

# Cultural and Linguistic Gaps in Cross-Cultural Translation

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**Abstract.** Globalization and the fast growth of technology have made our world more connected than it has ever been before, thus giving more significance to the issue of cross-cultural gaps and the ways of translating them. The need to understand each other and to share new technology, medicine, literature, or knowledge is very high. Each language is unique and revolves around that country's culture and morals. As Culler (2007) puts it, if languages were simply a nomenclature for a set of universal concepts, it would be easy to translate from one language to another. One would simply replace the French name for a concept with the English name. If languages were like this, the task of learning a new language would also be much easier than this. But anyone who has attempted either of these tasks has acquired, alas, a vast amount of direct proof that languages are not nomenclatures and the concepts of one language may differ radically from those of another. Each language articulates and organizes the world differently. Languages do not simply name existing categories; they articulate their own. And here arise cultural gaps and problems of equivalence because each language has its own culture, and those differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure.

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**Key words:** *cross-cultural translation, cultural and linguistic gaps, culture specific items*

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## Introduction

**The aim** of this article is to overview the definitions of cultural and linguistic gaps, culture specific items that usually cause them. The article also aims at presenting possible translation methods and analyzing how the translator Nadas Rastenis (1967) deals with the gaps in his translation of Kristijonas Donelaitis' poem *Metai*. The methods employed in the analysis are the following: 1) a theoretical overview of the definitions of cultural and linguistic gaps, as well as culture specific items, 2) the analysis of the translation of Donelaitis' *Metai* by Rastenis (1967). The issue of cultural and linguistic gaps is very much important and relevant for the research, as there is no clear definition of what it actually is, especially nowadays, when communication between nations and cultures has become a part of our everyday life. Many linguists and translators have different opinions, but actually there is not much research on this specific topic.

## Theoretical Background

It is necessary to overview the notions of cross-cultural translation, cultural gaps and culture specific items in order to outline the theoretical background of the research.

### *Cross-cultural translation*

In this part we will present cross-cultural translation as well as the difficulties that make cultural translation problematic for translators. *Cambridge Online Dictionary* defines cross-culture as “involving two or more different cultures and their ideas and customs”. So cross-culture translation is translating a text from one language (*source language*) that belongs to a specific and unique culture to another (*target language*) that might have different ideas and customs than SL.

Language is embedded in culture, so it is not possible to separate one from another. Each culture forms the way its citizens view and understand the world and it is expressed through communication and language. “Culture refers to the entire way of life of a society” (Wu, 2008). Another explanation of culture can be found in Newmark's book *A Textbook of Translation* (1988), where he claims that culture is “the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression”. So it is not hard to understand that without culture languages would not be diverse, colorful and interesting, but dealing with cultural differences while translating can be quite a task. “However, one cannot face fairly the translator's problems without reckoning with the many and sometimes striking differences between cultures, since cultural diversities or cultural conflicts are, after all, the major reasons for the breakdown of cross-cultural communication” (Liu, 2012). As it appears, culture

differences are the biggest problems for translators and they cause the appearance of cultural gaps (*lacunas*).

#### *Cultural gaps in cross-cultural translation*

*Culture gap*, as it is explained by *Oxford Online Dictionaries*, means *difference in values, behavior, or customs between two cultures or groups of people, especially as a hindrance to mutual understanding and communication*. What it means is that during translation, or cross-cultural translation, the lack in information about one or another thing in TL (*target language*) or SL (*source language*) causes difficulties and then cultural gaps appear. It is one of the biggest problems when dealing with cross-cultural translation. Culture specific items might be one of the hardest things to deal with for a translator, as there is no direct equivalence; yet it is important to give across the same meaning or impression to the reader. Cultural gaps appear in different areas, when translating in cross-cultural translation, between two or more languages from different cultures. Wu described them in his paper *The Analysis of Cultural Gaps in Translation and Solutions* (2008). According to the author, there are 5 possible areas for gaps to appear: cultural background, non-equivalence, extension and intention, and derivation.

#### *Culture specific items*

Culture specific items are “those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the non-existence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text” (Aixela, as cited in Narvaez and Zambrana, 2004).

Culture is a very complex concept. Each translator or linguist has their own opinions about culture and how it affects language and interactions between different languages. Nida even claims that “differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure” (Nida, 1964). Each culture has words or culture specific items that belong to that one or a few cultures only. A few linguists put those culture specific items into categories. Newmark (1988) views culture specific items as cultural words and divides them into 5 groups by adapting Nida’s theory:

- (1) Ecology;
- (2) Material culture artefacts – food, clothes, houses and towns, transport;
- (3) Social culture – work and leisure;
- (4) Organisations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts – political and administrative, religious, artistic objects;
- (5) Gestures and habits.

The Lithuanian linguist and translator Lionginas Pažūsis also talks about culture specific items in his book *Kalba ir vertimas* (2014). He mentions them while talking about

nonequivalence. Pažūsis uses the word *realia* to describe words and their combinations that do not have equivalents because they belong to a particular nation and culture. The author divides them according to the subject: geographical, ethnographical (everyday life, culture, art, customs, rituals, celebrations, games, money), social and political; according to the place: local, national and international; as well as according to time: modern, historical (Pažūsis, 2014).

#### *Diminutives as culture specific item*

“Diminutives are expressive language units, the expressiveness of which is partially determined by formation and semantics” (Macienė, as cited in Kuliešienė, 2009). The Lithuanian language is very expressive, and diminutives constitute a great part in it. Diminutives are often understood only as a means to express smallness; however, the Lithuanian linguist Stasys Keinys also distinguished hypocoristic, augmentative, pejorative, peculiar or specific diminutives (Keinys, as cited in Kuliešienė, 2009). Diminutives are part of the reason why the Lithuanian language is unique and distinguished from other languages.

## **Research Findings**

The research is focused on the analysis of cultural gaps in cross-cultural translation that occur due to culture specific items between the English and Lithuanian languages. The research itself is based on the first chapter *Pavasario linksmybės (Spring Joys)* of Donelaitis’ poem *Metai*.

The first Lithuanian poem *Metai* or *The Seasons*, which was written between 1765–1775, depicts everyday life of Lithuanians, their culture, struggle with serfdom and feudal tasks, and how life goes around in between four seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Each part of the poem is named after a season – *Pavasario linksmybės (Spring Joys)*, *Vasaros darbai (Summer Toils)*, *Rudenio gėrybės (Autumn Boons)*, and *Žiemos rūpesčiai (Winter Cares)*.

This poem has been chosen because it is one of the most popular Lithuanian poems, translated into 21 languages and is part of the UNESCO World heritage list. Moreover, it is a piece of writing that perfectly reveals everyday life of the people in Lithuania in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the language that was used back then.

Contrastive analysis has been chosen as a research method to discover culture specific items and to present how a translator might deal with cultural gaps that arise in the process of cross-cultural translation. The analysis is based on the theories of Newmark, and Keinys and Macienė, which refer to what falls into the category of culture specific items that create cultural and linguistic gaps in the process of translation. The translation of the poem was made by Rastenis (1967).

There are 4528 words in this chapter alone. In total, 79 culture specific items were found, 32 of which were diminutives.

### *Diminutives*

*Jau saulelė vėl atkopardama* budino svetą <...>

*The climbing sun* again was wakening the world <...>

The translator tries to portray the feeling of a poem using more colorful words. However, by using this tactic, the meaning of words or phrases can mean slightly different things. For example, in the original the writer wrote 'saulelė' which is a diminutive in the Lithuanian language. Rastenis translates it as the 'climbing sun' which can be understood as 'kylanti saulė'. Also, Rastenis pays attention to the words next to 'saulelė', which are 'vėl atkopardama' – which can also mean climbing.

Ale sakyk, *gaidel!* Dėl ko tu vis pasislėpus <...>

But say, *O queen of song*, why do you always hide <...>

'Gaidel', or otherwise 'gaidau', in Donelaitis' poem *Metai* means 'mano mielas, brolyti, širdelė', according to Lietuvių kalbos žodynas (LKŽe). Rastenis translates it as 'queen of song', which does not represent the meaning. He chooses to emphasize the greatness of the nightingale, while in the original it is just an affectionate way to address the nightingale.

Ne! jis nor pamokint, kaip dievo didė galybė

Ir *paukštelių balsuos* yr didei stebuklinga.

No, he just told the world that God's majestic will

Is wondrous even *in the gleeful voice of birds*.

'Paukštelių' is a diminutive (in the accusative case) in the Lithuanian language and there is no equivalent translation into the English language. 'Balsuos' means the voice (the locative case). Rastenis chooses to translate it as 'in the gleeful voice of birds'. He uses the adjective 'gleeful' to better represent the diminutive and gives it more emotion.

O vei! kaip kiek išminties užaugdami gavom,

Ir *darbeliai su vargeliais* jau prasidėjo;

Then just as soon as we began to gain some sense,

Our *tasks and miseries* began to multiply,

Rastenis translates 'darbeliai ir vargeliai' as 'tasks and miseries'.

O ir tą daugyšk, kad skūpas randasi čėsas,  
Su *maldelėms* ir kone verkdams vos išsiprašo.  
Yet oft, when times are hard and vegetation lean,  
He has to live on straw, and not too much of that.

‘Maldelėms’ is a diminutive form of the word ‘malda’. According to the online dictionary Alkonas, ‘malda’ means ‘prayer or grace’. Rastenis does not translate this diminutive. In fact, he chooses to translate the whole sentence quite differently. In the original, Donelaitis writes about begging for a bit of food, whereas Rastenis does not mention it.

Let us analyze the translation according to Newmark’s categories.

### (1) Ecology

Krūmai su šilais visais išsibudino keltis,  
O laukų kalnai su *kloniais* pametė skrandas.  
Each hill and *dale* had cast away the snowy furs;  
The bush and heath were glad to heed the springtime’s call.

‘Kloniai’ is a word for ‘dauba’, or as LKŽe explains ‘slėni vieta, slėnys, lenkė, loma, dauba’. Rastenis chooses the words that mean exactly what they should, even though they are a bit different.

Tikt palūkėk, margi vištyčiai tuo pasirodys:  
Nėš *šleikutė* su *baltžande* jau pasičypsini, <...>  
And now *they* gently hum maternal lullabies:  
Just wait, ere long new broods of chicks will come.

‘Šleikutė’, or ‘šlekuotė’, is ‘perlavištė, patarška’ (LKŽe). It is a type of chicken that has a different name in this poem. And ‘baltžande’ refers to the chicken as well and means ‘kuris baltais žandais’ (LKŽe). Rastenis does not translate the words, instead he writes ‘they’.

### (2) Material culture artefacts (a) Food

O burokų bei *lapienės* niekini garbę.  
And down the good repute of beet and *cabbage soups*, Beetroot and *wholesome cabbage soup* you scorn <...>

‘Lapienė’ means ‘kopūstų sriuba’ (LKŽė). The word formed from another word ‘lapė’ which means ‘a fox’. It can be tricky to correctly understand what Donelaitis refers to, if you do not know the Lithuanian culture. However, Rastenis does his job well and understands the reference correctly. He translates it as ‘cabbage soup’.

Žirnių sav pasisėk zopostui didelį plotą,  
Juk žinai, kaip skanūs jie, kad šupinį valgai.  
Sow, too, a goodly patch of ever-useful peas,  
For peas do taste so good with freshly cooked *mixed mass*; <...>

‘Šupinys’ or ‘šiupinys’ is ‘tiršta su kiauliena ar spirgučiais virta košė iš žirnių, pupų, bulvių, kruopų, miltų’ (LKŽė). Rastenis translates ‘šupinis’ as ‘cooked mixed mass’, perhaps to emphasize that it can be composed of quite a few ingredients, but there is no concrete definition of what that *mass* is, because he said “peas do taste so good *with* a freshly cooked mixed mass”.

Tu neliūbiji pyragų neigi *ragaišių*  
Irgi nevožiji gardžiausio gėrimo ponų; <...>  
You care not for sweet cakes and *fancy rolls and buns*,  
Nor care for bracing mead or stupifying wine.

