LINGUISTIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN TRANSLATION TO MAINTAIN MEANING

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Abstract: Linguistic transformations are deliberate changes in form that translators use to preserve meaning when direct equivalence is unavailable or unnatural. This article explains why transformations are necessary and how they function as meaning-maintenance tools at lexical, grammatical, and discourse levels. Drawing on classic taxonomies of procedures (e.g., transposition and modulation) and the concept of translation shifts, the paper proposes a practical framework for selecting transformations based on context, genre, and reader needs. Multiple short examples demonstrate how transformations prevent semantic loss, pragmatic distortion, and cohesion breakdown. The analysis shows that successful transformations are not "free translation," but controlled operations guided by communicative purpose and target-language norms. The article concludes that transformation competence is a core indicator of professional translation quality and can be systematically taught and assessed.

Introduction

Translation aims to reproduce meaning and communicative effect, but languages encode meaning differently. A translator therefore cannot rely on one-to-one substitution for most texts, especially when differences involve grammar, information structure, idioms, politeness, or culture-specific references. Modern translation pedagogy emphasizes that meaning is realized in use: translators must consider context, cohesion, coherence, and pragmatic inference rather than treat words as independent labels. This is the practical reason linguistic transformations exist: they allow the translator to maintain meaning by changing form. In the broadest sense, a linguistic transformation is any controlled departure from the source form that is motivated by meaning preservation, acceptability, or communicative purpose in the target language.

Classic translation theory describes many of these operations explicitly. Vinay and Darbelnet's well-known framework distinguishes direct (literal) procedures from oblique procedures and identifies key transformation types such as transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation. Catford uses the term "translation shifts" for departures from formal correspondence, including level shifts and category shifts. While terminology varies across authors, the shared point is stable: translators often must change linguistic form to keep meaning stable. This article investigates how transformations maintain meaning in practice, how they can be selected systematically, and why they should be treated as a professional skill rather than ad hoc improvisation.

Methods

This study uses qualitative, example-based analysis grounded in established transformation models. First, it synthesizes a practical taxonomy of transformations from major translation frameworks (Vinay & Darbelnet procedures and Catford shifts) and links them to meaning preservation goals. Second, it applies the taxonomy to short translation scenarios typical of English–Uzbek or English–Russian–Uzbek training contexts (since many transformation models are widely used in post-Soviet translation pedagogy). Each example is followed by brief interpretive commentary explaining what meaning would be lost with a literal rendering and how the transformation prevents that loss. Third, the study integrates discourse-oriented concepts (cohesion and explicitation) to show that transformations operate beyond sentence grammar and also preserve reader interpretation.

Results

1) Transposition to preserve propositional meaning and naturalness

Transposition (changing grammatical category or syntactic structure) is one of the most common meaning-preserving transformations. Vinay and Darbelnet treat transposition as replacing one grammatical unit with another without changing the message content. The key practical reason is that languages distribute meaning across parts of speech differently: what English expresses with a noun phrase may be more natural as a verb phrase in Uzbek, or what English expresses with an adjective may require a clause.
Example: EN "He gave me an answer." UZ "U menga javob berdi."
A literal noun-heavy rendering (u menga bir javob berdi) is possible, but the verb-centered Uzbek version is more idiomatic and preserves the same proposition with greater naturalness. The meaning is maintained because the action ("answering") is preserved; only grammatical packaging changes.
Example: EN "Her refusal shocked everyone." UZ "Uning rad etishi hammani hayratda soldi." / "U rad etgani hammani hayratda qoldirdi."
Both Uzbek options maintain meaning, but the clause-based alternative often reads more naturally in narrative style. The supportive point is that transposition is not stylistic decoration; it prevents unnatural target syntax that can distract readers or subtly change emphasis.

2) Modulation to preserve viewpoint, evaluation, and pragmatic intent

Modulation changes the perspective or conceptual angle while retaining sense. Vinay and Darbelnet include modulation among oblique procedures because meaning may be preserved better by changing viewpoint than by copying form. Modulation is especially important when literal translation would sound illogical, culturally odd, or pragmatically too strong/weak.
Example: EN "He is no stranger to pain." UZ "U og'riqqa bardoshli."
A literal rendering (u og'riqqa begona emas) may be understandable but can sound unnatural and less expressive in Uzbek. The modulated version preserves the intended meaning ("he has experienced pain many times") and keeps the pragmatic force. The supportive point is that modulation often protects implicature: the sentence implies experience, not unfamiliarity as a literal concept.
Example: EN "It's not impossible." UZ "Buni bajarish/uddalas mumkin."
Literal double negation can sound heavy. The modulated positive statement maintains the same

communicative intent in many contexts (possibility) and improves readability. This matters because meaning is not only logical truth conditions; it also includes reader processing and tone.

3) Structural shifts to preserve information flow and cohesion

Catford's shift framework highlights category shifts such as structure shifts and unit shifts. In practice, restructuring is often required to preserve focus, emphasis, and coherence. Word order and clause packaging are not identical across languages; if copied mechanically, the TT can become confusing or change what is foregrounded.
Example: EN "Only then did he understand the truth." UZ "Shundan keyingina u haqiqatni tushundi."
The Uzbek structure preserves emphasis ("only then") while using a natural Uzbek focus marker (-gina). The supportive point is that emphasis is part of meaning: if the translator drops "only then," the narrative logic weakens.
Example: EN "After he arrived, he called me, which surprised me." UZ "U kelgandan keyin menga qo'ng'iroq qilishi, meni hayron qoldirdi."
Splitting the sentence preserves coherence by matching Uzbek preferences for clarity and avoiding overloaded subordination. The meaning is preserved because causal surprise remains explicit, and the reader's processing becomes easier, not flatter.

