifest in cinematic expressions, emphasizing the political, cultural, and ethical dimensions of translation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Untranslatability in translation studies involves linguistic, cultural, and contextual challenges that underline the complexity of capturing the essence of a source text in another language. This paper explores untranslatability through the theoretical insights of prominent scholars, including Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Roman Jakobson. Their insights reveal how nuances deeply embedded in the original linguistic and cultural contexts often resist full transference, translating an act of creative transformation rather than mere linguistic substitution (Benjamin, 1923; Derrida, 1985; Jakobson, 1959). Recent studies have further examined the implications of these theoretical perspectives, emphasizing the dynamic and evolving nature of translation in a globalized world (Baker, 2018; Munday, 2021).

Parallel to the exploration of untranslatability, this paper examines the notion of translation as appropriation, informed by the critical perspectives of Lawrence Venuti, André Lefevere, and Spivak. These theorists highlight the power dynamics and cultural negotiations involved in the act of translation, where the target culture's norms and ideologies often reshape the source text (Venuti, 1995; Lefevere, 1992; Spivak, 1992). Contemporary research focuses on the ethical considerations and the translator's agency in handling these complex interactions (Bassnett, 2019; Tymoczko, 2010). This process of appropriation can either conceal or unveil cultural identities, reflecting broader socio-political contexts and the translator's active role in meaning-making.

In the light of this theoretical framework, the paper analyzes two seminal works of Moroccan cinema: Moumen Smihi's El Chergui (1975) and Abdelkader Lagtaa's Hubb fi al-Dar al-Baida

(Love in Casablanca, 1991). Smihi's film illustrates the complexities of cultural translation and resistance to hegemonic narratives through its use of an untranslated Berber soundtrack, emphasizing the untranslatability of oral traditions. Lagtaa's film, on the other hand, exemplifies translation as appropriation by recontextualizing the classic American film Casablanca (1942) within the socio-political landscape of postcolonial Casablanca, thereby challenging Western representations and offering a postcolonial localized narrative. These case studies illustrate how translation in cinema acts as a site of cultural negotiation and resistance, resonating with recent scholarly debates surrounding translation, film studies, and postcolonial theory (Cronin, 2019; Pérez-González, 2014).

2. UNTRANSLATABILITY IN TRANSLATION STUDIES: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

The theoretical exploration of untranslatability in translation studies involves several critical perspectives, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of this complex phenomenon. Central to this discourse are the ideas posited by theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Roman Jakobson. Their insights offer a foundation for examining how linguistic, cultural, and contextual factors interplay to create instances of untranslatability.

Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, "The Task of the Translator," provides a profound philosophical framework for understanding the nature of translation. For Benjamin, "the task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (1923, p. 256). Benjamin suggests that translation should not be viewed merely as a mechanical process of converting text from one language to another but as an art that captures the "pure language" or the essence of the original text (Benjamin, 1923, p. 71). According to Benjamin, every text has a deeper, intrinsic meaning that transcends its literal words. The translator's task, therefore, is to uncover and convey this hidden essence.

Benjamin's notion of "pure language" suggests that certain cultural and philosophical nuances within a text are inherently challenging to translate. This difficulty arises from these nuances being deeply rooted in the specific linguistic and cultural context of the source text. As a result, the process of translation becomes an act of transformation rather than a straightforward transfer, highlighting the potential for untranslatability when the intrinsic meaning cannot be adequately conveyed in the target language.

Jacques Derrida's concept of "différance" further complicates the translation process by emphasizing the fluidity and indeterminacy of meaning in language. In his essay "Des Tours de Babel," Derrida argues that meaning is always deferred and never fully present in any given term or phrase. This perpetual deferral means that words carry multiple layers of significance that are continually shifting, making it difficult for translators to capture the complete essence of the source text.

Derrida's ideas highlight the inherent instability of language and the impossibility of achieving a perfect translation. The act of translation, therefore, requires handling these shifting meanings and making interpretive choices that inevitably result in the loss or transformation of certain elements. This perspective highlights the concept of untranslatability as an integral aspect of translation, where some meanings resist being fully captured or conveyed in another language.

In the same vein, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work, particularly her essay "The Politics of Translation," offers a critical postcolonial perspective on untranslatability. Spivak emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity in translation, arguing that translators must be acutely aware of the cultural and political contexts within which texts are produced and received. She critiques the tendency to prioritize fluency and readability in translation, which often leads to the erasure of cultural specificities and the imposition of dominant cultural norms.

