

Ethic and Emic Perspectives in Cross-Cultural Translation: A Study of Indonesian Folklore into Korean

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Abstract: Translating culturally embedded folklore across typologically and culturally distinct languages presents challenges that extend beyond lexical equivalence. This study examines the Korean translation of the Indonesian folktale *Sangkuriang* by integrating Kenneth L. Pike's etic–emic distinction with Tagmemic theory and principles of translation equivalence. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the research analyzes selected culture-bound expressions to identify how structural choices reflect cultural positioning. The findings reveal that translation operates along a continuum between etic orientation, characterized by structural fidelity and lexical preservation, and emic orientation, marked by cultural adaptation and interpretive mediation. Tagmemic analysis demonstrates that shifts in slot, class, role, and cohesion correspond to deeper cultural negotiations, particularly in expressions related to morality, cosmology, and familial authority. By proposing a Tagmemic–Ethnographic Model of Translation, this study offers a systematic framework for tracing how linguistic structure mediates cultural meaning. The research contributes to translation studies by operationalizing the etic–emic framework and revitalizing Tagmemic theory within cross-cultural translation analysis.

Keywords: Etic–emic perspective; Tagmemic theory; cultural translation; folklore translation; Indonesian–Korean translation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Translating culturally embedded texts between typologically and culturally distinct languages presents persistent challenges that go beyond lexical equivalence. When narratives rooted in local cosmology, moral systems, and social hierarchies are transferred into another linguistic and cultural framework, meaning is inevitably reshaped (Mochammad et al., 2025; Aditya, 2023; Rahman & Rahman, 2019). This challenge becomes particularly evident in the translation of Indonesian folklore into Korean, where differences between an analytic language and an agglutinative language intersect with contrasting cultural worldviews. Folklore such as *Sangkuriang* does not merely tell a story; it encodes moral authority, filial obligations, cosmological beliefs, and symbolic relationships between humans and nature. Rendering such elements into Korean requires not only linguistic competence but also intercultural negotiation.

Despite extensive scholarship in translation studies, much of the existing research has focused primarily on equivalence at lexical, semantic, or pragmatic levels (Nida, 1964; Baker, 2011), or on ideological orientations such as domestication and foreignization (Venuti, 2017). While these frameworks provide valuable evaluative tools, they often overlook how the translator's cultural positioning can be systematically traced through linguistic structure. Furthermore, Kenneth L. Pike's (1967) etic–emic distinction—originally developed in anthropological linguistics—has rarely been operationalized within translation analysis, particularly in studies involving Southeast Asian folklore and East Asian target languages. As a result, there remains a theoretical and methodological gap in understanding how structural choices in translation reflect deeper cultural mediation.

To address this gap, this study analyzes the Korean translation of *Sangkuriang* by integrating

Pike's etic–emic framework with Tagmemic theory and principles of translation equivalence. Specifically, the study aims to (1) examine how etic and emic perspectives are manifested in the translation process, (2) analyze how cultural meanings and moral concepts are structurally mediated between Indonesian and Korean.

This research is important for three reasons. First, it expands translation studies by offering a structurally grounded approach to examining cultural negotiation. Second, it revitalizes Tagmemic theory by demonstrating its relevance in contemporary cross-cultural translation analysis. Third, it contributes to intercultural understanding by highlighting how folklore translation serves as a site where linguistic form and cultural identity intersect. Through this approach, translation is reconceptualized not merely as language transfer, but as a traceable process of cultural mediation across linguistic boundaries.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Translation as Cultural Mediation

Translation has long been understood as more than a mechanical transfer of linguistic forms from a source language to a target language. Early functionalist approaches, particularly Nida's (1964) theory of dynamic equivalence, emphasize that translation should aim to produce a similar effect on the target audience as the original text does on its source audience. This perspective positions translation as an act of cultural mediation, where meaning is negotiated rather than simply reproduced. Baker (2011) further argues that equivalence operates at multiple levels—lexical, grammatical, textual, and pragmatic—each influenced by cultural context.

More recent scholarship has strengthened the view of translation as a culturally situated practice. Venuti (2017) conceptualizes translation as an ideological act shaped by strategies of domestication and foreignization, highlighting the translator's visibility and ethical responsibility. In the context of folklore translation, cultural mediation becomes even more critical, as folklore texts encode collective memory, moral values, and symbolic systems unique to a particular culture (Aditya, & Sabarguna, 2023; Jung et al., 2025; Mahdori et al., 2025). However, while these studies acknowledge cultural negotiation, they often remain descriptive and lack a systematic linguistic mechanism for tracing how cultural mediation is realized through grammatical structure.

