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TRANSLATION CHALLENGES OF MALAY CULTURAL WORDS INTO ENGLISH

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Abstract: Translation involves more than transferring words from one language to another; it also requires the transmission of cultural meanings embedded within linguistic expressions. Malay contains numerous cultural words that reflect local customs, traditions, social relationships, religious beliefs, and ways of life. Many of these words do not have direct equivalents in English, creating challenges for translators. This study investigates the translation challenges associated with Malay cultural words when translated into English. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, selected Malay cultural terms are analyzed to identify linguistic and cultural difficulties encountered during translation.

Keywords: Translation, Cultural words, Malay language, English translation, Cross-cultural communication, Semantics, Translation challenges, Cultural equivalence.

Introduction. Translation serves as a bridge between languages and cultures, enabling communication across different linguistic communities. However, translation is not merely a linguistic activity; it also involves transferring cultural meanings from one context to another. Cultural words are particularly challenging because they represent concepts, practices, beliefs, and experiences that are unique to a specific society. When translators encounter cultural words, they must decide how to convey meanings that may not exist in the target language.

The Malay language contains a rich collection of cultural expressions rooted in Malaysian and broader Malay cultural traditions. These include terms related to food, social relationships, religious practices, traditional customs, and community life. Words such as *gotong-royong*, *kampung*, *baju kurung*, *Hari Raya*, and *kenduri* carry meanings that extend beyond their literal definitions. They embody cultural values and social practices that may not be fully understood by English-speaking audiences.

The translation of such cultural words presents significant difficulties because direct lexical equivalents are often unavailable. Translators must therefore employ various strategies to preserve meaning while ensuring comprehensibility for target readers. Failure to account for cultural nuances may result in semantic loss, misunderstanding, or cultural distortion.

Methods. This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design. Data consist of selected Malay cultural words commonly found in literature, media, educational materials, and everyday communication. The cultural terms were analyzed by comparing their meanings in Malay with their available English translations. The analysis focuses on identifying semantic differences, cultural

gaps, and translation difficulties. Translation strategies used to address these challenges are also examined. The findings are interpreted from a cultural and linguistic perspective to understand how cultural meanings are preserved or altered during translation.

Results and Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that Malay cultural words often contain cultural meanings that cannot be fully represented through direct English equivalents. The challenges arise because language reflects the experiences and cultural realities of its speakers. When these realities differ between cultures, translation becomes more complex.

Table 1. Examples of Malay Cultural Words and Their English Translations

Malay Cultural Word	Literal English Translation	Cultural Meaning	Translation Challenge
Gotong-royong	*Mutual cooperation*	Community-based collective work	No exact cultural equivalent
Kampung	*Village*	Traditional rural community and lifestyle	Cultural connotations lost
Kenduri	*Feast*	Communal religious or social gathering	Meaning broader than "feast"
Hari Raya	*Eid celebration*	Major Islamic festival with local traditions	Cultural specificity
Baju Kurung	*Traditional dress*	Symbol of Malay identity and culture	Requires explanation
Balik Kampung	*Return to village*	Cultural practice of returning home during holidays	Concept absent in English culture

One of the most significant challenges identified is the lack of direct equivalence. For example, the term *gotong-royong* refers to a traditional practice in which community members voluntarily work together to accomplish shared tasks such as cleaning public spaces, preparing for events, or assisting neighbors. Although it is often translated as "mutual cooperation" or "community service," these English expressions fail to capture the strong cultural values of solidarity, social responsibility, and communal participation associated with the original term.

Similarly, the word *kampung* is commonly translated as "village." However, the Malay concept of *kampung* extends beyond a simple geographical location. It often evokes feelings of nostalgia, cultural identity, family relationships, and traditional lifestyles. The English word "village" primarily denotes a settlement type and lacks many of the emotional and cultural associations present in Malay. Consequently, important cultural nuances may be lost during translation.

Another challenge concerns religious and ceremonial terminology. Words such as *kenduri* and *Hari Raya* are deeply embedded within Malay-Muslim cultural practices. Translating *kenduri* as "feast" provides only a partial representation because a *kenduri* often includes religious, social, and communal dimensions that are not necessarily implied by the English term. Likewise, *Hari Raya* is frequently translated as "Eid," but the Malay celebration incorporates distinctive local customs, foods, and family traditions that differ from Eid celebrations in other Muslim societies.

Table 2. Translation Strategies for Malay Cultural Words

Translation Strategy	Description	Example
Borrowing	Retaining the original Malay term	*kampung*, *Hari Raya*
Cultural Adaptation	Using a culturally similar	*kenduri* → community feast

	concept	
Descriptive Translation	Explaining the meaning	*gotong-royong* → community voluntary work
Footnotes/Glosses	Providing additional information	*balik kampung* with explanatory note
Paraphrasing	Expanding the meaning in context	*baju kurung* → traditional Malay women's attire

The findings indicate that borrowing is one of the most effective strategies when dealing with highly culture-specific terms. Maintaining words such as *kampung* or *Hari Raya* preserves cultural authenticity and introduces readers to local concepts. However, borrowing alone may not ensure comprehension, especially for audiences unfamiliar with Malay culture. Therefore, translators frequently combine borrowing with explanatory notes or descriptive translation.

Descriptive translation is particularly useful when a concept has no direct equivalent in English. For instance, *balik kampung* literally means "returning to the village," but culturally it refers to the mass movement of people returning to their hometowns during major festivals. Translators often need to explain this cultural practice rather than simply translating the individual words. Such explanations help readers understand the social significance of the concept.

The study also reveals that some cultural meanings are inevitably reduced during translation. Certain words carry emotional, historical, or symbolic associations that cannot be fully reproduced in another language. For example, *baju kurung* is more than a traditional garment; it represents cultural heritage, identity, and social values. Translating it merely as "traditional dress" omits many layers of cultural significance.

From a broader perspective, these challenges demonstrate the close relationship between language and culture. Cultural words reflect unique worldviews and social experiences, making them difficult to transfer across linguistic boundaries. Effective translation therefore requires not only linguistic competence but also intercultural knowledge and sensitivity. Translators must balance accuracy, readability, and cultural preservation to achieve meaningful communication.

Conclusion. This study examined the challenges involved in translating Malay cultural words into English. The findings indicate that cultural specificity, semantic gaps, and the absence of direct equivalents are the primary obstacles faced by translators. Words such as *gotong-royong*, *kampung*, *kenduri*, *Hari Raya*, and *baju kurung* contain cultural meanings that extend beyond their literal definitions and therefore cannot always be translated directly. The analysis also demonstrated that translation strategies such as borrowing, descriptive translation, adaptation, paraphrasing, and explanatory notes can help preserve cultural meaning while improving reader comprehension. Nevertheless, some degree of semantic and cultural loss is often unavoidable when translating culturally bound expressions.

Ultimately, successful translation requires a deep understanding of both source and target cultures. Translators must act as cultural mediators who not only transfer linguistic information but also facilitate intercultural understanding. Future research may explore translation challenges involving other Southeast Asian languages or investigate how readers interpret translated cultural terms in different contexts.

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