

MENTAL ENLIGHTENMENT SCIENTIFIC – METHODOLOGICAL JOURNAL



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<http://mentaljournal-jspu.uz/index.php/mesmj/index>



THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF CULTURAL REALIA

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ABOUT ARTICLE

Key words: cultural realia, translation strategies, equivalence, intercultural communication, borrowing, adaptation, descriptive translation, localization.

Received: 01.05.26

Accepted: 02.05.26

Published: 03.05.26

Abstract: The translation of cultural realia remains one of the most complex issues in translation studies due to the absence of direct equivalents across languages. Cultural realia represent culture-bound concepts that reflect traditions, social norms, and historical contexts of a particular community (Newmark, 1988). This study aims to examine the main translation strategies used in rendering cultural realia and evaluate their effectiveness in preserving both meaning and cultural identity. A qualitative research methodology was employed, analyzing selected literary and non-literary texts. The findings indicate that borrowing, descriptive translation, adaptation, and functional equivalence are the most frequently applied strategies (Baker, 2018; Venuti, 1995). The results also show that the choice of strategy depends on the target audience, text type, and communicative purpose. The study concludes that successful translation of realia requires not only linguistic competence but also deep intercultural awareness (Katan, 2014).

Introduction. Translation is not merely a linguistic activity but also a complex cultural process that facilitates communication between different societies and worldviews (Lefevere, 1992). It involves not only the transfer of words and grammatical structures but also the

transmission of cultural values, beliefs, and social norms embedded in the source language. In this regard, translation serves as a bridge between cultures, enabling mutual understanding while simultaneously revealing cultural differences. One of the major challenges in translation arises when dealing with cultural realia—terms and expressions that are deeply rooted in a specific cultural context and often lack direct equivalents in the target language (Nida, 1964). These units are closely tied to the historical, geographical, and social background of a particular community, which makes their accurate rendering especially demanding. Cultural realia encompass a wide range of categories, including references to food, clothing, traditions, institutions, customs, and historical events. Such elements carry not only denotative meanings but also rich connotative and associative meanings that reflect the identity and worldview of a culture (Newmark, 1988). For instance, the translation of culturally specific food items or social institutions may require more than a simple lexical substitution, as these concepts often evoke unique cultural associations in the source language. Consequently, translators must carefully consider how to convey both the explicit and implicit meanings embedded in these expressions. According to Baker (2018), translators are required to make strategic decisions in order to either preserve the original cultural meaning or adapt it to ensure better comprehension for the target audience. This decision-making process highlights the dynamic and interpretative nature of translation.

Furthermore, the translation of cultural realia is closely linked to broader theoretical debates within translation studies. Scholars such as Venuti (1995) emphasize the tension between domestication and foreignization as two opposing translation strategies. Domestication involves adapting the source text to the cultural norms of the target audience, thereby increasing readability and accessibility. In contrast, foreignization seeks to preserve the foreignness of the source text, maintaining its cultural uniqueness and resisting assimilation into the target culture. This dichotomy underscores the translator's role as a cultural mediator who must balance fidelity to the source text with the expectations and comprehension level of the target audience. In addition to these considerations, the effectiveness of translating cultural realia depends on several contextual factors, including the purpose of the translation, the genre of the text, and the background knowledge of the intended readers (Nord, 1997). For example, literary texts often prioritize aesthetic and cultural preservation, while informative texts may emphasize clarity and functionality. Therefore, the translation of cultural realia cannot rely on a single universal strategy; instead, it requires a flexible and context-sensitive approach. Given these complexities, this study seeks to analyze the range of strategies employed in translating cultural realia and to assess their effectiveness in different communicative contexts. By

examining how translators navigate cultural differences, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between language and culture in translation practice.

Methods. This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, which is widely applied in translation studies to investigate and interpret textual phenomena in their natural context (Toury, 1995). A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research because it allows for an in-depth examination of how cultural realia are translated and how meaning is negotiated across languages and cultures. Rather than focusing on numerical data, this method emphasizes interpretation, contextual analysis, and the identification of patterns in translation practices. The data for this study were collected from a diverse range of sources in order to ensure representativeness and analytical depth. These sources include literary texts such as novels and short stories, which are rich in cultural references and stylistic variation. In addition, media and journalistic texts were selected to reflect contemporary language use and culturally specific expressions in everyday communication. Academic materials were also included, as they often contain culturally bound terminology and concepts that require precise and context-sensitive translation. The selection of texts was guided by purposive sampling, focusing specifically on materials that contain a significant number of cultural realia. Instances of cultural realia were identified through careful reading and textual analysis. Each instance was then paired with its corresponding translation in the target language, forming a dataset for further examination. This systematic collection process ensured that the data were relevant to the research objectives and suitable for detailed analysis.

