PAPER

TRANSLATION METHODS OF HISTORICAL TEXTS

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Abstract

The translation of historical texts presents unique challenges, especially when conveying the cultural, historical and linguistic features of the original work. This article examines the translation methods used in the translation of Baburnama, the memoirs of Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur, focusing on literal translation, dynamic equivalence and cultural substitution. By analyzing different translation strategies, the article highlights how these methods affect the accuracy, readability and cultural authenticity of historical texts. Through the case study of Baburnama, this research underscores the importance of balancing linguistic precision and accessibility to ensure the original context and essence are preserved for modern audiences.

Key words: translation, literal translation, Baburnama, Thackston Wheeler, Substitution

Introduction

The translation of historical texts is a complex and multifaceted process that requires not only linguistic expertise but also a deep understanding of the cultural, historical and social contexts in which the original text was created. Historical works often carry immense value, offering insights into the past and helping modern audiences understand the beliefs, practices and experiences of people from different time periods. One such significant work is Baburnama, the memoirs of Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur, the founder of the Great Empire. Written in the early 16th century, Baburnama provides a first-hand account of Babur's life, including his military campaigns, political strategies and personal reflections. However, translating such a rich and culturally embedded text poses several challenges.

The primary difficulty lies in preserving the historical accuracy of the work while making it accessible and engaging to modern readers. Unlike modern texts, historical works often use outdated language, specific cultural references and regional idioms that may not have direct equivalents in other languages. Moreover, historical events and customs described in such works require careful attention to ensure that their true significance is conveyed without distorting the meaning.

In the case of Baburnama, translators have to balance between staying faithful to the original

text's historical and cultural contexts and ensuring that the translation resonates with a contemporary audience. Various translation methods, including literal translation, dynamic equivalence and cultural substitution, are employed to tackle these challenges. Each method comes with its strengths and limitations and the choice of method depends on the translator's goal — whether it is to remain as close as possible to the original or to adapt the text for readability. This article explores these translation methods in the context of Baburnama, analyzing how each strategy has been used in the translation of this historical work and its implications for understanding and interpreting the text.

Literature Review

The translation of historical texts has long been a subject of interest among scholars due to the unique challenges it presents. These challenges arise from the need to preserve the historical, cultural and linguistic aspects of the original while ensuring that the text remains comprehensible to modern audiences. Various translation methods have been proposed and applied to historical texts, each addressing different aspects of the translation process. In this literature review, we will examine the key concepts and theories that have shaped the translation of historical works, with a particular focus on Baburnama.

One of the most influential theories in translation studies is Eugene Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence. Nida (1964) argued that the goal of translation should not be a word-for-word rendering of the original but rather a focus on conveying the meaning and intent of the original text in a way that resonates with the target audience. This approach emphasizes the importance of cultural context and reader interpretation over linguistic fidelity. In the context of historical texts like Baburnama, dynamic equivalence becomes crucial, as the text is deeply rooted in the cultural and historical context of 16th-century Central Asia. Translators, according to Nida's theory, must ensure that the core messages of Babur's memoirs—his experiences as a ruler, his reflections on personal and political life—are conveyed meaningfully in the target language.

However, dynamic equivalence is not without its critics. Some scholars argue that this approach can lead to the loss of the original text's aspects. Literal translation, also known as formal equivalence, is another approach that prioritizes accuracy and fidelity to the source text. According to Newmark (1988), literal translation aims to preserve the original syntax, vocabulary and structure as much as possible. While this method may ensure linguistic accuracy, it can often result in a translation that feels rigid, archaic, or culturally distant. In historical texts, where language and cultural references are often tied to specific time periods, literal translations may risk alienating modern readers who may not grasp the significance of these references.

The debate between dynamic and literal translation methods also touches upon the concept of cultural substitution, an important aspect of translating historical texts. Cultural substitution involves replacing elements of the original text with equivalents that are more familiar or relevant to the target culture. This approach acknowledges that cultural differences can present significant challenges in translation. In translating historical works, such as Baburnama, this method can be crucial for ensuring that readers from different cultural backgrounds can understand and relate to the text. For example, references to specific historical events, customs, or figures may require substitution with terms that are familiar to the target audience while still maintaining the original meaning.

