
THE ROLE OF CULTURAL EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION THE GAP BETWEEN SOURCE AND TARGET TEXTS

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Abstract: Translation is not just about changing words from one language into another; it also involves understanding and transferring the culture behind those words. Every language is shaped by the way people live, think, and interact within their community. Translators often encounter words, phrases, or expressions that do not have direct equivalents or carry different meanings due to cultural differences. This highlights the importance of cultural equivalence in translation. This paper explores the concept of cultural equivalence and its critical role in translation. It discusses how translators handle idioms, customs, traditions, and humor unique to a particular culture. Drawing on examples from literature, film, and real-life translation cases, the paper illustrates how translators address these challenges to ensure that the message remains clear and culturally appropriate for the target audience. It also examines the limits of translation and the creative strategies employed when direct equivalence is impossible. The aim is to show that effective translation must not only sound accurate but also resonate culturally in the target language.

Keywords: Translation, Cultural Equivalence, Idioms, Cross-Cultural Communication, Translation Strategies, Cultural Transfer, Language and Culture, Translation Challenges, Target Audience, Creative Translation

1. INTRODUCTION

When we think about translation, we often imagine the simple act of changing words from one language into another. However, translation is much more than just substituting words—it is a complex process of facilitating understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds. Every language is deeply shaped by its culture, reflecting the way people live, think, celebrate, joke, and express emotions. Thus, when a translator engages with a text, they are not only working with words but also with the ideas, feelings, and traditions that lie behind those words.

This is where the concept of cultural equivalence becomes crucial. Cultural equivalence involves finding ways to convey meanings in the target language that may not have direct counterparts but still resonate meaningfully with the target audience. For instance, consider the English idiom “kick the bucket”. A literal, word-for-word translation into another language might sound nonsensical or amusingly strange. Yet, by translating it in a way that communicates the intended meaning—to die—the translator ensures that the readers can grasp the idea without confusion.

In today’s increasingly globalized world, where people regularly travel, study, and work across borders, translation plays a vital role in bridging cultural divides. Translators act as cultural mediators, enabling ideas and stories to flow smoothly across languages and societies. However, this is rarely a straightforward task. Vast cultural differences often mean that certain words, concepts, or traditions simply do not exist or make sense in the target culture. Additionally, humor, rituals, and social norms can vary widely, requiring translators to creatively adapt content while preserving its original spirit.

In this paper, we will explore how translators confront and manage these cultural challenges. We will examine common obstacles they face, the strategies they employ to overcome them, and real-life examples from actual translation work. By the end, it will become clear how cultural equivalence not only facilitates communication but also helps bring people closer together—building bridges across even the widest linguistic and cultural gaps.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION

The concept of equivalence in translation has evolved over time. Scholars like Nida (1964, as cited in Newmark, 1988) introduced dynamic equivalence, focusing on producing the same effect on the target audience as the original text. Cultural equivalence builds upon this by emphasizing the need to consider traditions, values, social norms, and historical context when translating.

2.1. Key Concepts

- Source Culture vs. Target Culture: Understanding both is critical for successful translation.
- Cultural Untranslatability: Some concepts or references have no direct counterpart in the target culture.
- Equivalence Strategies: Including adaptation, substitution, explanation, and omission.

3. CULTURAL CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATION

One of the hardest parts of translation is dealing with cultural differences. Every language has words, expressions, and ideas that are deeply connected to the people who speak it—their way of life, beliefs, history, and humour. When a translator comes across something that doesn't exist in the other language or that doesn't make sense in a different culture, it becomes a real challenge.

Idioms and Proverbs

Idioms are expressions that don't mean exactly what the words say. For example, in English we say, "It's raining cats and dogs," which means it's raining heavily. But if we translate this literally into Albanian – "*Po bie shi me mace dhe qen*" – it sounds strange and funny, not serious. The equivalent in Albanian would be something like "Po bie shi me rrebesh."

Another example is the English phrase "to break the ice" (to start a conversation in an awkward situation). In Albanian, we might say "me hap bisedën" or "me thyer heshtjen," which is close in meaning.

Cultural References and Traditions

Sometimes translators deal with names of holidays, foods, or habits that don't exist in the target culture. For instance, the American holiday "Thanksgiving" has no direct Albanian equivalent. Instead of translating it literally ("*falënderimi*"), which sounds odd, a translator might describe it as "një festë tradicionale amerikane për të falënderuar për të mirat e vitit".

In the opposite direction, an Albanian phrase like "për Bajram shkohet për vizita" (we go visiting during Bajram) might be unclear to someone from a non-Muslim background. The translator might need to explain it: "During Eid, families visit each other to celebrate the end of fasting."

