AN ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR CULTURAL-SPECIFIC ITEMS FROM THAI INTO ENGLISH IN MY DEPARTURE FOR SUPHAN: A POEM BY SUNTHORN PHU, TRANSLATED BY JONGJIT ARTHAYUKTI

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ABSTRACT

Abstract— This study aims to categorize culture-specific items and examine the strategies used to translate them from Thai into English in My Departure for Suphan: A Poem by Sunthorn Phu, translated by Jongjit Arthayukti. Using Nida's (1945) framework, the cultural terms are systematically classified to highlight key dimensions of Thai cultural identity embedded in the poem. Newmark's (1988) model is applied to analyze the translation strategies, offering insight into how cultural meanings are conveyed, adapted, or reformulated in the target language. The analysis identifies 279 culture-specific terms, which are grouped into five categories: ecological culture, material culture, religious culture, social culture, and linguistic culture. Eight translation strategies are observed: transference, literal translation, classifier, paraphrase, gloss/notes, cultural equivalence, deletion, and combinations such as couplets, triplets, or quadruplets. The findings enhance the understanding of cultural representation and translator decision-making in literary translation.

Keywords— cultural words, translation strategies, Sunthorn Phu

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

1. To classify the culture-specific items appearing in My Departure for Suphan: A Poem by Sunthorn Phu.
2. To examine and analyze the translation strategies used to convey the meanings of culture-specific items from Thai into English.

INTRODUCTION

Culture represents the distinctive identity of each society, encompassing shared ways of life, beliefs, traditions, rituals, food practices, and patterns of behavior that are collectively recognized and understood. Language plays a crucial role in mediating these cultural differences, serving as a primary means through which ideas, beliefs, and cultural values are communicated across societies. Translation, therefore, functions as a vital bridge that enables cross-cultural understanding by transferring meaning from one linguistic and cultural system to another. Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University plays a significant role in promoting the cultural identity of society through educational policies and the preservation of arts and culture, especially in the field of classical Thai dance, where it has highly skilled and public-spirited personnel, which helps create

a distinctive image both nationally and internationally. (Vasinarom, et al., 2021)

Translation is an important tool for cross-cultural communication (Kunnu & Darnsawasdi, 2024), not merely the substitution of words between languages, but a complex process that requires careful consideration of cultural context to ensure that meaning is conveyed accurately and appropriately. This complexity is particularly evident in literary translation, where cultural references are deeply embedded in the text. Translating Thai classical literature into English presents significant challenges, especially in rendering culture-specific items that lack direct equivalents in the target language.

My Departure for Suphan, a classical poem by Sunthorn Phu, richly reflects Thai social life, beliefs, geography, and cultural practices of its time. Its English translation by Jongjit Arthayukti provides a valuable case study for examining how culture-specific items are translated. Given the poem's dense cultural content, this study investigates the translation strategies employed to convey Thai cultural meanings effectively to English-speaking readers, thereby contributing to research on literary translation and cross-cultural communication.

LITERATURE AND THEORY

1. Definitions and Classification of Culture-Specific Items

Culture-specific items refer to lexical units in the source language that reflect distinctive cultural features of the originating society and may be unfamiliar or nonexistent in the target culture. As a result, such items often lack direct equivalents in the target language and pose challenges in translation. These items may represent both tangible and intangible aspects of culture. According to Nida's (1945) classification, culture-specific items can be categorized into five types: ecological culture, material culture, religious culture, social culture, and linguistic culture. Ecological culture includes terms related to geographical environments, climate, and local flora and fauna. Material culture refers to culturally specific artifacts such as clothing, food, tools, musical instruments, and means of transportation. Religious culture encompasses beliefs, values, rituals, and doctrinal practices. Social culture reflects social structures, customs, traditions, and legal systems, while linguistic culture refers to language-specific features, including vocabulary use, grammatical structures, and contextual conventions. This classification provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the wide range of culture-specific items found in My Departure for Suphan.

2. Concept and Definition of Translation

Phinitphuwadol (1999) states that translation is widely recognized as a process that goes beyond the mere substitution of words between languages. It involves the accurate and complete transfer of meaning, form, and cultural significance from the source language to the target language to achieve equivalent understanding among target readers. Effective translation, therefore, requires sensitivity to both linguistic and cultural contexts.

3. Translation Strategies for Culture-Specific Items

To address the challenges posed by culture-specific items, Newmark (1988) proposes several translation strategies that enable translators to convey culturally embedded meanings effectively. These strategies are outlined as follows.

