

Research Article

# Compositional and Semantic Meaning of Non-Equivalent Vocabulary in a Poetic Text (Original and Translation)

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## Abstract

The article addresses the theoretical and practical issues related to the translation of non-equivalent vocabulary (NV) in poetic texts, focusing on its compositional and semantic role in the original and translated versions. Non-equivalent vocabulary often appears in the strong positions (SP) of a text, such as titles, rhyme elements, and key metaphors, which are critical for maintaining the semantic integrity and artistic essence of the work. The presence of NV in these positions creates a unique challenge for translators, as the loss or replacement of such vocabulary can lead to significant semantic distortions, affecting the stylistic unity and cultural flavor of the text. By examining examples from German poetry by Heinrich Heine, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Rainer Maria Rilke, as well as their Ukrainian translations, this paper highlights the diverse strategies used by translators to recreate NV in a target language context. The study also explores the theoretical approaches of renowned scholars shedding light on the impact of NV on the semantic structure and ethno-linguistic worldview conveyed through poetic texts. The aim is to analyze how NV functions as a strong position in poetic discourse, influencing the overall compositional hierarchy and meaning of the text. The research concludes that the transmission of NV in poetic translation requires a careful balance between preserving the original's national identity and adapting it to the stylistic and cultural norms of the target language. The study underscores that inadequately rendered NV can disrupt the semantic unity of a poem, thereby altering its cultural context and reader reception.

## Keywords

Non-Equivalent Vocabulary, Poetic Translation, Strong Positions, Semantic Integrity, Cultural Markers, Ethno-Linguistic Worldview, National Identity

## 1. Introduction

The translation of poetry is one of the most intricate tasks in literary translation, as it demands the recreation of the text's content and form in a new language without losing its original artistic unity. This complexity is primarily due to the dense interaction between the semantic and compositional elements of a poem, including the use of *non-equivalent vocabulary* (NV). NV refers to words or phrases in the source language

that have no direct analogues in the target language, often embodying cultural, historical, and national specificities that are difficult to convey in translation. As a result, NV becomes a significant marker of a text's national identity and a bearer of unique cultural meanings, making it an essential component of the poem's *strong positions* (SP).

The translation of a poetic text is the creation of the unity of

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its content and form by means of another language, which is revealed in the composition of a work of art. After all, it is not words, lines, sentences, or sounds that are translated... It is a system of concepts in their interrelationships and the ways in which these interrelationships are manifested that is being translated (or rather, conveyed). The relationship of concepts is the content of a work, and the way they are expressed is its style [2] (p.69). In our opinion, this 'dialectical unity of content and form' is embodied in the system of SP of a poetic text, among the hierarchy of which a prominent place is occupied by the NV.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Problem Analysis

Every nation, every people, even every social group has its own customs, developed over many centuries and sanctified by the ages. But customs are not an isolated phenomenon in the life of a people, they are the worldview, world perception and relationships between individuals that are set in motion and action. And these relationships and worldview directly affect the spiritual culture of a given people, which in turn affects the process of creating texts [1] (p.6).

The problem of translating NV has been extensively explored in modern translation theory, especially in the context of conveying the ethno-linguistic worldview embedded in poetic texts. According to V. Koptilov [3] (p.52), NV serves as a linguistic reflection of the cultural and historical reality of the source language community. In the context of poetic texts, NV is not just a lexical unit but a semantic and stylistic construct that shapes the emotional and conceptual structure of the poem. F. de Saussure's theory of linguistic signs highlights the importance of SPs in a text, where certain words or expressions, such as NV, acquire heightened semantic significance through their placement and repetition [7] (p.124). O. Tupytsya [8-11] extends this concept by emphasizing that NV often serves as a compositional anchor in poetic texts, linking various semantic elements and contributing to the formation of a cohesive ethno-cultural worldview. This role is particularly evident in German poetic texts, where NV frequently reflects historical and cultural realities that resonate deeply within the source culture. Consequently, its translation requires a strategy that preserves both the semantic content and the stylistic impact of the original, while also making it comprehensible to the target audience.

### 2.1. Analysis of Translation Strategies for Non-Equivalent Vocabulary

Translators have developed a range of strategies to deal with NV in poetic texts, each with its advantages and limitations. These strategies include:

1) **Hypernymic Transformations** – This involves replacing an NV with a broader term in the target language. While

this method ensures intelligibility, it often results in the loss of cultural specificity, weakening the emotional and stylistic impact.

- 2) **Hyponymic Transformations** – Using a more specific term in the target language, which can enhance clarity but may introduce unintended associations or nuances.
- 3) **Descriptive Paraphrasing** – This strategy involves expanding the NV into a descriptive phrase that conveys its cultural and semantic essence. While effective for preserving meaning, it disrupts the rhythm and conciseness typical of poetry.
- 4) **Calque** – A literal translation that attempts to preserve the structural and semantic characteristics of the NV. Although calques maintain the form, they can sometimes lead to unnatural expressions in the target language.
- 5) **Transcription and Transliteration** – This involves retaining the NV's phonetic or orthographic features in the translation, maintaining its foreignness but often obscuring its meaning.
- 6) **Cultural Substitution** – Replacing the NV with a target language equivalent that carries a similar cultural connotation. This approach can enhance readability but may alter the original's cultural context.
- 7) **Exoticism and Barbarism** – Leaving the NV untranslated, thereby preserving its foreign character. While this technique retains the 'otherness' of the original, it may alienate readers unfamiliar with the source culture.

NV acts as the basis that brings texts (original and translation) closer together, i.e., unites cultures, placing the translated text on the border of two cultures. The loss or replacement of NV with other national symbols introduces certain contradictions into the fabric of the work. The likeness of realities leads to "obscuring the national originality of the original" [6] (p.9), "therefore it is not always appropriate from the national and cultural point of view, as it introduces a foreign national flavor into the work" [6] (p.9). However, there are cases when various semantic transformations of NV in translation become justified.

To translate, one must understand – this is the first and foremost law of translation [4] (p.21). One of the biggest problems of literary translation is the reproduction of the national originality of the original. Modern translation theory has developed the thesis that translation combines certain national features of the original with the features inherent in the national culture of the translator [3] (p.52). This thesis cannot be disagreed with when it comes to the translation of poetry. One of the components of the original's imagery, which gives the text vivid national and cultural features, is NV. Non-equivalent units are in the composition of the original text in the SP, since NV plays an important role in shaping the meaning of the whole text, acts as a kind of 'link' in the hierarchical structure of the work. The thesis about language units as certain components of the hierarchy belongs to F. de Saussure, who said: "A linguistic unit can be compared to a certain part of a building, for example, a column: on the one

hand, the column is in a certain relationship with the architect who supports it – this mutual arrangement of two units equally present in space resembles a syntagmatic relationship; on the other hand, if this column is of the Doric order, it evokes comparisons with other orders (Ionic, Corinthian, etc. etc.), i.e. with elements that are not present in this space – this is an associative relation” [7] (p.124).

A non-equivalent unit, when it comes into contact with other strong positions (dominants) of a work, forms associative series in our minds that are important for understanding the meaning of the whole text. It is impossible to neglect equivalent lexical units in translation, since the compositional role of the latter not only affects the content of individual meanings of the work, but also the content of the entire text.

A work of fiction almost always reflects the features of the way of life of the people from which its author came, so the translator must be an ethnographer to a certain extent, otherwise he or she will simply get confused in the realities [3] (p.4).

## 2.2. Compositional and Semantic Role of Non-Equivalent Vocabulary in German Poetic Texts

NV frequently occupies strong positions in German poetic texts, serving as key components of the poem’s compositional and semantic framework. For instance, in Heinrich Heine’s “Die Grenadiere” [13], the repeated use of ‘Kaiser’ not only establishes a national and historical context but also functions as a rhythmic and thematic motif. The term ‘Kaiser’ is deeply embedded in the socio-political landscape of the time, reflecting the soldiers’ loyalty and personal commitment. In the Ukrainian translations of this poem, the term is often rendered as “імператор” or “володар”, which, while semantically appropriate, lacks the phonetic and emotional intensity of the original. This substitution leads to a shift in the poem’s tone and diminishes its rhetorical impact. Observing the texts of poems and their translations, we have noticed an interesting pattern: NV can often play a leading role in the semantic organization of the content of the whole work, being put forward in the SP, entering into a complex system of co- and contrasts with other SPs of the text, forming a wide range of associations and subtext. The adequate transmission of such SPs is a prerequisite for reproducing not only semantic shades but also the content of the entire text, since changing even one element deforms the entire hierarchy.

The short essence of the work is as follows: two grenadiers return home from captivity in Russia, they receive the sad news that France has been defeated, and ‘und der Kaiser, der Kaiser gefangen’ (the Kaiser has been captured). They continue on their way, complaining to each other about their fate, wounds, and hardships, but ‘mein Kaiser, mein Kaiser gefangen!’ One of the soldiers is wounded and asks his friend to bury him in his native land, but with his weapon. He will lie there until he hears the cannons and horses’ hooves again, and then he will stand up “den Kaiser, den Kaiser zu schützen” (to

defend the Kaiser).

In the Ukrainian translations of this poem, the word ‘Kaiser’ is replaced by “імператор” and “володар”. Indeed, when it comes to German soldiers, such a substitution would be inappropriate, but here we are talking about French grenadiers, so ‘emperor’ is a justified name. But Heine uses *Kaiser*, not *Imperator*: *Der Kaiser, der Kaiser gefangen. - Mein Kaiser, mein Kaiser gefangen! - Den Kaiser, den Kaiser zu schützen*. At the same time, there is a certain pressure and amplification of the sound: ‘The Kaiser, the Kaiser has been captured!’ – *Мого кайзера, мого кайзера схопили! – Кайзера, кайзера захищати*. Doesn’t this sound like a call to defend one’s Kaiser in the wake of the events in France? We can assume that this is what Heine meant to say, but we cannot establish this implication from the translation due to the inadequate translation of one NV, which occupies the SP. That is why it is necessary to be so attentive to the SP in the composition of a poetic work when translating it [8] (p.170).

Similarly, in Goethe’s “Erlkönig” [12], the term “Erlkönig” encapsulates a specific folklore image that is central to the poem’s eerie atmosphere. Ukrainian translations such as “Лісовий цар” or “король ельфів” convey the general meaning but fail to capture the chilling, supernatural quality of the original term. This example underscores the difficulty of preserving both the semantic content and the stylistic nuances of NV in translation. An example from the poem: *Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind? Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind; Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm, Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm*. In Ukrainian: *Хто мчить так пізно крізь ніч і крізь вітер? Це батько, що сина тримає в обіймах. Він цільно тримає, оберігає, Щоб вітру холодного син не злякався*. The word “Knabe” is translated as “син” (*son*), which is a correct but somewhat simplified version. In the German text, “Knabe” carries connotations of youth, innocence, and nobility, which are absent in the straightforward Ukrainian equivalent. This example illustrates the difficulty of preserving the nuanced semantic and cultural layers of NV in translation.

## 3. Non-Equivalent Vocabulary and Semantic Hierarchy in Poetic Texts

Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Der Panther” [15]. NV’s role as a strong position in a text extends beyond its immediate semantic value. It influences the entire semantic hierarchy of the poem, shaping its thematic and symbolic layers. For instance, in Rilke’s “Der Panther”, the NV “Zwinger” (often translated as “клітка”) evokes a sense of existential entrapment that is central to the poem’s message. Its replacement with a less evocative term would significantly alter the reader’s interpretation, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach to translating NV.

Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Der Panther”. *Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe so müd geworden, daßer nichts mehr*

*hält. Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.* Ukrainian translation: *Його погляд стомлений, від залізних прутів Вже більше не бачить нічого, як в міні. Йому здається, що є тисячі прутів, А за тисячами цих прутів – немає світу.*

The translation of “Zwinger” as “прути” does not fully convey the sense of despair and confinement suggested by the German term. A more contextually appropriate translation might be “темниця” or even “ув’язнення”, depending on the thematic intent.

In order to transfer information encoded in such non-equivalent units, some translators consider it necessary to replace national and cultural symbols with similar units of the target language, looking for folklore parallels, for example. M. Lukash often used the method of simile. This led to the appearance of a large number of Ukrainian realities in his translations. There are cases of replacing foreign language lexical units with Ukrainian ones that are not equivalent, although there were no such units in the original. Consequently, the translation contains a SP that is not peculiar to the original, which can lead to a change in the semantic shell of the entire text: *Кого доля оцастила Тим, що другові він друг, Кого любить лада мила, - Йдуть до нас в веселий круг (Пер. М. Лукаш “До радості”). – Wem der große Wurf gelungen, Eines Freundes Freund zu sein, Wer ein holdes Weib errungen, Mische seinen Jubel ein! (F. Schiller “An die Freude”). Ладa – ein holdes Weib (прекрасна, чарівна жінка). На ясній вершині віри Піднімає хоругвов... (Пер. М. Лукаш “До радості”). – Auf des Glaubens Sonnenberge Sieht man ihre Fahnen wehn (F. Schiller “An die Freude”). Хоругви – Fahnen (прапори) [14, 16]. Хоругва – прикріплене до довгого держала полотнище чи бляха із зображенням святих, що несуть під час хресного ходу [5] (p.251). In the Ukrainian language, this word, as well as the object, has a special meaning; we can say that this lexical unit belongs to the non-equivalent ones, because a banner is a cloth or plaque with the image of saints attached to a long pole and carried during a religious procession.*

Such substitutions can often be considered inappropriate, as the translation ceases to carry the “taste of the foreign” and loses its ties with another culture. “Literary translation is primarily an aesthetic phenomenon: it should affect the mind and feelings of the reader in the same way as the original. And the work of a translator is basically work on words. The images and ideas that the author of the original embodied in the work in his own language, the translator must transfer to the soil of his native culture with the help of another language, looking for the most accurate shades of meaning in it” [3] (p.3).

