
**LINGUISTIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN LITERARY TRANSLATION: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LEXICAL AND SYNTACTIC SHIFTS IN ENGLISH-
RUSSIAN FICTION**

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Abstract. *Literary translation is not merely a linguistic activity but a complex process of cultural mediation. Translators must constantly make decisions about how to handle culture-specific elements such as idioms, food names, customs, and historical references. This article examines two opposing translation strategies: domestication, which makes foreign texts feel familiar to target readers, and foreignization, which preserves cultural differences. Through comparative analysis of English translations of Russian literary works and Russian translations of English literary works, the study identifies patterns in how professional translators mediate between cultures. The findings suggest that effective literary translation requires a flexible combination of both strategies rather than rigid adherence to one approach. The article concludes that the translator's role as cultural mediator is central to successful literary translation.*

Keywords: *literary translation, cultural mediation, domestication, foreignization, culture-specific elements, translation strategies.*

Introduction

Every literary text carries the imprint of the culture in which it was created. When that text is translated for readers from a different cultural background, the translator faces a fundamental question: how much of the original culture should be preserved, and how much should be adapted? This question has occupied translation scholars for decades.

Lawrence Venuti, an American translation theorist, introduced two influential terms to describe opposite approaches to this question. Domestication refers to strategies that make foreign texts read fluently and naturally in the target language. Foreignization refers to strategies that deliberately preserve foreign elements, reminding readers that they are reading a translation¹¹⁶. Venuti argued strongly in favor of foreignization, claiming that domestication reflects cultural imperialism. However, many translators and scholars have questioned whether foreignization is always appropriate or even possible.

¹¹⁶ Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 1-20.

This article aims to examine how professional literary translators actually handle culture-specific elements in practice. Rather than starting with a theoretical preference, the study analyzes real translations to identify patterns and strategies. The research questions are: 1. What strategies do literary translators use most frequently when encountering culture-specific elements? 2. Do translators consistently prefer domestication or foreignization, or do they combine both strategies? 3. What factors influence the choice of strategy?

The article is organized as follows. Section two describes the research methods. Section three presents the results of the comparative analysis. Section four discusses the findings and their implications for translation theory and practice. Section five concludes with recommendations for literary translators.

Methods

This study employs a comparative descriptive methodology. The research examines published literary translations from two language pairs: English to Russian and Russian to English. Three novels from each language pair were selected for analysis, all published between 2000 and 2020. The selection includes both contemporary fiction and modern classics.

Table 1: Literary Works Analyzed in the Study

Original Language	Title	Author	Target Language	Translator
English	The Catcher in the Rye	J.D. Salinger	Russian	Rita Rait-Kovaleva
English	Nineteen Eighty-Four	George Orwell	Russian	Viktor Golyshev
Russian	The Master and Margarita	Mikhail Bulgakov	English	Michael Glenny
Russian	One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich	Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn	English	H.T. Willetts
Russian	Dead Souls	Nikolai Gogol	English	Robert A. Maguire

The analysis focused on four categories of culture-specific elements: food and drink items, idioms and fixed expressions, social customs and institutions, and proper names with cultural connotations. For each category, the study identified the translation strategy used and recorded the frequency of different strategy types.

Translation strategies were classified using Aixela's taxonomy, which distinguishes between conservation strategies (keeping the source element) and substitution strategies (replacing it with something from the target culture)¹¹⁷. Within conservation, the study distinguished between pure retention, retention with gloss, and literal translation. Within substitution, the study distinguished between functional equivalence, descriptive equivalence, and omission. The study also conducted a qualitative analysis of selected passages to understand how strategy choices affect the reader's experience. Three professional translators were interviewed informally to gain insight into their decision-making processes.

Results

The analysis of 224 culture-specific elements across six literary works revealed several patterns. The results are presented in three sections: overall strategy distribution, variation across language pairs, and differences between categories of culture-specific elements.

Overall Strategy Distribution. Across all six works, conservation strategies (keeping something of the original) accounted for 58% of all decisions, while substitution strategies (replacing with target-culture elements) accounted for 42%. However, the distribution varied significantly depending on the category of culture-specific element and the language direction.

Table 2: Distribution of Translation Strategies

Strategy Type	Frequency	Percentage
Pure retention	78	35%
Retention with gloss	32	14%
Literal translation	20	9%
Functional equivalence	45	20%
Descriptive equivalence	31	14%

¹¹⁷ Aixela, Javier Franco. "Culture-Specific Items in Translation." In Translation, Power, Subversion, edited by Roman Alvarez and M. Carmen-Africa Vidal, 52-78. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1996.

Omission	18	8%
Total	224	100%

Pure retention was the most common strategy overall. Translators kept foreign words such as "kasha" (Russian porridge), "dacha" (Russian country house), and "pirozhki" (Russian pastries) without explanation. Functional equivalence was the second most common strategy, particularly for idioms where the target language had a similar expression¹¹⁸.

Differences Between Language Pairs. Translations from English into Russian showed a higher rate of domestication than translations from Russian into English. In English-to-Russian translations, substitution strategies accounted for 51% of all decisions. In Russian-to-English translations, substitution strategies accounted for only 33% of decisions. This difference may reflect several factors. Russian translators of English literature may feel more pressure to make texts accessible to Russian readers. Alternatively, Russian readers may have less tolerance for foreign elements than English readers. Another possibility is that the specific translators in the sample had different personal philosophies about translation¹¹⁹.

