

THE PECULIARITIES OF TRANSLATING “JAN” REALIA. A CASE STUDY OF THE ARMENIAN FILM “I AM”

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to examine the translation peculiarities of the Armenian realia “ჯანი” (jan) and to explore the ways in which it is rendered in English. Drawing on a contrastive analysis of 34 occurrences of jan in the Armenian film Yes Em (“I Am”) alongside its English subtitle translation, this study investigates how culturally embedded terms function across languages. In Armenian, jan serves as a vocative marker imbued with emotional and relational nuances that convey affection, familiarity, and politeness. The paper discusses how various translation strategies, including omission, loan, transposition, and substitution, are employed (or misapplied) in subtitling, highlighting the challenges in preserving linguistic identity and cultural integrity in audiovisual translation.

Key words: realia, linguo-culture, strategy, loan, omission, substitution, transposition, text integrity.

Introduction

In the cross-cultural world very often we come across concepts that are specific and typical of only one language and culture, known by the term “realia”. Although the translation study has thoroughly defined the term “realia”, the latter is still considered one of the most controversial and problematic elements of the language and culture.

Various scholars suggest different definitions of the term realia which are similar, close, or identical. They differ in the degree of abstraction and depth of details. Bulgarian theorists S. Vlahov and S. Florin were the first to thoroughly study realia in its modern sense. “Realia” are words (and phrases) that name objects typical of lifestyle (everyday life, culture, social and historical development) of one nation and alien to another; being the carriers of national and/or historical trends, they, as a rule, do not have exact equivalents in the target languages, and, therefore, are untranslatable, requiring a special approach (Vlahov & Florin, 1980: 47).

As linguacultural phenomena, realia (Vlahov and Florin, Leppihalme) are known by different names “*cultural words*” (Newmark), “*Culture-specific concepts*” (Baker), “*extralinguistic culture-bound references*” (ECR) (Pedersen) and can be defined as words or expressions that can imply concepts which are partially or totally unknown to the target culture. They can be abstract or concrete and may refer to different spheres of life (Baker, 1992: 21).

Many taxonomies and classifications for realia have been offered by various theorists and translators which mainly refer to territorial, cultural, ethnic, domestic, military and social peculiarities. Some theorists (Newmark, Vlachov and Florin, Nedergaard-Larsen) suggest almost identical categories of realia due to their cultural nature. B. Nedergaard-Larsen sums up the “Extralinguistic culture-bound problem types” into four main typologies with their subtypes: *geography, history, society, and culture* (Nedergaard-Larsen, 1993: 210–211).

Considering the realia under study- “*jan*”, within the typology by Nedergaard-Larsen, we can clearly state that it belongs to the subcategory of ways of life and customs of social category. “*Jan*” realia is an inseparable part of the Armenian language and culture, typical of both the literary and colloquial language layers. Originally, the word is borrowed from Persian (جان — jān), which stands for soul, spirit, and life. Due to close historical, cultural, and economic relations between the two nations, the word “*jan*” has long been rooted in the Armenian language and culture and is deemed to be a typical Armenian realia. Nowadays it is used as a diminutive interjection, often accompanied by proper nouns, to get someone's attention or to express happiness, or excitement. It is also a tender

response to someone's question or request. It is worth mentioning that in a number of dubbed and subtitled versions of Persian and Afghani movies (*The Breadwinner*), these specific realia are transferred into the target language without creating any reading or hearing difficulties.

Methodology

A contrastive analysis methodology was adopted to investigate the translation of “jan” realia in the film *Yes Em* (“I Am”). A total of 34 instances were examined from the source text, with attention to both the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the term. The analytical framework integrates descriptive, contrastive, and linguocultural approaches, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of how “jan”, a culturally embedded term of endearment and affection, functions semantically and pragmatically in Armenian. This framework also facilitated a critical evaluation of the translation strategies employed in the English subtitles, such as omission, neutralization, or substitution, and assessed the extent to which these strategies preserved, altered, or erased the cultural and emotional significance of the original term. By combining linguistic analysis with cultural interpretation, the study aims to highlight the challenges subtitlers face when rendering culture-specific realia and the potential implications for intercultural understanding.

Analytical Framework

A large variety of translation strategies and techniques are proposed by scholars (Newmark, Leppihalme, Pedersen, Diaz-Cintas and Remael) some of which are quite identical in essence, yet they have different names in their respective theories. For the purpose of dealing with the given realia, a set of strategies, proposed by Diaz Cintas and Remael, are deemed the most appropriate and comprehensive due to its compliance with the material under study as they are commonly used in subtitling.

