



Translating Cultural Terms: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract. This study aims to explore how cultural terms are translated in the context of intercultural communication, with a particular focus on the translation of Indonesian cultural terms into English. The research investigates the strategies used by translators to convey the cultural meaning embedded in the source language without Translating cultural terms poses significant challenges as translators must navigate between linguistic accuracy and cultural authenticity. This study investigates the strategies and challenges encountered in translating Indonesian cultural terms into English. Drawing on Venuti's (1995, 2012) concepts of domestication and foreignization and Baker's (2011) model of equivalence at the word, textual, and pragmatic levels, the research examines how translators mediate between source and target cultures. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the study analyzes five Indonesian non-literary texts containing culturally specific expressions. Data were collected through document analysis and supplemented by interviews with professional translators. The findings reveal that translators frequently apply strategies such as cultural substitution (e.g. replacing *tali yeye* with *the skipping rope game*), descriptive equivalence (e.g. replacing *berselonjor* with *legs stretched*), and borrowing (e.g. *yeye*), depending on the communicative purpose and cultural distance between the two languages. The results demonstrate that successful translation of cultural terms requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability to balance fidelity to the source culture with readability for the target audience. By integrating Venuti's ideological perspective and Baker's pragmatic equivalence framework, this study offers a more contemporary and context-sensitive understanding of how cultural meaning is negotiated in translation.

Keywords: Cultural Terms, Domestication, Equivalence, Foreignization, Intercultural Communication, Translation Strategies.

1 Introduction

Language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a carrier of culture and identity. Through language, people express their values, traditions, and ways of thinking, all of which reflect their cultural background. When texts travel across linguistic and cultural boundaries, translators face the task of conveying messages that are deeply rooted in one culture to readers from another. This process becomes particularly challenging when dealing with cultural terms—words or expressions that encapsulate unique social practices, beliefs, and realities of a specific community. Such

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terms often lack direct equivalents in the target language, making their translation a complex act of negotiation between accuracy and cultural representation. In multilingual contexts such as Indonesia–English translation, these challenges are more evident, as cultural distance can lead to misunderstanding or loss of nuance. Foreignization retains the original cultural attributes, potentially leading to a less accessible text for the target reader [1], [2]. Hence, exploring how translators handle cultural terms provides valuable insight into how meaning, identity, and culture are mediated through translation.

Recent studies on the translation of cultural terms elucidate the complex nature of bridging cultural and linguistic divides. A notable study by Larasati and Nurochman [3] revealed that Indonesian translators of "It Ends With Us" mainly deployed the "unit shift" strategy for translating terms tied to material and gesture culture, exemplifying a prevalent approach in dealing with cultural nuances in literature [4]. This aligns with the findings of Mukhtar and Mahmud [5], who documented that translation strategies vary significantly based on cultural contexts, often leading to different interpretations and understandings among target audiences [1]. The use of specific strategies such as unit shifts indicates the translator's effort to retain the cultural essence while adhering to linguistic constructs. Investigating another literary work, Rosliana [6] analyzed the translation of cultural terms in "Laskar Pelangi" into Japanese and noted a consistent application of foreignization to maintain cultural specificity. However, this approach presented considerable challenges in terms of coherence and accessibility for readers unfamiliar with Indonesian culture [7].

While previous studies have broadly examined cultural term translation across literary texts, only a few have offered a focused exploration of material culture, particularly within domestic settings. Recent findings by Jasiūnaitė [8] show that culture-specific items related to domestic and material culture tend to reveal translators' ideological tendencies toward either foreignization or domestication, depending on the target readership and cultural familiarity. Similarly, Siregar [9] observed that in the Indonesian–German translation of *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, the most frequently translated items belonged to the material culture category, employing strategies such as transference, descriptive equivalence, and reduction. These studies emphasize the continuing relevance of material culture in reflecting translation ideology. However, few have investigated how ideological orientation explicitly shapes translators' strategic decisions in handling household-related cultural terms. The present study fills this gap by combining the analysis of translation ideology and strategy within the specific category of household goods and house surroundings. This integrated focus provides new insight into how ideology operates at the micro level of translation, influencing not only lexical choices but also the cultural representation constructed in the target text.

