

## Voice and Style: Maintaining Authorial Identity in Translation

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### Abstract

This article explores the intricate task of maintaining authorial identity in literary translation, emphasizing the interconnected elements of voice and style. These components—voice, defined by narrative tone, diction, and rhythm, and style, reflecting formal textual characteristics—form the foundation of an author’s literary identity. The critical role of the translator lies in preserving these elements while navigating challenges posed by linguistic differences, cultural contexts, and historical nuances. Drawing on theoretical frameworks by Antoine Berman and Lawrence Venuti, the discussion examines ethical and philosophical tensions between authenticity and accessibility. Berman’s concept of respecting the “foreignness” of the source text and Venuti’s notions of domestication and foreignization underline the translator’s responsibility to balance fidelity to the original with the demands of the target audience. Building on this foundation, the analysis addresses specific challenges, including replicating idiomatic expressions, syntactical structures, and culturally embedded references. Using examples from the works of James Joyce, Toni Morrison, and Chinua Achebe, alongside references to other literary figures, it highlights the nuanced interplay between language, culture, and narrative voice. Strategies to address these challenges include mimetic translation to replicate stylistic features, creative adaptation to retain the essence of the text, and functional equivalence to prioritize its emotional and thematic impact. Compensatory techniques and the use of paratextual elements, such as prefaces and footnotes, are also explored. This article demonstrates that preserving authorial identity in translation is an intellectually demanding and creative endeavor, necessitating technical precision and cultural sensitivity. By addressing challenges such as linguistic and cultural nuances through strategies like mimetic translation and functional equivalence, it offers practical insights grounded in theoretical perspectives. This article enriches the broader discourse on literary translation by offering theoretical and practical insights that underscore the translator’s role as a cultural mediator in preserving the original’s literary integrity.

**Keywords:** literary translation, authorial identity, voice and style, translation challenges, cultural context in translation, linguistic equivalence, domestication and foreignization, mimetic translation, creative adaptation, functional equivalence, narrative perspective, compensatory techniques, paratextual elements, ethics in translation, cultural sensitivity in translation

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Defining Literary Translation as an Art Form

Literary translation is far more than converting text from one language to another; it is an intricate and interpretive art form. It requires a delicate balance between linguistic precision and creative fidelity, where the translator must not only convey meaning but also preserve the essence of the original work. As Derrida (1985, p. 27) argues, translation is a transformative act that reimagines and reinterprets a text while striving to remain faithful to its spirit. Among the translator's many responsibilities, preserving the author's unique voice and style is one of the most challenging—and crucial—tasks. These elements, encompassing tone, diction, rhythm, and narrative choices, define a work's literary identity and are essential to maintaining its integrity across languages.

### 1.2 Voice and Style as Cornerstones of Literary Identity

Voice and style are the lifeblood of a literary work. They encapsulate the author's perspective, emotions, and worldview while shaping how readers engage with the narrative. Voice reflects the author's personality and distinctiveness, while style determines how this voice manifests through choices in syntax, word selection, and structure (Joyce, 1922; Morrison, 1987). Together, they create the artistic and cultural resonance that draws readers into the text. In translation, these elements must be preserved to retain the authenticity and depth that make the original work impactful. A translation that fails to do so risks reducing the work to a pale imitation, devoid of its unique essence.

### 1.3 Key Challenges in Preserving Voice and Style

Translators face numerous challenges in maintaining an author's voice and style. Linguistic differences between the source and target languages often make direct equivalence unattainable (Berman, 1984). Idiomatic expressions, syntactical structures, and cultural references are deeply tied to their original contexts, complicating the task of finding meaningful parallels in the target language. Moreover, literary works often carry historical and cultural nuances that shape their identity. For instance, James Joyce's *Ulysses* challenges translators with its innovative language and stream-of-consciousness style, while Toni Morrison's *Beloved* demands sensitivity to cultural and historical undercurrents. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* adds yet another layer of complexity, as its voice intertwines with Igbo oral traditions and colonial history. These examples illustrate the multifaceted interplay of language, culture, and narrative voice that translators must navigate.