- *Loan;*
- *Calque or literal translation;*
- *Explicitation;*
- *Substitution,*
- *Transposition;*
- *Lexical recreation;*
- *Compensation;*
- *Omission;*
- *Addition* (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 202-207) .

The film “I am” serves as the material for the practical analysis of the article. Being one of the most popular films of local production its choice is conditioned by the abundance of cultural elements and realia typical of the comedy genre. The film was released in 2012 and tells about army life, friendship, and love. “Jan” realia is encountered 34 times in this film and only in three cases it has been transferred into the English language. Below are the cases where the omission strategy, which is considered to be an extreme one, is justifiably applied and the ones where it was possible to convey the meaning of “*jan*” realia with the help of the above-mentioned strategies.

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed distinct translation challenges related to both linguistic and cultural dimensions of the realia “jan”. “Jan”, a realia of endearment in Armenian that carries both emotional warmth and cultural significance, presented a variety of translation strategies in the English subtitles. These strategies included omission, substitution, and calque, each of which reflected different degrees of fidelity to the original meaning and emotional impact.

In many cases, “jan” was omitted, hindering the general comprehension of the dialogue or its emotional tone. These omissions resulted in the loss of the emotional nuance associated with the term. In instances where the term was replaced, neutral equivalents such as “dear” or “sweetheart” were often used. While these translations retained some of the affectionate tone, they did not fully capture the cultural weight or the flexibility inherent in jan within Armenian society.

The findings also underscored the influence of context in determining the translation strategy. In more intimate exchanges, affectionate equivalents like “darling” could be used in English, while more

neutral terms appeared in less familiar relationships. This variability in translation choices suggests a context-sensitive approach, yet none of the strategies fully accounted for the emotional depth and cultural resonance of “jan”.

✓ Substantiated **complete omission**:

<i>Source text</i>	<i>English Translation</i>	<i>Suggested translation</i>
Մերսի, հոպար ջան : 05: 04	Thanks, Uncle!	_____
Տղերք ջան , բանակի մասին շատ բան եք լսել: 10:17 -10:20	Guys, you must have heard a lot about the army.	_____
Հա, Ճուտ ջան , դրան էլ սպասում եմ: 1:01:52- 1:01:53	Yes, Little Man, I'm waiting for it.	_____

In the above-mentioned examples, “**jan**” realia is applied as a demunitive interjection. In one of the examples it is used with a nickname (proper noun), while in other cases- with common nouns. The omission strategy is justified for the given examples as the application of **loan** strategy or any other strategy would be unnatural and would distort the coherence and the integrity of the passages. The analysis of following examples clearly indicates that “**jan**” realia with proper nouns should be completely transferred into the target language to properly convey the meaning, as well as contextual and stylistic colorings. However, in the example- “Հա, Ճուտ **ջան**, դրան էլ սպասում եմ”, the proper noun still possesses the characteristics of a common noun and the omission is justified for the sake of the eloquence of the passage.

✓ Below are the cases where the use of **omission** strategy is not justified, since the meaning can partially or fully be conveyed with the correct transfer of the adjacent linguistic units with the help of other strategies.

<i>Source text</i>	<i>English Translation</i>	<i>Suggested translation</i>
Տղա ջան , դու էլ իջացրու: 02:07	You also pull it down.	Son , you too, pull it down.
Տղա ջան , իջա՛ցրու: 02:31	Pull it down.	Pull it down, son .

In the mentioned two examples **jan** realia is used with a common noun- “**տղա**” (boy/son). The scene depicts a doctor repeating one and the same sentence over and over as the recruits, who undergo a medical examination, are unfamiliar with the procedure. It is worth mentioning that the recruits are mostly teenagers, and the doctor addresses them with a typical Armenian phrase “**տղա ջան**”. In both cases, **jan** realia are **omitted** in the target language, thus failing to convey both the specific demunitive sense of the realia and the stylistic and contextual nuances. With the help of **transposition** and **substitution** strategy in both cases, the expressions can be partially restored and transferred with the help of a common noun “**son**” which, when applied to a person with no blood relation, gives the demunitive and tender sense of the Armenian realia.

The same **strategies** are applied for the accurate transfer of the following example too.

Տղա ջան էս հո խանութ չի, որ բաշի մեջ խաբեն: 02:27 – 02:29	Look, boy , we are not at a market to cheat you.	Look, son , we're not at a market to cheat in price.
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The preservation of the adjacent word has partially conveyed the meaning of the diminutive realia. Unlike the previous example, the translator has made an attempt to partially preserve the meaning by translating the noun “**տղա ջան**” into “**boy**” in the target language. The chosen version, however, does not properly convey the meaning of realia, and since the dialogue takes place between a young recruit and a nurse with years of experience, the phrase can be **substituted** with a common noun “**son**” which is more precise and closer in sense and style to the source text language units.

<i>Source text</i>	<i>English Translation</i>	<i>Suggested translation</i>
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Մեր հոպարը բան ունի ասելու: Հոպար ջան լսում ենք, ցա՛վի տանենք : 03:58 – 04:00	Uncle wants to say something; Uncle, we are all ears.	Uncle wants to say something; uncle, my dear , we are all ears.
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The above-mentioned scene portrays a typical Armenian farewell part for the soldiers joining the army. One of the characteristics of any Armenian gathering or party is the abundance of proposed toasts. To capture the attention of his soon-to-be-a-soldier son, the father uses “*Մեր հոպարը բան ունի ասելու: Հոպար ջան լսում ենք, ցա՛վի տանենք*”, where “jan” realia is followed by another cultural realia – “*ցա՛վի տանենք*”, with almost the same intensity and frequency of use. Both realia are omitted in the target language, failing to convey the intimacy, love between the interlocutors and the main meaning and style. “**Jan**” realia can easily be partially conveyed through the word “**my dear**” with the help of **transposition** strategy. It is worth mentioning that the use of personal pronoun “**my**” intensifies the affectionate feeling between the characters. However, the second realia which is used to express love and affection and in its literal sense means *to take someone's pain away*, is **omitted** in both versions, since the sentence is immediately followed and spiced up with similar linguistic units. Given the fact the “**jan**” realia already transfers the sense of affection as well as for the sake of preserving the integrity and cohesion of the text, the **omission** strategy is justified.

Ո՞նց էկաք, տղերք ջան : 09:57-09:58	How was the way?	How did you get here, guys ?
Բարի օր, ապ ջան : 12:08- 12:09	Hallo brother .	What's up, bro .
Քո անունն ինչ ա, տղա ջան : 33:46 – 33:48	And what's your name, my boy ?	_____
Դե լավ ախպեր ջան : 36:41- 36:43	Time to go.	See you, bro .
Տղա ջան , մենք թուզը չենք քաղում: 42:44 – 42:46	We don't pick the fig.	We don't pick the fig, son .
Ընկերներ ջան , արա գնալս չի գալիս: 1:38:36 – 1:38:38	Guys, I don't want to leave, but I have to.	Hey, buds , you've no clue how much I want to stay.

In the presented six examples, “**jan**” realia is preceded by similar language units – “*տղա, ապ, ախպեր, ընկերներ*”. In three cases, the translator has applied the **omission** strategy not only for “**jan**” realia but also for the preceding word units. The affection and intimacy of the passage is possible to partially transfer by restoring the above-mentioned words through the use of close synonyms in the target language. In these examples “*Ո՞նց էկաք, տղերք ջան*”, “*Դե լավ ախպեր ջան*” and “*Տղա ջան, մենք թուզը չենք քաղում*”, the meaning is partially channeled by “**guys**”, “**son**” and “**bro**” through the use of **transposition** and **substitution** strategies.

It should be noted that in three examples the translator has made an attempt to preserve the meaning of “**jan**” realia by conveying the meaning of the adjacent word units. However, the translator succeeded to transfer the demunitive and contextual meaning of the realia only in one example: “What is your name, **my boy**?”

The next example – “*Բարի օր, ապ ջան*”, is translated into the target language as “*Hallo brother*”, where the word brother proposed by the translator does not fully transfer the informal context and the meaning of the dialectical interjection “*ապ*”. Therefore, through **transposition** and **substitution** strategy, “*What's up, bro*” version more precisely express the friendly, affectionate atmosphere between the interlocutors, as well as the informal characteristics of Gyumri dialect.

In the last example “*Ընկերներ ջան, արա գնալս չի գալիս*”, the suggested option fails to convey the style and intimacy of the context. Given that the word is accompanied by another realia “*արա*”, the passage can be replaced by a slang word “**buds**” with the help of **transposition** and **substitution** strategy. It should be noted that the whole translation is modified into: “*Hey, buds, you've no clue how much I want to stay*”. The proposed option is comprehensive among the target viewers and does not create any inconvenience or violate any of the subtitling criteria.

