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THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIRDS IN TRANSLATION: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRAJECTORY AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS IN THE STUDY OF ALISHER NAVOI'S "LISON UT TAYR"

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ABSTRACT: This article systematically examines the historiography, critical reception, and methodological frameworks surrounding Alisher Navoi's allegorical masterpiece "Lison ut-tayr" (The Language of the Birds, 1499) and its English translations. Although Navoi's work represents a milestone in Chagatai (Old Uzbek) literature and Sufi philosophy, its translation history and scholarly reception within the Anglophone literary space remain less developed compared to its Persian prototype, Farid al-Din Attar's Mantiq al-tayr. This study traces the trajectory of Navoi scholarship from classical Eastern commentaries and Soviet philological traditions to contemporary Western translatological studies. Furthermore, it outlines a rigorous interdisciplinary methodology combining comparative-historical analysis, hermeneutics, linguo-stylistic evaluation, and Skopos-based translation theory tailored for evaluating how Sufi allegories, spiritual stations (maqāmāt), and poetic nuances are rendered into English.
Keywords: Alisher Navoi, "Lison ut-tayr", Sufi allegory, English translation, comparative literature, translation methodology, historiography, Chagatai literature.

ANNOTATSIYA: Ushbu maqolada Alisher Navoiyning allegorik shohasari "Lison ut-tayr" (1499) hamda uning ingliz tilidagi tarjimalarining o'rganilish darajasi, tarixshunosligi va tadqiqot metodologiyasi tizimli tahlil qilinadi. Navoiy asari chig'atay (eskio'zbek) adabiyoti va tasavvuf falsafasida muhim bosqich sanalsa-da, uning inglizzabon adabiy muloqot maydonidagi o'rni va tarjima tarixi uning forsiy manbai Fariduddin Attorning "Mantiq ut-tayr" asariga nisbatan yetarlicha tadqiq etilmagan. Maqolada navoiyshunoslikning sharq mumtoz sharhchilik an'analaridan tortib, sho'ro davri filologiyasi hamda zamonaviy g'arb tarjimashunosligigacha bo'lgan rivojlanish bosqichlari kuzatiladi. Shuningdek, asardagi tasavvufiy timsollar, ma'naviy maqomlar va poetik nozikliklarning ingliz tilida qayta yaratilishini baholashga mo'ljallangan majmuaviy metodologiya qiyosiy-tarixiy, hermenevtik, lingvostilistik va Skopos nazariyasiga asoslangan yondashuvlar asoslab beriladi.
Kalit so'zlar: Alisher Navoiy, "Lison ut-tayr", tasavvufiy allegoriya, inglizcha tarjima, qiyosiy adabiyotshunoslik, tarjima metodologiyasi, tarixshunoslik, chig'atay adabiyoti.

АННОТАЦИЯ: В данной статье систематически исследуются степень изученности, историография и методологические основы изучения аллегорического шедевра Алишера Навои «Лисон ут-тайр» («Язык птиц», 1499 г.) и его переводов на английский язык. Несмотря на то, что произведение Навои является вершиной чагатайской (староузбекской) литературы и суфийской философии, его переводческая история и рецепция в англоязычном литературном пространстве остаются менее изученными по сравнению с его персидским прототипом «Мантик ут-тайр» Фарид ад-Дина Аттара. В исследовании прослеживается эволюция навоиведения от классической восточной традиции комментариев и советской филологической школы до современных западных переводоведческих исследований. Кроме того, обосновывается междисциплинарная методология, сочетающая сравнительно-сторический, герменевтический, лингвостилистический

анализ и теорию Скопоса для оценки передачи суфийских аллегорий, духовных стоянок (макамат) и поэтических нюансов на английском языке.

Ключевые слова: Алишер Навои, Лисон ут-tayr, суфийская аллегория, английский перевод, сравнительное литературоведение, методология перевода, историография, чагатайская литература.

Introduction

Alisher Navoi (1441–1501), the paramount figure of Chagatai (Old Uzbek) literature, holds a monumental status in Eastern poetic traditions. Written in 1499 toward the conclusion of his prolific life, “Lison ut-tayr”(The Language of the Birds) serves as the spiritual and artistic synthesis of Navoi’s lifelong engagement with Islamic mysticism, poetic craftsmanship, and philosophical humanism. Composed in response to Farid al-Din Attar’s twelfth-century Persian masterpiece Mantiq al-tayr, Navoi’s work is far more than a slavish imitation or direct translation; it represents a deliberate ideological and stylistic re-creation (nazīra) designed to establish Turkic as a literary medium fully capable of capturing the most refined nuances of Sufi allegory. While “Lison ut-tayr” has long been revered in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Eurasia, its global dissemination specifically within the Anglophone literary and academic spheres has historically been hindered by linguistic barriers and orientalist canonical biases. For centuries, Western scholarship prioritized Persian and Arabic literatures, frequently relegating Turkic mystical poetry to a derivative status. However, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed a structural shift in translation studies and comparative literature, sparking renewed interest in rendering Navoi’s major works into English.