Spivak's focus on cultural context highlights the difficulties of translating culturally specific concepts, idioms, and expressions that may lack direct equivalents in the target language. This lack of equivalence can lead to significant distortions or losses in meaning, highlighting the untranslatable elements within a text. Spivak's perspective also reveals the power dynamics inherent in translation, where decisions regarding what to translate and the methods of translation can reflect wider cultural and political power structures.

Roman Jakobson's framework, outlined in his essay "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," provides a linguistic foundation for understanding untranslatability. Jakobson identifies three types of translation: intralingual (within the same language), interlingual (between different languages), and intersemiotic (between different sign systems). He argues that while all forms of translation involve a degree of interpretation, interlingual translation is particularly challenging due to the structural and semantic differences between languages. "Interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" (1959, p. 232).

Jakobson introduces the concept of "linguistic relativity," proposing that the structure and vocabulary of a language shape its speakers' perceptions and categorization of the world. This notion implies that certain concepts and meanings are intricately tied to the linguistic framework of the source language, rendering them a challenge to translate into a language with a different structure and worldview. The translator must grapple with these differences, often finding that some aspects of the source text resist straightforward translation, thereby contributing to the notion of untranslatability.

These theoretical perspectives shed light on the complex nature of untranslatability. Benjamin's focus on the "pure language" of the source text, Derrida's emphasis on the indeterminacy of meaning, Spivak's call for cultural sensitivity, and Jakobson's exploration of linguistic relativity all contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges inherent in translation. These challenges are not merely technical but also deeply philosophical and cultural, reflecting the complex interplay between language, meaning, and context.

3. TRANSLATION AS APPROPRIATION: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The concept of translation as appropriation explores how translation involves not only transferring meaning but also recontextualizing and transforming the source text within a new cultural and linguistic framework. This process often entails a degree of appropriation, where the translated text is shaped by the norms, values, and ideologies of the target culture. Several seminal theorists have enriched the understanding of translation as appropriation, including Lawrence Venuti, André Lefevere, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Their insights offer a critical framework for analyzing the dynamics of power, identity, and cultural exchange inherent in translation.

Lawrence Venuti's influential work, particularly his book *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), addresses the power dynamics involved in translation. Venuti argues that the prevailing norm in many Western cultures is to produce translations that are fluent and domesticated, making the translator invisible and the text seem as if it were originally written in the target language (Venuti, 1995, p. 20). This approach often results in the appropriation of the source text, as it is adapted to fit the cultural and linguistic expectations of the target audience.

Venuti advocates for 'foreignization,' a strategy that preserves elements of the source culture and language to highlight the translated text's origins and challenge dominant cultural norms. By doing so, foreignization resists the appropriation of the source text and promotes cultural diversity (Venuti, 2013, p. 13). Venuti's critique of domestication underscores the political and ethical implications of translation practices, where appropriating the source text can result in the marginalization of the original culture.

André Lefevere's concept of "rewriting" in translation further illuminates the idea of translation as appropriation. In *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992), Lefevere argues that translation is a form of rewriting influenced by the ideological, literary, and social constraints of the target culture. Translators, as rewriters, play a crucial role in shaping how texts are perceived and understood, often adapting them to fit the dominant values and ideologies of the receiving culture (Lefevere, 1992, p. 9).

Lefevere's perspective highlights the power of translation to appropriate texts in ways that can alter their meaning and significance. This appropriation process is not neutral; it is deeply embedded in the cultural and ideological context of the target culture. By recognizing the translator's role as an active agent in the creation of meaning, Lefevere's work emphasizes the transformative nature of translation and the potential for appropriation to serve specific cultural and ideological agendas.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "The Politics of Translation" (1992) provides a critical post-colonial perspective on translation as appropriation. Spivak argues that translation is inherently political and that translators must be acutely aware of the power dynamics at play. She critiques the tendency to prioritize fluency and accessibility in translation, which often leads to the appropriation and homogenization of the source text (Spivak, 1992, p. 400).

Spivak emphasizes the importance of maintaining the cultural specificity and alterity of the source text, advocating for a translation practice that resists the erasure of difference (Spivak, 1992, p. 400). In the context of post-colonial theory, translation as appropriation can be seen as a form of cultural imperialism, where dominant cultures impose their values and norms on marginalized texts (Spivak, 1992, p. 402). Spivak's call for a politically engaged and ethically responsible approach to translation emphasizes the need to acknowledge and respect the cultural integrity of the source text, avoiding appropriation that diminishes its distinctiveness.

