

Viktoriia Denysenko

Zaporizhzhia National University, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine

TRANSLATING CULTURE-SPECIFIC REFERENCES IN LITERARY PROSE: FUNCTION, VOICE AND READER ACCESSIBILITY

Abstract. Culture-specific references in literary prose create translation problems that cannot be resolved through lexical substitution alone. Their meaning often depends on social relationships, historical knowledge and the narrative voice that introduces them. This paper proposes a functional framework for evaluating translation choices among retention, explicitation, cultural substitution and selective omission. The analysis brings together work on culture-specific items, translator visibility, equivalence and skopos-oriented decision-making. Through clearly identified constructed examples, it demonstrates why strategies must be judged by their effect on characterization, narrative rhythm, cultural distance and reader inference rather than by their surface similarity to an original expression. The central argument is that accessibility and cultural specificity should be treated as negotiated variables, not as mutually exclusive translation ideals. The paper presents a reproducible decision sequence for literary translators and reviewers without claiming new comparative corpus findings.

Keywords: literary translation; culture-specific items; narrative voice; explicitation; domestication; functionalism.

Introduction

Literary prose often locates readers in a social world through seemingly minor details: an address form, a festive dish, a school custom, an administrative title or a gesture whose significance depends on local history. A translator may recognize the surface meaning of a word and still face a difficult interpretive choice. Retaining the unfamiliar term preserves its cultural texture but may interrupt comprehension. Replacing it with a familiar analogue speeds reading but can suggest a social equivalence that does not exist. Explaining it can add clarity while changing the pace and distribution of information in the narrative. These decisions belong simultaneously to lexicology, stylistics, pragmatics and translation studies.

Aixelá (1996) shows why culture-specific items are relational: an expression becomes a translation problem because the receiving culture may lack the relevant object, convention or associative network. Venuti (1995) places translation choices within broader questions of cultural representation and the visibility of mediation. Baker (2018) demonstrates that non-equivalence can arise at several levels, from individual words to cohesion and implicature. A useful literary model must therefore ask what a reference does inside the story rather than simply how to replace a lexical unit.

This article develops a functional decision framework for the translation of culture-specific references in English-language literary prose. It is a conceptual study informed by published scholarship; its examples are invented and used to make alternatives explicit. It does not present newly sampled novels, translator interviews or frequency counts. The claim advanced is methodological: a translation is more accountable when the translator can identify the narrative function of a reference, compare competing strategies and explain which loss or gain each strategy creates.

What counts as a culture-specific reference?

Culture-specificity is not a permanent quality sealed inside a word. A title of office, a meal or a public ceremony may be recognizable to one readership and opaque to another. Moreover, the same lexical item can serve very different literary purposes.

A festival name may provide setting in one scene, trigger nostalgia in another and become an ironic marker of class or generational difference elsewhere. Treating it as a fixed dictionary entry ignores how the narrative distributes information. Aixelá's (1996) approach usefully directs attention to the relationship between source expression and target readership, but practical analysis must also map the expression onto focalization and voice.

The first relevant level is referential: what entity, practice or institution is being invoked? The second is associative: what evaluative and historical resonances are likely to matter? The third is narrative: whose perspective makes the item meaningful, and what does the reader know at that point in the story? The fourth is stylistic: does the term contribute to rhythm, register, dialogue credibility or a recurring motif? A translation that preserves only reference may still change the scene by erasing connotation, perspective or social distance.

Consider an invented sentence: 'He called her auntie, although they were not related.' The expression 'auntie' may communicate affection, customary politeness, age hierarchy or irony depending on narrative context. Substituting a neutral title would retain some interpersonal orientation yet lose the kinship metaphor. Conversely, a literal retention in a target language might sound unusually intimate. The correct decision cannot be established from the isolated expression; it depends on whether the narrator foregrounds ambiguity and how the relationship unfolds across the text.

Four strategy families and their trade-offs

Retention carries the original term into the target text, with or without typographical marking. It foregrounds cultural difference and may support recurring motifs, but repeated unexplained retention can create an unequal interpretive burden. Explication adds information either locally or in paratext. It can make a crucial relation accessible, but it can also introduce a narrator-like explanation where the source relies on inference. Cultural substitution uses a familiar target-language expression for a roughly comparable practice or institution; it may preserve communicative function while misrepresenting the setting. Omission removes a detail that appears expendable under constraints, yet may erase a pattern only visible across the narrative.

