

**TOUCHES UPON CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC UNTRANSLATABILITY WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO DAN BROWN'S "THE DA VINCI CODE" AND ITS ARMENIAN VERSION**

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12578778>

Abstract

This article discusses the problem of linguistic and cultural untranslatability between Armenian and English languages, specifically of artistic words. The phonemic system, character structure and figure of speech are all completely different among these languages, and most of these in one language do not have equivalent in the other language. This causes linguistic untranslatability. But untranslatability is not absolute, we should understand the co-existence of translatability and untranslatability. Some techniques of artistic translation are suggested in the frame of this research to reduce the barrier in translation and promote language and culture communication.

Keywords- untranslatability, translatability, linguistic and cultural untranslatability.

Translation, often regarded as a bridge between languages and cultures, is a complex and nuanced endeavor that involves grappling with the intricacies of linguistic and cultural exchange. Within the realm of translation studies, one concept that stands out for its challenges and implications is "untranslatability." This article delves into the multifaceted nature of untranslatability, tracing its historical roots, exploring various theoretical frameworks, and examining its practical implications for translators. By shedding light on the complexities of linguistic and cultural exchange, the discussion aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of untranslatability and its significance within the broader context of translation studies.

It is a well acknowledged fact that untranslatability encompasses the difficulty or impossibility of finding equivalent expressions in another language due to linguistic, cultural, and contextual disparities (Lucia, 2007).

This foundational understanding sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how scholars such as Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida have made significant contributions to the understanding of untranslatability, emphasizing its ties to language, culture, and history (Brian James, 2015). Benjamin associates the concept with the "sacred" nature of translation, suggesting that certain words and concepts carry intrinsic meanings that resist translation. J. Derrida explores the paradoxical nature of translation stemming from the myth of Babel, where the multiplicity of tongues creates both a need and impossibility of translation (Sergio Gabriel, 2005).

The notion of untranslatability was first raised by Catford in 1965 where he distinguishes between the **linguistic and cultural untranslatability** stating that the former is more associated with the difference between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) in terms of formal features peculiar to them, whereas the latter is the resultant consequence of the absence in the TL of relevant situational features (Catford, 1965, p. 94-101). More specifically, Catford echoes that "in linguistic untranslatability the functionally relevant features include some which are in fact formal features of the SL text. If the TL has no formally corresponding

feature, the text, or the item, is (relatively) untranslatable" (p.94). The examples that include linguistic untranslatability, as Catford provided, are ambiguity, plays on words, ...etc.(p.96-98). As for cultural untranslatability, he adds that "what appears to be a quite different problem arises when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the SL text, is completely absent in the culture of which the TL is a part" (p. 99). Admitting that cultural untranslatability is less 'absolute' than the linguistic untranslatability, Catford comments that "to talk of 'cultural untranslatability' may be just another way of talking about collocation untranslatability: the impossibility of finding an equivalent collocation in the TL". And this would be a type of linguistic untranslatability (p.101). He finally concluded that "the validity of the differentiation between linguistic and cultural untranslatability is questionable" (De Pedro, 1999, p.551). However, Snell-Hornby (1988, p.19-20) has severely criticized Catford's definition of equivalence in particular and his approach to translation in general describing them respectively as 'circular' and 'hopelessly inadequate'. Her arguments in this regard are based upon the fact that translation process cannot simply be interpreted in terms of linguistic theory alone as what Catford has claimed since some other factors, i.e. textual, cultural and situational should be carefully considered when translating (Snell-Hornby, 1988). Apart from this, Catford's notion of untranslatability has been described as a 'myth' and therefore 'divorced from reality' since it yields the paradox to translation in practice (John, 2011). Bassnett (2002) criticizes Catford by identifying that he "starts from different premises, and because he does not go far enough in considering the dynamic nature of language and culture, he invalidates his own category of cultural untranslatability" (p.40).

Building upon these theoretical foundations, the article examines various factors that contribute to untranslatability, including cultural nuances, contextual specificity, linguistic structures, wordplay, historical references, idiomatic expressions, and terminology (Catford, 1965). These factors can be categorized into linguistic and cultural types of untranslatability, each

presenting unique hurdles for translators seeking to convey meaning across languages.

