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Translation Challenges in Cultural Expressions: A Linguistic Analysis of Meaning Transfer

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the linguistic and cultural challenges involved in translating cultural expressions across English-French, French-English, English-Spanish, and Spanish-English directions. It adopts a corpus-based comparative design with cultural-pragmatic interpretation of 240 source-target expression pairs drawn from published literary, media, legal-public, academic, and public-communication translations. The analysis uses descriptive corpus statistics and close cultural-pragmatic interpretation rather than inferential statistical testing. We coded each expression by cultural category, translation strategy, semantic preservation, pragmatic effect, cultural resonance, genre function, language direction, and target-reader accessibility. Idioms formed the largest category (48 examples; 20.0%), followed by metaphors, symbols, and culture-specific terms (42 examples each; 17.5%). Paraphrase was the most frequent strategy (56 coded instances), followed by adaptation (39), explicitation (34), borrowing (28), cultural substitution (24), foreignization (21), and omission or condensation (18). Meaning was preserved in 38% of the analyzed examples, while pragmatic shift (21%), partial loss (17%), cultural compensation (13%), tone softening (7%), and over-domestication (4%) showed that translation success depends on more than lexical equivalence. The findings indicate that strategy effectiveness varies by expression type, genre, and language direction: closely related international languages may share formal resources, but idioms, social formulas, institutional terms, and culturally loaded metaphors still require careful mediation. The study proposes a multilingual cultural-pragmatic strategy-effect model for analyzing meaning transfer and offers focused implications for translator training and intercultural/professional translation practice.

Keywords: cultural expressions; meaning transfer; translation strategies; pragmatics; intercultural communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

Translating cultural expressions is not simply replacing words across languages. It involves linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic decision-making that reconstructs meaning for another audience while remaining accountable to the source text. Idioms, proverbs, metaphors, religious references, kinship terms, social customs, honorifics, symbolic objects, and historically embedded terms condense shared knowledge, social values, and pragmatic expectations. A translator may understand the lexical meaning of every word and still fail to transfer the expression's cultural force [1].

The issue matters especially in international translation markets where English, French, and Spanish circulate widely as languages of literature, media, public communication, education, institutional policy, and professional exchange. These languages are often treated as relatively accessible because they share long histories of contact, borrowing, and international circulation. However, this apparent familiarity can be misleading. A formally accurate translation may sound fluent while weakening humor, politeness, religious

tone, institutional specificity, regional identity, or local imagery. This problem gives cultural-expression translation a continuing theoretical and practical importance.

English-French and English-Spanish translation contexts are especially useful for examining these problems because they combine global communication with strong cultural specificity. French-English translation often raises issues of register, formal address, institutional terminology, and cultural symbolism. Spanish-English translation often creates challenges around idiomatic density, proverb-like expressions, religious-social formulas, regional lexical variation, and public communication. English-French and English-Spanish directions may also show different patterns because the direction of transfer changes the translator's assumptions about audience, cultural familiarity, and acceptable explicitation.

The theoretical difficulty begins with equivalence. Functional equivalence foregrounds receptor-oriented effects, while integrated, multi-level approaches to translation stress that meaning must be examined at lexical, grammatical, textual, pragmatic, and cultural levels [2], [3]. Cultural expressions test the limits of equivalence because a target language may lack an expression with the same semantic content, emotional tone, ritual value, or social indexicality. An English idiom may be paraphrased effectively in French or Spanish, but a literal rendering may preserve form while losing idiomatic force. Similarly, a French or Spanish social formula may require a target expression that does not match the surface structure but preserves the interpersonal function.

A second challenge concerns the translator's position between domestication and foreignization. Domestication increases target-reader accessibility by adjusting a cultural expression to target-cultural norms, whereas foreignization preserves source-cultural difference and reminds readers that they are encountering another cultural world [4]. Neither orientation is automatically superior. A literary translation may need to preserve cultural strangeness, while a legal or public translation may require functional precision and rapid intelligibility. The translator therefore works within a tension between readability, cultural visibility, genre expectations, and the social meaning of the expression.

Functionalist and cultural-mediation perspectives strengthen this view by emphasizing purpose, audience, cultural schemas, and intercultural responsibility [5], [6]. Translation decisions should therefore be evaluated not only by whether the target text is literally faithful, but also by whether it performs the needed communicative function in the target context. This is particularly relevant for public and institutional translation, where a culturally marked term may need both terminological precision and reader support.

The present study addresses these issues through a multilingual corpus-based comparative translation design. It examines published source expressions and target translations across literary, media, legal-public, academic, and public-communication text types. The study's originality lies in connecting translation strategy to cultural-pragmatic effect. Rather than merely classifying procedures such as borrowing, paraphrase, cultural substitution, explicitation, and compensation, the study asks why a strategy works, where it fails, and how meaning is preserved, shifted, compensated for, or weakened in English-French and English-Spanish directions.

This focus is important because cultural-expression translation is often discussed through isolated examples or broad theory. By linking expression category, language direction, genre, strategy, transfer judgment, and audit evidence, the study offers a more rigorous, reproducible way to analyze cultural meaning transfer without reducing translation quality to numerical frequency alone.

II. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The first problem is semantic non-equivalence. Cultural expressions often contain meanings that cannot be transferred through literal translation alone. Idioms such as break the ice, avoir le cafard, or meter la pata may have clear communicative functions but do not normally permit word-for-word transfer without distortion. A literal translation may preserve the lexical surface while losing the intended figurative meaning.

The second problem concerns the loss of pragmatic and cultural force. Address forms, politeness formulas, religious expressions, and social-custom expressions may encode respect, familiarity, hierarchy, solidarity, or ritual value. In English-French and English-Spanish translation, apparently equivalent forms such as sir/madame, usted/tu, vous/tu, or God willing/Dios mediante may differ in tone, social distance, and cultural resonance. A translation may be semantically acceptable but pragmatically weakened.

