Adaptation Strategies in Video Game Localization: A Case Study of *Civilization*

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Abstract

In audiovisual translation, where video game localization plays a critical role, integrating visual elements with spoken content is essential. This study investigates the translation of expressions within the video game *Civilization*, exploring the prevailing norms of adaptation in Persian translation. The study has two main objectives: first, to examine the application of Skopos theory principles in the Persian translation of *Civilization*; second, to analyze the adaptation strategies based on Bastin's (2005) model in this translation. For this purpose, a corpus of English text segments from the *Civilization* video game and their Persian translations was selected and analyzed. Using Skopos theory and Bastin's adaptation model, the study examines adaptation strategies. The findings illuminate how adaptation strategies an6 d societal ideologies interact within the context of video game localization. Ultimately, the study reveals that, as video games are primarily designed for enjoyment, coherence as an adaptation strategy should be prioritized to enhance the game's appeal.

Keywords: Video Game, Localization, Adaptation, Skopos Theory

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Introduction

As a branch of descriptive study, research in audiovisual translation occupies a prominent position within translation studies (Orero, 2004). Audiovisual translation, as a professional practice, has seen considerable growth, particularly within two key subfields: subtitling and dubbing (Diaz Cintas, 2009). With the rapid increase in audiovisual products since the 1990s, the demand for audiovisual translation has intensified significantly (Perez Gonzalez, 2006).

Translation studies encompass both oral and written forms of translation. Audiovisual translation, however, presents a unique challenge as it integrates both spoken and written modes of communication, demanding specialized considerations to establish its position within the discipline (Varela, 2002). Varela (2002) argues that audiovisual translation differs fundamentally from both written and oral translation. Remael (2000) similarly highlights that numerous scholars strive to bridge the gap between traditional translation studies and the distinct field of audiovisual translation.

As noted, audiovisual translation diverges from other forms of translation due to its simultaneous reliance on spoken content and visual elements. In this context, Varela (2002) identifies several constraints that translators face in audiovisual texts: (1) the speakability of the audiovisual translation; (2) the cohesion between verbal and visual elements and their meaning in communication; (3) synchronization of body gestures and lip movements in dubbing; and (4) the effective conveyance of emotions through voice and intonation.

Localization has thus been proposed as a strategy to address these constraints. Pym (2010) describes localization as a process that adapts both source and target languages and cultures, emphasizing that it goes beyond mere translation, as cultural perception varies widely (Diaz Cintas & Anderman, 2009). Diaz Cintas (2009) further asserts that language both reflects and manifests culture, situating translators at the intersection of language and culture.

According to Bastin (2005), adaptation as a translation strategy is essential when the source culture context differs significantly from the target culture. In video game translation, as a type of multimodal text, visual elements necessitate the consideration of special norms and adaptation strategies. Therefore, this study seeks to (1) examine the application of Skopos theory in the Persian translation of the *Civilization* video game; and (2) investigate the adaptation strategies in this translation according to Bastin's (2005) model.

Literature Review

Audiovisual Translation

A substantial body of research has developed within the field of audiovisual translation, leading to a broad spectrum of studies and publications. According to Orero (2004), audiovisual translation is a dynamic and evolving branch of translation studies. He argues that technological advancements have transformed a traditionally paper-oriented society into one that is media-oriented, posing new challenges and practices for audiovisual translation. Furthermore, Remael, de Houwer, and Vandekerckhove (2008) emphasize audiovisual translation as a distinct discipline within translation studies, encompassing a variety of forms such as partial dubbing, off-screen narration, and voice-over. These scholars also highlight its importance as a medium that considers both language and culture, recognizing the significant role of bridging linguistic and cultural gaps to foster impactful understanding and communication. They underscore the complexity of audiovisual translation and the critical need for approaches that incorporate both linguistic and cultural dimensions.

