

CHALLENGES OF INTERMEDIARY TRANSLATION: ANALYZING INACCURACIES IN THE ARMENIAN TRANSLATION OF NANSEN'S WORK 'ARMENIA AND THE NEAR EAST'

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Abstract: Intermediary translation is a mode of translation that involves the usage of an intermediate language. In this process, the original source language is translated into an intermediate language, which is then translated into the final target language. This approach is used when the translator is not proficient in both the source and target languages, but is proficient in the intermediate one. In this case, an intermediate language can be used as a “bridge” to facilitate the translation process. However, intermediary translation also has its drawbacks. One major issue is that it can lead to inaccuracies in the final translation. When using an intermediate language, there is a risk of losing some of the semantic nuances and subtleties of the original text. This can result in a translation not entirely faithful to the original meaning. The case under study are the translations of F. Nansen’s work *Armenia and the Near East*. Through a comparative analysis of the English, German and Armenian versions some significant inaccuracies were revealed.

Keywords: intermediary translation; source language; intermediate language; target language

1. Introduction

Translation may be considered a metaphorical “bridge” that connects diverse cultures and languages. In the realm of translation studies, one fascinating area of exploration is intermediary translation. This specialized field involves multiple phases in the translation process, where an intermediary language is used as a stepping stone between the source and target languages. Intermediary translation, often referred to also as ‘relay’ or ‘pivotal translation,’ occurs when a source text is translated into an

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intermediary language before being translated into the final target language. This modality is employed for various reasons, including the absence of a qualified translator for a direct translation between source and target languages, or when multiple languages are involved in a translation process.

According to Toury, there should be certain preliminary norms which determine the accuracy of a translation. In this respect, “the threshold of tolerance for translating from languages other than the ultimate source language,” i.e. the levels of acceptability and precision of mediated translation, is taken into account as well. In the present article, this is the case with the translation made from English into Armenian through German (Toury 1978, 2000: 202).

There are many controversies about intermediary translation, which has often been subjected to a lot of criticism, as in many cases it is considered a coarse imitation of an original source text that lacks a number of details. In fact, this may further lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations and, eventually, to the distortion of the general message. However, intermediate translation is a widespread phenomenon in translation practice, especially in cases when there is no availability of the original text, or when the translator is unaware of the original language, but is proficient in the intermediate one. On the other hand, it is easy to come across such cases when a text translated from an intermediate language results in “impending catastrophes,” e.g. inaccuracies in the message and divergences from the original text in terms of semantic, syntactic, as well as stylistic peculiarities, since the translation was carried out from an intermediary source.

In the present paper F. Nansen’s *Armenia and the Near East* (1928)¹, which was written in English, is the original text, while the German translation acts as the intermediate language between English and the Armenian language, which is the target one². The study aims at evaluating the fidelity of the final translation to the English source text, highlighting some of the most problematic deviations which have affected the content of the original work semantically, syntactically and stylistically, bearing in mind that it is the result of an intermediary process of translation.

¹ *Armenia and the Near East* is a significant work by the renowned Norwegian explorer, scientist, and diplomat Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930). The book was published in 1928 and is a first-hand account of Nansen’s experiences in the aftermath of World War I, especially in the context of the Armenian Genocide and its impact on the Near East. Nansen was appointed as High Commissioner for Refugees for the League of Nations, and his work provides a detailed account of his efforts to provide relief and support to refugees in the Near East, with a particular focus on the Armenian population. In *Armenia and the Near East* Nansen not only documents the dire conditions faced by the refugees, but also discusses the political and diplomatic challenges of the time. This book is not only a historical account, but also a testament to Nansen’s dedication to humanitarian causes and his efforts to alleviate the suffering of those affected by one of the most devastating events of the 20th century. It remains an important source for understanding the history of the Armenian Genocide and the broader humanitarian response in the Near East during that period.

² The translations of important works like Nansen’s book help to disseminate historical knowledge and contribute to a broader understanding of significant events and humanitarian efforts in different parts of the world. They also make such works accessible to individuals who may not be proficient in the original language of the original text.

