Article

CADERNOS de TRADUÇÃO

Cultural transmission and semantic loss in the English translation of V. J. James's *Nireeswaran*

Ammu Maria Ashok
Amity University of Haryana
Gurugram, Haryana, India
ammuashoke@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3144-4699

Udaya Narayana Singh
Amity University of Haryana
Gurugram, Haryana, India
unsciil51@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5969-7787

Abstract: Translation is widely regarded as an art that involves retelling an author's story in an entirely different language while preserving the essence and meaning of the original text. The primary significance of translation lies in conveying words and expressions from one language to another without distorting the original meaning. Ideally, there should be minimal addition or omission during the translation process. Furthermore, the translated text should be both highly expressive and accurate. This study examines the extent of cultural and linguistic challenges in translation through a comparative analysis of V. J. James's *Nireeswaran* (2014), a highly acclaimed Malayalam novel, and its English translation *Nireeswaran* (2022) by Ministhy S. The novel, noted for its rich cultural elements and literary significance, poses unique challenges in maintaining equivalence between the source and target texts. The study explores how effectively the translated text conveys the original's cultural and contextual nuances by analysing translation strategies and the translator's techniques in overcoming linguistic gaps. This work aims to analyse the potential loss of meaning that occurs due to cultural and linguistic challenges through a comparative reading of V. J. James's Sahitya Akademi award-winning 320-page novel, *Nireeswaran* (2014, 582 pages in Kindle edition 2016) which has already undergone 22 editions, and its English translation *Nireeswaran* (2022) by Ministhy S. The author, V.J. James grew up in Changanacherry, Kerala, and worked at Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre. This debut novel received the DC Silver Jubilee Award (1999), Malayattoor Prize and Rotary Literary Award. *Nireeswaran* also received the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Basheer Puraskaram and Vayalar Award.

Keywords: literary translation; equivalence; cultural transmission linguistic challenges; translation techniques; Malayalam literature.

Cadernos de Tradução, 45(Special Issue 1), 2025, e105460
Graduate Program in Translation Studies
Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil. ISSN 2175-7968
DOI https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2025.e105460

1. Introduction

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as *Linguistic Relativity* and *Linguistic Determinism*, suggests that language shapes thought and perception (Sapir, 1961; Whorf, 1956). It supports the idea that languages take a particular form due to cultural influences, which, in turn, determine how individuals think and perceive the world. According to this theory, speakers of different languages inevitably perceive the world in ways influenced by their linguistic structures, including variations in their understanding of concepts such as shape, size, colour, and speed. This linguistic relativity explains why gaps and losses of meaning are common in translation; the worldview embedded in one language may differ significantly from that of another, making perfect equivalence challenging, if not impossible, to achieve. Crystal (1990) raises this argument regarding the notion of exact equivalence in translation. He comments that exact equivalence in translation is inherently unattainable and no translator can produce a translation that perfectly mirrors the source text. He further argues that some loss of information is inevitable, as one cannot recreate the nuances, connotations, and specific meanings contained within the original text. Such losses are unavoidable even if the author-translator is a grassroots bilingual, translating her own text into the target language.

Addressing gaps in translation can pose challenges for translators, as different strategies may be required to bridge conceptual differences. As cited in Singh (2004, p. 61), Panikar highlights that gaps in translation arise not only from differences in linguistic content but also from various "shadows" that intervene between the source and target languages. These shadows encompass elements such as language, time, cultural preferences, the translator's personality, and the method of transmission. Similarly, Ivir (1987) suggests that gaps or voids arise mainly due to the differences in external realities between languages and how these are represented within each linguistic framework**.**

V. J. James, in his novel *Nireeswaran (*2014) explores these translation challenges through a provocative narrative**.** The novel, recently translated from Malayalam into English by Ministhy S.**,** introduces the concept of an "un-god" as an act of human intervention. Nireeswaran features a headless, limbless god invented by village boys – Antony, Bhaskaran and Sahir, who represent Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, respectively. The trio, self-named Abhasa Sangha (meaning "The Fellowship of the Debauched" in Malayalam), aims to challenge religious beliefs and confront the deep-seated superstitions of their village. Their pursuit extends beyond atheism as they seek to expose the constructed nature of faith and shake the villagers into confronting the non-existence of god.

