

## Translating Taboo Language in the 1390s: The Case of *The Catcher in the Rye*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to discover the prevailing strategies of translating taboos in the 1390s/~2010s. To this end, four Persian translations of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in the mentioned decade, were investigated. However, to make a comparison between strategies of translating taboo words and expressions in the 1390s/~2010s and the pre-Islamic Revolution era, the only translation of the novel published before the Islamic Revolution was also examined. This study adopted a mixed theoretical framework, one to detect the taboo items and the other to analyse the collected taboos with respect to the translation strategies. To carry out the research, first, the taboo items of the source text were extracted. Then the 124 taboos extracted from the source text were compared to their Persian counterparts with respect to translation strategies. Findings of the study showed great diversity regarding the adopted strategies, possibly highlighting the role of translators' personal decisions, rather than norm-based decisions, in translating taboo items.

**Keywords:** Persian translation, Taboo, *The catcher in the rye*, Translation strategies

### 1. Introduction

The word taboo derives from "the Tongan *tabu*, which came to notice towards the end of the eighteenth century" (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 2).

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Wardhaugh (2006) defines taboo as “the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behaviour believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame” (p. 239). Based on Allan and Burridge (2006), “taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual’s behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury” (p. 1). While taboo “initially referred to the sphere of beliefs among primitive cultures”, now it is basically used “to indicate subjects that should not be discussed” (Hensoldt-Fyda, 2018, p. 90). Taboos are not universal. In other words, “nothing is taboo for all people, under all circumstances, for all time” (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 9). Each culture, language and time has its own specific taboos. Thus, it can be said that taboos are “created by each culture and each language” and “as there are many intercultural taboos, so are there culture-specific taboos” (Karjalainen, 2021, p. 15). Therefore, briefly, the word taboo “refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts” (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 11). However, there are some specific concepts and subjects that are considered taboo in most societies. Some of the common sources of taboo words shared among many societies and cultures are “(a) Sexual organs, sexual relations, (b) Religion . . . , (c) Excrément, (d) Death, (e) The physically or mentally disabled, (f) Prostitution, (g) Narcotics, crime” (Andersson, as cited in Karjalainen, 2021, p. 17). It is important to note that “taboo words are not just insults but proscribed words which are not accepted in a given society” and the “fact of uttering this kind of word may have as a consequence a great repulsion and an offense to the listener” (Torres-Cuenca, 2016, p. 12). Infractions of taboos can be dangerous to individuals. As Wardhaugh (2006) explains, “The penalty for breaking a linguistic taboo can be severe ... but it is hardly likely to cost you your life, as the violation of certain non-linguistic taboos, e.g., incest taboos, might in certain places in the world” (p. 239). Taboos can therefore be viewed as “strong social

norms that are supported by severe social sanctions" (Freshtman, Gneezy, & Hoffman, 2011, p. 140).

As taboo items are part of "culturally bound language", translating them "is a very challenging task for translators" (Atanasovska, 2016, p. 89). The difficulty of translating taboo language gets even worse when it comes to literary translation. In works of literature, "the author intentionally uses certain linguistic features in a given context to achieve certain purpose in order to create an effect on the reader" (Atanasovska, 2016, p. 72). Therefore, the author's use of a specific linguistic feature in a literary work "is certainly purposeful and without it the reader's response would be completely different" (Atanasovska, 2016, p. 72). Thus, just like any other linguistic feature, the frequent use of taboo items in a literary text is considered a "stylistic feature", which "conveys a strong message to the reader about the topic, characters [and] the setting" and also "reflects the mental image of the author or of the characters" (Atanasovska, 2016, p. 72). Due to the significant role of taboo language, the literary translators must be warned against either substituting taboo words "for a word that is not a taboo in the target language" or euphemising them to make their translations "more acceptable for the readers" (Atanasovska, 2016, p. 76). This is because the strategies of "neutralisation of taboo words" result in "minimisation of the stylistic dimension of the translation", which in turn causes the translation not to "produce the necessary artistic and aesthetic effect of the reader" (Atanasovska, 2016, p. 76).

