

Speech or Silence? The Significance of Balloon Size in Translating Comics*

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Abstract

The present article discussed translations of comics, a topic largely neglected in Translation Studies. Comics in Persian polysystem don't occupy a special position, so our translators face a new genre and must create some strategies to translate the comic books. The limited amount of space as well as interplay of words and pictures could make translating comics much more difficult than translating prose. The translators have got to almost count the letters in their sentences because everything has got to fit in the bubble, in this space. This paper was aimed at studying the translation of Tintin comics before and after the Islamic Revolution to determine whether the expansion strategies mostly adopted for translating them were necessary or not. The research falls under the category of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) as developed by Toury; and as it was a descriptive study, the discussions are mostly subjective. The result revealed that the translators of the new Farsi version by *Rayehe-Andishe* publication added lots of unnecessary words arbitrarily while the translators of the old Farsi version by *Universal publication* dedicated more attention to the imagination of their readers and suppressed arbitrary and unnecessary expression to fit the size of the speech balloon.

Keywords: Comic books, polysystem, speech balloon, image, balloon size, addition, Descriptive translation studies.

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1. Introduction

Finding equivalences to convey the same meaning and effect of a source language text in a target language is not always an easy task. The difficulties associated with the process of translation have been widely commented on by scholars and professional translators, but they become highly remarkable when the image and picture are interrelated with the text to convey meaning. The power in comics lay in both the visual and the textual elements; and balloons are important parts of the comic. The balloon, as Saraceni (2003) calls it, is probably the element that most people associate with comics. It is the space in which most of the verbal text is contained. Balloons are used to report speech or thought, and that is why the terms speech balloon and thought balloon are used.

This article discussed translations of comics, a topic largely neglected in Translation Studies. Basic distinction (all too often neglected) must be made between comic strips, published daily in newspapers, and comic books. The main focus of this article was on comic books. Grun and Dollerup (2003) mentioned that translation of comics represent a special challenge in that they have to actively interplay with illustrations as well as genre

elements, i.e. humor. Here the focus was on illustrations rather than humor which is the special characteristic of comics. Translating comic books can seem easy at first glance. However, the differences in languages and cultures are the same in all translations. The limited amount of space and interplay of words and pictures can make translating comics much more difficult than translating prose. Here, the researcher tried to compare the source text with the two different target texts to see whether the words translated are tied to its image or fitted to the size of the balloon or not.

1. Comics and its translation

Comics is defined in Webster's Dictionary as a sequence of drawing, either in color or black and white, relating a comic incident, an adventure or mystery story, etc., often serialized, typically having dialogue printed in balloons, and usually printed as horizontal strip in daily newspapers and longer sequence of such strips in comic books, (Webster's 1999), so, why comics are called 'comics'? According to

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Saraceni (2003), the reason is that the early strips, both in England and in America, were humorous (in America they were also called 'the funnies') and so the attribute 'comic' remained attached to this art form even when new genres were developed later on.

Comic books began as a popular, relatively inexpensive American art form in the 1930s and have continued to flourish today. Comic books are valuable sources for collection as well as rich sources for research in the arts, advertising, socio-cultural studies, and history. Perhaps Comics is among the few media which provides such a wide variety of research field as well as national interests.

Above all, as Ahrens and Meteling (2010) pointed out, perhaps the academic disregard of comics is because of the popular belief that comics are the area for children or those adults who think like children. Another reason can be the specific nature of this medium which is the combination of words and pictures.

From translation studies angle, comics have features in common with picture books. Among which, the most important one is the interaction between two semiotic systems, namely a verbal and non-verbal one, as pointed by Oittinen (2001). The visual is a central issue in many branches of translation, not just in comic and picture book translation but also in such fields as audiovisual translation and technical writing. Even interpreters - especially signed language interpreters - need to interpret gestures and body language. Visual elements range from typography and layout to illustrations, graphics, pictures, and photographs. Yet most of the time translators are assumed to deal with the verbal only, which is why visual elements are neglected both in translator training and in research on translation and interpreting. The balance between text and image, the way you can use both of those by looking, reading, and going between those two kinds of modes, is one of the unique things about comics.

Although the so-called cultural turn has opened up new research angles and opportunities in Translation Studies, scholars in the field still tend to show a distinct preference for researching the linguistic dimension of texts and little research has been done on translating the visual dimension of written and spoken texts. Scholars such Oittinen and Kaindl (2003) and Poyatos (1997) are among those who work on the visual and verbal aspects of comics. Oittinen and Kaindl (2003) argued that 'Nowadays, the verbal is not the only means of communicating meaning in many contexts; more often, the verbal and

visual modes work together to represent multi-layered and complex messages at the same time.