The analysis was conducted using a multi-step procedure aimed at identifying patterns and evaluating translation strategies. First, the collected examples were classified according to the type of cultural realia, such as food items, social institutions, traditions, and historical references. This categorization made it possible to observe how different types of realia are treated in translation. Second, the translation strategies applied in each case were identified. These strategies include borrowing, adaptation, descriptive translation, functional equivalence, and omission, among others. The classification of strategies is based on well-established models in translation studies, particularly those proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) and further developed by Chesterman (1997). Finally, the effectiveness of each strategy was evaluated in terms of its ability to preserve meaning, convey cultural nuances, and ensure readability for the target audience. This evaluation was carried out through comparative analysis, examining the relationship between the source text and the translated version. Special attention was paid to the extent to which cultural information was retained, modified, or lost in the translation process. The analytical framework combines theoretical models with practical textual analysis,

providing a comprehensive approach to understanding how cultural realia are translated in different contexts.

Results. The analysis revealed several key strategies employed in translating cultural realia, reflecting the translator's effort to balance semantic accuracy, cultural preservation, and communicative effectiveness. One of the most frequently observed strategies is borrowing, also known as transliteration, which involves the direct transfer of a lexical item from the source language into the target language without significant modification (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). Examples such as *plov* and *kimono* demonstrate how this strategy preserves cultural authenticity and introduces the target audience to foreign cultural elements. Borrowing is particularly common in literary and ethnographic texts, where maintaining cultural specificity is essential. However, despite its advantages, this strategy may reduce immediate comprehensibility for readers who are unfamiliar with the source culture, often requiring additional explanations or contextual support (Newmark, 1988).

Another widely used approach is descriptive translation, which involves rendering cultural realia through explanatory phrases that explicitly convey their meaning (Nida & Taber, 1969). For instance, *plov* may be translated as "a traditional Uzbek rice dish with meat and carrots," thereby making the concept accessible to the target audience. This strategy is especially effective in informative and academic contexts, where clarity is prioritized. Nevertheless, it tends to reduce conciseness and may affect the stylistic quality of the text, as longer explanations can disrupt textual flow and diminish the symbolic value of the original term (Newmark, 1988).

Adaptation is another important strategy identified in the analysis, involving the replacement of a source-culture element with a culturally analogous concept in the target language (Baker, 2018). This approach enhances readability and allows the target audience to relate more easily to the text by using familiar references. However, adaptation often results in the loss of cultural specificity and may obscure important distinctions between cultures. As noted by Venuti (1995), this strategy aligns with domestication, where the translator prioritizes the target culture at the expense of preserving the foreignness of the source text.

Functional equivalence also plays a significant role in translating cultural realia, as it involves selecting a target-language term that performs a similar function within the target culture (Nida, 1964). For example, the Uzbek term *mahalla* is often translated as "community," enabling readers to understand its general social function. While this approach is effective in ensuring communicative clarity, it does not fully capture the cultural and social nuances

embedded in the original concept. House (2015) argues that such translations result in partial equivalence, where some aspects of meaning are inevitably lost.

Finally, omission is used in cases where cultural realia are considered non-essential or too complex to translate effectively (Chesterman, 1997). This strategy simplifies the text and improves readability; however, it leads to the complete loss of cultural information and may reduce the richness and authenticity of the original message. From a theoretical perspective, omission represents the most radical form of translation strategy, as it removes the cultural element entirely. The findings indicate that translators employ a range of strategies depending on the communicative context, text type, and target audience. Borrowing and descriptive translation are more effective in preserving cultural identity, whereas adaptation and functional equivalence enhance accessibility and readability. Omission, while sometimes necessary, should be applied cautiously due to its impact on cultural representation. These results highlight the complexity of translating cultural realia and emphasize the importance of informed and context-sensitive decision-making in translation practice.

