

## Problems faced when translating Atilla İlhan's poetry: Case study of the poem 'Döşeme'

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**APA:** Savaşkan, İ. (2019). Problems faced when translating Atilla İlhan's poetry: Case study of the poem 'Döşeme'. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (17), 346-354. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.656912

### Abstract

The existence of poetry is nearly as old as the existence of language itself. Since the last millennia, with the inception of translation studies the relationship between poetry and translation has been a controversial issue. While translation facilitates linguistic and cultural transfer, poetry which can be described as subliminal power of language, embeds additional elements influencing the reader's interpretation. Therefore, within the context of literary translation, the need to transform the cogitation that the poem offers to the reader makes poetry translation an even more challenging task for the translator. The aim of the present study is to examine the major problems faced when translating the prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century poet Atilla İlhan's poem 'Döşeme' from Turkish into English. Metaphor is the first and foremost problem that İlhan's poetry constitutes for the translator because metaphor is a prevalent and predominant feature of the poem under investigation. The second problematical area dealt with arises from the lexical items employed by İlhan, and the cultural constraints that these items bring to the translation process. The study also deals with the attempts to overcome the problems of metaphors and lexical items faced when translating İlhan. As this study indicates, translating the Atilla İlhan into English is a challenge.

**Keywords:** Translation, poetry, metaphor, Atilla İlhan, culture.

### Atilla İlhan'ın şiirini çevirirken karşılaşılan sorunlar: "Döşeme" şiiriyle ilgili örnek olay incelemesi

#### Öz

Şiirin varlığı, dilin varlığı kadar eskidir. Çeviri araştırmalarının başlamasıyla birlikte şiir ve çeviri arasındaki ilişki tartışmalı bir konu olmuştur. Çeviri, dilsel ve kültürel aktarımı sağlar oysa dilin bilinçaltı gücü olarak nitelendirilebilecek olan şiir, okuyucunun düşünme biçimini etkileyen diğer unsurları da barındırır. Bu nedenle, edebi metin çevirisi bağlamında, şiirin okuyucusuna sunduğu bu düşünce unsurlarının da erek dile aktarılması gerektiğinden, şiir çevirisi daha da zorlu bir görev olmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, 20. yüzyıl seçkin Türk şairi Atilla İlhan'ın 'Döşeme' adlı şiirini İngilizce'ye çevirirken karşılaşılan sorunları irdelemektir. İlhan'ın şiir çevirisinde karşılaşılan ilk belirgin sorun eğretileme sorunudur, çünkü bu İlhan'ın en yaygın ve belirgin özelliğidir. Özel olarak ele alınan öbür sorunsal alan ise, İlhan'ın kullandığı sözcükler ve bu sözcüklerin çeviri sürecine getirdiği kültürel sınırlamalardır. Çalışma aynı zamanda, Atilla İlhan'ı çevirirken özel olarak karşılaşılan eğretileme sorununa değinmekte ve karşılaşılan bu sorunların üstesinden gelme

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denemelerine yer verir. Bu çalışmada da görüleceği gibi Atilla İlhan'ı İngilizce'ye çevirmek zorlu bir uğraştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Çeviri, şiir, eğretileme, Atilla İlhan, kültür.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout all ages and perhaps in all languages, the cadence and beauty of poetic language has been an influential type of discourse that has been eagerly read or listened to. Poetry embeds a subliminal power of language because it is a kind of discourse which is economical and compact. Intensive expressions are interwoven and more meaning can be fitted into a poem. As a result, poetry opens the doors to significant experiences for the reader and adds further meaning to the understanding of life.

It is possible to claim that poetry is a universal form of language because it deals with themes that are common to all cultures and societies. However, the treatment of these themes differs from culture to culture and while the distinctive features governing poetry can be familiar to all languages, the language coding differs. Nevertheless, poetry needs to be shared by readers all around the world and translation is one of the major means for the realization of this sharing process. As a result of this sharing process, the target text, as claimed by Venuti (1995; 306) becomes "the site where a different culture emerges, where a reader gets a glimpse of a cultural other." In this means of communication, it is evident that language and culture are so deeply rooted that learning a language is not possible without learning a culture.

