




## A Comparative Study of Shift Strategies in English Translations of the Nahj al-balagha: A Case Study of Sayings 1-30

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### ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the translation shifts and most frequent types of translation shifts according to Catford's model in the translation of Sayings 1-30 in the Nahj al-balagha from Arabic into English. The researcher selected the first thirty sayings of the Nahj al-balagha for the analysis. Throughout the analysis, each shift strategy was traced and manually counted to determine the most frequent type of translation shift. The findings revealed that unit shifts were the most frequent type of shift (59.70%), followed by structure shifts (23.30%), then level shifts (10.70%), intra-system shift (4.50%), and finally class shifts (1.50%). Both translators used unit shift and structure shift with the highest frequencies in their translations. The results also indicated that, unlike Sayyid Ali Reza, Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari went beyond the surface structure and translated words into phrases and explained them in some cases, thus providing an understandable translation. Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari used unit shifts more frequently than Sayyid Ali Reza. Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari most of the time used unit shift to convey the message to the target language reader in a comprehensible way. The translator who used unit shift was successful in conveying the message of the source language text to the reader of the target language. Using unit shift made the target language's readers understand the material better.

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## 1. Introduction

The critical role of the translation of religious texts, no doubt, in various aspects of humanity's life, is undeniable. Different nations and ethnic groups with non-Arabic languages pay attention to Islam. Therefore, some translators think of translating the *Nahj al-balagha*, the leading book of Shia, to convey Islamic concepts to non-Arabic speaking Muslims. Translating *Nahj al-balagha* is a means to spread the words of Imam Ali to the world. But it should be noted that translation, especially religious texts, is not an easy task and requires specialized skills and knowledge. The translation is not just transferring meaning from one language into another. As English is the global language and the most widely used language globally, sacred texts have been translated into English more than any other language. Therefore, paying the most attention to the translation of English of this holy book seems to be an essential task. Crystal (1997) states that the number of English users has increased. This means that most people in the world know the English language.

Regarding the *Nahj al-balagha* as the most influential book of Shī'a (a major branch of Islam), appropriate strategies in translation can increase the effect of the text on the second-language reader. Since the translation of religious books and sacred texts such as *Nahj al-balagha* has always been a sensitive issue in Islamic theology, translators devote all their ability to a high-quality and perfect translation of these religious books. But they are constantly faced with controversial translation problems, including finding the exact lexical equivalents in the target language and finding the most appropriate strategy for successfully conveying language aspects of the source language to the target language. One of these theories is the shift theory proposed by Catford (1965). The term "shift" was first coined by a Scottish translation theorist, linguist, and phonetician, Catford (1965). He defined this linguistic term as the departure from formal correspondence in the process of going from the source language into the target language. The Scottish translation theorist divided the category shifts into four subgroups: structure shifts, class shifts, unit shifts (rank changes), and intra-system-shifts.

Throughout history, there have been various definitions of translation, but in all of these definitions, either implicitly or explicitly, translation is associated with change; because translation is impossible without changes. In literal translation, the difference is as minimal as possible, and in free translation, the change is unlimited.

In the present study, the researcher, adopting Catford's theoretical model for translating sayings of the sacred *Nahj al-balagha* from 1 to 30, explores the shift strategies translators have adopted in dealing with these sayings. Catford's theory is a great important attempt to systematically apply linguistics to translation. And since translation has to do with language, the analysis and description of the translation process must make considerable use of categories set up for the description of the language. Also, the researcher would discover the most frequent shift strategies employed in the English translations of the selected expressions of *Nahj al-balagha*. Third, in this shifts-based study of translation, the researcher aims to compare the strategies used by both translators to discern which translator has provided a fluent and understandable translation. Additionally, the researcher would scrutinize the effects of Catford's translation shift strategies on the level of accuracy of the translation.

It should be noted that the significance of this research lies in the fact it helps the translator to render meaningful expressions most effectively. Since brainy sayings have a high rate of interest among people all over the world, translation can help the reader to

understand the meaning and concept of these quotes. If translators are inattentive to the translation of Islamic texts, rendering messages from one language into another can be inaccurate.

