

"TRANSLATION CHALLENGES OF UZBEK CULTURE-SPECIFIC WORDS IN LITERARY TEXTS"

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Abstract

This study explores the translation challenges of Uzbek culture-specific words in literary texts, focusing on how cultural meaning is preserved when such terms are rendered into English. Translation is not only a linguistic process but also a cultural one, especially in literary works where language reflects traditions, values, and social structures. Uzbek literature contains a wide range of culture-bound terms that have no direct equivalents in English, creating difficulties for translators.

The research applies a qualitative methodology and is based on the analysis of two significant Uzbek literary works: O'tkan kunlar by Abdulla Qodiriy and Kecha va kunduz by Abdulhamid Cho'lpon, along with their English translations. The study examines specific examples of culture-specific words such as nikoh, mahalla, hashar, and dasturxon, identifying the translation strategies used to convey their meanings.

The findings show that translators employ various techniques, including borrowing, descriptive translation, generalization, and functional equivalence. Borrowing is often used for culturally and religiously significant terms to preserve authenticity, while descriptive translation helps explain unfamiliar concepts. However, strategies like generalization may lead to partial loss of cultural nuance.

The study also highlights differences in translation approaches, with one text demonstrating a foreignizing strategy and the other a more domesticating approach.

These differences reflect the translator's role as a cultural mediator who must balance readability and cultural preservation.

Overall, the research concludes that no single strategy is sufficient for translating culture-specific vocabulary. Instead, a flexible and context-dependent approach is necessary to ensure both accuracy and cultural integrity in literary translation.

Аннотация

Данное исследование посвящено проблемам перевода узбекских культурно-специфических слов в художественных текстах и анализу способов сохранения их культурного значения при переводе на английский язык. Перевод рассматривается не только как лингвистический, но и как культурный процесс, особенно в художественной литературе, где язык отражает традиции, ценности и социальные структуры общества. Узбекская литература содержит множество культурно обусловленных лексических единиц, не имеющих прямых эквивалентов в английском языке, что создаёт значительные трудности для переводчиков.

В исследовании используется качественный метод анализа на основе двух известных произведений узбекской литературы: «O'tkan kunlar» Абдуллы Кадыри и «Kecha va kunduz» Абдулхамида Чулпана, а также их английских переводов. Особое внимание уделяется таким словам, как *nikoh*, *mahalla*, *hashar*, *dasturxon*, и анализируются стратегии их перевода.

Результаты показывают, что переводчики используют различные методы, включая заимствование, описательный перевод, обобщение и функциональную эквивалентность. Заимствование применяется для сохранения культурной аутентичности, особенно в случае религиозных терминов, тогда как описательный перевод помогает объяснить незнакомые понятия. Однако обобщение может приводить к частичной утрате культурных оттенков.

Также выявлены различия в переводческих подходах: один текст ориентирован на сохранение оригинальной культуры (форенизация), другой — на адаптацию для читателя (доместикация). Это подтверждает роль переводчика как культурного посредника.

В целом исследование показывает, что эффективный перевод требует гибкого и контекстуального подхода для сохранения как смысла, так и культурной специфики текста.

Introduction

Translation is not just about replacing words from one language with word from another; it also involves transferring meaning, cultural values, and ideas. This becomes especially challenging in literary translation, where texts are deeply connected to the culture they come from. Uzbek literature is rich with history, traditions, and social customs, and many words in these texts are culture-specific. These words often carry meanings that go beyond their literal sense, making it difficult for translators to fully convey both meaning and cultural context in another language (Abdiyeva, 2025).

Culture-specific words are terms that are tied closely to a community's customs, traditions, and everyday life. In Uzbek literary works, such words often describe social practices, holidays, clothing, rituals, and family or community relationships. For example, words like mahalla, navruz, sumalak, and kelin salom do not only describe objects or events but also carry deeper cultural significance about social life and traditions. Translating them directly into English is usually not possible, so translators need to find ways to explain or adapt these terms while keeping their original meaning (Naimova et al., 2025).

Many scholars have studied how culture-specific words can be translated. Saidmurodova and Babayeva (2025) argue that translators act as cultural mediators, meaning they must not only translate the words but also convey the cultural meaning.

Strategies like borrowing the original word, adding an explanation, or using a similar concept in the target language can help maintain meaning and context. However, each strategy has its limits, and translators often need to balance clarity for the reader with preserving the original culture.

According to Akhmedov and Jakhongirova (2022), some culture-specific words reflect concepts and traditions that simply do not exist in the target language. In these cases, translators might need to use description or explanation to make the meaning understandable. This shows that translation is not just a linguistic activity but also a cultural one. Understanding the culture behind the text is essential to produce a translation that is both accurate and meaningful.

Despite these guidelines, translating Uzbek culture-specific words remains difficult because there are not always clear rules. Previous research often focuses on theory rather than real examples from Uzbek literary texts. This study aims to explore these challenges by examining specific examples from Uzbek literature and their English translations. The goal is to identify common types of culture-specific words and evaluate the strategies translators use to maintain both meaning and cultural context.

