



SEMANTIC AND CULTURAL SPECIFICITY OF REALIA

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Abstract

This article examines the semantic and cultural specificity of realia as one of the most important objects of linguocultural and comparative linguistic research. Realia are treated as culturally marked lexical units that denote objects, institutions, customs, traditions, and concepts unique to the life of a particular nation. Unlike neutral vocabulary, realia carry not only denotative meaning but also a wide range of cultural, historical, evaluative, and associative meanings. Their semantics are deeply rooted in the ethnocultural experience of a speech community, which makes them especially significant for the study of language and culture interaction. The article analyzes the layered semantic structure of realia, their cultural markedness, their relation to national worldview, and the difficulties they create in interpretation, translation, and intercultural communication. Particular attention is paid to the fact that realia function as condensed carriers of collective memory and cultural identity. The study argues that the semantic and cultural specificity of realia can be adequately understood only through an integrated approach that combines semantic, contextual, linguocultural, and comparative methods of analysis.

Keywords

realia, national-cultural realia, semantic specificity, cultural specificity, linguoculturology, ethnocultural identity, cultural semantics, national worldview,



culture-bound vocabulary, comparative linguistics, intercultural communication, translation.

Introduction

In modern linguistics, the study of lexical meaning has moved far beyond the boundaries of purely dictionary-based definitions. Words are no longer viewed as isolated labels attached to objects in reality; rather, they are understood as complex units that preserve and transmit historical experience, social values, and culturally significant knowledge. In this context, **realia** occupy a special position because they most vividly demonstrate the inseparable relationship between language and culture.

Realia are lexical units that denote objects, phenomena, institutions, customs, traditions, rituals, and concepts specific to the life of a certain nation or ethnic community. Their distinctive feature lies in the fact that they are deeply embedded in the material and spiritual culture of a people and often lack exact equivalents in another language. For this reason, they cannot be interpreted adequately through linguistic meaning alone. Their full understanding requires the analysis of the cultural background in which they function.

The semantic and cultural specificity of realia constitutes one of the central problems in linguoculturology, comparative linguistics, ethnolinguistics, and translation studies. This problem is particularly important because realia preserve culturally specific models of experience and reveal the mechanisms through which language encodes national worldview. They serve not merely as nominative units, but as signs of culture, markers of identity, and repositories of collective memory.

The purpose of this article is to provide a detailed analysis of the semantic and cultural specificity of realia, to examine the structure of their meaning, to describe their role in reflecting national worldview, and to show why they require a special approach in linguistic research.



Realia as Culturally Marked Lexical Units

Unlike ordinary vocabulary, realia are inseparable from the cultural environment in which they emerge. Neutral lexical items such as *tree*, *water*, *book*, or *road* refer to universally recognizable objects and can usually be translated into other languages without significant loss of meaning. Realia, however, belong to a different category. They denote objects or concepts that are culturally specific and historically conditioned. Because of this, their meaning cannot be reduced to simple reference.

For instance, a lexical item naming a traditional national dish does not merely identify food. It may also evoke associations with family rituals, seasonal cycles, hospitality traditions, social status, or religious symbolism. Similarly, a word referring to a national ceremony may reflect social hierarchy, ethical norms, collective values, and historical continuity. Thus, realia are lexical units in which denotative meaning is inseparably connected with cultural meaning.

The semantic specificity of realia lies in their non-universal reference. Their referents are often absent from another culture, or if similar referents exist, they do not possess the same symbolic and functional value. That is why a realia unit cannot be fully understood outside the national-cultural system to which it belongs.¹

From a linguocultural perspective, realia are not simply words with difficult meanings. They are verbal manifestations of a people's way of life. Through them, language records fragments of reality that are particularly significant to a given community. This makes them one of the clearest examples of how lexical meaning reflects culture-specific experience.²

¹ Kramsch, C. *Language and Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1998. – P. 3–15.

