

# Translating British Culture to Kurdish Immigrants: Domestication or Foreignization?

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**Abstract**—Translating culturally specific terms and expressions is often perceived as a challenging practice. This paper explores translating English cultural terms to Kurdish immigrants in the context of the UK public services. The UK government provides information related to public services in different languages for different immigrant communities living in the UK. The information can be in the form of reports, leaflets, brochures, etc., which are produced in different settings such as courts, local councils, hospitals, and so on. Dozens of English-Kurdish translators render such materials to members of the Kurdish community who do not have a good command of English. Following Venuti's (1995/2008) theory of domestication and foreignization, the paper attempts to identify whether translators adopt a domesticating or a foreignizing strategy when rendering cultural terms found in UK public service materials from English into Kurdish (Sorani). The results reveal that translators use a mixture of both strategies; however, they opt for domestication in the majority of instances. The results also show a lack of consistency in implementing cultural translation procedures among the translators, which points to a need for translation training courses that offer guidelines regarding consistent use of terminology in translating culturally specific terms from English into Kurdish.

**Keywords**—Culture-specific Terms, Domestication, English-Kurdish translation, Foreignization, Translation Procedures, UK public Service Materials

## I. INTRODUCTION

Translation is both interlingual and intercultural communication. As Nida (2001: 82) asserts, “for truly successful translation, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function”. The cultural aspect of a language consists of all the terms and expressions that pertain to a specific society or ethnic community. Translating cultural terms are said to pose translation difficulties no matter which language pairs are concerned.

This paper explores cultural aspects of English-Kurdish translation in the context of the UK public services. Today the UK is a multicultural society; apart from English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish, there are other nationalities living in the UK, such as: Pakistani, Indian, Kurdish, Arab, Turkish and

Persian. Many of them travelled to the UK as immigrants. Among those are a considerable number of people who cannot communicate in English competently. Given that, the UK government gets materials related to the public services translated into the languages of those different communities, including the Kurdish. In 2016, it was estimated that over 120,000 Kurds were living in the UK (Tas 2016: 66), the number seems to have increased now. This paper attempts to ascertain whether English-Kurdish translators adopt a domesticating or a foreignizing strategy when translating British cultural terms (found in public service materials) for members of the Kurdish community residing in the UK.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A set of 40 culturally specific terms and expressions, which are frequently found in UK public service materials, are chosen. Then, a questionnaire is devised that specifically aims at English-Kurdish translators who have translation experience in the UK. The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part focuses on the translators' demographics in terms of educational background, years of experience and the field of translation they work in. The aim behind this part is to offer insights into and provide descriptions of the professional translators working between English and Kurdish in the context of UK public services. The second part of the questionnaire consists of a set of 15 short English sentences, each containing two or more of the chosen cultural terms (see Appendix 1). All the cultural terms are incorporated in the sentences inconspicuously and no hints are given to suggest that the purpose of the translation is to shed light on cultural terms and expressions. They participants are required to translate the sentences from English into Kurdish (Sorani) in the typical way they translate UK public service materials.

Overall, 24 translators completed the questionnaire, who demonstrate a wide range of academic backgrounds as shown in Figure 1 below. Ten translators (42% of participants) have major in translation and/or interpreting. They hold translation/interpreting qualifications, such as: ‘Diploma in Public Service Interpreting’, ‘PhD in Translation Studies’, ‘MA in Applied Translation Studies’, ‘Level 2 in Community Interpreting’, ‘Level 3 in Community Interpreting’ and ‘Level 3 in Translation and Interpretation’. Seven translators (29% of participants) have minor in translation and/or interpreting. They have studied translation and/or interpreting as part of a relevant qualification, such as: ‘BA in English Language and

Literature', 'MA in English Language Teaching', 'MA in TESOL' and 'PhD in English Studies'. The remaining seven translators (29% of participants) hold qualifications in areas outside translation and interpreting, such as: 'BA in Law', 'BSc in Computer Science' and 'PhD in Media'.

