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CULTURE-SPECIFIC ITEMS IN HUMOROUS LITERATURE: TRANSLATION STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

Abstract

Humorous literature presents one of the greatest challenges in literary translation due to the close relationship between humor and culture. Culture-Specific Items (CSIs), including idioms, proper names, historical references, dialects, customs, and wordplay, often carry meanings deeply embedded in the source culture, making them difficult to reproduce in the target language. This article examines the translation of culture-specific items in humorous literature and the challenges they create for translators. It focuses on cultural references, idioms, food, customs, social practices, and culturally marked expressions that carry both humorous and cultural meanings. The study analyzes major translation strategies, including preservation, substitution, adaptation, explicitation, and omission. The findings show that effective translation requires a balance between cultural accuracy and humorous effect. The study concludes that context-sensitive and pragmatic strategies are essential for preserving both the cultural identity and comic function of the source text.

Keywords: humorous literature, culture-specific items, literary translation, humor translation, translation strategies, domestication, foreignization, cultural adaptation.

HAJVIY ASARLARDA MILLIY-MADANIY BIRLIKLAR: TARJIMA MUAMMOLARI VA STRATEGIYALARI

Annotatsiya

Hajviy adabiyot hazil va madaniyat o'rtasidagi uzviy bog'liqlik sababli badiiy tarjimaning eng murakkab yo'nalishlaridan biridir. Madaniy o'ziga xos birliklar (Culture-Specific Items — CSIs), jumladan, idiomalar, atoqli otlar, tarixiy ma'lumotlar, shevalar, urf-odatlar va so'z o'yinlari ko'pincha manba madaniyatiga chuqur singib ketgan ma'nolarni ifodalaydi va shu bois ularni tarjima tilida to'laqonli qayta yaratish qiyin. Mazkur maqolada hajviy adabiyotdagi madaniy o'ziga xos birliklarning tarjimasi hamda ularni tarjima qilish jarayonida yuzaga keladigan muammolar tadqiq etiladi. Unda madaniy va hajviy ma'nolarni birgalikda ifodalovchi madaniy referenslar, idiomalar, oziq-ovqat nomlari, urf-odatlar, ijtimoiy amaliyotlar va madaniy jihatdan belgilangan ifodalar tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda saqlab qolish, almashtirish, moslashtirish,

eksplitsitatsiya va tushirib qoldirish kabi asosiy tarjima strategiyalari ko'rib chiqiladi. Tadqiqot natijalari samarali tarjima madaniy aniqlik va hajviy ta'sir o'rtasidagi muvozanatni ta'minlashni talab qilishini ko'rsatadi. Xulosa sifatida, manba matnning madaniy o'ziga xosligi va komik funksiyasini saqlab qolishda kontekstga yo'naltirilgan hamda pragmatik strategiyalar muhim ahamiyatga ega ekanligi aniqlanadi.

Kalit so'zlar: madaniy o'ziga xos birliklar, hajviy adabiyot, badiiy tarjima, tarjima strategiyalari, madaniy moslashtirish, yumor, pragmatika, ekvivalentlik.

КУЛЬТУРНО-СПЕЦИФИЧЕСКИЕ ЕДИНИЦЫ В ЮМОРИСТИЧЕСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ: СТРАТЕГИИ И ПРОБЛЕМЫ ПЕРЕВОДА

Аннотация

Юмористическая литература представляет собой одну из наиболее сложных областей художественного перевода вследствие тесной взаимосвязи между юмором и культурой. Культурно-специфические единицы (Culture-Specific Items — CSIs), включая идиомы, имена собственные, исторические реалии, диалектизмы, обычаи и языковую игру, часто передают значения, глубоко укоренённые в исходной культуре, что затрудняет их полноценную передачу на языке перевода. В статье исследуется перевод культурно-специфических единиц в юмористической литературе и анализируются трудности, возникающие в процессе их передачи. Особое внимание уделяется культурным реалиям, идиомам, названиям блюд и продуктов питания, обычаям, социальным практикам и культурно маркированным выражениям, которые одновременно выполняют юмористическую и культурную функции. В исследовании рассматриваются основные переводческие стратегии, включая сохранение, замену, адаптацию, экспликацию и опущение. Результаты исследования показывают, что эффективный перевод требует достижения баланса между культурной точностью и юмористическим эффектом. В заключение отмечается, что контекстно обусловленные и прагматические стратегии имеют ключевое значение для сохранения как культурной идентичности, так и комической функции исходного текста.