In the case of Baburnama, several scholars have examined how these methods have been applied in its translation into English and other languages. Thackston (1996), for instance, presents a widely recognized translation of Baburnama that strives for a balance between literal and dynamic equivalence. Thackston's translation aims to preserve the historical details and aspects of Babur's life, while making the text readable and engaging for modern readers. However, Thackston, like many translators, faces the difficulty of choosing between staying faithful to the original text and adapting it for contemporary audiences. In his work, Thackston often opts for dynamic equivalence, particularly when translating idiomatic expressions, cultural references and regional names, while maintaining a more literal approach for the main narrative.

Similarly, Mikhail S. Voskresensky (2013) highlights the importance of cultural adaptation in translating Baburnama. He argues that while fidelity to the original text is important, the translator must also consider the cultural gap between the historical context of Babur's time and the audience's contemporary understanding. Voskresensky emphasizes that cultural substitution can help bridge this gap, but it must be done carefully to avoid misrepresenting the original meaning or intent of the author. Furthermore, Baker (2006) explores the broader implications of translation methods in cross-cultural communication, particularly in historical texts. Baker suggests that translators need to not only focus on linguistic equivalence but also understand the broader social and historical context of the text. For works like Baburnama, this means being aware of the socio-political climate of Babur's time, his worldview and his reflections on power, identity and history.

Finally, Bassnett (2002) and Hermans (2007) provide critical insights into the role of the translator as both a mediator and an interpreter. In the case of historical texts, they argue, the translator's role extends beyond merely transferring words from one language to another. The translator becomes responsible for ensuring that the historical significance of the work is conveyed, maintaining the integrity of the original while also making it comprehensible to readers from different cultural backgrounds.

Translation Methods in the translation of Baburnama

The translation of historical texts such as Baburnama, the memoirs of the Mughal emperor Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur, presents unique challenges. Translating these works requires not only a deep understanding of the linguistic structures of the source and target languages but also a certain grasp of the historical and cultural contexts in which the text was written. Several translation methods, each with distinct approaches and strategies, can be employed to navigate the complexities of translating such historical works. The most commonly used methods in translation studies include literal translation, dynamic equivalence and cultural substitution, each of which can be applied differently depending on the translator's aim and the nature of the text.

1. Literal Translation (Formal Equivalence)

Literal translation, also known as formal equivalence, is a method that strives to stay as close as possible to the exact wording and structure of the original text. The primary goal of this method is to maintain the linguistic accuracy and integrity of the original. In the case of Baburnama, this could mean translating Babur's Persian expressions, idioms and sentence structures directly into English. Literal translation ensures that every word of the original is accounted for and the meaning is conveyed as closely as possible. However, this approach can often result in translations that are awkward, difficult to understand, or culturally distant. For instance, Persian terms such as "Shah"or "Sultan,"when translated literally, may not carry the same significance or connotations in English.

One limitation of literal translation is that it can fail to capture the aspects of the original text's cultural and historical context. For example, when Babur describes specific customs, ceremonies, or regional practices, a literal translation may not fully communicate their significance to readers unfamiliar with the cultural setting of the 16th century Mughal Empire.

2. Dynamic Equivalence

Dynamic equivalence, a term coined by Eugene Nida (1964), focuses on conveying the meaning and intent of the original text in a way that resonates with the target audience. The goal of dynamic equivalence is not to remain faithful to the exact wording but to ensure that the translation communicates the same impact, emotion and understanding. This method allows the translator to adapt idiomatic expressions, cultural references and local customs to make them more accessible to modern readers while preserving the original essence of the text.

For example, in Baburnama, references to regional sites or cultural events could be rendered in ways that are more relatable to a contemporary audience. While the original Persian text may use specific words that evoke particular emotions or meanings in Babur's context, the dynamic equivalence method might choose a term or phrase that conveys a similar emotional or cultural weight in English. Babur's descriptions of landscapes,

nature, or city life, which are central to the memoir's poetic tone, might be translated with a focus on evoking similar sensory experiences in the English-speaking reader. This approach ensures that the narrative feels fluid and engaging, without getting bogged down by historical or linguistic gaps.

3. Cultural Substitution

Cultural substitution involves replacing specific elements of the original text that may be unfamiliar to the target audience with concepts or terms that are more culturally appropriate or easier for the audience to understand. This method is particularly important in translating historical works, as it helps bridge the cultural gap between the source and target languages. In the case of Baburnama, cultural substitution could be used to replace names of specific historical figures, events, or practices with those that are better known or more relatable to readers.

For instance, a reference to a regional figure like a 16th-century Mughal general may not resonate with modern readers without contextual explanation. A translator might choose to substitute or explain such a reference with a comparable figure from the target culture, or provide additional context in the form of footnotes or explanations. Similarly, Babur's religious or philosophical musings might be substituted with terms or practices that are more familiar to the reader without altering the original meaning. The key to cultural substitution is to ensure that the substituted elements do not distort the original meaning, while making the text more accessible.

4. Idiomatic Translation

Idiomatic translation focuses on rendering expressions or phrases in a way that aligns with the natural idiomatic structure of the target language. In historical texts, idiomatic expressions often pose significant challenges, as the source language may use expressions or metaphors that have no direct equivalent in the target language. In Baburnama, Babur's poetic descriptions, metaphors and proverbs are crucial to the tone and depth of the text. For example, when Babur uses a metaphor related to nature, such as comparing the changing seasons to the unpredictability of life, a literal

translation might fail to convey the full meaning. An idiomatic translation, however, might adapt the metaphor in a way that retains its underlying message while using a more familiar and relatable structure for the English-speaking reader.

5. Explicitation

Explicitation is a method where the translator adds explanations or clarifications to make the meaning clearer in the target language. This approach is often necessary when translating historical texts that contain obscure references, complex cultural concepts, or outdated expressions. In Baburnama, this could involve adding footnotes or parenthetical explanations to clarify references to historical figures, places, or events that modern readers may not be familiar with. By explicating these aspects, the translator ensures that the reader can fully appreciate the historical and cultural context of the text.

6. Adaptation

Adaptation is a more flexible translation method that involves significant changes to the text to make it more culturally relevant to the target audience. This approach is often used when there is a significant cultural gap between the source and target languages. In the case of Baburnama, adaptation might involve rewording certain passages to align with the modern values or social norms of the target audience. However, the danger with adaptation is that it can lead to significant alterations in the meaning of the original text, so this method should be used sparingly.

Results

In the case of Baburnama translations, the application of various translation methods has yielded different outcomes depending on the approach used. Through the analysis of several English translations of Baburnama, including those by Thackston (1996) and the review of translation methods like literal translation, dynamic equivalence, cultural substitution and idiomatic translation, the following key results can be observed:

Impact on Readability and Accessibility

The use of dynamic equivalence and idiomatic

translation significantly enhances the readability of Baburnama for modern English-speaking audiences. Thackston's translation, which predominantly adopts dynamic equivalence, maintains the essence and emotional impact of Babur's original text while making it accessible. The translation of cultural references, idiomatic expressions and metaphors into equivalent English forms allows the narrative to resonate with readers who may be unfamiliar with 16th-century Mughal culture and language. This is evident in the translation of Babur's reflections on his personal life and struggles, which, through dynamic equivalence, retain their emotional depth.

Cultural Substitution and Contextual Understanding

The use of cultural substitution has proven crucial in making Baburnama comprehensible to readers who lack the historical and cultural background of Babur's time. For instance, references to Persian, Turkic, or Central Asian figures are often substituted with brief explanatory notes or adapted terms that make sense to the reader. While this technique ensures clarity, it also raises concerns about the potential loss of historical specificity. However, when appropriately employed, cultural substitution does not detract from the integrity of the text; rather, it allows modern readers to engage with the text more fully.

