

# Cultural Dimensions of Poetry Translation

## *Translation Solutions of Culturally-Bound Lexical Elements in Hungarian and English Translations of Finnish Poems*

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**Abstract.** The present research analyses Hungarian and English target-language translations of contemporary Finnish poems. The translation solutions of culturally-bound lexical elements are compared in both Finnish–Hungarian and Finnish–English translation directions. The analysis is carried out using a text corpus comprising Hungarian and English translations of Finnish poems published after 1950. The text corpus consists of 160 Finnish source poems and their 160 Hungarian and 160 English target-language translations. The objective of the research is to reveal the cultural aspects of the translation of poetry and to answer the question as to what types of translation solutions literary translators use when translating culturally-bound lexical elements in Finnish poems into Hungarian and English. Results show that English-language translators of contemporary Finnish poems more frequently use translation solutions which are less creative and do not stray far from the original source language text. Hungarian translators, on the other hand, are more courageous in deviating from the source text and adapting their translations to the target language. This can be explained by reference to the two translation contexts or as a result of genre-specific reasons.

**Keywords:** translation solution, culturally-bound lexical element, poetry translation, text corpus

## 1. Subject of research

This research analyses Hungarian and English target-language translations of contemporary Finnish poems. The translation solutions of culturally-bound lexical elements are compared in both Finnish–Hungarian and Finnish–English translation directions. The analysis is carried out using a text corpus comprising

Hungarian and English translations of Finnish poems published after 1950. The text corpus consists of 160 Finnish source poems and their 160 Hungarian and 160 English target language translations.

In existing research, culturally-bound expressions are mainly studied in the contexts of literary prose, film captions, or, less frequently, in specialized texts. No research has been carried out, however, on the translation strategies of culturally-bound expressions in poems. The present study is the first to analyse the translation solutions of culturally-bound expressions in a text corpus containing source poems and their translations, collected according to strictly defined criteria.

## **2. Research objectives and preliminary research observations**

In describing the translation solutions of culturally-bound lexical elements, the objective of the present research is to reveal the cultural aspects of the translation of poetry. It also aims to verify the claim that behind the apparently individual strategies of translators certain translation regularities and tendencies can be detected also in translations of literary texts. Combining the paradigm of text linguistics and that of cultural research, the study aims at revealing the culturally-bound position of both the literary translator and the translation researcher, as well as its effect on the translation and research process. In this way, the research follows the humanistic methodology of cultural anthropology by reflecting on the role of the researcher. The research also aims to define the concept of culturally-bound lexical elements, based on the conclusions of the empirical research.

The study begins from the preliminary research observation that poetry translation is a culture-mediating activity in which, besides creativity, cultural constraints also influence translation decisions. Another preliminary research observation regarding the particular text corpus utilized is that Hungarian translations of modern Finnish poetry activate more creative and more domesticating translation solutions than the English translations of the same Finnish poems.

This work seeks to answer the question as to what types of translation solutions literary translators use when translating culturally-bound language items in Finnish poems into Hungarian and English. It studies how Hungarian and English target text solutions differ from each other, and if there are any similarities between the types and frequency of translation solutions within the Hungarian- and the English-language corpus. In the course of qualitative research, the question as to what extent the relationship between source-, and target-culture influences the translation solutions is also addressed.

### 3. Theoretical background

This study is an example of translation-theory-oriented poetry research, comparing several target language translations of the same source text. It is the first to analyse thoroughly a text corpus of poetry selected according to strict criteria, focusing on a particular research problem, namely the translation of culturally-bound items.

The research is based on the culture concept defined by contemporary symbolic and interpretative anthropology. According to this, a culture is “a negotiated set of shared symbolic systems that guide individuals’ behaviors and incline them to function as a group” (Chen–Starosta 1998: 26). According to this dynamic frame, which emphasizes instantaneity and the symbol-creating ability of the interpretative community, symbols are not self-evident, but can be interpreted solely in a given context. These interpretations are owned by those defining and constantly creating them. People form culture-based groups and, according to the dynamic interpretation of identity, an individual may be a member of several such groups at the same time. This concept of culture brings us closer to the interpretation of culturally-bound lexical elements, according to which language items suggesting special connotations within the community using that particular symbol may be considered culturally bound (Forgács 2004: 39–40). Connotative content is thus analysed as a meaning shared by the members of a given cultural community. The paper compares Hungarian and English translations of modern Finnish poems. When translations from Finnish into Hungarian are studied, the analysis focuses on the translation process between two languages of limited diffusion and between two less dominant literary contexts. However, when translations from Finnish into English are studied, a translation process from a language of limited diffusion into a global language and texts from a marginal literary context transferred into a dominant literature are considered. These two different translation contexts and the double role of the author of present study – that of the researcher and of the translator – are analysed and reflected on throughout the study.

