

TEACHING CULTUREMES THROUGH MEDIATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Lucia ȘCHIOPU, PhD, Associate Professor

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8342-1385>

“Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University, Republic of Moldova

Abstract. This article explores the role of culturemes in the process of mediation across cultures. It shows how teaching culturemes at the university level helps students not just spot these unique cultural elements, but also understand their deeper meanings and learn strategies to translate them effectively in the process of mediation. The article highlights the main translation approaches, especially the two main methods: foreignization, which keeps the original cultural flavor, and domestication, which adapts content to fit the target audience's culture. This article describes the research design of a qualitative study titled *Translating Culturemes in Stylistics*, conducted within a teacher education language program. The study employed classroom observations, reflective journals, annotated student projects, and discussions to explore how students developed cultural awareness and translation strategies through mediation engagement with culturemes over one academic semester.

Key-words: culturemes, translation strategies, cultural mediation, intercultural communication, translation teaching.

PREDAREA CULTUREMELOR PRIN MEDIEREA CULTURALĂ ÎN ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNTUL SUPERIOR

Rezumat. Acest articol explorează rolul culturemelor în medierea interculturală. În articol se analizează cum predarea culturemelor la nivel universitar ajută studenții nu doar să identifice aceste elemente culturale unice, ci și să le înțeleagă sensurile profunde, și să învețe strategii eficiente de traducere în procesul de mediere. Articolul evidențiază varii abordări de traducere, printre care două metode principale: înstrăinarea, care păstrează savoarea culturală originală, și adaptarea culturală, care adaptează conținutul pentru cultura publicului țintă. Acest articol descrie designul unei cercetări calitative intitulată *Traducerea culturemelor în stilistică*, desfășurată în cadrul unui program de formare a studenților pedagogi în domeniul limbilor străine. Studiul a utilizat observații la clasă, jurnale reflexive, proiecte și discuții pentru a explora modul în care aceștia și-au dezvoltat sensibilitatea culturală și strategiile de traducere prin activități de mediere axate pe cultureme, pe parcursul unui semestru universitar.

Cuvinte-cheie: cultureme, strategii de traducere, mediere culturală, comunicare interculturală, predarea traducerii.

I. Translation as Cross-Cultural Mediation

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping mediation strategies because every language user becomes an active mediator who interprets meaning through his own cultural lens. Language learners mediate between source and target cultures, navigating differences to ensure cultural relevance and understanding. Varied translation approaches (like foreignisation and domestication) highlight the balance between preserving the original culture and adapting to the target audience's cultural context.

The transmission of culture in mediation is complex and multifaceted [4]. It involves reproducing not only linguistic elements but also the historical, ethnic, and spiritual values of the original text. This process is further challenged by cultural differences, which can hinder translation equivalence [4].

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), mediation is defined as the ability to facilitate communication and understanding between people who do not share the same language or cultural background. Mediation is a communicative competence or skill within language learning programs that involves learning to use different methods or strategies like summarizing, paraphrasing, explaining, including translating to pass over communication barriers [9].

Mediation, as a pivotal act of intercultural communication, has played a substantial role in fostering cultural shifts and facilitating communication between diverse cultures through language [9]. However, when translation occurs between different cultures, it often brings about inevitable conflicts over influence and power, which are mediated through language. That is why it is essential for teacher education students to develop mediation skills, as they are future facilitators of intercultural understanding and play a key role in shaping inclusive, culturally responsive classrooms.

The cultural context significantly impacts the meaning of linguistic units, as language serves both as a component of culture and as a tool for shaping and evaluating human behavior [16]. The cultural background is full of realia (everyday real-life objects, things) and culturemes (realia and practices, cultural experiences, proceedings etc.) that are historical references, or unique cultural practices, that often lack direct equivalents. These aspects create significant challenges in mediating communication, as they require not only linguistic substitution but also cultural interpretation. Teacher education students must navigate these nuances carefully to preserve meaning, avoid misrepresentation, and foster deeper understanding between cultures.

In cross-cultural communication, symbols, culture loaded words, cultural markers, and culture-based expressions exposed through media play critical roles in conveying cultural values and reconstructing meaning. According to Common European Framework for Languages the key elements in mediation of texts, concepts and communication are the culturemes and in the process of exploring culture there are revealed numerous culturemes, including language-specific idioms, realia, rituals, and symbolic objects that reflect the national identity [9]. Teaching culturemes at the university level, within teacher education language programs, becomes essential to teach teacher education students to recognize culturemes, to comprehend the cultural significance and to explore different strategies to deal with them [9].