Ключевые слова: культурно-специфические единицы, юмористическая литература, художественный перевод, переводческие стратегии, культурная адаптация, юмор, прагматика, эквивалентность.

INTRODUCTION

Literary translation involves much more than transferring words and grammatical structures from one language into another. A literary text is closely connected with the cultural, historical, social, and communicative

context in which it is produced. This becomes particularly significant in humorous literature, where the comic effect often depends on culturally specific knowledge shared by the author and the intended readership. When such cultural elements are transferred into

another language, translators face the complex task of preserving not only the semantic content but also the humorous effect, pragmatic intention, and cultural associations of the original.

The relationship between language and culture has long been recognized as a fundamental issue in translation studies. Jakobson [1] argues that translation is not restricted to correspondence between individual words but involves the interpretation of verbal signs through other verbal signs. From this perspective, translation may be regarded as an act of interpretation in which linguistic meaning is reconstructed within another semiotic and cultural system.

Nida [2] developed this idea further through his distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence. According to Nida, successful translation should aim to produce a response in the target audience that is comparable, as far as possible, to the response produced by the original text in its source audience. This principle is especially relevant to humor because a formally accurate translation may nevertheless fail to make the target reader laugh or recognize the intended irony.

Culture-specific items (CSIs) are linguistic and cultural elements that are closely associated with a particular society and may not have direct equivalents in another language. They can include personal and geographical names, traditional foods, clothing, customs, forms of address, social institutions, historical references, idioms,

proverbs, religious expressions, and culturally determined patterns of behavior. Their translation is particularly challenging because their meaning frequently extends beyond the dictionary definition of the word or expression.

The concept of culture-specific items has been approached through various terminological frameworks. Newmark [3] uses the term “cultural words” to refer to expressions associated with particular cultural environments. Nord [4], in turn, emphasizes the concept of “cultureme,” referring to culturally conditioned verbal and non-verbal phenomena that may create difficulties in intercultural communication. Leppihalme [5] discusses “culture-bound elements” and emphasizes their potential to create communication barriers between source-language and target-language readers.

Aixelá [6] provides one of the most influential approaches to the concept of culture-specific items. He views CSIs as dynamic phenomena that emerge from the conflict or difference between two cultural systems during translation. Consequently, an item is not inherently “culture-specific” in isolation; rather, its cultural specificity becomes particularly visible when it is transferred into another cultural environment. This contextual understanding is especially useful for literary humor, where an apparently ordinary lexical unit may acquire a humorous or ironic function because of its cultural associations. Aixelá's model distinguishes between conservation and

substitution strategies and provides a detailed taxonomy of procedures for handling CSIs.

In humorous literature, the problem is even more complex. Humor is frequently constructed through cultural stereotypes, allusions, wordplay, idiomatic expressions, social conventions, and references to everyday life. A reader who does not possess the necessary cultural background may fail to understand the joke or interpret it differently. Consequently, a literal translation may preserve the lexical meaning while destroying the humorous effect.

Attardo [7], drawing on the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), demonstrates that humor can be analyzed through several interacting knowledge resources. These include language, narrative strategy, target, situation, logical mechanism, and script opposition. This perspective is particularly valuable for translation because the humorous effect may depend on more than one linguistic component. A translator may therefore need to reconstruct the relationship between several humorous mechanisms rather than simply translate the individual words that constitute the joke. Attardo's work has explicitly applied GTVH to the problem of humor translation.

Delabastita [8] likewise emphasizes the importance of wordplay in translation and demonstrates that linguistic humor often depends on the interaction between different meanings and forms. In such cases, formal equivalence may be impossible, requiring

the translator to employ creative reformulation, substitution, compensation, or other strategies.

