



Please cite this paper as follows:

Fadaei, H., & Fatehi Rad, N. (2021). Culture-specific Items: Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner in Machine and Human Persian Translation*. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 9 (39), 81-90.

Research Paper

Culture-specific Items: Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner in Machine and Human Persian Translation*

Homa Fadaei¹, Neda Fatehi Rad^{2*}

¹M.A. Translation Studies, Department of English Language, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran
Fadaeihoma@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of English Language, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran
nedafatehi@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present descriptive study aimed at investigating the human and machine Persian translations of *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini, and comparing the applied translation strategies in the translated texts for culture-specific items (CSI). To this end, based on Newmark's (1988) category, the applied strategies were identified in the two translations and compared. The obtained results showed that Naturalization and Transposition strategies were the most frequently-used strategies by both human translators and machine translation. The results also showed that machine translation could not present a comprehensible translation due to overuse of these strategies (75%). It was further revealed that the spirit of the original text was not lost in the translated versions due to the closeness of Iranian and Afghan cultures. In fact, the translated versions kept the real beauty and creativity of the original work. However, the remorseful theme of the source text was kept intact to a great extent in the human translation of the novel, while machine translation lost it. Thus, the general impression is that culture-specific terms make it difficult for the machine translation to achieve complete word-for-word and semantic equivalence, and that the human translator must have a broad knowledge of the literature and traditions of both the source and target languages.

Keywords: *Culture-specific items, machine translation, human translation*

Introduction

Translation has always played a central role in inter-lingual communication as a means of sharing knowledge and culture among languages. Today, advances in technology have changed



the way translation is getting done. In fact, technological advances have altered the perception of translation in such a way that traditional human translation can no longer keep up the pace with the translation needs of today and tomorrow.

According to Esselink (2000), recognizing the need to translate their products in order to be successful on international markets, software companies and several other technology-related industries, have sought a way to increase productivity in translation and maintain consistency of their linguistic data across a growing number of languages and countries. As a result of this need and other factors such as the increased availability of computing power and the Internet, computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools provided the first major technological shift in the present-day translation industry with their commercial debut in the 1990s. Generally, it is called machine translation which is a translation memory (TM), a software program that stores a translator's translated text alongside its original source text, so that these pairs can later be reused in full or in part when the translator is tasked with translating texts of a similar linguistic composition.

Snell-Hornby (2006), believed that while translation research has undergone many paradigm shifts, it has been slow to adopt such translation technologies within its mainstream. This was partly due to the issue of culture and its transference, which had to be considered during the translation process, and which machine translator could not be as sensitive to as the human translator. So, since understanding culture is essential in the translation of culture-specific items, many translation theorists have dealt with the definition of culture. Larson (1984) defined culture as "a complex of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules which a group of people share" (p.431). He noted that the translator needs to understand beliefs, attitudes, values, and the rules of the SL audience in order to adequately understand the ST and adequately translate it for people who have a different set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules. Newmark (1998) remarked that culture is "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" (p. 94). Nida and Taber (1982) believed that cultural translation is a translation in which the content of the message is changed to conform to the receptor culture. Nida (1964) listed four basic factors which make communication possible and, therefore, make possible the translation of a message from one language and culture to another. These were, 1) the similarity of mental processes of all people, 2) similarity of somatic reactions (similar physical responses to emotional stimulus), 3) the range of common cultural experience, and 4) the capacity for adjustment to the behavioral patterns of others (Nida 1964, pp. 53-55). Therefore, he asserted, each society interprets a message in terms of its own culture.

Based on what was stated above, the present study was conducted to analyze the English-to-Persian human and machine translations of cultural terms in *The Kite Runner* (2003), in order to find the extent of comprehensibility of the two mentioned methods of translation, and to discover the best ways and methods to translate cultural items. Thus, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1. What strategies were applied in the human and machine translations of *The Kite Runner* for rendering culture-specific elements of the source text?

RQ2. To what extent were human and machine translations successful in transferring the culture-specific messages of the source text?

Literature Review

Culture-specific Items

There is no consensus on the definition of CSIs within Translation Studies. Different authors give them different labels and define them in different ways. For example, Vinay and Darbelnet (1973, p.84) use the term “gaps”, Ivir (1987, p.36) calls them “unmatched elements of culture”, Florin (1993, p.122) uses the term “realia”, and Aixelá (1996, p.56) calls them “culture-specific items”. All of these authors have a different view of what exactly these terms denote.