The theoretical perspectives of Venuti, Lefevere, and Spivak shed light on the complex dynamics of translation as appropriation. Venuti's critique of domestication and advocacy for foreignization challenge the tendency to erase the cultural identity of the source text. Lefevere's concept of rewriting underscores the ideological constraints that shape translation practices, revealing how appropriation can serve specific cultural and political agendas. Spivak's post-colonial perspective emphasizes the ethical dimensions of translation, advocating for a practice that respects and preserves cultural differences.

These insights have significant implications for translation studies, especially in contexts where cultural exchange and power imbalances are pronounced. For instance, in the translation of Moroccan cinema, the appropriation of culturally specific elements poses significant challenges. Films that incorporate local dialects, cultural references, and socio-political contexts should be translated in ways that respect their cultural integrity while making them accessible to international audiences. This process requires a delicate balance between fidelity to the source text and adaptation to the target culture, highlighting the ongoing relevance of theoretical discussions on translation as appropriation.

Engaging with these seminal theories deepens our understanding of the transformative nature of translation and how appropriation can influence the reception and interpretation of texts. This awareness is essential for developing translation practices that are culturally sensitive, ethically responsible, and critically informed.

4. MOUMEN SMIHI'S URBAN IMAGI(N)ING: UNTRANSLATIBILTY OF SOUNDTRACK IN *EL CHERGUI* (1975)

Moumen Smihi's film *El Chergui* (1975) serves as a compelling exploration of the challenges inherent in translating texts, particularly those rooted in oral traditions, into different languages.

The film offers a nuanced examination of the complexities of cultural translation and the politics of (un)translation as a form of resistance. Set in Tangiers on the eve of independence, *El Chergui* tells the story of Aicha, a traditional Moroccan woman who embarks on a quest to prevent her husband from taking a second wife. Throughout the film, Aicha remains silent, yet her silent presence serves as a powerful lens through which the city's past, present, and urban spatiality are witnessed.

Smihi's portrayal of Tangiers is intricately woven with layers of colonial imagery and neocolonial presence, as reflected through the moving camera that captures Aicha's journeys through the city's streets, markets, and visits to the fqih (religious scholar) in search of a solution to her plight. The urban spatiality depicted in the film mirrors the patriarchal society in which Aicha navigates, where men hold voices of authority while women remain silent and invisible. This gendered iconography is further emphasized by the spatial segregation of foreign and Moroccan characters on screen, highlighting the lack of communication and shared spatiality between the genders.

The film opens with the voice of a female singing songs of the north. Smihi's deliberate choice not to translate the Berber soundtrack at the beginning of the film underscores the exploration of the untranslatability of oral culture and the resistance against hegemonic linguistic and cultural domination. By preserving the indigenous Berber language in its original form, Smihi challenges the hegemony of the dominant colonial language and asserts the importance of preserving and valuing indigenous cultural heritage.

In essence, *El Chergui* serves as a poignant reflection on the complexities of cultural translation and the politics of representation, highlighting the importance of amplifying marginalized voices and resisting hegemonic cultural narratives. Through Aicha's silent yet powerful presence, Smihi invites viewers to interrogate the intersections of gender, colonialism, and cultural identity, ultimately sparking critical reflections on the complexities of translating oral traditions and reclaiming cultural heritage in a post-colonial context.

Smihi's film also exemplifies Moroccan cinema's engagement with the postcolonial project of nation-building during the early years of independence. The film's unique translation practice reflects the complexities of navigating between local culture and global forces, highlighting the tensions between globalization and Moroccan nationhood. Through the use of binaries, Smihi depicts the social hierarchies that divide Tangiers' narrative world, juxtaposing colonial memory and neocolonial presence with local culture and indigenous people. This binary not only presents the nation and the global as opposing frames but also suggests their mutual influence.

The untranslatable Berber song at the outset of the film serves as a potent symbol of national political protest within a globalized context, inviting viewers to reflect on the preservation of local culture amid globalization. Smihi's decision not to translate the soundtrack underscores the tension between globalization Western homogenization and Moroccan nationhood. While foreign elements form an integral presence in Tangiers' spatiality, Smihi's choice aims to resist the potential for othering inherent in translation.

Moreover, the film exposes the limitations of translation in fully conveying the cultural system of which the text/song/oral culture is a part. Translation, in this context, is not merely an instrument of communication but also a means of alienating the text/song/oral culture from its source culture and relocating it to a new one.