Translation scholars have proposed different approaches to the problem of cultural transfer. Nida emphasizes the importance of achieving an equivalent effect on the target audience, while Newmark distinguishes between communicative and semantic approaches to translation. Baker discusses translation at different linguistic levels and emphasizes the importance of context in achieving equivalence. Venuti draws attention to the relationship between domestication and foreignization, which are particularly relevant when translating culturally marked expressions.

Within translation studies, culture-specific items have also been examined in relation to adaptation, substitution, explicitation, omission, and preservation. These strategies demonstrate that the translator's task is not simply to identify a linguistic equivalent but to determine how a cultural element functions within the literary context.

METHODS

The study employs a qualitative descriptive and comparative approach based on principles of literary translation, comparative linguistics, cultural linguistics, and pragmatics. The methodological framework combines linguistic, cultural, contextual, and pragmatic analysis.

The research focuses on culture-specific elements occurring in

humorous literary texts and their translations. Particular attention is given to items whose meanings are determined by cultural knowledge rather than by linguistic structure alone.

The methodological approach is informed by several major theoretical traditions. Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence [2] provides a reader-oriented perspective; Newmark's distinction between semantic and communicative translation [3] helps distinguish between formal-cultural fidelity and target-reader accessibility; Venuti's theory of domestication and foreignization [9] provides a framework for analyzing cultural orientation; Aixelá's taxonomy [6] provides specific procedures for dealing with CSIs; and Attardo's theory of verbal humor [7] helps explain the internal structure of humorous discourse.

Pedersen [10] emphasizes that extralinguistic cultural references constitute a particular translation problem because they refer to phenomena outside the linguistic system itself. His model is especially useful for identifying cultural references and examining the strategies used to transfer them. Pedersen's research specifically develops a model for investigating extralinguistic cultural references as translation problems.

The analysis follows four principal stages.

Stage 1: Identification of culture-specific items

First, culture-specific items are identified in the source texts. The items

are classified according to their cultural function, including:

- proper names and geographical references;
- food and traditional dishes;
- clothing and material culture;
- customs and traditions;
- social institutions and practices;
- idioms and proverbs;
- forms of address;
- historical and cultural references;
- culturally specific humor and stereotypes;
- culturally marked metaphors and comparisons;
- allusions and popular-cultural references;
- wordplay based on cultural knowledge.

Stage 2: Contextual and pragmatic analysis

Second, each item is examined within its textual and pragmatic context. This stage is important because the same cultural expression may perform different functions depending on the surrounding narrative situation.

For example, a form of address may simply identify a social relationship in one context but may become humorous when it conflicts with the character's social status or behavior. Similarly, an idiom may function as a neutral expression in one context and as an ironic or sarcastic device in another.

House [11] emphasizes that translation quality cannot be determined solely by comparison of isolated linguistic units. The relationship

between the source text, target text, communicative function, and contextual situation must also be considered.

Stage 3: Identification of translation strategies

Third, the translation solution is analyzed according to the strategy applied by the translator.

The study considers the following strategies:

1. **Preservation** – retaining the original culture-specific element in the target text.
2. **Literal translation** – transferring the lexical structure of the source expression as closely as possible.
3. **Substitution** – replacing a source-culture item with another element that is more familiar to target readers.
4. **Cultural adaptation** – modifying the original reference to make it understandable within the target cultural environment.
5. **Explication** – adding information that is implicit in the source text.
6. **Generalization** – replacing a culturally specific item with a broader or less specific expression.
7. **Omission** – removing an element when its preservation is considered unnecessary or difficult.
8. **Compensation** – reproducing a lost cultural or humorous effect elsewhere in the target text.

These procedures correspond in different ways to the strategies proposed by Aixelá [6], who distinguishes conservation-oriented procedures from substitution-oriented procedures. His taxonomy includes repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic translation, intra-textual and extra-textual glosses, synonymy, universalization, naturalization, deletion, and autonomous creation.

Stage 4: Evaluation

Finally, the translation is evaluated from three perspectives:

- semantic accuracy;
- cultural representation;
- humorous effect.

An additional pragmatic criterion is also proposed:

- communicative accessibility.

Thus, a translation may be considered successful when it preserves the most important functional properties of the source item even when formal correspondence is not possible.

