



Retranslation and Recreation of Child Speech: The Case of Shirley Jackson's *Charles* in Persian

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Abstract

The comparative study of retranslations has long been a topic of interest in Translation Studies, particularly as a means of assessing translation quality. One illustrative case in the Iranian context is Shirley Jackson's *Charles*, a short story translated into Persian multiple times over the past two decades. Accordingly, this paper conducted a comparative and analytical critique of eight existing Persian translations of *Charles*, focusing on the retranslation of child speech. Specifically, the study examined whether repeated translations merely duplicated existing versions or offered added value. Drawing on Emam's (2014) framework of child speech characteristics and Khazaeefar's (2022) principles of naturalness in spoken-language translation, the analysis evaluated how each translator rendered Laurie's childish language and tone. The findings revealed that most translators defaulted to formal, adult-oriented registers. The study concluded that retranslation is justified when it addresses earlier shortcomings and offers new approaches. The paper underscores the necessity of translation criticism as a quality-assessment tool and contributes to discussions on retranslation, children's literature translation, and the recreation of child speech in Persian.

Keywords: Child speech in translation, children's literature translation, Persian translation, retranslation, translation criticism

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1. Introduction

In Translation Studies, the term *retranslation* (also referred to as multiple translations) is used to describe cases in which a single source text is translated more than once into the same target language, whether by different translators over time or by the same translator producing a new version of the same work at different points in time (House, 2024; Munday et al., 2022; Newmark, 1988; Pym, 2023). Generally speaking, the phenomenon of repeated translations is neither new nor limited to Iran or to the translation of literary texts (Emam, 2014). Nevertheless, in the present century, the proliferation of multiple translations of a single work—particularly in literature and the humanities—has increased noticeably. Retranslation has long been a controversial and highly debated issue, driven by a variety of underlying causes and motivations, a full discussion of which lies beyond the scope of the present study (for detailed discussions, see Emam, 2014).

Opponents of retranslation often point to the waste of resources (capital, time, and energy), unnecessary duplication of effort, purely economic motivations with little regard for translation quality, unhealthy competition among translators and publishers (including the pursuit of easy commercial profit and artificial prestige), the mass entry of underqualified translators into the market, reader confusion, and the fragmentation of interpretation—especially when multiple translations differ significantly or even contradict one another. In addition, suspicions of opportunistic practices such as copying or closely imitating earlier or superior translations for rapid book production and résumé building are frequently raised. In many cases, later retranslations have been produced either due to lack of awareness of existing versions or, more critically, due to negligence in conducting effective preliminary research.

Supporters of retranslation, however, advance a different set of arguments. These include diachronic changes in language and its expressive resources, shifts in cultural contexts and translation norms over time, differences in translators' styles and approaches, variations in target audiences and translation purposes, the discovery of new aspects and interpretations of the source text, translators' desire to test their skills, and—perhaps most importantly—the inadequacy or inaccuracy of earlier translations and the consequent need to correct linguistic, conceptual, or ethical shortcomings. From this perspective, the multiplicity of translations is not only an indicator of linguistic and literary vitality but also a cultural and scholarly necessity, contributing to the enrichment of linguistic and cultural capital. It may therefore be concluded that retranslation is justifiable only when there are sound reasons for undertaking it, when a genuine need is felt, and when the new translation offers something beyond what already exists. In other words, repeated translations must provide added value.

Overall, the phenomenon of multiple translations of a single work is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently detrimental; it entails both advantages and drawbacks (Emam, 2014). Like any relative phenomenon, when grounded in necessity and guided by clear and rational justification, it can be productive. Otherwise, it risks little more than confusing readers and lowering translation quality. Consequently, the issue of multiple and renewed translations is intrinsically linked to evaluation, criticism, and quality assessment. The comparative study of retranslations has long been a topic of interest in Translation Studies research, particularly as a means of assessing translation quality.

One particularly illustrative case in the Iranian context is Shirley Jackson's short story *Charles* (1948), a work that has been translated into Persian multiple times over the past two decades. Accordingly, the present paper undertook a comparative and analytical criticism of the existing Persian translations of this story, as the repeated retranslations of *Charles* raise important questions concerning both differences and quality. The central research question guiding this study was therefore as follows: Are these retranslations merely repetitive, or does each offer some form of added value? To address this

question, the paper first provides a brief introduction to the author and her works, with particular attention to the short story *Charles* and its Persian translations.