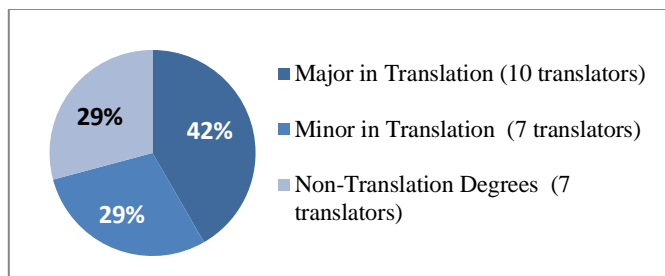


Fig. 1. Academic backgrounds of participants

Likewise, the participants demonstrate different levels of experience, ranging from one year to 20 years. The experience range is divided into four categories (as shown in Figure 2 below) and the largest proportion of participants (37%) has 1-5 years of experience working as translators. A quarter of participants have between 11 and 15 years of translation experience. Strikingly, over one-fifth of participants have between 16 and 20 years of translation experience, which is quite a lengthy period of time to gain rich and in-depth experience in any kind of profession. Participants' diverse academic backgrounds, along with their different levels of experience, can be responsible for the inconsistency in the translation procedures and strategies employed in rendering the cultural terms (as can be seen in Section V - Analysis and Discussion).

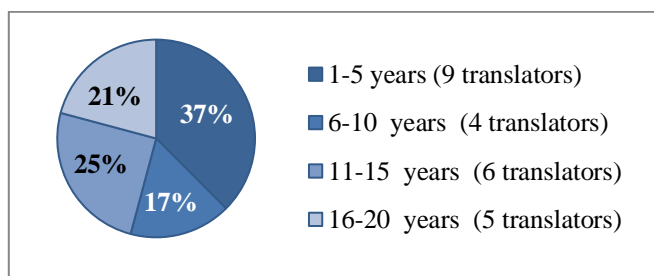


Fig. 2. Participants' years of translation experience

Regarding the participants' translation field, all the translators indicate they have experience working in the area of public services. Four participants indicate they work in 'public services in general'. The majority of participants (14 translators) work in public services with focus on both 'legal' and 'medical' translation. Four participants work in public services with focus on 'medical' translation and two participants with focus on 'legal' translation. Beyond these fields, a few translators have also referred to areas such as: immigration, police, insurance companies, prison, housing,

social services and engineering. As can be seen, legal and medical translations are the most prominent fields in the UK public service translation as far as English and Kurdish are concerned.

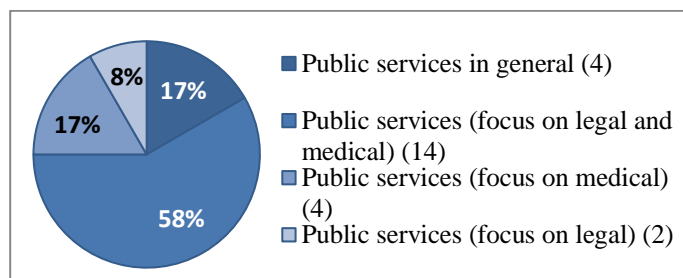


Fig. 3. Participants' field of translation

As for the research methods, the paper employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. The questionnaire is essentially designed to generate quantitative data. To identify the percentage of domestication and foreignization, the number of occurrences for each chosen cultural term or expression is given priority. This part of the research heavily depends on a quantitative study. However, the interpretation of answers from different participants, as well as the analysis of unexpected findings, will require a qualitative study.

To be more specific, the translations provided by the participants are analyzed by focusing on the translation of cultural terms and expressions and the findings are tabulated in the Table of Findings (Appendix 2). The cultural terms in question are listed in column 1 of the table. The translation occurrences are divided into three categories:

- Translation occurrences that characterize foreignization (column 2);
- Translation occurrences that characterize domestication (column 3); and
- Exceptional cases, i.e. occurrences where 'foreignization and domestication are combined', 'foreignization is based on Arabic loanwords' or 'the cultural term is omitted' (column 4).

To systematically study the results, the total percentage of each of the two strategies of foreignization and domestication is drawn, along with the percentage of omission occurrences. It is worth mentioning that translation of proper names is taken for granted in the study because, by default, they are translated by transliteration, which leads to foreignization. Therefore, people's names (such as *Omed* and *Emma*) and names of cities and towns (such as *Manchester* and *Huddersfield*) are excluded in the analysis.

### III. DOMESTICATING AND FOREIGNIZING TRANSLATION

The American translation scholar and literary translator, Lawrence Venuti, puts forward the two translation approaches of 'domestication' and 'foreignization' in his seminal book

*The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995/2008). Venuti is mainly concerned with translations produced in contemporary Anglo-American culture, which he considers to be characterized by domestication, i.e. adherence to the norms of the target language and culture.

