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The Pragmatic Challenges of Translating Culturally and Historically Specific Realities from Russian into English

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Abstract: The translation of culturally and historically specific realities from Russian into English represents a complex linguistic and intercultural process. Historical realities reflect the traditions, political systems, social structures, everyday life, and cultural identity of a particular nation. Therefore, translating such elements requires not only linguistic knowledge but also an understanding of their historical background and pragmatic meaning. Russian historical vocabulary, including Soviet-era terminology, traditional social concepts, administrative titles, monetary units, and culturally significant expressions, often has no direct equivalent in English. This creates difficulties in preserving the original meaning, cultural associations, and historical atmosphere of the source text. The present paper examines the main pragmatic challenges of translating Russian historical realities into English and analyzes the strategies used to overcome them. Particular attention is given to transliteration, descriptive translation, contextual explanation, functional substitution, and cultural adaptation. The study emphasizes the importance of considering the target audience, communicative purpose, and historical context when selecting appropriate translation techniques.

Keywords: historical realities, Russian-English translation, pragmatics, cultural-specific vocabulary, realia, translation strategies, cultural adaptation, historical context, Soviet terminology, intercultural communication.

Translation is not simply the replacement of words and grammatical structures from one language into another. It is a complicated process of transferring meaning, cultural information, historical knowledge, and communicative intentions. This becomes particularly important when translating historical realities, which represent specific objects, institutions, traditions, social relationships, and phenomena connected with the history of a particular nation. Russian historical realities are especially challenging for English translators because Russian culture has developed under different political, social, and historical circumstances. The Russian language contains numerous words and expressions that reflect different historical periods, including Imperial Russia, the Soviet Union, and contemporary Russian society. Such words as царь (tsar), земство (zemstvo), кулак (kulak), комсомол (Komsomol), совет (Soviet), and колхоз (collective farm) represent concepts that cannot always be translated through direct lexical equivalents. Their meanings are closely connected with particular historical events and social structures. Consequently, a translator must understand not only the dictionary meaning of these words but also their cultural and pragmatic significance.

The pragmatic aspect of translation concerns how meaning is understood by readers in a particular communicative situation. When historical realities are translated into English, the translator must consider whether the target audience possesses sufficient background knowledge to understand the original concept. According to translation studies, culture-specific vocabulary requires special attention because its meaning depends on the cultural environment in which it developed [1]. The main purpose of this paper is to examine the pragmatic challenges involved in translating Russian historical realities into English. It focuses on the difficulties of preserving

historical accuracy, cultural identity, and communicative effectiveness. It also considers the major translation strategies that help convey historically specific information to English-speaking readers.

The relevance of this topic is determined by the growing importance of intercultural communication and the international study of Russian literature, history, and culture.

The Concept of Historical Realities in Translation

Historical realities, commonly referred to as realia, are words and expressions that describe objects, institutions, traditions, and phenomena characteristic of a particular historical period or culture. They represent an important part of national identity because they contain information about the lifestyle, political organization, social relationships, and cultural development of a society. In Russian-English translation, historical realities frequently create difficulties because the English language does not always possess equivalent concepts. For example, the Russian word земство (zemstvo) refers to a system of local self-government introduced in the Russian Empire in 1864. Translating it simply as "local government" may communicate its general function but cannot fully explain its historical and institutional characteristics. Similarly, the term кулак (kulak) originally referred to a relatively wealthy peasant, but during the Soviet period it acquired strong political and ideological associations. Its translation as "rich peasant" may explain the basic meaning, but it does not completely convey the political implications of the term during collectivization. Vlahov and Florin emphasize that realia are closely connected with the national and historical characteristics of a particular culture [1]. Therefore, translators must consider the historical background of a word rather than relying exclusively on its dictionary definition.

