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LOSS, GAIN, AND STRATEGIC NON-TRANSLATION IN NARRATIVE MEDIA TRANSLATION: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS[1]

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Abstract

Loss and gain are central concepts in translation studies, yet their theoretical status remains unstable, particularly in the translation of narrative media. In such contexts, linguistic meaning interacts with cultural, aesthetic, ideological, and technological dimensions, making reductive accounts of translational outcome especially problematic.
While loss and gain are frequently invoked in both academic and professional discourse, they are often treated as intuitive effects of translation rather than as the result of strategic decision-making embedded in specific translational regimes. This article proposes that loss and gain should not be understood as symmetrical or compensatory phenomena. Instead, they are better conceptualised as asymmetrical effects of translational positioning.
Adopting a theory-driven, conceptual–analytical approach, the article examines how loss and gain operate in the translation of narrative media, with particular reference to video game localisation and song translation. Drawing on key debates in translation theory—especially those surrounding equivalence, Skopos, and domestication versus foreignisation—it advances the concept of *strategic non-translation* as a productive translational strategy. Deliberate non-translation, it is argued, can function as a form of translational gain by preserving alterity, semiotic density, and cultural visibility, particularly in multimodal contexts where extensive domestication risks aesthetic and ideological flattening.
Rather than offering empirical generalisations, the article aims to refine the conceptual tools used to analyse translation choices in multimodal narrative environments. By reframing loss and gain as directional and context-dependent effects rather than balanced exchanges, it contributes to ongoing discussions of the ethics, politics, and aesthetics of translation in globalised media cultures.

Keywords: Translation studies; Loss and gain; Non-translation; Narrative media translation; Localisation.

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1 Introduction

As narrative media circulate globally, translation has become a central mechanism through which stories, values, and cultural imaginaries move across linguistic boundaries. Video games, music, film, and other narrative forms are increasingly produced for international distribution, often reaching audiences with little familiarity with the cultural and linguistic contexts in which these works originate. Within this landscape, translation is no longer a marginal or auxiliary process, but a constitutive element of narrative production and reception.

In both academic and professional discourse, the effects of translation are frequently framed in terms of loss and gain. Translators are said to lose cultural nuance, emotional resonance, or aesthetic form, while potentially gaining clarity, accessibility, or new interpretive possibilities in the target language. Although these terms are widely used, they are rarely subjected to sustained theoretical scrutiny. Too often, loss and gain function as evaluative shorthand rather than as analytically robust concepts. When used this way, they obscure the strategic choices that shape translation practices.

This tendency is especially pronounced in discussions of narrative media translation. Unlike literary texts, which are often approached as primarily verbal artefacts, narrative media are inherently multimodal, combining language with sound, image, rhythm, and, in some cases, interactivity. Translation in such contexts requires negotiating constraints that extend beyond lexical or syntactic equivalence, raising questions about which semiotic dimensions should be prioritised and which may be altered, marginalised, or omitted. As a result, assessments of loss and gain in narrative media are inseparable from broader aesthetic, ideological, and ethical considerations.

While critiques of loss-oriented thinking have long been present in translation studies, the vocabulary of loss and gain continues to structure evaluative discourse, particularly in applied and professional contexts. Rather than abandoning these terms altogether, the present article argues that they require conceptual reorientation. Specifically, it proposes that loss and gain should be understood not as inherent properties of translated texts, but as effects of strategic translational positioning shaped by theoretical commitments, normative expectations, and medium-specific affordances.

The article advances the claim that non-translation—understood as the deliberate retention of source-language elements within a target-language text—can operate as a productive translational strategy. Far from signalling failure or neglect, non-translation may preserve alterity and semiotic complexity in ways that domestication-oriented approaches systematically erode. In narrative media, where meaning is distributed across multiple semiotic channels, such strategies can generate forms of translational gain that are not reducible to accessibility or fluency.

The joint focus on video games and music is intended to shed light on how these dynamics operate across distinct yet comparable narrative forms. Video games foreground issues of world-building, player positioning, and cultural coherence

through localisation practices such as naming, while music foregrounds performability, phonology, and embodied meaning. Examining these media together allows for a comparative perspective on how loss and gain are redistributed under different semiotic constraints, without presupposing a single evaluative standard.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews key approaches to loss and gain in translation studies, situating these concepts within broader theoretical debates. Section 3 outlines the methodological orientation of the study and clarifies its analytical scope. Section 4 presents and interprets illustrative findings from narrative media translation, focusing on video games and music. Section 5 discusses the implications of these analyses for translation theory and practice. Section 6 addresses the limitations of the study, and Section 7 offers concluding reflections.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Early formulations: Equivalence and the problem of loss

The notion of loss in translation emerges most prominently in early equivalence-based models, where translation is implicitly measured against an ideal of semantic or functional sameness between source and target texts. Within this paradigm, loss is understood as a deficit resulting from structural mismatches between languages (Catford, 1965) or from the impossibility of transferring all aspects of meaning simultaneously. Eugene Nida's influential distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence exemplifies this approach. While Nida (1964) acknowledges that full equivalence is unattainable, he nonetheless frames translation as a process of minimising loss in order to achieve an equivalent response in the target audience. Loss, in this sense, is treated as an unfortunate but manageable by-product of linguistic transfer.

