SIMILE TRANSLATION: LANGUAGE AND CULTURE CHALLENGES

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Abstract. *This study aims to examine the complexities of translating similes in literary texts, focusing on both linguistic and cultural challenges. Similes, which compare two different elements to enhance imagery and meaning, often carry culture-specific connotations that may not have direct equivalents in the target language. The paper discusses strategies such as literal translation, cultural substitution, and explicitation to maintain clarity, emotional tone, and stylistic integrity. It also highlights the importance of readability and audience reception in successful translation. By analyzing theoretical frameworks and practical examples, the study emphasizes the translator's role as a cultural mediator. The findings suggest that simile translation requires creative adaptation to preserve the rhetorical impact of the original text.*

Key words: simile translation, figurative language, cultural adaptation, translation strategies, readability, linguistic challenges

Introduction. In literary and linguistic expression, the **simile** represents one of the most effective rhetorical tools for enhancing clarity, emotional resonance, and vivid imagery. It works through the explicit comparison of two fundamentally different entities by highlighting shared qualities, typically using markers such as *"like"*, *"as"*, or *"as if"*. As defined by *Cuddon*, a simile is a figure of speech in which one thing is compared to another in order to clarify or intensify an image, distinguishing it from a metaphor through its directness and linguistic transparency. While similes serve as illustrative and decorative devices in literature, they also embody cultural codes that are not always easily transferrable across languages. Renowned translation theorist *Peter Newmark* argued that "the translator must always determine whether the figurative image is universal or culture-bound," especially in the case of similes. A culturally embedded simile—such as one derived from folklore or local idioms—may lose its communicative power or even become incomprehensible when rendered literally into another language. Therefore, effective translation often requires creative equivalence rather than direct substitution. *Lawrence Venuti* similarly emphasizes the translator's dual responsibility: to preserve rhetorical effect while ensuring accessibility in the target language. In the case of similes, this may involve reimagining the comparison in culturally appropriate terms that evoke a similar reaction in the target audience. *Antoine Berman* further warns that failure to grasp the stylistic function of figurative devices, including similes, risks a distortion of the author's voice—a loss not only of meaning, but of aesthetic intent.

Scholars such as *Alm-Arvius* have noted that similes play a vital cognitive role: they enable readers and listeners to process abstract or unfamiliar concepts by relating them to known images. This psychological and stylistic bridge enhances both understanding and engagement, making similes indispensable in genres ranging from poetry to journalism.

In translation practice, however, similes can present significant semantic and pragmatic challenges. A seemingly straightforward construction like "He is as brave as a lion" may carry different connotations depending on the cultural context. As Cruse points out, similes selectively emphasize certain features of the comparison—yet what is salient in one culture may be irrelevant or even contradictory in another.

A simile is more than a stylistic ornament; it is a conceptual bridge that links abstract ideas with familiar imagery. Unlike metaphors, which rely on implicit comparisons, similes offer explicit analogies, usually marked by linguistic signals such as "like," "as," or "as if". Translating similes is particularly complex because they not only carry semantic value but also serve rhetorical and cognitive functions—illustrating tone, mood, and characterization. In literary discourse, similes are used to enhance visualization and emotional impact, making them central to an author's voice and style. According to *Cuddon*, similes differ from metaphors in that they "clarify and enhance an image" through explicit comparison, making their linguistic structure both more accessible and more rigid in translation. However, this very explicitness becomes a challenge when the cultural associations of the image (or vehicle) do not translate well into the target language.

One of the key challenges in simile translation is cultural specificity. Many similes derive their meaning not from universal logic but from culturally-bound knowledge. For instance, the simile "as sly as a fox" may resonate in English due to the literary and folkloric tradition of foxes representing cunning. However, in some cultures, the fox may have neutral or even positive connotations, making the comparison ineffective or confusing. As *Hartono* highlights, "an effective simile in the source language may not have a direct equivalent in the target language." This necessitates either adaptation or replacement strategies. Consider the Uzbek simile *"tili zahar kabi achchiq" (literally: "the tongue is as bitter as poison").* A direct translation might sound unnatural or hyperbolic in English unless adapted as "a tongue like venom," which preserves the intended negativity but fits the stylistic conventions of the TL (target language).

