

**THE UNTRANSLATABILITY OF TRANSLATION IN ALIAH SCHLEIFER'S *MARY THE BLESSED VIRGIN OF ISLAM* INTO AGUNG PRIHANTORO'S *MARYAM SANG PERAWAN SUCI***

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**Abstract**

The paper is to identify the factors of untranslatability, to describe the strategies applied by translator in handling the problem, and to find out the effect of untranslatability to the readability of the text, and the readability level of the text.

The analysis shows that there are two factors of untranslatability: linguistics and culture. Cultural factor is more dominant because the original text deals with the Arabic culture and the religion issue, Islamic religion. In solving the untranslatability problem, translator applied a contrastive analysis by : (1) italicizing the untranslatable concepts; (2) replacing it by the similar concept in the target language (including the spelling modification); and (3) describing the concept by putting annotation, clarifying phrase and other things to clarify. Based on the questionnaire, the translated text is proved to have a high readability level. However, there is a tendency that the book is more appropriate for the readers who are used to the religious terms, and not so for the common readers.

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**Key words:** *untranslatability, contrastive analysis, culture.*

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**Introduction**

Religion issue is a knowledge that is important for people. In a multireligion country like Indonesia, a good relation among religions is absolutely important. A good understanding among different religions would in turn influence the unity of the country. One way to improve the inter-religion understanding is by spreading right information of each religion through books. Two religions that are considered to have the most potential of conflicts are Christian and Islam. Many efforts have been done to bridge the two differences to realize the understanding and good relation between them. The presence of "*Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam*" by a Cairo writer Aliah Schleifer seems to provide a valuable contribution to realize this. Gray Henry of Fons Vitae, the publisher of the book, in his comment under "In Memoriam" stated that this work of Schleifer could be not only of help in the Christian-Muslim dialogue, but

an inspiration to women in general. He added that very few Christians have any idea of the importance of the Virgin Mary in Islam, and Islamic doctrine maintains that Jesus and Mary are the only two in all eternity to have been born without sin and that Mary is considered the purest woman in all creation. She is considered to be an example for both men and women.

Since the book was originally written in English, it will be difficult for Indonesian readers to comprehend fully the content of the book. The translation version by Agung Prihantoro is aimed at giving opportunity to the readers who do not have enough ability of English, to understand the book. He has tried to transfer the message in the original book to Bahasa Indonesia with the possible equivalents of words and expressions. However, as the book deals with specific terms, in this case religion and foreign cultures, there are some words or expressions in the book that have no exact equivalents in Bahasa Indonesia, since they have different concept in the two languages. This phenomenon that is normally called untranslatability, will possibly cause some problems to the readers to understand the content of the book.

It is a fact that translating a material in one language into another is in most cases not an easy affair, since language is influenced by some factors such as social culture and the source language. Thus, translating does not only mean transferring a message from a source language into a target language by changing the words or sentences in source language with their equivalents in the target language. Translation involves a transfer of culture, concept, style and other elements of the source text as well. Therefore, the translator has to take some approaches to solve the problems to ensure that the readers would get equal understanding of the translation version, as good as those who read the original one.

### **Theoretical Review**

#### **Translation**

There many definitions of translation. Kridalaksana defined translation as the transfer of inter-culture and/or inter-language messages in grammatical and lexical level by maintaining the objectives, effects, or the forms (Kridalaksana, 2001:162). In line with the statement, Bell (Year?) stated: "translating is the expression in another language (or target language) or what has been expressed in another source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalence" (Setiyaningsih, 2002:18). The stress on semantic and stylistic equivalence means that messages of SL have to be transferred into TL not only without reducing the meaning wholeness, but also the beauty, style and register. In the context of translation, a translator has to consider the style especially in translating literary text, as stated by Soemarno in Setiyaningsih (2002:18) that language form is still considered important especially in the translation

of literary work. However, principally the content of message gets the main priority.

Based on the above opinions, it can be summarized that translation is the transfer of message or information, either verbal or non-verbal, from a source language with the closest equivalence in target language, by maintaining the meaning wholeness, the style, and the form of the original text.