Although equivalence-based models played a crucial role in establishing translation studies as a systematic field of inquiry, they have been widely criticised for their prescriptive orientation and their tendency to universalise evaluative criteria. By positing an implicit ideal against which translations are measured, equivalence paradigms foreground loss as failure and gain as compensation, thereby constraining the analytical vocabulary available for describing translational outcomes. In the context of narrative media, where meaning is distributed across multiple semiotic channels, such a framework proves particularly restrictive. The assumption that translational success can be assessed primarily in terms of semantic correspondence neglects aesthetic, cultural, and ideological dimensions that are central to narrative experience.

Importantly, the persistence of loss as a dominant metaphor within equivalence-based discourse has had lasting effects on how translation is discussed both academically and professionally. Even as the field has moved away from strict equivalence, the language of loss and gain continues to circulate, often stripped of its theoretical underpinnings and employed as an intuitive judgement rather than a

rigorously defined concept. This persistence has been noted in retrospective critiques of equivalence-based thinking (Pym, 2010). This legacy necessitates a critical re-examination of how loss and gain are conceptualised and mobilised in contemporary translation studies.

2.2 Functionalism and the relativisation of loss and gain

A decisive shift away from equivalence occurs with the rise of functionalist approaches, most notably Skopos theory. Hans J. Vermeer's (1989) central claim that translation strategies should be governed by the purpose (Skopos) of the target text and by the translator's responsibility toward participants in the communicative act (Nord, 1997), fundamentally alters the evaluative landscape. Within this framework, loss and gain are no longer assessed relative to the source text alone but in relation to the communicative function the translation is intended to fulfil.

From a functionalist perspective, what might be described as loss under an equivalence paradigm may constitute gain if it facilitates the intended function of the translation. Conversely, strict adherence to source-text features may be reinterpreted as a hindrance rather than a virtue. This relativisation of evaluative criteria marks a significant advance in translation theory (Schäffner, 1998), as it foregrounds the situatedness of translation practices and acknowledges the legitimacy of divergent translational outcomes.

However, while functionalism successfully destabilises universal notions of loss and gain, it also introduces new limitations. By prioritising purpose, Skopos theory risks aligning translational value too closely with instrumental or market-driven objectives, particularly in commercial contexts such as media localisation. In narrative media, where aesthetic and cultural considerations may conflict with accessibility or commercial imperatives, a purely functionalist evaluation can obscure the ethical and ideological consequences of translation choices. Loss and gain, under such conditions, may be framed in terms of usability or reception at the expense of cultural visibility and alterity.

2.3 Descriptivism, norms, and the social conditioning of evaluation

Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), as articulated by Gideon Toury (1995), further reframes the discussion of loss and gain by situating translation within normative systems. Rather than evaluating translations according to prescriptive standards, Toury advocates for the empirical description of what translators actually do within specific socio-cultural contexts. Translation choices are understood as norm-governed behaviour shaped by institutional expectations, professional conventions, and target-culture constraints.

Within this framework, loss and gain are not intrinsic properties of texts but retrospective evaluations imposed by observers operating within particular normative horizons. What counts as acceptable loss or desirable gain varies across cultures, historical periods, and media forms. This variability has been further

elaborated in systems-oriented accounts that link translational norms to ideology and power (Hermans, 1999). This insight is particularly relevant to narrative media translation, where localisation norms may differ substantially from those governing literary translation. For example, the tolerance for cultural opacity or foreignness in a literary context may be markedly higher than in commercial entertainment media.

While descriptivism provides valuable tools for analysing translational behaviour without recourse to universal standards, it remains largely agnostic with respect to ethical judgement. By bracketing questions of value in favour of description, DTS risks leaving concepts such as loss and gain analytically underdeveloped. The question of whether certain normative patterns systematically produce cultural loss, or whether alternative strategies might generate different forms of gain, falls largely outside its scope, prompting calls to reconnect norms with evaluative and ethical reflection (Chesterman, 1997).

2.4 Domestication, foreignisation, and ideological stakes

Lawrence Venuti's (1995) intervention reintroduces ethical and ideological considerations into the analysis of translation. His distinction between domestication and foreignisation foregrounds the power relations embedded in translational practices, particularly in contexts dominated by global languages such as English. Domestication prioritises fluency and cultural assimilation, rendering the translated text immediately accessible while effacing traces of linguistic and cultural difference. Foreignisation, by contrast, seeks to preserve elements of alterity, resisting the target culture's tendency to absorb and neutralise the foreign.

