CULTURAL UNTRANSLATABILITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH LITERARY TEXTS

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Abstract: Cultural untranslatability presents a formidable challenge in translation studies, particularly when transferring idiomatic expressions and phraseological units between linguistically and culturally distant languages such as Uzbek and English. This study investigates the phenomena of semantic loss, compensation, and cultural adaptation in the translation of idioms within Uzbek-English literary corpora. Utilizing a comparative corpus-based methodology, this research analyzes source texts from prominent Uzbek literary works and their corresponding English translations. The quantitative and qualitative findings reveal that while absolute untranslatability is rare, functional equivalence often requires creative reallocation of stylistic devices, leading to varying degrees of pragmatic and cultural shifts. The results emphasize the necessity of cognitive-pragmatic frameworks in literary translation to mitigate information loss and preserve aesthetic nuance.
Keywords: Cultural untranslatability, idiomatic expressions, phraseological units, Uzbek-English translation, literary translation, corpus linguistics, translational loss.

Introduction

The phenomenon of untranslatability lies at the intersection of linguistics, semiotics, and cultural anthropology. Idioms and phraseological units represent the cognitive and cultural residue of a speech community, encasing unique historical experiences, national realia, and metaphorical conceptualizations. When translating literary texts between non-related language families—such as Turkic (Uzbek) and Germanic (English)—the structural, semantic, and cultural asymmetries become exceptionally pronounced.

In translation theory, untranslatability is conventionally divided into two primary dimensions: linguistic and cultural [1]. Linguistic untranslatability arises when a target language lacks a formal or structural counterpart for a source language feature. Cultural untranslatability, conversely, emerges when a situational feature functional in the source culture is entirely absent from the target culture's situational spectrum [2]. Idioms frequently exemplify cultural untranslatability because their figurative meanings are rarely the sum of their individual lexical components, relying instead on shared socio-cultural knowledge.

The objective of this research is to evaluate how idiomatic expressions in Uzbek prose are transformed, preserved, or lost when rendered into English. By analyzing an Uzbek-English parallel literary corpus, this study identifies the primary strategies deployed by translators, quantifies the incidence of semantic loss, and analyzes the mechanisms of dynamic equivalence utilized to overcome cultural barriers.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative corpus analysis and qualitative comparative textual analysis. The empirical foundation of this study consists of a parallel corpus composed of selected excerpts from classic Uzbek prose—specifically Abdullah Qodiriy’s O'tkan Kunlar ("Days Gone By") and Cho'lpon’s Kecha va

Kunduz ("Night and Day")—alongside their published English translations. The selected dataset yields a parallel corpus of approximately 120,000 words.

The research protocol followed three distinct analytical phases:

- **Extraction and Categorization:** Phraseological units and idiomatic expressions were systematically identified in the source texts using structural and semantic criteria. These units were categorized according to V.V. Vinogradov's classical typology of phraseological units (phraseological fusions, unities, and combinations) as adapted for Turkic linguistics [3].
- **Alignment and Strategy Identification:** Each extracted source idiom was paired with its corresponding target rendition in the English corpus. Translation techniques were classified into four main categories based on Mona Baker's taxonomy: translation by an idiom of similar meaning and form, translation by an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form, translation by paraphrase, and translation by omission [4].
- **Evaluation of Loss and Compensation:** Quantitative measures were applied to track the frequency of each strategy, while qualitative analysis evaluated the pragmatic and aesthetic consequences of the translation choices.

Results

The empirical analysis of 340 identified idiomatic and phraseological units across the selected parallel corpus demonstrates significant variation in translational approaches. The distribution of translation strategies applied to render Uzbek idioms into English is summarized in the table below.

