

CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING CULTURALLY-BOUND MUSICAL TERMS FROM  
UZBEK INTO ENGLISH: THE CASE OF SHASHMAQOM TERMINOLOGY

O'ZBEK TILIDAGI MADANIY JIHATDAN YUKLANGAN MUSIQIY ATAMALARNI  
INGLIZ TILIGA TARJIMA QILISHDAGI QIYINCHILIKLAR: SHASHMAQOM  
TERMINOLOGIYASI MISOLIDA

ПРОБЛЕМЫ ПЕРЕВОДА КУЛЬТУРНО-СПЕЦИФИЧНЫХ МУЗЫКАЛЬНЫХ  
ТЕРМИНОВ С УЗБЕКСКОГО ЯЗЫКА НА АНГЛИЙСКИЙ: НА ПРИМЕРЕ  
ТЕРМИНОЛОГИИ ШАШМАКОМ

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**ANNOTATION**

The translation of culturally-bound musical terms presents significant challenges due to deep differences in linguistic, cultural, and philosophical worldviews. This study explores the difficulties encountered when translating Uzbek musical terminology, particularly terms related to the Shashmaqom tradition, into English. Drawing on the concepts of cultural untranslatability and dynamic equivalence, the research analyzes a corpus of 60 key Shashmaqom terms, including modal systems, rhythmic patterns, vocal techniques, instrument names, and performance styles.

The findings reveal that many Uzbek musical terms, such as *maqom*, *shobe*, *gushe*, *nasr*, *soz*, *hofiz*, and *tanbur* carry rich cultural, spiritual, and historical connotations that lack direct equivalents in English. While English musical terminology tends to be primarily technical and structurally oriented, Shashmaqom terms are deeply embedded in Sufi philosophy, Persian-Arabic literary tradition, and Central Asian cultural identity. The study identifies four major types of translation challenges: lexical gaps, semantic asymmetry, cultural loss, and pragmatic differences.

The paper argues that successful translation of such terms requires not only linguistic competence but also profound cultural and ethnomusicological knowledge. It proposes a combined translation approach involving explanatory translation, cultural annotation, and strategic use of domestication and foreignization techniques. The results contribute to the fields of cultural translation studies, ethnomusicology, and Uzbek-English contrastive linguistics.

**Keywords:** cultural translation, musical terminology, Shashmaqom, untranslatability, Uzbek-English translation, cultural equivalence, ethnomusicology

**Annotatsiya**

Madaniy jihatdan yuklangan musiqiy atamalarni tarjima qilish tilshunoslik, madaniyat va falsafiy dunyoqarashdagi chuqur farqlar tufayli jiddiy qiyinchiliklarni keltirib chiqaradi. Ushbu tadqiqot o'zbek musiqiy terminologiyasini, xususan Shashmaqom an'anasi bilan bog'liq atamalarni ingliz tiliga tarjima qilishdagi qiyinchiliklarni o'rganadi. Madaniy tarjima va dinamik ekvivalentlik nazariyasiga asoslanib, tadqiqot 60 ta asosiy Shashmaqom atamalarini (modal tizimlar, ritmik naqshlar, vokal texnikalari, asbob nomlari va ijro uslublari) tahlil qiladi.

Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, *maqom, shobe, gushe, nasr, soz, hofiz, tanbur* kabi ko'plab o'zbek musiqiy atamaları ingliz tilida to'g'ridan-to'g'ri ekvivalentga ega bo'lmagan boy madaniy, ma'naviy va tarixiy ma'nolarga ega. Ingliz musiqiy terminologiyasi asosan texnik va struktural yo'nalishga ega bo'lsa, Shashmaqom atamaları tasavvuf falsafasi, fors-arab adabiy an'anasi va Markaziy Osiyo madaniy identifikatsiyasi bilan chuqur bog'langan. Tadqiqot tarjima qilishdagi to'rt asosiy turdagi qiyinchiliklarni aniqladi: leksik bo'shliqlar, semantik assimetriya, madaniy yo'qotish va pragmatik farqlar.

Maqola shuni ta'kidlaydiki, bunday atamalarni muvaffaqiyatli tarjima qilish nafaqat lingvistik, balki chuqur madaniy va etnomuzikologik bilimlarni talab etadi. Tadqiqot izohli tarjima, madaniy annotatsiya hamda domestikatsiya va foreynizatsiya strategiyalarini birlashtirgan yondashuvni taklif etadi. Natijalar madaniy tarjima tadqiqotlari, etnomuzikologiya va o'zbek-ingliz solishtirma tilshunosligiga hissa qo'shadi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** madaniy tarjima, musiqiy terminologiya, shashmaqom, tarjima qilib bo'lmaslik, o'zbek-ingliz tarjimasi, madaniy ekvivalentlik, etnomuzikologiya

#### Аннотация

Перевод культурно-специфичных музыкальных терминов представляет значительные трудности из-за глубоких различий в лингвистическом, культурном и философском мировоззрении. Данное исследование анализирует трудности, возникающие при переводе узбекской музыкальной терминологии, особенно терминов, связанных с традицией Шашмаком, на английский язык. Опираясь на концепции культурной непереводаемости и динамической эквивалентности, исследование проводит анализ корпуса из 60 ключевых терминов Шашмакома, включая модальные системы, ритмические рисунки, вокальные техники, названия инструментов и стили исполнения.

