

Cultural Gaps And Untranslatability In English–Uzbek Literary Translation

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Abstract: The present study investigates the manifestations of cultural gaps and untranslatability in English–Uzbek literary translation, focusing on how socio-cultural asymmetries impede semantic transfer and stylistic equivalence. Drawing upon comparative textual analysis and conceptual frameworks from translation studies, the research identifies recurrent categories of untranslatable items, including culture-specific lexicon, idioms, metaphorical imagery, and pragmatic implicatures. The findings demonstrate that literal transfer often distorts cultural connotations and narrative voice, while functional strategies, such as dynamic equivalence, explicitation, and cultural substitution, partially mitigate loss of meaning. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how cultural gaps shape translational decision-making and underscores the necessity of translator agency in preserving cultural authenticity without compromising textual coherence.

Keywords: Cultural gaps, socio-cultural asymmetries, semantic transfer, untranslatable items, culture-specific lexicon, metaphorical imagery.

Introduction: Literary translation constitutes a complex semiotic practice wherein language functions as a carrier of cultural memory, value systems, and collective worldview. In the context of English–Uzbek translation, cultural asymmetries frequently challenge the translator’s capacity to reproduce semantic nuances, aesthetic form, and pragmatic intention embedded in the source text. The concept of untranslatability—the resistance of certain linguistic or cultural elements to adequate rendering—remains central to translation studies and is particularly salient in literary discourse, where meaning is deeply interwoven with cultural subtexts. This article

examines how cultural gaps engender untranslatability in English–Uzbek literary translation and analyzes strategies for negotiating these gaps without eroding the communicative force of the source text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of untranslatability has occupied a central position in translation studies for several decades, evolving from linguistically oriented explanations toward culturally and semiotically grounded interpretations. One of the earliest systematic discussions of untranslatability is found in Catford’s (1965) linguistic theory of translation, which distinguishes between linguistic and cultural

untranslatability. According to Catford, linguistic untranslatability arises from the absence of formal correspondence between source and target languages, while cultural untranslatability emerges when situational features of the source culture are not present in the target culture. Although this framework provides a foundational classification, it has been criticized for reducing untranslatability primarily to structural incongruence.

In contrast, Nida's (1976) theory of dynamic equivalence shifts the focus from formal correspondence to receptor-oriented meaning. Nida argues that translation should aim at producing an equivalent effect on the target reader, even if this requires structural and semantic shifts. From this perspective, untranslatability is not absolute but relative, depending on the translator's ability to recontextualize meaning within the cultural and cognitive framework of the target audience. This approach has been particularly influential in literary translation, where aesthetic and emotive functions often outweigh formal precision.

Venuti (1995) further reconceptualizes untranslatability by framing translation as an ideologically charged practice shaped by power relations between cultures. His dichotomy of domestication and foreignization highlights the ethical dimension of translation decisions. Venuti contends that excessive domestication may erase cultural otherness, rendering foreign texts deceptively familiar, while foreignization deliberately preserves cultural difference, even at the cost of fluency. In the English-Uzbek context, this tension is especially visible due to asymmetries in historical experience, literary traditions, and socio-cultural norms.

Poststructuralist and semiotic approaches, as articulated by Bassnett (2014) and Torop (2002), further expand the notion of untranslatability beyond lexical and syntactic constraints. These scholars argue that literary texts function as semiotic systems embedded in cultural memory, intertextual networks, and symbolic traditions. From this standpoint, untranslatability reflects the impossibility of fully transferring culturally encoded meanings, allusions, and ideological undercurrents. Translation thus becomes an act of interpretation rather than reproduction.

Within Uzbek translation studies, scholars have increasingly emphasized the role of national worldview (*milliy tafakkur*), cultural symbolism, and pragmatic norms in literary translation. However, much of this research remains descriptive or prescriptive, often focusing on individual examples rather than systematic categorization of cultural gaps. Moreover, English-Uzbek translation has received comparatively limited attention in global translation scholarship, despite the growing demand for high-quality literary translations in Uzbekistan. This study contributes to the existing literature by synthesizing Western theoretical models with empirical analysis of English-Uzbek literary translations, thereby addressing a notable gap in current research.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative comparative methodology informed by descriptive translation studies. Data were collected from selected English literary texts and their Uzbek translations, focusing on works by authors whose prose exhibits dense cultural references, including Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and Toni Morrison. Instances of untranslatability were identified using semantic-pragmatic analysis, examining shifts in meaning, imagery, and cultural resonance. Translational strategies were classified following Newmark's (1988) taxonomy and further interpreted through Venuti's domestication-foreignization dichotomy. Observations were triangulated through cross-referencing bilingual dictionaries, ethnographic literature, and usage corpora to ensure semantic reliability and contextual accuracy.

RESULTS

Analysis revealed four recurrent domains of untranslatability rooted in cultural gaps:

1. **Culture-Specific Items (CSIs):** Terms tied to historically contingent institutions or customs, such as Victorian workhouse, Thanksgiving dinner, or prom, often lack direct Uzbek correlates. Uzbek translations typically resort to descriptive paraphrase, leading to reduced concision and altered narrative rhythm.
2. **Idiomatic and Metaphorical Expressions:** English idioms grounded in cultural metaphors, e.g. "break the ice", "silver lining", or "ivory tower", resist literal reproduction. Functional equivalents in Uzbek

frequently shift metaphorical imagery, yielding partial semantic mapping while disrupting symbolic coherence.