² Sharifian, F. *Cultural Linguistics: Cultural Conceptualisations and Language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017. – P. 27–35.



The Semantic Structure of Realia

The meaning of realia is multilayered. It usually includes several interconnected components that together form the full semantic content of the unit.

Denotative Component- The denotative component is the basic lexical meaning that refers directly to the object, phenomenon, or institution named by the word. At this level, the realia unit functions like any other lexical item: it identifies something in the external world. For example, a word denoting a traditional garment, a ritual, or a type of food has an immediate referential meaning.

However, the denotative layer alone is not sufficient for understanding realia. Two units from different languages may appear denotatively similar while differing greatly in their cultural value. For example, two cultures may both have traditional festive meals, but the meanings associated with those meals may differ in terms of ritual significance, symbolic content, and social practice.

Connotative Component- The connotative layer includes emotional, evaluative, associative, and stylistic meanings attached to the realia. These connotations are culturally conditioned and often reflect collective attitudes. A realia unit may evoke warmth, respect, nostalgia, pride, sacredness, humor, irony, or social prestige.

For example, a word naming a national holiday is rarely emotionally neutral. It often carries associations of family unity, ritual obligation, moral values, childhood memory, or national belonging. These connotations are part of the semantic content of the word, even though they are not always explicitly stated.

Cultural Component- The cultural layer is what makes realia fundamentally different from ordinary lexical items. This component includes information about customs, traditions, social institutions, historical events, beliefs, values, and



symbolic practices associated with the unit. In many cases, the cultural layer is more important than the denotative one.

A realia unit does not simply point to an object; it activates a whole network of cultural knowledge shared by members of the same speech community. Understanding this layer requires background knowledge that native speakers often possess automatically. For outsiders, however, this meaning may remain hidden unless it is explained.

Pragmatic Component- The pragmatic dimension of realia concerns how these units function in discourse. Depending on the communicative context, realia may signal solidarity, social status, cultural competence, emotional closeness, or ideological positioning. They may also serve as markers of in-group identity. When speakers use certain realia, they often presuppose shared cultural knowledge and thereby reinforce communal belonging.

Thus, the semantic structure of realia is not static. It is dynamic, context-sensitive, and culturally saturated. Its full interpretation requires attention not only to lexical semantics, but also to discourse, context, and social usage.

Cultural Specificity of Realia

The cultural specificity of realia lies in the fact that they emerge from the unique historical and social experience of a people. Every linguistic community develops its own system of values, institutions, rituals, and categories of everyday life. These cultural phenomena find expression in language, and realia are among the most visible forms of such expression.

Realia preserve information about the material and spiritual culture of a nation. They reflect what is socially important, historically memorable, and culturally meaningful. Through them, language records such spheres as:



- food culture,
- clothing and appearance,
- household organization,
- kinship and family structure,
- rituals and ceremonies,
- religion and belief,
- social hierarchy,
- traditional occupations,
- forms of hospitality,
- historical institutions,
- local governance,
- moral and symbolic values.

What makes realia culturally specific is not only the uniqueness of their referents, but also the cultural significance attached to them. A certain object may physically exist in two cultures, yet only in one of them does it function as a symbol of identity, ritual purity, social honor, or communal memory. Therefore, cultural specificity is not identical with material uniqueness; it also includes symbolic and axiological uniqueness.

This is why realia are often called **culture-bound vocabulary**. Their meaning is bound to a specific ethnocultural context, and the loss of this context results in partial or distorted understanding.

Realia and National Worldview



One of the most important functions of realia is their ability to reflect national worldview. The notion of worldview in linguistics refers to the culturally shaped way in which a people conceptualizes reality. Language does not merely mirror the external world; it represents the world as filtered through collective experience and cultural interpretation.³

Realia are especially important in this respect because they reveal what a culture chooses to name, preserve, and transmit linguistically. If a community has numerous lexical units for social roles, kinship distinctions, ritual actions, or traditional artifacts, this indicates that these spheres occupy an important place in its worldview.

