

Translating Virality: Cross-Cultural Localisation of US Small Business TikTok Content for Russian-Speaking Audiences

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Abstract

TikTok has evolved from a youth entertainment app into a valuable tool for small business promotion. The platform's recommendation algorithm favours authentic and engaging content, and language choices often determine whether a video gains traction. This study examines the key linguistic strategies used in viral English-language TikTok content created by small businesses, and explores the translation challenges that emerge when adapting such content for Russian-speaking audiences. The research draws on an empirical analysis of 15 viral videos from five US small business accounts. The corpus includes over 3,200 words of transcribed speech, on-screen captions, and multimodal elements. The analysis focuses on lexical, syntactic, and multimodal patterns that contribute to viewer engagement. Several findings stand out: emotional interjections serve as trust-building devices; six recurring hook types shape viral narratives; and non-verbal or community-driven calls to action tend to outperform direct sales pitches. A comparative look at US and Russian TikTok conventions reveals notable differences. US hooks tend to be more imperative and direct, while Russian hooks are more narrative and situational. Russian content generally features more slang and informal register, and Russian calls to action are noticeably softer and less directive than their American counterparts. These observations are interpreted through Hall's high-context/low-context framework and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The study argues that localising viral content is not a matter of literal translation but rather a form of cross-cultural mediation where globalised templates are adapted for Russian-speaking audiences while preserving cultural identity. Practical outputs include a pre-translation analysis algorithm, a checklist for translators, and a glossary of viral English phrases with suggested Russian equivalents.

Keywords: TikTok, viral content, cross-cultural communication

Introduction

The rapid globalisation of social media has changed how content is created, shared, and consumed across linguistic and cultural boundaries. TikTok, launched in 2016, has become one of the world's most influential platforms, with over 1 billion active users worldwide (Dean, 2025). Unlike traditional social media platforms that emphasise social connections, TikTok's algorithm prioritises engagement metrics: watch time, likes, comments, shares, and replays. This algorithmic logic has given rise to a new linguistic environment where content produced in one cultural context often reaches audiences speaking entirely different languages. This digital environment creates new challenges for cross-cultural communication, where globalised English-language templates must be adapted for local audiences with different cultural norms. Research on social media marketing



suggests that users develop sophisticated ad-avoidance behaviours, scrolling past content that feels overly promotional or intrusive (Pahari et al., 2024).

However, from the perspective of linguistic support for international business, one critical issue remains underexplored. When a company wants to adapt its successful viral content for a foreign market – say, from the USA to Russia – direct translation often falls short. Humour, cultural references, and speech patterns do not always travel well across languages. This creates a need for localisation strategies designed specifically for short-form video content, a need that current translation theory has yet to fully address. This study addresses this gap by examining the linguistic strategies used in viral English-language TikTok content produced by small businesses, and by analysing the challenges of adapting globalised English templates into the Russian mother tongue – a process that requires preserving cultural identity and multilingual practices in digital spaces. The study draws on Hall's (1976) high-context/low-context framework and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to interpret cross-cultural differences in communication styles observed on the platform.

Research objectives

The study is structured around four key objectives. First, it aims to identify and classify the lexical, syntactic, and multimodal features that characterise viral TikTok videos produced by US small businesses. Second, it seeks to compare the linguistic mechanisms at work in viral content on US and Russian TikTok, with particular attention to cross-cultural differences. Third, it analyses the translation difficulties that arise from slang, cultural references, and platform-specific conventions. Finally, it develops practical tools for linguists working on cross-cultural localisation of business content, with a focus on small business TikTok accounts.

Scope of the research

This study examines viral TikTok content produced by small businesses in the United States. Five accounts were selected with close attention to several criteria: each had at least one video exceeding 500,000 views, the content contained substantial spoken or written text, and the accounts represented different product niches. The analysis looks at lexical variables (emotional interjections, slang, branded keywords), syntactic variables (hook types, narrative structures, calls to action), and multimodal variables (how spoken text, on-screen captions, and sound interact). The material covers content published between 2023 and 2025, a period when TikTok became increasingly important for business promotion.