2. Ecological untranslatability

According to Newmark (1988) in *A Textbook of Translation*, ecological features are not solely confined to one aspect of nature; rather, they are intricately connected to various elements such as flora, fauna, weather, terrain, and even geographical concepts like plains and hills. Translating texts that involve ecological descriptions necessitates careful consideration of a wide range of environmental elements, ensuring that all interrelated aspects of nature are accurately

represented in the target language. Eco-translation involves both adaptation and the judicious selection made by each translator to align with the original text while choosing suitable expressions for the target language. In translation, particularly when addressing ecology-based, culture-specific items, challenges emerge due to the intrinsic differences between cultures and the natural environments they represent. All these can complicate the task of preserving the contextual meaning of these terms during translation.

As a fundamental component of ecology, flora carries cultural, symbolic, and geographical significance that may be deeply rooted in the source culture. In some instances, these ecological elements – particularly plants or trees – are so specific to a region (and to a speech community) that they lack direct equivalents in the target culture. This presents challenges for translators attempting to convey their cultural and ecological importance. To address this issue in *Nireeswaran,* the translator primarily employed a transliteration strategy to retain the original names of plants, thereby preserving their cultural authenticity and encouraging the target reader to engage with the source culture. For instance, the ecological entity "*Communist Pacha*" (James, 2022, p. 163) is the Malayalam name for a green, native medicinal plant found in South India. Etymological research indicates that the name originated from World War returnees stationed in the Assam/Northeast region, who brought it back to Kerala. During the same period, communism spread rapidly in Kerala, leading to *the identification* of Communist Pacha as a particularly invasive plant. The cultural reference to communism may be lost on target readers unless a definition or footnote is provided. Another example is the "*Vazhana*" (James, 2022, p. 163) plant (also known as *Edana* in Malayalam), mentioned in medieval texts that describe the dried leaves of the *Cinnamomum* genus, believed to possess medicinal properties. The term "*Kuppacheera*" (James, 2022, p. 163) in Malayalam refers to spinach that grows in rubbish heaps; many people use its leaves as a vegetable similar to spinach in various parts of Kerala. "*Veliparuthi*" (James, 2022, p. 266), another well-known plant found in Kerala villages, is distinguished by its heart-shaped leaves and is typically found along roadsides, which explains its name.

Consider this sentence: "There were Muyalcheviyan, mukkutty, and kakkapoo in that mélange" (James, 2022, p. 172). Here, the author lists three plants in one sentence, each with distinct ecological and cultural significance. "*Mukkootti/mukkutty*" – commonly known as a little tree plant in English – is frequently found in Kerala and has medicinal uses in Nepal and India. The "*Muyalcheviyan*" plant is a medicinal herb and one of the "Ten Sacred Flowers of Kerala", with strong religious and cultural associations. "*Kakkapoo*", or blue rat tail or blue snakeweed, is a shrub. Similarly, "*Eerkil*" (James, 2022, p. 257) refers to the midrib of a coconut leaf, a stiff central vein that supports the leaf while facing the sun.

Beyond transliteration, the translator also utilised a definition strategy to clarify cultural concepts that may not exist in European contexts. For instance, "*Dasapushpa*," or ten sacred flowers, appears in this sentence. "Anyone searching for the *dasapushpa*, the ten local flowers used for traditional rituals, could easily discover nearly eight in the list right there" (James, 2022, p. 172). Here, the literal meaning of the Malayalam word "*Dasapushpam*" is insufficient, as it fails to convey their ritualistic and cultural significance. The term *Dasapushpam* is derived from Sanskrit, where "*Dasha*" means "ten," and "*Pushpam*" means "flowers." These herbs hold special importance in Kerala's traditional practices, particularly in the Western Ghats. This will ultimately

create a cultural gap in target readers as they are unaware of the history and significance of these flowers in Kerala culture.

In another instance, the translator faced a unique challenge and found no equivalent word for the plant "*Mashithandu*" mentioned in the source text, which is used to explain its quality indirectly in a sentence. In Kerala, Mashithandu was traditionally used to erase writing on a slate, a practice that is now largely obsolete. To convey this function, the translator substituted it with the word "eraser". While this is effective in communicating its purpose, it neglects the historical and cultural context of the term in Kerala. Since *Mashithandu* is deeply tied to traditional educational practices in Kerala, would a footnote or brief cultural annotation provide additional context for readers unfamiliar with its historical usage? This could help maintain the richness of the original reference while ensuring accessibility for a wider audience.

