



Semantic Ambiguity in Translation: A Comparative Study Between English and Indonesian

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Abstract

This study investigates semantic ambiguity in translation, with a specific focus on lexical ambiguity in the English–Indonesian translation of the *Cinderella* short story. Grounded in Nida and Taber's theory of semantic equivalence and Baker's framework of non-equivalence, the research examines how lexical items in the source language may lead to multiple interpretations or shifts in meaning when translated into the target language. Using a qualitative content analysis method, the study identifies patterns of meaning distortion resulting from ambiguous or culturally loaded words. The findings indicate that lexical ambiguity significantly contributes to semantic non-equivalence, often causing partial or lost meaning that undermines narrative clarity and coherence. The study highlights the critical role of contextual awareness and lexical precision in literary translation to preserve intended meaning.

Keywords: *Lexical Ambiguity; Semantic Non-Equivalence; Literary Translation*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bentuk dan fungsi meminta maaf sebagai tindak tutur dalam komunikasi sehari-hari dari perspektif pragmatik dan sosiolinguistik. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian pustaka kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari sumber-sumber ilmiah terbaru dan dianalisis melalui kerangka teori tindak tutur dan teori kesantunan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa permintaan maaf dipengaruhi oleh faktor-faktor sosial seperti hubungan kekuasaan, jarak sosial, dan tingkat keparahan pelanggaran. Permintaan maaf sering kali disampaikan secara tidak langsung, dengan menggunakan lindung nilai dan pelembut untuk mengurangi ancaman terhadap muka. Hal ini mengindikasikan bahwa permintaan maaf bukan hanya sekedar ungkapan penyesalan pribadi, tetapi juga merupakan tindakan strategis untuk menjaga keharmonisan sosial.

Kata Kunci: *Ambiguitas Leksikal; Non-ekivalensi Semantik; Penerjemahan Sastra*

INTRODUCTION

Translation is not merely a linguistic activity, but a complex communicative act that involves the transfer of meaning, context, and cultural nuance from a source language (SL) to a target language (TL). In this process, translators are not only tasked with preserving the literal meaning

of a text but also its stylistic features and communicative intent. This becomes particularly challenging when translating between languages that differ significantly in structure and cultural background, such as English and Indonesian. Scholars have emphasized that effective translation must balance linguistic equivalence with cultural appropriateness to ensure the message resonates with the target audience (Rohmah, 2021; Kurniawan, 2023).

One of the most critical issues in translation is non-equivalence, especially at the lexical and semantic levels. Non-equivalence occurs when no direct counterpart exists in the TL for an SL expression, often leading to meaning distortion or omission. This problem is especially pronounced in literary translation, where metaphor, idioms, and culture-specific terms are prevalent. According to recent research, failure to achieve semantic equivalence can negatively affect the overall fidelity and readability of the translated work (Fitria, 2020). Thus, translation should not be reduced to a mere lexical substitution but must consider pragmatic and contextual factors.

Lexical ambiguity is one common source of non-equivalence that significantly affects translation accuracy. It arises when a word in the SL carries multiple meanings, making it susceptible to misinterpretation if translated without sufficient contextual awareness. For example, in the translation of the English fairy tale *Cinderella*, the word *slipper* was rendered into Indonesian as *sandal*, which misses the symbolic and narrative significance of the original "glass slipper." Such mistranslations reduce the cultural and aesthetic value of the text, raising concerns about how translators manage semantic ambiguity in their practice (Hasibuan, 2021; Siregar, 2021).

Several studies have investigated strategies used by translators to manage ambiguity in cross-language settings. Research by Arifin and Sari (2022) and Siregar (2021) highlights the need for contextual sensitivity and pragmatic competence in dealing with polysemous expressions. Fitria (2020) points out that indirect strategies such as paraphrasing, explicitation, or cultural adaptation are often employed to compensate for gaps between SL and TL meanings. However, most existing studies either focus on technical or non-literary texts, leaving a gap in research specifically addressing semantic ambiguity in English-Indonesian literary translation. Therefore, further examination is needed to analyze how lexical ambiguity is approached within this genre and language pair.

This study aims to investigate the manifestation and treatment of lexical ambiguity in the English-Indonesian translation of literary texts, with a focus on the classic narrative *Cinderella*. The research seeks to identify ambiguous lexical items in the source text, examine how they are translated into Indonesian, and assess the semantic accuracy and cultural relevance of the translation choices. By doing so, this study hopes to contribute to translation theory and practice, especially in highlighting strategies that

enhance semantic equivalence and preserve the communicative value of the original literary work.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative library research approach, utilizing content analysis as its primary method to investigate lexical ambiguity in translation. Library research is particularly suitable for this investigation, as it allows for a focused examination of primary textual sources—in this case, the original English version of the *Cinderella* story and its corresponding Indonesian translation. The objective of this research is to explore how ambiguous lexical items are rendered in the target language and to assess the extent to which semantic equivalence is preserved or altered.