"The Da Vinci Code" by Dan Brown is abundant with instances that resist direct translation, predominantly stemming from cultural and historical references, intricate wordplays, and specialized art terminology.

Ultimately, the translation of artistic texts transcends linguistic boundaries, offering readers an immersive experience into diverse cultural landscapes. By navigating the complexities of language and culture, translators play a pivotal role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of artistic expression (Catford, 1965). As translators continue to grapple with the evolving nature of language and terminology, their endeavors serve as catalysts for cultural exchange and dialogue, enriching the global literary landscape (Lefevere, 1998).

In general, translators have to mediate specialized language by working on the network of meanings that these texts develop, consisting of verbal and visual information. Moreover, working with art texts, translators need to consider the potential performative value of both the source and the target text (i.e., the aesthetic gesture that it realizes in relation to the expectations of the audience). The most challenging aspects of translating art and more generally art texts are related to coherence and the complex syntax that art writing uses. This *poetic vagueness* can be challenging for the translator, whose cultural background is continuously tested. The implications for interlingual and intersemiotic translation are complex: the target text must be considered with its source text and in its relation to other target texts as well as to visual elements. In other words, the translated text is part of a network of visual, textual, and cultural elements. A failure to *negotiate* and adapt the translation to such multiple polarities may lead to varying degrees of interpretive breakdown on the part of the end-user. In a multilingual environment, both target and source texts must operate side by side within the book space and in relation to the same set of visual items. In general, translators are required to render a text with no deletions or additions that might alter the lexicogrammatical structure of the text.

Despite the challenges posed by untranslatability, translators employ a range of strategies to address them effectively (Nida & Taber, 1969). Cultural adaptation, footnotes, literal translation with explanation, borrowing (transliteration, transcription), pragmatic equivalence, paraphrasing are among the strategies used to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps (Hervey, Higgins, & Haywood, 1995).

The article emphasizes the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of language and culture in translation (House, 2009). It argues that meaning is deeply intertwined with cultural context and societal norms, necessitating a nuanced approach to translation that goes beyond linguistic considerations.

Moreover, the article highlights the evolving nature of translation studies, with recent scholarship challenging traditional linguistic-based approaches (Samuel & Samuel, 2007). Scholars such as House and Samuel argue that translation is not solely linguistic but also

involves the interaction between authors, readers, and cultural contexts.

Despite the fact that there are still some language points that are deemed difficult to translate, however, the principle of translatability has increasingly gotten universal acknowledgment as the general rule in translation theory and practice. In other words, the notion of untranslatability should not be taken as "a rule stating that it is impossible to create a text in the target language in the form of a text previously written in the TL. Untranslatability concerns some special cases that can be interpreted as the exceptions to the general rule of translating from one language to another" (Cluz, 2001, p.23). Most importantly, translators's awareness of the fact that structural differences languages have are no obstacles to translation since each "linguistic community has the potential of expressions which generates resources for verbalizing every extralinguistic nuance including those which go beyond its own social and cultural experience" (Schulte and Biguenet, 1992). Additionally, meaning is still be adequately transferred from one language to another cross-culturally, according to which the cultural gap has increasingly been bridged as a result of globalization and communication technology that gets even different cultures to become more closely accessible.

In delving into the intricate tapestry of linguistic and cultural nuances, "The Da Vinci Code" by Dan Brown serves as an invaluable trove of examples. Within its pages lie instances that illuminate the multifaceted nature of untranslatability, spanning both linguistic and cultural realms. Linguistically, the novel presents challenges across various dimensions: phonological, semantic, and morphological. Words and phrases imbued with intricate phonetic nuances, nuanced semantic layers, or complex syntactic structures pose significant hurdles for translators seeking to convey the essence of the original text.

The study entails an examination of the Armenian translation of Dan Brown's renowned novel "The Da Vinci Code" conducted by the authors of this scholarly article.

- *O, Draconian devil!*
Oh lame saint!

