A Descriptive Study on the ‘Loss’ and ‘Gain’ in the Process of Translating Idioms of *Death of a Salesman* into Persian

Mohammad Reza Zebardast
English Language Department, Kerman Institute of Higher Education, Kerman, Iran
Email: aseman2st@gmail.com

**Abstract**

This essay is a descriptive translation study concerning the translation of the idioms of Death of a Salesman (Miller, 1949) into Persian. As Bassnet (1991) stated, differences usually result in untranslatability, which inevitably leaves the translator no choice but to pick a TL expression to compensate this inequality. Two questions arise: a) What are the kinds of loss and gain founded in translation process?; b) What prediction we can make about translation quality based on the notion of ‘concordance’? The purpose of this study aims to answer these two research questions, with an attempt to present a new model of getting the losses and gains in translation based on the innovatory notion of ‘concordance’ defined and developed by the researcher to provide a new way of thinking about translation, translation quality and to compensate the inadequacy of ‘translation equivalence’. The documentation method was used as a main research tool to complete this study. The data were collected based on the Trask (1999) definition of ‘idiom’, and were analyzed based on the innovatory notion of ‘concordance’. As the result of the research, the researcher concluded that ‘merismitic concordance’ was the most important and frequent type of concordance, while ‘ideational concordance’ was the least used typology. Also it was found that the notion of ‘concordance’ has a predictive value for assessing and evaluating the quality of translations.

**Keywords:** Loss, Gain, Translation, Concordance, Quality, Idioms

Received June 30, 2016; Accepted August 15, 2016.
Introduction

In Translation Studies, most attempts to describe and explain the relation between a source language (SL) and a target language (TL) is necessarily defined by the concept of ‘equivalence’. Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) viewed equivalence-oriented translation as a procedure which ‘replicates the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording’ (quoted in Kenny, 1998, p.342). Jakobson’s (1959) study of equivalence gave new impetus to the theoretical analysis of translation since he introduced the notion of ‘equivalence in difference’. According to his theory, ‘translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes’ (Jakobson, 1959, p.233). Nida argued that there are two different types of equivalence, namely formal equivalence —which in the second edition by Nida and Taber (1982) is referred to as formal correspondence— and dynamic equivalence. Formal correspondence ‘focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content’, unlike dynamic equivalence which is based upon ‘the principle of equivalent effect’ (Nida, 1964, p.159). The second type of translation being referred mostly, since this is the one that concerns the concept of equivalence, and which moves on to analyze the notion of translation shifts, as elaborated by Catford, which are based on the distinction between formal correspondence and textual equivalence. In Catford’s rank-bound translation an equivalent is sought in the TL for each word, or for each morpheme encountered in the ST. In his unbounded translation equivalences are not tied to a particular rank, and we may additionally find equivalences at sentence, clause and other levels. Catford’s approach to translation equivalence clearly differs from that adopted by Nida since Catford had a preference for a more linguistic-based approach to translation and this approach is based on the linguistic work of Firth and Halliday.

House (1997) expressed that ‘The notion of equivalence is the conceptual basis of translation’ and, to quote Catford, ‘the central problem of translation practice is that of finding TL (target language) equivalents. A central task of translation theory is therefore that of defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence’ (1965, p.21). House (1977) herself is in favor of semantic and pragmatic equivalence and argues that ST and TT should match one another in function. Another extremely interesting discussion of the notion of equivalence can be found in Baker (1992) who seems to offer a more detailed list of conditions upon which the
concept of equivalence can be defined. She explores the notion of equivalence at different levels; at word level, above word level, grammatical level, textual level, and the level of pragmatics.

But as Newmark commented (1988) the question that remains is: What is a good translation? What fails? Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, p. 128) states that ‘evaluation involves making judgments which means that we must have criteria... if there is no clear objective for a particular activity or material, how can its success be measured?’ And as Newmark (1988) claimed Quality in translation is ‘relative’. House (1998, quoted in Baker, 2000, p.197-8) introduces three translation quality approaches: anecdotal and subjective approaches, response oriented approaches and text-based approaches.

