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Localization strategies and their impact on gaming community identity

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Abstract. This article examines the translation of in-game terminology in English-to-Russian game localization, with particular focus on the sociolinguistic consequences of translation strategy selection for gaming community identity. The relevance of the topic is driven by the rapid global expansion of the video game industry and the formation of a stable English-based gaming sociolect that frequently conflicts with officially localized equivalents. The novelty of the approach lies in the application of an integrated theoretical framework – combining Vinay and Darbelnet’s translation strategy typology, O’Hagan and Mangiron’s concept of transcreation, Tajfel’s social identity theory, Lave and Wenger’s Communities of Practice model, and discourse theory by Michel Foucault – to the Russian localization of *Resident Evil 4: Remake* (Capcom, 2023). The analysis identifies four categories of translation difficulty: loss of character-specific idiolect markers, register distortion, untranslatable wordplay, and terminological inconsistency. It is concluded that domesticating translation strategies, while ensuring surface-level fluency, may undermine the discursive coherence of gaming communities and erode the identity-bearing subcultural language.

Keywords: game localization; gaming terminology; translation strategies; community identity; sociolect; English-to-Russian translation; domestication; borrowing

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Приемы локализации и их влияние на идентичность игрового сообщества

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Аннотация. В статье исследуется перевод игровой терминологии в процессе англо-русской локализации видеоигр с особым акцентом на социолингвистических последствиях выбора переводческих стратегий для идентичности игрового сообщества. Актуальность темы обусловлена стремительным ростом глобального рынка видеоигр и формированием устойчивого англоязычного социолекта, который вступает в противоречие с официально переведенными эквивалентами. Новизна подхода заключается в применении комплексной теоретической рамки, объединяющей типологию переводческих стратегий Вине и Дарбельне, концепцию транскреации (О’Хаган и Мангирон), теорию социальной идентичности Тэджфела,

модель сообществ практики Лэйва и Венгера, а также теорию дискурса Фуко, к материалу русской локализации Resident Evil 4: Remake (Capcom, 2023). Проведенный анализ выявил четыре категории переводческих трудностей: утрату отличительных знаков идиолекта персонажей, искажение контекста, неперебиваемые языковые игры слов и терминологические непоследовательности. Сделан вывод о том, что доместицирующие стратегии перевода, обеспечивая поверхностную беглость речи, способны подрывать дискурсивную связность игровых сообществ и разрушать субкультурный язык, несущий идентификационную функцию.

Ключевые слова: локализация игр; игровая терминология; стратегии перевода; идентичность сообщества; социолект; англо-русский перевод; доместикация; заимствование

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Introduction

The rapid global expansion of the video game industry has produced a distinctive linguistic phenomenon: a specialized English-rooted lexicon that has penetrated virtually every major gaming market. Terms such as *grind*, *respawn*, *buff*, *nerf*, *tank*, and *meta* are no longer confined to Anglophone contexts – they circulate across forums, streaming platforms, and in-game chats in dozens of languages, coexisting awkwardly with official localized equivalents or outright displacing them. This tension between global gaming English and target-language adaptation is not merely a terminological inconvenience; it is a sociocultural phenomenon with direct consequences for how players construct and experience community belonging.

The English-to-Russian context presents a particularly compelling case. Russia represents one of the largest gaming markets in Europe and Central Asia (Newzoo, 2023), and Russian-language localizations of titles such as *World of Warcraft*, *League of Legends*, and *Counter-Strike* have long been subjects of community debate – with players frequently rejecting official translations in favor of anglicized or community-coined alternatives (Kovalev, 2019: 47). This tension between institutional translation and organic community usage reflects the resistance of identity-bearing subcultural language to domestication.

Despite the prevalence of this phenomenon, the field of translation studies has been slow to engage with the language of video games as a sociolinguistic object. Existing scholarship on game localization has largely focused on technical challenges, cultural adaptation of narrative content, and humor translation, while identity-related dimensions of terminology transfer remain underexplored (Bernal-Merino, 2015: 88). This gap is particularly pronounced in the Russian-language context.

The aim of the present study is to examine how translation strategies applied to in-game terminology in English-to-Russian localization influence the formation and coherence of gaming community identity. To achieve this aim, the following objectives are addressed: (1) to systematize theoretical frameworks relevant to specialized terminology in translation studies, sociolinguistics, and game studies; (2) to identify and classify categories of in-game terminology carrying community identity markers; (3) to analyze translation strategies applied in the Russian localization of a commercially significant video game and assess their sociolinguistic impact.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Video Game Translation as a Discipline

The translation of video games occupies a distinctive and increasingly prominent position within translation studies. The field's key concept is localization – borrowed from the software industry, denoting the comprehensive adaptation of a product for a specific locale, encompassing linguistic translation, cultural adjustment, technical modification, and legal compliance (Esselink, 2000: 3). In video games, localization extends beyond language replacement to include adaptation of visual elements, voice acting, interface design, and the specialized terminology embedded in gameplay systems (Mangiron, 2006: 11).