Concerning the translation of flora, the "transliteration" strategy allows unique cultural or ecological features (in this case, specific plants or trees) to retain their original identity in the target text. By using transliteration, the translator maintains the specific names of flora, thereby preserving their cultural significance as these plant species or trees hold unique associations within the source culture, such as connections to traditional practices, religious beliefs, or folklore. However, a description or footnote may elucidate its symbolic meaning, such as its ties to life, culture, and the environment in specific Kerala communities, which may be unfamiliar to foreign readers. Transliteration introduces the target audience to unfamiliar flora and ecosystems, thereby enriching their understanding of diverse cultures and environments.

For flora that is integral to the identity of the source culture, even when an equivalent exists in the target culture, the translator finds transliteration to be a valuable strategy. This approach enables the translator to convey the importance of the plant while recognising the cultural uniqueness of the term. The translator must carefully balance transliteration with contextual explanations to ensure that the reader understands the significance of the flora. Thus, transliteration serves as a bridge to navigate ecological untranslatability, while acknowledging the cultural gaps it may create for target readers who are unfamiliar with Kerala's ecological landscape.

3. Material culture and untranslatability

The translator has used both borrowing (direct borrowing of loan word), and naturalized loanwords, to translate numerous words from material culture related to clothing and food in the source text. Here, the translator has integrated several common Malayalam cultural instances into English, which have been naturalised as part of standard English vocabulary. For instance, "*Mundu*" (James, 2022, p. 44), from the Malayalam "mund", refers to a garment primarily worn by men around the waist in Kerala. Similarly, "*Chatta*" (James, 2022, p. 217) comes from a traditional dress worn by Christians in Kerala. It is a seamless white garment with a white blouse covering the upper body. "*Thorthu*" (James, 2022, p. 44) is a traditional Kerala bath towel. "*Kasavu*" (James, 2022, p. 124) is also associated with Kerala clothing. It's a technique used in handlooms of Kerala with delicate threads of gold or silver used in weaving to make border lines and designs on silk and cotton fabrics. The custom of wearing those garments is not seen in the foreign culture, but their use here has made the items seem unique to the target audience as cultural clothing of the Eastern

part. Thus, we can add the key difference between 'borrowing' and 'naturalisation' used by the translator in a tabular manner:

3.1 Difference between 'borrowing' and 'naturalisation' used by the translator

Table 1: Borrowing and naturalisation

Feature	Borrowing	Naturalization
Definition	Direct adoption of a word from the source language	Modification to fit target language norms
Modification	Minimal or none	Adjusted for pronunciation, spelling, or grammar
Integration	Retains foreign identity	Adapts to the target language's system
Example	*Pizza* (English from Italian)	*Correo* (Spanish from Latin *currere*)

Source: Author (2025)

In the case of translation of food items, there are references to Kerala's own dessert, "*Payasam*" (James, 2022, p. 89), a traditional popular pudding or porridge in South Asia, is usually made by boiling milk, sugar and rice. It is given as *Prasadham* in Hindu temples. It is usually considered as a symbol of prosperity and happiness. "*Rasam*" (James, 2022, p. 86) is a kind of thin soup prepared especially in Kerala and other regions of South India, to which lentils, various spices, tomatoes, and tamarind are added. "*Avial*" (James, 2022, p. 86) is another dish used as a curry with rice. These references to delicacies served in every household of South India, particularly in Kerala, are unlikely to be understood by foreign readers without footnotes. Terms like "*avial*" and "*rasam*" refer to mixed vegetable dishes from the southern region, particularly associated with Kerala, and are often part of traditional feasts. The assertion is that these items reference Kerala's historical past, dating back to *the Dvapara Yuga*. Additionally, there are terms related to Ayurveda, an alternative medicinal treatment. For instance, the term "*Kashayam*" (James, 2022, p. 89) designates a water decoction or extract of a single herb or a group of herbs used for healing ailments.

Therefore, it can be summarised that translating material culture, particularly food and clothing, involves more than a straightforward linguistic transfer; it requires an understanding of cultural connotations and historical significance. While borrowing and naturalisation assist in maintaining authenticity, they may also create interpretive gaps for readers who are unfamiliar with the source culture. To improve accessibility, the translator could consider additional strategies such as glossing, footnotes, or embedding context within the narrative. This approach not only preserves the integrity of the source text but also enhances the target reader's experience by offering cultural insights. Ultimately, the translation of material culture serves as a site of negotiation between fidelity to the source and comprehensibility for the audience, highlighting the broader function of translation as a mediator of cultural knowledge.