The present research aimed at investigating the strategies adopted by the Iranian translators in rendering the taboo words and expressions of *The Catcher in the Rye* from English into Persian in the 1390s/~2010s. *The Catcher in the Rye*, a novel written by J. D. Salinger, has been translated into different languages since its publication in 1951. So far, several Persian translations of

the novel have been published, both in pre- and post-Islamic Revolution. Translation of this novel in the pre-Islamic Revolution is limited to one translation done by Ahmad Karimi, published in the 1340s. However, in the post-Islamic Revolution era, several translations of the novel have been published.

The reason behind selecting *The Catcher in the Rye* for this study is the unique language of the novel. As noted by many critics, the significant feature of *The Catcher in the Rye* is the “‘daring’, ‘obscene’, ‘blasphemous’” language of Holden, the main character of the novel, and the “informal, schoolboy vernacular” language of the novel, which “is particularly typical in its ‘vulgarity’ and ‘obscenity’” (Costello, 1959, pp. 173–175). In fact, instead of “vandalism or anarchism”, Holden uses language to challenge the “social and cultural conventions underlying American society during the 1950s” (Yazdanjoo, Ghorban Sabbagh, & Shahriari, 2016, p. 2).

## 2. Literature Review

Until now, numerous studies have been conducted on translating taboo items in different literary genres. Regarding the translation of taboo words in dramas, Alavi, Karimnia, and Salehi Zadeh (2013) investigated the differences in translation of taboos in ten dramas from a Skopos-based view. Analysing 30 taboos, which were randomly selected from the dramas, showed that the most common strategy used in translating these taboos was censorship. In another paper, Vossoughi and Etemad Hosseini (2013) used Toury’s classification of norms to discover norms of translating taboo words and concepts from English into Persian after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The corpus of this study included novels by Paulo Coelho, both written and translated from 1990 to 2005. Based on the findings of this study, the main strategies used by the translators in translating the taboo words of Coelho’s work into Persian were omission, manipulation of segmentation and euphemism. The researchers also concluded

that since “foreign texts are not always in line with the social and cultural norms of the target text, the translators try to manipulate or bowdlerize the literary works to fit the ideological framework of the target language” (Vossoughi & Etemad Hosseini, 2013, p. 6). Thus, it is “not the translator who makes the final decision, but the dominant ideology that assigns what should or should not be imported to the target text” (Vossoughi & Etemad Hosseini, 2013, p. 6).

With respect to the strategies used in translating the taboo words of *The Catcher in the Rye* into Persian, as far as the researcher is concerned, two studies have been conducted so far. One is a master’s thesis, carried out by Azardashti in 2013, in which two different versions of Ahmad Karimi’s translation plus the translations done by Najafi and Zolghadr, were examined. Azardashti’s research revealed that the most frequently used strategy in translating taboo items was softening. In another research, conducted by Hadipour in 2016, Allen and Burridge’s framework was adopted to study the strategies used in rendering 25 instances of taboo words in five Persian translations of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Her study showed that censorship was the most frequently used strategy in translating the taboos of this novel.

The present study differs from the aforementioned ones with respect to the corpus of the study as well as the framework used for analysing the data. While this study follows the same purpose as the previous ones, it complements their findings by shedding light on some of the unmentioned or unconsidered aspects of the Persian translations of taboo words and expressions of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Moreover, since several translations of this novel have been published in different decades, conducting research on the strategies that different generations of translators adopted for rendering the taboo language of the novel has the potential to uncover some of the norms of translating taboo items in different decades in Iran. Therefore, comparing the findings of this research with

the findings of the previous studies might shed light on the changes that happened in the policies of rendering the taboo words over time, in turn reflecting the effect of social, political and/or ideological factors on translation norms and conventions in different decades.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Corpus