House (ibid.) maintains that: Text-based approaches may be informed by linguistics, comparative literature or functional models. Linguistics/Text-oriented theories do take into account the SL text and the way an equivalent target language text has been produced and consider it to be of crucial importance for determining how the translation process has occurred and to what extent it has been successful. In a source-language-oriented approach, the emphasis is both on the source text and on the concept of equivalence. In this approach, evaluation will be made based on the type of the source text which itself determines the translation strategy and the equivalence. Also the notion of equivalence has been mostly an indicator of the type of translation which caused debates concerning the importance of meaning and form in any kind of translation. Larson (1984) calls these kinds as meaning-based translation and form-based translation. Pym (1992) stated that it is so because of the circularity of this notion which means that equivalence is supposed to define translation and translation, in turn defines equivalence.

The same as Snell-Hornby (1988), who stated that equivalence is an illusion, the researcher believes that not only it is an illusion but it is also delusive and groundless for three main reasons. Firstly that the value in the term equivalence could be defined in many ways, it could be form, meaning, identity, message, concept, function, ideology, cultural assumption, etc., or as Toury (1995) identified the term equivalence would have two main uses: first, equivalence could be ‘a descriptive term denoting concrete object and actual relationship between actual utterance in two languages’. And second, a theoretical term, denoting an abstract, ideal relationship between TT’s and ST’s. Secondly, there are many writers that have addressed the
problem of the nature of equivalence include Catford (1965, 1994), Pym (1992) and others, as it is mentioned in the second edition of *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*. The question which comes across here is if it is problematic - and if it is known to be problematic - why should it be *circular* and why Many theorists did the same, whether they defined translation based on the notion of equivalence or vice versa, they defined equivalence based on the their definition and their approach to translation, while we know it will lead only lead to other problems. Thirdly and most importantly why insisting on a problematic term to describe and evaluate the quality of translation and the relation between a source and target language or culture while we can use another term.

To do so, the researcher defined translation merely as a process of gains and losses in which these losses and gains could be cultural or linguistic. This assumption about translation is grounded in what is mentioned by the following scholars. Bassnett (1991, p. 30) stated that: Once the principle is accepted that sameness cannot exist between two languages, it becomes possible to approach the question of loss and gain translation process. And Nida (1964, p.119) who is a rich source of information about the problems of loss in translation, in particular about the difficulties encountered by the translator when faced with terms or concepts in the SL that do not exist in the TL. He believes that the generic differences in the two language systems naturally generate loss on all levels. Gain, on the other hand, is very rare, if ever, because as Bassnett (2002, p.38) points out translation theoreticians as well as practitioners are mainly concerned with matters of equivalence and the like, ‘Ignoring what can also be gained, for the translator can at times enricher clarify the SL text’. Moreover, what is often seen as ‘lost’ from the SL context may be replaced in the TL context? Nida and Taber (1974, p.106) stated that ‘Whereas one inevitably loses many idioms in the process of translation, one canals stands to gain a number of idioms’. Newmark, however, stated that the additional information a translator may have to add to his version is normally cultural (accounting for difference between SL and TL culture), technical (relating to the topic) or linguistic (explaining wayward use of words), and is dependent on the requirement of his, as opposed to the original readership (1998, p.91).

Gain is a concept that relates to translation as a finished product. It is the enrichment or clarification of the source language text. Gain enables a language to be flexible and usable in any
social circle. McGuire (1980, p.30) describes gain as ‘the enrichment or clarification of the source language text in the process of translation’. Gain also depends on the relative expressional abilities of a language and on the creativity of the translator. The creativity is seen when the translator reconciles language and social life so as to come up with a tangible interpretation. Such creativity enhances our understanding of the role that language plays in social life as Hatim & Mason (1990, p.1) consider that ‘translation is a useful text case for examining the whole issue of the role of language in social life’. Loss is the disappearance of certain features in the target language text which are present in the source language text. In translation there is more probability of loss than gain. This is largely attributed to the lack of immediate equivalence between concepts, words, phrases and syntax in the target language, which are in the source language. This process is termed ‘linguistic distance’.