The additional problem with graphic novels is that you only have a limited amount of space to do your translation. If you were translating a normal novel, you could substitute five words to get the proper sense, without it being a problem. In a graphic novel, the translation must fit in the same cube of space, even if you miss out on meaning by doing that. You have to almost count the letters in your sentences because everything has got to fit in the bubble, in this space. The second great difference is that the words are tied to the image and that if a person in the comics tells a joke and you have a picture of an audience laughing, you have to have the joke yourself - which doesn't hold true in literature because there you can always compensate for the joke in some other place.

Perhaps the most noticeable expressive advantage comics have over television is a variably sized and shaped frame. Smith (1999, p. 34) mentioned:

When I rediscovered comics in the 1980's during my early graduate studies in film and television, I was struck by how much expressivity film and television relinquish by maintaining a constant frame size. Film has only a few possible frame sizes ranging from the Academy aspect ratio (1.33 times as wide as it is high) up to the widest widescreen ratios (up to 2.66:1), and once the film uses a particular aspect ratio, it rarely varies from that established norm during projection. Television is limited to a single aspect ratio. Comics can accentuate a leap from a great height by using a tall, thin frame. They can show complex interconnections among different actions by arranging single frames into an overall page layout. Actions in comics can extend past the frame boundary and intrude into other frames on the page. In comics, decorative graphic patterning is not limited to the area within the frame. The frame itself can convey meaning.

The act of translation is at all times a linguistic activity which is constrained by a number of factors but comic and picture book translation may be considered more constrained. Even if the translators were able to overcome all the usual challenges posed by

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the differences between the source and target languages and cultures, they would still have to face and overcome constraints of space in a way that is only rarely the case with reports, articles, novels, plays, etc. Space constraints can set an absolute limit to the target language options available to a comic translator.

2. The position of comics and its translation in Persian polysystem

The term polysystem is the complex, multi-facial nature of the interactions of the interconnected elements of a given community or society wherein a translation is realized. By presenting its own literary works to its people, each society aims at improving its literary culture. Society also attempts to satisfy the various needs and wants of its members by providing, according to certain criteria, a variety of literary works from different cultures and countries via translation. Shuttleworth (1998, as cited in Baker, 1998, p. 176) has defined the term as follows:

In the early 1970s, Itamar Evan-Zohar developed the polysystem model....much of Evan-Zohar writing is devoted to a discussion both of the role which translated literature plays in a particular literary polysystem, and also of a wider theoretical implications which polysystem theory has for translation studies in general.

Our contemporary language is under the influence of translation from European languages, and translation in Persian literary polysystem has been most of the time in the center and if not it has had a very great and influential impact on our literary systems. There are so many reasons for this centrality which are changed in different eras but factors such as lack of modern literature and genres such as comics, novels and short stories are among the most influential ones.

The origins of the comic books are somewhat controversial. Some say Great Britain's Ally Sloper's "Half Alley" was the first comic book. This was a black and white tabloid that had panels of cartoons mixed with a sliver of news in 1884. Now while all this was going on in Great Britain, this inching towards the comic book, the United States had its own brand of evolution. Persian literature has had a very strong background in picture and graphic books but doesn't have any special work on comic books

except those strips published in children magazines and newspapers such as Golagha and Keyhan recently. Before the Iranian revolution in '1978, Tintin was first published in Persian by *Universal* publication, the only authorized publisher of Tintin books in Iran. These books were among the first translated comic books in Iran. Now we can see some Persian comic books such as those written by ManaNeisanni and BozorgmehrHosseinpour but unfortunately this genre still maintain a peripheral position in our translated literature and cannot occupy a central position in Persian polysystem so Iranian translators are facing a new genre and they must find logical strategies for translating comic books.

3. The data of the study

The data selected for this research was from Tintin comics translated before and after the Islamic Revolution. The major items which analyzed and focused on were the comparison of the translation done by *Rayehe-Andishe* Publications of Tintin comics after the Islamic Revolution with the ones done by *Universal* Publications before the Islamic Revolution. The reason for selecting comics was that comics become highly remarkable when the image and picture are interrelated with the text to convey meaning; so the power in comics lay in both the visual and the textual elements.

