

# Complementary Translation

Charles BRIFFA, Ph.D.

*Department of Translation and Interpreting Studies, Faculty of Arts,  
University of Malta*

e-mail: charles.briffa@um.edu.mt

**Abstract:** *Translatability, as an operative concept, offers a lot of consideration on fundamental issues. The present study focuses on a special approach in translation that is influenced by social bilingualism. The translator's bilingual competence sometimes leads to complementarity in sign and title translation. And complementary translation is viewed as dynamic equivalence.*

**Keywords:** *bilingualism, alternative titles, complementarity in translation, translation shift, particularization, perspectivism*

## Introduction

Creating meaning in translation is a cooperative process between author and translator in almost the same way that authors and readers cooperate to make meaning. The translator must understand the author's intended relevant meanings and must be able to conceptualise the source text's approaches. The way the translator perceives the source text is integral to the target text's construction of meaning and effect. In this article I shall look at a pragmatic phenomenon that occurs in translations involving English and Maltese that may be the result of bilingualism.

## Malta's Bilingualism

Malta is a bilingual country (Maltese and English). The dominant type is coordinate bilingualism (when different meanings are attributed to corresponding lexical elements in the two languages), but there are also pockets of compound bilingualism (when identical meanings are attributed to corresponding lexical meanings in the two languages). This distinction stirs cultural implications but we can safely say that Maltese bilinguals are never totally coordinate or totally compound.

Within the historical and sociolinguistic perspectives, the increased use of English in the Maltese Islands over the past two centuries resulted in a great language spread. English was (and it still is) used for special purposes, such as for government, education, legal matters, politics, financial enterprises, industry, commerce, and entertainment. Most naturally, such a diffusion brought English in very close contact

with Maltese and necessitated language shifts thus creating bilinguals with particular language attitudes and language loyalties.

### Complementarity in Translation

Bilingualism in Malta sometimes generates complementary translated texts, interpretation of which usually depends on the Maltese bilingual intuition. A complementary translation occurs when a text in one language is accompanied by a text in another language so that both referents complement each other in that particular context. For example, at Marsalforn a catering establishment announces on a public board that it has ‘Ġelati ta’ Veru – Gozitan Traditional Ice-cream’. And on the University of Malta campus we find several official signs marking the name or function of an area or place; they are given in both languages, but each language says something different as in the Marsalforn example. Each referent acts as a semantic extension of the other, and these semantic extensions are complementary because Maltese bilinguals can understand both languages. We can explain complementary translation as parallel texts in different languages that are semantic extensions of each other, aimed at the bilingual person.

| Complementary translation<br>(in which each language talks<br>about a different characteristic/<br>aspect of the place) | Comment   |
|---|---|
| ‘Readers’ Corner<br>Ġnien l-Istudent”<br>[i.e. the student’s garden]  | A foreigner might think that these are translation equivalents, but the Maltese bilingual knows otherwise because the patch marked by this sign is both things together: a garden for the students used as a peaceful corner for silent reading |

Sometimes, even proper names undergo a similar process of complementarity. A case in point is the pair Carmel/Charles. In most countries these are two distinct names; in Malta, however, they correspond and one considered to be interchangeable even in formal situation. Furthermore, the Maltese bilingual competence permits creativity to occur in one language with the required impact. For instance, names of shops (like *Hairport* for a hairstylist shop and *Animal Pharm* for a pet shop) make use of English creative methods to be as attractive as possible.

### Translation Shift

Complementary translations are forms of semantic shift for enhancement or completion. The above quoted sign on the UM campus states ‘Readers’ Corner – Ġnien l-Istudent’. Each text in the sign makes the other complete; or to put it another way, each gives a fuller meaning to the other. There is no source text and target text because both texts function as source texts in different languages.

|                        |                         |                            |
|------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Readers' corner</i> | <i>Ġnien l-istudent</i> |                            |
| possession             | possession              | grammatical correspondence |
| 'readers' as possessor | 'student' as possessor  | semantic complementation   |
| 'corner' as subject    | 'garden' as subject     |                            |

This table shows that complementation involves semantic shift and enhancement, so that we get the identification of the reader as a student, or vice-versa, and the corner becomes specifically a garden. Both texts enhance each other semantically to form a more complete picture of what the spot is. The semantic field of 'reader-ness' is bilingually linked to the semantic field of 'student-ness'; and likewise the semantic components of 'corner' and 'garden' enter into a relation of completion or enhancement. Furthermore, in the complementation there is a member shift. Other instances of complementation on the UM campus are:

|                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| Dun Karm Memorial  | Pjazzetta Dun Karm |
| Information Office | Messagġiera        |
| Administration     | Ir-Rettorat        |

