

THE UNIVERSALS OF POETIC TRANSLATION: A STUDY BASED ON UZBEK TRANSLATIONS OF ENGLISH POETRY FROM THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: This article investigates the universals of poetic translation through the lens of 20th-century English poetry translated into Uzbek. By examining over 120 translated poems by prominent English-language poets such as W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Frost, and their Uzbek renditions by major Uzbek translators, this study identifies recurring translation strategies and the underlying linguistic, cultural, and stylistic transformations. A combination of comparative stylistics, corpus linguistics, and qualitative discourse analysis is applied. Findings reveal that poetic translation often conforms to universals such as explicitation, simplification, and stylistic leveling, while cultural nuances and prosodic forms are domesticated to align with Uzbek literary aesthetics.

Keywords: poetic translation, translation universals, Uzbek literature, English poetry, 20th century, stylistic equivalence, cultural transfer.

Introduction

The translation of poetry has long stood as one of the most intricate and contested domains within translation studies. Unlike prose, which often prioritizes the faithful conveyance of content, poetry demands sensitivity to structure, rhythm, metaphor, symbolism, and cultural connotation. As the Polish poet and Nobel Laureate Wisława Szymborska once noted, "Poetry is what gets lost in translation" — a sentiment that reflects both the fragility and profundity of poetic language. In this regard, the current study investigates the universals of poetic translation, focusing on the translation of 20th-century English poetry into Uzbek, a linguistic and cultural pairing that poses unique theoretical and practical challenges.

The concept of translation universals—patterns or tendencies commonly found in translated texts regardless of language pair or genre—has gained increasing traction since the 1990s, particularly through the work of Mona Baker (1993), Andrew Chesterman (2004), and others. These universals include phenomena such as explicitation (making implicit information explicit), simplification (reduction in lexical or syntactic complexity), normalization (conformity to target language norms), and stylistic leveling (diminishing distinctive features of the original). While these patterns are well-documented in prose and technical translation, their presence and implications in poetic translation—especially across languages as typologically divergent as English and Uzbek—remain underexplored.

The 20th century was a transformative period in English poetry, marked by the emergence of Modernism, Imagism, Confessional poetry, and Postmodernism. Poets such

as W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Frost introduced innovations in form, voice, and content. Their works often rejected traditional metrical constraints, embraced fragmentation, and pursued personal or metaphysical depth. Translating such poetic innovation into Uzbek, whose literary tradition is shaped by classical prosody, Sufism, and epics, is not merely an act of linguistic conversion—it is a complex negotiation of aesthetic worldviews.

Uzbek, a Turkic agglutinative language with vowel harmony and subject-object-verb (SOV) word order, contrasts sharply with English, an inflectional, stress-timed, subject-verb-object (SVO) language. These typological differences directly impact how meaning, emphasis, and poetic rhythm are constructed. For example, English poetry frequently utilizes enjambment and ambiguous clause boundaries to create layered meanings, while Uzbek poetry traditionally relies on syntactic clarity and rhyme-driven structure.

Further complicating this process is the sociopolitical history of literary translation in Uzbekistan. Literary translation was a state-controlled mechanism for ideological dissemination. Western works, including English poetry, were selectively translated and published to align. After independence in 1991, Uzbekistan underwent a cultural reorientation that sought to reconcile its Turkic-Islamic heritage with global modernity. In this environment, translation played a critical role in shaping new literary and national identities. Between 1960 and 2020, over 300 English poems were translated into Uzbek and published in state-run journals, anthologies, and newspapers. According to the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences (2021), 78% of these translations were produced by a handful of officially recognized translators and editors.

This institutional background informs both the choice of texts and the translation strategies employed. Poetic translations often served dual functions: introducing foreign literary achievements and reaffirming Uzbek cultural values. As such, the translator was not only a linguistic mediator but also a cultural gatekeeper, deciding which metaphors, allusions, and rhythms could be assimilated into Uzbek poetics.

Against this backdrop, this article seeks to answer several interrelated research questions:

- To what extent do translation universals manifest in Uzbek translations of 20th-century English poetry?
- How do linguistic, cultural, and ideological factors influence the application of these universals?
- What are the implications of these findings for our understanding of poetic equivalence across distant linguistic and cultural systems?

The hypothesis of this study is that translation universals are indeed present in Uzbek poetic translations but are selectively applied and shaped by genre-specific constraints and ideological pressures. For instance, while explicitation may be common in technical translation due to clarity requirements, in poetry, it can dilute metaphorical density and alter rhythm. Therefore, this study posits that the appearance of universals in poetry is modulated by the need to preserve poetic effect and cultural intelligibility.

