

## **TRANSLATING REALIA IN POPULAR FICTION: STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES**

Understanding of literary translation as translations from culture to culture, not only from language to language, has become the core idea nowadays. The concept of the cultural approach is specifically focused on the strategies of rendering realia in fiction. Realia, as culturally significant objects, reflect the everyday life, traditions, institutions, and material culture of a particular country. These vocabulary units present one of the most delicate challenges in the translation of popular fiction. Their presence in a literary text serves not only to localize the narrative but also to immerse readers in a culturally rich setting. However, these culturally specific items often lack direct equivalents in the target language, making their translation a matter of strategic choice rather than straightforward linguistic transfer [3; 8; 9]. Also, while choosing the approaches and techniques, the translator has to define the needs of the target readership and perceive the specific features of the text, and the role of each single item in the whole narrative.

Popular fiction, with its focus on vivid storytelling and wide reader engagement, tends to be densely packed with realia — from names of foods and clothing items to references to social institutions, brands, or customs. All this creates the atmosphere of the setting and of the narrative itself. Those vibes should be rendered by a proper culture-based translation with a suitable preservation of the reader's comfort. The translator is tasked not only with conveying meaning but also with mediating cultural experience [6]. Drawing on my long-term teaching and translation practice, this paper outlines the most effective strategies for translating realia in popular fiction, with special attention to how these choices influence target audience reception and cultural adaptation.

The term 'realia' in translation studies is regarded as the words or phrases 'closely bound with the source culture reference sphere' [3, p. 185]. This lingo-cultural phenomenon has been the focus of scholars like Newmark, Aixela, Leppihalme [3;5;8;9]. Realia are generally defined as words and expressions that denote objects, phenomena, or concepts characteristic of a particular nation, country, or people. These elements can be grouped into several categories:

- Geographical (e.g., place names, landscape features),
- Ethnographic (e.g., clothing, food, traditions),
- Political/social (e.g., institutions, titles, historical references),
- Everyday life (e.g., currency, brands, social norms).

Translators generally rely on a spectrum of strategies when approaching realia [5; 14]. The most frequently discussed include:

- Transcoding (transcription/transliteration), used when maintaining the original form is essential (e.g.: 'Mrs' – 'micic').
- Calque (loan translation) as direct translation of components (e.g.: 'The Globe theatre' – 'театр "Глобус"').
- Adaptation or substitution, replacing the realium with a culturally appropriate equivalent (e.g.: 'town hall' – 'ратуша/мерія').

- Descriptive or explicative translation – offering an explanatory phrase or a footnote (e.g.: 'a cartoon of Ribena' – 'і пакетик "Рібени", вітамінного напою, який всі дбайливі матері додають до шкільних сніданків').
- Omission or generalization, employed when the realium is too obscure for the target reader or just redundant (e.g.: 'Sainsbury' – 'супермаркет'; 'Maglite' – 'великий довгий ліхтар').

These strategies reflect two overarching approaches identified by Lawrence Venuti [12]: domestication (bringing the source culture closer to the reader, e.g.: 'Mr Smith' – 'пан Сміт') and foreignization (preserving the foreignness of the text 'Mr Smith' – 'містер Сміт'). The translator's choice depends on several factors, including genre, target audience expectations, and publishing context. Considering the specific of popular fiction with its wide target audience, we have to choose the most balanced approach, preserving the realia, recreating the source culture, but not overloading the text with translator's footnotes (e.g. explaining every single toponym) or false adaptations (e.g. 'сільрада' for 'village hall').

In translating popular fiction, realia often appear in contexts where cultural immersion is essential to the reader's experience. Over the years, both in translation practice and in the classroom, I have encountered numerous instances where the handling of realia significantly shaped the reception of the text. This section highlights several representative cases that illustrate the application of key strategies.

#### A. *Food and cuisine as cultural anchors*

Food-related realia are among the most recognizable cultural markers in fiction. For example, the term 'scones' in British fiction may be transliterated for authenticity (which is more likely) or substituted with a culturally equivalent pastry in the target language to evoke a similar emotional resonance ('содові коржики'). In Josie Silver's *Two Lives of Lidia Bird* (2020) the protagonist is returning to her normal social life after having a long period of mourning. Her mother packs a lunchbox for her as an emotional support gesture. All the foods inside are the same, as they were in Lidia's school years, and there is a 'cartoon of Ribena' among them [11, p.180]. This realium is an important feature in the story, as this black currant sugar-free juice was very popular in the British parents' community and a necessary component of the school lunchboxes; in the novel, it is the evidence of Mom's love and care. But this product is unfamiliar to Ukrainian readers. Thus, the best strategy for the translation here should be the descriptive or explicative translation, and the explanatory phrase is offered in the footnote: 'Усі дбайливі матері гадали, що цей напій — невичерпне джерело вітаміну С; набув популярності в 2010-х' [4, p.115].

#### B. *Social, Institutional, and Historical References*

The job titles, especially academic and police ranks, are real challenges for a popular fiction translator due to the differences in the related systems. 'Constable' in English has many more rank references than 'констебль' in Ukrainian, though the word was borrowed and widely used in detective stories. Such high ranks as 'Chief Constable', 'Deputy Chief Constable' (DCC) or 'Assistant Chief Constable' (ACC) are unknown to a Ukrainian reader, thus, the hierarchy is difficult to render. The strategy here is the combination of adaptation and descriptive approaches: 'замісник старшого констебля' and 'помічник старшого констебля'. Translating the police ranks demands deciphering the abbreviation, as they are not informative for the target audience, and a specific domestication approach in rendering the job titles. E.g.: 'Crime Scene Investigator' (CSI) may be rendered as 'експерт-

криміналіст', 'Senior Investigative Officer' (SIO) – 'старший слідчий/старша слідча', 'Detective Inspector' (DI) – 'детектив-інспектор/ детектив-інспекторка'.

