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**THE ROLE OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE FOR ACHIEVING  
PRAGMATIC EQUIVALENCE IN POETRY TRANSLATION**

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***Abstract***

The article discloses the point of view about translator’s background knowledge that influences on the pragmatic equivalence of poetry translation. It is generally known that translation is not only a transition from one language to another, but also from one culture to another. Knowledge of a translator about the life of another country and other people could be seen from background knowledge, which is one of the most important determinants of the translation. The role of background knowledge in the translation of poetry makes it possible not only to convey the entire meaning of the source text but also helps to maintain a pragmatic equivalence in translation. The article shows the result of a study on determining the role of background knowledge in translation by analyzing two poems of prominent Kazakh poet M.Makataev and translation of poems in the English language. Pragmatic equivalence of translated poems was evaluated by the correspondence to the impact that the source language poems have on the reader. While analyzing the original and translated poems the role of translator’s background knowledge resulted in resemblance to the effect they have on readers.

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**Keywords:** Culture, background knowledge, background information, poetry translation, pragmatic of translation, pragmatic equivalence.



## 1. Introduction

Poetry is thorough selection process of words in conveying information for people, usually speaking in one language. That is why translating poetry is considered to be one of the most difficult types of translation and some presumed that it is impossible to translate poetry by stating that in poetry translation “only creative transposition is possible” (Jakobson, 1966) and its untranslatability is caused by two sources: linguistic and cultural (Catford, 1965). However, many outstanding translated poems have made a great contribution to cultural exchange and understanding, as well have become an inseparable part of the world civilization. Besides, the poetry translation could be considered as interlanguage and intercultural communication because poetry reflects many of the common pursuits, general feelings, and emotions of humankind. The poet of the original language uses all the capabilities of the language of his/her people, he/she uses words well known to the readers of his/her nation and always uses them according to the laws of his/her native language. While the poet-translator has to transfer poetry created by the original poet and should try to transfer the same effect on the reader of the target language that the reader of the source language has. Trying to achieve “the golden mean”, the translator who translates the poetic work, meets the number of difficulties that arise in his/her path and greatly hinder in finding the optimal variant.

## 2. Problem Statement

The essential conditions for a person to translate a poem from the source language to the target language should include translator’s profound mastery of both source language and target language, also he/she has to have a deep understanding of the two different cultural backgrounds. As it is known that one of the main questions in literary translation is how to achieve equivalence of literary work in all aspects of the source language and target language, especially in the cultural aspect. From this statement, we can say that “the aim of the translator is to reproduce the whole function of the original without letting the audience realize that they are dealing with a text originally produced in the target language. The text is reproduced in such a way as to achieve the same effect on the audience in the target language as it did on the audience in the source language. In order to accomplish this aim, translator focuses on the pragmatic meaning ... and pragmatic equivalence” (Kallia, 2014).

The good translation of poems cannot be isolated from culture because cultural understanding during the process of translation is essential. So, we can state that pragmatic equivalence refers cultural equivalence. However, such culture-oriented translation is known to be one of the most challenging aspects of translation. Nida and Reyburn point out that: “In fact, difficulties arising out of differences of culture constitute the most serious problems for translators and have produced the most far-reaching misunderstandings among readers” (Nida & Reyburn, 1981).

To overcome the aforementioned problem, the attention given to pragmatic facts and principles in the course of poetry translation can help in translation of poetry and enhance the understanding of translation. “A good poetry translation is not simply concerned with transferring the content of the source language text but also with its pragmatic features. The pragmatic task of poetry translation aims at ensuring maximal equivalence with the original. In attempting to fill gaps in readers’ knowledge and fulfil their expectations of what is normal or acceptable, translator should be careful not to ‘overdo’ things by explaining too much and leaving the reader with nothing” (Baker, 2011). Here it is important to emphasize the role translator’s background knowledge on the culture of both source and target language.

### 3. Research Questions

In the paper the following questions will be considered for clarifying the topic:

What is background knowledge and its role in poetry translation?

How translator's background knowledge can influence the equivalence of original and translated poetry?

Which type of translation strategy was the most optimal in translating poetry to save the impact on the reader of the original?

