LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING REALIA BETWEEN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN

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Abstract

The translation of realia—culture-specific words and expressions that lack direct equivalents in other languages—represents one of the most complex challenges in intercultural communication. In the context of English and Russian, the problem becomes especially significant due to the cultural, historical, and linguistic differences between the two languages. This paper explores the linguistic and cultural challenges encountered in the process of translating realia, focusing on issues of equivalence, semantic loss, pragmatic adaptation, and cultural connotation. It analyzes the strategies translators employ, such as borrowing, calque, descriptive translation, adaptation, and domestication versus foreignization approaches. Through examples from literature, media, and socio-political texts, the study highlights how translation choices can either preserve cultural uniqueness or adapt terms for better comprehension in the target culture. The findings emphasize that successful translation of realia requires not only linguistic proficiency but also deep cultural awareness, as misinterpretation may distort meaning, reduce authenticity, or create cultural gaps. Ultimately, the study argues that the translator's role is both linguistic and cultural mediation, balancing fidelity to the source text with accessibility for the target audience.

Keywords: Realia, translation challenges, English–Russian translation, cultural adaptation, equivalence, domestication, foreignization, cultural mediation, intercultural communication, descriptive translation.

Introduction

Translation is not merely the act of substituting words from one language to another; rather, it is a complex process of transferring meaning across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Among the many difficulties translators face, one of the most persistent challenges lies in dealing with *realia*. Realia refers to culture-specific words, expressions, or objects that are deeply rooted in the social, historical, and cultural context of a particular community. These terms often carry unique cultural

associations that lack exact equivalents in the target language, making their translation particularly problematic.

In the context of English and Russian translation, the issue of realia occupies an especially prominent place. Both languages reflect distinct cultural heritages, historical experiences, and socio-political systems. English, as a global lingua franca, has absorbed and disseminated a wide range of cultural phenomena from around the world, while Russian, with its own long literary tradition and cultural specificity, preserves expressions that are unique to the Slavic world and post-Soviet space. As a result, translating realia between these languages often requires not only linguistic knowledge but also a profound awareness of cultural nuances.

For instance, terms such as “Thanksgiving” in English or “субботник” in Russian cannot be easily translated through literal substitution. “Thanksgiving” refers not just to a holiday but also to specific cultural traditions such as turkey dinners, family gatherings, and historical references to the Pilgrims. Similarly, “субботник” denotes a Soviet-era tradition of voluntary communal labor, which carries political and ideological connotations beyond its literal meaning. These examples demonstrate how realia embodies collective memory, social practices, and cultural identity, making direct equivalence nearly impossible.

The main challenge for translators, therefore, lies in choosing the most appropriate strategy for rendering such terms in a way that preserves both meaning and cultural resonance. Scholars of translation studies, such as Eugene Nida, Lawrence Venuti, and Susan Bassnett, have emphasized the tension between two major approaches: *domestication* and *foreignization*. Domestication adapts the source term to the cultural norms of the target audience, making it easily comprehensible but risking a loss of authenticity. Foreignization, on the other hand, preserves the cultural uniqueness of the term, retaining its “foreignness” but potentially alienating the reader who lacks background knowledge. When translating between English and Russian, translators must carefully navigate between these strategies, taking into account the purpose of the text, the expectations of the audience, and the degree of cultural specificity inherent in the term.

In addition to cultural barriers, linguistic factors also complicate the translation of realia. English and Russian differ structurally in grammar, morphology, and word formation, which can affect how realia is rendered. For example, English tends to employ compact noun phrases and borrowings from other languages, while Russian often uses descriptive phrases or calques to explain unfamiliar concepts. This structural difference influences the translation process, as the translator must consider not only cultural but also linguistic compatibility. Moreover, the semantic fields of certain words may not align across languages, leading to partial or misleading equivalence.

Another significant challenge is the context in which realia appears. Literary texts, historical documents, political speeches, and media discourse all present different demands for the translator. In literature, preserving the cultural atmosphere and authenticity is often paramount, requiring strategies that highlight the uniqueness of the source culture. In political or journalistic contexts, however, clarity and accessibility may take precedence, prompting the translator to use explanatory footnotes or descriptive phrases. Thus, the translation of realia is not a one-size-fits-all process; it must be adapted to the communicative purpose and the readership.

Furthermore, the growing interconnectedness of cultures in the era of globalization complicates the treatment of realia. Some cultural terms have gained international recognition—for example, “vodka,” “kremlin,” or “perestroika” from Russian, and “computer,” “jeans,” or “weekend” from English—which no longer require translation. Yet, many culturally specific terms remain opaque to outsiders. This dynamic demonstrates how realia operates on a continuum: from terms that are completely untranslatable and require explanation, to those that have entered global usage and no longer pose translation difficulties.

The study of realia translation between English and Russian also provides valuable insights into intercultural communication and cultural exchange. Every translation decision—whether to preserve, adapt, or explain—shapes how one culture is represented to another. Misinterpretations or oversimplifications may distort cultural meaning, while careful and thoughtful strategies can enhance cross-cultural

understanding. In this sense, translators act not only as linguistic intermediaries but also as cultural mediators, bridging gaps between two distinct cultural systems.

This paper aims to explore the linguistic and cultural challenges in translating realia between English and Russian, analyzing the main strategies employed by translators and evaluating their effectiveness in different contexts. The discussion will cover issues of equivalence, semantic loss, cultural adaptation, and pragmatic considerations, drawing examples from literary texts, media, and real-life communication. By doing so, the study seeks to highlight both the theoretical complexity and the practical importance of addressing realia in translation practice.

Ultimately, the translation of realia goes beyond technical linguistic choices—it reflects broader questions of cultural representation, identity, and global communication. In an era where English and Russian continue to interact on political, cultural, and academic levels, understanding how to effectively translate culture-specific terms becomes not only a linguistic task but also a crucial step toward fostering mutual understanding between peoples.

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