



## APPROACHES TO ZERO-EQUIVALENCE LEXICAL UNITS IN UZBEK FOLKLORE

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### ABSTRACT

**Abstract:** This article examines the translation of zero-equivalence lexical units in Surkhandarya folklore — terms such as *baxshi*, *do'mbira*, *tulpor*, *chiltonlar*, *nafas*, and *daston* — that resist direct equivalence in English. Drawing on Venuti's foreignization/domestication dichotomy, Newmark's semantic and communicative translation approaches, and Appiah's concept of thick translation, the study analyses six practical translation strategies through concrete bilingual examples. The findings confirm that a hybrid combination of foreignization and descriptive expansion best preserves cultural identity without sacrificing readability. The article provides translators and researchers with a practical framework for handling culturally embedded folklore terminology.

**Keywords:** zero-equivalence realia, Uzbek folklore, foreignization, domestication, *baxshi*, translation strategies, cultural identity

**Аннотация:** В данной статье рассматривается перевод лексических единиц нулевой эквивалентности в фольклоре Сурхандарьи — таких терминов, как *бахши*, *думбра*, *тулпор*, *чилтонлар*, *нафас* и *дастан*, — которые не поддаются прямой эквивалентности в английском языке. Опираясь на дихотомию фореенизации/доместикации Венути, семантический и



коммуникативный подходы Ньюмарка, а также концепцию «плотного перевода» Аппиа, в статье анализируются шесть практических стратегий перевода на конкретных двуязычных примерах. Результаты подтверждают, что гибридное сочетание форенизации и описательного расширения наилучшим образом сохраняет культурную идентичность, не жертвуя читабельностью.

**Ключевые слова:** реалии нулевой эквивалентности, узбекский фольклор, форенизация, доместикация, бахши, стратегии перевода, культурная идентичность

**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu maqolada Surxondaryo folkloridagi nol ekvivalentli leksik birliklarning — *baxshi, do'mbira, tulpor, chiltonlar, nafas* va *daston* kabi terminlarning — ingliz tiliga tarjimasi o'rganiladi. Venutining begonalashtirish/o'zlashtirish dichotomiyasi, Nyumarkning semantik va kommunikativ yondashuvlari hamda Appiyaning «qalin tarjima» kontseptsiyasiga tayanib, maqolada olti ta amaliy tarjima strategiyasi aniq ikki tilli misollar orqali tahlil qilinadi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, begonalashtirish va tavsifiy kengaytirishning gibrid kombinatsiyasi o'qilishga zarar yetkazmagan holda madaniy o'zlikni saqlashda eng yaxshi natija beradi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** nol ekvivalentli realiyalar, o'zbek folklori, begonalashtirish, o'zlashtirish, baxshi, tarjima strategiyalari, madaniy o'zlik

## INTRODUCTION

The translation of oral folklore into English involves a persistent dilemma between foreignization (preserving cultural difference) and domestication (assimilating into target norms). This challenge is particularly acute for the rich, archaic oral tradition of the Surkhandarya oasis, which is saturated with zero-equivalence lexical units. Culture-specific terms like *baxshi, do'mbira, tulpor, chiltonlar*, and *nafas* do not merely name objects but encode entire social, spiritual,



and performative frameworks. Translating these terms through thin approximations (e.g., rendering *baxshi* as "folk singer") results in what Venuti (1995) terms "cultural erasure. To address this, the present article investigates available translation strategies and proposes a principled hybrid framework that combines selective foreignization with descriptive expansion. Based on Baker's (1992) typology, the Surkhandarya folklore corpus presents six primary categories of zero-equivalence terms that pose the most pressing challenges.

*Performative identity terms:* The term *baxshi* denotes a figure who is simultaneously a hereditary epic bard, a virtuoso do'mbira player, a spiritual intermediary with pre-Islamic shamanic roots, an oral-formulaic improviser, and a custodian of communal historical memory. No single English term captures this synthesis. Compound glosses such as "epic bard," "oral poet," or "minstrel" capture one or two dimensions but sacrifice the others. Related terms — *sozanda* (female court musician), *jirov* (Kazakh-Karakalpak equivalent of the *baxshi*), *dostonchi* (emphasizing the narrative dimension) — carry overlapping but distinct cultural loads that resist conflation.

*Cosmological and mythological terms:* The *tulpor* (Boychibor in the Alpomish epic) is not merely a horse but a mythologized celestial creature — the hero's spiritual extension, a symbol of divine mandate, and a structural formula marking the protagonist's readiness for epic action. The *chiltonlar* are not "spirits" or "ghosts" in any Western sense: they are forty invisible protective entities of Islamic-Sufi origin whose presence in a narrative signals a moment of supernatural intervention. The term *dev* similarly occupies a semantic space between "giant," "demon," and "cosmic adversary" that no English lexeme can map onto with precision.

*Instrument and performance terms:* The *do'mbira* is not a "lute" or "guitar"; it is the physical extension of the *baxshi*'s *nafas* (breath-energy), a two-stringed



instrument whose specific timbre and playing technique are inseparable from the meaning of the doston it accompanies. *Bo'g'iz ijrochiligi* (throat-vocal technique) refers to a specialized resonance production practice distinct from both Western operatic technique and Mongolian throat singing. *Nafas* itself — literally "breath" — functions as a technical term for the combined physical stamina, vocal power, and spiritual energy that sustains a bakhshi through hours of improvised epic delivery.

*Genre terms:* The *doston* is not simply an "epic" — it is an oral-performative genre alternating between prose narration (*nasr*) and sung verse (*nazm*), structured around a formulaic system and performed live with *do'mbira* accompaniment. The *terma* (from the Uzbek verb *termak*, to gather/pick) is a short improvisational philosophical prelude performed before the main epic to establish a moral and emotional connection with the audience — a function for which no English generic term exists.