Loss is a result of dissimilar cultures because there are no two living languages that can have the same cultures. This suggests that there are cultural concepts which are unique to specific languages. At times it is realized that cultures differ radically such that the languages cannot be reconciled and as a result some concepts are sacrificed and thus loss occurs. Nida (1974, p.5) says ‘at this point languages just do not correspond, so we must be prepared to sacrifice certain formal necessities for the sake of content’. Loss can also be attributed to the failure by the translator to render an element of meaning such as expressiveness where the impact, spirit and vividness of the text is lost. If the translator is not competent in the target language some words and phrases might be omitted hence loss occurs. To counteract such problems the translator has to be versatile and innovative in dealing with languages. ‘Untranslatability’ is another cause of loss in translation. This can be realized at two levels, namely the linguistic and cultural. At the linguistic level, untranslatability occurs when there is no lexical or syntactical substitute in the target language for a source language item. Cultural untranslatability is due to the lack of absence in the target language culture of a relevant situational feature equivalent to that in the source language. Generally, the languages under study are spoken in different environments and as a result they have different world views.

In this research, as it was mentioned earlier researcher accepted the principle that translation is a process of losses and gains. He explores losses and gains of the idioms founded in
the ‘The Death of a Salesman’ with referring to the notion of ‘concordance’. ‘Concordance’ is a test designed by the researcher to measure a target chunk relationship with its real source or its hypothetical source. In general it shows the types of losses and gains in the process of translation but it can be use more specifically to represent and show the translator or translators’ tendencies in translation within another culture in terms of the genre of the text, the type of translation, the style of translation, the quality of translation, the purpose of translation and the method chosen. Also it is supposed to function as a criterion that shows when and where there is an absolute symmetrical relationship between the two units under the investigation and where, when, and how is the existing asymmetrical relationship.

**Methodology**

This research is a descriptive study with an empirical design in peruse of two major objectives: (i) being explanatory in explaining the notion of ‘concordance’ and its kinds, and (ii) being predictive in showing the different quality of translation based on this notion. The researcher used a parallel corpus of some idioms and their translation from *The death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1949) translated into Persian by Ali Asghar Bahram Beigi. The researcher pursued evidence from this corpus to confirm or disconfirm his grounded theory. As it is a descriptive model, it would be valid beyond this research samples and generalization of the grounded model would also be possible.

**Data Collection**

The samples were selected from the first act of the *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1949) in which the falsity of the American Dream is the dominant theme of the play, and which has been translated by Ali Asghar Bahram Beigi (1985) from English into Persian. The researcher used a systematic and purposive sampling of idioms guided by two key stage: firstly, samples were identified based on the Trask’s definition of idiom as ‘an expression whose meaning cannot be worked out from the meanings of its constituent words’ (Trask 1999, p. 119); secondly, samples were analyzed based on the notion of ‘concordance’; thirdly, it is given a statement on the quality of translation.
Data Analysis

As it was discussed in the introductory part of this paper what was mostly discussed by different scholars in different periods of translation history was the type of equivalence, the type of translation, and broaching different approaches to discussed the problems of not having an absolute equivalent in translations (but no test or criterion was developed to gauge these problems). In order to fill this gap, the researcher used the notion of ‘concordance’ in an inventory way as a test to measure that what the TL reader gain in comparison to what a SL reader gains from a written or spoken linguistic or cultural chunk. This could be stated in this way that this notion measures the relationship between a target chunk under the investigating with its real existed source or its hypothetical source, the one which is created in the target as a translation of the source by doing a back translation of it shows that it deviates and differs in some way from what was actually stated in the source. The researcher believes that these differences can be discussed by the following types of concordances by which some are meant to be useful when discussing differences in a literary work, and some are supposed to be useful to discuss ideological and cultural differences, and some other for discussing other types of comparisons. This notion was developed according to some properties of the notion of ‘equivalence’ and some properties of the ‘figures of speech’;

A: Functional concordance: The general property and medium of presentation, the medium that a chunk or chunks are presented through. For example being a written or spoken either poem, song, drama, novel, and other features associated with the level of that chunk, level of presentation, whether at the level of text, genre, or discourse.

