

# Translating Cultural Specificity: Pragmatic Equivalence and Nuance in Rendering Regional Vernacular Texts into English

Henry Marwick

Research Scholar

Department of English

California State University

Chico, USA

## Abstract

This manuscript explores the complex sociolinguistic and translational challenges encountered when rendering culturally specific regional vernacular literature into English. Focusing on the interplay between source-text pragmatic nuances and target-text readability, this study investigates how translators navigate cultural asymmetry, localized idiomatic expressions, and non-equivalent sociolinguistic markers. Utilizing a framework grounded in pragmatic equivalence and functional translation theories, the analysis evaluates strategies such as thick translation, cultural substitution, and descriptive borrowing. The findings demonstrate that achieving pragmatic equivalence requires a balanced compromise between maintaining local cultural authenticity and ensuring accessibility for a broader global target readership.

**Keywords:** Translation Studies, Pragmatic Equivalence, Cultural Specificity, Vernacular Literature, Thick Translation, Sociolinguistics, Postcolonial Translation

## 1. Introduction

The act of translation extends far beyond simple linguistic substitution; it is a cross-cultural negotiation through which social structures, historical contexts, and localized worldviews are recontextualized (Bassnett, 2014). When translating regional vernacular texts—particularly postcolonial or regional literature rich in localized dialects, proverbs, and

socio-religious rituals—translators confront profound asymmetries between the source and target languages (Baker, 2018; Bassnett, 2014).

Regional vernacular literature frequently relies on culturally specific items (CSIs) and pragmatic markers that lack direct lexical or functional equivalents in global English (Baker, 2018; Hermans, 2014). In transferring these texts into English, translators face a fundamental dilemma: excessive domestication risks erasing the distinct cultural identity and socio-historical authenticity of the source text, whereas extreme foreignization can impede reader comprehension and disrupt narrative flow (Venuti, 2008). This study investigates how translators achieve pragmatic equivalence while preserving the nuanced cultural specificity inherent in regional vernacular literature.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### **2.1 Pragmatic Equivalence and Functional Approaches**

In modern translation theory, equivalence is no longer viewed as a strict word-for-word identity, but rather as a relational concept operating across linguistic, textual, and pragmatic tiers (Baker, 2018). Pragmatic equivalence specifically addresses how utterances convey meaning in context, taking into account user intent, implied meaning, and cultural presuppositions (Baker, 2018). Within functional translation theory, the primary objective is to reproduce a target text that achieves a communicative purpose comparable to that of the original source text (Nida, 1964).

### **2.2 Foreignization, Domestication, and Thick Translation**

Translating culturally loaded texts routinely highlights the tension between two primary strategic orientations (Venuti, 2008):

- **Domestication:** Adapting the source text to conform to target-language linguistic and cultural norms, thereby creating a smooth, transparent reading experience (Venuti, 2008).

- Foreignization: Deliberately retaining source-text cultural elements and syntactic idiosyncrasies to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the original text (Venuti, 2008).

To bridge this gap, scholarship often draws upon thick translation—a technique that uses annotations, glossaries, prefaces, and contextualized commentary to preserve source-culture nuances without alienating target readers (Appiah, 1993; Hermans, 2014).

### **3. Challenges in Translating Regional Cultural Specificity**

The translation of regional vernacular literature into English reveals several distinct pragmatic and sociolinguistic hurdles:

#### **3.1 Non-Equivalent Culturally Specific Items (CSIs)**

Vernacular texts are filled with domain-specific terms—such as traditional attire, cuisine, kinship structures, and ritual practices—that lack direct English equivalents (Baker, 2018). Direct literal translation frequently results in semantic distortion, whereas over-generalized terms strip the text of its local color and cultural depth (Baker, 2018; Nida, 1964).

#### **3.2 Honorifics, Kinship Systems, and Social Hierarchies**

Regional languages often employ complex systems of honorifics, pronominal registers, and specialized kinship terms that explicitly map social hierarchy, age, caste, or intimacy (Baker, 2018; Hermans, 2014). Standard English, lacking an equivalent morphosyntactic honorific apparatus, struggles to convey these intricate social dynamics without relying on descriptive additions or contextual adjustments (Baker, 2018).

#### **3.3 Proverbs, Idiomatic Expressions, and Humorous Register**

Proverbs and vernacular idioms are heavily rooted in localized folk wisdom, geography, and oral traditions (Bassnett, 2014). Translating these expressions literally often yields incomprehensible English phrases, while substituting them with Western or standard English

proverbs causes cultural incongruity and compromises the original setting (Baker, 2018; Venuti, 2008).

#### **4. Strategies for Achieving Pragmatic Equivalence**

To successfully navigate cultural non-equivalence, translators utilize a combination of targeted techniques:

1. **Descriptive Borrowing and In-Text Glossing:** Retaining the original vernacular term alongside subtle contextual explanations within the narrative flow allows target readers to absorb cultural terminology without interrupting their reading experience (Baker, 2018; Hermans, 2014).
2. **Cultural Substitution:** Replacing a source-culture item with a target-culture item that carries a similar pragmatic impact, applied carefully in contexts where emotional resonance outweighs literal accuracy (Nida, 1964).
3. **Thick Annotation:** Employing prefaces, footnotes, and postscripts to explain complex socio-historical contexts, thereby honoring the intellectual integrity of the source text (Appiah, 1993).

#### **5. Conclusion**

Translating regional vernacular texts into English demands a delicate balance between fidelity to the source culture and accessibility for the target audience. As this analysis indicates, achieving pragmatic equivalence relies on flexible, context-sensitive translation choices rather than rigid adherence to single strategies. By strategically blending localized borrowing, selective cultural substitution, and contextual annotations, translators can successfully render the pragmatic richness and unique cultural voice of regional literature for a global audience.

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