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# The exploration of compensation in English literal translation of Sesotho proverbs

**Relebohile Margrett Molulela[1], Rethabile Possa*[2] and Mape John Mohlomi[3]**
*[1]Department of African Languages and Literature, National University of Lesotho, Maseru, Lesotho*
*[2]Department of African Languages and Literature, School of Languages and Literature, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa*
*[3]Department of Media, Language and Communication, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa*
**Correspondence: rethabile.possa@uct.ac.za*

**Abstract:** This study explores how Mokitimi employed compensation in producing literal translations of Sesotho proverbs in her book *The Voice of the People* (1997). The impetus for this study was our observation that generally, researchers tend to provide literal translations of their Sesotho excerpts, not only to give readers a taste of the foreignness of the Sesotho culture embedded in the proverbs but also to familiarise them with its unique and interesting features. However, the lack of one-to-one correspondence for concepts or words in the source text in the target language often poses challenges in achieving a genuine literal translation in some communicative contexts. Based on the methodological principles of qualitative research, this paper explores how Mokitimi used compensation in the literal English translations of Sesotho proverbs and examines the communicative context in which these strategies were employed to understand the complexities of producing a literal translation. The researchers extracted excerpts from the book to which the compensation strategy had been applied and analysed this qualitative data based on the descriptive and target-oriented approach. As a result of this investigation, we argue that Mokitimi's compensation strategies effectively communicate the meaning of the source text in the English translations of selected Sesotho proverbs and that using compensation strategies minimises the chances of confusion for the target readers and improves their comprehension of the proverbs. We recommend further research on literal translation, as its dynamics and complexities in handling cultural concepts have not received enough attention.

## List of abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CM | Communicative meaning |
| DTS | Descriptive translation studies |
| LT | Literal translation |
| SA | Syntactic analysis |
| SL | Source language |
| ST | Source text |
| TL | Target language |
| TT | Target text |

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing research interest in Sesotho proverbs. Mieder (1993: 5) defines a proverb as '[…] a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is

handed down from generation to generation'. This definition follows the general view that proverbs are culture-bound expressions that reflect the philosophy of a given community that coins and uses them.

The need for research on old and contemporary proverbs has resulted in translating various Sesotho proverbs into English. Warwal (2014) defines translation as the comprehension of the meaning of a text and the subsequent production of an equivalent text that communicates the same message in another language. When preparing data on Sesotho proverbs for analysis, scholars usually attempt to provide the literal translations of Sesotho proverbs, along with their contextual meaning or communicative translation. Lomaka (2017: 238) points out that literal translation is a type of translation that:

> […] characterises the way of rendering the source text and the approach to achieving equivalence, which suggests that all elements of the source text are reproduced one by one without regard to their position and possible changes of their meaning in the context, to the detriment of their communicative significance, often lead[ing] to the distortion of all levels of the text.

This suggests that literal translation is viewed as a method of translation where the source language's grammatical units are translated with their closest target language counterparts. Such words are usually converted independently into the target language without considering the communicative context. However, doing so often leads to the misrepresentation of the message of the source text on various levels. By contrast, communicative translation is another method that endeavours to convey the precise contextual meaning of the ST so that both content and language are readily acceptable and intelligible to the target readers (Newmark 1988).

It is worth noting that translation involves working in two different languages and their cultures. Ekegbo (2012: 1) explains that 'every language is a bundle of grammatical structures, nuances, and meanings which help the language owners to understand one another'. This view of language illustrates some of the elements that differ between languages. However diverse languages may be, translation aims to facilitate communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. And yet, as argued by Guerra (2012: 1), '[…] when cultural differences exist between two languages, it is extremely difficult to achieve a successful transfer, if not impossible […]'. This is because language and culture are intertwined, as language mirrors the culture of the people who use it.

Working in two languages means a translator must deal with various linguistic and cultural challenges. 'Linguistic and cultural challenges' here refer to words, phrases, expressions, or groups of words whose meanings are complex and, therefore, difficult to transfer into another language, in addition to the differences that exist between languages and cultures. As a result, a translator must devise other means to convey their meaning. In this study, we refer to the challenges that often pose restrictions to translators on how they can translate some aspects of a language as translation problems.