According to Venuti (2008), the origin of domestication and foreignization goes back to the German philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who believes that any translator has to potentially choose between two approaches of translation, namely domestication or foreignization. Domestication is defined in Venuti's terms as "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home" (2008: 15), whereas foreignization is defined as "an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad" (ibid). In domesticating translation, the translator is an invisible player and the translation product reads fluent and natural with no indication of foreignness originating from the source language (SL) culture. In the case of foreignization, however, the translator has a visible presence, reflected in reproducing the SL linguistic and cultural features in the target text, whereby the resultant translation is characterized by the foreignness of the SL. Venuti personally advocates foreignization as a method of "resistance to values that prevail in contemporary Anglo-American culture—the canon of fluency in translation, the dominance of transparent discourse, the individualistic effect of authorial presence" (ibid: 30).

Schleiermacher admits that the two distinct strategies of domestication and foreignization are not mutually exclusive; it is virtually impossible to retain complete adequacy when rendering a foreign text. In effect, it is difficult to maintain the same translation approach throughout a text; any translation more or less contains features of the two translation approaches. "A translation may be radically oriented to the source text in representing certain aspects of the source text [...] but depart radically from the source text in other respects so as to assimilate to norms of the receiving culture" (Tymoczko 1999: 55-56). As such, domestication and foreignization cannot be considered a binary dichotomy.

Although in his study of domesticating and foreignizing translations Venuti focuses on literary translation in Anglo-American culture, the model "can be productively applied to translating in any language and culture" (2008: 19). We shall, therefore, adopt Venuti's strategies of domestication and foreignization to investigate the translation of culture-specific terms found in UK public service materials translated for members of the Kurdish community in the UK.

#### IV. PROCEDURES FOR TRANSLATING CULTURE-SPECIFIC TERMS

Different translation scholars refer to different models of procedures for translating culturally specific terms. This study follows Rasul's (2015) model, which is a composite model combining procedures from Peter Newmark (1988), Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) and Dickens, Harvey and Higgins

(2002/2017). The model is adapted for the purpose of this study to cover the following relevant procedures:

##### A. Exoticism

Exoticism involves the transference of the cultural features of a SL term or expression into the target language (TL) with minimum or no adaptation. Translation by exoticism is oriented towards the SL culture and it sounds exotic and foreign in the TL culture. Therefore, it leads to foreignization. In the data concerned, the term 'Crown Court' is literally translated by one respondent as دادگاری تاج, which is an example of exoticism because the term sounds foreign in Kurdish.

##### B. Cultural Borrowing

The procedure involves the transliteration of SL cultural terms into the TL, which are pronounced more or less similar as in the SL. Borrowing is said to be the simplest of all translation procedures to apply (Vinay and Darbelnet 1995: 31); if a cultural term does not have a counterpart in the TL, translators normally opt for cultural borrowing as a first resort. For example, the British organization 'Refugee Council' is often translated by cultural borrowing for Kurdish refugees as ریفیوجی کاونسل. Likewise, the word *flat*, as a Western style of accommodation, can be simply translated by cultural borrowing as فلات. Translation by cultural borrowing is oriented towards the SL culture, which obviously leads to foreignization.

##### C. Calque

Calque is defined as "a special kind of borrowing whereby a language borrows an expression form of another, but then translates literally each of its elements" (Vinay and Darbelnet 1995: 32). According to Newmark (1988: 84), "literal translation of common collocations, names of organisations and components of compounds" are typical examples of the calque translation procedure. Consider the literal translation of the term *United Kingdom* into Kurdish as شانیشینی یه‌کگرتوو. In the sense that a calque replaces SL cultural terms by literal counterparts of its constituent words the procedure can be said to lean towards domestication.

##### D. Communicative Translation

This procedure involves the replacement of a SL cultural expression by a corresponding expression that occupies a more or less similar situational position in the TL culture but uses a totally different formal structure. For example, the English conversational cliché 'you're welcome' as a polite response for 'thanks' can be best translated as شایانی نییه [it is not deserved], which is an equivalent conversational cliché that describes the same situation in the TL culture. Communicative translation is a typical example of domestication.