Ivir defined an “unmatched element of culture” as “an element of the source culture which is absent from the target culture” (1987, p.36). He distinguishes between CSIs that are a consequence of “differences in extralinguistic reality” and gaps that stem from “the different language-specific (lexical) mapping of the same extra-linguistic reality” (p.36). According to Florin (1993, p.122), CSIs are “those elements in the original that are intimately bound up with the universe of reference of the original culture”. He divided such elements into groups: thematic categories and sub-categories (ethnographic realia, social and territorial realia), geographical categories (national, local, microlocal, international and regional), modern and historical categories, etc. Aixelá (1996, p.58) defines CSIs as those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the non-existence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text. Olk (cited in Ramière 2007, 66) gave the following definition of what he calls cultural references: those lexical items in a source text which, at a given point in time, refer to objects or concepts which do not exist in a specific target culture or which deviate in their textual function significantly in denotation or connotation from lexical equivalents available in the target culture. Aixelá's definition of CSIs (as well as his term: “culture-specific items”) seems to be a suitable starting point for our research. In the initial stage of the research, we realized that the problem of rendering CSIs in a translated text goes further than simply trying to render items that are obviously closely bound to the SC and nonexistent in the target culture (TC). He illustrated his point using the example of the word lamb: In Bible translation, there is now a classic argument over how to translate the image of the “lamb” into languages in whose cultures this animal is unknown or, if known, does not have connotations of innocence, helplessness, and so on. Thus, the translation of “lamb” from Hebrew into the language of Eskimos will acquire, in principle, the status of a CSI and will become a translation problem.

Newmark's translation procedures

Newmark (1988) has defined culture as “the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression”, thus acknowledging that each language group has its own culture-specific features. He has also introduced ‘*Cultural word*’ which the readership is unlikely to understand and the translation strategies for this kind of concept depend on the particular text-type and the requirements of the readership. Newmark has categorized cultural words as follows:

- 1) Ecology: flora, fauna, hills, winds, plains
- 2) Material Culture: food, clothes, houses and towns, transport
- 3) Social Culture: work and leisure
- 4) Organizations Customs, Activities, Procedures,

Concepts:

- Political and administrative
- Religious

- artistic

5) Gestures and Habits

He introduced contextual factors for translation process which include:

- 1- Purpose of text
- 2- Motivation and cultural, technical and linguistic level of readership
- 3- Importance of referent in SL text
- 4- Setting (does recognized translation exist?)
- 5- Recency of word/referent
- 6- Future or referent

He has further clearly stated that operationally he does not regard language as a component or feature of culture in direct opposition to the view taken by Vermeer who stated that "language is part of a culture" (1989:222). According to Newmark, Vermeer's stance would imply the impossibility to translate whereas for the latter, translating the source language (SL) into a suitable form of TL is part of the translator's role in transcultural communication. Language and culture may thus be seen as being closely related and both aspects must be considered for translation. When considering the translation of cultural words and notions, Newmark proposed two opposing methods: transference and componential analysis. According to him transference gives "local color," keeping cultural names and concepts. Although placing the emphasis on culture, meaningful to initiated readers, he claimed this method may cause problems for the general readership and limit the comprehension of certain aspects. The importance of the translation process in communication led Newmark to propose componential analysis which he described as being "the most accurate translation procedure, which excludes the culture and highlights the message".

Newmark's (1988) taxonomy includes:

- **Transference:** It is the process of transferring an SL word to a TL text as a translation procedure. It includes transliteration, which relates to the conversion of different alphabets: for example, Russian (Cyrillic), Greek, Arabic, and so on into English. The word, then, becomes a loan word. It includes transliteration and is the same as what is called transcription.

- **Naturalization:** It conforms the SL word first to the normal pronunciation, then, to the normal morphology of the TL.

- **Cultural Equivalent:** It intends replacing a cultural word in the SL with an, although not accurate, TL word.

- **Functional Equivalent:** In this procedure, a culture-free word is used, sometimes a new specific term is used; therefore, it generalizes the SL word.

- **Descriptive Equivalent:** In this procedure, the meaning of the CBT is explained in several words.

