



TRANSLATING THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE SURKHON OASIS: STRATEGIES FOR RENDERING ZERO-EQUIVALENCE FOLKLORE REALIA INTO ENGLISH

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Abstract: This article investigates the translation of zero-equivalence folklore realia from the Surkhandarya oasis of Uzbekistan into English. Grounded in Venuti's foreignization/domestication, Newmark's communicative/semantic translation, and Appiah's "thick translation," the study examines how culture-specific terms—such as *baxshi*, *do'mbira*, *daston*, *tulpor*, *chiltonlar*, and *bo'g'iz ijrochiligi*—can be effectively rendered. Through a comparative analysis, seven translation techniques are evaluated, including borrowing, expansion, and adaptation. The findings demonstrate that combining foreignization with descriptive expansion yields the most culturally authentic and communicatively effective results for an international academic audience, offering a specialized framework to enhance the cultural integrity of Uzbekistan's intangible heritage translations.

Keywords: zero-equivalence realia, Surkhandarya folklore, foreignization, domestication, thick translation, *baxshi*, oral epic, cultural mediation, translation strategies, linguoculturology



Аннотация: В данной статье исследуются особенности перевода на английский язык безэквивалентной фольклорной реалии Сурхандарьинского оазиса Узбекистана. Опираясь на теоретические концепции форенизации/доместикации Л. Венути, коммуникативного/семантического перевода П. Ньюмарка и «насыщенного перевода» (thick translation) К. Э. Аппиа, в исследовании анализируются методы эффективной передачи таких культурно-специфических терминов, как *baxshi*, *do'mbira*, *daston*, *tulpor*, *chiltonlar* и *bo'g'iz ijrochiligi*. В ходе сравнительного анализа оцениваются семь переводческих трансформаций, включая заимствование, описательный перевод (расширение) и адаптацию. Результаты исследования показывают, что обоснованное сочетание форенизации и описательного расширения обеспечивает наиболее культурно аутентичный и коммуникативно эффективный результат для международной академической аудитории. Работа предлагает специализированную аналитическую базу, направленную на сохранение культурной целостности при последующих переводах нематериального культурного наследия Узбекистана.

Ключевые слова (русский): реалии нулевой эквивалентности, фольклор Сурхандарьи, форенизация, доместикация, плотный перевод, бахши, героический эпос, культурное посредничество, стратегии перевода, лингвокультурология

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada O'zbekistonning Surxondaryo vohasiga mansub, ingliz tilida muqobili bo'lmagan (nol-ekvivalentli) folklor realiyalarining ingliz tiliga tarjima qilinishi tadqiq etiladi. L. Venutining xorijiyashtirish/mahalliyashtirish, P. Nyumarkning kommunikativ/semantik tarjima hamda K. E. Appianing "kengaytirilgan tarjima" (thick translation) nazariy kontseptsiyalariga tayangan holda, tadqiqotda *baxshi*, *do'mbira*, *daston*, *tulpor*, *chiltonlar* va *bo'g'iz ijrochiligi* kabi madaniy-spesifik terminlarni qanday qilib



samarali ifodalash mumkinligi o‘rganiladi. Qiyosiy tahlil jarayonida tarjimaning yettita usuli, jumladan, kalkalash (o‘zlashtirish), tavsifiy kengaytirish va moslashtirish (adaptatsiya) usullari baholanadi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko‘rsatadiki, xorijiy lashtirish va tavsifiy kengaytirish usullarining maqsadli kombinatsiyasi xalqaro akademik auditoriya uchun eng madaniy-autentik va kommunikativ jihatdan samarali natijani beradi. Shuningdek, ushbu ish O‘zbekistonning nomoddiy madaniy merosi namunalarini kelgusida tarjima qilishda uning madaniy yaxlitligini ta‘minlashga xizmat qiladigan maxsus tahliliy asosni taklif etadi.

