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The Great Taboo: Omission and Addition in the Mongolian Translation of "Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World"

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Abstract: In literary translation, alterations such as omission and addition are often made to adapt the source text to the target language. But how frequently do translators make such changes, and what motivates these alterations? This paper explores these questions by applying both qualitative and quantitative methods to compare Weatherford's *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* with its Mongolian translation by Ganbold Gonchig. The theoretical framework of this study posits that translators modify the source text to accommodate linguistic, pragmatic, cultural, and ideological differences in the receptor language and culture. The findings reveal that both omission and addition are commonly used techniques in literary translation to meet linguistic and stylistic preferences, as well as to bridge cultural disparities for the target language readers.

Introduction

In literary translation, alterations such as omissions and additions are commonly made to adapt the source text to the target language. This phenomenon is widely acknowledged, yet there is limited empirical evidence regarding the frequency and motivations behind these changes. The objective of this research is to explore the extent to which translators modify texts, and to understand the underlying reasons for these alterations. The author hypothesizes that omissions and additions are frequently used strategies in literary translation, and that these alterations are primarily motivated by the need to adapt the text to the target audience's linguistic and cultural context.

Literature review

The analysis of omissions and additions is based on the concept that omission is a practice whereby professional translators delete words, phrases, sentences, and sometimes even more substantial parts of the source text. This occurs in the translation process to adjust the text linguistically, pragmatically, culturally, and ideologically for the target audience, as suggested by Dimitriu (2004:165). Dimitriu’s concept builds on Nida’s notion of adjustment (1964:226–240), which includes additions, subtractions, and alterations. However, Nida’s methods primarily address the linguistic aspects, lacking consideration for cultural or ideological adjustments.

Just as Nida refers to omission as subtraction, different researchers have used various terms for similar concepts. For instance, Vinay and Darbelnet (1995:342) use the terms explicitation and implicitation. Explicitation refers to the practice of making implicit information from the source text explicit in the target text to ensure clarity for the audience, often requiring additions. Conversely, implicitation involves reducing or omitting details from the source text when they are redundant or unnecessary for the target audience, aligning with omission. An example of this can be seen in the translation of the phrase “what looks like glaciers in the winter” into Mongolian as “алсаас мөсөн гол мэт харагдах”, which roughly translates back to English as “looking like a glacier from a distance”. In this case, the phrase “in the winter” is omitted, as it is considered obvious to Mongolian readers, while “from a distance” is added to enhance clarity in the target language.

Omission is a more contentious practice compared to addition. For example, while Nida considers it a highly important strategy in the process of adjustments (1964:231), some researchers, like Nozizwe and Ncube (2014:671), criticize omission as a “loss”. Supporting the practical application of omission, Baker (2011:42) states:

> This strategy may sound rather drastic, but in fact it does no harm to omit translating a word or expression in some contexts. If the meaning conveyed by a particular item or expression is not vital enough to the development of the text to justify distracting the reader with lengthy explanations, translators can and often do simply omit translating the word or expression in question.

Regarding the appropriate use of these practices, Djohan and Lestari (2021:590) put forward that

> In translating a text, a translator must be able to properly transfer the message from the source text into the target language [text]. A good

> translation is one that does not add or delete information from the source text. However, these additions and deletions are needed to make the translation results sound more natural and easily understood by the target reader. In adding and deleting information, the translator must not do it arbitrarily. There must be careful consideration and calculation before the translator enters additional information or deletes information from the source language.

Yao (2017) said, "Sometimes we make additions to make the translation native to the target language expression or for rhetorical purposes", and "Omissions and additions are made so that the grammar is correct, the meaning is clear and the expression is native." Newmark (1998:91–92) also found that the extra information a translator might need to include typically relates to cultural, technical, or linguistic aspects and is based on the needs of the translator's audience rather than the original readers.

Moreover, Mongolian translation theorists recognize the practice of employing alteration strategies in translation. For instance, Dashdavaa (2010:193) highlights that "In the translation by Natsagdorj D., the abundant occurrence of techniques such as addition, omission, relocation, and substitution is observed. Such transformations are considered as normal phenomena in the realm of translation."

Further expanding her formula, Dimitriu (2004) suggested an integrated typology of omissions, which has become the main foundation for this research. (This typology also applies to some aspects of addition.) The typology includes:

1) Ensuring linguistic accuracy and stylistic acceptability;
2) Presenting all the information in a more concise manner;
3) Presenting only essential information;
4) Avoiding unnecessary "bumps" in terms of culture, time, and space;
5) Observing text-type and genre-related norms (poems, web pages, brochures, etc.);
6) Observing editorial norms;
7) Avoiding cultural taboos; and
8) Supporting the ideology of a political system.

