IS IT A TABOO TO TRANSLATE A TABOO IN A LITERARY TEXT?

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Abstract

The close relationship between language and culture, which is perhaps the most vital one, is reflected in translation. Since culture is considered to be its fundamental aspect, taboo language, which is culturally bound and deeply rooted into the socio-cultural context, certainly challenges the translator. This paper outlines some aspects of taboo language and focuses on problems and challenges related to translation of these items in literary texts. The purpose of the survey is to show that, bearing in mind all the necessary aspects of literary translation, it is absolutely necessary to keep taboos in translation as much as possible because neutralizing them would have a negative impact on its stylistic dimension. Furthermore, the negative impact on the quality and the stylistic aspect of translation will also be discussed. The results are of practical value since they shed light on the role and the dimension of taboo words as an important stylistic feature of

the literary text and on the importance to retain their explicitness in translation.

Key words: language, translation, culture, literature, style, taboo, stylistic and aesthetic effect

Introduction

The inseparable connection between language and culture is a very well-known concept. Since this relationship is such a vital one and the speakers' thought processes and the way they express themselves are strongly influenced by the concept of culture within their community (Kremsch, 1998:8), the translation process, whose aim is broadly speaking to transfer meaning from one language to another, will inevitably be dependent on and oriented towards culture.

Translation and Culture

The first insights into the connection between translation and culture have been initiated by the advent of the Functionalist approach to translation. The main argument of this approach is that "texts are produced and received with a specific purpose, or function in mind"(Schäffner and Wiesemann, 2001: 14) and that "scholars working within functionalist approaches want to highlight that translation is not only, or exclusively, a

linguistic activity, but rather a purposeful activity, embedded in and contributing to other purposeful activities"(ibid).

Analyzing the problems of correspondence and translation, Nida confers equal importance to both linguistic and cultural differences between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) and concludes that "differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure"(Nida, 1964 in Venuti, 19995: 130). According to Vermeer and Reiss, "a translation, i.e. TT, is information offered in a TL culture about information offered in SL and culture. Since language and culture are interdependent, translation is a transfer between cultures, i.e. it is a specific kind of culture-determined text production" (ibid: 15). Toury explains that translation is "a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions" (Toury, 1978, cited in James, 2005). Davoodi, (2007) in her studies dedicated to discussing essential aspects of translation also lays an emphasis on culture and cultural issues related to translation.

The above mentioned standpoints suggest that culture is central to translation and translation studies –Toury, Lambert, Basnett-McGuire, Lefevre – (Snell Hornby, 2006. p.48). Hence, it could be said that the whole translation process is actually oriented towards it, meaning that cultural

implications for translation are as much important as lexical concerns.

Translating taboo

Consequently, translating culturally bound language - taboo language being part of this category – is a very challenging task for translators and this is probably the most complicated issue they could deal with having in mind that different languages reflect different realities and cultures. As Newmark points out "culture words will be a translation problem unless there is cultural overlap between the source and the target language (and its readership). In addition, where there is cultural focus, there is a translation problem due to the cultural gap or distance between the source and target languages (Newmark, 1988: 94). The meaning of taboo words is so deeply rooted into the socio-cultural context that it inevitably challenges translators.

Taboo is a Tongan word meaning 'forbidden". According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary a taboo is "a cultural or religious custom that does not allow people to do, use or talk about a particular thing as people find it offensive or embarrassing". The Free Dictionary and Thesaurus defines it as "a ban or inhibition resulting from social custom or emotional aversion". A taboo word is a "word that many people consider offensive or shocking, for example because it refers to sex, the

body or people's race" (the Oxford Learner's Dictionary). According to Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams "people know the social situations in which taboo words are desirable, acceptable, forbidden, and downright dangerous to utter. All societies have their

taboo words. People everywhere seem to have a need for undeleted expletives to express their emotions or attitudes. Words relating to sex, sex organs, and natural bodily functions make up a large part of the set of taboo words of many cultures" (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2009: 472). According to Trudgill, "taboo language has to do with words   and   expressions   which are supposed not to be used, and which are shocking,   offensive,   blasphemous   or indecent when they are used" (Trudgill, 1992:73). Allan and Burridge maintain that "taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury" (Allan and Burridge, 2006:1). Moreover, they introduce six different areas for taboos in the Western world:

1. bodies and their effluvia
2. the organs and acts of sex
3. diseases, death and killing, physical and mental handicap
4. religion and church, naming and addressing sacred persons, beings, objects and places
5. food gathering, preparation and consumption