Baker (2011) identifies various translation problems of non-equivalence at a word level, that is, a translation problem in which the TL has no direct or exact equivalent for a word in the ST, where the translator has to employ specific strategies to deal with this challenge. She also provides a series of common translation strategies professional translators employ when encountering different problems. Khudaybergenova (2021) explains that a translation strategy is a principle approach used within the framework of a general translation process to solve translation problems.

As highlighted earlier, scholars researching Sesotho proverbs tend to provide literal translations when they prepare their data for analysis. Generally, such scholars provide literal translations of Sesotho proverbs to allow the intended readers to experience the foreignness of the ST culture and familiarise them with its unique features. This differs from communicative translation, which is often employed to convey the proverbs' contextual meaning or intended message in a way that is easy for the target audience to understand. However, research on Sesotho proverbs seems to have focused mainly on literary and cultural aspects, as illustrated by Possa's (2013) interest in the role performed by contemporary Sesotho proverbs, as well as Khotso and Mashige's (2011) examination of consequences resulting from the use of male-oriented proverbs among the Basotho people.

As a common observation, one-to-one correspondence between concepts in the ST and TT is hard to achieve in some communicative contexts. This makes producing literal translations of proverbs

that still sound grammatical seem impossible. In translating Sesotho proverbs into English, Mokitimi appears to have struggled with finding English equivalents for different concepts she encountered in Sesotho proverbs. In the face of a lack of one-to-one correspondence of concepts, words or cultural expressions between English and Sesotho, Mokitimi employed compensation strategies. According to Klaudy (2008), compensation is a technique where a translator makes up for inevitable losses suffered in translation. From the descriptions of compensation strategies put forward by Hervey and Higgins (1992) and Baker (1998), this definition can be elaborated upon by stating that compensation strategies make up for the loss of significant features of the ST by approximating their effects in the TT, adding information that will make a source concept as easily accessible to the target reader as the source concept is to the source reader.

Literature on the use of compensation when translating between English and Sesotho is rare. However, scholars such as Motallebzadeh and Tousi (2011), Stiasih (2013) and Putra (2016) examine the use of compensation strategies in language pairs such as Persian-English, Indonesian-English, and English-Indonesian, respectively. Their studies focused on analysing the different types of compensation in communicative translation rather than literal translation. As a result, it is necessary to explore how compensation is used in literal English translations of Sesotho proverbs and examine the communicative context in which Mokitimi utilised it for this study to offer a thorough understanding of the complexities evident in producing grammatically correct and faithful literal translations.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study is explorative, interpretive, and descriptive in nature. Using Mokitimi's (1997) *The Voice of the People* as a case study, this research utilised a purposive sampling technique in manually extracting the proverbs and their translations for which compensation strategies had been used. The identified excerpts were then presented in tabular format, and analysed using descriptive translation studies (DTS) as this study's analytical paradigm. Pym (2010: 2) notes that DTS aims to 'describe what translations actually are, rather than simply prescribing how they should be'. Pym (2010: 3) adds that DTS focuses on identifying '[…] how people actually do translate, no matter the supposed quality'; and is echoed by Toury (1995: 11), who states that DTS is 'the study of what translation DOES involve, under various sets of circumstances, along with the REASONS for that involvement'.

Furthermore, this study is target-oriented since DTS does not follow the traditional and prescriptive approach to translation analysis, instead placing more stress on the target text. As Rosa (2016) observes that in contrast to the conventional, fixed, unrealistic, and directive views of equivalence, DTS promotes a practical translational relationship that centres on a flexible approach to the production of target texts. We use DTS for the study's data analysis because of its descriptive nature, its ability to explore contexts and conditioning factors, as well as its target-orientedness and its ability to highlight Mokitimi's use of compensation strategies, and also to specify the communicative contexts in which compensation has been employed. As Hermans (1999: 5) clarifies, DTS is a theory that explores 'context and conditioning factors to search for grounds that can explain why there is what there is'.

