



TRANSLATION PROBLEMS OF HISTORICAL POEMS: TRANSLATION OF BALLADS

Askarov Farrux Komiljon o‘g‘li
O‘zbekiston davlat jahon tillari universiteti
Tarjimonlik fakulteti, Badiiy tarjima (ingliz tili)
mutaxassisligi 2- bosqich magistranti
farrukhaskarov1112@gmail.com
Ilmiy rahbar: Choriyeva Shaxnoza Shuxratovna
katta o‘qituvchi (PhD)

Abstract: *Translating historical poems, particularly ballads, presents numerous challenges due to the unique cultural, linguistic, and temporal contexts they embody. This article explores the core difficulties in translating ballads, such as the retention of rhythm, rhyme, historical context, and cultural significance.*

Keywords: *Historical poems, ballads, translation challenges, cultural context, linguistic translation, archaic language, rhythm and rhyme.*

Аннотация: *Перевод исторических поэм, особенно баллад, представляет собой многочисленные проблемы из-за уникальных культурных, языковых и временных контекстов, которые они воплощают. В этой статье рассматриваются основные трудности перевода баллад, такие как сохранение ритма, рифмы, исторического контекста и культурного значения.*

Ключевые слова: *исторические поэмы, баллады, трудности перевода, культурный контекст, лингвистический перевод, архаичный язык, ритм и рифма.*

Annotatsiya: *Tarixiy she'rlarni, ayniqsa balladalarini tarjima qilish, ular o‘zida mujassam etgan o‘ziga xos madaniy, lingvistik va temporal kontekstlar tufayli ko‘plab qiyinchiliklarni keltirib chiqaradi. Ushbu maqola ritm, qofiya, tarixiy kontekst va madaniy ma‘noni saqlash kabi balladalarini tarjima qilishning asosiy muammolarini ko‘rib chiqadi.*

Kalit so‘zlar: *tarixiy she'rlar, balladalar, tarjima qiyinchiliklari, madaniy kontekst, lingvistik tarjima, arxaik til, ritm va qofiya.*

Ballads are an integral part of the literary tradition, offering not only poetic beauty but also historical and cultural insights. Translating such forms of poetry, especially from the past, can be daunting due to the need to preserve their narrative essence while adapting them for modern readers. Historical ballads often incorporate archaic language, cultural idioms, and specific metrical patterns that can be difficult to convey across different languages. For translators, the dilemma is between staying true to the original text and adapting it in a way that resonates with Challenges in Translating Ballads

Archaic Language and Idioms



Archaic language refers to words, phrases, and grammatical structures that were commonly used in earlier periods of a language but have since fallen out of everyday use. Historical ballads often feature such language, reflecting the time when they were composed or transcribed. Words like “thee,” “thou,” “hath,” “dost,” and “whence” not only indicate an older form of English but also contribute to the formality and poetic rhythm of the text. For instance, in the ballad “Barbara Allen,” the use of archaic language like “hearken” (meaning to listen) or “aye” (meaning always or yes) reinforces the ballad’s historical setting and lends an elevated tone to the narrative.

For translators, archaic language presents a challenge. Should these older forms be retained in translation to preserve the historical flavor of the ballad, or should they be modernized to improve readability? Both approaches have their advantages and drawbacks. Retaining archaic language helps maintain the ballad's historical authenticity and poetic texture, but it can make the text difficult for contemporary readers to understand. On the other hand, modernizing the language can improve accessibility, but risks losing the formality, rhythm, and tone that the original language conveyed.

Rhythm and Meter in Archaic Forms

Ballads are typically characterized by their regular meter and rhyme schemes, which are often shaped by the use of archaic words. Archaic language frequently includes monosyllabic or otherwise metrically significant words that fit into the strict rhythmic structure of the poem. For example, the word “hath” is an archaic form of “has,” and “dost” is an older form of “does.” Replacing these with modern equivalents could disrupt the meter and rhyme scheme of the ballad.

In the famous ballad “Sir Patrick Spens,” the lines “The king sits in Dumferline town, / Drinking the blude-red wine” use words that create a specific rhythm and poetic structure. Attempting to modernize the language could lead to a loss of this carefully constructed rhythm. Translators often struggle to find modern equivalents that preserve both the meaning and the poetic qualities of the original text.

Idiomatic Expressions in Historical Ballads

The Cultural Context of Idioms

Idiomatic expressions are phrases or sayings whose meanings are not directly interpretable from the literal meanings of their words. They are often deeply tied to the culture and time in which they were used, making them particularly challenging for translators. In historical ballads, idioms frequently reflect the societal values, superstitions, or beliefs of the time. For example, in many English and Scottish ballads, idiomatic references to “greenwood” or “the gallows tree” often carry specific symbolic meanings tied to nature, death, or law, concepts that may not resonate with contemporary or non-native audiences in the same way.