To investigate the translation strategies used in rendering the taboo words and expressions of the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* into Persian in the 1390s/2010s, among several translations of the novel published for the first time in that decade, four translations were selected randomly. Moreover, to make a comparison between the norms of translating taboo words and expressions in the 1390s/2010s and the pre-Islamic Revolution era, the only translation of the novel published before the Islamic Revolution, done by Ahmad Karimi, was also examined. The bibliographical information of the Persian translations and the source text investigated in this research is as follows:

1. *Nātūr-e dasht* by Ahmad Karimi, published in 1345/1966 by Mina publication.
2. *Nātūr-e dasht* by Matin Karimi, published in 1392/2013 by Jami publication.
3. *Nātūr-e dasht* by Araz Barseghian, published in 1393/2014 by Milkan publication.
4. *Nātūr-e dasht* by Reza Zare', published in 1397/2018 by Elina publication.
5. *Nātūr-e dasht* by Saeed Douj, published in 1397/2018 by Ruzegar publication.
6. *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger published in 1991 by Little, Brown and Company.

#### 3.2. Theoretical Frameworks

In the present study, two theoretical frameworks were used, one for classification of taboos and the other for analysing them. To detect and classify the taboo words and expressions of the *The Catcher in the Rye*, the typology of taboo elements proposed by Sharifi and Darchinian (1388/2009) was used and to analyse the instances of taboos with respect to the translation strategies

adopted in rendering them, the typology of the translation strategies of taboos proposed by Lovihandrie, Mujiyanto, and Sutopo (2018) was adopted. In the following paragraphs, these two theoretical frameworks are explained.

The typology of taboo items proposed by Sharifi and Darchinian, in an article published in 1388/2009, is part of their study on the linguistic representation of taboo in Persian translations. In their study, these researchers recognised that two types of censorship were at work in the process of translating taboo words and expressions—one applied by the translators and the other imposed by social institutions, organisations and individuals — and provided eight types of taboos as well. Since in proposing their typology, Sharifi and Darchinian have taken the context of Iran into account, it was deemed more appropriate to use it for the purpose of this research. It should be explained that although in this research, this typology was used to detect the taboo items of an English novel, the researcher needed to know which words and expressions of the novel are considered taboo in the context of Iran. Therefore, using a local framework, like the one selected here, was necessary to make sure that the selected instances of taboos are actually considered taboo in the Iranian culture and society. Sharifi and Darchinian (1388/2009) classified taboo items into the following types:

1. Personal relationships between men and women, whether it is legitimate or illegitimate, and words related to such relationships, such as kissing, sexual intercourse, cuddling, infidelity, etc.;
2. Boys' and girls' premarital relationships, for instance boyfriend-ship, girl-friendship, etc.;
3. Naming organs of generation and words related to such organs;
4. Any word or action related to alcoholic drinks and drugs;
5. Abusive language, like insult or offensive remarks;

6. Mentioning improper features regarding social actions or habits, like appropriation;
7. Stating religious or philosophical issues and beliefs which are in conflict with the beliefs dominant in the translator's society;
8. Stating some political issues that can be in some way threatening to the interests of the translator's society or may lead to its instability, and also attributing some characteristics to key jobs in a society like the president of a country. (p. 132)

In addition to selecting the abovementioned framework for detecting the taboo items, another framework was used to analyse the data with respect to the translation strategies. The second framework of the research is the one proposed by Lovihandrie, Mujiyanto, and Sutopo (2018), which classify translation strategies for translating the taboo items into the following types (pp. 211–213):

1. **Omission:** based on this strategy, "the translator deletes a certain part or parts of a source text while transferring it into target language";
2. **Substitution:** this is "replacing a culture-specific item or expression" which is embedded in the source text with an item in the target language "which does not have the same propositional meaning but is likely to have a similar impact on the target reader";
3. **Euphemism:** this is "the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression to replace one that offends or suggests something unpleasant";
4. **Taboo for taboo:** based on this strategy, a taboo expression or item in the source text is "translated into taboo expression in the target language and has both the same expressive meaning and propositional meaning";
5. **Translation by a more general word:** in this strategy, the taboo expression is rendered "using the expression in the target text that can cover the meaning found in the source text";

6. **Borrowing:** the very expressions or words are taken directly from the source text and rendered untouched to the target one. Of course, some phonological “rules in the target language” are applied to these words.