To investigate this hypothesis, a corpus-based and stylistic methodology was adopted. A parallel corpus of 120 poems and their translations was compiled, spanning a range of poetic voices and movements. Quantitative metrics such as lexical density, sentence length, and metaphor frequency were analyzed using corpus tools like AntConc. Qualitative methods—including close reading, stylistic comparison, and translator interviews—were used to assess how tone, imagery, and rhythm were handled in translation.

One critical case is the Uzbek translation of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The original poem, dense with intertextual references, ironic tone, and syntactic dislocation, poses immense challenges. The Uzbek version, while retaining the general narrative, exhibits significant lexical simplification, omission of literary allusions, and regularization of syntax. These modifications can be interpreted as instances of translation universals but also as deliberate adjustments to match the expectations of an Uzbek poetic audience unfamiliar with the Anglo-European literary canon.

Similarly, in the translations of Sylvia Plath's confessional poems, the intense personal tone is often softened, and metaphors involving death or taboo themes are culturally adapted or euphemized. This again suggests the interplay between universal tendencies and cultural domestication, a strategy well documented in the translation of children's literature and now being increasingly observed in adult poetic works.

Furthermore, the metrical transformation observed in most translations—from free verse to rhymed or syllabic verse—demonstrates how prosodic norms in the target culture can override formal fidelity to the source. While this might seem to contradict universals such as stylistic leveling, it can also be seen as a form of norm-oriented adaptation, where the translated text conforms to prevailing poetic conventions in the target language.

In sum, this study positions itself at the intersection of descriptive translation studies, poetic stylistics, and intercultural communication. It contributes to the growing body of research that seeks to balance universality and particularity in translation theory. Unlike previous studies that have focused either on intra-European translations or on prose, this article provides new insights into cross-cultural poetic mediation between two highly dissimilar languages and literary systems.

The significance of this research lies not only in its academic contribution but also in its implications for translator training, curriculum development, and literary policymaking. By identifying patterns in poetic translation, this study can inform future translation practices and enhance the appreciation of world literature in Uzbekistan.

Moreover, in an era where machine translation is rapidly evolving, understanding how nuanced poetic elements are handled manually can guide the development of literary-sensitive translation algorithms for lesser-resourced languages like Uzbek. According to UNESCO's 2022 report on language and artificial intelligence, only 0.4% of global machine translation datasets include Central Asian languages. Thus, descriptive studies like this can offer foundational data for future computational applications.

In conclusion, the translation of 20th-century English poetry into Uzbek is more than a technical exercise—it is a mirror reflecting the linguistic, cultural, and ideological currents that shape literary exchange. By uncovering the universals that govern this process, and the ways they are embraced, resisted, or transformed, we gain deeper insight into how poetry transcends borders and reconstitutes itself in new linguistic and cultural landscapes.

Materials and Methods

This section outlines the theoretical framework, corpus construction, analytical tools, and methodological procedures used to examine the universals of poetic translation within the context of Uzbek translations of 20th-century English poetry. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the study, which sits at the intersection of translation studies, comparative literature, and stylistics, a hybrid methodology was adopted—combining qualitative textual analysis with quantitative corpus-linguistic techniques.

The research is grounded in the theoretical paradigm of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), primarily influenced by Gideon Toury (1995), and in the concept of translation universals as outlined by Mona Baker (1993), Andrew Chesterman (2004), and Sara Laviosa (2002). Translation universals are recurrent patterns that appear in translated texts irrespective of the language pair involved. These include:

- Explicitation – the tendency to spell out implicit information in the source text.
- Simplification – the use of less complex lexical or syntactic structures.
- Normalization – a shift toward more typical or standard forms in the target language.
- Stylistic leveling – the reduction of unique stylistic features of the source text.

The aim of this study is to detect the presence and nature of these universals in poetic translation between English and Uzbek and to evaluate how such tendencies are mediated by poetic genre constraints and cultural variables.

A parallel corpus was developed specifically for this research, consisting of 120 English poems from the 20th century and their published Uzbek translations. The English source texts were selected to represent major literary movements such as Modernism, Imagism, Confessionalism, and Postmodernism. The selected poets include W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Robert Frost, e. e. cummings, and Dylan Thomas.

While quantitative data informs structural changes, poetic translation demands qualitative close reading to analyze aspects such as tone, metaphor, sound play, and rhythmic structure. For this, the following stylistic features were manually examined:

- Metaphor retention and adaptation
- Alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm
- Tone (emotional and authorial)
- Syntactic structure and enjambment
- Cultural substitutions and omissions

To ensure consistent evaluation, a five-point stylistic fidelity scale was developed to assess each translated poem in relation to its source:

- 5 – Full stylistic equivalence

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- 4 – Minor stylistic shifts
- 3 – Moderate stylistic adaptation
- 2 – Significant loss or transformation
- 1 – Total stylistic departure

4. Interviews with Translators

To contextualize the observed linguistic shifts, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five prominent Uzbek literary translators, all of whom have published translations of English poetry. The translators included:

- Professor Z. Nuraliyeva (Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature)
- Poet-translator Sh. Qodirov (editor at “Sharq Nashriyoti”)
- Two members of the National Writers’ Union
- A doctoral researcher specializing in poetic translation

The interviews were conducted in Uzbek and focused on:

- Decision-making in translating metaphors, cultural references, and rhythm
- Institutional constraints (e.g., editorial policies)
- Perceptions of what makes a “faithful” poetic translation

Transcripts were coded using NVivo 12 for thematic patterns, particularly in relation to translation universals.

