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Translation discrepancies of interlingual lacunae in A. Chekhov's plays

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Abstract. The study focuses on the lexical units of Russian culture that have no equivalent in English and cause misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. A. Chekhov's plays are very rich in linguistic units containing encoded cultural information, which make the texts ambiguous or incomprehensible, especially for readers from different cultural backgrounds. The article investigates the specific concepts of Russian culture in A. Chekhov's plays: *"Uncle Vanya"*, *"The Sea-Gull"*, *"The Cherry Orchard"* and *"Three Sisters"*. The purpose of the paper is to study the features of interlingual lacunae types in A. Chekhov's plays and analyse the discrepancies in their translation into Russian and English. Four hundred and ten interlingual lacunae are analysed and divided into three main groups: linguistic, ethnographic and zero. The results show that the most numerous group is stylistic lacunae due to the expressiveness of A. Chekhov and the linguistic means used by the playwright. Absolute, vacant, vector ethnographic, associative and zero lacunae are less frequent. The study reveals that vector and absolute ethnographic lacunae are the most difficult for translation and only experienced translators are able to avoid mistakes and misunderstandings in their interpretation.

Keywords: lacuna(e), interlingual, intralingual, cultural background, lexical gap, intercultural communication

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Отличительные особенности переводов межъязыковых лакун в пьесах А. Чехова

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Аннотация. Исследование посвящено лексическим единицам русской культуры, не имеющим соответствующих эквивалентов в английском языке и вызывающим непонимание в межкультурной коммуникации. Пьесы А. Чехова очень богаты языковыми единицами,

содержащими закодированную культурную информацию, которая делает тексты двусмысленными или непонятными, особенно для читателей, принадлежащих к иному культурному фону. В статье исследуются специфические концепты русской культуры в пьесах А. Чехова «Дядя Ваня», «Чайка», «Вишневый сад» и «Три сестры». Цель работы – изучить особенности разных видов межъязыковых лакун в пьесах А. Чехова и проанализировать расхождения в их переводе в русском и английском языках. Автором проанализированы 410 межъязыковых лакун, среди которых выделены три основные группы: лингвистические, этнографические и нулевые. Результаты показывают, что наиболее многочисленную группу составляют стилистические лакуны, обусловленные экспрессивностью А. Чехова и языковыми средствами, используемыми драматургом. Реже встречаются абсолютные, вакантные, векторные этнографические, ассоциативные и нулевые лакуны. Исследование показало, что векторные и абсолютные этнографические лакуны являются наиболее сложными, и только опытные переводчики способны избежать ошибок при переводе.

Ключевые слова: лакуна(ы), межъязыковой, внутриязыковой, культурный фон, лексический пробел, межкультурная коммуникация

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Introduction

English facilitates intercultural communication and promotes learning about other countries' cultures and literatures. This is one of the reasons why much of the literature and folklore of different peoples is translated into English. A. Chekhov's plays could be of great importance to researchers because they reveal concepts specific to Russian culture.

The term *lacuna* in philology was first introduced by the authors of “Comparative Stylistics of the French and English Languages” J. P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet¹. In the middle of the twentieth century, I. I. Revzin² applied this term to the situations in which something common to the language and culture of one nation has no analogue in the language and culture being compared. The general lacuna theory proposed by Yu. A. Sorokin and I. Yu. Markovina defines the phenomenon as “the absence of an equivalent in the compared linguistic-cultural area”³. This definition implies the identification of lacunae with the so-called equivalent-lacking vocabulary studied by Y. M. Vereshchagin and V. G. Kostomarov⁴. However, the concept of a *lacuna* is much broader than that of an equivalent-lacking vocabulary, since the latter includes the phenomenon of “omissions” mentioned in the research of L. S. Barkhudarov⁵.

¹ Vinay J.-P., Darbelnet J. *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*. Paris: Didier, 1958. 331 p.

² Revzin I. I. *The fundamentals of human and machine translations*. Washington: Department of Commerce, National Bureau of Standards, Institute of Technology, 1966.

³ Сорокин Ю. А., Марковина И. Ю. Культура и ее этнопсихолингвистическая ценность. *Этнопсихолингвистика*. Москва: Наука, 1988, с. 5–18.

⁴ Верещагин Е. М., Костомаров В. Г. *Язык и культура*. Москва: Русский язык, 1990. 246 p.

⁵ Бархударов Л. С. *Язык и перевод*. Москва: Международные отношения, 1975. 240 с.