### **Concept of Untranslatability**

The phenomena of untranslatability start from the difficulty in finding the language equivalence of SL in TL. This problem arises because of the fact that there are some elements of a language that have no direct equivalence in other languages. Catford in Setiyaningsih (1991:32) by stated that linguistic untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL culture a relevant situational feature for the SL text (Setiyaningsih, 2002:31). According to Nida untranslatability in linguistics and culture arise because principally each language has its own structure and uniqueness (Setiyaningsih, 2002:30).

#### *Types of Untranslatability*

Catford divided untranslatability into two categories namely linguistic untranslatability and culture untranslatability (Setiyaningsih, 2002:33-34).

#### 1) Linguistic untranslatability

This kind of untranslatability is caused by linguistic factors. Catford (in Bassnet, 1991:32) states: "On the linguistic level, untranslatability occurs when there is no lexical or syntactical substitute in the Target Language from a Source Language item (Setiyaningsih, 2002:33)." For example, the word *snakes* and *snaps*. Both words have the same additions of suffix -s. But -s in the word *snakes* function as plural mark, while in word *snaps*, -s function as the mark of the third singular person. Linguistic untranslatability may also be caused by the ambiguity of certain language elements and polysemy.

#### 2) Cultural Untranslatability

Catford defined this untranslatability as an untranslatability that was due to the absence in TL culture of a relevant situational feature for the SL text (Setiyaningsih, 2002:34). This kind of untranslatability can not be said to be less frequent to occur compared to that of linguistic one, since the things dealing with culture is very wide in range. Eating habit, dressing, custom, language, ceremonies, cultural events, even painting, sculptures, building and many others are regarded as the products of culture (Soemarno in Setiyaningsih, 2002:35). An example of culture untranlatability is the phrase *Home Sweet Home*. This phrase cannot be translated easily into Bahasa Indonesia by finding the equivalence of the word home.

### *Factors of Untranslatability*

According to Nida (1975: 68-77) there are some factors that cause the problems of untranslatability, namely:

1) Ecological problem

Ecological problem arises because there are differences of living things, season and nature objects between one place and others (Nida, 1975: 68-69)

2) Social Culture problem

Social culture covers anything dealing with the life of a society. Each society has different cultural background. This background is also reflected through their use of language.

3) Material Culture problem

The problem of material culture correlates to the differences of material in each place. The material difference deals with human-made things like foods, building and cloths (Soemarno via Setiyaningsih, 2002:35).

4) Religious Culture problem

An untranslatability problem will occur when the text contains religious terms of a religion that is not familiar for people of the target language.

5) Linguistic culture problem

This problem arises when the translator has a lack of ability of the language system of SL and TL. Nida (1975: 74-75) stated that linguistic problems cover phonology, morphology, syntax and lexical factors.

### *How to solve the problem of untranslatability*

In solving the problem of untranslatability, Soemarno in Setiyaningsih (2002:40) propose some ways namely:

- 1) Translating the definition;
- 2) Changing the similar words in TL linguistic culture; and
- 3) Taking the words and adding a footnote.

Besides, in solving the difficulty of translation, a translator should do the following steps:

- Giving an italic printing on specific terms;
- Giving annotation or writing the terms in TL spelling;
- Giving explanation (descriptive phrase).

While Sri Samiati in Setiyaningsih (2002:41) recommended to use semantic features of the language or terms as complete as possible to determine the explanation or description of the specific terms.

### **Readability in Translation**

Readability refers to the level of easiness of a writing to be understood (Sakri in Nababan, 1999). Similarly, Richards et al stated, "Readability... how easily written materials can be read and understood (Nababan, 1999)." The definitions seem to be abstract because they do not involve the interaction of the readers and the text. Moreover, reader is an element that also determines the readability of a text, as stated by Dale and Chall (1984:236): "readability ... the sum total (including the ones) of all those elements within a give piece of printed material that affects the success a group of readers have with it (Nababan, 1999)."

#### *Factor of The Readability*

Level of readability of text is determined by some factors. According to Richards et al in Nababan (1999), readability depends on the average length of sentences, the sum of new words and grammatical complexity of the language. Beside the above factors, Nababan (1999) listed some factors of readability as follows:

- 1) the use of foreign or local words or sentences
- 2) the use of ambiguous words and sentences
- 3) the use of incomplete sentences
- 4) idea that is not in good order and illogical

### **Result and Discussion**

#### *Classification of the Factors Causing Untranslatability*

##### 1) Linguistic Equivalence Absence

Examples:

- English data

*Extra-qura'anic*

SL : At the present, however, our concern is to decampment traditional Sunni Islam's view of the events of Mary's life. The data has been sifted by traditional scholarly discussions about enigmatic or *extra-Qur'anic* data—details about her background, ...

