

CULTURE AND TRANSLATION: THE CASE OF ENGLISH AND PERSIAN LANGUAGES

Mahmoud Afrouz¹
¹University of Isfahan

Abstract: Translation is not merely a matter of linguistics. The major goal of the present paper is to investigate the relationship between ‘culture’ and ‘translation’. To this end, the researcher drew on a corpus from English and Persian languages. The findings indicated that although different languages, like English and Persian, employ different linguistic forms, this variety cannot be considered as a real challenge. Since during the process of translation, source text’s container (i.e. form) usually undergoes a sort of lexical, phonological, graphological and grammatical change, and source text’s content (i.e. meaning) is logically required to be held constant, accurate understanding of ST meaning and natural rendition into TL depends on the translator’s deep acquaintance with both TL and SL cultures. Resorting to a descriptive equivalent or using explanatory notes would be of great help for accurate rendition and would, consequently, lead to a deep and clear understanding of the TT on the part of the target audiences.

Keywords: Language; Culture; Translation; Descriptive Equivalent; Notes

CULTURA E TRADUÇÃO: O CASO DAS LÍNGUAS INGLESA E PERSA

Resumo: A tradução não é apenas uma questão de linguística. O objetivo principal do presente artigo é investigar a relação entre “cultura” e “tradução”. Para tanto, a pesquisadora utilizou um corpus das línguas inglesa e persa. Os resultados indicaram que, embora diferentes idiomas, como inglês e persa, empreguem formas linguísticas diferentes, essa variedade não pode ser considerada um verdadeiro desafio. Uma vez que durante o processo de tradução, o conteúdo do texto fonte (ou seja,



a forma) geralmente sofre uma espécie de mudança lexical, fonológica, grafológica e gramatical, e o conteúdo do texto fonte (ou seja, o significado) é logicamente necessário para ser mantido constante, compreensão precisa do significado do ST e a tradução natural em TL depende do profundo conhecimento do tradutor com as culturas TL e SL. O recurso a um equivalente descritivo ou a utilização de notas explicativas seria de grande ajuda para uma interpretação precisa e, conseqüentemente, levaria a uma compreensão profunda e clara do TT por parte dos públicos-alvo.

Palavras-chave: Língua; Cultura; Tradução; Equivalente Descritivo; Notas

Introduction

It is only through language that human beings are able to talk together, share their experiences, express their wishes, hopes, beliefs and expectations and, above all, communicate with each other, in their own society, as well as with people from other nationalities with different cultural background. To approach this end, language needs to be learned functionally, in relation to its culture, since it should be considered as the utterly essential means of communication, not merely as a set of words congregated by a limited number of grammatical rules.

Culture can be expressed via language. Orators' perception of the whole world and its events are strictly under the influence of language. Except via language, there would be no means for them to share their ideas and experiences; in other words, they need a container, a sort of mould, to pour their mental, abstract, or even concrete, concepts into it. Therefore, it may come to mind that one's way of thinking, and consequently, one's culture, can be influenced by language. Considering culture "as a conceptual entity", Veisi Hasar & Panahbar (2017, p. 23) point out that divergence between an SL's and a TL's conceptual system "is the impediment for bridging the gap between these two different conceptual systems in translation". The serious question that arises

now is: What would happen to translation? Is it still a feasible act under such circumstances?

Translation is a journey from source to target language, during which, the form of languages would usually undergo an alteration. The important point here is that while the outer or surface layer of discourse (i.e. form) is most likely to change, the inner layer (i.e. meaning) is supposed to be held constant—of course, as much as possible. But what happens to the third layer of discourse? Intent, as the most inner layer of discourse, is a very controversial subject; however, in general, it may depend on the level of source and target cultures' proximity.

Some translation theorists believe that translation is impossible because all or most words have different meanings in different language, i.e. all words are culture specific and no two grammatical systems are the same. While Goethe (1813, as cited in Newmark, 1981, p. 18) claims that translation is impossible, Grant Showerman (1916) goes so far as to consider translation as a sin. In the same vein, Max Eastman (1959) points out that “almost all translations are bad” (as cited in Miremadi, 1993, p. 33).

There are other theorists who believe differently. Chomsky's “deep” and “surface” structures and Humboldt's “inner” and “outer” forms approve the possibility of translation.