2. Shirley Hardie Jackson (1916–1965) and Her Works

Shirley Jackson is one of the most prominent American writers of the twentieth century, renowned for her psychological, horror, and darkly humorous fiction. By combining realism with Gothic elements and black humor, she produced works that blur the boundary between horror and everyday life. Her distinctive artistic ability to intertwine fear, bitter irony, and social realism has led to her works being regarded not only as literary creations but also as psycho-social analyses. Through precise and multilayered prose, Jackson challenges readers to uncover the unspoken darkness lurking beneath the seemingly calm surface of ordinary life. Jackson was a multidimensional writer who, with a sharp and critical eye, explored a wide range of themes such as superstition and hidden (often violent) traditions, loneliness, supernatural fears with religious or social roots, and institutionalized horror within society and the family. Overall, she can be considered a pioneering author who critically examined social norms and the unconscious fears of human beings.

Her most famous work, the short story *The Lottery* (1948), symbolically portrays a horrifying collective tradition within an apparently civilized society, where communal violence is concealed beneath the guise of religious ritual—a violence born of blind adherence to superstition, supernatural beliefs, and violent customs. Jackson's unique style in revealing the hidden darkness of everyday social life and creating seemingly ordinary characters with terrifying secrets has had a lasting influence on horror literature and psychological fiction. Her novels *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) are also outstanding examples of Gothic and psychological literature that depict inner fears and the complexities of human relationships. In addition to her symbolic horror stories, Jackson also produced (semi-)autobiographical works such as *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), as well as several short stories, in which she humorously examines challenges related to family life, parent–child relationships, educational practices, and child-rearing. In these collections, she focuses on the daily life of the Jackson family, particularly her own experiences as a wife and the mother of four children. One of her most notable works that directly addresses destructive parenting practices during children's growth and personality formation is the short story *Charles* (1948).

3. *Charles*: A Brief Introduction

The short story *Charles* was first published in July 1948 by Mademoiselle. It narrates the story of a creative yet mischievous young boy named Laurie during his first days in kindergarten. Every day, Laurie reports to his parents the misbehavior of one of his classmates, Charles—such as disrespecting the teacher, bullying classmates, or using offensive language. The story, however, keeps the reader in suspense and ends with a surprising twist: in the final sentence, it becomes clear that Charles does not exist and is merely a product of Laurie's imagination, created to attribute his own violent and inappropriate behavior to someone else. In reality, the problematic child is Laurie himself. This sudden plot twist forces the reader to reconsider the story, characters, and events, prompting a reassessment of earlier assumptions. The central themes of the story include dual identity, the gap between appearance and reality, parental blindness to truth, deception, lying, and masking.

The characters in the story include Laurie, Charles (an imaginary yet central character), the mother, the father, the teacher, and the schoolchildren. Except for Laurie/Charles, none of the characters are named. The story is narrated by Laurie's mother, using a first-person limited perspective. One of the main themes is social masking and dual identity, manifested through the contrast between Laurie's

outward behavior and inner reality, as well as his parents' ignorance of his true conduct. The tension arises between the identity Laurie has (or the identity his parents believe he has) and the identity he desires—embodied in the imaginary character of Charles.

Charles is essentially autobiographical, drawing on Jackson's own life experiences. Laurie is inspired by Laurence, Jackson's eldest son. Through this short story, Jackson demonstrates how children may invent imaginary characters to conceal their own mistakes, hide aggressive behavior, and project their ideals onto these fictional figures. The story also highlights the role of parents in child-rearing and their occasional naïveté in accepting children's narratives at face value. The unexpected ending encourages readers to reflect on how little we may truly know even about those closest to us.

As in most narrative fiction—particularly novels and short stories—*Charles* clearly distinguishes between two types of language that shape its structure: spoken language (dialogues, quotations, and narrative discourse) and written language (the descriptive narrative text). Together, these play a crucial role in atmosphere-building, characterization, and narrative progression. Spoken language in *Charles* includes direct dialogues and indirect reported speech, and is generally natural, simple, and close to everyday colloquial usage, often informal and intimate, reflecting the characters' individual traits. Speech patterns vary according to relationships, age, roles, social position, and distance. For example, Laurie's casual, intimate speech with his parents differs significantly from the parents' broken colloquial exchanges with each other or the mother's polite, formal speech with the teacher. The narrator's feminine tone is also evident.

