

**TRANSLATION CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN CROSS-CULTURAL EPIC
TRANSMISSION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UZBEK ALPOMISH AND ENGLISH
BEOWULF**

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ABSTRACT: The translation of heroic epics across distant linguistic and cultural boundaries presents unique challenges, as epics encode not only narrative content but also formal poetic features, oral performance traditions, and culture-specific value systems. This article examines these challenges through a comparative analysis of the Uzbek heroic epic Alpomish and the English epic Beowulf, focusing on the problems and strategies involved in translating each work into the other language. Using a descriptive-comparative methodology grounded in translation studies (equivalence, cultural adaptation, loss and gain, and domestication vs. foreignization), the study analyzes three levels of translation difficulty: (1) formal poetic features (syllabic metre vs. alliterative verse; rhyme vs. no rhyme; sung vs. recited performance), (2) culture-specific concepts (comitatus code, lof, hospitality, kinship honour, the miraculous horse Baychibar), and (3) the treatment of supernatural and religious elements (pagan-Christian syncretism in Beowulf vs. Turkic-Islamic worldview in Alpomish). The analysis draws on existing English translations of Alpomish (fragmentary) and Uzbek translations of Beowulf, as well as theoretical literature on epic translation. The findings indicate that no single translation strategy can preserve all dimensions of the source text; metrical translation tends to sacrifice lexical accuracy, while prose translation loses the epic's oral-performative essence.

Keywords: epic translation, Alpomish, Beowulf, translation strategies, cultural equivalence, oral poetry translation, Uzbek-English translation

INTRODUCTION

The translation of epic poetry across languages and cultures is widely recognized as one of the most demanding tasks in literary translation. Epics are not merely long narrative poems; they are repositories of collective memory, embodiments of cultural values, and — in many traditions — works that were originally performed orally, with formal features (metre, formulaic diction, repetition, musical accompaniment) that do not map neatly onto the prosodic systems of other languages. When the source and target cultures are historically and geographically distant, as in the case of Uzbek and English, the translator faces a doubly daunting challenge: rendering not only the semantic content but also the poetic form and cultural resonance of the original.

The Uzbek heroic dastan Alpomish and the Old English epic Beowulf represent two such distant traditions. Alpomish (approximately 14,000–17,000 verses) is a Turkic oral epic, sung by bakhshis to the accompaniment of the dombra or kobuz, with syllabic metre (7–11 syllables per line) and end-rhyme. It embodies Uzbek values of kinship solidarity, tribal unification, hospitality, and a providential Turkic-Islamic worldview. Beowulf (3,182 alliterative lines) is an Old English poem composed in alliterative metre (four stresses per line, no rhyme), originally recited by scop, blending Germanic pagan heroism with Christian allegory, and centred on the comitatus code of loyalty and the pursuit of renown (lof). Translating either epic into the other language requires the translator to navigate profound differences in poetics, ethics, and theology.

Despite the growing interest in world literature and the increasing availability of translations from Central Asian languages into English, the translation of Alpomish into English remains fragmentary and under-studied. Conversely, Beowulf has been translated into Uzbek multiple times (during the Soviet period and after independence), but these translations have not been subjected to systematic analysis from a translation studies perspective. This article aims to fill that gap by providing a comparative analysis of the translation challenges posed by the two epics, and by examining existing translation strategies as documented in available translations and scholarly commentary.

The specific objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the formal poetic features of Alpomish and Beowulf that create translation difficulties, (2) to analyse the culture-specific concepts in each epic that lack direct equivalents in the target language, (3) to compare how existing translations (English translations of Alpomish and Uzbek translations of Beowulf) have handled these challenges, (4) to evaluate the strategies used (domestication, foreignization, compensation, etc.) in terms of loss and gain, and (5) to propose a tentative typology of translation strategies for epic poetry between Uzbek and English. The central research question is: What are the principal translation challenges when rendering Alpomish into English and Beowulf into Uzbek, and how have translators resolved (or failed to resolve) these challenges?

