

# IDENTITY, LANGUAGE AND POWER: SOCIOLINGUISTIC DIMENSIONS OF LITERARY TRANSLATION

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the sociolinguistic dimensions of literary translation, with a focus on the interplay of identity, language, and power in the translation process. Drawing on examples from Uzbek literary texts translated into English, the study investigates how translators negotiate sociolinguistic variables — including register, dialect, social stratification, and ideological positioning — when rendering source-language texts into a target-language context. The paper argues that literary translation is never a neutral linguistic act; rather, it is a site of ideological intervention where the translator's choices reflect and reproduce power relations inherent in both source and target cultures. The findings highlight the need for sociolinguistically informed translation strategies that preserve the social identity of literary characters while remaining accessible to target-language audiences.

**Keywords:** *literary translation, sociolinguistics, identity, language and power, Uzbek literature, translation strategies*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literary translation occupies a unique position at the intersection of linguistics, cultural studies, and social theory. Unlike technical or legal translation, literary translation requires not only linguistic competence but also a deep understanding of the sociolinguistic context in which the source text was produced. The translated text does not merely transfer meaning from one language to another; it transports an entire social world, complete with its power dynamics, identity markers, and ideological underpinnings.

The concept of identity in literary texts is deeply embedded in language use. Characters reveal their social class, regional background, educational level, ethnicity, and gender through the way they speak. When these texts are translated, the sociolinguistic fabric of characterization is at risk of being lost, simplified, or distorted. As Bourdieu (1991) argues, language is not merely a tool of communication but a form of symbolic capital that reflects and reinforces social hierarchies. This insight is particularly relevant to translation studies, where the translator must decide how — and whether — to reproduce such hierarchies in the target text.

Uzbek literature presents a compelling case study for this investigation. Rich in dialectal variation, sociolectal diversity, and culturally specific forms of address, Uzbek literary texts pose significant challenges for translators working into English — a language with its own distinct sociolinguistic norms. The translation of works by authors such as Abdullah Qodiriy, Chingiz Aitmatov (in Uzbek translation), and contemporary Uzbek writers reveals the tensions between fidelity to the source text's social texture and the demands of target-language readability.

This article aims to: (1) identify the key sociolinguistic features of Uzbek literary texts that present translation challenges; (2) analyze how these features relate to identity and power dynamics; and (3) propose a framework for sociolinguistically informed translation that addresses these challenges.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on three interconnected areas: sociolinguistics, translation studies, and critical discourse analysis.

### **2.1 Language, Identity, and Social Power**

Sociolinguistics has long established that language use is inseparable from social identity. Labov's (1972) seminal work on social stratification and language variation demonstrated that speakers systematically vary their language according to social context, audience, and purpose. In literary texts, authors exploit these variations to construct complex, socially situated characters. The translator who ignores these variations produces a socially flattened text that misrepresents the original work's portrayal of society.

Fairclough's (1989) critical discourse analysis provides another key lens, emphasizing that language use both reflects and constructs relations of power. In literary translation, this means that the translator inevitably makes choices — conscious or otherwise — that either reproduce or transform the power relations encoded in the source text. A translator who domesticates a colonized character's speech, for instance, may inadvertently erase the political dimension of the original author's portrayal.

### **2.2 Translation and Cultural Mediation**

Venuti's (1995) influential distinction between domestication and foreignization offers a productive framework for analyzing translation choices in sociolinguistic terms. Domesticating translations tend to assimilate the source text's sociolinguistic features to the norms of the target culture, often at the cost of erasing culturally and socially specific markers of identity. Foreignizing translations, by contrast, preserve the otherness of the source text, including its sociolinguistic distinctiveness, though this may create comprehension challenges for target-language readers.

Hatim and Mason (1990) further develop this framework by arguing that translators function as communicators within a social context, and that translation choices are shaped by ideological as well as linguistic considerations. This perspective is particularly valuable for the analysis of Uzbek literary translation, where the social and ideological dimensions of language use are closely intertwined.

