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**TRANSLATION OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN KAI  
AARELEID'S *LINNADE PÕLETAMINE* INTO  
ENGLISH BY ADAM CULLEN**  
BA thesis

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## ABSTRACT

When a literary text, containing culture-specific references, either to items, concepts or historical events, is translated into another language and brought into the target language's cultural space, the text becomes a representation of the source culture and its values. The thesis at hand offers an insight into the translation process of the transfer of cultural elements from one language and cultural space into another. Thus, the thesis aims to document the possibly problematic areas and analyse the translation of cultural elements of (Soviet) Estonia in Kai Aareleid's *Burning Cities* ("Linnade põletamine") into English.

The introduction gives a brief summary of the novel and introduces its main characters, as well as provides the historical background to the time period in which the novel is set, and discusses the particular linguistic situation created by it. The literature review provides an overview of different modes in which cultural elements could be manifested in a literary text and provides a variety of different methods for their translation. The empirical part starts with introducing methodology, then discusses the cultural elements found in the novel and examines the approach taken in their translation.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	2
INTRODUCTION .....	4
1 CULTURAL REFERENCES, LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION .....	7
1.1 Culture-specific Items .....	7
1.2 Language Use and Varieties of Language .....	9
1.3 Methods of Translation of Cultural Elements.....	11
2 ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSLATION OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN <i>BURNING CITIES</i> .....	15
2.1 The Translation of Culture-specific Items .....	15
2.1.1 The Translation of Toponymy .....	16
2.1.2 The Translation of Social Culture .....	18
2.1.3 The Translation of the References to Historical Events .....	19
2.2 Translation of the Variation in Language in <i>Burning Cities</i> .....	20
2.2.1 The Translation of Multilingualism .....	20
2.2.2 The Translation of Dialect .....	22
2.2.3 The Translation of Sociolect .....	24
2.3 The Translation of Wordplay.....	24
CONCLUSION.....	27
REFERENCES .....	30
RESÜMEE.....	33

## INTRODUCTION

Kai Aareleid (b. 1972) is an Estonian author and translator whose second novel *Burning Cities* (“Linnade põletamine” 2016) has found popularity and acclaim among readers and critics alike. Moreover, in 2019, Aareleid adapted her novel into a play of the same name for the Estonian Drama Theatre (Draamateater 2024). So far, the novel has been translated into Latvian, English and Finnish (Aareleid 2018: 82). As a translator herself, whose working languages include English, the author was able to be part of her novel’s translation process from Estonian into English (Aareleid 2018: 82). Adam Cullen (b. 1986) is an American translator who has translated numerous works of Estonian prose, poetry and drama into English.

*Burning Cities* is a fictional memoir set in Tartu, the second largest city in Estonia, during the first decades of the Soviet occupation (1950s and 1960s). The events of the novel are mostly told in chronological order, allowing the author to reflect on the era and depict the city landscape of post-war Tartu. The story follows a young girl named Tiina Unger as she comes of age and deals with the separation of her parents, heartbreak, death and the secrets kept by the grown-ups all around her. The novel looks back at memories, past lives and family history of the Unger family as they are remembered many years later by Tiina, now in her old age.

The plot involves characters such as Tiina’s parents, father Peeter and mother Liisi who first met by chance in 1941 when Peeter offered Liisi a ride. Liisi had just said farewell to her first husband and love of her life, Valdek Karm, with whom she had married a week earlier and who had now enlisted himself in the Soviet army, like many other men during the II WW. Five years later, Peeter is working as a director in a warehouse where Liisi comes to work – a year after that they get married and Tiina is born. While their first years together are happy, Peeter’s gambling habit and Liisi being 18 years younger than him, they drift

apart and eventually separate. Though, after some time, Liisi moves back to her previous home, with Peeter and Tiina, things were never the same.

Tiina, the main character, was born in 1946 and as an only child of her parents, she spent a lot of time with sitters and neighbours. Although she was loved and cared for by everyone around her, she often felt alone, especially after her parents started to drift apart. At 13 years of age, she becomes good friends with a Russian boy, going to a Russian school next to hers, after she threw an egg at him during a clash between the two schools (Estonian and Russian) neighbouring each other. Vladimir, or Vova for short, quickly becomes an important part of her life – he becomes her best friend, first love and first heartbreak.

Vova's family came to Estonia after his father, working as an engineer in the military, was sent here. As they immigrated to Estonia a couple of years before Vova started school, he can speak Estonian fairly well as he went to an Estonian nursery school. After two years of their friendship, Vova's father gets transferred and he has to move away. According to the author's conception, Vova and his family are not only a representation of all those who immigrated to Estonia or were assigned here but also a way to reflect on the linguistic situation of Estonia during the Soviet occupation.

To understand the time frame in which the events of the novel are set, we should first address the occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union. After the annexation of Estonia and being renamed the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1940, the social, demographic and as well as the linguistic situation of Estonia changed (Rannut 1994: 195–196). While the Estonian population had decreased due to imprisonments, executions and mass deportations, many non-Estonians immigrated to Estonia for a better standard of living or because they were offered privileged positions that the Estonians would not have been trusted with (Rannut 1994: 196–197) (as is the case with Vova and his family).

Soviet Union aspired to become monolingual and for Russian to become the ‘international language’, the *lingua franca* (Rannut 1994: 184–185). In order to achieve that, Russification was implemented, for instance in functional domains, such as banking, transport and the militia, Estonian language was gradually being replaced with Russian and Russian was taught in schools as an obligatory ‘second native language’ (Rannut 1994: 198, 200).

Therefore, a novel, whose main events take place during a certain period of time (1950s and 1960s) and are set mainly in one location (Tartu), will for certain have linguistic and cultural references that are considered to be culture-specific. Moreover, when such references are translated into a larger language, which also happens to be the *lingua franca*, and into a different cultural space, the novel becomes a representation of the culture, values and history of Estonia.

Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to analyse the transition of concepts and phenomena connected to (Soviet) Estonia and manifestations of its specific linguistic situation into English in Adam Cullen’s translation of a contemporary Estonian author, Kai Aareleid’s *Burning Cities*. The theoretical part of the thesis defines the concept of culture-specific items (hereinafter CSI) and explains different levels and manifestations of multilingualism as well as gives an overview of some of the most common translation strategies used for translating cultural spaces. The empirical part of the thesis gives an overview of the methodology, examines the portrayal of CSIs and the use of language in the context of the post-war period in which *Burning Cities* takes place and discusses different translation strategies used in their translation into English. Moreover, wordplay, its rendition into English and the implications of translational choices will also be analysed. For better systematisation, the empirical part is divided into three parts: CSIs, culture-specific language variation and wordplay.

## 1 CULTURAL REFERENCES, LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

Due to its extensive nature, it is difficult to come up with a single and comprehensive definition for culture. However, to offer some sense, this thesis will discuss culture as the organisation of things and people, the patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that a person has acquired from their social environment and during their lifetime (Goodenough 1964: 36, Hofstede et al 2010: 4–5), taking into account a particular temporal setting. Culture is the embodiment of things, including language, that one has to know in order to be part of, be accepted and function in that particular society (Goodenough 1964: 36–37). Moreover, language is the tool that enables its users to make sense of and reflect on their culture, for it provides the necessary vocabulary for it (Hoijer 1953: 556). Thus, language is an aspect of culture and it functions together with most cultural behaviour, as well as enables its users to continuously learn, experience and access the learning and experiences of other members of the same group (Hoijer 1953: 556).

### 1.1 Culture-specific Items

Although different scholars have used different terminology to refer to the same concept – realia (Vinay and Darbelnet 1995), culture-bound terms (Munday 2009), cultural words/terms (Newmark 1984), culture specific concepts (Baker 1992) and culture-specific items (Aixelá 1996) – the terms could all be used practically synonymously. For the sake of clarity and consistency, this thesis will use the term *culture-specific item* and its abbreviation *CSI* to refer to items and concepts belonging to a particular cultural space.

A CSI is a source language (SL) word or a cultural term concerning a person, an object, or a process representative of a particular community (Newmark 1984: 70, Baker 1992: 21). In addition to being a reference to a specific item of a given linguistic/cultural community, it could also refer to its holidays, historical events, names and addresses (Klaudy

2010: 96). When translated, these terms or references might not have an equivalent in the TL and its cultural space (Vinay and Darbelnet 1995: 65). Thus, it could be said that CSI is a translation problem which occurs when the source text's (ST) cultural reference gets transferred to the target language (TL) culture where the original concept might not exist, or it has a different value (Aixelá 1996: 57).

According to Aixelá (1996: 59–60), there are two types of CSIs – proper nouns (divided into conventional and loaded proper nouns) and common expressions. As conventional proper nouns bear no meaning in themselves, they are usually preserved in translation, unless there is an existing equivalent in the TL, like in the case of most toponyms, historical fictional or non-fictional names. Loaded proper nouns however refer to suggestive or expressive nicknames and fictional or nonfictional names that might have a certain historical or cultural association in a particular culture; the more expressive the components of a loaded name are, the more probable is their linguistic translation. Under common expressions, Aixelá (1996: 59) includes all cultural objects, institutions, habits and opinions which cannot be categorised as proper nouns. To expand on what Aixelá (1996: 69) labelled as common expressions, we might consider adding Newmark's (1995: 95) classification of cultural categories: ecology; material culture; social culture; organisations, customs, activities, procedures and concepts; gestures and habits. The translation of Aixelá's common expressions and/or items under Newmark's categories is more intricate as textual elements and the nature of the CSI become more crucial (Aixelá 1996: 69).

Thus, we might consider a CSI to be an SL concept or a reference to something that is considered to be part of that said country, ethnic group or region and its cultural and temporal space. Whether it is a reference to a food item, political or social organisation, name of a person, multi-linguistic situation or a habit of some sort, it often poses a translation

problem for the translator due to non-equivalence issues in TL caused by the differences between the two cultures or their distance from each other.

## **1.2 Language Use and Varieties of Language**

The use of foreign languages, different dialects or sociolects, varieties of language and register in a literary text might serve the purpose of constructing the characters, plot or setting; it could also be the author's way of reflecting on linguistic, social and cultural hierarchies of the perceived reality. (Delabastita 2009: 110, Meylaerts 2010: 227, Monticelli et al 2023: 7)

However, the translation of such works of literature could prove to be difficult for translators. For instance, multilingualism – the co-existence of two or more languages in a society, an individual or a text (Gutman 2009: 182) – in a literary text could pose a challenge for translators in regard to the treatment of multilingual elements and the rendition of these into a different linguistic setting. The course of action taken to translate both multilingualism as well as language varieties depends on the target audience's linguistic context but also their attitudes and views regarding languages and cultures that are not their own, as well as their tolerance to foreign words in the text. While bilingual readers might consider the translation of foreign words in the text unnecessary, it provides essential guidance to the text for those who are unable or unwilling to read or understand foreign languages. (Grutman 2006: 18, 23–24; 2009: 183–184) Thus, a suggestion is to leave foreign words or phrases as they appear in the SL text but accompanied by a translation in brackets or inserted into the text somewhere later on (Lefevere 1992: 29 quoted in Grutman 2006: 20). However, the translation strategy and to what degree to use explicitation would depend on the language environment as well as the genre and the target reader.

Dialects as regional variations in language are manifested through differences in their users' phonology, morphology, use of lexemes and syntax when compared to the standard variety of language (Karlsson 2002: 283). Azavedo (2002: 505) argues that dialectal variation is a good depiction of the "relationships between language and power, marginalisation and social exclusion" as speakers of "nonstandard varieties" often belong to groups of lower status, such as ethnic or social minorities, rural folk, refugees or immigrants. In order to incorporate dialect into a literary text, the authors may want to alter the spelling of the words or use variations of the conventional orthography (Ives 1971: 146–147), thus making dialects untranslatable; yet the imitation of their dialectal variation is possible (Halliday and Martin 2005: 96). However, substituting one dialect with another in a translation is advised against (Grutman 2006: 20–21) since the cultural connotations would differ and the outcome might be rather confusing.

