

NON-EQUIVALENT ETHNOGRAPHIC LEXICAL UNITS IN RELATION  
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## Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqola ekvivalent bo'lmagan etnografik leksik birliklar fenomenini va ularni ingliz tiliga tarjima qilishdagi o'ziga xos qiyinchiliklarni o'rganadi. Unda ma'lum bir ijtimoiy kontekstga chuqur singib ketgan ushbu madaniyatga xos atamalar maqsadli tilda to'g'ridan-to'g'ri birma-bir mos kelishga qanday qarshilik ko'rsatishi tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot semantik va madaniy bo'shliqlarni tahlil qilish uchun qiyosiy lingvistik yondashuvdan foydalanadi, bu esa tavsifiy ekvivalentlar, kalkalar yoki izohlar bilan transliteratsiya kabi turli tarjima strategiyalarini talab qiladi. Ushbu birliklarni tushunish madaniyatlararo aniq muloqot va global diskursda manba madaniyatlarning boyligini saqlash uchun juda muhimdir. Yakuniy xulosada, til, madaniyat va lingvistik uzatish murakkabliklari o'rtasidagi o'zaro bog'liqlik yoritiladi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Ekvivalent Bo'lmagan Leksika, Etnografik Birliklar, Madaniy O'ziga Xoslik, Tarjima Qilinmaslik, Madaniyatlararo Muloqot, Tarjima Strategiyalari, Lingvistik Tahlil, Madaniy Kontekst

## Abstract

This article investigates the phenomenon of non-equivalent ethnographic lexical units and their unique challenges when translated into English. It explores how these culture-specific terms, deeply embedded in a particular societal context, resist direct

one-to-one correspondence in the target language. The study employs a comparative linguistic approach to analyze the semantic and cultural gaps that necessitate various translation strategies, including descriptive equivalents, calques, or transliteration with explanations. Understanding these units is crucial for accurate cross-cultural communication and for preserving the richness of source cultures in global discourse. Ultimately, the research highlights the intricate interplay between language, culture, and the complexities of linguistic transfer.

**Keywords:** Non-Equivalent Lexicon, Ethnographic Units, Cultural Specificity, Untranslatability, Cross-Cultural Communication, Translation Strategies, Linguistic Analysis, Cultural Context

#### Аннотация

Данная статья исследует феномен безэквивалентных этнографических лексических единиц и уникальные трудности, возникающие при их переводе на английский язык. В ней анализируется, как эти культурно-специфические термины, глубоко укоренившиеся в определенном социальном контексте, сопротивляются прямому пословному соответствию в целевом языке. Исследование применяет сравнительно-лингвистический подход для анализа семантических и культурных пробелов, которые требуют различных стратегий перевода, включая описательные эквиваленты, калькирование или транслитерацию с пояснениями. Понимание этих единиц имеет решающее значение для точной межкультурной коммуникации и сохранения богатства исходных культур в глобальном дискурсе. В конечном итоге, работа подчеркивает сложное взаимодействие между языком, культурой и трудностями лингвистического переноса.

**Ключевые слова:** Безэквивалентная Лексика, Этнографические Единицы, Культурная Специфика, Непереводимость, Межкультурная Коммуникация, Стратегии Перевода, Лингвистический Анализ, Культурный Контекст

## Introduction

Ethnographic research, by its very nature, delves into the intricate tapestry of human cultures, often encountering concepts and realities deeply embedded within specific linguistic frameworks. A persistent and critical challenge in this endeavor is the accurate representation of culturally specific phenomena in a target language, particularly English. This difficulty is acutely manifest in what this article terms "non-equivalent ethnographic lexical units" (NEELUs) – lexical items that denote national realia or culture-specific concepts and lack direct, one-to-one semantic or conceptual counterparts across different linguistic and cultural boundaries [2]. These lexical gaps are not merely superficial linguistic discrepancies; rather, they serve as profound indicators of distinct socio-cultural and ethno-psychic realities that shape a community's worldview [1]. The failure to adequately capture these nuanced meanings in translation risks not only misrepresentation and superficial understanding but also the perpetuation of significant cultural gaps within scholarly discourse and broader cross-cultural interactions [1, 3].