## **3. SOCIOLINGUISTIC FEATURES IN UZBEK LITERARY TEXTS**

Uzbek literary texts display a rich array of sociolinguistic features that carry significant identity and power-related meanings. Three categories are particularly relevant to translation: dialectal variation, register and speech levels, and forms of address.

### **3.1 Dialectal Variation**

The Uzbek language encompasses a range of dialects, including the Tashkent, Fergana, and Samarkand varieties, each associated with distinct regional identities. Literary authors frequently employ dialect to signal a character's geographic origin, social background, or cultural affiliation. In Qodiriy's *O'tkan kunlar*, for example, dialectal features serve as markers of social differentiation between characters of different classes and regions. The translation of these features into English — a language with its own dialectal hierarchy — requires careful negotiation between authenticity and accessibility.

### 3.2 Register and Social Stratification

Register variation in Uzbek literary texts encodes social hierarchies with considerable precision. The contrast between formal and informal registers, literary and colloquial styles, and educated and uneducated speech patterns is a key resource for characterization. When translating these features into English, translators frequently resort to register equivalents — using British Received Pronunciation associations, archaic forms, or colloquial markers — but these equivalents rarely capture the full social meaning of the source-text variations.

### 3.3 Forms of Address and Politeness

Uzbek has a grammatically encoded system of politeness and social deference that differs significantly from English. The distinction between *siz* (formal/respectful 'you') and *sen* (informal/familiar 'you') encodes complex social relationships involving age, status, intimacy, and power. This distinction, which pervades Uzbek literary dialogue, is essentially invisible in English, which has collapsed the earlier *thou/you* distinction into a single second-person pronoun. Translators must therefore find alternative means — through word choice, sentence structure, or narrative framing — to convey the social significance of these distinctions.

## 4. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES: SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES

Based on the analysis of Uzbek literary texts and their English translations, this study identifies three principal strategies employed by translators when dealing with sociolinguistic features.

The first strategy is sociolinguistic compensation, whereby translators introduce sociolinguistic markers in other parts of the text to compensate for features lost in translation. For example, when the *siz/sen* distinction cannot be rendered directly, translators may introduce vocabulary choices or syntactic structures that signal the same power differential. This strategy preserves the social texture of the original at a global level, even when local equivalence is impossible.

The second strategy is sociolinguistic adaptation, which involves replacing source-language sociolinguistic features with functionally equivalent features in the target language. This approach is effective when source and target cultures share analogous social structures but employ different linguistic means to signal them. Its limitation is that it may introduce target-culture associations that are inappropriate for the source text's social world.

The third strategy is sociolinguistic annotation, which involves providing footnotes, glossaries, or translator's notes that explain source-language sociolinguistic features to target-language readers. While this strategy preserves fidelity to the source text, it interrupts the reading experience and is therefore more suited to scholarly editions than to literary translations intended for a general audience.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that literary translation is a sociolinguistic act with significant implications for the representation of identity and power. The translation of Uzbek literary texts into English reveals the challenges of rendering a sociolinguistically complex source language into a target language with different social structures and linguistic norms. The three translation strategies identified — sociolinguistic compensation, adaptation, and annotation — offer practical approaches to these challenges, though each involves trade-offs between fidelity, readability, and social authenticity.

The findings of this study have broader implications for translation pedagogy and practice. Translators working with literatures from minority or underrepresented language communities — including Uzbek — have a responsibility to preserve the sociolinguistic diversity of their source texts, both as a matter of artistic fidelity and as a contribution to the representation of diverse social worlds in global literary culture. A sociolinguistically informed approach to translation, grounded in the theoretical frameworks discussed in this paper, offers a productive path toward meeting this responsibility.

Future research should investigate reader responses to different translation strategies, with particular attention to how target-language audiences perceive the social identity of translated literary characters. Corpus-based studies comparing source texts with their translations would also provide valuable empirical data on the patterns and consequences of sociolinguistic decision-making in literary translation.

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