The written narrative consists of descriptions of scenes, settings, characters, emotions, inner thoughts, clothing, and analyses of events. This part is generally written in formal literary language. With simple and fluent language, subtle humor, and a surprising ending, Jackson creates a story that appeals to children while also provoking adult reflection. By employing literary devices such as irony, satire, and ambiguity, she crafts a short yet profound narrative about parental illusions and childhood behavior. The apparent simplicity of the text masks its complex semantic layers. Charles does not exist, yet his impact is real.

Jackson uses short, direct, and colloquial sentences to make the narrator's voice and Laurie's childlike dialogue sound natural and credible. One of the dominant stylistic devices in the story is repetition: Charles's name is repeatedly mentioned to emphasize the importance of the imaginary character and reinforce the story's humor. Repetition is also a key linguistic feature of children's speech, both in vocabulary and sentence structure. The informal narrative style avoids heavy or complex literary ornamentation. Jackson deliberately refrains from elevated diction or elaborate structures, and even the descriptions are plain and unadorned. The story's vocabulary is largely composed of simple, everyday words, as the narrative reflects the perspective of an ordinary mother describing her six-year-old child. Most sentences are short and straightforward, ensuring narrative pace and accessibility. However, toward the end—when the twist occurs—sentences become longer and the tone more serious to intensify the impact of the final shock and situational irony. Beneath the seemingly simple tone lies a layer of dark humor and satire.

4. Persian Translations of *Charles*

A search of the National Library of Iran and major academic databases (e.g., Magiran, SID, the Comprehensive Humanities Portal, and Noor Journals) revealed that *Charles* has been translated into Persian multiple times and published in both anthologies and specialized journals. These translations, listed chronologically, include works by Amraei (1991), Bidarmaghz (1995) (1995), Karagahi (2000), Shariati (2004), Pourjafari Khaneghah (2004), Eslami (2008), Ghane (2011), and Khazaeefar (2023). The present study conducted a comparative–analytical and evaluative critique of these eight translations. Although other Persian translations exist—such as Fallah's (2007) version published in a limited-

circulation youth magazine—they were excluded due to lack of full access. Audiobook translations were also omitted due to their different nature and for methodological consistency.

It is noteworthy that within just over two decades, at least nine Persian translations of *Charles* have entered the Iranian market. Seven were published in mostly specialized literary journals, while only the earliest and latest translations appeared as part of book collections. Particularly striking is the fact that the literary magazine *Golestaneh* published two translations of the story approximately ten years apart without cross-referencing the earlier version. Among the translators of the work, Amraei (1991), Karagahi (2000), and Khazaefar (2023) have written a short introduction to the work and its author. Amraei (1991) and Bidarmaghz (1995), for their part, have respectively confined themselves to providing a single footnote to introduce the Persian reader to the English spelling of the proper name “Laurie.” Aside from these scant instances, most translations lack supplementary materials (typically appearing in translations in the form of footnotes or endnotes) to help readers compensate for their informational deficiencies, including any introduction to the work, a translator’s preface (elaborating on the translation method, translation strategies, challenges, and solutions), or cultural notes. It should be noted, however, that Khazaefar (2023) alone, in his “Translator’s Preface” (to the collection he selected for translation), offers a “brief explanation” in one short paragraph concerning his general methodology for translating all twenty stories in the collection, rather than case-specific strategies for rendering each individual work (Khazaefar, 2023, pp. 7–8).

5. Assessing Laurie’s Child Speech in Persian Translations

Laurie’s linguistic and behavioral features are entirely appropriate to his young age and childish status. His language, marked by distinctly childlike features—including simple vocabulary and the use of short, straightforward, and informal sentences—vividly brings the narrative to life and renders it believable, while effectively foregrounding his childish nature. Linguistically, Laurie reflects a child transitioning from early childhood to the initial stages of socialization and identity formation. This developmental stage manifests in changes in behavior, speech, and even clothing, as Laurie seeks independence, attention, and recognition. Indeed, Laurie’s speech reflects the personality and behavior of a child endeavoring to leave childhood behind, take the initial steps toward maturity, adapt to a new environment and world, and construct a fresh identity for himself.

