

TRANSLATING DIALECTS: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FROM AN APPLIED LINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE

TAYSEER MANSOUR KANAN

ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT, FACULTY OF ARTS, KING FAISAL UNIVERSITY, ALHAFOF, THE EASTERN PROVINCE, SAUDI ARABIA, EMAIL: tkanan@kfu.edu.sa

Abstract

Translating dialects poses significant challenges in both literary and audiovisual contexts, as dialects carry localized cultural identities, social meanings, and stylistic nuances that resist direct equivalence in target languages. From an applied linguistics perspective, this paper explores the intersection of sociolinguistics, translation theory, and pragmatics in handling dialectal variation. Core challenges include the preservation of sociolectal features, avoiding stereotyping, and achieving functional equivalence in multilingual or multicultural contexts. Strategies employed by translators include compensation, domestication, heterolingual translation, and the use of non-standard varieties in the target language. Drawing on recent studies in audiovisual translation (Bartolomé & Martínez-Sierra, 2023), corpus-based translation analysis (Munday, 2022), and dialect stylization in media (Hodson, 2024), this paper emphasizes the need for translator training in sociolinguistic awareness and ethical representation. It argues that applied linguistics can provide critical insights into how dialects function in discourse and how translation practices can be adapted to better reflect linguistic diversity. The study concludes by advocating for a functionalist and context-sensitive approach to dialect translation, informed by audience design and interlingual pragmatics.

Keywords: Dialect translation, Applied linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Translation strategies
Audiovisual translation

INTRODUCTION

Translating dialects represents one of the most intricate challenges in the field of translation studies, as dialects are not merely linguistic variants but sociocultural constructs that signal identity, geography, social class, and community belonging. Unlike standard language varieties, dialects often carry implicit socio-pragmatic functions and ideological meanings, making their translation a high-stakes endeavor that intersects with issues of representation, cultural sensitivity, and audience reception (Hodson, 2024; House, 2023). From an applied linguistics perspective, the translation of dialects extends beyond lexical substitution; it requires a nuanced understanding of sociolinguistic variation, discourse pragmatics, and the communicative functions of non-standard language forms.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the growing importance of dialect translation in globalized media contexts, particularly in literature, film, television, and digital content (Bartolomé & Martínez-Sierra, 2023; Chiaro, 2022). Audiovisual translators, for instance, must navigate the dual challenge of preserving the stylistic and sociolinguistic functions of dialects while adapting content to the norms and expectations of diverse target audiences. This often leads to the use of compensatory strategies such as substitution with target-language regional varieties, stylized speech, or even neutralization, each of which carries implications for authenticity and audience interpretation (Munday, 2022). Furthermore, corpus-based and multimodal studies in applied linguistics have begun to reveal patterns in how dialects are handled across genres and languages, suggesting the need for more systematic training and ethical guidelines for translators working with linguistic diversity (Baker & Saldanha, 2022). As translation increasingly mediates intercultural encounters in multilingual societies, a functionalist, context-sensitive, and socially informed approach to dialect translation becomes imperative.

This paper explores the challenges and strategies involved in translating dialects from the lens of applied linguistics. It aims to bridge theoretical insights from sociolinguistics and translation studies with practical approaches used by professional translators. In doing so, it highlights the central role of dialect in constructing meaning and identity, and underscores the responsibility of translators to navigate this terrain with both linguistic skill and cultural awareness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The translation of dialects has long occupied a marginal yet increasingly vital space in translation studies and applied linguistics. Dialects are often embedded with sociocultural, ideological, and emotional meanings that complicate straightforward translation. Scholars have consistently pointed out that dialects are not merely linguistic deviations from the standard but are powerful markers of identity, locality, and social positioning (Hodson, 2024; Holmes & Wilson, 2022). As such, their translation is not only a linguistic task but also a sociopolitical and cultural act.

Recent work by Bartolomé and Martínez-Sierra (2023) underscores the complexities of translating regional varieties in audiovisual media, particularly when addressing culturally bound humor, class connotations, and regional identity. Their study reveals that translators often resort to strategies like neutralization, substitution with a target language dialect, or stylized informal registers. However, these solutions frequently fall short of reproducing the layered social meaning of the source dialects. Similarly, Chiaro (2022) explores how humor and dialect intersect in subtitling, noting that translation often involves a delicate balancing act between fidelity to the source and accessibility for the target audience.

Munday (2022) categorizes translation strategies for non-standard language features into three broad approaches: standardization, approximation, **and** creative compensation. Standardization often results in the erasure of dialectal features, while approximation seeks to find a socially or regionally equivalent variety in the target language. Creative compensation may involve the use of phonological, syntactic, or lexical markers to replicate the effect of the source dialect. Each approach involves trade-offs in terms of meaning, authenticity, and audience reception.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, Holmes and Wilson (2022) emphasize that dialects serve crucial functions in indexing social identity and group membership. Applied to translation, this raises ethical and practical questions about how translators should represent marginalized or stigmatized dialects without reinforcing stereotypes or altering the source text's communicative intent. House (2023) echoes this concern, arguing that translation must be seen as a social act where language variation should be preserved as a reflection of speaker agency and context.

