



CULTURE-BOUND TERMS IN TRANSLATION: STRATEGIES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract

Culture-bound terms, also called nationally and culturally specific units or realia, are words and expressions rooted in the traditions, institutions, and everyday practices of a community. Their translation poses not only linguistic but also ethical challenges. This paper outlines key strategies for handling culture-bound terms and considers the ethical implications of translation choices.

Introduction

Translation has always been more than linguistic transfer. It involves negotiating between worldviews, traditions, and values. Culture-bound terms (CBTs) — expressions such as sari, siesta, or Ramadan — illustrate this challenge. These terms carry cultural weight that cannot be replicated by simple word-for-word substitution (Newmark, 1988).

The handling of CBTs is central to translation studies because it raises both practical questions of readability and ethical questions of cultural representation.

Strategies for Translating CBTs

Scholars propose multiple strategies for addressing CBTs (Newmark, 1988; Baker, 2018; Venuti, 1995):

- Transference: Borrowing the original term (kimono → kimono).
- Calque: Literal translation of components (flea market from marché aux puces).
- Explication: Adding explanatory detail (polder → reclaimed land).
- Cultural substitution: Using a local equivalent (parliament for дума in certain contexts).
- Generic replacement: Replacing with a broader term (red wine for Beaujolais).



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- Omission: Leaving the term untranslated, often in subtitling when space is limited. Empirical studies confirm that translators often prefer domestication (making terms familiar), especially in informative genres, while foreignization (retaining the foreign element) is more common in literature and tourism (Forum for Linguistic Studies, 2024).

Ethical Considerations

Translation strategies are not neutral. Venuti (1995) argues that domestication risks erasing cultural difference, presenting foreign texts as if they originated in the target culture. By contrast, foreignization highlights the strangeness of the source culture, respecting cultural integrity but possibly alienating readers.

The ethical dimension lies in the translator's responsibility:

- To the source culture, ensuring faithful representation.
- To the target audience, ensuring accessibility and clarity.

Striking this balance requires cultural sensitivity, contextual judgment, and sometimes compromise.

Conclusion

Culture-bound terms exemplify the interplay of language, culture, and ethics in translation. Strategies such as transference, calque, explicitation, and substitution offer varied solutions, but none are universally sufficient. Translators must navigate between domestication and foreignization with an awareness of their cultural and ethical consequences. Ultimately, translation of CBTs is not just a technical task but an act of cultural mediation.

References

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