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**Challenges in translating culturally loaded words and phrases**

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**Abstract**

Language and culture are inseparable. There are words and phrases in one language or another which are closely connected with cultural contexts. Translating them into another language is mostly difficult and challenging as there is no cultural equivalence in the destination language. To make the learning of a language possible, the student needs to be fully familiar with the cultural load of those words and phrases to be able to find the closest possible equivalent for them. The most commonly culturally loaded words and phrases come under the following categories: a) greeting terms, b) politeness terms, c) relationship terms.

Not being familiar with the cultural background of these terms will lead to the danger of literal translation, which in turn will result in their inappropriate usage in communication. In this paper, these culturally loaded terms are discussed and the danger of literal translation is highlighted.

In conclusion, it is suggested to solve the problem of learning culturally loaded words and phrases, it is better to explain them in the destination language rather than find a single equivalent for them, which does not carry all the intended meaning. Using footnotes is also another solution, which is discussed in this paper.

## **Introduction**

Language without culture is artificial and in abstraction. The close relation between language and culture has been known in the related literature for a long time. It is also noted that language is only understood when it is placed in its cultural setting (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996). A realistic teaching of a second or a foreign language takes place with the introduction to the culture of the language community. The same is true about translation from that specific language. There are some language components which are interrelated with the culture of speakers of the language more than other components. These components have particular meanings which are adopted by the speech community of that language. In fact, these components are created for that specific cultural content in that specific language and may have or may have not any equivalent semantic context within the culture of the destination language.

There is a connection between language and identity of a social group (Kramsch, 2004:65). Thus, understanding the culture of a language helps the speaker to identify with the language community of that language and makes him an insider to the culture. It is not possible to understand culturally loaded word and phrases without knowing the cultural background for them. McKay (2002: 85) says that to use a language for special purposes, one needs to learn the culture associated with the aspects of the discourse. Thus, the translator needs to know the concept of the words and the contexts which they are used, if he or she wants to be a skilled translator.

The culturally loaded words and phrases, which will be discussed in this paper, fall into different categories. The languages, which are compared here for the culturally loaded terms, are English, Persian, and Azari. In the first part, the words and phrases in Persian and Azari are introduced which have no equivalent in English, and in the second part, the English words with no equivalents in Persian and Azari are explained.

## **1. Persian and Azari terms**

### **1.1. Politeness terms**

As Kramsch says (2004), etiquettes, expression of politeness, social do's and don'ts shape people's behavior. It seems that these cultural aspects exist in one language more than in others. That is, some languages are loaded with politeness terms and expressions while others have a few. Persian and Azari are among those languages which have a huge number of words and phrases to show politeness and formalities. As it is expected, the literal meaning of these words and phrases are different from their meaning which is used in formalities within the context. That is, almost all of them are idiomatic and it is difficult to translate them literally into English, and that is why, learning polite forms are always a difficult part for the students of these languages.

#### **1.1.1. Address terms**

Addressing people is a category which is culturally loaded in most languages. To learn the way people address each other in a language is not just learning the words and phrases because it is related to the culture of the speakers of that language. For example, in Persian and Azari, using a singular second person pronoun to call strangers or people

higher than the speaker in age or position is impolite and sometimes is regarded as an insult. Thus, except for close friends and children, one should always use the plural form. The translator won't know the difference unless the cultural implication of addressing people is also known to them.

	Persian	Azari	English
second person singular	to	san	you
second person plural	šomā	siz	you

In both languages, the singular person is only used to address kids, close friends and family members who are younger than the speaker. In other circumstances, using it to address people is impolite and can even be regarded as an insult.

Another example is addressing people by using a title of Mr or Ms with the job which is followed by the surname. In these languages, the title comes either before or after the job. For example, a doctor is addressed as in below:

Persian	Azari	English
äqäye doktor	äqäye duktur	doctor

To translate these phrases, the learner should go back to the context in which they are used and extract the meaning based on that specific context. However, sometimes the same phrase has different usage in different contexts. Thus, the learner should be able to guess the relevant meaning based on the specific context.

### 1.1.2 You may order!

Another example, which is common among these two languages, is the following phrase, which literally means 'you may order':

Persian	Azari	English
befarmäyin	buyurun	-

This phrase has many different politeness denotations based on different contexts as follows:

How can I help you?

Context: e.g., when you enter a shop and say hello and the shopkeeper says: *befarmäyin*.

Come in

Context: e.g., when you knock on the door and the person inside says *befarmäyin*.

Here you are

Context: e.g., when you are going to pay the money for your purchased items in the shop, you give the money to the shopkeeper and say *befarmäyin*.

Please go on, continue

Context: e.g., when you are talking and someone interrupts, and then he apologises and tells you *befarmäyin*.

Take a seat

Context: e.g., when you enter somewhere and the person inside offers you a seat and says *befarmäyin*.

You go first

Context: e.g., when you are entering somewhere with someone else, you say to him *befarmäyin*.

### 1.1.3 You may not be tired!

Another example which is common among these two languages is the following phrase which literally means 'You may not be tired!':

Persian	Azari	English
xaste nabäšid	yorulmiyasuz	-

**Context:** This phrase is frequently used in different contexts in daily conversation:

When you meet someone who is in the middle of doing some work.

When you see someone who has finished a work, and as a comfort you say this phrase.

### 1.1.4 Your place was empty!

Persian	Azari	English
jayetun xali bud	yeruz boš	-

#### Context:

This phrase is used in different contexts:

- When somebody asks you about a trip, a function, a party or any other situation which they missed and you answer by saying this phrase.