### E. Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation (otherwise known as ‘cultural equivalent’ in Newmark’s (1988) model and ‘cultural transplantation’ in Dickins et al.’s (2002/2017) model) is a “procedure that involves the replacement of an SL cultural term by a TL term that occupies the same position in the target culture” (Rasul 2015: 51). For example, in the British legal system, there is ‘probation centre’ for offenders and the staff in charge of such centres are called ‘probation officers’. The terms can be translated by cultural adaptation as چاکسازی (reformation [centre]) and کارمندی چاکسازی (reformation officer), respectively, which are counterpart terms in the legal system of the Kurdistan Region. Of course, when it comes to the details, these two legal systems are different. In the former legal system, the offender enjoys freedom of movement while put under probation, whereas in the latter, the offender is confined to the centre. A more extreme case of adaptation would be the replacement of iconic literary figures used in a not-so-serious context, such as substituting ‘Romeo and Juliet’ by شیرین و فرهاد [Shirin and Farhad] in a context where the notion of sacrifice for the sake of love is of utmost importance. Cultural adaption is strongly oriented towards the TL culture, i.e. it results in domestication.

### F. Functional Equivalent

In functional equivalent, the focus is on the function of the SL cultural item, which is replaced by a TL equivalent that is less culturally loaded. For example, ‘Home Office’, the ministry in charge of UK’s internal affairs, can be translated into Kurdish by functional equivalent as وزارتی ناوخو [Ministry of Interior], the ministry in charge of internal affairs of a number of governments, including KRG’s. While the cultural indication of the SL term is reduced in the translation, the resultant translation leans towards the TL culture, which leads to domestication.

### G. Descriptive Equivalent

Descriptive equivalent “involves a fairly precise description of what is meant by the Source Culture element” (Dickins 2012: 54-55). It is similar to functional equivalent in that it reduces the cultural indication of SL terms in the translation. However, they are effectively different in the sense that descriptive equivalent focuses on the description of culture-specific terms rather than their functions, because in translation “description sometimes has to be weighed against function” (Newmark 1988: 83). Consider the term ‘caseworker’ in the British legal and social care systems, which is translated in the data by descriptive equivalent as ئەر کارمهندهی کار لاسەر کهپسهکه دمکات [the officer that works on the case]. The descriptive equivalent is carried out in the form of paraphrase that reduces the cultural indication of the SL term. Thus, the translation product orients towards the TL, resulting in domestication.

### H. Cultural Explication

In cultural explication, some extra information is provided to make a culture-specific term clearer and more understandable in the TL. The use of cultural explication usually results from “differences between the cultural and world knowledge shared by members of the SL and TL communities” (Rasul 2019: 185). For example, the English cultural term ‘bank holiday’ is typically translated by cultural explication as پشووێ بانک هۆلیدهی [bank holiday break].

The procedure also covers cases where two translation procedures are combined (‘couplets’), for instance, a SL cultural term is rendered by cultural borrowing followed by literal translation in the form of a calque, or vice versa. Consider the cultural term ‘health visitor’, in the data concerned, which is translated by cultural explication, as follows:

- Cultural borrowing followed by calque: هیلث فیزیتەر (سەردانکاری تەندروستی)
- Calque followed by cultural borrowing: سەردانکاری تەندروستی (هیلث فیزیتەر)

Cultural explication, which usually carries the cultural feature of the SL, naturally leads to foreignization.

### I. Omission for Cultural Reasons

Even professional translators occasionally leave out words and terms, including cultural ones, which do not drastically affect the overall meaning of the message. Despite the negativity attached to omission in translation, some translation scholars consider it a useful translation procedure (cf. Aixelá 1996: 64; Baker 1992/2011: 42-43; Chesterman 1997: 109-110; Dickins et al. 2002: 23 and Dimitriu 2004: 163-174). Dickins (2012: 56) contends that “omission involves avoiding the normal problems associated with translating a culturally specific element”. In a similar vein, Dimitriu (2004: 167) inserts that omission can be used to eliminate culturally specific terms “whenever an extralinguistic (cultural) presupposition in the source text is not understood by the TL audience, and the cultural item does not fulfil an important function”. When a cultural term is omitted, the result is zero translation, i.e. “a case where the TT contains no equivalent of a ST item” (Hatim and Munday: 2004: 353). In effect, omission for cultural reasons can be considered a neutralizing procedure that results in neither foreignization nor domestication.

### J. Generalization

Although generalization is not covered in the adopted model of procedures for translating culture-specific terms, the procedure is incorporated here because the data contain examples of culturally specific terms that are rendered by generalization. Generalization involves the replacement of a specific SL (cultural) term by a more generic term in the TL, typically because the term in question does not have a one-to-one counterpart in the TL culture. An example, in the data, is the translation of the specific English cultural term ‘reception class’, in the utterance ‘she described him as an angel at the

reception class', by the generic term پۆل [class] in the TL. Generalization is described as "a handy procedure when translators face a lexical gap" (Rasul 2016: 404). However, when dealing with cultural terms, the procedure is better off avoided because the resultant translation lacks specificity. Generalization results in a natural-sounding translation, which characterizes domestication.

## V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, there are 960 translation occurrences of cultural terms in the data – 40 cultural terms translated by 24 participants. However, this has resulted in 1100 occurrences of translation procedures because in dozens of cases two procedures are used in translating a cultural term, such as in the case of cultural explicitation. As the results show (Figure 4 below), the data contain 647 occurrences where cultural terms are translated by procedures leading to domestication. 473 instances are directly translated by domestication and 174 instances involve both domestication and foreignization concurrently. Overall, domesticating translation makes up nearly third-fifths (59%) of all cultural translation occurrences in the data. On the other hand, the data contain 437 occurrences where cultural terms are translated by procedures leading to foreignization. 239 occurrences are directly translated by procedures leading to foreignization, while 198 occurrences represent cases that contain both foreignization and domestication. Overall, foreignizing translation constitutes two-fifths (40%) of the cultural translation occurrences. Finally, the data contain 16 instances (1%), where cultural encounters are simply omitted in the translation, which result in neutralization.

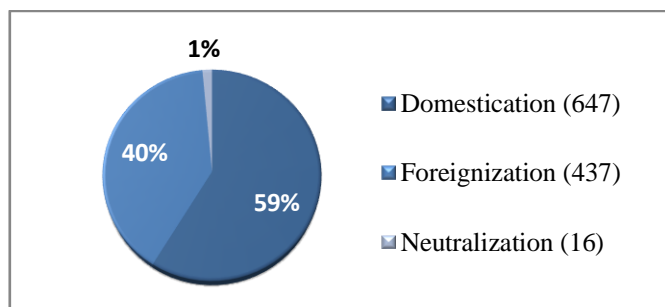


Fig. 4. Percentages of translation strategies in the data

### A. Domesticating Translation Orientation

Domesticating translation refers to the translation occurrences in which SL cultural terms are replaced by TL counterparts, i.e. the cultural terms are translated by procedures resulting in domestication, such as:

1. *Calque*: literal translation of fixed (cultural) terms, e.g.:

**ST:** The health visitor advised Omed to make an appointment with his GP...

**TT:** سەردانکاری تەندروستی نامۆزگاری ئومێدی کرد که کاتێک دیارییەکات بۆ ببینی پزیشکی گشتیی...

In the example above, both fixed terms 'health visitor' and 'GP' (general practitioner) are translated literally into Kurdish producing a *calque* translation, which leans towards domestication. In fact, there is no such as thing as سەردانکاری تەندروستی in the Kurdistan Region's health system, however the term is very much familiar to Kurdish immigrants in the UK. As for the term 'GP', it could also be translated by cultural borrowing, since it "is understood by the majority of the members of the UK based Kurdish community and by SK [Sorani Kurdish] speakers who have knowledge about medical matters" (Mustafa 2018: 212).

2. *Functional Equivalent*: the replacement of a SL cultural term by a TL cultural counterpart focusing on the function of the entity or institutional body to which the cultural term refers, e.g.:

**ST:** Hewa attends Kirklees College and is doing entry level 2...

**TT:** هێوا له پهیمانگای کیکلیس له قوتناغی دووم دمخوینیت...

The term 'college' is typically translated by transference as *کۆلیج*, especially when it is part of an institutional term (such as *Kirklees College*, *Manchester Community College*, etc.). In the example above, 'College' is translated as پهیمانگا [institute], which is an educational establishment in the Kurdistan Region educational system that has almost the same function as 'college' in the UK educational system – both offering diploma degrees and pre-university programs.

3. *Descriptive Equivalent*: this involves the description or explanation of a cultural term in the form of a definition or paraphrase, e.g.:

**ST:** The couple first met days before Christmas...

**TT1:** دوو نۆستهکە یهکەم جار چەند رۆژێک پێش جەژنی سەری سەل یهکتریان بینیوه...

**TT2:** یهکەم دیداری دوو خوشەریستەکە چەند رۆژێک پێش جەژنی لەدایکبوونی مەسیح بوو...

While in the vast majority of instances, the translators opted for cultural borrowing in dealing with the religious term 'Christmas', there are two instances where the term is translated by descriptive equivalent. In the first instance, 'Christmas' is described as سەری سەل [new year celebration] and in the second instance it is described as جەژنی لەدایکبوونی مەسیح [Christ's birth celebration].

