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# LINGUOCULTURAL FEATURES OF REALIA IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF MARK TWAIN AND O. HENRY

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**Abstract.** The article examines realia as a special layer of culture-specific, equivalent-lacking vocabulary in fiction and the ways of rendering it in Russian translation. Drawing on the classifications of S. Vlakhov and S. Florin and I. S. Alekseeva, the study focuses on ethnographic realia: everyday life, labour, art and culture, ethnic objects, measures and money. The material comprises 108 ethnographic realia selected from 43 short stories by O. Henry, supplemented by observations on Mark Twain's story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County". Realia of everyday life (52.78%) and of art and culture (26.85%) proved to be the most frequent; within everyday life, food and drink account for about half of all units. Transcription and calque were found to be the most common translation techniques. The results confirm that realia serve not only stylistic purposes but also recreate the national, local and historical colour of an American literary text.

**Keywords:** realia, equivalent-lacking vocabulary, lacunae, ethnographic realia, national colour, translation techniques, transcription, calque, Mark Twain, O. Henry.

## Introduction

No comparison of languages and cultures is possible without knowledge of realia, or equivalent-lacking vocabulary. Equivalent-lacking vocabulary is understood as foreign words and word combinations denoting objects and processes that have no equivalents in the target language at a given stage of its development [4]. This type of interlingual relationship is described by the terms "non-equivalence" and "cultural-linguistic lacunae".

Realia form the background knowledge of a reader. They create the real setting against which the picture of life of another country and another people unfolds. The problem of translating such "lacunae" — situations that are ordinary in one culture but absent in another — has been studied by V. S. Vinogradov, E. M. Vereshchagin, V. G. Kostomarov, S. Vlakhov, S. Florin, A. V. Fedorov, V. N. Komissarov, L. S. Barkhudarov, G. D. Tomakhin, V. N. Krupnov, I. S. Alekseeva and many other scholars.

Fiction is the area where realia are especially productive. In a literary text they perform not only a stylistic function but also recreate national, local and historical colour. American short-story writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — above all Mark Twain and O. Henry — wrote about the everyday life of ordinary people, and their texts are saturated with names of food, clothing, transport, coins, games and holidays. This makes their works convenient material for studying realia.

The aim of the article is to identify the features of the use of ethnographic realia in the works of Mark Twain and O. Henry and to determine the main ways of rendering them in Russian translation. To reach this aim, the following tasks were set: to review the main definitions and classifications of realia; to describe the techniques of their translation; to select and classify realia from the literary texts; and to establish which groups of realia and which translation techniques prevail.



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**Theoretical background**

Scholars define realia in different ways. According to M. L. Vaisburg, realia include events of the social and cultural life of a country, public organisations and institutions, customs and traditions, household objects, geographical names, works of art and literature, names of historical figures, public figures, scientists, writers, composers, actors, popular athletes and literary characters, natural phenomena, and so on. L. N. Sobolev uses the term "realia" for everyday and specifically national words and phrases that have no equivalents in the everyday life of another people. L. S. Barkhudarov defines realia as objects of material and spiritual culture [1].

Western authors do not always use a single term. P. Newmark, for example, has no term corresponding to "realia" in our sense. Instead, he speaks of national institutional terms, which partly correspond to socio-political realia, and cultural terms, which cover most of the remaining realia; other groups are scattered across his classification [5, p. 153].

The best-known definition belongs to S. Vlakhov and S. Florin. In their view, realia are words and word combinations naming objects characteristic of the life (everyday life, culture, social and historical development) of one people and alien to another [2, p. 47].

This study focuses on **ethnographic realia**, because a clear understanding of these terms helps the reader enter another culture. This group covers everyday life, work, art and culture, units of measurement and money. I. S. Alekseeva divides ethnographic realia into six groups: clothing and footwear; buildings and household objects; national occupations and the names of those who practise them; customs, rituals and games; mythology and cults; measures and money [3]. Vlakhov and Florin offer a more detailed scheme [2, pp. 57–59]:

1. **Everyday life:** food and drink; clothing, footwear and headwear; housing, furniture and utensils; transport and its "drivers"; other.
2. **Labour:** working people; tools; organisation of labour.
3. **Art and culture:** music and dance; musical instruments; folklore; theatre; other arts and objects of art; performers; customs and rituals; holidays and games; mythology; cults; calendar.
4. **Ethnic objects:** ethnonyms; nicknames (usually humorous or offensive).
5. **Measures and money:** units of measurement; monetary units; colloquial names of both.