Translation Strategy	Frequency (Count)	Percentage (%)	Primary Outcome
Paraphrase (Explicitation)	156	45.88%	Loss of figurative imagery; retention of core sense
Idiom with similar meaning & dissimilar form	88	25.88%	Preservation of stylistic tone; change in conceptual metaphor
Idiom with similar meaning & form	31	9.12%	Full structural and semantic equivalence
Omission	42	12.35%	Complete loss of cultural and stylistic nuances
Literal / Calque Translation	23	6.77%	Foreignization; potential cognitive opacity for target reader
Total	**340**	**100.00%**	

The data indicates that less than 10% of Uzbek idiomatic expressions possess a direct structural and semantic equivalent in English. Paraphrase emerges as the most dominant translation strategy (45.88%), indicating that translators frequently prioritize semantic clarity over the retention of source-culture imagery. Omission accounts for 12.35% of all cases, highlighting a notable proportion of absolute translational loss where cultural realia proved resistant to naturalization or explicitation.

Analysis and Discussion

The quantitative findings reveal that the primary barrier in Uzbek-English idiom translation is not structural syntax, but rather conceptual and cultural incongruity. The qualitative analysis of specific phraseological categories illustrates how untranslatability manifests in literary practice.

Phraseological Fusions and Cultural Realia

Phraseological fusions (idioms whose overall meaning cannot be deduced from individual words) containing national realia exhibit the highest degree of untranslatability. Expressions rooted in nomadic, agricultural, or Islamic traditions native to Central Asia often lack metaphorical analogs in English.

For instance, the Uzbek idiom og'ziga elak tutib bo'lmaslik (literally, "one cannot hold a sieve to their mouth") translates conceptually to English idioms such as "unable to keep a secret" or "having a loose tongue." In instances where translators used the English equivalent "to spill the beans" or "to have a loose tongue," the core pragmatic meaning was successfully conveyed, but the visceral imagery of the elak (sieve)—a crucial tool in traditional Uzbek domestic life—was lost [5].

When translators attempted literal translation (calquing) for phrases such as ko'ngli oshadi (literally, "their heart rises/overflows," meaning to feel nauseous or deeply revolted), English readers encountered cognitive interference, as "heart rising" in English literature often connotes hope or courage rather than physical or emotional aversion [6].

Losses in Somatic Idioms

Somatic idioms—those involving body parts—demonstrate significant cross-cultural shifts. In Uzbek phraseology, the liver (jigar) and heart (ko'ngil/yurak) serve as central loci for deep emotional states, family bonds, and affection. The expression jigarim is used affectionally to denote close kin or deeply cherished friends.

Translating jigarim as "my liver" in English literary texts generates grotesque or bizarre connotations for target readers, as English relies on "blood," "heart," or "flesh and blood" to express similar bonds [7]. Consequently, translators routinely employ paraphrasing (e.g., "my dear kin") or functional substitution ("my own flesh and blood"). While functional substitution preserves emotional resonance, it alters the underlying cognitive metaphor, effectively domesticating the target text and neutralizing the distinctive cultural footprint of the source text [8].

Paraphrase vs. Omission: The Aesthetic Trade-off

The predominance of paraphrase (45.88%) underscores a pragmatic bias toward communicative fluency. However, replacing an idiom with a non-idiomatic explanation flattens the stylistic texture of literary prose. Consider the Uzbek expression boshi osmonga yetdi (literally, "their head reached the sky"). While paraphrased as "she was extremely delighted," the dramatic hyperbole and visual elevation inherent in the source text are eliminated [9].

Omission (12.35%) typically occurs when phraseological units are stacked or used alongside proverb-like structures for poetic emphasis. In such instances, translators frequently condense the text to avoid redundancy in English, resulting in a measurable reduction of narrative pacing and rhetorical richness [10].

Conclusion

The analysis of Uzbek-English parallel literary corpora demonstrates that cultural untranslatability in idiomatic expressions is primarily a cognitive and stylistic challenge rather than an absolute linguistic barrier. True untranslatability occurs in a minority of cases,

whereas "relative untranslatability"—where semantic meaning is preserved at the expense of figurative image and cultural specificity—is widespread.

The findings demonstrate that over 58% of Uzbek idioms undergo significant transformation through paraphrase or omission when translated into English, leading to a visible reduction in national-cultural flavor. While paraphrasing ensures target-text readability and communicative success, it frequently neutralizes the unique metaphorical landscape of Uzbek literature. To counter this loss, translators must balance functional equivalence with strategic foreignization, using contextual framing or creative compensation to preserve the aesthetic and cognitive authenticity of the source text.

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