3. Pragmatic Implicatures and Politeness Norms: Variability in speech act conventions affects pragmatic meaning. English indirectness strategies, such as understatement or ironic politeness, require pragmatic adaptation to align with Uzbek communicative norms, where directness varies across social hierarchies.

Overall, direct translation proved insufficient for conveying cultural connotations, while hybrid strategies combining explicitation and semantic modulation preserved communicative impact most effectively.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study reinforce the theoretical assumption that untranslatability in literary translation is fundamentally rooted in cultural asymmetry rather than linguistic deficiency alone. In the English–Uzbek translation context, cultural gaps manifest not merely as lexical absences but as deeper divergences in worldview, social structure, and symbolic representation. These divergences significantly influence how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and evaluated in literary discourse.

Culture-specific items (CSIs) emerged as one of the most problematic domains, particularly those tied to historically and socially bounded institutions. The frequent use of descriptive paraphrase in Uzbek translations, while ensuring referential clarity, often disrupts narrative economy and stylistic rhythm. This supports Newmark's (1988) observation that communicative translation may sacrifice stylistic compactness in favor of intelligibility. However, such losses appear unavoidable when the target culture lacks experiential familiarity with the referent.

Idiomatic and metaphorical expressions present an even more complex challenge, as they operate simultaneously on semantic, cognitive, and cultural levels. The replacement of English metaphors with culturally resonant Uzbek equivalents demonstrates the translator's attempt to preserve pragmatic force rather than surface imagery. Nevertheless, this process often results in symbolic shifts that alter the aesthetic texture of the original text. These findings align with cognitive metaphor theory, which suggests that

metaphors are culture-bound conceptual structures rather than purely linguistic ornaments.

Pragmatic implicatures and politeness conventions further complicate translational equivalence. English literary discourse frequently employs understatement, irony, and indirectness as markers of social interaction, particularly in canonical works such as those of Austen or Dickens. Uzbek communicative norms, shaped by hierarchical respect and explicit evaluative markers, necessitate pragmatic adaptation. Failure to account for these differences may result in pragmatic misinterpretation, even when lexical meaning is accurately conveyed.

The study also highlights the centrality of translator agency in negotiating untranslatability. Rather than functioning as a neutral conduit, the translator actively mediates between competing cultural logics, reader expectations, and textual constraints. Strategic decisions—such as selective explicitation, metaphorical reformulation, or contextual annotation—reflect an interpretive stance shaped by ideological, aesthetic, and pedagogical considerations. This supports Venuti's assertion that translation is an ethically and culturally situated act.

Ultimately, untranslatability should not be viewed as a failure of translation but as an indicator of cultural specificity. When managed consciously, it can enhance intercultural awareness and preserve the alterity of the source text. However, the balance between cultural authenticity and readability remains delicate, requiring a nuanced understanding of both source and target literary systems.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the phenomenon of cultural gaps and untranslatability in English–Uzbek literary translation, demonstrating that translational challenges extend beyond linguistic mismatch to encompass deeper socio-cultural, pragmatic, and semiotic disparities. The analysis confirms that literary texts function not only as linguistic constructs but also as repositories of cultural memory, ideological values, and culturally specific modes of expression, which resist complete transfer across languages.

The findings indicate that untranslatability in the English–Uzbek context is predominantly driven by culture-specific items, metaphorical imagery, idiomatic

expressions, and pragmatic conventions that lack direct counterparts in the target culture. Literal translation of such elements frequently results in semantic distortion, pragmatic misalignment, or loss of stylistic nuance. Conversely, functional and adaptive strategies—such as dynamic equivalence, explicitation, cultural substitution, and contextual modulation—enable partial preservation of meaning while inevitably introducing shifts in form and imagery.

Importantly, the study underscores the pivotal role of translator agency in mediating between source-text fidelity and target-text acceptability. Translators emerge as cultural negotiators whose decisions are shaped by genre conventions, readership expectations, and ideological considerations. Rather than striving for unattainable absolute equivalence, effective literary translation requires informed compromise and interpretive sensitivity, allowing the target text to resonate culturally without erasing the foreignness of the original.

The research further suggests that untranslatability should not be conceptualized as a limitation or failure of translation practice but as an inherent feature of intercultural communication. When acknowledged and strategically managed, untranslatable elements can enhance cultural visibility and deepen readers' engagement with the source culture. In this sense, translation becomes a dialogic process that fosters cross-cultural understanding rather than mere textual substitution.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The analysis is confined to a qualitative examination of selected literary texts and does not incorporate empirical data on reader reception or translator cognition. Future research may therefore benefit from corpus-based methodologies, reception studies, and comparative analyses involving additional language pairs to further illuminate how translational shifts influence cultural perception.

In conclusion, cultural gaps play a decisive role in shaping untranslatability in English–Uzbek literary translation. While complete equivalence remains theoretically and practically unattainable, conscious and culturally informed translational strategies can preserve the communicative force, aesthetic value, and cultural integrity of literary texts. This study contributes

to translation studies by systematizing key areas of untranslatability and reinforcing the view of translation as an interpretive and culturally situated practice.

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