Challenges with Literal Translation

Literal translation, though providing linguistic accuracy, often leads to awkwardness in the narrative and can cause readers to struggle with understanding the cultural and historical references in Baburnama. For example, a literal translation of specific Persian expressions or references to Mughal rituals may sound stilted or unclear without sufficient contextual explanation. While this approach ensures the preservation of Babur's original phrasing, it risks alienating the target audience by making the text difficult to understand without additional scholarly intervention.

Explicitation and Clarity

Explicitation has been an important tool in ensuring clarity and understanding. The addition of footnotes or parenthetical explanations in translations has been effective in clarifying obscure historical, cultural, or linguistic references. For instance, when Babur describes the politics of the regions he ruled, the translator might include an explanatory note to describe the political climate or the significance of specific figures. This technique allows readers to grasp the context of Babur's life and actions without interrupting the flow of the narrative.

Effectiveness of the Combined Approach

The most effective translations of Baburnama appear to be those that combine various methods, including dynamic equivalence, cultural substitution and explicitation, with a careful application of literal translation when needed. By balancing fidelity to the original text with adaptation to the target language and culture, these translations successfully preserve the historical and cultural richness of Babur's memoirs while ensuring that modern readers can connect with the text.

Translation Challenges in Preserving Literary Style

One of the key challenges in translating Baburnama is preserving the literary style of the original Persian text, which contains poetic imagery and historical reflections unique to Babur's era. While dynamic equivalence captures the meaning, it does not always capture the rhythmic and poetic qualities of Babur's language. Literal translations may preserve some of the original stylistic elements, but the result may come across as cumbersome or archaic. Translators often face the delicate balance of ensuring the translation is both faithful to the original style and accessible to a contemporary audience.

Summary of Results

The results of this study indicate that the translation of historical texts like Baburnama requires a combination of methods to effectively convey both the linguistic and cultural aspects of the original work. Dynamic equivalence, cultural substitution and explicitation are particularly effective in making historical texts accessible and relatable to modern readers, while literal translation remains useful for maintaining accuracy. A careful balance of these techniques is essential for producing a translation that preserves the integrity of the original while engaging contemporary audiences.

Conclusion

The translation of historical texts like Baburnama presents unique challenges and requires a specific approach to ensure that the linguistic, cultural and historical integrity of the original work is preserved while making it accessible to modern readers. Through the application of various translation methods—such as literal translation, dynamic equivalence, cultural substitution, idiomatic translation and explicitation—this study has demonstrated the importance of selecting the most appropriate methods based on the specific goals of the translation.

Literal translation, while ensuring accuracy, often results in awkward or difficult-to-understand phrasing, especially when dealing with cultural and historical references that may not resonate with the target audience. On the other hand, dynamic equivalence allows for the preservation of meaning and emotional impact, adapting the text in a way that is more engaging for contemporary readers. Cultural substitution helps bridge the gap between the cultural contexts of the source and target languages, making the text more relatable, though it should be applied carefully to avoid altering the original meaning. Explicitation has proven useful in clarifying obscure references, ensuring that readers can fully comprehend the historical and cultural aspects without interrupting the narrative flow.

Ultimately, the most effective translations of Baburnama are those that combine these methods to create a balanced and comprehensive translation. This allows translators to preserve the richness of Babur's memoirs while ensuring that the text remains accessible and engaging for a modern, global audience. Given the complexity of translating historical works, translators must carefully consider their choices of methods to avoid distorting the original meaning or alienating the reader.

In conclusion, the translation of Baburnama exemplifies the delicate art of balancing fidelity to the source text with the need to make the work comprehensible and relevant to new audiences. Through careful and strategic application of translation techniques, historical works can be effectively communicated across linguistic and cultural boundaries, ensuring that their significance is understood and appreciated by future generations.

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