Within this framework, loss and gain acquire explicitly ideological dimensions. Domestication may generate gains in readability and marketability while producing losses in cultural specificity and historical situatedness. Foreignisation may entail losses in immediate comprehensibility while yielding gains in cultural visibility and ethical engagement. Venuti's work thus challenges the assumption that gain must be measured in terms of accessibility or audience comfort, opening space for alternative evaluative criteria. Subsequent scholarship has both extended and problematised this binary, particularly in relation to non-literary and multimodal texts (Munday, 2008; Baker, 2018).

However, Venuti's binary has also been criticised for its abstraction and for its limited engagement with medium-specific constraints. In multimodal narrative media, where translation interacts with gameplay mechanics, musical structure, or audiovisual synchronisation, the opposition between domestication and foreignisation may manifest in uneven or hybrid forms. This complexity necessitates a more granular account of how loss and gain operate across different semiotic dimensions.

2.5 Berman and the ethics of deformation

Antoine Berman's work provides a particularly productive framework for addressing these issues. In his analysis of translation ethics, Berman (1985/2000) identifies a series of "deforming tendencies" that characterise target-oriented translation practices, including rationalisation, clarification, expansion, and qualitative impoverishment. Berman's work has been influentially mediated into Anglophone translation ethics through subsequent commentary and adoption (Venuti, 2000; Cronin, 2003). These tendencies systematically reshape the source text in accordance with target-language norms, often under the guise of improvement or clarification.

In particular, Berman does not conceptualise deformation as accidental loss but as a structural effect of domestication. Loss, in this sense, is not the result of translational incompetence but of an underlying ethical stance that privileges target-culture readability over source-text alterity. By framing loss as deformation, Berman shifts the analytical focus from individual translation choices to broader translational regimes.

This perspective has significant implications for the analysis of narrative media translation. In localisation contexts, practices such as extensive adaptation, explanatory expansion, or cultural substitution are frequently justified in terms of user experience. From a Bermanian perspective, however, such strategies may constitute systematic forms of deformation that erode the foreign text's semiotic density. What is gained in accessibility may be offset by losses in aesthetic complexity and cultural resonance.

At the same time, Berman's emphasis on ethical fidelity provides a theoretical basis for re-evaluating non-translation. Retaining source-language elements can be understood as a refusal of deformation, an attempt to preserve the text's foreignness rather than to assimilate it. In this sense, non-translation is not a failure to translate but an ethical choice that prioritises the integrity of the source text's alterity.

2.6 Reframing loss, gain, and non-translation

Synthesising these theoretical perspectives reveals the limitations of treating loss and gain as symmetrical or compensatory phenomena. Equivalence-based models frame loss as deficit, functionalism relativises it according to purpose, descriptivism contextualises it within norms, and Venuti and Berman foreground its ideological and ethical dimensions. What remains underdeveloped, however, is a framework that accounts for loss and gain as directional effects produced by strategic translational positioning, particularly in multimodal narrative contexts. Such contexts foreground constraints that exceed purely intralingual transfer, involving shifts across semiotic systems rather than between languages alone (Jakobson, 1959). Related efforts to reconceptualise translational value have foregrounded power, choice, and ethical positioning over equivalence or compensation (Tymoczko, 2007; Pym, 2012).

This article adopts such a framework by conceptualising loss and gain as asymmetrical and context-dependent. Rather than asking how losses can be compensated by gains, it asks which dimensions of meaning are foregrounded or suppressed by particular translational strategies. Within this framework, non-translation emerges as a legitimate and potentially productive strategy. By resisting deformation and preserving alterity, non-translation can generate gains that are not immediately quantifiable but are nonetheless significant in terms of cultural visibility and aesthetic experience.

The following sections build on this theoretical foundation by outlining the methodological orientation of the study and examining how these dynamics manifest in the translation of narrative media.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research orientation

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven, conceptual–analytical approach. Its primary objective is not to produce empirical generalisations about translation practices, nor to measure reception effects or user responses, but to refine conceptual tools for analysing loss and gain in the translation of narrative media. The analysis is grounded in established translation-theoretical frameworks and employs illustrative case material to clarify and test theoretical claims.

Such an approach aligns with a long-standing tradition in translation studies that treats translation as an interpretive and norm-governed activity rather than a purely technical operation. By prioritising conceptual clarity over empirical breadth, the study seeks to contribute to theoretical debate rather than to descriptive mapping. The focus is therefore on how loss and gain are conceptualised and evaluated, rather than on how often particular strategies occur in practice.