### 4. Research Methods

To answer the above questions, translation of two Kazakh poems, which are native reader oriented and have many culture-specific words in original poems, were chosen for the analysis. The poems in the source language and target language were reviewed, compared and analyzed to reveal the influence of translator's background knowledge for achieving pragmatic equivalence. Special consideration was given to the culture-specific words in the poems of the source language that author had used to make an impact on Kazakh readers. Also, original poems and their translation were analyzed to define the ways the translator used for transferring the impact on readers of the original poems to the translated poems.

### 5. Findings

Foremost the concept of 'background knowledge' is going to be considered for defining its role in translation. 'Background knowledge' in Russian linguistics was first considered in detail in the book by E.M. Vereshchagin and V.G. Kostomarov "Language and Culture". In it, background knowledge is defined as "common to participants in the communicative act of knowledge" (Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 1973). In other words, this is the information common to communicants, which provides mutual understanding in communication. In subsequent works on linguistics and translation studies, the term itself and its definition were modified, but the essence remained the same. For the theory and practice of translation, only that part of the background knowledge that relates to phenomena specific to another culture and another country and which is necessary for the readers of the translated work is important, so that without loss in detail it is possible to assimilate its content. In this regard, V.S. Vinogradov uses the term 'background information', which, in his opinion, correlates with the concept of background knowledge. He defines the proposed concept: "Background information is a socio-cultural information characteristic only of a certain nation or nationality, mastered by the mass of their representatives and reflected in the language of a given national community. It is of fundamental importance that it is not just knowledge, for example, of the habits of animals living in only one geographical area, or the musical rhythms of a given ethnic group, or recipes for the preparation of national dishes, although all this in principle also forms part of the background knowledge, that knowledge (information) which are reflected in the national language, in its words and combinations." (Vinogradov, 2001)

Neither background knowledge, as a category more general, nor background information is something established once and for all. A certain part of them may lose over time, as it has become irrelevant and not receiving an application, but in general background information tends to constantly expand due to ever-growing contacts between peoples and their cultures.

Translation is one of the forms in which these contacts are made. Thus, the distribution of background information occurs through the translation, "especially through the translation of literature and, in particular, narrative

prose, as well as drama, where the background image actions are important real detail of material and social life, the nature of the treatment of people to each other, etc.” (Fedorov, 2002). Such details have names in the original and require names in translation. The question of the role of background knowledge in communication, and in particular translation is solved uniquely in most works on translation theory. Scientists wholeheartedly support the idea of the importance of having appropriate background knowledge among participants in the communicative process, including interlingual. L.S. Barkhudarov in the article “What should translator need to know?” he noted that the problem of ‘translation competence’ is important for the translation theory. Analyzing the mistakes that occur even among well-known masters of literary translation, he clearly demonstrates that one of the most important conditions for a deep and accurate understanding of the text by translators is their knowledge of the facts of objective reality (i.e. background knowledge) (Barkhudarov, 1978).

Translator's background knowledge and his/her familiarity with the actual situation described in the text are the most important elements of the translation competence. Some analyses of translations testify that translator's background knowledge plays the great role in translation. Sometimes background knowledge is the cause of many translation errors which lie on the ignorance or misunderstanding of objective reality described in the text by the translator, the other times it could be the key to successful translation when translator transfers the meaning and emotion of the original text that it could be considered as a masterpiece. In connection with the aforementioned, examples are going to be considered taken from M. Makataev's two poems ('Oh, my ancestors – a great many thanks to you' and 'Folk poem') in Kazakh and English languages.

