

LEXICAL-SEMANTIC AND CULTURAL FEATURES OF REALIA IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract. This article explores the lexical-semantic and cultural features of realia in the English language, focusing on their role as culturally specific lexical items that encode social, historical, and cultural realities. By examining theories such as linguistic relativity and cultural semiotics, the study highlights the significance of realia in reflecting the worldview of their originating communities. Realia are analyzed in terms of their semantic complexity, encompassing denotation, connotation, and cultural significance, and their categorization into geographical, social, and ideological types. The article also addresses the role of realia in identity formation, cultural transmission, and intercultural mediation. Additionally, it emphasizes the challenges of translating realia, given their context-dependent and culturally loaded nature. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of realia as carriers of cultural heritage and tools for intercultural communication while proposing future research directions on their relevance in digital and globalized contexts.

Keywords: Realia, linguistic relativity, cultural semiotics, lexical semantics, cultural transmission, intercultural communication, cultural identity.

Realia occupy a distinctive position in linguistic studies, serving as lexical markers of cultural, historical, and social specificity. Coined in the 19th century and formally conceptualized in linguistics by A. Veselovsky, realia denote objects, phenomena, or concepts intrinsically tied to a specific cultural context [1]. Unlike universal terms, realia are highly context-dependent and culturally loaded, reflecting the unique worldview of their originating communities [2]. Consequently, realia play an essential role in understanding language as a medium of cultural transmission, bridging the gap between linguistic structures and socio-historical realities [3].

Rooted in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, linguistic relativity suggests that language shapes thought and perception. Realia serve as evidence of this phenomenon, as they encapsulate cultural knowledge and worldview. For example, the English term “*pub*” reflects not only a location for drinking but a communal space integral to British social life.

Cultural semiotics, as developed by Y. Lotman, provides a framework for understanding how language serves as a medium for encoding and transmitting cultural

values. According to this theory, language is not just a tool for communication but a cultural code that reflects and shapes the worldview of its speakers [4]. Within this framework, realia function as semiotic units –specific lexical items that carry culturally significant meanings beyond their denotative definitions. For instance, terms such as “*Thanksgiving*” or “*afternoon tea*” are not merely words but cultural symbols that encode the practices, traditions, and norms of their respective societies. These realia act as bridges between linguistic and cultural systems, allowing speakers to articulate and preserve their unique socio-historical realities. By embedding cultural values into language, realia become essential components in the maintenance of collective memory and cultural identity, ensuring the transmission of these values across generations and facilitating intercultural communication (see diagram 1).

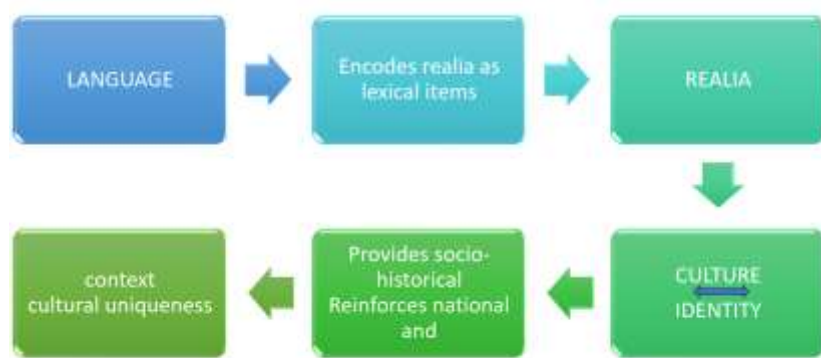


Diagram 1. The Conceptual Relationship of Realia

The flow of the diagram shows how language and realia interact to provide deeper cultural meaning and preserve identity through context and socio-historical significance. This interaction ensures that realia serve not only as linguistic items but also as vital carriers of cultural heritage.

Realia are unique lexical items tied to a specific cultural, historical, or geographical context. Unlike neutral or universal terms, realia are culturally loaded and often resist direct translation due to their specificity.