In conclusion, *El Chergui* exemplifies Moroccan cinema's engagement with the complexities of cultural translation and the politics of representation in a postcolonial context. Through its innovative translation practice and nuanced exploration of global-local dynamics, the film

offers critical insights into the tensions between globalization, Western hegemony, and the construction of national identity in Tangiers and beyond.

Smihi's point of view is that the city's cultural identity is rooted in its historical memory and is not easily changed by external forces. While Tangiers may be marked by colonialism and international business, its cultural heritage remains intact. Smihi's use of spatial and cultural imagery reflects this perspective, highlighting the city's complex cultural heritage and challenging dominant cultural narratives that seek to universalize Western cultural norms.

The decision not to translate the Berber soundtrack in the opening scene of *El Chergui* reflects Smihi's commitment to recognizing and respecting cultural differences and power dynamics. By leaving the soundtrack untranslated, Smihi emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural specificity and resisting the pressures of cultural homogenization.

Overall, Smihi's decision not to translate the Berber soundtrack in *El Chergui* (1975) reflects a conscious choice to highlight the untranslatability of oral culture and tradition. The term "untranslated" implies a deliberate absence of translation, while "untranslatable" refers to the difficulty or impossibility of accurately translating something due to linguistic or cultural disparities or specificities. The untranslated soundtrack in the film serves as a critical platform for discussing the challenges of translating oral cultures and their emotional and cultural significance.

An example of a word that resists translation in everyday Moroccan culture is "dherra," which cannot be accurately translated due to the loss of emotional effect and cultural load. The word is central to Smihi's film, which revolves around a Moroccan woman's struggle to stop her husband from marrying a second woman by resorting to magic. Smihi's approach highlights the perspective of translation as a complex decision-making process. The untranslatable word explores the theme of "dherra" and its significance in Moroccan culture, showcasing the limitations of language and translation in capturing the nuances of certain cultural practices, and traditions, and the emotional effect they carry.

In an interview with Mahi Binebine, the challenge of translating emotions is discussed:

> "Je n'arrive pas a tout dire en français parce qu'il y a des choses intraduisibles. L'effort pour relater une situation devient parfois poétique dans la langue d'emprunt. Je discutais à Londres avec Assia Djebar qui m'a raconté une drôle d'histoire concernant la traduction : en recevant un jour des amis à Alger, ils ont vu une femme d'âge mûr qui semblait faire partie de la famille et lui ont demandé qui elle était. Assia a hésité un moment puis elle a répondu : « c'est la coépouse de mon père ». Elle cherchait le mot pour dire la deuxième épouse de son père. Mais cela sonnait bizarre. Puis elle s'est efforcée à traduire le mot en arabe : dharra. Littéralement, cela signifie « la blessure ». Elle leur a dit alors : « cette femme est la blessure de ma mère ». Intéressant, n'est-ce pas ? La traduction devient parfois beaucoup plus poétique que l'original. Le mot dharra a perdu sa signification propre pour ne désigner que la seconde épouse. Il a perdu en arabe la notion de « blessure » (p. 301)." (Binebine, 2013, p. 301)

By leaving the Berber song untranslated, Smihi emphasizes the importance of understanding the cultural background and significance of orality/tradition rather than reducing it to a simplistic translation. The untranslatable soundtrack in the film also highlights the complexities of national identity, which resists translation. Smihi's decision informs his resistance to homogenization and globalization by curbing the process of cultural circulation.

5. ABDELKADER LAGTAA'S (*LOVE IN CASABLANCA*, 1991): TRANSLATION AS APPROPRIATION

This section examines Lagtaa's *Hubb fi al-Dar al-Baida* (1991) as a paradigmatic instance of translation as (re)appropriation and rewriting of urban space, with a particular focus on Casablanca's spatial narrative. Lagtaa adeptly reappropriates and rewrites the American story while engaging with the city's complex cultural and social space. By intertwining the urban vision and spatial narrative, Lagtaa's work offers a unique perspective on the intricate process of cultural translation and the negotiation of identity within a postcolonial framework. This analysis demonstrates how Lagtaa's transformative process highlights the significance of translation, not only as a linguistic act but as a cultural and spatial practice enmeshed in the politics of translation.

