

STRATEGIES FOR TRANSLATING REALIA

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Introduction

Translation is more than linguistic transfer; it is an act of cultural negotiation. While most words have equivalents across languages, certain terms are deeply culture-bound and resist direct translation. These terms, called *realia*, denote real-world objects, customs, institutions, and phenomena tied to the daily life, geography, and traditions of a particular community (Vlahov & Florin, 1980/2012). Examples include *kimono* (Japanese clothing), *bazaar* (Middle Eastern market), *fjord* (Norwegian geography), or *Thanksgiving* (American holiday).

For translators, *realia* present a dilemma: how much of the source culture should be preserved? If the translator retains the original form, readers may feel disoriented. If the translator replaces the item with a local equivalent, cultural nuance is lost. This problem has long preoccupied scholars. Toury (1995) described it as a tension between adequacy (faithfulness to the source text) and acceptability (adaptation to target culture norms). Venuti (1995) later reframed this as foreignization versus domestication, linking translators' choices to broader ethical issues of cultural representation.

In contemporary translation studies, strategies for translating *realia* are particularly significant because global communication increasingly involves culturally marked texts—from literary works and tourism brochures to film subtitles and news reports. In these contexts, successful translation depends on more than accuracy: it requires a deep sense of audience expectations, text function, and cultural diplomacy (Vermeer, 1989).

This paper seeks to analyze the strategies translators use when faced with *realia*. The objectives are threefold:

1. To outline the main categories of *realia* and their associated challenges.
2. To review the most common translation strategies, as theorized and applied in practice.
3. To discuss how context, purpose, and ethics influence the choice of strategy.

By applying the IMRAD framework, this study synthesizes theoretical insights, empirical findings, and practical implications for translators.

Methods

The study adopts a qualitative literature review methodology, supplemented by case analysis of applied research. This approach is justified because the question of how to translate realia is primarily interpretive and normative rather than experimental. Unlike laboratory studies, translation strategies are embedded in texts, cultures, and audiences, making qualitative synthesis the most appropriate method (Munday, 2016).

The methodological steps included:

1. Literature selection – Core theoretical texts such as Toury (1995), Venuti (1995), and Vermeer (1989) were used as conceptual anchors. Additional scholarly works on realia (Vlahov & Florin, 1980/2012) and empirical studies (Forum for Linguistic Studies, 2024; Khachatryan, 2024) were reviewed.
2. Classification review – Existing typologies of realia were analyzed (e.g., geographical, ethnographic, sociopolitical, fictional/irrealia).
3. Strategy mapping – Strategies listed by Toury, Grit, and others were categorized into broader themes (foreignizing vs. domesticating).
4. Case analysis – Empirical examples were examined: (a) Ukrainian translations of English nonfiction/fiction texts; (b) mediated literary translation of *The Catcher in the Rye*; (c) subtitling practices in audiovisual translation; and (d) tourism discourse.
5. Synthesis – Findings were consolidated into a framework highlighting contextual decision-making in realia translation.

This methodology ensures both breadth (theoretical coverage) and depth (practical evidence), providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Results

1. Classification of Realia

Scholars classify realia into several categories (Vlahov & Florin, 2012):

- Geographical: natural or man-made features unique to a culture (*fjord, pampa, polder*).
- Ethnographic: objects and practices of daily life (*kimono, sauna, samovar*).
- Social/political: institutions, events, or cultural references (*duma, Kremlin, Thanksgiving*).
- Fictional/irrealia: invented cultural terms in literature or film (*hobbit, muggle, Jedi*).

Each category poses specific challenges. For example, geographical realia may lack equivalents due to unique environmental features, while sociopolitical realia may carry ideological weight.

2. Documented Strategies

Toury (1995) and Grit (2004) identify multiple strategies, which can be grouped into three main families:

- Retention/foreignization:
 - Transliteration (*bazaar* → *bazaar*).
 - Phonetic transcription (*cachemire* for “Kashmir”).
 - Calque (*flea market* from *marché aux puces*).
 - Adjective addition (*Argentine pampa*).
- Adaptation/domestication:
 - Cultural equivalent (*art nouveau* for *Jugendstil*).
 - Generic substitution (*red wine* for *Beaujolais*).
 - Analogous coinage (inventing a similar local term).
- Explanatory strategies:
 - Explication/description (*polder* → *reclaimed land*).
 - Sense translation (functional adaptation, e.g., *Does the NHS cover this drug?* → *Is this drug expensive?*).
 - Omission (rare, but used in subtitling when space is limited).

3. Empirical Trends

Several case studies illustrate how these strategies are applied:

- Ukrainian case study (Forum for Linguistic Studies, 2024) – Analysis of nonfiction and fiction texts revealed that domestication dominates: 55% of realia were adapted into familiar terms, and 66.5% of irrealia were domesticated. Calque and descriptive equivalents were the most common methods.
- Mediated literary translation (Khachatryan, 2024) – The Armenian translation of *The Catcher in the Rye*, based on the Russian version, showed that indirect translation increases loss of cultural fidelity, often leading to explanatory phrases or substitutions.
- Audiovisual translation – In subtitling, space and timing constraints often force omission or cultural substitution. For example, Japanese food item *onigiri* is sometimes translated simply as “rice ball,” losing nuance but aiding viewer comprehension (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2014).
- Tourism translation – Tourism brochures often deliberately retain foreignized terms (*tapas*, *flamenco*, *fjord*) to market authenticity, but they pair them with short descriptions for accessibility (Kelly, 1997).

Discussion

The findings highlight several key implications:

1. Context Determines Strategy

No single strategy is universally “correct.” Translators adapt based on **genre, audience, and purpose**. Literary works tolerate exoticism; textbooks favor clarity. Tourism texts emphasize authenticity; news texts prioritize comprehensibility.

2. Adequacy vs. Acceptability

Toury's (1995) spectrum explains why translators oscillate between **source-oriented adequacy** and **target-oriented acceptability**. This tension reflects the dual responsibility: loyalty to the source text and service to the target audience.

3. Domestication Dominance

Empirical studies confirm that domestication is most common, particularly in nonfiction and informative texts (Forum for Linguistic Studies, 2024). However, Venuti (1995) warns that domestication risks erasing cultural otherness and promoting ethnocentric perspectives.

4. Ethical and Political Dimensions

Venuti's (1995) advocacy for foreignization reminds translators that their choices shape cultural representation. Retaining *kimono* rather than replacing it with "robe" preserves cultural integrity and resists homogenization.

5. Pedagogical Relevance

For translation training, exposure to realia is essential. Students must learn to evaluate strategies not mechanically, but with sensitivity to function, readership, and cultural ethics (Munday, 2016).

6. Future Directions

- Audiovisual contexts: As global streaming grows, subtitling/dubbing of culture-specific items will require refined strategies.
- Machine translation: Current MT systems often mistranslate realia, highlighting the continued need for human intervention.
- Cross-cultural research: More comparative studies across languages would enrich our understanding of how realia circulate globally.

Conclusion

Realia translation exemplifies the translator's dual role as linguist and cultural mediator. The strategies—ranging from calque and transliteration to cultural substitution and explication—show the diversity of solutions available. While domestication is dominant in practice, foreignization retains ethical and aesthetic significance.

Ultimately, translating realia is not about finding a single "right" answer but about negotiating between authenticity and intelligibility. As global interconnectedness deepens, translators will increasingly serve as ambassadors of culture, ensuring that realia not only survive but enrich communication across linguistic borders.

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