This paper addresses two interrelated academic imperatives. First, it constructs a comprehensive historiographical synthesis detailing the degree of study of “Lison ut-tayr” and its English renders, mapping the analytical progression from classical Eastern exegesis to contemporary Western translatology. Second, it outlines a robust, multi-layered research methodology specifically designed to evaluate the English translations of Navoi's text, balancing hermeneutic, comparative-historical and functional translation frameworks.[2]

Literature review

To understand the scholarly landscape of “Lison ut-tayr”, one must trace its reception across three distinct academic domains: traditional Eastern exegesis, Soviet and post-Soviet philology, and Western Orientalist/Anglophone translatological scholarship.

Traditional Eastern Exegesis and Philological Foundations

Historically, the initial wave of engagement with “Lison ut-tayr” took the form of manuscript copying, marginal commentaries (hāshiya), and literary emulation across the Persianate and Turkic worlds. Classical scholars and Sufi practitioners treated the text primarily as a spiritual manual (suluk). Early commentaries focused on deciphering the complex allegory of the thirty birds (sīmurgh) journeying through the seven mystical valleys (vādī), matching Navoi’s imagery with Naqshbandi spiritual doctrines.

Soviet and Post-Soviet Navoi Scholarship (Navoiyshunoslik)

During the twentieth century, the institutionalization of Navoiyshunoslik (Navoi Studies) in Uzbekistan and across the Soviet Union transformed the critical approach to “Lison ut-tayr”. Scholars such as Yevgeniy Bertels, Abdurauf Fitrat, Izzat Sultan, Porso Shamsiyev, and Nathan Mallayev shifted the analytical lens from purely mystical interpretation to historical, socio-cultural, and literary-structural dimensions. Bertels emphasized Navoi’s creative autonomy in relation to Attar, demonstrating that Navoi revised structural elements, altered parable narratives, and infused the work with distinct pedagogical and moral imperatives tailored to the Timurid social reality. Post-independence Uzbek scholars including Ergash Rustamov, Karomat Mullakhojayeva, and Hamidulla Boltabayev further

deepened this analysis by reintegrating Sufi theology (tasavvuf) and hermeneutics into the text, stripping away the secularized ideological constraints of the Soviet period.

In contrast to the extensive literary traditions surrounding Attar's Mantiq al-tayr which enjoyed celebrated Western translations by Edward FitzGerald (1889), Garcin de Tassy (1863), and later Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi (1984) Navoi's "Lison ut-tayr" remained largely overlooked in English-speaking academic circles for generations. Early Western Orientalists like Edward G. Browne and E. J. W. Gibb acknowledged Navoi's genius in generic terms, yet frequently subordinated his Chagatai poetry to Persian precedents. The primary barrier was the specialized linguistic expertise required: scholars needed fluency in Chagatai Turkic, classical Ottoman, and Persian prosody (ʻarūz). The late twentieth century saw partial poetic renderings and thematic translations in scholarly anthologies by Turkologists such as Edward A. Allworth and Robert Dankoff. However, full-length, systematic English translations of "Lison ut-tayr" emerged only recently through the concerted efforts of Uzbek translators collaborating with native English poets and scholars (such as the translations published under UNESCO auspices and national jubilee initiatives). While these efforts successfully introduced Navoi to international readers, academic scholarship analyzing these English translations remains in its infancy. Existing literature largely consists of introductory prefaces, descriptive reviews, or general comparative essays, highlighting a glaring need for systematic translatological critique.

Research methodology

Evaluating a complex Sufi allegorical text written in Chagatai and its modern English translation requires an interdisciplinary methodology. Relying solely on conventional literal-versus-free translation dichotomies fails to capture the theological, poetic, and cultural nuances embedded in "Lison ut-tayr". Therefore, an integrative research design comprising four distinct methodological pillars is proposed. The comparative-historical method serves as the baseline for investigating "Lison ut-tayr". This approach operates on a triadic plane:

1. Diachronic Comparison: Examining Navoi's text alongside Attar's Mantiq al-tayr to identify structural modifications, omitted tales, and newly added parables (e.g., Navoi's distinct inclusion of royal narratives and localized Central Asian folklore).[1]

2. Synchronic/Translatological Comparison: Placing the Chagatai original side-by-side with its English translation(s) to determine structural fidelity, lineation choices, and narrative pacing.

3. Cross-Translational Mapping: Comparing how English translators handle shared allegorical motifs in Attar (e.g., Davis & Darbandi) versus Navoi to evaluate whether translators maintain Navoi's distinct Turkic voice or erroneously flatten it into Persianized idioms.