The part of the poem 'Oh, my ancestors – a great many thanks to you' under consideration in the Kazakh language is:

Бабаларым, Рақмет сендерге  
Балаларым болмасын деп көр-кеуде,  
**Қобызыңмен** қосып ән мен тіл бердің,  
Өмірге мен мылқау болып енгенде.  
Бабаларым, Рақмет сендерге!  
**Жыраулардың** жазбай кеткен жырларын,  
Арулардың айтпай кеткен сырларын,  
**Қорқытыңның** қорқынышты мұң-зарын,  
**Қобызыңның** шанағынан тыңдадым.  
Құлазыған сенің құла түздерің,  
Не білмеген, не көрмеген, ізгі елім.  
Жазылмаған тарихымның жолдарын,  
Ауызекі **аңызыңнан** іздедім (Makataev, 1991)

Translation into English is as follows:

Oh, my ancestors – a great many thanks to you!  
When I came into this life blind, deaf and mute,  
Alongside my **musical instrument**, you gifted me with songs and speech,  
May your children not grow up bound and ignorant.  
My beloved ancestors – a great many thanks to you!  
The songs that by **bards** are yet to be writ,

The secrets yet to be uncovered of princess,  
The woeful tears and grief,  
Carried to me the sounds of the deep.  
Your lifeless, barren steppe,  
What have we not survived, seen or wept through, my scared land!  
The lines that are yet to be writ of my history,  
I found buried in the betrayals of your utterances (Makataev, 2016)

From the examples given, it is obvious that the translator has missed the specific Kazakh words like “қорқыт”, “аңыз” and some have been translated with corresponding lexical units as “қобыз” – “musical instrument”, “жырау” – “bard”. By omitting and using substitution of cultural specific words in translation the pragmatic impact on reader has weakened. As the researcher of M. Makataev’s works, B. Begmanova has noted that ‘M.Makataev’s poem ‘Oh, my ancestors – a great many thanks to you’ is his way of expressing his gratitude and showing his respect to the history and ancestors’, (Begmanova, 2015: 92) and in translation the reader cannot feel that.

Another example taken from M. Makataev’s poem ‘Folk poem’ translated into English language has virtues. The parts under analysis are the first and last stanzas of the poem and their translations.

The first reads as follows in the Kazakh language:

Қалқам,  
Мен Лермонтов, Пушкин де емес,  
Есенинмін демеймін ешкімге мен,  
Қазақтың **қара өлеңі** – құдіретім,  
Онда бір сұмдық сыр бар естілмеген. (Makataev, 2016)

Translation is as follows:

My dear,  
I – am no Lermontov, nor Pushkin.  
Nor have I told some I’m Esenin.  
Yet, Kazakh **folk poetry** is my strength.  
For, within, grand mysteries lie in its depth. (Makataev, 2016)

The last stanza in the Kazakh language:

Ақынмын деп қалай мен айта аламын,  
Халқымның өзі айтқанын қайталадым.  
... **Күпі** киген қазақтың қара өлеңін,  
**Шекпен** жауып, өзіне қайтарамын... (Makataev, 2016)

Translation into English is as follows:

How could I utter that I am a poet?  
I simply repeat – ‘twas my nation who told it.  
Dressed in **plain shirt** – the Kazakh folk poem,  
In **caftan** adorned, to him I return. (Makataev, 2016)

During translating these parts, the translator has used compensation technique for recreating the similar effect on target readers that original readers have. The Kazakh phrase “қараөлең” is translated to “folk poetry” which fully transferred the meaning and the translation of “күпі” as “plain shirt” and “шекпен” as “caftan” has been successful

because the translations have saved the effect of original text. From the translation of this poem, it could be stated that translator has good background knowledge since the translated poem has the similar impact on target language readers as source language reader has.

In connection to it, we can say that background knowledge is one of the most important determinants of translation activity already at the stage of perception of the source text when the translator acts as a Recipient. Adequate perception and understanding of the text by the translator depends on the knowledge of the features of culture and the history of the people in whose language the work was created.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the above analyses of poems it could be stated that by using background knowledge the translator can damage or refine translation. From the analyses of translations of poems, it is observed that when translator uses omissions of culture-specific words in translation he/she can preserve the general format of the poem which leads to the inequality of translation to the original, but when translator translates the culture-specific words by using right background knowledge the impact of the author of the original poem is saved in translation and helps to achieve the equivalence of translated and original poems. Although, excepting the parts that were omitted, the translation of the first poem is regarded to be satisfying the target language readers because the translations were completely reader-oriented. Therefore, by translating the culture-specific words that are the base of the local color of the original text and saving the meaning of these words, the translator has successfully used background knowledge and achieved the pragmatic equivalence of translated and original poems.

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