Perez Gonzalez (2009) contends that audiovisual translation is integral to translation studies, facilitating the transfer of multimodal texts across languages and cultures, thereby forming a foundation for global communication. He further notes that the multimodal nature of audiovisual texts entails interpreting elements like image, color, music, and perspective.

Multimodality and Video Games

Video game translation is essential to providing players with a quality experience in their own language (Fernandez Costales, 2012). According to O'Hagan (2005), the multimodality of video games connects them to other art forms, such as cinema, offering players a chance to immerse themselves in the game's narrative. She highlights the multimodal and polysemiotic environment in which players interact with the game through various channels. Video game translation involves blending audio, video, and narrative techniques, allowing players to participate in the story, which combines narrative techniques and technical advancements. This type of translation plays a key role in creating an authentic atmosphere within a foreign culture (Fernandez Costales, 2012).

Initially, players could perform limited functions as games had basic interfaces (Tavinor, 2009). Advances in programming and graphic design led to greater interactivity between players and the machine (Fernandez Costales, 2012). Early video games included basic special effects, sounds, and music, which were gradually optimized to today's standards, where sound cues can signify enemy locations (Tavinor, 2009). Fernandez Costales (2012) states that video games now feature original orchestral soundtracks, and the audio elements are integral to translating spoken dialogues. The game industry's development has led to using real actors' voices in dialogue recordings.

Additionally, narrative techniques like cinematics and cut-scenes are now used in video game plot development. In translating these scenes, they resemble animated movies. Video game producers use lip-sync techniques to match facial expressions with spoken dialogue (Chandler, 2005). Bernal Merino (2008) adds that adapting dialogues requires considering subtitling, dubbing, and voice-over features.

Besides spoken dialogue and music, turning subtitles in modern video games requires synchronization with dialogue based on audiovisual translation principles (Diaz Cintas, 2009). Diaz Cintas and Remael (2007) define subtitling as presenting written text at the bottom of the screen while preserving the original speaker's audio. They suggest that subtitling, as a faster and more cost-effective method than dubbing, involves mode changes from oral to written and needs alignment with the screen. Ghaemi and Benyamin (2010) emphasize that subtitling's distinctness lies in its technical and contextual constraints. Gottlieb (1992) categorizes subtitling constraints into formal (space and time) and textual (visual context influence) constraints, proposing ten types of subtitling strategies like paraphrase and expansion. Orero (2004) also suggests that the term "screen translation" can encompass screen-based products like computer games and web pages, similar to how "radio translation" falls under audiovisual translation.

Dubbing is another technique used in modern game translation. Chaume (2012) regards dubbing as both a technical and artistic practice, replacing original speech with recorded dialogue. Ensuring coherence between lip movements, character visuals, and the dialogue is crucial. Luyken et al. (1991) argue that the dynamics of the original text, such as pacing and lip movements, must be preserved in the dubbed version to maintain authenticity.

Additionally, Gambier (2003) introduces terms like "multimedia translation" and "transadaptation" within audiovisual translation. Multimedia translation involves localizing software and internet programs, adapting content for specific platforms, while transadaptation goes beyond literal translation, focusing on target culture and cultural nuances.

Diaz Cintas (2009) notes that Tomaszkiewicz (1993) identifies eight translation strategies within audiovisual translation categories like dubbing and subtitling. Due to the inherently untranslatable nature of culture-specific elements, these strategies – such as omission, literal translation, borrowing, and adaptation – help translators manage culturally specific content.

Bastin (2005) associates "adaptation" with audiovisual translation and advertising, categorizing it as follows:

- Transcription, which reproduces the original word-for-word, preserving the source text's authenticity.
- Omission, where specific elements are excluded, especially culturally specific references not relevant in the target culture.
- Expansion, adding or clarifying information through footnotes, glossaries, or other means.
- Exoticism, which introduces unfamiliar elements to intrigue the target audience.
- Updating, replacing outdated content with modern equivalents to resonate with the target audience.
- Situational or cultural adequacy, tailoring content to the target culture's values and expectations.
- Creation, substituting source text elements to maintain core ideas and clarity for target readers. (Bastin, 2005)

These adaptation strategies enable audiovisual translators to address various cultural and linguistic challenges, ensuring that the translated content effectively conveys the intended message to the target audience. Bastin (2005) further divides adaptation into "local" and "global" types, with the former addressing text-specific issues and the latter involving comprehensive revisions based on external factors.