**The functions of compensation strategies in translating Sesotho proverbs**

As stated earlier, compensation focuses on making up for the unavoidable losses experienced when a text is translated from one language into another. This section focuses on compensation's use and functions to convey the literal meanings of selected Sesotho proverbs in Mokitimi's translations. Regarding compensation as a strategy, Khalilova and Orujova (2020) and Bakar and Ramli (2021) observe that it is an effective strategy that translators can employ. According to Khalilova and Orujova (2020: 31), '[c]ompensation is successful only if it meets three conditions: necessity, having the same rhetorical result, and relevance'. Bakar and Ramli (2021) add that compensation strategies are significant role players in achieving the relevancy of meaning and functional effect of the translated text to the target culture.

Table 1 below shows the extracted Sesotho proverbs and their translations for which Mokitimi used compensation strategies, the proverbs' English meanings and the compensation strategies' functions. The table labels the Sesotho excerpts from the source text as 'ST', their literal English

translations provided by Mokitimi as 'LT' and their communicative meaning as 'CM'. Table 1 also provides a syntactical analysis ('SA') of the proverbs.

Excerpts (1) to (7) in Table 1 show instances where Mokitimi added a brief explanation of the meaning in brackets in the translations. The added words in the brackets do not appear explicitly in the ST or Sesotho proverbs because they are implied and can be inferred from the context. Depending on the nature of the information that is being compensated for or the compensatory method that the translator decides to use, compensation may appear in different places in the TT. For instance, our data shows that all the bracketed compensatory information Mokitimi has added in the literal translations appears immediately after the word that is being explained, contrary to Molina and Albir's (2002: 500) observation that 'an item of information or a stylistic effect from ST that cannot be reproduced in the same place in the TT is introduced somewhere else in the TT'.

Yemen (2020: 248) explains that 'to compensate for meaning loss, the translator can use different techniques such as providing more explanation between brackets [and] giving commentaries in the footnote […]'. Nida (1993) adds that certain translation adjustments can be introduced in the TT if a close, formal translation is likely to misrepresent the designative meaning. Our analysis shows

**Table 1:** The functions of compensation strategies

| Sesotho proverb | Literal translation and communicative meaning | Researchers' word-for-word translation | Function of compensation strategy |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. **ST**: *Taba tsa hole li jesa ntja e chesa*.<br>**SA**: 10-stories from afar-POSS 10-AGR eat-CAUS 9-dog 9-ARG hot-CAUS. | **LT**: Stories from afar make one to eat a cooked dog (not English 'hot dog').<br>**CM**: One should not trust communication that has travelled far and been told by a series of people. | Stories from afar make one to eat a dog while it is still hot. | To make the meaning explicit |
| 2. **ST**: *Pelo e jele masoko*.<br>**SA**: 9-heart 9-AGR eat-Tns 6-kalmas. | **LT**: The heart has eaten kalmas [a very bitter plant].<br>**CM**: S/he is very angry. | The heart has eaten a very bitter plant. | To make the meaning explicit |
| 3. **ST**: *Motho o retloa maleo a sa phela*.<br>**SA**: 1-person 1-AGR slice-PASS 6-body parts SUB. CLAUS PRES.CONT alive. | **LT**: A person is sliced [cut up for making medicine] while still alive.<br>**CM**: One is helpful to others while alive. | A person is cut into pieces while still alive, for ritual purposes. | To make the meaning explicit |
| 4. **ST**: *Lesaka ha le bolae*.<br>**SA**: 5-kraal NEG 5-AGR kill-NEG. | **LT**: A kraal does not kill (animals).<br>**CM**: Discipline keeps one from trouble and problems. | A kraal does not kill. | To make explicit the object in the literal translation |
| 5. **ST**: *E hlabang ha e bope*.<br>**SA**: 9-REL.PRO-pierce NEG 9-AGR sulk-NEG. | **LT**: The dangerous one [a bull] does not sulk.<br>**CM**: One should beware of the fury of a patient person. | The one that pierces does not sulk. | To make the subject explicit |
| 6. **ST**: *Li jele mahe, ho setse likhaketla*.<br>**SA**: 10-AGR eat-Tns 6-eggs INFL remain-Tns 10-shells. | **LT**: They [dogs] have eaten eggs, and shells are left.<br>**CM**: All the essential things have been taken away; only useless things have been left. | They have eaten eggs, shells are remaining. | To make the subject explicit |
| 7. **ST**: *Li tla fofa li khotše*.<br>**SA**: 10-AGR will fly 10-AGR satisfy-Tns. | **LT**: They [birds] will fly satisfied.<br>**CM**: People will be killed. | They will fly on full stomachs. | To make the subject explicit |