Bernal-Merino identifies a spectrum ranging from full gold localization (including dubbed voice acting) to minimal text-only translation (Bernal-Merino, 2015: 56). The degree of localization directly affects terminological handling: full adaptation may permit creative domestication, whereas partial localization leaves core gameplay vocabulary in English by default, cementing anglicisms in target-language communities. O'Hagan and Mangiron introduce the concept of transcreation – the freedom, and sometimes obligation, to depart from source text fidelity in favor of functional and experiential equivalence (O'Hagan, Mangiron, 2013: 215). A translated game must not merely be understood; it must be played, and terminology must preserve the player's ability to interact with game systems and community networks effectively.

1.2. The Nature of Gaming Terminology

Gaming language constitutes a sociolect: a variety associated with a particular social group, shaped by shared practices, values, and forms of communication (Eble, 1996: 11). Its vocabulary can be organized into four broad categories, each presenting distinct translation challenges.

Player role and archetype labels (*tank, healer, carry, support*) originated as functional descriptors but have acquired strong community-cultural weight. Social structure terminology (*guild, clan, raid, party*) describes organizational forms that carry not only semantic content but the weight of social contracts within gaming communities (Bernal-Merino, 2015: 43). Gameplay mechanics vocabulary (*grind, farming, respawn, nerf, buff, aggro*) is largely technical but often metaphorical, with many terms already adopted as loanwords before any official localization is produced (Bernal-Merino, 2015: 102). Meta-discourse and community terminology (*meta, OP, AFK, GG, noob*) functions primarily in player-to-player interaction and has achieved a degree of cross-linguistic standardization that makes translation both unnecessary and, in many communities, actively unwelcome (Gee, 2003: 45).

The distinctiveness of gaming terminology also lies in its rate of change: unlike legal or medical terminology, it is generated and modified in real time by developer communications, content creators, competitive scene developments, and community discourse – a pace that official localization systems can rarely match (Mangiron, 2006: 14).

1.3. Translation Strategies

Vinay and Darbelnet's typology – ranging from direct methods (borrowing, calque, literal translation) to indirect methods (transposition, modulation, equivalence, adaptation) – provides a useful framework for analyzing how in-game terms are rendered in target languages (Vinay, Darbelnet, 1995: 31). The following analysis of four terms illustrates the full range of strategies encountered in English-to-Russian game localization.

Noob, etymologically derived from “newcomer,” has evolved to function as a term of social stigmatization denoting not merely inexperience but a perceived failure to meet community standards (Paul, 2018: 43). Official Russian localizations have used equivalents such as “новичок” or the colloquial “чайник,” but the Russian-speaking gaming community has overwhelmingly adopted the anglicism *нуб*, preserving both phonetic identity and social connotations of the original (Kovalev, 2019: 48) – a clear case in which borrowing has displaced institutionally sanctioned translation.

Grind – repetitive low-engagement gameplay for incremental reward – has no precise pre-existing equivalent in Russian. Functional equivalents such as “прокачка” capture part of the mechanical meaning but lose the connotation of tedious repetition; calques are descriptively accurate but unusable in player communication. The anglicism *гринд* has consequently become dominant, used as both noun and verb (*гриндить*), demonstrating productive morphological integration of English loanwords into the Russian gaming sociolect (Bernal-Merino, 2015: 104).

Buff and *debuff* constitute a semantically paired set denoting temporary enhancement or weakening of character attributes. Calque-based alternatives (“усиление” / “ослабление”) are semantically accurate but morphologically awkward for real-time gameplay communication. Players uniformly employ *бафф* and *дебафф*, coupling them as productive verbs (*баффать*, *дебаффать*). This case demonstrates how Russian's verbal suffixation system turns English gaming terms into flexible lexical items rather than rigid borrowings.

DPS (damage per second) operates simultaneously as a technical metric, a player role, and community shorthand. Acronyms resist direct conversion because their compression is inherent to their function (Gottlieb, 1994: 105). Russian-speaking players uniformly employ the English acronym *ДПС*, reflecting broader standardization of competitive gaming vocabulary across language communities.

These four cases expose a clear pattern: when source terms carry identity, social, or expressive weight that target-language equivalents cannot match, official localization strategies are consistently overtaken by community borrowing.

1.4. Language, Identity, and Community in Gaming Culture

The foundational sociolinguistic insight of this study is that language is not merely a vehicle for communicating meaning but a medium through which social identities are constructed, performed, and negotiated (Bucholtz, Hall, 2005: 586). Tajfel's social identity theory argues that group membership is maintained through shared practices, symbols, and language (Tajfel, Turner, 1979: 40). In gaming communities, shared terminology functions as precisely such a signal – the ability to use terms like *meta* or *carry* correctly marks one as a legitimate community participant.

Lave and Wenger's concept of Communities of Practice – defined by mutual engagement, a jointly negotiated repertoire of resources, and a shared understanding of collective purpose (Lave, Wenger, 1991: 98) – applies directly to online gaming communities. When localization disrupts the shared linguistic repertoire by replacing established terms, it risks fracturing the community's sense of shared identity.