The research defines the concept of culturally-bound lexical elements based on the connotative meaning connected to them. By separating the denotative meaning of the selected words (which is the relationship between words and the entities in the world to which they refer), the study focuses on the connotative meaning of the lexical elements selected in the source texts. Connotative meaning is defined here as the personal or emotional associations which are suggested by words (Crystal 1994: 80, Hatim–Mason 1992: 112–113, Klaudy 2006: 149, 159).

Consequently, the study considers lexical elements culturally bound if they have connotative meanings shared by members of the source community. A lexical element can be one word or a combination of words, regardless of their word class. The definition is thus source-culture-oriented since lexical elements

are considered culturally bound within the source texts and not in their relation to their target-language equivalents.

It is important to note, however, that despite the fact that culturally-bound words are selected in the source poems regardless of the translation context, in the course of analysing the translation solutions of these source lexical elements, conclusions are interpreted and relevant solely in the context of the given source- and target-language pairs and cultures.

The study also creates its own typology of translation solutions based on classifications of previous studies.

## 4. Research data

A strictly defined text corpus was used, containing Finnish source poems and their Hungarian and English target-language translations. This was compiled by the author following strict criteria defined at the beginning of the project, without any content selection. The complex work of compiling the corpus took several years and involved visits to several countries.

In selecting material for the corpus, both the Finnish source poem and its Hungarian and English translations had to be works published in poetry collections, anthologies, or literary journals. Thus, the basic criterion was that the Finnish source poem had a translation both in Hungarian and English. The fact that only published poems are chosen for inclusion in the text corpus guarantees that the source and the two target reading audiences accept the texts as poems. Consequently, these poems may be studied as expressions of the respective cultural communities.

Another criterion for the selection of Finnish source poems was that they had to be published after 1950. After WW2, a new modern poetic style emerged in Finland, which continues to influence Finnish poetry today. This modernist poetic style is characterized by free verse, the rejection of formal constraints such as rhyme and metrical structure, and the placing of the poetic image at its centre (Parkko 2012: 102–107).

Target-language poems made from rough translations were not selected for inclusion in the corpus. The works of Finnish-speaking translators, translating directly from the original Finnish poem, were included in the corpus. I also excluded my own poetry translations from the text corpus. Analysing my own translation work would reach far beyond the scope of the present research.

The strict criteria used in compiling the text corpus guarantees the objectivity of the selection. Thus, while the process of analysis is qualitative, also reflecting on subjective aspects, the selection of the texts was carried out based on objective criteria.

As a result, a digitalized three-language translation corpus was created, containing 160 Finnish source poems and their 160 Hungarian and 160 English language translations.

## 5. Methodology

In the analysis, the lexical elements considered culturally bound are first selected. The selection is a rather complex and sensitive process in which the researcher is guided by their knowledge and research experience, as well as by both theoretical and empirical conclusions of previous studies in the area.

Another important factor in the selection process is the experience of the author as a literary translator. For the purposes of the current research, as a poetry translator myself, I consider expressions culturally bound if I can interpret them and make their connotative meanings explicit since I know and understand the implicit and affective meanings the source culture attaches to them. While translating these expressions, I consider how much the imagined Hungarian reader knows about the Finnish source culture, after which the appropriate translation solution may be selected.