In essence, Laurie is undergoing one of the most critical and sensitive phases of his growth and maturation: the formation of his personality. Consequently, pronounced changes emerge in his behavior (manifested in mistreating his father, ignoring his mother, and displaying rudeness and disobedience), his speech patterns, and his attire. He expects to be treated in the same manner as his father and, upon returning from school, anticipates that his mother will come to welcome him and take his hat and schoolbag. This alteration in Laurie’s conduct signifies a transition from childhood to the initial stages of socialization and engagement with societal rules, by means of which he seeks to garner attention. At home, Laurie addresses his parents with incivility, indifference, and even asperity, refusing to heed their words. He replies to his parents’ questions—particularly those of his father—with curt, and occasionally one-word, responses, and deliberately leaves some of their queries unanswered. When narrating Charles’s mischievous exploits, his code of conduct and speech take on an aggressive and impudent tone. Collectively, these instances are indicative of his rapid growth, his quest for independence, and his concerted effort to exhibit a new identity and signal his progression toward adulthood.

One of the most important aspects of Laurie’s speech, according to Heidari Tabrizi (2026), is its child-oriented speech and childish tone of voice, shaped by lexical choices and grammatical structures. Khazaefar (2022) emphasizes that it is essential for the translation reader—much like the reader of the original work—to “*feel* the spoken quality of the language and accept its naturalness” (p. 4). He

argues that achieving the “naturalness” of rendering spoken discourse in Persian narrative writing—or, more precisely, “making the written text colloquially spoken”—in contemporary works hinges on three principal features:

[first,] similarity (in terms of vocabulary and syntax) to the language used by individuals in corresponding real-life situations; [second,] proportionality between the individual’s speech and their sociocultural and age-based identity; [third,] coherence among the individual’s utterances, such that not only each sentence and its constituents but also the flow between them sounds natural to the ear”. (Khazaefar, 2022, p. 3)

Khazaefar (2022) further explains that since the characters in a story each speak in a manner befitting their own distinct personality rather than in one uniform style, the translator must likewise refrain from rendering the language of the various characters identically, so that the translation reader may believe the dialogues are natural. In addition, a defining characteristic of any dialogue is its coherence; that is, the sentences exchanged in verbal interactions are not “halting and disjointed.” In fact, the author presents the sentences exchanged between the interlocutors in such a way “that the reader believes the speaker has uttered these sentences in a continuous and natural flow” (p. 4). Acknowledging these distinguishing characteristics of spoken discourse in general, Emam (2014), in particular, identified seven core features of childlike speech, proposing a framework for analyzing children’s speech in terms of its key phonological, lexical, syntactic, and stylistic constituents. Table 1 presents Emam’s (2014) proposed typical characteristics of child speech:

Table 1. Emam’s (2014) Classification of Child Speech

No.	Feature	Explanation
1	Simplicity of Themes	Using simple, straightforward, and age-appropriate topics that children can easily relate to and understand.
2	Simplicity of Vocabulary	Choosing easy, everyday, and familiar words instead of complex or formal vocabulary.
3	Simplicity of Grammatical Structures	Employing short and simple sentences with basic grammar, avoiding complicated structures.
4	Colloquialism/Conversational Language	Making the language sound natural, conversational, and close to children’s everyday spoken language.
5	Tendency toward Repetitive Patterns	Using repeated phrases, rhythms, and verbal patterns that feel familiar and comforting to children.
6	Wordplay/Verbal Jokes	Incorporating rhymes, sound games, alliteration, and playful language features.
7	Dominance of Form over Content	Prioritizing rhythm, sound, musicality, and form rather than dense or complex content.

Naturally, these characteristics are also dominant in the speech of six-year-old Laurie—a child speaker—manifesting equally in his spoken dialogues and in the narrative prose of the story. The translator is therefore expected, through appropriate lexical, syntactic, pragmatic choices, and forms of address, to preserve the childlike language, tone, and ambiance of the protagonist. In brief, the translator, akin to the author of the source text, must endeavor to ensure that the spoken and narrative language of the story in general and the child speech in particular appear natural. Indeed, failure to recreate his simple, slightly insolent, and colloquial childish tone would inevitably diminish the story’s appeal. According to Emam (2014), many translators, however, tend to “normalize” these features by translating them into grammatically correct, formal, and adult-oriented language. Ostadi and Heidari Tabrizi (2026) concluded that “the process of normalization results in the loss of spontaneity, humor, intimacy, and authenticity, which characterize children’s literature.”

