



## CULTURAL PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATION

***Egamberdiyeva Irodaxon***

*Teacher of Andijan State Foreign Language Institute*

***Dadaxonova Muharramoy***

*Student of Andijan State Foreign Language Institute*

***Abstract:*** Translation is not merely the transference of words from one language to another but an complicated cultural process that encompasses worldviews, traditions, and unique ways of expression. Cultural problems in translation arise when concepts rooted in one cultural context lack equivalents in another. These challenges are further exacerbated by idiomatic expressions, historical references, and sociolinguistic norms that define one culture but remain foreign to another. This article explores the nature of these cultural difficulties, emphasizing how they affect meaning, tone, and intention in translation. Drawing on real-world examples and theoretical frameworks, it examines how translators navigate the cultural fields of both linguistic and contextual directions.

***Keywords:*** Translation, culture, idioms, equivalence, untranslatability, pragmatics, intercultural communication

Translation is a process that is dynamic and multifaceted, with many different components that go beyond just substituting words between languages. It involves a careful negotiation between two or more cultural systems, each with its own worldview, traditions, and communicative norms. As languages are deeply rooted in the cultural contexts that shape them, translation becomes a delicate act of interpretation and mediation. The cultural dimension of translation presents numerous challenges for translators who must grapple with idiomatic expressions, historical references, religious connotations, and differing social values. These



cultural problems do not simply complicate the task of the translator; they fundamentally influence how meaning is understood and conveyed. Understanding the intricacies of culture-bound expressions and the potential for miscommunication is essential for ensuring the success of any translation effort, particularly in our increasingly globalized and multicultural world.

Translation has always been more than a linguistic activity; it is fundamentally a cultural exchange. When a translator approaches a text, they do not merely decode and re-encode words that they interpret social customs, values, and ideologies embedded in language. Language and culture are inextricably linked; thus, any act of translation involves cultural interpretation. The notion of cultural untranslatability underscores the gravity of this task. Certain words or expressions are so deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the source language that finding a direct equivalent in the target language becomes virtually impossible.

One of the most common cultural problems in translation is the issue of idioms and colloquial expressions. For instance, the English idiom "kick the bucket," meaning "to die," "break a leg" meaning "good luck" cannot be translated literally into most other languages without losing its idiomatic meaning. A literal translation might evoke confusion or amusement rather than understanding. The translator must therefore find an equivalent expression in the target culture or resort to paraphrasing, which might dilute the original flavor. These challenges exemplify the broader problem of domestication and foreignization in translation theory. Domestication involves adapting the source text to fit the target culture, while foreignization retains the source culture's features to preserve authenticity. Both strategies carry ethical and interpretive implications, and the translator must decide which to prioritize depending on context, purpose, and audience.

Another complex area of cultural translation lies in the rendering of culturally-specific terms (CSTs), such as those related to food, traditions, or administrative systems. Words like "samovar," "do'ppi", "kimchi," or "hijab" may not have



precise equivalents in the target language. Translators must then choose whether to leave the word untranslated, add explanations what does this word mean and its definitions, substitute it with a familiar but culturally different term. Each of these choices can alter the one's perception of the original culture.

For example, translating "hijab" simply as "headscarf" erases its religious and cultural dimensions, potentially misrepresenting the term's full significance.

Futhermore,, politeness conventions and speech levels vary significantly across cultures and often resist direct translation. For example, the use of honorifics in Japanese or the T-V distinction in Romance languages (tu/vous in French, tú/usted in Spanish) reflects social hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics that might not be present in the target culture. English, for instance, lacks a formal/informal second-person pronoun distinction, which can cause difficulties in conveying social nuances in translated texts. Likewise, Arabic features various degrees of formality and deference, which are difficult to replicate in English without resorting to awkward or artificial expressions.

Humor and wordplay represent perhaps the most notorious cultural hurdles in translation. Puns rely heavily on linguistic structure, phonetics, and double meanings. A joke that hinges on the homonymy in the source language may be entirely incomprehensible when translated. Translators must then employ creativity to reproduce a similar humorous effect rather than a literal equivalence. This type of translation often requires an understanding of both cultures and a literary style. In subtitling, where space and time are limited, humor frequently suffers or vanishes altogether due to these constraints.

Religion, taboos, and societal norms can also restrict translation. What may be perfectly acceptable in one culture may be offensive or prohibited in another. For example, Western texts containing explicit sexual references, liberal gender roles, or critiques of religious institutions may face censorship or require adaptation in conservative societies. This raises ethical questions: Should the translator respect



the sensibilities of the target audience, or should they preserve the source text's original intentions at the risk of controversy or rejection? The answer often depends on the purpose of the translation and the expectations of its readership. An equally pressing issue is ethnocentrism and cultural bias. Translators, being human, are not immune to their own cultural assumptions. Their interpretations can unconsciously reinforce stereotypes or erase the voices of the source culture. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism serves as a reminder of how Western representations of Eastern cultures are often filtered through a colonialist or exoticizing lens. The translator, therefore, must be aware of their positionality and strive for cultural sensitivity. It is not enough to know the language; one must also understand the values, traditions, and worldview of the people who speak it.

In literary translation, the challenge of cultural transfer becomes particularly acute. A novel, poem, or play is not just a collection of words but an aesthetic and emotional experience shaped by its cultural context. Translators must capture tone, rhythm, imagery, and symbolism while navigating the cultural landscape of the source text. The Russian poet Anna Akhmatova's use of religious allusions, the Persian ghazal's structure and themes, or the African oral tradition's performative elements, all demand cultural as well as linguistic fluency. Success in literary translation is often measured not by fidelity to the words but by fidelity to the spirit of the original.

The concept of equivalence, whether formal, dynamic, or functional is central to translation theory, yet it remains elusive when applied to culture. No two languages show perfectly onto each other, and no two cultures interpret the world in exactly the same way. Meaning, therefore, is always negotiated, never merely transferred. As Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere have argued, translation is a form of rewriting, influenced by ideological and cultural forces. Recognizing this allows us to appreciate translation not as a mechanical act but as a creative, interpretive process that shapes our understanding of the world.



Cultural problems in translation are thus unavoidable but not impossible. They demand awareness, sensitivity, and skill on the part of the translator. Training in cultural competence, along with linguistic proficiency, is essential for effective translation. It must be seen as a collaborative process involving readers, editors, and cultural consultants when necessary. As the world becomes more interconnected, the role of the translator as a cultural bridge-builder becomes increasingly essential. A successful translation is not one that erases difference but one that negotiates it with respect and clarity.

Cultural problems in translation focus on the complexities of transferring meaning across linguistic and cultural bounds. These challenges range from untranslatable idioms and culturally-specific terms to deeply rooted religious, historical, and social references. Successful translation requires more than linguistic fluency; it demands cultural intelligence, empathy, and creativity. A translator must serve as both a linguistic expert and a cultural mediator, capable of navigating the subtleties and nuances of both the source and target cultures. As translation continues to play a critical role in global communication, literature, diplomacy, and business, addressing its cultural dimensions becomes ever more important. Embracing cultural differences rather than erasing them improve the translation process and fosters greater intercultural understanding. Ultimately, acknowledging and addressing cultural problems in translation not only enhances textual loyalty but also deepens the connection between diverse peoples and attitudes.

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