- **Componential Analysis:** It means comparing an SL word with a TL word which has a similar meaning, although not being its one-to-one equivalent, by presenting, first, their common, and then, their differing sense components.

- **Synonymy:** It is a near TL equivalent. Here economy trumps accuracy.

- **Through-Translation:** It is the literal translation of common collocations, names of organizations and components of compounds. It can also be called: calque or loan translation.

- **Shifts or Transpositions:** It involves a change in the grammar from SL to TL, e.g., (i) change from singular to plural; (ii) when a specific SL structure does not exist in the TL, a change is required; (iii) change of an SL verb to a TL word, change of an SL noun group to a TL noun, and so forth.

- **Modulation:** It occurs when the translator reproduces the message of the original text in the TL text in accordance with the current norms of the TL, because, the SL and the TL may be different in perspective.

- **Recognized Translation:** It occurs when the translator normally uses the official or the generally accepted translation of any institutional term.

- **Compensation:** It occurs when loss of meaning in one part of a sentence is compensated in another part.

- **Paraphrase:** In paraphrasing, the meaning of the CBT is explained. The explanation in paraphrasing is much more detailed than in descriptive equivalent.

- **Couplets:** It occurs when the translator applies two different procedures together.

- **Notes, Additions, Glosses:** These are additional information which a translator may have to add to his version; the additional information that the translator adds are normally cultural.

Strategies introduced by Newmark for dealing with cultural gap are as follows:

1) **Naturalization:** A strategy when a SL word is transferred into TL text in its original form.

2) **Couplet or triplet and quadruplet:** Is another technique the translator adopts at the time of transferring, naturalizing or calques to avoid any misunderstanding: according to him it is a number of strategies combine together to handle one problem.

3) **Neutralization:** Neutralization is a kind of paraphrase at the level of word. If it is at higher level it would be a paraphrase. When the SL item is generalized (neutralized) it is paraphrased with some culture free words.

4) **Descriptive and functional equivalent:** In explanation of source language cultural item there is two elements: one is descriptive and another one would be functional. Descriptive equivalent talks about size, color and composition. The functional equivalent talks about the purpose of the SL cultural-specific word.

5) **Explanation as footnote:** The translator may wish to give extra information to the TL reader. He would explain this extra information in a footnote. It may come at the bottom of the page, at the end of chapter or at the end of the book

6) **Cultural equivalent:** The SL cultural word is translated by TL cultural word

7) **Compensation:** A technique which is used when confronting a loss of meaning, sound effect, pragmatic effect or metaphor in one part of a text. The word or concept is compensated in other part of the text.

Method

Design of the Study

The current study was a qualitative research to scrutinize the English translation of *The Kite Runner*, based on Newmark (1988)'s categorization of translation strategies. The unit of analysis included word (s), phrase(s) and sentences. *The Kite Runner* (2003) is the story of Amir, a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul, whose closest friend is Hassan, his half-brother. The story is set against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of Afghanistan's

monarchy through the Soviet military intervention, the exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban regime.

Corpus of the Study

The corpus included 100 pages of *The Kite Runner* and its two Persian translations by Ghabrayei (2003) and Ganji-Soleymanzadeh (2004).

Procedures

Data collection and analysis procedures in this study were as follows: (a) Extracting culture-specific terms from 100 pages of *The Kite Runner* in accordance with the working definition of cultural terms by Newmark (1988). These terms were selected on the basis of their forms and nature of appearance, b) Finding the translation of the extracted terms in the Persian translated versions, and (c) Comparing and contrasting them with their Google translation equivalents with regard to Newmark's (1988) proposed strategies and in terms of the frequency of use of the applied strategies in Google and human translations. The results were then tabulated for interpretation.

Results

According to the results obtained from the analysis of the data (Tables 1, 2, and 3 below), in Ganji-Soleymanzadeh's translation, 'modulation' was the most frequent strategy (12), followed by 'loan translation' (11), 'recognized translation' (4), 'cultural equivalence' (4), 'transposition' (3), and 'descriptive equivalence' (2), Paraphrase (2) and Synonym (2) with the same frequency. In Ghabrayei's translation, the most frequent strategy was 'loan translation' (10), followed by 'modulation' (9), 'recognized translation' (6), 'Synonym' (4), 'naturalization' (4), 'transposition' (4) 'descriptive equivalence' (3), 'cultural equivalence' (3), 'functional equivalence' and 'paraphrase'. Therefore, 'loan translation' which is the literal translation of common collocations, names of organizations and components of compounds, was the most frequently-used strategy in the two human translations.

