

## **Translating English proverbs into Persian: A case of comparative linguistics**

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### **Abstract**

Translation of English proverbs into Persian language makes Iranian translators encounter at the Source Language (SL) comparing Target Language (TL) levels such as lexical, stylistic, cultural and rhetorical parameters. In this respect, the main concerns would be on the three corresponding SL/TL bases: form, content and context. This goes back to similar and different parameters of English and Persian languages regarding Contrastive Analysis studies in the 1940s. At the content and context levels, there may be several shared properties between SL and TL equivalents which are connotatively motivated while at the formal level the lexical differences can be problematic. This survey provides a model which facilitates the translation of English proverbs into Persian with the minimum loss in the connotative meaning of the SL proverbs. It also proposes a theoretical model concerned with weak, moderate and strong versions of conceptual translation equivalents. This model is applicable in the other domains of translation practices at linguistic and metalinguistic levels.

**Keywords:** translation, proverbs, equivalent, English, Persian, SL/TL

## **1. Introduction**

Since no translation is entirely “the best ‘or even “acceptable” (Robinson, 1997: 25), the translator cannot be certain that the adequacy of the proposed proverb equivalents. According to Catford (1965), when the lexical substitutes are unavailable in the target language, equivalence is not achieved at all. In light of Catford’s remark, proverbs are idiomatic and this makes them idiosyncratic elements which are culturally bound to a specific language.

Inferential entity of proverbs would be the other problematic aspect of translating proverbs since it makes the meaning of TL equivalents unclear and to some extent untranslatable. Therefore, there is a need to develop a workable model which enables translators to render English proverbs into Persian through three proposed versions of translation strategies. In doing so, a three-dimensional model of proverb translation may be proposed as the outcome of this survey. This model focuses the activation of linguistic domains and non-linguistic domains (i.e., lexeme, structure and concept) in proverb translation. The domain of lexeme refers to vocabulary adjustment in SL/TL equivalents. The domain of structure refers to syntactic properties adjusted in SL/TL equivalents.

The domain of concept is a general non-linguistic term which covers all aspects of pragmatic, idiomatic, discursal, cultural and iconic notions of language shared among the interlocutors of a language. Thus, translating proverbs is a complex process in which lexical, structural and conceptual domains are involved simultaneously. The translator should be aware of various aspects of these dominant implicatures in rendering proverbial units.

## **2. Review of literature**

A proverb is defined as a pithy and popular expression that presents an idea of experience, knowledge, advice, morality, truth, virtue, genius, irony, etc. The wit and wisdom of a nation can be discovered in its proverbs. Persian culture is rich and its proverbs and sayings can be rarely found in other languages (Gorjian & Molonia, 2004). Oxford Learner’s Dictionary (2004) defined a proverb as “a well-known phrase or sentence that gives advice or say something that is generally true, for example “waste not, want not.” According to Hatim and Mason (1990), in translation of metaphorical expressions (e.g., proverbs) the theory of one-to-one correspondence or literal translation failed because the meanings of proverbs in SL and TL are indirect, idiomatic, connotative and non-iconic. Although the translators may find several instances of lexical similarities in SL/TL proverbial expressions, these similarities connotes differently in the TL culture. For instance, the proverb “He/She is a rabbit.” Rabbit in English culture is the symbol of forgetfulness but in Persian culture it connotes the opposite meaning and shows sharpness and witness. Therefore, Rabbit is intrinsically iconic. Yet it is not interchangeably used in Persian language.

The word “Owl” in the proverb of “He/She is an owl.” connotes differently in English and Persian languages. In Persian culture it is the icon of “bad omen”, “death” and

“bad fortune” while in English culture it is traditionally thought to be “wise” and the symbol of “good fortune”.

The next example shows that even the similar words connote differently. The English proverb "He/She is a rabbit." means that "He/She is an ass." in Persian. In rendering into Persian language, the translator should change the word "rabbit" into "ass" to provide the Persian readers with appropriate equivalent. In Persian culture an "ass" is the symbol of stupidity and ignorance. There are other examples which show the connotative differences in proverbial elements such as the proverb "Cats have nine lives." in English language while in Persian language there is a proverb which says "Cats have seven lives." This cultural and proverbial difference can be illustrated as follows:

English proverb: Cats have nine lives.

Persian proverb: Cats have seven lives.

Persian equivalent: گربه هفت جان دارد.