There is no specific way of transforming the cogitation that a poem offers to every individual reader. Therefore, within the category of literary translation poetry translation is perhaps the most difficult and problematic. In addition, other than rendering the meaning of a poem, poetry also makes use of additional elements such as prosodic devices and figurative language which further complicate the translation process. In figurative language, metaphor is one of the most important resources for a poet because it not only embellishes the poetry but is also an exceptional linguistic phenomenon due to breaking the referencing of the language which drives the reader to use imagination in order to deduce the meaning intended.

However, in terms of language studies it can be seen that metaphor is not only a figure of speech because language, as described by Mason (1982), is itself a metaphor. The problems faced when encountering a metaphor necessitates interpretation and discovering the meaning of the metaphor in the source language and its transfer to the target language. "Hence, all languages require the translation of man into language, and language is the metaphor by which man expresses himself. Therefore, all languages are metaphorical in their origin, and it is, in part, by original metaphors that language develops: given that a person grows up in a language, and that he does not typically invent new words, he will create a metaphor out of the given when faced with an impossibility of expressing what he wishes to express by means of terms in common use (Mason: 1982; 141)."

The present study attempts to investigate the problems which are faced when translating Atilla İlhan's poetry from the source language (SL) Turkish into the target language (TL) English. The study is twofold; the first specific problems are created by metaphor because this is a prevalent feature of İlhan's poetry and the second problematical area specifically dealt with arises from lexical items used by İlhan, and the cultural constraints that these items bring to the process of translation.

## 2. Metaphor translation

Metaphor is an important resource for writers because they are functional and structural when they are used to vigorously express oneself in the most economical way. Generally there is a comparison in metaphor because a word which is literally applied to one thing is described by analogy to another. As Newmark (1988; 104) states metaphor has two purposes "It's referential purpose is to describe a mental process or state, a concept, a person, an object, a quality or action more comprehensively and concisely than is possible in literal or physical language; its pragmatic purpose, which is simultaneous, is to appeal to the senses, to interest, to clarify 'graphically', to please, to delight, to surprise."

The importance of metaphor in translation studies was pointed out by Dagut in 1976 and he had debated the insufficient research on this topic in his article "Can Metaphor be Translated?" Since then, a notable number of studies on this topic have been carried out. A couple of decades ago Kurth (1994) had claimed that in the cognitive and pragmatic aspects of metaphor translation, the literary source text (ST) containing specific information has three levels. The situational level is the level which contains cultural information; the linguistic level is where the translator finds contextual information and; the aesthetic level, where there is intertextual information interwoven in the text. Based on these levels, the translator is expected to find the literary norms and conventions of the period in which the ST was produced. Then the translator within the frame of decoding the metaphor with acute logical reasoning may then be able to render the meaning of the metaphor.

The intricacies of metaphor translation have been addressed by various theorists, as cited in Burmakova and Marugina (2014; 527):

Metaphors are untranslatable (Nida, 1964; Dagut, 1976).

Metaphors are fully translatable (i.e. metaphor translation is no different than translation in general) (Reiss, 1971; Mason, 1982).

Metaphors are translatable but pose a considerable degree of inequivalence (van den Broeck, 1981; Newmark, 1988).

Raymond van den Broeck (1981; 75) also distinguishes between categories of metaphor, uses of metaphor, and functions of metaphor. According to Broeck (ibid.) metaphors can be divided into three categories. In the first, are "those that have gradually lost their uniqueness and have part of the established semantic stock (or 'lexicon') of the language. They are the so-called lexicalized metaphors whose range may vary from mere 'formators' (such as in the face of, beforehand, everybody, already) to single lexical items (such as to harbour evil thoughts, hard cash, a hard-boiled character, etc.) and idioms...the second category is constituted by the large group of traditional, or conventional metaphors, which are more or less 'institutionalized' in that they are common to a literary school or generation. And there is the category of "private metaphors, the so-called 'bold,' innovating creations of individual poets (ibid.)."

In addition, Broeck (1981; 77) defines the uses of metaphor according to whether the metaphors are functionally relevant or not in terms of the communicative function of the text. According to Broeck (ibid.) the function of metaphor can be explained as; Translation 'sensu stricto' (i.e., transfer of both SL tenor and SL vehicle into TL), substitution (i.e., replacement of SL vehicle by a different TL vehicle with more or less the same tenor), and paraphrase (i.e., rendering a SL metaphor by a non-metaphorical expression in the TL).