In this study the original source (English), the intermediary source (German) and the final target (Armenian) texts are studied applying the method of comparative analysis. This approach aims to unveil the linguistic, cultural, and stylistic deviations between the original source and the final target. It enables us to explore how the meaning of the source text is interpreted and conveyed in the respective target language through intermediate languages. This methodology is functional to a better understanding of the nuances of translation, and it may contribute significantly to the improvement and progress of translation theory and practice.

2. Literature Review

It goes without saying that translation has immensely guaranteed the communication and spreading of knowledge and information for centuries. The history of translation has evolved with the blooming and development of humanity and civilization. Thus, the inevitable socialization needs of peoples speaking in different languages gave rise to the necessity of translation. Initially it occurred in the form of oral translation, and it later developed into the written one. Thus, the earliest samples of written translations were mainly treaties that were signed by communities, as well as their written records. Gradually, the process of socialization between different communities and cultures increased, and as a result the translation process began to develop as a science. Translation science does not necessarily presuppose a mechanical transfer of the original text into a given language. It is actually a creative process, demanding linguistic skills and a deep cultural background. As Fischbach states,

“Translation was the key to scientific progress as it unlocked for each successive inventor and discoverer the mind of predecessors who expressed their innovative thoughts in another language.” (Fischbach 1998: 194)

Owing to the real endeavours and hard work of such distinguished linguists, scholars, interpreters and translators, today there is much progress in a constantly developing world where academic achievements are now available in a great number of languages. As Jacobson puts it, “Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey” (Jacobson 2015: 236). Consequently, it may be concluded that the richer the context of the message is, the smaller the loss of the information can be. As far as translatability is concerned, there are different opinions mainly concerning the possible success and fulfilments or failures of translating certain texts from one language into another. Some linguists think that the differences between languages are a marginal issue, because they are only “practical,” concrete barriers for translation, while the main problems connected to translatability may be caused by their typical nature and linguo-cultural background. Still people all over the world are endowed with a unique ability of reasoning. As it is stated in Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies,

“Different languages may package meaning differently, but ultimately all languages are able to convey all possible meanings... In the universalist perspective, language is

typically seen as comprising two layers, a surface and a deep structure. Ideas and meaning are generated at the deeper layer and can be represented by a variety of surface linguistic structures. This view was held in the medieval period by Roger Bacon and dominated Early Modern and Enlightenment thinking; it is echoed in Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar of the 1960s. The idea of language as two-layered promote a dissociation between form and meaning, or, in Saussurean terms, signifier and signified. Form is material and perceptible, and varies from language to language, while meaning is invisible and can be extrapolated from the form that carries it." (Baker&Saldanha 2009: 300-301)

As we already said, translation from an intermediate language is the process of translating not directly from an original source language, but from an already translated text in the target language into another language. In other words, the translation is made with the help of an intermediate language. As a rule, this process presupposes at least three languages. In some cases two intermediate languages, or even more, may be implied, depending on how many languages are employed in the translation process³. So the main idea underlying mediated translation is the intermediary language that serves as a multi-faceted "link" between two different languages, namely the original source language and the final target one. The actual intermediate translation is the final outcome and represents the "reconstruction" of a text via another language in case of the shortage of the original text, or in case of the translator's higher competence in the intermediate language rather than the original. As the target reader is not supposed to know the language of the original work, the translator may have difficulties transferring the *intention* of the original author and work, although he himself may express the intent in his own estimation. And if a translation is confined to certain limits in the original context, the target reader has the opportunity of interpretation and may have a different perception of the source material. As Liddicoat states in his survey, "Mediation is fundamentally an interpretive act" (Liddicoat 2015: 354). To be more precise, it is worth mentioning that interpretation is the basis of any mediation. As Liddicoat adds,

"The translator as mediator stands between the reader and writer and rewrites the text for an audience that is not the audience imagined by the writer and does not share the language, knowledge, assumptions, etc. that the writer has assumed of the imagined audience for the text." (Liddicoat 2015: 356)

The main problem here may be caused by the number of languages involved; depending on the number of languages used in conducting a translation a great number of deviations might occur in the translated product, since translation is not the direct outcome of the original text, but of an already translated text that serves as an intermediate source for the translator, which may ultimately lead to manifold distortions and ambiguities.