Additionally, several social factors affect audiovisual translation, including race, pragmatics, class, gender, sound, and ideological influences (Varela, 2002). These factors enhance understanding of audiovisual content complexities, highlighting the ideological contexts shaping the final products.

Localization of Video Games

Although video games have a shorter history compared to other entertainment products, they have expanded significantly across languages and cultures, addressing both verbal and non-verbal aspects of translation (Chandler, 2006). Verbal translation addresses linguistic aspects, while non-verbal translation encompasses non-linguistic elements.

Munday (2001) argues that video game translation combines audiovisual translation and software localization. Diaz Cintas and Remael (2007) add that video game translation lies between localization and audiovisual translation, necessitating cultural adaptation for local audiences to ensure content comprehension. Mangiron and O'Hagan (2006) refer to this as "game localization", which includes both subtitling and dubbing forms to expand market reach. O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) describe game localization as the varied processes required to adapt a game for a target market.

Bernal Merino (2008) outlines three levels of game localization: "Box and Docs" (translating only packaging and manuals), "Partial localization" (translating text and subtitles but not dialogues), and "Full localization" (adapting all game elements to the target language and culture). Bernal Merino (2015) emphasizes the importance of considering cultural, linguistic, technical, visual, and legal aspects.

Furthermore, Bernal Merino (2007) argues that translation is essential to adapting games for diverse cultures, stressing that it encompasses more than language transfer, extending to semiotic elements and audio-visual components.

Chandler (2005) suggests that video game translation incorporates cultural and legal considerations, along with audio components like dialogue. For example, violent scenes might need modification for certain cultures, and marketing materials should also be localized.

In Iran, Jooyaeian and Khoshsaligheh (2022) explore game localization, particularly in translating video games into Persian. They find that Coping Structure, emphasizing word-for-word translation, is commonly used, while Cultural Correspondence, requiring creative transfer of culture-specific elements, is less frequent. They note challenges and gaps in the Persian localization within the Iranian cultural and industrial context.

In summary, advancements in video games underscore the audiovisual elements and artistic dimensions, like music, positioning video games as complex multimedia products. As a result, adapting video games for different cultures requires specialized strategies and approaches. Video game translation is a growing area within translation studies and can be explored from multiple perspectives (Fernandez Costales, 2012).

Skopos Theory

Translation studies have developed significantly across various fields, with multiple approaches emerging for translation analysis (Bassnett, 2010). Skopos Theory, introduced by Reiss and Vermeer in the 1980s, represents one of these critical developments, extending beyond literary translations. This theory emphasizes the purpose, or skopos, of the translation, guiding translation strategies to achieve a functional outcome, known as the translatum (Munday, 2001).

Reiss and Vermeer (1984, p. 119) outline several fundamental rules within Skopos Theory:

1. A Translatum (TT) is assigned by the skopos (purpose)
2. A TT is related to the information of the target culture and language (the purpose changes according to the receiver)
3. A TT does not initiate an offer the information in a clearly reversable way
4. A TT is coherent internally
5. A TT is coherent with the source text
6. The mentioned rules are hierarchical.

Rule 2 is particularly significant as it links function and translator, facilitating intercultural communication and the creation of the Translatum. Rule 3 highlights the function of the Translatum, while Rules 4 and 5 contribute to information conveyance through the coherence and fidelity rules, respectively. The coherence rule ensures that the TT is accessible to its audience, and the fidelity rule requires alignment between the TT and the source text (Munday, 2001). These principles guide translators toward meaningful translations that bridge cultural and linguistic differences while honoring the source text.

