

## Transferring ecology-related culture-specific items: A diachronic and quantitative approach

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### Abstract

This article uses the Descriptive Translation Studies framework to examine the Turkish translations of *To A God Unknown* by John Steinbeck, with a view to reveal the diachronic distribution of translation methods formulated in the transfer of culture-specific items related to ecology through quantitative data. As a novel with its vivid descriptions of natural surroundings, the translations of it are expected to demonstrate the same ecological stance of the source text. This research examines a corpus consisting of one chapter from three translations of *To A God Unknown* conducted in 1955, 1985, 2019 for presenting the profile of the translations by comparing the translators' methods while translating ecology as a culture-specific item through a semantic categorization. The findings demonstrate that for these ecology-related items under the categories of flora, fauna, names of the places, land forms, weather conditions, and natural formations, literal translation is the most frequently adopted method in three translations followed by domestication and foreignization, respectively. The results show that the translators, especially the one translating the latest version, seem to be aware of the diversity and specificity of the ecological items in the source culture and try to transfer each one with ecological sensitivity to the target culture.

**Keywords:** Translating ecology, translation methods, translation of culture-specific items, domestication, foreignization.

## Ekolojiye ilişkin kültüre özgü öğelerin aktarımı: Tarihsel ve nicel bir yaklaşım

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Betimleyici Çeviribilim çerçevesinde, John Steinbeck'in *To A God Unknown* eserindeki ekolojiye ilişkin kültüre özgü öğelerin çevirisinde kullanılan çeviri yöntemlerinin dağılımlarını nicel verilerle tarihsel olarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Canlı çevre betimlerinin oldukça yoğun olduğu bu eserin çevirisinde de aynı ekolojik tutumun var olması beklenmektedir. Çalışmada, eserdeki bir bölümde kültüre özgü bir öğe olarak değerlendirilen ekolojiye ilişkin sözcükler, 1955, 1985 ve 2019 yılında yapılmış olan üç çeviride, anlam kategorilerine ayrılarak karşılaştırılmıştır. Ekolojiye ilişkin unsurlar flora, fauna, yer adları, doğal oluşum, hava ve iklim koşulları ve doğal afet kategorileri altında incelenmiştir. Çalışmanın bulguları, üç ayrı dönemin çevirisinde en fazla sözcüğü sözcüğüne çeviri yönteminin kullanıldığını ve bunu sırasıyla yerleştirme ve yabancılaştırma yöntemlerinin takip ettiğini göstermiştir. Sonuçlar, çevirmenlerin, özellikle 2019'daki çeviriyi yapan çevirmenin,

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kaynak kültürdeki ekolojik unsurların çeşitliliğinin ve özelliklerinin bilincinde olduğunu ve bu unsurları hedef kültüre ekolojik duyarlılıkla aktarma çabasında olduklarını ortaya koymuştur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Ekoloji çevirisi, çeviri yöntemleri, kültüre özgü öğelerin çevirisi, yerileştirme, yabancılaştırma.

## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of this century, more and more academic disciplines have been including ‘ecology’ in their study fields which yields to the “ecological turn” (Stibbe, 2015, p. 7). Cronin (2017) explored the importance of the ecological turn for the practice and study of translation which is one of these multi-disciplinary disciplines in relation to environmental studies. In order to foreground the relationship between translation studies and environmental studies, Jianzhong stated that “there is an innate relation between translation and ecology, thus leading to the emergence of a new discipline, translation ecology, which not only bridges natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities but also offers new perspectives for translation studies”(in Cao, 2011, p. 89).

Translation studies regard ecology as a notion that can be investigated in order to reveal whether ecological considerations are capable of influencing translation choices of translators and preserve the text’s existing stance towards the environment. Within the framework of an ecocritical approach to literary translation studies, as Aksoy (2020, p. 2) put forth, “translated texts are now regarded as the space where the existence and treatment of ecological concerns in the source text have either been expressed or subdued in relation to the cultural environment in which the translated text is allowed to exist”.

