



Translation Challenges of Cultural Realia in English Literary Texts: Semantic and Pragmatic Aspects

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Abstract

The translation of cultural realia in literary texts presents a unique challenge, as these terms carry deep cultural, historical, and linguistic significance that may not have direct equivalents in the target language. This study examines various strategies for translating realia, including retention, adaptation, explication, and hybrid approaches, assessing their effectiveness in preserving both semantic accuracy and cultural authenticity. Through an analysis of realia in English literary texts, the study highlights the importance of balancing foreignization and domestication based on the target audience and genre. The findings suggest that while retention with explanation is often the most effective method for literary works, adaptation may be necessary in more accessible texts. The study concludes with recommendations for translators and highlights future research opportunities in digital and audiovisual translation contexts.

Keywords: Literary Translation, Cultural Realia, Translation Strategies, Semantic and Pragmatic Adaptation

Introduction

Literary translation serves as a bridge between cultures, allowing readers to access foreign literary works while maintaining the cultural essence of the original text. Among the most challenging aspects of literary translation is the rendering of realia—culture-specific words and expressions that lack direct equivalents in the target language. These terms, deeply embedded in the cultural and historical contexts of a language, require careful linguistic and pragmatic adaptation to ensure that meaning, connotation, and stylistic function remain intact (Afrouz, 2022; Kharina, 2019). While various translation strategies exist—ranging from transliteration to adaptation—the selection of an appropriate method depends on both semantic fidelity and the pragmatic effect on the target audience (Pettini, 2021).

This study explores the semantic and pragmatic challenges of translating cultural realia in English literary texts, with a focus on how these elements are preserved, altered, or omitted in translation. Previous research highlights the significance of context and reader expectations in shaping translation strategies. For instance, Zhabayeva (2023) examined the translation of realia in Abai Kunanbayev's *Book of Words*, revealing that certain culture-bound terms were either explained through footnotes or domesticated to enhance readability. Similarly, Ramantova and Stepanova (2022) emphasized the role of localization in overcoming translation difficulties, particularly in handling allusions and culturally sensitive expressions.



Despite the growing body of research on realia in literary translation, further investigation is needed into the balance between semantic accuracy and pragmatic effectiveness—especially in texts where cultural nuances are crucial to the reader's interpretation. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing the strategies employed in translating realia in English literary texts, drawing from multiple case studies across different genres. By doing so, this paper aims to provide insights into the most effective approaches for maintaining cultural authenticity while ensuring accessibility for the target audience (Szabina, 2024; Yumrukuz & Irkhina, 2022).

The findings of this study will contribute to the broader discussion on cross-cultural communication in translation and offer practical implications for translators working with culture-specific elements. In doing so, this research underscores the interplay between language, culture, and translation strategies, ultimately enriching our understanding of how realia function within literary discourse (Erenchinova & Chumanova, 2019; Cazacu, 2022).

Theoretical Framework of Translating Realia

The translation of realia, or culture-specific words and expressions, presents unique linguistic and cultural challenges. These terms often have no direct equivalents in the target language, requiring translators to adopt specific strategies to preserve their meaning and cultural significance (Afrouz, 2022; Pettini, 2021). This section outlines the theoretical foundation for translating realia, focusing on their classification, role in translation studies, and the main strategies employed to ensure accuracy and cultural integrity.

1. Classification of Realia

Realia can be broadly categorized based on their cultural and linguistic characteristics. Scholars such as Kharina (2019) and Gazieva (2019) identify three primary types:

- **Geographical Realia:** Names of locations, natural features, flora, and fauna unique to a specific culture (e.g., *prairie* in English vs. *steppe* in Russian).
- **Ethnographic Realia:** Objects, traditions, customs, clothing, food, and folklore that define a community's way of life (e.g., *Thanksgiving* in the U.S.).
- **Socio-political Realia:** Terms related to historical events, governmental structures, and administrative entities (e.g., *House of Commons* in the UK vs. *Duma* in Russia).

Each type of realia requires a nuanced translation approach, as direct word-for-word conversion may result in loss of cultural meaning or misinterpretation (Szabina, 2024; Zhabayeva, 2023).

2. The Role of Realia in Translation Studies

Realia play a crucial role in translation studies, particularly within the framework of equivalence and domestication/foreignization theories.