B: Normative concordance: The degree of usage, pattern of use and applicability of a chunk in the two language or culture whether at the medium of presentation and level of presentation.

The functional and normative concordance are the supplementary kinds that have practicality in evaluating the quality of translation and other translation behaviors.
1. Ideational concordance: A target chunk which establishes ‘an ideationally symmetrical relationship with its source chunk only at the surface level. When the back translation of the TT results in the same ST at its surface level but not necessarily its deep meaning’. For example: ‘to smoke cigarette’ in Persian is ‘to pull cigarette’, but if it gets translated as smoke cigarette it will be a kind of ideational.

2. Structural concordance: A target chunk which establishes a symmetrical relationship with its source chunk’s structural means of expression (idiom with idiom, and rank with rank). ‘To smoke cigarette’ to be rendered as ‘smoking cigarette’ or the same as source to be translated as ‘to smoke cigarette’.

3. Pragmatic concordance: when a target chunk contextual meaning establishes a symmetrical relationship with its source chunk contextual meaning. The two chunks are therefore pragmatically in concordance. For example: ‘bread and butter’ in English with ‘bread and cheese’ in Persian and vice versa.

4. Merismitic concordance is a type of concordance by which something is referred to by a conventional chunk which replaces with its contextual meaning (sense) of it or vice versa. For example: ‘flesh and bone’ when referring to the ‘body’ or vice versa.

5. Foregrounding concordance: referring to the language which stands out and is marked, whether literary (i.e. in a work of art, being figurative, ironic, ambiguous, etc.), or cultural and ideological (culture specific items or ideological chunks like mash, and going on a date).

The abovementioned typology were the main types of concordance and the following are some branches of the foregrounding concordance:

a) Similic concordance is a type of concordance in which two unlike things get compared. Often introduced with the word conveying the meaning of ‘like’ or ‘as’. ‘He fights like a lion’ for ‘he is strong’ and vice versa.

b) Metaphoric concordance is a type of concordance that compares directly two or more unrelated things or subjects. They get compared not using like or as. ‘Drowning in money’ for ‘being rich’ and vice versa.
c) Metonymic concordance is a type of concordance in which a chunk or concept is not called by its own name in the ST, but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept. ‘The White House’ when referring to ‘the American administration’, ‘Coca’ for a ‘soft drink’ or ‘a hundred heads of cattle’ may be stated as ‘whole animals’, or vice versa.

d) Litotesic concordance is a type of concordance consisting of an understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by negating its opposite in the target. ‘He was not home’ to be stated as ‘He was in the open’; or saying ‘He is not my friend’ for ‘He is an enemy’ and vice versa.

e) Expressive concordance is a type of concordance in which human characteristics in the SL are attributed to an abstract quality, animal, or inanimate object in the target and vice versa. For example: ‘the astonishing smell of rose’ to be stated as ‘the rose that smiles’, and vice versa.

f) Metalepsis concordance is a type of concordance in which reference is made to something by means of another chunk in that is related to it, either through a causal relationship, or through another figure of speech. Example: ‘the sun shines’ for ‘it was hot weather’, and vice versa.

g) Tautologic concordance is a concordance in which a statement that says the same thing with a statement that is true from another ideological point of view (i.e. it means saying same things in different ways). For example, instead of saying ‘Sunday’ it is stated ‘the day after Saturday’ or saying ‘a day before Monday’, whether Monday is stated explicitly or implicitly and vice a versa. Another example would be ‘go on a date’ for ‘to meet my friend’.

h) Understatement concordance is a type of concordance used to deliberately make a situation seem less important or serious than it really is and vice a versa. For example, instead of saying ‘assassin’ it may be stated ‘killed’ and vice a versa.