From this perspective, presenting the relationship between translation and ecology, and investigating the ecology-based culture-bound words in terms of the strategies adopted by the translators can be a contributing dimension. Translation plays an important role in creating ecologically beneficial target texts and, according to Klaver (2018, p. 22), it requires substantial changes on the source text and adopting domestication strategies rather than foreignization. The intercultural transfer of ecology-related cultural words has an effect on the environmental literacy of the readers, and it influences the increase in the environmental awareness of the target group. In order to achieve this, translators either choose to adopt different techniques such as literal translation, by finding the exact equivalence of the term in the source text, or, domestication strategies by using the terms conforming to the target language culture, or foreignization strategies by deliberately creating foreignness for the target reader.

Within this framework, this study intends to provide a clear picture of the strategies adopted for the translation of ecology-related cultural terms by three different translators of *To A God Unknown* conducted in three different years, thus revealing the diachronic distribution of these translation methods through quantitative data.

## 2. Theoretical background: Translation of culture-specific items

According to Duranti (1997), culture is “something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and, of course, through linguistic communication” (p. 24). Similarly, Newmark (1988) defined culture as “the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression” (p. 94). Both statements reaffirm the reality that language is an integral part of

culture, and that each language has its own cultural features. Vermeer (1992) clarified the relationship between culture and translation: “Translation involves linguistic as well as cultural phenomena and processes and therefore is a cultural as well as linguistic procedure, and as language, now understood as a specific language, is part of a specific culture, translation is to be understood as a ‘cultural’ phenomenon dealing with specific cultures: translation is a culture transcending process” (p. 40).

Axielá (1996) proposed the following definition that embodies culture-specific items (CSI) as a translation challenge depending on the nonexistence of the referred item in the receiving culture: “A CSI does not exist of itself, but as the result of a conflict arising from any linguistically represented reference in a source text which, when transferred to a target language, poses a translation problem due to the nonexistence or to the different value of the given item in the target language culture” (p. 57).

Within the framework of the translation of cultural words, phrases, and notions, Nida and Taber (1964, 1969) provided classifications of cultural terms according to five major fields: ecology, material culture, social culture, ideological culture, and linguistic culture. Later, Newmark (1988) categorized the culturally-bound words as: ecology such as flora, fauna, hills; material culture such as food, clothes, towns; social culture such as work and leisure; organizations, customs, activities, procedures; and gestures and habits.

Different theorists have provided different procedures of translating culture-specific concepts. Harvey (2000), for instance, offered four major techniques for translating these terms: functional equivalence which implies using a referent in the target culture whose function is similar to that of the source language referent; formal equivalence or linguistic equivalence, i.e. a word-for-word translation; transcription or borrowing; descriptive or self-explanatory translation. Newmark, (1988, pp. 82-91) on the other hand, proposed different translation procedures which are transference, naturalization, cultural equivalent, descriptive equivalent, and componential analysis. As used in the study of Yetkiner, Yavuz, and Duman (2018) these methods, adopted in translating culture-bound words and expressions, can be categorized under three main headings: literal translation, domestication, and foreignization. They proposed that synonymy, limited universalism, absolute universalism, paraphrase, adaptation, omission, explicitation, and componential analysis can be considered as the sub-types of domestication method, while extratextual and intratextual gloss, transcription, repetition, calque, couplets, triplets, and loan words can be regarded as the sub-types of foreignization method (p. 67).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Selection of the material

The source text drawn upon in this study is John Steinbeck’s *To A God Unknown*, the reason of which is mainly Steinbeck’s close connection with nature since birth. As Hart (1997) stated: “The early Steinbeck was a writer of the land and its natural inhabitants, morally disposed to the preservation of nature’s integrity. He was, in his thinking and work, both a functional part of nature and a student of nature” (p. 45). As the main focus of this study is to investigate the transfer of ecology-related terms from English into Turkish, this novel was found to be appropriate as it describes the chief character of the novel, Joseph Wayne’s relation to nature and his passion for it; therefore, it is rich in terms of descriptions of the surrounding environment, mainly that of California. The novel begins with Wayne’s moving to California, in the Valley of Nuestra Señora, settling down, and establishing a new homestead full of descriptions of the land, its scenery, fertility, mystery, and the animals.