To sum up, an investigation on metaphor studies has also shown that there is also a significant change of attitude towards the translation of metaphor. For example, Kurth (1999) pointed out that before the question of metaphor can be approached there are translation theorists who believe that it is necessary to know more about the neurological and cognitive bases of the translation process. Despite these argumentations studies have revealed that while there is consensus on the point that metaphor cannot be reduced to linguistics, there is still no model or framework that can be applied to elucidate the processes operating during the translation of metaphor.

### 3. Translation of Atilla İlhan's poetry

A distinctive contemporary Turkish poet Atilla İlhan (1925–2005), since the early 1940's until his death in 2005, has contributed to the Republican era of Turkish literature and is described as one of the forerunners of modernism in the period of modern Turkish poetry. According to Aksoy (2018) while both old and new sources of Turkish poetry were influential on the works of İlhan, the main influence was "modernist French poetry which he met during his travels to France (Aksoy: 2018; 154)." As a result, İlhan is a unique poet whose "flavor comes from his ability to mix modernist elements of theme, style and form with those of traditional Turkish poetry and Turkish folk poetry (Aksoy: 2018; 160)."

İlhan had published twelve poetry books during this period. His poem 'Döşeme' is an early example of his work and was published in the first section of his book 'Duvar' (1948) which is composed of five sections. The first section is called "Gavurdağları'ndan Rivâyet" in other words it is a collection of poems based on the stories from the mountains called Gavurdağları which are located in the Çukurova region of Turkey.

The poem "Döşeme" (Atilla İlhan: 2006) is about the season of spring in the region of Çukurova, alternatively known as Cilicia, in southern Turkey. This section of the study is devoted to dealing with the attempts to overcome the potential problems in the poem 'Döşeme' (the title 'Döşeme' can be translated as 'preface' because it aims to prepare the listener for the story or lines to come), see Appendix A for the full version of the poem. In this poem İlhan depicts the atmosphere of nature and the lifestyle of the people in the region. Metaphor is the predominant and prevalent feature of İlhan's poetry, in this poem there are various difficulties that metaphor brings to the translation process.

The following two lines from "Döşeme" refer to the joyous theme of spring in Hasanbeyli, a sub-province of this region:

hasanbeyli yaylaları can bulup yeşerdi mi  
kınalanır elvan elvan yeryüzü

when the Hasanbeyli highlands find life and flourish  
the earth applies henna in many colors

The example above displays a metaphoric system where the translator needs to consider on the aesthetic level the metaphor 'kınalanır' which means 'the application of henna' because not only is there personification but there is also intertextual information interwoven into the metaphor.

In the Turkish culture, the application of henna is more often a ceremonial activity conducted in times of happiness. For instance, henna is applied to a bride's hand to show that she is getting married; it is

also applied to a young man's hand when he is being sent off to fulfill his military service. In this verse, İlhan expresses the happiness of the arrival of spring through the metaphor that the earth ornaments itself with henna referring to all kinds of colorful flowers and fauna.

The translation of the element 'kına' to the English 'henna' needs the target text reader to be familiar with it so that the metaphor can be recognized. Translating this metaphor is very easy however; the full meaning cannot be transferred into the TL if the reader does not have the extra cultural knowledge about the traditions when henna is used. Perhaps, the translation of this metaphor can be explained in the terms of van den Broeck (1981; 77) because here, there is translation 'sensu stricto', the SL vehicle is transferred into the TL and while personification is preserved the successful rendering of the deep-structure meaning in the SL is at risk.

