

COPING WITH LEXICAL GAPS: STRATEGIC HANDLING OF NON-EQUIVALENT ITEMS

ПОДОЛАННЯ ЛЕКСИЧНИХ ПРОГАЛИН: СТРАТЕГІЧНЕ ОБРОБЛЕННЯ НЕЕКВІВАЛЕНТНИХ ЕЛЕМЕНТІВ

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The article addresses the challenge of non-equivalent vocabulary, which stands as one of the key issues in contemporary translation studies. In an era characterized by rapid globalization, intense intercultural exchange, and advancements in information technology, the role of language mediation is becoming increasingly vital. Translation is evolving beyond a mere tool for conveying information between languages; it has become a crucial aspect of intercultural communication, essential for preserving the semantic, stylistic, and cultural nuances of the original text. The translation of non-equivalent vocabulary – linguistic units that lack a precise equivalent in the target language due to their strong ties to specific national and cultural contexts – presents particular difficulties. These lexemes often encapsulate unique elements of both material and spiritual culture, ethnic realities, traditions, daily life, and the historical experiences of distinct linguistic communities. The article delves into the interpretation of the term “non-equivalent vocabulary” and examines the functional role of such units within text structures, alongside potential translation strategies that vary according to the genre and pragmatic characteristics of the original work. Special attention is given to literary translation, where even minor lexical nuances carry significant weight. In such cases, conveying non-equivalent units requires not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural competence. The study emphasizes that the successful rendering of these elements is essential for the authenticity and expressiveness of translated works. It also touches upon the role of translator creativity and adaptability in navigating lexical gaps. Ultimately, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how language operates in cross-cultural contexts and highlights the evolving role of the translator as a cultural mediator.

Key words: non-equivalent vocabulary, lexical transformations, realities, linguistic units, accidental gaps.

У статті розглядається проблема безеквівалентної лексики як одного з ключових викликів у сучасному перекладознавстві. В умовах стрімкої глобалізації, інтенсивного міжкультурного обміну та розвитку інформаційних технологій, мовне посередництво набуває дедалі більшого значення. Переклад стає не лише інструментом передачі інформації між мовами, але й важливою складовою міжкультурної комунікації, що забезпечує збереження семантичних, стилістичних та культурних нюансів оригіналу. Особливу складність становить переклад безеквівалентної лексики – мовних одиниць, які не мають точного відповідника у мові перекладу через свою тісну пов'язаність із національно-культурним контекстом. Такі лексеми часто відображають специфічні елементи матеріальної чи духовної культури, етнічні реалії, традиції, побут, а також історичний досвід певної мовної спільноти. У статті акцентується увага на тлумаченні визначення терміна «безеквівалентна лексика» та розглядається функціональна роль таких одиниць у структурі тексту, а також можливі стратегії їх перекладу залежно від жанрових і прагматичних характеристик оригіналу. Зокрема, підкреслюється, що в художньому перекладі, де кожен елемент мовлення має високий семантичний та стилістичний потенціал, адекватна передача безеквівалентної лексики вимагає глибокого розуміння як мовної системи, так і культурного контексту джерельної мови. У статті аналізуються різні підходи до перекладу безеквівалентної лексики: транслітерація, калькування, описовий переклад, використання функціональних аналогів тощо. Порівнюється ефективність цих методів у конкретних перекладацьких випадках. Отже, дослідження безеквівалентної лексики не лише сприяє розвитку теорії перекладу, а й поглиблює розуміння механізмів міжкультурної комунікації загалом, відкриваючи нові горизонти для подальших наукових розвідок у галузі мовознавства, етнолінгвістики та комунікативної лінгвістики.

Ключові слова: безеквівалентна лексика, лексичні трансформації, реалії, мовні одиниці, лакуни.

Problem setting. In today's fast-paced world, globalisation, and increased intercultural interactions, marked by rapid technological advancement, the exploration of linguistic diversity has emerged as

an essential factor for the harmonious development of society. In this setting, translation serves as a vital tool for intercultural communication, playing a critical role not only in conveying meaning but also in preserving the cultural, emotional, and idiomatic nuances of language.