In order to compare and contrast the methods selected for the translation of ecology-related culture-specific items, the Turkish translations under the same title, *Bilinmeyen Bir Tanrıya*, by Filiz Karabey in 1955 published by Varlık Publishing, Mehmet Harmanlı by Bilgi Publishing, and Ezgi Kardelen in 2019 by Sel Publishing are selected.

### 3.2. Data analysis

With the aim of investigating the methods used in translating the ecology-related culture-specific items in three translations of *To A God Unknown*, this study employs a descriptive design with a quantitative approach. Initially, the first ten chapters are selected which are regarded as representative, given its rich descriptions of the natural surroundings with a variety of ecological terms. The chapters are read from the source text and the target texts thoroughly by the researcher in order to highlight all the ecology-related cultural terms. Then, the terms are put under six different semantic categories which are flora, fauna, names of the places, land forms, weather conditions, and natural formations.

Following the semantic categorization, a comparative study is conducted for revealing the methods; namely, literal, domestication, and foreignization, all benefited by the three different translators.

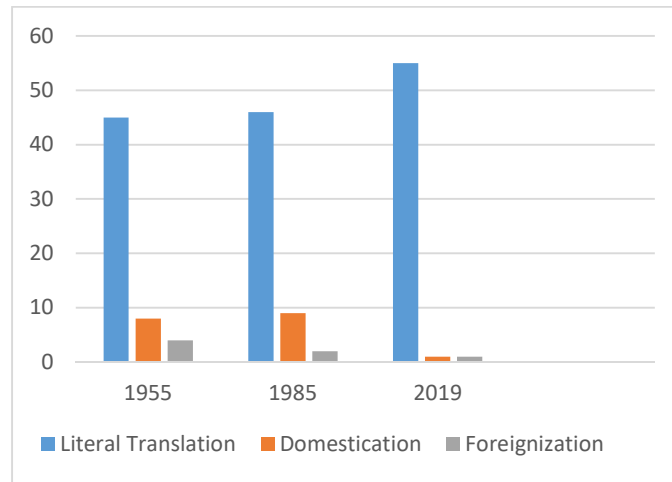
The results are presented quantitatively through a chart and a table and some interesting instances are provided to comment on the reasons, consequences, and effects of the selection of a particular method.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Diachronic distribution of translation methods

It is found in the corpus that there are 57 ecology-related terms in total. As it is presented in Figure 1, the literal translation strategy is the mostly adopted one in all the three translations with 45 instances in 1955, 46 in 1985, and 55 in 2019 – clearly setting a rising trend in terms of application.

**Figure 1.** Diachronic Distribution of Translation Methods



In the latest translation, nearly all of the ecology-related cultural terms are translated through literal translation method, except for two instances. ‘Live oak’ is translated as ‘Virginia meşesi’ (Virginia oak) using foreignization; while in the 1985 translation, the translator chooses to benefit from adaptation by using the absolute universalism strategy and yielded ‘ağaç’ (tree), which is an overgeneralizing term.

Yet, in the 1955 translation, the same term is translated through foreignization as ‘yaprak dökmeyen meşe’ (the evergreen oak) by using the intratextual gloss strategy. In the latter two translations, the method used results in the loss of biodiversity and hinders the transfer of this environmental information to the target reader. The second term, not translated through literal translation in the latest translation is ‘madrone tree’, yielded as ‘kocayemiş ağacı’ (strawberry or madrona tree). As ‘madrone’ is of Spanish origin and phonetically resembling ‘Madrid’, it is transferred to the target text in the 1955 and 1985 translations through foreignization, and transcription strategy as a subtype. However, there is no term which is omitted in the text translated in 2019.

