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Ideological Representation of the Holocaust in Persian Translations of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*: A Discourse-Based Analysis[1]

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of ideological elements of the Holocaust in two Persian translations of John Boyne's novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, by Parvaneh Fattahi and Hormoz Abdollahi. Drawing on Hatim and Mason's (1997) model, the study examines thirty-five purposively selected samples (thirty-two of which were organized into the five thematic categories examined below) across five thematic categories: Bruno's mispronunciation of Nazi-related terms, power and authority, dehumanization, suffering and death, and Jewish identity. Five discourse-analytic tools—lexicalization, reduction, elaboration, modality, and tense shift—were employed to identify ideological translational choices. The analysis of the results shows that both translators preserved the novel's condemnation of Nazi ideology, yet differed markedly in how explicitly these meanings were conveyed. Fattahi preserves the simple, childlike register of Bruno's narration and retains the irony that depends on his limited understanding, whereas Abdollahi more often resolves ambiguities through elaboration and clarification. Nevertheless, these two translators converge almost completely at two ideological moments of the novel, indicating that ideological fidelity and translational variation operate only at different levels of the text. The results show that ideological meaning in literary translation is not merely transferred but reconstructed, which may have implications for the translation of historically sensitive fiction.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, Holocaust literature, Ideology, Literary translation, Persian translation

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Introduction

Translators are not neutral conduits of meaning. Munday (2022) frames the point plainly: translators make decisions, and those decisions can shift how cultures, identities, and historical events are presented to a new readership, whether or not the translator intends any such shift. This is particularly consequential when a historically and ethically weighted text such as Holocaust fiction is translated, since its representational choices are inseparable from questions of historical responsibility (Bieber & Feldman, 2025; Mašát, 2025). A novelist writing about the Holocaust already negotiates a delicate balance between fidelity to historical fact and an ethical obligation not to trivialize suffering; a translator inherits that balance and must renegotiate it in a second language, often without the freedom to reproduce the original's specific lexical choices.

John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) intensifies this difficulty because its central narrative device is a nine-year-old narrator who does not understand what he is witnessing. Bruno mishears "Führer" as "Fury" and "Auschwitz" as "Out-With"; he believes moving to a concentration camp is simply his father's promotion. Canani (2022) argues that this restricted focalization is structural: the novel's ethical force depends on readers recognizing, gradually and independently, the gap between what Bruno perceives and what surrounds him. Varghese and Babujee (2021) similarly suggest that the child's innocence invites the reader to do the interpretive work the narrator cannot do. A translation that resolves Bruno's confusion, upgrading his mispronunciations into standard vocabulary, does not simply produce a stylistic variant of the same story; it produces a different reading experience, with a different ethical demand placed on the reader.

Despite the novel's considerable critical and pedagogical attention (Mosciaro, 2024; UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, 2022), very little of this scholarship engages with translation, a curious omission given how widely the novel has circulated internationally and given that Translation Studies has increasingly framed ideology as a legitimate object of textual analysis (Hatim & Mason, 1997; Gu, 2023). Within the Persian context specifically, ideology has attracted growing scholarly interest (Mollanazar & Fuladi, 2021; Heidari Tabrizi, 2026), yet studies bringing this interest to bear on a single, closely comparable pair of literary translations remain scarce, and Holocaust fiction in particular has received almost no attention.

This gap carries particular weight in the Iranian context, where the Holocaust is not part of the formal school curriculum. For many Persian-speaking readers,

translated novels such as this one may function as one of the few accessible sources of historical understanding available to them, which makes the ideological choices embedded in their translation especially consequential rather than a matter of stylistic preference alone.

The present study responds to this gap by comparing two Persian translations of the novel, asking: how are Holocaust-related ideological elements represented in the two Persian translations, and what does this reveal about the translation of historically sensitive fiction more broadly?

