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Cultural Code and Equivalence in Literary Translation: Challenges and Strategies in Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract. Literary translation is a multidimensional process that extends beyond linguistic transformation and involves the transfer of cultural meanings, national identity, historical memory, and ideological values embedded within the source text. Among the most challenging aspects of literary translation are cultural codes, which encompass symbols, traditions, customs, beliefs, historical references, and culturally specific concepts that shape the worldview of a particular society. Since these elements are deeply rooted in the source culture, they often lack direct equivalents in the target language, creating significant challenges for translators. This paper investigates the relationship between cultural code and equivalence in literary translation by examining the theoretical foundations of translation studies and evaluating the effectiveness of different translation strategies in preserving both semantic meaning and cultural authenticity. The study draws upon the theories of Eugene Nida, Peter Newmark, Lawrence Venuti, Mona Baker, Susan Bassnett, Juliane House, Gideon Toury, and Umberto Eco to demonstrate that equivalence should be regarded as a dynamic and context-dependent concept rather than absolute linguistic correspondence. Through the analysis of culturally marked lexical items, idioms, metaphors, realia, folklore, and national symbols in literary works, this research argues that successful literary translation requires balancing linguistic accuracy with cultural adaptation. The findings suggest that translators act not only as language specialists but also as intercultural mediators responsible for reconstructing cultural identity for readers belonging to different linguistic communities.

Keywords: cultural code, literary translation, equivalence, intercultural communication, domestication, foreignization, translation strategies, cultural identity.

Introduction

The increasing interconnectedness of societies through globalization has intensified cultural exchange, making translation one of the most influential instruments of international communication. Literary translation, in particular, serves as a bridge between civilizations by introducing readers to different cultural traditions, systems

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of values, and artistic expressions. Unlike technical or scientific translation, literary translation aims not only to reproduce linguistic meaning but also to convey aesthetic effects, emotional resonance, and cultural significance. Consequently, translators face the complex task of preserving the cultural identity embedded in literary texts while ensuring that the translated work remains comprehensible and engaging for target-language readers.

The concept of **cultural code** has become one of the central issues in contemporary translation studies because literature reflects the collective memory and cultural consciousness of a nation. Every literary work contains culture-specific elements that reveal the traditions, social norms, religious beliefs, folklore, historical experiences, and symbolic systems of the source culture. These elements frequently appear in the form of idiomatic expressions, proverbs, metaphors, customs, geographical references, proper names, food terminology, clothing, rituals, and historical allusions. Such culturally bound expressions often have no direct lexical equivalents in another language, making their translation one of the most demanding tasks for translators.

The notion of equivalence has occupied a prominent position in translation theory for several decades. Early linguistic approaches viewed equivalence as the reproduction of semantic correspondence between the source text and the target text. However, later scholars emphasized that linguistic equivalence alone is insufficient for literary translation because meaning is inseparable from culture. Consequently, modern translation studies increasingly recognize equivalence as a functional and communicative relationship rather than a literal linguistic match.

The debate surrounding equivalence has generated numerous theoretical models. Eugene Nida distinguished between formal equivalence, which focuses on preserving the linguistic form of the original text, and dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes producing an equivalent response in the target audience. Peter Newmark proposed semantic and communicative translation as two complementary approaches depending on the purpose of translation. Lawrence Venuti introduced the concepts of domestication and foreignization, arguing that translators inevitably make ideological choices when deciding whether to adapt cultural elements to the target culture or preserve their foreign character. Similarly, Mona Baker

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emphasized pragmatic equivalence, highlighting the importance of context, implicature, and communicative intention in intercultural communication.

Within literary discourse, cultural codes rarely function independently. Instead, they interact with stylistic devices, symbolism, narrative techniques, and character development to construct national identity. Therefore, literary translators must possess not only advanced linguistic competence but also profound intercultural awareness. An inadequate understanding of cultural references may result in semantic distortion, loss of symbolism, or even complete misunderstanding of the author's intentions. This challenge becomes particularly evident when translating works originating from cultures with distinct historical, religious, or social traditions.

The importance of preserving cultural codes has become increasingly significant in the context of globalization. While global communication encourages accessibility and standardization, literature continues to preserve linguistic diversity and cultural uniqueness. Excessive domestication may eliminate the national character of literary works, whereas excessive foreignization may reduce readability and hinder communication between the text and its new audience. Consequently, translators must continuously negotiate between fidelity to the source culture and acceptability within the target culture.