A variation in language, particular to a certain social class, community or occupation is categorised as a sociolect (Crystal 2008: 440). It could manifest itself in its speakers' shared discourse patterns, vocabulary or accent (Kramsch 2003: 65, Hofstede et al 2010: 46). However, the latter could also be an indication of the use of interlanguage, a language learner's own linguistic system, influenced by their mother tongue and resulting in an accent in a national language (Crystal 2008: 249). Although phonetically, grammatically, lexically or sententially noticeable sociolectal features of the ST are suggested to be translated, the target text (TT) can be less heavily marked and could include just enough sociolectal clues to remind the audiences about the sociolect in the ST (Hervey and Higgins 1997: 119).

Thus, keeping in mind the broader definition of culture, we could consider variations in language as a manifestation of culture, for it is a reflection of the social environment and the organisation of ideas of a particular regional and/or social group of people.

### **1.3 Methods of Translation of Cultural Elements**

When it comes to the process of translation, there are numerous possibilities and approaches to use, depending on the type of the text and its purpose. Consequently, the text and its elements might be domesticated or foreignized (Venuti 1995: 5, 20). Domestication adapts the ST and its elements into the target culture, producing a text that is accessible to the target audience and due to its fluency gives the reader an impression of an untranslated work (Venuti 1995: 5). According to Venuti (1995: 20), domestication is “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target language cultural values” and adds that unlike domestication, which “brings the author home”, foreignization “sends the reader abroad”. Thus, foreignization preserves the characteristics of the ST and the outcome may sound exotic or foreign to the target audience (Davies 2003: 69). According to Venuti (1995: 20), this translation method allows us to notice the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text but only if the cultural codes existing in TL culture have been severed during the translation process. However, in practice, there are very few occasions when the entire text becomes foreignized; most often translators tend to use elements of foreignization in order for the readability of the text not to suffer.

However, the aforementioned scholars engage in the study of already existing translations and none of these concepts or methods is meant as a direct guide to translators, in fact, the approach each translator takes, is different but during translation they probably all aim to account the following factors:

- 1) the target audience – different reader groups will have different levels of understanding, for instance, children whose vocabulary and cultural experiences are usually limited would not be able to understand texts meant for adults and adults, despite their good understanding of the text, would not be able to understand texts meant for specialists who have expert knowledge within their own field of study; (Nida 1964: 158)

- 2) the type of the text – nevertheless of the type of the text, all its formal components should be always accounted for, however, since most literary texts have allegory and/or symbolism in them, one should take notice of connotation and emotion, especially with works of poetry as it uses more levels of language; (Newmark 1984: 6, 127)
- 3) the relationship between the two languages and/or cultures – due to previous history or contacts between the two languages and/or cultures, there might be some similarities between them (Toury 2012: 70). However, the basic character and the social varieties of these languages or cultures might as well differ and the closeness of the translation and the original is in correspondence with the proximity of the language and the culture. (Newmark 1984: 7–8)

Therefore, no single translation strategy can be favoured over another, in fact, it is often the case that a combination of methods is used to treat identical CSIs in the same text (Aixelá 1996: 60). Moreover, the choice of treatment depends on the text type and its target audience, as well as the type of connection the two languages and/or cultures have. Some possible translation methods of CSIs and cultural references which are relevant in the context of this thesis are as follows:

### **Clarification**

Clarification, also referred to by some scholars as the *use of gloss* (Nida 1964, Aixelá 1996), is concerned with “the level of ‘clarity’ perceptible in words and their meanings” (Berman 2004: 289). The method is an effective way to address linguistic and cultural differences, such as plays on words, customs, units of measurement, geographical objects and to add historical and/or cultural background to the text. (Nida 1964: 238–239) By using clarification, the TT might become more straightforward than the ST, as elements of the text, originally concealed or repressed, are uncovered, thus possibly revealing something that was meant to be left ambiguous in the ST. (Aixelá 1996: 62, Berman 2004: 289) Translators might incorporate explanations directly into the TT or add them to footnotes, endnotes,

glossaries or commentary (Aixelá 1996: 62). For clarity purposes, this thesis will use the terms *clarification* and *explicitation* synonymously to refer to the aforementioned approach in translation.

### **Universalisation**

Aixelá (1996: 63) identifies two types of universalisation – limited and absolute and notes that the first strategy is used when the translator feels the CSI to be too obscure for their readers' understanding, or if there is another, less specific reference that they could use instead. To keep cultural credibility, the replacement CSI should come from the same cultural space as the ST. On the contrary, absolute globalisation is the removal of all foreign connotations and substituting them with a more neutral reference. According to Aixelá (1996: 63), this often happens when translators are unable to find a more neutral replacement for the CSI. This thesis will not be distinguishing between the two types of universalisation and will refer to them as one.

### **Adaptation**

This translation method, also referred to as *translation by cultural substitution* by Baker (1992: 31), is used in instances where the ST reference, when transferred, would be of different significance to the target reader from what was originally intended, or the reference would be unknown to TL culture (Baker 1992: 31, Vinay and Darbelnet 1995: 39). In order to avoid losing the syntactic structure and interrupting the development of ideas and their representation in TT, translators create a new reference that would be equivalent to the former SL reference (Vinay and Darbelnet 1995: 39), resulting in the CSIs having the same expressive value and the produced text being appealing and relatable to the target audience. (Baker 1992: 31)

### **Orthographic adaptation**

In case a literary text contains multilingual elements that are expressed in a different alphabet from the one the target readers use, the word or reference might be orthographically adapted by the author of the text or by its translator. The CSI or the word in a foreign alphabet goes through transcription or transliteration (Aixelá 1995: 61). The latter replaces the SL characters with equivalent characters in TL and is most often used for transferring the names of people, places and institutions (Crystal 2008: 494). Transcription on the other hand is concerned with speech sounds (Crystal 2008: 490) and thus writes down how the word is pronounced.

