

Punctuation in Translation: The Unseen Side of the Coin

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Abstract: *This paper critically surveys the role of three punctuation marks: the colon, the semicolon, and the comma, in translating from English to Persian. It aims at investigating how problematic these punctuation marks can be and to what extent the students' familiarity with their pragmatic and metadiscourse functions can affect their translation from English to Persian. To accomplish this, twenty two graduate students of translation were selected and asked to translate some sentences from English to Persian. The results have indicated that only a minority of them were successful. The root causes of their poor performance can be traced back to the lack of contrastive study on punctuation systems of English and Persian as well as lack of familiarity with metadiscourse functions of punctuation marks.*

Key words: *punctuation, metadiscourse, comma, semicolon, colon, translation.*

1. Introduction

As Gile (1995) has said, the translation process consists of three main phases: comprehension of the source text, the transfer phase, and revision (cited in Mendoza & Ponce, 2009: 129). The analysis of the source text can be regarded as one of the most important phases in translation. To achieve this goal, a good translator should scrutinize both intra- and extra-textual elements. Considering intra textual elements, most translators pay obsessive attention to the structure and lexemes of the text while minorities of them consider punctuation as an influential part in their work. In this respect, Newmark (1988:58) has said "punctuation is potent, but is so easily overlooked".

Besides its mechanical function, punctuation is important from a pragmatic point of view. It is considered as an integral part of written discourse to bound elements of a text. Punctuation marks can be regarded as nuts and bolts of writings. They attach the sentences together and bring unity to the texts. Moreover, punctuation can be enumerated as a part of metadiscourse usually defined as "the linguistic resources used to organize a discourse or the writers' stance toward either its content or reader (Hyland 2000: 109). Metadiscourse focuses on the relationship between the writer and the reader of the text. Mauranen (1993: 9) asserts that in metadiscourse the writer tries to show "his or his presence" in the text and shows the reader "how the text is organized." Inadequate punctuation makes the reader confused and forces him/her to iterate reading the text several times to understand its meaning. Kirkman provides a good example to show how lack of punctuation in a text can make it difficult to understand: "He draws an analogy between this and the learning process of a new-born child as it develops into maturity and quotes Freud: ... "(2006:3). Without a comma before the phrase "and quotes Freud," the meaning changes drastically. Similarly, using punctuation marks desperately in places where they are not supposed to be used can be overwhelming for the reader. Therefore, the correct application of punctuation marks is notable for translators because of their vital role in transferring meaning from the source text to the target text.

In the current paper, an attempt will be made to clarify how punctuation marks have semantic and pragmatic load and can be problematic in translation. After a comparative study of punctuation marks of English and Persian, three intra-sentential ones were selected. They include comma, colon, and semicolon. The logic for selecting these marks is that they are repeatedly used in English written discourse and that they have some additional functions in English such as stating omitted words or adding emphasis other than those that they have in Persian (revise this part). The importance

and multi-functional nature of punctuation has stimulated the researchers to investigate the level of familiarity of Iranian students of English translation with this discursial device. The research is hoped to discover the extent to which punctuation can be problematic for the selected translators and how much these translators can perceive the role of punctuation in conveying the meaning and therefore translate it correctly. To do this, 22 undergraduate students of English translation in Azad University of Quchan were asked to translate some paragraphs adopted from some books or some novels. The sample consisted of students who had taken at least, eight semesters (theoretical and practical courses), to ensure that they had proper mastery of translation practice and theory. Students were asked to translate sample texts from English into Persian. Special attention was paid to their renderings of the punctuation marks to see whether the students were aware of their semantic and pragmatic uses. The findings may be illuminating in training the translators.

2. Literature review

2.1. The status of punctuation in translation

Languages vary significantly in the sentence-marking features they possess and the way they use these to combine elements of them. When analyzing the text, the translator should beware of subtle differences between SL and TL. In this respect Baker (1992:151) asserts that "apart from syntactic structure, punctuation can also be used as a device for signaling information structure in written language. . . Different languages use different devices for signaling information structure and translators must develop sensitivity to the various signaling systems available in the languages they work with."