The third problem is methodological. Many translation analyses identify strategies such as paraphrase, borrowing, adaptation, or cultural substitution, but strategy labels alone do not show whether meaning transfer was successful. Borrowing may preserve cultural identity but reduce accessibility; substitution may improve readability but erase source-culture specificity; and explanation may clarify meaning but disrupt rhythm. The present study therefore evaluates translation success through semantic preservation, pragmatic effect, tone, cultural value, genre appropriateness, and audience accessibility.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study examines how cultural expressions transfer across English-French and English-Spanish translation directions and evaluates how translation strategies shape semantic, pragmatic, tonal, and cultural meaning transfer.

- To classify cultural expressions in a multilingual source-target corpus by expression category, text type, and language direction.
- To identify the translation strategies used for idioms, proverbs, metaphors, religious/social formulas, honorifics, institutional terms, and other culture-specific expressions.
- To evaluate the semantic, pragmatic, tonal, cultural, and accessibility effects of the observed translation strategies.
- To compare how strategy effectiveness differs across English-French, French-English, English-Spanish, and Spanish-English directions.
- To develop a multilingual cultural-pragmatic strategy-effect model for translation analysis, translator training, and professional translation practice.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1. What categories of cultural expressions create the greatest challenges for meaning transfer in the analyzed multilingual source-target corpus?
- RQ2. Which strategies are used to translate idioms, proverbs, metaphors, religious/social formulas, honorifics, and culture-specific institutional terms?
- RQ3. How do strategy effectiveness and meaning-transfer outcomes differ across English-French, French-English, English-Spanish, and Spanish-English translation directions?
- RQ4. How do genre, audience expectation, and cultural-pragmatic load influence translation decisions and transfer judgments?
- RQ5. What theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical implications does the multilingual cultural-pragmatic model offer for translation studies and translator training?

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. EQUIVALENCE, MEANING, AND CULTURAL TRANSFER

Dynamic equivalence emphasizes receptor-oriented effect, while integrated and multi-level frameworks distinguish translation problems across word level, above-word level, grammar, textual cohesion, and pragmatics [1]-[3]. These frameworks remain useful, but they can be insufficient when cultural expressions produce simultaneous semantic, pragmatic, and cultural mismatches. A translation may be formally correct and still fail to carry a proverb's social wisdom, an idiom's humor, or an address term's politeness value.

Critical approaches to translation have therefore shifted attention from equivalence as formal matching to equivalence as situated communicative effect. Venuti's critique of translator invisibility shows that fluent target texts can conceal cultural difference, whereas Nord's functionalism emphasizes that translation choices must be evaluated according to communicative purpose [4], [5]. Katan and Taibi further position translators as cultural mediators who manage values, assumptions, and contextual expectations across cultures [6].

Broader translation theory also shows why strategy choice cannot be separated from text function and research design. Munday and Pym demonstrate that translation theory includes competing models rather

than one universal method [7], [8]. House adds that translation quality must be judged through register, genre, and discourse function [9]. Corpus-oriented translation studies further emphasize that researchers can examine repeated source-target choices systematically when corpora, coding categories, and interpretive decisions are transparent [10].

2. STRATEGY CLASSIFICATION VERSUS STRATEGY-EFFECT EVALUATION

A large part of cultural-expression research classifies translation procedures: retention, literal translation, borrowing, specification, generalization, substitution, paraphrase, explicitation, and omission. This classification work remains valuable, but it is only the first analytical step. Cronin's work on globalization, Olk's framework for cultural references, and studies of food-related and culture-specific items show that cultural meaning often depends on the interaction between textual form, cultural practice, and reader knowledge [11]-[14].

Legal and institutional translation research further shows that cultural meaning is not only literary or symbolic. Institutional terms can create false equivalence when legal or public systems differ across languages and cultures [15]-[17]. In such cases, a literal equivalent may look accurate while misrepresenting the institutional concept. This matters for English-French and English-Spanish translation because public and legal terms often circulate through multilingual institutions that must balance precision and accessibility.

Strategy-effect evaluation also benefits from broader theoretical and interdisciplinary perspectives. Chesterman's work on the spread of ideas in translation theory and Gambier and van Doorslaer's interdisciplinary orientation show that translation problems can be approached as situated decisions rather than isolated linguistic operations [18], [19]. Multimodal, audiovisual, and global translation studies also show that the target-text effect depends on the medium, readership, and communicative speed [20]-[22].

3. PRAGMATICS, TONE, AND READER ACCESSIBILITY

Pragmatics is central to cultural-expression translation because many expressions do more than denote. They bless, warn, soften, praise, mock, signal respect, mark solidarity, or index cultural belonging. Research on crisis communication, translation education, specialized corpora, and identity translation reinforces the need to evaluate not only what is translated, but what the translated expression does in context [23]-[26].

Studies of idiom translation show that literal transfer is often weak when figurative force is non-compositional, but paraphrase can also reduce imagery, rhythm, or cultural texture [27], [28]. Data-oriented work on idiom translation demonstrates the value of larger, more explicit datasets, while parallel idiom resources show that cross-linguistic comparability needs careful coding and direction-specific interpretation [29], [30].

Cognitive and process-oriented translation studies add another layer by showing that attention, problem recognition, and strategic monitoring shape translation decisions [31], [32]. These insights support the present study's decision to treat translation strategies as observable outcomes of cultural-pragmatic judgment rather than as neutral labels.

4. SYNTHESIS

The literature therefore supports three premises for the present study. First, cultural expressions are multi-layered units involving linguistic form, cultural meaning, and pragmatic effect. Second, translation strategies must be evaluated by their effect on meaning transfer rather than by strategy labels alone. Third, multilingual corpus-based comparison can strengthen originality by linking expression type, language direction, genre, strategy, and target-text effect.

