

## TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL REALITIES: HOW TO AVOID LOSS OF MEANING

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**Abstract:** The article explores the theoretical foundations of translation, the challenges of translating cultural realities and the strategies to minimize meaning loss in the process. Cultural-specific terms, traditions, and concepts often lack direct equivalents in the target language, leading to semantic gaps or misinterpretations. By analyzing different translation theories and real-world case studies, this paper aims to provide insights into how translators can effectively bridge cultural gaps while maintaining the integrity of the original message. Different translation approaches, including transliteration, descriptive translation, cultural adaptation, and the use of footnotes, to ensure accuracy and preserve cultural identity are revealed in the article. Special attention is given to the impact of globalization on translation practices and the necessity of balancing fidelity to the source text with audience comprehension. The findings highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and translator competence in maintaining the authenticity of meaning.

**Key words:** cultural adaptation, cultural sensitivity, cultural realities, globalization, meaning loss, interlingual communication, mediator of cultures, realia, semantic gaps, translation, translator competence, transliteration.

Translation plays a crucial role in intercultural communication, serving as a bridge between languages and cultures. However, translation is not just about converting words from one language to another - it involves conveying meaning, intent, and cultural nuances. One of the biggest challenges in translation is dealing with cultural realities - words, expressions, customs, and traditions that are deeply rooted in one culture but may not have direct equivalents in another.

The importance of translation in culture is multifold. The task of translators is to tailor the source language text for the target culture by complying with the norms of the target language. Our description makes it clear that any translation however simple requires two languages and two cultures, traditions i.e. two sets of norms to function. [6, p. 27] Also, Structuralists stress the construction of reality as an effect of the translator's ideology and value system of the dominating culture.

Cultural differences appreciated in languages may stem from differences in period, religion, morals, and so forth. A specific world problem is given in to and received from different cultures so that the translator can ensure that the two worlds can understand each other. Within an inter-, or multicultural context, the challenge enhances. Snell-Hornby called the translator an intercultural expert or mediator of cultures in the globalized world.

In the modern world, translation can be carried out not only within a single semiotic paradigm, but also as a process of shifting between semiotic paradigms. During translation, significant changes in the original text may occur, as the process of translation always exists within the archetypal dichotomy of "one's own – the foreign." [5, p.64]

There is an entire layer of texts that vividly reflect a nation's worldview and spirit. For example, fairy tales undoubtedly belong to this category, as they, more than any other texts, are shaped by the cultural specificity of an ethnic group. Fairy tales from different cultures allow us to glimpse another ethnicity's perception of the world, which is why their translation requires special caution. The author of the article emphasizes that translating folk tales presents a particular challenge due to their significant lacunarity.

Translation scholars distinguish between two types of linguistic mediation: **proper translation** and **linguistic transposition**. In translation, scholars proceed from the assumption of communicative equivalence between the original text and the translated text. A modern perspective on the issue of translation adds to these two types a third concept-transposition, which is the process and result of transforming a verbal text into a text represented by other signs, such as iconic, audiovisual, and others.

E. Nida emphasizes that "the pragmatics of achieving specific communicative goals in translation requires the use of adaptive transcoding, in which information is not only transferred from one language to another but also simultaneously transformed (adapted) due to the necessity of presenting it in a different form, determined by the specific task of interlingual communication". [4, p.32] It should be noted that these tasks are generally related to targeting a specific recipient group and achieving the purpose of such adaptation.

Within adaptive linguistic transcoding, two types are distinguished: properly adapted translation and condensed translation. A combination of both types is also possible. As the article's author points out, "as a result of such transcoding, a translated text is created that intentionally deviates from the original text and does not assume a full-fledged 'replacement' of the original text, while the communicative goals of the original and the secondary text may either coincide or differ". [8, p.25]

In condensed translation, parts of a work that are undesirable to reproduce for moral, religious, or even political reasons are omitted, meaning that the reasons for such a translation may often be socially motivated. Adaptive transcoding and, consequently, the production of an adapted (graded) text are aimed at simplifying the original text in translation and are often determined by linguistic-didactic goals or the reorientation of the source text to a different audience, for example, adapting a text originally written for an adult audience to a children's audience. Changing the target audience requires a corresponding "adjustment" of the translated text. [2, p.21] The degree of adaptation is generally determined by the communicative goal.

