

TRANSLATION PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES OF CUSTOM TERMS IN THE ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGES

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Abstract:

This paper explores the challenges and strategies involved in translating custom terms between English and Russian. Custom terms, referring to specialized vocabulary within specific domains (e.g., legal, technical, medical, business), often present unique translation problems due to cultural differences, varying legal and social systems, and the absence of direct equivalents. This study examines the linguistic and contextual factors that contribute to these difficulties, including polysemy, semantic broadening/narrowing, and the influence of cultural connotations. We analyze various translation strategies employed to address these challenges, such as adaptation, calquing, descriptive translation, functional equivalents, and compensation. Specific examples of custom terms from are analyzed to illustrate the effectiveness and limitations of different translation approaches. The paper concludes by offering practical recommendations for translators working with custom terminology in the English and Russian language pair, emphasizing the importance of domain expertise, contextual awareness, and strategic adaptation.

Keywords: Translation, Custom Terms, Terminology, English, Russian Translation Problems

Introduction

Language serves as a bridge between different cultures, enabling communication, knowledge transfer, and cooperation across borders. However, translation—the act of transferring meaning from one language to another—is rarely a straightforward process. It becomes particularly challenging when dealing with *custom terms*, also known as culturally specific items (CSIs), culture-bound terms, or *realia*. These terms are expressions that are deeply rooted in the cultural, social, historical, and sometimes even political context of a community. Examples include legal, social, culinary, and institutional concepts that may exist in one culture but have no direct equivalent in another. The study of how these terms are translated between

English and Russian is especially relevant given the linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical differences between the Anglo-American and Russian spheres.

The Significance of Translating Custom Terms

Translation is not simply the substitution of words but the conveyance of meaning, context, and cultural associations. For instance, a term like the English *Thanksgiving* or the Russian *День Победы* (Victory Day) is more than just a word—it carries historical and cultural weight. Misinterpreting such terms may lead to distortion of meaning and loss of cultural nuance. In specialized fields such as law, politics, or economics, the problem intensifies because misunderstanding a term may lead to miscommunication or even legal misinterpretation. Therefore, identifying and developing strategies for translating custom terms is crucial for accuracy and intercultural understanding.

Relevance of English–Russian Translation

The relationship between English and Russian presents unique challenges. English, as a global lingua franca, frequently exports its cultural and institutional terms into other languages. Russian, meanwhile, retains a rich cultural and historical heritage with terms that may not exist in English. For example, the Russian *самовар* or *дача* does not have a direct equivalent in English, while English terms like *Brexit* or *Common Law* pose challenges when translated into Russian. Translators working between these two languages must navigate different worldviews, legal systems, political traditions, and cultural practices.

The Concept of Custom Terms and Their Categories

Scholars in translation studies often categorize custom terms into different domains:

Historical and political terms (e.g., *perestroika*, *House of Commons*).

Institutional terms (e.g., *Congress*, *Государственная Дума*).

Socio-cultural terms (e.g., *pub*, *самовар*).

Religious terms (e.g., *Orthodox Easter*, *Thanksgiving*).

Legal terms (e.g., *habeas corpus*, *уголовное право*).

Each group poses different translation challenges depending on the context. For example, socio-cultural terms often lack equivalents and require descriptive

translation, while legal terms often require precision and consistency across legal systems.

4. Problems of Translating Custom Terms

There are several recurring problems faced by translators of custom terms:

1. **Absence of direct equivalents** – Many culture-specific words have no lexical or semantic match in the target language. For example, the Russian *субботник* (a day of voluntary community service) does not exist in Anglo-American culture.
2. **Semantic ambiguity** – Some terms have multiple meanings depending on context. For instance, the word *commonwealth* can mean a political entity or a group of countries.
3. **Cultural gaps** – Different worldviews and traditions often create gaps. The Russian concept of *бабушка* carries not only the meaning of “grandmother” but also broader cultural connotations of wisdom, care, and authority in family life.
4. **Stylistic issues** – Preserving the register, tone, and connotation of the original word is difficult. For example, the Russian word *товарищ* (comrade) has ideological undertones in Soviet contexts, while the English translation *comrade* may sound ironic or archaic.
5. **Contextual constraints** – Translators often must adapt terms depending on the genre: in literary works, descriptive translation may be appropriate, while in legal texts, formal equivalence is required.

