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SEMANTIC LOSS AND MEANING SHIFT IN TRANSLATION

Abstract: Semantic loss and meaning shift are common outcomes of translation because languages do not match each other perfectly in lexical meaning, cultural presuppositions, and discourse conventions. This article explains semantic loss as the reduction of denotational components (missing or weakened meaning) and meaning shift as a change in the informational or evaluative direction of the message (e.g., tone, force, or implied stance). Drawing on translation studies discussions of equivalence, cohesion/coherence, and explicitation, the paper shows that loss and shift frequently occur when translators rely on surface similarity, choose the wrong contextual sense, over-generalize culture-specific items, or "smooth" style at the cost of the author's attitude. Baker's discourse-oriented view of meaning in use is used to highlight how coherence and pragmatic inference shape translation choices. Explicitation research (Klaudy; Pym) is applied to show how adding minimal clarification can prevent misunderstanding yet may also create shifts if overused.Practical examples are provided with short explanations to demonstrate how translators can detect and compensate loss while protecting meaning and style.

Keywords: semantic loss; meaning shift; translation equivalence; context; explicitation; implicitation; pragmatics; culture-specific items; compensation; translation strategies

Introduction

Translation is often described as transferring meaning from a source text (ST) to a target text (TT). In real practice, however, meaning is not a single object that can be moved intact: it is a layered structure that includes denotation (what is referred to), connotation (attitude and evaluation), pragmatic force (what the utterance does), and cultural presuppositions (what the reader is expected to know). When these layers are not reproduced, translation produces semantic loss or meaning shift. Semantic loss occurs when part of the ST meaning is weakened, omitted, or generalized; meaning shift occurs when the TT guides readers toward a different interpretation, evaluation, or relationship than the ST intended. These phenomena matter because they can change a text's message even if the TT is fluent.

Translation studies emphasizes that meaning is realized in context and across discourse relations, not only inside isolated words. Baker's approach highlights how cohesion, coherence, and pragmatic inference shape what "counts" as meaning for the reader, and why translators sometimes need to adjust structure to preserve the same interpretive path. At the same time, research on explicitation shows that translators frequently add clarifying detail to help TT readers, which can reduce loss but also risks shifting emphasis or tone if applied excessively. This article clarifies the main mechanisms of loss and shift, illustrates them through short examples, and proposes practical methods to manage them without damaging readability.

How semantic loss happens

One frequent mechanism is lexical narrowing or broadening caused by non-equivalence. Many ST words have several possible equivalents; selecting a broader TT word can reduce meaning specificity. Example: ST: “He was strolling along the river.” TT (too general): “U daryo bo‘yida yurib ketayotgan edi.” The TT communicates movement, but it loses the nuance of “walking slowly and casually.” A better solution may preserve nuance through a more specific choice or light expansion: “U daryo bo‘yida asta sayr qilib ketayotgan edi.” After this example, the key point is that semantic loss is often not a dramatic error; it is a gradual weakening of texture. Over time, repeated weakening can flatten an entire narrative voice.

A second mechanism is wrong sense selection in context. Polysemous words activate different meanings depending on co-text. Example: ST: “Both the state and federal authorities reacted.” If “state” is mistranslated as “davlat” (country/state) instead of “shtat” (federal unit), the TT changes institutional meaning. After this example, the lesson is that context triggers—contrast with “federal,” domain markers, and topic—are not decoration; they are the switches that select meaning. Baker’s discussion of context and coherence supports the idea that translators must read meaning as activated by discourse environment.A third mechanism is culture-specific generalization. Culture-specific items (CSIs) often carry dense meaning; translating them with generic terms increases accessibility but reduces cultural code. Example: Uzbek ST: “Navro‘zda sumalak qaynaydi.” TT (generalized): “People cook a traditional dish during a spring festival.” This TT is understandable, yet it removes the cultural names that anchor identity and social memory. A guided solution keeps the key item with minimal clarity: “During Navruz, people cook sumalak (a traditional spring dish).” After this example, the point is that loss is not only lexical—it is cultural meaning loss, where the TT becomes less locally “located.” Research on loss and gain in translating CSIs documents that loss often occurs and that translators use compensation to maintain meaning.