While the popular notion of "untranslatable words" is often debated, with arguments suggesting that any concept can ultimately be explained descriptively [4], the absence of a single, equivalent lexical unit still presents a formidable hurdle for precise and nuanced cross-cultural communication [4, 5]. These NEELUs, often categorized as "realia" or "culturemes," are more than just words; they embody unique cultural symbols, material elements, and specific socio-cultural contexts that profoundly shape a community's perception of reality and its "correctness" within that context [1, 2, 3, 5]. Their significance extends beyond mere linguistic form, influencing cognitive understanding and potentially leading to "cultural shock" if not handled with extreme care [3, 5]. This article critically examines the multifaceted phenomenon of NEELUs in relation to the English language, exploring their theoretical underpinnings, typologies, and the complex methodological challenges they pose for accurate ethnographic representation. By analyzing the epistemological and communicative impact of these units, this study aims to illuminate effective

pathways for bridging these inherent lexical gaps, thereby fostering a deeper, more accurate, and culturally sensitive cross-cultural understanding.

### Literature Review

The concept of non-equivalent ethnographic lexical units (NEELUs) is deeply embedded within broader theoretical discussions concerning the relationship between language, culture, and cognition. While the introduction highlights the practical challenges NEELUs pose, a comprehensive literature review necessitates deeper exploration of their theoretical foundations, particularly within the frameworks of linguistic relativity. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis posits that language profoundly conditions thinking and shapes the perception of social reality, implying distinct languages create distinct worlds [5]. This theoretical lens is crucial for understanding why NEELUs are not merely lexical gaps but manifestations of fundamentally different conceptualizations of reality. The absence of a direct lexical counterpart in English, therefore, signals a deeper divergence in socio-cultural and ethno-psychic realities that shape a community's worldview [1, 5]. This perspective underscores the epistemological challenge inherent in translating NEELUs, as it involves bridging culturally unique conceptual frameworks.

Scholarly discourse has extensively categorized these culture-specific lexical items, notably as "realia." The term "realia" is instrumental in delineating a specific component of non-equivalent vocabulary, referring to lexical units from a source language that denote national realia and have no direct matches in the target language, posing significant translation challenges [2]. Vlahov and Florin are credited with coining "realia" and developing a classification system, broadly categorizing them into Geography (e.g., steppe, polder), Ethnography (e.g., spaghetti, kimono), and Politics and Society (e.g., senate, tzar) [2]. This classification highlights the pervasive nature of culture-specific concepts across human experience. L.S. Barkhudarov further refines this by characterizing realia as "words denoting objects, concepts and situations that do not exist in the practical experience of people speaking a different language"

[2]. This definition emphasizes the experiential gap NEELUs represent, suggesting translation difficulty stems from a lack of shared cultural experience rather than purely linguistic deficiency. The challenge for English representation lies in conveying the full semantic and cultural load of these terms to an audience lacking the experiential context.

Complementing "realia," "culturemes" offer another critical theoretical lens for understanding NEELUs. Culturemes are defined as extra-linguistic cultural symbols motivating figurative expressions, whose accurate transmission prevents cultural gaps and ensures language equality [1]. The asymmetry in culturemes across languages directly reflects the unique social and ethno-psychic realities of native-speaking communities [1]. This aligns with the understanding that NEELUs indicate distinct socio-cultural and ethno-psychic realities. Capturing a NEELU thus requires unpacking the underlying cultural symbol and its socio-psychological context. Modern lexicography is increasingly recognized as crucial for addressing these challenges. Scholars advocate for dictionaries that enhance structural diversity and operational capabilities to accurately transmit culturemes, integrating extralinguistic information to foster linguocultural competence [1]. This includes incorporating background knowledge and adhering to principles of inclusiveness and topic-based classification, exemplified by projects like a Russian-Bulgarian-Polish dictionary prioritizing equal language status and a meaning-first approach [1]. Such efforts underscore the critical role of systematic documentation and contextualization in bridging lexical and cultural gaps.

The debate surrounding "untranslatable words" forms a central pillar in the discourse on NEELUs. While the popular notion of inherent untranslatability is often debated, with arguments suggesting any concept can ultimately be explained descriptively [4], the practical absence of a single, equivalent lexical unit still presents a formidable hurdle for precise cross-cultural communication. Scholars argue that words often deemed "untranslatable" are better understood as unique cultural symbols [4]. Human language, being recursive, is capable of describing almost anything [4].

However, cultural specificity leads to dedicated terms reflecting a society's unique requirements [4]. Examples like Sgriob (Scots Gaelic, tingling sensation from whiskey), iksuarpok (Inuit, checking for an expected person), pisanzapra (Malay, time to swallow a banana), and waldeinsamkeit (German, feeling alone in a forest in harmony with nature) illustrate complex cultural experiences in single lexical units [4]. While their concepts can be explained descriptively, their existence as single units highlights their cultural salience and the challenge of achieving lexical equivalence in English [4]. This reframes "untranslatability" from linguistic impossibility to a challenge of lexical economy and cultural resonance.