3.1 Transference refers to the process of borrowing a term directly from the source language and rendering it in the target language through transliteration or phonetic adaptation. This strategy is commonly used when a cultural item has no equivalent in the target language or when preserving its original form is essential for maintaining cultural authenticity. Examples include stamp rendered as แสตมป์ (/sa.tɛm/) and ice-cream as ไอศกรีม (/ʔaj.sà.krim/).

3.2 Literal Translation involves preserving the lexical meaning and syntactic structure of the source language as closely as possible. While this strategy may convey partial meaning, it often fails to capture the full cultural significance of the original term. For instance, translating กลองชนะ (/klɔːŋ.t͡ɕà.náʔ/) as Victory drum reflects the literal meaning but does not fully communicate its cultural and historical connotations.

3.3 Classifier strategy employs a more general or superordinate term in the target language to represent a culture-specific item. This approach prioritizes comprehensibility over specificity. For example, กล้วยบวดชี (/klûaj.bùat.t͡ɕʰiː/), a traditional Thai dessert, may be translated as dessert. Although this translation omits specific details, the broader term facilitates understanding for target readers unfamiliar with the item.

3.4 Paraphrase involves expanding or explaining the meaning of a culture-specific term to clarify its function or significance. This strategy enhances reader comprehension, particularly when the cultural concept is unfamiliar. For example, ไหว้ (/wâj/) may be translated as raised both hands to my forehead and bowed, providing a descriptive explanation of the gesture.

3.5 Cultural Equivalence replaces a source-language term with a culturally similar item in the target language, even if the meanings are not entirely identical. This strategy aims to evoke a comparable cultural response. An example is translating ตุ๊กตุ๊ก (/túk.túk/) as taxi, which conveys functional similarity despite cultural differences.

3.6 Glosses and Notes provide supplementary explanations without interrupting the flow of the main text. These may appear as footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical explanations. For example: Hanuman is the king of the monkey warriors in the Indian epic Ramayana. This strategy allows for cultural clarification while maintaining textual economy.

3.7 Deletion refers to the omission of a culture-specific item when it is deemed non-essential to the overall meaning or narrative. This strategy must be applied cautiously to ensure that the omission does not affect the coherence or integrity of the source text.

3.8 Couplet, Triplets, and Quadruplets combined strategies involve the use of two or more translation techniques simultaneously to resolve complex cultural references. For instance, กลองชนะ (/klɔːŋ.t͡ɕà.náʔ/) may be translated as Victory drum used during wartime to uplift the spirit and morale of soldiers, combining literal translation with paraphrase to convey both meaning and cultural context.

METHODOLOGY

1. Data Collection

The data for this study consist of culture-specific items extracted from My Departure for Suphan: A Poem by Sunthorn Phu, the English translation of Khlong Nirat Suphan by Jongjit

Arthayukti. The poem comprises a total of 462 stanzas. Culture-specific items were identified and collected based on Nida's (1945) classification framework, which categorizes cultural terms into five main types: ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture. Ecological culture includes references to places, geographical features, plant names, and animal names. Material culture covers food, utensils, buildings, and modes of transportation. Social culture involves activities and rituals, while linguistic culture focuses on figurative language.

2. Data Analysis

After the culture-specific items were identified and classified, they were analyzed to examine the translation strategies used to convey their meanings from Thai into English. The analysis was guided by Newmark's (1988) taxonomy of translation strategies. Although Newmark proposes twelve strategies, only those that appeared in the data were selected as analytical categories. As a result, eight translation strategies were identified and analyzed: transference, literal translation, classifier, paraphrase, glosses or notes, cultural equivalence, deletion, and combined strategies (couplets, triplets, or quadruplets).

3. Research Instruments

Two analytical instruments were employed in this study. The first was a classification checklist used to verify the categorization of culture-specific items according to Nida's framework. The second was an analytical checklist designed to examine the translation strategies applied to each culture-specific item in the translated text.

4. Data Presentation

The findings were summarized by calculating frequencies and percentages for each category of culture-specific items and translation strategies. The results were presented in descending order, followed by a discussion and interpretation of the findings in relation to translation theory and cross-cultural communication.