Munday (2009) argues that, as a TT-oriented approach, Skopos Theory prioritizes the purpose and function within the target culture, emphasizing the role of the receiver or initiator. He contends that in light of communication skopos, equivalence strategies from the source text are not suitable for assessing the TT. Additionally, Munday underscores the importance of coherence and fidelity, noting that a key critique of Skopos Theory lies in defining situations where fidelity is achieved. Nevertheless, he asserts that a significant advance in the 1980s was recognizing the cultural role of the TT.

Norms in Translation

According to Perez Gonzalez (2014), scholars in audiovisual translation frequently draw upon descriptive translation studies, examining concepts of polysystem and norms. Researchers explore the influence of source and target cultures within audiovisual translation (Baker, 2010).

Toury (1995, p. 55) provides a broad definition of norms as "the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community – as to what is right or wrong, adequate or inadequate – into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations". He identifies norms as sociocultural, shaped by the broader culture, era, and community, and classifies them into product-oriented, process-oriented, and function-oriented norms. Toury also describes three types of translational norms: initial norms, preliminary norms, and operational norms (Munday, 2001). Through examining norms, researchers gain insight into sociocultural dynamics, enhancing their understanding of audiovisual translation's complexities.

Chesterman (2016) approaches norms as descriptive phenomena, referring to them as "correct behavior". While individuals hold personal knowledge and awareness of norms, social norms gain recognition through collective acceptance, such as standing on an escalator. Chesterman (2016) extends Toury's (1995) framework, identifying product norms and professional norms. Product norms concern readers' expectations for specific translations, while professional norms include three categories: the accountability norm (an ethical norm), the communication norm (a social and pragmatic norm), and the relation norm (a linguistic norm).

Studies on localization norms have produced notable findings. For instance, Sharifi (2016) examines Toury's (1995) initial norms within an Iranian video game, Garshasp. He explores the translators' inclination toward source (adequacy) or target (acceptability) norms, observing that the translation leans more toward acceptability than adequacy. Touiserkani and Afzali (2014) similarly analyze localization norms in Persian video games, arguing that adaptation norms in game translation align with Toury's acceptable norms. They suggest that target-language norms serve as localization standards in video game translations, noting colloquial language and euphemism as pivotal norms in this process.

Ideology in Translation

The concept of "ideology" has attracted substantial attention from researchers and scholars. Sedighi and Najian Tabrizi (2012) argue that ideology and translation intersect in numerous ways. Schaffner (2003) asserts that all translations are ideological, with social agents' objectives shaping the selection of source texts. Calzada-Perez (2003) defines ideology as "a belief or set of ideas, especially the political beliefs on which people, parties or countries base their actions", highlighting ideology's influence on community norms. Similarly, Mason (in Baker, 2010, p. 83) describes ideology as "the set of beliefs and values which inform an individual's or institution's view of the world and assist their interpretation of events, facts and other aspects of experience."

Lefever (1992) emphasizes the translator's ideology as a critical factor, asserting that translation is a form of "rewriting" that reflects the translator's ideological stance (Munday, 2001). Diaz Cintas (2012) also underscores the translator's role in transferring ideological and cultural elements, acknowledging that translators can choose to either uphold or deviate from ideological norms. Diaz Cintas (2018) points out that ideological shifts often occur through manipulation. Recognizing the impact of ideology in translation, Lefever (1992) suggests that translators bring their values, beliefs, and attitudes into the translation process.

Baker (2010) adds that genres, texts, and discourse serve as semiotic systems that carry ideological weight, essential within an ideological framework. She argues that the translation process communicates two distinct ideologies: one from the text and another from the translator. Lemke (2002) echoes this sentiment, asserting that discourse formation is inherently ideological, reflecting society's social power structures. A comprehensive analysis of discourse can therefore reveal underlying ideologies and their relationship to social power.