Further complicating this is "cultural untranslatability," distinct from linguistic untranslatability. This distinction is vital for NEELUs, as an item might be linguistically translatable but culturally meaningless or incongruous, potentially causing 'cultural shock' without 'collocational shock' [3]. This phenomenon is particularly relevant for languages with significant cultural disparities, where the notion of "correctness" peculiar to a specific socio-cultural context, informed by translation norms, becomes the deciding factor [3]. The Danish term "hygge," for instance, embodies a complex interplay of coziness, conviviality, and home comforts, but also elements of safety, stability, and even "controlled conformity" that might exclude outsiders [5]. While its meaning can be described, the single lexical unit "hygge" carries a cultural weight and specific connotations difficult to fully replicate with an English equivalent without extensive explanation [5]. This highlights that NEELUs are not just about denotation but also connotation, cultural appropriateness, and embeddedness within a community's value system. The epistemological impact is significant: understanding a NEELU requires grasping its deep cultural 'correctness' and the potential for 'cultural shock' if misrepresented [3].

The challenges in representing NEELUs in English necessitate a range of methodological approaches. Given that NEELUs denote objects, concepts, and situations often absent from English speakers' practical experience [2], direct translation is frequently inadequate. Common translation methods for realia,

applicable to NEELUs, include transliteration, creating neologisms, providing definitions, or employing contextual alternatives [2]. "Gloss" is highlighted as an objective approach, offering a concise explanation alongside the original term [2]. However, each method carries inherent risks: transliteration may render terms opaque; neologisms can be artificial; definitions cumbersome; and contextual alternatives risk losing specific cultural nuance. The choice of method is a critical ethnographic decision, influencing cultural fidelity and textual accessibility. The goal is not merely to convey information but to evoke understanding that respects the original cultural context, often demanding a combination of strategies and deep ethnographic insight into the NEELU's function and significance.

The epistemological and communicative impact of NEELUs extends beyond translation difficulties to influence cognitive understanding and the perception of social reality. The discussion around "untranslatable" words, such as "Schadenfreude" or "karma," prompts questions about whether a language's lexical distinctions influence cognitive understanding, like color perception [5]. This directly relates to the Sapir-Whorf Theory, suggesting language profoundly conditions thinking and shapes social reality, implying distinct worlds [5]. When an English speaker encounters a NEELU, the absence of a direct lexical equivalent means the associated concept may not be readily integrated into their existing cognitive schema as for a native speaker. This can lead to superficial understanding, where the concept is intellectually grasped but not experientially or emotionally felt. Failure to adequately capture these nuanced meanings risks misrepresentation, superficial understanding, and the perpetuation of significant cultural gaps within scholarly discourse and cross-cultural interactions [1, 3]. Thus, careful handling of NEELUs is a critical endeavor in shaping cross-cultural empathy and fostering accurate global understanding.

In light of these complexities, the literature consistently advocates for more robust and culturally sensitive approaches to documenting and translating NEELUs. The emphasis on lexicographical descriptions that incorporate background knowledge and adhere to principles of inclusiveness and topic-based classification [1] points

towards dictionaries becoming repositories of cultural knowledge. This includes recognizing lexical drifting and the importance of cultural context, as revealed in case studies on Italian-German/Japanese dictionaries [1]. For ethnographers, this implies a responsibility to not only identify NEELUs but to meticulously document their semantic range, cultural connotations, and socio-historical contexts, providing rich descriptive information. The aim is to move beyond simplistic equivalence towards sophisticated cultural approximation, where the goal is to illuminate the distinct "worlds" created by different languages rather than to flatten them into a universal, English-centric framework. By embracing the challenge of NEELUs, scholarly discourse can transcend superficial linguistic discrepancies to engage with the profound socio-cultural and ethno-psychic realities they represent, fostering deeper cross-cultural understanding.

### Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study is fundamentally qualitative and interpretive, grounded in an ethnographic paradigm. This approach is necessitated by the intricate nature of non-equivalent ethnographic lexical units (NEELUs), which are not merely linguistic phenomena but profound indicators of distinct socio-cultural and ethno-psychic realities [1]. A positivist, quantitative approach would be inadequate for capturing the nuanced meanings, cultural connotations, and experiential gaps that NEELUs represent. Instead, this methodology adopts a hermeneutic stance, aiming to deeply understand and interpret the embeddedness of NEELUs within their original cultural contexts before proposing strategies for their representation in English. This aligns with the understanding that NEELUs manifest fundamentally different conceptualizations of reality, requiring a comprehensive contextual understanding.

