



CULTURAL UNTRANSLATABILITY IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

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Annotatsiya

Mazkur maqola tarjima jarayonida madaniy tarjima qilib bo‘lmaslik (cultural untranslatability) muammosini tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqotda til va madaniyat o‘rtasidagi uzviy bog‘liqlikni ochib berib, madaniyatga xos realiyalar, iboralar, maqollar, diniy va ijtimoiy tushunchalarning boshqa tilga to‘liq o‘girilishidagi qiyinchiliklarni yoritilgan. Maqolada madaniy tarjima qilib bo‘lmaslik tushunchasi nazariy jihatdan izohlangan hamda tarjimonlar tomonidan qo‘llaniladigan asosiy strategiyalar aniq misollar asosida tahlil qilingan. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko‘rsatadiki, tarjimada mutlaq ekvivalentlik har doim ham mavjud bo‘lmasa-da, funksional va kommunikativ moslikka erishish mumkin.

Kalit so‘zlar: madaniy tarjima qilib bo‘lmaslik, tarjima nazariyasi, madaniyat, ekvivalentlik, tarjimon strategiyalari

Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of cultural untranslatability in translation studies. It explores the close relationship between language and culture and analyzes the difficulties involved in translating culture-specific realia, idioms, proverbs, and religious and social concepts. The paper presents a theoretical overview of cultural untranslatability and discusses major translation strategies through concrete Uzbek–English examples. The findings demonstrate that while absolute equivalence is often unattainable, functional and communicative equivalence can be achieved through informed translational choices.



Key words: cultural untranslatability, translation theory, culture, equivalence, translation strategies

Translation is not limited to the mechanical substitution of words from one language into another; it is a complex process of intercultural communication. Language reflects the history, worldview, traditions, and social values of its speakers. Consequently, some linguistic and cultural elements resist direct translation. This challenge is known as cultural untranslatability. The term was first systematically discussed by J. C. Catford, who distinguished between linguistic and cultural untranslatability¹. While linguistic untranslatability arises from structural differences between languages, cultural untranslatability occurs when a concept in the source culture does not exist in the target culture. This phenomenon is especially evident in literary, religious, and audiovisual translation.

Cultural untranslatability stems from differences in social organization, belief systems, customs, and collective experience. Eugene Nida emphasizes that meaning is culturally conditioned and cannot be separated from its context². Thus, a translator must possess not only linguistic competence but also deep cultural awareness.

Peter Newmark further identifies culture-specific items (CSIs) as the main sources of untranslatability³. These include terms related to ecology, material culture, social institutions, customs, and gestures. When such elements lack equivalents in the target culture, translators must make strategic decisions.

Forms of Cultural Untranslatability with examples.

1. Culture-Specific realia. Culture-specific realia are objects or institutions unique to a particular culture. The Uzbek word *mahalla* is a clear example. It refers not only to a residential area but also to a social institution responsible for community support, moral regulation, and social cohesion. Translating *mahalla* as *neighborhood* or *community* fails to capture its full cultural meaning. As a result, translators often preserve the original term and provide explanation. Another example is *sumalak*, a traditional dish prepared during Navro'z. Translating it as



wheat pudding ignores its symbolic significance related to renewal, patience, and collective labor. In such cases, borrowing combined with explanation is the most effective strategy.

2. Idioms and Proverbs. Idioms and proverbs reflect cultural thinking and shared experience. For example, the Uzbek proverb:

“Besh barmoq bir xil emas.”

A literal translation (*“Five fingers are not the same”*) may confuse English readers. A functional equivalent such as *“People are different”* or *“Everyone is unique”* better conveys the intended meaning. Conversely, English idioms such as **“to spill the beans”** cannot be translated word-for-word into Uzbek. Translators usually replace it with:

“Sirni oshkor qilmoq.”

Here, the metaphor changes, but the communicative meaning is preserved⁴.

3. Religious and Social Concepts. Religious concepts often resist translation due to differing belief systems. Islamic terms such as *halol* and *harom* are often translated as *permissible* and *forbidden*. While semantically close, these English equivalents fail to convey the deep moral, legal, and religious implications embedded in the original terms. Similarly, cultural perceptions of days like **Sunday** differ across cultures. In English-speaking societies, Sunday traditionally carries religious significance, whereas *yakshanba* in Uzbek culture is primarily perceived as a day off. Such differences highlight the limits of direct equivalence.

4. Forms of Address and Politeness. Forms of address illustrate cultural norms of respect and social hierarchy. In Uzbek, words such as *aka*, *opa*, *amaki*, and *xola* are used beyond family contexts to show politeness. Translating *aka* as *brother* in English may imply a biological relationship and distort meaning. For example:

“Aka, yordam bera olasizmi?”

A culturally appropriate translation would be:

“Excuse me, could you help me?”



This shows how pragmatic equivalence often outweighs literal accuracy⁵.

5. Cultural Untranslatability in Literary Translation. Literary texts intensify the problem of cultural untranslatability. Uzbek literature frequently references traditions such as *mehmon kutish*, which symbolizes hospitality, honor, and generosity. Translating it merely as *receiving guests* weakens its cultural depth. Similarly, English cultural references such as *pub culture* or *afternoon tea* lack direct equivalents in Uzbek. Translators must decide whether to explain, adapt, or substitute such concepts depending on the target readership and purpose of translation.

The analysis demonstrates that cultural untranslatability does not imply the impossibility of translation. Instead, it reveals the limitations of literal equivalence and emphasizes the role of the translator as a cultural mediator. The examples confirm that meaning can be preserved through functional equivalence, adaptation, and contextual explanation. The findings also show that different text types require different strategies. Literary texts may favor explanation and borrowing, while pragmatic texts often rely on cultural substitution.

Cultural untranslatability remains one of the most significant challenges in translation studies. It underscores the inseparable relationship between language and culture and highlights the need for cultural competence in translation practice. Although absolute equivalence is rarely achievable, communicative and functional equivalence can be attained through informed translational strategies. Ultimately, cultural untranslatability enriches translation by promoting intercultural understanding and emphasizing the translator's creative and interpretive role.

References

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