Recently, the term “*non-equivalent vocabulary*” has gained prominence within the realm of modern linguistics. Researchers are working to clearly delineate its semantic boundaries, distinguishing this concept from other types of nationally labelled vocabulary, as it currently remains somewhat ambiguous and in need of further clarification. The significance of this phenomenon lies in its capacity to encapsulate the national and cultural specificity of a linguistic community, reflecting both material and spiritual aspects of culture, the historical evolution of society, and serving the crucial function of preserving and transmitting collective cognitive experiences.

Researchers hold a keen interest in the translation of non-equivalent vocabulary, as this practice not only uncovers the structural and semantic characteristics of different languages but also enhances our understanding of cultural distinctiveness. This understanding underscores the scientific and practical importance of further exploration into this linguistic phenomenon.

The aim of the study is to delve into the challenges that emerge when translating words that lack direct equivalents across languages. It seeks to uncover the intricate issues that translators face in these situations and to identify innovative and effective strategies to navigate and overcome these linguistic hurdles.

Task setting. The objectives of this study arise from its overarching goal and comprise several key elements: to delve into the theoretical foundations surrounding the problem and its unique characteristics; to explore the intricate classification of equivalent vocabulary as presented in contemporary translation studies; and to critically analyze the various methodologies employed in the translation of equivalent vocabulary, shedding light on their effectiveness and nuances.

Analysis of recent researches and publications. The issue of untranslatability stands as one of the most significant challenges in translation studies, drawing the attention of linguists from across the globe for many years. The foremost difficulty faced by translators lies in conveying non-equivalent vocabulary, a challenge that is intricately tied to the cultural concepts of various countries and their unique histories.

The study of the unique characteristics of translating non-equivalent vocabulary is a crucial

step toward enhancing the quality of translations and gaining a deeper understanding of the linguistic and cultural nuances present in various national literatures. Scholars such as M. Vardanian [4, 5], R. Zorivchak [6], M. Kocherhan [7], V. Yablochnikova [15], T. Shmiher [19], M. Baker [1], and V. Venuti [2], among others, have dedicated their work to this topic. Their research explores both the linguistic and translation aspects of non-equivalent vocabulary, examining the types and methods employed in reproducing this vocabulary in translations into other languages.

Scope of the research. The linguistic landscape of the world is influenced by national, cultural, and historical factors. At each stage of a language’s development, its lexical system includes terms that have emerged to describe the objects and phenomena in the surrounding reality. These terms are also shaped by the cultural traditions embraced by a specific society. Consequently, certain lexical items may not exist in other languages, as their usage is confined to the culture and history of a particular country or region. Such lexical items are referred to as realities. They are sometimes designated as non-equivalent vocabulary because they lack direct counterparts in other languages. Non-equivalent linguistic units can be found in the terminology related to natural phenomena, as well as in the vocabulary on both material and spiritual artefacts that are integral to a particular culture. This includes names for household items, dishes, holidays, animals, plants, buildings, weapons, and more. For individuals studying the language and culture of a specific ethnic group, mastering this unique vocabulary is challenging without a comprehensive understanding of the natural, cultural, and historical context of that group [3].

When examining the classification of non-equivalent vocabulary, it is important to recognise that scholars adopt various approaches to this subject. Numerous researchers, including linguists and academics, have endeavoured to categorise non-equivalent vocabulary, identifying several subgroups within it. A significant number of linguists, such as V.M. Manakin, L.F. Chernikova, L.V. Zubkova, and O.F. Burbak, classify this vocabulary into two main categories: 1) Proper non-equivalent vocabulary, which encompasses proper names such as personal names, geographical locations, and institutional titles; and 2) Words of reality, defined as “a subset of non-equivalent vocabulary that denotes objects and concepts absent in other national cultures” [10].

Discussions regarding realities as a manifestation and as a facet of national identity in its modern understanding began in the early twentieth century.