There are several types of translation adaptation:

1. translating a text that has already been adapted or condensed for educational purposes;
2. adaptation (and condensation) due to linguistic and ethnic discrepancies (including cultural-historical and current event-related differences);
3. intentional adaptation in translation when changing the recipient, which is determined by the pragmatics of translation.

In the context of translation, mediation implies that the translator must correctly understand the meaning of the text and ensure that this meaning is comprehensible to others. M. Baker defines mediation as "an interpersonal activity aimed at interpreting and conveying meanings, which takes place in the communicative space between writers and readers" [7, p. 41]. At the same time, the translator's task is not only to convey the meaning of the text in the target language but also to transmit its cultural context. The latter is a more complex challenge, as the translator must reflect meanings that are implicitly expressed through context.

Let us consider a text written in a specific language, within a particular cultural context, for a defined audience. This audience speaks the same language and belongs to the same culture as the writer. Typically, the writer does not engage in intercultural communication, as their text is intended for a specific cultural group-people who speak the same language. Readers engage with the text in their native language while remaining within their cultural environment, and sometimes, they may not even be aware that they are reading a translated text. Therefore, reading a text cannot always be considered a form of intercultural communication. [3, p.714]

The translator, on the other hand, becomes an intercultural communicator. They act as a mediator between the reader and the writer, rewriting the text for an audience that the original author did not consider as their target. The translator's challenge is to turn something that was neither conceived nor perceived as intercultural communication into an act of intercultural communication. This is what makes the translator's mediating role particularly complex.

Translation is a form of intercultural mediation, in which the translator, working with a text rather than direct communicators, transfers the original text into another literary tradition with its own distinctive features that influence the text's perception [1, p.35]. The result of the translator's mediating work is a text that can be perceived by readers as if it were originally written in their language and cultural context.

Translation serves as a bridge between cultures, requiring not only linguistic precision but also cultural sensitivity. Cultural realities, unique to each linguistic community, often pose significant challenges for translators. Their ambiguity arises from their deep integration into historical, social, and everyday contexts, which may be unfamiliar to speakers of other languages. For example, the Russian word *авось* reflects a philosophy of relying on luck, which has no direct equivalent in European languages. Losses in translating such cultural concepts can lead to a dilution of meaning and, at times, the formation of misleading stereotypes (e.g., the association of the *balalaika* with all of Russian culture).

Cultural realities pose a significant challenge for translators, as a literal translation often fails to convey the intended meaning. A lack of cultural awareness can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or even offense. Therefore, translators must employ various strategies to ensure that cultural meaning is preserved while maintaining linguistic accuracy.

The term reality comes from the Latin *realis* ("tangible"), but in translation studies, it encompasses intangible phenomena such as traditions, social institutions, and mental frameworks:

- V.S. Vinogradov defines realities as "linguistic units that designate objects absent in a foreign cultural environment."
- S. Vlakhov and S. Florin, in their work *Untranslatability in Translation*, classify them as "words without equivalents" that require special translation solutions. [8, p.65]

Beyond traditional categories (ethnographic, social, natural), additional classifications can be introduced:

- **Emotionally-evaluative realities:** Russian *тоска* (a deep existential melancholy) vs. English melancholy.
- **Behavioral patterns:** Japanese *tsukiau* (adapting to others) as a key element of collectivist culture.
- **Technological realities:** Куликов (a self-taught Russian inventor) or Silicon Valley (a symbol of technological innovation).
- **Semantic gaps:** In Arabic, there is no plural for "snow," as the phenomenon is rare in the region.