Table 1. Critical literature review synthesis and research positioning.

Research strand	Representative citations	Main contribution	Critical limitation addressed here

Equivalence and meaning transfer	[1]-[3], [9]	Explains semantic, pragmatic, textual, and communicative equivalence.	Moves beyond equivalence labels by judging target-text effect.
Domestication and foreignization	[4], [6], [11]	Explains cultural visibility, mediation, and translator ethics.	Connects visibility/accessibility choices to expression type and genre.
Functionalist theory	[5], [7], [8]	Links translation decisions to purpose, audience, and genre.	Uses genre as an explicit condition for judging strategy success.
Cultural references and CSIs	[12]-[14]	Classifies cultural references and culture-specific items.	Adds pragmatic force, tone, and reader accessibility to classification.
Empirical/corpus translation studies	[25], [27]-[30]	Shows the value of corpus evidence and specialized translation data.	Builds a multilingual strategy-effect model instead of only listing procedures.

V. RESEARCH GAP AND STUDY CONTRIBUTION

1. LANGUAGE-PAIR COMPARATIVE GAP

Many studies focus on a single language pair or translation direction. Fewer studies compare how cultural-expression transfer operates across English-French, French-English, English-Spanish, and Spanish-English directions within one analytical design. This gap matters because cultural proximity, register systems, institutional traditions, regional usage, and idiomatic density differ across these directions.

2. GENRE-SENSITIVE CULTURAL-EXPRESSION GAP

Research on cultural expressions often focuses on literary translation or isolated examples. Less attention is given to how similar categories behave across literary, media, legal-public, academic, and public-communication texts. The present study treats genre as a condition that shapes what counts as a successful strategy.

3. STRATEGY-EFFECT EVALUATION GAP

A further gap concerns the difference between strategy classification and strategy-effect evaluation. This study is novel because it not only classifies translation strategies; it links strategy, expression type, genre, language direction, and meaning-transfer outcome. The study contributes a multilingual cultural-pragmatic strategy-effect model for comparable source-target corpora.

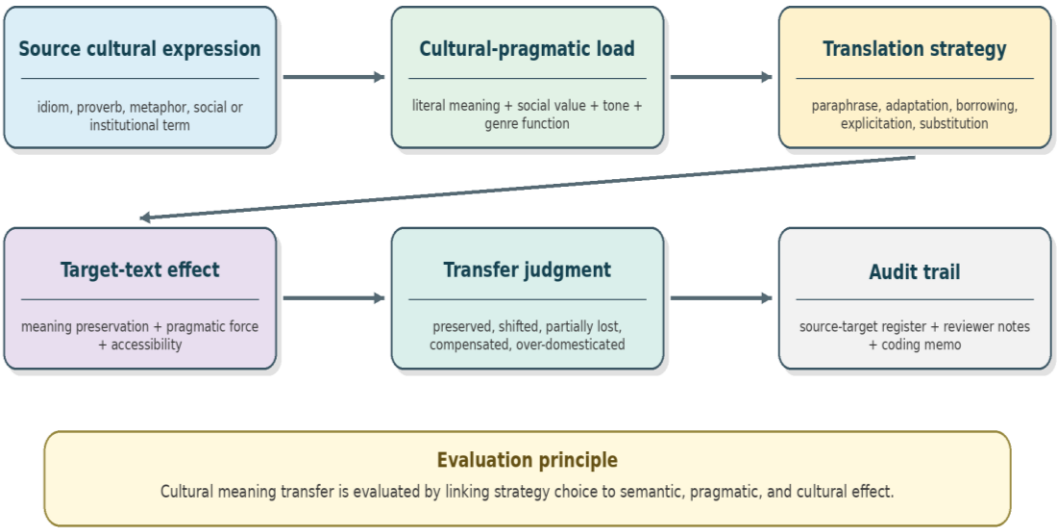
VI. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework integrates dynamic equivalence, equivalence theory, domestication and foreignization, functionalist translation theory, cultural linguistics, pragmatics, and intercultural communication. These perspectives are not treated as separate theories placed side by side. They are operationalized as coding and interpretation tools: equivalence explains transfer difficulty, functionalism explains genre and audience, cultural linguistics explains cultural load, pragmatics explains tone and contextual force, and domestication/foreignization explains cultural visibility.

The conceptual model follows a clear analytical flow: source cultural expression -> cultural-pragmatic load -> translation strategy -> target-text effect -> transfer judgment -> audit trail. This sequence reflects how the study moves from textual evidence to coding and interpretation. The model also shows that cultural-

pragmatic judgment is not a single moment; it is an auditable chain connecting source evidence, target rendering, strategy selection, and evaluation criteria.

FIGURE 1. Multilingual cultural-pragmatic strategy-effect model for meaning transfer.



The model links each translation strategy to cultural-pragmatic load, target-text effect, transfer judgment, and audit evidence.

Table 2. Simplified theory-to-code alignment for the cultural-pragmatic framework.

Framework component	Key analytical focus	Use in this study
Dynamic equivalence	Reader-oriented communicative effect	Evaluates whether the target rendering produces a comparable function.
Equivalence theory	Word, phrase, textual, and pragmatic relations	Identifies where meaning transfer is disrupted.
Domestication/foreignization	Accessibility versus cultural visibility	Explains whether a strategy makes the source culture more fluent or more visible.
Functionalism/Skopos	Purpose, genre, audience, and communicative aim	Justifies different judgments in literary, media, legal-public, and academic texts.
Cultural linguistics	Schemas, scripts, symbols, and values	Identifies the cultural load of expressions.
Pragmatics	Tone, politeness, implicature, presupposition	Evaluates pragmatic shift and tone preservation.