Kalit so‘zlar (o‘zbek): nol ekvivalentli realiyalar, Surxondaryo folklori, begonalashtirish, o‘zlashtirish, qalin tarjima, baxshi, qahramonlik eposi, madaniy vositachilik, tarjima strategiyalari, lingvokulturologiya

INTRODUCTION

The translation of oral folklore from a regional, minority, or indigenous cultural context into a globally dominant language such as English represents one of the most complex challenges in contemporary translation studies. Unlike the translation of technical or scientific texts — where universally shared referential systems reduce the likelihood of semantic loss — the rendering of folklore demands that the translator navigate a dense web of culturally embedded meanings, performative structures, and ethnographic realities that have no structural or conceptual mirror in the target language. This phenomenon is particularly acute in the context of the Surkhandarya (Surkhon) oasis of southern Uzbekistan, a region whose oral heritage constitutes a uniquely layered palimpsest of Turkic, Persian, and pre-Islamic cosmological traditions.

The Surkhon oasis, situated at the geographic and cultural confluence of the Amu Darya river basin and the Pamir-Altai mountain range, is home to one of the



most vibrant and archaic bakhshi (folk epic bard) traditions in Central Asia. The bakhshi schools of Sherobod, Denov, and Boysun have preserved an oral corpus — comprising heroic epics (dastons), ritual songs (yor-yor, badia), lyrical-improvisational genres (terma, o'lan), and an extensive body of proverbs (maqol) and riddles (topishmoq) — that stretches back, in its deepest roots, to pre-Islamic Turkic antiquity. These texts are not merely literary artifacts; they are, in the precise sense of Jan Assmann's framework (2011), instruments of cultural memory — living linguistic archives in which the values, social structures, spiritual beliefs, and historical identity of the oasis-dwelling communities are stored and perpetually re-enacted.

The core translation problem posed by this corpus is the prevalence of zero-equivalence realia: culture-specific lexical units for which the target language — English — possesses no conceptual, functional, or structural equivalent. Terms such as baxshi (the shaman-bard epic performer), do'mbira (the two-stringed instrument central to epic delivery), tulpor (the mythologized celestial horse of the hero), chiltonlar (protective supernatural beings), bo'g'iz ijrochiligi (specialized throat-vocal technique), ovul (nomadic settlement unit), and nafas (the spiritual-physical breath energy of performance) each encode entire socio-cosmological frameworks that cannot be reduced to a single English word without catastrophic semantic and cultural loss. It is the thesis of the present article that addressing this zero-equivalence challenge requires a theoretically grounded, hybrid approach to translation strategy — one that combines principled foreignization, descriptive expansion, and Appiah's concept of "thick translation" to produce results that are simultaneously ethnographically faithful and communicatively accessible.

Translation strategies: a practical analysis: Drawing on the theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 2 and the taxonomy established in Section 3, this section analyses the specific translation strategies employed — and recommended — for rendering zero-equivalence realia from Surkhandarya folklore into English.



Seven primary strategies are identified and illustrated through concrete textual examples drawn from the Alpomish epic and related folklore materials.

Borrowing (Transliteration with Paratextual Gloss)

Borrowing — the direct transliteration of the source-language term into the target language — is the most commonly and appropriately applied strategy for zero-equivalence realia in Surkhandarya folklore. When accompanied by an immediate paratextual gloss (an inline parenthetical definition or a footnote), borrowing achieves the dual goals of foreignization (preserving the cultural specificity and otherness of the term) and accessibility (ensuring the target-language reader can apprehend its meaning).

Example : Source: *Baxshi dombira chalgancha doston boshladi*. Literal: "The baxshi started the doston while playing the dombira." Recommended rendering: "The *baxshi* began the *doston* — a heroic oral epic — while playing the *do'mbira* (a two-stringed instrument central to the bakhshi performance tradition)." This rendering retains all three zero-equivalence terms in their transliterated form while providing the minimum contextual information necessary for the reader's comprehension.

Expansion (Descriptive Translation)

Expansion involves replacing a zero-equivalence source-language term with a descriptive phrase that unpacks its semantic content. This strategy is most appropriate when the term's cultural function is more important than its specific local identity — when the reader needs to understand what the concept does rather than what it is called.

