

## CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING NAVOI'S WORKS INTO ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** Alisher Navoi (1441–1501) is the cornerstone of Uzbek literary heritage, yet rendering his classical Turkic (Chagatai) texts into English poses complex problems. This article examines linguistic, lexical, cultural, and poetic challenges in translating Navoi's works, including archaic vocabulary, Sufi symbolism, and strict metrical forms. Using a comparative analysis of existing translations, the study identifies key difficulties and illustrates them with examples from Navoi's ghazals. We discuss translator strategies, such as balancing fidelity and

creativity, and propose best practices (e.g. explanatory notes, adaptive meter) to preserve Navoi's intent. The findings underscore that, as scholars note, maintaining the *cultural and linguistic richness* of Navoi's poetry is crucial for meaningful English renditions.

**Keywords:** Alisher Navoi; translation studies; linguistic challenges; cultural nuances; poetic form; lexical gaps; Uzbek literature

### Introduction

Alisher Navoi, the 15th-century poet-statesman, founded Uzbek (Chagatai) literature and remains culturally iconic in Central Asia. His magnum opus *Khamsa* and lyrical *divans* are rich in metaphor, Arabic–Persian loanwords, and Sufi allusions. Translating Navoi into English is therefore not only a linguistic exercise but a cultural one. Recent scholarship notes a growing interest in rendering Uzbek classics abroad, but also warns that “translation challenges cultural untranslatability, lexical gaps, stylistic strategies remain formidable”. This article surveys the **translation issues** specific to Navoi's works, reviews methodological approaches, and discusses solutions.

### Methodology

This study employs qualitative comparative analysis of Navoi's original poems and their English translations. We draw on published translations by Uzbek scholars (e.g. Sultonova's *Selected Ghazels of Navoi*, 2015) and by foreign translators (e.g. English versions of Navoi's ghazals). Following Shermamatova (2024), we adopt a cross-cultural lens to assess how linguistic nuances and cultural meanings are rendered. In practice, we analyze representative passages (e.g. a ghazal verse) and consult translation theory on literary and poetic texts. This comparative textual method highlights where translations succeed or falter in conveying Navoi's intent.

### Linguistic and Lexical Challenges

Navoi's language is deeply historicized and polysynthetic. Translators face **archaisms and specialized terms** that lack English equivalents. For example, many Persian and Arabic borrowings in Navoi (e.g. *fano*, *bolaji*, *ijozat*) convey social or spiritual concepts unfamiliar to general readers. Literal glosses often fail to capture their full connotations. Azizkhojayeva and Ibrat (2025) note that such *lexical gaps* are “formidable” obstacles.

- **Loanwords and Archaisms:** Navoi's texts include honorifics and medieval Islamic terms (e.g. *hikmat*, *maqam*). A translator may leave some terms untranslated with footnotes, or substitute modern analogs, but these risks losing nuance.

- **Metaphorical Expressions:** Navoi's poetry abounds in cultural metaphors (e.g. “*nightingale and rose*” for lover and beloved). These may be unintelligible without context. The translator must decide whether to explain (with notes) or adapt them (sometimes choosing a different image in English).

- **Syntax and Word Order:** Chagatai syntax allows long, ornate constructions. English often requires breaking these into shorter clauses, which can disrupt flow or poetry.

Addressing these issues typically involves compromise. Some translators opt for *dynamic equivalence*, prioritizing sense over literal wording. Others use intermediary strategies (as Shermamatova observes, translators vary widely in approach). Regardless, preserving Navoi's thematic meaning while finding natural English phrasing remains key.

### Cultural and Poetic Challenges

**Cultural Context:** Navoi's imagery is rooted in Central Asian and Islamic culture. Symbols like wine, tavern, or beloved's eyes carry Sufi allegorical meanings. An English reader unfamiliar with these traditions may miss implications. For instance, "wine" in Navoi's ghazals often signifies divine love, not literal intoxication. Translators often handle this by adding *explanatory notes* or slightly altering wording (e.g. *spiritual wine*). Shermamatova emphasizes the translator's task to "maintain the cultural and linguistic richness of Navoi's poetry".

**Poetic Form:** Navoi composed many ghazals, which follow strict rhyme (**qāfiya**) and refrain (**radif**) patterns, and use the classical *arūd* meter. English lacks a comparable quantitative meter, so preserving the original form is nearly impossible. Shukurova (2016) points out that poetic translation must aim for "*similarity (but not sameness)*" – i.e. capturing artistic effect even if form changes. Rhyme is especially challenging: forcing an English rhyme can distort meaning, while forgoing rhyme can lose musicality.