### 3.3. Procedure

As the aim of this study was to pinpoint the strategies of translating taboo items, first it was necessary to single out the taboo items in the source text, i.e. the Salinger’s novel entitled *The Catcher in the Rye*. The collected items, which were the data of this study, ranged from single words or phrases to even a whole sentence. In the next step, after detecting and collecting the taboos of the source text based on Sharifi and Darchinian’s (1388/2009) typology of taboo items, the five Persian translations were examined carefully and line by line to find the Persian counterparts of the source text taboos in the target texts. Next, the 124 instances of taboo items, collected from the source text, and the five Persian counterparts of each item, collected from the five Persian translations, were analysed based on Lovihandrie, Mujiyanto and Sutopo’s (2018) framework to identify the translation strategies each translator used for rendering each taboo item.

### 4. Results

In this section, the results of the analysis of the 124 instances of the taboo items used in the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* and their counterparts in five Persian translations are presented. To find the strategies each translator used in rendering the taboo items, the collected taboo words and expressions from *The Catcher in the Rye* were compared with their Persian counterparts by using the Lovihandrie, Mujiyanto and Sutopo’s (2018) framework. The number of instances of using each translation strategy by each translator is presented in Table 1. It should be mentioned that in some cases, it was not easy to assign a specific strategy to a taboo word.

Table 1. Comparing the strategies used by five translators in rendering the taboo items of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Translation Strategies	Translators				
	Ahmad Karimi	Matin Karimi	Araz Barseghian	Reza Zare'	Saeed Douj
Omission	16	48	34	50	4
Substitution	15	18	36	23	2
Euphemism	11	28	32	23	41
Taboo for taboo	75	29	17	26	71
Translation by a more general word	5	1	0	1	6
Borrowing	0	0	1	0	0

As shown in Table 1, with respect to preserving the taboo words and expressions of *The Catcher in the Rye*, i.e., using the strategy of translating taboo for taboo, Ahmad Karimi's translation, which was published before the Islamic revolution, showed the highest number. From among the 124 instances of the taboo items, Ahmad Karimi preserved 75 of them, equal to more than 60% of the taboos. Surprisingly, among the other four translators, whose translations published in the 1390s/2010s, one of them adopted taboo-for-taboo strategy almost as frequently as Ahmad Karimi. It is Douj who has used the strategy of taboo for taboo in rendering 71 instances of taboo items, amounting to about 57% of the total instances. In Zare' and Matin Karimi's translations, 26 and 29 taboos are translated by a taboo in the Persian language, respectively. The least use of taboo for taboo strategy was seen in Barseghian's translation. These numbers indirectly highlight the difference among two groups of the translators, namely Ahmad Karimi and Douj, on one

side, and the remaining ones on the other. Such number of preserved taboo items in Douj's translation (by the application of taboo-for-taboo strategy) probably reflects his concern regarding the taboo language and his attempt to preserve it in his translation.

With respect to adopting the substitution strategy, which involves replacing a taboo with an item that does not have the same meaning but has "a similar impact on the target reader" (Lovihandrie, Mujiyanto & Sutopo, 2018, p. 212), Barseghian's translation showed the highest number of instances by 36 cases. In Zare's translation, 23 taboo words are translated by using the substitution strategy. Ahmad Karimi's and Matin Karimi's translations did not show a significant difference in this regard as they used this strategy for rendering 15 and 18 taboo items, respectively. However, a dramatic difference was seen in Douj's translation with only 2 instances of using the substitution strategy. This might be explained by considering the number of taboo items translated using taboo-for-taboo strategy by him. The numbers of this part are on a par with those of the previous one and complement that discussion. As Douj was probably sensitive about the taboo language, he used taboo-for-taboo strategy more and the substitution strategy less. On the contrary, Barseghian used substitution strategy more than others and taboo-for-taboo one less.