Example: Source: *Nafasi kuchli baxshi halq yuragiga yetadi*. Recommended rendering: "A bakhshi whose vocal and spiritual stamina (*nafas*) is strong reaches the heart of the people." The parenthetical retention of the original term, combined with the descriptive expansion, reflects the thick translation principle: the reader



receives both the cultural form (nafas) and the cultural content (vocal and spiritual stamina).

Modulation (Semantic Perspective Shift)

Modulation involves a shift in semantic perspective — expressing the same content from a different angle — when direct or descriptive translation produces an awkward or culturally misleading result. This strategy is particularly valuable for translating the mythological and cosmological dimensions of folklore.

Example: Source: *Doston yo'llari* (literally "the roads of the doston," referring to the melodic and narrative paths available to a bakhshi during improvisation). Literal translation: "the epic roads." Modulated rendering: "the melodic repertoire of the epic" or "the narrative pathways of the oral tradition." The modulation shifts from a concrete spatial metaphor (which would be opaque to English readers) to the musically and structurally precise terminology of oral epic studies.

Transposition (Grammatical Category Shift)

Transposition involves changing the grammatical category of a unit while preserving its semantic content. In the translation of Uzbek folklore, transposition is frequently required to accommodate the shift from an agglutinative morphological system (Uzbek) to an analytic one (English).

Example: Source: *Baxshichilik maktablariga xos bo'lgani kabi* (literally "as is characteristic of the bakhshichilik schools"). Direct transposition: "owing to the unique characteristics of the bakhshi performance schools." The Uzbek noun *baxshichilik* (formed by the suffix -chilik, denoting a practice or institution) is transposed into the English nominal phrase "bakhshi performance schools," preserving the institutional meaning while accommodating English syntactic norms.

Equivalence (Functional Replacement)



Functional equivalence involves finding an English expression that performs the same communicative function as the source-language expression, even if the semantic content differs. This strategy is appropriate for proverbs and idiomatic expressions where the pragmatic effect (the "moral" or "wisdom") is more important than the literal meaning.

Example: 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"). A purely literal rendering fails to convey the proverbial structure. A functionally equivalent rendering — "A mountain's glory is its rocks; a person's glory is their youth" — preserves the parallelism and the didactic force of the original while adopting the more natural register of English proverbial speech.

Adaptation (Cultural Transposition)

Adaptation — the most domesticating of the strategies examined here — involves replacing a source-culture element with a target-culture equivalent. While generally less appropriate for the translation of zero-equivalence realia (where cultural specificity is the paramount concern), adaptation is occasionally justified when the source-culture element would otherwise create an impenetrable barrier to comprehension.

Example: The Surkhandarya ritual concept of *qirq chilla* (forty days of spiritual seclusion, a practice with pre-Islamic and Islamic dimensions) might, in a purely academic context, be rendered as "the forty-day spiritual retreat (*qirq chilla*)," combining adaptation (the descriptive rendering) with borrowing (the retention of the original term) to minimize cultural loss while ensuring comprehension.

Literal Translation with Annotation

In certain contexts — particularly in the academic translation of epic verse, where the structural and rhythmic properties of the original are themselves the object



of study — literal translation, accompanied by detailed scholarly annotation, is the most appropriate strategy.

Example: Source (oral-formulaic sequence from Alpomish): *U bir kun yurdi, ikki kun yurdi, uch kun yurdi...* Literal translation: "He traveled one day, he traveled two days, he traveled three days..." While this rendering may sound stylistically excessive by the standards of modern English prose, it preserves the oral-formulaic repetition that is structurally and culturally essential to the epic genre — and which is, in Propp's (1968) morphological analysis, a defining marker of the narrative's "preparatory" stage. Scholarly annotation explaining the function of the formula allows the reader to appreciate the structural significance of what might otherwise appear as mere stylistic redundancy.