Literature Review

Ideology as a Property of Discourse

Hatim and Mason (1997) remain a central reference point for locating ideology not in a translator's stated intentions but in the observable texture of language: which word is selected from a set of near-synonyms, whether a detail is stated outright or merely implied, how strongly a claim is hedged. None of these choices needs to be conscious to carry ideological weight, which is part of what makes discourse-level analysis useful. Du and Afzaal (2024) apply a comparable logic to translated Chinese political discourse, showing that modal verbs can shift the perceived force of a claim without altering its propositional content. Gu (2023) combines critical discourse analysis with corpus techniques to identify ideological patterns that recur across a translator's output rather than appearing in isolated instances. Within Iranian Translation Studies, Mollanazar and Fuladi (2021) trace the conceptual borrowing of "ideology" from Marxist theory into translation research, while Heidari Tabrizi's (2026) systematic review calls for more consistent, discourse-analytic operationalizations of the term. Kuzderová and Bednárová-Gibová (2021) add that translators' own ideological commitments inevitably inflect the linguistic choices they make, even when those choices appear purely stylistic.

Translating Holocaust Literature

Holocaust literature poses distinct demands on discourse-level analysis because the stakes of a lexical choice are rarely only aesthetic. Miñano Mañero (2020), examining the translation of a Holocaust survivor's memoir, shows that small choices can affect how a reader relates to historical testimony, and that translators of this material carry an ethical responsibility beyond ordinary fluency. Levina and Baratz (2021) argue that what a Holocaust text withholds from its child characters, and by extension its child readers, is itself an ideologically significant choice. Mašát

(2025) argues that Shoah-themed literature plays an active role in shaping how younger readers construct historical and ethical identity, while Bieber and Feldman (2025) observe that Holocaust memory does not travel intact across languages; it is reconstructed, sometimes softened and sometimes sharpened, at each point of transmission, translation being one of the most consequential such points.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas in Scholarship

Scholarship on Boyne's novel has concentrated on its narrative technique and its ethical and pedagogical reception rather than on its translation. Canani (2022) offers the most sustained account of how the novel's child focalization generates dramatic irony, arguing that Bruno's naivety is a deliberate structural choice that forces readers into an active, uncomfortable interpretive role rather than allowing them the more passive position of simply being told what happened. Varghese and Babujee (2021) extend this reading, suggesting that the novel's refusal to explain itself—its insistence on staying inside Bruno's limited vocabulary—is precisely what allows it to address prejudice and moral responsibility without becoming didactic. Mosciaro (2024) compares the novel with its 2008 film adaptation and finds that the shift in medium alters how much of this ironic distance survives, since film cannot easily withhold visual information the way prose can withhold verbal information; the observation is suggestive for translation as well, since a translation can likewise widen or narrow the gap between what the reader perceives and what the protagonist understands. The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education (2022) documents the novel's classroom use, noting ongoing debate about whether its historical simplifications serve or undermine Holocaust education. None of this scholarship, however, considers what happens to Bruno's restricted understanding once the novel is rendered into another language—the gap this study addresses.

Translation, Memory, and the Iranian Context

Translation also plays a constitutive role in how historical memory circulates across languages. Deane-Cox and Spiessens (2022) argue that translation does not merely transmit Holocaust memory but actively participates in shaping it, since decisions about wording, omission, and emphasis can foreground or obscure particular aspects of historical experience for a new readership. A related strand of research examines ideology in literary translation more broadly: Yao, Kasuma, and Moindjie (2025) compare multiple English translations of a single Chinese literary work and find that ideological orientation varies considerably even among translations sharing the same target language, underscoring that translator-level

variation shapes ideological outcomes. Within Iran specifically, literary translation has long functioned as a site of cultural negotiation (Haddadian-Moghaddam, 2014), suggesting that translators' choices in rendering foreign literary works carry consequences that extend beyond the immediate text. Holocaust fiction translated into Persian enters this same field, where translators mediate historical content for readers with limited independent access to the events represented.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design appropriate for examining how meaning is constructed within particular passages rather than how often a feature recurs across a large corpus. The corpus consists of Boyne's (2006) English source novel together with its two published Persian translations, by Parvaneh Fattahi and Hormoz Abdollahi. From this corpus, thirty-five textual samples were purposively selected from eight chapters (1, 3, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 20), chosen for their ideologically dense material: Nazi authority, the camp itself, Bruno's misunderstandings of adult language, and his friendship with Shmuel. Of these, thirty-two samples were organized into five recurring thematic categories: Bruno's mispronunciations, power and authority, dehumanization, suffering and death, and Jewish identity. The three remaining samples did not correspond naturally to any of the five categories and were therefore not included in the category-based analysis, though they were considered in the broader comparison between the two translations.

