



STATUS OF AN UZBEK LANGUAGE. NATIONAL LITERATURE OF UZBEKISTAN AND ITS REPRESENTATIVES

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Annotation: This paper examines the current status of the Uzbek language and the development of national literature in the territory of modern Uzbekistan. It traces Uzbek's historical roots (from Chagatai to modern Northern Uzbek), outlines the language's official and sociolinguistic status since independence, summarizes the script reforms and present orthographic situation, and surveys major stages and representatives of Uzbek literature from Alisher Navoi (Chagatai tradition) to 20th–21st century authors (Abdulla Qodiriy, Cho'pon, Hamid Olimjon, Erkin Vohidov, Abdulla Oripov, and others). The article combines findings from legal documents, linguistic surveys, academic studies and literary histories to offer an integrated view of language policy, literary continuity, and contemporary challenges (script transition, digraphia, media and education). Key problems and prospects for Uzbek as a national language are discussed and substantiated with referenced sources.

Key words: Uzbek language, Uzbek literature, Alisher Navoi, Abdulla Qodiriy, language policy; state language; constitution of Uzbekistan; Ethnologue; modern Uzbek poetry; 20th-century Uzbek prose; national identity; literary canon; literary modernization; bilingualism; language planning; orthography; language vitality; contemporary Uzbek writers; translation movement.

1. Introduction — scope and methodology

This study synthesises legal texts, linguistic surveys, historical-literary scholarship and primary literary scholarship (monographs, journal articles, and selected digital archives) to describe the status of Uzbek and the main features and representatives of national literature. Where possible I cite primary legal documents (the Constitution and language laws), large-scale language surveys, digital archives of Uzbek literary history, and peer-reviewed or institutional publications. (Key factual claims — legal status, number-of-speakers estimates, script policy, and canonical literary claims — are referenced in the text.)

2. Historical background: from Chagatai to modern Uzbek

The literary and linguistic tradition of the region stretches back to medieval Turkic literary cultures. Chagatai (also called Old Uzbek or Chigatoy) served as the regional literary language for several centuries and is widely regarded as the principal ancestor of modern Uzbek literary practice; the greatest classical representative is 'Alī Shīr Navā'ī (Alisher Navoi, 1441–1501), who established a Turkic literary idiom and argued for Turkic vernacular literary prestige.

During the 19th–20th centuries, the vernaculars evolved into modern Northern and Southern Uzbek varieties; the 20th century saw the emergence of a modern Uzbek literary language (standardization, first modern novels and newspapers), strongly shaped by both Turkic grammatical patterns and Persian/Arabic lexical influence. The Soviet period brought major orthographic reforms (Latin → Cyrillic) and centralised language planning.

3. Legal and sociolinguistic status of Uzbek today

The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan explicitly establishes Uzbek as the state language: Article 4 states that “The state language of the Republic of Uzbekistan shall be Uzbek.” This constitutional provision anchors Uzbek’s legal status in the republican polity and underpins subsequent language policy.

Demographic and language-survey sources indicate that Uzbek is the largest Turkic language in Central Asia by speakers within Uzbekistan and extensive diaspora/neighboring use (tens of millions of speakers across Uzbekistan and in neighboring countries). Ethnologue and other language profiles list Uzbek (Northern

Uzbek) as the national/official language of Uzbekistan and provide speaker estimates used in planning and educational policy.

3.1 Script policy and orthography

Uzbek orthography has changed repeatedly in modern times: classical Perso-Arabic scripts (pre-1920s), an Arabic-based reform (yaña imlā, 1920s), an official Latin alphabet (Yañalif) in 1928, then Soviet-mandated Cyrillic from 1940, and since independence (1992) a transition back to Latin script. Despite official Latinization policies, Cyrillic remains widely used in print and everyday contexts, producing a digraphic situation (Latin + Cyrillic) in the media, education and public signage. Recent government adjustments to the Latin alphabet (e.g., proposals/updates in the late 2010s) reflect ongoing fine-tuning of orthography.