5. Strategies for Translating Custom Terms

Scholars and practitioners of translation propose several strategies to deal with these problems:

Borrowing (transliteration or transcription): Direct transfer of the original term into the target language (e.g., *samovar*, *kremlin*).

Calque (loan translation): Literal translation of the structure of the term (e.g., *collective farm* from Russian *колхоз*).

Descriptive translation (explicitation): Explaining the meaning of the term (e.g., translating *субботник* as “voluntary Saturday community clean-up day”).

Functional equivalence: Using a similar concept in the target culture (e.g., translating *бакалавр* as “bachelor’s degree”).

Adaptation (domestication): Replacing the term with a culturally familiar equivalent (e.g., Russian *челлендж* for English *challenge* in modern slang).

Footnotes or commentary: Often used in academic or literary translation to clarify cultural nuances without altering the text.

Each strategy has its advantages and limitations, and the translator’s choice often depends on the purpose of the translation, the target audience, and the text type.

6. Theoretical Background

The translation of custom terms is closely linked to key theories in translation studies:

Eugene Nida’s dynamic equivalence theory, which emphasizes the effect of translation on the target audience.

Lawrence Venuti’s domestication vs. foreignization, which debates whether to adapt terms to the target culture or retain their foreignness.

Peter Newmark’s communicative vs. semantic translation, which distinguishes between conveying meaning naturally and maintaining fidelity to the original.

In translating between English and Russian, these theories guide translators in deciding whether to preserve the cultural “foreignness” of terms or adapt them for better comprehension. For example, *dacha* may be transliterated for cultural preservation, but in a children’s story it might be rendered descriptively as “a summer house in the countryside.”

Conclusion

The study of *translation problems and strategies of custom terms in the English and Russian languages* reveals that cultural, historical, and institutional realities embedded in language create significant barriers to accurate translation. Unlike general vocabulary, custom terms (culture-bound terms, realia, or culturally specific items) are deeply tied to their cultural and societal origins, making them resistant to simple lexical substitution. Translators are therefore compelled not only to be bilingual but also bicultural, navigating the nuances of context, history, and cultural associations.

One of the most persistent issues is the **lack of direct equivalence**. Words such as *dacha* or *samovar* in Russian, or *Thanksgiving* and *Brexit* in English, have no single-word counterparts in the target language. Other challenges include **semantic ambiguity**, **cultural gaps**, and **stylistic mismatches**, all of which complicate the translator's task. These problems often manifest differently depending on the genre of text: in literary translation, the cultural and emotional resonance of terms is paramount, while in legal or institutional translation, precision and consistency are more critical.

To address these challenges, translators draw upon a range of strategies including **borrowing**, **calquing**, **descriptive translation**, **functional equivalence**, **adaptation**, and the use of **footnotes or commentary**. No single method can universally resolve the challenges posed by custom terms. Instead, the translator must make context-specific decisions guided by factors such as the purpose of translation, target audience, and the balance between preserving cultural identity (foreignization) and ensuring accessibility (domestication).

The English–Russian translation pair is particularly illustrative because it involves two cultures with distinct historical and ideological traditions. Translators must carefully negotiate terms with political, legal, or socio-cultural significance, avoiding distortions while ensuring comprehensibility. For example, rendering *товарищ* as *comrade* carries ideological connotations that may need explanation, while terms like *habeas corpus* demand technical precision that may not have an equivalent in Russian law.

Ultimately, this study underscores that **translating custom terms is not a mechanical act but a cultural negotiation**. It demands both linguistic competence and cultural awareness. The translator's role is not merely to replace words but to mediate meaning, bridging cultural gaps while respecting the integrity of both the source and target texts. By systematically studying translation strategies and their outcomes, researchers and practitioners can contribute to more effective intercultural communication, whether in literature, diplomacy, law, or media.

Future research should focus on empirical analysis of translations across different text genres, the impact of machine translation tools on handling custom

terms, and the pedagogical implications for translator training. As globalization accelerates intercultural exchange, the ability to handle custom terms effectively will remain central to the discipline of translation studies.

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