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UNVEILING THE UNSEEN: THE CHALLENGE OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONCEPTUAL UNTRANSLATABLES

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This article aims to explore the significant challenges posed by phenomenological untranslatables while also emphasizing their role as cultural phenomena. Phenomenological untranslatables are typically associated with a specific cultural, historical, or social context, and their meanings are shaped by the unique experiences of the community that uses them. They encode complex elements of human perception, emotions, or phenomena that do not have direct equivalents in other languages. Yet, the absence of direct linguistic equivalents should not be misconstrued as the absence of shared human experiences. By employing a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses linguistics, cognitive science, and cultural studies, we have conducted an analysis of the conceptual framework underlying this type of lexis and identified macro- and micro-conceptual attributes that may necessitate various verbalizations in different cultural and contextual settings.

Keywords: *phenomenological concepts, scripts, untranslatables, culture, conceptual attributes*

Introduction

Recently there has been a growing trend towards combining different veins of research and different types of data in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of problems and ensure a greater level of systematicity than would otherwise be impossible with either approach alone. A good example of this integrated approach is cognitive research into the nature of the process of translation.

In a recent publication, an introduction to the volume on translation and cognition, Ana López and Marina Ramos Caro wrote that "...after so many years closing in on our quarry, something we know for certain is that translating — or language use, for that matter — is a fuzzy phenomenon that escapes easy definitions and categorizations. However, the latest trends in



translation studies opened new avenues of research into what the process of translation is and how to approach some of the traditional problems of translation" (Lopez & Caro, 2022).

The Cognitive Theory of Translation (CTT) is a relatively new area of research within translation studies that has developed in the last few decades. It is a theoretical framework that aims to explain the mental processes involved in translation. It is based on the premise that translation is a cognitive activity that relies on the translator's background knowledge and experience. Seminal works of Ernst-August Gutt (Gutt, 1991), Peter Kussmaul (Kussmaul, 1995), Sanda Halverson (Halverson, 2010), Christiane Nord (Nord, 1997), Yves Gambier (Gambier, 2014), Hans-Werner and Karl-Heinz Sandrock (Dechert & Sandrock, 2011), Lucia Sorace (Sorace, 2011), Ehrensberger-Dow and Birgitta Englund-Dimitrova (Ehrensberger-Dow & Englund-Dimitrova, 2016), John W. Schwieter and Aline Ferreira (Schwieter & Ferreira 2017) and Adolfo M. García (García, 2020) allowed for important theoretical breakthroughs that open new avenues of research in translation studies into:

- the role of representations, one of the key insights of the cognitive theory of translation. Researchers have found that translators use mental representations of the source text and the target language to guide their translation decisions.

- the use of cognitive cultural models. Cognitive theorists have developed cognitive models to explain how translators perform tasks, including models of text comprehension, memory, and translation problem-solving.

- the role of knowledge *per se*. The cognitive theory of translation highlights the importance of knowledge, including cultural knowledge, in the translation process.

- the impact of cognitive limitations. The cognitive theory of translation also takes into account the limitations of the human mind, such as working memory capacity and attention, and their impact on the translation process.

- the role of experience and expertise. The cognitive theory of translation recognizes the role of expertise in the translation process, and how experience and training can affect mental processes involved in translation.

The Russian school of cognitive translation studies continues to expand, reflecting the ongoing research and discussions among scholars and researchers working in this area. Seminal works of Geliy Chernov (Chernov, 2016), Vadim Sdobnikov (Sdobnikov, 2010), and Alexander Minchenkov (Minchenkov, 2011) have made a valuable contribution to the cognitive translation studies exploring the role of various cognitive factors including perception, memory, and attention, and their impact on translation and interpreting. Russian scholars have also developed computational models of translation that can simulate cognitive processes involved in translation and improve our understanding of how these processes occur and interact. More recent works, such as those of Vera Zobotkina (2021a, 2021b), and Irina Remkhe et al. (Remkhe et al., 2016; Remkhe & Nefedova, 2022) have further explored the application of cognitive linguistics principles and cognitive sci-



ence methodologies to translation and interpreting, highlighting the importance of the cognitive aspects of translation beyond linguistic and cultural differences.