Literature Review

Recent linguistic research has increasingly focused on understanding viral language as a distinct multimodal phenomenon. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2025) offer the first book-length study of internet memes as a linguistic phenomenon, proposing a 'grammar of memes' as a new framework for approaching multimodal genres. They argue that memes generate meaning through specific patterns that cut across image and text, governed by rules of composition and interpretation that enable their replication and adaptation. Importantly, their model extends to platform-specific formats, including TikTok, where the combination of audio and video opens up new possibilities for memetic expression. Zappavigna (2018) builds on this foundation by identifying three conditions that make content go viral: replicability, relevance, and resonance. Aleksic (2025) offers empirical support for these

mechanisms, drawing on his own experience as a linguist and TikTok creator (@etymologynerd). He shows how algorithms accelerate the spread of new expressions, turning them into viral memes at remarkable speed. One striking example is the word 'rizz', which went from niche internet slang to Oxford Word of the Year within a single year — a process that would likely have taken a decade without algorithmic amplification (Aleksic, 2025).

Small businesses on TikTok face a particular tension: they need to appear authentic while also promoting their products. Research suggests that successful accounts tend to adopt a conversational style rather than a polished marketing voice (Fairclough, 1992). This style fits what Horton and Wohl (1956) described as the parasocial register — a mode of communication that creates a sense of intimacy and personal connection between creator and viewer, even though the interaction is not genuine face-to-face contact. The parasocial register typically involves synthetic personalisation (frequent use of first- and second-person pronouns), interactivity markers (rhetorical questions), spontaneity cues (hesitations, repetitions), and shared experience framing (expressions of common ground).

More recent work has refined this concept. Harger (2024) adapts the parasocial framework to the TikTok context, introducing the notion of transparasocial relationships – a more interactive form of engagement in which creators and audiences co-construct meaning through comments, duets, and direct communication. Based on interviews with 21 TikTok creators, Harger shows that the platform's affordances allow creators to manage their identities in authentic ways, fostering communication satisfaction and building healthy audience relationships. This dynamic is especially relevant for small businesses, where audience engagement directly influences brand trust and commercial outcomes. In our corpus, all five accounts draw on these strategies, though to varying degrees.

A key distinction underpinning this study is that between translation and localisation. While translation is conventionally understood as the transfer of meaning with an emphasis on semantic equivalence, localisation involves a broader set of adjustments aimed at making content culturally and functionally appropriate for a specific market. When it comes to viral TikTok content, localisation is not just helpful – it is essential. Following Skopos theory (Reiß & Vermeer, 1984; Nord, 2018), which maintains that translation is shaped by its purpose, we argue that localising viral content is not simply about conveying information. Rather, it is about generating a communicative effect – engagement, emotion, and spread. This aligns with Nida's (1964) notion of functional equivalence, later developed by pragmatics scholars: the aim is to produce a target text that evokes a response similar to that of the original.

Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context cultures has long served as a reference point for understanding cross-cultural differences in communication. More recent scholarship, however, has complicated this picture. Piller (2025) argues that cultural identity, difference, and similarity are not fixed properties of national groups but are discursively constructed through language use and power relations. Drawing on sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, she shows that communication across cultures needs to be understood in terms of multilingual practices, access to linguistic resources, and the differing prestige of language varieties – insights that are particularly relevant when comparing viral content on US and Russian TikTok.



