

THE UNIVERSALITY AND UNIQUENESS OF PROVERB AND ITS IMPACT ON TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT—*As a linguistic resource, proverb functions to show facts, human socio-cultural experiences and to give advice to human beings about life. It is very common that a proverb used in one culture is also used in other cultures with similar meaning but generally in different linguistic form (structure and diction). On the other hand there are proverbs which are culture-specific, i.e. only in a certain culture the proverb exists not in the others. This study has tried to address the phenomenon of universality and uniqueness of proverbs across cultures i.e. English, Indonesian and Mandailing. Five proverbs from English, five from Indonesian and five from Mandailing are collected and compared. The comparison shows that those fifteen proverbs are equivalent in meaning but different in form. On the contrary one proverb of English does not have its equivalents in both Indonesian and Mandailing. Two proverbs of Indonesian do not have their equivalents in both English and Mandailing and four proverbs of Mandailing do not have their equivalents in both English and Indonesian. Thus it can be concluded that some proverbs are universal and some others are unique or culture-specific.*

Keywords: culture, equivalent, meaning, proverb, translation

I. INTRODUCTION

Translating a message from one language to another deals with the transfer of the content of the message of the source text (ST) to the target text (TT). Looking at the procedures of translating, it seems that the job of a translator is so simple. In general, translation procedure starts from reading the ST in order to understand clearly the meaning of the message. When the meaning of the message has been grasped, then the translator transfers the meaning to a linguistic form which is structurally correct and acceptable in the target language (TL) (Larson, 1984; Nida, 1982). However the job of a translator is not merely to transfer only the meaning of the ST to the TT but the style and the cultural nuance embedded in the text should also be conveyed to the TT. For example, translating an Indonesian cultural term *berpuasa*, one of the religious obligations for

Moslems to undertake during the month of Ramadan, to *fasting* in English, only the generic meaning “to eat no food for a period of time” (See Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary, 1995) that can be conveyed while the other meanings such as ‘no drinking, no smoking, no dating, no sex’ from the dawn (the start of fasting) to *magrib* time (time for breaking the fast) are not conveyed

Translating a text with a figurative sense is more difficult than translating one with literal sense. The meaning of a word or a phrase with nonliteral meaning as found metaphors, idioms, proverbs or similes is difficult to transfer to another language when there is no its equivalent in the TL. When it is translated literally, only its literal meaning that can be conveyed and the translation does not make sense, the true meaning cannot be conveyed as when translating *dalihan na tolu* of Mandailing Language (ML) literally to “a fire place made of three stones” in English. Only the literal meaning that can be grasped by English speakers while its connotative meaning as “kinship relation derived from marriage” cannot be grasped.

How to deal with proverbs which commonly express figurative meaning in translation? Baker (1992:64) sees that idioms, fixed expressions and proverbs, in terms of form, are not so different. However, the form of an idiom is so fixed that it allows no change made to it either by lengthening its form or by inserting or deleting a single word from it. In terms of meaning, the meaning of idioms are opaque. We cannot deduce the meaning of an idiom from the literal meaning of each word that constitutes the idiom. Proverbs, on the other hand, sometimes their meanings are transparent. The meaning of *Better late than never* is quite transparent since each word of it expresses literal meaning. However there are many proverbs whose meanings are opaque.

By looking at certain aspects of language which are universal such as word order universals, syntactic universals, and phonological universals (Malkin & Anderson, 1991:277-284) we believe that proverb is also universal in the sense that a certain proverb in one

language has its equivalent in only one or more than one language. For example, the message expressed in the English proverb *An apple falls not far from its tree* can be found in Indonesian proverb as *Cucuran atap jatuh ke pelimbahan juga* (the rainwater from the roof falls to the ditch), and it can be also found in ML as *Muda singkam tungkuna, singkam ma tunas na* (When the tree is *singkam*, its sprout will be also *singkam*).

