

A Cognitive-Semiotic Approach to Reconstructing Meaning in Literary Translation

Nosirova Dilnoza Rizokulovna

Lecturer at Asia International University

Abstract: This article advances a cognitive-semiotic perspective on literary translation, reframing it as a sophisticated process of reconstructing meaning and effect within a new semiotic system, rather than a simple linguistic transfer. Using John Green's novel "The Fault in Our Stars" and its Russian and Uzbek versions as a central case study, this analysis employs the theoretical lenses of frame semantics, pragmatics, and cultural connotation to deconstruct the challenges inherent in translating complex domains such as metaphors, minimalist formulae, and intertextual references. It demonstrates that successful translation requires a strategic blend of retention, modulation, and compensation to preserve the source text's conceptual structures and cultural resonance. The article culminates in a pragmatic, multi-tiered workflow designed to guide translators toward achieving not just literal accuracy, but profound artistic veracity.

Keywords: cognitive-semiotic translation, frame semantics, conceptual metaphor, pragmatics, effect equivalence, cultural connotation, compensatory techniques, The Fault in Our Stars, Translations in Russian and Uzbek.



This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license

Introduction

Contemporary translation studies have undergone a significant conceptual shift, moving away from the traditional view of translation as a purely «linguistic operation» toward a more holistic understanding of it as a multifaceted form of intercultural communication (Artemyeva, 2014). This modern perspective recognizes that the visible act of substituting words is merely the surface of a far deeper process governed by cognitive and semiotic mechanisms. The central thesis of this article is that effective literary translation demands a profound cognitive-semiotic engagement with the source text. It is not a transfer of words but a reconstruction of meaning, effect, and cultural resonance within the distinct semiotic system of the target language. To achieve this, the translator must skillfully align the conceptual structures, cultural contexts, and pragmatic intentions of the source with the expressive capabilities of the destination language and culture.

This paper will first outline the theoretical foundations of a cognitive-semiotic approach, exploring the interplay of semantics, context, and frame theory. It will then delve into the critical challenge of cultural connotation, a frequent source of misinterpretation. Subsequently, a case study of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* will illustrate these principles in practice by

analyzing specific translational challenges. Finally, this analysis will be synthesized into a pragmatic workflow for literary translators aiming for artistic integrity. These theoretical underpinnings provide the necessary framework for understanding translation as a reconstructive and creative act.

The Theoretical Foundations of Cognitive-Semiotic Translation

To understand translation as a reconstructive act, one must first grasp the foundational theories that govern how meaning is created, interpreted, and culturally embedded. A translator's work is far more complex than finding lexical equivalents; it is an act of deep interpretation and re-creation. This section will deconstruct the core principles of semantics, semiotics, and frame theory, which together form the analytical lens for the modern translator, enabling them to move beyond the word and engage with the conceptual world of the text.

Semantics and semiotics provide the foundational frameworks for the translation process. A translator's task extends beyond dictionary knowledge to encompass the ability to interpret language units within their specific cultural milieu. This distinction is crucial, as the process facilitates the transmission of both explicit and implicit layers of meaning. As Artemyeva (2014) notes, we must differentiate between:

- **“Meanings”**: The explicit, denotative, and subject-logical core of a word or phrase.
- **“meanings”**: The implicit, interlinear, and culturally mediated significances, including connotations, subtext, and pragmatic force.

In non-fiction, the goal is often a «transparent» functional equivalency focused on the first category. In literary translation, however, retaining the second category is paramount. The preservation of effects—such as intonation, imagery, rhythm, and intertextual links—is what elevates a translation from a mere rendering to a work of art. This redefines the «unit of translation» from a minimal linguistic sign to a unit of meaning, which could be a word, a phrase, or an entire compositional passage through which the work's overarching semantics are reconstructed.

A word in a text is simultaneously less and more than its dictionary entry: less because context activates only a fraction of its potential meanings, and more because that same context can imbue it with new connotative dimensions. According to Sternin (2011), context influences meaning through several distinct mechanisms, all of which are critical for a translator to recognize:

1. In the case of a polysemous word, context isolates a single interpretation while suppressing others. For example, the Russian word for «guest» can signify a simple visitor, a status symbol, or a metaphor for an «uninvited presence.» The translator's first task is to identify which profile is active in the specific narrative moment.
2. Context can activate specific semantic features (semes) of a word. The phrase «A tall woman was sitting on the bench» primarily activates the seme of «an adult female,» leaving other potential attributes (social role, career) unengaged. A literary translator might strategically shift this profile if the author later develops a related motif, perhaps choosing a word like «slender» to foreshadow a character's fragility.
3. Context can either generalize or specify a seme. When translating a word like the English «home,» which carries a warm, intimate connotation, into Russian, a translator must choose carefully. The context may demand a modulation from the direct equivalent 'дом' (house) to a more specific term like 'дача' (dacha/country house) to properly align with the source text's intended rhythm and tone.
4. Context can imbue a neutral word with new meaning that is absent from its core definition. In an ironic passage, a standard lexeme can become sarcastic. The translator's challenge is to convey

this subtly through word order, punctuation, or rhythm, rather than with a «thick hint» that destroys the author's nuanced effect.