4. Translation of words related to social culture

When translating texts that reference social culture – such as work, profession, customs, habits, class, caste, kinship, and other cultural norms – it is essential for translators to navigate the differences in social structures and cultural values between the source and target cultures. These

elements often reflect deeply ingrained aspects of a specific society and can be challenging to translate due to their cultural specificity. When the source culture's social customs, values, and stratifications lack a direct or equivalent counterpart in the target culture, it can lead to cultural untranslatability. In such cases, one must employ alternative strategies such as glossing, footnotes, or adaptation to enhance the authenticity and clarity of the resultant text.

The translator in this case also employed the 'definition' strategy when rendering terms associated with religion, custom, and culture. Some words related to Kerala's historical culture and customs included: "Panchangam - the Vedic calendar" (James, 2022, p. 85), "Urja (energy) and tantra (system)" (James, 2022, p. 92), "Prarthana Sangham, also known as the Niprasa, the association for praying to Nireeswaran" (103), "Deep sleep or Sushupti" (James, 2022, p. 176), "The intellectual nerve, Medha nadi" (James, 2022, p. 195), "Satakodisuryaprakasam, the light of a hundred crore suns" (James, 2022, p. 197), and "Urja Sathyam, vastumithya – that is, energy is reality, matter is illusory" (James, 2022, p. 252).

Similarly, the translator employs the definition strategy to translate philosophical ideologies and concepts associated with Indian culture. For instance: "Vairudhyathmaka Bhauthikavadam or dialectical materialism" (James, 2022, p. 234), "Jnanapazha meaning the fruit of wisdom" (James, 2022, p. 43), "Brahma satyam jagat mithya, the philosophy that asserts absolute consciousness is reality and the world is an illusion" (James, 2022, p. 250), and "Mayavad, an unrealistic argument" (James, 2022, p. 250). The definition strategy helps translators navigate the complex world of cultural untranslatability, particularly when dealing with social structures and customs. This approach enables them to convey the intended meaning while ensuring that the translation remains accessible and culturally relevant for the target audience. The translator, however, employs the definition strategy when addressing cultural references that may not be readily understood in the target culture, and also to ensure clarity. This conscious procedure tackles, to some extent, the challenges arising from linguistic or cultural differences between source and target languages. The translator views this as an appropriate way to convey meaning in the new language without additional information through footnotes or glossing.

In India, religion is deeply rooted in various cultures, reflecting ancient Hindu scriptures, typically used as titles for deities. Within the Hindu pantheon, there are hundreds of gods and goddesses. Given that India has been influenced by many cultures, it is natural for there to be various words for "God" in Indian culture. In South Indian languages, which have borrowed many Sanskrit terms, people often use these words to address their god. The translated text contains numerous words meaning god, which may confuse foreign readers. Especially within Hinduism, God is identified by several names, including *Bhagwan*, *Eshwar*, *Deivam,* and *Thevar* (James, 2022, p. 239). The most common term, *Eshwar*, means "Supreme God" and is derived from Sanskrit. This term is widely used in Hindu scriptures in different contexts, but is also used broadly across various religions to denote supreme power. Furthermore, *Eshwar* is regarded as sharing a lot with the name for a benevolent supreme divine being, the creator of the universe. *Allah* is the Arabic word for God among Muslims. *Devan* or *Thevar* is employed by the Hindu community in Kerala to refer to God in Hinduism. Additionally, people often append the name of the location where each *Thevar* is situated. For instance, "*Thirunakkara Thevar*" (James, 2022, p. 239) from the target text

exemplifies this. All these explanations regarding the concept of God must be conveyed through the text via translation.

Culture is defined as "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community which uses a particular language as its means of expression" (Newmark, 1988, p. 94, cited in Bhattrai, 2000). However, when some lifelong Hindu religious terms are mentioned without footnotes or explanations, it creates numerous gaps in the target text. For instance, "*Mandala Puja*" (James, 2022, p. 60) is detailed in Hindu puranas as one of the rarest rituals for deriving ultimate benefits in a person's life. The purpose of performing "*Aarti*" (James, 2022, p. 63) in Hindu culture is to wave light in a spirit of humility and gratitude, where it is believed that the faithful become immersed in God's divine form. Meanwhile, "*Kettukazhcha*" (James, 2022, p. 88) is a festival celebrated in some temples in the southern districts of Kerala, considered an event of Buddhism and performed during the Devikshetra festivals in central Travancore.

