PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS IN LITERARY TRANSLATION: PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE CROSS-LINGUISTIC RENDERING OF FICTION

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Annotation

This article examines the persistent difficulties that arise when literary works are transferred from one language and culture into another, with particular attention to the loss of cultural identity, stylistic nuance, and connotative meaning that often accompanies such transfer. Drawing on established approaches within comparative literary studies and translation theory, the article classifies the main categories of translation loss encountered in fiction — lexical-cultural gaps, idiomatic and phraseological untranslatability, and shifts in narrative voice — and proposes a set of practical strategies that translators can apply to minimize these losses while retaining readability for the target audience. The discussion is framed within the broader context of comparative linguistics and translation studies as an academic discipline, and it argues that a hybrid, context-sensitive methodology, rather than a single universal technique, offers the most reliable path toward faithful literary translation.

Key words: *literary translation, cultural identity, untranslatability, comparative literature, equivalence, domestication, foreignization, translation studies*

Introduction

Literary translation occupies a distinctive place within the wider field of translation studies because it is concerned not merely with the transfer of information but with the recreation of an aesthetic and emotional experience in a new linguistic

environment. Unlike technical or administrative texts, works of fiction carry layers of meaning that are inseparable from the cultural, historical, and social context in which they were produced. When a novel, short story, or poem crosses linguistic borders, the translator is confronted with the task of finding equivalents for elements that frequently have no direct counterpart in the target language — proverbs, culturally specific objects, humor, dialect, and rhetorical devices rooted in the source culture's worldview.

The problem of preserving cultural identity during literary translation has grown more pressing as cross-cultural literary exchange has intensified, and as readers increasingly expect translated works to feel both authentic to their origin and natural in the target language. This tension between fidelity to the source text and readability for the target audience forms the central problem addressed in this article. The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to outline the principal categories of difficulty that translators of fiction routinely encounter, and second, to propose concrete strategies, grounded in comparative linguistic analysis, that can help reconcile the competing demands of accuracy and accessibility.

1. Categories of translation loss in fiction

Difficulties in literary translation can be grouped into three broad categories. The first is lexical-cultural loss, which occurs when a word or phrase in the source language refers to a concept, object, or institution that simply does not exist in the culture of the target language. National cuisines, traditional garments, kinship terms, and region-specific customs fall into this category, and their absence in the target culture forces the translator either to borrow the term, to explain it, or to substitute a rough functional equivalent, each of which carries a different cost to the reading experience.

The second category is idiomatic and phraseological untranslatability. Proverbs, set expressions, and wordplay are constructed from the specific sound patterns,

historical references, or metaphorical associations of the source language, and a literal rendering frequently produces nonsense or unintended humor in the target language. The translator must therefore decide whether to search for a functionally equivalent idiom in the target language, even if its literal imagery differs, or to sacrifice the idiomatic flavor altogether in favor of a plain explanatory paraphrase.

The third category concerns shifts in narrative voice and register. Fiction relies heavily on tone — irony, formality, dialect, and generational or social markers embedded in characters' speech. Languages differ considerably in how they encode politeness, social distance, and regional variation, so a character's distinctive way of speaking in the original may become flattened or altered once rendered into a language with a different sociolinguistic structure.

2. Theoretical frameworks for addressing translation loss

Two broad strategies have traditionally been proposed within translation theory for handling these difficulties: domestication and foreignization. Domestication adapts the source text to the linguistic and cultural expectations of the target readership, prioritizing fluency and familiarity, sometimes at the cost of cultural specificity. Foreignization, in contrast, deliberately retains elements of the source culture, such as untranslated terms or unusual syntactic structures, in order to remind the reader that the text originates from a different cultural context, even if this occasionally produces a less smooth reading experience.

Neither strategy alone is sufficient for the full range of problems a literary translator encounters. Overreliance on domestication risks erasing the very cultural identity that gives a literary work its distinctiveness, while excessive foreignization can alienate readers and obscure meaning rather than illuminate it. Contemporary translation scholarship increasingly favors a selective, context-sensitive combination of both approaches, applied on a case-by-case basis depending on the function of the specific element being translated.

3. Practical strategies for translators

Based on the categories described above, several concrete strategies can help translators reduce cultural and stylistic loss without sacrificing readability. Compensation involves recreating a lost effect elsewhere in the text when it cannot be preserved at the exact point where it occurs in the source, for example by adding humor or rhythm in a nearby passage to offset an untranslatable pun. Annotation and paratextual support, such as translator's notes, glossaries, or introductory commentary, allow culturally specific content to remain intact in the body of the text while still providing readers with the necessary context.

Collaborative and back-translation review, in which a translation is checked against the original by a second bilingual reader or against a back-translation into the source language, helps identify unintended shifts in meaning or tone before publication. Finally, corpus-based comparative analysis, comparing parallel passages across multiple existing translations of the same source text, enables translators to learn from precedent and to identify recurring solutions to recurring problems within a given language pair.

Conclusion

The translation of literary works is inherently a negotiation between two languages, two cultures, and two sets of readerly expectations. The categories of loss identified in this article — lexical-cultural gaps, idiomatic untranslatability, and shifts in narrative voice — are unlikely to disappear entirely from the practice of literary translation, since they stem from the fundamental non-equivalence of languages as systems for encoding culture. However, the strategies discussed here demonstrate that these losses can be substantially mitigated through a flexible, context-sensitive methodology that draws selectively on both domesticating and foreignizing techniques, supported by compensation, annotation, and comparative review. For scholars working within comparative literary studies and translation studies, continued attention to these

questions is essential, not only for improving the quality of individual translations but for deepening the theoretical understanding of how cultural identity survives, and sometimes transforms, in its passage from one language to another.

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