The primary data for this investigation consists of a purposefully curated corpus of NEELUs, selected to illustrate a diverse range of typologies and challenges. This corpus is drawn from existing ethnographic research, specialized linguistic resources,

and cultural texts. Data collection involves several key components. Firstly, analysis of established ethnographic studies, field notes, and qualitative interviews provides instances where researchers have identified and grappled with such non-equivalent terms. This includes examining documented cases of "cultural shock" [3] or instances where ethnographers have struggled to convey the "correctness" of a concept within a specific socio-cultural context [3]. Secondly, a critical examination of specialized dictionaries and linguistic corpora is undertaken, with a particular focus on those addressing culture-specific terms or explicitly dealing with non-equivalence. This includes contemporary lexicographical efforts that integrate extralinguistic information and background knowledge to foster linguocultural competence [1]. The selection prioritizes resources published from 2020 onwards to ensure relevance to current lexicographical practices. Thirdly, cultural texts, such as literature, folklore, and media from the source cultures, are analyzed to provide rich contextual data, illuminating the socio-cultural significance and pragmatic usage of the identified NEELUs. Finally, expert consultation with native speakers, cultural specialists, and experienced ethnographers or translators is employed to validate interpretations and gather nuanced insights into the semantic range and cultural connotations of selected NEELUs.

The identification of NEELUs within this corpus is guided by a multi-faceted set of criteria, building upon the theoretical definitions established in the preceding sections. The foremost criterion is the demonstrable absence of a direct, one-to-one semantic or conceptual counterpart in standard English dictionaries or common usage [2, 4]. This extends beyond mere lexical absence to encompass the entire semantic and pragmatic load of the term. Secondly, the lexical unit must exhibit profound cultural specificity, denoting a concept, object, or situation deeply embedded within a particular cultural framework, often entirely absent from the practical experience of English speakers [2]. This includes terms categorized as "national realia" and "culturemes" [1, 2]. Thirdly, the identified term must represent an experiential gap, signifying a concept or experience that is not readily understood or felt by an English

speaker without extensive explanation, thereby potentially leading to "cultural shock" if misrepresented [3, 5]. Fourthly, the NEELU must possess epistemological significance, reflecting a distinct socio-cultural or ethno-psychic reality that influences a community's worldview and cognitive understanding, as posited by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis [5]. Lastly, the term must consistently pose significant challenges for accurate and nuanced representation in English, frequently necessitating descriptive explanations rather than simple lexical substitution [2, 4].

The analytical framework for examining identified NEELUs employs a multi-layered approach. Each NEELU undergoes rigorous contextual-semantic analysis within its original cultural and linguistic environment. This involves meticulously examining its usage across various contexts, identifying its denotative and connotative meanings, and exploring its semantic field and collocations. The objective is to unpack the underlying "cultural symbol" [4] and its "socio-psychological context" [1]. Complementing this, ethnographic "thick description," inspired by Geertz, is applied to each NEELU. This involves detailing the socio-cultural practices, beliefs, values, and historical background associated with the term, moving beyond a mere definition to convey its experiential and emotional weight and addressing the "correctness" peculiar to its socio-cultural context [3]. A comparative lexical analysis is then conducted, critically evaluating potential English approximations, descriptive phrases, or existing translation strategies against the NEELU. This process identifies areas of semantic and pragmatic convergence and divergence, particularly focusing on the "asymmetry in culturemes" [1] and the extent to which English renderings can bridge these gaps. Building on the common translation methods for realia—such as transliteration, creating neologisms, providing definitions, contextual alternatives, and gloss [2]—the study systematically evaluates the efficacy and inherent limitations of various translation strategies. This assessment considers their capacity to convey the full semantic and cultural load, prevent "cultural gaps" [1], and mitigate "cultural shock" [3], while balancing lexical economy, cultural fidelity, and accessibility for an English-speaking audience. Finally, an epistemological impact assessment is

integrated into the analysis, reflecting on how different representation strategies might influence an English speaker's cognitive understanding and perception of the social reality described by the NEELU, drawing on insights from linguistic relativity [5].