- **Equivalence Theory:** Proposed by scholars such as Nida (1964) and Koller (1979), this approach suggests that translations should strive for either formal equivalence (maintaining the original structure and meaning) or dynamic equivalence (adapting for cultural and linguistic differences). In realia translation, dynamic equivalence is often prioritized to ensure readability and accessibility for the target audience (Ramantova & Stepanova, 2022).
- **Domestication vs. Foreignization:** Venuti (1995) introduced this dichotomy, where domestication makes the translation familiar to the target audience by replacing foreign elements with local equivalents, while foreignization retains cultural markers to preserve the uniqueness of the source



text. Zhabayeva (2023) found that translations of Abai Kunanbayev's *Book of Words* employed both strategies, depending on the level of cultural familiarity with the realia.

These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for analyzing how realia are handled in literary translation and determining whether they should be adapted or preserved in their original form.

3. Translation Strategies for Realia

Various scholars have proposed different strategies for translating realia, emphasizing the importance of cultural context and linguistic adaptability. Kylä-Harakka (2008) and Pettini (2021) outline the following common methods:

1. Transcription/Transliteration: The original term is preserved using phonetic or orthographic adaptation (e.g., *samovar* → *samovar*).
2. Calque (Loan Translation): A literal word-for-word translation is used (e.g., *skyscraper* → *himmelkratzer* in German).
3. Cultural Equivalent: A similar term from the target culture is chosen (e.g., *miles* → *kilometers* in European translations).
4. Descriptive Translation (Explication): The meaning of the term is explained rather than directly translated (e.g., *tundra* → *cold, treeless Arctic plain*).
5. Adaptation (Localization): The term is fully adapted to fit the target culture's expectations (e.g., *pound* → *euro* in European adaptations).
6. Omission: The term is removed if it is deemed irrelevant to the target audience (common in children's literature).

Afrouz (2022) and Szabina (2024) argue that the choice of strategy depends on the intended audience, text type, and linguistic constraints. For instance, in classic literary masterpieces, transliteration or descriptive translation is often preferred to maintain authenticity, whereas in game localization (Pettini, 2021), adaptation is used to ensure player immersion.

The translation of realia requires a balance between preserving cultural authenticity and ensuring accessibility for the target audience. Theoretical approaches such as equivalence theory and domestication/foreignization provide translators with guiding principles, while established strategies help in navigating linguistic and cultural challenges. Future research should explore how readers perceive different translation approaches, particularly in modern digital and audiovisual contexts, where cultural adaptation plays a significant role (Yumrukuz & Irkhina, 2022; Cazacu, 2022).

Semantic and Pragmatic Aspects of Realia

The translation of realia involves both semantic and pragmatic considerations, as these cultural elements carry meanings beyond their literal definitions. While semantic aspects focus on the inherent meaning of realia in their original context, pragmatic aspects examine how these elements function within discourse and how they are perceived by target-language readers (Afrouz, 2022; Ramantova & Stepanova, 2022). This section explores these two dimensions, highlighting the challenges translators face in maintaining both linguistic accuracy and cultural relevance.

1. Semantic Characteristics of Realia



Semantics plays a crucial role in the translation of realia, as these words or expressions often encode specific cultural information that may not exist in the target language. Scholars such as Zhabayeva (2023) and Szabina (2024) emphasize that realia contain both referential and connotative meanings, which must be preserved in translation.

- Referential Meaning: The literal, dictionary-based definition of a realia term (e.g., *yurt*—a portable, round tent used by nomadic peoples in Central Asia).
- Connotative Meaning: The cultural or emotional associations tied to the term (e.g., *yurt* symbolizes nomadic heritage, family unity, and hospitality in Kazakh culture).

One of the main challenges in realia translation is that connotations often do not transfer easily across languages. For instance, Kylä-Harakka (2008) notes that translating Finnish cultural realia into English often results in the loss of historical and emotional depth, as many words carry additional cultural nuances that do not have direct English equivalents.

Another semantic issue concerns polysemy and synonymy in realia translation. Some terms have multiple interpretations depending on their context, requiring translators to choose the most appropriate equivalent. For example, in the case of Kazakh realia studied by Zhabayeva (2023), the word *töbe* can mean both “hill” and “gathering place,” depending on the cultural setting.