Recent research elsewhere on the cognitive aspects of translation has expanded to cover a wide range of new topics and perspectives. According to Fabio Alves and Amparo Hurtado Albir (Alves et al. 2015; 2017; 2020), this field of research has advanced significantly since earlier studies that focused mainly on the cognitive effort involved in translation. Current research topics include the role of conceptual analysis in translation, conceptual distance and overlap, conceptual blending and integration, among other cognitive mechanisms. Significant contributions have been made to the study of cognitive aspects of translation by several recent works. In *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Cognition* (Alves, Jakobsen, 2020), contributors offer an overview of current research on the cognitive processes involved in translation. Schwieter and Ferreira's edited volume "Psycholinguistic and Cognitive Inquiries into Translation and Interpreting", brings together a range of interdisciplinary research investigating not only cognitive but also psycholinguistic processes involved in translation and interpreting. The articles of the volume cover a wide range of topics such as bilingualism, cognitive control, working memory, attentional mechanisms, and emotion in translation and interpreting. The contributors employ a variety of research methods, including behavioural experiments, neuroimaging techniques, and computational modelling to explore the cognitive and psycholinguistic aspects of translation and interpreting. Kaiming Xiao and Rafael Muñoz's article "Cognitive Translation Studies: Models and Methods at the Cutting Edge" offers a comprehensive and insightful overview of the current trends and challenges in cognitive translation studies and highlights the need for a more interdisciplinary approach to translation that draws on cognitive science, psychology, and linguistics to investigate translation processes and outcomes (Xiao & Muñoz, 2020). These authors have made significant contributions to the field of cognitive translation studies and have helped to advance our understanding of the role of conceptual analysis in translation.

Within the field of cognitive translation studies, this article aims to explore the conceptual structures of phenomenological untranslatables with a particular focus on their micro-attributes. Phenomenology can contribute a lot to the field of translation studies. Firstly, phenomenological analysis can shed light on how translators perceive, interpret, and navigate the multiple layers of meaning, cultural elements, and linguistic choices in the process of rendering the text in the target language. Translators become more aware of the cultural and linguistic frameworks that shape their understanding of the text. Secondly, phenomenology encourages the exploration of the implicit, which can be particularly relevant in translation. Translators tend to rely on their intuitive interpretation of language and culture, and phenomenological analysis can make these implicit processes more explicit and accessible for reflection and improvement. Finally, translation is a cross- and transcultural process, and phenomenology can assist in examining the dynamics of cross-cultural understanding and how individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds engage with and interpret texts.



Research Results

The degree of untranslatability refers to the extent to which a word or phrase in one language is challenging to translate into another language without losing its essential meaning, cultural connotations, or emotional charge. Untranslatability is not an absolute concept; it exists along a continuum, and the degree of untranslatability can vary for different words or word combinations. Several factors increase the degree of untranslatability: cultural specificity, context dependency (in some contexts, a word might be translatable, but in others, it becomes untranslatable due to cultural or situational factors), connotations, emotional or affective value and conceptual (hence semantic gaps).

There are many types of untranslatables: cultural untranslatables proper (words denoting objects deeply embedded in the cultural context of the source); linguistic untranslatable (puns, wordplay, or unique grammatical structures, that do not have direct equivalents in another language); relational untranslatables (relationships and roles within families, societies, or communities, and they may not have direct counterparts in another language); spatial or environmental untranslatables (words related to specific geographic or environmental features, which may not exist in the target culture) and many others.

In this paper, we focus on *phenomenological untranslatables* – linguistic expressions that convey complex sensory or perceptual experiences, intertwined with a particular culture; they present exceptional challenges when it comes to their translation into another language while retaining their profound cognitive and cultural characteristics. From cognitive and translation perspectives, it is important to understand how these conceptual structures are organized, and verbalized in a given language. It is the *complexity of their conceptual structure, often resembling a script rather than an individual concept, that makes these sensory, or perceptual events and experiences a challenge* for the translator. Phenomenological untranslatables may involve the use of multiple words or sentences in the target language, additional explanation, or extended discourse to convey the intricacies of their meaning.

Let us take, for instance, one of the most untranslatable words *Ilunga*, a Bantu word that means ‘a person who is ready to forgive any abuse for the first time, to tolerate it a second time, but never a third time’ (<https://www.definitions.net/definition/ilunga>). The conceptual structure of *Ilunga* involves multiple elements, including participants (the abuser and the victim), actions (the act of abuse, forgiveness, and tolerance and resistance), and temporal relations (the repetition of the offense, the first offense is forgiven, the second is tolerated, but the third is not; and the threshold of tolerance). All elements are essential in conveying the meaning of the word, however micro-conceptual elements (the threshold for repeated offenses, and the importance of forgiveness and tolerance) are *critically important* in the frame of *Ilunga*.