The data sources consist of two key texts: the original *Cinderella* fairy tale in English and its official Indonesian translation. These texts serve as the main corpus for analysis due to their rich use of figurative and expressive language, which often gives rise to lexical ambiguity. Since literary texts emphasize narrative fidelity and cultural resonance, they offer a suitable context to evaluate the translator's strategies in resolving semantic challenges.

Data collection is conducted through systematic textual comparison. The researcher first reads both the source and target texts thoroughly to identify instances of lexical ambiguity in the English version. These ambiguous items—either at the word or phrase level—are then traced in the Indonesian translation. Particular attention is paid to cases where the translation suggests a shift, loss, or distortion of meaning. Each identified case is documented and categorized for further analysis.

In terms of analysis, the study employs a threefold procedure. First, the ambiguous lexical items are categorized based on the type of ambiguity (e.g., polysemy, homonymy) and the nature of the translation outcome (e.g., different meaning, omission, addition). Second, contextual analysis is applied to determine whether the meaning in the target language aligns with the source context. Finally, the findings are evaluated through the theoretical lenses of Nida and Taber (1982), particularly their concept of dynamic equivalence, and Baker's (1992) framework of non-equivalence and lexical ambiguity. The results are presented descriptively, illustrated with representative examples from the text, and supported by brief frequency data when necessary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lexical Ambiguity in Translation

This research is important because it focuses on a specific linguistic challenge that is often underestimated in translation studies: lexical ambiguity. In the context of literary translation, conveying meaning

accurately involves more than just transferring vocabulary—it requires capturing the cultural, emotional, and stylistic dimensions of the source text. Lexical ambiguity, where a word holds more than one possible meaning, threatens this process. Without contextual awareness, such ambiguity can lead to semantic distortion, resulting in misinterpretations that weaken both the narrative coherence and aesthetic resonance of the target text.

From a theoretical standpoint, this issue aligns with the concerns raised by Nida and Taber (1982), who emphasize the necessity of semantic equivalence in translation. According to their framework, effective translation is not merely about word substitution, but about transferring meaning in a way that elicits the same response from the target audience as the original. Lexical ambiguity disrupts this process by creating semantic gaps between the source and target texts. When translators fail to resolve these ambiguities based on context, they risk violating one of the core principles of equivalence: communicative function.

Furthermore, Mona Baker's (1992) analysis of non-equivalence in translation highlights lexical ambiguity as one of the most persistent and complex challenges. Baker categorizes translation problems that stem from differences in meaning ranges, cultural associations, and structural gaps between languages. Ambiguous terms—especially in literary texts—often lack direct equivalents, requiring translators to make interpretative decisions that balance accuracy with cultural sensitivity. This decision-making process is where the translator's critical competence becomes central, and thus, a more focused study on lexical ambiguity is warranted.

The Cinderella text serves as an ideal case study due to its widespread cultural familiarity and the multiple versions that exist in both English and Indonesian. Previous studies, including Hasibuan (2021), have identified general semantic and grammatical issues in its translation, but have not deeply investigated how ambiguous lexical items specifically impact meaning. This research narrows that focus and contributes to filling a scholarly gap by offering a systematic analysis of how lexical ambiguity interferes with semantic equivalence, particularly within a well-known literary narrative.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study also has practical implications. Translators, educators, and students of linguistics can benefit from insights into how context-sensitive strategies—such as explicitation, paraphrasing, or cultural adaptation—can be employed to handle ambiguous terms effectively. It also promotes a deeper appreciation for the interpretative nature of literary translation, reminding practitioners that linguistic choices carry semantic weight that can reshape a reader's understanding of the text. The research therefore enhances both the competence and awareness of those engaged in cross-linguistic communication.

In a broader sense, the study reinforces the argument that language is not a transparent medium. As theories of semantics and pragmatics suggest, words are loaded with context, assumptions, and sociocultural codes. Addressing lexical ambiguity through focused research not only sharpens our analytical lens in translation studies but also contributes to improving the quality of intercultural communication. In an increasingly interconnected world, refining how we translate meaning across languages is not just an academic pursuit—it is a communicative necessity

Data Presentation and Analysis

To identify the effects of lexical ambiguity on semantic equivalence, the following table presents selected data from the English–Indonesian translation of *Cinderella*. The analysis focuses on words or phrases with ambiguous lexical meanings that may lead to semantic non-equivalence in the target language (Bahasa Indonesia).

Table 1. Lexical Ambiguity and Semantic Non-equivalence in Translation

ST (Source Text)	TT (Target Text)	Ambiguous Word/Phrase	Type of Ambiguity	Translation Effect
The Prince picked up the slipper...	Pangeran mengambil sepatu itu...	<i>slipper</i>	Lexical ambiguity (polysemy)	Meaning shift (glass slipper → general shoe)
Go and search everywhere for the girl whose foot this slipper fits.	cari di mana pun gadis yang kakinya cocok dengan sandal ini.	<i>slipper</i> → <i>sandal</i>	Cultural lexical gap	Cultural misrepresentation
The Prince said to his ministers...	Pangeran berkata kepada menteri...	<i>ministers</i>	Lexical ambiguity (contextual)	Inaccurate equivalence (palace official → government official)
You have something neither of your stepsisters has...	Kamu memiliki sesuatu yang saudara tirimu tidak memilikinya	<i>stepsisters</i>	Gender ambiguity	Incorrect interpretation (gender-neutral)
Near the cinders	Dekat abu	<i>cinders</i>	Cultural metaphor	Missing narrative reference (Cinderella's origin)

Data (1)

ST: The Prince picked up the slipper

TT: Pangeran mengambil sepatu itu

Analysis: The word slipper refers to a specific object—glass slipper—central to the story. Translating it as sepatu generalizes the meaning and weakens the iconic image, creating a meaning shift.