Each sample was examined using five discourse-analytic tools drawn from Hatim and Mason (1997): lexicalization (word choice among available alternatives), reduction (omission of ideologically relevant material present in the source text), elaboration (addition of explanatory, intensifying, or clarifying material not present in the source), modality (shifts in the expression of certainty, obligation, or possibility), and tense shift (changes in the temporal framing of an event). These tools were applied selectively rather than mechanically, since not every sample activates all five, and in several cases two tools operate jointly on the same passage. The analysis was carried out manually through repeated close reading and comparison of the three texts, without recourse to statistical software, an approach consistent with the interpretive character of the research question. Page references throughout follow the pagination of the English source edition. All categorization and close-reading analysis were carried out by a single analyst; no second coder independently verified the classifications, a limitation noted here given the reliance on fine-grained judgments of connotation and tone.

Table 1 illustrates, for a representative subset of the corpus, which tool was identified as primary in each sample; several samples activated more than one tool jointly, as noted above.

Table 1.

Illustrative Mapping of Analytical Tools to Selected Samples

Tool	Sample(s)	Illustrative Focus
Lexicalization	1, 6, 17	Rendering of "the Fury" and "Out-With"
Reduction	2	Omission of the euphemism explaining "some people"
Elaboration	11, 24	Added descriptors in Shmuel's appearance and the ghetto scene
Modality	29	Framing of Kotler's interrogation about his father
Tense shift	21	Framing of Mother's protest as ongoing or concluded

Data Analysis

Before turning to the category-by-category discussion below, Table 2 presents a representative set of parallel-text samples: the relevant English source passage alongside both Persian renderings, with romanized transliterations and literal English glosses for the Persian terms discussed. This parallel-text format makes explicit the specific lexical and phrasal choices on which the categorical analysis that follows is based.

Table 2.

Parallel-Text Samples Illustrating Translational Divergence and Convergence

Category	English Source (page)	Fattahi's Rendering	Abdollahi's Rendering	Note
Mispronunciations	"the Führer" (p. 14)	pīshvā (standard adult term)	pīshvā (standard adult term)	Shared domestication; both silently correct Bruno's error.
Mispronunciations	"Out-With" [Auschwitz]	jā-ye parat ("a remote place")	barhoot ("wasteland")	Fattahi softens; Abdollahi sharpens the term's darker associations.

Mispronunciations	Chapter 11 title	pīsh-pā (mispronunciation preserved)	pīshvā (corrected adult form)	Abdollahi strips the chapter title of its ironic function.
Power/Authority	"some people" euphemism for Father (p. 18)	clarification omitted	clarification retained	Fattahi weakens an already indirect critique.
Power/Authority	"Out of Bounds At All Times" (p. 19)	mamnūʿ ("strictly forbidden")	tābeʿ-e moqarrarāt ("subject to regulations")	Fattahi conveys unusual force; Abdollahi is bureaucratic.
Dehumanization	"are not people at all" (p. 52)	aslan ādam nīstand	aslan ādam nīstand	Near-identical; both preserve the line's full bluntness.
Suffering/Death	Shmuel's appearance (p. 91)	stays close to the source's understatement	adds ostokhānī ("bony"), bī-kas o tanhā ("alone and helpless")	Abdollahi intensifies; Fattahi remains restrained.
Jewish Identity	"Can you speak Polish?" (p. 95)	preserves the national-identity reference	"the language of the Jews"	Abdollahi foregrounds Jewish identity explicitly.
Jewish Identity	"like twins" (p. 94)	near-identical rendering	near-identical rendering	Convergence; undercuts Nazi racial hierarchy without softening on either side.

The detailed, category-by-category interpretation of these and the remaining samples is developed in the Results section below.