that Mokitimi attempted to enhance the literal meanings of the proverbs and provided necessary modifications or adjustments as compensation in round or square brackets. For instance, in excerpts (1) and (4) in Table 1 above, Mokitimi enclosed the explanatory notes in round brackets, while in excerpts (2), (3), (5), (6) and (7), the compensatory information is provided between square brackets. Aziza and Mebitaghan (2014:12) argue that 'the translator may translate literally and add an extra-textual note explaining the cultural connotation of the proverb to maintain the intended aesthetics of the source text to the target audience'.

As illustrated in excerpt (7) in Table 1, Mokitimi's compensation notes perform three functions, namely to make the meaning of an ST concept more explicit in the TL, to make an implicit ST syntactic object explicit in the literal translation, and to make an implicit ST syntactic subject explicit in the literal translation. In excerpt (1), '*Taba tsa hole li jesa ntja e chesa*' ('Stories from afar make one eat a dog while it is still hot' [our word-for-word translation]), the focus falls on '*ntja e chesa*' ('a dog while it is still hot'), which Mokitimi translated as 'a cooked dog'. To eliminate any confusion, Mokitimi explains in round brackets that the phrase '*ntja e chesa*' ('a dog while it is still hot') does not mean 'hot dog'. Mokitimi's translation of '*ntja e chesa*' means 'the hot meat of a cooked dog'. By providing the compensatory note 'not English "hot dog"' in brackets, Mokitimi minimised the chances of confusion for the target readers and improved their comprehension of the proverb.

In excerpts (2) and (3), Mokitimi employed a compensation strategy using brief explanations: in '*Pelo e jele masoko*' ('The heart has eaten a very bitter plant' [our word-for-word translation]), the compensation occurs around the word '*masoko*', which Mokitimi has translated as 'kalmas'. She also finds it necessary to provide a brief explanation, 'a very bitter plant', for it, since it is information known to the source readers, namely the figurative meaning of 'kalmas', but may not be as well-known to the target readers because of the differences between the cultural backgrounds of Sesotho and English. Nasser (2018: 1) highlights that a compensation strategy 'goes with the spirit of the original text and does not ruin the meaning', meaning that what the translator does is strictly in the interest of the source message and ensures that the target readers understand the TT as the source readers understand the ST.

In the same manner, the proverb in excerpt (3), '*Motho o retloa maleo a sa phela*' ('A person is cut into pieces while still alive, for ritual purposes' [our word-for-word translation]), the focus of the compensation is on '*maleo*' ('pieces of meat' [our word-for-word translation]), for which Mokitimi provided additional information, 'cut up for making medicine', in square brackets. This compensation note again makes information that the ST readers know explicitly for the target readers. Neither the English verb 'slice' nor 'cut' conveys the meaning of 'cutting a person into pieces while still alive, for ritual purposes', as is the case for the Sesotho verb '*retloa*'.

Moreover, Mokitimi used compensation strategies to make certain grammatical elements of Sesotho proverbs explicit, as illustrated by excerpts (4), (5), (6) and (7). For instance, excerpt (4) shows that Mokitimi presented additional information in round brackets. As may be seen from the TT, in 'A kraal does not kill (animals)', the additional information, 'animals', can only be inferred from the Sesotho text '*Lesaka ha le bolae*' ('A kraal does not kill' [our word-for-word translation]). In the translation, the explicated information, 'animals', appears immediately after the verb 'kill' to explicate the object of that verb in the translation. The omission of the object could make the interpretation of the ST confusing to the target readers, even though this construction is appropriate for and comprehensible to the source readers.

