

CULTURAL REALIA IN TRANSLATION: ADAPTATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

Sobirjonova Mushtariy Muzaffar qizi

2nd year student of Namangan state institute of foreign languages

Annotation: This paper explores the linguistic and cultural challenges encountered when translating cultural realia—elements deeply embedded in a specific culture such as food, rituals, social institutions, and folklore—into English. It focuses on two major strategies: **adaptation**, which involves replacing culture-bound items with culturally equivalent ones in the target language, and **transcription**, which retains the original term, often with a gloss or explanation. Through theoretical analysis and practical examples from the Uzbek-English translation context, the study highlights how these approaches help translators navigate between **fidelity to source culture** and **comprehensibility to the target audience**. The findings emphasize that neither strategy is universally superior; rather, the choice must be dictated by **textual purpose, genre, and target readership**. By understanding these strategies, translators can make informed decisions that ensure both cultural authenticity and reader accessibility.

Keywords: cultural realia, adaptation, transcription, translation strategies, culture-specific items (csi), intercultural communication, uzbek-english translation, cultural equivalence, linguistic challenges, translational fidelity

The translation of cultural realia—terms, expressions, or concepts specific to a particular culture—is one of the most challenging tasks in cross-cultural communication. These elements carry deep cultural meanings that often have no direct equivalents in the target language. The significance of this topic lies in its central role in preserving cultural identity while ensuring comprehension for the target audience.

Adaptation and **transcription** are two primary strategies used by translators to deal with cultural realia. **Adaptation** allows translators to replace culturally specific elements with more familiar ones to the target audience, promoting better understanding and emotional resonance. In contrast, **transcription** (or transliteration) maintains the original form, preserving authenticity and introducing readers to foreign concepts.

This topic is crucial in literary translation, subtitling, tourism texts, historical documents, and other fields where cultural accuracy and audience engagement must be balanced. Studying these strategies helps translators make informed choices that respect both the source and target cultures. Furthermore, it contributes to broader discussions on globalization, intercultural dialogue, and the role of translation in shaping worldviews.

The concept of *cultural realia* refers to words and expressions that are closely tied to the culture, traditions, institutions, food, clothing, or geography of a particular community (Newmark, 1988). These terms often lack direct equivalents in other languages and require translators to apply specific strategies to bridge the cultural gap. Scholars such as Nida (1964), Vinay & Darbelnet (1995), and Baker (2011) emphasize

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the importance of conveying both the denotative meaning and the connotative-cultural associations of such terms during translation.

Adaptation is a widely discussed method in translation studies. According to Peter Newmark (1988), adaptation is the “freest” form of translation, often used in translating plays, advertising, and folklore. It involves replacing culture-specific elements with ones that are more familiar to the target audience. For instance, when translating Uzbek cultural realia like “*sumalak*”, a translator might describe it as “a traditional spring dish made from wheatgrass” to help English readers understand its significance.

On the other hand, transcription (or transliteration) preserves the source term in its original or phonetically equivalent form, often with a footnote or explanation. This method is commonly used to retain the authenticity of the source culture and is often employed in academic texts, literature, and ethnographic works (Baker, 2011). For example, the Uzbek word “*Navruz*” is typically transcribed into English as “Navruz” rather than being translated, since it represents a unique cultural event with no exact equivalent.

Scholars like Aixelá (1996) introduced the term *culture-specific items* (CSIs), categorizing strategies like omission, literal translation, explicitation, adaptation, and borrowing (transcription) as potential solutions. The choice between these strategies depends on the function of the text, the audience's familiarity with the source culture, and the translator's intent.

The central challenge of translating cultural realia lies in maintaining cultural fidelity while ensuring readability for the target audience. For example:

Uzbek phrase: “*Qo‘sh ko‘rpa to‘shab mehmon kutdi.*”

Adaptation: “She welcomed the guest warmly and offered a comfortable bed.”

Transcription with explanation: “She laid out a *qo‘sh ko‘rpa* (double-layered traditional quilt) for the guest.”

Uzbek word: “*Mahalla*”

Adaptation: “Local neighborhood community”

Transcription: “Mahalla” (often followed by a footnote or glossary entry)

These examples show how adaptation improves clarity for an unfamiliar reader, while transcription preserves cultural nuance and authenticity.

Translating culture-specific items often requires either adaptation (changing the original term to suit the target culture) or transcription (retaining the original form, often with explanation). Below are several examples from Uzbek-to-English translation practice.

1. Uzbek Realium: “Sumalak”

Transcription. During Navruz celebrations, Uzbek families prepare sumalak together in large pots outdoors. The word sumalak is left unchanged and unfamiliar to English readers, but the context helps explain it.

Adaptation. During spring festivities, families cook a traditional sweet paste made from sprouted wheat. The meaning is made accessible, but the specific cultural identity of sumalak is lost.

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Why use transcription? To maintain cultural authenticity, especially when the term is central to the cultural setting.

Why use adaptation? When comprehension is more important than authenticity.

2. Uzbek Realium: “Mahalla”

Transcription with explanation. The mahalla (traditional neighborhood community) plays a central role in social life in Uzbekistan.

Adaptation. The local community organization serves as a support system for residents. Here, transcription introduces the reader to a new cultural concept, while adaptation replaces it with a familiar term that may not fully capture its meaning.

3. Uzbek Realium: “Osh”

Transcription. The guests were served a generous portion of osh, a national rice dish, often cooked during weddings.

Adaptation. The guests were served a large dish of spiced rice and meat, similar to pilaf. Using osh signals a distinct national dish, while describing it as “spiced rice and meat” makes it more relatable to non-Uzbek readers.

4. Uzbek Phrase: “Qo‘sh ko‘rpa to‘shash”

Literal Transcription. She laid out a qo‘sh ko‘rpa for the guest. (Requires a footnote or gloss explaining it's a double-layered traditional quilt.)

Adaptation. She prepared a soft and comfortable bed for the guest. The first keeps the cultural item intact; the second prioritizes reader understanding.

5. Uzbek Custom: “Beshik To‘yi”

Transcription. They held a traditional beshik to‘yi (cradle ceremony) for their newborn son.

Adaptation. They organized a baby-naming and cradle ceremony to celebrate their son's birth. The adapted version explains the function, while transcription preserves the unique term.

6. Uzbek Term: “Ayvon”

Transcription. They had tea on the ayvon, a shaded wooden veranda commonly found in Uzbek homes.

Adaptation. They had tea on the shaded porch. While “porch” is a close substitute, it doesn't convey the cultural uniqueness of ayvon.

7. Uzbek Clothing: “Do‘ppi”

Transcription. He wore a traditional do‘ppi, embroidered with national patterns.

Adaptation. He wore a traditional Uzbek skullcap.

Adaptation offers clarity, while transcription adds ethnic and cultural flavor.

These examples show that transcription is useful when cultural preservation is key, especially in literary or ethnographic translation. Adaptation works best in functional texts (e.g., journalism, advertising, or children's books), where clarity for the reader is the priority. Often, hybrid strategies are best: use transcription with brief explanations for balance—introducing cultural terms without losing the reader.

In the translation of cultural realia, both adaptation and transcription serve vital roles. Adaptation enhances accessibility and emotional resonance, whereas transcription

safeguards cultural identity. A successful translation balances these approaches depending on the context, purpose, and target audience. For translators, mastering these strategies is essential for fostering intercultural understanding and accurately transmitting meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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