### **Omission**

Although originally referred to as *deletion* by Aixelá (1996: 64), I have decided in favour of using Baker's (1992: 40) term *omission* as it explains the nature of the method better. Omission happens when the translator considers the CSI unacceptable either on ideological or stylistic grounds, it is too obscure or it is not relevant enough to know for the target reader (Aixelá 1996: 64). A word or an expression could also be omitted from the text if its explanation, either inside the text or via glossary, footnotes, etc., could become a distraction to the reader due to its lengthiness (Baker 1992: 40, Aixelá 1996: 64). Baker (1992: 41–42) suggests using this translation strategy only if it is necessarily important to produce “a smooth, readable translation” as the text produced might not be accurate enough due to omissions.

## **2 ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSLATION OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN *BURNING CITIES***

The following part of the thesis analyses the translation of culture-specific items, language variation and wordplay in the translation of *Burning Cities* into English by Adam Cullen.

To collect the data for the analysis, the Estonian version of the novel was closely read alongside the translation and the two texts were compared in order to determine the CSIs and how the translator had manipulated the ST. In total, 35 major cultural items were identified, selected and grouped for the analysis. Three categories emerged: CSIs, culture-specific language variation and wordplay. The category of CSIs was further divided into four subcategories: toponymy, material culture, social culture and historical references. The category of language variation has three subcategories: multilingualism, dialect and sociolect. After categorisation into groups and subgroups, each finding was examined and its translation method was identified and discussed.

### **2.1 The Translation of Culture-specific Items**

The following section will discuss the CSIs and their translation strategies found in *Burning Cities*. For better organisation of the material, three of Newmark's (1995: 95) cultural categories (ecology, material culture and social culture) as well as an additional category for references to the history of (Soviet) Estonia, have been adopted. Although Newmark's (1995: 95; 2010: 175) category of ecology consists of references to the ecological, geological and geographical environment, this thesis will focus on the translation of toponyms due to the novel being concerned with only the place names, thus the category will be renamed as toponymy. Material culture includes items regarding objects of everyday life, for instance, food, clothing, housing, transportation, medication and furniture

(Newmark 1995: 97–98; Dozier 1964: 513). The category of social culture consists of CSIs referring to work and leisure activities (Newmark 1995: 95). Therefore, the cultural categories applied in this thesis are toponymy, material culture, social culture and historical references.

### 2.1.1 The Translation of Toponymy

The novel includes many references to the places and the street names of Tartu, for instance, there is a chapter titled “Tartu kaart/Map of Tartu” in which Tiina is running on the streets of Tartu and reflects on the streets and places around her. Most of the street names were transferred in translation using explicitation; for instance, ‘Vanemuise tänav’ (303) became ‘Vanemuise Street’ (299). However, during the translation of “Nad on juba Tähe tänavaga nurgale jõudnud /.../.” (64) the street name was omitted and universalisation was used since knowing the actual name of the street would not have been of importance to the target readers. As a result of universalisation and explicitation, “They’ve already **gone a block** /.../.” (64) will still give readers a sense of the distance that was walked.

As to the translation of references to different districts of Tartu explicitation was used, for instance, ‘Annelinn’ (153) was translated through the description as ‘**the new housing projects in Annelinn**’ (149) and the translation of “/.../ terve ringi Maarjamõisani välja.” (164) explains the planning of Tartu for those not familiar with it with “/.../ a diversion to Maarjamõisa **on the outskirts of town.**” (160). Additionally, ‘Abja’ (24) and ‘Nuia’ (156) were respectively translated through explicitation as ‘**the little village of Abja**’ (26) and ‘**the little Southern town of Karksi**’ (152), offering background information for international readers not familiar with the topography of Estonia.

### 2.1.1 The Translation of Material Culture

Food items are recommended to be translated with a “recognised one-to-one equivalent and transference” with the addition of a “neutral term, /.../ for the general readership” (Newmark 1995: 97). The translation of ‘kukekomm’ (63), ‘komm ja präänik’ (111) and ‘uhhaa’ (305) into English demonstrates the use of universalisation as more generic references are chosen. Thus, ‘kukekomm,’ which refers to a specific type of candy, a rooster shaped caramel, has become a ‘lollipop’ (63), ‘komm ja präänik,’ originally referring to ‘candy’ and ‘pryanik,’ the latter being a particular type of thick and soft cookie, containing honey and spices (Sõnaveeb 2024), has been translated into ‘chocolate and biscuits’(109) and ‘uhhaa’ (305) meaning ‘ukha,’ a distinct type of fish soup, with a clear broth (Sõnaveeb 2024), has become a more general ‘fish soup’ (301). However, the translation of “/.../ Ahti ema kartulid ja tädi Juuli pekk. (104)” into English suggests the use of explicitation, as the translator has decided to clarify which kind of pork fat was meant “/.../ Ahti’s mother’s potatoes and Aunt Juuli’s pork fat, **called salo.**” (101). It should also be noted that by adding an explanation with ‘salu,’ the translator has also used orthographic adaptation of the Russian word ‘сало’ (Sõnaveeb 2024).

To translate ‘köögipliit’ [made into a compound word by me] (14) into English, the translator has used clarification by explaining its type and purpose as ‘the wood-burning kitchen stove’ (16). The translation of ‘sinepiplaaster’ (223), follows the same pattern, since its equivalent in English ‘mustard plaster’ is not in frequent use and the term is considered to be historical (OED 2023). Hence, the translator has decided to use clarification by describing it as ‘a poultice with a secret recipe containing mustard’ (219).

