

Semantic-Functional Features of Non-Equivalent Lexis in Literary Translation

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Abstract: The article investigates the problems of literary translation, focusing on non-equivalent lexis – the class of lexical units that possess no ready counterpart in the target language and that therefore expose, more sharply than any other category, the cultural and conceptual asymmetries between languages. Drawing on Uzbek and English material, the study examines culture-specific words, or realia, as cultural-linguistic units in which the national experience of a people is condensed, and it analyses the semantic and functional mechanisms through which such units resist or accommodate translation. Concrete examples are used to demonstrate the principal strategies – transliteration, retention with footnoting, and context-governed disambiguation – by which the translator preserves the meaning encoded in these units while re-creating the literary work within the norms of another language.

Keywords: Lexicology, translation, non-equivalent lexis, realia, translator, culture-specific vocabulary, literary translation.

Introduction: Historically, all peoples and states have lived alongside one another in good neighbourliness and friendship, and these cooperative relations have made an enormous contribution to the development of science and culture within society. In establishing contact with one another, nations have invariably needed translators, and translators, in turn, work with words as their primary material. When a translator succeeds in preserving the content of the original in the target text, the value of the translation rises accordingly, for the worth of a translation is measured not by its fidelity to surface form alone but by its capacity to convey what the source actually means. As it has been justly observed, “the aim of translation is not to transfer a string of words and a chain of sentences into a second language, but to bring out the meaning hidden in their core” [1, p. 168]. This principle carries far-reaching implications, since it locates the essence of translation not in the mechanical substitution of one lexical inventory for another but in the recovery and re-expression of meaning that lies

beneath the words. For this reason, translators are required to possess a thorough command of the source language and to analyse its linguistic units deeply, a demand that serves directly to remove the difficulties that arise during the translation process. The range of units important to us – whether they are translatable, difficult to translate, or in a strict sense untranslatable – is very wide indeed: works of literary fiction, poems, epics, samples of folk oral creation, political terms, articles in newspapers and magazines, official documents of state institutions, and much else besides. As in every field of knowledge, translation theory too has its characteristic problems that translators encounter when rendering a written work or oral speech from one language into another. Prominent among these are phraseological units, idioms, the general question of equivalence, and, most acutely, the translation of non-equivalent words, which forms the central concern of the present article.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the present-day practice of translation from English

into Uzbek and from Uzbek into English, a whole spectrum of lexical, grammatical, stylistic, and phraseological problems regularly arises, and each of these levels of language presents its own resistances to transfer. Translating a work of literary fiction differs appreciably from translating the literature of other fields of scholarship, since the literary text is organised not only to convey information but to produce aesthetic effect, and this dual orientation multiplies the translator's obligations. As noted above, literary translation has its own particular problems and difficulties, and these are not incidental but constitutive of the genre. According to G'. Salomov, "the specificity of literary translation is determined by the specific qualities of literary fiction itself" [2, p. 16] – a formulation that ties the difficulty of the task directly to the nature of the object being translated. Among the lexical problems of translation, the rendering of non-equivalent words ("non-equivalent vocabulary") presents especially stubborn difficulties, because every people possesses a vocabulary of its own that expresses its culture, its mentality, its customs, and the texture of its everyday life. In linguistics such words are also designated culture-specific lexemes, while in translation studies they are captured by the term exotic units, or realia. They are properly regarded as cultural-linguistic units, standing at the meeting point of language and culture, and precisely for this reason it is difficult to find their equivalent in translation. As the standard account has it, "realia are lexical units that denote the national customs in people's lives and the phenomena peculiar to them" [3, p. 157]. This cultural-linguistic phenomenon demands still deeper investigation than it has commonly received, for in another language no words or units can be found that would fully replace the objects or concepts these words express within their own linguistic community. The absence of such counterparts is not a temporary lexical gap to be filled by further research but a systematic reflection of the fact that languages segment and conceptualise experience in divergent ways.

Non-equivalent lexemes thus bring to light the distinctive features of the world's languages as these features surface in the act of translation, and they function almost as diagnostic instruments through which the deeper divergences between languages become visible. It is the lofty and arduous labour of