In a study, Sedighi and Najian Tabrizi (2012) investigate strategies for translating taboo words and expressions in romantic films dubbed after Iran's Islamic Revolution. Their findings reveal that translators employ various strategies to convey taboo language in ways that align with societal moral, cultural, and religious values. Rather than direct translation, these expressions were rendered to respect societal norms, underscoring the significant role of ideology in translating romantic films.

Methodology

This study examines a corpus of 1,030 textual elements from the English video game Civilization, randomly extracted and compared with their Persian translations. Civilization is a turn-based, 4X strategy game series, released in 2016 by Firaxis Games, published by 2K Games, and directed by Sid Meier in the United States. This series, comprising six main games, is readily accessible on multiple platforms and is distributed by Steam Club in Iran. In the gameplay, players aim to achieve victory through various conditions, such as military domination, or technological and cultural supremacy.

The primary reason for selecting Civilization lies in its strategic and comprehensive appeal to gamers and its accessibility across multiple platforms. Each game level begins with "demos"—video segments introducing each stage, providing a rich source of textual material. Additionally, as audiovisual products continue to advance, this game stands out for its high-quality visuals, engaging design, and well-executed narration.

To address the first research question, i.e. identifying adaptation strategies used in the Persian translation, the study analyzed the frequency and percentages of three adaptation strategies proposed by Bastin (2005), namely omission, expansion, and situational or cultural adequacy. Then, the study measures the frequency and percentage of two Skopos Theory rules: the coherence rule and the fidelity rule.

To answer the second research question, the study also examined the ideological implications of these adaptation strategies within the context of current Iranian society, analyzing how these reflect prevailing social values.

Results

In this study, 1,030 text segments from the Persian localized version of the video game Civilization were analyzed and compared to their corresponding English segments to determine the application of Bastin's (2005) three adaptation strategies: omission, expansion, and situational cultural adequacy. The analysis revealed a total of 232 instances of these adaptation strategies summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of adaptation strategies

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	74	32%
Expansion	39	16%
Situational/Cultural Adequacy	119	52%

Specifically, the findings indicated that 74 instances, or approximately thirty-two percent, involved omission; 39 instances, or about sixteen percent, were categorized as expansion; and 119 instances, representing roughly fifty-two percent, were classified under situational cultural adequacy.

According to Table 1, situational cultural adequacy was the most frequently employed strategy in the localization process, while expansion was the least utilized. The high percentage of situational cultural adequacy may reflect an effort to align the game content more closely with cultural contexts familiar to Persian-speaking players.

An instance of the omission strategy can be observed in the translation of the English segment, "Change the plan quickly, but the lord will be angry and piss out," which appears in the game as " نقشه را زود عوض کن، وگرنه پادشاه ناراحت میشه" ("Change the plan quickly, or the king will be upset"). In this segment, spoken by a character in a commanding role, the phrase "piss out" was omitted in the Persian localization. This omission likely occurred due to cultural constraints, as the phrase contains a mild profanity inappropriate for Persian-speaking audiences. Since the meaning is conveyed effectively without the final phrase, the translator's choice to omit it aligns with cultural sensitivities and maintains coherence.

Another example of omission appears in a dialogue from the introductory sequence, where a father figure says to his son, "We built wonders of monuments honoring the gods." This was translated as "بناهای بزرگی ساختیم" ("We built great monuments"). Here, the phrase "honoring the gods" was removed, likely because references to multiple deities conflict with Islamic beliefs and cultural norms. By omitting this segment, the translator ensures that the dialogue aligns with the target audience's religious expectations without altering the central message of historical achievement.

The expansion strategy is illustrated in the translation of "… go with my blessing," spoken by a father to his son who is about to assume a leadership role. In the Persian version, this becomes " برو و کارت را شروع کن که دعای خیر من بدرقه راهته" ("Go and start your work, my blessings are with you"). The addition of "… my blessings are with you" provides cultural clarity, adding depth to the relationship between father and son, which resonates with Persian-speaking audiences and aligns with the tradition of parental blessings.