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-comparative design within the framework of translation studies (specifically, the comparative analysis of source and target texts). The approach is both product-oriented (examining existing translations as finished products) and process-oriented (inferring translator strategies from the comparison of source and target texts). Where multiple translations exist, they are compared diachronically to identify shifts in translation norms. For Alpomish, the source text is the Uzbek variant recorded from bakhshi Fozil Yuldash o'g'li (approximately 14,000 verses). Available English translations are limited. The most substantial is the English prose summary/translation by H. B. Paksoy (1989) in *Alpamysh: Central Asian Heroic Epic* (partial), and shorter excerpts in various anthologies. These are supplemented by Russian translations (which sometimes serve as mediating texts). For Beowulf, the source text is the Old English manuscript (Cotton Vitellius A.xv). Uzbek translations examined include: (a) a Soviet-era prose translation (1970s–80s), and (b) a post-independence verse translation (early 2000s). Where specific published translations are not accessible, the analysis draws on secondary scholarship describing their strategies. The analysis is organized around three levels of translation difficulty, adapted from the work of Lefevere (1992) on epic translation and Bassnett (2013) on comparative literature and translation:

1. Formal poetic features – metre, rhyme, alliteration, formulaic language, and the oral/performative dimension (music, recitation). Strategies examined include: metrical translation, free verse, prose, and compensatory rhythm.

2. Culture-specific concepts – terms and institutions with no direct equivalent in the target culture (e.g., comitatus, lof, bakhshi, kuy, mehmondo'stlik as a virtue, Baychibar as a supernatural horse). Strategies include: loan word + gloss, functional equivalence, descriptive translation, and omission.

3. Supernatural and religious elements – theological terms and worldviews (Christianity vs. Turkic-Islam; *wyrd* vs. providence). Strategies include: neutralization, adaptation to target religious framework, or retention with footnotes. Each level is analysed for both translation directions (Uzbek→English and English→Uzbek), noting asymmetries.

Data were collected through close reading of source text excerpts (selected passages with high density of translation-relevant features) and parallel reading of available target texts. Where multiple translations exist, they are compared line-by-line for key passages (e.g., the hero's boast,

the description of the horse, the battle with Grendel). Loss and gain are identified by comparing what the source text conveys (form, content, connotation) with what the target text conveys, using the concept of equivalence at different levels (formal, dynamic, functional). This study faces significant limitations. First, no complete, published English translation of the full Alpomish exists; the analysis must rely on partial translations and scholarly summaries, which is a serious constraint. Second, access to Uzbek translations of Beowulf is limited to bibliographic descriptions and secondary critiques, rather than full text analysis in some cases. Third, the study does not include empirical reception studies (how Uzbek readers respond to translations of Beowulf or vice versa). Future research should fill these gaps.

RESULTS

The results are presented in three subsections, each addressing a level of translation difficulty. Uzbek Alpomish → English

The source text of Alpomish is composed in syllabic metre, typically with 7 to 11 syllables per line, and a regular rhythmic pattern that supports singing. End-rhyme is obligatory. For example, a typical line (transliterated):

“Qo‘lingdan kelgancha yordam ber, xudoyo” (11 syllables, rhyme -o).

Beowulf is composed in alliterative metre, with four stressed syllables per line and a medial caesura. Alliteration binds the two half-lines. For example (line 1):

“Hwæt! We Gar-Dena in geardagum, / þeodcýninga þrym gefrunon” – alliteration on /g/ and /þ/.

Uzbek does not have a native alliterative tradition; its oral epic tradition uses syllabic metre and rhyme. Translators of Beowulf into Uzbek have used two strategies:

- Soviet-era prose translation: Converts the poem into prose, losing all alliteration. This is functionally equivalent to a “literal” translation for informational purposes.

- Post-independence verse translation: Attempts to render Beowulf in Uzbek syllabic metre (11 syllables) with end-rhyme, effectively adapting the poem to the Uzbek epic form. This is a cultural adaptation strategy.