Many scholars extensively analyzed and categorized realia, dividing them into distinct types based on their origin, function, and cultural specificity. This classification provides a deeper understanding of the semantic and cultural dimensions of realia. Below are the key defining characteristics and types as proposed by various researchers:

Scholars like Newmark (1988) and Veselovsky (19th century) categorized realia into types based on their geographical, social, and ideological origins:

Geographical Realia. These refer to objects, landmarks, or phenomena that are unique to a specific location. Examples: “*Big Ben*” (UK), “*Mount Rushmore*” (USA), “*Lake District*” (UK).

Social Realia. This type reflects the social practices, rituals, and daily life of a culture. Examples: “*Afternoon tea*” (UK), “*pub*” (UK), “*Thanksgiving*” (USA).

Ideological Realia. These denote historical, political, or cultural ideologies unique to a community. Examples: “*The Crown*” (UK monarchy), “*Magna Carta*” (England), “*Commonwealth*” (former British colonies).

Semantic Complexity. Realia exhibit a multi-layered semantic structure: Denotation: The literal meaning (e.g., “*pub*” = public house).

Connotation: Associated meanings (e.g., communal gathering space).

Cultural Significance: Broader societal relevance (e.g., British social traditions).

Historical Embeddedness. Many realia are rooted in historical events or traditions: “*The Mayflower*” evokes the voyage of the Pilgrims and the founding narrative of the USA. “*Magna Carta*” represents constitutional history in England.

Based on their origins and functions, realia can be categorized as follows:

Type	Examples	Description
Geographical Realia	“Big Ben”, “Lake District”	Refers to specific locations tied to cultural identity.
Social Realia	“Afternoon tea”, “pub”	Reflects social customs, rituals, and practices.
Ideological Realia	“Commonwealth”, “The Crown”	Linked to political or cultural institutions.

The semantic structure of realia is unique, encompassing multiple layers of meaning. These layers are shaped by cultural and historical factors, making realia deeply contextual. Semantic Layers of Realia:

- **Denotation:** The primary, dictionary definition. For example, “*pub*” is defined as a public house for drinking.
- **Connotation:** The implied or secondary meanings. For “*pub*”, this includes its role as a social hub in British culture.
- **Cultural Significance:** The broader societal or historical importance. A “*pub*” represents British identity, leisure, and tradition.

Examples of Lexical-Semantic Complexity:

Single-Word Realia: “*Lord*”: Denotes aristocratic rank but also connotes feudal traditions and historical power structures. “*Sherlock Holmes*”: A fictional character, but also a symbol of Victorian logic and detective culture.

Phraseological Realia: “*Afternoon tea*”: A social ritual symbolizing British refinement and etiquette. “*Raining cats and dogs*”: A humorous idiom unique to British culture, signifying heavy rainfall.

Realia act as cultural markers, preserving the identity and heritage of a community. They function as bridges between language and culture, enriching communication with cultural nuance. Cultural Functions of Realia:

- **Identity Formation:** Terms like “*Afternoon tea*” embody British values of leisure and politeness. “*Fourth of July*” reflects American patriotism and independence.
- **Cultural Transmission:** Realia such as “*Magna Carta*” serve as tools for transmitting cultural knowledge across generations.
- **Intercultural Mediation:** Terms like “*Thanksgiving*” often require contextual explanation when introduced to non-American audiences, fostering cultural understanding.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis emphasizes that language influences thought. Realia demonstrate how culturally specific terms encode unique worldviews, shaping perceptions of reality. According to Lotman, language serves as a cultural code. Realia act as semiotic units that encapsulate cultural values, making them essential for cross-cultural communication.

Realia in the English language are not merely lexical items but carriers of cultural identity and historical memory. They enrich language by embedding cultural nuance and fostering global understanding. However, their unique characteristics pose challenges for translation, necessitating innovative strategies that respect both linguistic and cultural integrity.

By combining theoretical insights from linguistic relativity and cultural semiotics this research underscores the importance of realia as tools for intercultural communication. Future studies could explore their role in digital media and globalized communication.

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