6. prostitution, narcotics, and criminal activity

Very often translators find themselves caught on the horns of the dilemma over whether a taboo word should be translated directly with another taboo or it should be 'neutralized' by a less offensive or less explicit term. In her paper *"On the Translation of the Taboos"*, Davoodi mentions several strategies for translating taboo words (Davoodi, 2009). She explains that if translators are faced with such situations they have several strategies at their disposal (ibid):

a) censorship: the first and the simplest choice in translation of taboos. The translator ignores the term and censors it as an extra term. However, it is not always a proper strategy, because in some occasions, the taboo term is a key term in the source text and the omission of it will change the meaning of the text.

b) substitution: the other way to translate a taboo term is by substituting the term with another term which is not considered a taboo in the other language. It often distorts the meaning and confuses the reader. In most cases, such translation will be absurd to the readers.

c) taboo for taboo: although the translator knows the expressions are not acceptable to target people and society, s/he prefers to translate them into taboo. Applying this method is an easy way, but it

might often be embarrassing to the readers and audience.

d) applying euphemism: euphemism is a use of an agreeable or inoffensive expression to replace one that offends or suggests something unpleasant. In fact, euphemism is the best choice for the translator not to express offensive or unpleasant terms.

Furthermore, Davoodi explains that when doing a translation of taboo terms, the following factors should be taken into consideration (ibid):

a) situation: some words are taboo when used in certain situations, while in others they are not considered to be taboo. Their meaning and the extent to which they are taboo change according to the situation in which they are used. *Breast* is a taboo word if used by a man to refer to a female body part, but when used in a butcher's shop it is not a taboo and has a completely different meaning.

b) subject matter: taboos are sometimes necessary to convey certain meanings like jokes for example. It is absolutely necessary to convey the meaning of taboos in these cases. In other cases, we can see the repetition of some words like *urine* that may be taboo or slight euphemism in other texts, but they are not taboo in scientific texts. The translator must follow different attitudes in the texts with different subject matters.

c) religion: taboo terms and expressions among several religions may be different. In Jew, calling

God is a taboo, while in Islam, people call their *God* every day especially in their daily prayers. If the translator wouldn't be aware of these differences, he/she may even unintentionally insult the readers and their religion.

d) readers' age: some words and expressions are prohibited for children but acceptable for adults. The words like *piss* and *shit* may be acceptable in adult conversation while euphemisms like *number one* and *number two* are preferred for children. By identifying the readers' age, the translator will decide to apply direct translation or euphemism.

e) readers' social class: some expressions are taboo just in some social classes. For example; *bribe* and *graft* are taboo words especially in the government and among politicians while they may be used by workers and laborers as common words. In this case, if this rule is the same in both L1 and L2, the translator translates the taboo into taboo and euphemism into euphemism. But if the rule is not the same, he/she'd better translate them according to the rules of the target language.

However, when it comes to translation of taboos in literary texts other factors also need to be taken notice of. Broadly speaking, literary translation means to transfer a piece of artistic work (either prose or poetry) from one language into another. Literary translation is a very specific and complex procedure and for many it is the most difficult type of translation. When translating literary texts not only is it important to transfer

meaning from one language into another but it is also vital to transfer the form (the manner in which the meaning is communicated) and to produce equivalent effect upon the reader who should thus be able to experience the original through the translation itself.

The uniqueness of literary translation can be put down to several specificities. The **language in literature** is used in a specific way to attract the reader's attention and to exert a distinctive artistic effect on him/her and it is through the specific use and choice of language that the reader gets an insight into the aesthetic dimension of the work itself. It may "violate or deviate from the generally observed rules of language in many different ways, some obvious, some subtle. Both means of and motives for deviation are worth careful study (Leech, 1969:5); "literary expression is a creative liberation of the resources of language which we use from day to day" (Leech and Short, 1981:6).

The specific use of language in literature is closely connected to **foregrounding**, another vital feature of a literary text. It refers to those parts of the text in which language is 'unusual' enough to attract the reader's attention thus having the emphasizing effect on the reader (Louwerse and van Peer, 2002: 91-92) and its aim is to bring about affective response from the reader by engaging him/her emotionally into the comprehension of the text (ibid:92). This means that the specific use of language in literature and the foregrounding are

highly motivated mechanisms through which the author strives to present his artistic achievements to the reader and the aesthetic value of its work. It is through these mechanisms that the reader reaches the mental state of a character, his personality or understands what happens in the plot.