These are analytical categories rather than a universal hierarchy. Nord's (1997) functionalism foregrounds the purpose of the target text and its relationship to a commissioning and reading situation. However, purpose alone cannot justify the removal of features central to a work's narrative ethics. A literary translation must often maintain productive ambiguity and estrangement rather than resolve every difficulty. The framework therefore treats the intended readership and publishing format as constraints while also asking whether the chosen strategy respects character perspective and textual coherence.

Venuti's (1995) distinction between domestication and foreignization is relevant but should not be collapsed into a binary scoring rule. A translator might retain a culturally marked food name and nevertheless simplify a complex form of address in dialogue. Strategies can vary within the same paragraph because references serve different functions. The philological task is to evaluate concrete choices and their effects on tone, not to classify the entire book as either culturally faithful or assimilating on the basis of one example.

A context-sensitive decision sequence

The proposed sequence begins by identifying the referent and gathering information about its cultural use. The translator then marks its function in the immediate scene and across the larger narrative. Next, at least two plausible target solutions are drafted. Each is tested against four criteria: factual accuracy, preservation of characterization, readability in context and coherence of recurring motifs. The final choice is accompanied by a short rationale for any significant shift in register or cultural distance. This sequence does not eliminate judgement; it makes the judgement inspectable and revisable.

Take a deliberately invented narrative fragment: 'The family placed the ceremonial loaf at the center of the table before speaking.' If a particular ceremony is essential later, generic substitution such as 'bread' removes a cultural signal and may interrupt cross-scene cohesion. A retained term with a subtle contextual clue may preserve unfamiliarity while giving the reader enough information to follow the action. A lengthy explanation inside the sentence, however, could disrupt the quietly observed narrative voice. The choice should be based on what the literary passage asks readers to infer at this moment, not on an abstract mandate to explain everything unfamiliar.

Translation reviewers can use a compact comparative record: original expression, narrative situation, candidate renderings, anticipated gains and losses, and reason for selection. Where a cultural reference recurs, the record should track consistency and any deliberately justified variation. The procedure resembles a mini-critical apparatus: it allows translation choices to be evaluated as arguments about a text. Baker's (2018) discussion of pragmatic and textual equivalence supports this attention to the way local choices affect the coherence of larger discourse units.

Voice, focalization and reader inference

The narrator's voice can be more important than the apparent difficulty of a reference. A culturally unfamiliar item may be entirely ordinary to a first-person narrator; explaining it within the narrative could transform that narrator into an instructor addressing outsiders. Conversely, a character newly entering a community may herself experience a reference as strange. In that case clarification can be integral to focalization. A good strategy keeps the informational position of the reader aligned with the perspective established by the text, whether that alignment creates recognition, uncertainty or gradual discovery.

Dialogue presents a related challenge. Honorifics, nicknames and kinship-based address often encode status, intimacy and conflict. A fluent target-language sentence can still be pragmatically inaccurate if it changes who is entitled to speak casually and who must show deference. Review therefore needs to consider speech acts, turn-taking and interpersonal asymmetries. It is insufficient to verify that the referential content of each sentence has been transferred. The surrounding sequence may require a repeated lexical feature whose significance accumulates only over several exchanges.

Reader accessibility should not be equated with complete transparency. Literature can deliberately withhold explanations so that the reader experiences partial understanding, notices cultural specificity and interprets contextual clues. Yet unnecessary opacity may obscure relationships essential to the plot. The goal is calibrated access: enough information to sustain intended narrative inference without eliminating the literary work performed by uncertainty. That goal explains why

footnotes, glossaries and embedded paraphrases are not interchangeable; each locates interpretive work in a different place and changes reading time.

Micro-level revision and recurring motifs

The value of a function-sensitive translation model becomes especially apparent when a culture-specific item returns at different narrative moments. Imagine a fictional object introduced at a family gathering and mentioned again during a later conflict. At the first appearance, readers may need a contextual clue to identify the object; at the second, recognition of the recurring term may carry an emotional association created by the earlier scene. A translator who changes strategy unpredictably can break this link. The solution is not necessarily identical wording in every passage, but it does require a record of when variation preserves the same motif and when variation obscures it. Local fluency and global coherence must be evaluated together.

Revision should also examine who has access to cultural knowledge in the fictional world. An omniscient narrator may identify a ritual directly, whereas a younger or newly arrived character may misunderstand it. If the original passage conveys misunderstanding through an incomplete label, an explanatory translation could prematurely solve a narrative problem. The opposite issue arises when a target reader cannot recognize a detail that the source reader would have understood immediately. Here a restrained contextual cue may restore a functional balance. Equivalence in literary translation cannot mean identical information at every word; it concerns patterns of access, delay and recognition across the reading experience.

