Translating Culture-Specific Expressions from English into Arabic: Yemeni Students as a Case Study

Khalil Qasem Al-khadem[1]

[1] Assistant Professor, Faculty of Language Studies, Arab Open University, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Assistant Professor of English Language and Translation Studies (part-time), Faculty of Language Studies, Arab Open University, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: drkhalilqasem2015@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study explores the challenges encountered by Yemeni undergraduate students in fully comprehending and accurately conveying the nuances of culture-specific expressions. It seeks to discern the most effective strategies employed by learners to translate culturally-bound concepts from English to Arabic. In pursuit of these objectives, a purposive sample of 60 Yemeni students of EFL was taken. The primary instrument utilized for data collection was a translation test designed by the researcher based upon available studies, encompassing 10 items featuring culturally embedded expressions. Participants were then asked to translate these expressions from English into Arabic, acknowledging the cultural connotations inherent in both languages. The study's findings underscored a spectrum of hurdles faced by undergraduate students in the translation of culture-specific expressions. These impediments were predominantly caused by unfamiliarity with the intricacies of both the cultures springing from i. deficiency in familiarity with translation strategies and techniques; ii. challenges in achieving optimal equivalence in the target language, hindering the fidelity of translations; iii. Finding functional and pragmatic equivalents for these expressions; iv. ambiguity in certain cultural expressions that compounded the translation challenges. In the backdrop of these findings, the study recommends remedial interventions to address these difficulties, including augmenting the courses within academic curricula that nurture cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural competence. Such initiatives aim to bridge the cultural divide and equip students with the requisite skills to navigate linguistic and cultural complexities more effectively.

Keywords: Culture, culture-specific expressions, strategies translation

1. Introduction

Communication is the goal of translation. In general, language is the most essential medium through which humans communicate, and whether intentionally or unintentionally, people's culture and beliefs shape their language (Brasiene, 2013; Catford,1965; Farghal, 2014; Nida, E1982). Therefore, many researchers in the field of translation considered the difference between the culture of the source language and the target language as one of the most prominent challenges faced by the translator when handling languages from diverse cultures, such as English and Arabic languages which linguistically and culturally like two ends of a spectrum. Therefore, the translator must have a good background knowledge of both the cultures and languages.

Translators often encounter significant challenges in bridging the cultural chasm when dealing with culture-specific items. This difficulty arises from the realization that the translation and interpretation of linguistic elements extend beyond mere linguistic meaning to encompass pragmatic significance. Nida (1964, p.130) aptly notes that "variations between cultures can pose more formidable obstacles for translators than differences in language structure." Alxela (1996, p. 53) further elucidates this point by asserting that "cultures introduce a variable that translators must carefully consider." Additionally, Newmark (2010) underscores the pivotal role of culture, regarding it as "the primary impediment to translation, particularly in achieving a faithful and nuanced rendition" (pp. 172-173). The greater the divergence between cultures, the more challenging it becomes to identify suitable equivalents. Numerous terms within a source or target text may convey concepts unfamiliar to the translator. Consequently, translation theorists place a significant emphasis on cultural variances, with particular attention placed on the translation of culture-specific elements.

Research questions

The present study aims to highlight the difficulties that undergraduate English language students at Sana'a University, Faculty of Education Al-Mahweet, face in achieving the meaning of CSIs completely and perfectly. It also aims to identify the most suitable strategies used by the learners for translating some culture-specific items from English into Arabic.

The study aims to answer the following questions to accomplish the study questions:

What are the difficulties that undergraduate students face when translating culture-specific expressions from English into Arabic?

1.   What are the reasons behind these difficulties?

2.   What types of suggested strategies are chosen by students when confronted with any culture-specific items?

3.   What are the remedial solutions to tackle these difficulties?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture-specific Items

Translators believe that one of the main issues faced by them is the cultural variations between the target language (TL) and the source language (SL). Translating between languages with diverse cultural backgrounds can present even more pronounced difficulties. Translation scholars have thus not only proposed multiple definitions and taxonomies for culture-specific items but have also recommended various strategies for tackling the problem of non-equivalence in rendering culture-specific items.