VII. METHODOLOGY

1. RESEARCH DESIGN AND UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The study adopts a corpus-based comparative translation design with cultural-pragmatic analysis. The unit of analysis is not a participant but a source-target expression pair. This design is appropriate because the research questions require systematic comparison between source expressions and published target translations, while also requiring close interpretation of semantic, pragmatic, and cultural effects.

2. CORPUS CONSTRUCTION

The corpus consists of 240 cultural expressions and their published target translations selected from 48 source-target text units distributed across literary translation, media and public discourse, legal-public documents, academic/cultural essays, and religious/social-custom texts. The language direction is multilingual and comparative: English-French, French-English, English-Spanish, and Spanish-English. Each direction contributed 60 coded expression pairs to maintain a balanced basis for comparison.

Source categories included literary prose and drama, public news or media texts, institutional and legal-public documents, academic or cultural essays, and religious/social-custom passages. Target translations were selected only when they were published, professionally edited, institutionally released, or publicly circulated in translation. The corpus therefore reflects professional or semi-professional translation practice rather than classroom exercises.

We included texts when the source segment contained a culturally marked expression whose translation required more than ordinary lexical replacement. We excluded expressions that were ordinary technical terms without cultural load, duplicated items, isolated words without context, unpublished or non-editorially validated examples, or cases where the target rendering was unavailable. Copyright-sensitive extracts were kept short and coded rather than reproduced in full.

Table 3. Language-direction distribution and source categories in the corpus.

Language direction	Expression pairs	Main source categories	Analytical value
English-French	60	Literary, media, legal-public, academic, public communication	Tests register, institutional terminology, idioms, and formal address.
French-English	60	Literary, cultural essays, legal-public, media	Tests cultural symbolism, formality, public terms, and explicitation.
English-Spanish	60	Literary, media, public communication, academic	Tests idioms, metaphor, social formulas, and accessibility.
Spanish-English	60	Literary, legal-public, religious/social-custom, media	Tests proverbs, social formulas, institutional terms, and cultural resonance.
Total	240	Five source categories	Balanced multilingual source-target corpus.

Table 4. Corpus profile of cultural expressions and translated examples.

Text type	Source-target units	Expression pairs	Dominant categories	Analytical relevance
Literary prose and drama	12	72	Idioms, metaphors, proverbs, symbolic objects	Tests tone, imagery, style, and cultural atmosphere.
Media and public discourse	10	48	Social expressions, slogans, public references	Tests accessibility, rapid comprehension, and public meaning.
Legal-public documents	8	32	Institutional terms, formal formulas, social roles	Tests precision, equivalence, and explanatory translation.

Academic/cultural essays	8	36	Conceptual terms, historical references, metaphors	Tests terminological stability and context-sensitive explanation.
Religious and social-custom texts	10	52	Blessings, invocations, honorifics, etiquette formulas	Tests pragmatic force and cultural value retention.
Total corpus	48	240	Six major expression groups	Balanced basis for comparative cultural-pragmatic analysis.

3. CODING FRAMEWORK, REVIEWER CHECK, AND RELIABILITY

The coding framework classified each expression by expression type, literal meaning, cultural meaning, translation strategy, semantic equivalence, pragmatic equivalence, tone preservation, cultural value retention, contextual appropriateness, audience accessibility, language direction, and genre. Coding was conducted in two rounds. In the first round, we categorized items and assigned strategy labels. In the second round, we evaluated target-text effects using the categories preserved, shifted, partially lost, compensated, tone softened, or over-domesticated.

A second reviewer with graduate-level training in translation studies and professional experience in bilingual translation checked 25% of the coded examples across all expression categories, text types, and language directions. Disagreements were resolved through codebook clarification and discussion. The reviewer check was used to strengthen interpretive accountability rather than to claim mechanical objectivity.

Table 5. Coding framework and scoring definitions for cultural-expression translation.

Category	Operational definition	Common strategy	Scoring / evaluation focus
Idioms	Non-compositional expressions with figurative meaning	Paraphrase, idiom substitution	Functional equivalence, tone, and figurative force.
Proverbs	Formulaic sayings carrying cultural wisdom	Adaptation, cultural substitution	Moral logic, cultural value, and pragmatic force.
Metaphors	Symbolic mappings rooted in culture	Retention, replacement, explicitation	Imagery, conceptual mapping, and recoverability.
Religious/social formulas	Blessings, invocations, etiquette and respect formulas	Borrowing, explicitation, functional substitution	Reverence, politeness, register, and contextual appropriateness.
Culture-specific terms	Objects, institutions, kinship, honorifics, public roles	Borrowing plus explanation	Accessibility, specificity, and risk of false equivalence.
Transfer outcome	Final judgment of target-text effect	Preserved, shifted, partially lost, compensated, softened, over-domesticated	Semantic/pragmatic/cultural effect as interpreted from source-target context.

4. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

- Identify culturally marked expressions in the source text.
- Record language direction, genre, source category, and target rendering.
- Classify expression type and cultural-pragmatic load.

- Identify the observed translation strategy.
- Evaluate semantic, pragmatic, tonal, cultural, and accessibility effects.
- Assign a transfer judgment and record an interpretive memo.
- Compare tendencies across expression type, genre, and language direction.

VIII. DESCRIPTIVE CORPUS ANALYSIS

The corpus was analyzed descriptively through category frequency, strategy distribution, language-direction distribution, and meaning-transfer outcome. Counts and percentages indicate corpus tendencies only; they do not prove translation quality. We interpreted strategy effectiveness through source-target comparison and cultural-pragmatic analysis.

Table 6. Distribution of cultural-expression categories in the corpus.