In short, both omission and addition are essential practices in translation, employed to ensure clarity, naturalness, and cultural relevance for the target audience.

Objective and methods

The objective of this paper is to analyze translation examples related to the living environment of Mongolians and natural conditions found in the source book

Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World, by Jack Weatherford, along with its translation by Ганболд Гончиг (Ganbold Gonchig). This researcher selected these works for analysis because they resonate so naturally with Mongolian readers.

Weatherford is a professor of anthropology at Macalester College in Minnesota, best known for his book *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (2004). After its success, he authored two additional works on Mongolian history: *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire* (2010) and *Genghis Khan and the Quest for God: How the World's Greatest Conqueror Gave Us Religious Freedom* (2017). In recognition of his contributions, he was awarded Mongolia's two highest national honors: The Order of the Polar Star (in 2006) and the Order of Genghis Khan (in 2022).

The Mongolian translator, Ganbold Gonchig, is a professional translator and interpreter, specializing in English Literature at the National University of Mongolia. He received education in India, Russia, the UK, Switzerland, the USA, and Germany. His career has been primarily related to foreign affairs and diplomacy, and he has translated over twenty literary works. According to the translator, he translated the source book to provide Mongolian readers with a foreign perspective on Mongolian history, particularly regarding Genghis Khan.

The fact that the book stayed on the *New York Times Bestseller List* for two weeks in 2004 and also ranked at number 6 on the *New York Times* e-book bestseller list in 2014, as well as that the translated version sounded highly natural to Mongolian readers, brought the books to this researcher's attention. The source book has 271 pages and the target language book has 240 pages.

Although the original book's content is rooted in history, its narrative style is highly artistic and novelistic. The author employs vivid descriptive language and occasional exaggeration to enhance the storytelling. Due to this unique writing style, this researcher categorized both the source book and its translation as part of the literary genre. The translator skillfully preserved this style, ensuring that the creativity and descriptive richness of the original work remained intact.

This comparative study of the source text and target text was conducted in two stages: first qualitative, then quantitative analysis. Initially, sentences related to the living environment of Mongolians, and natural conditions were extracted from the novel for examination. Specific words, phrases, and statements that were omitted or added in the translation were then identified. These identified elements were analyzed and categorized based on their purpose or rationale, forming the qualitative research phase.

In the quantitative research phase, the total occurrences of translation by omission and translation by addition are presented. The percentage distribution of the different purposes or reasons for both translation methods are then presented graphically.

Qualitative analysis: observation categories

When examining the words, phrases, or statements either omitted or added in the sentences describing the environment and living conditions of Mongolians in the target language book, it was observed that the translator used various translation strategies. This paper posits that these choices may have been influenced by the following factors:

1) Linguistic conventions and stylistic accessibility;
2) Cultural differences;
3) Geographical and natural distinctions; and
4) Ideological preferences and the author's choices.

The category "Geographical and natural distinctions" reflects the many occurrences related to this category which were observed, no doubt due to the nature-focused scope of this work. The factor aligns with Dimitriu's (2004:167) recommendation to "avoid unnecessary 'bumps' in terms of culture, time, and space".

Another category, "the author's choices", is included to reflect instances where the translator's reasons for omitting or adding content were unclear. The category is based on the notion that "one may feel inclined to think that, in order to fulfill this purpose, supporters of a particular ideology (including translators) may enhance the persuasive power of (translated) discourses by additions and expansions rather than by omitting parts of texts" by Dimitriu (2004:171).

Category 1: Linguistic conventions and stylistic accessibility

- Omitted parts explaining Mongolian words in English, for example:
  - Omission (case 4): "the Ikh Khorig, the Great Taboo" – here the expression "the Great Taboo" was omitted.
- Omissions or additions in order to sound natural to Mongolians, for example:
  - Omission (case 33): The phrase "The long, broad steppes" – here the word "long" was omitted as Mongolians do not say "long steppes".
- Parts that have been removed so as not to repeat words and to avoid confusion, for example:

  - Omission (case 21): "about directions, navigation, and the patience of waiting until someone came along" – here the words "direction" and "navigation" are translated as one word because in Mongolian they express the same thing.
- Deductions made for greater brevity and clarity, for example:
  - Omission (case 8): the expression "Blackened debris of unknown origin floated in the stagnant liquid, and animal bones, dried carcasses, swatches of fur, and clumps of feathers littered the edges of the ponds" was translated into "ямар нэгэн амьтны яс мэт хувхайрч гандсан сэг зэм, хэсэг бусаг арьс үс тогтоол усны захаар харагдана", or "A dried carcass like the bones of some animal, pieces of skin and hair are seen at the edge of the water", omitting the words and phrases like "Dark and mysterious ponds of unidentified chemicals", "eerily", "floated in the stagnant". What remains is definitely easy to imagine and understand for Mongolian readers.
- Added words or expressions for rhetorical purposes, for example:
  - Addition (case 1): "captured the power of the wind, the sky, and the sun" became "хурмаст тэнгэр, гэгээн нар, хорвоогийн салхины хүчийг өөртөө шингээн агуулах" which means "to absorb the power of the heavenly sky, the holy sun, and the wind of the world".