Having in mind that the author consciously and intentionally uses language in an unusual way, thus putting certain language choices to the foreground in order to catch the reader's eye and to create an aesthetic effect, language in literature and foregrounding bring us to another important feature, the **style** of a literary text. According to Crystal, it "refers to a selection of language habits, the occasional linguistics idiosyncrasies which characterize an individual uniqueness (Crystal and Davy, 1969: 9), while Leech and Short define it as "the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose" (Leech and Short, 1981: 10). These definitions show that style is regarded as a choice from more alternatives; it is dependent on the context, on the function and purpose it should fulfill and the affective stimulus it should produce. To determine the style of a literary text, attention should be paid on the frequency of certain linguistic features whose evident presence in the text draws the reader's attention (ibid: 43). In simple words, this means that the author intentionally uses certain linguistic features in a given context to achieve certain purpose in order to create an effect on the reader. If

a linguistic feature is obviously present in a text, it means that its presence is certainly purposeful and without it the reader's response would be completely different.

When it comes to literary translation, all these features are highly important and it is imperative that the translator be aware of them. They must be reflected in the translation for maximum effect on the reader.

Speaking of taboo language, if it is so frequently used in a text that it can be considered as its stylistic feature, then it conveys a strong message to the reader about the topic, characters, the setting; it reflects the mental image of the author or of the characters and ultimately gives an insight into the stylistic and artistic dimension of the text. If these words and expressions are omitted in the translation or 'neutralized' in any way, then it would not have the necessary impact on the reader and he/she would be deprived of the ability to experience the artistic work.

Using taboos in certain contexts or among certain social, professional, religious or age groups can be unacceptable even offensive and in these situations translators should be careful not to cause problems by using strong or foul language. In these cases, the necessity to euphemize or tone down certain expressions or words is justified and recommended. However, when it comes to literary translation, it is necessary to retain the strength and the expressiveness of these words because they tell

us so much about the original; their use is always intentional and motivated and without them the translation would be poor, awkward and difficult to read.

Corpus and Methodology

In order to show that neutralizing taboo words in literary translation can have a negative impact on the translation itself, two translations of literary texts rich in taboo language have been analyzed in terms of assessing their quality and the extent to which they meet stylistic standards of the original. The examples of taboos and their translations have been excerpted from the short stories collection *"The Most Beautiful Woman in Town"*[1] by Charles Bukowski and *"What We Talk about When We Talk about Love"*[2] by Raymond Caver and their Macedonian translations[3]. In both cases, the original stories talk about lower middle class people from the Mid-west in USA and their ordinary, monotonous lives full of problems and vices like alcohol, drugs, promiscuity and poverty. The persistent use of taboo language reflects their

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1 Bukowski, Ch. (2008) *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town and Other Stories*. London: Virgin Books Ltd

[2] Carver, R. (2009) *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. London: Vintage Books

[3] Буковски, Ч. (2009), *Најубавата жена во градот и други раскази*. Скопје: Икона and Карвер, Р. (1990), *За што зборуваме кога зборуваме за љубовта*. Скопје, Култура

social background – they are uneducated, poor and live on the skid row. The purpose of the analysis is to show that bearing in mind all the important aspects of literary translation mentioned previously it is absolutely necessary to keep taboos in the translation as much as possible because leaving them out or euphemizing them would totally change the perspective and the context of the stories. Also, the aim is to discuss the negative impact that this could have on the quality and the stylistic dimension of the translation.

The taboo words that were analysed comprised 27 random examples of vulgar words and expressions, swears and curses, pejorative words and expressions, offensive words, slurs and dysphemisms from T1[4] and T2[5] each. The taboo words from the original stories and their respective translations were compered in terms of whether the translators preserved the strength and the expressiveness of the taboos by using taboo for taboo strategy **(preserving tendency)**, or they toned down the taboos by applying substitution, censorship or use of euphemisms strategies **(neutralizing tendency)** and the implications these

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[4] T1 stands for **Text 1**, which comprises the stories in the collection *"The Most Beautiful Woman in Town"* in English and its Macedonian translation.

[5] T2 stands for **Text 2**, which comprises the stories in the collection *"What We Talk about When We Talk about Love"* in English and its Macedonian translation.

tendencies had od the stylistic dimension of the translation.