Translating idiomatic expressions requires a careful balance between literal meaning and cultural equivalence. For instance, in the ballad “Lord Randal,” the idiom “make my bed” refers to the character’s preparation for death. Translating this idiom into a modern language might lose its metaphorical meaning if taken literally,



requiring the translator to find an equivalent phrase that carries similar cultural and emotional weight.

Translating Idioms: Literal vs. Adaptation

When translating idiomatic expressions, translators face a choice: they can either translate the idiom literally or adapt it to a comparable expression in the target language. Both options have their challenges. A literal translation may maintain the integrity of the original text but confuse modern readers who are unfamiliar with the historical or cultural significance of the idiom. For instance, in the Scottish ballad "The Twa Corbies," the phrase "fae the clay" (meaning "from the grave") could confuse modern readers if translated literally without any context.

Adapting idioms, on the other hand, makes the ballad more accessible, but risks altering the original meaning. Translators might choose to replace an unfamiliar idiom with a culturally equivalent one that conveys a similar idea. For instance, the idiom "to cast away one's anchor," common in English ballads, could be replaced with a more familiar modern expression that conveys a sense of loss or abandonment. This approach, while more accessible to readers, risks losing some of the original cultural resonance.

In the ballad "Tam Lin," idiomatic phrases such as "bound to the greenwood" carry associations with both freedom and danger, rooted in Scottish folklore. A literal translation might lose the layered meanings behind such phrases, while an adaptation might oversimplify them, erasing some of the cultural richness embedded in the ballad.

Strategies for Translating Archaic Language and Idioms

Partial Modernization

Cultural Substitution

Historical ballads are rich with archaic words and idiomatic expressions that may not have direct equivalents in modern languages. For instance, words like "thee," "thou," and "hath" are no longer in common use, and their modern counterparts may lose the poetic rhythm or formality embedded in the original text. Additionally, idioms that were once easily understood may now require explanatory notes or careful adaptation to avoid confusion.

Rhythm and Rhyme

Ballads often follow a specific meter and rhyme scheme, which are essential to their musical quality and oral tradition. Translators must navigate the difficulty of preserving these poetic structures while ensuring that the meaning of the text remains intact. For example, maintaining rhyme can force a translator to alter the original sense of the text, leading to a compromise between form and content.

Cultural Context

Ballads frequently reference historical events, figures, and beliefs that may be obscure or unfamiliar to modern readers. A literal translation of these references might obscure the poem's meaning, requiring the translator to find cultural equivalents or offer additional context. For example, in translating "The Ballad of Chevy Chase," references to specific battles or places might lose their significance unless adequately explained.



Emotional and Symbolic Meaning

Many historical ballads rely on symbolism and emotional resonance that may not translate well across cultures. Certain images or metaphors deeply embedded in one culture's traditions may lack the same impact in another. In translating John Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci," for instance, the symbolic use of the "femme fatale" figure might not carry the same cultural weight in a language or culture where such a concept is unfamiliar.

Linguistic Economy

Ballads, especially in their oral tradition, tend to be succinct and economical in language, relying on few words to convey rich meaning. Translators must resist the temptation to over-explain or expand on the original text, which can dilute the intensity and immediacy of the ballad's narrative.

Examples of Translated Ballads

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

This English ballad is noted for its archaic diction, meter, and supernatural elements. In translation, maintaining the poem's intricate rhyme scheme and rich allegorical content presents a significant challenge. Translators must navigate the tension between preserving the haunting, archaic tone and making the poem accessible to modern audiences.

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" by John Keats

The emotional depth and symbolic resonance of this ballad make it both a rewarding and difficult text to translate. Translators must find a way to convey the ethereal quality of the poem, balancing the literal meaning with the emotive power of Keats' imagery. Keats' language is often economical, packing deep emotion into few words, making it difficult to translate without losing the poem's essence.

Strategies for Translating Ballads

Balancing Literal and Free Translation

While a literal translation may preserve the structure and content of the original text, it can result in awkward phrasing or a loss of poetic quality. On the other hand, a free translation might capture the spirit of the ballad but stray too far from its original meaning. Successful translation often lies in a balanced approach, where the translator maintains fidelity to the source while taking creative liberties to preserve the poem's aesthetic qualities.

Preserving the Rhythmic Flow

To maintain the rhythm and musicality of ballads, translators can prioritize the preservation of meter and rhyme. In some cases, translators may opt to sacrifice certain nuances of meaning for the sake of the poem's auditory and rhythmic qualities, ensuring that the translation remains true to the oral tradition.

Cultural Adaptation

Translators can offer cultural adaptations of specific references or symbols that may not be familiar to the target audience. This could involve finding equivalent historical or cultural references in the target language or providing footnotes and annotations to clarify the meaning.



Conclusion. Translating historical ballads involves navigating a complex set of challenges that stem from linguistic, cultural, and temporal differences. The translator must balance the need to preserve the original's form, structure, and meaning while ensuring that the translated work resonates with contemporary readers. By carefully managing this balance, translators can create versions of these ballads that are both faithful to the original and accessible to new audiences.

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