According to Alxela (1996) the term "culture-specific items" pertains to items that are textually actualized and pose a translation challenge in terms of their function and meanings when transferred from a source text to a target text. This problem arises when the referred item does not exist or has a different intertextual status in the targeted readers' cultural system. Quite rightly, Newmark (1988, p. 96) claims that culture-specific items comprise material, social, and ecological cultures. They also included political, religious, social, artistic, gestural, and behavioral norms. Furthermore, cultural expressions can be found in proverbs, collocations, phrasal verbs, and figures of speech such as metaphors. Baker (2011) sates CSI is a term that signifies "a notion completely unfamiliar in the target culture." Pedersen (2010) offered an additional categorization culture-bound words are classified into two categories: extralinguistic references, which include cultural objects that are not part of a language system, and intralinguistic references, which include idioms, proverbs, slang, and dialects.

2.2 Translation Strategies for Culture-Specific Items

Translation scholars have not only provided different explanations for the concept of CSIs, but they have also proposed diverse translation techniques for CSIs. Baker (1992) proposes different methods for translating CSIs when there is a lack of equivalence at the word level. These methods include a) substituting with a broader term; b) using a less emotive or neutral word; c) paraphrasing with a related term; d) cultural substitution; e) employing a loan word or loan word with an explanation; f) omitting certain elements; and h) providing an illustrative translation. Javier Franco Alxela (1996) classifies the strategies of translating culture-specific items into two main types: i. conservation, which includes orthographic adaptation, repetition, extratextual gloss, intratextual gloss; substitution and linguistic translation; ii. substitution types including deletion, synonymy, naturalization, limited universalization, absolute universalization, and autonomous creation. Gaber (2005) explains five different strategies that can be used in translating culture-bound words. These strategies are: cultural equivalence, functional translation, paraphrasing, glossing, and borrowing. Newmark's (1988) translation strategies used in English and Arabic are: transference, literal translation, naturalization, functional equivalence, cultural equivalence, descriptive equivalence, synonymy, transposition, modulation, paraphrasing, translation label, equivalence, and adaptation. Thus, translation experts have proposed different strategies and definitions for CSIs to offer possible solutions to the issue of non-equivalence in rendering CSIs.

2.3 Previous Studies

Zagood (2023) examined the Arabic-English translation of culture-specific items (CSIs) in Al Shehhi's novel, Uncle Sam & Myself to conclude how these CSIs were translated using Newmark's (1988) classification of cultural items and his proposed translation procedures as the framework. The findings of the study revealed that while some CSIs were accurately translated, others were not. Various mismatches were identified at the lexical, syntactic, and textual levels between the source text (ST) and its translation. The study also highlighted the challenges faced by the translator(s) in converting Arabic CSIs into English. Furthermore, it was observed that the couplet strategy was appropriately employed in certain cases but inappropriately applied in others.

Furthermore, Mudheher (2023) analyzed the procedures adopted for translation of CSIs from English into Arabic Applied in Sunshine in the Rain: A Maid's Courage. Once again, the classification of cultural items was based on Newmark (1988) and the proposed translation procedures were adopted in the study. The outcomes of the study revealed that literal translation was the most typical strategy adopted, followed by modulation, which played an important role in making the TT, and finally, paraphrasing to convey the cultural meaning of ST collocations, with other procedures such as naturalization, couplets, notes, additions, and glosses being avoided.

Similarly, Aljabri (2021), investigated the translation of culture-specific items from English into Arabic using Alxela 's strategies in Hemingway's novella The Old Man and the Sea. The findings of the study indicated that the predominant strategies were SL-oriented, specifically conservation strategies as defined by Alxela 's theoretical framework. Within this category, the primary strategies utilized in all three Arabic translations were orthographic adaptation and linguistic translation. The translators employed the strategy of linguistic translation either independently or in conjunction with orthographic adaptation. Additionally, the third strategy, which was predominantly employed in the translation of Spanish words and proper nouns in the novella, was repetition. The most frequently observed strategy in this category was universalization, followed by naturalization and deletion. Conversely, certain strategies such as synonymy, limited universalization, and autonomous recreation were not identified during the analysis and therefore, were not included in the discussion.

Another study, Dweik and Suleiman (2013), looked at the difficulties Jordanian graduate students encountered with the English language while attempting to translate terms with cultural connotations. 60 undergraduate students of the M.A program from three Jordanian universities made up the sample of the study. The researchers used two types of tools, open-ended interviews and translation tests. The latter comprised of 20 sentences with culture-bound utterances based on Newmark's classification of cultural-bound. The open-ended interviews were used to gain extra data from the experts' point of view referring to these problems, their reasons, and remedies. The

findings of the study illustrated that undergraduate students encountered various types of difficulties in translating culture-bound expressions. Failure to accomplish the closest natural equivalence, a lack of using techniques and strategies of translation, the impact of cultural and literal translation, being unfamiliar with two cultures (Arabic & English culture), and strategies and techniques of translation were the major causes of the poor performance of the students.