4. Tintin and its translation into Farsi

As it was mentioned before one of the most important and remarkable aspects of comic translation is the interplay and interrelation of words and pictures. To achieve this goal and provide an example for this paper, Tintin[†] comic books were selected. The books included *the secret of the unicorn* written by *Herge* (1943). But as its original work is in French, its rendition into English was chosen translated by *Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper and Michael Turner*. Two different Farsi translations of it were as follows:

1. One version of the translations was from the original French book which was translated into Farsi by *Khosro Samee* 'i about

[†] *The Adventures of Tintin* (French: *Les Aventures de Tintin*) is a series of Belgian comic books created by Belgian artist Hergé, the pen name of Georges Remi (1907– 1983). Tintin is a young Belgian reporter who through heroic action solves mysteries that are presented at the start of each comic book.

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30 years ago by *Universal* publication in 1858 (the old version).

2. And the second version was published by *Rayehe-Andishe* publication in 1381(the new version).

To point out some significant differences between the new and the old version, it should be noted that before the Islamic Revolution, Tintin was published in Persian by *Universal*, the only authorized publisher of Tintin books in Iran. These books were among the first translated comic books in Iran. They were hardcover books, with excellent print quality and outstanding translation. After the Islamic Revolution, however, printing of Tintin books was interrupted. It was only a few years ago, nearly a quarter century after the Islamic Revolution, that Tintin found its way back into Iran. This time, however, the publishers were unauthorized, and since there is no copyright law practiced in Iran, no one would stop them. An unfortunate outcome was that in the new versions, the publishers "‡censored" a lot of stuff out of the Tintin stories, and if they had failed to do so, they probably would never have been granted permission to publish the books.

As the new version is from English, all names are different from the French version because in the English version all names were domesticated in English. Thus as Farsi new version is from English, names are like their English version. For example in the old version of translation and the original one, the name of the dog is ____ (*Milou* in French). But in the English and new version of translation, it is ____ (snowy). Also, the new version is more formal and literal than the old while the French original version and its translation into Farsi are more colloquial and informal.

5. Marked strategies in translations of Tintin comics

Different strategies the translators applied during translation process including shifts/alteration, addition/expansion, deletion or reduction, censorship, mistranslation, and some techniques for translating idioms

‡ Capitan Haddock is one of the main characters in Tintin adventures who is always drunken. When you change Captain Haddock's drinks to lemonade or soda, you're modifying the essence of Captain's character, and this has a huge impact on the story. Imagine Captain Haddock drinking "lemonade" all the time instead of whiskey.

and culture specific items. After comparing the Farsi translation with its English version, the researcher found out that the most frequently used strategies in Tintin comic books were addition/expansion.

So the major item which would be analyzed and focused on was the strategy of addition used in the Farsi translation of *Rayehe-Andishe* publication and its comparison with the translation done by *Universal* publication from French original before revolution.

As we know addition or expansion is a strategy used for a sentence, even a phrase or a word to convey the meaning better to a non-native speaker. A translator sometimes needs to expand that word, phrase, or sentences or add some elements to it. Sometimes, an item may be referring to an idea not known in the target language, but by adding some elements to it the audience can better understand what is meant by that specific item. The important point here is that not all additions are necessary for understanding and some are arbitrary. In such cases the phrase or sentences added to the translated version does not exist in the original version at all.

As you see below, letter A is the English translation of the original French, letter B is the Farsi translation from the English version which was done by *Rayehe-Andishe* publication and letter C is the Farsi translation done before revolution by *Universal* publication. Now look at the following examples:

A: my wallet has been stolen!

B: _____ ! _____

C: ! _____ !.....د

In the above example, the translator of the earlier translated text i.e. *Universal* publication tried to correspond to the original version and just added some dots to occupy the same space as in the original. In contrast, the translator of the *Rayehe-Andishe* publication deliberately added the words to the translated text to fit in the bubble.

A: Mine's gone too!

B: ! " _ \$% _ ! _ ! _ _ !

C: . و ر ! د ز ! _ + ! _ ' _ _ !

In the above example, the translator of the earlier translated text i.e. *Universal* publication tried to correspond to the original version and just expanded the meaning to occupy the same space as in the original. In contrast, the translator of the *Rayehe-Andishe* publication deliberately added some words to the translated text which were not in the original version to fit in the bubble.

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A: Here, let me pay for them.

B: !1 + 2 " + 5 + و

C: . 6, / ' 7 ! 8

In the above example, addition could be seen in both translations but in Universal publication translation, the translator just added some words to fit in the bubble while the translator of the Rayehe-Andishe publication added lots of words which were even more than the original version and the size of the bubble.

A: Goodbye! We are going to report this straight away....

