

## **Teaching Terms, Culturemes and Realia in Teacher Education Language Programs**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the distinction between terms, realia and culture-specific terms as linguistic units within specialised and cultural communication through the research design *Translating Culturemes, Realia and Specialised Terms in Teacher Education*. Terms are approached as precise, standardised lexical units that convey technical meanings within professional domains, ensuring clarity and semantic stability. In contrast, culturemes are culturally embedded expressions tied to unique social traditions and practices, often lacking direct equivalents in other languages and requiring contextual adaptation in translation. Implemented within a teacher education program for language studies, this research examines how these units challenge teacher education students and evaluates various translation strategies: transliteration, cultural retention, functional equivalence, contextualization, etc., to preserve both meaning and cultural identity. A multi-level training terminological framework is proposed to guide teacher education students to effectively translate culturally rich texts. The findings highlight the complementary, yet distinct nature of terms, realia and culturemes and emphasise the importance of the training terminological framework, linguistic precision combined with cultural sensitivity in cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** terms, culturemes, realia, translation strategies, training terminological framework.

### **Introduction**

Teacher education language programs are part of a formal, standardised system designed to address particular issues within the domain of Language Education. Within teacher preparation programs in language education, there is a growing need to train future educators in the use and understanding of specialised terminology, realia, culturemes to create culturally responsive and accurate communication in multilingual contexts. The terminology used within the teacher education programs consists of a collection of terms used to create an objective, professional, universal, precise language subject to periodic changes (Cabr , 2010). However, the evolution of this specialised language of terminology adapts slowly through mandatory amendments or precedents, partly due to little research available in the field of terminology (Cabr , 2000, p. 169).

Within language teacher preparation programs, a set of terms belonging to different domains can be encountered. “Terms” as lexical units embody concepts with technical meanings that are integrated into the terminological systems characterised by specific hierarchical relationships with other terms (Cabr , 1999, p. 1-12). Terms as linguistic units possess precise and unambiguous semantic definitions, thereby minimising misunderstandings and facilitating clear professional communication among individuals within the language pedagogy training programs, ultimately contributing to standardisation (Cabr  2003, p. 184).

The word “term” means “sets of conditions” (Cabr  2003, p. 184) and is compared to a polyhedron, a three-dimensional figure with the cognitive, linguistic and communicative dimensions (Cabr , 2003). Terms within language education teacher training need to be approached in a particular way as they possess three distinct functions: a referential function, which names a concept; a cognitive function, which structures knowledge; and a communicative function, which facilitates communication within this specific field (Cabr , 1999, p. 1-12).

The terminological system developed through language teacher training programs is grounded in the Frame-based Terminology Theory (Faber, Le n-Ara z, and Prieto-Velasco 2009), which is composed of four micro-theories: 1. The Semantic Micro-Theory that explains the meaning of these entities, 2. The Syntactic Micro-Theory that explains the structural patterns, 3. the Pragmatic Micro-Theory that refers to cultural patterns of instructional speech acts. The Frame-based Terminology Theory elucidates how to make the connection between the term and the concept from the real world.

### **Challenges and Strategies in Understanding Culturemes and Realia**

Culture serves as a mirror, reflecting attitudes towards other cultures, people, and events, shaping the way societies engage with the world. It encompasses shared values, beliefs, and the mediation of these through various means, including language. As Faiq (2004) emphasises, culture involves both the shared values of social groups and the stances adopted by individuals in mediating texts, including translations as an essential consideration in language teacher education.

“A cultureme is the portion of cultural behaviour apprehended in signs of symbolic value that can be broken down into smaller units or amalgamated into larger ones (wiki). Culturemes, in this context, can be understood as multifaceted and dynamic concepts that reflect shared values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and practices within specific social groups (Bassnett, 2003, p. xiv). They represent culturally embedded elements that are often untranslatable or require specific strategies to render meaning across languages and cultures. The term “cultureme” derives from “culture” and the Greek suffix “-eme,” signifying a minimal unit of meaning, representing cultural concepts, behaviours, traditions, or values that are unique to a society. They can be phraseologisms, semiotic culturemes (signs, symbols, and emblems), and non-verbal culturemes (gestures, facial expressions, and body language).

Culturemes are deeply intertwined with language; therefore, language teacher education programs must go beyond teaching language structures and include systematic training on recognising, interpreting, and conveying culturemes.

Culturemes are linguistic and extralinguistic units that represent the culture of the society. Compared to terms, which are precise, standardised, and universal within specialised domains, culturemes are synchronised and resonate with a particular culture,

withstanding direct translation within the culture dichotomy (Cabr , 1999). For Venuti (2008), a *cultureme* is a word or concept so closely linked to its original culture that it doesn't easily fit into another language. Christiane Nord sees a *cultureme* as something—like a custom, object, habit, or word—that makes perfect sense in one culture but doesn't have a clear equivalent in another. It's the kind of thing that might need extra explanation when translated, because it's tied to how people in that culture live or think (Nord, 1997).

Peter Newmark (1988) defined *culturemes* as cultural words that are fluid, context-dependent, proposing a set of norms for adaptation rather than literal translation. Unlike terms, *culturemes* do not follow strict definitions or hierarchical structures; their meanings are tied to shared cultural experiences.

The term “*realia*” can be described as “*culturemes*,” “lexical gaps,” or “cultural words”, but they differ in scope and function, particularly in their pedagogical applications (See Table 1). In the context of language teacher education, preparing future educators to handle such culture-bound terms and cultural references is pivotal for developing competent language instruction.

*Realia* refer to culturally specific elements, encompassing culture-specific words or phenomena unique to a particular society, such as material objects (e.g., national dishes, clothing), natural phenomena (e.g., flora, fauna), gestures, idioms, and dialects. Understanding these elements is essential in language teacher education, as they play a vital role in grasping and conveying the cultural uniqueness embedded in language.

The concept of *realia*, representing culture-specific linguistic units, plays a crucial role in understanding and translating the unique features of national culture. Emerging as a recognised concept in the 1950s, *realia* is defined variably by scholars to encompass objects, phenomena, and their cultural significance (Zolotarev, 2012, p. 256).

Vereshchagin and Kostomarov describe *realia* as words and expressions that reflect the unique aspects, such as geography, history, customs, or social institutions. Vereshchagin and Kostomarov classify *realia* into geographical, ethnographic, historical and socio-political *realia* (Vereshchagin, Kostomarov, 2005, p. 42).

Schweitzer, meanwhile, defines *realia* as units specific to a particular linguistic culture, denoting unique referents absent in other linguistic communities (Schweitzer, 1973, p. 251). Fedorov outlines content and contextual meaning, introducing the distinction between the word-*realia* (linguistic units naming *realia*) and *realia* as extralinguistic phenomena, referring to tangible objects or cultural elements (Fedorov, 2002, p. 206; Vlachov, Sider, 1980, p. 7).

Gudiy evokes *realia* as references to objects, practices, or concepts specific to a particular culture, which may not have direct equivalents in another culture (Gudiy, 2012). His classification includes cultural objects (e.g. kimono, samovar), customs and practices (e.g., siesta, Halloween), geographical and natural features (e.g., fjords, the Eiffel Tower), social and political Terms (e.g. samurai, tsar) (Gudiy, 2012, p. 180).

Fenenko (2001) further categorises *realia* into:

- R-*realia* or *realia* of recognition - the words that acquire new cultural meanings, enhancing the translation language's nominative capacity.
- C-*realia* or cultural *realia*- the words that introduce new cultural concepts to enrich the translation language.
- L-*realia* or lexical *realia* - the words expanding the lexicon with proper names (anthroponyms, toponyms) (Fenenko, 2001, p. 8).

Realia have been categorised differently by scholars. Vlakhov and Sider propose a more detailed classification:

- Subject-based division comprises geographical realia (related to geographical locations), ethnographic realia (related to daily life, labour, art, ethnic objects), socio-political realia (related to administrative structures, political life).
- Local division comprises native realia (related to terms tied to a community, further divided into national, local, and micro-realial), foreign realia (borrowed terms or neologisms) (Vlakhov, Sider, 1980).
- Temporal division comprises modern versus historical realia.
- Translation division comprises strategies used to translate realia (Vlakhov, Sider, 1980, p. 50).

Newmark's classification focuses on culturally specific words, grouping them into categories such as ecology, material culture, social structures, organizations, gestures, and habits (Newmark, 1988, p. 95). In the context of language teacher education, familiarity with realia is crucial for preparing educators to effectively teach language as a cultural as well as communicative system.

## Methods

Researching the translation of terms, realia and culturemes in teacher education language programs is essential to equip future language teachers with cultural competencies to mediate cultural frameworks and specialised terminology in language teaching. The empirical study *Translating Culturemes, Realia and Specialized Terms in Teacher Education* addresses linguistic challenges and cultural translation nuances embedded in two short stories, Anton Chekhov's *The Slanderer* and Ivan Turgenev's *Mumu*.

This empirical study was integrated into the Hermeneutics course within the teacher education program, allowing students to apply hermeneutic methods to the analysis and translation of culturally rich texts. Although differing in tones and themes, both stories reflect deep-rooted aspects of Russian society, class structure, and interpersonal relationships. *The Slanderer* and *Mumu*, represent two case studies exploring culturemes, realia and specialised socio-cultural terminology functioning in narrative contexts, making them an ideal fit for examining translation strategies.

This analytical model, provided as part of a teacher education program, supplies future language educators with practical tools to identify, interpret, and translate culturally embedded elements. By engaging with authentic and culturally rich content texts, teacher education students develop the critical intercultural and linguistic awareness necessary for effective language instruction.

This research proposes a multi-level training terminological framework that consists of four instructional stages to explore how culture-specific terms and specialised terminology work in language and translation when exploring the intricate interplay between language and culture in a trilingual analysis of Chekhov's *The Slanderer* and Turgenev's *Mumu* in Russian, Romanian, and English:

- I. **Processing culturemes-** This stage investigates how students identify, understand culturemes compared to realia and terms using tools like eye-tracking and reaction time tests, measuring how culture-specific words affect reading fluency and comprehension. The target of this stage is to map the culturemes thematically, identifying culturally specific words to Russian life.

Table 1. The Map of Culturemes in Chekhov's *The Slanderer* and Turgenev's *Mumu*

RU - EN - RO Thematic Segments	Thematic category	Translation strategy	Cultural effect
«Поздравьте, Иван Иванович...» / “Congratulate me, Ivan Ivanovich...” / „Felicități-mă, Ivan Ivanovici...”	Naming cultural pattern (patronymic)	Literal translation Transliteration Cultural retention	Preserves cultural identity
«Stepanych сказал, что она кокетка...» / “Stepanych said she is a coquette...” / „Stepanici a spus că e o cochetă...”	Social labelling / judgment	Transliteration Cultural retention	The term <i>coquette</i> in Russian carries heavier social implications than in English.
«Это же напечатают в газете!» / “They’ll print it in the newspaper!” / „Asta o vor publica în ziar!”	Institutional Media	Literal translation Contextualization	Reflects social anxiety over public shaming.
Список лиц, желающих поздравить... / “List of persons wishing to congratulate...” / „Lista persoanelor care doresc să felicite...”	Civic custom / social ritual	Descriptive translation	Refers to a formal Russian custom, which needs explanation in translation.
«Вы меня сгубили, Иван Иванович...» / “You’ve ruined me, Ivan Ivanovich...” / „M-ați nenorocit, Ivan Ivanovici...”	Cultural value: reputation	Paraphrase with cultural explanation	Reflects the Russian cultural emphasis on honour and social standing.
«Герасим был глухонемой» / “Gerasim was deaf and mute” / „Gherasim era surdo-mut”	Social category (peasant/disability)	Literal Retention Contextualization	Refers to disability as divine punishment.
«Муму» / “Mumu” / „Mumu”	Naming / sound-symbolism	Transliteration	Preserved for effect.
«Барыня приказала...» / “The lady ordered...” / „Doamna a poruncit...”	Social hierarchy	Functional equivalent	Reflects serf-era power imbalance.
«Он был дворник у барыни» / “He was the yardman of the lady” / „Era portar la doamnă”	Feudal labour role	Descriptive translation	Refers to a specific labour role within the estate system.
«Ужасный поступок — утопить собаку» / “A terrible deed—to drown the dog” / „O faptă groaznică – să îneci câinele”	Emotional ethical cultureme	Retention with emphasis	Illustrates the tragic conflict between obedience and compassion under oppressive authority.
«Лакей передал приказ барыни» / “The footman delivered the lady’s order” / „Lacheul a transmis ordinul doamnei”	Servant hierarchy	Functional or descriptive equivalent	Reflects a socially submissive role.

All these categories are marked by cultural specificity, either geographical reference or historical context, and entail great resistance to direct translation, though the translators preserved both explicit (denotative) and implicit (connotative) meanings.

- II. **Learning culturemes, realia and specialised terms** - This stage explores how teacher education students best pick up specialised terms and culturemes through different translation methods: direct translation, paraphrasing, transliteration, cultural retention, use

of functional equivalents, explanatory notes, etc. The main target is to examine the translation choices of each story, analyse how the culturemes function within the lexical system of the story and translate them. Teacher education students have identified the following categories of culturemes, realia and specialised terms:

- Retained in original form (e.g., *samovar* left untranslated)
- Translated functionally (e.g., *barynya* as “mistress”)
- Explained with footnotes
- Omitted or replaced with a culturally equivalent term.

As the key descriptor for identifying realia, the following criteria have been outlined: cultural uniqueness, linguistic untranslatability (Newmark, 1988), historical and geographic ties (Nida, 1964), sensory and visual references (Jakobson, 1959).

### III. **Testing Translation Strategies-** This stage analyses how culturemes and realia are translated in Russian and Romanian with the help of different strategies: keeping the original term, adapting it, explaining it, evaluating different translation versions, and finding out the best methods that best keep the meaning and cultural feel of the original.

Teacher education students are proposed to practice different approaches for translating culturemes and realia that are:

- foreignisation (incorporating the source culture’s realia into the target text without adaptation, often through borrowing or direct transfer of cultural elements).
- domestication (adapting culture-specific items to the norms of the target language by using cultural or functional equivalents) (Chesterman, 1997; Venuti, 2008).
- Baker’s framework of strategies for translating terms and realia like: translation by a more general word (superordinate), translation by a more neutral or less expressive word, translation by cultural substitution, translation using a loan word or loan word with an explanation, translation by paraphrase using a related word, translation by paraphrase using unrelated words, translation by omission, translation by illustration (Baker, 1992);
- transliteration by adapting the spelling (Russian “Москва” becomes English “Moskva”, English “tsar” from Russian “царь”) (Schweitzer, 1973).
- transcription that maintains cultural authenticity using the target language’s phonetic system.
- loanwords/borrowing that incorporate the original term unchanged.
- descriptive translation that explains the concept within the translation (“samovar” as “a Russian tea urn”).
- contextualization through footnotes, glossaries.
- if equivalence cannot be established, the strategies of citation, paraphrasing, the creation of neologisms or a combination of neologisms are used (De Groot, 2006).

### IV. **Comparing different translations** – This stage examines several translations of the same literary work rich in culturemes and realia, to find the best choices when keeping, adapting, explaining, or omitting culturemes. By examining *The Slanderer* and *Mumu* across Russian, Romanian, and English versions, this stage exposes how translation choices shape students’ perception of cultural and emotional depth, revealing subtle shifts in meaning that occur between linguistic systems. The teacher education students have been promoting the following model based on Cabré’s approach (2010), which is structured in four levels:

1. Passive level - involves the analysis of bibliographical resources related to the translation of the specialised language.

2. Searching level – draws on the lexicological knowledge of the specialised text, where the student is searching for neologisms or equivalent terms to replace culture-bound expressions.
3. Filling in the terminological gap - focuses on solving the “term conflict translation”, making the best choice in preserving the meaning.
4. Creating the database – creates the terminological database on the previous translation experience.

## Results and discussion

The training program *Translating Culturemes, Realia and Specialized Terms in Teacher Education* examined the challenges involved in translating culture-specific terms and specialised socio-cultural vocabulary in Anton Chekhov's *The Slanderer* and Ivan Turgenev's *Mumu*. The texts *The Slanderer* and *Mumu* have been analysed comparatively in their Russian originals alongside Romanian and English translations, with particular focus on how culture-specific elements are preserved, adapted, or lost across the three linguistic and cultural contexts.

Four main insights emerged from this research in *Translating Culturemes, Realia and Specialized Terms in Teacher Education* program for training language educators:

- 1. Assimilation of translation strategies.** Culture-specific terms and realia resist straightforward translation due to their deep cultural and conceptual significance, which is why methods such as transliteration, cultural retention, use of functional equivalents, explanatory notes, and selective omission are necessary to maintain both the meaning and cultural essence of the original texts.
- 2. Cognitive processing of culturemes.** Culture-bound elements influence reading fluency and comprehension. Understanding how students process these terms thematically can support the development of more effective teaching and translation approaches.
- 3. Pedagogical considerations.** Programs for training language educators should focus on acquiring culturemes, realia, most effectively through a combination of direct translation, paraphrasing, and contextual explanation. However, foreignisation and domestication remain crucial aspects of managing cultural identity in translation.
- 4. Establishing a terminological framework.** A structured, multi-level training framework from bibliographical research to proactive terminology management supports teacher education students in resolving terminological challenges and cultural bridges. This framework aids in making informed choices that preserve the original cultural depth, develop cultural sensitivity, while ensuring accessibility for teacher education students.

## Conclusions

The findings of this study allow us to draw several important conclusions regarding the role of terms, culturemes and realia in translation and language teacher education programs.

A *term* in language education training initiatives is understood as a precise lexical unit, standardised to minimise ambiguity and ensure clear professional communication. Terms reflect a formal and relatively stable linguistic system that evolves slowly through institutional changes. They embody concepts organised in hierarchical relationships and serve referential, cognitive, and communicative functions essential to their domain. Unlike general words, terms are context-specific, unambiguous, and standardised, with meanings fixed by professional usage and specialised knowledge. Their formation follows specific

linguistic rules, often using stable or derivational components to create related terms within a field.

*Realia and culturemes*, on the other hand, are culture-specific linguistic units representing unique aspects of a society, such as geography, customs, history, or social institutions. Realia often lack direct equivalents in other cultures, presenting challenges in translation.

Table 2. The Differences between Realia and Culturemes

Culturemes	Realia
Linguistic or extralinguistic units that convey culturally specific meanings.	Concrete objects, real-world entities, or material culture items specific to a culture
Can be words, phrases, symbols, gestures, customs, or traditions	Primarily tangible objects, artefacts, and geographical or historical references
Includes abstract concepts like traditions, social norms, and non-verbal communication	Limited to physical and material culture
Translation requires adaptation or explanation due to cultural specificity	Transliterated or described in translation

Effective strategies for translating realia and terms include foreignisation and domestication, transliteration, transcription, borrowing, descriptive translation, and contextualization through glossaries or footnotes. Teacher education students must balance the explicit meanings and cultural connotations of these elements to navigate linguistic untranslatability and maintain cultural relevance in cross-cultural communication.

The qualitative research *Translating Culturemes, Realia and Specialized Terms in Teacher Education* highlights the successful translation of culturally bound terms based not only on linguistic skills but also on cultural awareness. The training program proved highly effective, as the students were able to identify and translate culturemes and realia, demonstrating a deeper understanding of how to handle them, showcasing the success of the training in supporting meaning across languages. Teacher education students gained practical skills in comparing English, Romanian, and Russian translations and justified the lexical and stylistic choices of the translations.

Teacher preparation programs in language education through proper pedagogical strategies must prioritise the teaching of culturemes and realia, as these elements are essential for preserving the cultural and emotional layers of the source text. Future language educators should be equipped with effective translation strategies to adapt these culturally specific references appropriately, ensuring both fidelity to the original and contributing to shaping a future generation that is both linguistically competent and culturally aware.

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