

TRANSLATION CHALLENGES OF CULTURAL REALITIES AND STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING THEM

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Abstract. *This article provides a comprehensive analysis of translation issues related to cultural realities—unique concepts, objects, and expressions rooted in a particular culture. It explores types of cultural realities, the linguistic and cultural barriers they create, and the factors contributing to translation difficulties. The article further offers an expanded and detailed discussion of practical translation strategies such as borrowing, descriptive translation, adaptation, cultural substitution, functional equivalence, and the use of footnotes. By integrating theoretical perspectives and practical examples, the article demonstrates that achieving accurate and culturally sensitive translation requires not only linguistic proficiency but also deep intercultural competence.*

Keywords: *cultural realities, translation difficulties, intercultural communication, equivalence, adaptation, descriptive translation, pragmatic meaning, culture-bound elements.*

INTRODUCTION.

Every language reflects the lifestyle, values, history, and worldview of the people who speak it. Because of this deep cultural connection, translation is not merely the transfer of words; it is the transfer of culture. Among the most challenging aspects of translation are cultural realities—also known as *realia*—which carry unique cultural meanings and often lack direct equivalents in the target language.

Cultural realities include names of traditional dishes, clothing, holidays, geographical features, social institutions, historical phenomena, idioms, metaphors, and many other culture-specific items. When translators encounter such elements, they must make choices: preserve the original form, replace it with something similar, explain it, or combine several strategies. Each decision affects how the target reader understands the text.

The aim of this article is to analyze the main translation challenges of cultural realities and offer expanded explanations of effective strategies for overcoming these challenges. The discussion is supported by examples from various languages and cultures.

Understanding Cultural Realities

Definition and nature of cultural realities

Cultural realities are linguistic units referring to objects, concepts, phenomena, or traditions rooted in the source culture. They may evoke emotional, historical, or symbolic meanings that are not shared by speakers of other cultures.

These terms often resist literal translation because:

- The target language may not have a similar concept.
- The cultural significance may be unknown to foreign readers.
- The term may have multiple layers of meaning.

Categories of cultural realities

Scholars classify cultural realities into several broad groups:

a) Geographical realia

Mountains, rivers, deserts, climate-specific terms

Example: Aral Sea, Kyzylkum Desert

b) Ethnographic realia

Traditional clothing, cuisine, crafts, rituals, lifestyles

Example: kimono, hanbok, plov, yurt, chaihana

c) Social and political realia

Institutions, administrative units, political systems, educational structures

Example: senate, mahalla, soviet

d) Cultural and historical realia

Historic events, symbols, celebrations

Example: Nowruz, Thanksgiving, Samarkand Registan

e) Idioms and phraseological units

Figurative expressions tied to cultural references

Example: “Ko‘ngli tog‘dek ko‘tarildi” (Uzbek)

Each type may require different translation strategies.

Translation Challenges of Cultural Realities

Linguistic non-equivalence

Many cultural terms simply do not have a direct translation. For instance, sumalak has no exact English equivalent because the dish is unique to certain Central Asian cultures.

Cultural differences and unfamiliarity

Target readers may not understand the cultural background of the term. Words like yurt, dacha, banyas require explanation for non-native audiences.

Connotative and emotional meanings

Some words contain strong emotional resonance in the source language.

Example: Uzbek word “ona yurt” (“motherland”) carries deep patriotic feelings.

Context-dependent interpretation

Cultural realities often depend heavily on context, making literal translation inadequate.

Idiomatic expressions and metaphors

Idioms rarely translate literally. Losing metaphor destroys stylistic and cultural flavor.

Reader expectations and text function

Translators must consider:

- Who is the reader?
- What is the text’s purpose?
- Should the translation be foreignized or domesticated?

Risk of cultural distortion

Inaccurate translation may lead to misinterpretation, strengthening stereotypes or misunderstanding cultural practices.

Strategies for Translating Cultural Realities

Borrowing (Transliteration or Transcription)

The original word is preserved in the target language.

Useful when:

- The word is culturally significant
- No equivalent exists
- It adds authenticity

Example: plov, kimono, sushi, Navro‘z

Advantages: authenticity is preserved.

Disadvantages: may confuse readers unfamiliar with the culture.

Descriptive Translation (Paraphrasing)

The translator explains the meaning using descriptive phrases.

Example:

sumalak → “a traditional sweet paste made from germinated wheat”

Advantages: clarity for readers

Disadvantages: loses brevity and stylistic effect

Cultural Substitution (Adaptation)

Replacing the source expression with a culturally familiar one.

Example:

chaihana → “tea house”

mahalla → “local community neighborhood”

Advantages: improves readability

Disadvantages: may distort cultural uniqueness

Functional Equivalence

Translating based on purpose or function rather than literal meaning.

Example:

Navro‘z → “a spring festival celebrating renewal and new beginnings.”

Footnotes and Endnotes

Used mainly in academic or literary works to provide additional explanations.

Example:

“Navro‘z (a centuries-old spring celebration in Central Asia)...”

Combination of strategies

Often, translators combine multiple approaches:

- Borrowing + description
- Description + footnote
- Substitution + functional equivalence

Example:

yurta → “yurt, a portable round tent used by nomads”

Combining strategies preserves both meaning and clarity.

Factors Influencing Strategy Choice

Text type

- Literary texts demand cultural preservation.
- Technical texts require clarity.
- Media texts need readability.

Audience knowledge

A translation for specialists may keep original realia, while translations for general audiences require adaptation.

Translator’s cultural competence

A translator must understand both cultures deeply to avoid errors.

Purpose of translation

Whether the translation aims for:

- foreignization (to preserve culture), or
- domestication (to adapt for readers)

The Role of Cultural Competence in Translation

A translator must:

- Understand cultural context
- Interpret symbolic meanings
- Recognize hidden cultural references
- Maintain cultural harmony between languages

Cultural competence ensures that the translated text remains meaningful, accurate, and culturally respectful.

Conclusion

Translating cultural realities is a complex and delicate task. Cultural differences, lack of equivalence, emotional connotations, idioms, and historical associations create significant challenges. However, these challenges can be effectively managed through appropriate translation strategies such as borrowing, descriptive translation, cultural substitution, functional equivalence, and the use of notes.

A successful translation balances accuracy with cultural sensitivity. It allows readers from another culture to understand the original message while maintaining the cultural richness and authenticity of the source text.

Thus, translating cultural realities requires not only linguistic knowledge but also deep cultural awareness and analytical skill.

The translator becomes a cultural mediator, bridging two worlds through language.

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