This study investigates the challenges and strategies involved in translating cultural terms from Indonesian into English. It addresses two main questions: (1) What challenges do translators encounter when transferring culturally embedded meanings? and (2) What strategies are most effective in preserving both cultural and communicative intent? Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research analyzes selected literary and non-literary texts alongside interviews with professional

translators. The analysis applies Venuti's foreignization and domestication framework [10], [11] and Baker's model of translation strategies [12]. By integrating textual and contextual perspectives, this study contributes theoretically to the refinement of intercultural translation frameworks and practically to enhancing translators' competence in dealing with cultural sensitivity and accuracy in multilingual contexts.

2 Conceptual Framework

2.1 Venuti's Domestication and Foreignization

Venuti [10] conceptualizes translation as an act of cultural and ideological mediation rather than a mere linguistic transfer. He argues that translators inevitably make choices that either assimilate the source text to the target culture (domestication) or preserve the foreignness of the source (foreignization).

Domestication refers to a translation strategy that makes the text conform to target-language norms, values, and cultural expectations, often resulting in a fluent and easily readable text but at the cost of reducing cultural specificity.

Foreignization, conversely, deliberately retains the linguistic and cultural features of the source language to make the translator's presence visible and to challenge ethnocentric assimilation.

Venuti's model is therefore ideological: it foregrounds questions of power, visibility, and cultural representation. In this study, Venuti's dichotomy serves as a framework for identifying the translator's orientation whether they privilege target-culture readability (domestication) or source-culture authenticity (foreignization) when dealing with culturally bound expressions such as *Tali Yeye*, *Gotri Legendri*, and *Ampar-ampar Pisang*.

This perspective enables an understanding of translation not just as a linguistic process but as a political and cultural act that shapes intercultural communication.

2.2 Baker's Model of Equivalence

While Venuti offers a macro-level ideological lens, Baker [12] provides a micro-level analytical model through her theory of equivalence, which explains how translators achieve meaning correspondence across linguistic and cultural systems. Baker distinguishes several types of equivalence:

- Equivalence at Word Level and Above Word Level concerned with finding lexical correspondences or combinations of words that convey similar meaning (e.g., gelang karet → rubber bracelets).
- Grammatical Equivalence – addressing syntactic and morphological adjustments between languages.
- Textual Equivalence focusing on cohesion and coherence in larger text units, achieved through devices such as paraphrase, expansion, or omission.

- Pragmatic Equivalence – emphasizing the importance of context and the communicative effect of the translation on the target reader.

Baker's framework allows this study to identify how specific translation strategies (borrowing, descriptive equivalence, cultural substitution, paraphrase, etc.) function to achieve different forms of equivalence when cultural terms resist direct translation. For example, rendering Ampar-ampar Pisang lyrics into interpretive English lines reflects pragmatic equivalence, prioritizing the intended effect rather than the literal form.

2.3 Integrating Venuti and Baker: Ideology Meets Practice

By integrating Venuti's and Baker's frameworks, this study captures both the ideological orientation and the linguistic mechanisms underlying cultural translation. Venuti's macro-perspective explains why a translator chooses a certain orientation (e.g., domestication to enhance readability, or foreignization to preserve authenticity), whereas Baker's micro-perspective explains how that choice is realized at the textual level.

The combined framework therefore supports a multi-dimensional analysis:

Venuti's axis (domestication ↔ foreignization) situates the translation strategy ideologically. Baker's equivalence levels categorize the operational techniques used to achieve cross-cultural meaning transfer.

3 Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze how Indonesian cultural terms are translated into English and to identify the strategies and challenges translators face. In addition to text analysis, this study employed semi-structured interviews with two professional translators as supporting data. The interviews aimed to gain insights into the translators' considerations in handling culture-specific terms and the strategies they selected during the translation process, drawing on Venuti's domestication and foreignization framework as well as Baker's equivalence model (word, textual, pragmatic).

The data consisted of five Indonesian non-literary texts. The sample data presented here focuses on traditional games, such as *Tali Yeye*, *Gotri Legendri*, *Ampar-ampar Pisang*, *Engklek*, *Guli* which feature rich cultural elements and idiomatic expressions that are challenging to translate. Each text (Source Text/ST) and its English translation (Target Text/TT) were analyzed to identify patterns of translation strategies.