Kazakh literature provides particularly valuable material for investigating cultural codes because it reflects the nomadic worldview, oral traditions, kinship relations, hospitality customs, and steppe philosophy that characterize Kazakh national identity. Expressions such as *shanyrak*, *zhuz*, *akyn*, *dombra*, *aul*, and *beshbarmak* embody cultural meanings that cannot be fully conveyed through direct lexical substitution. Similar translation difficulties are found in English literature, where concepts rooted in British history, Christianity, social hierarchy, or folklore require careful interpretation for readers from different cultural backgrounds.

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between cultural code and equivalence in literary translation by integrating linguistic, cultural, and functional perspectives. It explores the principal translation strategies employed in rendering culture-specific elements and evaluates their effectiveness in preserving both meaning and cultural authenticity. Particular attention is devoted to

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the role of translators as intercultural mediators whose decisions influence the representation of national cultures in global literary communication.

The objectives of this research are threefold. First, it analyzes the theoretical foundations of cultural code and equivalence within modern translation studies. Second, it investigates the principal translation strategies employed in transferring culture-bound elements into another language. Finally, it evaluates the effectiveness of these strategies through literary examples and discusses their contribution to intercultural understanding. The study argues that successful literary translation cannot rely solely on lexical equivalence; instead, it requires achieving functional, pragmatic, stylistic, and cultural equivalence simultaneously to preserve both the artistic integrity of the original work and the communicative expectations of the target readership.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of translation has evolved considerably over the past century, shifting from a predominantly linguistic activity to an interdisciplinary field encompassing cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, and communication theory. Contemporary translation studies emphasize that language and culture are inseparable phenomena; therefore, literary translation must be understood as an act of intercultural communication rather than a mere linguistic substitution. Within this framework, the concepts of **cultural code** and **equivalence** have become central to understanding how literary texts are transferred across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The notion of **equivalence** has long occupied a foundational position in translation theory. Early structuralist scholars regarded equivalence as the degree of correspondence between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). However, as translation studies developed into an independent discipline, researchers increasingly questioned whether complete equivalence between languages could ever be achieved. Since each language reflects a unique cultural and cognitive system, translation inevitably involves transformation rather than exact reproduction.

One of the most influential contributions to the theory of equivalence was made by **Eugene Nida (1964)**, whose distinction between **formal equivalence** and **dynamic equivalence** significantly reshaped translation studies. Formal equivalence seeks to preserve the grammatical

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structure, lexical choices, and stylistic features of the source text as closely as possible. Although this approach maintains textual fidelity, it may produce translations that appear unnatural or difficult for target readers to understand. Dynamic equivalence, in contrast, prioritizes the communicative effect of the translation by aiming to evoke in the target audience a response comparable to that experienced by the original readers. According to Nida, successful translation is achieved when readers comprehend the translated text with similar emotional and cognitive engagement rather than through literal lexical correspondence.

Peter Newmark further expanded this discussion by distinguishing between **semantic translation** and **communicative translation**. Semantic translation emphasizes preserving the author's stylistic individuality, cultural nuances, and lexical specificity, while communicative translation seeks to maximize clarity and accessibility for the target audience. Newmark argued that literary translators should carefully balance these approaches because excessive literalism may obscure meaning, whereas excessive adaptation may diminish the artistic uniqueness of the original work.

The cultural dimension of translation gained greater prominence through the work of **Susan Bassnett** and **André Lefevere**, who argued that translation should be viewed as a form of cultural rewriting rather than linguistic transfer alone. Their approach highlights the influence of ideology, historical context, literary conventions, and social institutions on translation decisions. According to this perspective, every translation inevitably reflects the values and expectations of the receiving culture. Consequently, translators become active participants in shaping intercultural dialogue rather than neutral transmitters of textual information.

Another influential contribution to cultural translation theory comes from **Lawrence Venuti**, whose concepts of **domestication** and **foreignization** continue to dominate contemporary discussions. Domestication involves adapting culturally specific elements to conform to the norms and expectations of the target culture, thereby enhancing readability and accessibility. Foreignization, on the other hand, intentionally preserves the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of the source text, allowing readers to encounter the foreign culture without excessive adaptation.