- **Connotation conflicts:** The Chinese dragon symbolizes strength and good fortune, whereas in European traditions, it represents a threat.
- **Historical amnesia:** The term Holocaust requires clarification in cultures where this tragedy is not studied.

Nida argued that translation should evoke the same response in the target audience as in the source audience. For example: The biblical Lamb of God in cultures unfamiliar with sheep is translated as innocent child. Risk of excessive adaptation, leading to a loss of cultural uniqueness. [4, p.41]

Several translation theories provide frameworks for understanding how cultural elements should be translated:

- **Equivalence Theory (Nida, Catford):** Eugene Nida introduced the concept of dynamic equivalence, which emphasizes naturalness in the target language over a literal word-for-word translation. This approach is particularly useful when translating idiomatic expressions or culturally bound terms.
- **Skopos Theory (Vermeer, Reiß):** This theory suggests that translation should be guided by its purpose (skopos). A translator must adapt their approach based on the function of the translated text in the target culture.
- **Cultural Turn in Translation Studies (Bassnett, Snell-Hornby):** Scholars such as Susan Bassnett emphasized that translation is not merely a linguistic process but a cultural one. This approach highlights the importance of understanding social, historical, and cultural factors in translation. [7, p.52]

The skopos theory states that translation strategy depends on the text's purpose:

- ✓ **Expressive function (literary texts):** Retaining realities through transliteration and commentary.
- ✓ **Informative function (scientific texts):** Substituting with neutral terms.
- ✓ **Operative function (advertising):** Full localization (e.g., McDonald's in India offering a vegetarian Big Mac).
- ✓ **Intercultural competence:** The translator acts as a mediator, explaining foreign concepts through analogies (e.g., Russian Ivan-durak → the clever fool in Western fairy tales).

Spivak emphasizes translation ethics: imposing a dominant culture by simplifying realities leads to cultural erosion. For example, Sanskrit terms translated into English often lose their spiritual depth.

We suggest the following strategies for translating cultural realities according theoretical and pragmatic issues in the field of translatology:

1. **Transliteration:** Матрешка → matryoshka. Suitable for well-known concepts (sushi, samurai), but requires context for less familiar ones (курник → kurnik with an explanation: "a traditional Russian wedding pie").
2. **Calquing:** Skyscraper → небоскреб.
3. **Literalism** (Iron Maiden mistranslated as virgin in a historical context).
4. **Extended description:** Щи → "A traditional Russian soup made of sauerkraut, meat, and root vegetables, often served with sour cream."
5. **Situational replacement:** Масленица → "A pre-Lenten festival featuring pancakes and folk celebrations."
6. **Functional analogy:** Дед мороз → Santa Claus (although the former is strict and the latter is jolly).

7. **Hyperbolization:** Soviet очередь in jokes replaced with Black Friday for Western audiences.
8. **Intratextual explanations:** In Harry Potter, pumpkin pasties are translated as “pumpkin pies” with a note on British cuisine.
9. **Epitext (prefaces, glossaries):** Editions of One Hundred Years of Solitude include a glossary explaining Latin American myths.
10. **Generalization:** Сарафан → traditional dress.
11. **Compensation:** If a reality is omitted, its meaning is conveyed later through context.
12. **Shifting noun to verb:** Задущеность → to share a heartfelt moment.

Cultural realities in translation can take many forms:

**Realia:** Words or concepts that exist in one culture but have no direct equivalent in another (e.g., “hygge” in Danish, “sobremesa” in Spanish).

**Idioms and Proverbs:** Phrases whose meanings cannot be understood from the literal definitions of their words (e.g., “raining cats and dogs”).

**Metaphors and Symbolism:** Figurative language that may carry different connotations in different cultures.

**Customs and Traditions:** Social practices that might not have direct parallels in other cultures.

Each of these elements presents a unique challenge in translation, requiring specific strategies to ensure meaning is effectively conveyed.