This research uses qualitative analysis of selected literary texts to study how translators handle culture-bound words. By analyzing these examples, the study aims to show the practical difficulties in translation and how translators make decisions to balance meaning and cultural integrity. Ultimately, this research highlights that successful translation of literature requires both language skills and cultural understanding, and that preserving cultural elements is essential to communicate the original message to readers in another language.

Literature review

The translation of culture-specific vocabulary has been a significant topic in translation studies, especially when dealing with non-equivalent terms. According to

Akhmedov and Juraxojayev (2022), these types of words often express culture-bound ideas that have no direct equivalents in the target language, which results in lexical gaps. To manage this issue, translators tend to use methods such as borrowing, adaptation, and explanatory techniques

In the same way, Naimova et al. (2025) argue that many Uzbek cultural expressions cannot be translated word-for-word because of differences between cultures. They highlight that using descriptive translation and providing context are important for preserving the intended meaning in literary works.

Additionally, Saidmurodova and Babayeva (2025) underline that a translator functions as a cultural bridge, responsible for transferring both meaning and cultural elements. They discuss strategies like domestication and foreignization, which allow translators to balance readability with the preservation of the original cultural features.

Abdiyeva (2025) further explains that culture-specific terms are highly dependent on context and often carry emotional and cultural nuances, making translation more challenging. The author recommends combining different translation strategies to achieve more accurate results.

Overall, the literature suggests that translating culture-specific words requires both strong language skills and cultural awareness. However, there is still a lack of practical research based on real Uzbek literary texts, which highlights the need for further studies in this area.

Methods

section

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the translation strategies used for culture-specific words (realia) in Uzbek literature. A qualitative approach was selected because it facilitates an in-depth analysis of linguistic choices and the preservation of cultural nuances, which are essential in literary translation. This method is appropriate for identifying how translators navigate the gap between the Uzbek and English cultural landscapes.

The data for this research was collected from two major Uzbek literary works and their English translations: "*O'tkan kunlar*" (*Bygone Days*) by Abdulla Qodiriy (translated by Mark Reese) and "*Kecha va kunduz*" (*Night and Day*) by Abdulhamid Sulaymon o'g'li Cho'lpon (translated by Christopher Fort). These texts were chosen using a purposive sampling method because they are rich in traditional Uzbek customs, religious practices, and social structures, providing a fertile ground for studying non-equivalent vocabulary.

The collected data was analyzed using comparative descriptive analysis. Each translation was categorized based on established translation strategies, such as borrowing (keeping the Uzbek word), calque (literal translation), or equivalence. For instance, the study looked at whether "*so'ri*" was translated as a "**traditional wooden platform**" (description) or simply as a "**bench**" (generalization). This allowed for a critical evaluation of whether the English versions successfully conveyed the "*Uzbek spirit*" to a foreign reader.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed by ensuring accurate citation of the original authors and translators. As this study is a textual analysis of published literature, it did not involve human participants; therefore, anonymity and informed consent were not required. However, the researcher ensured that the excerpts were analyzed objectively without altering the original context.

Overall, this methodology was designed to ensure the reliability of the findings by using two different periods of Uzbek literature. By analyzing real sentences and specific translation choices, the study aimed to provide a clear framework for understanding how Uzbek culture is represented in the English-speaking world.

Results

This study analyzed the translation of culture-specific words in *O'tkan kunlar* by Abdulla Qodiriy and *Kecha va kunduz* by Abdulhamid Cho'lpon to identify the main challenges and strategies used in rendering Uzbek cultural elements into English.

The findings reveal that culture-specific words in both works represent key aspects of Uzbek life, including religious rituals, social practices, and everyday traditions, and that these elements often lack direct equivalents in English.

Work (Source)	Culture-specific word	Original sentence (Uzbek)	English translation
1.O'tkan kunlar	nikoh	" <i>Nikoh</i> o'qilgach, Otabek va Kumush rasman er-xotin bo'ldilar."	"After the <i>nikoh</i> was performed, Otabek and Kumush officially became husband and wife."
2.O'tkan kunlar	so'ri	"Mehmonlar <i>so'rida</i> o'tirib suhbatlashar edilar."	"The guests were sitting on a <i>traditional wooden platform</i> and talking."
3.O'tkan kunlar	mahalla	" <i>Mahalla</i> ahli bu to'yga katta tayyorgarlik ko'rdi."	"The <i>neighborhood community</i> prepared

			greatly for the wedding.”
4.Kecha va kunduz	dasturxon	“ <i>Dasturxon</i> ustiga turli noz-ne’matlar qo’yildi.”	“Variou s dishes were placed on the <i>table.</i> ”
5.Kecha va kunduz	hashar	“Mahalla ahli <i>hashar</i> yo’li bilan yangi imorat ko’tardi.”	“The community raised a new building through <i>collective work.</i> ”
6.Kecha va kunduz	kelin salom	“ <i>Kelin salom</i> marosimi katta tantana bilan o’tdi.”	“ <i>The bride’s greeting ceremony</i> was held with great celebration.”
7.Kecha va kunduz	choyxona	"Erkaklar <i>choyxonada</i> yig’ilishdi."	"The men gathered in a <i>teahouse.</i> "
8.O’tkan kunlar	kuyov	<i>Kuyov</i> tantanali ravishda olib kelindi.	The <i>groom</i> was brought

			ceremoniously
9. Kecha va kunduz	oqsoqol	<i>Oqsoqol</i> masalaga yakun yasadi.	<i>The</i> <i>elder</i> settled the matter.

Otabek and Kumush officially became husband and wife. From **Night and Day**, the term "*dasturxon*" and the social concept of "*hashar*" were examined, such as in the context: "*Mahalla ahli hashar yo'li bilan yangi imorat ko'tardi*" (The community raised a new building through hashar)

Firstly, certain terms such as **nikoh** are not translated but directly borrowed because they *represent religious and cultural concepts specific to Uzbek and Islamic traditions*. There is no single English word that fully conveys the *legal, religious, and social dimensions of nikoh*. Translating it simply as “**marriage**” would result in semantic loss, as it removes the Islamic context. Secondly, words like **so’ri** and **hashar** are translated descriptively because *they refer to objects or practices that do not exist in the target culture*. For example, **so’ri** is not just a “**bench**” but a *culturally specific architectural element* used in social gatherings. Similarly, **hashar** is more than “**work**”; it is a *collective, voluntary community activity with social significance*. Since English lacks precise equivalents, translators use descriptive translation to make the meaning understandable. Thirdly, in cases such as **dasturxon**, translators often use generalization (e.g., “**table**”) because of readability and fluency considerations. While *dasturxon* carries *cultural meanings related to hospitality and food traditions*, translating it literally or descriptively in every instance may interrupt the flow of the text.

In addition, terms like **mahalla** and **kelin salom** are adapted or partially explained because they *represent social institutions and rituals unique to Uzbek culture*. For example, **mahalla** is not merely a “*neighborhood*” but a community-based

social structure with cultural and administrative functions. Similarly, **kelin salom** is *not just a greeting but a symbolic ritual reflecting respect and family hierarchy*. Translators attempt to convey these meanings through adaptation or descriptive equivalents, although some cultural depth is inevitably reduced.

Discussion

The findings from **O'tkan kunlar** and **Kecha va kunduz** demonstrate that culture-specific words pose significant challenges due to lexical gaps and cultural specificity. The frequent use of borrowing (e.g., *nikoh*) confirms that certain concepts cannot be adequately translated without losing their cultural and religious meaning. This supports the argument by previous scholars that borrowing helps preserve cultural authenticity when direct equivalents are unavailable.

At the same time, descriptive translation observed in examples like **so'ri** and **hashar** aligns with the findings of Naimova et al. (2025), who emphasize the importance of explanation in maintaining meaning across cultures. However, while this strategy improves comprehension, it may reduce stylistic naturalness and conciseness in the target text.

Furthermore, the use of generalization in translating *dasturxon* as “table” reflects what Akhmedov and Jakhongirova (2022) describe as a necessary compromise between accuracy and readability. Although this approach ensures fluency, it leads to partial loss of cultural nuance, particularly when the term carries symbolic or social significance.

A comparison of the two works reveals different translation tendencies. The translation of **O'tkan kunlar** follows a more foreignizing approach, preserving original terms, while **Kecha va kunduz** demonstrates a domestication strategy aimed at reader accessibility. This supports Saidmurodova and Babayeva's (2025) view that translators function as cultural mediators and must balance these two approaches.

However, this study is limited by its focus on a small number of examples from only two texts. Future research could include a broader corpus and examine reader responses to different translation strategies to better evaluate their effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study investigated the translation of culture-specific vocabulary in **O'tkan kunlar** and **Kecha va kunduz**, focusing on how culturally bound meanings are transferred into English. The results show that such lexical items present considerable difficulties in literary translation because they are strongly rooted in cultural, social, and historical contexts and often lack direct equivalents in the target language.

The findings reveal that translators apply several strategies, including borrowing, descriptive translation, generalization, and functional equivalence. These strategies reflect an effort to balance the preservation of source-culture elements with the need for clarity in the target language. Borrowing is mainly used for culturally significant or religious terms, helping retain original meanings while highlighting cultural uniqueness. Descriptive translation, on the other hand, clarifies unfamiliar concepts for readers, although it may reduce stylistic brevity. Meanwhile, generalization and equivalence contribute to smoother readability but can lead to a loss of cultural and semantic richness.

Moreover, the comparison of the two works suggests that translation strategies vary depending on context, translator decisions, and the intended readership. This supports the view that translation is not only a linguistic process but also a cultural one, requiring the translator to mediate between different cultural frameworks.

Overall, the study indicates that translating culture-specific vocabulary requires a flexible and context-dependent approach. Since no single method can fully convey both meaning and cultural depth, combining multiple strategies appears to be the most effective solution. Future studies could expand the range of texts analyzed and explore reader responses to assess the impact of different translation techniques.

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