However, since the universality is relative and because the social and cultural experiences of one society is not exactly similar to what experienced by nother society, the meaning of one proverb in one society may not be equivalent to that of any proverb in another society. The social and cultural experiences of a fisherman society living at a shore environment, for example, are commonly different from those experienced by a farmer society living at a hilly area. The register, a particular type of vocabulary used by the fishermen is different from that of the farmers. Based on the premise, we believe that certain proverbs can be found only in one or more than one language but not in every language. In other words, proverbs are also culture-specific.

In the analysis section below, we will see that some proverbs having similar meaning can be found across cultures: English, Indonesian, and Mandailing and some proverbs can be found in one language but not in the other two or a proverb can be found in two languages only but not in the third language.

II. PROVERB AND CULTURE

The word *proverb* is a familiar word. Like idiom, simile or metaphor, proverb is part of every language's lexicon. A proverb is often inserted into one's speech when the speaker wants to express experiences, truth, or to give advice to other people using indirect or connotative meaning. Proverb is defined as "A short sentence that people often quote, because it gives advice or tells you something about life (Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary of English, 2015). Ther same idea is expressed in " A short well-known sentence or phrase that states a general truth about life or gives advice" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1995).

The meaning contained in a proverb may be related to various aspects of life and truth. For example, *Lost time is never found again* is related to natural fact, *Pride comes before a fall* is related to a warning, *Strike while the iron is hot* is advice, and *A poor workman blames his tools* is to warn people not to blame other people for what they did not do (Lubis, 2018). El-Amin (2009) states "Proverbs are linguistic phenomena which reflect the people behaviour, norms, traditions, morals, and ethics". According to Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, and Roy (2007:23) because all people may have the same experiences so the meaning of a proverb in one culture may be equivalent to the meaning of a proverb in another

culture. The English proverb *A poor workman blames his tool* corresponds to Indonesian *Buruk rupa cermin dibelah* (Because the face is ugly, the mirror is broken or *Half a loaf is better than none* is similar to Indonesian *Tak ada rotan akar pun jadi* (When there is no a rattan, a creeping root will do) and to a Mandailing proberb *Gumonando na gonting sian na tos* (It is better frayed (string) than it is broken off) (Lubis, 2018).

Proverbs are the embodiment of people cultural experiences. Learning the proverbs of one country will tell us about the cultures of the people. *Time is money* is a good example of English proverb which clearly reflects how the English society views time. Time is a precious commodity. Time can be bought and sold. When the time is not used it means there is a loss. As far as the search made by the present author, there is no a proverb which is related to time as a precious commodity. In Indonesian or Malay, another local language of Indonesia we even find a proverb which regards time as something which is always available as *Biar lambat asal selamat* (Slow but safe) and in Javanese, a local language of most speakers in Indonesia we may also find a similar proverb *Alon-alon asal kelakon* (Slow but it is done).

III. METHODOLOGY

The proverbs compared are English, Indonesian, and Mandailing. Five of English, five of Indonesian and five of Mandailing are expected to be equivalent. On the contrary, one proverb of English seems to have no equivalent in both Indonesian and Mandailing. Two proverbs of Indonesian seem to have no equivalent in both English and Mandailing and four proverbs of Mandailing seem to have no equivalent in both English and Indonesian.

To determine whether two proverbs derived from two different languages are equivalent or not equivalent, the use of diction was also examined. If the use of diction is different, it is believed that the two proverbs are equivalent. It means that one is not the result of translation of another. The equivalence occurs by accident not by design. If the use of diction is similar (the diction is literally similar) it is believed that the similarity is derived from translation as the case of *Tong kosong* (empty vessel) *nyaring bunyinya* (makes most noise) or *An apple* (buah) *falls* (jatuh) *not far from its tree* (tidak jauh dari pohonnya). When one proverb had no its equivalent in another culture, the differences of the two cultures were examined. Like language, proverbs are also closely related to culture.