In addition, the poem *Döşeme* embeds multiple examples of reduplication; e.g. 1- the word 'elvan' (multicolor) see the verse presented above, and e.g. 2- 'alev' (flame or blaze) are doubled in the source text. The words e.g. 3- 'dizi' (in sequences), e.g. 4- 'sıra' (in rows), e.g. 5- 'yalap' (shiny/shimmering), and e.g. 6- 'korkunç' (fearful) are also reduplicated and cannot be or is very difficult to be translated into English in a doubled manner with the intended meaning of the author. These words are examples from Turkish folk speech; this characteristic of the source language is not reflected and can be lost when translated into English.

e.g. 2- alev alev yanaklı kaman kızları  
rosy-cheeked girls from the village of kaman

The doubled word 'alev' is also used metaphorically in this verse. The commonly known meaning of 'alev' would refer to fire or flames, but here the poet has used the word to express the red or rosy color of the girls' cheeks with the intention of describing their beauty in aesthetical terms. This reference can also be replaced with 'burning' of 'flamed' cheeks but this could lead to exaggeration. Perhaps the equivalence here can be reached with 'rosy-cheeked' which is a common expression for this type of reference in the TL. Taking such an approach brings to mind that metaphors are associated with culture and that during the translation process, this characteristic calls for shifts in meaning.

e.g. 3- bir yol sökün eyledi mi dizi dizi turnalar  
did the sequences of cranes suddenly show up and take a path

e.g. 4- sıra sıra cezveler köze sürülür  
row upon row coffee pots are put on the live coal

e.g. 5- batıya yıkılırken gün yalap yalap  
when the sun shimmeringly falls in the west

e.g. 6- korkunç korkunç bakar yüceleri  
the almighty look with fearful eyes

As can be seen in all of the examples of reduplications above, in the attempts to translate them in the manner that they are exactly reduplicated in the SL were not carried out in the TL. While these reduplicated words were used as intensifiers in the ST and sounded natural in the SL, they did not seem to have the same impact in English. In the examples above, another lexical item that can cause confusion in meaning is the word 'cezve' (e.g. 4) which refers to a long handled coffee pot without a lid and is specifically used for making Turkish coffee. Translating this item as 'coffee pot' brings a shift in meaning

because the target reader can visualize it as a pot with a spout and lid used for brewing coffee, in other words here there is a cultural substitution.

The following line constitutes examples of difficulties for the translator because here one has to work out the ambiguity due to the words 'gayrı' (hence, from now on, other) and 'sıradan' (as usual, common, sequences, order, in turns) because they have more than one meaning:

gayrı dağlar sıradan dumanlıdır

'Hence the mountains are smoky as usual' or perhaps 'From now on the mountains are smoky in rows'

In addition to ambiguity, the above mentioned verses speak of the mountains being 'smoky'. Is this word employed metaphorically? Or does it simply refer to the mist of fog on the mountains? Here, based on the translators own interpretation, the translator needs to determine whether the lines encompass an implicit meaning that needs to be explicit in the TL.

In the examples above, the word 'elvan' besides reduplication is a form of folk speech and the implementation of folk speech is also another characteristic of İlhan, for his poetry is replete with cultural words. In this sense, one other example would be the word 'gayrı' which not only adds the flavor of Turkish folk speech but is also a potential constraint for the translator. When the translation of the lexical item 'gayrı' is met through the equivalences 'hence' or 'from now on' the folk essence of the SL is hardly reflected in the TL.

The following four verses from "Döşeme" come one after the other and they seem to complement each other since they express the feeling and dreams of people living in the area of Gavurdağ. These verses can be interpreted that at night these people with the influence of folk songs and literature had had dreams and that with the first light of dawn they had to depart from their dreams and come back to their life in the village and work in the fields.

nasibini almış da bereketinden  
bahçe kazasından azimet eylemiş  
garib âşık nâdim hareketinden  
hayaller her seher vakti

has received ones share of blessings  
has continued to work in the fields  
after the folk literature of poet Nadım  
dreams at every dawn

The translation of the above verses is problematic because the verses 'Hayallar her seher vakti' and 'bahçe kazasından azimet eylemiş' in order to make sense need to follow one another. 'Hayal' means dream or fantasy but it is used as a metaphor and is personified in this poem; with the first lights of dawn 'dreams' go to work in the fields. Also, the verse 'garib âşık nâdim hareketinden' has culture specific items, e.g. there is the word 'âşık' which in English can be compensated with loan word 'ashık' meaning poet of folk literature and songs. İlhan has also added the word 'garib' which actually is 'garip' which is perhaps used by the meaning to be 'lonely' and there is the name 'Nadım'. Who is Nadım? This reference would necessitate extra cultural knowledge in order to actualize the translation process. Did

İlhan actually mean the ashik Nedim who was popular at that time? While this name causes ambiguity it ought to be left the way it is an explanatory footnote can be added by the translator.