Analysis of verse translation: The Uzbek verse translation regularises the line length, adds rhyme where the original has none, and sometimes adjusts word order to fit the metre. The result is a poem that sounds like an Uzbek dastan to Uzbek ears, but the original’s rough, alliterative, caesura-broken rhythm is replaced by a smoother, rhymed, song-like rhythm. This is a classic case of functional equivalence (Nida): the translator prioritises producing a similar effect on the target audience (recitability, epic feel) over formal correspondence.

Both epics use formulaic phrases (e.g., Beowulf: “that was a good king”; Alpomish: “Alpomish said, he said these words”). In translation, formulas are relatively easy to render literally, but their oral-performative function may be lost if the target language does not use similar repetitive patterns. For English translation of Alpomish, literal translation of formulas (“he said, he said”) sounds redundant to an English reader accustomed to variation. Translators often omit or reduce repetition, thereby losing the “oral texture” that signals the poem’s origins. For Uzbek translation of Beowulf, the opposite occurs: Uzbek oral epic formulas can be imported to replace Old English formulas. For example, the Old English formula “wordum wrixlan” (to exchange words) might be rendered as “so‘z almashdilar” which is idiomatic in Uzbek but does not carry the same formulaic weight. However, Uzbek translators often add repetition to match Uzbek epic style, thereby gaining an oral quality that the original also had (though in different forms). Alpomish is sung to a melodic pattern (kuy). The melody is part of the epic’s identity. No translation into English can preserve the melody unless the translator also composes a new melody in a Western idiom — which no one has done. This is an absolute loss in translation. English readers encounter Alpomish as a silent text, which is radically different

from the original performance. Beowulf was recited (not sung) with possible harp accompaniment. The loss is less extreme, but the oral-performative dimension is still flattened in written translation. Uzbek translations, if intended for oral recitation, could theoretically be recited in Uzbek metre, and some have been performed by Uzbek readers.

Table 1: Translation of formal poetic features – summary

Feature	Alpomish (Uzbek→English)	Beowulf (English→Uzbek)
Metre	Syllabic → lost (prose/free verse)	Alliterative → adapted to Uzbek syllabic + rhyme
Rhyme	Present in source → lost in English	Absent in source → added in Uzbek verse translation
Formulaic diction	Often reduced/omitted to avoid redundancy	Often preserved or adapted to Uzbek formulas
Music/performance	Sung → silent text (absolute loss)	Recited → can be recited in Uzbek
Dominant strategy	Foreignization (literal prose) / omission	Domestication (adaptation to Uzbek epic norms)

Beowulf contains several concepts rooted in Germanic warrior culture that have no direct equivalent in Uzbek traditional society:

- Comitatus – the bond between lord and thanes, involving gift-giving and mutual loyalty. Uzbek has the concept of jamoaviy sadokat (collective loyalty) but not the specific lord-thane feudal structure. Uzbek translations often use sadoqat (loyalty) and jangchi (warrior), but lose the reciprocal obligation aspect. A footnote may explain the comitatus.

- Lof (renown/fame that outlives death) – This is a central motivator for Beowulf. Uzbek culture values honour (nomus, or-nomus) but more in a social, face-based sense than a posthumous fame concept. Translators have used shuhrat (fame) or abadiy nom (eternal name), which is close but not identical. The Christian-pagan tension in lof (fame as a substitute for salvation) is almost impossible to convey without a gloss.

- Wyrđ – Fate personified as an inexorable force. Uzbek has taqdir (fate/destiny) but with stronger Islamic connotations of divine predestination. Translators often use taqdir, which subtly shifts the meaning from pagan impersonal fate to God-ordained destiny.

- Grendel as a descendant of Cain – The biblical reference is foreign to Uzbek culture (though educated Uzbeks know the Bible through world literature). Translators have used a footnote or, in Soviet-era translations, omitted the biblical link to avoid religious content. Conversely, Alpomish contains concepts that English readers find unfamiliar:

- Bakhshi – the professional epic singer. English has “bard” or “minstrel,” but these carry Western connotations (Celtic, medieval). The term “bakhshi” is usually transliterated (as bakhshi) with a gloss: “a Central Asian oral epic singer who accompanies himself on a stringed instrument.” This is a foreignizing strategy.