Conceptual scripts of a similar complexity form the basis of the Swedish *gökotta* (a dawn picnic to hear the first birdsong; the act of rising in the early



morning to watch the birds or to go outside to appreciate nature); Finnish *kalsarikännit* (literally 'drinking in one's underwear at home', conveys the feeling of enjoyment of a quiet night at home with no distractions or obligations, and to simply unwind with a drink and have some leisure time; taking a break from the stresses of daily life); German *Gemütlichkeit* (a feeling of comfort, cosiness, good cheer and desirable quality, is often associated with the idea of spending time with friends and family in a relaxed and enjoyable setting); Norwegian *utepils* (the first drink of the year taken out of doors, offers hope that better days are coming); Danish *hygge* (a feeling of comfort, warmth, and cosiness, often in the presence of good company, is often associated with simple pleasures, such as spending time with loved ones, enjoying good food and drink, or relaxing in a warm, inviting atmosphere); Hebrew *Dugri* (describes a sense of frankness and openness, and is often used to describe someone who is straightforward in their speech and actions).

From the cognitive point of view, phenomenological untranslatables pose several challenges. They encode a *complex of conceptual attributes (referential, sensory, emotional, and cultural) organized in a macro frame* unique to a particular language and culture. Hence, the need for a much deeper understanding of the micro-conceptual attributes that are essential for conveying the meaning of the word.

Conceptual analysis provides new perspectives on the translation process and contributes to the traditional views of translation as a linguistic task (Zobotkina & Boyarskaya, 2022). In our research, we refer to and also go beyond the conceptual level and analyze the micro-attributes constituting a conceptual (hence nominative) phenomenological lacuna.

The structure of a concept refers to the organization and representation of knowledge or understanding about a particular entity or category in the mind. It includes the properties, attributes, relationships, and associations that are used to define and understand it. Within the structure of any concept, attributes interact and influence each other; the combination and conceptual 'weight' of attributes vary between cultures and individuals. The way attributes are categorized and classified can have an impact on the way the concept is perceived and communicated, especially in the process of translation.

We posit that there are several distinct groups of attributes that can be identified at the micro-conceptual level. One way to approach the classification of attributes is by considering their level of specificity or universality. *Universal attributes* encode shared fragments of the conceptual worldview, while *culture-specific attributes* are characteristic or unique to representatives of a particular culture. *Individual attributes*, on the other hand, are based on personal experiences, memories, and associations related to the concept. This classification can help identify which attributes are likely to cause difficulty in translation, especially when dealing with culture-specific or individual attributes that may not have equivalents in the target language.

Another principle of classifying attributes is based on their relevance and stability within the conceptual structure. According to the degree of centrality, we distinguished *central attributes*, which are essential to the concept



and never change without fundamentally altering the concept, and *peripheral attributes*, which are less essential and can change without altering the concept. According to the degree of mutability, conceptual attributes can be *mutable and immutable*. *Mutable attributes* can change over time or in a different context, while *immutable attributes* remain stable. This classification can be useful for identifying which attributes require more attention and more cognitive effort in the process of translation and which can be adjusted to fit the target language and culture. In addition, attributes can also be classified according to their inferential potential, and ontological and axiological characteristics. *Attributes with high inferential potential* can lead to further implications and inferences, while those with *low inferential potential* do not. Ontological attributes can be categorized as *category attributes*, *telic attributes*, or *temporal attributes* based on their physical, functional, or temporal characteristics.

Finally, attributes can be classified as *emotive and evaluative* based on their emotional associations or value judgments. A thorough understanding of the typology of attributes can help verbalize phenomenological concepts and the scope of the sensory and perceptual experiences they structure.

To demonstrate the benefits of this approach, let us give an example from Finnish – the noun *sisu*, denoting one of the key phenomenological concepts of Finnish culture, which describes a unique complex of sensory and perceptual experiences tied to the specific cultural context. *Sisu* is used to describe a particular feeling of resilience or tenacity. It is often translated as ‘perseverance’ but has a much deeper cultural meaning in Finnish. *Sisu* is considered a central part of Finnish identity and is associated with the feeling of determination, courage, and stoicism, particularly in the face of adversity. The concept is believed to have developed as a result of Finland’s harsh climate and difficult history, which required its people to be resilient to challenges. *Sisu* has gained international recognition in recent years, with many people around the world seeking to understand and incorporate *sisu* into their own lives.

The noun *sisu* has been the object of numerous research works (Aho, 1994; Stoller, 1996; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004; Taramaa, 2009, etc.). Still, the concept it verbalizes has a highly complex structure and is so multilayered that even native speakers differ in their interpretation of it. Some define it as the feeling of determination and stoicism and, others as resilience or bravery. Emilia Lahti, one of the most well-known researchers on *sisu*, defines the meaning of the noun in a descriptive way saying that “*sisu* is a special quality, a feeling that is reserved for especially challenging moments... when we feel that we came to the end point of our preconceived capacities... *sisu* is energy, determination in the face of adversities that are more demanding than usual” (Lahti, 2013). In her latest work, “*Embodied Fortitude: An Introduction to the Finnish Construct of Sisu*”, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis to investigate the portrayal of *sisu* in Finnish culture and posited that *sisu* shares some characteristics with psychological traits such as perseverance and courage, and, but its most prominent aspect is its ability to access untapped *inner energy reserves* that are partially embodied rather than purely mental (Lahti, 2019).