3.1. Humor and Wordplay

Humor, especially jokes and wordplay, often presents significant challenges in translation because it relies heavily on double meanings, linguistic nuances, and shared cultural knowledge. For example, an English joke like: "I'm reading a book on anti-gravity. It's impossible to put down," plays on the phrase "put down," which has two meanings—both to stop reading a book and to physically lower an object. This pun creates a humorous effect that is difficult to replicate in Albanian because the phrase does not carry the same dual meaning.

In such cases, the translator faces a dilemma. They may attempt to create a new joke in Albanian that conveys a similar sense of humor and fits the context, a strategy known as cultural substitution or creative adaptation. Alternatively, if a suitable equivalent cannot be found, the translator might opt to omit the joke altogether or replace it with a neutral expression to maintain coherence. The choice depends largely on the purpose of the text and the expectations of the target audience.

Ultimately, humor translation requires not only linguistic skill but also cultural sensitivity and creativity, as the translator must balance fidelity to the original with producing an engaging and meaningful experience for the new audience.

3.2. Gestures and Social Norms

Even non-verbal communication can be tricky. In English, saying "Come here" while waving your hand toward you is friendly. In some cultures, that same gesture can seem rude. Similarly, the way people speak to elders in Albanian—using respectful forms like "Ju" instead of "Ti"—might be lost when translating into English, which does not mark formal and informal pronouns the same way.

In short, cultural challenges in translation are everywhere—from small phrases to big ideas. Translators need to think about more than just grammar and vocabulary. They must understand both cultures and find ways to make the message clear, respectful, and meaningful for the new audience. It's like telling the same story in a different world, and that takes both knowledge and creativity.

4. STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING CULTURAL EQUIVALENCE

When translators come across words or phrases that don't exist in the other language or carry different cultural meaning, they need to be creative. They don't just translate the words—they find a way to translate the meaning, the feeling, and the effect those words have in the original language. To do this, translators use different strategies. Each situation is different, so the translator chooses the best approach based on the audience, the text, and the purpose of the translation.

4.1. Adaptation (Cultural Substitution)

This means replacing a cultural element in the source language with something similar in the target language that people will understand better.

Example:

English: "*He eats like a pig.*"

Literal Albanian: "*Ai ha si derr.*"

This is understandable, but in Albanian, a more natural version might be: “*Ai ha sikur s’ka ngrënë kurrë*” (He eats like he’s never eaten before).

Another example:

English: “*Thanksgiving dinner*”

Adapted Albanian: “*Darka e festës*” (since Thanksgiving isn’t celebrated in Albanian culture).

4.2. Descriptive Translation (Explanation)

Sometimes there’s no single word in the target language, so the translator explains what it means.

Example:

Albanian: “*Fli, qifteli*”

English: Instead of translating it directly, you have to give definitions in English so they can understand properly.

Example:

Japanese: “*Obento*”

In Albanian: “*Një lloj dreke e paketuar që japonezët e marrin në shkollë apo punë*” (A kind of packed lunch common in Japan).

4.3. Retention with Footnotes or Glossaries

Sometimes it’s better to keep the original word, especially if it’s important for the culture or if there’s no good equivalent. Then you can add a short explanation in a footnote or glossary.

Example:

Albanian: “*Kanun*”

In English translation:

“*According to the Kanun¹, a traditional Albanian code of law...*”

¹Footnote: *The Kanun is a centuries-old set of traditional Albanian laws, especially known in the northern regions.*

4.4. Omission or Replacement

If the cultural reference is too specific or confusing, and it doesn’t affect the overall meaning, the translator might leave it out or replace it with something neutral.

Example:

English: “*He was wearing a Yale hoodie.*”

If the reader doesn’t know what Yale is, the translator might say:

“*Ai kishte veshur një bluzë sportive me kapuç*” (He was wearing a sports hoodie)

—especially if the focus isn’t on the university itself.

4.5. Borrowing (Using the Original Word)

Sometimes, especially with names of food, clothing, or cultural items, the best option is to just use the original word, especially if it’s becoming familiar.

Example:

Albanian: “*Baklava*”

English: Often kept the same because the food is known globally.

English: “*Smartphone*”

Albanian: Often used as-is, or just adapted slightly to pronunciation.

All these strategies help translators make the right choices. There’s no one-size-fits-all solution. A good translator looks at the context, the audience, and the purpose of the text. The goal is to help readers in the target language understand the message in a way that feels natural and culturally appropriate—while still staying true to the original text.

5. CASE STUDIES AND EXAMPLES

To better understand how translators deal with cultural challenges, let’s look at some real and practical examples from different types of texts—like literature, movies, everyday expressions, and social situations. These examples show how different strategies are used in action and how they help keep the meaning and feeling of the original message.