Data were analyzed using a content analysis approach, following these steps: identifying cultural terms in the ST (e.g., *Tali Yeye*, *Gotri Legendri*, *Ampar-ampar Pisang*, *Engklek*, *Guli*), classifying translation strategies used in the TT (based on Baker and Venuti frameworks) comparing and interpreting to determine the degree of domestication or foreignization in each case.

Despite providing in-depth insights into the translation of Indonesian cultural terms, this study has several methodological limitations. First, the analysis focuses on a

relatively small data set taken from five non-literary texts, specifically traditional games. Second, the study concentrates only on Indonesian-to-English translation, which limits its applicability to different language pairs and translation contexts.

4 Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed that translators employed a variety of strategies to deal with culturally specific terms. The dominant strategies observed include borrowing, descriptive equivalence, and cultural substitution. The degree of domestication or *foreignization* varied depending on the text type and intended audience.

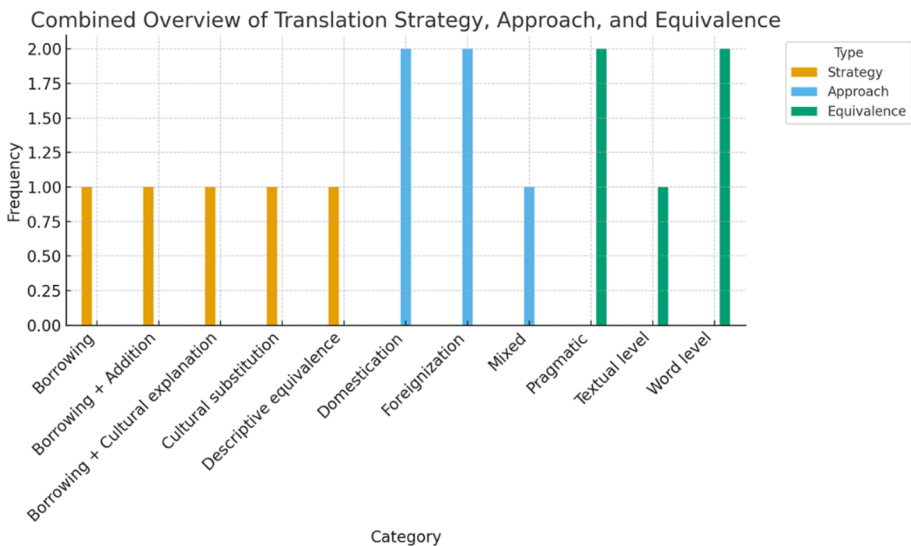


Fig. 1. Frequency distribution of translation strategies, approaches, and equivalence types applied in translating Indonesian culture-specific items (Source: Author's own work)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the most frequently applied translation strategy is borrowing, either in isolation or combined with cultural addition. This indicates that translators tend to preserve cultural authenticity rather than replacing cultural terms with target language equivalents. Foreignization dominates the translation approaches (40%), followed by domestication (40%) and mixed strategies (20%). This pattern reflects the translator's effort to balance between cultural preservation and reader comprehensibility. In terms of equivalence, word-level and pragmatic equivalence appear most frequently, suggesting that the translator focuses on lexical accuracy and contextual meaning transfer rather than full textual restructuring.

4.1 Analysis Results

Culturally specific terms embedded in a local children’s game are transferred from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL). Each pair of SL–TL sentences is analyzed to reveal the translator’s choice of strategy and its implications for meaning and cultural representation.

Table 1. Data 1

SL	TL
<i>Salah satu permainan yang cukup digemari oleh anak-anak perempuan di Desa Bojong Adalah tali yeye.</i>	<i>One of the games quite popular among girls in Bojong Village is the skipping rope game called “Yeye.”</i>

Source: Author’s own work

The translator employs a combination of borrowing and descriptive equivalence strategies in this sentence (Table 1). The word “yeye” is retained in its original Indonesian form, which signifies a clear foreignization approach [10]. This retention preserves the cultural identity and authenticity of the source culture, allowing readers to encounter the foreign term as part of Indonesian tradition. However, the translator adds a descriptive phrase — “the skipping rope game” — to provide clarification for English readers unfamiliar with the term. This aligns with Baker’s notion of pragmatic equivalence [12], where the translator adapts contextual information to facilitate understanding. Overall, this translation balances faithfulness to the source culture with accessibility for the target audience.