Many of these theorists view language as merely a carrier of thoughts and believe that translation is more a process of explanation and interpretation of ideas than a transformation of words. As a consequence, everything—even the most culture-specific terms would seem to be translatable. There are other scholars who take the middle ground, like Newmark (1988, p. 73) who considers everything translatable, but “up to a point”. By pointing out ‘*up to a point*’, it becomes evident that he is absolutely aware of enormous difficulties that any translator may confront during the process of translation, one of the most challenging difficulties being the existence of culture-bound terms or CBTs (Afrouz, 2020, 2021a).

As Terestyényi (2011, p. 13) writes, culture-specific items (CSIs) or culture-bound expressions refer to the objects and “words

that signify concepts that are related to a specific culture”. CSIs are believed to “constitute translation problems”, and thus translators should “adopt” specific translation procedures “to solve these problems” (Yılmaz-Gümüş, 2012, p. 120). Similarly, as Afrouz (2019, p. 1; 2021b) writes, “equivalent choice” is affected by the strategies selected by translators; therefore, various strategies employed by translators will lead to different equivalents.

When it comes down to it, however, the feasibility relies on the aim and how profound the ST is rooted in its culture. The deeper the ST is rooted in the respective culture, the more arduous it is to deal with.

In the next section, we will take a look at *culture* and its characteristics, and we will also consider the cultural interference which may happen in our communication, as well as the cultural elements which may cause some problems in translating for which some solutions are also provided.

Literature Review

Culture

All nations have their own particular “culture, traditions, and language with different structures. Consequently, every source text has its own linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic structures that can be different from those of target text” (Heidari Tabrizi, Chalak & Taherioun, 2014, p. 30). Culture is defined by Davis (2001, p. 45, as cited in Yang, 2010, p. 169) as “the total accumulation of beliefs, customs, values, behaviors, institutions and communication patterns that are shared, learned and passed down through the generations in an identifiable group of people”. Similarly, Yang (2010, p. 169) believes that culture includes “all the shared products of human society, which includes not only such material things as cities, organizations and schools, but also non-material things such as ideas, customs, family pat-terns, languages.”

González-Davies & Scott-Tennett (2005, p. 166, as cited in Díaz Pérez, 2017, p. 53), define cultural reference as any sort “of expression (textual, verbal, non-verbal or audiovisual) denoting any material, ecological, social, religious, linguistic or emotional manifestation that can be” ascribed to a specific “community (geographic, socio-economic, professional, linguistic, religious, bilingual, etc.) and would be admitted as a trait of that community by those who consider themselves to be members of it.”

Karamanian (2002) believes that culture addresses the following groups of human activity: the personal, the collective, and the expressive. Likewise, Addler (1977, as cited in Sukwiwat, 1981, p. 216) considers culture as an entangled system of norms and values that give significance to “both individual and collective identity.” In the same way, identity, as is asserted by Afrouz (2017, p. 41), “has its roots in a nation’s culture” and culture can be manifested through language. Likewise, language, according to Kondali (2012, p. 102), “represents one of the fetters of identity”; however, “far from being neutral,” it “inscribes the struggles and suffering of a whole culture, and acts as a mnemonic repository, encapsulating and passing on the history of a people, as well as the cultural subtext shared by the members of a community” (Kondali, 2012, p. 102).

While a community’s artifacts may become the subject of interest by many anthropologists, some scholars, like Goodenough (1957), have merely focused on culture as a sort of general knowledge being socially acquired. In the same way, Hudson (1999, p. 72) believes that “culture is a part of memory which is acquired socially”.

Cultural issues cover a great range of issues. One of the branches of sociology of culture, according to Caniato (2014), studies goods via focusing on cultural objects. A lot of researchers have taken this controversial issue into consideration. Focusing on the issue of rendering dysphemisms in crime films, Jesús Rodríguez-Medina (2015) asserts that swear words are also culture-specific. Therefore, a term or an action being considered as a taboo in the SL culture may not be taken into consideration as such in the TL culture.

The concept of ‘culture’, as Culpeper (2015, p. 137) asserts, “must surely stand as one of the most controversial, most difficult to define concepts in academia”. It is easier said than done, according to Kočan Šalamon (2015, p. 213), “to present a foreign culture through literature to a target culture, since the translator must be able to adapt foreign words or on many occasions add footnotes to explain what an exotic word actually means”.