A translator can conduct a controlled self-comparison by producing a retained version, a minimally explicit version and a culturally substituted version of one difficult sentence. Each draft is then read in its paragraph, not in isolation. The reviewer identifies which character's voice dominates, how quickly the sentence can be processed, whether cultural distance remains perceptible and whether any unintended social claim has been introduced. Such a procedure is more instructive than declaring one strategy faithful and another free. The aim is to produce reasons that could be evaluated by a second reader with knowledge of the relevant cultures.

Translation commentary as philological evidence

An accompanying commentary can strengthen the evidential basis of a translation decision. The translator may cite historical materials, dictionaries, parallel texts or established accounts of a custom when an unfamiliar referent requires confirmation. Those sources should be distinguished from the translator's aesthetic judgments. For example, a dictionary may help establish what an institution was called, but it cannot by itself show how a fictional narrator intends the reference to resonate emotionally. Literary function is argued from textual relations, speaker positioning and recurring patterns, with cultural research serving as context rather than a substitute for close reading.

Editorial collaboration introduces another variable. A publishing house may prefer fewer footnotes, a target audience may include students and general readers, or an audiobook edition may make parenthetical explanation sound especially disruptive. Functionalism draws attention to these conditions (Nord, 1997), yet the literary translator still needs to articulate the price of each editorial adjustment. Rather than treating publisher expectations as an unquestionable command, the framework

proposes explicit negotiation between accessibility, text integrity and readers' interpretive opportunities. This approach also makes the translator's professional role visible without requiring intrusive explanation in the work itself.

A particularly difficult case arises with humour, where cultural reference and timing can be inseparable. An allusion whose point depends on a short, unexpected turn may not survive lengthy clarification. Retention could preserve the foreign element but leave the joke obscure, while substitution might transfer comic timing at the expense of historical specificity. The translator should first identify what makes the episode comic—wordplay, social incongruity, character misunderstanding or an institutional stereotype—before comparing options. If no strategy retains every feature, the commentary can explain which function was prioritized and why. This is a defensible account of trade-offs, not proof that a particular audience will find the result equally humorous.

These examples show why translating culture-specific references is best treated as linked decision-making across levels. Word meaning, narrative perspective, rhetorical timing and readership are not independent variables that can be optimized one at a time. A solution that improves clarity at sentence level may damage a motif, while a solution that preserves one local association may compromise character voice. The proposed framework asks reviewers to make such interactions explicit and thereby supports criticism that evaluates literary effects rather than merely counting retained foreign terms.

Evaluation, limitations and implications

A systematic evaluation could compare published translations of the same literary passage, using an agreed coding manual for reference type, strategy and narrative effect. Reviewers would need to establish whose reader experience is represented rather than treating their own intuitions as universal. Interviews with translators might reveal editorial constraints, while reader studies could test whether proposed solutions support particular inferences. Such research should report its selection criteria and avoid treating a small convenience sample as representative of an entire literary tradition. The present paper proposes that agenda but offers no empirical outcomes from it.

The framework has limits. It presumes that a translator can reconstruct relevant cultural context, although historical meanings may remain contested. It may also be difficult to separate stylistic intention from accidental ambiguity. Finally, a publishing brief can constrain the range of available strategies. These limits strengthen the need for explicit decisions rather than negate the framework. Accountability in translation is rarely the absence of compromise; it is the willingness to identify what a compromise changes.

Conclusions

The translation of culture-specific references in fiction is a problem of narrative function, not simply lexical equivalence. Retention, explicitation, substitution and omission each redistribute knowledge between text and reader. A responsible choice considers referential accuracy together with voice, focalization, rhythm and the persistence of motifs. The proposed sequence provides a way to compare alternatives and justify trade-offs in a form that other translators can assess. It also keeps clear the distinction between a theoretically plausible solution and a demonstrated reader response. Literary translation remains an interpretive act whose quality depends on making cultural distance meaningful rather than automatically maximizing or eliminating it.

REFERENCES

1. Aixelá, J. F. (1996). Culture-specific items in translation. In R. Álvarez & M. C.-Á. Vidal (Eds.), *Translation, power, subversion* (pp. 52–78). *Multilingual Matters*.
2. Baker, M. (2018). *In other words: A coursebook on translation* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
3. Nord, C. (1997). *Translating as a purposeful activity: Functionalist approaches explained*. St. Jerome Publishing.
4. Pedersen, J. (2011). Subtitling norms for television: An exploration focussing on extralinguistic cultural references. *John Benjamins*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.98>.
5. Venuti, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge.