

## UNTRANSLATABILITY IN TRANSLATION: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

**Kasimova Nafisa Farhadovna**

Doctor of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor,  
Bukhara State University

**Gafurjanova Ferangiz**

2nd-year student, Faculty of Foreign Languages,  
Bukhara State University

### Abstract

Translation is not merely the transfer of words from one language into another; it is an attempt to render meaning, style, and culture across linguistic borders. Yet, there are instances where elements of a source text resist direct transfer—these instances are known as "untranslatability." This article explores the concept of untranslatability, its types, and the challenges it poses, with special reference to English and Uzbek. It also examines the strategies translators use to overcome such obstacles, from equivalence and adaptation to borrowing and compensation. Through examples drawn from idioms, culture-bound terms, puns, and literature, the paper demonstrates how untranslatability can be addressed creatively, turning a seeming limitation into an opportunity for cultural enrichment and interpretive depth.

**Keywords:** translation, untranslatability, equivalence, adaptation, borrowing, compensation, idioms, culture-bound terms.

### Аннотация

Перевод — это не просто передача слов с одного языка на другой, а стремление передать смысл, стиль и культуру через языковые границы. Однако существуют случаи, когда элементы исходного текста оказываются неподдающимися прямому переносу — такие явления называются «непереводимостью». В статье рассматривается понятие непереводимости, её виды и возникающие трудности, особенно на материале английского и узбекского языков. Также анализируются стратегии, применяемые переводчиками для преодоления этих препятствий: эквивалентность, адаптация, заимствование и компенсация. На примерах идиом, культурно-специфических реалий, каламбуров и литературных текстов показано, как непереводимость может быть творчески преодолена и превращена из ограничения в возможность культурного обогащения и смысловой глубины.

**Ключевые слова:** перевод, непереводимость, эквивалентность, адаптация, заимствование, компенсация, идиомы, культурные реалии.

### Annotatsiya

Tarjima — bu soʻzlarni bir tildan ikkinchisiga koʻchirish emas, balki maʼno, uslub va madaniyatni til chegaralaridan oʻtkazishga urinishdir. Biroq ayrim hollarda matnning ayrim unsurlari bevosita koʻchirilmaydi — bunday hodisalar «tarjima qilib boʻlmilik» deb ataladi. Ushbu maqolada tarjima qilib boʻlmilik tushunchasi, uning turlari va yuzaga keladigan qiyinchiliklari, xususan, ingliz va oʻzbek tillari misolida tahlil qilinadi. Shuningdek, mualliflar tarjimonlar qoʻllaydigan strategiyalarni — ekvivalentlik, adaptatsiya, oʻzlashtirish va kompensatsiyani — koʻrib chiqadi. Idiomalar, madaniy tushunchalar, soʻz oʻyinlari va adabiy matnlar misolida, tarjima qilib boʻlmilik hodisasini ijodiy yondashuv orqali qanday yengish mumkinligi va uni cheklov emas, balki madaniy boyish hamda maʼno chuqurlashuv imkoniyati sifatida qarash mumkinligi yoritiladi.

**Kalit soʻzlar:** tarjima, tarjima qilib boʻlmaslik, ekvivalentlik, adaptatsiya, oʻzlashtirish, kompensatsiya, idiomalar, madaniy tushunchalar.

### ***Introduction***

Translation has often been described as an art, a science, and a craft. While it aspires to accuracy and faithfulness, translators frequently face situations where a perfect transfer of meaning, tone, and cultural resonance is impossible. This phenomenon, termed "*untranslatability*," has been widely discussed in translation studies.

Untranslatability arises when a concept, expression, or cultural reference in the source language has no exact counterpart in the target language. For example, the Uzbek phrase "*yuzing yorugʻ boʻlsin*"—used as a blessing—cannot be literally translated into English without sounding awkward. Conversely, the English idiom "*to have cold feet*" makes little sense in Uzbek if translated word for word.

Such difficulties are not limited to isolated idioms; they extend to culturally embedded terms, puns, wordplay, and poetic devices. The study of untranslatability is therefore crucial, not to lament what is "lost in translation," but to understand the strategies by which meaning can be negotiated.

This paper examines linguistic and cultural untranslatability, provides English–Uzbek examples, and reviews the strategies available to translators.

### ***Theoretical Background***

The term "*untranslatability*" has been defined by several scholars:

- **Catford (1965)** distinguished between *linguistic untranslatability* (due to differences in grammar, syntax, or vocabulary) and *cultural untranslatability* (due to cultural concepts not shared across languages).

- **Nida (1964)** emphasized the principle of *dynamic equivalence*, arguing that translation should aim for equivalent effect rather than word-for-word transfer.
- **Jakobson (1959)** classified translation into three types—intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic—and argued that meaning can always be transferred, but often through rewording or interpretation.

Thus, untranslatability is not absolute; rather, it highlights points where direct equivalence is unavailable. The translator's task is to find functional equivalence, cultural adaptation, or explanatory strategies to bridge the gap.

### ***Challenges of Untranslatability***

#### **a) Idioms and Phraseology**

Idioms are notoriously difficult to translate because their meanings are metaphorical, not literal.

- English: “*to get cold feet*” → literally “*oyoqlari sovib qoldi*” in Uzbek, which is meaningless. Correct rendering: “*qo‘rqib qolmoq*” (to get frightened).
- Uzbek: “*yuzing yorug‘ bo‘lsin*” → literally “*may your face be bright.*” In English, it becomes “*may you be fortunate*” or “*best wishes.*”

Here, literal translation fails, and cultural equivalence is required.