A similar explanation can be provided for excerpts (5), (6) and (7), where the subject pronouns in the original proverbs were left open for different interpretations. However, having noticed that, in the absence of a syntactic subject in the TL, the English texts could be vague, Mokitimi employed a compensation strategy by presenting these subjects in square brackets. As demonstrated in Table 1, the compensatory notes 'bull', 'dogs' and 'birds' are provided to specify pronoun referents for the pronouns 'one', 'they' and 'they' in excerpts (5), (6) and (7), respectively.

This section has shown that Mokitimi's compensatory notes play a significant role in illustrating the meaning of concepts or aspects of the SL grammar that may be misunderstood in the target culture. Qiaozhen (2007: 74) elucidates that 'Descriptive Translation Studies sets the translated version against the target-cultural background, and the emphasis is put on the acceptation of the

target readers toward the translated version'. This statement shows that DTS investigates the TT's acceptability to the target readers. In other words, Mokitimi's compensatory notes increase the chances of the translations being accepted by the target readers.

**The communicative context of compensation strategies**

Mokitimi used compensation strategies in a communicative context where an incorrect interpretation (that is, misunderstanding information or not comprehending it fully) of her literal translations seemed possible. According to Hermans (1995), DTS is a theoretical framework that describes contextual and conditioning elements that can help identify and clarify the underlying reasons for the existence of a specific phenomenon in translation. A number of situations may trigger an incorrect interpretation of the original message. Excerpts (8) to (14) in Table 2 below illustrate situations that could have led to the wrong interpretation of the translations were it not for the compensatory notes. According to Gutiérrez (2018: 51), '[i]n many occasions, the technique of compensation is used to avoid a translation loss. Losses in translation are sometimes inevitable since some terms might not have natural or obvious equivalents in the TT. Excerpt (1) in Table 1, with the compensatory information 'not English "hot dog"', again serves as an example.

Unlike in excerpt (1) in Table 1, where the literal meaning of the SL concept may trigger an incorrect TL concept, in excerpts (9), (10), (11) and (12), more than one interpretation of the literal translation would be possible if no compensatory notes were provided. Khelil (2018) observes that compensation, especially in square brackets, has to do with the addition of words that do not appear in the ST because the context in the ST does not require them, but where they are necessary for understanding the TT. The proverb '*Lesaka ha le bolae*' ('A kraal does not kill' [our word-for-word translation]) in excerpt (4) of Table 1, where the object of the verb '*ha le bolae*' ('does not kill') is not explicitly expressed in the Sesotho proverb, serves as an example. In this case, the context of this proverb is not known by the target readers, so Mokitimi added the object 'animals' in round brackets in her literal translation 'A kraal does not kill (animals)'.

Similarly, in excerpts (10), (11) and (12) in Table 2, Mokitimi employed compensation to make the subjects of the proverbs explicit. The proverbs in these excerpts do not have syntactic subjects (nouns/pronouns) but are grammatically acceptable and semantically intelligible in Sesotho since it is a pro-drop language, as are most Bantu languages. Świątek (2012: 1) explains that '[a] pro-drop

**Table 2:** Situations that could lead to incorrect interpretations of the literal translations

| Sesotho proverbs | Literal translation | Situation that could lead to incorrect interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| 8. **ST**: *Taba tsa hole li jesa ntja e chesa*. | **TT**: Stories from afar make one to eat a cooked dog (not English 'hot dog'). | The literal meaning of the SL concept may trigger an incorrect TL concept. |
| 9. **ST**: *Lesaka ha le bolae*. | **TT**: A kraal does not kill (animals). | More than one interpretation of the literal translation is possible. |
| 10. **ST**: *E hlabang ha e bope*. | **TT**: The dangerous one [a bull] does not sulk. | More than one interpretation of the literal translation is possible. |
| 11. **ST**: *Li jele mahe, ho setse likhaketla*. | **TT**: They [dogs] have eaten eggs, and shells are left. | More than one interpretation of the literal translation is possible. |
| 12. **ST**: *Li tla fofa li khotše*. | **TT**: They [birds] will fly satisfied. | More than one interpretation of the literal translation is possible. |
| 13. **ST**: *Pelo e jele masoko*. | **TT**: The heart has eaten kalmas [a very bitter plant]. | The intended meaning of a lexical unit may not be as explicit in the TL as it is in the SL. |
| 14. **ST**: *Motho o retloa maleo a sa phela*. | **TT**: A person is sliced [cut up for making medicine] while still alive. | The TL lacks an equivalent word. |