Persian phonetic transcription: /gəurbəh hæft J<sup>n</sup> d<sup>r</sup>ˈd/

In Persian culture it is believed that "Cats have Seven lives" but in English culture "they have Nine lives". Therefore both concepts in SL/TL are the same regarding Cats as die hard creatures but the numbers of their lives are different. These equivalents show that the Persian collocational elements of Cats and Seven lives are totally different from the English collocations of Cats and Nine lives. The employment of these proverbial collocations in both languages gives aesthetic effects to these proverbs. Generally speaking, proverbs are metaphorical sayings in the form of stereotyped and prefabricated patterns in a language which convey cultural concepts. They are also related to the background heritage of a nation and have been formed and used among the people throughout years. They are deeply rooted in people's beliefs and thoughts which cannot be denotatively understood through their lexical or grammatical meanings. The translators should deal with proverbial concepts and their pragmatic meanings based on SL and TL socio-cultural similarities and differences of the two languages. Conceptual translation may be workable in this domain (Gorjian & Molonia, 1999).

Hatim and Mason (1990) proposed communicative translation to render socio-cultural and metaphorical elements of language. They (1990: 1) believe that "translation is the negotiation of meaning between the producer of the source-language text (SL) and the readers of the target text (TT), both of whom exist within their own different social framework." Kelly (1979:220) suggests a functional approach which focuses on the typology of functions rather than the structures of SL and TL. Newmark (1981: 39) prefers the term semantic and communicative translation. Hatim and Mason (1990) believed that translation is discursively motivated and any unit of language should be rendered to provide a level of negotiation between the translator and the reader. Hatim and Mason (1990: 8) state that " the translator seeks to achieve to judgments about the

intended meaning of the [source text] ST speaker/writer (i.e., in the domain of pragmatics). They (1990: 6) add that "it is erroneous to assume that one-for-one equivalent exists for all lexical items in two languages." Nida (1964) proposed formal (e.g., diplomatic) and dynamic (e.g., poetry) equivalents. Formal equivalents refer to the close possible match of form and content between ST and TT and dynamic equivalents refer to the principle of equivalence of effect on the reader of TT. In the latter, there is a place of interpretation while in the former, there is no room to interpret the equivalents; and literal meaning is important.

The closest equivalents in both languages cannot be reached (Gorjian & Molonia, 1999). However, the translator tries to arrive at particular circumstance and achieve an appropriate equivalent. Hatim and Mason (1990), Catford (1965), and Gorjian and Molonia (2004) believe that there is a need to arrive at the adequacy of given translation procedures especially in rendering metaphorical expressions. Tytler (1907: 9) proposed three levels of the translation adequacy as follows:

1. That the translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work.
2. That a style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original.
3. That the translation should have all the ease of original composition.

Nida's (1969: 164) basic requirements of a translation are as follows:

1. Making sense;
2. conveying the spirit and manner of the original;
3. having the natural and easy form of expression; [and]
4. producing a similar response.

The above directions relate to the problems of proverb equivalents in SL and TL equivalents. These problems refer to translators' understanding of form and content in TL which become basic pitfalls in translating metaphorical expressions. Hatim and Mason (1990: 21-22) emphasized these problems as: (1) comprehension of source text, (2) transfer of meaning, (3) assessment of target text. They noted that "translation becomes a non- correspondence of certain formal categories in different languages."

### **2.1. Translation of proverbs**

Mollanazar (2001: 53) defined the proverb as "a unit of meaning in a specific context through which the speaker and hearer arrives at the same meaning." Accordingly, proverbs are sentential or phrasal with complete meaning and are similar to sayings, slogans and maxims which convey cultural, legendary and folklore heritage of a nation. They are based on historical stories and tales which are rooted in people's shared background knowledge (Gorjian & Molonia, 2005).

Beekman and Callow (1974: 139) suggested three ways to translate a proverb as follows:

1. The words following the proverb could be introduced as the meaning of the proverb;
2. it can be replaced with an equivalent local proverb; and
3. its non-figurative meaning could be stated straight forwardly.