Culturemes can be defined as key points of interest that highlight the diversity and complexity of cultural communication. Espindola and Vasconcellos define culturemes as

cultural signs (words, expressions, or references) that represent values, beliefs, or customs of a specific culture [10]. The culturemes are words or expressions that carry meaning to a particular culture. An individual cannot understand or translate culturemes without knowing the cultural background they come from, because they reflect how people in that culture think, live, or communicate [7]. In Venuti's view, a cultureme is a word or idea that's deeply tied to the culture it comes from so much so that it is hard to translate it directly [21].

As the primary medium for cross-cultural communication, translation not only facilitates understanding of culturemes but also fosters creativity and cultural exchange. Mediation, in the form of paraphrasing, summarizing, or translation, plays a crucial role in making these culture-bound elements accessible to teacher education students and translation is pivotal in this process. When mediating culturemes the students see themselves as both mediators and cultural creators. By selecting appropriate strategies based on purpose, cultural background, and audience needs, the teacher education students contribute to bridging cultural divides through mediation, enabling mutual understanding, and promoting global collaboration [14].

II. Theoretical Foundations of Cultural Translation

Schweitzer (1988) defines translation as a "unidirectional and two-phase process of interlingual and intercultural communication" that creates a target text capable of functioning in a different linguistic and cultural environment [19]. This process requires the teacher education students to bridge cultural codes, ensuring that the cultural content of the source text is accessible to the target audience, while reflecting the nuances of both cultures. Moreover, translation theory emphasizes dynamic equivalence, as Nida suggests, where the target audience's response to the translation should mirror that of the original audience [18].

The translation of culture-bound words, integrated into university language curricula, involves rendering ethnic, historical, and unique cultural elements. Translation theorists like Chesterman, Venuti, and Schleiermacher propose two main strategies for translating realia and culturemes: foreignisation and domestication [8, 19, 21].

- Foreignisation, according to Venuti, preserves original cultural elements, exposing the reader to the source culture, but being less accessible for audiences unfamiliar with it. This approach incorporates the source culture's realia into the target text without adaptation, often through borrowing or direct transfer of cultural elements.
- Domestication, according to Nida, simplifies cultural content, replacing source realities with target culture equivalents to enhance comprehension. This strategy involves adapting culture-specific items to the norms of the target language by using cultural or functional equivalents. "Translating a text involves adopting a

stance, making choices about how it fits within the target culture, and determining the extent to which the translator becomes visible in that context” [2, p. 33].

Strategies such as domestication and foreignization, can be applied as instructional methods in language teaching. They highlight the complexity of translation through contrastive analysis tasks when students are asked to create two versions of texts through domestication and foreignization. Domestication adapts the source text to fit the beliefs and values of the target culture by altering the original meaning, foreignization retains the cultural uniqueness of the source text, introducing elements that may feel exotic to the target audience. Through these contrastive analysis tasks students perceive the changes in the tone, meaning, and cultural feel.

Chesterman (1997), Venuti (2008) and Schleiermacher offer frameworks for these strategies, defining foreignization as the direct borrowing of cultural elements and domestication as the use of cultural or functional equivalents in the target language. Additionally, Baker provides a detailed classification of strategies for translating culturally bound words, such as paraphrasing, borrowing, and cultural substitution [1].

Baker extends this framework, applied in academic language instruction, by providing a detailed classification of strategies for translating realia [1] through:

1. Translating using a broader or more general term.
2. Using a more neutral or less emotionally charged word in translation.
3. Replacing a cultural element with an equivalent from the target culture.
4. Employing a loanword, sometimes accompanied by an explanation.
5. Explaining the term through paraphrasing with related vocabulary.
6. Paraphrasing using words that are not directly related.
7. Leaving out certain elements in the translation (omission).
8. Using a visual representation or example to clarify meaning.

Methods and strategies of translating culturemes, used in the university language programs, require a balance between cultural preservation and accessibility. These strategies include:

- Transliteration and borrowing that consist in retaining the cultural markers for cultural authenticity.
- Adaptation that consists in modifying cultural markers to fit the target culture.
- Explanatory techniques consist in adding footnotes or glosses to clarify cultural context [2]; [22]. “Translators might opt for footnotes or glosses to preserve cultural references from the source text and to prevent readers from being misinformed through oversimplification” [2 p. 46].