As for the social references, the translator should consider the function of the given realia. E.g., a term 'village green' (an area of grass in the middle of an English village [7]) which historically refers to a common space in the village centre, a place for cattle pasturing and a venue for local festivals, has a very close equivalent in Ukrainian country life – 'вигін' (a common space for pasturing and social gatherings), but this one is situated in the village outskirts and cannot be applied. While translating Simon Beckett's *The Chemistry of Death* (2006), I replaced these realia with various words, according to the narrative context: 'центр села', 'галявина в центрі села', 'галявина', etc [1].

### *C. Units of Measure, Proper Names, and Address Forms*

Names of places, characters, or even titles (e.g., Mr or Mrs) often include embedded realia. Whether to retain the original form or adapt it to the target audience is a common dilemma. In my experience, popular fiction presents some of the most vivid cases, where names must retain flavour but remain readable. For example, while translating contemporary detective stories, set in the English countryside, it sounds logical to preserve all the local units of measure like 'stone' (20 kilos), 'yard' (0,91 m), etc. In some cases, when the exact distance or weight is not important for the understanding of the context, a translator may use a simple transcoding ('на невеликій відстані, десь, за декілька ярдів'). But when the distance is strictly defined and is important for the narrative, you should supply the word with a footnote: 'на відстані якихось двадцяти ярдів(\*)/ (\*)Приблизно 18 метрів (1 ярд = 0,91 м)'. This is the way to preserve the local atmosphere and the narrative context. Such an example demonstrates the balanced approach, which should be guided by the publisher's style guide.

For sure, no single strategy is universally applicable. The decision often hinges on genre, target age group, translator's brief, and the intended function of the text. In particular, in the fantasy novels, where the fictional world is created by the author, the domestication approach might seem more favourable. That is why calquing of the proper names or domestication of titles sounds more appropriate than in the texts with real settings.

In translation pedagogy, realia serve as an effective entry point for teaching students about the intersection of language and culture. In my experience, engaging students with authentic, realia-rich texts, particularly from popular fiction genres, helps foster both linguistic awareness and cultural sensitivity. Working with realia in translation assignments, our students often develop a deeper understanding of cultural nuance, especially when asked to justify their strategic choices in writing or discussion. But the primary task here is to teach the students to identify realia and choose the approach.

One of the most effective approaches in the classroom involves comparative analysis of multiple translations of the same text. For instance, students are asked to examine how different translators handled culturally loaded elements such as holidays, school terms, or forms of address. These tasks often lead to insightful discussions on reader expectations, norms of the target culture, and the translator's responsibility in balancing accuracy with accessibility.

I also ask students to analyse the excerpts from texts that I work with and facilitate a full-class discussion, including brainstorming, based on the provided background context information. Such discussions often lead to brilliant, inventive versions, seeming more appropriate than already published texts.

One more method involves rewriting activities, where students are given short excerpts containing realia and asked to produce two versions: one domesticated, one foreignized. This encourages them to reflect critically on the implications of each choice and articulate their reasoning. In some cases, I also incorporate guided use of translation memory tools or corpus searches to expose students to recurring solutions used in professional practice. I also provide a template to memorize the main strategies, based on one particular case. For example, 'a cartoon of Ribena' allows for illustrating all the possible techniques, based on the corpus search:

- Transcoding (transcription/transliteration) – 'It's a Capri Sun and Ribena cocktail. / Це коктейль з Рібени и Капрі Сан'.
- Calque – 'Ribena / чорна смородина' (in Italian).
- Specification – 'популярний негазований напій – рібена'.
- Omission (generalization – V. Karaban puts it [2, p.24]) – 'No, there's only Ribena. / Ні, друже, тільки сік'.
- Adaptation or substitution – 'Drink Ribena like it's your birthday! Пий сік "Садочок" на свій день народження!'
- Descriptive or explicative translation (modulation) – 'a cartoon of Ribena' / 'і пакетик "Рібени", вітамінного напою, який всі дбайливі матусі додають до шкільних сніданків').

Realia challenge for students is over-reliance on literal or dictionary-based translations, especially with terms that seem familiar but are culturally bound. I address this through targeted mini-lessons on background knowledge, including the historical or societal context of realia. For example, a brief overview of the UK social system can clarify terms like village green, town council, the Hall, city hall, etc. Through these methods, students begin to recognize that translating realia is not merely about linguistic accuracy, but about mediating cultural knowledge. This understanding is essential not only for literary translation but also for subtitling, localization, and intercultural communication more broadly. It is important to understand that basic translating skills formed through the training in fiction translation can be applied in any field of the language service providing industry. Starting training from the richer and more expressive texts, the students develop professional skills and master their language and cultural tools.

Translating realia in popular fiction demands more than linguistic competence — it requires cultural insight, strategic thinking, and sensitivity to audience expectations. As this paper has shown, realia often serve as narrative anchors that enrich the text, and the translator's choices in rendering them directly affect how readers perceive the cultural landscape of the story. A range of strategies — from foreignization to domestication, from calques to descriptive substitution — may be used depending on context, genre, and readership. Drawing from practical translation cases and classroom experience, it is clear that flexibility, awareness of cultural dynamics, and critical reflection are key competencies in training translators to handle realia effectively.

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