Research methodology

This study examines five U.S.-based small business accounts that have achieved notable viral success on TikTok. Several considerations guided the selection process: each account belongs to a small enterprise with a clear product or service; each had at least one video exceeding 500,000 views; the content included substantial spoken or written language; the accounts represent different product categories; and the videos were publicly available with complete transcripts. The selected accounts are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected Accounts for Analysis

Account	Niche	Key Viral Video Views	Business Outcome
@rashadjonesbbq	BBQ restaurant	9.2M	150% sales increase
@minibrands	Miniature collectibles	6M	6B+ hashtag views
@shopclubcoastal	Handmade jewellery	80.5M	\$1M in 6 months
@davidspov_	Social entrepreneurship	37.7M	2,200+ orders
@behavefoods	Healthy candy	4.6M	2,000 Target stores

Despite their diverse niches, the five accounts rely on a highly consistent set of communicative strategies. The observed link between viral reach and tangible commercial outcomes – ranging from a 150% sales increase to distribution in 2,000 retail stores – suggests that viral language on TikTok functions as an active driver of business performance, rather than a mere metric of popularity.

The decision to work with 15 videos (three per account) was pragmatic rather than statistically driven. For each of the five accounts, we selected the three most-viewed videos posted between 2023 and 2025 that contained at least 30 seconds of spoken language or visible on-screen text. This threshold ensured that the material was rich enough for linguistic analysis while excluding short clips that rely primarily on music or visual gags. The three-video limit per account was set after a pilot review of 40-50 videos per channel: beyond the third most-viewed clip, the linguistic patterns tended to repeat, suggesting that additional videos would add volume but little analytical depth. The final corpus of 15 videos thus captures the core communicative repertoire of each creator without becoming unwieldy.

The analysis draws on 15 video transcripts, three from each account. The full corpus contains roughly 3,200 words of spoken text, along with on-screen captions and video descriptions. We used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. We collected viral videos from each account through continuous and selective sampling. The analysis then proceeded along several lines: discourse analysis, following Zappavigna (2018), to examine lexical choices, syntactic structures, and pragmatic functions; contextual analysis, following Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), to examine linguistic units in their multimodal environment; comparative analysis, to compare English scripts with proposed Russian localisations; pre-translation analysis, following Brandes and Provotorov (2003) and Ayupova (2014), to assess each script's communicative purpose, target audience, and memetic potential; and cross-cultural comparison, to examine how US viral strategies relate to patterns observed in Russian-language TikTok. The comparative analysis of translation and localisation strategies is grounded in Skopos theory (Nord, 2018; Reiß & Vermeer, 1984), which holds that translation is shaped by its communicative purpose. This framework guides our assessment of how English viral scripts are adapted for Russian-speaking audiences, with particular attention to whether the adapted versions preserve the original's engagement function.



Linguistic features were coded using a scheme adapted from Zappavigna (2018) and Aleksic (2025), tailored to the TikTok format. The scheme covered three levels: lexical (emotional interjections, slang, branded keywords), syntactic (hook type, narrative arc, call-to-action format), and multimodal (interaction between speech, captions, and sound). To ensure analytical consistency, five randomly selected videos (33% of the corpus) were re-coded by the same researcher after a two-week interval. Minor discrepancies, primarily concerning borderline slang classifications, were resolved by refining the codebook definitions.

For the comparative analysis, Russian TikTok conventions were identified through expert observation of viral content from comparable Russian small business accounts. Rather than constructing a parallel formal corpus, this approach relies on direct analysis of hook typologies, register, and call-to-action strategies. This aligns with standard practice in translation studies, where target-culture norms are often established through professional expertise rather than matched empirical datasets.

Research results

Lexical Analysis

Across all accounts, emotional interjections emerge as important trust-building devices. Expressions like "Man...", "Oh my god", and "Wait..." signal spontaneity and give the impression of unscripted experience. Phrases such as "I'm obsessed" and "I can't even" invite viewers to share in the creator's delight, while expressions like "That's not right" or "That's a crime" turn observations into persuasive calls for action. Importantly, virality does not require extensive slang. The BBQ and POV accounts, for instance, deliberately avoid Gen Z slang to preserve a tone of sincerity and reliability. Their language tends to be colloquial rather than trendy – contractions like "what'd" and "that's", dialectal features, and direct address ("watch this") are more typical. This finding suggests that, in certain market niches, authenticity appears to matter more than being up to date with the latest slang.

Syntactic Analysis

The syntactic analysis points to recurring structural patterns across the corpus. The most successful hooks tend to combine multiple layers and draw on a limited set of templates. Table 2 summarises the six hook types we identified.

Table 2: Typology of Viral Hooks

Hook Type	Formula	Example	Account
<i>Imperative + visual</i>	[Command] + [unexpected visual]	"Watch this." + guest praising brisket	BBQ
<i>Curiosity question</i>	[Question about process]	"How are sugar-free gummies ACTUALLY made?"	Behave
<i>Emotional shock</i>	[Unexpected confession]	"We lost the lawsuit."	Clubcoastal
<i>Empathy hook</i>	[Problem + injustice framing]	"POV: zero customers"	Davidspov
<i>Scale contrast</i>	[Mini object + finger + ASMR]	Visual of tiny object + crinkling sound	Minibrands
<i>Personal story</i>	[Family member + problem]	"I started this for my dad"	Behave

The six hook types identified represent the dominant patterns observed in our corpus. Three of these six – the curiosity question, the emotional shock, and the personal story – hinge on narrative disclosure rather than visual impact. This pattern points to the primacy of linguistic framing over production quality in driving early engagement.

All the videos in our sample follow a similar narrative structure: Hook (0-3 seconds) → Problem or Context (3-10 seconds) → Discovery or Payoff (10-20 seconds) → Call to Action (final 2-5 seconds). Another notable finding is that the most effective CTAs are often non-verbal or community-oriented. Direct sales pitches like "Link in bio" or "Shop now" tend to work only after the viewer's trust has been built through storytelling.

Multimodal Analysis

Russian text typically requires 15-20% more visual space on screen than English to convey the same meaning. This expansion is largely due to specific morphological features, such as case endings, gender agreement, and the frequent use of prepositions. For instance, the concise English phrase "No sugar" (8 characters) translates to «Без сахара» ([bis 'saxərə], 'without sugar') (10 characters), representing a 25% increase in length. In the highly constrained environment of TikTok captions, where readability and timing are critical, this linguistic expansion forces the localiser to carefully balance semantic accuracy with visual brevity, often requiring syntactic compression.

Comparative Analysis: US vs Russian TikTok Conventions

A comparison of US and Russian TikTok conventions reveals systematic differences, which are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Comparative Analysis: US vs Russian TikTok Conventions

Dimension	US TikTok	Russian TikTok
<i>Hook types</i>	Imperative/interrogative: "Watch this", "How are... made?"	Narrative/situational: «А вы знали...», «Ситуация...»
<i>Slang/Register</i>	Variable; authenticity accounts avoid slang	Higher slang use overall; more colloquial particles («ну», «типа», «короче»)
<i>CTAs</i>	Direct: "Link in bio", "Shop now"	Soft: «Ссылка в закрепе», «Пишите в комменты»
<i>Humour</i>	Self-deprecation, punchlines	Situational irony, black humour
<i>Politeness</i>	Positive politeness (solidarity)	Negative politeness (autonomy)
<i>Cultural references</i>	Western pop culture, individualistic	Soviet nostalgia, collectivist

These observations are based on a comparison with Russian business TikTok accounts from the same period (2023–2025). The distinctions outlined in Table 3 reveal different communicative preferences. American TikTok conventions closely reflect Hall's (1976) low-context communication: meaning is stated explicitly, directives are straightforward, and the creator's individuality takes precedence. Russian content, however, is rooted in a high-context framework. In this environment, meaning is frequently implied, directives are mitigated by colloquial particles and question tags, and shared experience is valued over individual assertion.

This dynamic finds further support in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory. US videos typically employ positive politeness strategies to foster solidarity, whereas Russian equivalents lean toward negative politeness, prioritising the viewer’s autonomy. Consequently, a literal translation of an American hook often registers as overly aggressive or pragmatically inappropriate for a Russian audience. Successful localisation therefore demands more than mere lexical substitution; it requires a complete recalibration of the pragmatic stance.