The term *lacuna* and similar terms (accidental gap, hole, hole in the pattern, leemte in detail, Lücke, void) have been used by many linguists, such as K. Hale¹, Ch. F. Hockett², M. Shuttleworth³. The concept of the lacuna and the corresponding term have become extremely popular. The interlanguage approach to the idea of lacunae began to prevail. In translation theory, lacunae began to be described as gaps that are invisible from the inside. Such gaps are incomprehensible to anyone who speaks only one of the languages being compared. However, these lacunae become visible in the creative use of language in a literary text. Since the 90s of the twentieth century, the term has been included in dictionaries. The dictionary gives the following definition of lacunae “Lacunae are the absence of lexical equivalents, mainly national realities, in one of two compared languages”⁴.

The works devoted to the problem of lacunarity by L. K. Bayramova (2006); G. V. Bykova (2003); M. Ya. Dymarsky (2009); V. I. Zhelvis (1977); I. Yu. Markovina, Yu. A. Sorokin (1982, 2010); V. L. Muravyov (1971, 1975); Z. D. Popova, I. A. Sternin (1984); K. Hale (1975); H. Schröder (1995) are great contributions to the understanding of the nature of gap interpretation in different languages.

The main part

Analysing the level of scientific elaboration of the problem, the study proves that many problems of lacunarity have already been considered. Such areas of research as lacunarity in understanding the phenomenon of emotional and associative lacunarity⁵, theoretical substantiation of lacunology as a science⁶, lexicography of lacunae⁷ are worth considering. However, despite the research interest in this topic, many problems remain controversial and are still waiting for a solution.

The research studies A. Chekhov's plays “*Uncle Vanya*”⁸, “*The Sea-Gull*”⁹, “*The Cherry Orchard*”¹⁰ and “*Three Sisters*”¹¹ to select Russian terms that have no equivalent in

¹ Hale K. L. Gaps in grammar and culture. *Linguistics and anthropology. Papers presented at a Symposium in honor of C. F. Voegelin at the 70th Meeting of the American Anthropological Association* (New York, 17–21 November, 1971). New York, 1975, pp. 295–315.

² Hockett C. F. Chinese versus English: An exploration of the Whorfian theses. *Language in culture*, 1954, pp. 106–123.

³ Shuttleworth M. *Dictionary of translation studies*. London, New York: Routledge, 2014. 252 p.

⁴ Нелюбин Л. Л. *Толковый переводоведческий словарь*. Москва: Наука, 2016. 320 с.

⁵ Макарова Д. Н. Лакунарность как психолингвистическая проблема и проблема перевода. *Лакуны в языке и речи: сборник научных трудов*, под редакцией Ю. А. Сорокина, Г. В. Быковой. Благовещенск: БГПУ, 2008, № 4, с. 59–68.

⁶ Сорокин Ю. А. Лакуны как сигналы специфики лингвокультурной общности. *Национально-культурная специфика речевого общения народов СССР*. Москва: Наука, 1982, с. 22–28.

⁷ Быкова Г. В. *Лакунарность как категория лексической системологии*. Благовещенск: БГПУ, 2003. 276 с. EDN: QRCWIT

⁸ Чехов А. П. *Дядя Ваня*, 1896. URL: <https://ilibrary.ru/text/972/p.1/index.html> (дата обращения: 24.07.2025).

⁹ Чехов А. П. *Чайка*, 1896. URL: <https://ilibrary.ru/text/971/p.1/index.html> (дата обращения: 20.07.2025).

¹⁰ Чехов А. П. *Вишневый сад*, 1904. URL: https://librebook.me/vishnevyi_sad (дата обращения: 24.07.2025).

¹¹ Чехов А. П. *Три сестры*, 1896. URL: <https://ilibrary.ru/text/973/p.1/index.html> (дата обращения: 25.07.2025).

English or are ambiguous for translation. Such words verbalise the different cultural worldviews of two different nations. The number of analysed interlingual lacunae is four hundred and ten. According to the classification of V. L. Muravyov, the lacunae are divided into *linguistic*, *ethnographic* and *zero* groups with their subgroups¹.

The researcher used the following methods to carry out the study: *comparative* and *analytical* methods for detecting and studying interlingual similarities and differences between the equivalents in Russian and English languages; *contextual analysis* of A. Chekhov's plays; *descriptive* and *continuous sampling* methods.

Communication within a literary work is not simply a dialogue between the author and the reader, but a dialogue between cultures. Such a dialogue implies at least two cultures: the culture in which the text was written and the culture of the translator. The relationship between language and culture is studied in linguoculturology. The linguocultural analysis of a literary text involves the perception and understanding of a literary work. It is done by distinguishing linguistic units that are unfamiliar to the recipient, but that mark the conceptual features of the text.