Second, the present study could be interesting for instructors of translation and translators. Instructors could develop their knowledge of applying appropriate shift strategies, and the students of translation could perceive the model of Catford (1965) better in practice. Third, this study could help translation scholars investigate translations of Nahj al-balagha or other religious texts, such as the Holy Qur'ān, more meticulously. Last but not least, the study will be helpful to the researcher himself. The researcher can expand his knowledge about the analysis and translation of religious texts. This paper tries to address these questions:

- How are shift strategies applied in the English translations of Sayings 1-30 in Nahj al-balagha?
- What are the most common shift strategies used in the English translations of the sayings 1-30 in the Nahj al-balagha?
- How does the application of shift strategies affect the conveyance of the message in the two English translations of Nahj al-balagha?
- What is the impact of shift strategies on the quality of translation in the English versions of Nahj al-balagha?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This review tries to introduce similar theories to Catford's Shift model, including the ideas proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), Halliday (1961), Nida and Taber (1964), among others. Translation scholars have proposed different classifications in translation shifts. One of the most prominent taxonomies of translation shifts is presented by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995). The two translation strategies similar to shifts identified by Vinay and Darbelnet are direct translation and oblique translation. The former consists of three strategies borrowing calque and literal translation, and the latter consists of four strategies transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation.

According to Nida (1964), languages differ in wording and structure, so the translator cannot avoid changes. Nida and Taber divided change into a transition from general to specific meaning and vice versa. Also, four shifts are taken over by the famous British linguist and translation theorist Halliday (1961): unit, structure, class, and intra-system shifts. Moreover, Pekkanen (2010) proposed translation shifts into two significant types: obligatory and optional. Obligatory shifts result from syntactic, semantic, phonological, and cultural differences between the source and target languages. The optional shifts result from the translator's choice, not linguistic or cultural differences between the two languages.

## **3. Past Researches**

The literature review for the present study can be classified into two main categories: studies that were conducted utilizing the same theoretical framework, and those that focused specifically on the translation of Nahj al-balagha. In the subsequent sections, we will provide a brief overview of these studies and their respective findings.

### *3.1. Studies based on Catford's Model*

The current study shares similarities with other scholarly works that have explored Catford's Shift strategies theory in the translation of various texts. For instance, Pratama's (2011) study identified four types of shifts, namely noun into a verb, plural into singular, and transpose to fill lexical gaps. The study concluded that the Arabic language requires a third person, called plural. Similarly, Anari and Saghar's (2011) study found that structural and semantic shifts were the most common shifts in text translation. Finally, Rezvani's (2014) study showed that the most frequent strategy used by translators was the unit shifts strategy ( $f=83\%$ ), while the least frequent was the level shifts strategy ( $f=49\%$ ).

### *3.2. Studies on the Translation of Nahj al-balagha*

Moreover, there have been nine studies conducted on the translation of Nahj al-balagha. Semnani's (2015) study revealed that the most commonly used strategy for translating was transference, while globalization was the most frequently used low strategy for translating proper names by three translators of Nahj al-balagha. In his study, Moafi (2015) indicated that although the translation of sacred texts, in general, and Nahj al-balagha, in particular, may seem like an insurmountable challenge, it is not impossible and can be achieved by skilled translators with the right tools. Pourebrahim's (2016) study demonstrated that metaphors had been preserved in all cases of Nahj al-balagha translations, with the third mode of metaphorical transfer being the most commonly used. Hazaa and Mahmood (2016) highlighted the importance of translation shifts, especially when translating between languages from different families, such as English and Arabic. In their study, Hijjo and Kadhim (2017) found that BBC News translators used all kinds of shifts based on Catford's (1965) model while preserving the meaning and quality of the original text. However, the usage of sentence structure shifts from passive to active voice altered the original language meaning and message of the news. Finally, Mohammadalizadeh Khoob (2017) revealed significant differences between the three English translations of Nahj al-balagha, with Jafari's translation being dynamic while Sayyid Ali Reza's and Mutahari's translations were more formal in tone.

In their academic study, Aghajani et al. (2018) revealed that the Hammam Sermon of Imam Ali's Nahj al-balagha had been translated covertly, rather than overtly, by two English translators. The translators did not adhere to House's Model, which implies that a sacred text must be translated overtly, and any deviation from it is deemed an error. Altwaijri and Bandar (2019) conducted a study that revealed that intra-system shifts were the most common type of shifts, followed by unit shifts, structure shifts, class shifts, and level shifts. The identified translation shifts were mandatory due to the linguistic differences between English and Arabic. Aghai and Mokhtarnia's (2021) study discovered that among the translators, Dashti and Makarem Shirazi had transferred nine selected examples of Nahj al-balagha words to the target language, respectively, based on the dynamic model and five based on the formal model, while Ansarian transferred seven of the fourteen examples. These scholarly findings provide valuable insights into the translation of sacred texts, particularly the Nahj al-balagha.