The main characters in myths are usually gods, demigods, or supernatural humans. Bascom (1965) comments that myths are often endorsed by rulers and priests or priestesses and are closely linked to religion or spirituality. Words associated with myths and mythological figures, such as "*Yakshis*" (James, 2022, p. 140), are referenced here. The belief in *Yakshis* is deeply rooted in the popular culture of Kerala. They are believed to be female nature spirits that inhabit trees, mountains, rock mounds, rivers, and oceans. *Yakshis* appear across early Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu art and are also worshipped as local goddesses in Kerala. Other examples include characters from the epic Mahabharata. The references to the character Dhritarashtra, who is the blind son of Vyasadeva in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, and Shakuni, another antagonist from the same epic, are notable. The absence of explanations for these names in footnotes also creates gaps for foreign readers. Even if the English readers like the narrative's flow and the tension woven into the unfolding story, the cultural loss in the target text prevents them from fully appreciating the fiction. Each reader is left to form her own interpretation, which ultimately leads to a shift in meaning when the English translation becomes the basis for further translations of the Malayalam fiction into French, German, or Spanish.

Another example of a serious cultural loss is the word *"Trisanku"* mentioned in the target text. The term "*Trisanku"* refers to an imaginary place created by the sage Vishwamitra for Trisanku, the king of the Suryavamsha described in the epic Ramayana. *Num*erous stories are associated with him. The name "*Trisanku*" is a combination of the Sanskrit words "*Tri",* meaning "three", and "*Sanku",* meaning "stumps"; thus, the name translates to "three stumps", likely referencing the alignment of stars in the southern cross constellation. This meaning of the word "*Trisanku*" derives from the story of the king Trisanku found in the Puranas. A foreign reader will not be introduced to these many meanings of this single word from the Puranas.

Yet another good example of loss in translation is the reference to "Lord Yama's lasso" in the novel. The word "lasso" (meaning a rope tied in a circle at one end that is used for catching cattle and horses) is not the correct translation; rather, "noose" (meaning a circle tied at the end of a rope that becomes smaller as one end is pulled) is the appropriate term used to describe the mace that Lord Yama often carries, which serves as an ancient fighting weapon or is used to round up the souls of the dead for judgement. Each of these words matters in translation because, like all other societies, Kerala also groups its myths, legends, and history together and considers myths and legends to be true accounts of their distant past.

There are many linguistic Malayalam words like "*Amma*" (James, 2022, p. 101), "*Acha*" (James, 2022, p. 101), "*Muthassi*" (James, 2022, p. 105), "*Ammachi*" (James, 2022, p. 157), "*Valiyammachi*" (James, 2022, p. 247) and "*Achayan*" (James, 2022, p. 259) that are new to the target text reader. There are no target text footnotes to render the fully implied meaning of these words to the target text reader. These words translator omitted without translating are: "*Amma*" (mother in Malayalam) and "*Ammachi*" is generally used in a respectful address form with the suffix -chi added to the word "*Amma*". "*Ammachi*" is used by Christians to call both their mother and grandmother. In the past Kerala Christian children used to call their mother Ammachi. Ammachi is also used to address elder women in Hindu Nair community too as a respect. Farghal and Shakir (1994, p. 242) stress the honorific nature of kin terms saying that they "are used connotatively to maintain and enrich social interaction among both related and unrelated participants". "*Muthashi*" refers to 'grandmother' in Hindu community in Kerala. Similarly, Christians use the word "Valiyammachi" to address their great grandmother. These differences have to be given as a footnote as all these different words in the source text have the same meaning in English which will be confusing for each foreign reader. The word "*Achayan*" commonly used either plainly or as a suffix, to refer to the elder males belonging to Christian family Kerala- be it father, grandfather, great uncle, uncle or elder brother. These different kinship terms words given in the source text indicates that age differences are more important in Indian society. Respect for elders is one of the most important values of both cultures. This respect is shown in Indian culture by giving names developed by the society according to the age hierarchy. Kingship terms are an integral part of the Indian English communicative culture to address much older people to address people who are a bit older (Khalil *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). In India also it is not uncommon for speakers to make use of kinship terms when addressing strangers (Larina & Suryanarayan, 2013). Here the revealed features of these words showed that age differences are more important in Indian society than in Western culture, although respect for elders is one of the most important values in India.