Category 2: Cultural differences

- Exclusions or additions due to cultural differences, for example:
  - Omission (case 5): The word "shrine" is omitted. In relation to religion, the word is not familiar to Mongolians, so it was possibly left out for this reason.
  - Addition (case 47): "wrestling" became "бөхчүүд хүч үзэн уран мэхийг уралдуулан барилдаж" which roughly means "Wrestlers wrestle competing with their strength and skillful tricks". This extension may relate to Mongolians' great respect for their national wrestling.
- Sensitive contents or statements that can cause a negative impression on Mongolians, for example:
  - Omission (case 52): "hunting rats and other small mammals" – here the word "rats" was omitted as, of course, Mongolians would find it uncomfortable to eat rats.

Category 3: Geographical and natural distinctions

- Excluded or added parts due to different understanding and perceptions of nature and geography because of living in different parts of the world, for example:
  - Omission (case 28): "In the long winter" – here the word "long" is left out. The word might have been present in the ST because the cold season of most European countries is shorter than Mongolian winter, but Mongolians do not need to include the word "long".
  - Addition (case 16): "beyond the range of the Pacific Ocean's moisture-bearing winds" translated into "Номхон далайн чийглэг, зөөлөн салхи ч хүрдэггүй ажээ" which roughly means "Even the moist and gentle winds of the Pacific Ocean do not touch it" – here the word "gentle" was added. This perhaps was because of geographical disparities, i.e., that most Mongolians have no idea of the climate around oceans.

Category 4: Ideological preferences and author's choice

- Expressions that are incompatible with the concepts or ideology of the target language nation, as well as the omissions or additions that could have been translated as they are without posing any problems.
  - Omission (case 23): "the men eagerly hunted for their own sustenance" – here the word "eagerly" which can be considered ideologically inappropriate was left out because it might be misunderstood by Mongolians.
  - Omission (case 68): "The night was dark and moonless, and the only escape route was on the steep back side of the mountain …" – here considered the translator's choice as the entire sentence was rendered "in the dark".

Quantitative analysis

There were 184 units describing the living environment and natural conditions of Mongolians. It is noteworthy that the term "unit" here refers to the translation of English sentences into Mongolian, where in some instances, multiple English sentences were condensed into one Mongolian sentence, while in others, a single English sentence was expanded into two Mongolian sentences. These units were analyzed in 345 tables, with each unit examined across an average of two tables.

To illustrate, the following case shows how one sentence was divided into two tables, with different parts of the sentence analyzed separately:

ST: According to Mongol belief, the body of the dead should be left in peace and did not need a monument because the soul was no longer there; it lived on in the Spirit Banner. (Xxi)

TT: Нас нөгчсөн хүний цогцсыг хөндөлгүй амар амгалан орхидог монгол заншлын дагуу сүнс нь тэнд үлддэггүй болохоор хөшөө дурсгал босгох хэрэг ч үгүй билээ. (Page 20)

Source text	the body of the dead should be left in peace
Target text	Нас нөгчсөн хүний цогцсыг хөндөлгүй амар амгалан орхидог
Back translation	*the body of the dead should be in peace without bothering*
Technique	Translation by addition
Comment	Added the adverb "хөндөлгүй" roughly means "without bothering"

Source text	it lived on in the Spirit Banner.
Target text	Ø
Back translation	
Technique	Translation by omission
Comment	This part was omitted – author's choice

Across the 345 tables, omission and addition were identified 117 and 76 times, respectively. In nineteen cases, the two practices overlapped, meaning they were applied to the same phrase. Additionally, in 171 tables, neither omission nor addition were utilized. The percentages are summarized below:

- Omission: 31.2%
- Addition: 19.3%
- Neither technique: 49.6%

The percentages of purposes using omission and addition are shown below:

Omission

Linguistic adaptation: 52%
Cultural adaptation: 22%
Geographical adaptation: 14.5%
Ideological adaptation: 11.1%

Addition

Linguistic adaptation: 60%
Cultural adaptation: 25%
Geographical adaptation: 8%
Ideological adaptation: 7%

These results are shown in Figures 1 and 2 below.