**Table 1.** Culturally-bound lexical elements in Sirkka Turkka's poem entitled "Ja minä tahdon" and in its Hungarian and English translations

Ja minä tahdon, että sinä lopultakin vavahdat, kun sateesta märkä <b>järvi</b> nostaa siivilleen <b>kesän</b> , sen <b>joutsenet</b> . Kun ne vielä hetken viipyvät <b>puiston puiden</b> yllä, kaiken rakastetun kullan yllä. Kun niiden väri on jo valkoisempi <b>lunta</b> , valkoisempi eron väriä.	És azt akarom, hogy végül megremegj, mint amikor az esőtől csapzott <b>tavon</b> <b>a nyár a fénybe</b> emeli <b>a hattyúkat</b> . Mint amikor a hattyúk <b>a park fáí</b> fölött verdesnek, minden szeretett kedves fölött. Amikor a színük már vakítóbb a <b>hónál</b> , vakítóbb az elválás színeinél. (Tr.: István Turczi )	And I want you to tremble at last, when the rain-drenched <b>lake</b> raises <b>summer</b> in its wings, its <b>swans</b> . When they linger one more moment over the <b>park trees</b> , over all the adored gold. When their tint is <b>whiter</b> than <b>snow</b> already, <b>whiter</b> than the tint of parting. (Tr.: Herbert Lomas)
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Besides my Finnish language knowledge, the years spent in Finland also contribute to my ability to interpret culturally-bound Finnish expressions. Through the study of specialized and literary sources, I have also enhanced my knowledge concerning Finnish culture as a matter of course. I graduated as a

teacher of Finnish language and literature, and also studied at different Finnish universities as an exchange student.

Determined by the aspects and contexts described above, I, as a researcher and translator, will first select the culturally-bound lexical elements in the Finnish source texts.

Then, the Hungarian language equivalents of these items are selected and ordered next to their source equivalent in a table.

**Table 2.** *Translation solutions of culturally-bound lexical elements in the Hungarian translation of Sirkka Turkka’s poem entitled “Ja minä tahdon”*

Turkka, S. “Ja minä tahdon” “És azt akarom” István Turczi 1996	Culturally-bound language item in the Finnish source text	Its equivalent in the Hungarian translation	Translation solution
	<i>järvi</i>	<i>tavon</i>	literal translation
	<i>kesän</i>	<i>a nyár a fénybe</i>	cultural explicitation
	<i>joutsenet</i>	<i>a hattyúkat</i>	literal translation
	<i>puiston puiden</i>	<i>a park fái</i>	literal translation
	<i>valkoisempi</i>	<i>vakítóbb</i>	cultural explicitation
	<i>lunta</i>	<i>hó</i>	literal translation
	<i>valkoisempi</i>	<i>vakítóbb</i>	cultural explicitation

Following this, the equivalents of the Finnish culturally-bound items are detected in the English translation of the poem, and are ordered next to their source equivalents in a table.

**Table 3.** *Translation solutions of culturally-bound lexical elements in the English translation of Sirkka Turkka’s poem entitled “Ja minä tahdon”*

Turkka, S. “Ja minä tahdon” “And I want you” Herbert Lomas 1992	Culturally-bound language item in the Finnish source text	Its equivalent in the Hungarian translation	Translation solution
	<i>järvi</i>	<i>lake</i>	literal translation
	<i>kesän</i>	<i>summer</i>	literal translation
	<i>joutsenet</i>	<i>swans</i>	literal translation
	<i>puiston puiden</i>	<i>park trees</i>	literal translation
	<i>valkoisempi</i>	<i>whiter</i>	literal translation
	<i>lunta</i>	<i>snow</i>	literal translation
	<i>valkoisempi</i>	<i>whiter</i>	literal translation

After the source poem is analysed and the selected lexical elements and their equivalents are ordered in a table, a control analysis is carried out, in the course of which in the Finnish source poem I look for expressions whose Hungarian or

English equivalent suggests that the source lexical element may have a cultural connotation.

Following analysis of all the 160 source poems and their Hungarian- and English-language translations, and the selecting and ordering of the culturally-bound lexical elements in a table, I categorize the lexical element pairs according to their translation solution in both language directions. After this stage, a Finnish–Hungarian and a Finnish–English translation solution typology is established. Then, the two typologies are compared and analysed, revealing similarities and differences. The selected culturally-bound lexical elements are then classified in thematic groups. I also analyse and count the translation solutions typical for each thematic group in both language directions.

## **6. Research results**

### **6.1. Types of translation solutions identified in the studied corpus**

In the studied text corpus, a total of 728 culturally-bound lexical elements were selected from the Finnish source poems. These, together with their Hungarian and English language equivalents, were then arranged next to each other in a table. The translation solutions were then analysed in both language directions. Based on the categories of previous research (Aixelá 1995, Drahota-Szabó 2013, Forgács 2004, Heltai 2007, 2008a, 2008b, Klaudy 2007, Leppihalme 2001, Mujzer-Varga 2010, Pedersen 2005, Valló 2002), I classified the translation solutions detected in the text corpus into ten categories: (1) direct transfer, (2) partial transfer, (3) translation with a common target-language equivalent, (4) insertion, (5) generalization, (6) concretization, (7) omission, (8) adaptation, (9) cultural explication, and (10) literal translation.

### **6.2. Thematic groups of culturally-bound lexical elements identified in the text corpus**

The 728 culturally-bound lexical elements identified in the studied text corpus are arranged into eight categories. The categories are defined based on the denotative meaning of the lexical elements. Each occurrence of an expression is counted as a separate element. The identification of the thematic groups provides information on what words and expressions to which members of the Finnish language community connect connotative and affective meanings. The number of lexical elements classified in each thematic group shows which culturally connotative words and expressions occur more frequently in Finnish poems.

**Table 4.** *Number of lexical elements classified in each thematic group*

Lexical elements referring to climatic conditions, names of poles, months and seasons	185
Lexical elements referring to flora and fauna	184
Lexical elements referring to natural formations, toponyms and street names	129
Lexical elements referring to everyday life	65
Lexical elements referring to traditional Finnish rural lifestyle	57
Lexical elements referring to Finnish mentality	41
Lexical elements referring to historic events and characters, to ranks and titles, and scriptural texts	36
Lexical elements referring to political life, social structure and community life, names of holidays and famous people	31

### 6.3. Numerical distribution of translation solutions in the two language directions

The numerical distribution of translation solutions in the two language directions are presented in *Table 5*.

**Table 5.** *Numerical distribution of translation solutions in Finnish–Hungarian and in Finnish–English directions*

Translation solution	Finnish–Hungarian direction	Finnish–English direction
Direct transfer	12	7
Partial transfer	3	5
Translation with common target-language equivalent	104	120
Insertion	5	9
Generalization	41	29
Concretization	4	5
Omission	25	8
Adaptation	19	9
Cultural explicitation	53	22
Literal translation	459	510
Cannot be analysed	3	4



## 7. Conclusions

### 7.1. Preliminary research observation regarding poetry translation

The preliminary observation that poetry translation is a culture-mediating activity in which, besides creativity, cultural constraints influence translation decisions is verified as a result of the present research. The very fact that in the course of this study these source lexical elements and their target-language equivalents can be arranged next to each other and can be categorized into a precisely defined and analysed translation solution type in itself excludes the possibility that these are completely individually chosen translation solutions ignoring the given cultural context. From the 1,456 translation solutions, I have come across only one example which shows that the translator has interpreted the source-language image in their entirely individual way, ignoring the cultural context and providing an equivalent that is completely detached from the meaning of the original source lexical element.

### 7.2. Preliminary research observation regarding the studied text corpus

The preliminary observation that Hungarian translations of modern Finnish poetry activate more creative and more domesticating translation solutions than English translations of the same Finnish poems is verified in the course of the present research. Thus, Hungarian translators of Finnish poems more frequently apply translation solutions which result in a target-language equivalent that opens up the implicit cultural meaning of the source item, taking into consideration the function, the style, and the genre of the text, as well as the knowledge of the target reader and the given translation context.

The preliminary observation that Hungarian translators use domesticating translation solutions more frequently, however, has not been verified. If only those translation solutions visible on the text surface are considered, English translators apply almost as many domesticating solutions as Hungarian translators. This may be explained by the high number of literal translations providing the first, most generally given dictionary equivalent of the word: *metsä* → *erdő/forest*. This solution helps the target reader understand the denotative meaning of the source lexical element with little effort, although it reflects a less conscious and perhaps automatic intervention of the translator. However, if we count only those translation solutions which suggest the translator's conscious intervention – direct transfer, partial transfer, insertion, omission, generalization, concretization, cultural explication, and adaptation –, this observation is also verified since Hungarian translators of Finnish poetry far more frequently use those domesticating translation solutions which indicate the conscious intervention of

the translator than English language translators do. For example, in the English translation of Sirkka Turkka’s poem *Erossa sinusta*, the translation of the Finnish word *metsä* is *wood*; the same source-text word is translated as *erdő emlékek puha takarója* [soft covering memories of forests] in the Hungarian target text, providing the Hungarian reader with some originally implicit connotations of the culturally-bound lexical element of the Finnish *metsä* [forest]. This indicates the conscious decision of the translator.