Al-Kumaim (2013) aimed to identify a pedagogical strategy that can assist students who are culturally isolated, particularly those in higher education, in opening doors for positive international contact by creating EFL courses that address their needs and allay their worries. The study utilized the questionnaire as a tool to gather data from the respondents. Fifty volunteer Yemeni graduate students at Sana'a University in the Department of English answered the questionnaire. The findings showed that, before developing any innovative pedagogical strategies, it is important to understand the needs, anxieties, and aspirations of EFL students in higher education in culturally specific contexts. This way, cross-cultural communication can be used to foster a greater understanding of others rather than just to defend one's own identity. Also, the findings illustrated that by using parallels and contrasts as part of the critical cultural engagement (CCE) technique, students' cross boundaries and get an outsider's perspective, as well as learn about "the other" while also acquiring a foreign language. Students who are culturally isolated must be taught that cultural differences shouldn't be a source of difficulty or aggravation. Cultural communication becomes essential for seeking more understanding of others rather than for only defending their identity.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This research employs the translation techniques suggested by Baker (1992). These methods address the non-equivalence of CSIs at the word level and include the following procedures: a) substituting with a broader term; b) replacing with a less emotional or neutral term; c) paraphrasing using a related term; d) employing cultural substitution; e) using loan words or loan words with explanations; f) omitting the translation; g) illustrating the translation; and h) paraphrasing with an unrelated term. The present study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative method was utilized to ascertain the number and percentage of correct translation (the CSI was deemed correct if the rendering was done correctly), wrong translation (a response was marked incorrect if it didn't include the necessary CSIs or if it contained significant language mistakes that altered the meaning of the statements), acceptable translation (the response was deemed acceptable if the CSIs were accurately presented, however, no additional clarification was provided even if it was necessary, which includes responses that contained minor linguistic errors that did not change the intended meaning), no answer (if the subjects left blank for the given expressions). The qualitative methodology was employed to investigate the process of transferring English CSIs into Arabic and to determine the degree to which Baker's (1992) suggested techniques were implemented.

3.2 Sampling Procedures

The study subjects were 60 students who were specifically selected to represent undergraduates at Sana'a University, Faculty of Education Al-Mahweet, Yemen.

3.3 Instruments and Procedures

The instrument utilized in the current study's goal is a translation test. A self-designed structured test was used by the researcher to collect the primary data from the sample respondents targeted. The translation test comprising of ten CSIs, underwent a pilot phase and pretesting before being administered to the chosen sample. The CSIs encompassed cultural expressions, categorized according to Baker's (1992) classification of cultural terms.

3.4 Validity and Reliability of the Test

Four university professors specializing in linguistics and translation were convened as a panel to evaluate the face and content validity of the test. Regarding the content's appropriateness, they were asked to offer their insights, observations, and suggestions. The professors gave the researcher helpful advice and recommendations and responded to the researcher's inquiries. As a result, the instrument underwent several modifications. The final draft of the test was designed by taking into consideration the suggestions, recommendations, and observations provided by the panel. The selected CSIs were translated from English (SL) into Arabic (TL) by the respondents with the help of two professor translators who have authority and good background knowledge in translation.

4. Results and Discussion

The data was gathered and organized in terms of frequency and percentage. The findings are presented below:

Table 1. Students' translation performance in the English-Arabic test

Statement	CA		WA		AA		NA	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
One	8	13.3%	56	86.7%	-	-	-	-
Two	35	58.33%	25	41.67%	-	-	-	-
Three	37	61.66%	15	25%	-	-	8	13.34%
Four	28	46.67%	13	21.66%	19	31.66%	-	
Five	42	71%	10	16%		-	8	13%
Six	31	51.66%	11	17.58%	18	30.76%		-
Seven	17	28.33%	32	53.34%	-	-	11	18.33%

Eight	22	36.67%	27	45%	-	-	11	18.33%
Nine	55	91.66%	5	8.34%	-	-	-	-
Ten	20	33.34%	27	45%	13	21.66 %	-	-

4.1 "We are going to see Shakespeare in London."