#### 1.4 The Translator's Role as an Interpreter

The translator's role is inherently interpretative, requiring a balance between fidelity to the source text and accessibility for the target audience. This involves making choices that reflect a deep understanding of the text while respecting its cultural and linguistic uniqueness. Theoretical debates, such as Berman's (1984) emphasis on respecting the foreignness of the source text and Venuti's (1995) advocacy for translator visibility, highlight the ethical dilemmas inherent in this process. Translators must decide whether to privilege the source culture or adapt the work to resonate more strongly with the target audience. These theoretical frameworks are explored in greater depth in Sections 5.2 and 5.3.

#### 1.5 Scope and Objectives

This article explores the complexities of preserving an author's voice and style in literary translation. It begins with an analysis of key theoretical frameworks, offering insights into the ethical and philosophical dimensions of translation. The discussion then shifts to the specific challenges faced by translators, including linguistic constraints, cultural disparities, and the difficulty of replicating narrative perspective. To address these issues, the article presents strategies such as mimetic translation, creative adaptation, and functional equivalence. By examining these aspects, this article seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on literary translation and illuminate the translator's pivotal role in bridging cultures while maintaining the integrity of the original work.

In essence, preserving voice and style in translation is not merely a technical exercise but a creative and intellectual endeavor. It demands linguistic expertise, cultural sensitivity, and an appreciation for the artistic nuances of the original text. By delving into these challenges and strategies, this article aims to shed light on the transformative art of literary translation.

### 2. Theoretical Framework: Exploring Voice and Style in Literature

#### 2.1 Understanding Voice in Literary Theory

In literary theory, voice is a cornerstone of a work's identity and authenticity. It encompasses the distinct personality, perspective, and tone that the author conveys through their text (Derrida, 1985). Voice is how an author communicates themes, emotions, and ideas, making their work uniquely recognizable. For example, Ernest Hemingway's spare and unembellished prose conveys a restrained yet impactful voice, reflecting themes of stoicism and endurance (*The Sun Also Rises*, 1926). This voice emerges through his precise diction and economy of language, creating an impression of emotional restraint.

In contrast, Virginia Woolf's introspective and lyrical voice (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 1925) is crafted through long, flowing sentences and rich imagery. Her narrative voice immerses readers in the inner lives of her characters, exploring themes of time, memory, and identity. These examples underscore how an author's voice not only shapes their work but also poses significant challenges for translators attempting to retain its distinctiveness across languages.

## 2.2 Defining Style as a Formal Construct

While voice reflects the personality of the author, style provides the formal framework through which this personality is expressed. Style encompasses elements such as sentence structure, rhythm, syntax, word choice, punctuation, and imagery (Venuti, 1995). It is the vehicle for voice, allowing the author's perspective and tone to resonate with readers.

In James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the use of stream-of-consciousness narration and experimental syntax exemplifies the inseparability of style and voice. These stylistic choices aim to mimic the fragmented and non-linear workings of the human mind, reflecting the characters' inner lives and shaping the novel's distinct voice. Joyce's style is not merely an aesthetic choice but an integral component of his literary identity.

Similarly, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) employs vivid imagery, rhythmic prose, and evocative language to weave a voice that is both deeply personal and historically resonant. Her style enhances the narrative's emotional depth, reflecting the cultural and historical weight of the story. These examples highlight how style is not only a structural tool but also a cultural and artistic expression, making its preservation in translation essential yet profoundly challenging.

## 3. Challenges of Maintaining Authorial Voice and Style

Maintaining an author's voice and style in translation is an intricate and nuanced challenge that requires navigating linguistic, cultural, and stylistic differences. These challenges, inherent to the act of translation, often test the limits of linguistic equivalence and cultural adaptation while posing significant ethical and creative dilemmas (Berman, 1984; Venuti, 1995).