Results and Discussion

1. Explication in Uzbek Poetic Translation

Explication—the tendency to make implicit meanings more explicit—is the most prevalent universal observed in the corpus. It was identified in approximately 84% of the translated poems, evidenced through added modifiers, cultural annotations, or explanatory restructuring of metaphors.

Quantitative Indicators:

- The average sentence length in the English poems was 12.6 words, compared to 14.9 words in Uzbek translations, reflecting expansion due to elaboration.
- Causal and explanatory conjunctions (e.g., “sababi”, “natijada”, “ya’ni”) appeared 1.6 times more frequently in the Uzbek corpus.
- Footnotes or glosses, although not always present in printed form, were frequently added in *Jahon adabiyoti* journal translations, especially in the 1970s and 1980s.

Qualitative Examples:

In Sylvia Plath’s poem *Lady Lazarus*, the line:

“Dying / Is an art, like everything else.”

was translated into Uzbek as:

“O’lish ham san’at, go’yo har bir ishda bo’lganidek, mahoratni talab qiladi.”

This additional clause “mahoratni talab qiladi” (it requires mastery) is not present in the original but reflects an explication of the metaphor to aid comprehension.

Interpretation:

This trend suggests that translators perceived a need to “guide” the Uzbek reader through

culturally alien or metaphysically dense poetry. Interviews confirmed that translators often felt responsible for “explaining” Western abstractions within a culturally grounded idiom.

Simplification refers to the reduction of linguistic or conceptual complexity in translation. It was identified in 77% of the corpus, particularly in translations of Modernist and Postmodernist poetry.

Quantitative Indicators:

- The Type-Token Ratio (TTR) was 0.43 in English texts and 0.35 in Uzbek versions, indicating lower lexical diversity.
- Complex syntactic structures (e.g., embedded clauses, enjambment) were simplified in 67% of cases, based on syntactic parsing of both corpora.
- Metaphor density (defined as figurative expressions per 10 lines) dropped from an average of 4.2 in English to 2.8 in Uzbek.

Qualitative Examples:

In T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the line:

“A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,”

was translated into Uzbek as:

“Quyosh botayotgan xarobalar ustida hayot qoldiqlari yotardi.”

Here, the fragmented imagery is smoothed into a singular narrative picture. The metaphorical openness is replaced with descriptive clarity.

Interpretation:

This simplification often arises from cultural unfamiliarity with certain Western metaphysical or allusive traditions, leading translators to streamline the content into forms more acceptable within the Uzbek literary aesthetic. It also reflects an institutional preference for readability, especially during the period, when intelligibility and ideological clarity were emphasized.

3. Normalization: Conforming to Target Language Conventions

Normalization is the tendency to adjust unusual or innovative source language elements to align with norms of the target language. This occurred in 69% of translations, often affecting syntax, punctuation, and voice.

Quantitative Indicators:

- Unconventional punctuation in English (e.g., lowercase lines in e. e. cummings, dashes in Dickinson) was preserved in only 9% of Uzbek versions.
- Passive voice constructions, used liberally in English, were systematically replaced with active voice in 73% of translations.
- In the Uzbek corpus, standardized poetic devices such as parallelism, end-rhyme, and rhythmic balance were introduced into originally unrhymed poems.

Qualitative Examples:

e. e. cummings’ line:

“nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands”

was normalized into:

“Hatto yomg’ir ham bunday nozik qo’llarga ega emas edi.”

This loses the inversion and rhythm of the original, aligning instead with typical Uzbek sentence structure.

Interpretation:

Normalization reflects the translator's instinct to conform to Uzbek literary expectations and poetic norms, where syntactic regularity and balanced cadences are highly valued. This may improve fluency but often at the cost of source-text uniqueness.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the presence and influence of translation universals in the Uzbek translations of 20th-century English poetry, using a mixed-methods approach that combined corpus linguistics, stylistic analysis, and translator interviews. Drawing on a purpose-built parallel corpus of 120 English poems and their Uzbek renderings, the study identified four major universals—explicitation, simplification, normalization, and stylistic leveling—that significantly shaped the translation outcomes. These patterns were not merely incidental but systematic, revealing deep-seated tendencies in how poetic texts are recontextualized across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The results confirm that explicitation was the most dominant universal observed, present in approximately 84% of the corpus. Uzbek translators often added explanatory elements or modified metaphors to ensure the poem's meaning was accessible to the target audience. This trend points to the translator's role not merely as a linguistic transposer but as an active cultural interpreter, tasked with clarifying imagery that may otherwise be unfamiliar or ambiguous within the Uzbek context.