In the case of *Charles*, childlike speech and tone of voice must be treated as a primary criterion in translation quality assessment, not a secondary stylistic concern. Evaluating retranslations of this story therefore requires attention to preservation of child-appropriate pragmatics, resistance to adultization, functional handling of repetition and rudeness, and creative solutions for prosody and wordplay. Seen in this light, retranslations of *Charles* were meaningfully assessed in terms of whether they merely reproduced propositional content or succeeded in re-voicing childhood in a way that preserved both linguistic authenticity and narrative function.

Thus, it remains to be determined to what extent each Persian translator has succeeded in preserving Laurie's childish speech (along with the tone of voice) and in naturalizing the colloquial and narrative accounts of the story, as well as how meticulous they have been in their lexical and structural choices. It is also worth noting that in the majority of the story's dialogues, Laurie is almost always present as an active, engaged party. To determine the degree of success achieved by each translator, the present study compared and critically examined a selection of samples that exemplify the salient features of Laurie's childish tone speech in the original text, juxtaposed with their corresponding Persian renderings in the translations under review.

Laurie's speech is characterized by a developmentally marked, colloquial child voice, realized through conversational written discourse, low-politeness pragmatic strategies, and playful verbal aggression. In other words, the story constructs a performative child voice whose marked orality and pragmatic directness pose a significant challenge for translation. Thus, the Persian translations were explored to see how Laurie's child speech and tone of voice in terms of simplicity (of words, structures, and themes), repetitive patterns, child language errors, wordplay, and saliency of form (over content/meaning) were rendered into Persian. The present author acknowledges that translation criticism approached from a micro-level, detail-oriented perspective entails inherent limitations. It is possible, for instance, that a translation may be perfectly accurate on the micro-level, yet at the macro-level fail to exhibit the requisite stylistic coherence and appropriate meta-textual functioning. Thus, the concluding section of the study will offer an overarching macro-level evaluation of the translators' success in the existing versions in preserving the major features of Laurie's child-oriented speech in its Persian translations. This will ensure that the translations are likewise subjected to a macro-level critical assessment too.

5.1. Translating Laurie's Speech Simplicity

In this story, Laurie, a six-year-old child, possesses a lexical repertoire confined to extremely simple, highly quotidian, and colloquial words. Moreover, the sentences and grammatical structures he employs are all brief and uncomplicated, naturally devoid of any syntactic or literary complexity. Nevertheless, the translators in question have, in numerous instances, rendered Laurie's utterances into standard Persian by utilizing formal vocabulary, verbs, and expressions, alongside relatively intricate metaphorical constructs typically reserved for formal written Persian and adult discourse, thereby distancing the narrative tone from its childish simplicity.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that in these translations, the protagonist's tone bears no resemblance either to Laurie's colloquial, childish idiolect in the source text or to the conventional speech patterns of Persian-speaking children. In other words, these translators have largely failed to preserve a natural, childish tone for the young boy—particularly in his dialogues with his parents—and have proven unable to extricate themselves from the constraints of adult language and register. For instance, Amraei (1991) employs «دستیار», «تنبيه», and «سيلي»; Bidarmaghz (1995) uses «جسارت» and «گستاخ»; Karagahi (2000) employs «گوشه کلاس بايستد», «گوشه کلاس بايستد», and «گمان می کنم»; Shariati (2004) uses «به همین», «هوار کشیدن», «دستیار», «بی ادبی», and «گوشه کلاس بايستد»; Pourjafari Khaneghah (2004) employs «به همین», «هوار کشیدن», «دستیار», «بی ادبی», and «گوشه کلاس بايستد».

«خاطر» and «بی‌احترامی»; Eslami (2008) uses «امتناع کردن», «دمپایی روفرشی», and «خاطر نشان کرد»; Ghane (2011) employs «تکالیف», «به قدری», and «داد و بیداد به راه انداخت»; and Khazaefar (2023) uses «ریزه‌پیزه», «کودن», and «رساندن دست به شست پا».