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Venuti argues that domestication has historically dominated English-language translation, often rendering foreign literary works culturally invisible by replacing unfamiliar concepts with familiar ones. Such practices, while improving readability, may simultaneously erase the cultural identity embedded in the original text. Foreignization seeks to resist this tendency by maintaining cultural otherness, thereby encouraging readers to recognize linguistic diversity and intercultural difference. From this perspective, literary translation serves not only as communication but also as cultural education.

The concept of cultural code further enriches translation theory by emphasizing the symbolic systems through which societies organize and interpret reality. The semiotic theory developed by **Yuri Lotman** describes culture as a complex network of interconnected signs functioning collectively as a semiotic mechanism. Within literary texts, cultural codes include historical references, religious symbols, traditional customs, folklore, national mythology, kinship terminology, food culture, clothing, geographical references, and collective memory. These elements carry meanings that extend beyond their lexical definitions and often represent deeply rooted cultural values.

Similarly, **Clifford Geertz** viewed culture as a system of inherited meanings expressed through symbolic forms. According to Geertz, understanding culture requires interpreting these symbolic structures rather than merely describing observable behaviors. This anthropological perspective is particularly relevant to literary translation because translators must decode symbolic meanings before reconstructing them within another linguistic system. Consequently, literary translation becomes an interpretative act involving both linguistic competence and cultural expertise.

The linguistic relativity hypothesis proposed by **Edward Sapir** and **Benjamin Lee Whorf** also contributes significantly to discussions of cultural translation. Their theory suggests that language influences perception and conceptualization of reality, implying that speakers of different languages organize experience according to distinct cognitive frameworks. Although contemporary linguistics generally rejects strong linguistic determinism, numerous studies support the idea that cultural categories encoded within language shape communicative practices. Therefore,

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translators frequently encounter concepts lacking direct equivalents because they originate from different systems of cultural cognition.

The pragmatic dimension of equivalence has been extensively explored by **Mona Baker**, who argues that translation should be analyzed at multiple linguistic levels, including lexical, grammatical, textual, and pragmatic equivalence. Pragmatic equivalence concerns the interpretation of implied meanings, contextual assumptions, politeness conventions, and communicative intentions. Literary texts often rely heavily on implication, irony, metaphor, and intertextual references; consequently, successful translation requires reconstructing these pragmatic effects rather than merely transferring dictionary meanings.

Juliane House proposed another influential model through her theory of **functional-pragmatic equivalence**, emphasizing that translation quality depends on preserving the communicative function of the original text. According to House, translators must evaluate not only semantic content but also situational context, audience expectations, social relationships, and discourse conventions. Her model distinguishes between overt translation, which retains explicit references to the source culture, and covert translation, which adapts the text to function naturally within the target culture. This distinction is particularly relevant in literary translation, where translators continuously negotiate between cultural authenticity and reader accessibility.

From a descriptive perspective, **Gideon Toury** challenged prescriptive notions of equivalence by proposing that translations should be studied according to the norms governing target cultures rather than abstract ideals of fidelity. Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) demonstrates that translators operate within cultural systems influenced by literary traditions, publishing practices, ideological expectations, and reader preferences. Consequently, equivalence should be understood as a socially negotiated relationship rather than a universal linguistic principle.

The interpretative dimension of translation has been further developed by **Umberto Eco**, who argues that translation involves negotiation rather than replication. According to Eco, translators continuously balance multiple priorities, including semantic accuracy, stylistic consistency, cultural

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intelligibility, and aesthetic effect. Since every language possesses unique lexical, grammatical, and cultural structures, translators inevitably sacrifice certain aspects of the source text while emphasizing others. Translation therefore represents a process of informed decision-making rather than mechanical reproduction.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that literary translation operates at the intersection of language, culture, cognition, and ideology. Rather than seeking absolute equivalence, modern translation theory advocates achieving **functional equivalence**, **cultural equivalence**, **pragmatic equivalence**, and **aesthetic equivalence** simultaneously. These dimensions collectively enable translators to preserve not only informational content but also the emotional, symbolic, and artistic qualities that distinguish literary discourse from other forms of communication.

Within this theoretical framework, the concept of **cultural code** emerges as an essential analytical category for understanding translation challenges. Cultural codes encapsulate the collective knowledge, historical experiences, and symbolic values of a society, making them among the most resistant elements to translation. Their successful transfer requires translators to combine linguistic expertise with intercultural competence, critical interpretation, and literary sensitivity. Consequently, literary translation becomes an act of cultural mediation through which diverse societies gain access to one another's intellectual heritage while preserving the richness of cultural diversity.