Results

Bruno's Mispronunciations

Bruno's mispronunciations of Nazi-related terminology mark the clearest textual site at which the novel's ironic structure can be measured. The first occurrence

of "the Fury" (p. 14) is telling: both translators render it as pīshvā, the standard adult Persian term, silently correcting Bruno's error before the reader has registered it as an error. This shared domestication choice reduces the ironic contrast between Bruno's innocence and the reader's awareness of Nazi ideology in both translations. The clearer divergence concerns "Out-With," Bruno's mishearing of Auschwitz. Through lexicalization, Fattahi renders it as jā-ye parat ("a remote place"), softening the term's darker associations, while Abdollahi chooses barhoot ("wasteland"), sharpening them; the ideological implication is that Fattahi's translation mitigates the darker associations of the concentration camp, whereas Abdollahi's rendering evokes stronger connotations of suffering and isolation. The Chapter 11 title shows the same pattern economically: Fattahi preserves the mispronunciation as pīsh-pā, while Abdollahi uses the correct adult form pīshvā, stripping an entire chapter title of its ironic function. A related inconsistency appears when Father corrects Bruno's pronunciation (p. 100): Fattahi maintains his repeated failure, consistent with the novel's characterization, while Abdollahi has Bruno apparently succeed even as the narration states that he failed—an internal contradiction suggesting the translator's normalization was applied without checking local narrative logic.

Power and Authority

Passages representing Nazi authority, embodied chiefly in Father, show each translator sometimes intensifying and sometimes softening authority, depending on the passage. When the narrator explains that "some people" was a euphemism for Father (p. 18), Fattahi omits the clarification entirely, weakening an already indirect critique, while Abdollahi retains it. A related instance occurs when someone warns Bruno not to imitate Father's manner: Fattahi's pīravī nakonad ("avoid imitating") is comparatively mild, whereas Abdollahi's mesl-e pedarash harf nazanad ("do not talk like Father") preserves a sharper criticism of Father's authoritarian conduct. Around Father's office, described as "Out of Bounds At All Times" (p. 19), Fattahi renders the prohibition with unusual force (mamnūʿ, "strictly forbidden"), while Abdollahi opts for the bureaucratic tābeʿ-e moqarrarāt ("subject to regulations"). When Mother argues with Father and he ends the conversation by speaking louder, Fattahi describes the result as a pause (vaghefe), while Abdollahi states that the conversation came to an end (payān); consequently, Fattahi highlights the strictness of the prohibition, whereas Abdollahi foregrounds the finality of Father's authority. In Father's collapse after Bruno's disappearance (p. 175), Fattahi's compressed phrasing achieves a terse

finality and conveys a stronger sense of tragic closure and lifelong guilt, while Abdollahi elaborates on Father's repeated, failed attempts to understand, producing a longer but arguably less devastating rendering of the same moment.

Dehumanization

Only one sample addresses dehumanization directly, but it is the ideological center of gravity for the entire novel: Father's statement that Jewish people "are not people at all" (p. 52). Here the translations converge almost completely, both rendering the line as aslan ādam nīstand, preserving its full bluntness. Neither translator hedges, reduces, or elaborates on the claim—a striking contrast to the variability documented above, suggesting both recognized this line as effectively non-negotiable. This preservation is ideologically significant, since the line constitutes one of the novel's clearest expressions of Nazi prejudice, and both translators maintain its explicit force in the Persian versions. The sample gains further significance when read alongside its narrative counterpoint: Bruno and Shmuel's later declaration that they are "like twins" (discussed under Jewish identity below), which directly rebuts the claim examined here. That both translators preserve the dehumanizing statement and its rebuttal with equal fidelity suggests that the two poles of the novel's central ideological argument are treated as a matched pair, neither softened nor sharpened independently of the other.