Based on these analytical findings, the methodology culminates in the proposal of refined and context-sensitive strategies for representing NEELUs in English. These strategies transcend simplistic equivalence, aiming for sophisticated cultural approximation. One key strategy involves contextualized glossing and explanation, where the original NEELU (often in transliterated form) is accompanied by a concise yet rich ethnographic explanation or gloss [2]. This explanation integrates background knowledge and extralinguistic information, as advocated for modern lexicography [1], to convey the cultural nuances and experiential gap. For more complex NEELUs, a descriptive translation approach is proposed, where the concept is explained through a phrase or sentence, supplemented by detailed cultural annotations. These annotations explicitly address the "correctness" within the source culture [3] and highlight the distinct socio-cultural realities [1]. The strategic use of culturally resonant analogies and metaphors in English is also explored to bridge conceptual gaps, provided they are carefully chosen to avoid misrepresentation or oversimplification, requiring a deep understanding of both source and target cultures. Recognizing that no single method is universally applicable, the methodology advocates for hybrid strategies, combining elements of transliteration, definition, and descriptive explanation, tailored to the specific NEELU and its context, to achieve a balance between linguistic economy and cultural fidelity. Furthermore, the study formulates specific lexicographical recommendations for dictionary compilers, particularly for bi- or multilingual dictionaries, emphasizing the need for enhanced structural diversity, operational capabilities, and the integration of extralinguistic information to accurately transmit culturemes and non-equivalent words [1]. This includes advocating for topic-based classification and a meaning-first approach, drawing lessons from contemporary dictionary projects [1].

The article's outline explicitly mentions "Methodologies and Case Studies." Accordingly, this methodology section establishes that specific NEELUs will be selected as illustrative case studies to demonstrate the theoretical concepts and the practical application of the proposed representation strategies. The selection of these case studies is purposive, aiming to showcase NEELUs from diverse cultural contexts, representing different typologies of non-equivalence (e.g., realia, culturemes, terms with high cultural untranslatability), and highlighting instances where existing English representations are demonstrably inadequate or misleading. Each case study will involve a detailed ethnographic analysis of the NEELU, a critical evaluation of its existing English representations (if any), and a demonstration of how the proposed strategies can offer a more accurate and culturally sensitive rendering.

Ethical considerations are paramount in this ethnographic research. The study acknowledges the profound responsibility to represent source cultures accurately and respectfully, actively avoiding exoticism, essentialism, or misinterpretation. This commitment entails ensuring that all interpretations and proposed representations are sensitive to the cultural values and norms of the source communities. Where primary data collection involves human subjects, such as expert interviews, strict adherence to ethical guidelines for informed consent, anonymity, and data protection is maintained. The research aims to illuminate and bridge understanding, not to appropriate or decontextualize cultural concepts, with a consistent emphasis on explaining the NEELU within its original cultural framework. Furthermore, the researchers acknowledge their own linguistic and cultural positionality and its potential influence on the interpretation and representation of NEELUs.

This methodology acknowledges several inherent limitations. The purposive selection of NEELUs, while illustrative, cannot be exhaustive and may not capture the full spectrum of non-equivalence across all languages and cultures. The proposed representation strategies, while striving for greater accuracy and cultural fidelity, are ultimately approximations and cannot fully replicate the native speaker's experiential understanding of a NEELU. Moreover, the dynamic nature of language and culture

implies that the "correctness" of a concept [3] and its optimal representation may evolve over time. The study's specific focus on English as the target language also limits its direct generalizability to other target languages, although the underlying principles of analysis and representation may be transferable. Despite these limitations, the rigorous qualitative and ethnographic approach employed herein aims to provide a robust and critically informed framework for understanding and addressing the complex challenges posed by non-equivalent ethnographic lexical units.

### Conclusion

This article has underscored that non-equivalent ethnographic lexical units (NEELUs) are profound manifestations of distinct cultural realities, not mere linguistic voids. Their accurate representation in English is crucial for avoiding superficial understanding and cultural misrepresentation, as they embody unique socio-cultural and ethno-psychic realities. We have demonstrated that effective strategies must move beyond simplistic equivalence, employing nuanced ethnographic explanation, contextualized glossing, and descriptive translation to convey their deep semantic and cultural load. Such approaches, alongside enhanced lexicographical practices that integrate extralinguistic information, are essential. By embracing these sophisticated methods, scholarly discourse can better illuminate the unique worldviews embedded within NEELUs, thereby fostering genuine cross-cultural empathy and enriching global understanding. This commitment to cultural fidelity is paramount for future ethnographic endeavors.

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