

Cultural Realia in Literary Translation: Typology and Strategies of Cross-Cultural Transfer

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ABSTRACT

The article examines cultural realia as a systemic problem of literary translation, using Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as the principal corpus. Drawing on the taxonomies of Vlahov and Florin, Newmark, and Aixelá, and on the equivalence models of Nida, Venuti, and Baker, it classifies Twainian realia into geographic and hydrographic, ethnographic and material, social-political and historical, and linguistic groups. Case studies of the fence-white washing episode, food terms (corn-pone, cob pipe), "Sunday-school tickets," "Pike County grammar," Jim's African American English, and the period racial lexicon illustrate the losses incurred by standardization, substitution, and deletion. A practical hierarchy of procedures is proposed: conservation with gloss, functional analogue, descriptive translation, limited generalization, and compensation. The study concludes that adequate transfer of Twain requires a mixed foreignizing-domesticating regime that preserves the novels' cultural code rather than inventing a false target-culture equivalent.

Keywords: Cultural realia, culture-specific items (CSIs), literary translation, Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, foreignization, domestication, dialect translation, compensation, Vlahov and Florin, Venuti.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERARY REVIEW

Mark Twain's fiction is a concentrated archive of nineteenth-century American life: river traffic, village piety, frontier violence, foodways, money, and, above all, speech. Ernest Hemingway's famous claim that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*" is, among other things, a statement about language as cultural evidence [5: 2]. For the translator, that evidence takes the form of "realia" – words and phrases that name objects, institutions, and practices belonging to one culture and foreign to another. The present article reviews the principal theories of realia, classifies the culture-bound items that organize Twain's two Mississippi novels, and examines the strategies by which translators have attempted to carry those items across linguistic borders.

The modern technical sense of "realia" was established by the Bulgarian scholars Sergei Vlahov & Sider Florin [12]. They define realia as "words and combinations naming objects typical of the life, culture, and social and historical development of one people and alien to another." [12: 47]. Their monograph 'The Untranslatable in Translation' (1980) remains the most systematic Eastern-European account of the problem and supplies a working taxonomy: geographic, ethnographic, social-political, and historical realia. Peter Newmark, writing in the same decade from a British tradition, prefers the term "cultural words" and groups them under ecology, material culture, social culture, organizations, gestures, and habits [7: 94-103]. Javier Franco Aixelá later proposed the broader label "culture-specific items" (CSIs) and described a continuum of procedures from conservation (repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic translation) to substitution (universalization, naturalization, deletion) [1: 52-78].

Two further theoretical axes structure the discussion. Eugene Nida's distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence asks whether the translator should reproduce the form of the source item or the response it produced in the original audience [6: 159-177]. Lawrence Venuti recasts the same tension as "foreignization" versus "domestication": the former leaves

visible traces of the source culture; the latter assimilates the text to target-language norms and renders the translator “invisible” [11: 17-39]. Mona Baker has shown that neither pole is sufficient by itself when the source text’s very poetics depends on linguistic variation [2: 230-245]. Twain is a limit case of that dependence. The “Explanatory” prefixed to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* lists “the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary ‘Pike County’ dialect; and four modified varieties of this last” [9]. Dialect here is not ornament; it is itself a realium— a socially indexed way of speaking that no target language possesses ready-made.

Korney Chukovsky, who translated Twain into Russian and theorized the task in *A High Art*, concluded that a mechanical “dialect-for-dialect” substitution was doomed: A Siberian or Ukrainian peasant voice attached to Jim or Pap Finn would import the wrong geography and the wrong social history. His recommended “blandscrip,” a lightly colloquial standard, was a conscious sacrifice of phonetic color to semantic and ethical clarity [3: 145-152]. Subsequent scholarship, especially Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s argument that Huck’s voice is shaped by African American oral traditions, has made that sacrifice more controversial [4: 3-15]. The literary-critical problem and the translation problem are therefore the same problem: how to keep the novels’ cultural density without inventing a false equivalent culture.

A WORKING TYPOLOGY OF REALIA IN TWAIN

Applying Vlahov and Florin’s grid to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) yields four interlocking groups.

1. **Geographic and hydrographic realia** include the “Mississippi itself,” “the fictional village of St. Petersburg” (modeled on Hannibal, Missouri), “Jackson’s Island,” “Cairo,” the “tow-head” (a sandbar in river slang), “the raft,” and the “steamboat.” These items are not interchangeable

scenery. The river is a legal, economic, and moral corridor: freedom for Jim lies downstream toward the mouth, yet the raft's southward drift carries him deeper into slave territory. A translator who renders "tow-head" as a generic "island" erases a piece of occupational lexicon and flattens the novel's riverine literacy.

2. **Ethnographic and material realia** are the densest layer.

- **Food:** "corn-pone," "hoe-cake," "cold corn-beef," "buttermilk."
- **Tobacco:** "the cob pipe" as against the "genteel meerschaum."
- **Money:** "the bit," "two bits," "the picayune," "the dollar."
- **Tools and domestic objects:** "the Barlow knife," "the whitewash bucket" and "brush," "the hogshead" in which Huck sometimes sleeps, the "Sunday-school tickets" – yellow, red, and blue – that Tom hoards and cashes in for a Bible [8: 2].
- **Clothing and hygiene:** "combing up Sundays," "bare feet," the "sivilizing" regime of shoes and "prayers at the Widow Douglas's."

Each item is a compressed social signal. "Corn-pone" is not merely "bread" – it is poor, rural, Southern starch. The "colored tickets" satirize a Protestant economy of salvation in which piety is countable.

3. **Social-political and historical realia** organize the novels' moral plot. Slavery and the vocabulary that surrounded it – "nigger" as a period term of racial classification, the runaway, the slave-catcher, the bounty of two hundred dollars on Jim – cannot be neutralized without falsifying the historical world Twain is attacking. Religious institutions (Sunday-school, the camp-meeting, the Presbyterian and the "sadder" sermons Huck endures) and civic ones (the jail, the inquest, the feud of the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons) are equally culture-bound. *A Connecticut Yankee in King*

Arthur's Court (1889), though outside the two core texts, radicalizes the same principle by colliding sixth-century British realia with nineteenth-century American ones: the Yankee's matches, advertising, and patents become weapons of anachronism.

4. **Linguistic realia** cut across the other groups. Eye dialect ("sivilize" for "civilize"), non-standard grammar ("You don't know about me without you have read a book"), African American English in Jim's speech ("You is," "dat," "I's gwyne"), and Pap Finn's "drunken backwoods register" are not merely "style." They are indexes of class, region, and race. To standardize them is to delete a realium as surely as to replace "corn-pone" with "bread."

CASE STUDIES: HOW REALIA TRAVEL

The fence-white washing episode in *Tom Sawyer* is an ethnographic miniature. Tom turns a chore into a scarce privilege: Ben Rogers, the first victim, pays with an apple. The scene depends on three realia at once: the wooden fence as a marker of small-town property, whitewash as cheap lime paint rather than oil paint, and the barter economy of a boy's pockets. Translations that substitute "painting the fence" lose the poverty of the material and the comedy of the inflation Tom creates. A footnote or a retained "whitewash" plus a brief gloss preserves both the object and the joke.

Huck's opening sentence is a linguistic realium: "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter" [9: ch. 1]. Double negation, "ain't," and the loose syntax of "spoken Pike County English" establish the narrator's social position before any plot event occurs. Target languages without a stable written vernacular face a structural deficit. Russian versions by Chukovsky & N. L. Daruzes typically recode the sentence into a colloquial but grammatically regular first person; Finnish and Czech translators have experimented with regionalisms, at the cost of attaching Huck to a Baltic or Bohemian countryside he

never inhabited. The choice is not between “fidelity” and “freedom” but between two losses: loss of place or loss of voice.

Food realia in the Grangerford chapters illustrate Newmark’s “functional equivalent” under pressure. Huck lists “cold corn-pone, cold corn-beef, butter and buttermilk”; the “family smoke cob pipes” [9: ch. 18]. A functional equivalent such as “cornbread” is recognizable but milder; “peasant bread” domesticates too far and imports European class imagery. Transcription (corn-pone) plus a first-occurrence gloss is the foreignizing option; generalization (cold leftovers) is the domesticating one. The “cob pipe,” opposed later in American fiction to “imported meerschaum,” marks rustic masculinity rendering it as a generic “pipe” deletes the contrast.