### 1.1.5. It is not worthy of you!

Persian	Azari	English
qabele šoma ro nadare	qabele šoma ro nadare	-

#### Context:

This phrase is used in different contexts:

- when you thank someone for something he or she has done for you
- When you ask about the price, or fare, or cost of something
- When you thank someone for a gift.

### 1.1.6 Your steps on our eyes

Persian	Azari	English
qadametun ruye češm	gozumuz ustenda	-

**Context:**

This phrase is used in different contexts:

- when you want to tell someone that they are welcomed to your place
- When someone calls and asks you if they come to your place.

**1.1.7 Joy may pass you**

Persian	Azari	English
behetun xoš begozarad	xoš gečsin	-

**Context:**

- Wishing a good time for some one who is going to somewhere.

**1.3. Kinship terms**

Some languages are rich in kinship terms as both immediate and extended families are very important and more strong than in other cultures. Thus, there are several kinship terms in these languages, which have no equivalent in English, as in this list:

Persian	Azari	English
amu	ami	uncle: father's brother
amme	bibi	aunt: father's sister

däyi	däyi	uncle: mother's brother
xäle	xala	aunt: mother's sister
pesar amu	ami oqli	cousin: uncle's son
doxtar amme	amma qizi	cousin: aunt's daughter
bäjənäq	bäjänäq	married to the same sisters

#### 1.4. Celebration terms

In Persian and Azari, the celebratory terms are more than in English. For example, their celebration of birth and death are more detailed than in English culture, and many words are used for these occasions:

##### 1.4.1 Birth

Persian	Azari	English
qadame noraside mobarak	qadami mubarak	-
češmetun rošan	gozuz äydin	-
tabrik migam	tabrik diyeyram	-

##### 1.4.2. Death

Persian	Azari	English
tasliyat arz mikonam	tasliyat arz eleyram	my condolences
xoda sabr bede	allah saber versin	-

ghame axaretun bāše	son qamiz olsun	-
bāzmāndeganeš salamat bašand	qalanlari salamat olsun	-
xoda rahmateš bekone	allah rahmat elasin	-

## 2. English terms

In contrast, there are some culturally loaded words and phrases in English which have no equivalent in these languages. The examples are as follow:

### 2.1. Swear word

One of these culture related components are swearing and taboo words. They are different from one language to another, as they are culture related.

In some languages, the number of swear words is huge while in others, they are limited. English is one of those languages which is rich in swear words, and these words are used more frequently in the daily conversation compared to other languages like Persian and Azari.

In English, we hear many swear words which are used more often in different situations like in doing something wrong, in a surprise, in anger, in a fight and so many other

situations. But in some languages like Persian and Azari, swear words are only used in serious arguments and fights and their number is handful compared to English, and are rarely used in the daily conversation. This also seems to be cultural: the taboos of using swear words fades away in English while in other languages, it still is strong, like in Persian.

Sometimes, the reason is related to the moral values and taboos in the culture. For example, most swear words are sex related. Thus, in some cultures in which talking about sex is free, there are also a lot of swear words with sexual contents, while in other cultures which are very strict about sex and talking about it, there are many taboos, and thus there are only a few swear words. For example, in English where talking about sex is normal, there are several words about male and female genitalia. However, in Persian and Azari where the society is so sensitive about sex topics there are just one or two words for them.

The frequencies of use of swear words are also culture related. For example, in English, they are used more often than in Persian and Azari. In English, whenever, a guy or a girl gets angry, they say words like, 'bloody', 'shit', 'stupid', and so on, while in Persian and Azari, there is one word '*läinati*' which is equivalent to 'bloody'. In these languages, swear words can not be found in the female language and it is limited to the male while in English it is found in both male and female languages.

Finding a close equivalent for the swear words, and trying to explain them within the context will help readers to understand them. One swear word is Persian which is very insulting is calling someone *xar* 'donkey' which in English is not necessarily insulting. Thus, to understand this swear word, one should be familiar with the culture. In Persian culture, donkey is the symbol of stupidity, and thus calling someone as donkey is more insulting than calling him stupid!

## **2.2. Relationship terms**

There are many relationship terms in English which are culture dependent, as there are different types of relationships between people. These terms do not have an equivalent in Persian and Azari where the relationship culture is very strict. That is, in these cultures, the relationship is mostly through marriage, while in English speaking cultures, it can be through many other ways. Examples of these words are:

defacto

partner

gay

lesbian

bisexual

cross dresser

one night stand

date

dating

dumping

swinger

blind date

### **3: Conclusion**

As we can see from the sections 1-2, some words and phrases have no equivalent in the destination language. To translate the phrases and words in this group, one can not directly translate them into the destination language. This will result in literal translation and distorted meaning. For example a phrase like *xaste nabäšid* ‘you may not be tired’ when translated literally, the resulting sentence is meaningful but it does not make sense in the English context. The solution in dealing with these phrases is to explain the contexts where the phrase is used rather than translating them. Some words and phrases in this group are easier to deal with and can be translated into English in a phrase form rather than one word.

Another option in dealing with these words and phrases is to explain them in the footnote. This enables the translator to avoid including many complement clauses in the main text, which can confuse the readers.

However, the problem of conveying the exact meaning of the culturally loaded words and phrases from one language to another remains unresolved, as they carry the background concepts rooted in the tradition, culture, and the way the speakers of that specific language see, hear and comprehend the world.

## Resources

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