

Lexical Lacunae And Non-Equivalent Units: Interference In The Translation Process And Mechanisms For Its Prevention

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Abstract: Lexical lacunae and non-equivalent units are among the most persistent sources of translation difficulty because they reveal asymmetries in how languages segment experience, conventionalize cultural knowledge, and distribute meaning between lexicon and grammar. When a target language lacks a conventionalized lexical match, translators often compensate through approximation. This compensation can trigger interference, understood here as the uncritical transfer of source-language patterns into the target text, resulting in semantic distortion, pragmatic infelicity, or stylistic incongruity. The present article offers a theoretically grounded and practice-oriented account of how lexical lacunae and non-equivalent units generate interference and how such interference can be prevented. Drawing on translation theory, lacunology, and contrastive semantics, the study develops an integrative mechanism that links detection of lacunarity to controlled choice of translation procedures and to post-translation quality control. The results of the analytical synthesis show that interference is most likely when translators rely on formal similarity, calquing, or dictionary-level equivalence without checking frame compatibility, collocational norms, and communicative function. Preventive mechanisms are effective when they treat lacunarity as a diagnostic signal prompting structured decision-making, documentation of choices, and targeted verification through context, comparable texts, and revision protocols.

Keywords: Lexical lacunae, non-equivalent units, translation interference, equivalence, cultural specificity, explication, calque, paraphrase, translation strategy, quality control.

Introduction: Translation presupposes the possibility of equivalence, yet equivalence rarely means sameness. In real discourse, words carry not only denotational content but also conventional associations, genre constraints, stylistic value, and culturally salient presuppositions. When translators work between languages whose lexical systems partition reality differently, they encounter lacunae, that is, “gaps” where a source-language unit has no established one-word counterpart in the target language. In Russian and post-Soviet translation scholarship, lacunae have long been treated as a central problem of cross-cultural transfer because they expose areas where meaning is encoded through culturally specific concepts, institutional practices, or habitual speech behavior rather than through

universally shared categories [1].

Non-equivalent units are broader than lacunae. They include culture-bound realia, idioms, evaluative words with mismatched connotations, emerging neologisms, and specialized terms whose conceptual boundaries differ across traditions. A unit may be “non-equivalent” not because translation is impossible, but because the target language offers only partial matches that require contextual selection, paraphrase, or functional substitution. Classical linguistic translation theory emphasizes that the translator’s task is to reproduce meaning and function under the constraints of the target language system and norms of usage, rather than to replicate the surface structure of the source text [2], [3].

Interference becomes critical precisely at the point

where equivalence is unstable. When translators face lacunae, the pressure to produce a quick solution can lead to mechanically transferring source-language forms, metaphors, collocations, or semantic boundaries into the target text. Such transfer may appear “faithful,” but it often results in unnatural phrasing, incorrect implicatures, and shifts in register. Interference is closely related to the general phenomenon of language contact, where bilingual speakers may import structures from one language into another; in translation, this tendency is amplified by the constant presence of the source text as a cognitive prompt [4].

This article aims to clarify how lacunae and non-equivalent units provoke interference, what forms that interference typically takes, and which mechanisms help prevent it. The practical value of such analysis lies in developing translator competence: the ability to diagnose risk zones, to choose procedures consciously, and to evaluate whether the chosen solution preserves communicative effect in the target culture.

The article employs an analytical-synthetic design grounded in established translation theory and lacunology. The approach integrates three complementary perspectives. The first perspective is contrastive-semantic: it treats lacunae and non-equivalence as systemic differences in semantic segmentation and conventionalization across languages, drawing on works that discuss lexical meaning and translation correspondences in a linguistic framework [2], [3]. The second perspective is cultural-communicative: it treats many lacunae as manifestations of culture-specific knowledge and textual practice, consistent with lacunological approaches that connect “gap phenomena” to intercultural transfer and to predictable semantic losses or distortions [1]. The third perspective is process-oriented: it models interference as a recurrent cognitive and normative phenomenon in translation, building on contact linguistics and descriptive translation insights that highlight the role of norms and habitual solutions in shaping translated texts [4], [5].

The analysis proceeds by conceptual modeling rather than by reporting new experimental measurements. Representative patterns and examples are used illustratively to show how interference emerges and how prevention mechanisms operate. Claims are

therefore formulated as theoretically motivated generalizations supported by the cited scholarly tradition, and the “Results” section presents the synthesized mechanism as an outcome of this theoretical integration.

The synthesis shows that interference in the presence of lacunae and non-equivalent units is not random. It tends to cluster around predictable “pressure points” where translators must decide whether to preserve source-text form, to preserve communicative function, or to rebalance both under target norms. Three mechanisms explain most interference cases in lacuna-driven translation.

The first mechanism is form-led substitution under uncertainty. When a target language lacks a ready equivalent, translators often resort to calque, literal rendering, or morphological imitation. This solution may be attractive because it looks precise and minimizes apparent loss. However, it frequently imports alien semantic boundaries. A calque can preserve the source’s internal structure while changing the target’s conventional meaning relations, resulting in a phrase that is grammatically possible but pragmatically marked, stylistically awkward, or even misleading. Linguistic translation theory warns that structural similarity does not guarantee semantic or functional equivalence, especially when languages differ in lexicalization patterns and collocational conventions [2].