All the proverbs which had been compared here are common proverbs, i.e. they are used in daily situation.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Generic Proverbs

The following English proverbs as shown in Tables 1-5 are equivalent to both Indonesian and Mandailing proverbs.

Table 1. Proverbs with ‘One Act Producing Multiple Result’ Theme

English	(1A) To kill two birds with one stone
Indonesian	(1B) Sekali merangkuh dayung dua tiga pulau terlampaui (Rowing once, two or three islands are passed by)
Mandailing	1 (C) Santampul dua lancim sanduruk dua marobo (One cut two are cut (plants), one throw (e.g, a spear) two fall down (plants).

Table 2. Proverbs with ‘The Inheritance of Characterisrtics from Ancestor” Theme

English	2 (A) An apple falls not far from its tree
Indonesian	2 (B) Cucuran atap jatuh ke pelimbahan juga (The rain water from the roof falls to the ditch)
Mandailing	2 (C) Muda singkam tungkona, singkam do tunas na (When the tree is <i>singkam</i> , its shoot is <i>singkam</i> as well).

Table 3. Proverbs with “Uselessness to Regreat What was Done Wrongly in the Past ‘ Theme

English	3 (A) It is no use crying over spilt milk
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The five proverbs of English, five of Indonesian and five of Mandailing indicate the universality of proverb. A proverb in English has its equivalent in Indonesian and in Mandailing. When we look at the diction used in those three proverbs of 1 A,B, and C with the context *one act producing multiple result* we believe that the Indonesian proverb *Sekali merangkuh dayung dua tiga pulau terlampaui* is not

Indonesian	3 (B) Nasi sudah menjadi bubur (Rice (cooked) has become porridge)
Mandailing	3 (C) Madung sala kuah (Pouring too much sauce to a meal (usually a plate of rice)

Table 4. Proverbs with ‘Insufficiency is Better than None’ Theme

English	4 (A) Half a loaf is better than none
Indonesian	4 (B) Tak ada rotan akar pun jadi (If there is no rattan a creeping root will do)
Mandailing	4 (C)Dumenggan na gonting sian na tos (Being frayed (string) is better than being cut off).

Table 5. Proverbs with ‘A Slight Carelessness May Cause a Great Loss’ Theme

English	5 (A) A minute carelessness may destroy what was built in a year
Indonesian	5 (B) Karena nila setitik rusak susu sebelanga (Because of a small stain, a pot of milk becomes useless).
Mandailing	5 (C) Sayang logo sataon itinggang udan sadari (A year’s dry ground becomes useless because of a day’s rain)

the result of translation of English *To kill two birds with one stone* since there is no similarity in the use or choice of words. Similarly the Mandailing proverb *Santampul dua lancim sanduruk dua marobo* is not the result of translation from either the English proverb or the Indonesian proverb. The contexts of Mandailing proverb are *cutting down and throwing(a spear) to plants (trees)*. The contexts of the Indonesian proverb are *rowing a*

rowboat and islands while the English proverb uses *killing birds with a stone* as the context.

Similarly those three proverbs of 2 A,B, and C do not use the same diction. The context of the English proverb is *the fall of fruit (an apple) which is never away from its tree*. The Indonesian proverb uses *the fall of the rain water from the roof to the ditch*. The Mandailing proverb uses a tree (*singkam* tree) and its sprout. A *singkam* tree must produce a *singkam* sprout never other sprouts.

The three proverbs of 3 A,B, and C use the context of *uselessness to regret what was done wrongly in the past*. Again one proverb is not the translation of another for the diction used is different from one to another. The English proverb uses *spilt milk*, the Indonesian proverb uses *the turn of cooked rice to porridge* and the Mandailing proverb uses *pouring too much sauce to a meal* (usually rice) , which causes the taste and the look of the meal to change greatly.