This scheme was used as the basis for classifying the material of the present study.

**Methods of rendering realia in translation**

There are two main difficulties in translating realia: the absence of a correspondence in the target language, because its speakers lack the object the realia denotes; and the need to convey not only the subject meaning of the realia but also its colour — its national and historical connotation [2, p. 82].

In principle, all techniques used in translation practice can be reduced to four: transcription and transliteration; calque; analogue, or approximate correspondence; and interpretation, or explanatory translation.

- **Transcription** renders the sound form of a word with the letters of the target language, keeping it as close to the original as possible.
- **Calque** translates a compound word or word combination part by part.
- **Analogue** is a target-language word that denotes a similar but not identical concept.
- **Explanatory translation** almost always expands the text, which is its main drawback.

Zh. A. Golikova distinguishes three techniques: transcription, transliteration and translation. Introducing a neologism in the form of a calque or semi-calque means borrowing through literal translation, as in Red Army man — красноармеец, or partial borrowing, as in Decembrist — декабрист.


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Approximate translation includes genus-species substitution (Нарзан, Боржоми — mineral water), a functional analogue (so many miles — very far) and description (Two boys were playing flys up with a soft ball — Мальчики играли в мяч). Contextual translation conveys the content through a transformed context: Сколько стоит путёвка на курорт? — How much are accommodations at health resorts? L. K. Latyshev and A. L. Semenov name transliteration, calque, descriptive translation and approximate translation.

Vlakhov and Florin reduce all techniques to two: transcription and translation. Their general scheme looks as follows [2, p. 118]:

1. Transcription (and transliteration).
2. Translation (substitution):

a. Neologism: calque; semi-calque; assimilation; semantic neologism.

b. Replacement of realia.

c. Approximate translation: genus-species substitution; functional analogue; description, explanation, interpretation.

d. Contextual translation.

This scheme was used to analyse the translations in the present study.

**Material and analysis**

The main material of the study is 108 ethnographic realia selected by continuous sampling from 43 short stories by O. Henry [7]. It is supplemented by realia from Mark Twain's story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" and its Russian translation by N. Daruzes [6].

**Mark Twain.** Twain's story takes place in "the decaying mining camp of Angel's" in California during the Gold Rush period. Its realia reflect the life of a frontier settlement: the tavern where the narrator meets Simon Wheeler, the unfinished flume of the miners, the camp-meeting where Jim Smiley is ready to bet on anything, and Parson Walker. Money realia (forty dollars) show that betting is the centre of the characters' life. Particularly interesting are the names of historical figures given to animals: the bull-pup Andrew Jackson and the frog Dan'l Webster. For an American reader these names of a president and a famous orator carry irony; for a Russian reader, without a commentary, this layer of meaning is largely lost. Twain's realia are also closely linked with colloquial speech, so the translator has to convey both the object and the narrator's folksy manner.

**O. Henry.** O. Henry is one of the founders and perhaps the greatest master of the modern American short story. His stories are addressed to a broad public, which he understood very well. Their realia name the details of city life in New York: food and drinks (Sally Lunns, Manhattan cocktail, New Orleans sweetening), transport (Pullmans, cab), music and dance (ragtime, jigs), folklore (Jack Frost), holidays and entertainment (Thanksgiving Day, quail-eating contest), ethnonyms (Yankees) and measures (mile, pint). In "The Gift of the Magi" money realia are central to the plot: the story opens with Della counting one dollar and eighty-seven cents, and the rent of the flat at $8 per week shows the poverty of the young couple.

The table shows typical examples with their group and the technique used to render them in Russian.

| Realia | Author | Group | Translation technique | Russian rendering |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Thanksgiving Day | O. Henry | Holidays and games | Calque | День благодарения |
| Manhattan cocktail | O. Henry | Food and drink | Transcription | коктейль «Манхэттен» |