Sanz-Moreno (2019), concentrating on the subjects of audio description and intertextuality, emphasizes that the describer should strive to keep a balance between the audience’s cultural knowledge and their ability to infer the concealed aspects represented through the film, on the one hand, and being quite prepared to fill the cultural gaps, on the other hand.

Translators undoubtedly need “a thorough knowledge of both the source and the target culture to re-create a text that enables” the readers “to enjoy reading, and to gain some (inter- or cross-) cultural knowledge” (Rot Gabrovec, 2015, p. 236).

Features of culture

From what was mentioned earlier, we can conclude that culture is a sort of general-shared-learnable-knowledge:

1. culture can include a wide variety of concepts (ideas, feelings, abstract entities) and items (concrete objects),
2. culture is usually shared by a nation, (sub-cultures are shared by small communities, tribes, villages existing within the borderlines of a country),
3. cultural knowledge can be learned in a family, a school, a university, or a society, in general.

All of the abovementioned characteristics confirm that, in today’s global village, a translator can easily (or, of course, sometimes with a lot of efforts, in the case of minorities) access the very knowledge and engage the act of translating.

Cultural interference in communication

Bamgbose (1995, p. 87) in his article ‘*Language and cross-cultural communication*’ distinguishes two types of interference: language-motivated and culture-motivated.

Language-motivated interference

Culture and language, according to Kavalir (2015, p. 29), “are inextricably linked”. Language, as Kondali (2012, p. 102) writes, “has never constituted a facile or definite means of communication”. Bamgbose (1995) defines language-motivated interference as a transport of the characteristic of language A (LA) to language B (LB). This kind of interference arises from the dissimilarity between LA and LB. This interference is of two kinds: linguistic and cultural.

Linguistic interference involves LA interference in the LB with no implication for LB culture. While Bamgbose talks about LA and LB, in the present paper, the researcher is going to use his framework to apply on various kinds of interferences occurred during translation process.

Therefore, we will have TL and SL instead of LA and LB, and the previous definition will change to this one: Linguistic interference is a kind of interference that involves SL interference in the TL with no implication for TL culture.

Linguistic interference includes phonological transfer (e.g. /θ/ in ‘Macbeth’ which is usually pronounced /t/), lexical transfer (e.g. ‘cow meat’ for ‘beef’), and syntactic deviance (e.g. ‘*I go home tomorrow*’ instead of ‘*I will go home tomorrow*’)—in Persian we usually use the present time to refer to future.

Cultural interference is a case where the interference of LA to the LB also includes a transport of an aspect of the LA culture into the second. For example, in Persian, the first person is mentioned first in noun phrase coordination. Hence, we have من و ت /*man va to*/ (= I and you). Imagine the consequence of transferring this to

English by a naïve translator or interpreter. The person who uses this sentence is considered to be impolite or arrogant, because, in English, the first person is mentioned last.

Culture-motivated interference

There are two types of culture-motivated interference: ‘source-to-target’ interference and ‘target-to-source’ interference.

Examples of ‘source-to-target’ interference are found in greetings, idioms and use of pronouns of respect. It is normal for an Iranian getting into a taxi to say ‘*hello everybody*’ or سلام عليكم / *salam aleikom!*. Now imagine that he gets in a taxi in London and says ‘*hello everybody*’. But none of the passengers would answer him and there would be a dead silence. Obviously the native English speakers in the taxi may think he is mad, while he feels that they are rude and unfriendly.

Target-to-source interference is a case where a bilingual in terms of the norms of his own culture wrongly interprets a cultural norm of LB. “Advertisements”, according to Lazović (2018, p. 26) “are very often characterised by the inventive use of language and unorthodox semantic functions of words”. An advertisement for کباب /*kæbab!* in Persian restaurants can be that it has ‘*finger liking goodness*’. While this advertisement makes sense in a culture where people like their fingers for any delicious taste, it sounds disgusting or offensive in cultures where such practice is considered as a taboo.