The translator prioritizes the understanding and experience of the target culture audience when making word choices. Here, the translator focuses on making the text adhere to the nuances of the source texts, considering their cultural and linguistic level, rather than making it accessible and meaningful to the intended target audiences.

Building on the discussion of material culture, the translation of social and religious concepts presents an even greater challenge, as these terms are deeply embedded in societal structures, kinship systems, and belief traditions. Unlike objects or ecological terms, which have tangible referents, social-cultural terminology often lacks direct equivalents in the target language, making translation a process of negotiation between linguistic fidelity and cultural intelligibility. The translator emphasizes the use of language that is clear and concise without oversimplifying certain complex concepts of material and religious culture where necessary. Thus, some terms are adjusted and retained without further explanation to resonate with the writing style of the source text.

5. Translation of words and concepts from other languages

In addition to the social and cultural terms specific to Kerala, the novel also incorporates words from other languages, further enriching its linguistic landscape. These borrowed elements

pose additional challenges for the translator, necessitating careful consideration of meaning, pronunciation, and contextual usage. The idea that many Sanskrit words are "not translatable" highlights a deep cultural and philosophical divide between the way concepts are expressed in Sanskrit and the limitations of other languages, particularly in the context of Western or colonial frameworks. Sanskrit, as a language, is rich in nuance, with words often encapsulating complex, multi-layered meanings that cannot be fully conveyed through a single equivalent term in other languages. This non-translatability is not just a linguistic issue but also reflects the unique worldviews and values embedded within Indian philosophical, spiritual, and cultural traditions.

Sanskrit words are often deeply embedded in cultural practices, philosophies, and spiritual teachings. Removing these words or substituting them with English equivalents risks stripping away the layers of meaning that come with them. Thus, the translator uses transliteration strategy to translate the Sanskrit words in source language text. For example: The word "*Muhurat*" (James, 2022, p. 52) means an auspicious time when planets are aligned favorably to ensure positive results in Hindu customs. Sanskrit word "*Vandana*" (James, 2022, p. 64) meaning to praise, salute, worship or adoration. "*Sloka*" (James, 2022, p. 37) in Sanskrit literally means hymn, stanza and it's a verse form generally used in the Mahabharata and other puranic stories and scientific treatise of Hinduism. "*Prakriti*" (James, 2022, p. 187) in Sanskrit is "the original or natural form or condition of anything, original or primary substance". *Prakriti* here refers to the basic cosmic material that is the root of all beings and also refers to nature. "*Dvarapalaka*" (James, 2022, p. 272) is a Sanskrit word, meaning "door guard" or guardian deity protecting the gate, often portrayed as a warrior or fearsome giant, usually armed with a weapon – the most common being the gada (mace). "*Muladhara*" (James, 2022, p. 160) in Sanskrit means *"root of Existence" ("Mula"* means "root" and "*dhara*" means "flux"). It also refers to the root chakra as one of the seven primary chakras according to Hindu tantrism.

The distinction between verb-based and noun-based languages is indeed a crucial factor in understanding the non-translatability of many Sanskrit terms. Indian languages, particularly Sanskrit, are primarily verb-centric, which means the focus is on actions, processes, and relationships rather than static entities or objects. The verb-centered nature of Sanskrit allows it to convey these ongoing, fluid aspects of existence more vividly than noun-based languages, which tend to focus more on stable, discrete objects or concepts. In contrast, Western languages – many of which are noun-based – tend to frame knowledge in more static terms. Concepts are frequently understood as objects or categories that exist independently of the processes or relationships that provide them with meaning.

The cultural asymmetry between Sanskrit and English significantly contributes to the lack of direct equivalents for many key Sanskrit terms. This gap is not merely a linguistic issue, but also a cultural one, as certain ideas and practices within Indian traditions have no parallel in the Western worldview. The concept of "Sanskritising" English goes beyond simply introducing Sanskrit words into the English language; it involves recognising the limitations of translation and honouring the complexity of concepts inherently tied to the cultural and philosophical context of the language. Preserving Sanskrit terminology in its original form ensures that these connections are not lost, allowing for a richer, more authentic understanding of the traditions they represent. In this way,

the preservation of Sanskrit can be seen as a means of maintaining the integrity of dharmic wisdom and resisting the homogenizing forces of colonialism.