B. Etic–Emic Perspective in Linguistic and Cultural Analysis

The etic–emic distinction introduced by Kenneth L. Pike (1967) has been influential in anthropology and linguistics as a framework for understanding the relationship between external description and internal cultural meaning. The etic perspective refers to an observer's analytical framework applied across cultures, while the emic perspective reflects meanings as understood by cultural insiders (Galperin et al., 2022; Youngsun et al., 2024; Ko et al., 2025). This duality has been widely applied in ethnography, sociolinguistics, and discourse studies to explain how cultural meaning is constructed and interpreted.

In translation studies, however, the application of the etic–emic framework remains limited. Some scholars (e.g., Katan, 2014) have suggested that translators inevitably occupy both outsider and insider positions, navigating between analytical distance and cultural empathy. Nevertheless, etic and emic perspectives are often discussed metaphorically rather than operationally. Few studies demonstrate how these perspectives can be systematically identified in translated texts, especially through concrete linguistic features (Tian, 2024; Kyeongjae et al., 2025; Youngsun et al., 2024). This lack of operationalization constitutes a theoretical gap, particularly in the analysis of translations involving culturally dense narratives such as folklore.

C. Tagmemic Theory and Structural Analysis in Translation

Tagmemic theory, also developed by Pike (1967), conceptualizes language as a hierarchy of units characterized by four interrelated components: slot, class, role, and cohesion. This framework

allows linguistic analysis to account for both formal structure and functional meaning within discourse. Longacre (1983) later expanded Tagmemics into discourse analysis, emphasizing its usefulness in examining narrative structure and semantic relations across texts.

Despite its potential, Tagmemic theory has rarely been applied in translation studies. Most structural analyses of translation rely on syntax-based or functional grammar approaches, which may not adequately capture the interaction between structure and cultural meaning. The limited integration of Tagmemics into translation research represents a methodological gap, particularly in studies that seek to connect grammatical shifts with cultural interpretation. By combining Tagmemic analysis with the etic–emic framework, translation shifts can be examined not only as structural changes but also as reflections of cultural positioning and interpretive stance.

III. METHODS

A. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in textual and discourse analysis. The qualitative approach is employed to capture nuanced cultural meanings and interpretive shifts that occur in the translation of folklore texts. Rather than measuring translation accuracy quantitatively, the study focuses on how linguistic structure and cultural perspective interact in the translation process, particularly through the lens of etic–emic distinction and Tagmemic theory.

B. Data Source

The primary data consist of selected excerpts from the Indonesian folktale *Sangkuriang* taken from the Balai Pustaka edition published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (2017). The target text is a Korean translation produced for analytical purposes, designed to maintain literal–structural correspondence with the source text. To enhance analytical reliability, the translation was cross-checked through reference to standard Korean grammatical conventions and validated by consultation with Korean language resources. The focus of the data selection is on culturally bound expressions that reflect moral values, cosmological beliefs, and social relationships.

C. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is culture-bound linguistic expressions, including clauses, metaphorical constructions, and evaluative statements that carry significant cultural meaning. Five representative data units were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives and their potential to illustrate etic and emic translation orientations.

D. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through close reading of the source text to identify culturally salient expressions. These expressions were then translated into Korean using a literal–structural approach to preserve grammatical alignment. Each source–target pair was documented and organized into analytical tables to facilitate systematic comparison.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study and discusses how etic and emic perspectives are manifested in the Korean translation of *Sangkuriang*. The discussion focuses on how cultural meanings are structurally and interpretively mediated through tagmemic elements in cross-cultural translation.

Data 1

“Dayang Sumbi mengusir Sangkuriang karena telah melanggar larangan ibunya.”

다양 솜비는 아들의 명령 불복종 때문에 상구리앙을 쫓아냈다.

This sentence contains the concept of strong filial obedience to parents, which is deeply rooted in Indonesian folklore. The Korean translation preserves the cause–effect structure literally through the use of the causal marker *때문에*. From an **etic** perspective, the translator maintains lexical and grammatical equivalence by preserving the subject–predicate–cause relationship. However, from an **emic** viewpoint, the concept of violating a mother’s prohibition is reduced to *명령 불복종* (disobedience to an order), which reflects a more rational and administrative nuance in Korean culture.

From a tagmemic perspective, the cause slot is filled by a moral action; its class is a verbal clause; its role functions as a violation of social norms; and its cohesion is causal in nature. Therefore, this translation demonstrates the dominance of an etic orientation, with limitations in representing the emic cultural meaning.

Data 2

Kesaktian para dewa menentukan nasib manusia.”

신의 뜻은 인간의 운명을 좌우한다.

This expression represents a traditional cosmology that positions the gods as sacred entities endowed with supernatural power. In the Korean translation, the term referring to the gods’ sacred power is adapted into *신의 뜻* (the will of God), which is more familiar within the Korean religious and philosophical framework. This choice indicates an **emic** orientation, as the translator performs a cultural reinterpretation to ensure cognitive acceptability for the target readers.

From a tagmemic perspective, the agent slot is filled by an abstract concept; its class is a theological noun; its role functions as the determiner of fate; and its cohesion is conceptual in nature. Although semantic fidelity undergoes a shift, readability increases significantly. Therefore, this data reflects the dominance of an emic perspective.

Data 3

“Gunung Tangkuban Parahu menjadi saksi kutukan tersebut.”

탕쿠반 파라후 산은 그 저주의 증인이 되었다.

This sentence personifies nature as a symbolic entity endowed with a sacred function. The Korean translation preserves this personification through the phrase *저주의 증인* (witness of the curse), which is structurally equivalent to the source text. From an **etic** perspective, the translator successfully maintains the metaphorical structure and the semantic relationships among the sentence elements. However, from an **emic** standpoint, the personification of nature tends to be interpreted as a literary stylistic device rather than as part of a living cosmology, as it is understood in Sundanese culture.

In the tagmemic analysis, the slot is filled by a locational element; its class is a geographical noun; its role functions as a symbolic witness; and its cohesion is maintained through narrative continuity. This data demonstrates a strong etic orientation with limited emic acceptance.

Data 4

“Kutukan ibu adalah hukuman paling berat.”

어머니의 저주는 가장 가혹한 벌로 여겨진다.

This expression affirms the mother's moral authority within a traditional social structure. In the Korean translation, the use of the evaluative passive form *여겨진다* ("is considered") reflects an attempt to soften the absolute meaning conveyed in the source text. From an **emic** perspective, the translator adjusts the concept of moral punishment to align with Korean cultural norms, which tend to emphasize social consensus rather than the metaphysical force of a curse.

From a tagmemic standpoint, the evaluation slot is filled by a moral judgment; its class is an abstract noun; its role functions as an ethical sanction; and its cohesion is normative in nature. Although there is a partial shift in meaning fidelity, readability increases. Therefore, this translation demonstrates the dominance of an emic perspective.

Data 5

"Sangkuriang menentang takdirnya sendiri."

상쿠리앙은 자신의 운명에 맞섰다.

This sentence presents the theme of individual agency in opposition to the cosmic order. The Korean translation maintains the active structure and the sense of conflict through the verb *맞섰다* ("to confront" or "to resist"), which carries heroic connotations in Korean narratives. From an **etic** perspective, the syntactic structure and semantic relations are consistently preserved.

Meanwhile, from an **emic** standpoint, the concept of resisting fate is acceptable within the framework of heroic storytelling that is familiar in Korean culture. In the tagmemic analysis, the actor slot is filled by a single agent; its class is an active verbal clause; its role functions as an agent of resistance; and its cohesion supports the development of the narrative theme. Thus, this data demonstrates a balance between etic and emic orientations.

Table 1. Etic–Emic Orientation and Tagmemic Mediation in the Korean Translation of *Sangkuriang*

No	Source Text (Key Expression)	Cultural Meaning	Etic–Emic Orientation	Tagmemic Analysis	Translation Effect
1	melanggar larangan ibunya	Filial obedience and moral transgression	Dominant Etic	Cause – Verbal clause – Moral violation – Causal	Structural fidelity preserved; cultural meaning partially reduced
2	kesaktian para dewa	Traditional cosmology and divine power	Dominant Emic	Agent – Abstract/theological noun – Determiner of fate – Conceptual	Cultural reinterpretation increases readability
3	menjadi saksi kutukan	Sacred nature and personification	Etic-oriented	Location – Geographical noun – Symbolic witness – Narrative continuity	Metaphor – preserved; emic reception limited
4	kutukan ibu	Maternal moral authority	Dominant Emic	Evaluation – Abstract noun – Ethical sanction – Normative	Semantic softening; cultural acceptability enhanced
5	menentang takdir	Individual agency vs	Balanced Etic–Emic	Actor – Active verbal clause – Agent of resistance – Thematic	Structural and cultural meanings preserved

cosmic order	progression	aligned
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It demonstrates that the Korean translation of *Sangkuriang* reflects varying degrees of etic and emic orientation depending on the cultural density of the expressions. This pattern supports Pike’s (1967) argument that linguistic analysis must account for both external structural description (etic) and internal cultural interpretation (emic). Data showing dominant etic orientation preserve slot and class relations, indicating a focus on structural fidelity, while shifts in role and cohesion signal emic mediation aimed at cultural intelligibility.

These findings are consistent with Nida’s (1964) view that translation involves balancing fidelity and readability. When cultural concepts such as cosmology and moral authority are adapted, the translator prioritizes dynamic equivalence to achieve a comparable cognitive effect on the target audience. This adaptive strategy also aligns with Venuti’s (2017) notion of domestication, where cultural adjustment enhances accessibility without entirely erasing the source culture. Overall, the table illustrates how tagmemic elements provide a systematic means of tracing cultural negotiation within translation structure.

B. Discussion

This study demonstrates that the translation of *Sangkuriang* into Korean operates along a dynamic continuum between etic and emic orientations, rather than adhering exclusively to either structural fidelity or cultural adaptation. The findings indicate that linguistically transparent constructions tend to preserve etic alignment through slot–class equivalence, while culturally dense expressions—particularly those involving moral authority, cosmology, and filial relations—trigger emic mediation. This confirms that translation is not merely a transfer of semantic content, but a negotiation of cultural cognition embedded within grammatical structure.

Theoretically, this study addresses a significant gap in translation research. Previous scholarship has largely emphasized equivalence at lexical or semantic levels (Nida, 1964; Baker, 2011), or ideological positioning through domestication and foreignization (Venuti, 2017). However, limited attention has been given to how **structural linguistic analysis can systematically reveal the translator’s cultural stance**. Moreover, although Pike’s (1967) etic–emic distinction has been influential in anthropology and linguistics, it has rarely been operationalized as an analytical tool in translation studies, particularly in the context of Southeast Asian folklore translated into East Asian languages. This study fills that gap by integrating Tagmemic structure with the etic–emic framework to explain translation shifts as both grammatical transformations and cultural negotiations.

The discussion further suggests that structural changes at the level of role and cohesion frequently signal deeper interpretive adjustments. When moral absolutes in the source text are softened in the target text, or when cosmological concepts are recontextualized into more universal theological terms, these shifts reflect not linguistic inadequacy but cultural recalibration. In this sense, translation becomes an ethnographic act in which the translator oscillates between analytical distance (etic) and empathetic proximity (emic). The Tagmemic–Ethnographic Model proposed in this study thus reconceptualizes translation not as a binary choice between fidelity and readability, but as a structurally traceable process of intercultural mediation.

By situating translation within both linguistic structure and cultural worldview, this study contributes to cross-cultural translation research and expands the applicability of Tagmemic theory beyond its traditional domain. It also opens space for further empirical studies that test the etic–emic structural model across other folklore traditions and typologically distinct language pairs.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the translation of *Sangkuriang* into Korean involves a dynamic interplay between structural fidelity and cultural mediation. Rather than functioning as a purely linguistic transfer, translation emerges as a process of intercultural negotiation in which the translator oscillates between etic distance and emic proximity. Through Tagmemic analysis, structural correspondences and shifts were shown to reflect deeper interpretive choices, particularly in culturally dense expressions concerning moral values, cosmological beliefs, and social hierarchy.

By integrating the etic–emic framework with Tagmemic theory, this research addresses a theoretical and methodological gap in translation studies. It provides a systematic means of identifying how cultural positioning is encoded within grammatical structure, thereby moving beyond conventional discussions of equivalence. The proposed Tagmemic–Ethnographic Model highlights translation as a traceable process of cultural mediation rather than a binary choice between fidelity and readability.

Future research may apply this integrative model to other folklore traditions and language pairs to further test its analytical robustness. In doing so, translation studies can continue to develop more structurally grounded and culturally sensitive approaches to cross-cultural textual analysis.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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