Table 2. Data 2

SL	TL
<i>Alat yang digunakan dalam permainan tersebut adalah tali dengan untaian gelang karet.</i>	<i>The tool used in the “tali yeye” game is a rope threaded with rubber bracelets.</i>

Source: Author’s own work

Here, the translator employs a blend of literal translation and borrowing with slight descriptive modification (Table 2). The phrase “tali yeye” is preserved to emphasize the local terminology, again exemplifying foreignization. However, “rubber bracelets” is used instead of a literal equivalent, such as “rubber loops,” to make the text more relatable and vivid for target readers. Baker’s [12] concept of semantic equivalence is visible here — the translator seeks meaning-based correspondence rather than word-for-word equivalence. The translation effectively conveys both material and cultural

aspects of the object, allowing the reader to visualize a typical Indonesian children's toy.

Table 3. Data 3

SL	TL
<i>Satu pemain akan mulai dengan melemparkan gotri dari luar lingkaran untuk mencoba mengeluarkan gotri lawan dari lingkaran.</i>	<i>One player starts by flicking a marble from outside the circle to try to knock the opponent's marbles out of the circle.</i>

Source: Author's own work

This translation is an excellent example of pragmatic and dynamic equivalence (Table 3). Instead of literally translating “*melemparkan gotri*” as “*throwing a marble*,” the translator uses “*flicking a marble*,” an idiomatic and culturally appropriate English expression describing how marbles are actually played. This shows domestication for idiomatic fluency while preserving the authentic action from the source culture. The strategy highlights the translator's ability to balance accuracy (Baker's equivalence) and cultural naturalness (Venuti's domestication).

Table 4. Data 4

SL	TL
<i>Setiap anak duduk dengan cara berselonjor, dua kaki lurus ke depan dan dirapatkan.</i>	<i>Each child sits with legs extended straight forward and held together.</i>

Source: Author's own work

The translator applies semantic and pragmatic equivalence (Table 4). The Indonesian word “*berselonjor*” a culturally specific term describing sitting with legs stretched—is replaced by “legs extended straight forward.” This is a descriptive translation that conveys the meaning but sacrifices the local term, reflecting domestication. The strategy helps non-Indonesian readers visualize the position accurately, even though a subtle cultural nuance (the social informality of “*berselonjor*”) is lost.

Table 5. Data 5

SL	TL
<i>Ampar-ampar Pisang, Pisangku balum masak, Masak sabigi, dihurung bari-bari...</i>	<i>The bananas are not yet ripe (reminding us that everything has its time); They will ripen by morning (nurtured by sun and wind, showing patience and growth)...</i>

Source: Author's own work

This portion exemplifies interpretive translation using ideational equivalence [12]. Instead of translating the lyrics literally, the translator provides paraphrased commentary explaining the philosophical and moral values of the song (Table 5). This is a clear act of domestication, transforming poetic metaphor into cultural interpretation for foreign readers. The parenthetical explanations — “*reminding us that everything has its time*”, “*showing patience and growth*” — help the target audience grasp the underlying cultural wisdom of the lyrics, demonstrating a cross-cultural pragmatic equivalence.

Table 6. Data 6

SL	TL
<i>Semua peserta duduk berdampingan dengan rapat, sehingga kaki-kaki mereka berderet dengan rapi seperti sesisir pisang.</i>	<i>All participants sit closely side by side, so their legs line up neatly like a row of bananas.</i>

Source: Author's own work

Here, the translator performs a literal transfer of the simile “*seperti sesisir pisang*” to “*like a row of bananas*” (Table 6). While this translation achieves lexical equivalence, it also reflects foreignization because the imagery of a *bunch of bananas* carries Indonesian cultural connotations related to the name of the game. Maintaining this image retains the local flavor and rhythm of the source expression. This combination of literal and foreignized translation demonstrates sensitivity to metaphorical meaning while preserving semantic structure.