Results and discussion

The results of the analysis in T1 show that three strategies for translating taboo words were used in the translation; in 18 out of 27 cases taboo for taboo strategy was used (66.7%), substitution was used in 7 cases (25.9%), while 2 taboo words were euphemized (7.4%). None of the taboo words were censored in the translation. This situation in T1 is shown in Table 1 and in Chart 1 given below.

Table 1
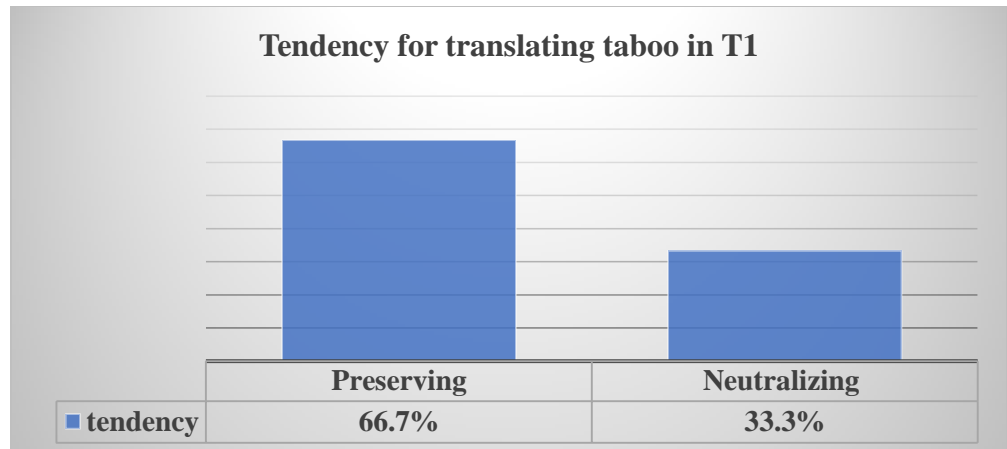**Translation strategies for translation of taboo words in T1**

Number of analyzed examples	Translation strategy			
	taboo for taboo	censorship	euphemism	substitution
27	18	0	2	7
	66.7%	0%	7.4%	25.9%

Chart 1
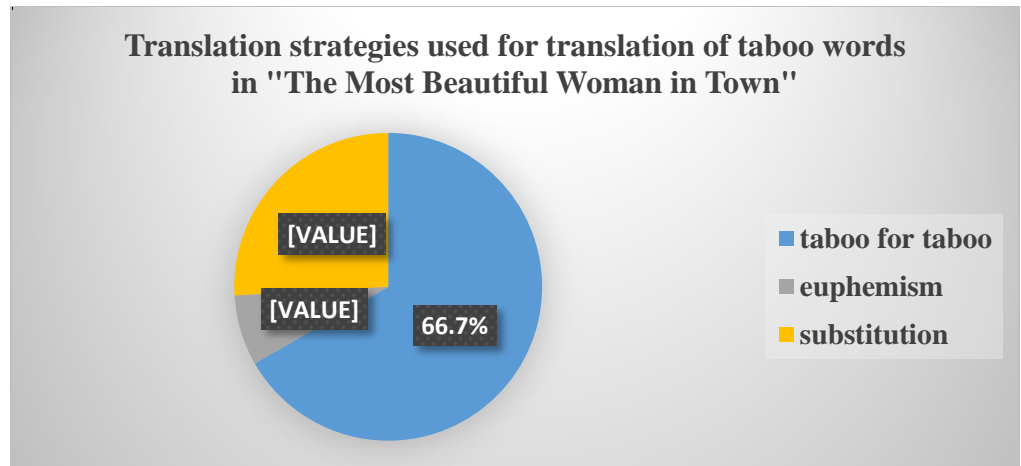
**Translation strategies used for translation of taboo words
in "The Most Beautiful Woman in Town"**

According to the results, the preserving tendency in strategies used for translating taboo language prevails in T1 and it is present in great majority of the cases (66.7%), while the neutralizing strategy is noticed in smaller number of cases (33.3%). This situation is shown in Graph 1.