The context of the three proverbs of 4 A,B, and C is *insufficiency is better than none*. The English proverb states that even the loaf is very small but it is still better than no loaf at all. The Indonesian proverb states that when there is no a rattan (a strong creeping plant used to tie things or to make chairs) and a creeping root (not as strong as a rattan) can be used instead. Meanwhile the Mandailing proverb states that a frayed string or a road is still better than a cut one.

And the context of the proverbs of 5 A,B, and C is that *a slight carelessness may cause a great loss*. Again the use of the diction is different from one proverb to another. The English proverb uses literal meaning that is a slight careless action may cause a big loss. The Indonesian proverb uses a small stain found in a pot of milk that makes the whole milk useless (no one wants to drink it anymore) and the Mandailing proverb uses a long dry season (or dried ground because of the long dry season) changes to a wet ground only because of a day's rain.

The fifteen proverbs presented above (five of English, five of Indonesian and five of Mandailing) show that the English, Indonesian and Mandailing societies have the same cultural experiences and the same views about life. We can say that the five English proverbs have their equivalents in Indonesian and Mandailing language. We may believe that the equivalence is not the result of translation for there are no similarities in the use of words but the contexts and the cultural background are similar. A proverb resulting from a translation is easy to identify as it is the result of a literal translation. For example, the Indonesian proverb *Tong kosong nyaring bunyinya*, in terms of diction, it is the translation of the English *Empty vessel makes the most sound* since *tong kosong* literally means *empty vessel/drum*, *nyaring bunyinya* means *its sound is sonorous/hard*. Another example which is believed as the result of a literal translation is

Buah jatuh tidak jauh dari pohonnya. This Indonesian proverb is literally similar to *An apple falls not far from its tree*. *Buah jatuh* is similar to *an apple (fruit) falls down*, *tidak jauh dari pohonnya* is similar to *not far from its tree*.

B. Specific Proverbs

The following proverbs may not have equivalents in the other two languages.

English 1. *Time and tide wait for no man*. This proverb does not have its equivalent in both Indonesian and Mandailing. Sometimes we hear people say or we can read it in books of English – Indonesian proverbs *Waktu dan pasang tidak menunggu siapapun*. But when we look at the words used it is the translation of the English proverb since the similarity of the words is quite clear. *Waktu* is time, tide is *pasang*, wait for no is *tidak menunggu*, man is *siapapun* (anyone). In Mandailing culture there is no such proverb. Not only in Mandailing but also in other ethnic languages of Indonesia it is very hard (or impossible) to find a proverb which is concerned with the economy of time. The following Indonesian proverb which also tells about time, as far as the investigation made, has no its equivalent in English and Mandailing.

Indonesian 1. *Biar lambat asal selamat tidak lari gunung dikejar*. In a book of proverb the very old and famous Indonesian proverb it is found that it is translated into *Being late does not matter long as you survive*. As the use of the words indicates, this is only the meaning of the Indonesian proverb; for *safety is a priority*. No need to chase the mountain. A mountain never moves, it is stationary. So far there is no its equivalent found in Mandailing even though Mandailing is part of Indonesia.

Indonesian 2. *Surga di telapak kaki ibu* (Heaven is at the mother's sole of foot). This proverb shows the high honor possessed by a mother in comparison to a son. The position of a mother is so high that a son's position lies at the lowest part of the mother's body. So far there has not a single proverb been found in both English and Mandailing whose meaning is similar to the Indonesian proverb. The four Mandailing proverbs below have no equivalents in both English and Indonesian.

Mandailing 1. *Inda sala marumbak sopo harani eme*. The very typical Mandailing proverb literally means 'It does not matter when a hut breaks because of rice (the weight of a heap of rice). As we know that the primary staple foods of

Mandailing people is rice. Every family grows rice. The possession of much rice indicates wealth. People who do not have or eat rice as their diet is regarded poor as they eat corn to replace rice. So this proverb means that rice is more valuable than the hut or the rice barn as its container. The proverb may also mean 'It does not matter one gets sick because of consuming too much good food, not because of no food or the shortage of foods'.

