



Naming Culture: The Linguistic Power of Culturonyms

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Abstract. *Culturonyms are culturally bound lexical units that encode specific meanings, values, and worldviews unique to particular speech communities. This study examines the linguistic power of culturonyms through a qualitative, comparative analysis grounded in cultural linguistics and translation studies. Drawing on examples from multiple languages, the research explores how culturonyms function as carriers of cultural knowledge, their resistance to direct translation, and their role in intercultural communication. The findings reveal that culturonyms possess high semantic density and are deeply embedded in cultural contexts, making them difficult to translate without loss of meaning. Translators often employ strategies such as borrowing, paraphrasing, and explicitation to convey their significance. Additionally, culturonyms serve as markers of cultural identity and play a dual role in communication, acting both as bridges that introduce new cultural perspectives and as barriers when cultural knowledge is lacking. In a globalized world, the increasing circulation of culturonyms contributes to linguistic hybridity and cultural exchange, while also raising concerns about the preservation of original meanings. The study highlights the importance of integrating cultural competence into linguistic and translational practices. Overall, culturonyms are shown to be essential for understanding the dynamic relationship between language, culture, and communication.*

Keywords: *culturonyms, cultural linguistics, translation studies, intercultural communication, semantic density, cultural identity, linguistic borrowing*

1. Introduction

Language and culture are fundamentally interconnected, with linguistic systems functioning not only as tools for communication but also as repositories of cultural knowledge and social meaning. Within this dynamic relationship, culturonyms — lexical items that denote culturally specific concepts, practices, or artifacts — occupy a central role. These terms encapsulate shared experiences, values, and worldviews that are deeply embedded in particular cultural contexts, often defying direct translation into other languages (Wierzbicka, 1997). As such, culturonyms provide valuable insight into how communities conceptualize reality and encode culturally salient knowledge in language.

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From the perspective of cultural linguistics, language is not merely reflective of culture but constitutive of it, shaping cognition, perception, and social interaction (Sharifian, 2017). In this sense, culturonyms act as cultural schemas — linguistic markers that trigger complex networks of meaning, including beliefs, norms, and emotional associations. Terms such as *hygge* in Danish or *ubuntu* in many African languages are not simply lexical units but condensed representations of cultural philosophies emphasizing well-being, social harmony, and communal identity. This aligns with the view that vocabulary can function as a key to understanding cultural conceptualizations, as highlighted in ethnolinguistic research (Wierzbicka, 1997).

The semantic richness of culturonyms raises important questions within translation studies. Traditional models of translation, which prioritize formal or semantic equivalence, often prove inadequate when dealing with culturally bound terms. Nida (1964) introduced the concept of dynamic equivalence to address this issue, emphasizing the importance of conveying meaning in a culturally and functionally appropriate way for the target audience. However, even dynamic equivalence has limitations when the source concept lacks an analogous cultural framework in the target language. As Baker (2018) notes, translators frequently resort to borrowing, paraphrasing, or explanatory notes to bridge these gaps. Newmark (1988) distinguishes between semantic and communicative translation, highlighting the need to balance fidelity to the source text with accessibility for the target audience.

Culturonyms also play a crucial role in intercultural communication. While they can enrich communication by introducing new perspectives and concepts, they can also create misunderstandings when interlocutors lack the necessary cultural knowledge to interpret them accurately (Katan, 2014). This dual function underscores the importance of cultural competence — the ability to understand, interpret, and appropriately respond to culturally specific meanings. Furthermore, the circulation of culturonyms across languages reflects broader processes of cultural exchange and globalization. Borrowed terms often retain their original cultural connotations while acquiring new meanings in the target language, contributing to linguistic hybridity and cultural diffusion (House, 2015). This article investigates the linguistic power of culturonyms by examining how they encode and transmit cultural knowledge, what challenges they present in translation, and how they function in intercultural communication.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative research design grounded in cultural linguistics and translation studies. The qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on meaning, interpretation, and cultural context rather than quantifiable variables (Creswell, 2014). A comparative framework was employed to examine how culturonyms function across different linguistic and cultural systems, allowing for the identification of patterns, similarities, and divergences in their usage and translation.



2.2 Data Selection and Analytical Framework

The dataset consists of a purposive sample of 20–30 culturonyms drawn from multiple languages including English, Danish, Japanese, and selected African languages (Zulu and Xhosa), chosen to represent diverse cultural and linguistic traditions. Primary sources included monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, literary texts and essays containing culturally specific expressions, and previously published studies in cultural linguistics and translation studies. Selection criteria required that each term represent a culturally specific concept, lack a direct lexical equivalent in English, and demonstrate relevance in authentic communicative or textual contexts.

The analysis was conducted using a three-tier framework combining semantic, cultural, and translational perspectives. Each culturonym was examined for its denotative and connotative meanings, including semantic components, metaphorical extensions, and pragmatic usage, drawing on Wierzbicka's (1997) concepts of semantic primes and cultural scripts. Cultural contextualization analyzed each term within its socio-cultural context, considering historical background, social practices, and value systems (Sharifian, 2017). Translation strategy analysis then categorized how culturonyms are rendered in English, using frameworks proposed by Baker (2018) and Newmark (1988), covering borrowing, paraphrase, cultural substitution, and use of footnotes or glosses. To enhance analytical rigor, examples were triangulated across multiple sources where possible.

3. Results

3.1 High Semantic Density and Cultural Encoding

One of the most prominent findings is the high degree of semantic density exhibited by culturonyms. Unlike general lexical items, culturonyms encapsulate multilayered meanings that integrate emotional, social, and philosophical dimensions. Terms such as ubuntu or wabi-sabi encode not only descriptive meanings but also culturally specific value systems and worldviews. This supports Wierzbicka's (1997) argument that certain keywords function as cultural scripts, representing shared cognitive and social frameworks within a speech community. The semantic richness of culturonyms often derives from their historical and cultural embeddedness — many are deeply rooted in traditions, rituals, or collective experiences, making their meanings difficult to isolate from their cultural context (Sharifian, 2017).

3.2 Resistance to Direct Translation

The data strongly confirm that culturonyms generally resist direct, one-to-one translation. In most cases, no single lexical equivalent exists in the target language, particularly when translating into English, aligning with Nida's (1964) observation that linguistic equivalence is often unattainable when cultural frameworks differ significantly. Borrowing was frequently observed, especially for widely recognized culturonyms such as hygge, which is increasingly used in English discourse without translation. Paraphrasing and descriptive translation were also common, particularly in



academic or explanatory texts where clarity is prioritized over brevity (Baker, 2018). Newmark's (1988) distinction between semantic and communicative translation is particularly relevant: semantic translation preserves the original term and its cultural nuances, while communicative translation prioritizes accessibility, often at the cost of cultural specificity.

3.3 Variation in Translation Strategies Across Contexts

The choice of translation strategy varies significantly depending on textual genre, audience, and purpose. In literary texts, culturonyms are more likely to be retained in their original form — sometimes with minimal explanation — in order to preserve cultural authenticity and stylistic nuance. In academic or pedagogical contexts, explicitation strategies such as glosses or footnotes are more commonly employed to ensure comprehension (House, 2015). In media and popular discourse, certain culturonyms undergo lexical borrowing and integration into the target language, a process through which borrowed terms may lose some of their original cultural specificity or acquire new connotations — what House (2015) describes as cultural filtering.

3.4 Culturonyms as Markers of Cultural Identity

A further key finding is the role of culturonyms as markers of cultural identity. Their use often signals membership within a particular cultural or linguistic community, reinforcing shared knowledge and values. This is particularly evident in diaspora contexts, where maintaining culturally specific vocabulary serves as a means of preserving cultural heritage and identity (Katan, 2014). Speakers may intentionally retain culturonyms even when communicating in a different language as a way of asserting cultural distinctiveness, highlighting the symbolic power of language and its close ties to identity construction and social positioning (Javid & Sadikhova, 2025).

3.5 Dual Role in Intercultural Communication and Hybrid Meanings

Culturonyms were found to play a dual role in intercultural communication, functioning both as facilitators and barriers. They enrich communication by introducing new concepts and expanding the expressive capacity of the target language, while simultaneously hindering understanding when interlocutors lack the cultural background necessary for accurate interpretation (Katan, 2014). The study also identified a trend toward hybrid meanings as culturonyms circulate globally: when borrowed into another language, they may undergo semantic shift, retaining core meanings while developing additional, context-specific interpretations. This process illustrates the dynamic nature of language in a globalized world and demonstrates that cultural exchange leads to both linguistic innovation and the potential dilution of cultural specificity (House, 2015).



4. Discussion

4.1 *Culturonyms as Cultural-Cognitive Constructs*

The observed semantic density of culturonyms supports the view that language encodes culturally shared conceptualizations rather than merely labeling objective reality. In line with Wierzbicka's (1997) theory of cultural keywords and Sharifian's (2017) framework of cultural conceptualizations, culturonyms can be understood as nodes within a network of cultural meaning that activate culturally specific schemas guiding interpretation, behavior, and social interaction. This perspective challenges purely structural or formal approaches to language, emphasizing the need for culturally informed linguistic analysis. The inability to fully translate culturonyms without loss of meaning highlights the limitations of universalist assumptions about language, reinforcing the argument that linguistic competence must be accompanied by cultural competence.

4.2 *Implications for Translation Theory and Practice*

The resistance of culturonyms to direct translation has important implications for translation theory. Traditional equivalence-based models — whether formal, semantic, or dynamic — are insufficient to account for the full complexity of culturally bound terms. While Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence offers a more flexible approach, the findings suggest it may fall short when the target culture lacks comparable conceptual structures. Translation must therefore be viewed as an interpretive and creative process rather than a purely technical one. As Baker (2018) and Newmark (1988) suggest, translators must make strategic decisions that balance fidelity to the source text with communicative needs of the target audience, acting as cultural mediators rather than mere linguistic converters (Babayev & Alaviyya, 2023).

4.3 *Intercultural Communication and Globalization*

The dual role of culturonyms in intercultural communication emphasizes the need for heightened cultural awareness. As global interactions increase, the ability to recognize and interpret culturally specific language becomes increasingly important: misunderstanding or oversimplifying culturonyms can lead to miscommunication, cultural misrepresentation, or stereotyping. Katan (2014) argues that intercultural communication involves navigating different systems of meaning, and the findings of this study support this view, with practical implications for education, diplomacy, and international business. The emergence of hybrid meanings also highlights the dynamic nature of language in a globalized world: while linguistic borrowing facilitates cross-cultural exchange, it simultaneously raises concerns about the preservation of original meanings and cultural integrity (House, 2015; Sadikhova & Babayev, 2025).

4.4 *Future Directions*

Building on these findings, future research could explore culturonyms in digital communication, where rapid cultural exchange and informal language use may accelerate processes of borrowing and semantic change. Another productive direction is the role of culturonyms in language learning



— particularly how learners acquire and interpret culturally specific meanings. In the context of machine translation and artificial intelligence, understanding culturonyms presents both a challenge and an opportunity, as current systems often struggle with culturally bound language. Integrating insights from cultural linguistics into technological development could enhance the accuracy and cultural sensitivity of language processing tools. Expanding the dataset to include corpus-based or experimental methods would provide broader generalizations about how culturonyms are processed across different audiences.

5. Conclusion

Culturonyms represent a vital intersection between language and culture, functioning as compact yet powerful carriers of culturally embedded knowledge, values, and social meanings. This study has demonstrated that these linguistically bound elements are characterized by high semantic density, resistance to direct translation, and strong ties to cultural identity. Through qualitative and comparative analysis, it has become evident that culturonyms operate not merely as lexical units but as cultural-cognitive constructs that shape how individuals interpret and communicate experience.

The findings highlight the challenges culturonyms pose for translation and intercultural communication. Their lack of direct equivalents necessitates flexible and context-sensitive translation strategies, reinforcing the importance of cultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency. At the same time, culturonyms contribute to enriching global discourse by introducing new perspectives and fostering cross-cultural understanding. In the context of globalization, the increasing circulation of culturonyms reflects ongoing processes of linguistic borrowing and cultural exchange, often leading to hybrid meanings. Recognizing the linguistic power of culturonyms is therefore essential for advancing both theoretical inquiry and practical engagement in multilingual and multicultural settings.

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