__Graph 1__

Tendency for translating taboo in T1

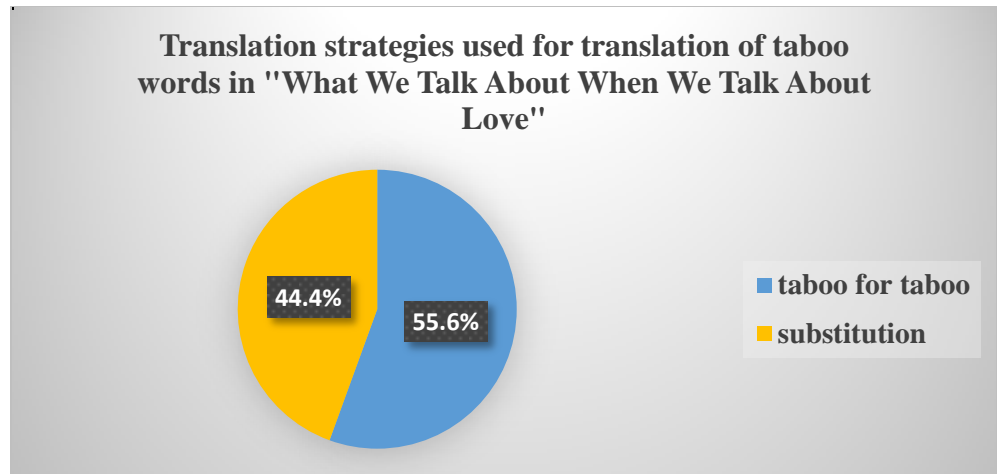|	Preserving	Neutralizing
■ tendency	66.7%	33.3%

The analysis in T2 shows a different situation. The results indicate that two strategies for translating taboo words were used in the translation; out of 27 analysed examples, taboo for taboo strategy was used in 15 cases (55.6%), while in as much as 12 cases (44.4%) the taboo words or expressions were substituted for a word or expression that is not considered a taboo in the target language. None of the taboo words were censored or euphemized. Unlike the results in T1, the results in T2 show that the discrepancy between the usage of the taboo for taboo strategy and the other three mentioned strategies (censorship, euphemism and substitution) is smaller than in T1, which means that the translator in this case opted

for not choosing translation strategies that would retain the expressive power of the taboo words and expressions, which represent a stylistic feature of the original. This situation is presented in Table 2 and in Chart 2 given below.

__Table 2__
__Translation strategies for translation of taboo words in T2__

Number of analyzed examples	Translation strategy			
	taboo for taboo	censorship	euphemism	substitution
27	15	0	0	12
	55.6%	0%	0%	44.4%

__Chart 2__

Translation strategies used for translation of taboo words in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love"

44.4%	55.6%

■ taboo for taboo
■ substitution

According to the results, the preserving tendency in strategies used for translating taboo language prevails in T2, but it is present in 15 out of 27 cases (55.6%), while the neutralizing strategy is noticed in a considerable number of cases (12), which amounts to 33.3%.This tendency indicates that, unlike in T1, in T2 the extent to which the translator used preserving tendency is close to the extent of the neutralizing tendency, which is shown in Graph 2 given below.

Graph 2

	Preserving	Neutralizing
▪ tendency	55.6%	44.4%

Tendency for translating taboo in T2
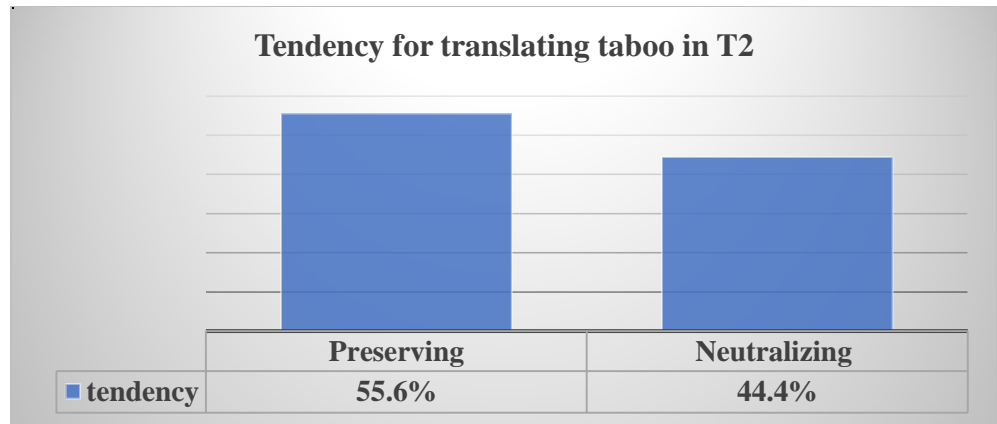
Concerning the impact that the neutralizing strategies have on the quality of the translation, the analysis of the 21 examples showing this tendency in both T1 and T2 indicates that three effects on the translation can be detected (see Table 3 below):