In machine translation, a total of 63 strategies were used to translate cultural-specific terms. The most frequently-applied strategy was 'literal translation', followed by 'naturalization', 'recognized translation' and 'transposition'.

Table 1

The frequency and percentage of strategies used by Ganji-Soleymanzadeh (HT1)

Strategies	Cultural equivalence	Through translation	Transposition	Modulation	Naturalization	Descriptive equivalence	Paraphrase	Functional equivalent	couplet	Recognized translation	Synonymy	Componential analysis	Total
Frequency	5	17	14	10	15	10	2	1	4	1	1	1	81

Percentage	6.17	20.9	17.2	12.3	18.5	12.	2.4	1.2	4.9	1.2	1.2	1.23	10
	%	8%	8%	4%	1%	34	6%	3%	3%	3%	3%	%	0%
		%				%							

Figure 1
The frequency and percentage of strategies used by HT1

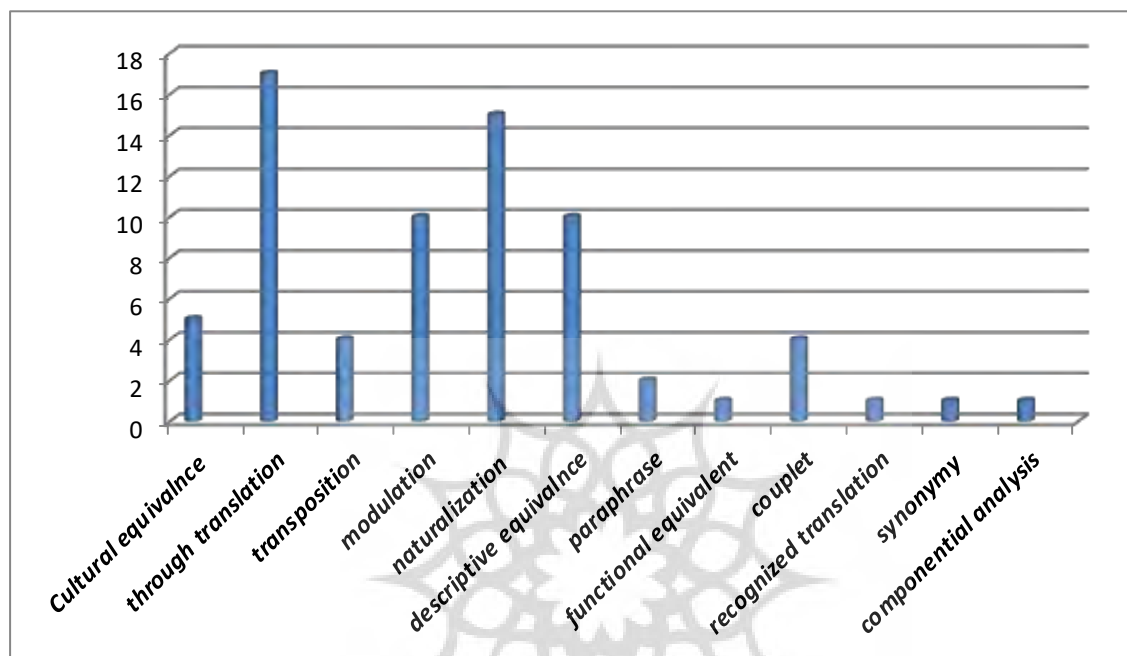


Table 2
The frequency and percentage of strategies used by Ghabrayei (HT2)

Strategies	Cultural equivalence	Through translation	Transposition	Modulation	Naturalization	Descriptive equivalence	Paraphrase	Functional equivalent	couplet	Recognized translation	Synonymy	Componential analysis	Total
Frequency	6	7	20	9	17	8	0	2	4	2	3	0	80

Percentage	7.5	8.75	25	11.25	21.	10	0	2.5	5	2.5	3.75	0	100
	%	%%	%	%	25	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
					%								

Figure 2

The frequency and percentage of strategies used by Ghabrayei (HT2)