4) Explicitation and implicitation to preserve coherence for target readers

Explicitation is a transformation where implicit information becomes explicit in translation; it is widely discussed in Translation Studies, including Klaudy's explicitation hypothesis and later refinements. Explicitation can prevent meaning loss when the TT audience lacks presupposed knowledge. However, it also risks meaning shift if it adds emphasis or interpretive framing that the ST did not carry.
Example: EN "He finally got into Harrods." UZ "U nihoyat Londondagi mashhur Harrods do'koniga tashrif buyurdi."
If TT readers do not know Harrods, the name alone may not activate the intended frame ("famous department store"). The added descriptor is a controlled explicitation that restores coherence and preserves the communicative value (the achievement of entering a well-known place). Baker's discussion of coherence and reader expectations supports the principle that TT readers may need such links made explicit.
Example of careful limitation: EN "He spoke at Yale." UZ "U Yale universitetida ma'ruza qildi."
Adding "university" helps comprehension in Uzbek where proper-name institutions are often clarified. The supportive point is to explicate once and avoid repeated glossing, otherwise the translation becomes pedagogical rather than literary.
Implicitation is the reverse operation: making something less explicit when the target language makes it redundant. Pym notes that some explicitness changes are required by language systems, while others reflect translator behavior.) A skilled translator chooses implicitation when explicit markers would sound unnatural or repetitive in the TT, thereby maintaining naturalness without reducing meaning.

5) Register transformation to preserve politeness and social meaning

Meaning includes interpersonal stance. If the TT changes politeness level, it may shift social meaning even if the factual content remains. Register-sensitive transformation is therefore meaning-preserving, not merely stylistic. House's register-based quality assessment tradition emphasizes the importance of matching function and tenor (relationship) between ST and TT. Example: EN "We would appreciate it if you could send the documents by Friday." UZ "Hujjatlarni juma kuniga qadar yuborsangiz, minnatdor bo'lar edik."

A direct imperative (juma kunigacha yuboring) is not always wrong, but it changes interpersonal stance from polite request to command. The supportive point is that business communication meaning is partly relational: the TT must preserve respect and indirectness if the ST uses them.

6) Phraseological equivalence and adaptation to preserve figurative meaning

Vinay and Darbelnet include "equivalence" and "adaptation" for cases where direct translation fails and a different expression is needed to produce the same effect. This is crucial for idioms and proverbs, where literal rendering often produces nonsense or unintended humor.
Example: EN "The game is not worth the candle." UZ "Ovvora bo'lishga arzimaydi."
The TT preserves the proverb's pragmatic function (discouraging effort) even though imagery changes. The supportive point is that figurative meaning is part of message force; if the translator keeps candles and games literally, the TT loses communicative clarity.
Example: EN "Make hay while the sun shines." UZ "Temirni qizig'ida bos."
Here the Uzbek proverb uses a different image, but the same pragmatic meaning (act when the opportunity is present). This is a classic case where maintaining meaning requires replacing the entire expression with a culturally equivalent one, not translating parts.

Discussion

Transformations are not "free translation": they are controlled meaning maintenance

A common misunderstanding among students is that transformations reduce accuracy. In professional terms, the opposite is often true: transformations maintain meaning more accurately than literal translation because they preserve function, emphasis, and pragmatic effect. Catford's notion of shifts frames this as systematic: translation frequently involves departures from formal correspondence.) Vinay and Darbelnet similarly present oblique procedures as necessary when literal translation is impossible or unnatural. From a discourse perspective, transformations also protect cohesion and coherence. Cohesion studies (Halliday & Hasan tradition) show that texts rely on reference, substitution, and linking devices to guide interpretation. When translating, some cohesive devices may need restructuring to prevent ambiguity (e.g., pronoun reference in Uzbek) or to maintain thematic flow. This is why "sentence-by-sentence literalness" can damage text-level meaning even when each sentence seems accurate.

Purpose and audience as selection criteria

Functionalist translation theory (Skopos/translation purpose) stresses that strategies should match the intended function of the TT. Nord's functionalist overview emphasizes that translators choose strategies according to purpose and communicative situation. This has direct implications for transformations: explicitation may be essential in educational or informational texts but may be minimized in literary translation to protect voice; register transformation is crucial in

customer service but less relevant in technical manuals; idiom adaptation is central in literary dialogue but may be replaced with paraphrase in safety instructions.

A practical decision routine for translators

To maintain meaning, translators can apply a short routine: (1) identify the meaning load (denotation + evaluation + pragmatics), (2) test whether literal form is natural in the TT, (3) if not, select a transformation type (transposition/modulation/restructuring/explicitation/equivalence), (4) recheck cohesion and register, and (5) verify that no new emphasis or facts were added unintentionally. This routine aligns with the broader view that translation is interpretive reconstruction rather than mechanical substitution.

Conclusion

Linguistic transformations are essential for maintaining meaning because languages differ in how they encode grammar, emphasis, cohesion, politeness, and figurative sense. This article showed that meaning-preserving transformations operate at multiple levels: transposition preserves propositional content while improving naturalness; modulation preserves viewpoint and pragmatic intent; structural shifts preserve information flow; explicitation and implicitation preserve coherence across cultures; register transformation preserves interpersonal meaning; and phraseological equivalence/adaptation preserves figurative function. The key conclusion is that transformations are not optional "stylistic tricks" but systematic operations grounded in translation theory and justified by communicative needs. Translators who master transformation selection maintain meaning more reliably than those who depend on literal equivalence, and this competence can be trained through context-based analysis and purposeful revision.

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