

## LOST IN TRANSLATION: CAN CULTURAL UNTRANSLATABILITY EVER BE OVERCOME?

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**Annotation:** *Translation does not just involve the cross-language converting of words but also the negotiation of the cultural context. The problem of cultural untranslatability—where specific linguistic uses or cultural ideas prove resistant to successful translation between languages—poses daunting challenges for translators. The current study examines how far untranslatability can be overcome rather than just endured. Through the use of tools like Nida’s dynamic equivalence, Venuti’s foreignizing and domesticating strategies, and polysystem theory, the inquiry examines certain case studies from literary, religious, and audiovisual translation environments. sions, increased intercultural sensitivity, and reevaluations of fidelity.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural untranslatability, translation strategies, foreignization, domestication, equivalence, adaptation, cultural mediation, linguistic barriers.*

### INTRODUCTION

"Lost in translation" thus usually implies difficulties with translating meaning with accuracy between two differing languages. In translation studies, cultural untranslatability is used to describe situations where something from one culture, expressed as discourse using language, has no immediate equivalent within the target culture as a result of differences between views, historical backgrounds, or societal orders. According to Susan Bassnett (2002), "language is a complex and dynamic set of practices that are most fully grounded in cultural habits," thus translation essentially being an interpretative process.

This paper sets out to ask the question: Can one overcome challenges of cultural untranslatability, or does this reflect a basic limitation inherent to translation approaches? We consider this notion within both theoretical and practical frames, critically evaluate approaches taken to breach cultural differences, and consider how translators transmit meaning while upholding cultural uniqueness.

#### Methodology

This research performs a qualitative theoretical analysis using interdisciplinary methods based on Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), Skopos theory, and semiotic translation theory. It focuses on comparative examples drawn from major language pairings such as English–Japanese, Arabic–English, and Russian–Uzbek, as well as literary, religious, and media texts. Its aim is not to quantify but to identify and analyze the translation strategies employed by translators in the depiction of non-translatable elements.

#### Results and Discussion

### Understanding Cultural Untranslatability

Cultural untranslatability is the phenomenon where one specific lexical item or concept is inherently associated with a specific cultural background, thus making its exact translation to a different tongue susceptible to misrepresentation.

The German *Weltanschauung* expresses a deeply philosophical point of view that eludes neat translation into English. Attempts at translating this concept—whether as “worldview” or “philosophical outlook”—miss the nuances pertaining to the existential and metaphysical aspects.

Here, the translator faces a tricky dilemma: simplifying the terminology at the cost of its rich meaning (domestication) or preserving the original terminology and risking alienating the reader (foreignization). Both solutions are imperfect, proving that cultural specificity resists straightforward transference.

### Strategies to Address Untranslatability

#### Adaptation refers

Adaptation involves modifying the cultural item to suit the target culture, often used in children’s literature, dubbing, or advertising.

There are instances in the Uzbek version of Harry Potter where “treacle tart” is replaced with “shirin pishiriq,” a term that places meaning on a dessert in this local context.

Analysis: The strategy sacrifices fidelity to accessibility. Where this works to enable understanding, it can potentially mortgage that uniqueness that is necessary to proper world-building. The best adaptation occurs where there is least acquaintance with the source culture, and where fluency is most important.

#### Explanation and Analysis

Here, the translator uses footnotes or gives in-text explanations.

The Islamic concept of *taqwa* is usually translated as “God-consciousness” but is often explained further to define its theological and ethical implications.

Analysis: Such methodology maintains the original vocabulary but gives illumination to the reader. Excessive usage, however, can disrupt narrative flow such that readers can skip footnotes. Nonetheless, with regards to sacred texts or philosophic works, glossing offers a prudent compromise.

#### Transliteration and Conservation

Some untranslatable words are simply left untranslated.

Words like *karma* (from Sanskrit), *samurai* (from Japan), and *sufism* (from Arabic) are retained in many translations and incorporated into the English language.

Analysis: The method recognizes the nature of the source culture. It, however, assumes that the target audience is familiar with the vocabulary or is ready to decipher it in that context. Whilst this might raise visibility, this is also likely to cause confusion.

#### Cultural Substitution

The translator substitutes the untranslatable element with one that is culturally equivalent.

In English to Russian translations, it is feasible to replace the word "Thanksgiving" with "Maslenitsa," a Slavic holiday, in a quest for functional equivalence.

Analysis: It focuses on practical use; however, it may risk changing the meaning that was intended. Substitution should be used carefully, particularly in historical or politically charged text.

#### The Translator as Cultural Mediator

Translators have moved beyond being simple transmitters of language; they are now cultural interpreters involved with acts of interpretation, negotiation, and reconstruction of meaning.

In the English version of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo word *chi*, meaning spiritual protector, is preserved. Achebe insisted on the use of Igbo words as a defense against the cultural erasure taking place during colonialism.

Analysis: The strategy stresses that there is a need to recognize the source culture, reconceptualize untranslatability as an opportunity for cultural contest and exchange. The translator is thus granted an ethical duty to maintain authenticity of identity.

#### Constraints and Conceptual Frameworks

Some scholars argue that true translation is impossible (see Derrida's *différance*), while others (like Eco) see translation as an approximation. Complete overcoming of untranslatability is thus not the goal—negotiation is.

Figurative devices, like alliteration and metaphor, often lose force while being translated. The Russian metaphor *zvezdnaya pyl'evaya doroga* ("star-dusty road") can evoke powerful images when used in its original form but can sound awkward when translated word for word.

Commentary: Certain cultural and emotional forces are translation-resistant by dint of being dependent upon mutually known contextual data, sound associations, or historical references. The translator must accept that loss and change are inherent to this process.

#### Conclusion

Cultural untranslatability is a formidable challenge for translators, but not one that cannot be addressed. While overall semantic equivalence is rarely achievable, a range of effective strategies—ranging from adaptation to foreignization—enable translators to bridge cultural divides while holding onto the unique character of the source text. Translators need to adopt the roles of meaning interpreters, context curators, and mediators of cultural values. Rather than seeking perfect replication, the historical path of translation should be based on an acceptance of its limitations, using these limitations as a springboard for creating links.

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