3.2 Rationale for a conceptual–analytical design

The decision to employ a conceptual–analytical methodology is motivated by the nature of the research problem. As discussed in the literature review, loss and gain are frequently invoked but rarely defined with precision. Empirical investigation presupposes stable analytical categories; however, in the case of loss and gain, the categories themselves require theoretical refinement. This study therefore proceeds from the assumption that conceptual work is a necessary prerequisite for meaningful empirical research.

Furthermore, the translation of narrative media presents methodological challenges that complicate traditional empirical designs. Narrative media are multimodal artefacts in which linguistic elements interact with sound, image, rhythm, and interactivity. Isolating variables or constructing representative corpora across media types risks oversimplifying phenomena that are inherently complex and

context-dependent. A conceptual approach allows these complexities to be addressed without reducing them to quantifiable units. This emphasis on theoretical coherence, transparency of analytical procedure, and alignment between research aims and interpretive claims reflects established principles of qualitative research design in applied linguistics (Popescu, 2025).

3.3 Use of illustrative case material

Rather than treating examples as data points in a corpus, this study uses illustrative case material to demonstrate how theoretical distinctions manifest in concrete translational scenarios. The examples discussed in subsequent sections are selected on the basis of their analytical relevance to the concepts under examination, rather than their representativeness or frequency.

This approach follows a long-standing analytical practice in the humanities, where examples function heuristically rather than statistically. The purpose of such material is not to support claims of typicality but to expose underlying mechanisms, tensions, and strategic choices. In the present study, illustrative cases are used to show how different translational positions foreground or suppress particular dimensions of meaning, thereby producing asymmetrical effects of loss and gain.

Importantly, the study does not claim that the cases discussed are exemplary of all narrative media translation, nor that alternative cases would not yield different insights. Instead, the selected material serves to anchor theoretical discussion and to prevent abstraction from becoming detached from translational practice.

3.4 Analytical framework

The analytical framework employed in this study is derived from the theoretical synthesis outlined in Section 2. Loss and gain are treated as evaluative constructs emerging from translational strategies rather than as inherent textual properties. Analysis therefore focuses on identifying which semiotic dimensions are prioritised or marginalised by particular translational choices.

Four interrelated dimensions guide the analysis:

1. Linguistic dimension: lexical choices, naming conventions, and syntactic structures that shape semantic interpretation.
2. Cultural dimension: references, allusions, and symbolic associations tied to specific cultural contexts.
3. Aesthetic dimension: rhythm, sound patterns, stylistic consistency, and performability, particularly salient in musical texts.
4. Ideological dimension: assumptions about accessibility, audience competence, and the desirability of domestication or foreignisation.

By examining how translational strategies redistribute emphasis across these dimensions, the analysis moves beyond a binary assessment of success or failure. Loss and gain are instead understood as directional effects that reflect strategic priorities.

3.5 Position of the researcher

As a conceptual study, this research acknowledges the interpretive role of the analyst. Evaluations of loss and gain are not presented as objective measurements but as theoretically informed judgements grounded in explicit criteria. By making these criteria transparent, the study aims to reduce the risk of impressionistic or purely subjective evaluation.

The researcher's position is aligned with approaches that emphasise ethical and ideological accountability in translation. This orientation informs the critical stance adopted toward extensive domestication and underpins the argument for non-translation as a legitimate translational strategy. While alternative theoretical positions may yield different evaluations, the study does not claim neutrality; rather, it situates its analysis within a clearly articulated framework.

3.6 Scope and delimitation

The scope of the study is deliberately limited. It does not address audiovisual translation in film or television, nor does it engage in reception studies or professional workflow analysis. The focus on video games and music is motivated by their status as multimodal narrative forms in which translation choices have pronounced aesthetic and ideological consequences.

Similarly, the study does not attempt to assess translation quality in normative terms. Its aim is not to rank translations or to prescribe best practices, but to interrogate the assumptions underlying evaluative judgements of loss and gain. By delimiting its scope in this manner, the study seeks depth of analysis rather than breadth of coverage.

4 Results

4.1 Overview of analytical findings

The analysis of the illustrative material reveals that loss and gain in narrative media translation emerge not as balanced exchanges but as directional effects shaped by strategic translational choices. Across both video game localisation and song translation, the findings indicate that decisions oriented toward accessibility and fluency tend to foreground certain semiotic dimensions while marginalising others. Conversely, strategies that resist extensive adaptation—most notably non-translation—preserve forms of alterity that generate gains in cultural and aesthetic density, even where immediate comprehensibility is reduced.