Six translation strategies are identified and evaluated below through bilingual examples drawn from the BMI corpus. Each example includes the Uzbek source unit, the translation variant(s), the strategy classification, and a brief evaluative commentary.

*Table 1. Translation strategies applied to zero-equivalence realia in Surkhandarya folklore*

Source Unit (UZ)	Translation Variant (EN)	Strategy	Analysis
baxshi	bakhshi (an improvisational	Borrowing + Expansion	Foreignization preserves cultural



	epic bard who performs epics while playing the do'mbira)		specificity; expansion ensures reader comprehension. Translating as "folk singer" commits cultural erasure (Venuti, 2008).
do'mbira	do'mbira (a traditional two-stringed instrument central to bakhshi epic performance)	Borrowing + Thick Gloss	"Lute" or "guitar" strip the instrument of its ethnographic and spiritual function. Appiah's thick translation principle justifies the explanatory gloss.
tulpor (Boychibor)	the tulpor Boychibor — a mythologized celestial horse, symbol of the hero's spiritual power	Borrowing + Apposition	The appositive construction preserves the original term while unpacking its cosmological dimension absent in the English word "horse."



chiltonlar	the chiltonlar (the forty invisible protective spirits of the mountains)	Borrowing + Parenthetical	Rendering as "spirits" alone flattens the Islamic- Sufi and numerological dimensions. Parenthetical gloss enacts thick translation (Appiah, 1993).
nafas	nafas (the physical and spiritual stamina of the bakhshi's performance breath)	Borrowing + Descriptive Expansion	"Breath" misses the technical and spiritual dimensions. Expansion converts a zero-equivalence unit into a communicatively adequate expression (Newmark, 1988).
ko'k bo'ri (blue wolf)	the ko'k bo'ri — the Blue Wolf, ancestral totem of the Turkic people	Literal Translation + Cultural Annotation	Direct translation produces a surface rendering; the annotation supplies the mythological dimension absent from the English



			reader's cognitive framework (Dundes, 2007).
daston	daston — a Turkic oral epic, performed in alternating prose and sung verse	Borrowing + Genre Definition	"Epic" alone omits the prose-verse alternation and the live performative context. Genre definition follows Newmark's descriptive equivalence procedure.
bo'g'iz ijrochiligi	bo'g'iz ijrochiligi (throat-vocal technique: specialized resonance production in bakhshi performance)	Borrowing + Technical Expansion	No English ethnomusicological term covers this practice. Technical expansion follows communicative translation principles (Newmark, 1988).

Borrowing alone, however, is insufficient for general academic or public audiences unfamiliar with Uzbek folklore. The consistent co-application of



descriptive expansion, parenthetical glosses, or appositive annotations — the instruments of Appiah's thick translation — transforms borrowing from a mere transliteration into a culturally informative act. The combination of foreignization and expansion is thus the recommended default strategy for translations of Surkhandarya folklore intended for international academic audiences.

While the analysis strongly favors foreignization, domestication retains a limited and legitimate domain of application. When translating proverbs and idiomatic expressions — where the pragmatic function (the "moral" or communal wisdom) takes precedence over the specific cultural form — functional equivalence or cultural adaptation may better serve the communicative purpose. For example, the Surkhandarya proverb *Tog'ning ko'rki tosh bilan, odamning ko'rki yosh bilan* ("The beauty of the mountain is in its stones; the beauty of a person is in their youth") can be rendered with sufficient cultural fidelity through a functionally equivalent English proverbial structure: "A mountain's glory is its stones; a person's glory is their youth." The structural parallelism and the didactic function are preserved; the cultural specificity of the Surkhon mountain landscape is the only casualty — an acceptable trade-off for this genre.

Similarly, when translating for general or popular audiences (rather than academic specialists), a selective domestication of mythological terms may be justified to prevent incomprehension. The *dev* might be rendered as "the giant adversary" in a children's adaptation of *Alpomish*, provided that a scholarly edition retains the original term with annotation. The key principle, following Newmark's (1988) genre-sensitivity, is that the degree of foreignization should be calibrated to the communicative purpose and intended audience of each translation.

The practical analysis confirms three principal findings regarding Surkhandarya folklore translation. First, the zero-equivalence status of core realia is a structural feature, meaning that any attempt at domestication systematically



misrepresents the source culture. Therefore, translators must resist standard English "fluency" and embrace the productive "foreignness" of the source text. Second, combining borrowing with descriptive expansion—or "thick translation"—is a practical necessity to bridge the zero-equivalence gap without cultural erasure. Third, because terms like *do'mbira* and *nafas* derive meaning from live performance contexts, translation frameworks must attend to the performance event itself, not just the text. Consequently, direct ethnographic knowledge and collaboration between linguists, translation theorists, and ethnomusicologists are practical requirements for producing culturally authentic translations.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that translating zero-equivalence lexical units in Surkhandarya folklore requires a hybrid strategy combining principled foreignization with descriptive expansion. Analyzing these realia confirms that domesticating choices (e.g., rendering *baxshi* as "folk singer" or *tulpor* as "horse") commit cultural erasure by reducing complex ethnographic realities to thin approximations. Instead, combining borrowing with thick translation provides the most culturally faithful and effective framework for international academic contexts. These findings have practical implications for training Central Asian folklore translators, who need both linguistic and ethnographic competence. Furthermore, they emphasize the development of specialized bilingual glossaries to standardize terminology and prevent inconsistencies across publications. Ultimately, the Surkhandarya case offers a model for minority and indigenous cultural translation, showing how the foreignization/domestication debate can be resolved through a calibrated hybrid framework



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