



Challenges of Translating Totemic Phrases from English into Uzbek

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This article examines the underexplored domain of translating totemic phrases - idiomatic expressions rooted in clan-based animal or natural symbolism - from English into Uzbek. While general translation theory addresses cultural equivalence, totemic language presents a unique challenge as it intersects taboo, spiritual ancestry, and modern secular idiom. Drawing on case studies from English (e.g., Native American totemic references) and Uzbek (e.g., Turkic wolf and eagle totems), this paper identifies three core challenges: 1) lexical gaps where a source language totem has no counterpart in the target culture, 2) connotative shifts where the same animal carries opposite sacred versus profane meanings, and 3) pragmatic loss when ritual functions of a phrase are stripped during translation. The article proposes a hybrid strategy combining functional equivalence with ethnographic annotation, arguing that preserving totemic force often requires sacrificing fluency for cultural accuracy.

Translation is never a mere substitution of code; it is an act of cultural negotiation. Among the most resistant elements to this negotiation are **totemic phrases** - linguistic units that reference a totem (an animal, plant, or natural phenomenon serving as a emblem for a clan, family, or individual). In both English (via its colonial and Native American heritage) and Uzbek (via its Turkic, Shamanistic, and Islamic layers), totemic references survive in idioms, proverbs, and anthroponyms. However, the semantic load of a totem differs radically between these two linguistic landscapes.

While English totemism is largely historical or metaphorical (e.g., "low man on the totem pole"), Uzbek totemism retains residual sacrality, particularly around the wolf (*bo'ri*) and the eagle (*burgut*). Translating a phrase like "to follow one's spirit animal" into Uzbek does not simply risk mistranslation - it risks theological and tribal offense. This article systematically maps these challenges and offers a typology of solutions for translators working between English and Uzbek.

Totemic phrases fall under the broader category of culture-specific items. However, they differ from ordinary CSIs in three ways:

1. Vertical symbolism: The totem connects the speaker to ancestry and cosmology, not just to a referent.
2. Taboo potential: Misusing a totemic phrase can constitute a ritual violation.
3. Fluid secularization: A totem may be sacred in one context and metaphorical in another.

Drawing on Nida's dynamic and formal equivalence, this study argues that totemic phrases resist dynamic equivalence precisely because their *form* (the specific animal) is inseparable from their *function* (invoking clan identity). For Uzbek, Venuti's concept of "foreignization" is often more ethical than "domestication" when translating English totemic phrases.¹

This study employs qualitative comparative analysis of 15 totemic phrases extracted from:

• ¹ Nida, E. *Toward a Science of Translating*. 1964.



- English sources: Native American literature (e.g., *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*), North American idioms, and anthropological texts.
- Uzbek sources: Oral epics (*Alpomish*, *Manas* - Kyrgyz but influential in Uzbek tradition), modern Uzbek prose, and field interviews with three Uzbek translators in Tashkent

Each phrase was evaluated for translatability using a 3-point scale:

- 1) Direct equivalence possible,
- 2) Partial equivalence with loss,
- 3) No equivalence without annotation.

English totemic phrases often refer to animals with no equivalent symbolic status in Uzbek culture. For example:

English Phrase	Totem	Uzbek Challenge
"Bear clan"	Bear (as a totem among Haudenosaunee)	The bear in Uzbek folklore is a neutral beast, not a clan ancestor.
"Raven the trickster"	Raven (Pacific Northwest)	Raven (<i>qarg'a</i>) is a negative omen in Uzbek tradition (associated with bad news).

The Same Animal, Opposite Meaning

A more deceptive challenge occurs when the same animal exists in both cultures but with reversed totemic valence.

Animal	English Totemic Meaning	Uzbek Totemic Meaning
Wolf	Predator, lone villain (e.g., "lone wolf" neutral to negative)	Sacred ancestor; symbol of honor, freedom, and national pride (the <i>bo'ri</i> is a Turkic totem).
Eagle	National symbol (U.S.), but rarely personal totem	<i>Burgut</i> – a clan protector, associated with justice and sky deities.

Example: Translating "He is a wolf among sheep" (positive connotation in English – strong predator) into Uzbek as "*U qo'ylar orasida bo'ri*" would be ambiguous: does it mean "heroic leader" or "oppressor"? Context is insufficient; the translator must add a pragmatic marker.

English totemic phrases are largely metaphorical or dead metaphors (e.g., "totem pole" as a hierarchy). Uzbek totemic phrases, especially in rural dialects, retain ritual speech acts (blessings, curses, oaths).

- Uzbek example: "*Bo'ri bilan qasam ichaman*" ("I swear by the wolf") – a serious oath invoking ancestral power.
- English equivalent attempted: "I swear by my spirit animal" - in English, this sounds ironic or New Age, not binding.



If a translator renders the Uzbek oath literally into English as "I swear by the wolf," the pragmatic force is lost (English readers assume a metaphor). If they substitute "I swear by God," they erase the totemic identity. No good solution exists without paratext.

Case 1: Translating Sherman Alexie's "Totem" into Uzbek

In Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, a character says: "My totem is the crow. It sees everything dead before it happens."

Uzbek translation attempt:

"Mening totemim – qarg'a. U hamma narsani o'limidan oldin ko'radi."

Problem: Uzbek *qarg'a* (crow) is a harbinger of death, but not a personal totem. The concept of a *personal* totem is foreign in Uzbek collective clan totemism.

Solution: Added a translator's footnote: "*Totem - qadimgi Amerika qabilalarining ajdod ramzi. O'zbek tilida aniq ekvivalenti yo'q.*"

Case 2: Translating an Uzbek Proverb into English

Uzbek: "*Bo'ri izingni bosmasin*" (lit. "May the wolf not step on your track") - a blessing for a traveler, invoking the wolf's protection.

English translation (literal): "May the wolf not step on your track" - confusing.

English translation (dynamic): "Safe travels" - loses totemic force.

Proposed hybrid: "May the wolf (our ancestor) not cross your path - travel safely."

Based on the analysis, propose a tiered translation strategy for totemic phrases in English-Uzbek pairs:

Context	Strategy	Example
Academic text	Literal translation + footnote	"low man on the totem pole* <i>Totem</i> – ..."
Literary fiction	Borrowing + in-text explanation	"His spirit animal – what the tribes call a totem – was the wolf."
Tourism/market ing	Substitution with analogous Uzbek totem	Replace English "bear clan" with "bo'ri urug'i" (wolf clan) with a disclaimer.
Sacred/ritual use	Retain source totem + gloss	" <i>Bo'ri bilan qasam</i> " → "oath by the wolf (sacred Turkic oath)"

Dynamic equivalence that erases the totem entirely. This is cultural erasure.

Translating totemic phrases between English and Uzbek reveals the limits of standard translation theory. Where a totem is still a living cultural symbol (wolf in Uzbek), any translation that flattens it into a metaphor fails. Where a totem is already dead or literary (raven in English), borrowing is acceptable. The translator's ethical duty is not fluency but fidelity to the sacred-semantic load of the source. Future research should explore computational methods



for tagging totemic phrases in corpora and developing a digital "totem equivalence" database for Turkic and Anglo-Saxon languages.

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