As for euphemism, in which translators try to preserve taboo words and expressions of source text by replacing them with more agreeable and less offensive items, Douj comes first, with 41 instances, which is about 33% of the total taboos. After Douj, Barseghian and Zare' are the ones who have used this strategy more than others with 32 and 23 instances, respectively. Matin Karimi has euphemised 28 taboo words and expressions and in Ahmad Karimi's translation only 11 taboo items are rendered by using the euphemism strategy.

As stated before, deletion is a strategy in which "some ST units are omitted in the translation" and such omissions are done "for various reasons" (Dukate, 2007, p. 208). Among the five translators, Zare', with 50 instances, and Matin Karimi, with 48 instances, are the ones who have adopted the omission strategy more than others. To explain by percentage, Zare' has deleted about 40% of the taboo items and in Matin Karimi's translation, more than 38% of the taboo words and expressions are omitted. Barseghian has deleted 34 taboos and Ahmad Karimi has omitted 16. The only translator who has decided to preserve most of the taboo items of the source text and avoided the omission strategy, as much as possible, is Douj, in whose translation only 4 taboo items are deleted.

The next strategy is translating a taboo with a more general word, which is not adopted for rendering many taboo items in any of the translations. While Barseghian has not used this strategy at all, Matin Karimi and Zare' have adopted it in only one case. In Ahmad Karimi and Douj's translations less than 5% of the taboo items are replaced by a more general word. Finally, with respect to borrowing strategy, only one borrowed item was found, seen in Barseghian's rendition. In his translation, Barseghian has translated the taboo expression "Fuck You" into "اف. يو" in Persian. This is not a complete borrowing, though. The first word, i.e., "Fuck", which is a taboo word, has not been borrowed as it is in the source text; rather, only the first letter of the word has been transliterated (as is pronounced as a separate letter) into Persian. Perhaps it is better to consider "اف. يو" a combination of borrowing and euphemism.

In addition to the abovementioned strategies, the researcher also found another strategy which is not mentioned in Lovihandrie, Mujjyanto and Sutopo's (2018) framework. This strategy, which is a kind of coinage, is used by Barseghian. In his translation, Barseghian has used a new word, believed to be

unprecedented in Persian. This new word is "رَدَدِشْتان" [radadištān], which has been used to translate four taboo words of *The Catcher in the Rye* all related to "sexual intercourse" or "sex" (Table 2).

Table 2. Barseghian's word coinage in translating taboo words related to "sexual intercourse" or "sex"

ST	Barseghian's Translation
He lost his virginity when he was only fourteen, in Nantucket. 79	وقتی چهارده سالش بود، اولین رَدَدِشْتانِش را رفته بود. تو چهارده سالگی! ۱۱۸
Most guys at Pencey just talked about having sexual intercourse with girls all the time. 28	بیشتر برویجه‌های پَنسی فقط راجع به رَدَدِشْتان با دخترها زر می‌زنند. ۴۱
Sex is something I really don't understand too hot. 35	رَدَدِشْتان تو رابطه را نمی‌فهمیدم. ۵۲
It was the address of this girl that wasn't exactly a whore or anything but that didn't mind doing it once in a while. 36	آدرس همان دختره که زیادی هم خراب نبود ولی هر از گاهی با این بارو تو پرینستون بود و خلاصه از رَدَدِشْتان‌بازی <sup>۱</sup> بدش نمی‌آمد. ۵۳