#### **b) Culture-Bound Terms**

Languages encode unique cultural concepts:

- Uzbek: *mahalla* (a traditional neighborhood community), *sumalak* (a spring festival dish), *dasturxon* (traditional dining spread).
- English: *brunch* (late breakfast), *pub* (public house/bar), *Thanksgiving*.

Such words often require borrowing with explanations, since there is no exact equivalent.

### c) Wordplay and Puns

Wordplay depends on homonyms, sound patterns, or double meanings that rarely survive translation.

- English: “*sole*” (fish vs. “only”) → impossible to reproduce in Uzbek.  
Uzbek: “*Til bilan tish orasida gap yo‘q.*” (literally “there is no distance between the tongue and teeth,” meaning secrets are easily revealed) → difficult to render in English with the same punning effect.

### d) Poetry and Literature

Poetic untranslatability is one of the greatest challenges. Rhyme, rhythm, and sound symbolism often resist transfer.

- Shakespeare’s plays employ puns, rhymes, and meter that lose effect in translation.
- Alisher Navoiy’s ghazals rely on internal rhyme and cultural imagery (nightingale, rose, wine) that may not resonate with English readers.



### *Strategies for Dealing with Untranslatability*

Translators have developed several methods:

1. **Equivalence**—finding the closest expression.
  - *Broken-hearted* → *yuragi ezildi*.
2. **Adaptation**—modifying to suit the target culture.
  - English “*as busy as a bee*” → Uzbek “*ariqday tinimsiz*” (like a canal, always flowing).
3. **Explanation/Footnotes** – adding clarifications.
  - *Mahalla* → “mahalla (a traditional Uzbek neighborhood community).”
4. **Borrowing**—keeping the original term.
  - *Dasturxon* → retained in English texts on Uzbek culture.
5. **Paraphrasing**—expanding meaning.
  - *Sumalak* → “a festive dish made from sprouted wheat, prepared during Navruz.”
6. **Compensation**—recreating the lost effect elsewhere.

- If a pun cannot be translated, another wordplay may be inserted in a nearby passage.

### *English–Uzbek Case Studies*

#### **Idiomatic Expressions**

- *To pull someone's leg* → not “*birining oyog‘ini tortmoq*,” but “*hazillashmoq*.”
- *Qo‘l qovushtirib turmoq* (to fold one's hands, meaning idleness) → not “*to fold one's hands*” in English, but “*to stand idly by*.”

#### **Proverbs**

- Uzbek: “*Yaxshi otga bir qamchi, yomon otga ming qamchi*.”  
→English: “*A word is enough for the wise*.”
- English: “*Don't cry over spilled milk*.” → Uzbek equivalent: “*O'tgan ishga salovat*.”

#### **Culture-Bound Words**

- *Mahalla* cannot be translated as simply “district” or “neighborhood,” because it carries connotations of social solidarity. Often

retained

with

explanation.

- *Pub*—in Uzbek, there is no exact equivalent; it is usually explained as “*bar*, *ichimlik* *uyi*.”

### Literature

- Translating Navoiy: “*Bulbulning nolasi gulning xandoniga to‘g‘ri keladi*” → “The nightingale’s lament corresponds to the rose’s smile.” Some imagery (rose, nightingale) is understood globally, but others are deeply tied to Sufi symbolism.
- Translating Shakespeare: the pun in *Romeo and Juliet* (“Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man”) is nearly impossible to reproduce in Uzbek.

### Discussion

Untranslatability demonstrates that translation is not a mechanical act but a negotiation of meaning. While some losses are inevitable, translators also have opportunities to enrich the target language and expose readers to new cultural concepts.

For English–Uzbek translation, cultural awareness is especially crucial. Many idioms, proverbs, and customs are not shared between the two languages. However, this challenge enhances creativity: translators may choose adaptation, borrowing, or compensation depending on context.

Ultimately, untranslatability is not a flaw but a natural part of cross-cultural communication. It reminds us that languages are unique, and perfect equivalence is often an illusion.



## Conclusion

Untranslatability is a central issue in translation studies, arising from differences in language structure, cultural concepts, idioms, and literary traditions. While it poses challenges, it also provides opportunities for creativity, cultural exchange, and linguistic enrichment.

English–Uzbek translation illustrates both the universality of human experience and the uniqueness of cultural expression. By employing strategies such as equivalence, adaptation, borrowing, and compensation, translators can bridge the gap, ensuring that what might otherwise be “lost in translation” is transformed into a meaningful, if different, expression.

For scholars, translators, and learners, untranslatability is not a barrier but a challenge to engage with language more deeply. It pushes us to appreciate diversity, cultivate sensitivity, and embrace creativity in the art of translation.

## References

- Baker, M. (2018). *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*. Routledge.
- Catford, J. C. (1965). *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. Oxford University Press.
- Jakobson, R. (1959). *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*. In R. A. Brower (Ed.), *On Translation* (pp. 232–239). Harvard University Press.
- Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating*. Brill.
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. Prentice Hall.

- Rakhmatullaev, Sh. (1995). *O'zbek frazeologiyasi*. Toshkent: O'qituvchi.
- Madvaliyev, A. (2008). *Frazeologiya masalalari*. Toshkent: Fan.
- Wray, A. (2002). *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*. Cambridge University Press.