**Table 6.** *Numerical distribution of domesticating translation solutions suggesting conscious intervention*

Translation direction	Domesticating translation solutions suggesting conscious intervention	Foreignizing translation solutions suggesting conscious intervention
Finnish–Hungarian	150	15
Finnish–English	98	12

7.3. Defining the concept of culturally-bound lexical elements

Based on the results and conclusions of the present research, the concept of culturally-bound lexical elements is defined as follows: culturally-bound lexical elements are lexical elements which evoke the connotative and affective meanings connected to them by the given culture or subculture regardless of both text and translation context.

7.4. Similarities in the type and frequency of translation solutions regardless of translation direction

To sum up the results, it is proposed that when modern Finnish poetry is translated either into Hungarian or into English, translators tend to use translation solutions that preserve the denotative meaning of source-language elements, at the same time adapting the target-language equivalent to the expectations of the target reader. The fact that this claim is true regardless of translation direction suggests that this may be considered a common translation strategy typical of translating contemporary Finnish poetry. Thus, it can be regarded as a translation norm (Chesterman 1993, Toury 1995).

This result demonstrates that certain regularities and tendencies may be detected also in the translation of literary texts – in this case in that of poetry – in spite of the fact that the translation process of poetry as a genre presupposedly provides a wider range of choices for the translators. Thus, beyond individual translation solutions, translators of Finnish poetry tend to follow particular translation norms.

### **7.5. Differences in the type and frequency of translation solutions regardless of translation direction**

With regard to the differences in the type and frequency of translation solutions in the two translation directions, the following may be stated. English-language translators of contemporary Finnish poems more frequently use translation solutions which are less creative and do not stray far from the original source-language element (literal translation, translation with a common target-language equivalent and partial transfer) and apply less frequently solutions which activate creativity resulting in target-language equivalents which may be considered more remote from the original source-language element (omission, generalization, cultural explication, and adaptation). English translations of contemporary poems are “more loyal” to the source text than their Hungarian translations. In other words, English language translations “respect” the Finnish source poems, their style and poetic devices to a greater extent. Hungarian translators, on the other hand, are shown to be more courageous in deviating from the source text and adapting their translations to the target language. This can be explained by reference to the two translation contexts or as a result of genre-specific reasons. Translations from Finnish into Hungarian are considered a translation process between two languages of limited diffusion and two less dominant literary contexts. However, translations from Finnish into English are considered a translation process from a language of limited diffusion into a global language and texts from a marginal literary context transferred into a dominant literature. The readership of the two translation contexts differ to a great extent; English translations of Finnish poetry are mostly initiated by the source culture motivated by the aim of getting Finnish literature known all over the world, this way targeting a general international readership with many different domestic poetic traditions, while Hungarian translations of Finnish contemporary poetry are mostly initiated by the target culture, drawing upon the century-long political and cultural relations of the two nations. Also, the mostly Hungarian native translators of Finnish poetry adjust their translations to the stylistic expectations of the Hungarian readers, this way deviating to a greater extent from the inherently implicit source text.

## **8. Summary**

The present study draws its conclusions by combining the experience of poetry translation practice and translation studies into a theoretical framework, providing relevant and useful conclusions for both theory and practice. It is the first research project to systematically analyse the occurrence of culturally-bound lexical elements and their translations, applying inductive, descriptive

and qualitative methodology to a text corpus comprised of poems selected according to strict criteria. The study breaks new ground in consciously and consistently avoiding aesthetic evaluations and normative comments, with the aim of following the norms of descriptive translation studies.

The results of the present research and its conclusions are derived from concrete text examples that may be used in translation training, especially in courses for literary translators. The results may also be utilized in literary criticism, chiefly in evaluating poetic translations.

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