### 2.1.2 The Translation of Social Culture

Although Newmark's (1995: 98–99) classification of social culture consisted of references to work, occupations and leisure activities, such as various national games, this thesis will also include references to literature and paintings.

*Burning Cities* mentions the titles of two novels “Pantrikuru vangid” (by Vahtang Ananjan) (215) and “Aruanne akadeemiales” (by Franz Kafka) (294). Since both have no English translation, the translator has used a combination of universalisation and explicitation. Therefore, the first title has been translated into ‘an Armenian adventure novel’ (211) which probably gives international readers an idea of what the book might be about as its genre is mentioned. As to the translation of the second title, the translator has decided to instead reference the novel mentioned by its author ‘Kafka’ (290) thus providing readers with a reference they could understand and relate to. The translation of the passage “Emajõe vaatega maal, mida isa oli uhkelt ja hellitavalt Kitseks nimetanud.” (283) omits the name of the Estonian painter, Elmar Kits and refers to him as ‘a famous artist’ by using universalisation “A painting of the Emajõgi river – a work dad treasured – painted by a famous artist.” (279). Thus, by omitting the name of the painter, the reference is made accessible and understandable to the international audience as it is no longer specific to one cultural space.

The passage “Pärast mängitakse saalis veel teisi ringmänge rahvaste sõpruse kinnitamiseks, **rukilõikamist ja lapaduud ja need tondid tulivad kaugel maal ja peremees võttis naise ja...**” (190) mentions various round dances which have been omitted during the translation and replaced with a general note specifying the countries of origin of the games. Nevertheless, the translation “After, they play other circle games – **all kinds, both Estonian and Russian** – there in the assembly hall to consolidate the friendship of the nations.” (185–186) maintains the same expressive value as the ST as it combines

universalisation and adaptation. The only cultural reference to labour in *Burning Cities* is ‘pühapäevak’ (105) which refers to a voluntary-obligatory communal labour day, specific to the Soviet era, where people would collectively fulfil various tasks, such as harvesting potatoes or clearing the streets of rubble, especially during the years after the war. For its translation, the translator has decided to use explicitation by describing the concept of ‘pühapäevak’ as ‘the occasional Sunday communal labour day’ (103). To conclude, references to social culture were too specific to be transferred into TT as they were, therefore universalisation was used to render them more general and explicitation for providing the readers with additional information.

### 2.1.3 The Translation of the References to Historical Events

When it came to references to historical events, the English translation almost always uses explicitation. For instance, a chapter set in 1945, a year after the bombing of Tartu by the Soviet army forces (Kaasik 2024), contains a passage “/.../ et see [viljaelevaator] on ikka veel raasuke viltu.” (33) whose translation into English added a clarifying sentence as to why the grain silo was askew “/.../ [the grain silo] still looks very slightly out of alignment: **another legacy of the war.**” (35). The effects of the Second World War were noticeable even during the post-war period, as the cleaning up of the ruins of the war and the restoration and rebuilding of the city began during the 1950s (Mägi 2019: 20, 23). Thus, the passage in a chapter set in 1959, is mentioning how ‘the empty city blocks’ (‘lagedad kvartalid’), created by the bombing of the city, are finally being rebuilt “lagedad kvartalid /.../ hakkavad majadega täituma.” (163) and its translation into English “**the bomb sites** /.../ are gradually filling up with buildings.” (159). As seen, the translation is more explicit as ‘the empty city blocks’ have been substituted with ‘the bomb sites’, reminding the reader about the bombing of Tartu during the Second World War.

Moreover, the novel makes references to the deportations of Estonians by the Soviet Union during and after the Second World War – something that probably every Estonian knows about but international readers might need additional information.

“Romaniga juhtule mõtlemine võttis ta alati seest vōbisema: kui lähedalt sama saatus temast möōda läks!” (48)

“Paul’s stomach still churned when he thought about what became of Roman – **deported to Siberia in June 1941 and executed**. How close a brush with fate he himself had had.” (48)

Despite the passage in Estonian being vague and not mentioning deportation at all, the Estonian reader will probably be able to make the connection to deportation. However, during the translation of the passage into English, the translator has decided to add a clarifying sentence for international readers, letting them explicitly know about the deportation.

## 2.2 Translation of the Variation in Language in *Burning Cities*

### 2.2.1 The Translation of Multilingualism

Considering the time period in which *Burning Cities* takes place (1950s–1960s), it is not surprising that the author has incorporated characters of different linguistic background into the text. In the text, Russian characters are either introduced by their description as Russians or recognised by the reader by their use of language, whether it is an accent, a single word or a whole sentence in Russian. It must be noted that while the TT provided translations for all Russian language items, the ST left few of them as they were, without translation.

The use of words in Russian was most prevalent during conversations between Tiina and her Russian friend Vova. For instance, Vova used Russian language words ‘šaški’ and ‘šahmatō’ (195) and their counterparts in English ‘shashki’ and ‘shakhmaty’ (191) in an Estonian language conversation with Tiina, for he was unable to come up with the words ‘draughts’ and ‘chess’ in Estonian. While the examples above illustrate the use of

orthographic adaptation in both languages, Estonian and English, some Russian language inserts have remained in Cyrillic in the ST but have been adapted orthographically during the translation; for instance, “Paremal seisab kirillitsas nimi: *A. E. Яковлев, Санкт-Петербург.*” (201) and its translation in English “To the right of it is writing in Cyrillic: *A. E. Yakovlev, Sankt-Peterburg.*” (197). As demonstrated, in conversational situations, both ST and TT used orthographic adaptation as it would be easier for a reader, probably more accustomed to the Latin alphabet, to read. However, considering the multilingual past and present of Estonia, the Estonian reader would probably find the occasional Cyrillic inserts in the text acceptable.