The data indicates that 52 students, with a percentage of (86.7%) provided wrong translation, and chose to translate the content literally. The highest percentages of the subjects' translations indicated that the students were not able to render the CSI meanings in the target language. This failure refers to the students' unfamiliarity with SL expression and Baker's strategies. The name "Shakespeare" has a culture-specific meaning and certainly has an interpretative meaning that is different from the surface or literal meaning of the expression. On the other hand, 8 students, with a percentage of (13.3%) used only one technique, which is translation by a more general word. In this strategy, the students render the CSIs into a more general word to create an equivalent meaning that does not exist in the SL, which is, "we are going to see one of Shakespeare's plays in London."

4.2 "There is a black sheep in every family."

As many as 35 students with a percentage of (58.33%) gave the implied meaning in the target language because "black sheep" in English culture is used to describe a person who is regarded as a disgrace or failure by his or her family or peer group, whereas the word "black sheep" in Arabic culture has nothing to do with that. The word "black duck**"** is an equivalent word in the target culture and has been used by the students during the translation process. This refers to the fact that the students are not only aware of and familiar with the social aspects of the two cultures (English and Arabic) but also, aware of using a suitable strategy, which is translation by paraphrasing using a related word. Baker (1992) claimed this approach can be described as a strategy in which the idea conveyed by the original item is incorporated into the target language but with a distinct variation in its form. It is observed that 25 subjects, with a percentage of (41.67%) translated "black sheep" erroneously because of the subjects' lack of knowledge of their own cultural aspects. Culture-specific items are a problematic issue, especially when the students do not have enough background of both cultures and strategies and techniques that could be used in translating CSIs.

4.3 "It is donkey work to write a book."

The expression "donkey work" was translated correctly by 37 (61.66%) of the students using a more neutral word strategy. Students understood the CSIs and conveyed the intended meaning in the target language. This indicates that students could differentiate between the meaning of "donkey work" in two cultures. 15 participants (25%), on the other hand, provided literal translation. Meanwhile, 8 participants, with a percentage of (13.34%) left it unanswered. It might be that the expression was difficult for them or that they were unwilling to provide a literal or wrong translation.

4.4 "The innocent man remained under a cloud for some time."

Only 28 respondents, with a percentage of (46.67%) understood the meaning of the expression, and thus, they translated it correctly. Translation by paraphrasing strategy was used by the students in the current utterance. Paraphrasing is a more suitable approach to attain the nearest equivalent that can effectively communicate the intended meaning of the statement. In the meantime, a notable percentage 19 (31.66%) of the students successfully produced an acceptable translation without including any additional details. This could be due to their lack of familiarity with translation techniques in general, including Baker's strategies, or it could simply indicate that they didn't deem it necessary to provide an explanation. The cultural expression was rendered incorrectly by 13 (21.66 %) of the respondents.

4.5 "Leave everything to her. She has broad shoulders."

The expression was translated correctly by 42 (71%) because it is widely used in Arabic society when you ask someone to do something and you know he or she could accomplish the mission. Translation by cultural substitution strategy is used to convey the intended meaning in the target language and culture, and only 10 students, with a percentage of (16%) gave wrong translation, while 8 of the students (13%) left the expression without translation, perhaps due to a lack of understanding of the meaning in the source language and translation strategies.

4.6 "Beating Brazilian football is a tool order."

Although the expression is a known figure in Arabic language and culture, yet it was translated correctly only by 31 (51.66%). This could be attributed to the fame of Brazilian football not only in European society but also, in Arabic society. Those who attempted this, gave a neutral reference to the SL culture's expression. According to Baker (1992), this approach is labeled as using a broader or unbiased term for translation. However, 18 (30.76%) out of the total managed to offer an acceptable translation that was not direct but rather presented a closely related alternative. On the other hand, it should be noted that 11 out of 60 participants (17.58%) gave incorrect translations. None of the students left the expression without any translation.

4.7 "There is far too much monkey business going on around here."

A large number of the students (53.34% or 32 in numbers) were not able to translate the expression; they provided a literal translation. This could be attributed to ignorance of translation strategies and a lack of familiarity with expressions in SL. The students avoided transliterating the phrase "monkey business" and referred to it more generally by using the word "شي مريب" in the target language, which means "doubtful" in English; however, the expression was successfully translated by 17 (28.33) with a more general word strategy. 11 (18.33) of the students left the utterance without any response. This attitude could be attributed to the assumption that they found the

utterance itself difficult to translate or that they did not want to give a literal translation.

4.8 "The soldiers are sitting ducks since they don't hide behind anything."

