

STRATEGIES FOR TRANSLATING CULTURE-SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract: The translation of culture-specific religious expressions is a complex process that requires more than direct linguistic substitution. Religious expressions are closely connected with the beliefs, traditions, values, history, and social practices of particular communities. Consequently, translating such expressions from one language and culture into another may result in semantic, pragmatic, stylistic, and cultural difficulties. This article examines the major strategies used in translating culture-specific religious expressions, including literal translation, borrowing, transliteration, functional equivalence, adaptation, descriptive translation, domestication, foreignization, and the use of explanatory notes.

Keywords: religious expressions, culture-specific items, translation strategies, cultural equivalence, pragmatic meaning, intercultural communication, adaptation, functional equivalence, domestication, foreignization.

Introduction

Translation has always played an important role in communication between different cultures and communities. It enables people to access literary, religious, historical, and scientific works produced in other languages. However, translation becomes particularly challenging when the source text contains expressions that are strongly connected with a specific religious or cultural tradition. Such expressions often contain meanings that cannot be fully understood through their literal linguistic forms. Religious expressions are an important component of cultural identity. They can occur in sacred texts, prayers, sermons, religious literature, everyday conversations, greetings, blessings, condolences, and traditional ceremonies. In many societies, religious expressions have both religious and social functions. For example, an expression may simultaneously communicate faith, respect, gratitude, politeness, solidarity, or sympathy.

The difficulty of translating such expressions is caused by differences between source and target cultures. Even when two languages have similar religious terminology, the pragmatic and cultural meanings of particular expressions may differ. A literal translation can therefore preserve the words but fail to reproduce the communicative function or emotional effect of the original.

The main purpose of this article is to examine the major strategies for translating culture-specific religious expressions and to identify the factors that influence the choice of an appropriate translation strategy. The article also emphasizes the importance of cultural competence and contextual analysis in the translation process.

Main Part

Culture-specific religious expressions are linguistic units whose meanings are closely associated with the religious beliefs, traditions, and social practices of a particular cultural community. They may include names of religious concepts, prayers, blessings, greetings, rituals, festivals, sacred objects, forms of address, quotations from religious texts, and conventional expressions of faith. Their translation requires careful consideration because they frequently contain both explicit and implicit meanings.

One of the simplest strategies is **literal translation**. This method involves translating the words and grammatical structure of the original expression as closely as possible. Literal translation can be effective when the target language has a well-established equivalent and when the expression has a similar meaning and function in both cultures. It is particularly useful for widely recognized religious concepts whose meanings are shared across different linguistic communities. However, literal translation may be problematic when the expression contains culture-specific associations or a pragmatic meaning that cannot be reproduced directly.

Another important strategy is **borrowing**. In this approach, the original religious term is retained in the target text. Borrowing is useful when the source-language term has no precise equivalent in the target language or when preserving the original cultural identity is important. Borrowed terms are particularly common in religious, historical, and academic texts. However, unfamiliar terms may be difficult for target readers, so they may need contextual clarification.

Transliteration is closely related to borrowing. It involves representing a source-language term using the writing system of the target language. This strategy is particularly useful for religious names, traditional concepts, names of festivals, sacred places, and other culturally significant terms. Transliteration allows the translator to preserve the identity of the original expression while adapting its written form to the target language.

Functional equivalence is one of the most effective strategies when the literal meaning of a religious expression does not produce the same communicative effect in the target language. Instead of reproducing the exact linguistic structure, the translator chooses an expression that performs a similar function. For example, a religious greeting may be translated by a conventional greeting in the target culture if the main purpose is to preserve the social function of greeting and respect.

However, functional equivalence should be applied carefully. **Adaptation** is another strategy that can be used when a source expression is unfamiliar or difficult to

understand for the target audience. Adaptation modifies the expression so that it becomes culturally accessible. It may be useful in educational texts, children's literature, popular media, and translations intended for general readers. Nevertheless, excessive adaptation can distort the original religious meaning and should therefore be used selectively.

Descriptive translation is particularly useful when no direct equivalent exists. Instead of searching for a single target-language word, the translator describes the meaning or function of the source expression. This strategy allows the translator to preserve important cultural information. It is often appropriate for religious rituals, traditional objects, ceremonial practices, and culture-specific concepts that are unfamiliar to target readers.

For example, if a religious term refers to a particular ritual or traditional practice that does not exist in the target culture, simply replacing it with a general word such as “ceremony” may result in the loss of important information. A brief description can provide readers with a clearer understanding of the original concept.

Domestication and **foreignization** represent two broader approaches to cultural translation. Domestication makes the source text more familiar to target readers by adapting culturally unfamiliar expressions to the norms of the target culture. It can improve readability and accessibility. However, excessive domestication may reduce the cultural specificity of the original text.

Foreignization, in contrast, preserves unfamiliar elements of the source culture. This strategy allows readers to encounter the cultural and religious characteristics of the original community. It is particularly useful when the cultural identity of a religious expression is an important part of the text. Nevertheless, foreignized expressions may require explanations or contextual support.

The use of **translator's notes** is another effective strategy. Footnotes or endnotes can provide additional information about religious concepts, historical references, rituals, or cultural practices. This approach is especially useful in academic, historical, literary, and religious translations. However, too many explanations can interrupt the reading process and reduce the aesthetic quality of a literary text. Therefore, notes should be used only when necessary.

Religious festivals and rituals create another category of culture-specific expressions. The names of religious celebrations may have established equivalents in other languages, but the practices associated with them can differ significantly across cultures. A translator should distinguish between the name of a festival and the cultural practices surrounding it. When necessary, a short contextual explanation can help readers understand the significance of the practice.

The translation of religious expressions also involves an important ethical dimension. Translators should avoid introducing personal interpretations that are not

present in the original text. Religious texts and expressions can be sensitive for communities, and inaccurate or careless translation may lead to misunderstanding. Therefore, translators should aim for accuracy, neutrality, cultural respect, and consistency. Thus, successful translation of culture-specific religious expressions requires a flexible and context-sensitive approach. No single strategy can solve every translation problem. The best results are achieved when translators combine several strategies according to the needs of the text and its intended audience.

Conclusion

The translation of culture-specific religious expressions is a complex task that requires linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, pragmatic awareness, and ethical responsibility. Religious expressions frequently carry meanings that extend beyond their literal linguistic forms and reflect the beliefs, traditions, values, and social practices of a particular community.

In conclusion, the translation of religious expressions should be viewed as an act of intercultural mediation rather than simple linguistic substitution. A culturally competent translator can help readers understand not only the words of a religious expression but also the worldview and cultural values behind them. This approach contributes to more accurate translation and promotes mutual understanding between different linguistic and religious communities.

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