Translating Culture-Bound Terms

What are culture-bound terms?

Mailhac (1996: 173) defines these as follows (he uses the term 'cultural reference'):

> Any reference to a cultural entity which, because of its distance from the target culture, is characterised by a sufficient degree of opacity from the point of view of the target reader to constitute a translation problem. In other words, as is normally the case in such discussions, transparent cultural references will be ignored.

A reference to Hitler, or to the Eiffel Tower, will be sufficiently transparent as to present no problem to the translator, but for other 'cultural references', the reader may require some help.

Such references are sometimes termed 'culturemes', phenomena that are specific to your Source Culture, but not to your Target Culture, or as Nord describes them (1997: 34):

> A cultureme is a social phenomenon of a culture X that is regarded as relevant by members of this culture and, when compared with a corresponding social phenomenon in a culture Y, it is found to be specific to culture X.

In my view, culture-bound problems expand beyond purely 'social phenomena'. Leppihalme lists the following:

- Extralinguistic phenomena - both natural (topography, flora and fauna) and manmade (social institutions, buildings, trademarks).

- Intralinguistic phenomena - the implicit messages coded within idioms, word-play, or ways of addressing a person, complimenting them or apologising that might be particular to a culture

In the latter category would fall, for example, the dual system of address that exists in French (tu/vous). For a good, detailed introduction culture-bound terms, see Gonzalez (2009). She points out that it is not necessarily the case that a cultureme will be specific to one of the two cultures. It may simply be that the way in which the cultural artefact is interpreted is different from culture to culture. She gives the example of Christmas Eve: in Britain, this is a time to get together with one's family, but in Japan, it is a time to meet up with one's lover. The phrase is the same, but the underlying association differs (significantly!).

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In a section that is worth exploring in detail, Armstrong (2005: 68-73) offers up some further examples in French of what he calls ‘complex words’ that are highly culture-specific and require unpacking for the reader: *ENA, Grande École, commune, pantoufle, frileux, banlieue*.

### How can the translator deal with culture-bound terms?

Mailhac (1996: 174) argues that there are two broad approaches available to a translator:

- **CULTURAL TRANSPLANTATION** - converting the source culture setting into a target culture setting:
  - So *The Morning Star* would become *L’Humanité* in the French translation

- **EXOTICISM** - plunging the target reader into the source culture, with either overt or covert presence of the translator:
  - So *The Morning Star* would become *Le Morning Star* (covert presence)
  - Or *Le Morning Star, journal communiste britannique* (overt presence)

Mailhac suggests the following strategies, to which I have added my own explanations:

- **cultural substitution** (choose an equivalent in the target culture)
- **literal translation** (provide a word-for-word calque)
- **definition** (provide the reader with a little extra support in the form of a gloss, as which the 'journal communiste britannique' solution above)
- **lexical creation** (translator creates a new term)
- **deliberate omission** (just avoid the problem and leave it out, possibly **compensating** for this omission elsewhere!)

### BIBLIOGRAPHY


- Christiane Nord (1997), Translating as a Purposeful Activity (Manchester: St Jerome).


**SEE ALSO**