In 1929, O. Finkel was likely the first to employ the term “reality” alongside “local colour” (*couleur locale*) [13, p. 198]. A prominent scholar in Ukrainian translation studies, R. Zorivchak, defined the concept of realities in the 1980s as follows: “Realities are mono- and polysemous units, the principal lexical meaning of which, in terms of binary comparison, encompasses a traditionally assigned complex of ethno-cultural information that is foreign to the objective reality of the receiving language” [6, p. 58]. According to Zorivchak, this term should encompass not only words and phrases at the level of speech but also phraseological units that diverge in semantics through historical, everyday, and ethnographic meanings [6, p. 60]. After analysing various scholarly works on this subject, it becomes evident that linguists and translators generally regard words of reality as the primary category of non-equivalent vocabulary. A variety of terms have been used to describe them, including “realities”, “ethnographisms” (as noted by M.P. Kocherhan), and “cultural accidental gaps” (according to K. Berdnikova). Nonetheless, there is a consensus among most scholars regarding the definition of the term.

Non-equivalent vocabulary is among the least-examined units of language, making its translation a challenging endeavour. M. Kocherhan observes that non-equivalent vocabulary comprises no more than 6–7% of the total number of actively used words [7, p. 322]. The prevalence of non-equivalent vocabulary within a text is influenced by various factors, including the author’s style, the content of the work, the period in which it was written, and many others.

It is important to highlight that S. Pakhomova, in her work “Slovak Non-Equivalent Vocabulary: Definition of the Object”, draws a pertinent conclusion: the growth of the non-equivalent lexicon is primarily driven by neologisms, abbreviations, lexical innovations, slang, jargon, proper names, and similar elements [11, p. 72].

T. Shchepochieva emphasises that the classification of vocabulary as non-equivalent arises from two primary factors. First, the target language may lack a corresponding lexical unit during the process of reproducing terms from another culture. Second, there may be no lexical unit at all that captures the meaning of a concept unique to the foreign language. This absence of vocabulary in the target language reflects a common historical reality [14].

Currently, researchers typically categorize non-equivalent vocabulary into groups. Specifically, M. Kocherhan, in his work “General Linguistics”, points out that the language differences stemming

from cultural peculiarities are reduced to such distinctions [7, p. 321–324]:

1) Vocabulary and phraseology: Each language possesses unique vocabulary that includes terms denoting specific cultural phenomena, which often lack direct one-word translations in other languages. For instance, the word *sterling* in English or *chumak* in Ukrainian.

2) Lexical backgrounds of words with identical denotative meanings: Words may share the same basic meaning yet differ in their origins and usages across languages.

3) Typological features of literary languages: The culture significantly influences the form of a literary language and its relationship with the vernacular.

4) The distinct characteristics of communication processes within various cultures: This encompasses rules of language interaction among different social groups, such as between children and parents, spouses, or hosts and guests.

The most comprehensive classification is presented by R. Zorivchak, who categorises realities based on their historical and semantic nature into distinct groups: 1) actual realities (those with existing referents), such as Ukrainian *kolomyika*, *trembitiar*, *yavorivka*, etc.; 2) historical realities, which the researcher defines as “semantic archaisms that have become part of historically distant vocabulary due to the disappearance of their referents, thereby losing their viability” – examples include Ukrainian *shcheznyk*, *kopnyi maidan*, *smerd*, etc. Additionally, Zorivchak further divides these realities by structure: 1) single-member realities, such as Ukrainian *vechornytsi*, *krynychar*, *dentsivka*, etc.; 2) nominalised multi-member realities, such as Ukrainian *kurna khata*, *razovyi khlib*, *bratska mohyla*, etc.; and 3) phraseological realities, including Ukrainian expressions like *loby zabyty*, *kolo pechi poratysia*, *dbaty pro skryniu*. [6, p. 70–71].

M. Vardanian investigated the translation of culturally rich vocabulary into Ukrainian, focusing on English-language children’s literature [5]. The researcher examined the unique vocabulary found in bilingual literature aimed at children and youth within the Ukrainian diaspora. This included Ukrainianisms and various cultural realities, such as place names, the proper names of historical and cultural figures, folklore characters, dishes, and depictions of rituals and customs [5, p. 26].

