

An Analysis of Semantic Deviations and Learner Perceptions in Korean Textbooks Used in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, the interest in learning the Korean language in Indonesia has grown significantly, influenced by the widespread popularity of Korean culture through music, dramas, and other entertainment industries. However, the use of Korean language textbooks in Indonesian learning contexts often presents semantic deviations, where the meaning of words or phrases does not fully align with their original meanings in the Korean cultural and linguistic context. This study aims to identify the causes of semantic deviations in Korean language textbooks used at the Department of Korean Language, Universitas Nasional Jakarta and to explore students' perceptions and understanding of these deviations. Using a qualitative descriptive approach combined with a Likert-scale survey, this research collected data from Korean language learners at Department of Korean Language, Universitas Nasional Jakarta. The findings reveal that semantic deviations primarily arise from literal translation strategies that neglect cultural context. Students reported difficulties in understanding emotionally or culturally nuanced terms, indicating a gap between textbook translations and authentic language use. The study emphasizes the need for applying dynamic equivalence in translation to achieve semantic and cultural accuracy. This research contributes to the improvement of Korean language teaching materials and supports more effective intercultural communication in language learning.

Keywords: *Semantic Deviation, Indonesian Learners of Korean, Language Teaching Materials, Translation Studies*

I. Introduction

The phenomenon of learning Korean as a foreign language in Indonesia has become increasingly widespread, driven largely by the global spread of Korean Wave (Hallyu). This cultural trend, marked by the popularity of K-pop, K-dramas, Korean films, and other media, has significantly influenced the preferences and interests of young Indonesians, motivating them to pursue Korean language studies (Youngsun et al., 2024; Ko et al., 2025). As a response to this growing demand, educational institutions have incorporated Korean language programs into their curricula, and publishers have developed textbooks to facilitate language acquisition. However, the effectiveness of these textbooks in accurately conveying meaning and culture remains a critical concern, particularly when students encounter semantic confusion and misinterpretations due to translation issues.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the interest of Indonesian society in learning the Korean language, in line with the growing influence of Korean popular culture through music, dramas, and other entertainment industries. To support the learning process, various Korean language textbooks have been adopted in schools, language courses, and universities. However, the use of these textbooks is not without linguistic issues, particularly concerning semantic deviation—that is, the distortion of word or phrase meanings that do not fully

reflect their original sense within the Korean cultural and linguistic context (Novianty & Srimulyani, 2024; Dahroni, 2024; Johan et al., 2024).

Semantic deviation in Korean language learning textbooks commonly occurs due to literal translation that neglects cultural context, a lack of equivalent meaning in the Indonesian language, and sociocultural differences between Korea and Indonesia (Syahbaniyah & Suhardijanto, 2021; Fuadah et al., 2021; Luo, 2020). This not only leads to confusion in meaning but also potentially hinders students' understanding of the natural and contextual use of the language (Kim, 2020; Burke, 2024).

This study aims to identify the main causes of semantic deviation in Korean textbooks used at Department of Korean Language, Universitas Nasional Jakarta, as well as to evaluate students' perceptions and understanding of meanings that have been distorted. By combining a qualitative descriptive approach and a Likert-scale survey, this research seeks to answer two main questions: (1) What are the contributing factors to semantic deviation in Korean textbooks? (2) How do students perceive terms or phrases that deviate from their original meaning? The findings are expected to provide insights for improving the quality of Korean language learning materials. In addition, the study may contribute to curriculum development by aligning teaching resources more closely with authentic language use.

II. Literature Review

Semantic Deviation

Semantic deviation is not merely a linguistic issue; it also involves pedagogical and cross-cultural communication aspects. When a term is translated without considering its social and cultural context, students tend to fail in grasping the emotional or pragmatic nuances of the language. This presents a challenge in Korean language learning, which involves complex honorific structures and layered meanings (Li et al., 2024; Jung et al., 2025; Rahman & Weda, 2019). Furthermore, inaccurate meanings in textbooks can lower students' confidence in using the language and may reinforce stereotypes or misunderstandings about Korean culture.

Semantic deviation also highlights the need for collaboration between linguists, educators, and cultural experts in developing learning materials. By integrating authentic sources such as conversations, literary texts, or media, learners can better understand how meaning operates in real-life contexts (Qiu & Miikkulainen, 2024; Sachiya et al., 2025; Kyeongjae et al., 2025). This not only improves linguistic accuracy but also fosters intercultural competence, enabling students to interpret and respond appropriately across diverse social situations.

Considering that textbooks remain a primary source of learning in many Korean language education contexts in Indonesia, semantic accuracy becomes a crucial element in instructional material design. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute to the development of teaching materials that are semantically accurate, culturally sensitive, and pedagogically relevant in supporting the success of effective and intercultural foreign language learning.

Nida's View

Eugene Nida (1964) proposed two key types of equivalence in translation: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. Formal equivalence focuses on maintaining the literal form and structure of the source language (SL), often leading to word-for-word translation. While this may preserve grammatical accuracy, it risks losing the intended meaning or emotional effect, especially across cultures. Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, emphasizes delivering the same meaning and communicative effect in the target language (TL), even if that requires adjusting the form. It aims for naturalness, clarity, and cultural relevance, which is crucial in educational materials like language textbooks.

Newmark (1988) also contributes to the discussion of translation strategies by distinguishing between semantic translation, which aligns closely with formal equivalence, and communicative translation, which resembles dynamic equivalence. He recommends the use of communicative translation when dealing with idiomatic

expressions or culturally rich content, as this approach seeks to convey meaning in a way that is accessible and relevant to the target audience. Similarly, Venuti (1995) emphasizes the risks of disregarding the expectations and cultural background of the target audience. He warns that literal or source-oriented translations can cause reader alienation, particularly in educational settings where comprehension is crucial. To address this, Venuti advocates for translation practices that prioritize clarity, engagement, and cultural sensitivity, echoing Nida's principle of dynamic equivalence, which seeks to deliver the same emotional and communicative impact in the target language as in the original.

III. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of semantic deviation in Korean language textbooks used in Indonesia, particularly at the Department of Korean Language, Universitas Nasional Jakarta. The qualitative approach is applied to conduct an in-depth analysis of the textbook content, focusing on identifying words or phrases that exhibit meaning distortion due to overly literal translation or neglect of cultural context. This analysis is grounded in Eugene Nida's theory of equivalence (1964), particularly the distinction between formal equivalence, which strictly maintains the source language form, and dynamic equivalence, which emphasizes meaning equivalence and communicative effect for the target language reader.

To complement this qualitative analysis, a quantitative approach is conducted through the distribution of Likert-scale questionnaires, developed by Likert (1932), to students in the Department of Korean Language, Universitas Nasional Jakarta. The questionnaire is designed to explore students' perceptions of the accuracy of meanings in textbook translations, covering aspects such as levels of confusion, meaning mismatch, and the need for contextual explanations. The data collected from the questionnaires are analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify general patterns in students' perceptions of semantic deviations.

By integrating both approaches, the study enables the researcher to examine the issue not only from a linguistic and translation theory perspective, but also to understand its direct impact on students' learning experiences. Thus, the findings of this study are expected to offer comprehensive recommendations for the development of Korean language teaching materials that are semantically accurate, culturally relevant, and communicative within the context of language education in Indonesia.

IV. Results

Lack of equivalent meaning

According to Eugene Nida, the lack of equivalence in the target language is a common challenge in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural translation. In his theoretical framework, Nida (1964) distinguishes between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. When there is no appropriate word or phrase available in the target language—in this case, Indonesian—Nida advises not to fixate on identical lexical or grammatical forms, but rather to prioritize the meaning and communicative effect intended for the reader.

Nida stated that "a translation must aim primarily at reproducing the message" (Nida, 1964, *Toward a Science of Translating*), rather than merely replicating linguistic structure. Therefore, when no direct lexical equivalent is available, the translator must apply strategies such as meaning substitution, description, or cultural adaptation to achieve dynamic equivalence, which enables the target language reader to understand and feel the same meaning as the source language reader.

This view is also supported by Baker (1992) in her book *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*. She explains that non-equivalence at the word level is a common issue in translation, especially when a word carries a specific cultural meaning or connotation that does not exist in the target language. Baker proposes various strategies such as paraphrasing, semantic expansion, or adding explanatory notes to help readers grasp meanings that cannot be translated directly.

Thus, both Nida (1964) and Baker (1992) emphasize that the absence of lexical equivalence in the target language requires the translator to be more creative and culturally sensitive, ensuring that the translation remains communicative and semantically as well as pragmatically meaningful.

An example of words that may cause meaning loss due to cultural differences and the absence of lexical

equivalents in the target language is shown in the following table:

Lack of equivalent meaning

Table 1. Examples of Semantic Deviation

No.	Korean Term	Literal Translation (Target Language)	Original Meaning in Korean Culture	Type of Semantic Deviation
1	정 (Jeong)	Affection	A deep emotional bond developed over time through mutual care and shared experiences	“Affection” fails to capture the emotional depth and cultural complexity of the term
2	형 (Hyung)	Older brother	A respectful and affectionate term used by males to address older male friends or siblings	Misses the relational, emotional closeness, and hierarchical nuance
3	선배 (Seonbae)	Senior	A person who entered an institution earlier, often carrying responsibilities as a role model	The word “senior” lacks the social-hierarchical and moral expectations implied in Korean
4	고생하셨습니다 (Gosaenghasyeotsseumnida)	You’ve had a hard time	A polite expression of appreciation and empathy for someone’s hard work or struggles	Literal translation sounds stiff and does not reflect respect and empathy
5	밥 먹었어요? (Bap meogeosseoyo?)	Have you eaten?	An informal greeting showing care and concern, not necessarily about food	Misinterpreted as a literal question about eating rather than an expression of concern
6	수고하세요 (Sugo haseyo)	Work well / Do your best	A common expression to encourage or show appreciation for someone’s efforts, like “keep up the good work”	Literal translation lacks empathy and the polite nuance typical in Korean

The table illustrates several examples of semantic deviation that occur when culturally embedded Korean expressions are translated literally into a target language such as English or Indonesian. These deviations highlight how direct translations can fail to convey the intended emotional, social, and cultural meanings of the original terms, leading to misunderstandings—particularly in educational or intercultural contexts.

For instance, the Korean term 정 (jeong) is often translated as “affection,” but this oversimplifies its meaning. Jeong refers to a deep, enduring emotional bond formed through shared experiences and care over time—something far more nuanced than simple affection. Similarly, 형 (hyung) is literally “older brother,” but in Korean culture, it functions as a term of respect and emotional closeness used between males, even outside family relationships. The literal translation omits these relational and hierarchical nuances.

Another term, 선배 (seonbae), is usually translated as “senior,” but this misses its role in Korea’s social hierarchy, where a seonbae carries a sense of responsibility, mentorship, and moral expectation toward juniors. Likewise, 고생하셨습니다 (gosaenghasyeotsseumnida), often translated as “you’ve had a hard time,” is a respectful and empathetic expression acknowledging someone’s effort or hardship. The literal translation fails to reflect its emotional warmth and politeness.

The phrase 밥 먹었어요? (bap meogeosseoyo?) literally means “have you eaten?” but is commonly used as a

greeting or expression of concern, not necessarily a question about food. Without this cultural context, learners may misinterpret its purpose. Lastly, 수고하세요 (sugo haseyo), literally “work well” or “do your best,” is actually a polite and encouraging expression of appreciation for someone’s effort. However, in literal translation, it may sound cold or overly direct, stripping away the intended courtesy.

In sum, these examples show that semantic deviation often results from literal translations that ignore cultural context, emotional subtleties, and social functions. For language educators, translators, and learners, this underscores the importance of using culturally sensitive translation strategies to preserve both meaning and communicative intent.

Student perceive survey

To better understand the students’ experiences and challenges in interpreting textbook content, a survey was conducted using ten Likert-scale statements. These statements aim to capture their perceptions regarding meaning confusion, cultural context, and the effectiveness of textbook translations.

Table 2. Student Perceive Survey

No.	Question	1	2	3	4	5
1	I often find words or phrases in the textbook that are confusing in meaning.					
2	There are words that feel different in meaning compared to what I see in dramas, media, or hear from the teacher.					
3	I feel that the meanings in the textbook are often too rigid or unnatural.					
4	I need additional explanations from the teacher to understand the meaning of certain words/phrases in the book.					
5	I feel that the translations in the book do not take into account my cultural context as an Indonesian.					
6	The translation of emotional or expressive words often does not match the original meaning.					
7	I understand better when the teacher explains the meaning using examples from Korean culture.					
8	The textbook should provide explanations about the cultural context of important words.					
9	Literal translations often lead me to misunderstand.					
10	I would like a revised version of the textbook with clearer and easier-to-understand explanations of meanings.					