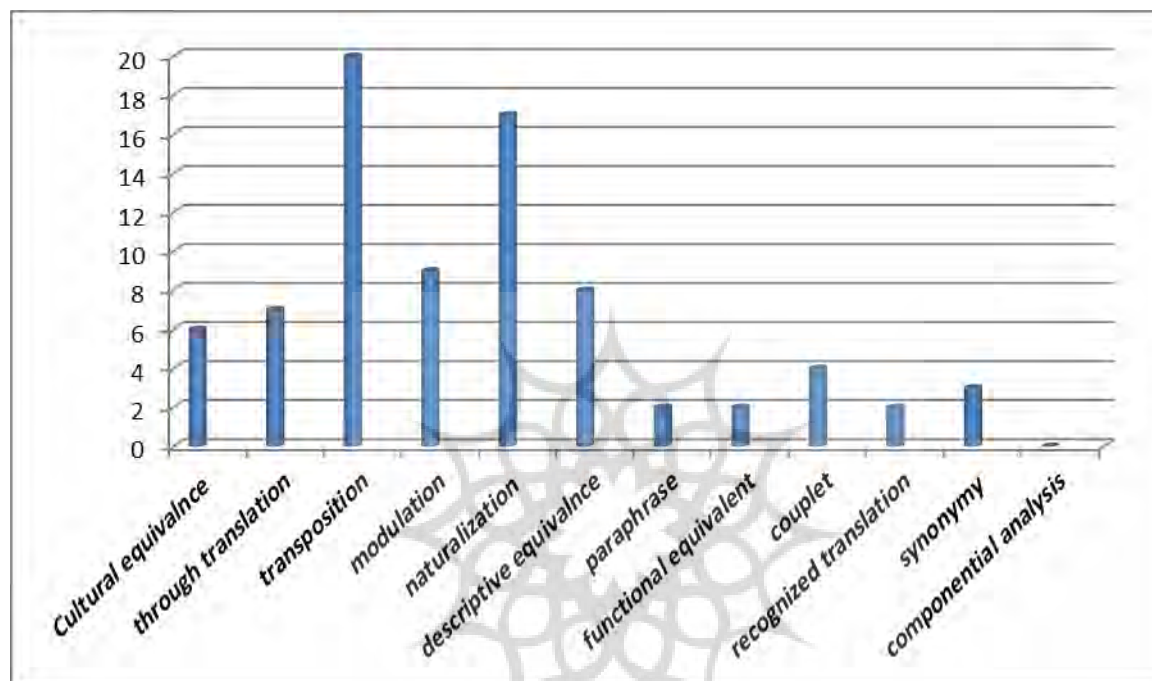


Table 3

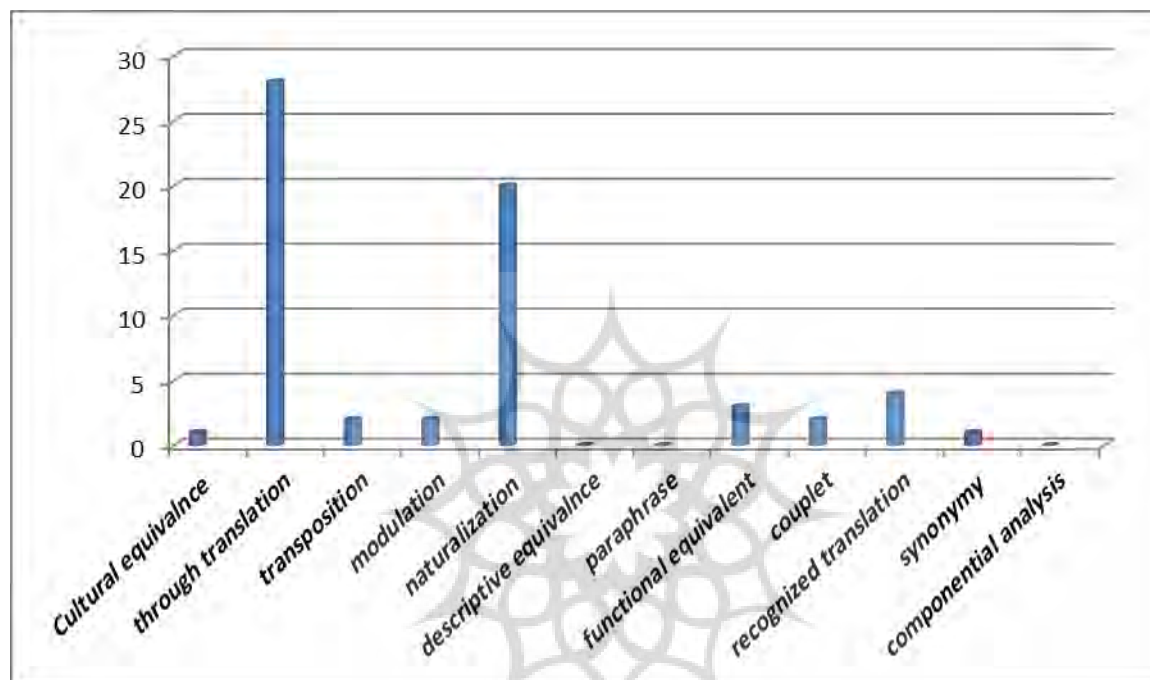
The frequency and percentage of strategies used in MT