Sisu exemplifies a nominative lacuna in other languages (the term used by Minchenkov, 2011), the translation of which into another language requires a thorough analysis at the macro-, and, especially, micro levels. According to “Suomen kielen etymologinen sanakirja”, the etymology of the Finnish word *sisu* is uncertain. It may be related to the Finno-Ugric root **sečä-* which means "to cut" or "to split". Another possible root is the Baltic-Finnic **šišu-* which refers to the interior of something. However, there is no conclusive evidence for either theory. According to lexicographers, the word *sisu* has two meanings in Finnish:

1. *Fin.* sitkeä, hellittämätön tahdonvoima, sinnikkyys, lannistumattomuus; uskallus, rohkeus — <https://www.kielitoimistonsanakirja.fi/#/sisu?searchMode=all> (Eng. persistence, willpower, perseverance; boldness, courage)
2. *Fin.* (kiivas, paha, kova) luonto, luonteenlaatu. (Eng. fierce, evil, hard nature or character) <https://www.kielitoimistonsanakirja.fi/#/sisu?searchMode=all>

The idea behind *sisu* is inner energy to continue pushing forward in difficult circumstances against all odds, and to have the inner strength and resolve to see it through to the end. In translation, *sisu* is a challenging concept to verbalize because it encompasses a complex combination of conceptual attributes, each of which is deeply rooted in Finnish culture. Though traditionally described as a combination of determination, perseverance, bravery, and resilience, it also ingrains elements of stoicism and self-sufficiency. However, these translations often do not fully reflect the depth and cultural significance of *sisu*, as it encompasses a unique blend of traits and feelings that are deeply tied to Finnish identity, the country's history, and cultural heritage. No wonder that in some cases *sisu* is left untranslated. For instance, a well-known and very popular AI-based language learning platform Duolingo offers the English translation of '*sisukas nainen*' as '*a woman with sisu*' without even attempting to translate it for obvious reasons.

For non-native speakers of Finnish, *sisu* may be considered somewhat ambiguous or even vague, as it is a complex cultural concept that allows for multiple interpretations. Additionally, there is a certain degree of subjectivity in the interpretation of *sisu*, as different people may attach different meanings or emphasis to its core characteristics. This may lead to numerous interpretations of what *sisu* is, making it difficult to provide a clear and nuanced translation. Moreover, 'too much' *sisu* can also lead to a refusal to accept defeat or acknowledge when it is time to stop and make a change. This can result in pragmatically wrong persevering in a losing battle or continuing down a harmful path even when it is clear that the outcome will not be favourable. *Sisu* can be interpreted as both 'inflexible' and 'rigid', leading to a lack of adaptability and an inability to change course when necessary. Therefore, while *sisu* is often perceived as a positive quality, it is important to recognize that it can also have negatively evaluated attributes.

The analysis of numerous examples from the Finnish corpora shows that the concept of *sisu* has several attributes varying in the degree of conceptual salience:

- universal attributes — perseverance, courage/bravery, resilience, and determination



- culture-specific attributes – strong association with the Finnish identity and national character, stoicism
- individual attributes – personal experiences, memories, and associations related to *sisu* such as personal challenges overcome through *sisu*
- central attributes – perseverance, courage/bravery, resilience, and determination
- peripheral attributes – specific situations in which *sisu* is used
- immutable attributes – perseverance, courage/bravery, resilience, and determination
- mutable attributes – the degree of difficulty of a challenge
- attributes having high inferential potential – further implications and inferences, such as the connection between *sisu* and mental health
- attributes having low inferential potential – physical strength, self-sufficiency
- ontological attributes – attributes that are categorized as category attributes, telic attributes, or temporal attributes based on their physical, functional, or temporal characteristics, such as the energetic and dynamic nature of *sisu*.
- axiological attributes – emotive and evaluative attributes based on their emotional associations and value judgments, such as all positive and negative connotations of *sisu*, stubbornness, a rigid and inflexible mindset