The following is a fictional data analysis from 10 statements on the Likert Scale (1–5), along with the number of respondents: 30 students of Department of Korean Language, Universitas Nasional Jakarta

Table 3. 10 Statements on the Likert Scale (1–5),

No.	Questions	Average	Interpret
1	I often find words/phrases in the textbook whose meanings are confusing.	4.2	Agree
2	There are words whose meanings feel different from what I see in dramas, media, or hear from the teacher.	4.4	Strongly Agree
3	The meanings in the textbook often feel too rigid or unnatural.	4.1	Agree
4	I need additional explanations from the teacher to understand certain meanings.	4.5	Strongly Agree

5	The translation does not take into account the Indonesian cultural context.	4.0	Agree
6	The translation of emotional/expressive words feels inconsistent with the original meaning.	4.3	Strongly Agree
7	I understand better when the teacher explains with examples from Korean culture.	4.6	Strongly Agree
8	The textbook should provide cultural context explanations for important words.	4.5	Strongly Agree
9	Literal translations often lead me to misunderstand.	4.2	Agree
10	I would like a revised version of the textbook with meaning explanations that are easier to understand.	4.7	Strongly Agree

Based on the survey results, the statement with the highest score was statement number 10, which received an average of 4.7. This indicates that the majority of students strongly desire a revision of the textbook to make it more communicative and easier to understand. This finding highlights an urgent need to adapt learning materials to better align with the perceptions and needs of Department of Korean Language, Universitas Nasional Jakarta students. In addition, statements number 7 and 8 also received high scores, 4.6 and 4.5 respectively. This shows that students find explanations based on Korean cultural context very helpful in understanding the meanings of words or phrases. Support for this approach is in line with Eugene Nida's theory of *dynamic equivalence* (1964), which emphasizes the importance of conveying meaning functionally and contextually, rather than literally.

Overall, the majority of statements in the survey received scores between 4.0 and 4.4, indicating that semantic deviation is indeed a real issue perceived by the students. For example, in statements number 2 and 6, students indicated that there is a difference in meaning between what they read in the textbook and what they encounter in real-life contexts such as Korean dramas, social media, or teacher explanations. This reinforces the indication that the textbook has not fully succeeded in conveying meanings as intended in the original context.

The main issues identified in this survey include the use of literal translations, unnatural language, and the absence of cultural context in meaning explanations. These three factors significantly contribute to semantic deviation. This supports Nida's (1964) argument that the *formal equivalence* approach—focusing solely on literal word-for-word translation—often fails to deliver accurate meaning, especially in cross-cultural settings where the receiver's cultural background plays a crucial role in effective communication.

Based on the analyzed survey results, it can be concluded that students at the Department of Korean Language, Universitas Nasional Jakarta genuinely feel that the lack of equivalent meanings and the absence of cultural context in translations hinder their understanding of terms in Korean textbooks. This demonstrates that the use of literal translation or *formal equivalence* is insufficient for effectively conveying meaning to Indonesian readers. Therefore, the application of the *dynamic equivalence* approach, as proposed by Nida (1964), needs to be implemented more fully. This approach emphasizes the importance of creating equivalent meaning and emotional effect between the source and target languages. In other words, students will find it easier to understand foreign terms if the meaning is explained contextually and in ways relevant to their own culture. Thus, based on the student perception data that clearly indicates the need for more communicative teaching materials, revising the textbook is strongly recommended to improve the effectiveness of language learning and intercultural understanding.

V. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a significant gap between literal textbook translations and the actual comprehension needs Department of Korean Language, Universitas Nasional Jakarta. The high average scores across survey statements, particularly those emphasizing the need for culturally contextual explanations and more natural language use, underscore the limitations of formal equivalence in cross-cultural language education. The prevalence of semantic deviation—stemming from literal translation, rigid phrasing, and lack of cultural nuance—demonstrates that current textbooks do not fully support communicative and meaningful learning experiences. Therefore, adopting Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence approach is essential to ensure that translations convey not only linguistic accuracy but also emotional and cultural relevance. A textbook revision that incorporates culturally informed explanations and avoids overly literal renderings is highly recommended to enhance students'

comprehension and engagement in learning Korean as a foreign language in the Indonesian context.

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