Some researchers offer a more detailed classification of non-equivalent vocabulary. For instance, Lisna M.I. indicates in her article that, based on scientific sources, several categories can be identified: 1) cultural non-equivalence, which

includes references and kinesic realities, borrowings from foreign cultures, onomastics, and abbreviations; and 2) linguistic non-equivalence, which comprises lexemes that lack direct counterparts in the target language despite the presence of an appropriate referent. This particularly applies to lexemes that are not equivalent due to word formation and other characteristics of the source language [9].

Linguist M.P. Kocherhan [7, p. 260] identifies three categories of non-equivalent vocabulary:

1) Terms that represent the national and cultural realities of a nation, such as Ukrainian *varenyky*, *kobzar*, and *borshch*.

2) Words that lack a direct equivalent in the language to express specific concepts inherent to a society, which he further categorises into two subgroups:

2.1) non-equivalent terms that arise from differing classifications of the surrounding world in various languages;

2.2) non-equivalent terms that emerge because a particular ethnic group, unlike others, has not acknowledged certain phenomena or processes as significant.

3) The absence of certain words, which may be attributed to linguistic factors.

The concept of “non-equivalent vocabulary” encompasses various categories of words characterised by distinct challenges in the translation process. This includes reality, slang, idiomatic expressions, jargon, homonyms, and other forms. Researchers have thoroughly examined this topic, identifying its manifestations within vocabulary and categorising non-equivalent terms into specific groups. Such vocabulary can be conveyed through various methods, with the appropriateness of each determined by the translator.

A successful and comprehensive translation hinges not only on a translator’s proficiency with vocabulary but also on their understanding of the cultures associated with both the source and target languages. The translator’s task involves preserving not just the literal meaning of the text but also its stylistic nuances. As noted, “To translate means to find a counterpart in the target language, and how can this be achieved if there is no comparable object, concept, or phenomenon in the ethnoculture—whether material or spiritual—within the history of the target language speakers?” [6, p. 92]. When selecting a method for translating equivalent vocabulary, it is essential to consider translation strategies, specifically domestication and foreignization. These concepts were first introduced into modern translation studies by L. Venuti in 1991 [2, p. 127]. Venuti’s

ideas are further elaborated upon in M. Vardanian’s “Actual Problems of World Translation Studies,” which describes domestication as a strategy that often relegates the cultural context and culturally specific terminology to the background, whereas foreignization serves to maintain the original cultural context more prominently [4, p. 79].

The methods of reproducing non-equivalent vocabulary in the target language – such as replacement, transcription, and calque – should be differentiated not by general abstract principles but by the specifics of each particular case [12, p. 116]. For instance, a translator must recognise that in the source language, a word with a social function does not primarily serve an artistic purpose but often has a terminological quality. Moreover, it typically remains within the general framework of the language, being commonly used and unremarkable [12, p. 116]. However, when such a word is introduced into a foreign language context, its nature may shift, potentially taking on artistic roles. This transformation can lead to a discrepancy between the style of the original work and that of the translation, highlighting differences between phenomena and their names that were previously nonexistent [12, p. 117]. Additionally, when attempting to convey elements of the national context, a linguist might inadvertently employ realities from an entirely different cultural environment, resulting in a dual distortion: the cultural nuances of the original are lost, and inappropriate, foreign elements are introduced [12, p. 118].

In her book, “In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation”, M. Baker emphasizes that selecting an appropriate equivalent involves various factors that can be either purely linguistic or extralinguistic [1, p. 17]. She points out that the type of equivalence does not always rely solely on the strategies employed by translators. The most prevalent types of equivalence at the word level include [1, p. 56–58]:

1) Culturally specific concepts. A term in the source language may convey a notion that is entirely foreign to the target culture. For instance, the word *speaker* (in the House of Commons) lacks a direct equivalent in Chinese or Arabic. In Ukrainian, it is often translated as *chairman*, which fails to accurately capture the role of the Speaker as an independent individual responsible for maintaining order and authority within the parliament.