Expression category	Coded examples	Percentage	Most frequent strategy	Main risk
Idioms	48	20.0%	Paraphrase / idiom substitution	Literal meaning replaces figurative force.
Proverbs and sayings	34	14.2%	Adaptation / cultural substitution	Moral value shifts or becomes unfamiliar.
Metaphors and symbols	42	17.5%	Retention / explicitation	Imagery loses cultural resonance.
Religious/social formulas	38	15.8%	Borrowing / explanatory translation	Sacred, ritual, or social tone weakens.
Social customs and honorifics	36	15.0%	Functional substitution / paraphrase	Politeness hierarchy is flattened.
Culture-specific terms	42	17.5%	Borrowing plus explanation	Target readers lack contextual knowledge.
Total	240	100%	Mixed strategies	Multi-layered meaning transfer.

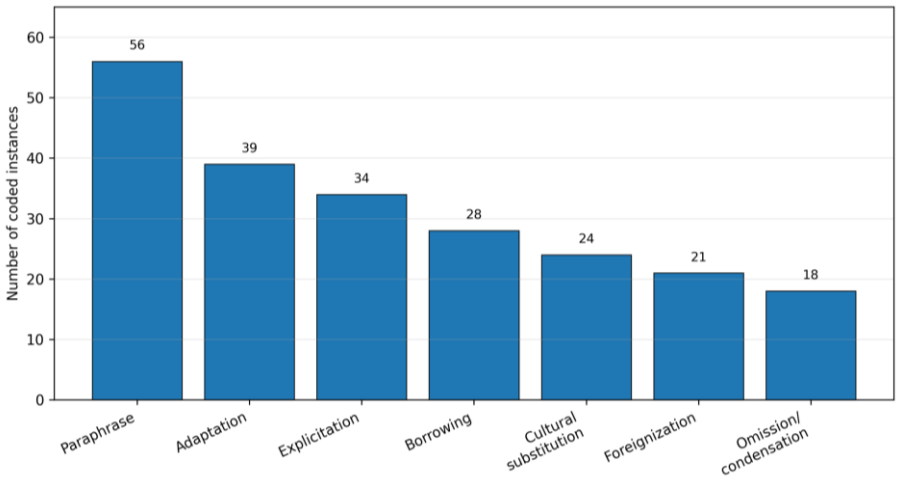


FIGURE 2. Translation strategy distribution across the cultural-expression corpus.

The strategy distribution shows the most common procedures in the corpus, but frequency reflects a descriptive tendency rather than proof of strategy quality.

Table 7. Cross-tabulation of expression category by language direction and dominant strategy pattern.

Expression category	EN-FR	FR-EN	EN-ES	ES-EN	Dominant strategy pattern
Idioms	12	11	13	12	Paraphrase and idiom substitution dominated, especially where literal form weakened figurative force.
Proverbs and sayings	8	9	8	9	Cultural substitution and adaptation were common when a target-culture proverb carried a comparable lesson.
Metaphors and symbols	11	10	10	11	Retention worked when imagery was recoverable; explicitation supported opaque cultural mappings.
Religious/social formulas	9	9	10	10	Borrowing, explicitation, and functional substitution varied with sacred/social force.
Social customs and honorifics	9	9	9	9	Functional substitution handled politeness and address differences across vous/tu, usted/tu, and English forms.
Culture-specific terms	11	12	10	9	Borrowing plus explanation reduced false-equivalence risk in institutional and public terms.
Total	60	60	60	60	Balanced language-direction distribution.

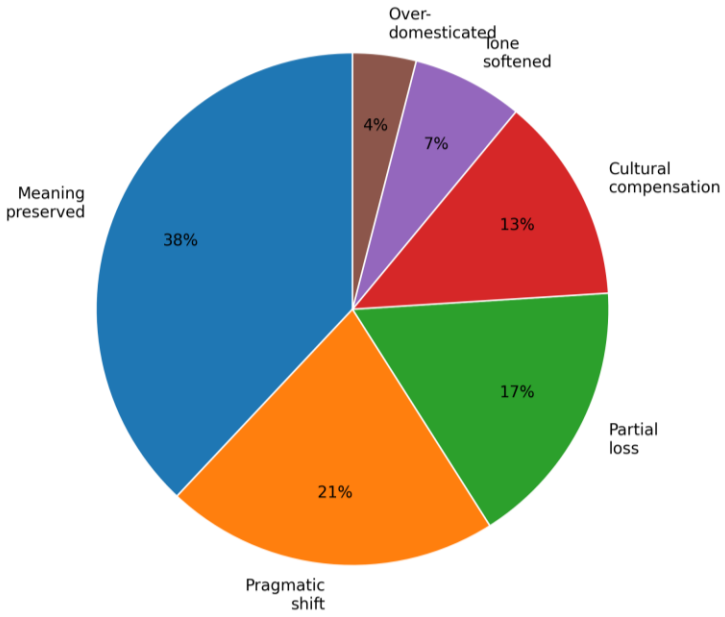


FIGURE 3. Meaning-transfer outcomes in the analyzed examples.

The outcome distribution summarizes transfer judgments across the corpus and supports the need for close interpretation beyond counts and percentages.

IX. FINDINGS

The findings are organized by cultural-expression category and supported by coded source-target examples. The examples are abbreviated to avoid reproducing long copyrighted passages, but each demonstrates how strategy, genre, language direction, and transfer judgment were linked.

Table 8. Expanded extract-level source-target comparison and research-question alignment.