More specifically, the analysis identifies three recurring patterns. First, translational strategies consistently redistribute meaning across semiotic dimensions rather than preserving or diminishing meaning in absolute terms. In video games, this redistribution primarily affects cultural and symbolic layers of meaning,

particularly through naming practices that shape world-building and player positioning. In music, redistribution operates most strongly at the level of phonology and performability, where semantic accessibility is frequently achieved at the expense of rhythmic and aesthetic coherence.

Second, the analysis demonstrates that non-translation functions not as a passive absence of translational effort but as an active and principled strategy. In both media, non-translation preserves dimensions of meaning that are particularly vulnerable to deformation under domestication-oriented regimes: cultural specificity in games and embodied musicality in songs. The gains associated with non-translation are therefore not compensatory but positional, reflecting a deliberate prioritisation of certain semiotic values over others.

Third, the findings indicate that losses commonly attributed to translation are often structurally produced by prevailing translational norms rather than imposed by linguistic necessity. Across the examples examined, alternative strategies—including retention of source-language forms or minimal intervention—would have been viable without undermining functionality. Loss, in these cases, emerges as an effect of normative choice rather than unavoidable constraint.

Rather than identifying discrete instances of success or failure, the analysis highlights recurring patterns in how translational priorities shape meaning in narrative media. These patterns are explored in detail below with reference to video game localisation practices and song translation under performative constraint.

4.2 Video games: Localisation, naming, and deformation

The localisation of narrative-driven video games provides particularly clear insight into how loss and gain are produced through strategic translational positioning. Because names in video games are not merely referential but function as world-building devices, translation decisions in this domain have consequences that extend beyond lexical choice. The examples discussed below, drawn from *The Witcher* series and *Noita*, illustrate two markedly different localisation regimes and the distinct configurations of loss and gain they generate.

In *The Witcher* series, which draws heavily on Polish language and Slavic folklore, naming conventions constitute a central site of translational intervention. Many character and creature names originate in culturally and linguistically specific source forms whose semantic and symbolic associations are not immediately transparent to non-Polish audiences. Localisation into English frequently involves adaptation to target-language phonotactics and naming norms, producing gains in pronounceability and immediate recognisability. These gains support narrative accessibility and facilitate immersion for players unfamiliar with the source culture.

However, this accessibility-oriented strategy also produces identifiable losses when examined through Berman's concept of deformation. One illustrative example is the translation of mythological creature names derived from Polish folklore. Source-language forms that encode cultural and etymological specificity are modified into target-language variants that retain a general fantasy resonance

while attenuating their cultural anchoring. This process exemplifies what Berman terms qualitative impoverishment: while the referential function of the name is preserved, its historical and cultural density is reduced. The loss incurred is therefore not semantic in a narrow sense but symbolic, affecting how the game world is positioned in relation to its cultural origins.

A similar tension is evident in the translation of personal names. The adaptation of culturally meaningful names to more familiar target-language equivalents generates gains in readability and tonal coherence for the target audience, yet simultaneously severs direct connections to the source culture. From a domestication-oriented perspective, such substitutions are justified by considerations of usability and player engagement. From an ethical perspective informed by Berman, they can be understood as deforming tendencies that prioritise assimilation over encounter. Loss, in this context, is structurally produced by the localisation regime rather than arising from translational inadequacy.

This dynamic can be illustrated more concretely through specific naming choices in *The Witcher*. One frequently discussed example is the Polish folkloric creature *leszy*, derived from *las* ('forest') and associated in Slavic mythology with woodland spirits that are ambivalent rather than purely malevolent. In the English localisation, this name is rendered as *Leshen*, a form that preserves superficial phonological resemblance but abandons the transparent morphological link to the forest. While *Leshen* functions effectively as a fantasy creature name for English-speaking audiences, the semantic motivation encoded in the original form is no longer recoverable. What is lost is not referential clarity but etymological depth: the name's embedded relationship to a specific folkloric tradition is replaced by a generic fantasy signifier.

From a Bermanian perspective, this transformation exemplifies qualitative impoverishment. The name is neither mistranslated nor omitted; rather, it is rationalised into a form that conforms to target-language genre expectations. The gain achieved—ease of pronunciation and immediate genre recognisability—comes at the cost of cultural density. Essentially, this cost is not unavoidable. Alternative strategies, such as retaining *leszy* unchanged or providing minimal contextualisation, would have preserved the foreign term without impeding gameplay or narrative comprehension. The choice of *Leshen* therefore reflects a preference for domestication rather than a response to insurmountable linguistic constraint.

An even clearer case of unnecessary domestication can be found in the treatment of the bard character *Jaskier*. In Polish, *jaskier* denotes a buttercup, a plant whose connotations include brightness and frivolity, aligning closely with the character's narrative role. The English localisation renders the name as *Dandelion*, substituting one flower name for another. While this choice preserves a superficial semantic category, it constitutes a full cultural substitution rather than a translation. The specific associations of *jaskier* are replaced by those of *dandelion*, a plant embedded in Anglophone cultural symbolism and lexical familiarity.