4. National literature — periods and defining features

Uzbek national literature is usually presented in broad periods:

1. Pre-Timurid and Timurid (classical): early Turkic and Chagatai poetry and prose; Alisher Navoi is the central figure of this epoch and is often treated as the “founder” of Turkic (Chagatai) literary prestige.

2. 19th–early 20th century: growth of modern vernacular prose, adoption of new genres (novel, drama), influence of Jadid reformers (educational-cultural modernizers), and increasing translation/interaction with Russian and European literatures.

3. Soviet period (1920s–1980s): institutionalization of Soviet literary institutions, rapid expansion of print culture, but also episodes of repression (e.g., the 1937–38 purges that targeted leading writers such as Cho‘lpon and Abdulla Qodiriy). Soviet-era literature combined nation-building themes with mandated socialist realism, while many writers sought to preserve local traditions.

4. Independence and contemporary literature (1991–present): renewed interest in classical heritage (Navoi, Chagatai literature), exploration of national identity, plurality of genres and experimental forms, and rapid digital/media dissemination. Recent scholarship discusses continuity and innovation in the post-Soviet literary scene.

5. Major representatives and their contribution

5.1 Alisher Navoi (1441–1501)

Alisher Navoi (Nizām-al-Dīn ‘Ali-Shir Herawī) is the crucial classical figure: a poet, polymath and statesman who wrote in Chagatai and Persian. Navoi’s Diwan and other poetic works established Chagatai’s suitability for high literary expression and are still read as foundational texts for Uzbek literary identity.

5.2 Abdulla Qodiriy (1894–1938)

Regarded as the father of the Uzbek novel, Qodiriy’s O‘tgan kunlar (Bygone Days) and later historical novels combined realist techniques with social critique and remain canonical in school curricula and literary histories. Qodiriy’s fate (arrest and execution in 1938) exemplifies the Soviet-era repression of several prominent intellectuals.

5.3 Cho‘lpon (Abdulhamid Yunusov, 1897–1938)

Cho‘lpon was a poet, novelist and translator (including early Uzbek translations of Shakespeare). He introduced realist and modernist tendencies and played a formative role in the 1920s–30s literary revival; like Qodiriy, he was a victim of the Great Purge.

5.4 20th-century poets and postwar literati

Figures such as Hamid Olimjon, Erkin Vohidov, Abdulla Oripov, and others are central to mid–late 20th century Uzbek poetry — blending lyricism, national themes and modernist poetics; their works shaped public culture (song, recitation, education) and post-independence literary memory. Recent criticism places these authors within debates on national identity and cultural continuity.

6. Areas of continuity and rupture in Uzbek literature

Continuity: strong respect for classical Chagatai heritage (Navoi) and the oral/folk tradition (epics, proverbs). Modern writers often reference or rework classical motifs; canonical texts remain central in education and cultural commemoration.

Rupture: Soviet-era ideological impositions and purges interrupted literary development and led to the loss/repression of key voices (1920s–1930s).



Independence brought renewed recovery of suppressed works and a revaluation of literary history.

7. Contemporary challenges and prospects

1. Orthographic/digraphic transition — implementing Latin orthography across education, administration, and publishing while many citizens and materials still use Cyrillic has been slow and uneven. This affects literacy materials, signage, and intergenerational transmission.

2. Bilingualism and Russian — Russian remains important in higher education,

science and city life; managing bilingualism while reinforcing Uzbek as state language is a policy priority.

3. Digitization and globalisation — new media (web, social networks, e-books) create opportunities for Uzbek-language publishing and diaspora engagement, but also require digital fonts/encoding solutions and harmonised orthographies.

8. Conclusion

Uzbek enjoys constitutionally protected status as Uzbekistan's state language and rests on a long, rich literary tradition from Chagatai classics to a vibrant modern literature. The national literature is shaped by both continuity (classical inheritance, folk genres) and rupture (Soviet interruptions). Contemporary priorities involve completing script transition in practice, expanding Uzbek-language higher education and media, and preserving and re-evaluating suppressed or marginalised works from the Soviet period. Addressing orthographic consistency and digital support will be crucial for the language's vitality in the 21st century.

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