Finally, situational or cultural adequacy is demonstrated in the phrase, "It is time to change the animals' coverings", which was translated as "وقت عوض کردن پالان الاغ ها است" ("It's time to change the donkeys' saddles"). Here, the original term for animal coverings is adapted to "پالان الاغ ها" (donkeys' saddles), a more contextually appropriate term in Persian culture, aligning with familiar rural imagery. This adaptation preserves the functionality of the phrase while ensuring cultural relevance for Persian players.

In the next phase of analysis, the application of two primary principles of Skopos theory—the fidelity rule and the coherence rule—was examined across the selected segments, with findings summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of skopos rules

Skopos Theory Rules	Frequency out of 798	Percentage
Fidelity Rule	306	38.34%
Coherence Rule	295	36.96%
Other Rules	197	24.68

As indicated in Table 2, the fidelity rule was applied in 306 instances, or approximately 38.34%, while the coherence rule appeared in 295 instances, or 36.96% of cases. Together, these two rules

demonstrate a significant adherence to Skopos theory in the translation of this video game, with coherence and fidelity serving as guiding norms.

Examples for Fidelity Rule

In one instance of the fidelity rule, the English phrase "Come sit with me and listen" is translated as "بیا کنارم بشین و گوش کن" ("Come sit by me and listen") in Persian. This line occurs during a dialogue in the introductory movie of the game, where an elder character gives advice to a younger character, the player's avatar. Here, fidelity to the source text's direct and intimate tone is maintained, preserving the instructive role of the elder's dialogue.

Another example is "Allah saves our tribe," translated into Persian as "الله قبیله ما را حفظ می‌کند" ("Allah protects our tribe"). This line is spoken by the leader of an Arabian tribe, and the use of "الله" aligns with the character's cultural and religious background, enhancing authenticity and preserving the source text's original religious tone.

Examples for Coherence Rule

The coherence rule can be seen in the translation of the phrase "If I may interrupt!" rendered as "میشه مزاحمت بشم!" ("May I interrupt!"). In this instance, the player character seeks guidance from an advisor. The translation of "interrupt" to "مزاحم شدن" (to disturb or interrupt) makes the expression more familiar and contextually appropriate for the target audience.

Further examples include the phrases "... That will stand the test of time" translated as "که از آزمون زمانه سربلند بیرون بیای" ("to come through the test of time with pride") and "... And decide your future" translated as "برو و آینده‌ات رو بساز" ("Go and build your future"). Spoken by a tribal elder to encourage the young leader, these phrases are adapted in a way that emphasizes hope and resilience, resonating with the cultural values of the Persian audience. Here, the coherence rule ensures that the expressions remain optimistic and motivational, aligning with the expected tone and context for Persian-speaking players.

Conclusion

he results of the current study highlight the significance of Bastin's (2005) adaptation model as a framework for analyzing translation strategies in video games. Among the adaptation strategies identified, situational or cultural adequacy emerged as the dominant norm in the localization process, underscoring the crucial role of adapting cultural content to resonate with the target audience. Additionally, the coherence and fidelity rules are recognized as essential strategies within Bastin's model, reflecting their frequent application by translators. These rules serve as important norms in video game translation, shaped by the prevailing cultural and ideological contexts.

The study also reveals that the coherence rule functions as a translation strategy that aligns closely with the cultural and situational context of the target audience. By fostering a coherent relationship with players, this strategy enhances the overall appeal and engagement of video games, making the content more relatable and enjoyable for Persian-speaking gamers.

Overall, the findings of this research provide valuable insights into the norms of adaptation in video game translation, equipping translators with a deeper understanding of industry practices. These insights can benefit not only translators but also dubbers, linguists, and gamers. Future research could explore adaptation strategies in other forms of software and audiovisual media, such as websites and mobile applications, to further enrich the understanding of localization practices.

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