Մամ, իսկ եթե որոշեք տեղափոխվել մեզ մոտ, իմացի՜ մենք կուրախանանք, մամ ջան: 1:44:21 – 1:44:23	And you can be sure, we'll be very happy to meet you whenever you move around.	And ma , if you ever decide to move here, you'll make us truly happy, ma .
Պապ ջան, ճիշտ ա՛ դուք եք իմ ծնողները... 1:44:31- 1:44:33	Dear dad , I know that you're my parents...	_____

The above-mentioned examples are extracted from the epilogue of the film, where the soldier son who has chosen the life in the bordering village sends an emotional letter to his parents. In the first example the realia is preceded by *“մամ ջան”*, which is an informal direct address for mother. In this specific case the translator has applied omission strategy not only for *“jan”* realia, but also for the word *mother*. The protagonist repeats the word within the same sentence several times, therefore it is obligatory to restore it. With the application of **transposition** and **substitution** strategies the meaning of the realia can easily be expressed with the application of colloquial noun *“ma”*, which conveys intimacy, love and care. This option is more preferable than *mom*, also typical of colloquial style, as it is applied in direct address. Later on, he addresses to his father using *“jan”* realia with colloquial form of the noun father- «Պապ ջան». The choice of word *“dear”* and informal version *“dad”* proposed by the translator with the help of **transposition** strategy is justified, as the passage is expressed in a form of a letter.

- ✓ Below are some of the instances where the **omitted “jan”** realia needs to be restored through the use of **loan** strategy.

<i>Source text</i>	<i>English Translation</i>	<i>Suggested translation</i>
Տիկո ջան, Տիկո՛, արի տես հոպարն ինչ ա ասում, բալես: 04:02 -04:03	Tiko, come here, Uncle wants to say something.	Tiko jan , come here, son , uncle has something to say.
Տիկ ջան արի, արի ցավդ տանենմ, արի: 04:04	_____	Tik jan , come here, bud , come.
Ի՞նչ տարբերություն Թամար ջան: 30:34-30:36	It doesn't matter, Tamar.	What does it matter, Tamar jan .
Ա դե, օպերացիա արա, թող պրծնի էլի, այ Հասմիկ ջան: 30:56 – 10:58	Hasmik, why wouldn't you have an operation.	Hasmik jan , why wouldn't you have an operation.
Ռոմ ջան, էս մի տարին քիչ ժամանակ չէր շատ բան հասկանալու համար: 46:21- 46:23	This one year was enough time to be able to understand many things.	Rom jan , one year was enough time to be able to understand many things.
Հա, Ռոման ջան: 1:01:23	Yes	Sure, Roman jan .

In the above-mentioned examples *“jan”* realia is used alongside with proper names, which is the most typical application of the cultural realia in the source language. In such cases, the restoration of *“jan”* realia is obligatory through the use of **loan** strategy. The same exact word is preserved in the target language to convey the affection, intimacy, care and respect expressed in the extracted passages to the target language audience.

It should be noted that out of the nineteen examples in this category, only the first two examples, where a complete omission is applied, are challenging. In *“Տիկո ջան, Տիկո՛, արի տես հոպարն ինչ ա ասում, բալես: Տիկ ջան արի, արի ցավդ տանենմ, արի”* the translator rendered the meaning of the two sentences by *“Tiko, come here, Uncle wants to say something”*, failing to convey both the meaning of realia and the contextual integrity. Apart from *jan* realia, in the extracted example we have two other typical cultural realia – *“բալես”* and *“ցավդ տանենմ”*, which belong to the subcategory of **ways of life/customs** of **social** category. Considering **omission** to be an extreme strategy, the realia can be

partially expressed with the help of “*son*” and “*bud*” options. The first realia- “*բայկ*”, can be transferred by a slang word “*son*”, given the fact that the dialogue is between a boy and his uncle, and the latter uses the realia to show his affection and love. The second interlocuter's speech is entirely omitted, thus, distorting the coherence of the passage. For the sake of ensuring comprehensiveness and the harmony the passage should be restored “*Tik jan, come here, bud, come.*” through the use of **transposition** and **substitution** strategies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the realia “*ջան*” (*jan*) functions as a culturally significant linguistic marker in Armenian, carrying affective and stylistic weight. The prevalent omission of “*jan*” in English subtitles diminishes these dimensions, with this strategy dominating in 31 out of 34 cases. Such omissions obscure both the stylistic nuance and emotional function of the term. However, in four cases, omission was justified, as restoring the realia using any strategy would have been unnatural and would have disrupted the coherence of the dialogues.

In 10 examples the meaning, partial retention of the meaning and emotional tone of “*jan*” was possible through the transposition strategy, often combined with substitution to accommodate space-time constraints. When “*jan*” was coupled with a proper name (in 19 examples), preserving the term was crucial for maintaining the intimacy of the original text. However, an outlier case involving a nickname showed that in certain situations, restoration may be unnecessary, as the nickname itself already conveys a familiar mode of address.

Overall, this analysis underscores the importance of context-sensitive translation strategies that balance cultural adaptation with the constraints of subtitling. By using a contrastive analytical framework, translators can better preserve the relational integrity of the original dialogue while respecting the limitations of the medium.

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