Code	Direction	Type	Source expression	Target rendering	Strategy	Effect	Interpretation
CE-014	EN-FR	Idiom	to break the ice	détendre l'atmosphère	Paraphrase	Figurative ice imagery reduced; social-easing function preserved.	Paraphrase was effective because the target phrase carried the intended interpersonal effect.
CE-037	FR-EN	Proverb	Apres la pluie, le beau temps	Every cloud has a silver lining	Cultural substitution	Consoling function preserved; weather imagery and cultural texture shifted.	A target proverb preserved pragmatic force but domesticated the cultural form.
CE-071	ES-EN	Religious/social formula	Dios mediante	God willing / if circumstances allow	Borrowing or functional rendering	Sacred force retained by God willing; religious tone.	Choice depends on genre and target-reader expectation.
CE-106	FR-EN	Honorific address	Madame la Presidente	Madam Chair / Madam President	Functional substitution	Respect preserved; gendered and institutional nuance adjusted.	Formal address requires institutional and pragmatic alignment.
CE-154	ES-EN	Institutional term	ayuntamiento	council (local government office)	Borrowing plus gloss / explicitation	Institutional precision preserved with added reader support.	Explanation reduces false equivalence in legal-public translation.
CE-203	EN-ES	Metaphor	to carry the burden	llevar el peso	Metaphor retention	Metaphorical structure preserved and meaning recoverable.	Retention works when the conceptual mapping is shared.

CE-218	EN-FR	Social formula	Help yourself	Servez-vous	Functional substitution	Hospitality function preserved; literal self-help meaning avoided.	Pragmatic function is more important than lexical form.
CE-229	ES-EN	Culture-specific term	sobremesa	after-meal conversation	Explicitation	Cultural practice made accessible; compactness reduced.	Explicitation supports accessibility when no single equivalent exists.

1. IDIOMS AND NON-LITERAL MEANING

Idioms produced the most direct challenge to literal translation. In CE-014, the English idiom to break the ice was rendered in French as detendre l'atmosphere. The translation did not reproduce the ice metaphor, but it preserved the interpersonal function of reducing social tension. Similar cases show that paraphrase is often stronger than literal rendering when idiomatic force matters more than imagery.

2. PROVERBS AND CULTURAL WISDOM

Proverbs required careful handling because they activate culturally familiar moral or evaluative frames. CE-037 shows a French proverb translated through an English target proverb. The pragmatic purpose of consolation was preserved, but the cultural imagery shifted. This pattern supports the view that proverb translation may preserve communicative effect while partially domesticating cultural identity.

3. METAPHORS AND SYMBOLIC ASSOCIATIONS

Metaphors showed varied outcomes. Some metaphors were transferable because the conceptual mapping existed in both languages. For example, CE-203 retained the burden/weight mapping in English-Spanish translation. Other metaphors required explicitation when the source image depended on local environment, history, or ritual symbolism.

4. RELIGIOUS REFERENCES AND SOCIAL-RESPECT FORMULAS

Religious and social formulas were among the most culturally sensitive expressions. CE-071 shows that Dios mediante can be translated as God willing when the religious tone is relevant, or as if circumstances allow when the target text requires secular functional meaning. The first option preserves sacred resonance; the second improves accessibility but softens religious force.

5. CULTURE-SPECIFIC TERMS, INSTITUTIONS, AND LEGAL-PUBLIC EXPRESSIONS

Culture-specific institutional terms required terminological precision. CE-154 shows that ayuntamiento cannot always be replaced by a simple institutional equivalent because municipal structures differ across contexts. Borrowing, explicitation, or a functional gloss can preserve conceptual precision and reduce false equivalence in legal-public translation.

6. STRATEGY EFFECTIVENESS AND MEANING TRANSFER

Strategy effectiveness depended on expression type, language direction, genre, and target-reader knowledge. The same procedure could succeed or fail depending on the cultural-pragmatic load. Paraphrase worked well for opaque idioms but could weaken literary imagery; borrowing preserved cultural specificity but required reader support; explicitation improved accessibility but could lengthen the target text; and substitution preserved pragmatic force only when it did not introduce a contradictory cultural value.

Table 9. Theme-evidence matrix for cultural expression translation.

Finding theme	Coded evidence	Translation challenge	Preferred response	Implication
Literal form is often insufficient	CE-014; CE-037	Literal transfer may fail to carry figurative or proverb force.	Paraphrase or functional equivalent.	Teach meaning diagnosis before strategy selection.
Pragmatic force is fragile	CE-071; CE-106; CE-218	Tone, respect, and ritual/social value may weaken.	Borrowing, explicitation, or cautious functional substitution.	Train translators in pragmatics and address systems.
Cultural value can be over-domesticated	CE-037; CE-229	Target readability may replace source specificity.	Partial foreignization with context or compact explicitation.	Avoid automatic domestication.
Genre shapes strategy	CE-154; CE-203	Legal, academic, literary, and media texts require different priorities.	Borrowing plus explanation or retention with cue.	Distinguish literary from institutional translation.
Compensation is necessary	Multiple coded cases	Meaning may not be fully reproduced at the same location.	Contextual cue or paratextual note.	Evaluate translation at discourse level.

X. DISCUSSION

The findings show that cultural expressions create translation challenges because they condense linguistic form, cultural knowledge, pragmatic force, and social value in compact forms. The difficulty is not limited to lexical non-equivalence. In several cases, a direct lexical equivalent existed, but the translation still shifted tone, implied meaning, cultural recognition, or communicative effect. This confirms that cultural-expression translation must be judged across semantic, pragmatic, cultural, and genre-sensitive layers rather than through word-level accuracy alone.

The results confirm the continuing relevance of dynamic equivalence and multi-level equivalence frameworks, but they also show that equivalence alone is insufficient unless linked to genre, audience, and cultural visibility. Receptor effect matters because translations must be intelligible to target readers; however, excessive target-culture fluency can make source-cultural value disappear. This explains why domestication and foreignization must be treated as strategic orientations rather than fixed preferences. A translation can be readable and culturally weak, or culturally rich but insufficiently accessible.