From these examples one can see that culture and cultural items are another factor constituting a direct challenge for the translator when there is an unshared concept between the ST and TT cultures. According to Larson (1984; 163) a translator can handle these types of discrepancies by employing: a generic word with a descriptive phrase, a loan word, and a cultural substitute. As can be seen from the above examples the lack of cultural overlap, at times can make the verses untranslatable. Or even if a verse is easy to translate, the main problem would be to get a spontaneous response that the source reader shows from the target audience.

#### 4. Conclusion

İlhan's poem 'Döşeme' is culturally laden presenting a panorama of folkloric culture mostly to that of the Çukurova region, southern Turkey. However, as the study has shown, there is a cultural gap between the SL and TL. As a result, the translator of İlhan's poetry needs to act as an intermediary between the SL and TL. Here, it must be pointed out that one's learning a language, in other words being proficient in both the SL and TL may not be sufficient to reach the desired dynamic equivalence. Extra linguistic and cultural knowledge is needed to reach a deeper understanding of İlhan's emerging meanings and the connotations of his words.

The recognition of humanistic values is another important segment of İlhan's poetic lore. His poetry embeds metaphors and personifications which not only embellish his work but are part of his style and reflect his creativity. His metaphors call forth a need for background knowledge on Turkey and its culture in order to understand the intended meaning. Along this line of thought, it must be noted that knowledge of the source language culture and cultural background of language users have an impact on conceptualization. As claimed by Hoang (2014; 11):

"It is important that learners discern the way figurative language is used in a particular culture, learning a language means learning about a culture (Bailey, 2003) and becoming culturally accepted by a group. Language learners can gain linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge from the way a group conceptualizes and instantiates their culture within which metaphors emerge."

Therefore, it is the duty of the translator of İlhan's poetry to show due respect to the author and the Turkish culture. Here, the translator needs to resort to various alternatives to achieve the same or similar equivalence. Nevertheless, as the study has attempted to display, with the variety of alternatives set forward for poetry translation, the translator can arrive at accurate interpretations of the meanings embedded in the poetry and metaphors of İlhan.

To sum up, due to extensive translation activities, it is possible to observe that Turkish literature is gaining worldwide recognition. İlhan's refined poetic sense has exerted an impact on Turkish literature. "Atilla İlhan has managed to become a model poet for the coming generation of Turkish poets (Aksoy: 2018; 161)." Therefore, this renowned Turkish poet needs to be further introduced to foreign readership; his poems need to be read by the target audience not only for sheer wisdom and joy, but also for its rich Turkish cultural overtones.

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## Appendix A

### Döşeme

işte evvel baharın üç ayları yetişti  
şimdi göçmen kuşların tebdil mekân çağıdır  
bir yol sökün eyledi mi dizi dizi turnalar  
hasanbeyli yaylaları can bulup yeşerdi mi  
kınalanır elvan elvan yeryüzü  
örencik'in yamacında meclis kurulur  
sıra sıra cezveler köze sürülür  
talim eder 'geldi m-ola' türküsünü sarı ökkeş  
- geldi m-ola şu bahçenin yazları  
kulağımdan gitmez oldu sözleri  
alev alev yanaklı kaman kızları  
deli gönül hayran oldu cemâlinize -  
batıya yıkılırken gün yalap yalap  
gayrı dağlar sıradan dumanlıdır  
garbi yeli pek reyhanlıdır  
fermanı kâr eylemez erkânın  
türküler yakılır dağlar taşlar aşkına  
tekmil ormanlar tutuşmuş gibi al olur  
korkunç korkunç bakar yüceleri  
gâvurdağları'na bir hal olur  
sıcak temmuz geceleri  
nasibini almış da bereketinden  
bahçe kazasından azimet eylemiş  
garib âşık nâdim hareketinden  
hayaller her seher vakti  
o afaka ser çekmiş dağları  
çok ağlamış çok gülmüş çok dert çekmiş dağları  
(Atilla İlhan: 1948, 2006; 170)