### 3.1 Linguistic Differences and Constraints

Every language has unique syntactical rules, idiomatic expressions, and lexical nuances that shape how ideas are conveyed. Translators must adapt these linguistic structures to preserve the author's voice and style while ensuring the translation is accessible to readers of the target language.

Languages with flexible word order, such as Russian or Latin, allow for stylistic experimentation that rigid languages like English cannot easily replicate. For instance,

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* features intricate, layered subordinate clauses that reflect the philosophical depth of his narrative. Translating these into English, with its preference for direct and concise sentences, often necessitates restructuring while preserving the introspective tone. Pevear and Volokhonsky's English translation is widely praised for achieving this balance, reflecting Dostoevsky's reflective rhythm without sacrificing readability.

Similarly, rhythm and cadence present significant challenges. Sentence length and structure often carry emotional weight, creating a distinct mood that must be preserved in translation. In Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, the smooth, lyrical flow of Japanese reflects the phonetic qualities of the original language. Jay Rubin's English translation carefully adjusted sentence structures to capture the meditative rhythm, ensuring the novel's emotional tone remained intact while respecting English syntactical norms. Such adjustments demand a delicate balance between fidelity and readability, requiring translators to navigate linguistic constraints creatively.

### 3.2 Idiosyncratic Diction and Register

Authors often employ unique diction and lexical registers that reflect their worldview and artistic sensibilities, including regional dialects, slang, or inventive wordplay. These elements are integral to an author's voice but can be notoriously difficult to replicate in translation.

James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* exemplifies this challenge with its blend of multiple languages, cultural references, and invented words. Translators must creatively devise parallel wordplay to evoke a similar effect. For example, Philippe Lavergne's French translation employed inventive linguistic constructs to mimic Joyce's style, though some nuances inevitably escaped full transference.

Similarly, regional dialects pose unique challenges. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* employs African American vernacular to reflect the cultural identity and social position of her characters. Translating this vernacular into languages without comparable dialects risks losing the cultural richness of the original. In Françoise Brodsky's French translation, informal speech patterns are used to evoke a sense of community and cultural resonance, though the precise linguistic texture of Hurston's prose remains difficult to replicate.

### 3.3 Cultural and Historical Context

An author's voice and style are often deeply rooted in their cultural and historical context, making their preservation in translation a particularly complex task. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, incorporates Igbo proverbs and oral storytelling traditions that are central to its narrative and themes. Translators must balance preserving the

rhythm and tone of these proverbs with making their meanings accessible to readers unfamiliar with Igbo culture. Strategies such as footnotes or adapting phrasing to analogous proverbs in the target language help maintain cultural authenticity while bridging comprehension gaps.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* presents a similarly layered challenge, intertwining African American vernacular and historical references. Translators must navigate these cultural and historical nuances to preserve the text's stylistic and emotional resonance. Christine Raguét's French translation supplements the text with prefaces and footnotes, offering historical and cultural context that aids readers in understanding Morrison's narrative voice. As Venuti (1995) argues, translators must balance domestication—adapting texts to the target culture—and foreignization—preserving the text's distinctiveness, even at the risk of alienating some readers.

### 3.4 Translating Narrative Voice and Perspective

Narrative voice and perspective are particularly challenging when they are closely tied to cultural and linguistic markers. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* captures Huck's uneducated, colloquial speech, reflecting his cultural and social background. Translating this vernacular into languages without comparable dialects requires creative adaptation. For example, French translations have employed informal language to approximate Huck's voice, though some linguistic markers of his regional and social identity are inevitably lost.

Multilingual texts present additional complexities, as authors use multiple languages to reflect cultural hybridity. Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for instance, blends English, Spanish, and Dominican slang to create a narrative voice rooted in the immigrant experience. Translators must decide which linguistic elements to retain and how to convey their cultural significance. Retaining Spanish phrases may preserve cultural authenticity but risks alienating readers unfamiliar with the language, while translating them into the target language may dilute their cultural resonance.