Produced in the 1990s, a time of significant political and social upheaval in Morocco following the repressive social environment of King Hassan II's era (1956–1999), Lagtaa's film contrasts sharply with Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942). Curtiz's film presents a panoptical view of Casablanca as a distant and anachronistic space, exemplifying the violence of translation and representation in screening the other's spaces. In contrast, Lagtaa's film provides a grounded, everyday account of the city. By reappropriating Casablanca's space and rewriting the American story within a postcolonial context, Lagtaa challenges the American perspective and offers a nuanced representation of the city that aligns with his urban vision.

In *Casablanca* (1942), the manipulation of time and spatial geography serves as a political and propagandist tool for American geopolitical sensibilities during WWII, constructing a temporal distance between Casablanca and New York and suggesting the end of America's isolationist policy. Lagtaa's *Hubb fi al-Dar al-Baida* provides a more authentic representation of Casablanca, grounded in the voices of the streets and framed within the act of walking through the city.

One significant scene in Lagtaa's film features Najib taking Seloua to Bar Casablanca to introduce her to the film *Casablanca* and its story. By drawing parallels between the classic film and the contemporary Moroccan setting, Lagtaa creates a dialogue between the past and the present, highlighting the complex and multifaceted relationship between the two.

The appropriation of the Bar Casablanca and the retelling of the film's story serve as powerful metaphors for the relationship between tradition and modernity in Casablanca's urban space. Through symbolic spaces and reinterpretations of classical film theory, Lagtaa provides a nuanced and authentic portrayal of urban life in Casablanca, challenging the colonial representation of the city as a distant and fictitious space.

Lagtaa's reappropriation of Casablanca's space and reinterpretation of the story illuminates two critical aspects of translation. First, the narrative has been reshaped to reflect Lagtaa's vision of a transgressive, rebellious society that defies traditional norms and addresses complex social issues. Second, this reinterpretation highlights how cultural products evolve as they move across different contexts, emphasizing that translation is a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a static outcome.

The retelling of the story in the context of the Bar Casablanca scene exemplifies appropriation—taking something from one context and re-contextualizing it in another with new meaning or significance. Lagtaa re-contextualizes the classic film and its narrative within the urban space of Casablanca, using it to explore the interplay between tradition and modernity. By appropriating the iconic Bar Casablanca and integrating it into the film's narrative, Lagtaa creates a space that challenges the audience's preconceived notions of the city and its culture.

The Bar Casablanca scene is a prime example of this appropriation in action, as Najib shares the story of *Casablanca* with Seloua in a public space that symbolizes the encounter and exchange between traditional Moroccan culture and modern Western culture. Through this act of appropriation, Lagtaa challenges colonial versions of the city and creates a cinematic language that better reflects Casablanca's urban space. The retelling of the story in this context is not merely a re-telling but a reinterpretation that sheds new light on the relationship between tradition and modernity in the city.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the intricate dimensions of untranslatability and the concept of translation as appropriation, integrating the seminal theories of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Roman Jakobson. These theorists offer a multifaceted understanding of the complexities involved in translating linguistic, cultural, and contextual nuances, revealing translation as an inherently intricate and transformative process (Benjamin, 1968; Derrida, 1985; Jakobson, 1959; Spivak, 1992).

Through the analysis of Moumen Smihi's *El Chergui* and Abdelkader Lagtaa's *Hubb fi al-Dar al-Baida*, these theoretical concepts are applied in practice. Smihi's decision to leave the Berber soundtrack untranslated in *El Chergui* illustrates the profound cultural and emotional layers that often resist translation, emphasizing a form of cultural resistance against dominant linguistic narratives (Smihi, 1975). In contrast, Lagtaa's reappropriation of the classic American film *Casablanca* within the context of Moroccan urban life in *Hubb fi al-Dar al-Baida* showcases how translation can reframe narratives to reflect local realities, challenging and reshaping dominant cultural perceptions (Lagtaa, 1991).

These case studies highlight that translation is not merely a mechanical transfer of words but a complex act of cultural negotiation. They demonstrate how translation can both obscure and reveal cultural identities, serving as a tool for cultural preservation and transformation. The insights from this study advocate for translation practices that are critically informed, culturally sensitive, and ethically responsible, acknowledging the translator's role in balancing fidelity to the source text with adaptation to the target culture.

In conclusion, discussions on untranslatability and translation as appropriation enrich our understanding of the translator's role as a cultural mediator. This paper underscores the necessity for a nuanced approach to translation that respects diverse cultural expressions while facilitating meaningful cross-cultural communication. As global interconnectedness deepens, the ability to navigate these complexities becomes essential for preserving cultural heritage and fostering global understanding of cultural plurality.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this article.

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