RESULTS

The analysis demonstrates that culture-specific items constitute one of the most challenging components of humorous literary translation. Their difficulty results from the interaction of linguistic meaning, cultural knowledge, pragmatic intention, and comic function.

The findings indicate that culture-specific items in humorous literature can generally be divided into three functional categories:

1. culturally informative items;
2. culturally humorous items;
3. culturally symbolic items;
4. culturally pragmatic items.

Culturally informative items

primarily provide information about the social and material environment of the source culture. Food names, clothing, traditional celebrations, social institutions, and forms of address belong to this category.

Their primary function is not necessarily to create humor. However, they contribute to the cultural atmosphere of the text. Removing such elements may make the translation fluent but culturally impoverished.

Katan [12] argues that translators work between cultural frames rather than merely between linguistic systems. Therefore, understanding the cultural context is a prerequisite for making appropriate translation decisions.

Culturally humorous items

contribute directly to the creation of humor. They may involve culturally specific idioms, stereotypes, allusions, wordplay, forms of politeness, or references to social behavior. These items are especially difficult to translate because their humorous effect may disappear if the cultural context is unfamiliar to target readers.

Attardo's [7] approach is particularly relevant here because humor is not always located in a single lexical item. It may arise from a combination of linguistic form, situation, cultural script, logical mechanism, and narrative

context. Therefore, the translator should identify the underlying humorous mechanism before selecting a translation strategy.

Culturally symbolic items may have meanings that extend beyond their immediate lexical meaning. A particular object, place, historical figure, or social practice may evoke associations that are immediately recognized by source-language readers but remain obscure to target readers. The analysis also demonstrates that preservation is particularly useful when the cultural identity of an item is important to the literary setting. However, preservation alone may not be sufficient if the target audience lacks the cultural knowledge necessary for interpretation.

Bhabha [13] views culture as a dynamic and hybrid space in which meanings are continuously negotiated. From this perspective, translation does not simply transfer a fixed cultural meaning; it reconstructs cultural meaning in another semiotic environment.

Culturally pragmatic items derive their meaning from the social relationship between participants. These include honorifics, forms of address, politeness formulas, insults, euphemisms, and culturally determined patterns of interaction.

A translator who transfers only the dictionary meaning of such an expression may fail to reproduce its pragmatic force.

Nord [4] emphasizes the importance of function and communicative purpose in translation. The

translator must therefore consider what the cultural item is intended to accomplish within the communicative situation.

Explicitation can solve this problem by providing additional contextual information. It is especially useful when the culture-specific item is essential to understanding a humorous situation. However, excessive explanation may interrupt the rhythm of the narrative and weaken the comic effect.

Substitution and adaptation are effective when the primary objective is to reproduce the humorous response of the original audience. By replacing an unfamiliar cultural reference with a

functionally similar target-culture element, the translator can make the humor more accessible. Nevertheless, this strategy may reduce the cultural specificity of the source text.

Generalization is useful when the exact cultural reference is less important than the general meaning. However, it can lead to cultural neutralization if applied excessively.

Omission is the least desirable strategy when a culture-specific element is central to the humorous effect. Removing such an element may result in the loss of both cultural information and humor.

The findings can be summarized as follows:

Table.1

Translation strategy	Main function	Potential advantage	Main limitation
Preservation	Retains source culture	Maintains cultural identity	May be difficult to understand
Literal translation	Maintains lexical structure	Semantic closeness	May sound unnatural or non-humorous
Substitution	Replaces unfamiliar reference	Improves accessibility	May reduce cultural authenticity
Adaptation	Adjusts cultural reference	Preserves communicative effect	May alter the original context
Explicitation	Adds cultural information	Improves comprehension	May weaken comic rhythm
Generalization	Broadens meaning	Avoids misunderstanding	Reduces cultural specificity
Omission	Removes problematic item	Produces fluent text	May eliminate humor

Compression	Recreates lost effect elsewhere	Preserves overall humorous function	Requires considerable translator creativity
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One of the most significant findings is that no single translation strategy is universally effective. The choice depends on the function of the culture-specific item, the genre of humor, the intended readership, and the degree of cultural distance between the source and target communities.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the translation of culture-specific items in humorous literature should be understood as an intercultural and pragmatic process rather than as a purely linguistic operation.

The translator functions as a cultural mediator who must negotiate between:

1. the source culture;
2. the target culture;
3. the author's communicative intention;
4. the literary context;
5. the target readership;
6. the humorous mechanism.

This understanding is consistent with Katan's [12] conception of the translator as a mediator between cultural systems.

The translator functions as a cultural mediator who must negotiate between the source culture, the target culture, the author's intention, and the expectations of the target readership.

The results support Nida's [2] concept of dynamic equivalence, according to which translation should seek to produce a comparable response in the target audience. In humorous literature, this principle is particularly important because the successful translation of a joke cannot be evaluated exclusively according to lexical accuracy.

The findings are also consistent with Venuti's [9] discussion of domestication and foreignization. Preservation and literal translation generally move toward foreignization because they maintain elements of the source culture. Adaptation and substitution, in contrast, tend toward domestication by making cultural references more familiar to target readers.

However, the present analysis suggests that a strict binary between domestication and foreignization is insufficient for humorous literary translation. A translator may preserve a proper name, adapt an idiom, explain a historical reference, and compensate for lost wordplay within the same text.

House's [11] functional approach to translation quality further supports this view. Translation quality should be evaluated according to whether the target text fulfills an appropriate communicative function in relation to the source text.

Pedersen's [10] work on extralinguistic cultural references also demonstrates the importance of examining how cultural references are transferred and what parameters influence the translator's choice. His research offers a systematic framework for analyzing cultural references as translation problems.

Another important issue is the role of shared cultural knowledge. Source readers often recognize historical, social, or popular-cultural references automatically, whereas target readers may require additional contextual information.

The translator must determine whether such information should be incorporated into the text, transferred through a footnote, or replaced by a more accessible cultural reference.

The study suggests that the translation of humorous literature should follow a functional-pragmatic principle. Under this principle, the translator first determines what the culture-specific item does in the source text and then selects a strategy that reproduces its most important function in the target text.

For instance, if the primary function is cultural characterization, preservation may be preferable. If the main function is humor, substitution or adaptation may be more effective. If comprehension is essential but the cultural element cannot be replaced, explicitation may be appropriate. When a humorous effect cannot be reproduced

directly, compensation may provide a solution.

Thus, translation quality should not be measured exclusively by formal similarity between source and target expressions. It should also be evaluated according to whether the target text preserves the cultural, pragmatic, stylistic, and humorous functions of the original.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that culture-specific items represent a significant challenge in the translation of humorous literature because they simultaneously encode linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, and comic meanings. Their translation requires more than direct lexical substitution; it requires careful interpretation of cultural context and communicative purpose.

The analysis of major translation theories demonstrates that culture-specific items have been conceptualized from different perspectives. Nida emphasizes receptor response and dynamic equivalence; Newmark distinguishes semantic and communicative translation; Venuti examines domestication and foreignization; Aixelá provides a detailed taxonomy of CSI translation strategies; Leppihalme focuses on culture-bound allusions; Pedersen develops a framework for extralinguistic cultural references; and Attardo provides a theoretical basis for analyzing humor and its translation.

The findings show that preservation, substitution, adaptation,

explicitation, generalization, omission, and compensation can all be useful depending on the specific context. However, no single strategy is universally effective.

The most productive approach is therefore a functional-pragmatic approach in which the translator first identifies the function of the culture-specific item and then selects an appropriate strategy.

A successful translation should preserve a reasonable balance between cultural fidelity and target-reader accessibility. Excessive domestication may erase the cultural identity of the source text, while excessive foreignization may make the humorous text inaccessible to target readers.

Ultimately, the translation of humor should preserve not only what the source text says, but also why it is humorous, what cultural knowledge it presupposes, and what communicative effect it seeks to produce.

This principle is particularly important for literary works in which humor functions as a means of representing national identity, social values, traditions, cultural attitudes, and interpersonal relationships. The translator's role in such cases extends beyond linguistic mediation: the translator becomes an intercultural mediator and creative re-constructor of humorous meaning.

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