Bearing in mind that these concordances could be both gain and loss for the TL reader comparing to what source reader gains from the source chunk, and also remembering that based on the unit of translation and the chunk under investigation, there will be different types of concordance. In this research, after the data were collected, several kinds of losses and gains
were described based on the notion of ‘concordance’ by which the researcher believes that there are some advantages in using this notion.

In general, it is believed that it shows the types of losses and gains in the process of translation but more specifically, it can be used to represent and show the translator or translators’ tendencies in translation within another culture in terms of the genre of the text, the type of translation, the style of translation, the quality of translation, the purpose of translation and the method chosen.

**Results and Discussion**

This chapter presents the data analysis in order to present the answers of the research questions. The questions of the study are: a) what are the kinds of loss and gain of the TL reader founded in translation process?; b) What prediction we can make about translation behavior based on the notion of ‘concordance’? In order to get the answers of these question consider the following examples and the discussion part:

1. He hasn’t the peace of mind to live in it.

Translation: او نقدر ارامش فکر و اعصاب نداره که توش زندگی بکنه ولذت ببره

‘Have a peace of mind to sth.” is an idiom that means a tranquility that results from not having worries, guilt, or problems. What target reader gains is the same ideational concordance (same surface), same foregrounding concordance (figurativeness), same structural concordance (idiomatic structure), just like what the source reader had gained from this chunk but the contextual meaning is not one of those codified and elaborated in the source, therefore comparing to its source reader it has loss of the pragmatic and merismitic concordance.

2. Gotta break your neck to see a star in this yard.

TT: گردن ادم میشکنه تا بتونه از تو حیاطیه ستاره تو اسمون بیچه

‘Break your neck” is an idiom which means to work very hard to accomplish something. The TT has a gain of ideational, foregrounding and structural concordance. Again in this example the TL reader has loss of the merismitic and pragmatic concordance.
3. Now don’t make a whole thing out of it.

TT: حالا خواهش دارم دوباره از سر نگیری

‘Make a whole thing out of sth.’ is an idiom which means to make an issue of something of little importance. In this chunk there is no concordance established between the ideational, Merismitic and pragmatic feature of it with the source reader but the foregrounding and structural concordance was gained. In other words, an idiom with another meaning and form was used.

4. Let’s buck him up.

TT: بیا برم از دلش در بیاریم

‘Buck sb. up’ is an idiom that means to encourage someone to be energetic and positive. Again this is another example which shows that translator had expressed an idiom with different ideational, Merismitic and pragmatic concordance but the foregrounding and structural concordance is a gain for the target reader.

5. Don’t breathe it to a soul.

TT: مبادا به هیچکس چیزی بگین

‘Don’t breathe it to a soul’ is an idiom which means not to disclose or reveal a secret under any condition. It has been rendered none figuratively, so it lacks the foregrounding concordance, also it lacks pragmatic, ideational and structural concordance, but the contextual meaning is preserved, therefore a merismitic concordance had been gained.

6. His eyes are going.

TT: چشم‌ها خیلی ضعیف شده

‘Eyes are going’ is an idiom that means to get or have weak eyesight. Again, it is not used figuratively, so it lacks the foregrounding concordance; it also lacks ideational, structural and pragmatic concordance, but the contextual meaning is preserved, therefore a Merismitic concordance has been gained.
7. You make mountains out of molehills.

   TT: تو بیخودی از یه کاه یه کوه درست می کنی

   ‘Make mountains out of molehills’ is an idiom that means to exaggerate a minor problem. The target reader has gained foregrounding, Merismitic, pragmatic and structural concordance, but with loss of ideational concordance comparing to the source reader.

8. You mustn’t lose your temper with him.

   TT: تو نباید وقتی به اون میرسی از کوه در بری و سرش داد بکش

   ‘To lose temper with sb,’ is an idiom which means to become angry at someone. The translation has pragmatic, Merismitic, structural and foregrounding concordance, but lacks an ideational concordance.