³ As already said, the material of the present case-study was originally written and published in English. Later Nansen translated the book into Norwegian himself, and it was also translated into German by Theodor Geiger in 1928 with the title *Betrogenes Volk*. In 2009 this German version served as an intermediate source for Evelina Makaryan, who translated it into Armenian.

3. Methodological Background

Comparative studies of the original and target languages are often used in the field of translation studies, because they involve a systematic analysis and evaluation of the two languages. This type of analysis helps assess the choices made by translators and their impact on final translations. The comparative study method can also be applied to intermediary translations, typically to the ones with an intermediary language between the source and target languages. Comparative study plays a pivotal role in understanding the intricacies of intermediary translation and its significance in facilitating communication across linguistic boundaries. The method of comparative analysis in intermediary translation studies is based on a systematic examination of the source, intermediary and target languages.

Numerous scholars in the field of translation studies have contributed articles on the method of comparative analysis⁴. When exploring this methodology, the consultation of the works of these scholars can provide a solid foundation for understanding the theoretical frameworks and practical applications of the approach in translation. The analysis in the present essay follows Toury's (1995) methodology for descriptive translation studies (DTS), by comparing the original source and the final target texts for shifts, by discussing the acceptability of the final text, and by making generalizations about the causes that may have generated the deviations. The method of comparative analysis of source, intermediate and target languages in this essay is a research paradigm that attempts to identify the deviations between the source and target languages resulting from the intermediary one.

4. The Comparative Analysis of the Original Source, the Intermediary and the Target Texts

“Armenia and the Near East” is a significant work authored by Fridtjof Nansen, a renowned Norwegian explorer, scientist, and humanitarian. The book, published in 1928, falls into the genres of travel literature, historical commentary, and political analysis. Nansen wrote the book in English, a language he was proficient in, although not necessarily bilingual. His choice of English may have been influenced by its status as an international language, making the work accessible to a broader audience beyond his native Norwegian readership. Additionally, English was widely used in diplomatic and scholarly circles at the time, particularly in discussions concerning geopolitical issues in the Near East. His writing style is likely clear, authoritative, and informed by his extensive research and first-hand experiences in the region. Translations of the work into languages such as German and Armenian would have facilitated access for

⁴ Among some prominent authors whose works delve into this subject are L. Venuti (2000), an influential figure in translation studies, who has explored the politics of translation and often employs comparative methods in his studies. Another relevant theorist in translation studies is S. Bassnett (2002), who has written about the challenges and nuances of comparative analysis in translation. Also A. Chesterman's (1997) works often involve the comparative examination of translations and the development of translation norms.

readers in those respective cultural contexts, providing insights into Nansen's perspectives on the region's history, politics, and humanitarian challenges. However, the accuracy and nuances of these translations may have been subject to scrutiny, as evidenced by the comparative analysis mentioned earlier, revealing significant inaccuracies in some versions. Overall, "Armenia and the Near East" remains a valuable primary source for understanding the historical and geopolitical dynamics of the region during the early 20th century.

The analysis of the examples resulting from the comparative study provides invaluable insights into the nuances of intermediary translation and into their impact on the final metatext. Through the meticulous examination of the original, the intermediary and the final translated texts the following deviations were discerned:

a) As a first example, the comparative analysis of the three languages revealed the following notable difference. The word 'Thursday' in the original source is translated into German as 'Dienstag' (Tuesday). Consequently, in the final translation, that underwent an intermediary language transmission, it is translated as 'երեքշաբթի' (Tuesday), which affects the clarity and coherence of the original source (see Figure 1).

"It had been arranged that on Thursday morning (June 16th) we were to drive out and see the work that was being done on the new Kura power-station, about fifteen kilometers north of Tiflis." (Nansen 1928: 73)

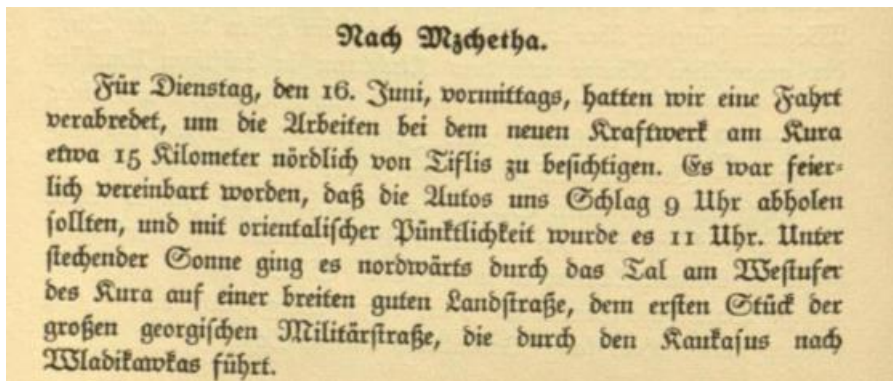


Figure 1.