As far as the investigation that had been made there was not no its equivalent found in English. It seems that the way Mandailing people view health differs from that of English people. The English people's appreciation for health can be shown by the existence of some institutions related to health care such as *health care, health center, health club, health farm, health food* (Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary of English, 1995). Similarly in the list of Indonesian proverbs, there was no one which was equivalent to the Mandailing proverb found.

Another Mandailing proverb which is very closely related to Mandailing culture is the following.
Mandailing 2. *Mata ni ari naso gakhahon, liang naso tungkiron, dapdap naso dahopon* (The sun which cannot be stared at, the hole which cannot be peeped, *dapdap* (a big thorny tree) which cannot be embraced). *Mata ni ari* (the sun), *liang* (hole), and *dapdap* (a thorny tree) symbolize the high status of *mora* (the parents of one's wife). A *mora* must be respected. He or she cannot be despised. This is a typical norm in Mandailing and other related ethnic groups. The uniqueness of the culture creates a proverb which is typically related to Mandailing culture. No such kind of culture had been found in other ethnic groups of Indonesia. In some other ethnic groups like Javanese and Malay the status of *mora* (father-in-law) is not placed in such a very high position. There is no a clear limit between a son-in-law and his father-in-law in social intercourse as between a Mandailing son-in-law and his father-in-law. In some Indonesian cultures a son-in-law can be close physically and socially to his father-in-law. They can have a chat or even make a joke but not between a Mandailing son-in-law and a father-in-law. They can be close one to another only in a formal situation as in traditional ceremonies not in an informal situation. And so far an English proverb which expresses the same meaning was not found.

Mandailing 3. *Maranak sapulu pitu marboru sapulu onom* (To have seventeen sons and to have sixteen daughters) is a typical Mandailing proverb. The proverb means that to have many sons and many daughters is an ideal of a marriage for the proverb is

usually pronounced at a ceremony of giving advice to a married couple (*mangupa* ceremony).

A marriage with many sons and daughters is regarded as a successful marriage while a marriage without a son or a daughter is a failure. Even a marriage without descendants may end in a divorce. Usually the husband will find another wife that can give him a son. And so far there had no equivalent of the proverb been found in both English and Indonesian. It is widely known that an English marriage is famous for child birth limitation.

Another proverb of Mandailing for which the equivalent in English and Indonesian was not found so far is:

Mandailing 4. *Tangi di siluluton, bege di sisiaon* (Listen (attentively) to one's sorrow, and hear one's joy). This proverb means that we should be sensitive/should care about one's sorrow, and just hear one's joy. If we know that someone has undergone a loss such as getting an accident, losing a valuable thing or losing one of the family members (death) we should care a lot about that. Even if we are not formally informed about that we should come and visit the loser at least to show our sympathy. On the other hand, we should not expect to have a share of one's joy or pleasure such as a wedding party unless we are officially invited. The verb *tangi* means 'to listen to something deliberately' and *bege* as its synonym means 'to hear something usually without special attention'.

V. CONCLUSION

After comparing 15 proverbs (5 of English, 5 of Indonesian and 5 of Mandailing) it was found out that, in terms of meaning, there is equivalence among those proverbs. Since the use of words differ from one proverb to another, it was concluded that one was not the result of translation of another. When one proverb was translated the result would be a literally translated proverb.

As societies across cultures have different socio-cultural experiences and the way they view the world is different, the idea of one proverb was not found in proverbs of other societies.

It was found out that one proverb of English was not equivalent to proverbs of Indonesian and Mandailing, two Indonesian proverbs were not equivalent to English and Mandailing, and four proverbs of Mandailing were not equivalent to both of English and Indonesian.

So a conclusion can be drawn that on one hand proverbs are universal and on the other hand proverbs are unique or culture-specific.

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