5. Authors often use polysemy and homonymy as stylistic devices. When faced with a pun, a translator has several strategies: preserve the wordplay if a direct counterpart exists, substitute it with a functionally equivalent play on words (compensation), or, in rare cases, elucidate the meaning through context or a note.

Building on the power of context is Charles Fillmore's concept of «frame shift.» A «frame» is a cognitive «scenario» or conceptual structure that is triggered by language. A single word can activate entirely different frames, drastically altering the reader's interpretation. For instance, the word *star* can evoke distinct scenarios:

1. A celestial star (astronomy frame)
2. A theatrical star (performance frame)
3. An instrument of fate («the stars aligned») (destiny frame)

For the translator, recognizing which frame is active is a crucial, high-stakes decision. Selecting the wrong frame can lead to a complete misreading of a passage. If a text oscillates between frames, the translator must make micro-adjustments in the surrounding text to guide the target-language reader through the same cognitive shifts intended by the original author.

This theoretical understanding of how context activates meanings and frames provides the groundwork for tackling the most nuanced and challenging domain of translation: cultural connotation.

The Critical Challenge of Cultural Connotation

The strategic management of cultural connotation is one of the most demanding aspects of literary translation. Defined as a value-laden, linguacultural phenomenon, cultural connotation carries information that is recognized as «self-evident» within a specific society (Ivanova and Chernysheva, 2014). Misinterpreting this layer of meaning leads not just to factual inaccuracy but to a fundamental breakdown in communication. A formally «correct» translation can become pragmatically inappropriate if it fails to convey a crucial value signal or, worse, evokes an entirely different cultural association in the target audience, causing the reader to perceive a nuance completely unintended by the author.

According to Ivanova and Chernysheva (2014), cultural connotation is a cognitive construct with several key properties that a translator must deconstruct:

- **Stereotypicality:** It establishes set evaluative frameworks that are commonly understood within a culture.
- **Axiologicality:** It involves the attribution of value, marking something as positive, negative, or otherwise significant.
- **Associativity:** It comprises a collection of cultural associations linked to a word or concept.
- **Cognition:** Its interpretation depends on the encyclopedic knowledge shared by native speakers of the language.

The source text further distinguishes between primary connotations, which emerge during the initial naming process and stabilization of a value within a sign, and secondary connotations, which consist of subsequent layers of ethnocultural and linguistic influences. This complex layering is precisely why even closely related languages often require significant translational transformations, such as modulation (shifting perspective) and explication (making implicit information explicit). A translator cannot simply rely on dictionary equivalents; they must be

proficient in both the source and target *cultures*. This reality underscores the principle that mastery of language is inseparable from mastery of the cultural knowledge in which that language is embedded.

Having explored the abstract challenge of connotation, we now turn to its concrete application in a literary text to see how these principles operate in practice.

Reconstructing Meaning in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*

John Green's novel *The Fault in Our Stars* provides a rich landscape for examining the practical application of cognitive-semiotic translation principles. Its blend of wit, emotional depth, and cultural references creates a series of complex challenges for any translator. This section will analyze specific «complex domains» from the novel—metaphors, minimalist phrases, intertextuality, and names—to demonstrate how translators must navigate these obstacles to preserve the original's artistic integrity and emotional impact for a new audience.

1. **«I am a grenade»:** This emblematic metaphor carries immense conceptual weight, encapsulating the protagonist's feelings of abruptness, devastation, and inevitability regarding her impact on her loved ones. The translator's task is to maintain its powerful conciseness and intensity. While a literal counterpart may work in some languages, in cultures where the imagery is less impactful, the translator might need to adjust the rhythm or the surrounding text to ensure the emotional payload is delivered with the same force.

2. **The «Unlit Cigarette»:** This symbol is not just an object but a pragmatic exercise of control over death. By clutching the «thing that kills» between his teeth without giving it the power to do its killing, the protagonist performs an act of defiance. A literal translation of the object is perfectly suitable here. However, the desired effect is achieved not by the word «cigarette» alone but by the translator's careful editing of the entire scene—its pacing, intonation, and rhythm—to convey the modality of purpose and control.