For example, kinship terms in many Asian cultures are more detailed than in a number of Western languages, reflecting the importance of age, family hierarchy, and relational status. Similarly, names of rituals often show how a people organizes life stages, social transitions, and moral obligations.

Realia therefore provide valuable evidence for reconstructing national conceptual models. They show how social reality is categorized, what values are prioritized, and which forms of behavior are culturally legitimized. Through their semantics, one can trace broader cultural orientations such as collectivism, individualism, respect for age, ritual order, hospitality, reverence for ancestors, or attachment to locality.

Thus, the study of realia is not only a lexical investigation. It is also an inquiry into how culture structures meaning and how language preserves that structure.

Examples of Semantic and Cultural Specificity of Realia

³ Wierzbicka, A. *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. – P. 21–38.



To illustrate the specificity of realia more clearly, it is useful to examine examples from different cultural spheres.

Food Realia- Food names are among the most common and culturally rich realia. They often represent more than culinary practice; they also reflect climate, economy, seasonal cycles, hospitality, and ritual traditions.

For example, the word **kimchi** in Korean culture does not simply denote fermented vegetables. Its semantic content includes everyday dietary practice, communal preparation, seasonal preservation, family cooperation, and national identity. The phenomenon of collective kimchi preparation is itself culturally meaningful and adds a broader social dimension to the lexical unit.

Similarly, a word like **plov** or **palov** in Uzbek culture is not merely the name of a rice dish. It is associated with hospitality, celebration, male communal cooking traditions in certain contexts, ritual gatherings, and social prestige. In such cases, the denotative reference to food is inseparable from its symbolic and social value.

Thus, food realia show that semantic specificity is closely connected with cultural practice.

Clothing Realia- Traditional clothing terms also reveal the cultural thickness of realia. A lexical unit naming national dress often includes information about gender norms, ceremonial behavior, social status, aesthetic values, and historical continuity.

For example, **hanbok** in Korean culture denotes traditional dress, but its meaning goes far beyond clothing. It evokes historical memory, formal occasions, ritual use, visual identity, and ideas of grace and national beauty. A dictionary gloss such as “traditional Korean dress” is insufficient because it does not convey the symbolic and emotional meanings attached to the garment.



The same can be said of words denoting traditional clothing in other cultures. Such items often function as visual signs of cultural belonging and may carry strong patriotic or nostalgic connotations.

Social and Institutional Realia- Some realia denote institutions or social formations that are deeply rooted in a national cultural system. These units are particularly difficult to translate because their meaning depends on a whole social structure.

For example, a term referring to a local communal institution may include implications of neighborhood solidarity, mutual obligation, informal governance, and moral supervision. Although another language may have approximate equivalents such as *community*, *district*, or *local council*, these do not fully reproduce the cultural meaning of the original unit.

Institutional realia therefore show how lexical meaning can preserve specific models of social organization.

Ritual and Ceremonial Realia- Ritual vocabulary is especially rich in cultural semantics. Words naming ceremonies often encode beliefs about life, death, family, morality, respect, purity, continuity, or social legitimacy.

A lexical unit naming a wedding-related ritual, for instance, may include reference not only to an action, but also to gender roles, family alliances, obligations to elders, and symbolic gestures of integration into a new household. Such realia are semantically dense because they stand at the intersection of language, action, and belief.

These examples demonstrate that the specificity of realia cannot be understood apart from the cultural scenarios in which they function.

Realia in Translation and Intercultural Communication



The semantic and cultural specificity of realia becomes especially evident in translation. Realia frequently lack exact equivalents in the target language, which creates one of the most difficult problems in translation studies.

A translator must decide whether to:

- retain the original word through transliteration,
- provide a descriptive equivalent,
- replace it with an approximate cultural analogue,
- add a footnote or commentary,
- or combine several strategies.

