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NATIONALLY AND CULTURALLY SPECIFIC UNITS IN TRANSLATION: CONCEPT, CLASSIFICATION, AND IMPLICATIONS

Muminov Elyor Turayevich

Teacher of the department of English linguistics

Navoi State University Uzbekistan, Navoi region

Email address: muminov.elyor.nsu@gmail.com

Phone: +998906186469

Abstract

Nationally and culturally specific units (NCSUs), also referred to as realia or culture-bound terms, are expressions that reflect the cultural life of a community. Because of their embeddedness in local traditions and contexts, they often lack direct equivalents in other languages. This paper outlines the concept and major classifications of NCSUs and examines their implications for translation. The argument advanced is that understanding NCSUs is not only crucial for translation accuracy but also for promoting intercultural understanding and cultural authenticity.

Introduction

Translation is both a linguistic and cultural activity. While many words transfer seamlessly across languages, others are deeply tied to a specific cultural context and defy straightforward equivalence. These terms are known as nationally and culturally specific units (NCSUs). Examples include kimono, Thanksgiving, and samovar.

NCSUs are significant because they highlight where languages diverge most visibly. They act as markers of cultural identity and collective memory. For translators, they present not only a challenge of equivalence but also an opportunity for cultural mediation (Newmark, 1988; Vlahov & Florin, 2012).

Concept of NCSUs

Vlahov and Florin (2012) define NCSUs as lexical items denoting objects and practices characteristic of one nation or culture, which therefore resist direct



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translation. Newmark (1988) frames them as 'culture-bound terms,' while Baker (2018) identifies them as cultural markers that embed collective traditions within language.

These definitions underscore that NCSUs are more than words: they encode history, ideology, and ways of life. Translating them requires sensitivity to both meaning and cultural resonance.

Classification

Scholars classify NCSUs in different ways:

- Geographical terms: natural features or landscapes (fjord, steppe).
- Material culture: food, clothing, architecture (kimono, tapas, yurt).
- Institutions and social life: political, legal, or educational entities (duma, parliament).
- Religious and ideological references: rituals and beliefs (Ramadan, bar mitzvah).
- Customs and traditions: celebrations and ceremonies (Thanksgiving, Holi).
- Fictional or irrealia: invented culture-specific references in literature or film (hobbit, Jedi).

(Newmark, 1988; Vlahov & Florin, 2012).

Implications for Translation

Handling NCSUs requires careful choices. Strategies include:

- Domestication, adapting terms into culturally familiar equivalents, aiding comprehension but risking cultural flattening (Venuti, 1995).
- Foreignization, retaining original terms, preserving authenticity but potentially alienating readers.
- Explication, where explanatory detail is added (e.g., polder → reclaimed land).

Empirical studies show that domestication is often dominant in nonfiction, while foreignization is more common in literature and tourism texts (Forum for Linguistic Studies, 2024). These choices are not merely technical but ethical, shaping how cultures are represented and understood.



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Conclusion

Nationally and culturally specific units embody the close link between language and culture. Their classification demonstrates how diverse cultural features are encoded lexically, while their translation highlights the balancing act between intelligibility and authenticity. Translators, therefore, act not just as linguistic mediators but as cultural diplomats.

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