The novel's iconic minimalist formulae, «Okay? — Okay.» and «Always,» derive their power from a structure of maximal impact achieved with minimal language. These phrases carry entire worlds of shared understanding between the characters. The translator's goal is not formal symmetry but *functional equivalence*. The translation must preserve the sense of tact, intimacy, and profound recognition embedded in these simple words. Adding elaborate explanations or more descriptive language would instantly destroy their delicate, hard-won emotional effect.

The scene set in the Anne Frank Museum demands a high ethical standard from the translator. The language employed must be «transparent»—precise and reverent, yet devoid of rhetorical embellishment or sentimentality. The translator's task is to strike a difficult balance between reverence for a historical memory that may resonate differently across cultures, the factual accuracy of the details, and the exclusion of any «sentimental superstructures» that would undermine the scene's stark emotional honesty.

The antagonism between the names «Augustus» and «Gus» is not a simple matter of onomastics; it is a powerful representation of the novel's central semantic dimensions of «greatness» and «vulnerability.» «Augustus» evokes imperial grandeur, while «Gus» is intimate and fragile. It is crucial for the translator to maintain this gradation using all available methods, such as transliteration, rhythmic adjustments, or the use of adjacent status markers in the text. Failure to preserve this distinction compromises the hero's entire emotional trajectory of disillusionment and acceptance.

These specific examples from the case study demonstrate the need for a systematized approach that moves beyond ad-hoc solutions to a structured and repeatable process.

A Pragmatic Workflow for Achieving Artistic Veracity

Based on the preceding theoretical and practical analysis, it is possible to synthesize a structured, multi-tiered workflow for literary translators. This process is designed to move beyond intuition and toward a systematic analysis that ensures a translation is faithful not just to the words on the page, but to the work's overall semantic, cultural, and artistic effect. It provides a checklist for deep engagement with the source text before committing to a final rendering.

The proposed multi-tiered semantic analysis consists of the following six steps:

1. **Lexicographic Level:** Document the core dictionary definition of a key term and its primary variants, verifying this information against multiple authoritative sources to establish a baseline.
2. **Psycholinguistic Level:** Investigate the intuitive definitions and associations held by native speakers, using corpus data and collocation profiles where possible to understand how the word is used in natural contexts.
3. **Communicative Level:** Identify the rhetorical functions of the word or phrase within the specific text, including any subtext, implicatures, irony, or shifts in tone and address.
4. **Cultural Level:** Uncover any antecedent texts, symbolic domains, and local evaluative criteria associated with the language, recognizing its place in the broader cultural conversation.
5. **Translation Heuristics:** Systematically consider a collection of methods for transfer, such as direct metaphor preservation, conversion of a metaphor to a simile, functional substitution, or compensation in an adjacent context.
6. **Verification:** Conduct a rigorous self-assessment to check for «false friends,» examine for unintended or undesirable implications in the target language, and evaluate the overall readability and flow at the chapter level, not just in isolation.

This methodical workflow serves as the critical bridge between theoretical understanding and practical application, guiding the translator toward the final goal of achieving artistic truth.

Conclusion

The translation of literary art is a complex endeavor that operates at the intersection of linguistics, semiotics, cultural studies, and creative practice. As this analysis has shown, effective translation is achieved not through literal, interlinear «arithmetic» but through a deep contextual and cultural comprehension that prioritizes functional-pragmatic equivalence. The translator's ultimate responsibility is to reconstruct the intricate network of connotations, rhetoric, intertextual references, and pragmatic impacts that constitute the original work's soul. By adopting a cognitive-semiotic approach and a systematic workflow, the translator can ensure the final product is faithful to the original not just in *what is said*, but in *how it resonates* and the lasting impression it leaves in the reader's consciousness. This commitment is what separates mere linguistic transfer from the profound act of creating artistic veracity in a new language.

References

1. Ahmadova A. Y. The Pragmatics of Translation: Challenges, Techniques, and Innovations // Euro-Global Journal of Linguistics and Language Education. — Vilnius : Euro-Global, 2024. — Vol. 2, No. 2. — P. 4–14.
2. Bagha, K. N. (2008). What is Semantics? Humanities, (2), pp.58-64, Azarbaijan: Baku State University.
3. Hafdhi K. Role of Literary Pragmatics in Translation: A Personal Case Study // Open Journal of Modern Linguistics. — 2023. — Vol. 13, No. 3. — P. 423–435.
4. Hermans, T. (2007). Literary translation. Routledge.