Suffering and Death

Representations of suffering display the clearest instance of the elaboration-versus-restraint pattern. In the description of Shmuel's appearance (p. 91), Abdollahi adds descriptors not present in the English original—ostokhānī ("bony"), bī-kas o tanhā ("alone and helpless")—intensifying the reader's sense of deprivation, while Fattahi stays close to the source text's understatement. A similar pattern recurs in Shmuel's account of ghetto violence (p. 107), where Abdollahi's idiomatic be bād-e kotak gereftan ("beaten mercilessly") carries more visceral force than Fattahi's literal bīkhod o bījahat. Shmuel's description of the train journey emphasizes overcrowding, lack of air, and unbearable smell; Fattahi employs a balanced ham ... ham ... ("both ...and ...") structure that closely reflects the cumulative effect of the original description, while Abdollahi's rendering conveys the same information in a slightly less cohesive manner, though both effectively represent the suffering of the journey. Both translators, however, handle the novel's more oblique references to death with comparable restraint: Shmuel's remark that soldiers "don't normally like people getting better" (p. 116) preserves its indirection in both versions, with Fattahi's yek

jūr-e dīgarī khūb mīšavand ("they get better in another way") reading slightly more naturally, while Abdollahi's darmān bešan ("get treated") is marginally more direct.

Jewish Identity

The construction of Jewish identity supplies some of the clearest divergences, since identity here is often signaled through small, alterable details. When Bruno asks, "Can you speak Polish?" (p. 95), Fattahi preserves the question's reference to national identity, matching the source, while Abdollahi renders it as asking whether Shmuel speaks "the language of the Jews," foregrounding a dimension of identity the source leaves comparatively implicit; this choice makes Jewish identity more explicit in Abdollahi's version, while Fattahi's rendering leaves it more implicit. A further contrast appears when Bruno, hearing that Shmuel was forced to leave his home, enthusiastically claims the same thing happened to him, failing to recognize the difference between voluntary relocation and forced displacement; Abdollahi intensifies this misunderstanding through balā saram omad ("the same disaster happened to me"), while Fattahi stays closer to the literal meaning of the source. Yet when Bruno and Shmuel discover they share a birthday and declare themselves "like twins" (p. 94)—a line that directly undercuts the premise of Nazi racial hierarchy—both translators render it almost identically, with no meaningful softening or intensification on either side, reinforcing the convergence pattern already visible in the dehumanization sample.

The Yes / No / Partial judgments in Table 3 were assigned using the following informal criteria: a category was coded Yes when the two translations converged on near-identical lexical and syntactic choices across its samples; No when the translators made clearly different lexicalization, reduction, or elaboration choices; and Partial when convergence held for only some of the category's samples, or only at the level of general sense rather than specific wording.

Table 3.

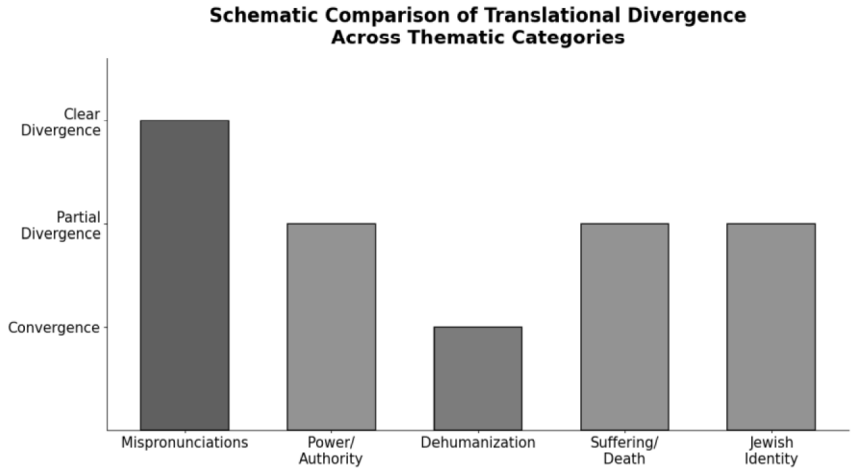
Summary of Translational Tendencies by Thematic Category

Category	Fattahi's Tendency	Abdollahi's Tendency	Convergence?
Mispronunciations	Preserves childlike forms	Normalizes to adult forms	No — clear divergence
Power/Authority	Mixed; often terse	Mixed; often elaborated	No — passage-dependent

Dehumanization	Blunt, unmodified	Blunt, unmodified	Yes — near-identical
Suffering/Death	Understated	Intensified	Partial — oblique references converge
Jewish Identity	Implicit labelling retained	Labelling made explicit	Yes, at the ideological core only

Figure 1.