How meaning shift happens

Meaning shift often occurs even when denotation is preserved. One common shift is register and politeness drift, where the TT becomes more direct or more formal than the ST. Example: ST (formal request): “We would appreciate it if you could send the documents by Friday.” TT (too direct): “Hujjatlarni juma kuni yuboring.” The TT changes the interpersonal stance from polite request to command. After this example, the insight is that pragmatic meaning is part of equivalence: translation must preserve not only “what is requested” but “how the relationship is managed.”

Another shift type is connotative reversal: a word may carry positive or negative evaluation depending on context. Example: “ambitious” can be positive (“grand, impressive”) or negative (“overly self-seeking”). Translating both contexts with one fixed equivalent shifts tone. After this example, the point is that evaluative meaning is context-sensitive; preserving it requires choosing different equivalents based on which semantic component is dominant in the communicative act.

A third shift mechanism is ideational reframing through explicitation. Adding clarification can prevent misunderstanding, but it can also change emphasis. Suppose a TT repeatedly adds explanatory phrases in brackets; the narrative can become didactic, and the translator’s voice becomes more visible. Explicitation research notes that translation often becomes more explicit than non-translation, but it distinguishes between necessary explicitation (to preserve coherence) and optional explicitation that may reflect translator preference.After this point, a practical rule emerges: explicate only what is needed for target readers to interpret the text correctly, not what the translator personally finds interesting.

Explicitation, implicitation, and controlled compensation

Explicitation is one of the main tools for reducing semantic loss when the TT audience lacks presupposed knowledge. Klaudy’s discussion of explicitation links it to shifts in cohesion and

coherence and to translator interpretation processes.overview of explicitation further clarifies that some explicitness changes are required by language systems, while others reflect translation as a communicative act.

Example: ST: “He finally got into Harrods.” TT literal: “U nihoyat Harrodsga kirdi.” For many readers, the proper name may not activate the intended frame (“famous London department store”). A controlled explicitation can prevent coherence failure: “U nihoyat Londondagi mashhur Harrods do‘koniga kirdi.” After this example, the key point is not “always explain names,” but “explain when the ST relies on background knowledge that TT readers cannot be assumed to have.”

Compensation can also be stylistic. If an idiom cannot be preserved without confusion, a translator may preserve the core meaning and compensate with stylistic richness elsewhere. Vinay and Darbelnet’s procedure set (e.g., modulation, equivalence, adaptation) offers a classical way to describe such transformations: translators may change viewpoint (modulation) or select functional idiomatic equivalence rather than literal transfer. After this point, the practical implication is that loss can be managed: if a metaphor must be simplified for clarity, the translator can preserve overall literary tone through other resources (rhythm, parallelism, lexical choice) so the text does not become flat.

Practical checklist for translators

A simple, repeatable routine reduces both loss and shift. First, identify the “meaning load” of an item: is it purely denotational, or does it also carry cultural and pragmatic meaning? Second, test for context triggers: co-text, domain words, and genre. Third, consider whether the TT needs minimal explicitation for coherence. Fourth, check register and stance: does the TT sound like the same speaker in the same social relationship? Fifth, scan for systematic drift: repeated generalization of CSIs, repeated strengthening/weakening of evaluation, or repeated addition of commentary. After listing these steps, the core idea is that errors are often cumulative; one loss is small, but repeated losses reshape the text.

When revising, it is helpful to mark three “high-risk” zones: (1) polysemous words, (2) evaluative adjectives and verbs (praise/criticism), and (3) culture-specific items and institutions. Loss and gain studies show that translators often compensate losses through addition, paraphrase, or explanation, but the effectiveness depends on selecting the right technique for the text’s purpose.

Conclusion

Semantic loss and meaning shift are natural risks in translation because meaning is layered and context-driven. Loss typically appears as weakening, omission, or over-generalization of denotation and cultural signals; shift typically appears as changes in tone, stance, pragmatic force, and interpretive framing. The most effective prevention strategy is context competence: reading meaning as activated by discourse, selecting equivalents that fit both semantics and register, and using controlled explicitation only when necessary to preserve coherence for TT readers. Research on explicitation shows why added clarity can be helpful but also why it must be disciplined to avoid shifting narrative voice and emphasis.Ultimately, high-quality translation is not the absence of all loss—often impossible—but the management of loss: preserving what is central, compensating what is fragile, and keeping the TT aligned with the ST’s communicative purpose.

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