5.1. Example from Literature – Translating Idioms

Idioms are one of the trickiest things to translate because their meaning is not literal. If you translate them word-for-word, they often make no sense in the other language.

English:

“*He spilled the beans.*”

This means: *He revealed a secret.*

Literal Albanian:

“Ai derdhi fasule.”

This sounds funny and confusing to an Albanian speaker.

Culturally equivalent Albanian:

“Ai e zbuloi sekretin.” or *“Ai tregoi atë që s’duhej.”*

Here, the meaning is preserved, even though the words are different.

5.2. Example from Film Subtitles

Subtitles need to be short, clear, and still deliver the same emotion and meaning. Humor and slang are especially difficult.

Film: *Home Alone* (1990)

Original line: *“Keep the change, you filthy animal.”*

This is a funny and slightly rude line meant to sound like a gangster movie.

Albanian subtitle: *“Mbaji kusurin, ti egërsirë.”*

This keeps the tone and humor, even though the words aren’t exactly the same.

Example from Everyday Speech – Greetings and Customs

Cultural differences also show up in everyday language, like how people greet each other or show respect.

English: *“How are you?”* – A common, friendly greeting.

Albanian equivalent: *“Si je?”* or *“Si jeni?”* – Depending on the level of respect or familiarity.

However, in Albanian culture, people often add more:

“Si jeni? Si kaluat? Si është familja?” – Which shows a deeper level of politeness and care.

Translators have to decide whether to keep these extra details or adjust them to match the culture of the target audience.

5.3. Example from Cultural Traditions

Some traditions or items don’t exist in the other culture, so they need to be explained or adapted.

Albanian:

“Në dasmat shqiptare këndohet dhe hidhet valle tradicionale.”

(At Albanian weddings, people sing and dance traditional folk dances.)

English translation:

“Albanian weddings often include traditional music and circle dances.”

Here, “hidhet valle” is explained as “circle dances” to help English readers picture what’s happening.

5.4. Wordplay and Humour

Puns and jokes often depend on double meanings, which are very hard to translate.

English pun:

“Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.”

This is funny in English because “flies” is used in two ways.

Albanian version:

This kind of joke doesn’t work directly. A translator might either skip the joke or create a new joke in Albanian that fits the tone of the text.

These case studies show that translation is not just about switching words. It’s about making the message work in another culture. That might mean explaining more, changing words completely, or coming up with something new.

The best translations sound natural to the new audience, while still staying true to the original meaning and tone. As Venuti (1995) explains, translation involves deep cultural negotiation.

6. LIMITATIONS OF CULTURAL EQUIVALENCE

Despite all strategies, some aspects of culture are inherently untranslatable:

- **Historical events or figures:** Deeply embedded in national identity.
- **Religious references:** Varying significance across cultures.
- **Wordplay, puns, and humor:** Often culture-bound and untransferable.

Translators must then decide whether to preserve foreignness (foreignization) or make the text familiar to the target culture (domestication). These terms are discussed in depth by Venuti (1995).

7. THE TRANSLATOR’S ROLE AS A CULTURAL MEDIATOR

Translators are not passive conduits of language but active agents of cultural negotiation. They must have:

- A deep understanding of both source and target cultures.
- Sensitivity to context and audience.
- Creative decision-making skills.

Their goal is not only to translate words but to evoke the same feeling, meaning, and understanding.

8. CONCLUSION

Translation is not just about changing one word into another. It's about helping people understand each other—even when they speak different languages and come from very different cultures. This is why cultural equivalence is so important. It helps the translator make sure that the message in the original language makes the same sense, gives the same feeling, and has the same effect in the new language. According to Baker (2011), effective translation requires both linguistic and cultural awareness.

As we've seen in this paper, there are many challenges when it comes to translating culture. Idioms, traditions, jokes, holidays, and ways of showing respect—all of these things can be very different from one culture to another. A phrase that makes perfect sense in English might sound strange, rude, or meaningless in Albanian, and vice versa. That's why translators need to be more than just good with words. They need to be smart, creative, and sensitive to both cultures. There are different strategies translators can use to handle these challenges—like adapting the message, explaining it in more detail, keeping some original words, or even changing things completely when needed. The goal is always the same: to help people from different cultures understand each other without losing the spirit of the original message. Of course, not everything can be translated perfectly.

Some cultural meanings are so deep or specific that they simply don't have an exact match. But that's okay. What matters most is that the reader in the target language feels what the original speaker wanted them to feel, and understands what they meant to say. In the end, translation is a kind of bridge—not only between languages, but also between people. And cultural equivalence is what helps make that bridge strong, meaningful, and respectful. A good translator doesn't just transfer words—they carry ideas, feelings, and cultures across that bridge, helping to bring the world a little closer together.

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