RESULTS

1. Distribution of Culture-Specific Items

A total of 279 culture-specific items were identified in My Departure for Suphan: A Poem by Sunthorn Phu, translated by Jongjit Arthayukti. These items were classified according to Nida's (1945) framework into five major cultural categories: ecological culture, material culture, religious culture, social culture, and linguistic culture. The distribution of culture-specific items across these categories is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 The Distribution of Culture-Specific Items

Type of Culture-Specific Items	Frequency	Percentage
Ecological Culture	200	71.68
Material Culture	37	13.26
Religious Culture	21	7.53
Social Culture	14	5.02
Linguistic Culture	7	2.51
Total	**279**	**100.00**

As shown in Table 1, ecological culture accounts for the largest proportion of culture-specific items, comprising 200 items (71.68%). This finding indicates that geographical references, natural features, and local flora and fauna play a dominant role in the poem. Material culture is the second most frequent category, with 37 items (13.26%), followed by religious culture (21 items, 7.53%), social culture (14 items, 5.02%), and linguistic culture (7 items, 2.51%).

Ecological culture includes terms related to geographical environments, such as places, landforms, plant names, and animal names. This category is further divided into four subcategories: place names, plant names, animal names, and geographical features. Place names constitute a significant portion of this category, reflecting the poet's journey and the cultural landscape of Thailand. Examples include Wat Pikun /wát . pʰí . kun/, Wang Lang /waŋ . lǎŋ/, Samchook /săːm . t͡ɕʰúk/, and Bang Kruay /baːŋ . kruaj/. Plant-related terms such as Pradu /prà . dùː/, Puttachad /pʰút . tʰá . t͡ɕʰâːt/, Gradeung flowers /dɔ̀ːk . krà . dìŋ/, and Mafueng /má . fuaŋ/ also appear frequently. Animal names, including Chonn /t͡ɕʰɔ̂ːn/, Dook /dùk/, Sawai /sà . wăːj/, and bullfrog /ʔùŋ/, further illustrate the ecological richness of the text. In addition, geographical features such as Mahanark /má .hăː.nâːk/, Bang Khwang /baːŋ . kʰwăːŋ/, Klong Bantao /kʰlɔːŋ . bâːn. tʰaw/, and Bangkok Noi Canal /kʰlɔːŋ . baːŋ . kɔ̀ːk . nɔ́ːj/ emphasizes the importance of spatial and environmental references in the poem.

Material culture comprises 37 items (13.26%) and includes terms related to utensils, buildings, food, and transportation. Examples of utensils include conch trumpet /săŋ . trɛː/, Tapons /klɔːŋ . tà . pʰoːn/, bag /jâːm/, and a monk's bowl /bàːt/. Buildings such as a guardian shrine /săːn . t͡ɕâw/, Wang /waŋ/, Chinese noodle houses /roːŋ . t͡ɕéék/, and a chapel /ʔù . boː . sòt/ reflect architectural and cultural practices. Food-related terms include preserved and rotten fish /plaː . ráː/, Fang tonic /náːm . fǎːŋ/, betel nut /mâːk . pʰluː/, and soup /kɛːŋ/, while transportation items such as carriages /kwian/ and boats /rua/ represent traditional modes of travel.

Religious culture accounts for 21 items (7.53%) and includes terms related to beliefs, rituals, and religious practices. Examples include Phra Prai /pʰrá . pʰraj/, water pouring /krùat . náːm/, sacrifice /sên/, and monks /pʰík . kʰù/, all of which reflect the influence of religious traditions in Thai society.

Social culture consists of 14 items (5.02%) and is divided into activities and rituals. Activity-related terms include setting up fish drying stalls /tàːk . plaː/, hide-and-seek /lên . pìt . taː/, catching fish /plâm . plaː/, and producing palm sugar /tʰam . taːn/. Ritual-related terms include topknot shaving ceremony /koːn . t͡ɕùk/ and delightful ceremony /tʰam . kʰwăn/, which represent traditional social practices.

Linguistic culture is the least frequent category, with 7 items (2.51%). These items reflect language-specific expressions and figurative usage, such as flower /bùp . pʰá . t͡ɕʰâːt/, forest /pʰrúk/, fragrance/sù . kʰon/, and mountain /sǐŋ . kʰɔːn/.