Researchers V. L. Muravyov (1975)², V. G. Gak (1976)³, V. I. Zhelvis (1977)⁴, Yu. A. Sorokin (1982)⁵, O. A. Ogurtsova (1979)⁶, Z. D. Popova (1984)⁷ classified lacunae in different ways but all of them identified two types of lacunae:

– *intralingual lacuna* is the absence of a word in the target language. However, there are semantically similar words within certain lexical paradigms in native and foreign languages;

– *interlingual lacuna* is the absence of a lexical unit in one of the languages when it is present in the other. Interlingual lacunae are distinguished only within the languages studied in their contrastive description.

After analysing A. Chekhov's plays and comparing them with the English translation, the types of interlingual lacunae were identified on the basis of the classification by V. L. Muravyov⁸ (table).

¹ Муравьев В. Л. *Лексические лакуны (на материале французского и русского языков)*. Владимир: Владимирский государственный педагогический институт, 1975. 97 с.

² Там же.

³ Гак В. Г. *Сравнительная типология французского и русского языков*. Ленинград: Просвещение, 1976. 286 с.

⁴ Жельвис В. И. К вопросу о характере русских и английских лакун. *Национально-культурная специфика речевого поведения*. Москва: Наука, 1977, с. 136–146.

⁵ Сорокин Ю. А. Лакуны как сигналы специфики лингвокультурной общности. *Национально-культурная специфика речевого общения народов СССР*. Москва: Наука, 1982, с. 22–28.

⁶ Огурцова О. А. К проблеме лакунарности. *Функциональные особенности лингвистических единиц: сборник трудов Кубанского университета*. Краснодар: Издательство Кубанского университета, 1979, вып. 3, с. 77–83.

⁷ Попова З. Д., Стернин И. А. *Лексическая система языка*. Воронеж: Воронежский государственный университет, 1984. 39 с. EDN: UMYSFP

⁸ Там же.

Table

Interlingual lacunae in A. Chekhov's plays

I. Linguistic	II. Ethnographic	III. Zero
1. Absolute (9.4 %)	1. Absolute ethnographic (4.7 %)	
1.1 Vacant (13.2 %)	2. Vector ethnographic (12.6 %)	(11.3 %)
2. Stylistic (37 %)	3. Associative (8.3 %)	
3. Vector (3.5 %)		

Linguistic lacunae

The first type of linguistic lacunae is called *absolute lacunae*. Such lacunae are used when the speakers of a particular language are unable to express a concept that has a lexical equivalent with a separate word or a set phrase. Here are some examples of absolute lacunae:

- 1) *чудак* – as eccentric as the rest; as silly as the rest (*“Uncle Vanya”*);
- 2) *штучка* – a little person (*“The Sea-Gull”*);
- 3) *душечка моя* – my little darling; my heart and soul (*“The Cherry Orchard”*);
- 4) *голубчик* – my dear boy; old boy (*“The Cherry Orchard”*);
- 5) *земляк* – one from our own country; a fellow countryman (*“The Three Sisters”*).

The absolute lacunae mentioned above are an example of how one word in Russian is translated by several words in English, with a slight loss of meaning. The number of absolute lacunae is 9.4 % of the total number of lacunae (410 lacunae) in the plays.

The study distinguishes the subtype of absolute lacunae called *vacant lacunae*. They are used when some words or expressions cannot be conveyed because of the specific connotation and national colour of the concept of another culture. To explain these lacunae, it is always necessary to include a context:

- 1) *я изнемогаю* – you're overtaxing my powers of endurance; I'm exhausted (*“Uncle Vanya”*);
- 2) *Не конфузьтесь, милая* – Don't be afraid of him, dear (*“The Sea-Gull”*);
- 3) *пивали когда-то* – had many a jolly time together (*“The Sea-Gull”*);
- 4) *никто не неволит* – nobody wants to force you against your will; nobody compels you; nobody is forcing you to do anything (*“The Cherry Orchard”*);
- 5) *назююкался* – You've been hitting the bottle; Speaking a bit difficult; You've had a good drop (*“The Three Sisters”*).

A comparison of the pieces revealed a large number of vacant lacunae (13.2 %). The use of such lacunae proves that the languages of different nations are very colourful and lexically rich. The translations of words and word expressions into English provide the connotative meanings due to the variety of cultural features of both nations. The vacant lacunae in A. Chekhov's plays draw the readers' attention to the originality of the playwright's language.