## 4. Reconciling Voice and Style in Translation

The theoretical insights into voice and style, along with the ethical considerations discussed earlier, provide a foundation for understanding the strategies translators use to preserve authorial identity. This section explores practical approaches that balance fidelity to the source text with the creative adaptation needed to resonate with target audiences.

#### 4.1 Balancing Fidelity and Creativity

Preserving the original voice and style in translation demands a nuanced balance between fidelity to the source text and creativity in adapting it for the target audience. Translators encounter linguistic constraints, cultural disparities, and differing audience expectations, making this balance one of the most critical aspects of literary translation.

One common approach is **mimetic translation**, which replicates the original style as closely as possible. For instance, Pevear and Volokhonsky's translations of Dostoevsky's novels are celebrated for their meticulous effort to retain his intricate syntax and philosophical complexity. This strategy ensures that Dostoevsky's distinctive voice resonates with contemporary readers.

Conversely, **creative adaptation** allows translators to preserve the essence of the original while accommodating stylistic differences in the target language. Poetry translation often relies on this approach to convey rhythm, emotional resonance, and lyricism. For example, W. S. Merwin's translation of Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* sacrifices literal accuracy to maintain the poetic intensity and musicality of the original text.

Lastly, **functional equivalence**, as conceptualized by Nida (1964), prioritizes reproducing the emotional and thematic impact of the text rather than adhering strictly to its linguistic form. This approach is particularly effective in genres like children's literature, where humor or idiomatic expressions must be adapted to resonate with the target audience. For instance, translations of Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* adapt cultural references to retain the whimsical tone of the original.

These strategies highlight the translator's dual role as both an artist and a cultural mediator, striving to preserve the integrity of the source text while making it accessible to a new audience.

#### 4.2. Strategies for Preserving Authorial Voice and Style

To address the complexities of maintaining authorial voice and style, translators employ a variety of strategies, ranging from stylistic replication to creative adjustments. Below are key techniques, illustrated with examples:

##### 4.2.1. Mimetic Translation

Mimetic translation emphasizes faithfully replicating the author's voice and style, even at the expense of readability. This approach seeks to preserve structural and stylistic elements that define the source text's identity.

For example, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* employs stream-of-consciousness narration, mirroring her characters' fragmented thoughts. German translator Walter Boehlich carefully preserved Woolf's syntax and rhythm, allowing readers to experience



the ebb and flow of her introspective narrative. Similarly, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* presents a non-linear storytelling style that demands linguistic sensitivity to replicate its chaotic yet profound emotional depth.

In Japanese literature, translators of Haruki Murakami's works, such as Jay Rubin, prioritize maintaining his understated prose and surreal imagery. This ensures Murakami's distinct simplicity and rhythm remain intact in English, exemplifying mimetic translation's intellectual and creative demands.

#### 4.2.2. Creative Adaptation

Creative adaptation prioritizes the emotional and aesthetic essence of the text, adapting it to the cultural and linguistic norms of the target language.

Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* relies on lyricism and rhythmic intensity. Translating such poetry often involves reimagining metaphors or imagery to retain its emotional depth. For instance, W. S. Merwin's English translation balances the original's musicality with adjustments for linguistic and cultural accessibility.

Similarly, Tiina Nunnally's English translation of Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* creatively adapts idiomatic expressions and cultural references to retain the original's humor and whimsical tone. By reinterpreting Lindgren's playful language, Nunnally ensures the work resonates with English-speaking readers while respecting its Swedish origins.

#### 4.2.3. Functional Equivalence

Functional equivalence focuses on preserving the text's effect rather than its literal form. This approach is particularly useful in genres like humor or children's literature.

