

Terminology as a Translation Challenge: Navigating Sociopolitical Texts across Languages

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ABSTRACT

Translating sociopolitical texts is widely considered one of the most demanding tasks in the field of translation studies. These texts deal with topics such as government, law, international relations, elections, and social movements, and they contain a large number of specialized terms that carry very precise meanings. When a translator fails to handle these terms correctly, the result can be a serious misunderstanding of the original message. This article explores the main challenges that translators face when working with terminology in sociopolitical texts, and suggests practical strategies for overcoming them. The study argues that terminology in this text type is not simply a matter of finding the right word — it is deeply connected to culture, ideology, and historical context. The article also discusses the growing role of technology in supporting terminological decisions, while noting that human judgment remains essential. Drawing on established translation theories and recent research in linguistics and language education, the article proposes a balanced approach that combines terminological accuracy with cultural sensitivity and communicative effectiveness.

Keywords: Sociopolitical translation; terminology; equivalence; cultural context; translation strategies; language and ideology; political discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

Every time a government issues an official statement, a diplomat delivers a speech, or an international organization publishes a report, translators work behind the scenes to make that message understood across languages and cultures. This work is never simple, but it becomes particularly complex when the texts involved belong to the sociopolitical domain — that is, texts that deal with politics, governance, law, diplomacy, and social issues. These texts carry great weight: a mistranslation in a legal document or a political declaration can have real consequences, both for the people involved and for the relationships between countries.

One of the central problems in translating sociopolitical texts is the handling of terminology. Unlike ordinary words, terms have very specific meanings within a particular field. The word “governance,” for example, is not simply another way of saying “government” — it refers to a specific set of principles and practices related to how power is exercised and controlled. When such terms are translated without

careful attention, their precise meaning can be lost or distorted. As Newmark (1988) famously noted, translation is “rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended.” In sociopolitical texts, this task becomes especially demanding because the author’s intention is often tied to a very particular political or ideological context.

The importance of this issue has grown significantly in recent years. The rise of global media, international institutions, and cross-border communication has increased the demand for high-quality sociopolitical translation (Gambier, 2016). At the same time, the development of digital tools and artificial intelligence has created new opportunities but also new risks for the translation profession (Babazade, 2026). Against this background, the present article asks a basic but important question: what are the specific terminological challenges in translating sociopolitical texts, and how can translators deal with them effectively? The article addresses this question through a review of relevant theoretical frameworks and practical strategies, and connects the discussion to recent developments in translation technology and language education.

2. THE NATURE OF SOCIOPOLITICAL TEXTS AND THEIR TERMINOLOGY

2.1 What makes sociopolitical texts special?

Sociopolitical texts form a broad and varied category. They include parliamentary debates, government reports, political party manifestos, international treaties, press releases from diplomatic institutions, speeches by political leaders, and journalistic commentary on political events. What all these text types share is a close connection between language and power. In sociopolitical discourse, words are rarely neutral: they are chosen carefully to achieve specific effects, to build support, to challenge opponents, or to frame issues in a particular way (Bassnett, 2002). This means that the translator must not only understand the literal meaning of words but also grasp the communicative purpose behind them.

The terminology found in sociopolitical texts reflects this complexity. Many of the key terms in this field — such as “democracy,” “sovereignty,” “human rights,” “rule of law,” or “civil society” — appear to have straightforward meanings, but in practice their interpretation varies significantly across different political systems and cultural contexts (Munday, 2016). A term that carries positive associations in one country may have negative connotations in another. Similarly, a term may have an official legal meaning in its source language that does not map cleanly onto the legal vocabulary of the target language.

From a terminological perspective, sociopolitical texts present two main types of difficulty. The first is the problem of cultural non-equivalence: some concepts simply do not exist in the target culture in the same form, and no direct translation equivalent is available. The second is the problem of false equivalence: a target-language term may look like a good translation but actually carries different meaning, scope, or connotations. Both of these problems require the translator to go beyond simple word-for-word substitution and engage with the deeper cultural and ideological dimensions of the text (Baker, 2011).