‘Ragaišius’ or ‘ragaišis’ is ‘rupių kvietinių ar miežinių miltų duona, karaišis’ (LKŽė). In the original text, Donelaitis wrote ‘pyragų neigi ragaišių’, and usually ‘pyragai’ (or ‘pies’) are associated with sweetness. Perhaps this is the reason, why Rastenis chooses to translate ‘ragaišius’ as ‘fancy rolls and buns’.

## **(b) Clothes**

Krūmai su šilais visais išsibudino keltis,  
o laukų kalnai su kloniais pametė *skrandas*.  
Each hill and dale had cast away the snowy *furs*;  
the bush and heath were glad to heed the springtime’s call.

In this case, ‘skrandas’ has a better Lithuanian word that is used more often and is more clear – ‘avikailis’, or the author could have simply said ‘kailiniai’. But ‘skrandas’ is more poetic, adds a specific flavour to the poem. Rastenis translates ‘skrandas’ as ‘snowy furs’, which does not exactly reflect what the author had in mind. The translator chooses to keep it more poetic. Besides, Rastenis changes the order of the sentence.

O kad kartais *kobotą* mes tavo pamatom,  
Tai tu mums nei žvirblis būriškas pasirodai.  
But when at times we catch a glimpse of your *attire*,  
Then you appear to be a homely sparrow's mate <...>

'Kobotas', as explained by LKŽe, means 'berankovis šiltas moteriškas drabužis, liemenė'. In Donelaitis poem, 'kobotas' is referred to the nightingale's appearance. Rastenis chooses to translate it more generally as 'attire'.

Tu *sermėgų* poniškų, puikiai padarytų,  
Ir žiuponiškų *turbonų* niekini rėdą;  
You scorn the *regal robes*, despise resplendent *gowns*;  
You shun the silken dress and all the gaudy styles.

Rastenis translates 'sermėga' as 'a robe', which might be the correct representation of 'sermėga' as it emphasizes its length. As for 'turbonas', Rastenis translates it as 'gowns', perhaps trying to convey the fact that it is not exactly a turban.

### (3) Social culture – work and leisure

Aš, kad man *skvieruot* pons *amtsrots urdelį* siuntė  
I, when the *squire* sent me with *writ* to *seize your goods*,

'Skvieruoti' means 'išieškoti, išreikalauti' (LKŽe). 'Amtsrots' means 'viršininkas' (LKŽe). Meanwhile, 'urdelis' is a word which means 'įsakymas, paliepimas' (LKŽe). Rastenis translates 'skvieruot' as 'seize your goods', because 'išreikalauti, išieškoti' means to take what's supposed to be yours. He translates 'amtsrots' as 'squire', which is 'dvarininkas' in Lithuanian (Alkonas). Rastenis chooses to translate 'urdelis' as 'sent me with writ', which is quite correct because in both cases the person had been given an order.

Blogs ir pusgyvis velkies į *baudžiovą* mielą.  
You drag along half-starved to do your *feudal tasks*.

At the time when Kristijonas Donelaitis wrote the poem, there was serfdom in Lithuania. Serfdom is the state of being a serf or the system by which the serfs worked on the land (*Cambridge Online Dictionary*). Serfdom appeared because of feudalism. Rastenis translates 'baudžiava' as 'feudal tasks', perhaps to communicate to the reader the important part of every Lithuanian's life, who was working for a feud of the region.



Ak išties! mūsų *būrai*, nei rėdyti ponačiai,  
Dar su dumčiais vokiškais susisėst užsigeistų.  
For then our *feudal boors*, dressed up like gentlemen,  
Would proudly sit among the German egoists, <...>

*Lietuvių kalbos žodynas* provides this definition of ‘būrai’ (or singular ‘būras’), which sounds as ‘valstietis Prūsijos valdytose lietuvių gyventose vietose’. Rastenis translates this word as ‘feudal boors’. At the time, ‘būrai’ had to work for others, as serfdom was in force. It is likely that Rastenis uses the word ‘feudal’ to explain more about their situation. However, the word ‘boor’ means ‘a rough and bad-mannered person’, which might give the wrong impression to the reader (*Oxford Online Dictionaries*).

#### **(4) Organisations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts**

##### **(a) Religious**

Ir *Sutvertoji* linksmi rykaudami gyrė.  
That gave glad, grateful praise to *the eternal Lord*.

‘Sutvertojas’, or ‘tvėrėjas’ means ‘kas tveria (tvorą) or kūrėjas, autorius’ (LKŽe). But here Donelaitis talks about God, so Rastenis translates it as the eternal Lord.

##### **(b) Artistic**

Kad tu mums dyvus linksmų lakštingalų čiauški.  
Tu vargonų bei *cimbolų* niekini garsą <...>  
When you sing your sweet airs, O happy nightingale.  
You put to scorn the sound of organ, *lute and lyre*, <...>

In Lithuania, ‘cimblas’ is used as a music instrument. Rastenis translates the word as ‘lute and lyre’. Although it is not exactly the same thing as ‘cimboliai’, perhaps the translator tries to at least give some kind of explanation of what ‘cimboliai’ might be.

Tuo pulkai jų pro plyšius išlįsti pagavo  
Ir lakstydami su *birbynėms* žaisti pradėjo; <...>  
Soon endless swarms of them began to buzz and zoom,  
*Affine merry tunes* and flying far and wide; <...>

Rastenis does not translate this word, he chooses to emphasize the music rather than the instrument.

As it can be seen from the analysis, diminutives are the biggest part of all culture specific items. They, perhaps, are the hardest to translate, as they can mean smallness, be used to express love, or have a pejorative meaning. But other words, especially from the category *Social culture – work and leisure*, are very hard to translate as well, as sometimes there are absolutely no equivalents or similar words in the target language.

Rastenis is a Lithuanian, so this may be the reason why he decides to let himself have more freedom in translation and tries to make it as poetic in English as it is in Lithuanian. It is hard to say what the translator has gone through during the time of translation and how he has made decisions of what methods to use to help him translate when problems occurred.

## Conclusions

The main purpose of the paper is to provide the research information on cross-cultural translation, cultural gaps, and the related problems, when translators have to translate a text of a different culture, provide definitions on culture specific items and use possible translation methods. Rastenis' translation (1967) of Donelaitis' poem *Metai* was chosen to present examples of cultural gaps in cross-cultural translation. The literature on cultural gaps, which are faced by translators in the process of cross-cultural translation, identifies that they appear when there is no exact equivalent in another language. And in such situations the translator most often has to deal with culture specific item – the reason for cultural gaps. Culture influences the way people think, which is expressed through language, and because of that difficulties may arise.

The comparative analysis showed that from 4528 words there were 79 culture specific items, or 1,7 % of all words from one chapter. Rastenis chose to have more of free translation, together with explanation of what one thing might be.

All in all, the field of cross-cultural translation leaves lot of uncertainty. There are no concrete definitions, many authors provide their own opinions. But what is known so far is that culture differences do cause problems for translators, and the translators must decide for themselves what methods they use and what is the best approach to solve the gaps that occur during translation.

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## Santrauka

Šio straipsnio tikslas – suteikti mokslinio tyrimo informacijos apie tarpkultūrinę vertimą ir kultūrinės spragas, kurios atsiranda verčiant tarpkultūrinius tekstus, taip pat supažindinti su kultūrinėmis realijomis ir galimais vertimo metodais. Kristijono Donelaičio poema „Metai“

pasirinkta kaip pagrindinis šaltinis realijoms ir jų vertimo spragoms rasti. Vertimo spragos atsiranda, kai tos pačios reikšmės žodžio nėra kalboje. Kultūra daro labai didelę įtaką kalbai, ypač tam, kokios emocijos yra asocijuojamos su tam tikrais žodžiais ir terminais. Kadangi kultūros yra skirtingos, jos žmonių suprantamos nevienodai, iškyla nemažai problemų verčiant autorių, kilusių iš skirtingų kultūrų, tekstus. Tyrimas atskleidė, jog vertėjas Nadas Rastenis pasirinko laisvesnį poemos vertimo būdą, nes kultūrinių realijų vertimas priklauso nuo individualaus vertėjo ir jo turimų žinių.

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***Esminiai žodžiai:*** kultūrinės realijos, tarpkultūrinis vertimas, kultūrinės ir kalbinės spragos.

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