Texts also comprises few philosophical concepts, compound words and untranslatable phrases from Sanskrit. Compound words like "*Pativrata dharma*" (James, 2022, p. 141) a vow of devotion to one's husband. The Sanskrit phrases like "*Eka mantra*" (James, 2022, p. 68) mean one sacred spell here. *Eka* in Sanskrit is used to define the number one and *Mantra* in Sanskrit means a "sacred message or text, spell or charm or hymn". Another example is "*danda namaskar*" (James, 2022, p. 47), which is a type of greeting or *namaskara*. The Sanskrit word "danda" means "stick" and therefore, when a person greets this manner to another who is much superior in position or age, one lies on the ground like a fallen stick. "*Swarga loka*" (James, 2022, p. 123) meaning Heaven, or the Celestial world. It deals with the myth associated with the heaven where Lord Indra, the King of Gods, dwells. As many religions believe in the concept of heaven, there are many words in the Hindu tradition, which have numerous meanings and references that are difficult for a non-Indian reader to understand.

Many terms are borrowed and later gradually naturalized in the target text. For example, "*Yateemkhana*" (James, 2022, p. 121) is a combination of two Arabic words: "*yateem*" meaning orphan who has no parents and has not reached the age of puberty in Islamic religion. "*Yateem khana*" is a phrase used to denote an institution providing care and shelter to destitute orphans in their community. "*Khana*" also has another meaning, "food", in Hindi. In English is referred to as "Creche" and it is driven by the English language. Another example is the Hindi word "*Crorepati*" (James, 2022, p. 121) which refers to a person whose assets are worth at least one crore or ten million rupees. It also refers to middle class strata based solely on the land and property one possesses. "Anganwadi" (James, 2022, p. 272) literally means "courtyard shelter" in Hindi. It is a type of rural childcare centre in India.'

The philosophical concept that the translator finds untranslatable is the idea of "*Shrishti Sthithi Laya*", which refers to the cosmic cycle of creation, preservation, and dissolution as presented in the Sanskrit texts. Lord Shiva is believed to have ordained that *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Rudra* are manifestations of the same divine origin and hold equal status, as each is a driving force that keeps the cosmic cycle eternally moving. Another example is the mantra "*Om Hari Sri Ganapataye Namah*", which is said to signify all 51 *Devanagari letters* that embody the *Naadarupini devi*, the Goddess of Sound. It is a traditional religious practice on the day of initiating studies, known as the *Vidhyarambha*, when a senior family member or a temple priest holds the child's hand and writes the first letters "*Om Hari Sri Ganapataye Namah*" in rice.

In the context of translating culture, a translator should always preserve cultural elements in the translation by employing suitable strategies. Here, the translator has maintained numerous culture-specific terms in their original form rather than translating them. The translator adheres to the principle that 'to understand a culture is to live it.' Some concepts are deeply embedded within the worldview of the source language and lack direct equivalents in the target language. The unique experiences of different cultures are not always interchangeable, and the words used to convey those experiences must remain intact. As Malhotra (2011, p. 61) argues in *Being Different*, "Many cultural artifacts have no equivalent in other cultures, and to force them into molds that the West finds acceptable and familiar – to appropriate them – is to distort them. This too is a form of colonization and cultural conquest". By retaining these untranslatable elements, the translator not

only preserves the authenticity of the text but also challenges the dominance of Western linguistic norms in translation.

6. Concluding remarks

Casagrande (1954, as cited in Wagle, 2004, p. 336) aptly states, "In effect, one does not translate language; one translates cultures". This idea captures the essence of translation as more than just a linguistic exercise – it is a process of cultural mediation. Language is deeply embedded in the worldview of its speakers, shaped by historical, social, and philosophical traditions. Thus, when a translator moves between languages, they are not simply substituting words but transferring an entire system of meaning, often with cultural elements that do not easily align between the source and target languages.