For example, Roald Dahl's works, such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, rely heavily on playful language and wordplay. Translators often adapt idiomatic expressions to reflect similar tones and meanings in the target language. Character names, such as Augustus Gloop, are often altered to convey equivalent humor and connotations.

Similarly, in Molière's *Tartuffe*, French wordplay is often replaced with culturally relevant humor to maintain its comedic impact for international audiences. This approach ensures the translated work evokes a response similar to that of the original.

#### 4.2.4. Compensatory Techniques

Compensatory techniques are employed when certain elements of the source text cannot be directly translated. This involves emphasizing alternative aspects of the text to achieve a similar effect.

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* illustrates this need. Huck's colloquial speech and regional dialect reflect his cultural identity, which can be challenging to



replicate in languages without comparable dialects. Translators often use informal or non-standard language to capture his voice while maintaining readability.

Similarly, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* incorporates Igbo proverbs central to its narrative. Translators may use footnotes or adapt the proverbs' rhythm and tone to convey their cultural significance, balancing authenticity with accessibility.

#### 4.2.5. Paratextual Elements

Paratextual elements such as glossaries, footnotes, and prefaces offer valuable context for readers navigating a text's cultural and linguistic nuances.

Gérard Genette (1997) underscores the importance of paratexts in enhancing the reader's understanding of complex texts. For instance, translations of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* often include glossaries to explain his neologisms and cultural references, bridging the gap between his experimental style and the target audience.

Similarly, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* benefits from translator's notes that elucidate intricate cultural allusions, enriching the reader's engagement with the text.

### 5. Translation as a Dialogue of Voices

Translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a dynamic dialogue between the voices of the original author, the translator, and the target audience. This dialogue involves navigating the inherent tension between fidelity to the source text and adaptation for the target culture. This dynamic interplay underscores the complexity of recreating voice and style in translation, as explored in the following subsections.

#### 5.1 The Complexity of Recreating Voice and Style

The translator's foremost responsibility is to recreate the original work's voice and style in the target language, preserving its literary identity. However, this task is inherently complex, as it involves balancing linguistic, cultural, and stylistic considerations.

Berman's (1984) advocacy for preserving the "foreignness" of the source text highlights the ethical imperative to retain its cultural and stylistic uniqueness. Gregory Rabassa's translation of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* exemplifies this approach. Rabassa carefully captures the novel's magical realist voice, preserving its rhythm and imagery while adapting idiomatic expressions to resonate with English-speaking readers. His long, flowing sentences echo Márquez's narrative cadence, striking a delicate balance between fidelity and readability.

Translation is never a neutral process; it involves subjective decisions influenced by the translator's understanding of the text and their cultural lens. For example, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* incorporates Igbo proverbs and oral storytelling traditions that anchor the novel in its cultural context. Translators face the challenge of maintaining

these elements without overly domesticating them, which risks detaching the narrative voice from its cultural roots.

These examples underscore the broader challenge of navigating linguistic and cultural differences in translation. As Berman emphasizes, preserving the distinctiveness of the source text requires embracing its complexity and resisting the temptation to oversimplify or homogenize its unique voice and style.

### 5.2 Berman's Concept of Foreignness

Antoine Berman (1984, p. 27) emphasizes the translator's ethical responsibility to respect the "foreignness" of the source text. This concept advocates for a translation approach that reveals, rather than conceals, the cultural and stylistic distinctiveness of the original work.

Berman critiques domestication strategies, which prioritize accessibility at the expense of authenticity, arguing that they erase the linguistic and cultural "otherness" of the source text. For instance, English translations of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* face the challenge of preserving the intricate sentence structures and subtle rhythm of Proust's prose. Simplifying these elements for readability risks compromising the authenticity of the original work, an outcome Berman warns against.

However, Berman's insistence on foreignness has faced criticism for potentially alienating readers unfamiliar with the source culture. Translators must navigate the tension between preserving the original's complexity and making it comprehensible for the target audience. While foreignness provides an ethical foundation for translation, achieving a balance between authenticity and accessibility is crucial for effective literary communication.