2) The concept in the source language lacks a direct lexical equivalent in the target language. A word in the source language may describe a phenomenon recognised in the culture of the target language, but it

does not have a specific term for it. For instance, the adjective *standard* (meaning “ordinary, not extra”, as in “standard range”) conveys a concept that most people widely understand; however, it does not have an equivalent in Arabic.

3) The source language word is semantically complex. A single morpheme can, in certain contexts, convey a more intricate set of meanings than an entire sentence. For instance, take the Brazilian term *arruação*, which refers to the process of clearing debris from the ground beneath coffee trees and stacking it in the row to assist in recovering beans that have fallen during the harvest.

4) When the source and target languages have differing meanings, it's possible that the target language may exhibit either fewer or more distinctions in meaning compared to the source language. For instance, the Indonesian language differentiates between two concepts related to experiencing rain: “*kehujanan*” refers to going out in the rain without realizing it, while “*hujanhujan*” describes the act of going out in the rain with full awareness.

5) The target language lacks a generic term. While it may possess more specific designations and hyponyms, it does not have a hypernym to encompass the semantic field. For instance, Ukrainian does not have a hypernym equivalent to the English word *facility*, which refers to any equipment, building, services, or other provisions designed for a particular activity or purpose.

6) The target language may lack a specific hyponym. Generally, languages tend to possess broad terms, or hyperonyms, but often do not include specific ones, as each language distinguishes meanings that correspond to the needs of its environment. For instance, the English term *house* has numerous hyponyms that do not have direct equivalents in other languages (such as *bungalow*, *cottage*, *croft*, *chalet*, *lodge*, *hut*, *mansion*, *manor*, *villa*, etc.).

7) Variations in interpersonal or physical perspective. The physical perspective may hold greater significance in the source language than in the target language. This perspective relates to the positioning of people or objects in relation to one another or to a specific location, and it is conveyed through word pairs, such as *come/go*, *take/bring*, and *arrive/depart*.

8) Variations in expressive meaning: A word in the target language may share the same denotation as a word in the source language, yet carry a distinct expressive connotation. For instance, in certain contexts, the English term *batter* (as in child or wife battering) might be substituted with the more neutral Japanese term 叩く (*tataku*). However, when used

with modifiers like *savagely* or *ruthlessly*, the nuance changes significantly.

9) Differences in form. There are often instances where the target language lacks an equivalent for a specific form found in the source text. Certain prefixes and suffixes that carry distinct meanings in English may not have direct counterparts in other languages. For example, English utilises pairs like *employer/employee*, *trainer/trainee*, and *payer/payee*. It also employs suffixes such as *-ish* (as in *boyish*, *hellish*, *greenish*) and *-able* (like *conceivable*, *retrievable*, *drinkable*). While it is generally straightforward to paraphrase such meanings, other types of meanings may not always be easily translatable.

10) Differences in the purpose and frequency of use of certain forms. Even if one form has an equivalent in the target language, there may be a difference in purpose or frequency of use. For example, in English, the suffix *-ing* is used much more frequently than in other languages, such as German or Swedish.

11) The use of borrowed words in the original text presents distinct challenges in reproduction. These borrowed terms can create difficulties for the unwary translator, particularly with what is known as “false friends of the translator.” False friends, or faux amis, are words or expressions that share the same form in two or more languages but have different meanings. This phenomenon is often associated with historically or culturally related languages, such as English, French, and German. However, it is important to note that numerous false friends also exist among entirely unrelated languages, like English and Japanese [1, p. 25].

Differences in cultural traditions across countries present significant challenges to the reproduction of non-equivalent vocabulary. According to V. Yablochnikova, the most prevalent methods include [15, p. 251]:

1) Transcription and transliteration. In transliteration, the graphic representation of a word from the source language is conveyed through the target language, while transcription focuses on its phonetic representation (examples include *marketing*, *muffin*, and *General Electric Company*). In contemporary translation practices, the use of transliteration and transcription has diminished compared to previous years.