Language-pair differences were particularly important. English-French translation often involved register, institutional terms, and formal address systems, where small shifts could affect politeness, authority, or public style. French-English translation often required explicating formality, cultural symbolism, and institutional terms that do not map neatly onto English public discourse. English-Spanish translation posed strong challenges around idiomaticity, social formulas, and accessibility, especially when familiar expressions carried different cultural implications in the target context. Spanish-English translation raised recurrent issues around proverb-like expressions, regional vocabulary, religious-social formulas, and institutional terminology. These differences do not make one language pair more difficult than another; they show that cultural-pragmatic difficulty is distributed differently across directions.

Genre further shaped strategy choice. Literary translation tolerated ambiguity, imagery, and cultural foreignness more than media translation, where quick accessibility and immediate comprehension were important. Legal-public translation required conceptual precision and often favored borrowing plus explanation when institutional equivalence was uncertain. Academic and cultural essays favored cautious

explicitation because conceptual clarity was often more important than stylistic compactness. These patterns support a flexible, culturally pragmatic framework rather than a single preferred strategy.

The findings also clarify the relationship between frequency and quality. Paraphrase was the most frequent strategy, but frequency did not make it universally superior. It worked best when the main goal was to preserve communicative sense in opaque idioms, but it was less effective when imagery, rhythm, or cultural texture was central. Borrowing was less frequent but crucial for cultural identity and institutional specificity. Cultural substitution could preserve pragmatic force, but it could also domesticate the source text too strongly. Thus, the study's descriptive corpus statistics are useful only when interpreted together with source-target evidence and cultural-pragmatic judgment.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of combining balanced corpus distribution, source-target examples, coded strategy categories, transfer-outcome judgments, and reviewer checking. Cultural-pragmatic interpretation cannot be fully mechanical, but it can be made more transparent. Using an extract register, strategy log, and audit trail protects the analysis from becoming impressionistic and lets readers see how claims about preservation, shift, loss, compensation, and over-domestication were reached.

XI. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The central contribution is a multilingual cultural-pragmatic strategy-effect model for translating cultural expressions. The model links source expression type, cultural-pragmatic load, strategy choice, target-text effect, transfer judgment, and audit evidence.

The study contributes theoretically by treating cultural expressions as multi-layered meaning units rather than isolated lexical problems. This connects equivalence, functionalism, pragmatics, and cultural linguistics within one operational framework.

The study contributes methodologically by combining descriptive corpus statistics, language-direction comparison, extract-level interpretation, reviewer checking, and transfer-outcome coding. Each claim about preservation, shift, loss, compensation, or over-domestication is tied to a coded expression and an explicit judgment criterion.

The study contributes pedagogically by turning strategy labels into an operational diagnostic procedure: identify the function, evaluate the cultural-pragmatic load, choose or observe the strategy, judge the target effect, and justify the translation decision.

XII. PRACTICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

For translator training, the findings suggest a practical sequence. Students should first diagnose what the expression does in context, then identify whether the main risk is semantic loss, pragmatic shift, cultural erasure, or accessibility failure. They should then choose a strategy and justify the target-text effect. This sequence is more useful than memorizing strategy lists without evaluating their outcomes.

Table 10. Practical implications for translator training and professional practice.

Practice area	Operational recommendation	Rationale
Translator training	Use a four-step task: diagnose function, select strategy, justify effect, compare alternatives.	Students learn to connect strategy choice to evidence.
Literary translation	Preserve imagery or compensate when imagery is central to style.	Over-domestication can weaken literary identity.
Media translation	Use concise paraphrase or explicitation when rapid comprehension is needed.	Public readers need accessible but culturally responsible meaning.
Legal/academic translation	Use borrowing plus gloss when institutional or conceptual equivalence is uncertain.	False equivalence can mislead readers.

XIII. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The study has several limitations. First, the corpus is systematically selected but bounded by language direction, text type, and availability of published translations. Second, the analysis focuses on written translation and does not examine interpreting, audiovisual performance, or reader reception. Third, some strategy evaluations involve interpretive judgment even though coding rules and reviewer checking were used.

A further limitation concerns unequal cultural density across language pairs. English-French and English-Spanish examples may not carry the same religious, social, idiomatic, institutional, or metaphorical load in every genre. The balanced number of examples supports comparison, but it does not remove the need for cautious interpretation.

Future research should extend this design through larger parallel corpora, more specialized subcorpora, professional translator interviews, think-aloud protocols, and target-reader reception studies. Reception testing would be especially valuable because it could show whether readers actually interpret tone, cultural value, and pragmatic force as the analyst predicts.

XIV. CONCLUSION

This study examined translation challenges in cultural expressions through a multilingual corpus-based comparative design with cultural-pragmatic analysis. It focused on English-French, French-English, English-Spanish, and Spanish-English directions and analyzed 240 source-target expression pairs from literary, media, legal-public, academic, and public-communication contexts. The findings show that cultural expressions cannot be evaluated by literal accuracy alone because they carry semantic, pragmatic, symbolic, social, and cultural meanings that translation may preserve, shift, soften, compensate for, or partially lose.

Descriptive corpus evidence showed that idioms were the largest expression category, paraphrase was the most frequent strategy, and meaning preservation was only one of several transfer outcomes. These results indicate that a strategy's frequency does not prove its quality. Strategy effectiveness depends on expression type, genre, audience expectation, cultural-pragmatic load, language direction, and target-text accessibility. Paraphrase may preserve function while reducing imagery, borrowing may protect cultural specificity while requiring reader support, and explicitation may improve understanding while affecting style or compactness.