9. You sneeze in here, and in my house hats blow off.

   TT: شما تو این طرف عطسه میکنین، تو خونه ما مثل بمب صدا میکنه

   ‘Blow off’ is an idiom that means to be carried off something by moving air. The TT expressed a similic concordance (a simile has been used in the target instead of an idiom), so it has gained foregrounding, and Merismitic concordance but lacks ideational, structural, and pragmatic concordance.

10. The way they boxed us in here.

    TT: با این ساخته‌نامه‌نمونه هم ما رو خفه کردند

    ‘Boxed sb. in’ is an idiom that means to trap or confine someone or something. The TT has used a metaphoric concordance, so the target reader has a gain of foregrounding, and merismitic concordance but the ideational, structural, and pragmatic concordance are the losses for him or her.

**Discussion**

Providing a full analysis of all examples would really take a huge bulk of the essay, so only a few examples out of ninety-five identified idioms which can be representative of the
others were chosen to be interpreted based on the notion of ‘concordance’. It was found out that forty-four items have gained ‘merismitic concordance’, and they had ideational, structural, foregrounding, and pragmatic loss. A total of thirty-eight items with gain of pragmatic, merismitic, structural, and foregrounding concordance, and had ideational loss. Ten items have gained foregrounding concordance but had an ideational, structural, merismetic, and pragmatic loss. Three item were identified with gain of ideational and structural concordance and with Merismitic and pragmatic loss.

The types of concordances - as the results above show - have been found out. And for evaluating the quality of translation, answer the second question of the study and get what prediction we can make about translation behavior, which in this research the quality of translation is discussed, it is worth mentioning Farahzad’s (2004: 81) claim as ‘Translation is traditionally understood as the transferring of meaning’. Therefore, a continuum of four kinds of quality for any translation is proposed as ‘bad’, ‘not bad’, ‘good’, ‘very good’, in which meaning or merismitic concordance is attributed to the ‘good translation’, in other words, it assumed the ‘good’ translation to be the one which has only a merismitic concordance gain, then the ‘not bad’ translation will be the one with a loss of merismitic and a gain of ideational. The ‘bad’ translation will be the one with the loss of ideational and merismitic concordance; while the ‘very good’ would be the one with a gain of Merismitic and foregrounding concordance.

This continuum considers the minimum requirement of the types of concordances for having a statement on the quality of translations, so other continuum with more feature would be possible. This continuum is not only be based on main types of concordances but it is also based on the comparison that is made between the ‘functional concordance’ and ‘normative concordance’. For example in here the ‘functional concordance’ is a gain of a written play for both source and target reader, and the ‘normative concordance’ which express the degree of usage of idioms in Persian written play comparing to the source language which is English is also the same and then it is a concordance gain. Therefore, establishing statements of the quality of translation on the part of idioms in the first act of the ‘Death of a Salesman’ would be the one exhibited in the following diagram based on their frequency percentages;
Conclusion

The notion of equivalence is undoubtedly one of the most problematic and controversial areas in the field of translation theory. The term has caused, and it seems quite probable that it will continue to cause, heated debates within the field of translation studies.

In this research another term which was ‘concordance’ was proposed to provide a new way of thinking about translation, translation behavior, and quality of translation. To prove its practicality, the gains and losses of the translation of *Death of a Salesman* were studied. Then, it was concluded that Bahram Beigi’s translation quality had a high quality, considering that the ‘merismitic concordance’ was the most frequent type and the ‘ideational concordance’ was the least frequent type of concordance. Also the discussion of the notion of ‘concordance’ illustrated that it is a constitutive translation relation that is hold between a SL text reader and a TL text reader and it opens new perspectives for further research.
References
Author

Mohammad Reza Zebardast is a Ph.D. student, a freelance translator and interpreter. After completing his Bachelor's degree in Translation from Vali-Asr University of Rafsanjan, Iran, in 2011. He received his M.A. in English Translation from Kerman University of higher Education, Kerman, Iran in 2015. He is now a P.H.D. student interested in cultural studies and linguistics, Psychology of teaching, TEFL, intercultural communication and translation, and issues of representation.