5. Kasimova, R. R., & ZIYADULLAYEVA, A. A. (2022). The Peculiarities of Comparative Historical Method and its Types. *International Scientific Journal Theoretical & Applied Science*, MA. USA.—Published, 15, 336-345.
6. Kasimova, R. R., Ziyadullayev, A. R., & Ziyadullayeva, A. A. (2021). THE NATURE OF THE CULTURE BOUND WORDS AND PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION. *Theoretical & Applied Science*, (3), 401-405.
7. MacLaverly's Cal. // *Twentieth-century fiction: From text to context* / eds. P. Verdonk, J. J. Weber. — London : Routledge, 2007. — P. 138–164.
8. Nosirova, D. (2023). LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES. *Modern Science and Research*, 2(9), 165–170.
9. Nosirova, D. (2023). LEARNING GRAMMAR THROUGH CONTEXT: ENHANCING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY. *Modern Science and Research*, 2(7), 349–351.
10. Nosirova, D. (2023). SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE ROLE OF DIDACTIC GAMES IN SLA. *Modern Science and Research*, 2(5), 1143–1145.
11. Nosirova, D. (2023). TYPOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTS OF SPEECH OF THE RUSSIAN, UZBEK, AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES AND THEIR TEACHING METHODS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION. *Modern Science and Research*, 2(4), 564–567.
12. Rakhmatulloevna, K. R. (2022, January). An effect of psychology on a work of art and translation studies. In *Integration Conference on Integration of Pragmalinguistics, Functional Translation Studies and Language Teaching Processes* (pp. 197-199).
13. Thai K., Karpinska M., Krishna K. et al. Exploring Document-Level Literary Machine Translation with Parallel Paragraphs from World Literature // arXiv. — 2022, Oct 25
14. Артемьева, Ю.В. (2014). Семантика и семиотика в переводе. *Вестник РУДН, серия Теория языка. Семиотика. Семантика*, 2, 26-28.
15. Дотмурзиева З. С. Прагматика англоязычного художественного текста и проблемы прагматики его перевода : автореф. дис. ... канд. филол. наук. — Пятигорск : [б. и.], 2006.
16. Иванова Е. В., Чернышева Н. В. Культурная коннотация как категория лингвокультурологии и её переводческие аспекты. — 2014.
17. Иванова, С.В., & Чанышева, З.З. (2014). Семантика и прагматика языкового знака как драйверы культуранности. *Вестник РУДН, серия Лингвистика*, 4, 154-165.
18. Касимова, Р. (2021). Психология, адабиётшунослик ва таржимашунослик узвийлиги. *ЎзМУ хабарлари.—Тошкент*, 1(6), 2.
19. Касимова, Р. Р. (2021). Адабиёт психологияси. *МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ ЖУРНАЛ ИСКУССТВО СЛОВА*, 4(6).
20. Колшанский Г. В. Коммуникативная функция и структура языка. — Москва : КомКнига, 2005. — 234 с.
21. Комиссаров В. Н. Теория перевода (лингвистические аспекты). — М.: Высшая школа, 1990.
22. Нойберт А. Прагматические аспекты перевода // *Вопросы теории перевода в зарубежной лингвистике : сборник статей.* — Москва : Международные отношения, 1978. — С. 195, 197–198.

23. Норман Б. Ю. Лингвистическая прагматика (на материале русского и других славянских языков) : курс лекций. — Минск : БГУ, 2009. — 183 с.
24. Носирова Дилноза Ризокуловна. (2025). Семантические Особенности Литературного Текста: Понятие, Классификация И Роль В Создании Многослойности Произведений. *International Journal of Formal Education*, 4(1), 231–235.
25. Носирова, Д. Р. (2023). ИЗУЧЕНИЕ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА И РОЛЬ ДАКТИЧЕСКИХ ИГР В ИЗУЧЕНИИ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА. *Educational Research in Universal Sciences*, 2(4), 256-260.
26. Носирова, Д. Р. (2023). ТИПОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ ХАРАКТЕРИСТИКА ЧАСТЕЙ РЕЧИ РУССКОГО, УЗБЕКСКОГО И АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКОВ И МЕТОДИКА ИХ ОБУЧЕНИЯ В НАЧАЛЬНЫХ КЛАССАХ. *PEDAGOGS journali*, 1(1), 87-87.
27. Стернин И. А. Лексическое значение слова: учеб. пособие. — Воронеж: Истоки, 2011.
28. Стернин, И.А., & Саломатина, М.С. (2011). Семантический анализ слова в контексте. Воронеж: Истоки