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**Author:** Karoubi, Behrouz  
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Introduction

What is a ‘good translation’? This is not a new question. This is a question that has obsessed translators and translation scholars throughout history, which is to say, since at least the Roman times, and is still obsessing them with increasing anxiety and intensity. After all these years, however, a definitive answer to this question has not yet been provided. The study of translation is by nature an interdisciplinary field of inquiry interfacing with a whole host of other disciplines such as, philosophy, linguistics, literary studies, and cultural studies. As a result, translation quality assessment (TQA), as a main area of research about translation, has not been immune of the influence of methodologies and analytical approaches introduced into the study of translation by various different disciplines. The multiplicity of views of translation, therefore, as House (1997, p. 1) aptly notices, has led to different concepts of translational quality, and hence different ways of assessing it.

To my best knowledge, almost all the existing theories and models for translation quality assessment merely focus on one specific concept of quality, enforcing a certain inflexible pattern of excellence to all translations they investigate, and often leave no space for hermeneutic interpretation and active decision making about the quality of translation for assessors. The current thesis is primarily an attempt to devise an alternative translation quality assessment model: a flexible assessor-centered model that, instead of promoting a particular concept of excellence or insisting on forcing certain pre-established decisions on assessors, serves as a methodological tool that facilitates the process of assessment and gives assessors full authority to make free decisions about the
quality of translations. Needless to say, such a model, when designed, has to be tested in practice in a real world situation in order to make sure of its optimum functionality. To this end, the theoretical model of assessment in this thesis is followed by a case study in which attempts are made to apply the model in practice to a real world local situation.

The first chapter of this thesis has been initially devoted to tracing the vicissitudes of the concept of quality in the history of translation theories. The concept of translation quality is inherent in almost every discussion about translation, since translation theories are evaluative in nature and explicitly or implicitly promote certain translational behaviors and practices and discourage certain others. A critical reading of translation theories throughout history will certainly help to uncover the hidden aspects relating to the concept of translation quality in these theories. In the course of the critical analysis of various translation theories in the beginning of this chapter, attempts have been made to show the readers how the meaning of translation, the expectations about the quality of translation, and accordingly the way translation was being assessed were constantly changing alongside the socio-cultural and ideological developments in the Western world during different historical periods before the advent of modern linguistics.

With the introduction of structuralism into the study of language at the beginning of the 20th century, the study of language underwent a huge evolution which consequently exerted a great influence on translation theories, especially on those of the second half of the century. The second part of Chapter One then deals with the analysis of the major modern approaches to the study of translation to discover what it is meant by the translation quality in these approaches and how it is assessed. The critical review of these approaches is a prerequisite for designing a new methodology for translation quality assessment; because by this means the strong points of previous theories and methodologies can be incorporated into the new model, which will be developed in the following chapters of the thesis, and
the possible pitfalls and shortcomings can be avoided. This will also make it easier to show the value of the new methodology by demonstrating precisely how and where it is similar to or different from its previous counterparts.

Chapter Two aims at developing a conceptual framework to describe translation quality assessment as a complex process of decision making. It starts with a discussion about the great amount of confusion that exists in the usage of terminologies relating to the area of translation quality assessment and tries to disambiguate and (re)define key terms that are often taken for granted such as translation, assessment, and quality. This chapter then deals with developing a theoretical model to explain different stages of the process of translation quality assessment, i.e. collection, synthesis, and interpretation of data with an emphasis on the significance of the role of assessors in the process. The theoretical model put forward in Chapter Two incorporates useful descriptive and analytical features of different approaches discussed in the first chapter of the current thesis and also encompasses different socio-cultural and ideological factors which might affect the process of evaluation. Toward the end of the chapter, the primary focus of attention is shifted on the role of assessors and the importance of the assessment skopos (i.e. the purpose for which the translation being assessed is going to be used) in the process of translation quality assessment.

Emphasizing the necessity of understanding the evaluative behavior of the translation assessors within the socio-cultural and historical context in which they perform the task of assessment, Chapter three presents a concise account of the history of translation in Iran, where the participant assessors in the case study in current research come from. This chapter addresses major developments of translation throughout the history of Iran from the antiquity to the present time focusing on historical turning points, such as the Arab conquest of Iran, the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-11), and the Islamic Revolution of 1979, that have given rise to different translation movements in this country.
Chapter Four details a case study which attempts to investigate different aspects of the evaluative behavior of two groups of assessors during different stages of the process of translation quality assessment within the specific socio-cultural context of Iran where the study is conducted. The main purpose of the case study in this chapter is to apply the theoretical model put forward in Chapter Two to collect information as to how the participant assessors evaluate the quality of the selected translation corpus of the study. The participants in the case study are comprised of a group of academic assessors consisting of 20 university professors/lecturers, who are native speakers of Persian and had the experience of teaching English into Persian translation courses, and a group of ordinary assessors consisting of 20 Iranian undergraduate/post-graduate students majoring in a variety of subjects in Iranian universities, who are also native speakers of Persian. The materials chosen for inclusion in the case study are three translated news article in Persian and their English source texts which were extracted from the website of the Voice of America (VOA). The main apparatus used for data collection in the case study are two web-based questionnaires (one in Persian and the other in English) which are especially designed to acquire data about the evaluative behavior of the participants during different stages of the process of translation quality assessment.

In Chapter Five the overall evaluative behavior of the participant assessors in the case study during different steps of the process of the assessment, i.e. identification of the problematic areas, linguistic description of the problem, description of the frustrated expectations, determining the gravity of problems, suggesting solutions to the problems, and stating the results of the evaluation, are analyzed and discussed.

Finally, Chapter Six contains a summary of the thesis and some remarks on limitations and practical applications of the research.