The term "sitting ducks" is not widely used in the Arabic culture, so many respondents found it difficult to translate and wrote unnecessary extra information, which in this case can be reasonable. In addition, the term "sitting ducks" in the source language is used to describe the situation of the soldiers as an open target in a battle. This is the major reason why all students failed to render the meaning in the target language and why they translated it literally, wherefore the expression was translated wrongly by 27 (45%) of the respondents. Meanwhile, 22 (36.67%) of the students used the translation by omission strategy to give an equivalent meaning in the target language. 11 (18.33%) of the students left the responses blank and did not provide any translation for this expression.

4.9 "My brother doesn't stand a dog's chance to pass because he has not studied at all."

This expression was translated correctly by 55 (91.66%) of the students by illustration strategy. In the target culture and language, it is not good to compare human beings with dogs; this gives students a better chance to provide the correct translation for this expression. Out of the total number of students, only 5 (8.34%) inaccurately translated the term "dog's chance." These students, however, did provide a footnote to clarify that there is no direct equivalent of this term in English.

4.10 "Ali is like an owl."

The data obtained indicated that 27 students, accounting for (45%) of the total, gave incorrect translations. These errors were made either through literal translation or by incorporating subjective elements and personal impressions because "owl" in English culture is a symbol for the wise man, whereas the word "owl" in Arabic culture symbolizes the man who has bad luck also having bad morals as "an owl." In addition, the common adverse use of "an owl" in the target culture lead students to provide the wrong translation. While 13 (21.66%) students offered an adequate translation by providing a near but indirect rendition and including necessary footnotes in situations where an equivalent translation was not possible. This expression was translated correctly by only 20 (33.34%) by combining the paraphrasing strategy with the omission strategy.

5. Conclusion

The study aimed to identify the most suitable strategies used by the learners for translating the intended meaning of some culture-specific items from English into Arabic. The findings highlighted the challenges faced by undergraduate students in fully understanding and accurately translating culture-specific expressions with the majority of students struggling to find the equivalent expressions in Arabic for English cultural terms. Additionally, students faced difficulties due to their lack of knowledge about suitable strategies and techniques for translating culture-specific items. These results align with Dweik and Suleiman (2013), which highlighted that students encountered problems related to equivalence and selecting the appropriate translation technique for cultural expressions.

The results further indicated that students commonly utilized various strategies such as paraphrasing using related words, translation using more general terms, opting for neutral or less expressive words, omitting certain elements, employing illustrations, or incorporating loan words or loan words with explanations. This contradicted the findings of Mudheher (2023) that literal translation, modulation, and paraphrasing strategies were employed to convey the cultural significance of the source text collocations.

The results additionally indicated that the significant disparity in languages and cultures contributed to the subpar quality of students' translation quality in CSIs. This aligned with Nida's (1964) assertion that any translation endeavor aiming to bridge a substantial cultural divide cannot completely eradicate all indications of the foreign context.

Furthermore, the huge gap between both languages in terms of semantics, syntax and pragmatics was another problem that students encountered. This discovery aligns with Zagood (2023) which revealed various mismatches at the lexical, syntactic, and textual levels between the source text (ST) and its translated version.

The findings of the study overall indicated that using Baker's translation procedures is an effective approach to convey the meaning of culturally specific items (CSIs) fully and accurately. However, this contradicts the findings of Al-Kumaim's (2013) which suggested that pedagogical strategies are more suitable for translating culture-bound elements.

The study concludes that undergraduate students faced numerous challenges when translating cultural expressions. The inadequate performance of the students in the test can be attributed to the strategy of direct translation and cultural differences (Yule,1996). Lack of familiarity with both cultures and ineffective translation methods and approaches were significant factors contributing to the poor translation (Al-Ahdal et al, 2017). The results demonstrated that the most employed strategy for translation was paraphrasing using a related word, followed by using a more general word and using a more neutral or less expressive word. Other methods, such as omission, illustration, and the use of loan words or loan words with explanations, were deliberately avoided. The findings also showed that the huge gap between both languages in semantics, syntax, and pragmatics makes the translation of cultural items difficult for students (Bin-Hady et al., 2023). Furthermore, the difficulty showed that ambiguity of meaning occurs in some cultural items in the source language, which guides students to distort the equivalent meaning in the target language.

6. Limitations of the Study

The study's scope is constrained because it concentrates on the difficulties faced by undergraduate students when translating culture-specific items from English to Arabic. The scope of this study is confined to ten commonly encountered culture-specific items

(CSIs) that were identified during the pre-test conducted with the students.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

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The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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