

THE CONCEPT AND CLASSIFICATION OF NATIONALLY AND CULTURALLY SPECIFIC UNITS

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Abstract: Nationally and culturally specific units (NCSUs), sometimes called *realia*, represent lexical and semantic items deeply embedded in the sociocultural fabric of a community. They include references to material culture, institutions, traditions, and phenomena that often lack direct equivalents in other languages. The translation and study of such units have attracted scholarly attention because they reveal how language mediates cultural identity. This thesis explores the conceptual foundations of NCSUs, reviews major classifications, and evaluates their implications for translation studies. By synthesizing theoretical frameworks and practical typologies, the paper argues that understanding NCSUs is essential not only for accurate translation but also for intercultural communication and cultural preservation.

Introduction

Language is not a neutral vehicle of communication; it is a repository of culture. Within each language, certain words and expressions are tied so closely to the historical, social, and cultural realities of their community that they resist direct transfer into another language. These are referred to as nationally and culturally specific units (NCSUs).

The problem arises most acutely in translation: how can a translator render terms like *samovar*, *polder*, *Thanksgiving*, or *kimono* in ways that preserve their cultural weight while ensuring comprehension? Scholars across linguistics and translation studies have sought to define, classify, and propose strategies for handling NCSUs.

This thesis examines (1) the concept of nationally and culturally specific units, (2) their major classifications, and (3) their implications for translation theory and practice. The guiding assumption is that NCSUs are not merely linguistic oddities but essential elements of cultural identity and global communication.

Literature Review

1. The Concept of Nationally and Culturally Specific Units

The term NCSUs overlaps with several related concepts in translation studies: **realia** (Vlahov & Florin, 1980/2012), **culture-bound terms** (Newmark, 1988), and

extralinguistic references (Baker, 2018). Vlahov and Florin (2012) defined *realia* as words and expressions designating objects and phenomena characteristic of the life, culture, or history of a people, which thus require special translation strategies.

Newmark (1988) emphasized that such terms “have no equivalents in the target language” and pose translation challenges, especially when embedded in culturally dense texts like literature or tourism discourse. Baker (2018) situates them within the broader field of *culture-specific references*, underscoring their role in intercultural mediation.

In all cases, the concept highlights **the inseparability of language and culture**. NCSUs embody traditions, customs, and collective memory, making them vital not only for translation but also for cultural studies.

2. Classification Approaches

Scholars have offered various systems for categorizing NCSUs:

- Vlahov & Florin (1980/2012): Divide *realia* into geographical, ethnographic, and sociopolitical categories.
- Newmark (1988): Classifies culture-bound terms into ecology, material culture, social culture, organizations/institutions, customs/ideas, and gestures/habits.
- Grit (2004): Adds strategies for dealing with culture-specific units, such as transliteration, descriptive equivalents, and cultural substitution.
- Baker (2018): Highlights the functional role of NCSUs, suggesting classification by semantic domain and context of use.

Though differing in terminology, all systems underscore that NCSUs are multidimensional: they can refer to tangible objects (e.g., clothing, food), abstract concepts (e.g., social institutions), or even fictional constructs (*hobbits*, *muggles*).

Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative, literature-based approach**. Primary theoretical works (Vlahov & Florin, Newmark, Venuti, Vermeer) and recent empirical studies (Forum for Linguistic Studies, 2024; Khachatryan, 2024) were reviewed. Comparative analysis was used to synthesize multiple classification systems and highlight their similarities and divergences. This method is suitable because the goal is conceptual clarification rather than experimental testing.

Findings

1. Conceptual Features of NCSUs

- They are **lexical gaps** in the target language.
- They are **culturally marked**, tied to unique practices or contexts.
- They serve as **identity markers**, preserving cultural heritage.
- They often require **context-dependent interpretation** in translation.

2. Classifications Consolidated

Based on synthesis, NCSUs can be grouped as follows:

1. **Geographical Units** – natural phenomena, place names (*fjord, steppe*).
2. **Material Culture** – food, clothing, architecture (*kimono, tapas, yurt*).
3. **Social Institutions** – political/legal/educational entities (*parliament, duma*).
4. **Religious/Ideological Units** – rituals, beliefs (*Ramadan, bar mitzvah*).
5. **Customs and Traditions** – holidays, ceremonies (*Thanksgiving, Holi*).
6. **Fictional/Irrealia** – invented cultural references in literature/film (*hobbit, Jedi*).

Discussion

The classification of NCSUs is not merely taxonomic; it has practical and ethical implications.

1. Translation Practice

Translators must choose between **domestication** (adapting units into familiar equivalents) and **foreignization** (retaining their cultural distinctiveness) (Venuti, 1995). For instance, rendering *kimono* as “robe” makes it accessible but erases cultural specificity.

2. Intercultural Communication

NCSUs reflect cultural values and worldviews. Misrepresentation can distort intercultural understanding. For example, simplifying *Ramadan* to “fasting month” loses its spiritual dimensions.

3. Pedagogical Relevance

Teaching translators about NCSUs fosters not only linguistic skill but also **cultural sensitivity**. This aligns with Skopos theory, which emphasizes purpose and audience (Vermeer, 1989).

4. Ethical Dimensions

Choices in handling NCSUs can perpetuate or challenge cultural hierarchies. Venuti (1995) argues for foreignization as a way to resist linguistic imperialism.

5. Technology and Future Trends

Machine translation often mishandles NCSUs, defaulting to literal renderings. This highlights the continuing importance of **human translators** as cultural mediators.

Conclusion

Nationally and culturally specific units embody the intimate relationship between language and culture. Their study reveals how communities encode identity, history, and tradition into words. While classifications vary, most agree that NCSUs fall into categories of geography, material culture, institutions, customs, and fictional constructs.

For translation, these units present both **challenge and opportunity**: challenge because they resist easy equivalence, and opportunity because they enrich cross-

cultural communication. Ultimately, the handling of NCSUs is not only a linguistic task but a cultural responsibility.

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