In such cases, failing to recognize the cultural mismatch leads to semantic loss or distortion. As a result, the translator must possess not only linguistic expertise but also intercultural competence—a crucial skill emphasized in modern translation pedagogy. Translation theorists such as *Newmark* and *Pierini* have outlined several strategies specifically tailored for translating figurative language, including similes. Their taxonomies include:

a) **Literal Translation**: Maintaining the original structure and imagery, effective only when cultural references align (e.g., "strong as an ox" remains unchanged in many languages).

b) **Substitution**: Replacing the source simile with a culturally analogous one in the TL (e.g., Uzbek *"yumshoq qoʻl bilan bosh kesish"* → English *"a velvet hand in an iron glove"*).

c) **Explicitation**: Rendering the implied meaning explicitly, often by paraphrasing.

d) **Omission**: Used rarely and only when a simile's cultural or rhetorical function is completely untranslatable or would distract the reader.

For example, *Pierini* argues that similes such as *"as busy as a bee"* might be translated literally into some Indo-European languages, but in other contexts, a **functional equivalent** might be more appropriate to preserve connotation rather than form.

Several empirical studies reinforce the importance of context-sensitive strategies. *Cahya* and *Setyaningsih*, in their analysis of simile translation based on Molina and Albir's model, found that **adaptation and explicitation** were most frequently employed in cases where cultural references were deeply embedded. Their results indicate that literal translation was only appropriate in approximately 25% of the simile cases. Similarly, *Sembiring* and *Sigit*, applying Pierini's strategies to Indonesian-to-English similes, concluded that literal translation, while frequent, often reduced readability and emotional impact. This is consistent with the findings of *Abdumaula and Hilman,* who assessed accuracy**,** acceptability**,** and readability using *Nababan's rubric* and found that over 30% of translated similes received only "moderate" readability ratings due to unnatural expression.

Despite the frequent use of Nababan's framework in evaluating simile translations, the component of readability often remains underanalyzed in terms of what specifically causes low or medium ratings. Many studies focus on whether a translation is readable, but do not explore the linguistic or cultural reasons behind awkward or strained phrasing. This omission represents a significant research gap. Consider the simile in Game of Thrones: *"His words were like ice."* While metaphorically rich, a literal translation into some languages may lead to confusion without prior cultural knowledge associating "ice" with emotional coldness. In such cases, functional equivalence or descriptive paraphrase *(e.g., "His words were sharp and heartless")* could enhance readability while preserving the figurative tone.

The overarching challenge in simile translation lies in balancing fidelity to the source text with fluidity in the target language. Translators must navigate between stylistic loyalty and reader reception, particularly in literary texts where stylistic devices are core to the narrative voice. As *Kennedy* insightfully claims, similes are "also metaphors— differing only in form, not in function." This underscores the necessity for *rhetorical equivalence* rather than mere lexical accuracy. A simile that sounds elegant in the SL should evoke a similar aesthetic and cognitive effect in the TL—even if this requires reimagining the imagery itself. To cut short, simile translation is a multifaceted process that requires cultural sensitivity, strategic flexibility, and linguistic creativity. While established models like those of Newmark and Pierini offer useful foundations, empirical

validation and context-specific adaptation remain critical to successful translation. Future research must go beyond classification to explore how similes function within narrative structures and reader reception, ensuring that translated similes not only carry meaning but also resonate emotionally and stylistically with their intended audience.

Conclusion: Translating similes is a complex and nuanced task that goes far beyond mere linguistic substitution. As a rhetorical device, the simile enriches texts with emotional depth, visual clarity, and cultural resonance. However, its reliance on culturally embedded imagery often creates challenges when transferring meaning into a different linguistic and cultural context. A simile that is vivid and natural in the source language may sound awkward, confusing, or even meaningless in the target language if not handled with cultural sensitivity. Literal translation strategies may work in some cases where imagery is universally understood, but in many instances, adaptation or creative reformulation is necessary to preserve the intended tone and effect. The choice of strategy—whether literal translation, substitution, explicitation, or omission—should depend on the simile's rhetorical purpose and the target audience's cultural frame of reference. Furthermore, similes are not just decorative features; they serve as cognitive tools that help readers understand abstract ideas through familiar comparisons. This makes their accurate and stylistically appropriate translation even more essential, particularly in literary and poetic texts where voice and aesthetic intent are closely tied to figurative language. Taking everything into account, simile translation demands not only linguistic competence but also a high level of intercultural awareness and literary sensitivity. To ensure both readability and rhetorical effectiveness, translators must make careful, context-driven choices. Future research should continue to explore how different strategies affect readers' interpretation and emotional engagement with translated texts.

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