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1. Research Design*

The research questions guided the study to employ a corpus-based comparative content analysis design that was in line with the research objectives. The study was focused on



translations of Nahj al-balagha and utilized Catford's (1965) theory as a framework. To accomplish these objectives, a descriptive-analytical design was utilized, which involved the calculation of frequency and percentage. The study was conducted in a professional and academic manner, adhering to rigorous standards and methodologies.

### 3.2 Research Corpora

In this study, the corpora analyzed were the Nahj al-balagha and their English translations. To ensure the feasibility of analyzing and describing the data, thirty sample Arabic source texts and two sample English target texts were selected. Specifically, the first thirty Sayings of Nahj al-balagha served as the sample source texts, while the English translations of the Nahj al-balagha by Sayyid Ali Reza (2010) and Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari (2010) were included in the target text sample. Various instruments were utilized in the study, including the Nahj al-balagha book, Lane's Arabic to English lexicon, Almaany's Arabic to English dictionary, and the Islamic website corpus, particularly *ahlolbait.com* and *nahj.makarem.ir*. Additionally, the *languageguide.org* website and the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English were incorporated as resources.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The study adopted a rigorous methodology to achieve its objectives. The units of analysis were words and sentences, and the translations were compared and contrasted with the source text and each other, where necessary, sentence by sentence or word for word. The analysis had three main purposes: to identify the translation strategies used by the translators, to compare and contrast the two translations, and to determine the most frequent shift strategies used in the translations of sayings 1-30 in Nahj al-balagha and their effects on the accuracy of the translation.

Data analysis involved presenting the relevant data collected from the corpus and their frequencies in tables. The researcher measured the frequency of Catford's shift strategies using SPSS software and evaluated the naturalness, readability, and comprehensibility of the target texts in relation to the source text to discover which shift strategies contributed to translation accuracy. Catford's shift strategies have been widely used in translation studies due to their effectiveness and comprehensibility. The collected data were presented in tables, and the number and frequency of the shift strategies used by each translator for every saying were carefully accounted for to ensure the accuracy of the results. The study's findings provide valuable insights into the translation strategies used by translators and their impact on translation accuracy.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Qualitative Findings

The present study aims to provide a descriptive analysis of the strategies employed by translators in rendering the sayings of Nahj al-balagha into English. In order to achieve this goal, a corpus of translated sayings was collected and analyzed. The findings of this analysis are presented in the following section, where the data is discussed and tabulated. As illustrative examples, a few selected samples are mentioned, but it should be noted that these are by no means exhaustive. Overall, the study sheds light on the translation strategies used in rendering the sayings of Nahj al-balagha into English and provides insights into the challenges faced by translators in this task.

### Example 1: Saying 1

كُنْ فِي الْفِتْنَةِ كَابْنِ اللَّبُونِ لَا ظَهْرٌ فَيَرْكَبُ وَلَا ضَرْعٌ فَيُخَلِّبُ

✓ **Sayyid Ali Reza:** During civil disturbance be like an adolescent camel who has neither a back strong enough for riding nor udders for milking.

✓ **Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari:** During the times of troubles, disturbances, tumults, and wars adopt such burden you with important and weighty affairs nor try to derive any advantage out of you.

In analyzing the translation of a text from Arabic to English, it is important to note the structural shifts that occur between the two languages. The use of the verb “كُنْ” at the beginning of the Arabic sentence contrasts with the English translation by Sayyid Ali Reza, which begins with “During civil disturbance”. This shift in structure is evident in the Arabic sentence, where the structure is verb+ subject+ object, but not in the English translation. Furthermore, both translators applied structure shift in their translation, as demonstrated by Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari's use of “During the times of troubles, disturbances, tumults, and wars”.