«Նախատեսված էր երեքշաբթի (հունիսի 16-ին) կեսօրից առաջ այցելել Կուրի ափին կառուցվող էլեկտրակայան, որ գտնվում էր Թիֆլիսից մոտ 15 կմ հյուսիս»: (Nansen 2009: 73)

b) The second example presents remarkable and multifaceted findings. In the original source the author uses the word 'Mongols,' which is translated into German as 'Mohammedaner' (Muslims). Consequently, in the target language stemming from the use of an intermediary language the word 'Mohammedaner' is translated as 'մահմեդականներ' (Muslims), leading to a subtle shift in linguistic and cultural elements from the original source (see Figure 2). This results in a translation which distorts the source language's idiosyncrasy. Moreover, in the same sentence we can see

another discrepancy between the three languages. In the original source the author mentions King George VI. The comparative study reveals a complete adherence between the source and first target (German) languages. However, in the Armenian language through the filter of the mediated language it is translated as ‘Գեորգ Չորրորդ թագավոր’ (King George IV), which is an obvious deviation from the original source. We dare to assume that this deviation must have occurred as a result of misinterpretation of the Roman numeric symbols VI and IV (see Figure 2).

“The church has been destroyed over and over again by ruthless enemies, and its fortunes reflect the history of Georgia. In 1318 it was wrecked by an earthquake. King George VI rebuilt it, but it soon fell a prey to the fierce Mongols” (Nansen 1928: 81).

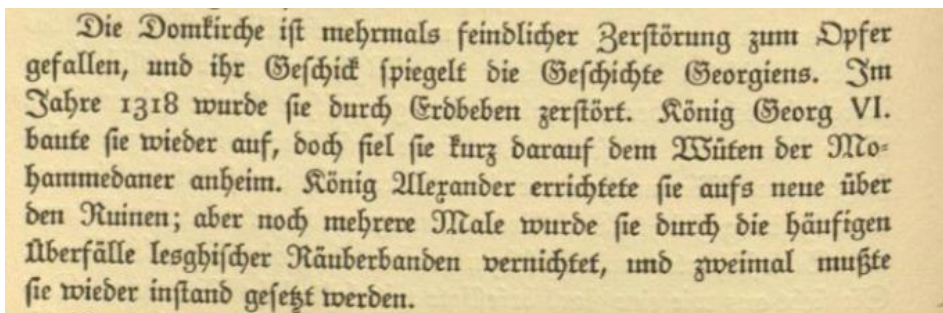


Figure 2.

«Գեորգ Չորրորդ թագավորը կրկին կառուցում է եկեղեցին, սակայն շատ չանցած այն բաժին է դառնում մահախնայանների վայրագություններին»:
(Nansen 2009: 80)

c) In the third example, the comparative study of the original source and the final text revealed evident semantic and syntactic deviations. The expression ‘*the Roman victory over Antiochus the Great*’ is translated into Armenian as ‘*կործանում են հռոմեացիները Անտիոք Մեծի գլխավորությամբ*,’ which literally translates as ‘*the Roman victory under the leadership of Antiochus the Great*.’ The meaning of the original source is therefore totally distorted, particularly if we take it into consideration that this is a violation of a historical fact. It should be observed, however, that in this case the deviation is not stemming from the intermediary language, which fully corresponds to the original source. The German phrase ‘*Sieges der Römer über Antiochus den Großen*’ translates into English as ‘*Victories of the Romans over Antiochus the Great*.’

