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TRANSLATING REALIA IN ENGLISH SUBTITLES OF UZBEK HISTORICAL FILMS

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Abstract: This study investigates the translation of realia in the English subtitles of Uzbek historical films, focusing on the preservation of national and cultural identity in audiovisual translation. The research is based on a corpus of the Uzbek film Elparvar (lit. translation: People's Protector, released internationally as Born Out of the Ashes in 2019) and aims to identify the translation procedures employed in rendering culturally specific items into English. The study adopts a linguocultural approach and draws on Vinay and Darbelnet's model of translation procedures as its theoretical framework. Particular attention is paid to historical-political, military, religious, social, ethnographic, geographical, and anthroponymic realia occurring in the source texts.

The findings demonstrate that borrowing, equivalence, adaptation, explicitation, generalization, and omission are the most frequently employed translation procedures. While borrowing and functional equivalence contribute to preserving national colour and historical atmosphere, generalization and adaptation often lead to the neutralization of ethnographic and axiological meanings embedded in culture-specific items. In some cases, omission and simplification result in the loss of pragmatic and emotional effects conveyed in the original dialogues. The study also reveals that the multimodal nature of audiovisual texts and the spatial and temporal constraints of subtitling significantly affect translators' decisions. It is argued that the combination of borrowing and concise explicitation provides a more effective strategy for preserving cultural specificity and ensuring comprehensibility for target audiences. The results contribute to audiovisual translation studies and provide insights into the translation of culture-bound elements in Uzbek historical films.

Keywords: audiovisual translation, subtitle translation, realia, Uzbek historical films, linguocultural units, translation procedures, cultural specificity, national colour.

Introduction

Audiovisual translation has become one of the most dynamic fields of translation studies due to the rapid development of digital media and the growing circulation of films across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Among the various forms of audiovisual translation, subtitling occupies a special place because it enables international audiences to access foreign-language films while preserving the original soundtrack. However, subtitle translation is constrained by spatial and temporal limitations, which often compel translators to condense information and make difficult decisions regarding culture-specific items. As a result, the translation of realia remains one of the most challenging issues in audiovisual translation, since such elements embody the historical, social, and cultural identity of a particular community.

Realia are generally understood as culture-bound lexical units denoting objects, institutions, customs, social relations, and phenomena characteristic of a specific nation or historical period. According to Vlahov and Florin, these units carry national and historical connotations and often lack direct equivalents in the target language. Consequently, their translation requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural mediation. In subtitle translation, this task becomes even more complex because the translator must preserve both semantic content and cultural colouring while complying with technical restrictions.

The translation of culture-specific elements has been extensively discussed in translation studies. Vinay and Darbelnet proposed a set of translation procedures, including borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation, which have become fundamental tools for analyzing translation solutions. Later studies by Newmark, Pedersen, Gottlieb, and Venuti further emphasized the role of cultural references and the balance between domestication and foreignization in audiovisual translation. Despite the growing body of research on subtitling and culture-specific items, the translation of Uzbek realia into English remains largely underexplored, particularly in the context of historical films.

This study focuses on the English subtitles of Elparvar, an Uzbek historical drama depicting the final years of the Khwarazmian state during the Mongol invasion. The film narrates the story of Muqbil, known as Haqqu (Phoenix), his father Abduvohid, and their struggle between personal aspirations and loyalty to their homeland in a period marked by war, honour, and sacrifice. Set against the backdrop of medieval Central Asia, the film contains a rich variety of historical, military, religious, ethnographic, geographical, and anthroponymic realia that reflect the cultural memory and national identity of the Uzbek people. These culture-specific elements constitute an important component of the film's historical atmosphere and linguistic worldview.

The aim of this study is to examine the translation procedures employed in rendering Uzbek realia into English subtitles in Elparvar. Drawing on Vinay and Darbelnet's model, the study analyzes the ways historical and ethnographic realia are transferred into English and evaluates the extent to which national colour and cultural meanings are preserved or neutralized. Particular attention is paid to cases where translation strategies lead to semantic reduction, cultural loss, or successful preservation of historical and cultural specificity. The findings are expected to contribute to audiovisual translation studies and to provide insights into the translation of culture-bound elements in Uzbek historical cinema.