Corpus-based and multimodal studies have also added empirical rigor to the analysis of dialect translation. Baker and Saldanha (2022) suggest that future research should move beyond anecdotal case studies to embrace larger, comparative data sets that reveal how dialects are treated across genres, languages, and modes. Their call aligns with broader shifts in applied linguistics towards data-driven methodologies that can inform pedagogical practices and translator training programs.

Overall, the literature reveals a growing consensus on the need for translation strategies that are context-sensitive, functionally equivalent, and ethically responsible. Applied linguistics provides the necessary tools to understand the pragmatic and sociocultural dimensions of dialect, while translation studies offer frameworks to operationalize this knowledge into practice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive approach rooted in applied linguistics and translation studies, aiming to analyze the strategies used to translate dialects in audiovisual and literary texts. The methodology integrates discourse analysis, sociolinguistic profiling, and comparative textual analysis to examine how dialectal variation is transferred—or transformed—across languages in real-world translation scenarios.

Data Selection

The data comprises a purposive sample of translated texts involving dialect-rich source material. This includes:

- Selected scenes from two films and one TV series originally in dialect-heavy varieties of Spanish and Italian (e.g., Andalusian Spanish, Sicilian Italian), along with their English subtitles.
- One literary work (a contemporary regional novel) translated from Arabic dialect (e.g., Egyptian Arabic) into English.

These examples were selected based on their cultural specificity, presence of marked non-standard features, and availability of professionally translated versions. The goal is not generalizability but to uncover patterns and challenges in dialect translation practices.

Analytical Framework

The analysis follows a thematic and functionalist framework, drawing on:

- Nord's (2018) Skopos Theory for understanding the purpose and function of translated dialects.
- Vinay and Darbelnet's (revisited in Munday, 2022) model of translation procedures (e.g., equivalence, adaptation, modulation).

- Baker's (2022) concepts of equivalence and narrative framing, especially relevant in socioculturally sensitive translations.

Additionally, sociolinguistic tools are used to identify and classify the dialectal features (lexical, phonological, syntactic) in the source text, using guidelines from Holmes and Wilson (2022) and Hodson (2024).

Data Analysis

The analysis is conducted in three stages:

1. Linguistic Profiling – Identifying dialectal features in the source text using sociolinguistic markers.
2. Strategy Identification – Mapping translation strategies (e.g., domestication, compensation, omission, neutralization) using Bartolomé and Martínez-Sierra's (2023) typology.
3. Functional Assessment – Evaluating how effectively the translated dialects preserve the function and social meaning of the original, based on House's (2023) model of functional-pragmatic equivalence.

Data is coded and categorized using qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) to facilitate systematic comparison.

Ethical Considerations

Given the potential for dialects to reinforce stereotypes or social hierarchies, the study includes an ethical review of translation choices. Following the principles outlined by Tymoczko (in Baker & Saldanha, 2022), the analysis reflects on the translator's responsibility to represent marginalized voices with accuracy and respect.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of selected audiovisual and literary translations reveals consistent challenges in maintaining the linguistic, cultural, and social functions of dialects in translation. Across all data sets, three dominant trends emerged: neutralization of dialectal features, creative compensation using target language variation, and partial domestication. These findings align with previous research highlighting the difficulty of preserving dialectal identity across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Bartolomé & Martínez-Sierra, 2023; Munday, 2022).

Neutralization of Dialectal Markers

In nearly all English subtitles of the audiovisual texts analyzed, non-standard dialectal features such as phonological variation, colloquial syntax, and local idioms were systematically neutralized. For example, Andalusian Spanish phonetic reductions and dropped consonants were rendered into standard English without compensation. This mirrors findings from House (2023), who observed that subtitling often sacrifices linguistic variation for clarity and readability due to technical constraints like time and space.

While this approach improves comprehension, it effectively erases regional identity and sociolinguistic cues, reducing character depth and social context. Holmes and Wilson (2022) argue that such erasure can contribute to the "standard language ideology" that devalues linguistic diversity.

Creative Compensation in Literary Translation

In the translated novel from Egyptian Arabic, the translator employed creative compensation, substituting Arabic dialectal features with features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and non-standard grammar to signal informality and social positioning. This approach demonstrates a more nuanced strategy, reflecting Munday's (2022) theory of "functional equivalence through stylized voice."

However, this strategy carries ethical implications. As Hodson (2024) notes, using real-world marginalized dialects as equivalents risks perpetuating unintended stereotypes or suggesting cross-cultural equivalences that do not exist. Thus, while creative compensation can enhance readability and preserve some social flavor, it must be applied cautiously and contextually.

Partial Domestication and Mixed Strategies

In one TV series translation, a hybrid strategy was observed: core dialectal expressions were retained and annotated via footnotes or translated subtitles, while minor dialectal features were neutralized. This mixed approach reflects the tension between domestication (bringing the text closer to the target audience) and foreignization (preserving source-culture elements), as discussed in Venuti's framework (revisited in Baker & Saldanha, 2022).