Differences Across Categories. The choice of strategy depended strongly on the category of culture-specific element. Food and drink items were most frequently handled through pure retention (67% of cases). Translators kept food names such as "borscht," "pelmeni," "bliny," and "kvas" without translation or explanation. By contrast, idioms and fixed expressions were most frequently handled through functional equivalence (54% of cases). Translators searched for idiomatic expressions in the target language that conveyed similar meanings. Social customs and institutions fell in the middle, with translators using a mix of retention, descriptive equivalence, and omission depending on how central the custom was to the plot. Proper names with cultural connotations, such as character names that carry meaning, were usually adapted or transformed rather than retained¹²⁰.

Qualitative Findings. The qualitative analysis revealed that skilled translators do not apply a single strategy consistently. Instead, they shift strategies depending on context. A translator might retain a foreign food name when it appears in a descriptive passage but replace it with a functional equivalent when it appears in dialogue where comprehension is essential. One translator interviewed for this study explained: "I ask myself what the reader needs to understand. If the exact name of a dish is not important, I might keep it. But if the humor of

¹¹⁸ Newmark, Peter. *A Textbook of Translation*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1988, pp. 81-96.

¹¹⁹ Toury, Gideon. *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995, pp. 53-69.

¹²⁰ Baker, Mona. *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2011, pp. 45-62.

a scene depends on understanding the idiom, I will find an equivalent in the target language." This pragmatic approach contradicts Venuti's call for consistent foreignization¹²¹.

Discussion

The findings of this study have several implications for translation theory and practice.

The Limitations of Binary Frameworks. Venuti's domestication/foreignization dichotomy, while useful for starting discussions, oversimplifies what translators actually do. Most translators in this study used both strategies within the same text. A translator might foreignize a food item while domesticating an idiom two sentences later. The binary framework cannot capture this complexity¹²².

Other scholars have made similar observations. Anthony Pym argued that the domestication/foreignization dichotomy obscures the fact that most translations involve both strategies in complex combination. Maria Tymoczko, writing from a postcolonial perspective, noted that foreignization can be just as problematic as domestication when practiced by a translator from a dominant culture¹²³.

The Centrality of Cultural Mediation. The findings support the view that the literary translator's primary role is cultural mediation. Translators must understand not only two languages but also two cultures. They must anticipate what their target readers will understand and what will confuse them. They must decide what cultural information to preserve, what to explain, and what to sacrifice¹²⁴. This role requires more than linguistic competence. It requires cultural empathy, creativity, and judgment. No theoretical framework can replace the translator's own decision-making in specific contexts¹²⁵.

Practical Recommendations for Translators. Based on the findings, the following practical recommendations can be offered to literary translators. First, translators should analyze their target audience carefully. Academic readers may tolerate foreign elements and footnotes. General readers may prefer more domesticating strategies. Children's literature requires the most extensive adaptation¹²⁶. Second, translators should consider the function of each culture-specific element in the source text. If an element is central to the plot or character development, it should be preserved even at the cost of explanation. If it is incidental, omission or substitution may be appropriate. Third, translators should be transparent about

¹²¹ Interview with professional translator (anonymous). Personal communication, March 2026.

¹²² Pym, Anthony. "Venuti's Visibility." *Target* 8, no. 1 (1996): 165-177.

¹²³ Tymoczko, Maria. *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1999, pp. 23-24.

¹²⁴ Katan, David. *Translating Cultures: An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 12-15.

¹²⁵ Bassnett, Susan. *Translation Studies*. 4th ed. London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 85-112.

¹²⁶ Lathey, Gillian. *The Role of Translators in Children's Literature: Invisible Storytellers*. London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 78-85.

their choices. Prefaces, footnotes, and translator's notes can explain difficult decisions and acknowledge what has been lost or changed. This transparency respects both the source culture and the target reader ¹²⁷.

Limitations of the Study. This study has several limitations. First, the sample of texts is relatively small, with only six literary works analyzed. Second, the study focused only on translations between English and Russian. Findings may not apply equally to other language pairs, particularly those involving non-Indo-European languages. Third, the study did not include empirical data from readers. It is not known how target readers actually responded to different translation strategies. Future research should address these limitations by expanding the sample and including reader response studies.

Conclusion

This article has examined how literary translators handle culture-specific elements in practice. The findings show that professional translators do not follow a single theoretical approach. They combine domestication and foreignization strategies flexibly, adjusting their choices based on text type, target audience, and the specific cultural element being translated. The study challenges Venuti's call for consistent foreignization. While foreignization can preserve cultural difference and resist cultural imperialism, it is not always appropriate. Children's literature, commercial fiction, and texts for general readers may require more domesticating approaches. The translator's goal should not be strict adherence to any single theory but effective cultural mediation.

Literary translation is both an art and a science. It requires theoretical knowledge and practical judgment. The best translators are those who understand multiple frameworks and apply them flexibly in context. They are cultural mediators who build bridges between different worlds. Their work, though often invisible, is essential to cross-cultural understanding.

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¹²⁷ Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 1.

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