The second type of linguistic lacunae, called *stylistic lacunae*, is marked by the absence of a word (phraseological unit) in one language that has the same stylistic colouring with

an identical meaning in another language. The following lacunae are examples of this group:

- 1) *и только ворчу, как старый хрен* – I only sit around grumbling like an old fogey; croak like an old raven (*“Uncle Vanya”*);
- 2) *несносное создание* – an insufferable creature (*“The Sea-Gull”*);
- 3) *озябла очень* – I’m awfully cold; I feel dreadfully cold; I’m chilled through and through (*“The Cherry Orchard”*);
- 4) *недотепа* – you bungler; you good-for-nothing; dimwit (*“The Cherry Orchard”*);
- 5) *сегодня я в мерলেখлюндии* – I’ve got the blues today; I’ve got the hump today; Today I have a fit of the blues (*“The Three Sisters”*).

Thus, due to the expressiveness of Chekhov’s language, the stylistic lacunae account for 37 % of the analysed lexical units lacking equivalence. Stylistic lacunae complicate the semantic translation of the plays. The stylistic colouring of the language used by A. Chekhov and the translators is not the same. The word combination *старый хрен* is translated into English with a phraseological unit. The combination of the words is emotionally coloured and has a derogatory and ironic meaning in Russian. In English, we see a stylistically neutral translation; the same is for the word *мерলেখлюндия*. In Russian, it has a sarcastic connotation. The meanings given in two languages are close but not identical.

The third group of linguistic lacunae is characterised by differences in the concepts of multilingual lexemes known as *vector lacunae*. When comparing the vocabulary of two languages, the reader can find the gaps that have a vector character. Lexical concepts in two languages do not always coincide. The concepts that find lexical expression in one language turn out to be broader than the corresponding concepts of another language (*име-ньишко, крестенький, сюртучишко*). Let us consider the examples of vector lacunae in the plays by A. Chekhov (3.5 %):

- 1) *крестенький* – dear godfather (*“Uncle Vanya”*);
- 2) *сюртучишко* – little old coat (*“The Sea-Gull”*);
- 3) *именины* – your name-day (*“The Three Sisters”*);
- 4) *физиономия* – your face (*“The Three Sisters”*).

Ethnographic lacunae

Ethnographic lacunae are created by the absence of certain things in another civilisation. The first type of ethnographic lacunae found in the plays is *absolute ethnographic lacunae*. They indicate the absence of a word or phraseological unit in one of the languages to express the corresponding concept. At the same time, it remains possible to convey this concept in a free phrase or explanatory paraphrase. The examples confirm the above mentioned statements:

- 1) *диван* – divan, sofa (*“Uncle Vanya”*);
- 2) *калоши* – galoshes (*“The Sea-Gull”*);
- 3) *квас* – kvass (*“The Cherry Orchard”*);
- 4) *Самовар!* – A samovar! (*“The Three Sisters”*);
- 7) *Баста!* – Basta! (*“The Three Sisters”*).

The number of absolute ethnographic lacunae in the plays is 4.7 %. Such lexical lacunae are connected with the extra-linguistic national reality and with differences in the ethnolinguistic area. The meaning of words in one culture may be absent in another. The above words show the absence of such things *дьячка, калоши, квас, нафталин, акциза* in the life of English-speaking people, but they exist in Russian civilisation.

Vector ethnographic lacunae appear when there is a discrepancy in categorization due to the fact that a phenomenon existing in the studied linguistic communities is given a different degree of importance. There are the following examples:

1) *и мы оба становимся брюзгами* – and we are both becoming grumblers; and so we're both grumblers (*"Uncle Vanya"*);

2) *тут на берегу шесть помещичьих усадеб* – there are six houses on its shores (*"The Sea-Gull"*);

3) *конторщик* – the clerk; the office clerk (*"The Cherry Orchard"*);

4) *ряженный* – carnival party; entertainer; mummer (*"The Three Sisters"*);

5) *сени* – porch; house; summer house (*"The Three Sisters"*).

The number of vector ethnographic lacunae is 12.6 %, and we can see that they reflect the time of the past. Some vector ethnographic lacunae are used today in the language of the rural population (*сарай, брюзга, бадья, сени, управа*). The direct meanings of such words can be confusing and incomprehensible even for Russian citizens, and especially difficult for translators and readers from other cultures.