2.2 Terminology and ideology

One of the most striking features of sociopolitical language is its strong connection to ideology. Political actors choose their words deliberately, and the terms they use often reflect particular worldviews or serve particular interests. The term “freedom fighter,” for instance, and the term “terrorist” may refer to the same person, but they position that person in very different ways politically. When a translator decides which term to use in the target language, they are not making a purely linguistic choice — they are also making a political one (Nord, 2005).

This ideological dimension of sociopolitical terminology creates a genuine dilemma for translators. Should they try to preserve the ideological position of the source text as faithfully as possible? Or should they adapt the terminology to suit the expectations and values of the target audience? There is no single correct answer to this question. Different translation traditions and different professional contexts call for different approaches. What is clear, however, is that translators must be aware of the ideological content of the terms they work with and make conscious, informed decisions about how to handle them (Munday, 2016; Sadiqzade, 2025).

3. KEY TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR SOCIOPOLITICAL TERMINOLOGY

3.1 Equivalence and its limits

The concept of equivalence has long been central to translation theory. In the simplest sense, equivalence means finding a target-language expression that has the same meaning as the source-language expression. However, as scholars have repeatedly pointed out, perfect equivalence is rarely possible, especially in culturally specific domains like sociopolitics (Baker, 2011; Bassnett, 2002). Formal equivalence, which focuses on reproducing the form and structure of the source text as closely as possible, may produce awkward or unclear results in the target language. Dynamic equivalence, first developed by Nida and later elaborated by many others, prioritizes the effect of the translation on the target reader rather than its formal similarity to the source (Munday, 2016).

In sociopolitical translation, a purely formal approach to equivalence is often inadequate. Consider the English term “impeachment”: in the United States, this has a very specific constitutional meaning. When translating this term into languages that do not have the same constitutional procedure, the translator cannot simply find a single word equivalent. They may need to use a descriptive phrase, add an explanatory footnote, or borrow the English term directly with an explanation. Each of these choices involves a trade-off between precision, readability, and accessibility (Newmark, 1988; Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995).

3.2 Borrowing and calque

When no satisfactory equivalent exists in the target language, translators often resort to borrowing — that is, they import the source-language term directly into the target text, sometimes adapting its spelling or pronunciation to fit the phonological patterns of the target language. This strategy is particularly common with newly coined political terms or internationally recognized institutions (Cabr , 1999). The names of international organizations, for example, are often borrowed or translated using a calque — a literal word-for-word translation that reproduces the structure of the source term. The United Nations, for instance, is translated into Azerbaijani as *Birl şmiş Mill tl r T şkilatı*, following the same structure as the English original.

Borrowing and calque have the advantage of preserving the precision of the source term and maintaining consistency across different translations of the same concept. However, they can also make a text harder to read for audiences who are not familiar with the borrowed term, particularly when the concept itself is new or unfamiliar in the target culture (Sager, 1990). The translator must therefore judge whether the gain in precision is worth the potential cost in accessibility.

3.3 Descriptive translation and explanatory paraphrase

When a term carries cultural or institutional content that cannot be conveyed by a single word or phrase, translators may use a descriptive translation or explanatory paraphrase. This approach sacrifices conciseness for clarity: instead of providing a brief equivalent, the translator explains what the source

term means in a way that target readers can understand. This strategy is especially useful in translated texts that are intended for general audiences rather than specialist readers (Nord, 2005; Baker, 2011).

In practice, descriptive translation is often used alongside other strategies. A translator might provide the borrowed or calqued term first, followed by a brief parenthetical explanation, or include a translator's note at the bottom of the page. This kind of transparent approach respects both the source text and the needs of the target reader, acknowledging the cultural gap that exists between the two without pretending that it can be fully bridged (Mammadova, 2025).

3.4 Adaptation and domestication

A more radical strategy for handling sociopolitical terminology is adaptation, sometimes described within the broader framework of domestication. In this approach, the translator replaces source-culture concepts with target-culture equivalents that fulfil a similar function, even if they are not exact terminological matches. The goal is to produce a text that feels natural and familiar to target readers, rather than one that foregrounds its status as a translation (Venuti, as discussed in Munday, 2016). This approach can be very effective when the primary aim of the translation is communication rather than documentation, but it carries the risk of distorting the specific cultural or political content of the original.