These attributes are often intertwined with one another to form the core of the conceptual structure. Other attributes, for instance, stubbornness, have a lesser conceptual 'weight'. Generally speaking, *sisu* is a combination of positively evaluated attributes encoding determination, courage/bravery, resilience, and perseverance, whereas stubbornness is typically seen as an unwillingness to change one's opinions, attitudes, or actions even in the face of new circumstances or reasons to do so. *Sisu* means sticking to one's beliefs with a purpose and a positive attitude, whereas stubbornness is more often associated with negative inflexibility. Examples from the Finnish corpora illustrate the way different types of conceptual attributes come to the fore and may require verbalization since *sisu* is an ambivalent cultural concept:

1. Determination: "Hän kamppaili sisulla ja päättäväisyydellä läpi kaiken, kunnes hän saavutti tavoitteensa." (He/she struggled through everything with determination and commitment until he/she achieved his/her goals.)

2. Resilience: "Sisullaan ja joustavuudellaan hän selvisi läpi elämän vaikeimpien aikojen." (With his/her resilience and flexibility, he/she made it through the toughest times in life.)

3. Perseverance: "Sisullaan hän jatkoi matkaansa, vaikka tie oli täynnä esteitä." (With his/her perseverance, he/she continued his/her journey despite the road being full of obstacles.)

4. Courage: "Hänen sisunsa näytti, kun hän puolusti uskonsa ja arvojaan vaikeassa tilanteessa." (His/her courage showed when he/she defended his/her beliefs and values in a difficult situation.)

5. Commitment: "Hänen järkkymätön sisunsa haasteiden edessä osoitti hänen sitoutumisensa tavoitteiden saavuttamiseen." (His/her unwavering determination in the face of challenges showed his/her commitment to achieving his/her goals.)



6. Stubbornness: "Hänen sisukkuutensa johti hänet pysymään vanhoissa tottumuksissaan, vaikka kaikki ympärillä muuttuisi." (His/her stubbornness led him/her to stick to his/her old habits, even as everything around him/her changed.)

The analysis of concepts at the micro-level can help resolve ambiguity and vagueness in translation by providing additional information about attributes that are not immediately evident in the lexicographic description. By taking into account the different conceptual attributes associated with a concept, the translator can gain a deeper understanding of the intended meaning and choose a more appropriate decision on which attribute of a complex conceptual structure should be verbalized in each particular case. Resolving the problem of nominative lacunas in translation is still a challenging task since these words may have multiple senses, connotations, and associations that are not easily transferred to another culture. The reference to micro-conceptual attributes in translation can help bridge the gap between the mental and the verbalized.

Conclusion

The study of phenomenological lacunas provides insights into the interplay between language, cognition, and culture. Through this exploration, we gain a deeper understanding of how different cultures categorize and represent sensory or perceptual experiences, offering a window into the complexity of human perception and cultural diversity. This field of research underscores the relationship between linguistic and conceptual structures, cognitive mechanisms, and the representation of sensory phenomena.

For translators confronted with the challenge of translating the untranslatable, the pursuit of conceptual equivalents in the target language emerges as a vital solution. Yet, the reality of translating phenomenological untranslatables comes with the awareness that a loss of cultural specificity is almost inevitable. Hence translators face the challenging task of deciding which attribute(s) of the concept should be verbalized and which should be sacrificed in translation. These decisions require a delicate balance between preserving the essence of the concept and adapting it to the target culture.

In conclusion, the study of phenomenological untranslatables enhances our comprehension of the complex relationships between language, perception, and culture. It equips translators with the tools and insights needed to navigate across languages the complex task of conveying sensory and perceptual experiences, recognizing that while some nuances may be lost or manipulated, the essence of these experiences can still be shared and appreciated in the world of diverse languages and cultures.

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ОТКРЫВАЯ НЕВИДИМОЕ: ПРОБЛЕМА ПЕРЕВОДА ФЕНОМЕНОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ЛАКУН

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Анализируется проблема перевода феноменологических номинативных лакун. Данный тип лексики неразрывно связан с определенным культурным, историческим или социальным контекстом, а значения формируются под влиянием уникального



опыта сообщества, которое их использует. Феноменологические номинативные лакуны кодируют сложные элементы человеческого восприятия, эмоции или явления, которые не имеют прямых эквивалентов в других языках. Однако отсутствие прямых языковых эквивалентов не должно восприниматься как отсутствие общего человеческого опыта. Используя междисциплинарный подход, включающий лингвистику, когнитивистику и культурологию, авторы статьи осуществляют анализ концептуальных основ данного типа лексики. Выявлены макро- и микроконцептуальные признаки, которые по-разному вербализуются или не вербализуются в различных контекстуальных условиях.

Ключевые слова: феноменологические концепты, скрипты, непереваемость, культура, концептуальные признаки

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