5.2. Translating Recurrent/Repetitive Speech Patterns

Repetitive structures abound in Laurie's speech, a hallmark characteristic of child language. He particularly picks up what he hears from his peers in the kindergarten environment, repeating it at home the same day because it holds novelty for him. This is especially true of actions, behaviors, and words that are considered impolite. Immediately upon returning home each day, he manifests these same behaviors, performs the same actions toward his parents, and repeats the same words several times until their novelty wears off, only to start anew the next day. For instance, Laurie twice says "Naaah" to express disagreement with his parents—a lengthened phonetic form of "No" that is informal, colloquial, familiar, and not particularly polite. In Persian, common words used to express dissent include «خیر» (/kheyr/, formal), «نه» (/na/, colloquial, informal, or familiar), and «نچ» (/nouch/, impolite).

In their translations, Amraei (1991), Shariati (2004), Eslami (2008), Ghane (2011) (who entirely omits it in the second instance), and Khazaefar (2023) have rendered this word using the standard term «نه», as in Amraei's (1991) «لاری مغرورانه گفت نه ... خیر» and Khazaefar's (2023) «لاری با لحنی تمسخرآمیز گفت: نه», which certainly fail to convey Laurie's rudeness, disregard, and nonchalance toward his parents. Bidarmaghz (1995) and Karagahi (2000), on the other hand, have captured the emphatic nature of Laurie's firm refusal from the original text, opting for the equivalent «نع»—repeated three times consecutively by Bidarmaghz (1995) as «نع نع نع»; although this is a fitting equivalent at the sentential level, it does not align with the overall text, atmosphere, and mood of the story in relation to Laurie's impolite speech and behavior. Only Pourjafari Khaneghah (2004) has correctly replaced this quasi-onomatopoeic English vocalization with the natural and common Persian childish equivalent, «نچ», as in «لوری با لحنی اهانت‌آمیز گفت نچ».

Among other indications of the tendency toward recurrent lexical patterns, one may point to the words "fresh" and "bad", which recur five and three times, respectively, throughout the linguistic exchanges in the narrative. Consequently, as might be expected of translators, the majority adhered to their chosen Persian equivalents with strict consistency across the story, doing so both to foreground this particular linguistic feature and to preserve uniformity in translational choices. A single instance of negligence, however, is observable on the part of Amraei (1991), who rendered "fresh" as «پُر رو» in the first, second, fourth, and fifth instances, but used «تازه وارد» in the third instance, interpreting the word in its alternative sense.

5.3. Translating Developmental Language Errors

At the beginning of the story, in response to his father's question—"Learn anything?"—Laurie produces the nonstandard utterance "I didn't learn nothing," committing a double-negative grammatical error. Linguistic studies indicate that this type of learning error is quite common and natural among most English-speaking children, particularly at younger ages, during the process of language acquisition and their developmental stages. His mother corrects him by repeating the grammatically correct form, thereby teaching him the proper structure ("didn't learn anything").

In translating this three-way exchange of information (the father's question → Laurie's response → the mother's correction), the translator has essentially two options. The first is domestication, that is,

using audience-oriented strategies to replace this error with a linguistic mistake typical of Iranian children acquiring Persian—one that would be entirely familiar to the Persian reader. The second option is foreignization, whereby the English error is preserved, and a corresponding ungrammatical equivalent is introduced into the Persian translation to justify the mother's correction. The next logical step is to consider what the present translators have actually done in this regard. Six translators altogether failed to notice such an error, did not understand it, and made futile attempts to preserve the logic of the dialogue by adding cohesive devices to the mother's speech. Eslami (2008) completely omitted the mother's reaction, rendering the exchange simply as «هیچی». Whereas only Bidarmaghz (1995) and Khazaefar (2023) recognized the error and, through explicitation, inserted an extra explanatory gloss to render the verbal exchange logically coherent: Bidarmaghz (1995) added «من» while Khazaefar (2023) similarly added «گفتم: جمله‌ات غلطه. بگو هیچ چی یاد نگرفتم». The proposed translation of the researcher renders the mother's sentence as «هیچی یاد نگرفتم. هیچی یاد نگرفتم» and Laurie's response as «هیچی یاد گرفتم».