1) **minimization of the stylistic dimension**
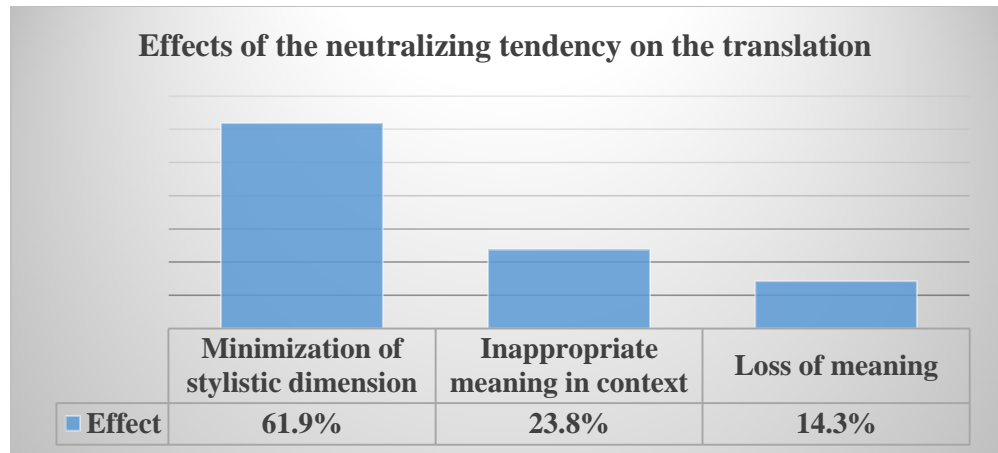2) **inappropriate meaning in context**
3) **loss of meaning**

Table 3

Effects of the neutralizing tendency on the translation

Effect	Number of	Percentage

	cases	
Minimiztion of the stylistic dimension	**13**	**61.9%**
Inappropriate meaning in context	**5**	**23.8%**
Loss of meaning	**3**	**14.3%**
Total	**21**	**100%**

Graph 3 given below shows that the effect of **minimization of the stylistic dimension** of the translation is the most prevailing of all effects, its presence being 61.9%. Other two effects are considerably less perceivable in the translation: **inappropriate meaning in context** amounts to 23.8%, while **loss of meaning** amounts to 14.3%.

Graph 3

Effects of the neutralizing tendency on the translation

	Minimization of stylistic dimension	Inappropriate meaning in context	Loss of meaning
■ Effect	61.9%	23.8%	14.3%

These results indicate that when taboo words and expressions are either substituted for a word that is not a taboo in the target language or euphemized in order to become more acceptable for the readers, it has a negative impact on the translation itself. This negative influence is most visibly manifested through minimization of the stylistic dimension of the translation, which means that in this case the translation does not produce the necessary artistic and aesthetic effect on the reader. Additionally, neutralization of taboo words in literary translation results in translation equivalents with inappropriate meanings in context, which certainly confuses the reader and makes reading difficult. Finally, toning down taboos in literary

translation can lead to loss of meaning in certain situations, which additionally puzzles the readers, impedes comprehension and make them unwilling to proceed reading.

Bearing in mind the results given in Graph 1 and Graph 2, we can see that the neutralizing tendency is stronger in T2, which means that in this case the scale of the negative effects on the translation is greater than in T1. Logically, this means that the quality of the translation in T2 is poorer; it sounds awkward and confusing, unlike in T1, where it is smooth, more acceptable and more appealing to the reader.

Conclusion

These findings confirm the thesis that when it comes to translation of literary texts it is absolutely necessary for the translator to be aware of the stylistic features of the original. In this case, taboo words and expressions are a vital element of the stylistic dimension of the text and they are used as a means of portraying the characters and the socio-cultural setting for the stories. Without them the characters and their social and cultural background would be a mismatch. Their systematic presence in the original stories is brought to the fore and it attracts the reader's attention as an essential part of the language used by the characters which

creates distinctive artistic and stylistic effect. Failing to observe their stylistic potential or trying to "subdue" or neutralize them results in rigid, artificial and confusing translation that no one enjoys. While in some situations which refer to communication between different social, professional, religious or age groups using taboo can be unacceptable and translator should pay attention not to offend someone, in literature their explicit nature must not be overlooked because it gives an insight into the aesthetics of the original. Having said this, it should by no means be a taboo to translate a taboo in a literary text!

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