Dan Brown presents a linguistic puzzle involving the anagram "O, Draconian devil! Oh lame saint!" An **anagram** is a word or phrase formed by rearranging the letters of a different word or phrase. In this particular case the letters of this verse rearrange to create an anagram for the expression "**Leonardo Da Vinci, The Mona Lisa**". Translating this anagram into Armenian presents a considerable challenge due to the differences in language structure, **phonetics**, and the availability of suitable words with matching letter combinations. The most obvious method to use in this situation would be creating a new anagram the letter combinations of which would be rearrangeable in Armenian. However there are 2 complications in our way. First of all it is the word Draconian, which is specifically highlighted by the characters, hence it would be necessary to preserve in Armenian.

"The word '**Draconian**'?" he ventured, offering the first thing that came to mind. Langdon was fairly

certain that a reference to Draco—the ruthless seventh-century B.C. politician—was an unlikely dying thought. " 'Draconian devil' seems an odd choice of vocabulary." (pg. 37)

Secondly the characters highlight the significance of the anagram being in English.

"Saunière was a Frenchman," Fache said flatly. "He lived in Paris. And yet he chose to write this message..."

"In English," Langdon said, now realizing the captain's meaning. (pg. 37)

So in order to preserve all these contextual details no translation was done and the anagram was kept in its English form, while a footnote with its literal translation is provided for readers to capture the meaning of the message.

O, Դրաքոնյան Սառանա
Oh, Կառլ Մուրք. (էջ 82)

• In fact, so strong was the Church's fear of those who lived in the rural **villes** that the once innocuous word for "**villager**"—**villain**—came to mean a wicked soul. (pg. 30)

Դրականում այնքան մեծ էր Եկեղեցու վախը այս բազմաստվածներից, ովքեր սպրում էին գյուղերում՝ «**villes**», որ ժամանակին գյուղացի նշանակող «**villain**» բառը վերափոխաստվածորեցին «սար ոգի»:

In "The Da Vinci Code," Dan Brown masterfully exploits the **semantic** aspect of untranslatability through the nuanced play on words surrounding "village" and "villain." The semantic ambiguity arises from the phonetic similarity between these terms, ingeniously intertwined with the narrative's exploration of historical misconceptions. Brown delves into how the Church's portrayal of pagan villagers as "villains" due to fear perpetuated a linguistic transformation, altering perceptions and shaping societal discourse. This semantic evolution, laden with layers of irony and critique, underscores the power of language in constructing meaning and influencing beliefs. Translating this semantic interplay into Armenian presents a profound challenge, as capturing the intricate semantic nuances and cultural resonances demands careful consideration. By preserving the original English terms supplemented with explanatory notes, the translation endeavors to convey the semantic richness and impact of Brown's linguistic artistry while ensuring coherence and relevance in the target language.

• While being interviewed by an American art magazine, Saunière had expressed his distaste for the modernist **Cubist** movement by noting that Picasso's masterpiece *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was a perfect anagram of vile meaningless doodles. Picasso fans were not amused. (pg. 83)

Ամերիկյան արվեստի ամսագրերից մեկին հարցազրույց տալիս՝ նա արտահայտել էր իր անգոհունակությունը ժամանակակից **կուբիզմի** շարժման հանդեպ, նշելով որ Պիկասսոյի գլուխգործոց "*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*" կոտավր կատարյալ անազրամա էր vile meaningless doodles - ի: Այդ ակնարկը Պիկասսոյի երկրպագուներին այնքան էլ դուր չէր եկել:

The Cubist movement, which emerged in early 20th-century Europe and later gained global traction, is renowned for its geometric aesthetic, often evoking the shape of "cubes" in its artistic representations, hence its name (Honour and Fleming, 2009). However, when translated directly into Armenian as "քառակուսի," the term may pose a **morphological** challenge due to the absence of the suffix "ism" (of Greek origin) in Armenian, traditionally used to denote movements or doctrines. Consequently, to ensure conceptual clarity and linguistic coherence, the term "Cubism" was adopted through transliteration from Russian, resulting in the Armenian equivalent, "կուբիզմ".

Culturally, the narrative delves into realms of *tradition, history, and religion*, where concepts and references may lack direct equivalents in other languages or may carry vastly different connotations. Through meticulous examination and translation of such instances, we gain insight into the complexities of bridging linguistic and cultural divides, navigating the intricate interplay between language, context, and meaning.