The uniqueness of cultures and their national character are crucial in literary translation, employed in higher education language courses as they shape the work's meaning. The students in the midst of the translation process must adapt the original text

to the target language while preserving its cultural essence. Since complete equivalence between languages is impossible, the students must employ strategies to convey the original's intent and context effectively.

Accommodation and Adaptation are the methods integrated into university language curricula that are crucial in translation of culturemes. Shi views adaptation as adjustments to align the translated text with the target culture's spirit. This process involves various types of accommodation [20]:

1. Collocation Accommodation - using word combinations typical of the target language.
2. Cultural Accommodation - reflecting values, norms, and behaviors of the target audience.
3. Ideological Accommodation - adjusting political, sexual, or ideological elements to avoid conflicts.
4. Aesthetic Accommodation - considering aesthetic differences between cultures.

Challenges in Translating Culture-Specific Items are difficulties like untranslatability, cultural differences, and historical or ethical nuances. Strategies to address these include [13]:

- Borrowing - retaining the original term with explanatory notes.
- Adaptation - replacing culture specific items with culturally familiar references.
- Functional Equivalence - finding expressions serving a similar purpose.
- Descriptive Translation - explaining the term's significance in detail.

Selecting the appropriate translation strategy depends on the text, audience, and desired balance between cultural fidelity and accessibility. The ultimate goal is to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps while preserving the essence of the original work.

III. Methodology

The classroom-based experiment *Translating Culturemes in Stylistics* was carried out within a teacher education language program, focusing on the exploration of culturemes through translation activities. The experiment lasted one semester and was conducted within a *Stylistics of the English Language* course, where students engaged in identifying and translating culturemes as part of their practical training.

The main activities included analyzing culturally rich texts- case studies, comparing source and target language expressions, translating passages containing culturemes, and reflecting on their translation choices in reflection journals. Students also participated in group discussions, peer reviews, completed a final annotated translation project, and stylistic and cultural analysis for the translation of culturemes in a student-selected literary work. To gather results, there have been used a combination of qualitative methods: students' reflective journals, project annotations, and classroom discussions etc.

to assess their growing awareness of cultural specificity. In addition, observational notes were taken throughout the course to track students' engagement and strategy development. The final projects served as summative evidence of students' ability to identify, interpret, and translate culturemes effectively, demonstrating both linguistic and cultural competence.

When university students explore reading materials filled with culture-bound elements referred to as culturemes, it requires more than just technical knowledge. The teaching strategy involves mediating the cultural awareness, through paraphrasing, translation, contrastive analysis and reflections on the concepts of culture between languages.

The study *Translating Culturemes in Stylistics* has applied a five-stage model outlining a practical, student-centered approach to teaching culturemes in the university classroom (Bassnett, 2002; Venuti, 1995; Baker, 1992; Schweitzer, 1988; Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1997) that consists of:

Stage 1: *Building Awareness* of culturemes based on helping students understand what culturemes mean through real examples or case studies from literary texts or media to guide students in identifying such elements and reflecting on their cultural significance. This is a stage of building sensitivity that is crucial for teacher education students what Byram (1997) calls intercultural communicative competence [5].

Stage 2: *Identifying Strategies for Translation*- after recognizing culturemes, the students are introduced to various translation methods and strategies, and through the contrastive analysis students explore how different strategies affect meaning and reader's perception. In this stage students are familiarized with Schweitzer's (1988) recommendations for contextualization, such as using glossaries or footnotes to explain unfamiliar terms [19].

Stage 3: *Applying Strategies in Practice* focuses on translation exercises by adding descriptive notes, or finding equivalent terms. Activities in this stage center around peer review, guided group discussions, reflective sessions, students being engaged in dynamic equivalence practice.

Stage 4: *Reflecting on the Translator's Role* focuses on the translations as an act of cultural mediation considering how the cultural background shapes their translation decisions [2], [22]. Reflective journals, class debates and short essays are used to encourage the students to explore ethical issues and critical cultural reflections in language education.

Stage 5: *Showcasing Understanding through Final Projects* focusing on consolidation of previous knowledge through experiential learning through annotated translations, glossaries of culturemes, comparative translation projects, reflection journals, stylistic and cultural analysis for the translation of culturemes in a student-

selected literary work. The goal of these final projects was to demonstrate the students' ability to translate and analyze culturemes and to move confidently between theory and practice, when being exposed to culture bound words based on audience, purpose, and text type (House, 2009; Baker, 1992).