TL : Namun, kita akan memfokuskan diri pada pandangan-pandangan Islam Sunni tentang peristiwa-peristiwa dalam kehidupan Maryam. Data-datanya telah teruji dalam pembahasan-pembahasan para ulama tentang data-data yang enigmatik atau *extra-Qur'anik*—detail-detail mengenai latar belakang Maryam, ...

The word *extra-Qur'anic* is an untranslatability data caused by linguistics factor. There is a difference of scope of meaning in the use of the word *extra* in the Source Language (English) and the target language (Bahasa Indonesia). In Bahasa Indonesia, the word *extra* (ekstra) tends to mean '*lebih dari*' (more than very) or '*tambahan*' (additional) as in the sentence *Hasan bekerja ekstra hati-hati di proyek yang sangat penting itu* (Hasan works extra-carefully in the very important project). While in

English, the word *extra* is used either to mean *more than very* and *additional* or *out of*, as in the phrase *extra-Qur'anic data* which means the data that is taken out of Qur'an. The translation of *extra-Qur'anic* into *ekstra-Qur'anic* may be misleading and ambiguous. Beside the above, the word also shows linguistic uniqueness when it is translated into Bahasa Indonesia. When it is translated, the word *extra-Qur'anic* will change into a phrase in Bahasa Indonesia. It is because the so-regarded prefix *extra* in English will be treated as word in Bahasa Indonesia, so that the combination will be word and word (phrase), not prefix and word (word). In brief, the linguistic phenomena that arise in the translation of this word is that there is a different scope of meaning between the two language in treating the word.

- Arabic data

*rizq*

SL : Whenever Zachariah, as Mary's guardian, came to provide her with food or drink, he was amazed to find that she had already been provided, not just with sustenance (*rizq*), but with the best of sustenance, ...

TL : Ketika Zakariyya sebagai wali Maryam masuk untuk memberikan makanan atau minuman, dia terkejut karena mendapati telah ada makanan di dekat Maryam. Makanan itu bukan ala kadarnya (*rizq*), tetapi makanan yang enak-enak, ...

"*rizq*" or *rezeki* in Bahasa Indonesia (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia) generally means anything (of good things) that we receive/get. At a glance, there is nothing wrong with the translation. But if we look more carefully, there is actually a linguistic phenomenon in it. The word *rizq* as the synonym of the word *sustenance* in English, which then translated into *makanan ala kadarnya* contains a specification of meaning that is "usual/common kind of food". Meanwhile, the word *rizq/rezeki* is used in Bahasa Indonesia without any limitation or specification of kind. It is used for any good gifts, being it is usual or special ones. On the other hand, there is a different scope of meaning between the concept of *rizq* used in English and the one used in Bahasa Indonesia.

#### *Cultural Equivalent Absence*

Examples:

*Qurays*

SL : Abu Hurayra said: 'I heard the Messenger of God صلى الله عليه وسلم saying, "The women of *Quraysh* are the best of those who ride camels, and the most loving to children, and the best guardians of their husband's property."

TL : Abu Hurairah berkata: Aku mendengar Rasulullah bersabda. "Perempuan-perempuan Qurays itu adalah yang terbaik di antara mereka yang menunggang unta, yang paling menyayangi anak-anak, dan para penjaga terbaik bagi harta benda suami-suami mereka.

*Qurays* is untranslatable because it is a proper name to refer a certain group of people in Arab, that is the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad, with no direct equivalence in Bahasa Indonesia. It is categorized as cultural untranslatability because the word is tightly related to a certain geographical condition as well as culture.

#### *Diwan*

SL : A popular example is the *diwan* found by E. Littman which comprises a fairly accurate reproduction of the accepted scholarly version of the life of Mary.

TL : Sebuah contoh *diwan* yang terkenal ditemukan oleh E. Littmann yang berhasil menulis ulangannya secara sangat apik tentang kehidupan Maryam yang umumnya diterima di kalangan akademisi.

*Diwan* is included in cultural untranslatability since it is a name for a certain thing, i.e. poems. Even though Indonesians also know poems (*puisi*), the word *diwan* may contain deeper meaning. That it why the translator bears it in the original word instead of using Indonesian word, for example, *kumpulan puisi*.