Methodology

The present study is a descriptive research focusing on a number of randomly selected Persian culture-bound terms, expressions and proverbs, accompanied by their equivalents in English. The following steps were taken to conduct the research:

1. selecting a corpus of culture-specific items (CSIs),
2. classifying the CSIs on the basis of Nida's (1964) categorization, including material culture, ecology, linguistic culture, religious culture, and social culture, and
3. proposing some practical procedures of rendering CSIs.

Results and Discussion

Culture and translation

The concept of culture is somehow ignored in some translation scholars' definition of translation. In Catford's (1965, p. 20) definition, for instance, only the "equivalent textual material" has gained the prime importance. In the same vein, as Savory (1969) postulates, translation becomes feasible via the existence of equivalent intentions or correspondent elements of thought being hidden under divergent lexical items. Moreover, resorting to the concept of "thought", Brislin (1976, p. 1) has defined translation as "the transfer of thoughts and ideas from" SL to TL.

Pinchuck's (1977, p. 38) definition also puts emphasis on "finding a TL equivalent for an SL utterance". Likewise, in Bassnett-McGuire's (1980, p. 2) opinion, text A is considered as a translation of text B if "the surface meaning of the two" is analogous and the structure of text B is "preserved as closely as possible". Moreover, in Newmark's (1981, p. 7) definition of translation as "a craft", the issue of culture is left unmentioned.

Similar to Catford's, Savory's and Pinchuck's, in Wilss's (1982, as cited in Noss, 1982, p. 3) definition of translation, just the issue of "equivalent TL text" is emphasized.

While almost none of the definitions mentioned above took cultural issues into consideration, the one by Nida & Taber (1969) implicitly refers to culture by explaining the process of translating as an act of reproducing "the closest natural equivalent" while observing content (or meaning) and, if possible, form (or

style). Furthermore, focusing on two elements of “semantic” and “pragmatic”, House (2015, p. 23) has provided the following “working definition of translation: translation is the replacement of a text in the source language by a semantically and pragmatically equivalent text in the target language”.

Cultural elements in translated texts

Translation is culturally determined; therefore, the central “focus of modern Translation Studies”, as Burazer (2013) writes, is “the ever changing challenges of successful cross-cultural communication”. According to Grosman (1987, as cited in Bratož, 2004, p. 96), “every translator is foremost a reader of the text and as a reader their interpretation is temporally, culturally and socially determined,” that is “why a translation is meant primarily for the contemporary reader and why it becomes old and less interesting for future generations”.

The significance of adequate cultural background for translators reveals when some errors appear in their work, including literalness and the tendency to keep away from the foreign lexical items. The bizarre outcome of literalness is palpable, for example, in rendering the Persian proverb مرغ همسایه غاز است / *morg-e-hæmsayeh gaz æst*/. If a naïve translator would attempt to translate the proverb literally, the result (i.e. *the neighbor's hen is a goose*) will be ridiculous and illogical. The supposed translator would have been most likely ignorant of the English proverb as a proper equivalent: *the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence*.

Some translators may tend to preserve their mother language lexical items at any cost and resist any borrowing from other languages. For instance, a translator of English to Maya language is reported to render ‘ass’ as ‘a long-eared animal or دراز گوش / *deraz guš*/. It will not seem sensible to a native Maya, since the word is as applicable to a rabbit as to a donkey—actually, somewhat more so (Nida, 1964). In this concern, Armstrong (2005) argues

that borrowing is problematic, because sometimes it may prove ephemeral.

Nida (1964, p. 91) sees translation challenges fundamentally as the problems of finding equivalent lexical items and believes that these problems can be dealt with under (1) material culture, (2) ecology, (3) linguistic culture, (4) religious culture, and (5) social culture.

Translation theoreticians propose various strategies to render CBTs. For instance, Graedler (2000) offers a number of procedures which roughly include: coinage (creating new terms in the TL); explanation (of ST lexical items); retention or preservation (of the SL word); selection of a functionally similar and absolutely relevant TL equivalent for the original term.