B: 8 A ! ? =! < = + > + + . '9 '9 : +1
! ج

C: ! " - 1 + : 9 '9 . + ! ! اذرد زا !

In the above example, the translator of the Rayehe-Andishe publication added a sentence which was not in the original version and did not pay attention to the limitation of the size of the balloons.

A: It really is a beauty. I've a good mind to buy it for Captain Haddock....

B: + D1. + ! C و ! \$% . " . A +
+ 2?
- E-

C: + D / + C و ! , ! F 6? + 2?

In the above example, the translator of the Rayehe-Andishe publication added a sentence which was not in the original version and again did not pay attention to the limitation of the size of the balloons.

A: Look here, young fellow, I'm a collector... how much did you pay? I'll give you double for it!

B: - و ' / H% ! I > و H_D + < % ' >
'
' _ ? _ F _ + 2 _
_ 8 C: _ - _ يدا ؟ ' و د J + _ / H% ! _ I > _ ? + - ' !
مد < _

In the above example, the translator of the Rayehe-Andishe publication added 2 or 3 sentences which were not in the original version and did not pay attention to the limitation of the size of the balloons while the translator of the Universal publication translated without any additions.

A: Forgive me if I am too insistent but as I explained, I'm a collector – a collector of model ships. And I would be so very grateful if you would agree to sell me your ship.

B: ار > I_ + _D6_'_ !D_= _ +_ !__ _7 _H__ _6C_
 " +_ براد _A _= .- _' _ _ _ _-! _ _' _" _ور
 2+? !_ _L_+_' _ _ _+_- +_' +! - _'_ _ _ _ _
 _?+_D1 ' _
 !_ _ _ _ _A ! +_-. -

C: > I_> _D6_ _DC_ +8, _ !D_= M_?...._6C_ _ !__ _ _7
 8 _" _زا
 .- _'_ _ور _D6_'_ و _ _\$, +_-. _= !_ _ +E- _ _ _و !_ _

In the above example, again lots of unnecessary additions could be seen in the translation of the *Rayehe-Andishe* publication and the translator did not pay attention to the limitation of the size of the balloons while the translator of the *Universal* publication tried to correspond to the original version.

6. Discussion of the problem

Translator of comics is limited by the size of the balloon. Although their size can be modified in order to accommodate the text, the modification can be performed only to some extent; otherwise, the balloon would blot out the images.

In almost all the above examples, the translator of the earlier translated text i.e. *Universal* publication tried to correspond to the original version. In contrast, the translator of the *Rayehe-Andishe* publication deliberately added the words to the translated text. Although most of the time, additions in comic translation might have done for two reasons:

1. fit in the bubble and occupy the same space as in the original. E.g.

A: my wallet has been stolen!

B: _____ ! _____

C: ! _____ !.....د

2. To convey the meaning better to the reader and to explain the image more, as all the above examples in B items translated by *Rayehe-Andishe* publication.

In the above examples, the first reason didn't seem logical. The difference between Farsi and English font was in such way that no significant problem could be found about the space fitness of the Farsi translation with its English translation. Also the translator of the old Farsi version found a solution for this problem which seems completely adequate. Sometimes, he filled the empty spaces by dots.

But the second reason was more logical. It seemed that translators of *Rayehe-Andishe* publication did not believe in the imagination of their

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readers and added so many words arbitrarily which were not in the original version and even in its English translation. So they tried to explain the visual image by their own imagination. On the contrary, the translators in the English version and old Farsi version by *Universal* publication dedicated more attention to the imagination of their readers and suppressed arbitrary and unnecessary expression to fit in the bubble and occupy the same space as in the original while the Farsi translator of the new version added expressions freely and did not pay attention to the limitation of the size of the balloons

7. Conclusion

Comics are a new and young genre in our polysystem and don't maintain a central position, so our translators are not yet fully familiar with them. Therefore, they use some strategies in translating such books which are sometimes not logical and correct.

As it was mentioned before, the balance between text and image is one of the unique things about comics. The relation between word and image is of prime importance in such works. Also you have got to almost count the letters in your sentences because everything has got to fit in the bubble, in this space. Considering the examples, we can see so much addition which seemed arbitrary and unnecessary in the translation of *Rayehe-Andishe* publication and the translators did not pay any attention to the size of the balloons. On the contrary, the translators of the old Farsi version by *Universal* publication dedicated more attention to the imagination of their readers and suppressed arbitrary and unnecessary expression to fit the size of the speech balloon. They seemed to have tried to remain faithful to the ST, if not making it even more implicit than the ST author himself.

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