TRANSLATING CULTURE-SPECIFIC ELEMENTS IN LITERARY TEXTS: DOMESTICATION AND FOREIGNIZATION

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Abstract

Culture-specific elements constitute one of the most challenging aspects of literary translation because they encode meanings associated with particular historical, social, geographical, and cultural environments. Translators must determine whether such elements should be adapted to the target culture or retained in a form that preserves their foreign cultural identity. This issue is traditionally discussed through the concepts of domestication and foreignization. The present study examines these two strategies in literary translation and investigates their influence on cultural representation, readability, and preservation of cultural identity. A qualitative analytical methodology is employed, drawing on translation theory and comparative analysis of culture-specific translation practices. The study demonstrates that domestication can improve accessibility for target readers but may reduce the visibility of the source culture. Foreignization can preserve cultural specificity and encourage readers to encounter unfamiliar cultural concepts, although excessive foreignization may create comprehension difficulties. The findings suggest that neither strategy functions as a universally appropriate solution. Effective translation requires context-sensitive decision-making based on genre, audience, narrative purpose, and the cultural significance of the source element.

Keywords: literary translation, culture-specific elements, domestication, foreignization, cultural identity, translation strategy, cultural representation.

Introduction. Translation is not only an act of transferring linguistic structures from one language into another. It is also a process of transferring cultural meanings. This becomes especially evident in literary texts, where cultural references frequently contribute to characterization, atmosphere, symbolism, historical representation, and narrative authenticity.

Culture-specific elements may include traditional food, clothing, religious references, historical events, geographical names, social institutions, forms of address, personal names, idiomatic expressions, festivals, material objects, and culturally embedded concepts. Such elements often have no exact equivalent in another language.

The translator must consequently decide how much of the source culture should remain visible in the target text. Two influential strategies in translation theory are domestication and foreignization. Domestication adapts the source text to conventions and expectations familiar to target readers. Foreignization maintains features of the source culture and makes its cultural difference more visible.

The objective of this study is to analyze the relationship between domestication and foreignization in literary translation and to examine their consequences for cultural identity, readability, and representation.

The study uses qualitative comparative analysis. Translation theory concerning cultural transfer, literary translation, domestication, and foreignization was examined alongside examples of common culture-specific categories.

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The analytical framework includes:

- material culture;
- social institutions;
- food and traditional practices;
- historical and geographical references;
- idiomatic and figurative expressions;
- forms of address;
- culturally specific symbolism.

Each category is considered in relation to the two principal strategies. The analysis evaluates how different choices may affect accessibility, cultural visibility, semantic precision, and literary authenticity.

The study does not assume that one strategy is inherently appropriate for every context. Instead, it considers translation strategy as a context-dependent decision.

Culture-Specific Elements as Carriers of Meaning

A culture-specific expression often communicates more than its dictionary definition. For example, a traditional item of food may simultaneously indicate geographical origin, social status, family traditions, or historical context.

Similarly, forms of address can communicate relationships between characters. A particular title may indicate age, social hierarchy, professional position, intimacy, or respect. Replacing such a term with an ordinary target-language equivalent may preserve basic reference while removing important interpersonal information.

Consequently, culture-specific elements should be analyzed according to their function within the literary text rather than treated as isolated vocabulary.

Domestication

Domestication seeks to make a translated text relatively natural and accessible to target readers. The translator may replace an unfamiliar cultural reference with a more recognizable equivalent or explain an unfamiliar concept in a way that conforms to target-language expectations.

The major advantage of domestication is readability. Readers can understand the narrative without having to stop frequently to interpret unfamiliar cultural references.

Domestication can be particularly effective when cultural specificity is secondary to narrative progression. In popular fiction, for example, excessive explanation of minor cultural references may interrupt the rhythm of the narrative.

However, domestication also creates a potential problem: cultural difference can become less visible. If a source-specific object or practice is systematically replaced by a familiar target-culture equivalent, readers may receive an altered representation of the fictional world.

Foreignization

Foreignization preserves elements that signal the cultural origin of the source text. Instead of eliminating unfamiliarity, the strategy allows target readers to encounter linguistic and cultural features that originate outside their own cultural environment.

Foreignization can contribute significantly to cultural preservation. Proper names, traditional terms, historical references, and culturally specific objects may remain visible in the translation, sometimes accompanied by contextual clarification.

This strategy can also produce an important literary effect. A foreign term may contribute to the atmosphere of a novel by reminding readers that the narrative takes place within a particular cultural environment.

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Nevertheless, excessive foreignization can reduce accessibility. If a literary text contains a large number of unexplained expressions, readers unfamiliar with the source culture may struggle to understand the narrative.

Comparative Effects

Aspect	Domestication	Foreignization
Readability	Generally increases	May decrease
Cultural visibility	May decrease	Generally increases
Familiarity	High	Lower
Source-culture specificity	May be reduced	Generally preserved
Need for explanation	Often lower	May be higher
Cultural distance	Reduced	Maintained
Literary atmosphere	May become more familiar	Can preserve cultural atmosphere

The comparison demonstrates that the choice between the two strategies involves competing considerations. Readability and cultural preservation do not always develop in the same direction.

The Role of the Translator

The translator acts as a cultural mediator between the source and target communities. This role requires more than bilingual competence. The translator must recognize culturally embedded meanings and determine how they contribute to the literary function of a passage.

An effective translator may also combine strategies. A culturally specific term can be retained in its original form while its meaning is clarified through context. In other cases, a familiar target-language expression may be used while preserving an important cultural feature elsewhere in the sentence.

Such mixed strategies demonstrate that domestication and foreignization should not always be understood as rigid alternatives. Literary translation often requires a flexible continuum of choices.

Conclusion. Culture-specific elements are fundamental to the representation of literary worlds. Their translation affects not only comprehension but also the visibility of cultural identity.

Domestication may improve accessibility and fluency, whereas foreignization can preserve cultural difference and source-text specificity. Both strategies therefore provide valuable possibilities, but both also involve potential losses.

The analysis indicates that translation decisions should be determined by the function of the cultural element, the literary genre, the intended audience, and the author's cultural representation. The translator should avoid mechanically domesticating or foreignizing every culture-specific element.

A context-sensitive approach allows literary translation to balance readability with cultural preservation. In this sense, the translator functions not simply as a linguistic intermediary but as a mediator of cultural meaning.

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