

CHALLENGES OF ADAPTING CULTURAL REALIA IN LITERARY TRANSLATION

Akhmadaliyeva Rukhshona Mukhammadjonovna

Fourth-year student, Faculty of Philology, Moscow State University Branch in Tashkent

rukhshonaahmadaliyeva@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines the challenge of rendering cultural realia in literary translation, arguing that such items are not merely lexical curiosities but condensed carriers of cultural meaning that require careful interpretative work. Cultural realia—names for foods, holidays, institutions, artefacts, social practices and idiomatic expressions that are specific to a given culture—frequently lack straightforward equivalents in a target language, which forces the translator to weigh competing priorities: fidelity to the source culture, clarity for the target reader, and maintenance of the original’s aesthetic effect. Drawing on established theorists in translation studies, the paper outlines the principal strategies used to treat realia (transliteration, calquing, descriptive rendering, functional substitution and hybrid solutions) and demonstrates their application and limits through a range of lived examples. Special attention is paid to idioms and phrasal verbs, which behave like cultural realia because their meanings cannot be deduced from component parts and because they index cultural assumptions. The discussion shows that literal renderings of such items often distort meaning and that effective translation therefore relies on culturally informed functional equivalents. The conclusion emphasizes the translator’s role as cultural mediator and calls for continued research into how globalization and digital communication are reshaping the reception and stabilization of realia in target cultures.

Keywords: cultural realia, literary translation, intercultural mediation, translation strategies, idioms, phrasal verbs, cultural context.

Over the past decades the translation of literature has become a focal point for debates about cultural contact and representation. As books travel more readily across linguistic borders, translators increasingly encounter lexical units whose communicative force depends on reference to a particular cultural world. Scholars have long treated such units—often referred to as realia—as belonging to the class of non-equivalent vocabulary and have insisted that their treatment must account for both denotation and connotation (Vlahov & Florin, 1980). Realia include a wide range of phenomena: domestic items and foods, religious rites and holidays, administrative or social institutions, place-names and local toponyms, and entrenched idiomatic phrases. The double function of realia—naming an object and evoking cultural associations—makes their translation a task that is as much cultural as it is linguistic.

Translation theory offers a variety of principled responses to the problem of realia. Some scholars stress preservation of foreignness in order to retain cultural specificity, while others prioritize intelligibility for the receiving audience (Komissarov, 1990; Barkhudarov, 1975). Vlahov and Florin (1980) underline that realia frequently carry national and historical colouring, and their loss can flatten the textual world; Garbovsky (2004) highlights the translator’s role as a mediator between cultural horizons; Newmark (1988) recommends pragmatic, context-sensitive choices, often favouring functional analogues when they conserve the communicative impact. From these perspectives, there is no single correct procedure: strategies must be chosen in relation to genre, intended readership and the function that a given realia plays in the source text.

Among the techniques available, transliteration (or transcription) preserves the source-form of a term, enabling the reader to perceive a foreign element directly. This choice is common for items

such as Navruz or mahalla, where preserving the original name signals cultural specificity; however, without additional context such preservation can leave readers puzzled.

Calquing—rendering a compound by literal structural transfer, as with skyscraper → «небоскрёб»—can succeed where semantic transparency helps, but may strip away cultural nuance. Descriptive rendering replaces the term with a brief explanatory phrase; while this guarantees comprehension, it risks breaking the narrative rhythm. Functional substitution replaces the source item with a culturally proximate target-language item (pub → «паб»/«пивная»), thereby facilitating immediate understanding, yet sometimes at the cost of erasing distinctive cultural meaning. In practice translators often adopt a mixed approach: an initial transliteration with a parenthetical gloss, followed by a simplified target form in subsequent mentions, which balances authenticity and readability.

The practical stakes of these choices become clear when we consider everyday examples that recur in translation practice. Food names are instructive: the Uzbek plov (often rendered as plov, palov or pilaf) exemplifies how a culinary term can signify social rituals and hospitality beyond its ingredients; rendering it as the generic pilaf risks losing that specificity. Conversely, items that have been globalized, such as sushi or karaoke, have passed into many target-language repertoires and may no longer require explanation. Holidays and social institutions pose similar dilemmas. Navruz is usually left untranslated in English-language renderings but accompanied by a brief contextual gloss (Navruz, the spring festival); Thanksgiving in contemporary Russian contexts can often appear without comment, yet historically required descriptive annotation. Place-specific terms such as London's Tube are often translated as «лондонское метро» to conserve both referential clarity and cultural colour.

If culinary and institutional realia highlight a pragmatic spectrum, idioms and phrasal verbs exemplify the intensity of the problem: their meanings cannot be assembled compositionally, and the literal equivalents are frequently misleading. Consider the idiom peace of mind, whose literal rendering as «мир разума» would be misleading; its pragmatic import is best captured in Russian as «душевное спокойствие» or «внутреннее спокойствие». Keep an open mind, if translated word-for-word as «держат открытым ум», fails to convey the idiom's pragmatic meaning of being receptive or non-prejudiced; a better Russian equivalent would be «быть непредвзятым» or «сохранять открытость к новым идеям». Make up (your) mind literally suggests an impossible cognitive assembly, yet its idiomatic force—deciding—must be conveyed succinctly, for example as «принять решение». Out of (your) mind is another case where literalness would mislead: although the components suggest spatial displacement of the mind, the idiom signifies madness or extreme agitation and should be translated accordingly (e.g. «быть не в своём уме»). In two minds does not point to a bifurcation of intellect but to indecision; a natural target phrasing would be «колебаться» or «быть в нерешительности».

Phrasal verbs reveal related risks. Get on (with) more commonly means to have a good relationship, a sense not captured by a literal translation; fall out (with) means to have a falling-out or quarrel rather than any physical displacement. Get used to (+ -ing) denotes the process of becoming accustomed to something, not a literal acquisition of use, and so requires a paraphrase in the target language that conveys the habituation process. Get down to means to begin a task in earnest and cannot be rendered simply as «спуститься к чему-то». Break up is polysemous and can denote the ending of a romantic relationship or the disbanding of a group; its translation depends on context and often needs disambiguating lexical choices. Put up (with) is idiomatic for tolerating something unpleasant; translating it word-for-word would produce incomprehension.

These items behave as cultural signs because their conventional meanings are shared within the speech community and must be matched by conventional equivalents in the target language, sometimes via native idioms that carry the same pragmatic weight.

The implications of these phenomena for translators are twofold. First, the translator must be attentive to the function of a realia within the text: whether it is merely referential, a stylistic marker, a cue to social identity, or a plot-relevant element. Second, decisions about strategy must also factor in the target audience's probable cultural knowledge and the genre conventions. For example, in a literary novel aiming for ethnographic authenticity, preserving a term with explanatory glosses may be appropriate; in a work intended for a mass market, readers' smooth comprehension may be privileged by using functional equivalents. Translators are thus cultural negotiators, making interpretative choices that shape how the source culture is perceived abroad.

Ultimately the translation of cultural realia is not a matter of algorithmic substitution but of cultural judgment. The stabilization of certain foreign forms in target languages—sushi or karaoke, for instance—illustrates how contact and cultural diffusion can alter the calculus of translation over time. Conversely, deeply embedded social institutions or ritual terms often retain their foreignness and require careful explanatory work. In all cases, the translator's competence must blend linguistic skill with cultural knowledge and sensitivity to literary form. Further research could examine longitudinally how global media and digital platforms accelerate the assimilation of foreign realia into target-language lexicons and thus change the translator's options in future projects.

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