Geographical elements can be culture-bound. Eskimos, for example, have various terms to classify diverse types of snow. In Iran's southern provinces, some can be found who have no idea of snow, and even in other northern and western provinces of Iran where people are familiar with snow, there are not many different terms to describe various types of snow—In Persian, all kinds of snow are just snow! On a similar base, '*white as snow*', may be rendered as '*white as egret feathers*', if the people of the TL are not acquainted with snow. Although one may say that nowadays mass media have solved a great deal of such problems, it should be noticed that, on the part of translation readers, nothing can really take the place of experiencing an event and close familiarity with geographical elements. For an Iranian, the words hurricane, storm, and strong wind are considered approximately the same terms, but for American people, these terms are quite different from each other. The reason seems to be that Iranians have never experienced hurricane, whirlwind or things like that; they have just experienced 'wind' in various degrees of strength. Therefore, reading or hearing such words, even when there is an equivalent for them (e.g. گردباد /gerdbad/ for 'whirlwind') can never convey the same feeling experienced by the SL text readers.

When a region lacks some topographical features, it seems unfeasible to present precisely the feature of another district. Suppose a person who has never seen a real mountain. He finds it unfeasible to conceive of this topographical feature in the same sense as a person who lives in a mountainous region conceives it. If the person is familiar with 'hill', translator could use 'great or very great hill' as a descriptive equivalent for the term.

Material-culture can also pose some challenges for translators. In many places in the world 'bread' has almost exact equivalents. A Persian translator translates it as نان /*nan*/. But we should bear in mind that the picture that the word 'bread' forms in the mind of an English man may be quite different from that of Iranian.

Regarding food habits, the importance of a food is not translatable to a readership who is extremely unaware of it. Some foods, for example, are cooked just during special ceremonies in Iran. Those foods remind Iranian audiences of a special festival, a particular event, a certain season, or a religious rite. Instances include سمنو /*səmanu*/ (cooked at the beginning of spring), شله زرد /*šoleh zard*/ (cooked in some religious festivals), and حلوا /*hælva*/ (usually cooked in funeral ceremonies). It is not unlikely to be realized by a foreign readership with a different cultural background.

Concerning social-culture, most Iranians used to live with their extended families. Under the circumstances, different words used to address each family member. There are lexical items to refer to a husband's mother خارسو /*xarsu*/, a second wife هوو /*havoo*/, the relation of husbands' of two or more sisters باجناق /*bajenag*/, the relation of wives' of two or more brothers جاری /*džari*/, a child's child نوه /*nəveh*/ and his/her child نتیجه /*natijeh*/, father's brother عمو /*æmu*/, father's sister عمه /*æmmeh*/, mother's brother دایی /*dai*:/, mother's sister خاله /*xaleh*/, etc. Most of the equivalent terms are nonexistent in English language since the concept of the extended family is mainly absent in the West.

The issue is more complicated in some languages where even the age of family members would affect their names. As an instance, in Maya language, there are only various terms for addressing a

younger / older sister or brother; however, for the words ‘sister’ and ‘brother’, in general, there are no terms.

Another example of socio-cultural issues is about the indication of class and caste in translation. In several provinces of Iran, people may generally use the phrase ‘*the people in the top part of the city*’ or مردم بالا شهر / *mardom-e-bala shahr*/ to designate the wealthy people. However, this phrase may designate nothing special, or a quite different social class, in other countries.

Tradition and customs are also an inseparable part of a nation’s culture. While the public exchange of kisses, in a Christian marriage, is part of the ceremony, in an Islamic context, especially Iranian context, it does not seem normal.

Beliefs and ideological elements are also culture-bound. An event, a plant or an animal which may be considered in SL culture as a good omen, can potentially symbolize nothing, or even worse, it may be taken into account as an ill omen in the TL culture. The bird جغد / *dʒogd*/ or *owl* in Persian culture is considered a bad omen; however, in English culture it symbolizes wisdom and intelligence. As a further instance, in Iranian culture when one sneezes while one is performing a task, they may say صبر آمد! / *sæbr amæd*/ which means that one should stop fulfilling what one was doing or what s/he intended to perform. Such a superstition is probably absent in other cultures, and therefore, causes a challenge for the translator.

Religious elements and myths are also culture-specific. In the case of religious culture, the problems of translation are the most perplexing. As an example, for the word نماز / *næmaz*/ in Persian or ‘*salat*’ in Arabic, the English word ‘prayer’ is suggested as an equivalent. However, the equivalent is inaccurate, since when an English man hears the word ‘*prayer*’, surely he will not think of a religious practice which requires ablution and is required to be fulfilled five times per day. In rendering such cases, resorting to a descriptive equivalent or using explanatory notes (in the form of either intra- or extra-textual glosses) would be of great help.

