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LITERARY TRANSLATION AS CULTURAL MEDIATION: PRESERVING IDENTITY AND CULTURAL MEANING IN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

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Abstract. Literary translation represents a complex form of intercultural communication in which translators mediate not only between languages but also between cultural systems. The transfer of a literary work into English requires decisions concerning cultural identity, historical references, social values, traditions, symbolism, and culturally embedded meanings. This article examines literary translation as a form of cultural mediation and focuses on the preservation of cultural identity and cultural meaning in English translations. The study employs a qualitative review and analytical approach based on contemporary translation studies and theoretical research concerning cultural transfer. Particular attention is paid to culture-specific items, literary style, historical references, metaphor, idiomatic expressions, and forms of social interaction. The analysis demonstrates that linguistic accuracy alone cannot guarantee successful cultural representation. Translation may preserve the denotative meaning of an expression while altering its cultural associations or pragmatic function. The article argues that cultural mediation requires a balance between accessibility for English-speaking readers and the preservation of source-cultural specificity. The translator therefore performs an interpretive and mediating function that is central to the international circulation of literature.

Keywords: literary translation, cultural mediation, cultural identity, English translation, intercultural communication, cultural meaning, translator.

Introduction. Literature provides readers with access to cultural experiences that may exist outside their own historical and social environments. When a literary work is translated into English, the translation becomes a significant channel through which cultural representations reach an international readership.

English occupies a particularly important position in global literary communication. Works originally written in languages with relatively smaller international readerships may reach broader audiences through English translations. However, international accessibility creates a fundamental translation problem: how can cultural identity be preserved while making the text understandable to readers who do not share the source culture?

The problem is especially complex because cultural meaning is often implicit. Literary texts contain references to traditions, social relationships, historical experiences, values, geographical environments, and collective memories. These elements may not have direct linguistic equivalents in English.

The purpose of this article is to examine literary translation as cultural mediation and to identify the principal factors influencing the preservation of cultural identity in English translations.

Methods. The research adopts a qualitative review-based methodology. Major theoretical approaches in translation studies, cultural translation, and intercultural communication were examined to identify principles relevant to cultural mediation.

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The analysis focuses on five categories:

1. culture-specific vocabulary;
2. historical and social references;
3. idiomatic and metaphorical expressions;
4. forms of address and interpersonal communication;
5. symbolic and culturally embedded meanings.

The study compares possible translation approaches according to their capacity to preserve cultural information while maintaining comprehensibility for English-speaking readers.

Rather than treating translation as a simple equivalence relationship, the research approaches it as a process of intercultural interpretation.

Translation Beyond Linguistic Equivalence

Traditional approaches to translation often emphasize correspondence between linguistic units. Literary translation demonstrates the limitations of this perspective.

A single word may contain cultural associations that cannot be transferred through a dictionary equivalent. For example, a culturally specific term may evoke a particular historical period, social practice, or collective memory. An English equivalent may communicate the general reference but fail to reproduce these associations.

Therefore, cultural mediation requires the translator to consider both semantic meaning and cultural function.

Preservation of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity in literature is constructed through multiple textual elements. Names of people and places, traditional objects, forms of address, clothing, food, rituals, historical events, and social relationships all contribute to the cultural environment of a literary work.

Preserving these elements can help English-speaking readers recognize the cultural origin of the text. Excessive adaptation, by contrast, may create a text that reads naturally in English but no longer reflects the cultural specificity of the source.

The preservation of identity does not necessarily mean reproducing every expression literally. Literal translation can itself distort cultural meaning when an expression has an established cultural function that differs from its surface form.

The translator must therefore identify what should be preserved: the literal wording, the cultural reference, the emotional effect, the symbolic function, or a combination of these elements.

Cultural Meaning and Literary Style

Cultural mediation is closely connected with literary style. Authors frequently construct cultural identity through particular patterns of speech, idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and forms of dialogue.

An English translation that replaces culturally marked expressions with completely neutral language may preserve basic information but reduce stylistic and cultural richness.

For example, an idiomatic expression can reveal how characters conceptualize emotions, relationships, or social situations. Replacing it with a neutral sentence may make the translation clear but eliminate the cultural imagery present in the source text.

Consequently, stylistic preservation should be considered an essential component of cultural mediation.

Historical and Social Context

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Historical references present another major challenge. Literary works frequently refer to events, institutions, social structures, or collective experiences that may be familiar to source-culture readers but unknown to international audiences.

The translator must decide whether contextual information should be incorporated into the translation, provided through a note, or left implicit.

A completely unexplained reference may preserve source-text structure but create comprehension difficulties. Excessive explanation, on the other hand, can interrupt the literary rhythm.

The appropriate solution depends on the importance of the reference to the narrative. If a historical reference is essential for understanding characterization or plot development, clarification may be necessary. If it functions primarily as atmospheric background, preserving the original reference may be preferable.

The Translator as Cultural Mediator

The translator occupies an intermediary position between the author, source culture, and target readership. This position involves continuous interpretation.

The translator must understand the source text deeply enough to recognize culturally embedded meanings and simultaneously understand English-language literary conventions sufficiently to communicate these meanings effectively.

This dual responsibility means that translation is neither complete domestication nor complete preservation. It is a process of negotiation.

The translator may retain a culturally specific term, modify its surrounding context, provide implicit clarification, or select an English expression that reproduces its function rather than its literal form.

Cultural Mediation and English as a Global Literary Language

The increasing circulation of literature through English translations gives cultural mediation particular significance. English translations can introduce readers to literary traditions from diverse linguistic communities.

At the same time, the international status of English can create pressure toward linguistic normalization. Texts may be adjusted to dominant English-language literary expectations, potentially reducing linguistic and cultural difference.

A culturally responsible translation therefore needs to maintain the distinctive characteristics of the source work while remaining accessible to its new readership.

Main Findings

The analysis identifies several principles of effective cultural mediation:

Dimension	Translation challenge	Possible mediation strategy
Culture-specific vocabulary	Lack of direct equivalent	Retention, contextual adaptation, or explanation
Historical references	Limited target-reader knowledge	Contextual clarification where necessary
Idioms	Cultural imagery may be lost	Functional or culturally sensitive equivalence
Forms of address	Social relationships may disappear	Preservation of interpersonal distinctions
Metaphors	Literal transfer may distort meaning	Context-sensitive reconstruction

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Symbols	Cultural associations may be unfamiliar	Preservation with contextual support
Social practices	Target readers may lack background knowledge	Selective explanation or contextualization

These findings indicate that successful literary translation should be evaluated not only by linguistic accuracy but also by cultural adequacy.

Conclusion. Literary translation is fundamentally a process of cultural mediation. The translator transfers not only words and sentences but also representations of history, identity, social relationships, traditions, values, and cultural memory.

English translations have the potential to expand the international circulation of literary works and provide readers with access to cultures beyond their immediate experience. However, accessibility should not necessarily require the elimination of cultural difference.

The preservation of cultural identity depends on context-sensitive translation decisions. Culture-specific vocabulary, historical references, idioms, metaphors, social practices, and symbolic elements require different strategies according to their function within the literary work.

The translator consequently acts as an interpreter between cultural systems. Successful mediation requires a balance between comprehensibility and cultural specificity. The objective is not simply to make a foreign literary work sound as though it were originally written in English, but to enable English-speaking readers to encounter the literary and cultural meanings embedded in the source text.

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