## 5. Discussion

The four Persian translations of *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in the 1390s/2010s, showed a remarkable variety with respect to rendering the taboo words and expressions. In Douj's translation, just like the pre-Islamic Revolution era translation produced by Ahmad Karimi, the most frequently used strategy is translating taboo items of the source text with the words and expressions that are considered taboo in Persian language. On the contrary, in Zare' and Matin Karimi's translations, omission is the dominant strategy. In Barseghian's

1. رددیشْتان‌بازی [radadištān-bāzī] in this example, as a combination of *radadištān* "sex" + *bāz*- "to play" (verbal present stem) + *-ī* (noun-maker) may be understood as a separate word (derivational compound), referring to the act of sex.

translation, substitution is the dominant strategy and omission, with the difference of two instances, is the second most frequently used strategy.

While previous studies on Persian translations of *The Catcher in the Rye* showed that the most frequently used strategy in translating taboo items of this novel was either omission or softening (see Azardashti, 2013 & Hadipour, 2016), findings of the present study revealed that in the 1390s/2010s, there were two groups of translators who adopted totally opposite strategies. The first group includes the translators who tried to preserve the taboo words and the second group were those who decided to delete them. As Bou and Pennock (cited in Azardashti, 2013) state, while translation of taboo “often depends on historical and political circumstances”, it is “also an area of personal struggle, of ethical/moral dissent, of religious/ideological controversies, of systematic self-censorship” (p. 113). The observed diversity in the strategies adopted for rendering the taboo items in four Persian translations of *The Catcher in the Rye*, all published in the 1390s/2010s, and the similarity between Douj and Ahmad Karimi’s translations – i.e. between a pre- and a post-Islamic Revolution era translation – can emphasize the role of translators’ personal decisions, rather than norm-based decisions, in translating or not translating the taboos. This finding is in line with the results of Azardashti’s (2013) study, which showed that the “translational patterns” in four Persian translations of *The Catcher in the Rye* (two different versions of Ahmad Karimi’s translation plus the translations done by Najafi and Zolghadr) were basically “rooted in the idiosyncratic decisions made on the part of translators, rather than a strictly norm-based assessment of the culture to which they contributed their product” (p. 1).

Finally, as previously mentioned, taboo items are one of the “stylistic feature[s]” of literary works, which are used purposefully by the authors “to create an effect on the reader” (Atanasovska, 2016, p. 72). Therefore, omitting

taboos or substituting them by non-taboo items results in “minimisation of the stylistic dimension of the translation” and has negative impact on the “artistic and aesthetic effect” of the work (Atanasovska, 2016, p. 76). That being the case, while Douj and Ahmad Karimi managed to preserve Salinger’s style, as they transferred more than fifty percent of taboo items of the novel into Persian, Zare’ and Matin Karimi, who left out nearly fifty percent of taboos of the source text, failed to maintain the author’s style.

## 6. Conclusion

Findings of this study showed that among four Persian translations of *The Catcher in the Rye*, all published in the 1390s/2010s, in two of them (Zare’ and Matin Karimi’s) omission was the dominant strategy and in one of them (Barsequian’s) the dominant strategy was substitution. The fourth translation, done by Douj, showed great similarity to the one done by Ahmad Karimi before the Islamic Revolution, as in both translations the most frequently used strategy was taboo for taboo. Interestingly, the number of omitted taboos in Douj’s translation was about one-fourth of the deleted taboo items found in the translation published in the pre-Islamic Revolution era. It is also worth mentioning that while Douj’s and Zare’s translations were both published in the same year, i.e. 1397, there is a profound difference between these two translations with respect to translating the taboos. In Douj’s translation, more than fifty-seven percent of the source text taboos are translated by Persian taboos and only 4 taboo items are deleted; but, in Zare’ translation fifty taboos are deleted and just twenty percent of them have been rendered by using Persian taboos. This great diversity in translating taboos of *The Catcher in the Rye* in four Persian translations, which are all published in one decade, stresses the role of translators’ personal decisions, rather than their norm-based decisions, in rendering taboo items.

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