Nida (1985) noted that proverbs are special metaphoric expressions and the translator should know the proverbial concepts in SL/TL regarding their similarities and differences. Mollanazar (2001: 54) emphasized that proverbs cannot be translated literally (word-for-word) and they may sometimes have no natural figurative equivalents in TL. Thus, he proposed two strategies in translating proverbs:

(a) some similar proverbs can be found in the two languages with more or less similar form, vocabulary and meaning (e.g., Better late than never.). It is corresponding with its exact equivalent in Persian (i.e., دیر رسیدن بهتر از هرگز نرسیدن است. Which is transcribed as: /di:r rəsɪdæn bəhtær æz hærgəz nærəsi:dæn æst/; and (b) Many proverbs may be found in the two languages which have similar meanings and can be applied in the same contexts, but they have different form and vocabulary (e.g., He has a finger in every pie.). It is translated in Persian (i.e., نخود هر آشی است. Which is transcribed as: /nu:xu:də hæɾ ʌshi: æst/.

Duff (1989: 11) cited that "idiomatic expressions are notoriously untranslatable. These include similes, metaphors, proverbs and sayings (as good as jargon, slang, and colloquialisms)." Duff also noted that if these expressions have no equivalents in TL, the translator may approach to TL equivalents as follows:

1. Literal translation,
2. original word in inverted commas,
3. close equivalents, and
4. non- idiomatic translation.

Finally, Duff (1989) emphasized that if there is not an appropriate equivalent in TL, the translator should not force it into the translation. Vinay and Darbelnet (1995: 342) believed that the TL equivalents should "replicate the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording." This approach can be used to maintain the stylistic impact of the SL text in the TL text. According to them, an equivalent is the ideal method when the translator has to deal with proverbs, idioms, clichés, nominal or adjectival phrases and the onomatopoeia of animal sounds.

Baker's (1992) approach to translation equivalents focused on linguistic and pragmatic levels of equivalents. Riazi (2003) proposed three approaches to translation equivalents at the word, sentence and concept levels. He emphasized conceptual

approach to translating proverbs and added that idioms and proverbs cannot be translated word-for-word; rather they should translate into equivalent concepts in the TL to convey the same meaning and produce the same effect on the readers.

Saad (2003: 10) believe that "for a translator, transferring a literary text, it is not enough to grasp internal structure of the text." Barnwell (1980) states that a translator needs to understand the internal and external structures operating within and around a work of art. Venuti (1998: 21) focused on the limitations of linguistics in the "translation of literary texts in translation studies (ST) in the 1980s." Toury (1995) believed that translation theory should be scientific, avoiding perspective accounts of translation to examine actual translation practices. He emphasized translation and discourse strategies to arrive at "acceptability" of a translation. Toury (1995: 61) defines "acceptability" of a translation as "the ways in which various shifts constitute a type of "equivalence" which conforms to domestic values at a certain historical moment."

## **2.2. Culture, context and proverbs**

According to Robinson (1997), the study of translation is an integral part of intercultural relations. Robinson (1997:1) noted that "we need for new approach to the process of teaching and learning which is certainly felt in translator and interpreter training programs around the world as well." Thus, the translators need to know SL/TL culture and its relations to their religion, customs, ceremonies, languages, geographical places, climate and all aspects of cultural background and literature heritage of both languages. Generally speaking, all these components should be considered in translation theories and especially in rendering proverbial expressions from SL into TL. They can be categorized into four classes as follows:

1. Linguistic class (e.g., phonetic, lexical, morphological, structural, cohesive and coherent elements).
2. Sociolinguistic class (e.g., context of situation, form-function relations, social classes, stylistic variation, cultural values/norms/rules, language varieties, racial and ethnic values).
3. Psycholinguistic class( e.g., translators' motivation, attitudes, personality, aptitude, deductive and inductive mental processing, top-down and bottom-up mental activation, schematic and background knowledge).
4. Pragmatic class (e.g., intended meanings, semantic and semiotic properties, figurative/connotative vs. denotative meanings, explicit vs. implicit meanings, discourse markers/implicatures, social roles).

It should be noted that all these classes can be studied under the umbrella term, culture. In other words, according to Robinson (1997: 128), "culture will always be more productive and effective than a focus on abstract linguistic structures or cultural conventions." Cultural elements of a language is often downplayed in translators'

training courses and issues such as linguistic features are mostly foregrounded. Both linguistic features and cultural elements affect the meanings of utterances in SL and inevitably they should be rendered to TL (Gorjian & Molonia, 2005). Written and spoken discourse features can convey meanings through the situations which form the cultural settings or the contexts of situations (e.g., the context of a wedding party or Christmas ceremonies).