In order to minimise the interlingual tension, the translator has offered a translation for the foreign element in the sentence “Nagu saad aru, et midagi on, aga kõik on üks suur... *тишина.*” (202), providing international audiences with a more comprehensive “Like you figure out there’s *something*, but everything’s just one big... *tishina*, a **big silence.**” (198) through using a combination of orthographic adaptation and clarification. However, it could be implied that by adding an explanation for ‘tishina’ (‘silence’ in Russian), the translator has used explicitation, as the meaning of the word, originally unexplained, is revealed to international readers.

Similarly, a combination of orthographic adaptation and explicitation has been used for the translation of the conversation between Tiina and a young Russian boy in the basement corridors of the building where one of her classmates lived.

“*Tõ kto?*” küsib ta.

Tiina kummardub, ulatab poisile prääniku ja vastab: “*Ded moroz.*” Muud ei tule pähe.

Poiss naeratab ja naksab präänikut.

“*Paka, ded moroz!*” hüüab ta Tiinale järele. (122)

“*Ty kto?*” the boy asks.

Tiina bends down, hands the boy her biscuit and responds, “*Ded moroz.*” Nothing else comes to mind.

The boy smiles and takes a bite of the biscuit.

“*Poka, ded moroz,*” \* he calls after her. (120–121)

\* “*Ty kto? – Who are you? / Ded moroz. – Father Christmas / Poka, ded moroz – Goodbye, Father Christmas (Russian)*”

As demonstrated, the passage in Estonian offers no translation for the phrases in Russian, as the author probably implies them to be common enough to be understood easily by her Estonian readers. The translation, however, is much more inclusive, as it provides translation for the phrases in Russian in the footnotes and specifies that the conversation between Tiina and the boy was in Russian.

### 2.2.2 The Translation of Dialect

*Burning Cities* includes two chapters written in dialect, both chapters consisting of letters addressed to Peeter, Tiina's father. Since dialects are very difficult to translate, Aareleid provided her translators with a note explaining why she had incorporated dialect into the text and specifying the context and the message the dialects in the letters were supposed to convey (Aareleid 2018: 85).

The first letter is written in the Mulgi dialect and is from Peeter's mother addressed to her son (60–61) – for its translation, Aareleid provided translators with a standard language copy of the letter and a suggestion to use language resembling the one that a person living in a rural area would use (Aareleid 2018: 85). For instance, the translated version of the letter maintains, similarly to the ST, the “odd” punctuation (missing commas and full stops) and contains dialectal words whose spelling deviates from the standard language use, for example ‘kiriuta’ instead of ‘kirjuta’ (transl. write) (60) and ‘writ’ instead of ‘write’ (60).

The second letter is from Peeter's older brother Aleksander; according to the author's concept, the letter was supposed to convey the reality of a less educated older brother, bitter from the hardships of life. Hence, the Estonian version of the letter uses an archaic spelling for words containing the letter ‘v’ for they are spelled with ‘w’ as in ‘wennas’ instead of ‘vennas’ (transl. ‘brother’); such spelling was still common at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but was gradually declining towards the 1920s. The only instance of such spelling

in the translation is at the very beginning of the letter when the town of ‘Viljandi’ was spelled ‘Wiljandi’ (93, 95–96). Although there were no other dialectal words in the English version of the letter, the sentence structure suggests a deviation from the standard version of the language (95–96). Translated versions of both letters suggest the use of adaptation, as a similar sentence structure to ST was created. Moreover, the letters were in accordance with the author’s conception of the impression they were supposed to leave of its writers.

However, in instances, where dialectal variation was of no textual importance, the dialect was omitted altogether during the translation process. For instance, Tiina’s neighbour was an elderly woman named Juuli who spoke with a dialect. According to the author’s idea, her manner of speech and use of dialectal words serve as a characterising feature for her character and add realness of life into the narrative, as elderly people often tend to use dialectal forms in their speech.

“Ja teeme laia vöö, et saaks siit kõvasti kokku tõmmata.”

“**Sääl** ei anna **midäki enämb** kokku tõmmata.” [in standard Estonian “**Seal** ei anna **midagi enam** kokku tõmmata.”]

“Küll ma seda ise vaatan, Juuli. Kas **nüüt saie** kõik?” [in standard Estonian “Kas nüüd sai kõik?”]

“**Saie, saie.**” (90–91) [in standard Estonian “**Sai, sai.**”]

“And we’ll have a wide belt so I can pull it in tight here.”

“Nothing more for you to pull in there.”

“Let’s just leave that to me. All done then, Juuli?”

“Yes.” (88)

The translation of the conversation between Tiina’s mother and Juuli during the former’s dress fitting at Juuli’s apartment omitted any reference to Juuli’s dialect as it had no major narratological importance and its dialectal imitation probably proved to be too difficult. Thus, English readers probably see the character of Juuli as speaking the standard form of the language, which illustrates the difficult nature of translating a dialect or trying to mimic its dialectal variation.

### 2.2.3 The Translation of Sociolect

In addition to the use of Russian words in their speech, Russian characters were also recognisable by their accent in Estonian, caused by the influence of their mother tongue. On the basis of *Burning Cities*, we could claim that the distinguishing trait of the members of that community, in ST, was the addition of the ‘j’ sound, marking the pronunciation as demonstrated by: “**Tjeere-tjeere!**’ vastab naine /.../.” (120) and “Mehed kõnnivad toast tuppa, ei räägi eriti. Üks neist osutab lihtsalt asjadele. ‘See. See. Need.’ **Sjee. Njeed**” (283). To translate the first sentence, the translator has decided to use clarification by explicitly mentioning the speaker’s Russian origin: “**Khello-khello!**’ the woman replies with a thick Russian accent.” (118). However, the translation of the second sentence suggests that no suitable spelling imitation of the Russian accent for the words ‘this’ and ‘that’ was available in English: “The men walk from room to room not saying much. One of them merely points to objects. ‘That. That. Those.’ **He speaks with a thick Russian accent**” (279). Thus, omitting ‘problematic words’ and instead explicitly mentioning that the man spoke with a Russian accent, the international readers will probably get the same impression of the text as ST readers would.