4.2 Discussion

The research findings provide an overview of how translation strategies, approaches, and equivalence levels interact in addressing the challenges of translating culture-specific terms. The translator's task is not only linguistic but also cultural—negotiating between maintaining the authenticity of the source text and ensuring intelligibility for the target audience. Borrowing, both in its pure form and in combination with *addition* or *cultural explanation* is the most frequent strategy used. This demonstrates a conscious effort to retain the cultural flavor of the source language while helping readers access its meaning through brief contextual cues. Such a method reflects Venuti's concept of *foreignization*, where the translator deliberately resists cultural assimilation to highlight the source culture's uniqueness. However, the simultaneous presence of *descriptive equivalence* and *cultural substitution* suggests that domestication is also employed strategically to overcome comprehension challenges when direct cultural transfer would hinder clarity.

The coexistence of *foreignization* and *domestication* approaches (each representing 40% of the data) reflects the translator's dynamic response to varying cultural densities within the text. Rather than adhering to a single ideological stance, the translator demonstrates pragmatic adaptability foreignizing when cultural authenticity is crucial, and domesticating when communicative clarity takes precedence. This interplay between approaches embodies one of the main *challenges* in translating cultural terms: how to mediate cultural difference without erasing it.

These findings directly support the research objective, which investigates how translators address cultural barriers in the transfer of Indonesian culture-specific terms into English. The dominance of borrowing strategies verifies the initial assumption that translators aim to retain cultural identity in the target text rather than replacing or neutralizing cultural elements. At the same time, the presence of descriptive equivalence and cultural substitution shows that translators shift toward domestication when necessary to ensure target reader comprehension.

The nearly equal distribution between foreignization (40%) and domestication (40%) further demonstrates that translation of cultural items is not guided by a single ideological stance, but by a pragmatic adaptation based on cultural density, text function, and target audience expectations. Thus, the findings confirm that translation strategies and approaches operate flexibly in response to varying cultural challenges within a text. Practically, these results highlight the need for translators to possess not only linguistic competence but also strong cultural awareness. The strategies identified here can serve as a reference for translators working with cultural heritage content, especially in ways that promote cultural preservation. Additionally, the findings emphasize the role of translation in safeguarding local cultural knowledge—such as traditional games that are gradually disappearing from younger generations' awareness.

These results align with findings from prior scholarly research. Harared [1] and Putrawan [2] similarly observed the frequent use of borrowing and limited reliance on cultural substitution as a means to maintain cultural authenticity in translated texts. Moreover, previous studies grounded in Venuti's foreignization theory (e.g., Rahmawati, and Sari) reported comparable tendencies, where translators resist full cultural assimilation to prevent loss of cultural specificity [13], [14]. In line with Baker's equivalence framework, the frequent application of word-level and pragmatic equivalence in this study is consistent with Al-Zoubi, who noted that translators tend to preserve the closest lexical meaning while enabling readers to infer culturally embedded concepts through context [15].

5 Conclusion

This study has explored the challenges and strategies in translating cultural terms from Indonesian into English, highlighting the translator's continuous negotiation between fidelity and readability. The findings affirm that the translator's main challenge lies in reconciling cultural fidelity with communicative clarity. The findings reveal that *borrowing*—often supported by *addition* or *cultural explanation*—is the most dominant strategy, signifying an attempt to preserve the authenticity and local identity of the

source culture. The balanced application of *foreignization* and *domestication* demonstrates that effective translation practice is not a matter of ideological allegiance but of pragmatic adaptation. Translators act as cultural mediators, making context-sensitive decisions that ensure both cultural retention and communicative accessibility. Moreover, the prevalence of *pragmatic* and *word-level equivalence* supports the view that equivalence in cultural translation is functional rather than formal. Meaning transfer takes precedence over literal structure, reaffirming Baker's notion of context-driven translation equivalence.

In conclusion, translating cultural terms represents one of the most intricate challenges in translation practice. It demands sensitivity to both linguistic and cultural nuances, as well as strategic awareness to balance preservation and adaptation. Future research could extend this study by examining a larger corpus or exploring audience reception to better understand how foreignized and domesticated elements influence cultural perception in translation.

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