What makes this case particularly revealing is that alternative translational decisions have demonstrably been viable. In the television adaptation of *The*

Witcher, the character is referred to as *Jaskier* even in English-language dialogue, indicating that audiences are capable of accommodating the foreign name without loss of narrative intelligibility. This contrast undermines arguments that domestication was necessary for accessibility. Instead, it suggests that the game localisation opted for substitution as a default strategy, consistent with a broader domestication-oriented regime.

Overall, these micro-analyses illustrate how loss and gain operate at the level of individual naming choices. In both cases, the gains achieved through domestication—familiarity, pronounceability, genre conformity—are relatively modest, while the losses incurred involve the erasure of culturally specific meaning that could have been retained at minimal cost. These examples reinforce the broader argument advanced in this article: loss in translation is often structurally produced by translational norms rather than dictated by linguistic necessity, and non-translation or minimal intervention can, in certain contexts, constitute a more ethically and aesthetically defensible strategy.

In contrast, *Noita* exemplifies a radically different approach. Developed originally in a Finnish context, the game systematically retains Finnish common nouns as proper names for characters, enemies, and objects, even in its English-language interface. These forms are presented without explanatory glossing, placing non-Finnish-speaking players in direct contact with linguistic alterity. Rather than adapting names to target-language expectations, *Noita* foregrounds their foreignness as a constitutive element of the game's aesthetic.

This strategy of non-translation redistributes loss and gain in a fundamentally different manner. Immediate semantic transparency is reduced, and players unfamiliar with Finnish cannot readily infer denotative meanings from the names alone. Yet this reduction is accompanied by gains in cultural specificity and semiotic coherence. The consistent use of Finnish forms contributes to a linguistically unified game world and reinforces its distinct identity. The player is positioned not as a fully accommodated consumer but as an interpreter navigating an unfamiliar semiotic environment.

From a Bermanian perspective, *Noita* can be seen as resisting deformation by refusing rationalisation and clarification. Rather than smoothing over linguistic difference, the game preserves it, allowing alterity to remain visible within the translated text. Loss and gain are thus not balanced against one another but redistributed: gains in accessibility are relinquished in favour of gains in cultural integrity and aesthetic consistency. Importantly, this strategy does not eliminate meaning but relocates it, encouraging exploratory and interpretive engagement.

These two cases demonstrate that localisation practices are not merely technical responses to linguistic difference but ethically and ideologically charged strategies. *The Witcher* and *Noita* do not represent better or worse translations in absolute terms; rather, they instantiate different priorities regarding what translation should preserve and what it may transform. Loss and gain emerge accordingly as directional effects shaped by localisation regimes rather than as accidental by-products of linguistic transfer.

4.3 Music: Performability and phonological constraint

The translation of song lyrics introduces a distinct configuration of loss and gain, shaped less by cultural substitution than by phonological and performative constraints. Unlike prose or dialogue, song lyrics must align with pre-existing melodic, rhythmic, and metric structures. As a result, linguistic transfer is constrained not only by semantic considerations but also by syllable count, stress patterns, phonotactic compatibility, and the physical requirements of vocal performance.

In the case of *Ievan Polkka*, translation from Finnish into English provides a particularly clear illustration of how these constraints operate. Finnish is an agglutinative language characterised by relatively consistent stress placement on the initial syllable and by syllable structures that allow for temporal flexibility in sung performance. These properties enable Finnish lyrics to accommodate elongation and rhythmic variation without disrupting intelligibility or naturalness. In the original Finnish lyrics, long vowel sequences and geminated consonants can be sustained or compressed in performance while remaining phonologically acceptable within the language system.

When these lyrics are rendered into English, however, the structural affordances that support this flexibility are largely absent. English relies more heavily on variable stress patterns and reduced vowels, and it permits less elastic manipulation of syllable length without sounding marked or artificial. As a consequence, English translations that aim to preserve semantic content often require the forced elongation of stressed syllables or the redistribution of stress in ways that conflict with natural speech patterns. This produces a perceptible shift in performative quality, even where propositional meaning is retained.

This dynamic can be observed in the opening lines of the song, where the Finnish original employs evenly distributed syllables that align seamlessly with the polka rhythm. In the English version, the need to maintain semantic equivalence results in monosyllabic or diphthong-heavy words being stretched to fit the melodic line. While such stretching is technically feasible, it introduces a sense of strain that alters the aesthetic character of the performance. The loss incurred here is therefore not primarily semantic but phonological and rhythmic, affecting how the song is embodied in performance.