Cultural Code in Literary Translation

The concept of **cultural code** has become increasingly significant in contemporary translation studies because literary texts function not merely as linguistic artefacts but also as repositories of collective cultural memory. Every literary work embodies a system of values, beliefs, traditions, historical experiences, and symbolic representations that shape the worldview of a particular society. These culturally embedded meanings are encoded through language and often remain inaccessible to readers who belong to different linguistic and cultural communities. Consequently, one of the primary responsibilities of the literary translator is to reconstruct these cultural meanings without diminishing either the artistic quality or the communicative effectiveness of the original text.

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Cultural codes operate on multiple linguistic and semantic levels. They include **realia**, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, metaphors, historical references, folklore, mythology, religious concepts, geographical names, food terminology, kinship systems, clothing, architecture, and national symbols. Unlike ordinary lexical items, these elements possess strong associative meanings that cannot be fully understood outside their cultural context. Their interpretation depends upon shared knowledge between the author and the original readership, making translation particularly complex.

Among the most problematic categories are **culture-specific realia**. Realia denote objects, institutions, customs, and social phenomena unique to a particular culture. For example, Kazakh words such as *shanyrak*, *dombra*, *zhuz*, *aul*, *akyn*, and *beshbarmak* represent concepts that have no direct lexical equivalents in English. Translating *shanyrak* merely as *roof* or *upper part of a yurt* eliminates its symbolic meaning as the representation of family continuity, ancestry, and national identity. Similarly, the word *dombra* refers not only to a traditional musical instrument but also to an important symbol of Kazakh cultural heritage and oral tradition. Such examples demonstrate that lexical substitution alone is insufficient to preserve cultural significance.

English literature presents similar challenges. Historical concepts such as *the House of Lords*, *Thanksgiving*, *Guy Fawkes Night*, or references to British public schools possess cultural meanings unfamiliar to readers from other linguistic backgrounds. Their translation requires not only linguistic competence but also knowledge of historical and social contexts. Translators frequently employ explanatory additions, descriptive translation, borrowing, or cultural adaptation to preserve both informational content and cultural associations.

Idiomatic expressions represent another category in which cultural codes become particularly evident. Idioms are fixed expressions whose meanings cannot be deduced from the meanings of individual words. Since idioms often originate from national history, folklore, religion, or everyday experience, literal translation usually results in semantic distortion. For example, the English idiom *to spill the beans* cannot be translated literally into many languages without losing its communicative meaning. Instead, translators seek equivalent

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idiomatic expressions that evoke similar pragmatic effects within the target culture. The same principle applies to Kazakh proverbs and phraseological units, many of which reflect nomadic traditions, hospitality, family relations, and respect for elders.

Metaphorical language further illustrates the interaction between culture and translation. Literary metaphors frequently rely on culturally specific associations that differ across societies. Animal symbolism provides a clear example. In many Western cultures, the owl symbolizes wisdom, whereas in certain Eastern traditions it may carry negative or supernatural associations. Likewise, the wolf occupies contrasting symbolic positions in different literary traditions. Translators must therefore evaluate whether preserving the original metaphor will maintain its intended emotional and symbolic impact or whether an alternative metaphor is necessary to achieve functional equivalence.

Religious and mythological references constitute another significant component of cultural codes. Biblical allusions frequently appear in English literature and often function as implicit cultural knowledge for native readers. Similarly, Kazakh literature incorporates references to Islamic traditions, Turkic mythology, oral epics, and steppe philosophy. Since these references contribute to thematic development and character construction, translators must carefully consider how much explanatory information should accompany them without interrupting the literary flow.

The translation of personal names and geographical references also reflects cultural considerations. While many proper names remain untranslated, others carry semantic or symbolic meanings essential for narrative interpretation. In fantasy literature, for instance, names often contain hidden descriptive functions. Translators must decide whether to preserve the original form or recreate its semantic significance in the target language. Such decisions directly influence readers' perception of characters and fictional worlds.