- Kuy – the melodic pattern used to sing each episode. No English equivalent. Translators have used “melody” or “air,” but lose the specific modal system. Usually omitted or footnoted.

- Mehmondo‘stlik (hospitality) – While hospitality exists in all cultures, in Uzbek tradition it is a central virtue, almost sacred. English “hospitality” is weaker. Translators often use “hospitality” and rely on context to convey its importance.

- Baychibar – the miraculous horse who rescues Alpomish from the dungeon. Horses are culturally important in both societies, but the supernatural, speaking horse is unique. English translators retain “Baychibar” as a proper name and describe his deeds.

- Kinship honour – The concept that one’s honour is tied to fulfilling social roles (son, husband, tribal leader). English has “honour” but it is more individualistic. Translators use contextual expansion. The table below summarises the strategies observed. Beowulf contains references to the Christian God (“the Lord of all,” “the Almighty Judge”) alongside pagan concepts (wyrd, magical swords, funeral customs). Translating this into a Muslim Uzbek context raises questions: Should the Christian deity be rendered as Xudo (God, the Islamic term) or as Alloh? Should the pagan elements be neutralised?

DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests several competencies that translators working between Uzbek and English epic traditions need:

- Bilingual poetic competence – ability to analyse metre and prosody in both languages.
- Cultural literacy – knowledge of the comitatus code, Turkic kinship systems, and the religious syncretism in each epic.
- Decision-making frameworks – when to domesticate (e.g., adapting Beowulf to Uzbek syllabic metre) and when to foreignize (e.g., retaining bakhshi as a loan word).
- Compensatory techniques – adding footnotes, prefaces, or glossaries to explain what cannot be rendered in the text.

Currently, translation programmes in Uzbekistan rarely include epic translation as a specialised module. This study argues that such training is valuable not only for producing future translations of Alpomish into English but also for translating other Uzbek dastans (Manas, Gorogly) that remain unknown to global audiences. No single translation can use only one strategy. The best translations combine several.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the translation challenges posed by the Uzbek heroic epic Alpomish and the English epic Beowulf from a comparative translation studies perspective. The analysis focused on three levels of difficulty: formal poetic features (metre, rhyme, formulaic diction, performance), culture-specific concepts (comitatus, lof, bakhshi, Baychibar), and supernatural/religious elements (Christian-pagan syncretism vs. Turkic-Islamic worldview).

The principal findings are:

1. Formal features present severe challenges. Alpomish’s syllabic metre and end-rhyme are typically lost in English prose translations, while Beowulf’s alliterative metre is adapted to Uzbek syllabic metre with added rhyme — a domestication strategy that preserves the “epic feel” but changes the prosodic system.
2. Culture-specific concepts require careful decisions between loan words (foreignization) and functional equivalents (domestication). Terms like bakhshi and comitatus are best retained with glosses, while lof and mehmondo‘stlik can be approximated but lose some nuance.
3. Religious elements are often neutralised or adapted. The Christian-pagan tension in Beowulf is difficult to convey in a Muslim Uzbek context; the Islamic-Turkic syncretism in Alpomish is flattened when rendered as generic “God” in English.

The study has limitations: the absence of a full English verse translation of Alpomish limits the analysis; access to Uzbek translations of Beowulf was partially bibliographic; and reception studies were not conducted. Future research should: (1) commission and analyse a complete English verse translation of Alpomish as an experimental case study, (2) conduct empirical research on how Uzbek readers perceive the adapted Beowulf translations, and (3) develop pedagogical materials for epic translation in Uzbek-English translator training programmes.

In a globalised literary landscape, the translation of heroic epics is not a nostalgic pursuit but a vital act of cultural mediation. Making *Alpomish* available to English readers as poetry — not just as prose summary — would enrich world literature. Similarly, continuing to translate global epics into Uzbek expands the literary horizons of Uzbek readers. This study has identified the challenges; the next step is to train translators who can meet them.

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