According to El-Shiyab (n.d:115) "punctuation and its functions lie within the field of pragmatics. The meaning of a particular utterance has to be deduced from the speaker's intention with reference to the context of situation in which the utterance is used." It means that in addition to its ordinary usages, punctuation also points to the tone and intention of the writer and carries pragmatic load. So many translators naively consider punctuation marks as mechanical elements, which relate the segments of a sentence together. A tiny 'comma' can be greatly influential in the interpretation of the reader from the information that comes after a relative clause. The following examples are adopted from Kirkman (2006: 39):

1. A six-month-old calf was submitted for examination, showing lameness in all four legs which had been present since soon after birth. (The *which* clause defines: it relates to legs, and tells us that the legs had been present since soon after birth).

2. A six-month-old calf was submitted for examination, showing lameness in all four legs, which had been present since soon after birth. (The *which* clause comments: it relates to lameness, and tells us that the lameness had been present since soon after birth).

The given examples are alike in terms of arranging words. The difference is only understood through the application of the comma. If one considers accurately the implications created by the use of the comma, s/he will observe that the first clause does not add any new information; it is supposed that the reader already knows enough about the calf to identify it from this description. Therefore, it is a defining or restrictive clause. Simultaneously, if one examines the implications created in the second clause, s/he can observe that there is a particular information structure showed by using the comma, and this structure embodies new information. Therefore, it is a commenting or non-restrictive clause. Therefore, a comma, as tiny as it appears, makes a big difference between two units of information worded similarly.

Dale (1991:118) poses three functions for the punctuation as it follows:

- Degree of rhetorical balance: i.e., the relative importance of juxtaposed elements;
- Aggregation: i.e., the relative closeness and distance of juxtaposed material; and
- Particular rhetorical relations: some punctuation marks seem to play a role in indicating what semantic or rhetorical relations hold between juxtaposed elements.

The first function discloses that punctuation marks are kinds of indicators for translators, which show the lexical elements next to them, may be of high significance, so they should be taken more thoroughly. The third function seems to be more related to translation because it shows interrelatedness of meaning between the elements of a sentence and the meaning they have in context and conveying the meaning relations between the elements of the text.

2.2. Punctuation from the viewpoint of metadiscourse

As mentioned before, punctuation is a sub-category of metadiscourse. Metadiscourse has recently been defined as “the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (Hyland, 2005: 37). It is a language device or a tool that enhances interaction for successful communication. The functional theoretical framework of metadiscourse defines writers as the conductors of interaction with the readers. The notion of the writer-reader interactions has underpinnings on the following three key principles of metadiscourse that was suggested by Hyland & Tse:

- “Metadiscourse is distinct from propositional aspects of discourse.
- Metadiscourse refers to aspects of the text that embody writer-reader interactions.
- Metadiscourse refers to relations only that are internal to the discourse” (2004:159).

The first principle indicates metadiscourse does not add anything to the propositional meaning and just facilitates the writer-reader interaction. In the second one, metadiscourse is about interaction therefore it only involves the interpersonal function, not the textual function. This indicates that metadiscourse takes into account the readers' knowledge, textual experiences and processing needs while it also equips the writer with (Farrokhi&Ashrafi, 2009:43). The last principle mentions that metadiscourse just unfolds the discourse and does not relate to the external world of the context.

Dafouz-Milne puts the punctuation in textual metadiscourse category and enumerates explaining, rephrasing, or exemplifying textual materials as its functions (2008:98). Researches about metadiscourse have done in different genres: Research articles (Mauranen, 1993; Dahl, 2004; Hyland, 1998, 2001a, 2002, 2007), textbooks (Hyland, 1999), advertisements (Fuertes-Olivera et al., 2001), science popularizations (Varttala, 1998), newspaper discourse (Hempel and Degand, 2008) and academic talks and lectures (Thompson, 2003; Eslami and Eslami- Rasekh, 2007). In this way, metadiscourse can also be considered in academic writing. Therefore it seems that there is a close relationship between metadiscourse and translation. Therefore, it will be possible to find some ways and different strategies in translation of metadiscourse. Accordingly, punctuation helps the reader to follow the writer's path of thought more easily and create meaningful connection with the text. Therefore, the duty of the translator will be multiplied in transferring the function of punctuation from the SL to the TL.