5.4. Translating Wordplay and Verbal Jokes

Another distinctive feature of the Laurie language is the use of childish verbal jokes or colloquial word games that Laurie learned in kindergarten, employing them to tease his father—or, at the very least, to playfully mock him. The riddles found in games or childlike (group) verbal jokes can be considered a form of wordplay. These language games are typically rooted in verbal dialogues and childish humor. Through the use of intonation, rhymed prose, rhyme, phonetic puns, and similar devices in brief, interactive exchanges, they first create a context for deceiving the interlocutor and subsequently surprise them with an unexpected twist, thereby eliciting laughter (Ostadi & Heidari Tabrizi, 2025). Two examples of this type of “linguistic teasing,” along with their respective translations, are examined here.

At the very outset of the narrative, on the second day of school, Laurie, intending to joke with his father and potentially mock him, puts into practice a verbal game he had learned in kindergarten. This childish ditty consists of a rhymed quatrain composed of short, rhyming, and rhythmic phrases. The first two couplets prime the mind and establish the groundwork for misleading the opponent within this language game, whereas the final two couplets, through a sudden turn, catch the father off guard, generating a humorous situation and a comedic effect. The original reads:

“Look up,” he said to his father. “What?” his father said, looking up. “Look down,” Laurie said. “Look at my thumb. Gee, you're dumb.”

In such instances, it is evident that a semantic and literalist translation approach is not an appropriate method for rendering this kind of childish verbal joke. In translating this particular case, Bidarmaghz (1995), Eslami (2008), and Ghane (2011) apprehended the nuance of the verbal jest and, by resorting to the strategy of domestication, identified functional equivalents that are commonly used in Persian. Eslami (2008), for instance, rendered the exchange as:

سپس رو به پدرش کرد و گفت: بگو دوچرخه.
- پدرش با سردرگمی گفت: دوچرخه؟
لاری گفت: سیبیل بابات می‌چرخه!

In contrast, the other five translators entirely failed to grasp the author's intention, merely discharging their task with a literal translation. Shariati (2004), for example, rendered the exchange as:

بعد رو به پدرش کرد و گفت اون بالا رو ببین
پدرش در حالی که به سمت بالا نگاه می‌کرد پرسید چی؟

لری گفت پایین رو ببین شست دستم رو وای شما چقدر خنگید!

As a result, the Persian-speaking audience receives no meaningful message from these nonsensical translations and remains wholly unaware of Laurie's purpose of teasing his father and displaying impertinence toward him.

The second instance of this type of verbal wordplay occurs at the beginning of the second week of school. It takes place when Laurie returns from kindergarten and, upon seeing his father at the lunch table, is expected to greet him politely; instead, he resorts to a childish verbal joke. This wordplay consists of two very brief parts: in the first, Laurie ostensibly shows his politeness by saying "Hi, Pop," thereby deceiving his father; in the second, however, he immediately follows up with "y'old dust mop!"—catching him off guard and achieving his aim, which is to engage in playful teasing or deliver a mild, non-serious insult, ultimately making a fool of his father.

For rendering this second part, most translators have availed themselves of communicative translation to convey the author's intent. The original reads, "Hi, Pop, y'old dust mop." Karagahi (2000) has substituted this language game with the best natural functional equivalent in Persian, «بابا، سلام، سرت تو» (Karagahi, 2000). Bidarmaghz (1995) has also employed another suitable functional equivalent, «سلام بابا، نیفتی تو» (Bidarmaghz, 1995), though it is far less common in Persian than Karagahi's (2000) rendering. Khazaeefar's (2023) functional equivalent, «سلام پاپا! کفشات کو هزارپا!», although it conveys the intended meaning, appears contrived and lacks natural currency in Persian. In all three translations, however, the brevity of phrasing, rhythmic quality, rhyme, and the element of surprise are duly preserved. The renderings chosen by Pourjafari Khaneghah (2004), «دوچرخه، سبیل بابات میچرخه!», and Eslami (2008), «متکا، بخور از این», although they are among the common childish verbal jokes in Persian and possess all these characteristics, fail to convey to the Persian reader Laurie's primary intention—namely, feigning politeness and subsequently delivering the decisive punchline. Amraei (1991), despite having omitted the verbal pun itself, has succeeded in communicating its ultimate purpose through an explanatory sentence, «با پدرش خوش و بش کرد: چطوری بابا». Ghane's (2011) translation, «و کمی سر به سر پدرش گذاشت», although comprehensible to the Persian reader, mistakenly interprets Laurie's primary intention (i.e., teasing his father) as an attempt at friendly socializing. Only Shariati (2004), «چطوری آقا بابا؟ تو باید اون گرد», remains entangled in an incomprehensible literal translation, «و غبار رو از روی میزت پاک کنی!».