• The pre-Christian God Mithras—called the Son of God and the Light of the World—was born on **December 25**, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days. By the way, **December 25** is also the birthday of Osiris, Adonis, and Dionysus. (pg. 196)

Նախաքրիստոնեական աստված Միիրը, որ համարվում էր Աստվածների Որդի Ու Աշխարհի Լուսավորիչը, ծնվել էր դեկտեմբերի 25-ին, մահացել ու թաղվել քարե դամբարանում, ապա վերակենդանացել երեք օր անց: Ի միջ այլոց, դեկտեմբերի 25-ը համարվում է նաև Օսիրիսի, Ադոնիսի և Դիոնիսոսի ծննդյան օրը: **Եվ ինչպես գիտես Քրիստոսի Ծնունդը Կաթոլիկ եկեղեցին տոնում է հենց այդ օրը:**

While the linguistic translation of December 25 poses no inherent challenge for Armenian readers, its **religious** significance diverges from Western contexts. In many Western cultures, December 25 marks Christmas, commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ. However, in Armenian Christianity, as observed by the Armenian Apostolic Church, Christmas is celebrated on January 6. This discrepancy in celebration dates may lead to confusion when discussing December 25 in an Armenian context, necessitating clarification for readers. Employing methods such as literal translation with explanation and paraphrasing, the translation addresses this religious aspect of cultural untranslatability to ensure clarity and coherence for Armenian readers.

• The Priory created a military arm—a group of nine knights called the Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon." Langdon paused. "More commonly known as the **Knights Templar**." (pg. 133)

Միաբանությունը ստեղծեց հատուկ զորախումբ, քաղկացած ինն ասպետներից, ովքեր կոչվում էին Քրիստոսի և Սողոմոնի տաճարի աղքատ ասպետներ,- Լեոգոնոր մի պահ կանգ առավ,- այն ավելի հայտնի է **Տամպլիերներ անունով:**

The book assumes familiarity with the concept of the Templars, a well-known entity in the Western

world, without providing additional explanation. However, this assumption may lead to confusion among Armenian readers, particularly those belonging to the Apostolic Church who may not be as informed about Catholic beliefs. The direct translation of "Templars" into Armenian as "Տամպլիերներ" is provided, supplemented with a footnote to elucidate its essence for Armenian readers. This approach acknowledges the **historical** aspect of untranslatability, ensuring clarity while preserving the cultural significance of the term.

• *Complete with two rectangular lakes and gardens designed by Le Nôtre, **Château Villette** was more of a modest castle than a mansion. (pg. 185)*

Եվ շրջապատված լինելով երկու ուղղանկյուն լճերով ու պարտեզներով՝ նախագծված Լենտորի կողմից, **Շատո Վիլլեթն** ավելի նման էր համեստ դղյակի քան առանձնատան:

The edifice known as Chateau Villette, constructed in 17th-century Paris, takes its name from the Old French term "chateau," originally referring to a castle but evolving in contemporary usage to denote large country houses in France. The decision not to opt for a literal translation but to borrow through transcription stems from linguistic research, as per Toramanyan (2007), and adheres to established principles that prioritize retaining the cultural nuances encapsulated in realia. This approach underscores the **traditional** aspect of untranslatability, particularly evident in realia, where preserving cultural authenticity and historical connotations outweigh direct linguistic conversion.

In conclusion, the notion of untranslatability presents formidable challenges for translators, particularly when dealing with linguistic intricacies, cultural nuances, and realia. However, through meticulous research, linguistic expertise, and innovative strategies, translators can effectively navigate these challenges to ensure a seamless transfer of meaning across languages. Techniques such as *literal translation*, *transliteration*, *paraphrasing*, and *explanatory notes* can be employed individually or in combination to capture the essence of the original text while maintaining linguistic coherence and cultural fidelity. By prioritizing the preservation of cultural authenticity and striving for a flawless end result, translators play a crucial role in bridging linguistic and cultural divides, enriching global discourse, and fostering mutual understanding across diverse communities.

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