### 2.3 The Translation of Wordplay

Although there are numerous forms of wordplay, this thesis will use the umbrella term ‘wordplay’ and defines it as the manipulation of the structural features of a language in order to produce a “communicatively significant confrontation” of linguistic structures bearing more or less similar meanings or forms (Delabastita 1996: 128). When it comes to the translation of wordplay, various methods could be used; for instance, rendering the ST pun by a non-punning phrase, omitting the pun, substituting the ST pun with another related rhetorical device, or a combination of methods (Delabastita 1996: 134).

In the *Burning Cities*, wordplays are mainly the result of young Tiina not knowing the meaning of some words or getting them mixed up, as illustrated by the passage where she asks:

“Mismoodi ‘õige usklikud?’”

“Mitte õige usklikud, vaid õigeusklikud, sellist usku.” (translation “Not of right religion, but orthodox, as in religious.”)

“Kas teised on siis valeusklikud?” (234). (transl. “Are others then of wrong religion?”)

“What does it mean ‘Orthodox?’”

“It means traditional; that’s the name of the religion.”

“Does that mean the others aren’t traditional?” (230)

What she meant to ask about was ‘õigeusklik’ as in orthodox not ‘õige usk’ whose word-for-word translation is the ‘right religion’. Her confusion was the result of ‘õigeusk’ being a compound of ‘õige’ and ‘usk’ that separately have a different meaning from the compound. To maintain the effect of the ST, the translation rendered the wordplay with a similar construct. Thus, the item of confusion in the TT is the meaning of ‘orthodox’ as ‘traditional’ which makes the child wonder whether other religions are non-traditional if this one is traditional.

As cards and card games are of significance in the context of *Burning Cities* – the Estonian title of the novel being a reference to a game of cards of the same name, known in English as War or Battle (Aareleid 2018: 81) and Tiina’s father being a gambler – various allusions are made to the subject throughout the book.

In the novel, there is a passage where young Tiina is learning the names of the cards and the suits. Upon learning about the suit ‘spades’ (in Estonian ‘pott’, ‘poti’ and ‘pada’ are used synonymously), she is confused about the name. To understand her confusion, we should first look into where the Estonian name for the suit came from. Seeing that it is assumed to originate from the Swedish ‘spader’ (meaning ‘spade’), from which as a result of folk etymology, it came to be associated in Estonian with ‘pott’ and ‘pada’ as in ‘pot’ (ETY 2012). Thus, it is the homonymy that confuses her, as ‘pada’ meaning ‘spades’ and ‘pada’ meaning ‘pot’ sound and spell the same way.

“Must tagurpidi süda ja...” Tiina ajab pea viltu ja torutab huuli. “Kuninganna?”  
 ”Poti, ja õige, kuninganna ehk emand, poti emand.”  
 “Mis poti?” Tiina naerab.  
 “Selline nimi. Võib ka õelda ‘pada’. Padaemand.”  
 “Poti.” (75)

“A black upside-down heart and...” Tiina cocks her head and puckers her lips. “A queen?”  
 “Spades, and you’re right – a queen. A queen of spades.”  
 “Spade. It’s got a tiny handle,” Tiina giggles. (75)

Since such association is not available in English, the translator omitted the wordplay around it from the TT and in order to compensate for the omission, he decided to associate the suit name ‘spade’ with a tool of the same name. Coincidentally, the Estonian ‘poti’ and English ‘spade’ are both referring to items of the same name in their respective languages that have handles.

After Tiina had learned the names of the cards and the suits, she learned how to play the game of ‘linnade põletamine’ (literal translation ‘burning cities’). The name of the game, however, made her wonder about the cities and burning. On account of the Estonian name of the card game being textually important, the translator has decided to add that the game, otherwise known in English by the name of War or Battle, is alternatively called burning cities. By doing so, the TT is able to have the same humorous effect as the ST, as Tiina’s questions, although slightly different, would still be asked.

“Kogu lugu?”  
 “Nojah. Nii lihtne mäng ongi.”  
 “Aga linnad?” (translation “What about the cities?”)  
 “Mis linnad?” (transl. “What cities?”)  
 “Ja põletamine? See pidi ju olema linnade põletamine?” (transl. “And burning? This was supposed to be burning cities?”)  
 “Sind naasklit küll.” Ida jääb mõttesse. “Sellega on vist nii, et tugevam kaart on nagu tuli, sööb teise kaardi ära, kuni kogu vastase linn on maha põlenud...” (78)

“That’s it?”  
 “That’s it. Simple as that. **Some people call the game burning cities.**”  
 “**But why cities?**”  
 “Hmm?”  
 “**And why are they burning?**”  
 “You’re as bright as a button, you know that?” Ida thinks for a moment. “I suppose it’s because the stronger card is like a fire that destroys the other one, until the whole city of cards is burned to the ground...” (77)

Another example of wordplay present in the novel is lexical innovation in word formation, such as the use of blending (Klitgård 2018: 238).

“Siin on ainult noad ja kühvlid.”

“Mis kühvlid, Tiina?”

“Ma ei jaksa nii palju rääkida. Kahv-lid ja tor-di-la-bi-dad. See teeb kokku kühvlid!” (74)

“There are just knives and forkulas here.”

“What’s a forkula, Tiina?”

“I like to keep words short. Forks and cake spatulas. Together, that makes forkulas!” (73–74)

By merging ‘kahvel’ (transl. ‘fork’) and ‘tordilabidas’ (transl. ‘cake spatula’) together, Tiina created the word ‘kühvel’ which is an actual word in Estonian, meaning ‘shovel,’ but in the context of that conversation, it confused her conversation partner as the word belonged to a different register from the one that was expected. The English translation of the passage merged ‘fork’ and ‘cake spatula’ together, creating an equivalent for the Estonian blend, although a nonce word, it still maintained the effect of the source.