“Sunday-school tickets” in *Tom Sawyer* are institutional realia. Yellow, red, and blue tickets accumulate toward a Bible prize; Tom buys the tickets with the loot of the fence and appears, to the superintendent, as a prodigy of memorized scripture. The satire is unintelligible if the translator converts the “tickets” into “points” or “stars” without explaining the Protestant pedagogy they encode. Here a couplet strategy – loanword or calque plus a short in-text explanation – is more adequate than either bare transcription or full substitution.

The racial lexicon poses the sharpest ethical problem. Twain’s repeated use of “nigger” is historically accurate speech of the 1840s Missouri setting and is also the word through which Huck’s moral education becomes audible: he decides to “go to hell” rather than betray Jim. Late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century translators have chosen among several procedures: retention with a translator’s preface; replacement by a period term of the target culture (Russian *негр* in Soviet editions; various euphemisms in post-1990 versions); or omission. Each procedure reallocates responsibility. Retention foreignizes and risks injuring the target reader; substitution may invent a racism that belongs to another history; omission sanitizes the novel’s central conflict. The responsible solution is not a single lexical swap but a paratext – preface, footnote, consistent internal usage – that treats the word as a documented realium rather than as the translator’s insult.

Jim's African American English concentrates the dialect-as-realia dilemma. Fishkin has argued that the musicality and syntax of Huck's narration themselves owe a debt to Black oral culture; Jim's speech is the more marked surface of that debt. Strategies attested in the world corpus of translations include: (1) standardization ("blandscript"); (2) colloquialization without regional marking; (3) approximation by a stigmatized target-language variety (a risky mapping of Black American speech onto, for example, a peasant or immigrant sociolect); (4) orthographic distortion that signals otherness without specifying a place; (5) compensation elsewhere – denser idiom, rhythm, or humor – when phonetic imitation is abandoned. Empirical studies of Chinese, Finnish, Czech, Polish, and Indonesian versions confirm that standardization remains the majority solution and that approximation almost always imports unintended stereotypes.

STRATEGIES: A HIERARCHY FOR TWAINIAN REALIA

No single procedure fits every item. A practical hierarchy, adapted from Vlahov & Florin [12], Newmark [7], and Aixelá [1], may be stated as follows.

1. First, **conservation with support**: retain the source form (Mississippi, corn-pone, Barlow, St. Petersburg) when the item is a proper name, a riverine term of art, or a food whose exoticism is part of the effect; add a gloss at first occurrence.
2. Second, **functional analogue** when an object exists in both cultures under different names and the analogue does not drag in a false setting (a clasp-knife for a Barlow is acceptable; "baguette" for corn-pone is not).
3. Third, **descriptive translation** for institutions that have no analogue (Sunday-school tickets; the two-hundred-dollar bounty).
4. Fourth, **generalization** only when the specific object is not thematically loaded.
5. Fifth, **compensation**: if dialect cannot be recoded phonetically, reconstruct social difference by lexicon,

rhythm, and address forms elsewhere in the same speech turn.

6. Sixth, **deletion** almost never, except where a topical joke is unrecoverable and a footnote would halt the narrative.

Venuti's polarity remains useful as a diagnostic rather than as a commandment. A fully domesticated Twain becomes a target-culture humorist who happens to live near a large river. A fully foreignized Twain becomes an annotated museum of the antebellum Midwest. The novels need a mixed regime: foreignization for the river, the table, and the schoolhouse; constrained domestication for syntax that must still be readable as speech. The translator's invisibility is, in this corpus, a form of damage.

CONCLUSION

Twain's realia are not an obstacle surrounding a portable "story." They are the medium in which character, satire, and moral argument exist. "Whitewash," "corn-pone," "Sunday-school tickets," "the tow-head," "Pike County grammar," and Jim's dialect" are devices of realism and of irony at once. Translation theory from Vlahov & Florin [12] to Venuti [11] supplies a vocabulary for the losses such devices incur in another language; it does not abolish the losses.

The most adequate translations of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* are those that treat realia as a system rather than as a list: they keep the river's occupational lexicon, gloss material culture at the point of first encounter, refuse to invent a target-language "equivalent dialect," and relocate social difference through compensation instead of phonetic caricature. For doctoral research, the productive next step is a aligned corpus of several target languages – including Russian and Uzbek versions already in circulation – scored item by item against the hierarchy outlined above. Only such a corpus can show which procedures actually preserve the novels' cultural code rather than merely naming it.

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