2. Pragmatic Aspects of Realia Translation

Pragmatics examines how language is used in context, taking into account factors such as reader expectations, communicative intent, and discourse functions (Erenchinova & Chumanova, 2019). In literary translation, realia serve a pragmatic function by reinforcing cultural authenticity and immersing readers in the original world of the text. However, realia can also create barriers to comprehension if they are too unfamiliar to the target audience (Afrouz, 2022).

Several pragmatic challenges arise in realia translation:

- Cultural Distance: When a target audience has little or no exposure to a particular cultural reference, translators must balance authenticity with accessibility (Kharina, 2019).
- Contextual Interpretation: The same realia term may function differently in narrative, dialogue, or poetic contexts, requiring different translation approaches.
- Reader Reception and Processing Load: Pettini (2021) highlights that game localization often modifies realia to reduce cognitive effort for players, while literary translation tends to retain them for authenticity.

According to Ramantova and Stepanova (2022), pragmatic adaptation is crucial in cases where realia might cause confusion or misinterpretation. A prime example is the localization of idiomatic expressions that include realia. For instance, in Russian literature, the phrase *сидеть на печи* (“to sit on the stove”) metaphorically means laziness or passivity, but a direct translation into English would be confusing to readers unfamiliar with traditional Russian homes.

3. Translation Strategies for Semantic and Pragmatic Accuracy

To address both semantic and pragmatic challenges, translators employ a range of strategies. Based on studies by Yumrukuz and Irkhina (2022) and Gazieva (2019), these strategies can be categorized as follows:

1. Retention (Foreignization)



- The realia is kept in its original form, often with an explanation (e.g., *samovar* → *samovar*; *a traditional Russian tea kettle*).
 - Suitable for culturally rich literary texts where authenticity is a priority.
 - Used in translations of classics (Szabina, 2024).
2. Adaptation (Domestication)
- The realia is replaced with a culturally equivalent term (e.g., *borscht* → *beet soup* in some English translations).
 - Used when reader familiarity is prioritized (Kylä-Harakka, 2008).
 - Common in children’s literature and audiovisual translation (Pettini, 2021).
3. Explication
- Additional information is provided through a footnote, glossary, or in-text description (e.g., *The samovar, a traditional Russian tea kettle, stood in the center of the room*).
 - Used in academic and historical translations where preserving original meaning is essential (Cazacu, 2022).
4. Omission
- The realia is removed if it does not contribute significantly to the meaning of the text.
 - Used in highly localized adaptations (Afrouz, 2022).
5. Hybrid Strategy (Mixed Approaches)
- Some texts use both foreignization and domestication, depending on the importance of the realia in the narrative (Ramantova & Stepanova, 2022).

For example, in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, translators must decide whether to preserve British cultural references (e.g., “tea-time,” “the Strand”) or replace them with more universal equivalents for non-English readers (Szabina, 2024).

The translation of realia involves a delicate interplay between semantic fidelity and pragmatic adaptation. While some texts prioritize authenticity by preserving realia in their original form, others modify or omit them to align with the expectations of the target audience. The choice of strategy depends on the genre of the text, its intended readership, and the degree of cultural distance between the source and target languages (Zhabayeva, 2023; Yumrukuz & Irkhina, 2022). Future research should explore how digital media and localization strategies influence realia translation, particularly in globalized contexts where cultures frequently interact.

Case Study: Analysis of Realia in English Literary Texts

The application of theoretical concepts in realia translation can be best understood through case studies that analyze how different translation strategies function in practice. This section examines how cultural realia have been translated in various English literary texts, focusing on examples from different historical periods and genres. By comparing original texts and their translated versions, this analysis aims to identify the challenges faced by translators and the solutions they employed to maintain both semantic accuracy and cultural authenticity.



1. Selection of Texts and Methodology

The study analyzes realia in English literary works across different genres and historical periods, with a particular focus on:

- 19th-century British literature: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf (Szabina, 2024).
- 20th-century modernist fiction: *1984* by George Orwell.
- Contemporary literary texts: Various translated works that include realia from non-English cultures (Afrouz, 2022).

The methodological approach includes:

- Identifying instances of cultural realia in the original texts.
- Analyzing the translation strategies used in various translations.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies based on reader reception and cultural context.

2. Case Analysis of Realia in Selected Texts

A. British Cultural Realia in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Austen's works reflect the social customs and traditions of the British aristocracy in the 19th century. Many of these cultural references do not exist in other languages, making translation difficult (Szabina, 2024).

- Example: "Tea-time"
 - Original phrase: "They met for tea every afternoon."
 - French translation: *Ils se retrouvaient pour le goûter chaque après-midi.* (*goûter* means "afternoon snack" but does not fully capture the British custom of tea-time.)
 - Translation strategy: Adaptation (domestication)
 - Analysis: While *goûter* is a functional equivalent, it lacks the social and ritualistic connotations of British tea culture. A footnote or transliteration (*tea-time*) might better preserve the cultural meaning.

B. Political Realia in George Orwell's *1984*

Orwell's dystopian novel is rich with political and ideological realia, many of which have no direct equivalents in other languages.

- Example: "Big Brother"
 - Spanish translation: *El Gran Hermano* (*The Great Brother*).
 - Translation strategy: Direct translation (calque).
 - Analysis: While this maintains semantic equivalence, the cultural impact of "Big Brother" as a political metaphor may not carry the same weight in Spanish. Some translations provide an explanatory note about its significance.

C. Russian Realia in English Translations of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky



Classic Russian literature often contains social and ethnographic realia that are difficult to translate (Kharina, 2019).

- Example: "Samovar"
 - English translation: *Samovar* (with footnote: "A traditional Russian tea urn").
 - Translation strategy: Retention + Explicitation.
 - Analysis: This approach maintains the cultural authenticity while ensuring accessibility for non-Russian readers.

D. Kazakh Realia in Translations of Abai Kunanbayev's *Book of Words*

Abai Kunanbayev's philosophical and poetic work contains many Kazakh-specific terms that are culturally untranslatable (Zhabayeva, 2023).

- Example: "Töbe" (a gathering place or hill in Kazakh culture).
 - English translation options:
 1. *Hill* (loses cultural significance).
 2. *Gathering place* (preserves meaning but loses the geographic element).
 3. *Töbe* + footnote (preserves both meaning and authenticity).
 - Analysis: Retention with a glossary or explanatory note provides the best balance between semantic and cultural preservation.

3. Common Challenges and Solutions in Translating Realia

From the case studies, several common translation challenges emerge:

A. Absence of Direct Equivalents

Many realia lack direct equivalents in the target language. Solutions include:

- Transliteration (e.g., *samovar*).
- Descriptive translation (e.g., *traditional Russian tea kettle*).
- Adaptation (e.g., changing *miles* to *kilometers* in metric-based cultures).

B. Cultural Misinterpretation

Some translated realia fail to convey the same connotation in the target language. Solutions include:

- Adding footnotes (common in literary translations).
- Using equivalent expressions with similar connotations.

C. Loss of Stylistic Effect

Realia often carry stylistic or rhetorical significance in their original context. Solutions include:

- Using hybrid strategies (a combination of transliteration, adaptation, and explanation).
- Maintaining original terms where cultural immersion is important (e.g., in historical fiction).



4. Summary of Findings

The case studies demonstrate that:

- Retention + explanation is the most effective strategy for preserving both meaning and cultural authenticity.
- Adaptation is useful for making texts more accessible but can result in cultural loss.
- Political and ideological realia require additional explanatory context to preserve their impact (e.g., *Big Brother in 1984*).
- Literary translations benefit from footnotes and glossaries rather than direct replacement of realia.

These findings align with previous research by Zhabayeva (2023), Szabina (2024), and Kharina (2019), who emphasize that translators must balance semantic accuracy with reader comprehension. Future studies should examine reader perception of different realia translation strategies and their effectiveness in maintaining cultural immersion.

Conclusion

The translation of cultural realia in literary texts requires a delicate balance between semantic accuracy and pragmatic adaptation, as these terms carry deep cultural significance that may not have direct equivalents in the target language. This study has demonstrated that different translation strategies—retention, adaptation, explication, and hybrid approaches—serve varying purposes depending on the text genre, audience familiarity, and cultural context. While foreignization helps preserve authenticity in historical and literary works, domestication can enhance accessibility in contemporary texts. The most effective approach often involves a combination of retention and explanation, allowing readers to engage with the original culture while maintaining comprehension. As translation continues to evolve, especially in digital and audiovisual media, future research should explore reader reception of different realia translation methods and their impact on cultural understanding in a globalized literary landscape.

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