Additionally, Sayyid Ali Reza adopted intra-system shift in the translation of “اللَّبُونُ” which means lion in English, but was translated as “camel”. This shift occurred from grammar to lexis, as Sayyid Ali Reza used the word “who” which is not found in Arabic sentences after the word “اللَّبُونُ”. Both translators also applied unit shift strategies, as seen in the translation of words such as “الْفِتْنَةُ”, which was translated as “civil disturbance” by both translators. Additionally, Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari used “troubles, disturbances, tumults, and wars” to replace the word “الْفِتْنَةُ”. In his translation of the sentence “لَا ظَهْرٌ فَيَرْكَبُ وَلَا ضَرْعٌ فَيُخَلِّبُ”, he did not translate literally, but instead tended to be reader-oriented and transfer the message. This analysis highlights the importance of understanding structural and unit shifts when translating between languages.

### Example 2: Saying 4

الْعُجْرُ آفَةٌ

✓ **Sayyid Ali Reza:** In capability is a catastrophe; endurance is bravery; abstinence is riches; self-restraint is a shield (against sin); and the best companion is submission (to Allah's will).

✓ **Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari:** Misfortune and helplessness are calamities; patience and ability to suffer in silence is a kind of bravery; to sever connections with the vicious world is the greatest wealth and fortune; piety is the best defense and the best armor. Surrender and acceptance of the will of God are the best companions;

The translation of the sentence “الْعُجْرُ آفَةٌ” by Sayyid Ali Reza and Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari demonstrated several shifts. Sayyid Ali Reza translated “آفَةٌ” as “is a catastrophe”, which resulted in a shift from grammar to lexis. On the other hand, Sayyid M

Muhammad Askari Ja'fari translated “آفَةٌ” as “are calamities” and applied the intra-system shift by translating it as plural. Moreover, he used the unit shift (word to phrase) in the translation of “الْعُجْرُ” by considering the phrase “Misfortune and helplessness” for it. Both

translators also applied level shift by using verbs “is” and “are” in English text, although the Arabic sentence was nominal without the verb ‘to be’.

**Example 3: Saying 5**

العلمُ وراثتهُ كريمةٌ

- ✓ **Sayyid Ali Reza:** Knowledge is a venerable estate
- ✓ **Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari:** Wisdom is the noblest heritage

In analyzing the translation of the sentence “الْعَجْرُ أَفَى” by Sayyid Ali Reza and Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari, it is evident that both translators exhibited their expertise in shifting between different linguistic structures and adapting them to the target language. Sayyid Ali Reza applied a level shift by using the verb “is” in the English translation, despite the Arabic sentence being nominal without the verb ‘to be’. Furthermore, he used a class shift in the translation of “وراثتهُ كريمةٌ” by placing the adjective before the noun, which is different from the original Arabic text where the noun is before the adjective. Similarly, Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari used a level shift by using the verb “is” in the English translation and applied a class shift by using the superlative adjective “noblest” before the noun. Both translators demonstrated their proficiency in adapting the linguistic structures of the source text to the target language, resulting in accurate and meaningful translations.

**Example 4: Saying 27**

امشِ بِدَانِكَ مَا مَسَى بِكَ

- ✓ **Sayyid Ali Reza:** Keep walking in your sickness as long as you can.
- ✓ **Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari:** When you get ill do not get nervous over it and try as much as possible to act hopeful.

Jafari tried to convey only the message of the text to the target language reader without obliging himself to observe the syntactic structure or do a literal translation.

*4.2. Qualitative Findings*

The findings of the present study are presented in the following tables and figures.

Table 1. The number and percentage of the shifts in the two translations of all the 30 sayings

Shift strategies	Level shift	Structural shift	Class shift	Unit shift	Intra- system shift
Sayyid Ali Reza	15	39	1	73	3
Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari	13	22	3	83	9
Percentage	10.70%	23.30%	1.50%	59.70%	4.50%