translators that makes it possible to deliver the pearls of literary fiction to readers throughout the world, and this labour is creative as much as it is reproductive. Translating an original may fittingly be compared to the creation of an entirely new and separate work, because in the process of translation the source text is subordinated to the laws of the target language, and out of this subordination a new work comes into being in another tongue. As G'. Salomov emphasises in his book "The Concerns of Translation," "he (the translator) re-expresses the author's intention in another language and re-creates his work" [4, p. 16] – a claim that dignifies the translator as a second author rather than a mere copyist. It follows that when a particular literary work is translated, it is expedient to analyse the national-linguistic features contained within it, since these features are the very locus at which the originality of the source resides and at which the translator's re-creative task is most severely tested.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a descriptive-analytical method combined with comparative linguistic analysis of paired English and Uzbek material. Culture-specific lexical units, or realia, are drawn from literary and lexicographic sources – including A. Qodiriy's novel "O'tkan kunlar" and the explanatory dictionary of the Uzbek language – and are examined in their textual contexts in order to establish the semantic range and functional load that each unit carries within its source culture. The analysis proceeds by isolating individual non-equivalent items, determining the concept or object they denote, and evaluating the strategies available for their transfer into the target language. Particular attention is directed to two recurrent phenomena: first, the role of context in disambiguating polysemous units whose several meanings cannot be captured by a single target-language word; and second, the techniques of transliteration and footnoting applied to units that denote culturally embedded objects for which no counterpart exists. By combining close reading of individual examples with a comparative view of how the two languages encode experience, the methodology seeks to account not merely for what is lost in the translation of non-equivalent lexis but for the principled procedures by which such loss may be minimised.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The analysis of concrete material demonstrates that the difficulty of non-equivalent lexis operates on two distinct planes – the plane of polysemy governed by context and the plane of culturally embedded reference – and that each requires a different response from the translator. Consider first the plane of context-dependent meaning. English has the word “crack,” which can be rendered into Uzbek in several meanings – “yormoq” (to split), “qarsilatmoq” (to make a cracking sound), and “muammoni hal qilmoq” (to solve a problem) – while in addition it is sometimes used in the meaning “to achieve success.” To determine which of these meanings is operative, an understanding of the surrounding context is indispensable, for the word in isolation offers no basis for choosing among its senses. In a text, accordingly, it may be used as follows: “Today we have an exam. I’ll crack it!” – where only the situational frame reveals that “crack” here denotes success rather than physical breaking. The same principle governs the English expression “it’s a piece of cake,” which, according to context, yields two entirely different readings: the literal sense, “this is a piece of pie,” and the figurative, image-based sense, “this is very easy, it is not hard at all.” Finding a unit in another language that conveys exactly this figurative meaning, together with its idiomatic colouring, is a considerable challenge, since idioms bind meaning to a specific image that rarely survives literal transfer.

The second plane – that of culturally embedded reference – presents difficulties of a still more intractable kind, because here the obstacle is not the multiplicity of senses but the very absence of the denoted object from the target culture. If we take examples of non-equivalent units from Uzbek, objects such as “sandal” [5, p. 438] – a traditional low table set over a source of heat and covered with a blanket – and “beshik” [6, p. 246], the traditional cradle, simply do not exist in another culture, and consequently no ready lexical counterpart is available. Words of this kind are preserved in their transliterated written form in translation and are then clarified by means of footnotes, so that the reader retains contact with the authentic cultural item while receiving the explanatory information necessary to understand it. This combined strategy – retention plus annotation – allows the national colour of the original to be conveyed without either erasing the item through domestication or

leaving it opaque. The workings of this approach are well illustrated in A. Qodiriy’s novel “O’tkan kunlar,” where sentences such as “Azizbek bu kunda ham Toshkent hokimidir?” [7, p. 13] occur. This single sentence contains three non-equivalent words, and it may be rendered as: “Is Azizbek Tashkent’s hokim also today?” Here there are two proper nouns (Azizbek, Tashkent) and one common noun (hokim, ‘governor’); the spelling of these items is adjusted slightly to the conventions of the target language, but the words themselves are retained rather than replaced. From these cases a general regularity emerges: proper nouns are not altered in translation, and common nouns, when they have no equivalent, are likewise left unchanged and preserved in transliterated form. The results therefore confirm that non-equivalent lexis is best served not by forced substitution but by strategies that keep the source item intact while supplying, through context or annotation, the meaning it carries.

CONCLUSION

Engaging in literary translation requires of translators not merely a knowledge of languages but also a measure of genuine creativity, since the re-creation of a literary work in another tongue is an act closer to authorship than to transcription. In the foregoing discussion we have dwelt upon some of the linguistic problems of literary translation, and in particular upon the semantic and functional behaviour of non-equivalent lexis. In the course of revealing the content of the original, literary translation encounters a series of obstacles that arise from the divergent ways in which languages organise meaning. Languages possess their own phraseological, lexical, and grammatical units, and the laws and features proper to these units are, in translation, subordinated to the laws of another language. If such units are translated in due observance of the norms of the given target language, the author’s thought can nonetheless be fully revealed, and the cultural specificity encoded in non-equivalent items can be preserved through transliteration and explanatory annotation rather than sacrificed. These factors, taken together, serve to enable readers to peruse the re-created work with the same aesthetic pleasure that the original affords, and they confirm that the careful handling of non-equivalent lexis is central to the success of literary translation.

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