Linguistic culture is also a real challenge for translators. A proper name (PN), as a linguistic cultural element, may contain

associative values, especially in literary texts. For instance, Persian PNs such as رستم /Rostam/ and کاوه /Kaveh/ (who are great legendary figures in Persian literature) and religious PNs such as ابوالفضل / Abulfazl/ and علی /Ali/ (who are considered as great religious figures in Islamic Shia context), possess special associative values in Iranian-Islamic culture. Such PNs would convey nothing to the Western readership. In such cases, the translators may need to use informative notes.

It should be noted that the area of meaning of SL lexical items cannot be claimed to be totally the same with that of the TL. For example, the Persian word او /ou/ may be translated by English word 'he' or 'she', depending on whether male or female is meant. However, regarding 'number' in English and Persian, we can find some similarities between the grammatical systems of the two languages. In both languages one person or entity is considered to be singular and more than one person or entity is regarded plural. Considering 'voice' in English and Persian grammatical systems, in the later system, there is a greater tendency for applying active sentences than in the first one. The reason can be the existence of را /ra/ in Persian grammatical system by which, object can be made quite simply—the Persian word را /ra/, as an object indicator, has no equivalent in English. There are also other cases of discrepancies between the two systems (e.g. *tense*, *gender*) which would be out of the scope of the present article.

In general, when dealing with problems caused by cultural differences, as Xue-bing (2006) explains, translator should be both linguistically and culturally competent and play the role of a bridge in cross-cultural communication.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy to mention that although there are various kinds of equivalence, "most of them do not imply 'perfect' equivalence" (Afrouz & Shahi, 2020, p. 3). Words are not the

only thing translators try to render; however, translating lexical items, as symbols for features of SL culture are the real challenge for translators. In rendering words, translators are supposed to take care of cultural and stylistic issues. Only naïve translators are likely to deal with SL words as isolated entities. Therefore, competent translators are persistently required to remind themselves of the differences between the SL and TL cultures. They need, firstly to have adequate knowledge of the TL, and secondly, they should get acquainted with SL material, social, ecological and linguistic culture, as well as the SL myths and history.

One requirement to translate acceptably is to study the actual usage of words and expressions—the way native TL speakers apply those terms are of prime importance. For example, the English proverb ‘*barking dogs seldom bite*’ may be literally translated into Persian as *سگی که عو عو می کند گاز نمی گیرد!* /*sægi ke ou ou mikonæd gaz nemigiræd*/. Obviously, in the real world, it is illogical and ridiculous to think that a barking dog will never bite anyone! Therefore, at first, the translator needs to consider the meaning of the expression (i.e. people who threaten others usually do not hurt them), and then strive to find a functionally equivalent Persian proverb—in this case it can be: *سنگ بزرگ علامت نزدن است* /*sæng-e-bozorg ælamat-e-næzadæn æst*/ (literally: choosing a huge rock implies the person’s decision not to throw it).

Confronting with culture-specific or culture-bound terms (CBTs), a translator may desire to use some footnotes. A number of theoreticians regard translations sprinkled by notes bad as to their faces (Burton, 1973); nevertheless, using footnotes in many cases would aid the reader and result in better understanding of the message of the text.

Translating a book full of CBTs, one can allot the last chapter of the translated book to the detailed explanations and clarifications of such terms. The title of this final chapter can be “*For Deep Readers*”, indicating that this chapter would seem absolutely essential for those readers who are not familiar with the SL culture and are interested in discovering the complete message of the text.

This chapter may consist of both verbal and non-verbal devices such as pictures. For instance, in the case of material culture, pictures of different types of Persian breads or even the picture of various actions done during Muslim prayers نماز /namaz/ can be illustrated in the very chapter. Regarding some customs specific to Persian culture, such as بله برون /bæleh borun/ (= a special meeting between the bride's and the bridegroom's families held before marriage) and هنا بندان /hæna bændan/ (= a certain ritual held before marriage), verbal descriptions and detailed explanations would be helpful in avoiding misunderstandings and would also help the TL readership to grasp an accurate understanding of the ST.

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Mahmoud Afrouz. Isfahan, Isfahan Province, Irã. E-mail: afrouz300@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3051-4769>.