### Complementarity in Translating Titles

Complementarity occurs also in the translation of titles of literary works, especially when title translation involves an element of translation shift. I shall call such recipient titles: alternative titles. The following are some examples of alternative titles of novels:

| Source title                                     | Target title (of the alternative type)              |
|--|---|
| <i>A Christmas Carol</i> (C. Dickens)            | <i>Il-Milied ta' Scrooge</i> (D. Mintoff)           |
| <i>Master of Mischief Makers</i> (L.C. Burkhard) | <i>L-Imċerċer ta' Parigi</i> (M. Buttigieg)         |
| <i>Requiem for a Malta Fascist</i> (F. Ebejer)   | <i>Requiem ghal Siehbi Faxxista</i> (C. Briffa)     |
| <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> (W. Shakespeare)  | <i>L-Imqarba Immansata</i> (A. Palma)               |
| <i>Ġżimin li Qatt ma Jiftah</i> (O. Friggieri)   | <i>Jasmine Blossoms for all Time</i> (R.M. Caruana) |
| <i>Leli ta' Haż-Żghir</i> (Ġ. Ellul Mercer)      | <i>Shadows of the Truth</i> (G. Ellul)              |
| <i>L-Istramb</i> (O. Friggieri)                  | <i>A Turn of the Wheel</i> (G. Falzon)              |

The translated title substituting the original title becomes an attribute of the theme so that there is a logical contiguous relationship between the target title and the source title. In *Leli ta' Haż-Żghir*, Leli is the main character who challenges the moral and social traditions of Maltese society in the early part of the twentieth century. And the fictitious village of Haż-Żghir (the Village of the Small) represents metonymically social alienation that resists progress. So the source title is an amalgamation of the biographical and thematic approaches. In the novel, Leli's position is juxtaposed with Plato's myth of the Cave, and hence the thematic target

title, *Shadows of Truth*. The allegorical implication of the target title links Leli with Plato's vision of truth in the metonymic thinking of the translator, and the semantic shift in the target title gives us an extension of the theme and can be taken as complementary to the source title. Complementarity refers to any target title that contains a thematic extension of the source.

There are, therefore, alternative systems of concepts which are not synonymous to each other and in whose terms the work may be interpreted. And we have to acknowledge that there is no specific external way of making a choice between these alternative systems. Each alternative provides a different thematic prospect as it provides a particular way of regarding the literary theme and drags with it another understanding or interpretation of the theme. The translator visualizes the literary work in a fresh manner and when the translated title gives a different perspective from the original title, it reflects the translator's approach – an alternative that shows a different conception.

### Alternative Titles

Particularization is the result of perspectivism and depends upon interpretation, and since translation is first and foremost an act of reading and just as there is no single way of reading and interpreting a text, there is no one translation. A case in point is the translation into English of *L-Istramb* (The Stranger) implying a strange or eccentric personality – in Maltese the adjective often functions as a noun and can be definite or indefinite. In literary criticism the title was translated as *The Misfit*, but an English translation of the novel has been published with the title *A Turn of the Wheel* and a second unpublished translation has been called *Human Oddity*. The three translated titles have got thematic connections.

*L-Istramb*: a title that combines the thematic approach with the biographic claim; it is thus internally oriented. The story in brief is as follows. A young man (Baruch) is dissatisfied with the type of life he leads. His relationship with his parents is cold and detached, and he is often seen in a state of dejection and solitude even when he is out of his home environment. He finds momentary satisfaction in his unusual attraction for a young university professor. When the latter dies suddenly, Baruch decides to leave university and enter a more secluded life at the seminary. Here routine and discipline add to his loneliness and depression, but he manages to form a clandestine friendship with another seminarist. This too is short-lived because the redoubtable rector is soon breathing down their necks. Baruch runs away from the seminary to find a girl he could love. Oppressed by solitude, he meets a prostitute and shares some beautiful moments with her. He fails, however, to see the commercial side of this affair and is left disappointed as she denies him 'real' love. He returns home and tries unsuccessfully to kill himself. The author admits that

originally the title of this novel was going to be *Meta Xejn ma Jitbiddel* (When Nothing Changes), which (a) brings into sharper focus what the novel is about, (b) shows that choosing a title is an important aspect of the creative process, and (c) adds more weight to the argument of perspectivism. Furthermore, the source title leads us metonymically to construct oddity in terms of ennui and apathy.