Associative lacunae are distinguished in the group of ethnographic lacunae and denote the words or a group of words capable of evoking certain linguistic associations in speakers' minds. The words are associated with other words in the target language or are completely absent in another civilisation. The examples illustrate associative lacunae:

1) *питомник* – a nursery section; seed bed (*"Uncle Vanya"*);

2) *авось пригодится!* – thinking that some day they may be useful to me (*"The Sea-Gull"*);

3) *Оборвыш!* – Rag-bag! (*"The Sea-Gull"*);

4) *У лукоморья дуб зеленый...* – By the sea-strand an oak-tree green...; There stands a green oak by the sea; A green oak grows by the curving shore... (*"The Three Sisters"*);

5) *этакого шаршавого животного* – some hairy animal; even in some respects misshapen animal; a rough coated sort of beast (*"The Three Sisters"*).

Every word in every language has its own system of linguistic associations. When Russians read *У лукоморья дуб зеленый*, they think of the poem *"Ruslan and Lyudmila"* by A. S. Pushkin, while the same combination of words in English is translated in its direct meaning in English without any associations. The Russian *авось* is associated with low colloquial vocabulary, meaning something that happens by chance. *Этакого шаршавого животного* evokes a derogatory feeling in Russian readers, but it is semantically neutral in English. The number of associative lacunae evoking specific associations is 8.3 %.

Zero lacunae

The absence of some words in the translated language indicates *zero lacunae*. This type of lacunae was discovered and described by O. A. Ogurtsova. According to

O. A. Ogurtsova, zero lacunae are the absence of a word or phrase suitable for translation into the target language. "This concept is expressed by an occasional combination of words, and in some cases a context or discourse is needed to denote it"¹. The examples of these lacunae are:

1) *сын простого дьячка, бурсак* – the son of a simple deacon, a theology student; he's the son of a common deacon ("Uncle Vanya");

2) *Вот вещь, о которой я давеча говорил...* – Here is the stuffed sea-gull I was telling you about... ("The Sea-Gull");

3) *Лошадь вы такая...* – Oh, you horse!; You dear old horse; You really are a kind of horse ("The Cherry Orchard").

Some of the words do not exist in English and are not common in everyday Russian (*дьячка, бурсак, фефёла, давеча*). The number of zero lacunae in A. Chekhov's plays is 11.3 %. The classification of zero lacunae could be relative due to the fact that A. Chekhov's plays were translated by several authors and lacunae in these translations correspond to different groups and subgroups. *Щеноточка* is a zero lacuna in the translations by Constance Garnett and Julius West and an absolute lacuna (*a small pinch*) in the interpretation by Gerard R. Ledger ("The Three Sisters"). A zero lacuna *без обидняков* in Marian Fell and an Anonymous Volunteer's, and David Widger's translations corresponds to a stylistic lacuna in Gerard R. Ledger's work (*no beating about the bush*) ("Uncle Vanya").

Conclusion

A comparison of A. Chekhov's plays "Uncle Vanya", "The Sea-Gull", "The Cherry Orchard" and "Three Sisters" with the texts translated into English revealed the following types of lacunae:

- 1) linguistic (stylistic, absolute, absolute vacant, vector);
- 2) ethnographic (absolute ethnographic, vector ethnographic, associative);
- 3) zero lacunae.

The study shows that the number of lacunae used in the plays varies. Despite the fact that all lacunae reflect the nationally specific elements of Russian culture, the most numerous are stylistic lacunae (37 %). Chekhov's language is extremely expressive in terms of lexical, semantic and grammatical possibilities. Translators need a sound knowledge of cultural and linguistic areas in order to give an appropriate interpretation of the concepts that correspond to the original texts. The translator should be able to construct a translated text without losing its expressive saturation. Vector (3.5 %) and absolute ethnographic (4.7 %) lacunae are the least common because, although they make translation difficult, they still force the translator to find the right word.

Cultural concepts that do not have direct equivalents in other languages are seen as obstacles in the process of intercultural communication. They reveal cultural and lexical discrepancies in the source and target texts. Linguists have researched and defined these con-

¹ Огурцова О. А. К проблеме лакунарности. *Функциональные особенности лингвистических единиц*: сборник трудов Кубанского университета. Краснодар: Издательство Кубанского университета, 1979, вып. 3, с. 77–83.

cepts in various ways, but there is still no consensus on their interpretation. Translation necessarily involves the reconstruction of the text based on the translator's understanding and interpretation. Professional translators take into account the lexical and semantic features of the text in order to avoid errors and misunderstandings. The interlingual lacunae studied in this research are the examples of cultural features and expressiveness in the original text. They reflect the features of the Russian language in general and the language of A. Chekhov, in particular.

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