4. *Generalization*: the replacement of a specific SL term (hyponym) by a more general term (superordinate) in the TL, which can be used for translating both cultural and non-cultural terms, e.g.:



explanatory elaboration [pre-school stage]. The transliteration is a prime example of foreignization, whereas the elaboration is an example of domestication.

2. *Unexpected cases where English cultural terms are translated by Arabic counterparts:* it is striking that the data contain 41 instances of foreignization based on Arabic borrowings, whereas the study is specifically concerned with English-Kurdish translation. Four translation occurrences involve both English and Arabic borrowings (e.g. ‘GP’ > (GP) دكتور). Twelve occurrences involve domestication (Kurdish literal translation) plus Arabic borrowing (e.g. ‘County Court’ > دادگای مهدهنی). Finally, 25 instances involve the replacement of English cultural terms by Arabic counterparts (e.g. ‘flat’ > شوقه). The use of Arabic loanwords in Kurdish communication is not an uncommon phenomenon; “Kurdish has been influenced by Arabic due to various factors, namely, religious, political, cultural ties as well as geographical proximity between the Kurdish and the Arabic societies” (Rasul 2020: 191).

3. *Cultural terms translated by omission:* although leaving out cultural terms in translation is generally dispreferred, the practice can be justified in certain circumstances. The data contain 16 occurrences where cultural terms are simply omitted in the translation, leading to cultural neutralization. Surprisingly, there are six occurrences of the omission of the term ‘NHS’ in the data, as in the ensuing example:

**ST:** While waiting for a decision from the Home Office regarding the fresh claim, you can get free health care from the NHS.

**TT:** له کاتی چاوهروانی بریاری و مزارعتی ناوخۆ تایبعت به داوا نووێهکەت، دتوانیت ببهرامبهر چاوهێری تهندهروستی وهر بگریت.

**BT:** While waiting for a decision from the Home Office regarding your fresh claim, you can get free health care.

Each of the cultural terms omitted has a counterpart of some sort and the omissions could be well avoided. The cultural terms in question are keywords and their omission would result in translation loss. Unless there is a legitimate reason for omitting a word or a term, omission in translation can be considered a deficiency or a weakness.

It is worth mentioning that the translations produced by the participant translators are marked by inconsistency while most of the chosen terms are commonly used and some of them are even fixed expressions that have established translations. A lack of consistency in the language of translated public service materials can certainly be a source of confusion for the target readership. The inconsistency can be, firstly, ascribed to the variation in the translators’ educational background and practicing experiences (see Section II above). Secondly, it can result from a lack of recognized institutions to offer guidelines with regard to a standard translation between English and Kurdish.

## CONCLUSION

The research unearthed that English-Kurdish translators working in the context of the UK public services apply a mixture of both domestication and foreignization strategies, but with varying degrees. Despite the fact that Kurdish immigrants in the UK are perceived to be more or less familiar with British culture, English-Kurdish translators tend to opt for domestication in the majority of instances (59%), whether it be purely domestication or combined with foreignization. Yet, a substantial proportion of the translation of cultural terms (40%) is marked by foreignization. A small but significant number of the cultural encounters (16 occurrences) are simply left out in the translation, which leads to cultural neutralization. The phenomenon can be deemed an area of weakness because leaving out keyword cultural terms in translation is hardly ever justifiable. As can be construed from the results, would-be translators are recommended to opt for Kurdish counterparts (i.e. domestication) as much as possible, and resort to foreignization only when a cultural term does not have a counterpart term in the TL culture and its transliteration is likely to be understood by the target readers.

One of the characteristics of the translations provided by the participants is a lack of consistency in their translation approach. The phenomenon can be due to the participants’ diverse academic backgrounds as well as their different ranges of experience. The inconsistency can become a source of confusion for readers and it makes it difficult to offer insights to would-be translators as to what type of approach they can take when dealing with certain cultural terms. This is an important area to be taken into account in translation training courses between English and Kurdish.

## APPENDICES

The appendices are available in the link below:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/145ARYLKyu2tO4Jab6JAQa-3PiDOXNX8B/view?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/145ARYLKyu2tO4Jab6JAQa-3PiDOXNX8B/view?usp=share_link)

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