Literature Review. The translation of culture-specific elements has long been recognized as one of the central issues in translation studies, since language and culture constitute an inseparable whole. Vlahov and Florin (1980) introduced the concept of realia as lexical units denoting objects, institutions, customs, and phenomena specific to a particular nation or historical period. According to the authors, realia possess strong national and historical connotations and frequently lack direct equivalents in the target language, which makes their translation a challenging task (1980, pp. 47-48). Consequently, translators are required not only to transfer linguistic meaning but also to mediate cultural information.

A systematic account of translation procedures was proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), who distinguished between two broad translation strategies: direct translation and oblique translation. Direct translation comprises borrowing, calque, and literal translation, whereas oblique translation includes transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation. According to the authors, translators resort to direct procedures when structural and semantic correspondence exists between the source and target languages, while oblique procedures are employed when literal rendering fails to convey the intended meaning or cultural effect (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995, pp. 30–40). Similarly, Newmark (1988) emphasized that cultural references constitute one of the greatest obstacles to translation and suggested procedures such as transference, descriptive equivalence, and functional equivalence to bridge cultural gaps between source and target audiences (1988, pp. 94–103).

The issue of culture-specific references has become particularly important in audiovisual translation, where linguistic transfer is subject to technical constraints. Gottlieb (1994) described subtitling as a form of diagonal translation characterized by condensation and reduction, while Pedersen (2011) proposed a taxonomy of strategies for rendering extralinguistic cultural references, including retention, specification, generalization, substitution, and omission. Venuti (1995), in turn, highlighted the tension between domestication and foreignization, arguing that translators

constantly negotiate between preserving cultural otherness and facilitating comprehension for target audiences.

A significant contribution to the linguocultural dimension of audiovisual translation was made by Matasov (2009), who examined the translation of film and video materials from linguistic, cultural, and didactic perspectives. He emphasized that audiovisual translation should not be viewed solely as a linguistic operation, since films represent complex semiotic structures in which verbal and non-verbal signs interact to create meaning. According to Matasov, the translator must take into account not only lexical meaning but also cultural associations, historical context, visual information, and audience expectations. He argues that the translation of audiovisual texts requires a linguocultural approach capable of preserving the communicative and cultural value of the original.

Within Uzbek translation studies, the linguocultural aspects of audiovisual translation have received increasing scholarly attention. In particular, Alimova (2026) investigated the linguocultural features of lexical units in audiovisual texts and demonstrated that culture-specific items, forms of address, phraseological expressions, and national realia constitute important markers of ethnic identity. Her study revealed that the translation of such units requires consideration of their semantic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions. Alimova also stressed that linguistic units in audiovisual discourse function in close interaction with visual and acoustic codes, which makes the translation process inherently multimodal and culturally conditioned.

Despite the growing interest in audiovisual translation and linguocultural studies, the translation of Uzbek historical realia into English subtitles remains largely unexplored. Existing research has mainly focused on European languages or general issues of audiovisual translation, while the historical and ethnographic elements embedded in Uzbek cinema have received limited attention. In particular, there is a lack of corpus-based studies devoted to the translation of historical-political, military, religious, social, geographical, and anthroponymic realia in Uzbek historical films. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining the English subtitles of Elparvar, an Uzbek historical drama rich in culture-specific elements. Drawing on Vinay and Darbelnet's framework, the study aims to identify the translation procedures employed in rendering Uzbek realia into English and to evaluate the extent to which national colour and historical-cultural meanings are preserved or neutralized in subtitle translation.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the English subtitles of Elparvar reveals that the translation of Uzbek realia and culture-specific expressions involves various procedures aimed at balancing comprehensibility and the preservation of national colour. Since subtitle translation is constrained by time and space limitations, translators frequently resort to adaptation, generalization, explicitation, borrowing, and omission. Although these procedures facilitate communication for international audiences, they often result in the partial neutralization of the historical and cultural meanings embedded in linguocultural units.