As far as the syntactic deviation is concerned, it should be mentioned that the latter comes directly from the intermediary version. The original sentence was split into two phrases in the intermediary language, thus resulting into the same deviation in the target language. Acting as a linguistic bridge, the intermediary translation introduces a different syntactical phrasing, which is therefore reflected in the final language (see Figure 3). Leaving aside the peculiarities of the German language, we may assume that

the translation shapes the perception and the effectiveness of communication, by fulfilling the communicative purpose of the target language:

“When the power of the latter was crushed by the Roman victory over Antiochus the Great in 189 b.c., the two satraps seized their independence, Zariadres in Little Armenia on the Upper Euphrates, and Artashes (Artaxias) in Great Armenia and the Ararat country around the Araxes.” (Nansen 1928: 247)

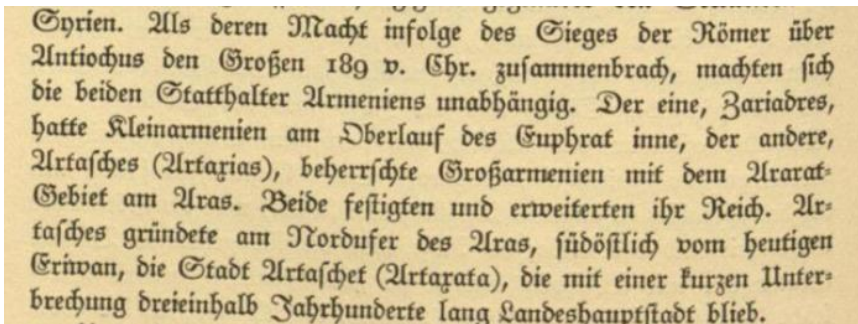


Figure 3.

«Երբ վերջիններիս պետությունը Ք. ծ. ա. 189 թ. կործանում են հռոմեացիները՝ Անտիոք Մեծի գլխավորությամբ, Հայաստանում իշխող երկու փոխարքաներն իրենց հռչակում են անկախ: Նրանցից մեկը Ջարեհն էր, որի իշխանությունը տարածվում էր Եփրատի վերին հոսանքի շրջանում ընկած Փոքր Հայաստանի վրա, մյուսը՝ Արտաշեսը (Արտաքսիաս), որ իշխում էր Մեծ Հայաստանում՝ Արազի հովտով, Արարատ լեռան շրջակայքով»: (Nansen 2009: 224)

These examples serve as focal points that illustrate the discrepancies encountered by the translator during the intermediary language phase, and how these discrepancies reverberated through the final text. Such a granular analysis not only allows for a better understanding of the role of the intermediary language, but also sheds light on the broader implications for translation practice and theory, enhancing our comprehension of the complex dynamics at play in multilingual and multicultural translation processes.

In the following examples, however, the disparities between the source and final texts do not originate from the intermediary language. For instance:

d) In the fourth example, the comparative analysis of the original source and the final text uncovered a clear semantic divergence. The expression ‘*where the sun has access*’ is translated into Armenian as ‘*ուր մայր է մտնում արևը*,’ which literally translates as ‘*where the sun sets*.’ The explanation that the abundance of foliage is due to the setting sun is highly illogical and disrupts the coherence of the text. As a result, the original meaning is completely changed. It’s worth noting, however, that in this instance, the discrepancy doesn’t originate from the intermediate language, which accurately mirrors the original source. In the intermediary text, the German phrase ‘*die Sonne Zugang hat*,’ which translates as ‘*the sun has access*,’ faithfully corresponds to the source equivalent (see Figure 4).

“The trunks are festooned with vines, ivy, and honeysuckle, and the ground is thickly covered with rhododendrons, azaleas, various kinds of ilex, nuts, camellias, tall ferns and much beside, while in the glades, where the sun has access, there are the most glorious, brilliantly coloured flowers.” (Nansen 1928: 58)

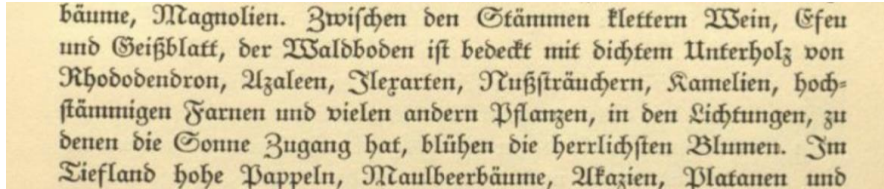


Figure 4.