In sum, the analysis revealed that most translators struggled to preserve Laurie's childish tone, frequently defaulting to formal or adult-oriented language as Laurie's speech frequently threatens parental "face." Consequently, both the spoken and narrative discourse lost their naturalness and authenticity in the Persian translations under study; they largely fail to preserve the simplicity, colloquial tone, and child-specific linguistic features of Laurie's speech. The translators largely disregarded the lexical and syntactic simplicity characteristic of Laurie's speech in their Persian renderings, opting instead for an adult register—and, occasionally, a literary one—which is ill-suited to representing children's language in Persian. Furthermore, they avoided conversational markers and recurrent speech patterns, and they were largely unsuccessful in rendering wordplay and verbal jokes. These findings suggest that the translations require substantial revision, particularly in recreating Laurie's speech and tone of voice and in maintaining the stylistic integrity of the original narrative.

6. Conclusion

Based on the analyses presented, from a macro-level perspective, the overall working method of each of the eight translators can be categorized as follows, according to their prevailing approach and principal translation strategies. Amraei (1991), Shariati (2004), and Ghane (2011), to varying degrees, have adopted a semantic, literal translation approach, producing a relatively faithful rendering of the source text by employing direct lexical equivalents wherever possible, albeit with certain deficiencies

in conveying stylistic and cultural nuances. On the other hand, Bidarmaghz (1995), Karagahi (2000), Pourjafari Khaneghah (2004), and Khazaeefar (2023) have largely followed a communicative, functional translation approach. Eslami (2008), however, vacillates between these two approaches, resulting in a translation that is heterogeneous, weak, and lacking in uniformity and coherence. Regarding translation strategies, Amraei (1991), Shariati (2004), Eslami (2008), and Ghane (2011) have mostly tended toward foreignization; whereas Bidarmaghz (1995), Karagahi (2000), and Pourjafari Khaneghah (2004) have, in most instances, employed domestication. Khazaeefar (2023), more than the others, has proven successful in integrating these two strategies, showing a predilection for their appropriate and judicious combination.

The analyses revealed that the multiple translations examined generally exhibit considerable differences in terms of quality and accuracy, and specifically with regard to the translation of Laurie's childish language and tone. Some translators, by focusing on literal translation, have failed to convey precise meanings and linguistic nuances, whereas others have been relatively more successful by employing domestication and communicative strategies. The present study established that despite fundamental similarities, most translations have their own particular shortcomings and fluctuations in recreating Laurie's linguistic identity. Among the common problems are insufficient attention to Laurie's childlike tone and an inability to recreate the verbal games of the source text. The overall assessment of the translators' degree of success indicated that, unfortunately, none of the translators under consideration have achieved significant success in preserving Laurie's childish speech.

The analyses also showed that, nevertheless, some translations—especially those that have more carefully attended to the stylistic and cultural features of the source text by providing natural equivalents appropriate to the target culture—have managed to add value to the original work. This suggests that retranslation can prove useful and effective if it adheres to translation principles and pays due attention to linguistic and cultural requirements. Therefore, the phenomenon of retranslation in the case of Charles's story has been, at least to some extent, necessary since some translations, by offering new approaches and rectifying the shortcomings of previous ones, represented a step forward. From this perspective, the present critical study showed that the most recent translation of this story, namely Khazaeefar's (2023) translation, is in many respects less flawed, more successful, and, so to speak, offers greater added value compared to its predecessors. At the same time, despite these repeated translations, there remains room for another translation that would be far superior in terms of preserving Laurie's childlike language and tone (linguistic simplicity, repetitive verbal patterns, linguistic errors, and verbal games/wordplay), as well as maintaining the tone of dialogues appropriate to the characters for the Persian-speaking reader. Ultimately, it can be asserted that repeated translations are justifiable when each is undertaken with the aim of improving quality, addressing the deficiencies of earlier translations, or adapting to linguistic and cultural developments. The present paper also emphasizes the necessity of paying attention to translation criticism as a tool for evaluating quality and improving the translation product and process.

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