#### *The Strategies to Solve the Untranslatability*

Based on the analysis, it can be said that basically, the translator has applied the principle of Contrastive analysis well. The approach of the translator in solving the problem of untranslatability was mainly by applying the principle of Contrastive analysis as follows:

- 1) giving an italic printing on untranslatable terms;
- 2) giving annotation or sometimes writing the terms in the target language spelling;
- 3) Giving explanation (in the form of descriptive phrase following the untranslatable words or footnote in the bottom of the page). The decision to put footnote is aimed at giving more easy access for the readers to find the explanation of untranslatable concepts, in a glance (in the same page). In the original book, the notes are put in the back part of the book; making it a bit difficult for reader to access immediately (it is not practical to skip frequently to the back pages to find the notes).

#### *The Influence of Untranslatability the Readability*

Based on the analysis of the researcher, the translation book has quite a good readability. This is indicated by the understanding of the researcher on the content of the book that has reached quite a good level just on the first reading. However, this pre conclusion must be supported by more valid and objective data. The data are obtained from 20 questionnaires distributed to the readers as the respondents. The respondents were divided into two groups, the first are those who are accustomed to religious terms (in some cases who have good knowledge of Islam), and the second, common readers who are not really used to religious terms (in some cases who have less knowledge of Islam). The results of the analysis on the questionnaires can be seen in the following table:

*Table 1*  
*The Influence of Untranslatability*  
*On the Readability (Based on respondent readers)*

Group A		Group B	
	TTL		TTL
1	Influence of the Untranslatability data	1	Influence of the Untranslatability data
	A. Very disturbing	1	D. Very disturbing
	B. Quite disturbing	6	E. Quite disturbing
	C. Not disturbing	3	F. Not disturbing
	10		10
2	Readability of the text	2	Readability of the text
	A. Very good	7	D. Very good
	B. Quite good	2	E. Quite good
	C. Less good		F. Less good
	10		10

Based on the table, the majority of respondents consider that the existence of untranslatability data is quite disturbing as said by 14 respondents (70%) of the total 20 respondents. Meanwhile, the readability of the text is quite good, as shown by the answers of 11 respondents (55%). However, the respondents who consider that the readability of the book is less good amounted to 8 (40%) of the total respondents, a quite significant number. It indicates, as shown in the response of group B, that for common readers, those who are not really accustomed to religious (Islam) terms, the book tends to be less readable. On the contrary, it is quite readable for group A readers (those who have sufficient knowledge

of Islam or who are quite accustomed to Islamic terms) in light of the overall answer of 70% (7 of 10).

### **Closing**

The existence of the untranslatability phenomena is caused by linguistic and cultural factor. Linguistic untranslatability in the translation is caused by the fact that there are always linguistic differences of the L1 and L2 texts, either in the system, structure, as well as the rules of the languages. The untranslatability data found that belong to this factor are caused by the different scope of meaning between the source language and the target language. The untranslatability phenomena caused by cultural factor in the translation appear in the level of word, phrase and clause and are dominant. This kind of untranslatability occurs dominantly because the book mainly discussed Arabian culture and religion issues (Islam), while language and culture are the inseparable parts. More important still, language is basically a part of culture, as language exists as the result of cultural contacts among human beings. In some cases, the translator also regarded some words as untranslatability data and thus maintained the original form, as he wanted to maintain the scientific nuance of the text. The translator uses the approach of Contrastive Analysis in solving the problem of untranslatability, by applying the contrastive principles.

The effect of influence of the untranslatability phenomena to the understanding of the readers and the level of readability of the book is based on the analysis of the researcher, supported by comments from some respondent readers. The result of the analysis and the questionnaires interpretation shows that basically the book is quite understandable and that it has a quite good readability. But, there is a tendency that it is most suitable to be read by readers who are accustomed to religious terms. For consumption of common readers, it is a bit inappropriate.

The process of translation requires not only mastery of the source and target languages, but also the culture of the two language users. Other supporting knowledge and translation practice on translation would be a good method for them to improve their translation skill. As translation has a very close relation with linguistic and cultural factors, more practices of translation relating to these two factors are badly needed. The teaching and practice of contrastive analysis will be of great benefit for students to improve their translating skills.

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