Pragmatic Problems in Translating Russian Historical Vocabulary

One of the most significant challenges in translating historical realities is preserving their pragmatic meaning. Pragmatic meaning refers to the additional information, associations, emotions, and cultural implications that a particular expression communicates to its audience. For instance, the Russian term товарищ (tovarishch) can be translated as "comrade". However, its meaning depends on the historical period and communicative situation. Before the Soviet period, it could be used to refer to a companion or associate. During the Soviet era, it became an important form of political and ideological address. Another example is совет (soviet). Although the word literally means "council", its historical meaning is associated with the political institutions of the Soviet state. Therefore, translating it only as "council" may cause the English-speaking reader to misunderstand its historical significance. Chepel argues that pragmatic adequacy is essential when translating realia because different translation methods may preserve the lexical meaning while changing the national and historical associations of an expression [2]. Thus, translators should analyze the context, historical period, communicative purpose, and intended audience before selecting an appropriate English equivalent.

Main Strategies for Translating Historical Realities

Several translation strategies can be applied to overcome the difficulties of transferring Russian historical realities into English.

1. Transliteration and transcription

Transliteration involves transferring the original Russian word into English using the Latin alphabet. This technique is particularly useful when the historical concept does not have an exact English equivalent.

Examples include:

Царь — tsar.

Земство — zemstvo.

Кулак — kulak.

Комсомол — Komsomol.

These translations preserve the original cultural identity of the historical concepts. However, transliteration alone may not provide sufficient information for readers who are unfamiliar with Russian history. Therefore, additional explanations may be necessary.

2. Descriptive translation

3. Descriptive translation explains the meaning of a historical concept through a phrase or sentence.

For example:

Колхоз — a collective farm established under the Soviet agricultural system.

Губерния — an administrative province of Imperial Russia.

Комсомол — the Communist youth organization of the Soviet Union.

This strategy helps readers understand the historical and institutional background of unfamiliar concepts. Nevertheless, excessive explanation may make a literary translation less natural and interrupt the narrative.

4. **Functional substitution**

Functional substitution involves using an approximate English expression that communicates the main function of the original concept. For example, уезд may sometimes be translated as "district", while приказ may be rendered as "administrative office" depending on its historical context. However, translators must be careful because modern English administrative terms may suggest institutions that did not exist in historical Russia.

5. Contextual explanation

Contextual explanation involves preserving the original term while explaining its meaning through the surrounding text. For example: "The peasants were organized into kolkhozes, collective farms established under the Soviet agricultural system." This approach combines cultural preservation with reader comprehension. It is especially useful in historical literature, academic publications, and documentary texts. Laskova and Voeykova identify transliteration, explication, descriptive translation, and approximate translation among the important strategies for rendering Soviet realities into foreign languages [3].

The translation of culturally and historically specific realities from Russian into English is a complex process that requires more than the knowledge of two languages. It involves the interpretation and transmission of historical, cultural, social, and political information. Russian historical vocabulary contains numerous expressions that reflect the country's unique historical development, particularly during the Imperial and Soviet periods. These expressions frequently lack direct English equivalents, which creates difficulties for translators attempting to preserve their original meanings and cultural associations. The analysis demonstrates that pragmatic adequacy is one of the most important requirements in translating historical realities. A translation may be grammatically correct and lexically accurate but still fail to communicate the historical significance of a particular expression. For this reason, translators should consider the historical background, communicative situation, ideological implications, and cultural knowledge of the target audience. The study also identifies several effective translation strategies, including transliteration, descriptive translation, functional substitution, and contextual explanation. Each method has its own advantages and limitations. Transliteration helps preserve national identity, while descriptive translation provides additional information about unfamiliar historical concepts. Contextual explanation makes it possible to maintain the original terminology while ensuring that English-speaking readers understand its meaning.

Furthermore, the translator must find an appropriate balance between foreignization and domestication. Preserving the cultural characteristics of the Russian language is important, but the translated text should also remain understandable and accessible to its intended audience. In conclusion, successful translation of Russian historical realities into English requires a combination of linguistic competence, historical knowledge, cultural awareness, and pragmatic

understanding. The translator acts not only as a mediator between two languages but also as an intermediary between different historical and cultural experiences. Therefore, the preservation of historical meaning and cultural identity should remain essential priorities in the translation process.

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