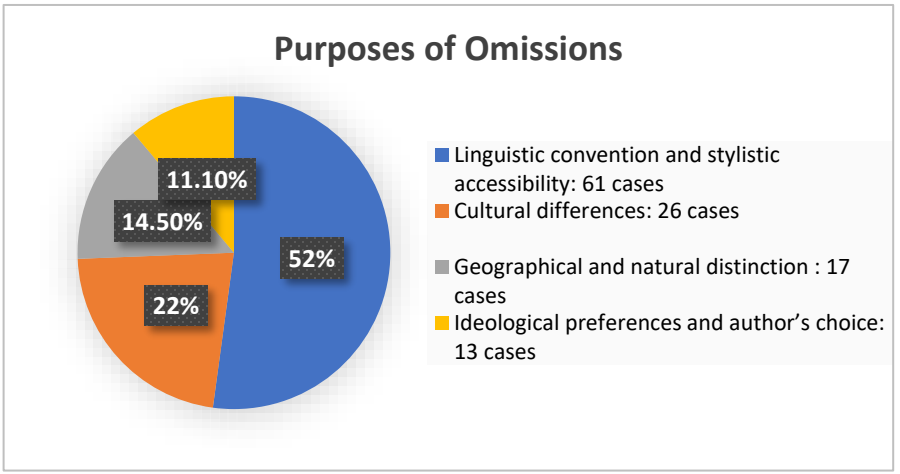

Figure 1.

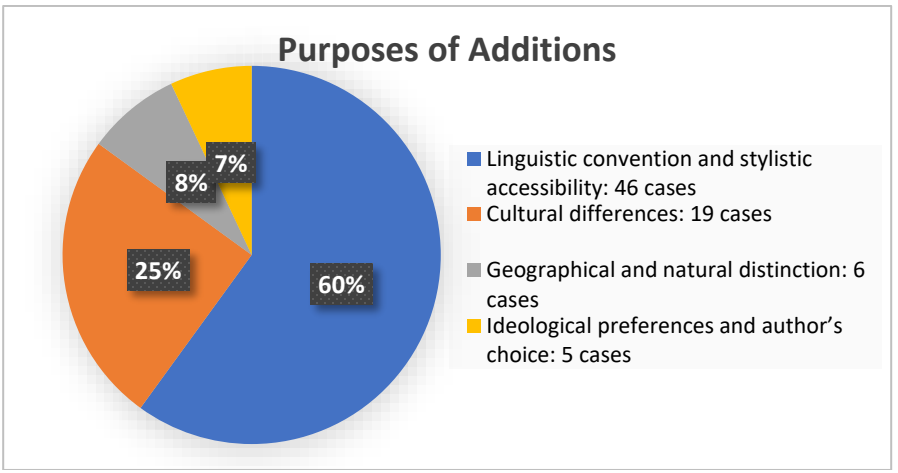

Figure 2.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of two key translation practices—omission and addition—in literary translation. Omission occurred in 31.2% of cases, while addition was used in 19.3% of instances, emphasizing their substantial impact on the translation process. Approximately 50% of the extracted sentences were affected by these techniques. Furthermore, the ratio of omission to addition is about 3:2, likely indicating a greater reliance on omission. However, this researcher acknowledges that omission might occur more frequently than addition in this particular translation, as the source text narrates Mongolian history and culture from a non-Mongolian perspective. As a result, elements that are explicit for foreigner readers of the source book may become implicit for Mongolian readers in the translated version.

The alterations in the translation aim to align the source text linguistically, culturally, geographically, and ideologically with the target text, the study shows. It also reveals that successful adaptation to the target language readers necessitates meticulous attention to linguistic norms and stylistic nuances. Notably, linguistic convention and stylistic accessibility emerged as primary drivers behind the majority of omissions and additions, accounting for more than half of the total occurrences.

Cultural adaptation emerges as a second significant issue, as approximately one out of every five sentences or units required either an addition or omission for effective cultural adjustment. This also points to the critical importance of cultural sensitivity in the translation process, emphasizing the need for translators to navigate and respect cultural differences while ensuring accurate and meaningful communication.

In summary, the results of this research show that omission and addition are important strategies used in literary translation to satisfy the linguistic, stylistic, cultural, geographical, and ideological differences of the target audience, particularly in contexts related to nature and living conditions. Despite its limited scope, the study provides valuable insights into the prevalence and effectiveness of these two translation strategies.

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