One illustrative example concerns the translation of religious and ethnographic expressions in the following dialogue:

ST:

– Assalomu alaykum.
– Va alaykum assalom. Qolganlar qayerda?
– Hasharda, Mergan bobo qurilish boshlagan.
– Hashar?

TT:

– Good afternoon.
– Good afternoon. Where is everyone?
– They are all helping Aksakal build. [Elparvar. Dir. A.G'aniyev. Uzbekfilm, 2018. 07:44]

The analysis demonstrates the application of several translation procedures simultaneously. The Islamic greeting formulas *Assalomu alaykum* and *Va alaykum assalom* are rendered as *Good afternoon*, which represents an instance of adaptation in Vinay and Darbelnet's terminology. Although this solution preserves the communicative function of greeting, it neutralizes the religious and cultural connotations associated with Islamic etiquette. Nevertheless, considering the multimodal nature of audiovisual texts, viewers can still hear the original greetings in the soundtrack, which partially compensates for the loss of linguistic information.

Another significant example is the rendering of *hashar*, an important ethnographic realia referring to collective voluntary work based on mutual assistance and communal solidarity. Instead of preserving the culture-specific term, the subtitle reads *They are all helping Aksakal build*, which involves generalization combined with partial explicitation. While the denotative meaning of cooperation is maintained, the social and ethnographic implications associated with *hashar* are lost. Furthermore, Abduvohid's surprised reaction (*Hashar?)* is completely omitted, resulting in the reduction of emotional and pragmatic effects. Therefore, although the communicative message remains understandable, the national colour is considerably weakened.

From a linguocultural perspective, a more appropriate translation would be:

– Assalamu alaykum!

– Wa alaykum assalam! Where is everyone?

– They're at the hashar – the community work. Mergan Bobo has started building.

– Hashar?

Such a solution combines borrowing with concise explicitation and allows the translator to preserve the cultural identity of the source text without sacrificing intelligibility.

Another example demonstrates how historical and stylistic colouring may be preserved or neutralized in subtitle translation:

ST:

– Men senga na xon, na qul, na do'st va na dushmaningman! … Otangman!

– Ma'zur tuting, ota, ma'zur tuting.

TT:

– I am no the Khan, not a slave, a friend, not the enemy! I'm your father.

– I'm sorry, father [Elparvar. Dir. A.G'aniyev. Uzbekfilm, 2018. 11:36].

The historical title *xon* is transferred into English as *Khan* through borrowing, successfully preserving its historical and cultural associations. This example demonstrates that borrowing may effectively maintain national colour and historical atmosphere. In contrast, the expression *Ma'zur tuting, ota, ma'zur tuting* is reduced to *I'm sorry, father*, which neutralizes several stylistic and pragmatic features of the original. In Uzbek, *ma'zur tuting* represents not merely an apology but also a marker of traditional politeness and respect characteristic of classical speech. Moreover, the repetition intensifies the emotional state of the speaker and reinforces the atmosphere of humility and supplication. These nuances are absent from the English subtitle, where the colloquial expression *I'm sorry* conveys only the basic semantic content. From the perspective of linguocultural equivalence, expressions such as *Forgive me, Father, forgive me or Pardon me, Father, pardon me* would better reproduce the emotional force, repetitive structure, and historical stylistic colouring of the original dialogue. Consequently, this example illustrates that borrowing contributes to preserving historical realia, whereas simplification and stylistic neutralization may lead to the loss of emotional and cultural information. Overall, the findings suggest that subtitle translators constantly negotiate between technical constraints and the need to preserve linguocultural specificity, and that borrowing accompanied by moderate explicitation often provides the most effective strategy for maintaining national and historical colour.

Another example demonstrates the interaction of equivalence, modulation, and generalization in the translation of historical and gender-related linguocultural units:

ST:

– Sen nimalar qilib yuribsan, ovsar? Yov kelsa, qalamingni ro'kach qilasanmi? Shamshirni ol, menga hamla qil!