As for the translation conducted in 1985, there are 46 terms translated through literal translation, 9 with domestication, and 2 with foreignization. For example, ‘python’ is domesticated as ‘yılan’ (snake) by using absolute universalism strategy, which is also the case in the translation in 1955. However, in the 2019 version, it is yielded as ‘piton’, which is a family of very large nonvenomous snakes. Again it is only in the latest version that the translator provides the exact term in the target culture, while the two previous translations prevent the reader from imagining the scenery described and grasping the exact meaning of the source item. As another instance, the term ‘trout’ is translated as ‘sazan balığı’ (carp) by replacing the source term with a different type of fish species. On the other hand, it is translated in 2019 and 1955 as ‘alabalık’ by providing the exact equivalence in the target language. There are 2 terms omitted in the target text in 1985, which are ‘underbrush’ and ‘meadow’.

When it comes to the translation conducted in 1955, there are 45 terms translated through literal translation, 8 with domestication, and 4 with foreignization. An example for domestication is ‘boar’, although it is translated in the latest translation as ‘yaban domuzu’, the exact equivalence of the source term, in 1955 and also in 1985, it is yielded as ‘domuz’ (pig) again by adopting absolute universalism which results in the loss of ecological diversity in the target texts. Another interesting example in the 1955 version is the translation of ‘California’. Despite the fact that all the names of the places are transferred to the target text directly without any change, ‘California’ was translated as ‘Kalifornia’ in 1955 by benefiting from adaptation method and transcription strategy as a sub-type, while it is transferred as ‘California’ by using foreignization method in the other translations. There are 2 terms omitted in the target text translated in 1955 which are ‘wild oats’ and ‘canary mustard flower’.

#### ***4.2. Distribution of culture-specific items related to ecology in terms of semantic categories***

Following the investigation of the selected chapter, it is revealed that most of the ecology-related terms are categorized under ‘flora’ as a semantic category and related to the plants and all about the plant life. Flora is followed by ‘fauna’ which is all about the animals in a given geographic location, ‘natural formations’ such as star, wind, moon, sun, etc., ‘land forms’ such as valley, island, sea, etc., ‘names of places’, either common or proper nouns, and ‘weather conditions’ such as rain, thunder, etc. The methods in the translation of these semantic categories are provided in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Distribution of ecology-related items in terms of semantic categories and the strategies adopted for their translations

		Literal Translation	Domestication	Foreignization
2019	Flora	20	1	1
	Fauna	13		
	Natural formations	9		
	Land forms	6		
	Names	5		
	Weather conditions	2		
1985	Flora	15	6	1
	Fauna	10	3	
	Natural formations	9		
	Land forms	6		
	Names	5		
	Weather conditions	2		
1955	Flora	15	3	5
	Fauna	10	3	
	Natural formations	9		
	Land forms	6		
	Names	4		1
	Weather conditions	2		

As it can be observed from Table 1, literal translation is adopted overwhelmingly for the translation of the ecology-related terms in all the semantic categories found in the novel. This strategy, along with foreignization, helps readers enrich their environmental knowledge by adding to their ecological terminology. Despite the incidence of domestication in all the three works, the results demonstrate that as translators approach present-day, they tend to achieve more accuracy in terms of ecological equivalences and, as such appeal more to the reader.

## 5. Conclusion

This diachronic study targets at revealing the distribution of translation methods adopted in the transfer of culture-specific items related to ecology in the three translations of *To a God Unknown* conducted in 1955, 1985, and 2019. Being a novel famous for its vivid descriptions of natural surroundings, just like the other works of John Steinbeck, the translations of it are expected to demonstrate the same ecological stance of the source text.

The analysis of methods and strategies adopted in the translation of culture-specific items related to ecology in a chapter of the novel reveals that literal translation is highly preferred when compared to other methods - domestication and foreignization – to illustrate ecological diversity and specificity. In terms of the semantic categories of the culture-specific items related to ecology, there are a number of terms that can be categorized under flora, fauna, names of places, land forms, weather conditions, and natural formations. Accordingly, it is shown here that the latest translation scores the highest number of culture-specific items related to ecology, translated literally.

Obviously, whereas a more thorough analysis of the precise differences among the three translations calls for a glimpse into their linguistic and stylistic preferences as well, the present work is a fair representation of the differences by focusing on a major chapter in *To A God Unknown*, and with consideration of the goal which is examining the methods adopted in translating ecology-related culture-specific items.

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