Translating proverbs, the translator should know the linguistic, pragmatic and cultural properties of the proverbs in SL/TL corresponding to each other. Furthermore, each proverb conveys specific meaning in a specific context of situation. Therefore, a proverb should be rendered with care to carry the same cultural conventions in the original proverb. Wittgenstein (1958: para 43, as cited in Robinson, 1997: 128) believed that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language." In other words, language is what people use in daily interactions in social contexts. In this case, dictionary meanings cannot be safe and the sole source for rendering a piece of a text into TL.

Nord (1991: 7) believed in cultural-bound linguistic signs and noted that "both the source and the target texts are determined by the communicative situation in which they serve to convey a message." Nord (1991: 9) held a functional approach to translation proverbs and cultural elements of SL which is pragmatically motivated by the "purpose of the intercultural communication." In other words, the meaning of the proverbs can be determined by the situation in which sender and receiver interact concerned with their background knowledge and shared concepts. In addition to this, proverbial expressions are communicatively motivated and can affect differently in various settings. For instance, the manipulating of the expression of "That's a big help." may be used to appreciate someone's help or to criticize someone who makes a mistake and bother others. The latter situation refers to a person who wants to help you but makes you trouble. The sender may use the same expression and structure while there are two different intentions concerned with two different contexts.

Proverbs are sometimes multimeanings and can be used to convey the senders' intended meanings (Gorjian & Molonia, 1999; 2001; 2004; 2005). The following proverb can be manipulated for both positive and negative intentions in Persian language according to the context in which they are used. However, they may be used as similar proverbs regarding their connotative meanings as follows:

1. English language: Don't entrust great affairs to the small. (Negative intention)
2. Persian equivalent conveys the sender's Negative intention: کار هر بزرگ نیست  
خرمن کوفتن / گاو نرمی خواهد و مرد کهن
4. Persian phonetic translation: /k^r hær bu:z ni:st xærmæn ku:ftæn//  
g^və nær mi:x^hæd væ mærdə ku:hæn/

5. Persian literal meaning: Do not put the yoke on the goat's neck because he cannot plough the fields.
6. English language: Every man to his job Or Let the cobbler to his job. (Positive intention)
7. Persian equivalent conveys the sender's positive intention: کار را به کاردان سپردن
8. Persian phonetic translation: /k^r r^ bəh k^rd^ʌn səpu:rdæn/
9. Persian literal meaning: Skilful people can do their job well.

These two intentions have appropriate equivalents in Persian and English languages and there are one to one correspondences in two settings. Thus the translator should know the intended meanings of each proverb appropriately and find equivalents with the same semantic load in SL and TL. The translator's misunderstanding of the proverbial intended meaning may mislead him/her to find the appropriate equivalent in TL. Nida (1969) , Al-Zoubi and Al-Hassnawi (2002) believed that the translator attempts to transfer meaning rather than structure from one language (SL)to another (TL) by means of the known practice of translation, the translator faces a plethora of linguistic, stylistic and even cultural problems.

### **3. Toward a model of translating proverbs**

Proverbs are structurally, pragmatically, conceptually, culturally and contextually sensitive. The translator faces figurative language (Gorjian, 1996) which makes him arrive at the meaning through inferential strategies to match the proverb in SL and TL by means of: (1) exact equivalence, (2) near equivalence, and (3) literal meaning. An exact equivalent refers to linguistic and discourse similarities in SL/TL. A near equivalent refers to linguistic differences but discourse similarities. Literal translation of proverbs refers to the literal meaning of translation in TL which is rendered to a non-proverbial simple sentence in TL. The latter strategy may be applied when the translator face the problem of finding exact or near equivalents in TL. In this case, finding proverbial equivalent in TL could be a three-fold strategy (Gorjian, 1996) which is presented as follows:



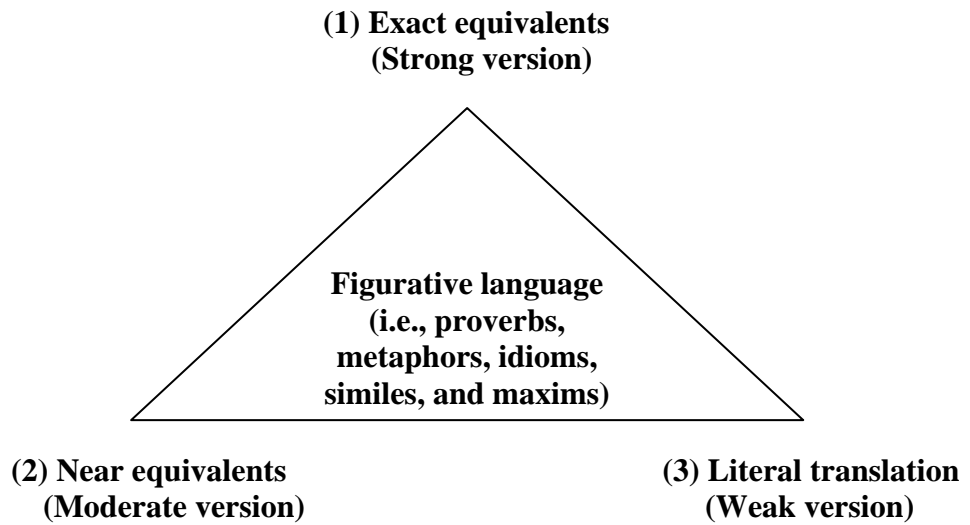


Figure 1. A three-fold strategy of translating figurative language

According to Gorjian (1996), this three-fold strategy may help the translators focus on the hierarchical strategies through which the translator start from the first strategy and if there is not any exact equivalents, he/she shifts to the second strategy (i.e., near equivalents); and again if there is not any near equivalents, the translator tries to comprehend and interpret the message of the proverb and render the proverb message in to TL literally. The third strategy can be manipulated for the last resort and it should not be applied before trying the earlier translation strategies.

The main problem is that figurative language and especially proverbs are concise and rich in cultural history. Therefore, they should be rendered without the loss of meaning and the aesthetic effects upon the receiver. They are meaningful phrasal or sentences which cannot be translated literally (i.e., word-for-word translation). Finally, proverbs as a part of figurative language are cultural and context sensitive and their equivalents in TL could be absent or hardly can be achieved. Thus the above three-fold strategy in rendering figurative language (Gorjian, 1996) contributes the idea that there could be three versions which are launched based on these three strategies as follows:

1. **Weak version:** there is not an equivalent of the proverb in the TL. In other words, there are not shared lexical, semantic and conceptual properties in the equivalents existed in the TL. In this case, the translator tries to comprehend and interpret the meaning of the proverb in SL and reproduce the message in the form of a simple statement. Here, there is not a proverbial load in the TL. For example:

1. English proverb: Anger has no eyes.
2. English interpretation: The one who is angry cannot judge or see the truth.
3. Persian literal equivalent: خشم چشم ندارد.
4. Persian phonetic translation: /xæshm chæsm næd^ræd/

**2. Moderate version:** there is a partial equivalent of the proverb in the TL. In other words, there are not shared lexical and semantic properties existed in the TL; however, there is a shared concept between the proverb equivalents in SL and TL. Therefore, the translator gets the concept of the proverb and tries to find a proverb which is as close as possible in the TL (i.e., this is called near equivalent). For example:

1. English proverb: Carrying coals to Newcastle.
2. English interpretation: Carrying or taking something which is abundant in the target place. In some cases, it refers to saying something which was known or discovered before.
3. Persian conceptual equivalents: زیره به کرمان بردن
4. Persian phonetic translation: /zi:rəh (Cumin) bəh kərm^n bu:rdæn/

The above example shows that English and Persian languages share conceptual properties concerned with proverbs. However, the lexical and semantic features are not exactly appeared in these two languages. The main reason which helps the translator to render the type of moderate version of the proverbs is the shared concepts between SL and TL. In analyzing the shared concept of the above example, the translator may focus on the element of "abundance" which is the same concept in English and Persian languages. If the translator maps these two proverbs onto each other, he/she can find the shared elements in SL/TL corresponded proverbs as follows:

1. English proverb: Carrying coal to Newcastle.
2. Persian equivalent: Carrying Zi: rəh to Kerman. (زیره به کرمان بردن)

In English version, there are coal mines in "Newcastle" in the Great Britain; therefore, "coal" is abundant there. In Persian version, there is the plant of cumin (i.e., Zi: rəh) which is produced in "Kerman city" and it can be found easily in that city situated in the central part of Iran. Therefore, carrying "Zi: rəh "to" Kerman" is futile because it is as same as carrying "coals" to "Newcastle" which is also futile.