Each of these solutions involves a certain loss or transformation of meaning. Transliteration preserves the national flavor but may leave the reader uninformed. Descriptive translation clarifies the referent but may weaken stylistic compactness and cultural resonance. Substitution with an approximate equivalent may improve readability but risks distorting the original culture-specific meaning.

For example, if a realia unit refers to a culturally unique social ritual, a simple translation may convey what happens but fail to show why it matters. In this case, the translator is not merely transferring lexical meaning; they are mediating between two systems of cultural knowledge.

This proves that the semantic content of realia is inseparable from background knowledge. Intercultural communication involving realia requires explanation, contextualization, and cultural interpretation. Without these, misunderstanding or reduction of meaning is almost inevitable.

Methodological Approaches to the Study of Realia



Because of their complexity, realia require a multidimensional methodology. No single method is sufficient to reveal their full semantic and cultural content.

Semantic Analysis- Semantic analysis helps identify the denotative and connotative components of the unit. It is useful for describing the lexical meaning and establishing semantic boundaries.

Contextual Analysis- Contextual analysis shows how realia function in actual discourse. It reveals pragmatic meanings, emotional overtones, and stylistic roles that may not be visible in dictionary definitions.

Linguocultural Analysis- Linguocultural analysis focuses on the connection between the lexical unit and the cultural knowledge it reflects. This approach is essential for understanding symbolic value, ritual significance, and national worldview.

Comparative Analysis- Comparative analysis helps reveal equivalent, partially equivalent, and non-equivalent units across languages. It is especially useful for identifying both universal human experiences and culture-specific conceptualizations.

Diachronic Analysis- Some realia change their cultural meaning over time. Diachronic analysis makes it possible to trace semantic shifts, historical evolution, and the preservation or transformation of cultural functions.

An integrated approach that combines these methods allows for a fuller interpretation of realia as both linguistic and cultural units.

Analytical Discussion

The semantic and cultural specificity of realia demonstrates that lexical meaning is never purely linguistic. In culturally marked vocabulary, meaning is shaped by history, society, ritual practice, and collective memory. Realia are



therefore especially valuable for linguistic theory because they challenge simplistic models of lexical equivalence and force researchers to recognize the cultural depth of language.

From a theoretical point of view, realia support the claim that vocabulary is one of the main repositories of cultural knowledge. From a methodological point of view, they show that interdisciplinary approaches are essential in lexical research. From a practical point of view, they have direct relevance for translation, language teaching, intercultural communication, and comparative cultural studies.

The study of realia also reveals an important principle: language does not merely name reality, but culturally interprets it. Realia are one of the clearest manifestations of this interpretive function. They preserve the way a community sees the world, values social relations, structures rituals, and remembers its past.

In this sense, realia should be seen as condensed texts of culture. Each one contains within it a fragment of national experience. The task of the linguist is to uncover that embedded cultural content and explain how it interacts with lexical form and semantic structure.

Conclusion

The semantic and cultural specificity of realia is one of the most significant problems in linguocultural and comparative linguistic research. Realia differ from neutral lexical units because their meaning includes not only denotative reference, but also connotative, cultural, symbolic, and pragmatic components. They are deeply rooted in the ethnocultural life of a people and preserve information about traditions, institutions, values, rituals, and collective memory.

Their specificity lies in the fact that they reflect a national worldview and encode culturally significant experience in lexical form. This makes them especially important for the study of the relationship between language and culture. At the same



time, their complexity explains why they create difficulties in translation and intercultural interpretation.

Therefore, the study of realia requires an integrated approach that combines semantic, contextual, linguocultural, and comparative analysis. Only such an approach makes it possible to reveal the full depth of their meaning and their role in preserving ethnocultural identity.

In conclusion, realia are not merely names of culture-specific objects or phenomena. They are carriers of cultural memory, signs of national identity, and linguistic expressions of collective worldview. Their analysis contributes not only to lexical semantics, but also to a broader understanding of how language encodes culture.

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