The second mechanism is frame mismatch. Many lacunae are not “missing words” but “missing conventional frames.” A frame is the culturally stabilized scenario of roles, expectations, and typical evaluation that a lexical unit evokes. When translators choose a near equivalent that matches denotation but not frame, they create hidden interference. The target reader receives a different social script than the source reader would. Lacunology emphasizes that intercultural transfer can produce semantic losses and distortions precisely because a target culture lacks the same background structuring of experience [1]. In such cases, interference appears as misaligned politeness, altered evaluation, or incorrect presuppositions.

The third mechanism is norm displacement. Translators sometimes maintain source-language discourse habits in the target text, particularly in idioms, metaphors,

and evaluative formulas. Even if the target language has a functional equivalent, the translator may default to a “transparent” literal variant because the source text remains cognitively dominant during production. Descriptive translation studies note that translations are governed by norms, including tendencies toward acceptability in the target culture versus adherence to source-text features, and these tendencies can shape the translator’s decisions even without conscious intent [5]. When the translator’s norm preference leans toward formal fidelity, interference risk rises in lacuna zones.

From this analysis, an integrative prevention mechanism emerges. Prevention works best when lacunarity is treated as a diagnostic trigger that initiates controlled decision-making. In practice, the translator first identifies that the unit is non-equivalent not only lexically but also pragmatically, meaning that “dictionary substitution” is insufficient. The translator then specifies the unit’s communicative function in context, including register, evaluation, and discourse role. Only after that does the translator select a procedure, aiming to preserve function under target norms. Finally, the translator verifies the solution through contextual compatibility: whether the chosen form collocates naturally, whether it matches genre conventions, and whether it produces the intended implicature. This cycle transforms lacunae from a “problem spot” into a structured workflow step.

The results suggest that interference is best understood as a failure of mediation under asymmetry: the translator continues to “think in the source language” at precisely the moment when the target language requires re-conceptualization. Such failure is not simply an error of attention; it is often a rational shortcut under time pressure and under the cognitive load of maintaining coherence. Contact linguistics describes interference as a systematic deviation from norms arising in bilingual practice [4]. Translation adds a special condition: the source text is continuously present, functioning as a powerful prime for lexical choice, syntactic rhythm, and metaphorical mapping.

In the case of lexical lacunae, the temptation to calque is especially strong because calquing appears to maximize informational preservation. Yet preservation is illusory when the target culture does not conventionalize the same concept or does not attach

the same social value to it. Markovina and Sorokin show that lacunarity is not merely lexical absence; it reflects how cultures organize meaning in language and text, and how transfer can yield semantic distortions if the translator does not compensate explicitly [1]. This insight supports a key prevention principle: the translator should not measure adequacy by formal closeness alone, but by whether the target reader can reconstruct the same communicative intention with comparable processing effort and cultural resonance.

A second prevention principle concerns controlled explicitation. Explicitation is often treated as a universal tendency in translation, but in lacuna zones it is a necessary technique, not merely a stylistic preference. When the target language lacks a compact form, the translator can preserve meaning by distributing it across a phrase, a brief explanation in the text, or a context-building reformulation. Functional approaches to equivalence emphasize that translation may legitimately change form to preserve effect [6], [7]. The risk is that explicitation can overburden the text, disrupt rhythm, or shift genre. For that reason, prevention requires proportionality: the solution should be as explicit as needed, but as economical as possible, and it should align with the target genre’s tolerance for commentary.

A third prevention principle is differentiation between non-equivalence types. Not all non-equivalent units require the same response. Culture-specific institutional terms may demand descriptive translation or borrowing with minimal explanation, while idioms may demand functional substitution to preserve pragmatic force. Classical Soviet translation scholarship repeatedly stresses the necessity of transformations that are semantically motivated rather than mechanically triggered by structure [8], [9]. From a prevention standpoint, this means that training should focus less on memorizing “strategies” and more on developing diagnostic competence: the ability to decide what kind of non-equivalence is present and what kind of loss is most dangerous in the given context.

A fourth prevention principle is revision as interference detection. Interference is often invisible during drafting because the translator remains immersed in the source text. Post-translation revision, ideally after a short interval, allows the translator to read the target text as

an independent document. Quality assessment approaches emphasize that translation quality should be judged against functional adequacy and target norms, not only against source-text alignment [10]. In lacuna zones, revision should focus on whether the chosen solution sounds conventional to the target audience, whether it introduces unintended evaluation, and whether it respects typical collocations and phraseology. Where possible, comparison with parallel texts in the target language strengthens this check because it reveals whether the solution belongs to established usage.

Finally, prevention requires documentation and consistency. Lacunae and non-equivalent units often recur throughout a text. If the translator does not record decisions, later choices may drift, producing inconsistency that itself becomes a form of interference, since the source term's unity is not preserved in the target text's conceptual system. Translation theory recognizes the importance of terminological consistency, but in culturally loaded lexicon this is not purely terminological; it is conceptual consistency. Documenting the chosen rendering and its rationale helps maintain coherence and reduces the chance that later segments revert to calque or to another partial equivalent.

Lexical lacunae and non-equivalent units are high-risk zones for translation interference because they force translators to choose between preserving source-text form and preserving target-language naturalness and communicative effect. The analysis shows that interference is typically produced by form-led substitution, frame mismatch, and norm displacement, all of which are intensified by the cognitive dominance of the source text during production. Effective prevention is achieved when lacunarity is treated as a diagnostic trigger that initiates a controlled workflow: functional specification of meaning in context, conscious selection of an appropriate procedure, contextual verification of collocational and pragmatic fit, and targeted revision. This approach reframes lacunae from "untranslatable items" into manageable points of intercultural mediation and strengthens translation quality by reducing hidden semantic and pragmatic distortions.

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