Schematic Comparison of Translational Divergence Across Thematic Categories



This figure presents a schematic, qualitative visualization rather than a measured or corpus-derived quantity; the ordering along the axis reflects the Yes/No/Partial convergence judgments in Table 3, not a numerical scale. Figure 1 visualizes the pattern summarized in Table 3: divergence between the two translators is greatest for Bruno's mispronunciations, at its lowest for dehumanization, and partial for the remaining three categories, illustrating that translational variation is concentrated at the narrative periphery rather than at the novel's ideological core.

Discussion

Read together, the five categories do not support a simple verdict that one translation is more ideologically faithful than the other. They support a layered picture in which the translators differ substantially at the periphery of the novel's ideological material—register, explicitness, narrative voice—while converging almost completely at its center, the small number of passages where the novel states its ethical claims outright.

Fattahi's tendency to preserve Bruno's mispronunciations and favor understated phrasing aligns with what Canani (2022) identifies as the source text's defining strategy: an ironic gap between the child narrator's limited understanding and the reader's fuller knowledge. By retaining this gap more consistently, Fattahi's translation arguably preserves more of the interpretive labor Varghese and Babujee (2021) argue the novel demands of its readers. Abdollahi's more frequent elaboration narrows this gap, which is not necessarily a flaw—Abdollahi's choices are, in several instances, more vivid or emotionally forceful in Persian, as the treatment of Shmuel's condition illustrates.

The convergence at the novel's most ideologically loaded moments deserves particular attention because it complicates an account built solely around the elaboration-versus-restraint axis. If Abdollahi is broadly inclined toward explicitness and Fattahi toward restraint, one might expect this tendency to appear even here, yet it largely does not. A plausible explanation, consistent with Miñano Mañero's (2020) observation about the ethical stakes of translating Holocaust testimony, is that both translators recognized these lines as carrying a kind of ethical weight that placed them outside the scope of ordinary stylistic variation. This explanation, however, may be complemented by a more formal consideration: the linguistic directness of the statements themselves. Where a claim is formulated with minimal ambiguity, the translator's interpretive latitude narrows accordingly. The convergence at these ideological peaks thus suggests that direct propositional content exerts a stronger constraint on translational variation than narratively embedded or implicitly conveyed meanings—a pattern that complicates, while also supporting, Heidari Tabrizi's (2026) call for more systematic attention to ideology in Persian translation research. Ideological consistency and variation are not evenly distributed across a text but concentrated differently depending on how directly a passage states its content, with directly stated claims proving far more resistant to translational drift than implied or narratively embedded ones. Because the novel's ideological effect depends so heavily on Bruno's restricted understanding, these findings may be most directly relevant to other works of historical fiction that rely on limited or child narrators (Levina & Baratz, 2021; Mašát, 2025), where translators face a comparable, rarely explicit choice between privileging narrative restraint and prioritizing legibility for the target reader.

Conclusion

This study examined how Holocaust-related ideological elements are represented in two Persian translations of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, using Hatim

and Mason's (1997) discourse-based model. Both translations preserve the novel's central ideological orientation while differing systematically in how explicitly that orientation is conveyed: Fattahi more often retains the understated register that sustains the source text's central irony, while Abdollahi more often resolves that irony through elaboration and explicit lexical choice. At the two passages where the novel states its ideological claims most directly, however, the translations converge almost completely, suggesting that variation and fidelity operate at different levels of the text rather than competing uniformly throughout it. These findings support a view of ideological representation in literary translation as reconstructive rather than transferred.

For translators of historically sensitive fiction, these findings suggest that preserving narrative ambiguity may be as important as preserving factual accuracy, particularly when a text's ethical force depends on what is left unsaid rather than stated outright. The analysis is limited to thirty-two purposively selected samples and two translations; future research could extend it to the complete novel, to further Persian translations, or to renderings of the same source text into other languages, to test whether the layered pattern identified here—variation at the periphery, convergence at the ideological core—holds more generally across the translation of historically sensitive fiction.

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