3. Punctuation in Persian

As Mohamadifar has asserted, the history of punctuation in Persian writing is not very old and it did not exist in classical writings. Its usage goes back to the advent of press industry in Iran (2002:439). So it seems important to go through the punctuation system of Persian language at first and then try to find which punctuation marks may be more problematic for Iranian translators. In this respect, Newmark advises translators to make a separate comparative punctuation check on their version and the original (1988:58). Yahaghi and Naseh in their book *A Guide to Writing and Editing* (1996) have listed sixteen punctuation marks as the most prevalent ones in Persian writing. They are as follows:

Punctuation	Sign	Function
Comma	,	Showing pause, separating two successive words, after and before appositive, after direct address
Semicolon	;	After related sentences, for separating independent meanings
Full stop	.	After complete declarative sentences, after abbreviations.
Colon	:	For showing items which need definition, showing items which need enumeration
Dash	-	Before and after appositive, for separating numbers and figures
		For separating parts of a date, for showing the equivalence of words
Diagonal line	/	
Underlining	<u>the</u>	For showing importance and emphasis
Curved brackets	()	For separating excessive information within a sentence
Square brackets	[]	For showing missing parts in a quotation, for explanation
Dots	...	For avoiding repetition, for showing omitted words
Question mark	؟	For direct question, for showing sarcasm
Exclamation mark	!	For showing surprise, addressing someone, pray, sigh
Double quotation marks	“ ”	For showing direct quotation, showing proper nouns
Ditto sign	” ” ”	For showing repetition

They mentioned five functions for comma (virgule in Persian): 1. Between independent elements or sentences within a compound sentence. 2. When a phrase is inserted as explanation or appositive in a sentence. 3. When some words refer to the same thing. 4. Between two words that are probable to be linked by kasreh. 5. When the parts of a whole are enumerated. However, when we look at the functions of comma in English, it will be easily recognized that there is a gap between Persian and English in usage of this sign. Stilman (1997:60) has mentioned some extra function for comma: "Indicating omitted words." Similarly, King (2000:47) provides a good example to show this function of comma: "If you want more time, half an hour, maximum."

In this example the clause "you can have" is not written but comma implies it and the reader should recognize it, otherwise, s/he cannot decipher the writer's intention. This function is unfamiliar to Iranian translators and may lead to committing errors because generally they expect the parts of the sentence be stated plainly and straight forwardly. To examine the selected translators they are provided with a part of *To build a fire* by Jack London. It is as follows:

Text1.

He reflected a while, robbing his nose and cheeks, and then turned to the left, stepping gingerly. Once clear of the danger, he continued. (1989:177)

Just an experienced translator may recognize that the last comma indicates the phrase "his way." Most of novices think they should just be careful of words and structures while ignore such a vital element like punctuation. Amongst the examinees, just 2 of them translated the sentence correctly, 18 students did not translate it at all, and 2 of them added irrelevant words like "his life" or "the danger". The suggestive translation can be:

Text 1. Translation.

در حالی که بینی و گونه هایش را می مالید اندکی فکر کرد و سپس در حالی که به آرامی گام بر میداشت به چپ چرخید. یک بار دیگر از خطر رها نشده بود و به راهش ادامه داد.