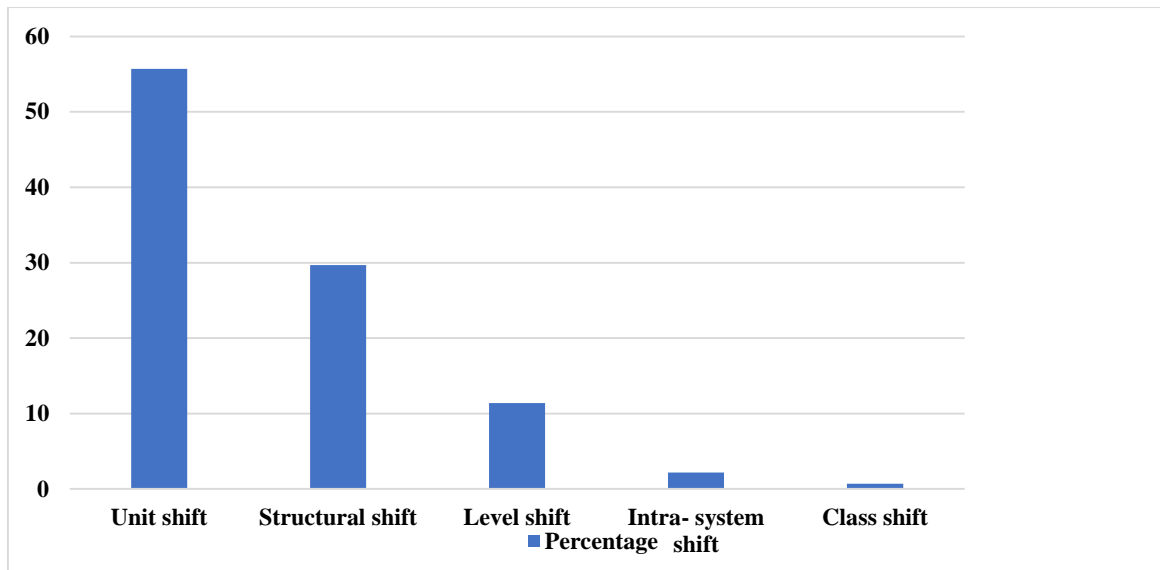


Figure 1. The percentage of the frequency for strategies in the translation by Sayyid Ali Reza

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequent shift strategies used by Sayyid Ali Reza were unit shift, structure shift, level shift, class shift and intra-system shift, respectively.

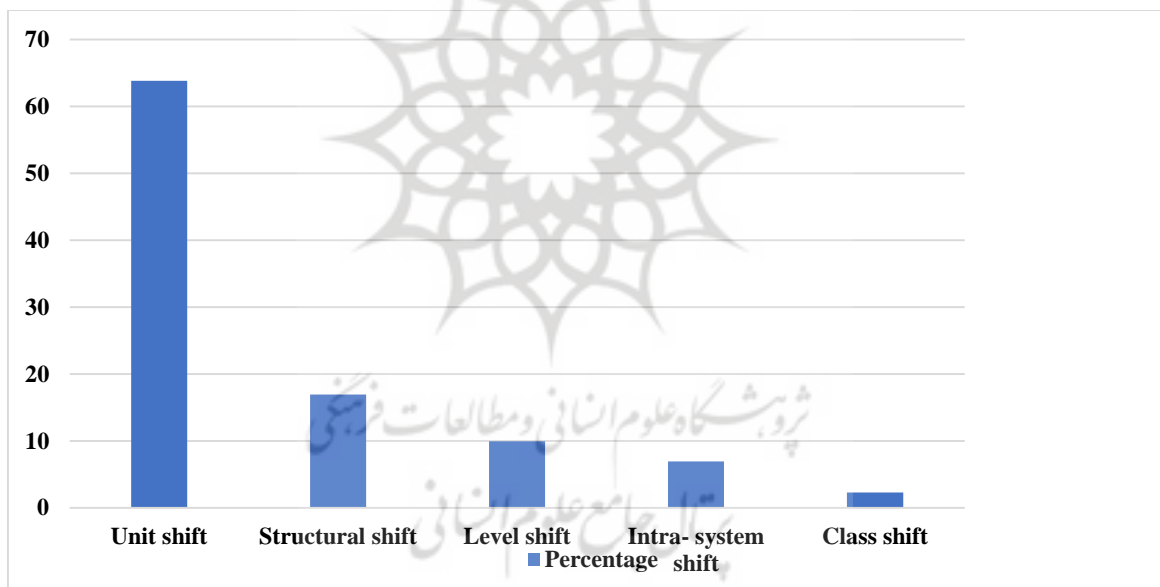


Figure 2. The percentage of the frequency for strategies in the translation by Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari

As shown in Figure 2, the most frequent shift strategies used by Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari were unit shift, structure shift, level shift, class shift and intra-system shift, respectively.