Data (2)

ST: Go and search everywhere for the girl whose foot this slipper fits.

TT: Pergi dan cari di mana pun gadis yang kakinya cocok dengan sandal ini.

Analysis: The word slipper translated into sandal is a lexical mismatch. In Indonesian, sandal refers to casual footwear and does not reflect the delicate and magical image of the glass slipper. This leads to cultural misrepresentation.

Data (3)

ST: The Prince said to his ministers...

TT: Pangeran berkata kepada menteri-menternya...

Analysis: In English, ministers in this context likely refers to palace officials. However, the Indonesian word menteri typically refers to political or governmental ministers. This is a case of contextual lexical ambiguity and causes inaccurate equivalence.

Data (4)

ST: You have something neither of your stepsisters has...

TT: Kamu memiliki sesuatu yang saudara tirimu tidak memilikinya...

Analysis: The term stepsisters implies female siblings. The Indonesian translation saudara tiri may not explicitly indicate gender, and this can cause gender ambiguity in the target text.

Data (5)

ST: Near the cinders

TT: Dekat abu

Analysis: Cinders carries a narrative significance as it is the root of Cinderella's name. Translating it as abu removes the symbolic reference, resulting in lost narrative meaning.

Discussion

The analysis of the Cinderella translation reveals that lexical ambiguity is a major factor contributing to semantic non-equivalence between the source and target texts. This is particularly apparent in instances where a word in English has multiple possible interpretations, yet the Indonesian translation selects only one, often without sufficient contextual grounding. In literary works, which are heavily reliant on stylistic nuance and connotation, such reduction in meaning leads to significant losses in narrative integrity. These lexical mismatches are not merely linguistic errors but represent deeper failures to grasp the pragmatic function of words within their narrative environment.

This observation aligns with Mona Baker's (1992) assertion that lexical ambiguity is among the primary sources of translation difficulties,

especially in contexts where no exact equivalents exist in the target language. Baker emphasizes that ambiguity is not always a flaw in the source text, but rather a natural feature of language that must be navigated through interpretive strategies. When a translator applies literal, word-for-word methods to ambiguous items without considering the broader narrative and cultural context, the result is often a misrepresentation of the source text's communicative intent. Such strategies overlook subtleties like tone, metaphorical significance, and character development embedded in lexical choices.

In this regard, Nida and Taber's (1982) concept of dynamic equivalence becomes especially relevant. Unlike formal equivalence, which aims for structural fidelity, dynamic equivalence prioritizes the effect of the message on the target audience. This model assumes that successful translation should elicit the same response from the target readers as from the original audience. In the *Cinderella* case, certain lexical items—such as “slipper” being translated as “sandal”—demonstrate a misalignment not only in literal meaning but also in the cultural imagination and emotional resonance of the term. Such cases exemplify how deviations from dynamic equivalence diminish the aesthetic and cultural richness of the text.

Thus, the findings underscore the need for context-aware translation strategies that go beyond lexical matching. Translators must engage in semantic interpretation, considering the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships within the text. In doing so, they uphold the communicative function and literary value of the original narrative. Addressing lexical ambiguity with such sensitivity is not merely a linguistic concern—it is an ethical responsibility in cross-cultural communication. As translation continues to serve as a bridge between linguistic and cultural worlds, enhancing awareness of how lexical ambiguity shapes meaning is crucial for producing accurate, faithful, and impactful literary translations.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis, this study concludes that lexical ambiguity significantly contributes to semantic non-equivalence in the English–Indonesian translation of the *Cinderella* story. Words such as *slipper*, *cinders*, and *ministers* exhibit multiple meanings or culturally embedded connotations that are not easily transferable into Indonesian without contextual interpretation. When these terms are translated literally, the narrative function, cultural symbolism, or character roles are often distorted or lost. This supports Baker's (1992) argument that lexical ambiguity is a key source of meaning shift in translation, especially in literary texts that rely heavily on nuance and implied meaning.

To address this issue, translators must go beyond surface-level word equivalence and adopt strategies that consider both the linguistic context and

cultural dimensions of the source text. As Nida and Taber (1982) emphasized, dynamic equivalence should be prioritized to preserve the communicative effect and integrity of the original narrative. Therefore, this study highlights the need for heightened sensitivity to context and ambiguity in literary translation, contributing both theoretically to translation studies and practically to the improvement of translator training and translation quality

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