This complexity makes translation both an art and a challenge. A word or phrase in one language may carry connotations, idiomatic meanings, or symbolic weight that has no direct equivalent in another language. In such cases, translation equivalence becomes a spectrum rather than a fixed concept. Theorists have long debated whether true equivalence is possible, often categorizing it into perfect, partial, or zero equivalence depending on the level of fidelity achievable. However, rather than seeking an exact match, a translator must balance linguistic accuracy with cultural resonance, ensuring that the essence of the original text is not diluted or distorted.

The difficulty of translating cultural and philosophical concepts highlights the role of the translator as an interpreter, not just of language but of meaning, context, and intent. Some translations require domestication, adapting the text to the cultural expectations of the target audience, while others benefit from foreignization, preserving the source culture's uniqueness to offer readers a more authentic experience. These decisions shape how a text is perceived and understood across linguistic boundaries.

Ultimately, translation is a powerful tool for cultural transmission, allowing literature, ideas, and traditions to transcend linguistic barriers. Yet, it is also an act of negotiation – between languages, between cultures, and between interpretation and representation. A successful translation does not merely convey words; it captures the subtleties, depth, and cultural texture of the original, ensuring that its meaning is not lost but reimagined for a new audience.

References

Bascom, W. R. (1965). *The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives*. University of California.

Bhattrai, G. R. (2000). *An Introduction to Translation Studies*. Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

Casagrande, J. B. (1954). The Ends of Translation. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, *20*, 335–340.

Crystal, D. (1990). *English Language*. Harmonds Worth.

Farghal, M., & Shakir, A. (1994). Kin Terms and Titles of Address as Relational Social Honorifics in Jordanian Arabic. *Anthropological Linguistics*, *36*(2), 240–253.

Ivir, V. (1987). Procedures and strategies for the translation of culture. *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *13*(2), 35–46.

James, V. J. (2014). *Nireeswaran*. DC Books.

James, V. J. (2022). *Nireeswaran.* (Ministhy S., Trad.). Vintage Books.

Khalil, A., Larina, T. V., & Suryanarayan, N. (2018). Sociocultural competence in understanding forms of address: Case study of kinship terms in different cultural contexts. *EDULEARN18 Proceedings*.

Larina, T., & Suryanarayan, N. (2013). Madam or aunty ji: address forms in British and Indian English as a reflection of culture and cognition. In M. Reif, J. A. Robinson & M. Putz (Eds.), *Variation in Language and Language Use: Linguistic, Socio-Cultural and Cognitive Perspectives Series* (pp. 190–217). Peter Lang.

Malhotra, R. (2011). *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism.* Harper Collins.

Newmark, P. A. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. Prentice Hall.

Sapir, E. (1961). *Culture, Language and Personality: Selected Essays*. (D. G. Mandelbaum, Ed.). University of California Press.

Singh, G. B. (2004). *Techniques and gaps in the translation of cultural terms: A study in translation of our social studies textbook grade 8*. [Unpublished Master's thesis]. Tribhuvan University.

Wagle, N. (2004). *A study on multiple translation of Munamadan from cultural perspective*. [Unpublished Master's thesis]. Tribhuvan University.

Whorf, B. L. (1956). Science and Linguistics (1940). In J. B. Carroll (Ed.), *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (pp. 207–219). MIT Press.

Notes

Authorship contribution

Conceptualization: A. M. Ashok & U. N. Singh
Data collection: A. M. Ashok & U. N. Singh
Data analysis: A. M. Ashok & U. N. Singh
Results and discussion: A. M. Ashok & U. N. Singh
Review and editing: A. M. Ashok & U. N. Singh

Research dataset
Not applicable.

Funding
Not applicable.

Image copyright
Not applicable.

Approval by ethics committee
Not applicable.

Conflicts of interest
Not applicable.

Data availability statement
The data from this research, which are not included in this work, may be made available by the author upon request.

Publisher
Cadernos de Tradução is a publication of the Graduate Program in Translation Studies at the Federal University of Santa Catarina. The journal *Cadernos* de Tradução is hosted by the Portal de Periódicos UFSC. The ideas expressed in this paper are the responsibility of its authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the editors or the university.

Guest editor
Umarani Pappuswamy

Section editors
Andréia Guerini - Willian Moura

Technical editing
Alice S. Rezende – Ingrid Bignardi – João G. P. Silveira – Kamila Oliveira

Article history
Received: 14-09-2024
Approved: 16-12-2024
Revised: 28-02-2025
Published: 03-2025