The analysis presented in Section 4 confirms that no single translation strategy is adequate to the full range of zero-equivalence realia encountered in Surkhandarya folklore. Each of the seven strategies identified has a specific domain of application, determined by the nature of the realia in question, the intended audience of the translation, and the communicative purpose of the translated text. The most consistent finding of the analysis is that the strategies of borrowing and expansion — typically in combination, in accordance with the thick translation framework — yield the most culturally faithful and communicatively effective results across the broadest range of realia types.

This finding has important implications for translation practice. It suggests that the translator of Surkhandarya folklore must, at minimum, possess three distinct competencies: 1) deep ethnographic knowledge of the Surkhon oasis's cultural, historical, and spiritual traditions; 2) advanced proficiency in both Uzbek (including the southern dialects and archaic registers) and English; and 3) theoretical fluency in translation studies sufficient to make principled, theory-grounded decisions about strategy selection. The frequent inadequacy of machine translation tools — which



consistently fail to recognize dialectal archaisms, oral-formulaic repetitions, and culturally embedded metaphors — underscores the irreplaceable role of human expertise in this domain (Kenny, 2017).

The analysis also reveals the critical importance of what this article terms the "performative dimension" of zero-equivalence: the fact that many Surkhandarya realia derive their meaning not from their lexical content alone but from the performative context in which they are embedded. The do'mbira is not simply a musical instrument; it is a sound-producing apparatus whose specific timbre, playing technique, and social function are inseparable from the meaning it carries in an epic performance context. Similarly, the daston is not simply a narrative; it is a performance event whose meaning is constituted by the interaction between the bakhshi's voice, the do'mbira's rhythmic accompaniment, the audience's participatory responses, and the specific social occasion of the performance. Translating these terms without attending to their performative dimension risks producing translations that are lexically accurate but culturally hollow.

The development of specialized bilingual glossaries for Surkhandarya folklore terminology emerges from the analysis as a practical priority. Such a glossary — standardizing the transliteration and providing ethnographic annotations for the key zero-equivalence terms — would serve as a foundational resource for translators, folklorists, cultural attaches, and international scholars working with this corpus. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) provides a normative framework within which such a glossary could be positioned as an instrument of international heritage preservation.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the translation of zero-equivalence folklore realia from the Surkhandarya oasis into English constitutes a paradigm case of the broader challenge of culturally asymmetric translation — a challenge that requires a



theoretically grounded, hybrid approach rather than the mechanical application of any single strategy. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Venuti's foreignization/domestication dichotomy, Newmark's communicative and semantic translation approaches, and Appiah's concept of thick translation, the article has developed a taxonomy of zero-equivalence realia organized into five semantic domains (performative identity terms, instrument and genre terms, mythological and cosmological terms, socio-spatial organization terms, and paroemiological and ritual terms) and has analysed seven translation strategies applied to concrete textual examples.

The principal findings of the study can be summarized as follows. First, the zero-equivalence status of core Surkhandarya realia — *baxshi*, *do'mbira*, *nafas*, *tulpor*, *chiltonlar*, and related terms — means that domesticating translation strategies that replace these terms with English equivalents invariably produce cultural erasure, reducing multi-layered ethnographic and cosmological concepts to superficial lexical approximations. Second, the combination of foreignization (borrowing/transliteration) and thick translation (descriptive expansion with paratextual annotation) yields the most culturally faithful and communicatively effective results for an international academic audience. Third, the performative dimension of Surkhandarya folklore — the fact that meaning is constituted not by lexical content alone but by the performative context of the *bakhshi* tradition — must be accounted for in any adequate translation framework. Fourth, the development of specialized bilingual glossaries and the training of deeply bicultural translators with expertise in both Uzbek southern dialects and English translation theory represent the most urgent practical priorities for improving the quality and consistency of future translations.

The translation of Surkhandarya folklore is, ultimately, an act of cultural diplomacy — a process through which the living intangible heritage of one of Central Asia's most ancient oasis civilizations is made accessible, without distortion



or erasure, to a global audience. The theoretical and practical framework developed in this article aims to contribute to the realization of that goal, ensuring that the "knowledge of the people" — the folk-lore of the Surkhon oasis — is not lost in translation but is amplified, with all its richness, on the world stage.

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