# Ways of rendering non-equivalent lexis in translating historical narratives

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**Abstract.** The translation of historical narratives presents numerous linguistic and cultural challenges, among which non-equivalent lexis occupies a central position. Non-equivalent lexical units refer to words and expressions in the source language that lack direct counterparts in the target language due to differences in culture, history, social institutions, religion, or linguistic systems. Historical narratives, in particular, are rich in culture-specific vocabulary, archaic expressions, administrative terminology, military ranks, titles, traditional objects, and proper names, all of which require careful translation strategies.

**Keywords:** non-equivalent lexis, historical narratives, translation studies, culture-specific items, borrowing, transliteration, adaptation, descriptive translation, functional equivalence.

Translation serves as a bridge between languages, cultures, and historical traditions. It enables readers to access literary, historical, and cultural heritage beyond the boundaries of their native language. Historical narratives occupy a special place among translated texts because they preserve information about past civilizations, political systems, customs, beliefs, and everyday life. Consequently, translators are expected not only to transfer linguistic meaning but also to preserve historical and cultural authenticity.

One of the greatest challenges in translating historical narratives is the rendering of non-equivalent lexis. Such vocabulary often reflects unique realities of a particular nation or historical period. Since many of these concepts do not exist in the target culture, translators must employ various strategies to convey both meaning and cultural significance.

The issue of lexical equivalence has attracted considerable attention in translation studies. Eugene Nida (1964) introduced the concepts of formal and dynamic equivalence, emphasizing that translation should reproduce not only lexical meaning but also communicative effect. Peter Newmark (1988) distinguished semantic and communicative translation and proposed several procedures for translating culture-specific items. Mona Baker (1992) explored equivalence at different linguistic levels and identified strategies for dealing with lexical gaps. Lawrence Venuti (1995) discussed the concepts of domestication and foreignization, arguing that translators should consciously decide whether to preserve foreign cultural identity or adapt texts for target readers. Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) classified translation procedures into direct and oblique methods, including borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation. Their classification remains one of the most influential frameworks for analyzing translation techniques. Non-equivalent lexis consists of lexical items that have no direct lexical counterpart in another language. These units generally include:

- Historical titles and ranks;
- Administrative institutions;
- Traditional clothing;
- National cuisine;
- Currency and measurement units;
- Religious terminology;
- Military terminology;
- Ethnographic vocabulary;
- Historical place names;
- Proper names with cultural significance.

For example, English historical texts contain terms such as *yeoman*, *shire*, *House of Commons*, *Magna Carta*, and *Privy Council*, each representing concepts deeply rooted in British history. Similarly, Central Asian historical texts include terms such as *mahalla*, *khan*, *bek*, *qurultay*, *madrasah*, and *amir*, many of which have no exact English equivalents.

The translation of non-equivalent lexis in historical narratives requires the application of various strategies that enable translators to preserve both the semantic content and the cultural significance of the source text. Since historical texts frequently contain culture-bound expressions, obsolete terminology, and concepts unique to a particular society or historical period, translators must carefully select methods that ensure historical authenticity while making the text comprehensible for the target audience. The choice of strategy largely depends on the purpose of the translation, the expectations of readers, and the degree to which the translator wishes to retain the foreign character of the original text.

One of the most widely used strategies is borrowing, also referred to as transliteration or transcription. This technique involves transferring the original lexical item directly into the target language, sometimes with minor phonetic or orthographic adjustments to conform to the linguistic norms of the target language. Borrowing is particularly common when translating historical titles, administrative positions, geographical names, and culturally specific concepts that have no exact equivalent. Terms such as khan, emir, samurai, shogun, and mahalla are usually retained in their original forms because they represent unique historical and cultural realities that cannot be accurately conveyed through substitution. The principal advantage of borrowing is that it preserves the cultural identity and historical authenticity of the original text, allowing readers to encounter concepts in their authentic form. However, the use of unfamiliar foreign terms may reduce readability, especially for readers who have limited knowledge of the source culture. Consequently, borrowed words are often accompanied by explanatory notes or glossaries that clarify their meanings.

Another important strategy is calque, or loan translation, which consists of translating the individual components of a lexical unit literally while preserving its structural composition. This method is appropriate when the target language already possesses comparable linguistic patterns or when literal translation does not obscure meaning. Examples include translating House of Commons as *Палата общин* in Russian or White House as *Белый дом*. Such renderings successfully preserve both the semantic structure and institutional significance of the original expressions. Calques are particularly effective for political, administrative, and governmental terminology that has become internationally recognized. Nevertheless, translators should exercise caution, as excessive reliance on literal translation may produce unnatural or confusing expressions when the source and target languages differ significantly in their conceptual organization.

Descriptive translation, also known as paraphrase or explanatory translation, is another effective strategy for dealing with non-equivalent lexis. Instead of searching for a direct lexical equivalent, the translator explains the meaning of the source-language item by providing a descriptive phrase or definition. For instance, the historical English term yeoman may be translated as "a free landowning farmer of medieval England." This approach is particularly valuable when the concept represented by the source-language word is unfamiliar to the target audience and cannot be adequately conveyed through borrowing alone. Descriptive translation improves reader comprehension while preserving the historical information contained in the original text. Although this method often results in longer translations and may reduce stylistic conciseness, it significantly enhances the communicative effectiveness of historical narratives.

The following examples demonstrate different translation strategies.

| **Source Lexis** | **Strategy** | **Possible Translation** |
|---|---|---|
| khan | Borrowing | Khan |
| mahalla | Borrowing + Note | Mahalla (traditional neighborhood community) |
| yeoman | Description | Free landowning farmer |
| shire | Functional equivalence | County |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| denarius | Generalization | Ancient coin |
| boyar | Borrowing | Boyar |
| samurai | Borrowing | Samurai |
| madrasah | Borrowing + Explanation | Madrasa (Islamic educational institution) |

The analysis indicates that borrowing combined with explanatory notes often provides the best balance between historical authenticity and reader comprehension.

**Conclusion.** The translation of non-equivalent lexis remains one of the most demanding aspects of translating historical narratives. Since many historical concepts lack direct lexical equivalents, translators must employ a variety of strategies, including borrowing, calque, descriptive translation, functional equivalence, generalization, and explanatory notes. No single method is universally applicable; rather, the choice depends on the communicative purpose, target readership, and historical significance of each lexical unit. Among the available approaches, borrowing accompanied by concise explanation appears to provide the optimal balance between preserving historical authenticity and ensuring reader comprehension. Ultimately, effective translation of historical narratives requires not only linguistic expertise but also deep cultural and historical knowledge, allowing translators to transmit both the informational and cultural dimensions of the source text.

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