– Qurol tutmaslikka ahdim bor.

– Sen yigitmi yo xonqiz?

TT:

– Look what you're doing with your life, you fool! If you're attacked by an enemy, will you wave a feather?! You'll need to use a sword!

– I swore not to ever hold a gun.

– Are you a guy or a girl?! [Elparvar. Dir. A.G'aniyev. 2018. 15:10]

The translation of this dialogue illustrates the use of several procedures in rendering culture-bound expressions. Abduvohid's sarcastic question *Yov kelsa, qalamingni ro'kach qilasanmi?* is rendered as *If you're attacked by an enemy, will you wave a feather?!* Through modulation and functional equivalence, the image of *qalam* ('pen'), associated with writing and scholarship, is recreated by means of *feather*, alluding to a quill pen. This solution successfully preserves the ironic tone and the contrast between intellectual pursuits and martial values embodied in the original dialogue. However, the subsequent expression *Sen yigitmi yo xonqiz?* is translated as *Are you a guy or a girl?!*, which represents a case of generalization and partial adaptation. In the historical-cultural context of Uzbek society, *xonqiz* denotes far more than simply "a girl." It refers to a khan's daughter brought up in luxury and comfort, associated with delicacy, dependence, and distance from military life. Within the context of the scene, the expression functions not as a reference to gender but as a harsh insult questioning courage, masculinity, and warrior virtues. Consequently, the lexical item *girl* fails to convey the pragmatic force and cultural associations embedded in the source text.

From a linguocultural perspective, translations such as *Are you a warrior or some pampered princess?* or *Are you a man or a pampered khan's daughter?* would more adequately reproduce both the historical connotations and the emotional intensity of the original utterance. While the former employs adaptation to achieve a similar pragmatic effect, the latter combines borrowing and explicitation to preserve the historical colouring of the source culture. This example demonstrates that although modulation and equivalence can successfully recreate figurative expressions, excessive generalization may result in the loss of important cultural and pragmatic meanings encoded in historical realia.

Conclusion

The analysis of the English subtitles of *Elparvar* demonstrates that the translation of Uzbek historical realia involves a continuous negotiation between cultural preservation and communicative accessibility. The findings reveal that borrowing, equivalence, modulation, adaptation, generalization, explicitation, and omission are the principal procedures employed in rendering culture-specific items. Among these, borrowing and functional equivalence prove to be the most effective strategies for preserving historical atmosphere and national colour, whereas generalization and adaptation frequently lead to the neutralization of ethnographic and axiological meanings embedded in realia.

The study further shows that religious formulas and ethnographic terms, such as *Assalomu alaykum* and *hashar*, are often adapted or generalized in the subtitles, resulting in the loss of Islamic and communal associations characteristic of Uzbek culture. Similarly, historical and gender-related realia, exemplified by *xonqiz*, undergo semantic reduction, which weakens their pragmatic force and cultural implications. By contrast, the transliteration of titles such as *Khan* and other culture-bound items contributes to maintaining the historical authenticity of the source text.

Another important finding concerns the role of stylistic and emotional features. Repetition, forms of address, and expressions characteristic of traditional Uzbek discourse are frequently

simplified in subtitle translation. Although such transformations facilitate readability and comply with the spatial and temporal constraints of subtitling, they often diminish the emotional intensity and stylistic colouring of the original dialogues.

The analysis indicates that the combination of borrowing with concise explicitation provides a more adequate solution for translating Uzbek historical realia into English. Such a strategy allows translators to preserve culture-specific meanings while ensuring comprehensibility for international audiences. Therefore, the translation of realia in historical films should not be limited to lexical equivalence alone but should also take into account their historical, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions. The findings of this study contribute to audiovisual translation studies by highlighting the importance of linguocultural considerations in subtitle translation and by providing practical insights into the transfer of Uzbek historical and ethnographic realia into English.

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