**3. Strong version:** there is an exact TL equivalent which is matched with the proverb in the SL. In other words, there are shared lexical, semantic and conceptual properties existed in both SL and TL. This one-to-one

correspondence between the two equivalents can be achieved if the mentioned three-fold strategy in rendering figurative language can be fulfilled by the translator. For example:

1. English proverb: The wolf in sheep's clothing.
2. English interpretation: The people who are savage but appear kindly in public situations.
3. Persian conceptual equivalents: (گرگی در لباس میش)
4. Persian phonetic translation: /gu:rgi: dær leb^sə mi:sh/

There is an exact one-to-one correspondence of the proverbs in SL/TL. This proverb refers to people who mask their savage character and tries to deceive others with their appearance and show themselves as kind and helpful people in both languages.

The main concern in using such a model is the translator's dominancy of the SL/TL background knowledge concerned with proverbial expressions. These three versions of translating proverbs may provide the translators with a three-dimensional model through which appropriate equivalents in the TL can be achieved. This model is also workable in other domains of translation activities such as the translation of literature (i.e., prose and verse), words, phrases, sentences and any text. This model may be beneficial in rendering metaphorical expressions such as ironies, similes, idioms, maxims, quotations, sayings and slogans. The translators who work on such a model should be aware of the hierarchical way of using each version and they also should start from the strong version of the three-dimensional model. If the exact equivalent in TL is not achieved, then they may deal with the moderate and for the last resort try the weak version.

According to this model, all the SL/TL proverbs can be categorized and translated correspondingly. There are also useful implications for developing translation training syllabuses at the academic level. This model is very flexible and can be used among different languages and cultures. The implication of this study for translation is that the translators may use moderate and weak versions for rendering literary texts and use the strong version for translating non-literary texts. Following this three-dimensional model in translating proverbs, we translate several popular English proverbs into Persian as follows:

#### 1. Weak version:

<b>English proverb (SL)</b>	<b>Persian equivalents (TL)</b>
The game is up.	بازی تمام شده است.
Fear kills the rich.	آدمهای ثروتمند را ترس می کشد.
Guests and fish in three days got stale.	مهمان و ماهی بعد از سه روز می گندند.

#### 2. Moderate version:

<b>English proverb (SL)</b>	<b>Persian equivalents (TL)</b>
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Time is money.	وقت طلا است.
"Ifs" and "buts" butter no bread.	با ما و اگر کار درست نمی شود.
I have butterflies in my stomach.	دلم مثل سیر و سرکه می جو شد.

### 3. Strong version:

English proverb (SL)	Persian equivalents (TL)
Money begets money.	پول، پول می آورد.
Wolf does not eat wolf.	گرگ، گرگ را نمی خورد.
Every ass likes to hear his brag.	هر خری عر عر خودش را دوست دارد.

### 4. Conclusion

This study provided the translators with two applicable notions: (1) a three-fold strategy of translating figurative language and (2) a three-dimensional model in translating proverbs. It is suggested that the translators should know the three strategies and their mechanisms in rendering proverbs. In this case, they may utilize the three-dimensional model in finding equivalents in SL/TL. Proverbs are metaphorical expressions which may make problems in giving TL equivalents especially when the TL equivalent is absent or cannot be matched exactly with its equivalent in the SL. With regard to this, lexical, semantic and conceptual components made us arrive at a three-dimensional model in rendering proverbs from the SL to the TL. This model helps the translators render problematic genres (i.e., literary, poetic, metaphorical and idiomatic texts) conserving their aesthetic effects in the SL. In this model, three translation strategies in the form of three versions were proposed: (1) weak version through which the translator focuses on adaptive or explained equivalent in the TL, (2) moderate version through which the translator deals with a close equivalent in the TL, and (3) strong version which focuses on the exact equivalent or the one which is one-to-one correspondence to the translated equivalent in the TL.

The three-dimensional model of translation works based on the three-fold strategy illustrated in Figure1. These three versions may help the translators interpret the intended meaning of the proverb in SL and recreate the appropriate equivalent in TL. The application of this model in promoting translation training courses and related syllabi can be inevitably felt. It may be used in rendering other linguistic components and other units of translation (i.e., words, phrases, sentences and texts). The main outcome of this study was to classify SL/TL equivalents in a clear way through which the degree of misinterpretation or misconception reduces to the minimum. Further investigations need to work on such models following contrastive analysis (CA) and discourse analysis (DA) studies to help the translators render problematic English expressions into Persian as easily as possible.

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Dr. Gorjian is currently working within several research areas covering TEFL , translation studies , metaphoric translation, maxims and quotation translation, Qur'anic translation studies, and teaching research, L1 and L2 acquisition. He is married and lives in Abadan (Iran).

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