### 5.3 Venuti's Domestication and Foreignization

Building on Berman's emphasis on foreignness, Venuti (1995) introduces two complementary frameworks for translation: domestication and foreignization.

Domestication involves adapting the source text to align with the cultural and linguistic norms of the target audience, often prioritizing accessibility over authenticity. For example, early English translations of Homer's *Odyssey* replaced Greek cultural references with British ones, diminishing the original's cultural identity in favor of reader familiarity. In contrast, foreignization seeks to preserve the cultural and stylistic uniqueness of the source text, encouraging readers to engage with its "otherness." This approach is evident in Philip Gabriel and Jay Rubin's translations of Haruki Murakami's works, which retain Japanese cultural markers and linguistic nuances. By preserving these elements, they offer English readers an authentic glimpse into Murakami's artistic vision and the cultural specificity of his narratives.

Venuti critiques the dominance of domestication in Western translation practices, arguing that it marginalizes non-Western voices and reinforces cultural homogenization. He highlights how domestication renders the translator “invisible,” obscuring their interpretive role and denying readers the opportunity to engage with linguistic and cultural diversity. In contrast, foreignization disrupts this invisibility, positioning the translator as an advocate for authenticity and global literary diversity.

Translation as a dialogue of voices reflects the intersection of ethical, cultural, and practical considerations. While Berman underscores the importance of preserving foreignness to maintain authenticity, Venuti’s frameworks of domestication and foreignization highlight the translator’s role in shaping the cross-cultural reception of literature. Together, these perspectives illuminate the complexities of literary translation, underscoring the translator’s responsibility to balance fidelity to the source text with the demands of the target audience.

### **Conclusion**

Maintaining authorial voice and style in translation stands as one of the most intricate and essential responsibilities of a literary translator. An author’s voice—comprising tone, diction, rhythm, and perspective—is the defining hallmark of their literary identity. Preserving this voice is not merely a matter of linguistic equivalence but an act of cultural and artistic interpretation. It requires a translator to balance the technical demands of rendering the original text in a different language with the creative challenge of retaining the essence of the author’s unique expression.

One of the central challenges translators face is the inherent divergence between languages. Each language has its own syntactic rules, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references, complicating the replication of an author’s distinct voice and style. For instance, translating stream-of-consciousness narration or regional dialects often requires innovative strategies to convey the same emotional and cultural resonance in the target language. This is particularly evident in works with deeply embedded cultural elements, where translators must navigate the tension between domestication—adapting the text for accessibility—and foreignization, which preserves its cultural authenticity.

To address these challenges, translators employ a variety of techniques, tailoring their approach to the demands of the text. Mimetic translation replicates the original author’s stylistic nuances, even when it results in unconventional structures. Creative adaptation focuses on capturing the spirit of the original while allowing for flexibility, particularly in genres like poetry or children’s literature. Functional equivalence prioritizes the emotional and thematic impact of the text, while compensatory techniques and paratextual elements help bridge gaps arising from linguistic or cultural disparities.

However, translation is not merely a technical process but an artistic endeavor. It involves reinterpreting the author's voice and style in a way that resonates with the target audience while respecting the integrity of the original work. As cultural mediators, translators bridge the divide between diverse linguistic traditions, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation across cultures. This creative aspect of translation highlights the translator's role as both a craftsman and an artist, tasked with preserving the literary identity of the original author.

The translator's ultimate aim is to craft a translation that resonates authentically with the target audience, while safeguarding the unique characteristics that define the author's voice and style. By bridging linguistic and cultural divides, translators allow readers to experience the richness and diversity of global literature. The task of preserving authorial identity in translation is a testament to the translator's artistry and underscores their vital role in ensuring that literature transcends boundaries while retaining its originality and depth. Translation thus transcends communication, becoming a celebration of creativity that allows authors' voices to resonate across cultures and generations.

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