Strategies	Cultural equivalence	Through translation	Transposition	Modulation	Naturalization	Descriptive equivalence	Paraphrase	Functional equivalent	Couplet	Recognized translation	Synonymy	Componential analysis	Total
Frequency	1	28	2	2	20	0	0	3	2	4	1	0	63

Percentage	1.58	44.44	3.17	3.1	31.7	0%	0	4.76	3.17	6.34	1.5	0	100
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%

Figure 3

The frequency and percentage of strategies used in MT



Discussion

Based on the results reported above, it turned out that 'loan translation', 'naturalization' and 'transposition' were the most frequently-used strategies for translating culture-specific items in both human and machine translations of the novel under investigation, which is in itself, answer the first research question posed in the presented study. An interesting point was that both human and machine translations were somehow similar in terms of the most frequently-employed strategies. It is also worth noting that both human and machine translations have dealt with more than 60 cultural items. They have tried to decrease the amount of omission of culture-specific items. They have rather tried to provide additional and explanatory information they have felt necessary to make them clear and comprehensible as much as possible for the Persian readers. It is, however, to be stated here that it is not always easy for a human translator to translate culture-specific items due to their various meanings. In fact, such items can deceive a translator since it is not only the referential meaning of an item which is of importance

Another interesting point which can be observed in the obtained results is that the spirit of the original text was not lost in translated versions, due to the proximity of Iranian and Afghan cultures (the answer to the second research question). In fact, the translated texts kept the real beauty and creativity of the original work. This is a merit because the terms that are transformed and localized are able to transfer the impact of the author's real work, and thus, the readers of the

target text can get the same flavor as that of original text. Also, the terminologies used in the translated text match the level of the readers' knowledge, and the regretful theme of the source text is kept to a great extent in the human translated versions of the novel too.

The findings of this study may help the instructors who teach translation to make the debate of translation studies far away from substituting lexical and grammatical equivalences. They may also be helpful for researchers and practitioners in translation studies to pay more attention to the culture as a significant aspect of language. The findings can further be useful for translators in criticizing and evaluating translation, or improving their capability to translate books, news, or articles particularly from English to Persian. Furthermore, the findings may help translation students to improve their translation assignments. The findings would help analysts to realize once again that translation is not only a matter of transferring lexical items from one language to another, but also a product of a decision-making process undertaken by the agents of the act of translation.

References

- Aixela, J. F. (1996). Culture-specific items in translation. R. Alvarez & M. Carmen Africa Vidal (Ed.). *Translation, power, subversion* (pp. 52-78). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Esselink, B. (2000). *A practical guide to localization*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Florin, S. (1993). Realia in Translation. In Zlateva P. (Ed.) *Translation as Social Action: Russian and Bulgarian perspective* (pp.122-128). London: Routledge.
- Ivir, V. (1987). *Procedures and Strategies for Translation of Culture*. In G. Toury, *Translation Across Cultures*. New Delhi: Bahri Publications.
- Larson, M. (1994). *Meaning-based translation: A Guide to cross equivalents*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall.
- Nida, E. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*. Netherland: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Nida, E.A. & Taber, C. R. (1982) *The theory and practice of translation*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Snell-Hornby, M. (1988). *Translation studies: an integrated approach*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Snell-Hornby, M. (2006). *The turns of translation studies*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Vinay, J. P. and Darbelnet, J. (1973). *Stylistique Comparée du français et de l'anglais*. Paris. Didier.