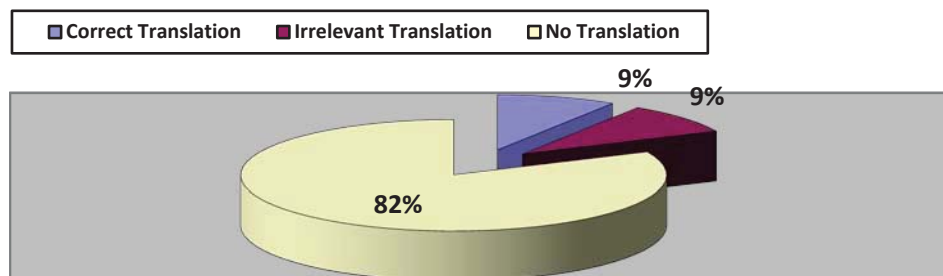


Chart 1 The analysis of students translation of text 1

The next significant punctuation mark is semicolon. Yahaghi and Naseh mention three functions for it in Persian sentence structure: 1. For separating the parts of a long sentence which are meaningfully related. 2. It comes in explanatory sentences. 3. While enumerating the different parts of a united whole (1996:71). Taking a look at the functions of semicolon in English, it can be easily understood that this mark as well as comma can be problematic in translation because some of its functions are absent in Persian. As Kirkman (2006:13) has said it can be used instead of a coordinate conjunction like and or but. To assess the degree of familiarity of students with mentioned function, two texts were provided.

Text2.

That boy had been notoriously worldly, and I just the reverse; yet he was raised to his eminence, and I was left in obscurity and misery. (Twain, 1989:3)

Semicolon in above text shows concession but few translators may perceive its function because they get into the habit of seeing the conjunction of concession like but and are not familiar enough with semicolon. Having evaluated the translations of students, the researcher found just 4 of them correct, 6 of them translated it as additive conjunction and

even 12 students did not translate it. Those who translated semicolon to but (amma in Persian) were right. A suggestive translation into Persian is as follows:

Text 2. Translation

آن پسر به طور عالم گیری بد نام شده بود و من بر عکس او بودم، اما او به شهرتش رسیده بود و من در گمنامی و بد بختی رها شده بودم.

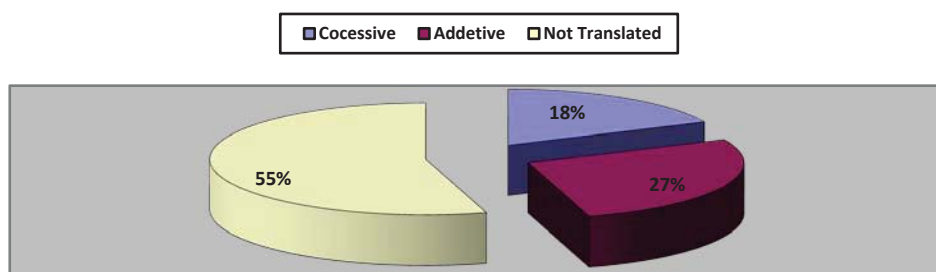


Chart 2 Analysis of students' translation of text2

In a different text, this punctuation mark has another meaning but again a minority of examinees could distinguish it. But unlike the previous text, semicolon acts as an additive conjunction in the below text.

Text3.

Classical method was adopted as the chief means for teaching foreign languages. Little thought was given at the time to teaching oral use of languages; after all, languages were not thought primarily to learn oral communication. (Brown, 2007:16)

Although it is not clear that the clauses before and after semicolon are those of the same value, the translator should be able to recognize it and join them by additive conjunction "and". Considering the translations, the results state that just 4 students were right, 16 of them did not translate the semicolon ,and 2 of them wrote "but "instead of "and". In Persian they should have written *va* (additive). The following translation can be suggested for the above text:

Text 3. Translation

روش کلاسیک (باستانی) به عنوان ابزار اصلی برای آموزش زبانهای خارجی اتخاذ شد. در آن زمان اهمیت کمی به تدریس کاربرد شفاهی زبانها داده می شد و روی هم رفته، زبانها از ابتدا برای آموختن ارتباط شفاهی تدریس نمی شدند.