For example, consider one Navoi couplet: "*Qoshi yosinmi deyin, ko'zi qarosinmi deyin? / Ko'ngluma har birining dardu balosinmu deyin?*" (Uzbek). One English rendering by A. Ivanov was literal: "Should I say that she's black-eyed, and eyebrows highly knitted as a bow...?" Sultanova (2015) instead translated it as:

*"Of her eyebrows bowed or of her eyes so black as night I'd care,  
Or of the smart and pains each gives my heart should I care?"*

Sultanova's version abandons strict rhyme but preserves Navoi's *metaphor* and questioning tone. Critics note this English variant is "closer to the ST [source text] in all spheres" than the Russian literalism. This example highlights the trade-off between form and meaning.

Key issues in this category include:

- *Figurative Language:* Similes and symbols (e.g. comparing eyebrows to a bow) may lack direct parallels. Translators often choose creative equivalents in English to retain imagery.
- *Meter and Rhyme:* English translators may use free verse or slant-rhyme to echo original cadence. Shukurova stresses a "critical approach" to transferring rhyme, focusing on imagery functions.
- *Voice and Tone:* Navoi's style ranges from courtly praise to mystical piety. Some nuances (e.g. irony, humility) can be obscured if translators impose English poetic conventions.

In summary, cultural background and poetic constraints make Navoi a *translation puzzle*. As Azizkhoyeva and Ibrat observe, even with increased translation efforts, the task of carrying Navoi's stylistic essence across languages "remains formidable".

## Results and Discussion

Our comparative review shows consistent patterns. Translators must constantly balance *fidelity* versus *readability*. Shermamatova's study of various English ghazals finds that approaches range from literal word-for-word to free re-interpretation, but **all recognize the need to convey cultural meaning**. Many English editions include translator notes explaining context, which aids comprehension but can interrupt poetic flow.

Similarly, Shukurova's analysis indicates that no translation can be identical: "TP (target poem) approaches ST (source text) but cannot copy it". In practice:

- **Lexical Issues:** Translators often gloss complex words or borrow terms (e.g. "*qāzī*" or "*yağma*") with brief explanations. This maintains the original flavor but may slow reading.
- **Cultural References:** Explanatory footnotes are common for historical or religious references (e.g. Uzun Hasan, or Sufi concepts like "*fānā*"). Some editions add a glossary.

- **Stylistic Tone:** When forced to drop rhyme, translators emphasize the emotional tone through diction and syntax. Alternatively, they may impose end-words to mimic Navoi's *rhythmic repetition*.

- **Example Summary:** In the eyebrow/eyes couplet above, Sultanova's creative English preserves meaning, while Ivanov's literal translation lost the gentle tone (the Russian version even made the beloved seem "furious" to onlookers). This shows how translation choices affect a reader's perception of Navoi's "voice".

These observations align with broader findings: as Azizkhoyeva and Ibrat noted, key challenges are *cultural untranslatability* and *lexical gaps*. Shermamatova likewise highlights that the translator's strategy must account for "cultural nuances" and strive to reflect them in English.

### Solutions and Best Practices

To address these challenges, translators of Navoi's works should adopt a combination of strategies:

- **Dynamic Equivalence:** Prioritize conveying semantic and emotional content over literal form. This may involve paraphrasing or splitting long lines for clarity, while retaining metaphoric references.

- **Explanatory Apparatus:** Include translator's notes, glossaries, or introductions to explain historical context and symbols. As one scholar advises, translators should aim to "convey the national spirit of creativity" even if footnoting is necessary.

- **Poetic Adaptation:** Use free verse or gentle rhyme to mirror the original's poetic feel without forcing unnatural English rhymes. In some cases, slight alterations (e.g. selecting a different symbol with similar connotation) can preserve poetic effect.

- **Collaborative Effort:** Work with subject-matter experts (literary scholars, historians) to ensure accuracy in cultural references. Dual-reader (bilingual) reviews can catch subtle losses of meaning.

- **Translator Training:** As a methodological note, translators should be well-versed in Turkic classical poetry and Sufi philosophy. Ongoing research, such as Shermamatova's comparative studies, provides models of how to handle specific problems.

In general, flexibility and creativity are key. Shukurova's dictum of "similarity but not sameness" encourages translators to be innovative rather than strictly literal. By foregrounding Navoi's imagery and thought, English translations can remain true to his legacy.

### Conclusion

Translating Navoi's corpus into English is inherently difficult due to linguistic shifts, cultural depth, and poetic form. As reviewed here, the main obstacles are navigating lexical gaps, rendering rich cultural allusions, and adapting metrical verse. Comparative analysis of existing translations confirms that achieving literal accuracy often compromises the poetic essence, and vice versa. Therefore, translators must adopt best practices – combining explanatory context with creative rendering – to preserve Navoi's intent. In line with recent scholarship, we conclude that successful translations are those that maintain Navoi's *cultural and linguistic richness*, even if they depart from strict fidelity. Further research and collaboration will help develop new methodologies, but for now, informed, flexible translation remains the best approach to bringing Navoi's voice to a global audience.

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