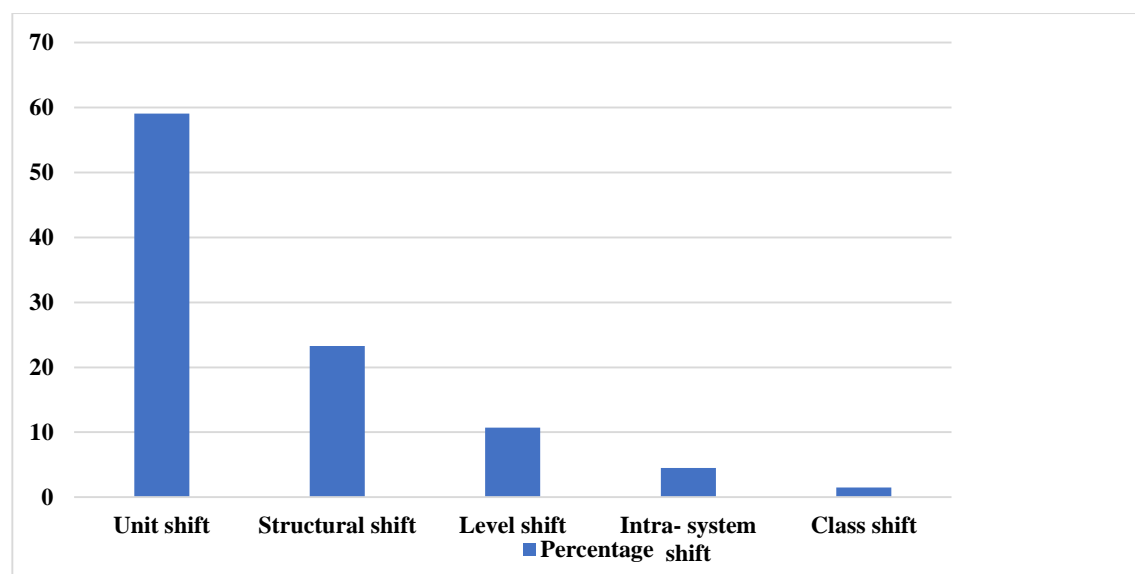


Figure 3. The percentage of the frequency for strategies in both translations

Table 1 and Figure 3 show the frequency and distribution of different types of category shifts proposed by Catford (1965) in two translations of the first thirty sayings in Nahj al-balagha. The most frequent shift is the unit shift, which occurred in every sentence with 156 cases. This shift involves changes in the rank or level of translation units, such as words, phrases, and sentences. The most common type of unit shift was from word to phrase, which could be attributed to the translator's effort to render the text as readable as possible for the target readers. The second most frequent shift is the Structure shift, which involves changes in the grammatical structure of the source and target languages. There were 61 cases of Structure shift identified in this study. The third most frequent shift is the Level shift, which involves changes in the level of abstraction or concreteness between the source and target languages. There were 28 cases of Level shift found in this study. The fourth most frequent shift is the Intra-system shift, which involves changes within a particular linguistic system, such as tense, number, or gender. There were 12 cases of intra-system shift found in this study. The least frequent shift is the class shift, which involves changes in the part of speech or word class between the source and target languages. There were only 4 cases of class shift identified in this study.

## 5. Discussion

The present study aims to report and discuss the findings in the following subsections in line with the research objective. The study compares the findings with Catford's (1965) theoretical model and past research, highlighting some differences observed between the translators in terms of translating SL-oriented or TL-oriented. As evident from the aforementioned 30 sayings, Alireza's translation strategies tend to preserve SL text's features. For instance, "الْحَذَرُ الْحَذَرُ" was translated as "Fear! Fear", which closely resembles the structure of the source text. Sayyid Ali Reza repeated the words twice, while Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari rendered it as "Take warning". Thus, one word in the source language was translated into two words in English. Sayyid Ali Reza aimed to remain as close to the source language text as possible, prioritizing the author and SL. Conversely, Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari went beyond the surface structure to present an understandable, clear, and fluent text, translating many words into phrases and explaining them in some instances. The frequencies of the Unit shift strategy by Seyyed Jafari were higher than those used by Seyyed Alireza, primarily to convey the message to the target language reader in a comprehensible way. For example, Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari translated "الطَّمَعُ" as

“greediness and avarice”, while Sayyid Ali Reza translated it as “greed”. Although Sayyid Ali Reza’s translation is more inclined to the source language than Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari’s, Sayyid Ali Reza’s translation employed the structure shift strategy more often than Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari’s translation. Sayyid Ali Reza translated literally, making only grammatical changes, while Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari transferred the message of the Arabic text to the reader, resulting in a change beyond the structure shift.