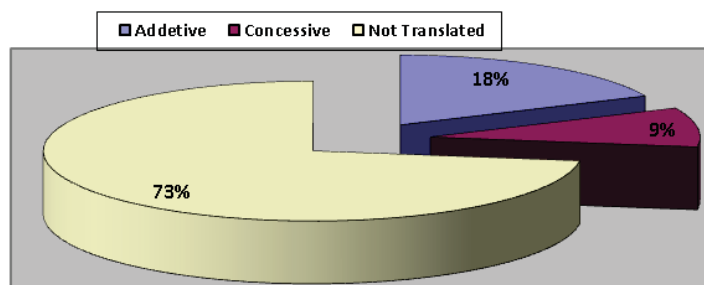


Chart 3 Analysis of student's translation of text 3

Stilman (1997:93) enumerates functions of semicolon as an alternative to some conjunctions like "so", "as", and "for", but besides these conjunctions, semicolon can be used as contrastive emphatic conjunction. In English it is used to mean emphasis but In Persian *balkhe* has this function and for assessing the examinees the following text was presented to them:

Text4.

The son is alone. God is alone, but the devil is far from being alone; he has a great deal of company. (Thoreau, 1989: 78)
It is found that amongst translators just one of them translated semicolon as emphatic, 3 students translated it to show concession and 18 of them did not translate it at all. The following can be a translation in Persian:

Text 4. Translation

خورشید تنهاست. خدا تنهاست اما شیطان از تنهایی خیلی دور است، بلکه همراهان زیادی دارد.

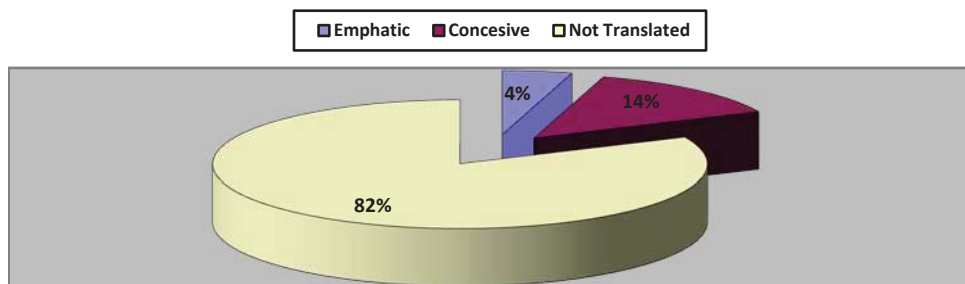


Chart 4 Analysis of students' translation of text4

The functions of semicolon in previous three examples are clear and straight forward for native speakers of English, but they can be very problematic for an Iranian reader because they are not familiar with these functions and because of that they could not successfully convey the intended meaning of writer. Native speakers of Persian usually expect to see conjunctions for connecting two sentences and are not beware of this potential of the semicolon. So they missed the metadiscourse function of it and just considered the semicolon as a sign and most of them exactly put it between sentences like the place it had in the original text.

The next potentially problematic punctuation mark can be the colon. As Stilman says "The colon acts as a signal of anticipation, drawing the reader's attention to what comes after it" (1997:97). So it is somehow different from the semicolon because it is cataphoric and points forward. In Persian it has some limited functions like: 1. Before a colation. 2. While enumerating the elements of a thing, and 3. Before explaining a matter that has been already pointed briefly (Yahaghi&Naseh, 1996:72). Looking at this matter from the framework of translation, Newmark says: "when a sentence is logically and not grammatically incomplete, and requires an explanation or illustration it is punctuated with the colon. Thus the clause succeeding it is its implicit response, its natural sequel" (1988:174). He also added that the complement can be analytical or synthetic. In case of analytic comment, the colon is useful to translator since a word or expression will be explained in complement. In a synthetic comment, the colon helps the translator in following the logical sequence of the SL text, and where necessary reinforces it. When it comes to translating the colon, the translator should account for it by marks that have the same semantic and metadiscourse functions. Again the translators were provided with a text to see whether they could distinguish these functions or not. It is as follows:

Text 5.