Hermeneutic and Sufi Literary Analysis (Hermenevtik va tasavvufiy tahlil)

Sufi poetry relies on a multi-tiered system of symbolism where surface metaphors (majāz) conceal divine truths (haqīqa). Hermeneutics allows the researcher to decode the spiritual architecture of "Lison ut-tayr". In "Lison ut-tayr", the hoopoe (Hudhud) represents the spiritual guide (Murshid), the thirty birds represent the soul-searchers (Sālikūn), and the perilous journey across the Seven Valleys (Talab / Yearning, ʻIshq / Love, Maʻrifat / Knowledge, Istighnā / Detachment, Tawhīd / Unity, Hayrat / Wonderment, and Faqr-u-Fanā / Poverty and Annihilation) symbolizes the stages of the Sufi path (Maqāmāt). The methodological task is to assess whether the English translation successfully renders these technical Sufi terms (istilohot) into functional English equivalents without forfeiting their esoteric depth. For instance, translating Faqr-u-Fanā as simple "poverty and destruction" diminishes its precise mystical connotation of spiritual self-extinction in the Divine.

To evaluate the success of an English translation, one must employ modern translatological models, specifically Gideon Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) and Hans J. Vermeer's Skopos Theory. [5]

Skopos Theory: Assesses the translation based on its intended purpose and audience. Is the English text designed as a literal academic prose reference for comparative religion scholars, or as a rhymed, metrical poetic reconstruction aiming for aesthetic equivalence among general literary readers? Equivalence Typology (Eugene Nida & Werner Koller): Distinguishes between formal equivalence (preserving sentence structure, quantitative meter, and imagery) and dynamic/functional equivalence (recreating the emotional and aesthetic impact on the English reader). Analyzing how translators navigate this tension reveals the overarching strategic decisions behind the translated text.

2.4 Linguo-Stylistic and Quantitative Textual Analysis (Lingvostilistik va miqdoriy tahlil) At the micro-level, the researcher must analyze the linguistic mechanics of the transformation from Chagatai to English. This includes:

• Prosodic Adaptation: Analyzing how the classical masnavī form (rhymed couplets in ‘arūz meter, specifically bahr-i ramal) is transformed into English verse structures (such as iambic pentameter, blank verse, or free verse).

• Phonostylistic Equivalence: Assessing whether alliteration, internal rhymes, and euphonic qualities (tanosub) inherent in Navoi's poetry are preserved or compensated for elsewhere in the text.

• Lexical Density and Cultural Specifics (Realialar): Measuring the retention or adaptation of culturally bound items, archaic idioms, and Islamic theological terminology.

Analysis and result

To demonstrate the practical application of these research methods, consider Navoi’s treatment of the pivotal climax in Lison ut-tayr: the realization of the Sīmurgh (the divine bird) through the wordplay on sī (thirty) and murgh (birds). Chagatai Original (Conceptual Concept):
“Chun boqurlar ko’zguga be-ishtihob,
Sī murgh ko’rurlar o’ni ango be-hijob...”
Literal Transliteration:
“When they look into the mirror without doubt,
They see themselves as thirty birds (sī murgh) without a veil...”
The linguistic challenge here is double-layered:
1. Etymological Puns: Navoi relies on the Persian-derived homophonic relationship between Sīmurgh (the mythical creature) and sī murgh (thirty birds).
2. 2. Theological Paradox: The mirror motif illustrates the Sufi concept of Wahdat al-Wujūd (Unity of Existence) the realization that the creator is not separate from the seeker, but reflected within the purified self. When applying the translatological methodology:
1. Historical-Comparative Method notes that while Attar introduced this pun, Navoi refines its philosophical impact by emphasizing the clarity of the mirror (ko'zgu) as the heart (qalb).
2. Hermeneutic Analysis insists that an English translation failing to convey both the numerical count (“thirty birds”) and the divine name (“Simurgh”) destroys the core epiphany of the epic.
3. Linguo-Stylistic Analysis evaluates the English translator's choice: Does the translator use explanatory endnotes, create an English poetic equivalent (e.g., “Si-murgh / Seeing-more”), or rely on dynamic paraphrasing? [4]

Conclusion

Alisher Navoi’s “Lison ut-tayr” represents a peak of Eastern mystical allegorical poetry. Yet, its presence in global Anglophone scholarship remains disproportionate to its literary merit. The historiography of its study reveals a historical progression from traditional Eastern commentaries to rigorous Soviet and Uzbek philology, culminating in an emerging, albeit incomplete, Western translatological canon. Future research in Navoi studies (Navoiyshunoslik) within the international arena must go beyond biographical summaries and basic narrative overviews. By adopting a multi-

dimensional research methodology integrating comparative-historical contextualization, Sufi hermeneutics, functional translation theory (Skopos), and micro-level linguo-stylistic analysis scholars can objectively assess English translations of Navoi. This methodological rigour ensures that “Lison ut-tayr” is recognized not merely as a regional variant of Persian models, but as an indispensable masterwork of world literature, preserved and vibrantly interpreted across linguistic boundaries.

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