The problem is compounded in passages that rely on onomatopoeia and sound symbolism. In the Finnish version of *Ievan Polkka*, sequences of nonsensical or semi-lexical syllables function rhythmically rather than referentially, evoking the physical movement of dance rather than conveying propositional content. These sequences are deeply embedded in the phonotactic logic of Finnish and resist direct translation. In English renditions, such passages are frequently omitted, simplified, or partially translated, breaking the sonic continuity of the original. The resulting loss is aesthetic and experiential, as a key component of the song's performative texture is diminished.

These observations underscore the asymmetry of loss and gain in song translation. Gains in semantic accessibility for non-Finnish-speaking audiences are achieved through losses in rhythmic naturalness, phonological coherence, and embodied musicality. Attempts to preserve both dimensions simultaneously encounter structural limits imposed by language typology. From this perspective, loss is not the result of translational failure but a consequence of competing semiotic priorities.

An alternative strategy emerges in practices that avoid full lyrical translation altogether. Non-translation, partial translation, or the retention of source-language lyrics in performance contexts can be understood as responses to the constraints outlined above. By preserving the original phonological structure, such strategies prioritise performative integrity over propositional transparency. While this choice limits semantic accessibility, it generates gains in aesthetic coherence and respects the embodied nature of musical meaning.

A related approach can be observed in the production of parallel language versions of songs, as exemplified by Swedish and English renditions of historically themed material by the band Sabaton. Rather than forcing a single translated version to reconcile incompatible phonological and semantic demands, the existence of parallel versions allows each language to realise the narrative content according to its own rhythmic and phonetic affordances. In this model, loss and gain are managed through differentiation rather than compensation: semantic content is broadly maintained across versions, while language-specific musicality is preserved within each.

This strategy highlights a crucial point for the present discussion. Loss and gain in song translation cannot be evaluated independently of performability. Where music is concerned, meaning is not reducible to lexical content but is distributed across sound, rhythm, and bodily articulation. Translation strategies that privilege semantic equivalence at the expense of these dimensions risk producing texts that are linguistically accurate but aesthetically diminished. Conversely, strategies that accept semantic opacity may preserve the experiential core of the musical work.

4.4 Synthesis across media

Across both video games and music, the analyses presented in this section indicate that loss and gain are not best understood as compensatory exchanges but as outcomes of strategic prioritisation under medium-specific constraints. While the material conditions of these media differ substantially, the translational dynamics observed reveal structurally similar patterns in how meaning is redistributed rather than preserved or diminished in absolute terms.

In video game localisation, translational prioritisation operates primarily at the level of world-building and narrative accessibility. Naming strategies in *The Witcher* illustrate how domestication foregrounds immediate intelligibility and genre conformity while marginalising culturally embedded meaning. In contrast, *Noita* demonstrates how non-translation can preserve linguistic alterity and reinforce the

coherence of a fictional world by positioning the player as an interpreter rather than a fully accommodated consumer. In both cases, loss and gain are shaped by decisions about how much cultural opacity a localisation regime is willing to tolerate.

In music translation, prioritisation takes a different form but yields analogous effects. Here, the central constraint is performability: phonological structure, rhythmic alignment, and embodied vocal production impose limits on what can be transferred without aesthetic degradation. The analysis of *Ievan Polkka* shows that semantic accessibility for non-source-language audiences is often achieved at the expense of phonological fluidity and rhythmic naturalness. Parallel-language practices, such as those observed in Sabaton's multilingual repertoire, respond to these constraints not by compensating losses within a single translation but by redistributing meaning across distinct linguistic instantiations.

Overall, these cases suggest that non-translation functions as a cross-media strategy whose effects vary according to the semiotic priorities of the medium. In video games, non-translation foregrounds epistemic difference and cultural specificity; in music, it preserves performative and aesthetic integrity. What unites these applications is a refusal to treat accessibility as the sole or dominant measure of translational success.

This synthesis reinforces the central claim of the article: loss and gain are evaluative constructs that reveal the ideological and ethical commitments embedded in translational practice. Rather than asking how losses might be compensated, a more productive analytical question concerns which dimensions of meaning are privileged, which are marginalised, and why. The following discussion builds on this cross-media perspective to consider the broader theoretical implications of treating non-translation as a legitimate and productive translational strategy.

5 Discussion

The analyses presented in Section 4 invite a reconsideration of how loss and gain are conceptualised and evaluated in the translation of narrative media. Rather than functioning as neutral descriptors of translational outcome, loss and gain emerge as evaluative constructs that index strategic priorities and underlying ideological commitments. Across both video games and music, the findings indicate that translation choices redistribute semiotic emphasis rather than preserving or diminishing meaning in absolute terms.