language, originating from 'pronoun-dropping', is a language in which certain classes of pronouns may be omitted when they are in some sense pragmatically inferable'. In Sesotho, lexical subjects are optional, as illustrated by Sesotho proverbs in excerpts (10), (11) and (12), which start with subjectival concords because their subject positions are left empty. In contrast, English lexical subjects are compulsory. Well aware of this grammatical difference between Sesotho and English, Mokitimi, guided by the subjectival concords, filled the subject positions in her literal English translations with pronouns and provided the nouns to which these pronouns refer in brackets.

In excerpt (10), for example, Mokitimi used the indefinite pronoun 'one' as a subject, while in (11) and (12), she employed the personal pronoun 'they'. However, since the pronouns used might have different interpretations, she employed a compensation strategy, namely specifying the lexical subjects, which are pragmatically inferable in the Sesotho proverbs, in her literal translations. For instance, the words 'bull', 'dogs' and 'birds' in square brackets in excerpts (10), (11) and (12), respectively, have been used to compensate for the meaning of the pronouns 'one', 'they' and 'they', thus eliminating the possibility of multiple interpretations of the literal translations by making the implicit lexical subject of the proverbs explicit.

In excerpts (13) and (14) in Table 2, the meanings of certain words in Mokitimi's literal translations are given in notes in square brackets. This shows that Mokitimi used compensation strategically to express a concept known to the translator in a way that conveys similar meaning and intent in the TT. For instance, in excerpt (13), Mokitimi employed the word 'kalmas' to translate the meaning of the Sesotho word '*masoko*'. The word 'kalmas' is accompanied by the compensatory note 'a very bitter plant' in square brackets because she may have assumed that the intended meaning of the original lexical unit, '*masoko*', may not be as explicit in the TL as in the SL.

Additionally, in excerpt (14), Mokitimi provided an explanatory note for the verb 'sliced', which, of course, failed to convey the meaning of the Sesotho verb '*retloa*' because of the differences in the socio-cultural backgrounds of the SL and TL. The compensatory note clarifies that the SL verb '*retloa*' does not only mean *'*slicing*'* but 'cutting a person into pieces while still alive for ritual purposes' (our word-for-word translation).

Generally, Mokitimi seems to have employed compensation strategies in contexts where she anticipated that there would be an incorrect interpretation of her literal English translations. As illustrated in Table 2, there are four situations that could possibly lead to an incorrect interpretation of Mokitimi's literal translations: First, where the literal meaning of the SL concept may trigger the incorrect concept; second, where more than one interpretation of the literal translation is possible; third, where the intended meaning of a lexical unit may not be as explicit in the TL as it is in the SL, and fourth, where the TL lacks an equivalent word. As an example of the fourth situation, there is no equivalent word to convey the literal meaning of the Sesotho verb '*retloa*' ('cutting a person into pieces for ritual purposes'; our word-for-word translation) in English; hence, Mokitimi employed translation by compensation.

Based on our data analysis, we conclude that Mokitimi employed compensation strategies to deal with the meaning of specific words in Sesotho proverbs and their grammatical complexities in her literal English translations when she anticipated they might be misinterpreted.

## Conclusion

This study has indicated that, in producing literal English translations of African ideas, concepts, words, and expressions, one-to-one correspondence between concepts and/or words in the ST and TT may not be viable in some translation contexts. In this light, the study concludes that Mokitimi's compensation strategies effectively communicate the literal meaning of selected Sesotho proverbs translated into English. We argued that these compensation strategies minimise possible confusion for target readers and improve their comprehension of the proverbs.

**ORCiD iD**

Relebohile Margrett Molulela – https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6139-8072
Rethabile Possa – https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3472-7270
Mape John Mohlomi – https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6776-1627

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