Translation Difficulties: Case Examples

Two examples illustrate the translation challenges we encountered. The first comes from @davids pov_ (POV format). The original script reads: "How's it going? What do you make? ... Wait, this jerky is incredible. And you've had no customers today? That's not right. I'm posting this." Our proposed Russian version is: «Привет! А что у вас тут? ... Слушайте, это невероятно вкусно. И у вас за весь день ни одного клиента? Так нельзя. Я сниму видео, ладно?». In this case, we simplified the greeting to «Привет» ([prʲiˈvʲet], 'hello') as a functional substitute, rendered the indignation as «Так нельзя» ([tak nʲɪlˈzʲɪa], 'that's not right / one cannot do that') to preserve the tone of moral disapproval, and softened the final promise with a question tag («ладно?» [ˈladnə], 'okay?') to reduce any sense of threat. The full Russian version can be translated back as: "Hello! And what do you have here? ... Listen, this is incredibly tasty. And you haven't had a single customer all day? That's not right. I'll film this, okay?"

The second example comes from @behavefoods, a founder story: "I started this candy brand for my dad. He's diabetic. He couldn't find a single gummy he could eat. Everything had sugar or sugar alcohols that upset his stomach." Our Russian version is: «Я сделала эти конфеты для папы. У него диабет. Он очень хотел сладкого, но всё, что пробовал, было с сахаром или с подсластителями – у папы болел живот.» Here, we simplified the brand reference from "candy brand" to «конфеты» ([kənˈfʲetʲi], 'candies') to make it sound warmer, and replaced the technical term "sugar alcohols" with «подсластители» ([pədsleˈstʲitʲɪlʲɪ], 'sweeteners') for clarity. The full Russian version can be translated back as: "I made these candies for my dad. He has diabetes. He really wanted something sweet, but everything he tried had sugar or sweeteners that upset his stomach."

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the linguistic strategies used in viral TikTok content created by US small businesses, and to explore the translation challenges that come up when adapting such content for Russian-speaking audiences. Our findings show that these strategies are not random – they follow clear patterns that can be classified and analysed. The concepts of replicability, relevance, and resonance, as proposed by Zappavigna (2018), offer a helpful lens for understanding why certain expressions and structural choices gain traction. The distinction between translation and localisation, grounded in Skopos theory (Nord, 2018), proves useful in practice for thinking about how to adapt content effectively.

Our comparison of US and Russian TikTok conventions brought to light systematic differences that align with Hall’s (1976) high-context/low-context framework and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory. US hooks tend to be more direct and imperative, whereas Russian hooks lean towards narrative and situational framing. Russian content generally includes more slang and a more informal register, and Russian CTAs are consistently softer and less commanding than their US equivalents. These observations have



concrete implications for translators and linguists working on social media localisation: success depends not only on knowing the target language, but also on understanding platform-specific norms, humour, and communication styles. For small business owners, this study suggests that working with professional linguists who understand these nuances may be more effective than relying on machine translation.

Recommendations

Before attempting to localise viral content, translators should carry out a pre-translation analysis that identifies culture-specific items, pragmatic markers, and memetic structures. For small business owners, the evidence points in a clear direction: working with professional linguists who understand platform-specific conventions tends to yield better results than relying on machine translation. Translation curricula, too, could benefit from dedicated modules on cross-cultural localisation of short-form video. Several avenues for future work suggest themselves. Extending the analysis to a larger corpus would allow statistical work on frequency patterns, while user testing with Russian-speaking audiences could reveal how well the proposed localisation solutions perform in practice. Comparing other language pairs – English-Spanish or English-Chinese, for instance – would show whether the patterns identified here are language-specific or more widely shared. Finally, tracking how TikTok conventions evolve as the platform's demographics and algorithms shift offers a rich area for longitudinal study.

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