The study's strongest contribution is the evidence-linked multilingual cultural-pragmatic strategy-effect model. This model connects source-target comparison with translation strategy, semantic equivalence, pragmatic effect, cultural value, transfer judgment, and audit evidence. It offers a practical, theoretical way to move beyond strategy classification to strategy-effect evaluation. Its strength depends on transparent corpus documentation, reviewer-check procedures, and supplementary evidence that keep the analysis auditable while respecting copyright limits. Overall, the study supports viewing cultural translation as disciplined linguistic and cultural mediation rather than a choice between literal fidelity and free adaptation.

Author Contributions

The author conducted the conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, investigation, writing, review, editing, and final approval of the manuscript.

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Data Availability

The dataset will be available from the author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A. Cultural Expression Corpus Register Summary

Table A1. Summary of the source-target corpus register.

Code range	Text type	Examples	Language direction	Audit note
LIT-001 to LIT-072	Literary translation	Idioms, metaphors, proverbs, symbolic objects	EN-FR/FR-EN; EN-ES/ES-EN	Source-target location, translator/editor status, and publication details recorded.
MED-001 to MED-048	Media translation	Headlines, slogans, public expressions	EN-FR/FR-EN; EN-ES/ES-EN	Short extracts and context notes recorded.
LEG-001 to LEG-032	Legal-public translation	Institutional terms, public formulas	EN-FR/FR-EN; EN-ES/ES-EN	Terminology notes and institutional context recorded.
ACA-001 to ACA-036	Academic translation	Conceptual and culturally embedded terms	EN-FR/FR-EN; EN-ES/ES-EN	Discipline and term-definition notes recorded.
SOC-001 to SOC-052	Religious/social-custom translation	Social formulas, honorifics, kinship terms	EN-FR/FR-EN; EN-ES/ES-EN	Pragmatic force and cultural value notes recorded.

Appendix B. Source-Target Comparison Sheet

Table C1. Source-target evaluation sheet.

Field	Description
Source expression	Exact source cultural expression with local context.
Literal meaning	Word-level meaning before cultural-pragmatic interpretation.
Cultural meaning	Shared cultural schema, value, symbol, or social implication.
Target rendering	Published translation used in the target text.
Strategy	Paraphrase, borrowing, adaptation, substitution, explicitation, foreignization, compensation, or mixed procedure.
Evaluation	Preserved, shifted, partially lost, compensated, tone softened, or over-domesticated.

Appendix C. Expanded Strategy Decision Matrix

Table E1. Strategy decision matrix for meaning-transfer evaluation.

Translation strategy	Best used when	Main advantage	Main risk	Quality indicator
Literal translation	The expression is transparent in both languages.	Preserves form and economy.	May preserve form without cultural meaning.	Target reader can recover intended meaning without explanation.
Paraphrase	The expression is idiomatic, opaque, or pragmatically dense.	Preserves communicative sense.	May flatten metaphor or rhythm.	Target text communicates the intended function

				without over-explanation.
Adaptation	The target culture requires functional adjustment.	Supports readability and rhetorical effect.	May move away from source specificity.	Adapted expression performs the same role in the target genre.
Cultural substitution	A target-culture expression has comparable pragmatic value.	Creates immediate recognition.	May replace source cultural identity.	Function is preserved without changing core meaning.
Borrowing	The source term carries high cultural value or lacks an equivalent.	Preserves cultural identity.	May reduce accessibility.	Borrowing is supported by context, gloss, or repeated cues.
Explicitation	Implicit cultural assumptions are needed for understanding.	Improves accessibility and precision.	May interrupt flow.	Explanation clarifies without overburdening the target text.
Foreignization	Source-cultural difference is thematically important.	Maintains cultural texture.	May increase processing difficulty.	Foreignness remains interpretable and purposeful.
Compensation	A cultural effect cannot be preserved at the same point.	Preserves discourse-level effect.	Can be hard to trace.	Lost tone or cultural value is recovered elsewhere.

Table F1. Reliability and audit procedures used in the study.

Audit component	**Procedure**	**Purpose**	**Evidence retained**
Source-target register	Each pair assigned code, text type, direction, category, and source metadata.	Make corpus construction traceable.	Coded register with expression IDs and text-type labels.
Coding manual	Categories and strategies defined before full coding.	Reduce category drift.	Operational definitions and borderline cases.
Repeated coding	Items reviewed in a second pass.	Identify inconsistent labels.	Revised strategy log and memo notes.
Second-reviewer check	25% of examples reviewed independently.	Test category clarity.	Agreement notes and resolved disagreements.
Meaning-transfer memo	Difficult items received interpretive explanation.	Link strategy to effect.	Semantic, pragmatic, tone, and cultural-value notes.

Appendix D. Expanded Analytical Examples

Table G1. Expanded analytical examples of cultural-pragmatic transfer.

Code	Expression type	Problem identified	Strategy used	Evaluation
EX-01	Idiom	Literal form did not convey figurative warning.	Paraphrase	Meaning preserved but imagery reduced.
EX-02	Proverb	Target culture had comparable moral function but different imagery.	Cultural substitution	Pragmatic force preserved with partial cultural shift.
EX-03	Religious/social formula	Literal translation sounded informational rather than social/ritual.	Borrowing with contextual explanation	Tone and identity retained when context supported the borrowing.
EX-04	Honorific address	Target language lacked equivalent hierarchy marker.	Functional substitution	Respect preserved; social hierarchy softened.
EX-05	Legal-cultural term	Target institution was not equivalent to source institution.	Borrowing plus gloss	Conceptual precision preserved.
EX-06	Metaphor	Source metaphor had local symbolic association.	Retention with cue	Imagery preserved and meaning recoverable.
EX-07	Social custom formula	Literal rendering sounded abrupt.	Adaptation	Politeness function preserved.
EX-08	Academic cultural term	Concept came from a local intellectual tradition.	Explicitation	Accessibility improved with slight increase in text length.