In order to determine the compositional role of NV in a poetic text (original and translation), it is necessary to distinguish between the groups of transformation of BL in the original and in the foreign language texts. Observing poetic translations, we noticed that the NV in a translated work is transformed by means of translation (hypernym, hyponym, descriptive periphrases, calque, combined renomination,

connotative transposition, situational correspondence, etc.), transcription (transmission of the sound of a foreign word, transliteration, exoticism, barbarism) or is lost altogether. On this basis, we decided that it was necessary to study the meaning of NV as a SP in the following aspects:

- 1) The meaning of NV as a SP in the original poetic text and in the translation when transformed by transcription.
- 2) The meaning of NV as a SP in a poetic text when transmitted into another language by the method of translation.
- 3) Influence of NV as a SP on the semantic hierarchy of a poetic text. Possibility/impossibility of deformation of the meaning of a poetic work due to the loss of BL in translation.

It is necessary to investigate the adequacy of the reproduction of BL in translation from these points of view, thereby determining the significance of NV as a SP for the poetic text in general, revealing such an important problem of practical translation and translation studies as the functioning of NV in the composition of a poetic work and the possibility of its translation.

## 4. Conclusion

NV occupies a central role in the structure and semantic organization of a poetic text. Its accurate translation requires not only linguistic skill but also a deep understanding of both source and target cultures. The challenge lies in maintaining the balance between semantic accuracy and preserving the original’s cultural and emotional resonance.

The study of NV is essential for understanding cultural differences and preserving national and cultural specificity in translation. Such units reflect the unique realities of a nation’s culture and worldview. Semantic structure and conceptualisation: The NV that do not have exact equivalents in other languages form unique concepts. Cultural context: When analysing a translation, it is important to take into account the etymology of the NV, as it contains cultural contexts that may be lost in a literal translation. The problem of localisation and adaptation: Translators often face a dilemma between preserving the original form of a word and adapting it to the realities of the target culture. This is especially important in literary translation, where NV can add flavour to a text.

Different approaches to the translation of specific terms illustrate how a translator can use transcription, descriptive translation or adaptation to preserve cultural specificity.

The linguistic and cultural analysis of the NV in the original and in translation emphasizes the importance of choosing translation strategies to convey the cultural identity of the text, which is critical for preserving its meaning and emotional component.

Based on the above materials and conclusions, we can identify several prospects for further research in the field of non-equivalent lexical items and their translation:

1. Expansion of the research corpus: Studying NV in other languages and cultures, which will allow comparing the ways

in which cultural concepts are conveyed in different linguistic contexts. This may include analysing vocabulary specific to minority or regional cultures.

2. Impact on perception: Research on how the use of NV in translations affects the perception of a text by readers from different cultures. This may include experimental studies that examine how different translation strategies affect comprehension and emotional perception.

3. Research on adaptation in different genres: Analysis of specific genres (literature, poetry, journalism, advertising, etc.) in terms of the use and adaptation of NV. This will allow us to understand how genre specifics influence the choice of translation strategies.

4. Economics of translation: Study of the economic aspects of translating NV, including the time and resources spent on text adaptation, which may be an important factor in the choice of translation strategies.

5. Intercultural communication: Exploring the role of NV in intercultural communication, in particular, how they can facilitate or hinder mutual understanding between speakers of different cultures.

6. Technological aspects: An analysis of the use of modern technologies, such as machine translation and computer-assisted linguistic tools, in the context of working with NV. This may include research into the effectiveness of such tools in preserving cultural specificity.

7. Symbolism and mythology: A deeper exploration of the symbolic meaning of NV in the context of mythology, folklore and religion, which may help to recover the cultural contexts associated with these terms.

These perspectives can help to better understand the complex interrelationships between language, culture and translation, and contribute to the development of new methods and approaches in the study of non-equivalent lexical items.

## Abbreviations

NV	Non-Equivalent Vocabulary
SP	Strong Positions

## Author Contributions

Oleksandr Tupytsya is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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