Glancing at the calendar, Morton made a mental note to buy a card that afternoon. He had not forgotten Great-Aunt Alma's birthday in eight years: The one time he had, she had temporarily cut him out of her will. (Stilman, 1997:100)

Translating the above text, the translator should notice that the colon has a causative function because it implies the result of the first clause. So the correct translation of this punctuation mark in Persian can be *čon* or *zira*. In students' translations, it was found that 3 students translated it as additive conjunction, 2 of them as concessive conjunction, 15 of them did not translate it and just 2 of them wrote the correct translation. The following is a suggested translation of the text in Persian:

Text 5. Translation

با نگاهی به تقویم، مورتون در ذهنش حک کرد آن بعد از ظهر یک کارت بخرد. او هشت سال بود تولد عمه بزرگ آلمان را فراموش نکرده بود چون آن دفعه ای که فراموشش شده بود او (عمه اش) موقتا او را از وصیت نامه اش خارج کرده بود.

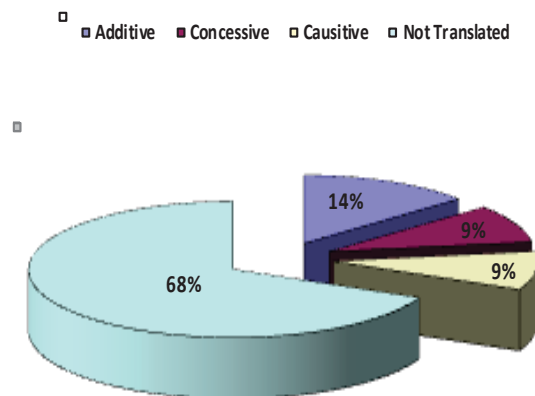


Chart 5 Analysis of students' translations of text 5

4. Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this paper has been to show how punctuation marks have pragmatic and metadiscourse functions and to what extent they can be problematic for Iranian translators while translating from English to Persian. As Dafouz-Milne (2008:97) has said: "Metadiscourse refers to those features which writers include to help readers decode the message, share the writer's views and reflect the particular conventions that are followed in a given culture. . . Metadiscourse thus is not simply a stylistic device, but is dependent on the rhetorical context in which it is used and the pragmatic function it fulfills". As punctuation is a sub- category of metadiscourse, writers use it to fulfill the stated functions so translators who neglect it seldom are able to convey the intended message of the ST to the TT.

As the charts has illustrated, in most cases, the majority of students couldn't translate the intended punctuation mark or mistranslated it. Just a few of them could correctly reshape the text in Persian. This fact means that they had not been beware that punctuation marks may carry meaning and be effective in connecting a mutual relationship between the reader and the writer. These findings strongly prove this hypothesis that lack of familiarity and knowledge of English punctuation system hinders Iranian translators to do their work flawlessly.

5. Conclusion

According to the goal of this study, three punctuation marks which supposed to be more problematic were selected. In case of the comma, just 9% of students could translate correctly. Considering the different functions of the semicolon, respectively 18%, 18%, and 4% were rightly translated. Finally, the right translation of the colon was just 4%. The focus of attention has been on the performance of the translators in transferring pragmatic and metadiscourse functions. These disappointing results may have some origins. First, the system of punctuation in Persian is inadequate because it does not have well-established rules for the use of specific punctuation marks. Second, no scientific and contrastive study has been done on punctuation system of Persian and English in order to distinguish the differences between the functions of similar marks in Persian and English. Third and final reason can be lack of courses to teach the findings of linguistics which are serviceable in translation.

To amplify the student and working translators' comprehension of the potential value of punctuation marks, more contrastive studies of the marks from a linguistic point of view and from a translation point of view are needed. It is hoped to fulfill the objectives of this paper and notice the students and expert translators how tiny punctuation marks can be determining in translation.

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