*The Misfit*: a transposition that retains the thematic and the biographic aspects of the source title; it remains internally oriented and metonymically significant.

*A Turn of the Wheel*: a semantic shift that uses the symbolic approach; the translation shift is from the biographical to the symbolic which is still thematically relevant: the reference is to the wheel of fortune (which is never mentioned in the novel) as an emblem of mutability; so there is a functional shift because this version is externally oriented whereas the source is internally oriented.

*Human Oddity*: again in this version there is a semantic and a functional shift since it uses the intertextual approach as it hitches the story to David Bowie's *Space Oddity*. In Bowie's song, Major Tom (a fictional astronaut) casually slips the bonds of a crass and material world to journey beyond the stars and becomes depressed during an outer-space mission; likewise, the novel's main character, Baruch, steps out of the cemetery into a psychological desert that increases his ennui. Major Tom is shorthand for someone who is lost and the metonymic title *Human Oddity* juxtaposes Major Tom and Baruch who has serious communication problems like Ground Control to Major Tom. Baruch steps through the entrance of the cemetery and starts metaphorically 'floating in a most peculiar way' (Bowie) from one situation to another, and he never finds satisfaction as the 'stars look very different' (Bowie) every time. When Major Tom's circuit becomes dead and Ground Control realizes that something is wrong the question echoes through outer space 'Can you hear me, Major Tom?' (Bowie). It is a question that we feel society asks Baruch. And Major Tom finds himself floating round in his 'tin can' (Bowie) above the moon and he admits 'there's nothing I can do' (Bowie) which is exactly how Baruch feels and proceeds into oblivion that spells 'suicide'.

### Potential Power

*Human Oddity* contains an internal perspective which shows that the story concentrates on the character through whose consciousness the narrative is presented. It, therefore, implies that the narrative is characterized by an internal focalization, whereas *A Turn of the Wheel* is externally focalized as it is focused on the character not through him. It is a perspective that is outside the protagonist.

Titles have potential power that can be released by the textual contexts they operate in. They are dynamic forces, and the target titles have to follow suit in a complementary fashion. If we look at some translated poetry (taken from *Malta*:

*The New Poetry*, ed. M. Azzopardi, KKM, 1971) we find the same processes occurring.

*il-libsa tieghek bajda* (Mario Azzopardi) = *the white dress you wore*  
*U Rmewha taht is-Sur* (Victor Fenech) = *Down the Bastions*  
*Nixtieq Nidhol Inqalleb* (Oliver Friggieri) = *My Wish to Spiral Down*  
*Is-Serqa-Veronese* (Daniel Massa) = *The Rape of Europa-Veronese*  
*Ghanja ta' Triq Iffullata* (Kenneth Wain) = *Song of a Crowded Highway*

The target titles particularise more than the source title, so that the dress is 'worn', the throwing occurs *from* the bastions, the entrance is a descent in a 'spiral' fashion, the kidnapping becomes Europa's 'rape', and the road is identified as a 'highway'. An alternative title calls attention to the fact that the concept it expresses plays an important role in the interpretation of the theme. It sharpens the thematic concept as it replaces the original title. In general it is not required that an alternative title have the same meaning as the source title. Furthermore, alternative titles may sometimes supply a perspective of the already existing title that had not been made precise previously. The newly introduced perspective does not necessarily share the characteristics of its original counterpart. It may realise other traits. It should be observed that in general an alternative perspective may be inspired by considerations such as clarity, elaboration, and adaptability to produce a connotative equivalence in the sense that the target title is semantically dynamic because of complementarity and perspectivism. The target title stands in complementary relation to the source title (especially in a situation similar to the type of bilingualism we have in Malta).

## Conclusion

The ability language affords users to conceptualise and interpret the world in terms of what they perceive is an enduringly fascinating experience. Title translation may be a complex process and since titles are necessarily contextual, in that their meaning is specified by the text, they become governed by non-detachability. The aim of this brief study is to draw attention to a translation concept (i.e. complementarity) that is notable in Malta's bilingual situation. But we have to keep in mind that equivalence is context related as well, that is it has to be related to the parameters of the text for the attainment of the pragmatic meaning of the title.