2. Translation Strategies for Culture-Specific Items

This section presents the findings related to the translation strategies used to render culture-specific items from Thai into English in My Departure for Suphan: A Poem by Sunthorn Phu, translated by Jongjit Arthayukti. The analysis is based on Newmark's (1988) taxonomy of translation strategies. The frequency and percentage of each strategy across five cultural categories, ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic, are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Analysis of Translation Strategies across Cultural Categories

Translation Strategy	Ecological (%)	Material (%)	Religious (%)	Social (%)	Linguistic (%)
1. Transference	-	1 (2.70)	-	-	-
2. Literal Translation	-	7 (18.92)	8 (38.10)	4 (28.57)	-
3. Classifier (More General Word)	2 (1.00)	3 (8.11)	1 (4.76)	1 (7.14)	-
4. Paraphrase	-	6 (16.22)	4 (19.05)	4 (28.57)	-
5. Notes / Glosses	-	-	-	-	-
6. Cultural Equivalence	5 (2.50)	12 (32.43)	1 (4.76)	2 (14.29)	7 (100)
7. Deletion	-	3 (8.11)	1 (4.76)	-	-
8. Couplet / Combination	193 (96.50)	5 (13.51)	6 (28.57)	3 (21.43)	-
Total	**200 (100)**	**37 (100)**	**21 (100)**	**14 (100)**	**7 (100)**

The findings reveal that the couplet or combination strategy is the most frequently employed approach, particularly in the translation of ecological culture-specific items. This result suggests that place names and geographical references in My Departure for Suphan often contain dense cultural and historical meanings that cannot be adequately conveyed through a single translation strategy. The frequent combination of transference with explanatory notes enables the translator to preserve cultural authenticity while simultaneously enhancing target readers' comprehension.

Source text: wát.pʰí.kun.krùn.klìn.klîianŋ klɔ:j.t͡ɕaj/

Target text: Wat Pikun[27] scented sweet flowery odor. / Wat Pikun - a temple on the eastern bank of Bangkok Noi Canal, named after the bullet wood- Pikun in Thai. (footnote) The term Wat Pikun (/wát . pʰí . kun/) was translated using transference as Wat Pikun, accompanied by a footnote explaining its location and the origin of its name.

Cultural equivalence is predominantly used in the translation of linguistically culture-specific items. Since figurative and stylistic expressions often lack direct equivalents, replacing them with culturally familiar terms in the target language allows readers to grasp the intended imagery and meaning more effectively. This finding aligns with Newmark's (1995) view that cultural equivalence is particularly useful when the communicative effect takes precedence over formal accuracy.

Source text: ʔùŋ.jɛ́:.t͡ɕʰê:.kʰem.klɯa klìat.kʰà.jân.klân.hɛ:/

Target text: Secretly, boys threw away salted lizard, bullfrog offered.

The Term /ʔùŋ/ translates as bullfrog. Although the two animals are not identical, both are large frogs known for their loud calls. The use of bullfrog enables target readers to visualize the animal more easily, demonstrating how cultural equivalence facilitates comprehension even when exact equivalence is unattainable.

Literal translation and paraphrase are commonly applied in the translation of religious and social culture. Religious terms such as monk for /pʰík.kʰù/ exhibits a high degree of semantic overlap between Thai and English, making literal translation feasible. A literal translation can be applied effectively without causing cultural ambiguity.

Source text: sŭa.tòp.kʰòp.pʰík.kʰù.săːŋ rûːp.múa j/

Target text: Two monks deadly found through a tiger attacking.

In contrast, paraphrasing is used when concepts are culturally unfamiliar, such as traditional food items, requiring additional explanation to ensure clarity.

Source text: /měn.nâw.kʰaːw.plaː.ráː rîat.kʰûŋ.kʰlûŋ.kʰlŏːŋ/

Target text: Stunk-smelling, preserved, and rotten fish

The term/ plaː.ráː/ is translated as preserved and rotten fish to describe both the method of preservation and its distinctive characteristics. This strategy enhances clarity and helps target readers understand unfamiliar cultural concepts.

Less frequently used strategies include classifier, deletion, and transference, which are applied selectively depending on contextual importance and cultural specificity. The classifier strategy involves using a more general term in the target language. An example is the translation of /t͡ɕan ʔàp / as sweet. Although the term loses specificity, it allows readers to grasp the general meaning without extensive explanation.

Source text: mâːk.pʰluː.sùː.sŏm.t͡ɕaj t͡ɕan.ʔàp.pʰláp.ʔəːj/

Target text: More to present were preserved fruits, betel nuts, and sweets.

Deletion is used selectively when a term is not essential to the core meaning of the text. In the translation of /kʰăn.jàj.sàj.mâːk.pʰluː/, the phrase /kʰăn.jàj/ is omitted without affecting overall comprehension, as the focus remains on the act of preparing betel nuts.