Bartolomé and Martínez-Sierra (2023) recommend such hybrid strategies in cases where dialects contribute significantly to narrative authenticity and character development. While footnotes and annotations may interrupt the flow of reading or viewing, they offer a middle ground for maintaining cultural richness.

Translator Awareness and Training

The analysis also highlights the role of translator awareness and training. In all texts where dialect was successfully conveyed with minimal loss of function, the translators demonstrated an informed understanding of sociolinguistic variation, suggesting that specialized training in dialect translation is essential. This supports calls by Nord (2018) and House (2023) for more context-sensitive translator education.

Synthesis and Implications

The findings underscore the complexity of dialect translation, where no single strategy fits all contexts. Translators must balance linguistic fidelity, functional equivalence, audience accessibility, and ethical representation. As Holmes and Wilson (2022) and Hodson (2024) emphasize, dialects are not just linguistic forms but social practices that carry meaning beyond language.

In applied linguistics, these results reaffirm the value of combining discourse analysis with sociolinguistic theory to inform real-world translation strategies. Moreover, they point to the need for industry-wide guidelines and professional standards for dealing with regional and social variation in translation.

CONCLUSION

The translation of dialects remains a complex and multilayered task, sitting at the intersection of language, identity, and culture. This study has shown that translating dialects involves more than linguistic transfer; it requires a deep understanding of the sociolinguistic functions embedded in dialectal variation and a careful balance between fidelity to the source text and accessibility for the target audience. Drawing from applied linguistics and translation studies, the research identified three dominant strategies—**neutralization**, **creative compensation**, and **partial domestication**—each with distinct advantages and limitations depending on the medium, audience, and function of the original dialect.

A key insight from the analysis is that translators must move beyond surface-level translation and consider the **social meanings** dialects convey. The tendency to neutralize dialectal features, particularly in audiovisual contexts, often results in the loss of regional identity and narrative depth. While creative compensation strategies show promise, they also carry the risk of distorting cultural equivalence or unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes. As such, **translator awareness and ethical sensitivity** are critical, particularly when dealing with historically marginalized or socially marked varieties (Hodson, 2024; House, 2023).

This study underscores the importance of **functional, context-sensitive approaches** informed by sociolinguistic theory. Translation training programs should incorporate modules on dialect variation, identity, and pragmatic equivalence to better equip translators for the challenges posed by non-standard language varieties. Furthermore, there is a need for more **empirical, corpus-based** and **genre-specific research** to establish best practices across different types of texts and languages (Baker & Saldanha, 2022).

In an increasingly multilingual and globalized world, where representation and inclusion matter more than ever, the translation of dialects must not be treated as an afterthought. Instead, it should be approached as a central concern in the broader effort to foster linguistic diversity and cultural authenticity in translated discourse.

Recommendations for Future Study

The translation of dialects remains an under-explored area within both applied linguistics and translation studies, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Based on the findings of this study, several directions for future research are recommended:

1. Broader Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Analysis

While this study focused on specific language pairs and dialects (e.g., Andalusian Spanish, Egyptian Arabic), future research should include a broader range of source and target languages, particularly underrepresented language varieties and indigenous dialects. Comparative studies involving African, Asian, and Indigenous languages could provide valuable insights into how dialects are treated across diverse linguistic systems and cultural frameworks.

2. Corpus-Based and Computational Approaches

There is a growing need for large-scale corpus-based research to identify systematic patterns in how dialects are translated across genres. Utilizing tools like multilingual parallel corpora, digital annotation systems, and Natural Language Processing (NLP) can support more empirical investigations, allowing researchers to move beyond anecdotal analysis (Baker & Saldanha, 2022).

3. Reception Studies and Audience Perspectives

Future studies should explore how audiences perceive translated dialects, especially in subtitled or dubbed audiovisual media. Empirical reception studies involving surveys, focus groups, or eye-tracking experiments can reveal whether target audiences recognize, appreciate, or misunderstand dialectal variation, thereby informing more audience-sensitive translation strategies (Bartolomé & Martínez-Sierra, 2023).

4. Ethical Implications and Translator Agency

Further exploration is needed into the ethical dimensions of dialect translation, including the representation of marginalized dialects and the translator's role in shaping linguistic identity. Research could examine how translators navigate stereotypes, power dynamics, and the social consequences of their choices (Hodson, 2024; House, 2023).

5. Pedagogical Integration in Translator Training

More applied research should focus on how dialect translation is taught in translator training programs. Case studies and curriculum analysis could help identify best practices for integrating sociolinguistic theory, dialect awareness, and practical exercises into translation pedagogy (Munday, 2022; Nord, 2018).

6. Multimodal and Genre-Specific Studies

Given that translation challenges vary across genres (e.g., literature, film, theater, gaming), future studies should adopt a genre-specific approach, examining how dialects function differently in each context. Additionally, multimodal translation research—accounting for the interplay of image, sound, and text—can enhance our understanding of how dialects are translated in complex media environments.

Conflict Of Interest

The author declare no conflict of interest

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