IV. Obtained results and discussion

To support the development of students' mediation awareness in translation, the experiment *Translating Culturemes in Stylistics* was integrated into a teacher education language program. The main focus of the qualitative designed research was to engage students in identifying, analyzing, and translating culturemes through a variety of practice-based and reflective tasks. The instructional process followed a structured, 5 stage-based model aimed at gradually enhancing students' ability to recognize cultural specificity and apply appropriate translation strategies.

The table below outlines the key stages of this pedagogical model, specifying the learning objectives, instructional methods used at each stage, and the theoretical frameworks that guided the design of the intervention.

Table 1. Pedagogical Framework for Cultureme-Aware Translation Instruction

Stage	Objective	Methods	Scholars
Stage 1: Building Awareness of Culturemes	Developing cultural sensitivity and recognizing culturemes in texts	- Case studies from literature/media - Class discussions - Identification tasks	Byram (1997) – <i>Intercultural Communicative Competence</i>
Stage 2: Identifying Strategies for Translation	Introducing methods for translating culturemes	- Contrastive analysis - Strategy mapping - Examples of glossaries and footnotes	Schweitzer (1988) – <i>Contextualization techniques</i>
Stage 3: Applying Strategies in Practice	Practicing the application of translation strategies	- Translation of selected texts - Peer review sessions - Reflective translation exercises	Nida – <i>Dynamic equivalence</i> Baker (1992) – <i>Translation strategies</i>
Stage 4: Reflecting on the Translator's Role	Understanding the translator as a cultural mediator	- Reflective journals - Class debates - Short analytical essays	Venuti (1995), Bassnett (2002) – <i>Translator visibility, mediation</i>
Stage 5: Showcasing Understanding through Final Projects	Synthesizing theory and practice in translation	- Annotated translations - Cultureme glossaries - Comparative projects - Stylistic and cultural analyses	House (2009), Baker (1992) – <i>Audience, purpose, and text type awareness</i>

The *Translating Culturemes in Stylistics* experiment revealed several important outcomes regarding the students' ability to identify, interpret, and translate culturemes both in depth and nuance.

Through guided analysis and case studies, teacher education students learned to recognize cultural references and to analyze them in their reflective journals being creators in the process of mediation between source and target cultures.

Also, teacher education students became confident in applying translation strategies tailored to different types of culturemes. Contrastive analysis and strategy mapping enabled them to justify their translation choices with greater precision. Their annotations proved an evolving understanding of varied translation techniques described above.

As the experiment progressed, students developed a shift in their mind perspective going beyond the word-for-word focus to a more culture-sensitive translation approach.

Final projects served as a summative demonstration of students' competence and performance as cultural mediators. Overall, the findings support the effectiveness of the structured, 5 stage-based instructional model in identifying culturemes, explaining their significance, and selecting translation strategies that preserved meaning while respecting the target culture's norms.

V. Conclusions

Confronting culturemes within, *Translating Culturemes in Stylistics study*, is not just about spotting unfamiliar customs, rituals, cultural experiences, but it is about developing a deeper understanding of culture through style, learning to mediate meaning across cultural boundaries, and becoming conscious of the speaker's role as intercultural communicator. The qualitative research *Translating Culturemes in Stylistics* led to meaningful and visible progress among teacher education students, like identifying the most obvious cultural references and the subtle elements, to see the relationship between deep levels of the language and culture.

Through the method of translation, students confronted different ways of mediating culture-specific terms as a process that isn't about finding one "correct" solution but developing the relationship built between the reader and the text.

Throughout the course, students also became more aware of their role as cultural mediators. Mediation lays foundation of the students' knowledge, their choices in representing culture through that knowledge. The main task of the students' projects was to preserve the original style of culturemes: tone, humor, style, rhythm. There have been established two strategies: to adapt the text to make it more accessible, and the other to stay faithful i.e. to maintain the original feel, even if it was more challenging. These choices sparked great discussions about when to adapt and when to preserve the meaning.

The final project was to translate a culturally rich text and explain the decisions were made in the progress of translation and reflect on how the translation choices influenced the tone, meaning, or reception of the translation. The mix of learning the theory, practicing translation, and thinking about the mediation choices gave students

useful tools to work with culture-specific words. It also prepared them to handle real translation challenges with confidence and respect for both languages and cultures.

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Email: schiopu.lucia@upsc.md