«Անտառի հողաշերտերը նույնպես ծածկված են խիտ բուսականությամբ՝ մրտավարդի, լեռնավարդի, փշարմավի, ընկուզենու, կամելիայի, բարձրաբուն ձարխտոսի և շատ այլ բույսերի թփերով, իսկ բացասներում, ուր մայր է մտնում արևը, աճում են հիասքանչ ծաղիկներ»։ (Nansen 2009: 60)

e) In the fifth example, the comparative analysis between the original source and the final text revealed a significant semantic and grammatical disparity. The conjunction ‘Moreover’ is translated into Armenian as ‘Այդ պատճառով,’ which literally translates as ‘therefore / as a result.’ Due to mistranslation, the distinctive attributes of the rivers in the Caucasus are interpreted as a consequence rather than an addition. Consequently, the original meaning is entirely distorted. It’s noteworthy, however, that in this case, the disparity does not stem from the intermediary language, which faithfully reflects the original source. In the German language, the conjunction ‘Dazu’ signifies ‘in addition’ or ‘moreover’ (see Figure 5).

“As a rule, the rivers in the Caucasus do not flow through lakes where the mud can settle, thus clearing the water. Moreover, these rivers, at least in their upper reaches, usually fall sharply and dash headlong through narrow canyons and gorges, carrying with them, if the rocky bottom is loose, large quantities of mud and gravel.” (Nansen 1928: 74)

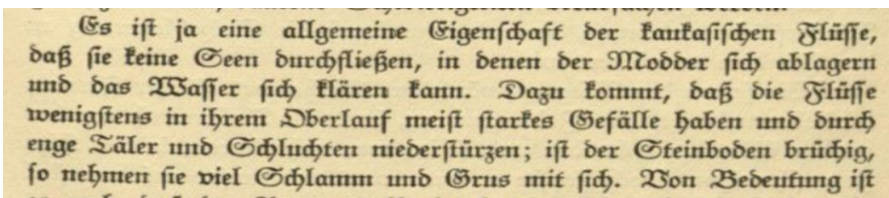


Figure 5.

«Կովկասի գետերը իրենց ճանապարհին չեն անցնում լճերով, ուր թողնելով նստվածքը, կմաքրեին ջրերը: Այդ պատճառով գետերը միայն վերին հոսանքներում ունեն որոշ թերություն և ցած են հոսում նեղ հովիտներով ու կիրճերով»։ (Nansen 2009: 74)

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of intermediary translations within the context of comparative analysis unveils fascinating layers in the intricate world of translation. When applying the comparative study method to mediated translation, it is crucial to consider the unique challenges and dynamics involved in this particular type of process. Acting as a linguistic and cultural bridge between the source language and a final target language, this practice presents both advantages and challenges in the realm of translation studies. On the positive side it can facilitate communication across diverse linguistic landscapes, making the translation of works accessible to individuals who may not be proficient in the original language of the text. In this way, it may help to disseminate knowledge and information influencing communicative efficacy.

However, the intermediary phase introduces potential semantic drifts, where subtle nuances may be lost or altered, impacting the fidelity of the final product. The analysis of some of the selected examples showed vivid deviations caused by the influence of mediated translation. This is especially important when dealing with documentary and historical texts, where every bit of information should be true to facts. When reading one and the same work in two different languages we can come across some instances of translating a text via an intermediate language which resulted in adverse effects, for the simple reason that the final outcome was achieved through another translation rather than the original text itself. It goes without saying that “natural” translation is not possible without hard work on reproducing equivalence and by relying on the translator’s expertise and individual style. Meaning shifts and misinterpretations are definitely inevitable because we become aware of certain facts and concepts in the natural text through a different language, which in its turn may imply or incur in some deviations from the original intent.

As we navigate the terrain of intermediary translation, a nuanced awareness of both its benefits and drawbacks is crucial for practitioners and researchers seeking to unravel the intricacies of translation in diverse and dynamic linguistic environments. Perceiving the nuances of intermediary translations not only enriches our grasp of translation processes, but it also contributes to a deeper comprehension of the complex intercultural dynamics inherent in the art of translation. Understanding how intermediary drafts impact the final product can be valuable for improving translation quality and efficiency.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.