Some words and concepts are deeply tied to a culture’s worldview and are difficult to translate directly. For example: The Japanese word “wabi-sabi” represents a worldview centered on imperfection and impermanence, which has no direct English equivalent.

The German term “Schadenfreude” refers to the pleasure derived from another's misfortune, a concept that exists in English but lacks a single-word equivalent.

In such cases, translators must choose between paraphrasing, adding explanatory notes, or using a loanword with an explanation. Idiomatic expressions often rely on cultural knowledge. A direct translation can lead to confusion or loss of meaning.

The English idiom “kick the bucket” (to die) cannot be translated literally into other languages without losing its figurative meaning.

The Russian proverb “Не все коту масленица” (literally, “Not every day is Pancake Week for the cat”) implies that good times do not last forever. In English, it may be translated as “Every tide has its ebb” or “You can’t always have it easy”.

Humor often relies on cultural context, making it one of the most challenging aspects of translation. Puns, jokes, and sarcasm may not be understood in a different cultural setting.

For example, in the movie «Shrek», the character Donkey makes a joke about waffles - a food commonly associated with American breakfasts. When translated into Chinese, this joke loses its comedic effect because waffles are not as culturally significant in China.

Translators must consider **historical** and **political** sensitivities. For instance: The use of formal vs. informal pronouns (e.g., “vous” vs. “tu” in French) can carry social implications.

Political terms like “democracy” or “freedom” may have different connotations in different political systems.

Adaptation involves modifying the text to fit the cultural expectations of the target audience. This approach is common in literary translation and dubbing for movies. For example, in Disney’s Aladdin, the original English phrase “It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home” was changed in the Arabic version to avoid negative connotations about Middle Eastern culture.



Localization involves adjusting cultural references, units of measurement, and even humor to make content more accessible.

Video game localization often changes character names, cultural jokes, and even entire plot points to suit the target audience.

In marketing, McDonald's menus are localized to reflect local dietary preferences (e.g., McPaneer in India, Teriyaki Burgers in Japan).

Academic and literary translators often use footnotes to explain cultural references. This is common in the translation of classic literature. For example, in the English translation of "The Tale of Genji", footnotes are used to explain Japanese court customs that may be unfamiliar to Western readers.

While AI-powered translation tools like Google Translate and DeepL have improved, they still struggle with cultural adaptation. Human translators remain essential for ensuring that meaning is accurately conveyed:

**Literary Translation:** The translation of Harry Potter required major cultural adaptations, such as renaming "Diagon Alley" to "Chemin de Traverse" in French.

**Film and Television:** The animated movie Zootopia was renamed Zootropolis in some regions to better fit local branding.

**Diplomatic Translation:** In 2009, a translation error in Hillary Clinton's "Reset" button with Russia led to an embarrassing diplomatic misunderstanding.

Translation is intended to facilitate intercultural communication. The translator acts as a mediator between the writer and a foreign audience. The uniqueness of the translator's role lies in the fact that neither the writer nor the foreign readers are fully engaged in intercultural communication - the only true communicator is the translator, who must accurately understand and convey the meanings and cultural context of the original text. The cultural context is most explicitly expressed through culture-specific vocabulary; therefore, the translation of cultural realities must be carried out with great care to ensure that readers can better grasp the meanings of the original. The examples examined in the article once again highlight the great responsibility placed on the translator, the challenges they face in their work, and the crucial role they play in the process of intercultural communication.

Translation is not just a linguistic task but a cultural one. To avoid loss of meaning, translators must go beyond literal word-to-word translation and consider cultural nuances, historical context, and audience expectations. By applying strategies such as adaptation, localization, and explanatory notes, translators can bridge cultural gaps and ensure effective communication. As globalization increases, the role of cultural awareness in translation will only become more critical, making the work of skilled translators more valuable than ever.

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