The analysis of Kazakh literary translation demonstrates the importance of preserving ethnocultural identity. Mukhtar Auezov's *The Path of Abai* contains numerous examples of traditional customs, kinship terminology, social hierarchy, and nomadic philosophy that resist literal translation. Words such as *bi*, *zhigit*, *tokal*, *ata*, and *kui* carry complex socio-cultural meanings that extend beyond dictionary definitions.

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Successful translations frequently retain these terms while providing contextual explanations, allowing readers to encounter the source culture without excessive domestication.

Translation strategies play a decisive role in transferring cultural codes. Among the most commonly applied techniques are borrowing, calque, descriptive translation, cultural substitution, generalization, explicitation, and annotation. Borrowing preserves the foreign cultural element but may reduce comprehensibility for unfamiliar readers. Cultural substitution increases readability by replacing the original concept with a culturally familiar equivalent; however, it risks erasing national identity. Descriptive translation provides semantic clarification but may disrupt stylistic economy. Consequently, translators continuously balance accuracy, readability, and cultural preservation.

Modern translation theory increasingly emphasizes that no universal strategy can adequately address every cultural challenge. Instead, translators must evaluate each case individually by considering textual function, genre, readership, communicative purpose, and cultural significance. This flexible approach reflects the dynamic nature of equivalence in literary translation.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the relationship between cultural code and equivalence represents one of the most complex dimensions of literary translation. Traditional linguistic approaches that define equivalence as lexical or grammatical correspondence cannot fully explain the transfer of culturally embedded meanings. Literary texts operate simultaneously on semantic, pragmatic, symbolic, aesthetic, and ideological levels; therefore, successful translation requires multidimensional equivalence rather than word-for-word accuracy.

The analysis further indicates that translators function as intercultural mediators whose decisions shape readers' perceptions of foreign cultures. Every translation strategy involves a compromise between preserving the authenticity of the source culture and ensuring accessibility for the target audience. Excessive domestication may simplify cultural diversity and diminish national identity, whereas excessive foreignization may reduce readability and hinder communication. Consequently, effective literary translation depends upon achieving an appropriate balance between these

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opposing tendencies.

Furthermore, globalization has intensified the importance of preserving cultural diversity through translation. As international literary exchange expands, translators increasingly contribute to intercultural dialogue by introducing readers to unfamiliar traditions, beliefs, and historical experiences. In this context, cultural codes should not be regarded as translation obstacles but rather as opportunities for expanding intercultural understanding.

The comparative analysis also confirms that modern functional theories provide more practical solutions than earlier linguistic models. Dynamic equivalence, communicative translation, pragmatic equivalence, and descriptive translation studies collectively acknowledge that translation is fundamentally an interpretative and culturally conditioned activity. Therefore, equivalence should be viewed as a flexible communicative relationship shaped by textual purpose rather than an absolute linguistic criterion.

Conclusion

Literary translation extends far beyond the transfer of linguistic forms because it involves the communication of cultural identity, collective memory, and symbolic meaning across languages. This study has demonstrated that cultural codes constitute one of the principal challenges in achieving equivalence due to their deep connection with national traditions, historical experience, and shared cultural knowledge. Since these elements frequently lack direct lexical correspondences, translators must adopt flexible strategies capable of preserving both semantic content and cultural authenticity.

The theoretical perspectives examined in this research indicate that equivalence should no longer be interpreted as complete linguistic similarity. Instead, contemporary translation studies recognize equivalence as a multidimensional concept incorporating semantic, pragmatic, functional, stylistic, and cultural dimensions. The theories proposed by Nida, Newmark, Venuti, Baker, House, Toury, Bassnett, and Eco collectively demonstrate that successful literary translation depends upon reconstructing the communicative and aesthetic functions of the original text rather than reproducing its linguistic form alone.

The analysis of culture-specific elements—including realia, idioms, metaphors, folklore, and symbolic references—

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confirms that translators perform the role of intercultural mediators. Their decisions determine how national identities are represented within global literary discourse. Appropriate translation strategies, such as borrowing, descriptive translation, explicitation, domestication, and foreignization, should therefore be selected according to the communicative purpose of the text and the cultural expectations of the target readership.

In conclusion, preserving cultural codes while achieving functional equivalence remains one of the defining objectives of literary translation. The translator's success depends not only on linguistic competence but also on profound intercultural awareness, literary sensitivity, and critical interpretation. Future research may further investigate the translation of cultural codes in contemporary multilingual literature and explore how emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, influence the preservation of cultural identity in literary translation.

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