Discussion. The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that no single translation strategy can be considered universally applicable when dealing with cultural realia, as the choice of strategy is highly dependent on multiple contextual factors, including the target audience, the purpose of translation, and the type of text being translated (Nord, 1997). In practice, translators must carefully evaluate the communicative situation in order to determine whether cultural preservation or reader comprehension should be prioritized. This decision-making process is not static but dynamic, requiring continuous adjustment based on textual and extratextual variables. For instance, literary translation often aims to retain the aesthetic, stylistic, and cultural richness of the source text, which explains the frequent use of borrowing and descriptive translation as strategies that preserve cultural specificity and convey the unique identity of the source culture (Venuti, 1995). Such strategies allow the target audience to experience elements of the foreign culture, thereby enhancing intercultural awareness and authenticity. In contrast, technical, academic, or journalistic translation typically prioritizes clarity, precision, and accessibility, leading translators to rely more heavily on strategies such as adaptation or functional equivalence, which make the text more immediately understandable and functionally effective for the target audience (Baker, 2018). Moreover, the role of the translator extends far beyond mere linguistic transfer to that of a cultural mediator who must navigate the complex interaction between source and target cultures (Katan, 2014). This mediating role requires a high level of intercultural competence, as translators must interpret not only the explicit meaning of words but also the implicit cultural values, beliefs,

and assumptions embedded within them. In many cases, cultural realia carry symbolic meanings that are deeply rooted in historical and social contexts, making their translation particularly sensitive and nuanced. As a result, translators must possess not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural literacy and critical awareness in order to make informed and responsible decisions. The tension between domestication and foreignization further complicates this process. Excessive domestication may result in the erosion of cultural identity and the loss of important cultural nuances, effectively assimilating the source text into the target culture and reducing its distinctiveness (Venuti, 1995). This can lead to a homogenized representation of culture, where differences are minimized or erased. On the other hand, excessive foreignization may preserve cultural authenticity and highlight cultural differences, but it may do so at the cost of readability and accessibility, potentially alienating or confusing the target audience. Therefore, translators must strike a delicate balance between these two approaches, ensuring that the translated text remains both culturally informative and communicatively effective. In this context, the concept of dynamic equivalence becomes particularly relevant, as it emphasizes the importance of achieving a similar communicative effect on the target audience as that experienced by the original audience (Nida, 1964). This perspective shifts the focus from formal correspondence to functional and pragmatic outcomes, encouraging translators to consider how meaning is received and interpreted rather than how it is structurally reproduced. Such an approach is especially important when dealing with cultural realia, as it allows for greater flexibility in adapting meaning while maintaining communicative intent.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that translation is influenced by broader sociocultural and ideological factors, including power relations, cultural dominance, and audience expectations (Lefevere, 1992). Translators do not operate in a neutral space; rather, their choices may reflect institutional norms, publishing conventions, or cultural preferences. This adds another layer of complexity to the translation of cultural realia, as decisions are shaped not only by linguistic and cultural considerations but also by external constraints and influences. Consequently, translators are required to adopt a flexible, reflective, and context-sensitive approach, selecting and combining strategies in a way that best serves the communicative purpose of the text while respecting cultural integrity. The ability to critically evaluate translation choices and anticipate their impact on the target audience is essential for achieving high-quality translation outcomes. Overall, the discussion highlights that the translation of cultural realia is a complex, multidimensional, and interpretative process that requires careful consideration of linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, and even ideological factors.

This reinforces the view that effective translation is not merely a mechanical transfer of meaning but a sophisticated act of intercultural communication and strategic decision-making.

Conclusion. Cultural realia represent a significant and persistent challenge in translation due to their deeply culture-specific nature and the absence of direct equivalents across languages (Newmark, 1988). As this study has demonstrated, a range of translation strategies—including borrowing, adaptation, descriptive translation, and functional equivalence—can be effectively employed depending on the communicative context, text type, and the expectations of the target audience (Baker, 2018; Nida, 1964). Each of these strategies offers particular advantages, yet none can fully resolve the inherent tension between preserving cultural authenticity and ensuring comprehensibility. Consequently, the process of translating cultural realia requires careful and context-sensitive decision-making, where the translator must continuously balance fidelity to the source text with accessibility for the target readership (Venuti, 1995).

Furthermore, successful translation extends beyond linguistic competence to encompass a high level of intercultural awareness and interpretative skill. Translators must act as cultural mediators who are capable of recognizing and conveying the implicit meanings, values, and cultural nuances embedded within the source text (Katan, 2014). This underscores the importance of developing not only language proficiency but also cultural literacy in translation practice.

In addition, the rapid development of digital technologies presents new opportunities and challenges for the translation of cultural realia. Future research should therefore explore the role of computer-assisted translation tools, machine translation, and artificial intelligence in handling culturally bound elements, as well as their limitations in capturing cultural nuance. Moreover, further studies could investigate reader responses to different translation strategies in order to better understand how cultural meaning is received and interpreted in the target context. Such research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of translation as a dynamic and evolving intercultural process.

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