In the case of proper names, wordplay might be used as a “characterising function” for it offers an explanation for the name (de Vries and Verheij 1997: 84). An illustration of this is the name of a tertiary character, Valdek Karm in ST and Valdek Stern in TT. Valdek was Liisi’s (Tiina’s mother) first husband who went to war and had prior left Liisi his notebook containing poetry. The notebook was titled “*Valdek Karm. Luuletused*” (29) and after reading some of the poems, a comment was made “/.../ Sünged luuletused, nagu ettekuulutus. Karm poiss see Karm. (30). To maintain the connection between the name of the character, the title of the notebook “*Valdek Stern. Poems*” (31) and the remark about the theme of his poems “/.../ Grim poems, like a foretelling. He’s stern, this Stern fellow.” (31) the translator has decided to use adaptation and translated his last name.

## CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that a memoir-based novel set mainly in one location, the city of Tartu after the Second World War and during the Soviet occupation of Estonia, includes references to concepts, events and places whose correct understanding would benefit the

reader and their interpretation of the text, its narrative and characters. Therefore, it is important to provide historical or cultural context to those probably not familiar with the local history or in fact, with the history of Estonia. Thus, texts embedded with cultural and historical references pose a challenge for translators as to how to translate these texts – to domesticate the CSIs and cultural references or to try to find possibilities to convey them in their translation?

Domestication adapts the SL reference into TL and its culture, providing readers with a reference they could understand and relate to. Meanwhile, foreignization, a practice at the opposite end of a continuum, preserves the SL reference and thus might yield an exotic effect. The direction each translator takes depends on the type of the text, its target readers and as well as on the type of the reference and its importance in the text. Thus, translators have a variety of methods at their disposal to treat such textual items.

Therefore, this thesis aimed to analyse the translation of cultural references in the Estonian contemporary novel *Linnade põletamine* by Kai Aareleid and in its translation into English *Burning Cities* by Adam Cullen. Hence, the theoretical part of the thesis explained the concept of culture-specific items (CSIs) and different manifestations of language variation, such as multilingualism, dialect and sociolect, as well as wordplay. Moreover, an overview of a variety of translation methods used to render these ‘translation problems’ into English was given.

The analytical part of the thesis discussed the translation methods of CSIs present in *Burning Cities* and found that the most common strategy in their translation was universalisation, explicitation or a combination of both. While universalisation provided readers with a more common reference, explicitation offered clarifying background information, for instance on historical events and their impact on daily life in Estonia before, during and after the period of Soviet occupation. Moreover, different methods used to render

instances of multilingualism, dialect and sociolect (which were all used for constructing the setting and characters) present in the novel into English were also discussed. Due to the untranslatability of dialect, dialectal words were omitted from TT. Although some sociolectal words allowed rendition into English as an equivalent spelling imitation of the Russian accent was possible, others were omitted and substituted with a clarifying sentence about the accent. When it came to multilingualism, the most prevalent method of translation was a combination of orthographic adaptation and explicitation. All Russian language phrases and sentences in the TT were written in the Latin alphabet, even when originally in ST they appeared in Cyrillic. These Russian language inserts in TT were almost always supplemented with a translation, allowing readers to fully grasp what was said or meant. When it came to wordplay, the TT managed to keep the same effect as the ST, as suitable equivalents were found. However, in some instances, there was some loss in meaning.

Overall, the current thesis illustrates the difficult nature of transferring cultural elements from one language and cultural space into another. As demonstrated by the English translation of *Burning Cities*, explicitation proved to be the most utilised practice as it allowed the translator to incorporate translations of foreign language elements of the text and provide the readers with additional information about life during the Soviet occupation and history of Estonia. As the novel has also been translated into Finnish and Latvian, cultures that are spatially nearer to Estonia and share some of the history, further research could be done to explore how Finnish and Latvian translators have approached issues of transferring (Soviet) Estonian culture into their respective languages.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Maria Mägi**

**Translation of Cultural Elements in Kai Aareleid's *Linnade Põletamine* into English  
by Adam Cullen / Kultuuriliste viidete tõlkimine inglise keelde Kai Aareleiu romaanis  
„Linnade põletamine”**

Bakalaureusetöö

2024

Lehekülgede arv: 29

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Töö sissejuhatus kirjeldab põgusalt romaani sisu ja tutvustab peategelasi, lisaks annab sissejuhatus ajaloolise tausta ajaperioodile, milles romaan aset leiab ning kirjeldab tolle aja keelesituatsiooni Eestis. Kirjandusülevaade annab ülevaate viisidest, mil kultuurilised viited kirjandustekstis avalduda võivad ning tutvustab erinevaid meetodeid nende tõlkimiseks. Empiiriline osa vaatleb romaanist leitud kultuurilisi viiteid ja analüüsib nende tõlkimiseks kasutatud tõlkestrateegiaid.

Analüüsi tulemusena leiti, et romaani „Linnade põletamine“ inglise keelde tõlkimiseks kasutati enim *explicitation*-meetodit (selgitamine). Meetodi kasutamine annab tõlkijale võimaluse tekstisiselt selgitada lähtekeelele ja kultuuriruumile omaseid mõisteid ja nähtusi, mis muidu võivad sihtkeelsele lugejale arusaamatuks jääda. Antud teose puhul kasutati meetodit näiteks võõrkeelsete (vene) sõnade ja fraaside tõlkimiseks ning Eesti ajaloo ja Nõukogude okupatsiooni-aegsete nähtustele selgitamiseks.

Märksõnad: Kai Aareleid, „Linnade põletamine“, tõlkimine, inglise keel ja kirjandus, kultuurispetsiifika, kultuurilised viited, tõlkeanalüüs

## **Lihtlitsents**

### **Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks**

Mina, Maria Mägi,

1. annan Tartu Ülikoolile tasuta loa (lihtlitsentsi) enda loodud teose  
  
Translation of Cultural Elements in Kai Aareleid's Linnade Põletamine into English by Adam Cullen,  
  
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