This study also found a significant difference in the use of shift strategies between the two English translations of *Nahj al-balagha*. The selected passages showed that Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari, unlike Sayyid Ali Reza, did not adhere to the surface structure of the source text, but tried to produce an understandable, clear, and fluent text for the target readers by translating words into phrases. The frequency of Unit shifts by Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari was higher than that by Sayyid Ali Reza. Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari used Unit shifts more often to convey the message of the source text in a comprehensible way for the target readers.

Another finding was the impact of shift strategies on the quality of translation. The most notable point was that the translator who used the Unit shift strategy (word to phrase) was more successful in conveying the message of the source text to the target readers. Using word to phrase made the target text more understandable for the target readers. In conclusion, this study suggests that applying shift strategies is a necessary and inevitable aspect of Arabic-to-English translation, because the two languages belong to different linguistic systems. Finding an equivalent English expression is not easy, because Arabic and English are diverse linguistically. The shifts in translation can be classified into two categories: shifts in the semantic field and shifts in the grammatical field. As the data analysis showed, shifts occurred in parts of speech, word choice, and tense, to achieve a better conceptual equivalence between the source and target languages.

When a source language (SL) item has an equal translation in the target language (TL), variation at the linguistic level can emerge. This variation can be seen in the shifts that occur when an utterance is presented in grammar in the Arabic language and lexis in English translation. In Arabic, nouns come before the possessive adjective, whereas in English, there is no such rule. For instance, the word “لسانه” (noun+pronoun) in Arabic becomes “his tongue” (possessive adjective +noun) in English. Level shifts occur due to the different situations of the verbs in both languages. In Arabic, nominal sentences begin with a noun or a pronoun, and they have two parts: a subject and a predicate. For example, in the nominal sentence “الصبرُ شجاعةٌ” the verb “to be” is not given in Arabic. However, in two English translations, the translators have applied the verb “to be”. Sayyid Ali Reza translated it as “endurance is bravery” and Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja’fari rendered it as “patience and ability to suffer in silence is a kind of bravery”. Both translators applied the verb “is”. To achieve an accurate meaning in TL, the translators made changes in the semantic field. For instance, Jafari translated the Arabic sentence “وَالْفِكْرُ مِرَاةٌ صَافِيَةٌ” as “deep thinking will present the clearest picture of every problem.” The translators used unit shifts to transfer the meaning of a word to the target language's reader message of the source text. For example, “البخلُ” is one word, but it was translated as two words “Parsimony and avarice.” However, the translators were negligent in some cases and could have provided a fluent and understandable translation. They applied unit shift (sentence to word) in an incorrect way. For example, the sentence “صلى الله عليه وآله” was translated as A.S.. Similarly, “عليه السلام” was translated as (p.b.u.h.a.h.p.). Such translations create ambiguity for the target-language reader. Intra-system shift often involves a change from singular to plural from SL to TL. For example, “الهيبة” which is a singular word, was translated as “fears”.

## 6. Conclusion

This study had three main objectives. Firstly, it aimed to identify the most frequent category shifts applied in the two English translations of sayings 1 to 30 of Nahj al-balagha by Sayyid Ali Reza and Sayyid Muhammad Askari Ja'fari based on Catford's model. To achieve this, the frequency of category shifts in the Arabic source text was manually counted and the strategies adopted by both translators were analyzed. The results indicated that Unit and Structure shifts were the most common types of category shifts. Secondly, the study compared the strategic differences between the two translations, revealing variations in the frequency and percentage of category shifts implemented. Thirdly, the researcher scrutinized the impact of Catford's category shift strategies on the accuracy of the target texts, finding that the Unit Shift strategy had the most significant effect on translation accuracy. Therefore, this study provides valuable insights into the translation process and suggests that individuals interested in researching translation should understand both the source and target languages to utilize translation strategies effectively. This study is of particular interest to translation researchers, critics, and scholars interested in linguistics, syntax, or semantics.

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