Closely related to this is the process of simplification, evident in over 77% of the analyzed poems. The reduction in lexical diversity, metaphorical density, and syntactic complexity reveals an inclination toward making poetry more readable and narratively cohesive in the target language. However, this approach, while arguably enhancing comprehension, also diminishes the poetic density and symbolic richness that often defines the literary uniqueness of 20th-century English poetry.

Normalization, as a third universal, was prevalent in around 69% of translations. It manifested through the adaptation of experimental or idiosyncratic stylistic features into more conventional Uzbek poetic forms. The punctuation irregularities, syntactic inversions, and grammatical deviations often used by poets like e. e. cummings or T. S. Eliot were largely removed or "corrected" to align with the normative structures of Uzbek poetry. This homogenization reflects both linguistic constraints and aesthetic preferences rooted in the traditions of Uzbek verse, which values rhythmic clarity, parallelism, and emotional harmony.

The final universal, stylistic leveling, emerged in over 90% of the cases. In many translations, multi-layered poetic voices were flattened, and tonal shifts were smoothed out, resulting in a more uniform poetic texture. The stylistic experimentation that characterizes much of modern English poetry, particularly in its embrace of ambiguity, irony, and fragmentation, was often moderated or lost in translation. This not only illustrates a

universal trend in poetic translation but also reveals a fundamental tension between artistic fidelity and cultural adaptation.

Beyond these universals, the study uncovered a range of culture-specific strategies, such as ideological reframing, cultural substitution, and prosodic transformation. For example, Christian references, psychological trauma, and taboo themes were frequently sanitized or euphemized to meet cultural and editorial standards in Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, English free verse was often reshaped into rhymed and rhythmic structures more consistent with Uzbek literary traditions. These transformations go beyond universals and point to systemic cultural filtering, shaped by ideological pressures, editorial expectations, and literary heritage.

The translator interviews further enriched these findings, revealing that many translators consciously employed these strategies. Some expressed a desire to preserve the “soul” of the poem rather than its literal form, while others emphasized the importance of making global poetry intelligible to Uzbek readers, even if it required interpretive intervention. These comments affirm that poetic translation is an act of creative negotiation, involving trade-offs between form and content, foreignness and familiarity, source fidelity and target readability.

Taken together, the study demonstrates that while translation universals provide a valuable explanatory framework, they must be contextualized within the genre-specific constraints of poetry and the socio-political and aesthetic dynamics of the target culture. In the case of Uzbek translations of English poetry, these universals are selectively manifested and often reconfigured through the lens of domestic literary norms, institutional influences, and translator ideology.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of literary translation studies by extending the application of translation universals to a lesser-studied language pair (English–Uzbek) and to a highly constrained genre (poetry). It supports the notion that universals are not fixed “laws” but probabilistic tendencies influenced by multiple variables—including language typology, textual genre, cultural distance, and historical moment.

Practically, the findings have implications for:

- Translator training programs, which can benefit from understanding how universals manifest and where to strategically resist them to preserve poetic integrity;
- Curriculum development in comparative literature and translation studies, especially in Central Asia;
- Machine translation tools, which currently struggle with literary content in low-resource languages like Uzbek and could be improved by incorporating universal tendencies and poetic rules.

Limitations and Future Research

Like any empirical study, this research has limitations. The corpus is representative but not exhaustive, and the analysis is based on published translations, which may already

reflect editorial revisions. The focus on text-based and linguistic universals also means that performative, auditory, or visual aspects of poetry are not fully addressed. Additionally, back-translation techniques were not employed, which could provide further insight into semantic shift and poetic equivalence.

Future research may expand this work by:

- Conducting diachronic studies to trace how translation practices evolve over time;
- Comparing English–Uzbek poetic translations with those in other Turkic languages (e.g., Kazakh, Kyrgyz) to examine regional patterns;
- Exploring the impact of AI-assisted translation tools on poetic fidelity and style in Central Asian literary ecosystems.

Final Reflection

Ultimately, this study illustrates that poetry, despite being the most linguistically and culturally bound form of literature, is capable of crossing borders through adaptive creativity. Uzbek translations of English poetry from the 20th century are not mere replicas but re-creations that carry with them traces of both the original and the new. In navigating the delicate balance between fidelity and fluency, universality and specificity, these translations remind us that poetry is not just what is lost in translation—but also what is reborn.

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