Source text: /kʰăn.jàj.sàj.mâːk.pʰluː nâːp.hâj/

Target text: Neatly arranged, for boys, betel nut savors.

Transference involves phonetic borrowing from the source language, as seen in the translation of /tà.pʰoːn/ as Tapons. This strategy helps preserve cultural identity but may require additional strategies to ensure comprehension.

Source text: faŋ.tiː.pìː.pʰâːt.kʰɔ́ːŋ klɔːŋ.tà.pʰoːn/

Target text: Gong, xylophone, and Tapons were playing.

Notably, notes or glosses do not appear as an independent strategy but are consistently combined with transference, highlighting the translator's effort to balance conciseness with cultural explanation.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the translator adopts a flexible, reader-oriented approach, selecting and combining strategies to effectively convey Thai cultural meanings while maintaining readability in English.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the translation strategies used to render culture-specific items from Thai into English in My Departure for Suphan: A Poem by Sunthorn Phu, translated by Jongjit Arthayukti. Drawing on Newmark's (1988) framework, the analysis demonstrates that the translator employs a wide range of strategies to address the cultural and linguistic challenges

inherent in literary translation.

The findings reveal that the couplet or multiple-strategy approach is the most frequently used strategy, particularly for ecological culture-specific items. This indicates that culturally dense terms, such as place names and geographical references, often require a combination of strategies to preserve both meaning and cultural resonance. The use of cultural equivalence, literal translation, and paraphrase further reflects the translator's adaptive approach to different cultural domains, highlighting the importance of strategy selection based on contextual and cultural factors.

The results affirm Newmark's theoretical position that no single strategy is sufficient for translating culture-bound elements. Instead, effective translation depends on the translator's ability to negotiate between semantic accuracy and communicative clarity. By integrating multiple strategies, the translator successfully conveys Thai cultural meanings while maintaining readability for English-speaking audiences.

This study contributes to translation studies by providing empirical evidence of Newmark's framework in practice within the context of Thai to English literary translation. It also offers pedagogical implications for translator training, emphasizing the need to develop strategic flexibility and cultural awareness. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing different translations of the same literary work or by examining reader reception to assess the effectiveness of various translation strategies in cross-cultural literary communication.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study strongly support Newmark's (1995) assertion that the translation of culture-specific items requires a flexible and context-sensitive approach rather than reliance on a single translation strategy. The predominance of couplet and multiple-strategy combinations, particularly in the translation of ecological culture, reflects the translator's need to balance semantic accuracy with communicative effectiveness, a core principle emphasized in Newmark's communicative translation theory.

Newmark (1995) argues that proper names and geographical references often carry cultural, historical, and emotional associations that cannot be fully conveyed through direct equivalence. This study confirms that ecological terms—especially place names—frequently demand the use of transference combined with paraphrase or explanatory notes. By preserving the original Thai terms through transference while providing supplementary explanations, the translator maintains cultural authenticity while facilitating reader comprehension. This approach aligns with Newmark's recommendation that foreign elements should be retained when they contribute to cultural meaning, provided that intelligibility is ensured through contextual support.

The frequent use of cultural equivalence in translating linguistic culture further corresponds with Newmark's view that this strategy is particularly effective when the source-language expression has no formal equivalent but serves a similar communicative or emotive function in the target culture. In such cases, the translator prioritizes the impact on the target reader over strict semantic fidelity, thereby enhancing readability and cultural accessibility. These finding underscores Newmark's distinction between semantic translation, which emphasizes source-text meaning, and communicative translation, which prioritizes the target reader's response.

Additionally, the application of literal translation in religious and social culture indicates a high degree of conceptual overlap between Thai and English in certain domains. Terms such as monk for demonstrate what Newmark describes as recognized translation, where established equivalents allow for accurate and economical transfer of meaning. However, when cultural concepts lack direct counterparts, such as traditional food items, paraphrasing emerges as an essential strategy. This supports Newmark's claim that paraphrasing is particularly useful for explaining culturally embedded concepts without overburdening the text.

The limited use of deletion suggests that the translator exercises caution in omitting cultural elements, adhering to Newmark's warning that deletion should only be employed when the omitted item does not significantly affect meaning or narrative coherence. Overall, the translator's strategic choices reveal a conscious effort to mediate between source and target cultures, reflecting Newmark's view of translation as an act of intercultural communication rather than mere linguistic substitution.

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