Foucault's theorization of discourse as a historically and institutionally conditioned system that produces and regulates social relations (Foucault, 1972: 49) provides a further critical lens. Official translation is not a neutral linguistic act but an exercise of institutional power – one in which a publisher determines the legitimate language of a gaming community, potentially overwriting the organic terminology players have developed as their collective identity (Foucault, 1977: 27). This dimension is particularly salient in the Russian-language context, where tension between state-affiliated language norms and informal internet culture has long been a site of ideological contestation (Tajfel, Turner, 1979: 67).

2. Practical Analysis

2.1. Material Selection

This section presents a practical analysis of the Russian localization of *Resident Evil 4: Remake* (Capcom, 2023) – a commercially and culturally significant release with over seven million copies sold within its first month. The choice of this title is additionally justified by its comparative dimension: the original *Resident Evil 4* (2005) was also localized into Russian, enabling a trace of how terminological choices evolved across nearly two decades of practice. The 2023 remake was created with full awareness of an established, opinionated gaming community, rendering translators' choices particularly deliberate and analytically valuable. The analysis is organized around four

categories of difficulty, identified through community-generated critiques and systematic comparison of source and target texts (Difficulties in translation..., 2026).

2.2. Categories of Translation Difficulty

2.2.1. Loss of Character-Specific Idiolect Markers. The clearest example involves Leon S. Kennedy's habitual use of the exclamation "Jesus Christ" – an established lexical marker of his character, present in *Resident Evil 2* (Capcom, 2019) and carried into the 2023 source text. In the Russian localization, this phrase appears in only one instance, with all other occurrences omitted or replaced with neutral equivalents. The strategy of omission is systematically employed, disrupting the character's established idiolect and, with it, the continuity of fan community expectations built across the franchise. Similarly, Leon's professional military register is toned down in several lines, rendered in a style more consistent with informal colloquial speech.

2.2.2. Register Distortion. Rather than maintaining a consistent expressive register, the Russian localization introduces emotionally charged or obscene language in several scenes where the English original displays restraint, while simultaneously toning down the emotional intensity of other lines. This two-way asymmetry cannot be explained by lip-synchronization constraints alone. Ada Wong's characterization is particularly affected: a line rendering Leon as "predictable" – a tonally neutral, psychologically accurate adjective – is replaced in Russian with the more pejorative "послушный" (compliant/obedient), altering the interpersonal register through modulation in a way unsupported by the source.

2.2.3. Untranslatable Wordplay. The most analytically significant difficulties are concentrated around wordplay in the source text. Three instances are particularly illustrative. (1) Leon's ironic use of "Bingo" – drawing on cultural stereotypes about rural leisure in a village setting – is rendered as "кино" (cinema), a cultural substitution that sacrifices the original's register in favor of a locally comprehensible but tonally inert equivalent. (2) The "Knighty-night" homophone play – bidding defeated enemies 'good knight' with reference to the castle setting – is inevitably lost, as the two words share no phonetic similarity in Russian and no equivalent wordplay is attempted. (3) The final boss pun on "holy" and "hole" – contextually tied to the cult setting – is similarly diminished, with no phonetic basis for the joke in Russian and no compensatory solution offered.

2.2.4. Terminological Inconsistency. The term "stranger" – a signature form of address used by the Merchant character – is rendered consistently as "чужак" (outsider) throughout most of the game but shifts to "незнакомец" in isolated scenes, disrupting the character's established voice. Such internal inconsistency undermines the sense of a coherent characterization, and is particularly consequential for players whose community identity is partly constructed around franchise-specific characters and their verbal signatures.

2.3. Discussion

The Russian localization of *Resident Evil 4: Remake* is best characterized as uneven rather than unsuccessful. Several characters receive genuinely accomplished treatment: the Merchant's signature lines are faithfully adapted; dramatic scenes demonstrate contextual sensitivity; some comedic exchanges show meaningful engagement with the source text. However, the analysis identifies systemic rather than isolated difficulties: erosion of character idiolect, asymmetric register handling, untranslatable wordplay rendered without adequate compensation, and internal terminological inconsistency. The dominant strategies employed are adaptation, functional substitution, and omission.

These findings corroborate the theoretical framework established in Section 1. Domesticating strategies tend to sacrifice the expressive texture of source texts in favor of fluency – and this, as Foucault's discourse theory implies, carries consequences for the coherence of community identity built around a text. When localization disrupts the shared linguistic repertoire – whether by eroding an established character's idiolect or by failing to preserve identity-bearing terminology – it risks fragmenting the community's sense of shared belonging.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the translation of in-game terminology and its impact on gaming community identity, integrating perspectives from translation studies, sociolinguistics, and cultural theory. The theoretical analysis established that game localization is never a merely technical act but a social intervention with measurable consequences for the communities it affects. The practical analysis confirmed that dominant localization strategies are adequate for main-message dialogue but insufficient for identity-relevant, expressive, and culturally specific content.

The findings carry practical implications for the professional practice of game localization: translators and studios must attend not only to semantic accuracy and technical constraints but to the sociolinguistic function of the terms they handle – their role in sustaining the discursive coherence of player communities. The intersection of game localization, sociolinguistics, and community identity remains a broad and underexplored field, and the present study warrants further research across languages, genres, and cultural contexts.

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