2) Calquing refers to the process of translating foreign language vocabulary by substituting its individual components – morphemes or words – with their direct equivalents in the target language. For example, *Royal Ascot* becomes *royal races*, *great go* translates to *Cambridge final exam*, and *tuition* is rendered as *tuition fees*.

3) Descriptive (“explanatory”) translation seeks to convey the meaning of a lexical item from the source language through detailed phrases that elucidate the underlying features of that item (e.g., *landslide* refers to a victory in an election by a significant majority of votes). This method is often viewed as cumbersome and inefficient. Consequently, translators frequently employ a combination of two techniques – transcription or calquing along with descriptive translation – often presenting the latter as a footnote or commentary (for instance, *pohorilets* – *a person who suffered from fire*).

4) Approximate translation is employed to identify the closest equivalent for a lexical item in the target language based on its source language. These near-equivalents can be referred to as “analogues” (know-how – secrets of production). It is important to keep in mind that these “analogues” do not always represent complete equivalents in the target language.

5) Transformational translation entails reconfiguring the syntactic structure of a sentence and making lexical substitutions that lead to a significant change in the meaning of the source word. This concept, often referred to as lexico-grammatical translation transformation, is exemplified by the word “glimpse,” which is used in expressions such as “to have” or “to catch a glimpse of something.” This approach allows for the incorporation of a verb in the translation, thereby facilitating a syntactic restructuring of the sentence.

R. Zorivchak identifies several methods for reproducing realities in translation. These methods include transcription (transliteration), hyperonymic renaming, combined renomination, descriptive periphrasis, calquing, the use of similes, interlingual transposition at the connotative level, contextual interpretation of realities, and identifying a situational equivalent [6, p. 93].

M. Vardanian identifies several techniques employed by professional translators when dealing with non-equivalent vocabulary [4, p. 58-59]: 1) translating with a more general term (hyperonym); 2) using a more neutral or less expressive term; 3) employing cultural substitution; 4) utilizing a borrowed word or loanword; 5) paraphrasing with a related term; 6) paraphrasing with unrelated terms; 7) omitting certain elements; and 8) providing an illustration for clarification.

R. Zorivchak views realities as “perhaps the most perilous pitfalls that translators must navigate, as they are tasked with conveying the author’s style as truthfully, accurately, and faithfully as possible

through a different language” [6, p. 38]. Consequently, an analysis of scholars’ works reveals two primary challenges in reproducing realities in translation: 1) the absence of equivalents in the target language, and 2) the necessity of conveying both the national and historical context of the reality alongside its semantic meaning.

A significant challenge arises from established expressions that typically lack equivalents in the target language, referred to as “accidental gaps”. Translating a phrase that has no direct equivalent is a complex undertaking; at times, it may be impossible to identify an appropriate phraseological expression in the target language. However, this does not imply that such a unit cannot be translated – its essence can still be communicated. Additionally, it is crucial to be aware of the potential for false equivalence with established expressions. This refers to the situation where the target language fails to convey the intended meaning of a phraseological unit when translated literally or through a word-for-word approach.

Conclusions. Based on the data presented, it can be argued that the existence of non-equivalent units does not imply that their meanings cannot be effectively conveyed in translation, nor that they are translated with less accuracy than units with direct correspondences. The key issue is that such vocabulary consistently presents the translator with the challenge of selecting one method of conveyance over another. The choice of how to translate this type of vocabulary is influenced by several factors: 1) the nature of the text; 2) the significance of the vocabulary within the context; 3) the specific characteristics of the vocabulary itself and its role within the lexical systems of both the target and source languages; 4) the languages in question, including their word-formation capabilities and literary traditions; and 5) the target audience of the translation in comparison to the audience of the original.

Taking all of the above into consideration, we can define the term “non-equivalent vocabulary” as follows: it encompasses words that express concepts that are absent in another culture and language, words that denote unique cultural elements characteristic of culture A but nonexistent in culture B, as well as terms that cannot be translated into another language with a single word and have no direct equivalents in other languages. Consequently, translating non-equivalent vocabulary necessitates a creative approach and a profound understanding of linguistic and cultural studies.

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