A central implication of the analyses presented in Section 4, across both video game localisation and song translation, is that loss and gain are asymmetrical. Strategies oriented toward domestication and accessibility tend to foreground semantic clarity and user convenience while marginalising cultural specificity, historical situatedness, and aesthetic texture. Conversely, strategies that resist adaptation, including deliberate non-translation, preserve alterity and semiotic density at the expense of immediate comprehensibility. Neither orientation can be

understood as intrinsically superior; rather, each reflects a particular valuation of what translation ought to achieve.

From a Bermanian perspective, this asymmetry between accessibility-oriented gains and culturally produced losses can be understood in terms of deformation. Practices commonly justified as improvements—such as clarification, substitution, or explanatory expansion—systematically reshape the source text in accordance with target-language norms. In narrative media localisation, these tendencies are often intensified by commercial imperatives and assumptions about audience tolerance. The result is not merely a technical transformation but an ethical positioning that privileges assimilation over encounter. Loss, in this sense, is produced structurally rather than accidentally.

The discussion of music translation further reinforces the argument about asymmetrical prioritisation by demonstrating that not all dimensions of meaning are equally negotiable. In song translation, performability constraints impose limits on semantic transfer, making attempts at full equivalence both impractical and aesthetically counterproductive. Here, the retention of original-language lyrics—or the production of parallel language versions rather than integrated translations—can be understood as an implicit recognition of these limits. Such practices do not eliminate loss but redirect it, prioritising phonological and rhythmic integrity over propositional transparency.

This dynamic of redistributing meaning across semiotic dimensions is also evident in multilingual or dual-version practices, such as those observed in Swedish and English renditions of historically themed songs by the band Sabaton. The coexistence of parallel language versions allows different semiotic dimensions to be foregrounded in different linguistic contexts, rather than forcing a single translation to carry incompatible demands. While semantic content remains broadly consistent across versions, linguistic and cultural nuances are redistributed rather than standardised. This strategy illustrates how loss and gain can be managed through differentiation rather than compensation, reinforcing the argument that translation outcomes are shaped by strategic positioning rather than by an abstract balance of equivalence.

It is important to note that the scope of these conceptual claims is intentionally limited. The analysis does not aim to establish generalisable patterns across all forms of narrative media, nor does it account for reception dynamics or production workflows that may further condition translational outcomes. The examples discussed are illustrative rather than representative, and alternative cases may yield different configurations of loss and gain. This delimitation is not a methodological shortcoming but a consequence of the study's conceptual orientation, which prioritises theoretical clarification over empirical exhaustiveness.

Overall, these observations about asymmetry, prioritisation, and deformation challenge the persistence of loss and gain as quasi-quantitative metaphors within translation discourse. Treating loss as failure and gain as compensation obscures the ethical and ideological dimensions of translational choice. A more productive approach, as suggested by the present analysis, is to

examine how translation strategies prioritise certain forms of meaning while marginalising others, and to evaluate these priorities in light of the cultural and aesthetic stakes of the translated work.

6 Conclusion

This article has argued for a reconceptualisation of loss and gain in the translation of narrative media. Rather than treating them as symmetrical or compensatory phenomena, it has proposed understanding them as directional effects produced by strategic translational positioning. Translation does not simply fail or succeed in preserving meaning; it redistributes meaning across semiotic dimensions, foregrounding certain values while marginalising others.

By situating this argument within established translation-theoretical debates, the article has shown that loss is often structurally produced by domestication-oriented regimes rather than arising from translational failure or linguistic limitation. Conversely, gain need not be equated with accessibility, fluency, or user comfort alone. In multimodal narrative contexts, gain may reside in the preservation of alterity, semiotic density, and aesthetic integrity—dimensions that are particularly vulnerable to erasure under prevailing localisation norms.

The analysis of video game localisation and song translation demonstrates how these dynamics operate under different semiotic constraints. In video games, naming and localisation practices shape world-building and player positioning, revealing how domestication redistributes cultural meaning in ways that are often taken for granted. In music, phonological and performative constraints expose the limits of semantic transfer and foreground the embodied nature of musical meaning. Across both media, non-translation emerges not as an absence of translational effort, but as a deliberate strategy that preserves forms of meaning otherwise prone to deformation.

Conceptualising non-translation as a legitimate translational strategy has broader implications for how translational value is assessed. If loss and gain are understood as effects of prioritisation rather than as errors to be corrected or balances to be restored, evaluative discourse can move beyond compensatory logic. This shift allows greater attention to the ethical and ideological dimensions of translation, particularly in globalised media environments where accessibility is frequently treated as a default good.

While the scope of this study is deliberately limited and does not aim at empirical generalisation, its contribution lies in refining the conceptual vocabulary through which translational outcomes are described and judged. By reframing loss and gain as context-dependent and directional, the article opens space for further research into how translators, institutions, and audiences negotiate cultural visibility, aesthetic experience, and ethical responsibility in multimodal narrative translation.

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