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| Realia | Author | Group | Translation technique | Russian rendering |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sally Lunns | O. Henry | Food and drink | Transcription + explanation | булочки «Салли Ланн» |
| Pullmans | O. Henry | Transport | Genus-species substitution | спальные вагоны |
| ragtime | O. Henry | Music and dance | Transcription | регтайм |
| jigs | O. Henry | Music and dance | Transcription | джига |
| Jack Frost | O. Henry | Mythology, folklore | Functional analogue | Дед Мороз |
| Yankees | O. Henry | Ethnonyms | Transcription | янки |
| mile, pint | O. Henry | Measures | Transcription | миля, пинта |
| one dollar and eighty-seven cents | O. Henry | Money | Transcription | один доллар восемьдесят семь центов |
| pier-glass | O. Henry | Furniture | Description | узкое простенное зеркало |
| camp-meeting | Mark Twain | Customs, cults | Description | молитвенное собрание под открытым небом |
| flume | Mark Twain | Labour | Genus-species substitution | жёлоб, водовод |
| tavern | Mark Twain | Everyday life | Analogue | трактир |
| Andrew Jackson, Dan'l Webster | Mark Twain | Names of historical figures | Transcription | Эндрю Джексон, Дэниел Уэбстер |

**Results and discussion**

The 108 ethnographic realia from O. Henry's stories were distributed among the subgroups of the Vlakhov–Florin classification: everyday life, art and culture, measures and money, ethnic objects, and labour. Realia of everyday life and of art and culture clearly prevail.

| Group of realia | Number of units | Share of the sample |
|---|---|---|
| Everyday life | 57 | 52.78% |
| Art and culture | 29 | 26.85% |



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| Group of realia | Number of units | Share of the sample |
|---|---|---|
| Labour, ethnic objects, measures and money (together) | 22 | 20.37% |
| **Total** | **108** | **100%** |

Within the group of everyday life, realia of food and drink take the leading position — 28 units, or about half of the group. Within art and culture, the largest subgroup is holidays and games (12 units). This is natural: O. Henry describes the daily life of clerks, shop girls, waiters and tramps, for whom a meal, a cheap restaurant or a holiday is an important event.

Twain's story shows a different picture. Here realia are tied to the frontier: the mining camp, labour (the flume), religious life (camp-meeting, the parson) and gambling. Names of historical figures play a special role, since they create humour that depends entirely on the reader's background knowledge. Thus, while O. Henry's realia mainly create the colour of the big city, Twain's realia create the colour of the West and of the American oral tradition.

As for translation techniques, the analysis covered description, genus-species substitution, assimilation, transcription, transliteration, semi-calque, functional analogue, contextual translation, replacement of realia and calque. In practice, **transcription and calque** were found to be the most frequent. Transcription preserves the national colour (ragtime — регтайм, Yankees — янки, pint — пинта), while calque makes compound realia understandable (Thanksgiving Day — День благодарения). Description and genus-species substitution are used when the object is unfamiliar to the Russian reader and the realia is not important for the plot (camp-meeting, Pullmans). A functional analogue (Jack Frost — Дед Мороз) makes the text easier to read but partly removes its foreign colour.

**Conclusion**

The study confirmed that both Mark Twain and O. Henry use realia quite often, and that ethnographic realia form the largest and leading group in the material. In O. Henry's stories, realia of everyday life (52.78%) and of art and culture (26.85%) are the most frequent. Within everyday life, realia of food and drink prevail (about 49%), and within art and culture — realia of holidays and games. These realia reflect the everyday life of ordinary people. Units such as Sally Lunns, Manhattan cocktail, Pullmans, New Orleans sweetening, cab, jigs, ragtime, Jack Frost, quail-eating contest, Thanksgiving Day, Yankees, mile and pint convey national colour and introduce the reader to American culture. In Twain's story, realia recreate the life of a mining camp in the Far West and are closely connected with humour and colloquial speech.

Among the translation techniques, transcription and calque were found to be the most common, in line with the Vlakhov–Florin classification. In any kind of translation it is constantly necessary to render new words, or new meanings of existing words, that are not yet recorded in dictionaries. Knowledge of realia helps the translator find a correspondence that may later become a permanent one. The absence of an exact lexical equivalent does not mean that the meaning cannot be conveyed in context, nor that the word will remain untranslatable in the future: the history of every language shows that its vocabulary constantly changes.

Knowledge of realia is knowledge of culture, and a broad cultural background also develops linguistic skills. Two national cultures never coincide completely, since each consists of national and international elements in different combinations. In fiction, realia serve not only stylistic purposes but also recreate national, local and historical colour, which is why they deserve the special attention of translators, teachers and learners of English.


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