The question of when to adapt and when to preserve a source-culture term is one of the most difficult judgments a translator must make. It requires deep knowledge not only of both languages but also of the political, legal, and cultural systems of both the source and target contexts. This is why the cognitive and pedagogical preparation of translators is so important: translation is not only a linguistic act but also an act of cultural mediation (Mammadova, 2025; Alisoy, 2024).

4. THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN TERMINOLOGICAL DECISION-MAKING

In recent years, digital tools have significantly changed the way translators work with terminology. Translation memory systems, glossaries, term databases, and machine translation platforms have made it possible to manage large volumes of specialized terminology more efficiently and consistently. These tools are particularly valuable in professional contexts where consistency across documents is essential — for example, in the translation of legislative texts or official reports of international organizations.

Machine translation and artificial intelligence tools have also improved rapidly. As Babazade (2026) demonstrates in a detailed comparative analysis, AI translation tools can produce impressive results for many types of texts, and they are increasingly used as a starting point for human revision. However, for sociopolitical texts with their complex terminological and ideological dimensions, human judgment remains indispensable. AI tools can identify a plausible equivalent for a given term, but they cannot yet fully assess the ideological implications of a terminological choice, the cultural associations that a particular word carries, or the communicative purpose of a given phrase in its specific context.

This is not a reason to reject technology, but rather to use it thoughtfully. The most effective approach is one where digital tools support the translator's terminological decisions without replacing the critical thinking and cultural awareness that high-quality sociopolitical translation demands. The growing integration of technology into language learning and professional practice, as discussed by Alisoy and Sadiqzade (2024) in the context of mobile-assisted language learning, suggests that future translators will need to develop strong digital literacies alongside their linguistic and cultural competences.

5. BUILDING TERMINOLOGICAL COMPETENCE IN TRANSLATORS

Given the complexity of sociopolitical terminology, the question of how to develop terminological competence in translators is of great practical importance. Terminological competence involves more

than simply knowing a list of terms and their equivalents. It requires the ability to identify terms in context, assess the degree of equivalence between source and target-language options, recognize culturally specific content, and make informed decisions about translation strategies (Cabr , 1999; Sager, 1990).

For students and early-career translators, building this kind of competence takes time and deliberate practice. Reading widely in both the source and target languages — not only literary texts but also newspapers, official documents, and academic articles in the sociopolitical domain — is an important foundation. Parallel corpus analysis, where translators study how professional translators have handled specific terms in comparable texts, is another valuable tool. The multilingual awareness that comes from exposure to multiple languages and cultures also plays an important role: as Alisoy (2024) argues, multilingualism promotes cognitive flexibility, which is precisely the kind of flexible, context-sensitive thinking that sociopolitical translation demands.

Reflection is equally important. Translators who regularly examine their own choices — asking themselves why they chose one term over another, and what the consequences of that choice might be — develop a sharper awareness of the challenges involved and a more sophisticated approach to solving them. The emotional and cultural dimensions of language, explored in Sadiqzade’s (2025) cross-cultural analysis of emotional expression, remind us that even highly formal sociopolitical texts are shaped by human feelings and cultural assumptions that a skilled translator must be sensitive to.

6. CONCLUSION

Translating sociopolitical texts is a task that requires knowledge, skill, and good judgment. The terminology found in these texts is not simply a technical challenge: it is deeply connected to culture, history, ideology, and the power dynamics between countries and communities. Translators who approach these texts without awareness of these dimensions risk producing translations that are technically accurate but communicatively or politically misleading.

This article has argued that there is no single best strategy for handling sociopolitical terminology. Borrowing, calque, descriptive translation, and adaptation all have their place, and skilled translators know how to choose among them depending on the context, the purpose of the translation, and the needs of the target audience. Technology can support these decisions but cannot replace the human judgment that is at the heart of high-quality translation.

Looking ahead, the growing demand for sociopolitical translation in a globalized world makes the development of strong terminological competence in translators more important than ever. This competence is built through wide reading, careful analysis, and consistent reflection on the choices translators make and why they make them. It also requires an appreciation of the fact that translation is never a neutral act: every terminological decision carries meaning, and the best translators are those who are aware of this and take it seriously.

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