Результаты показывают, что многие узбекские музыкальные термины, такие как *маком, шобе, гуше, наср, соз, хафиз* и *танбур*, обладают богатой культурной, духовной и исторической коннотацией, для которой в английском языке отсутствуют прямые эквиваленты. В то время как английская музыкальная терминология преимущественно носит технический и структурный характер, термины Шашмакома глубоко укоренены в суфийской философии, персидско-арабской литературной традиции и центральноазиатской культурной идентичности. Исследование выявляет четыре основных типа переводческих трудностей: лексические лакуны, семантическую асимметрию, культурные потери и прагматические различия.

В статье утверждается, что успешный перевод таких терминов требует не только лингвистической компетенции, но и глубоких культурных и этномузикологических знаний. Исследование предлагает комбинированный подход, включающий объяснительный перевод, культурную аннотацию, а также стратегическое использование методов *domestication* и *foreignization*. Полученные результаты вносят вклад в исследования культурного перевода, этномузикологию и сопоставительную узбекско-английскую лингвистику.

**Ключевые слова:** культурный перевод, музыкальная терминология, Шашмаком, непереводаемость, узбекско-английский перевод, культурная эквивалентность, этномузикология

#### Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the translation of specialized terminology across languages and cultures has become both essential and highly complex. This complexity is particularly evident in the

domain of music, where terminology is not only technical but also deeply embedded in cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts. Musical terms often function as carriers of cultural identity, emotional expression, and spiritual values, making their translation a challenging yet intellectually rewarding task.

The Uzbek musical tradition, especially the **Shashmaqom** art form, represents one of the richest and most sophisticated musical heritages of Central Asia. Recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, Shashmaqom is a complex cyclical genre that integrates classical poetry, modal systems, rhythmic cycles, vocal techniques, and instrumental performance. The terminology used within this tradition is profoundly culture-bound, reflecting centuries of Persian-Arabic, Turkic, and Sufi influences. Terms such as *maqom*, *shobe*, *gushe*, *nasr*, *hofiz*, *tanbur*, and *soz* carry layers of meaning that extend far beyond their literal musical functions.

Translating these terms into English presents unique difficulties. English musical terminology has been shaped primarily by Western classical music traditions and is largely technical, standardized, and structurally oriented. In contrast, Shashmaqom terminology is rooted in a different worldview — one that intertwines music with poetry, mysticism, philosophy, and spiritual enlightenment. This fundamental asymmetry between the source and target cultures often leads to lexical gaps, semantic loss, and cultural flattening during the translation process.

Despite the growing academic interest in Uzbek music and language, relatively few studies have systematically examined the specific challenges of translating Shashmaqom-related terminology from Uzbek into English. Most existing research has focused either on the musical analysis of Shashmaqom (Matyoqubov, 2000; Karomatov, 1987) or on general aspects of Uzbek musical terminology (Yusupova, 2025; Akhmedov, 2026). While valuable, these studies rarely address the practical and theoretical problems of cross-cultural translation. Works in translation studies (Newmark, 1988; Baker, 2011; Venuti, 1995) have discussed cultural untranslatability and foreignization strategies, yet their application to Central Asian musical terminology remains underexplored.

The present study aims to fill this research gap by investigating the challenges of translating culturally-bound musical terms from Uzbek into English, with a particular focus on Shashmaqom terminology. The main objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To identify and classify the most culture-specific musical terms in the Shashmaqom tradition.
2. To analyze the linguistic and cultural challenges encountered when translating these terms into English.
3. To examine the types and degrees of semantic and cultural loss that occur during translation.
4. To explore possible translation strategies that can minimize cultural loss while maintaining readability and accuracy in English.
5. To propose a more culturally sensitive framework for translating Uzbek traditional musical terminology.

This research is significant not only for theoretical linguistics and translation studies but also for practical fields such as music education, cultural diplomacy, and the international promotion of Uzbek musical heritage. As Shashmaqom gains global recognition, the need for accurate and respectful translation of its specialized vocabulary becomes increasingly urgent.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature in translation studies, ethnomusicology, and Uzbek musicology. Section 3 describes the methodology and data collection

process. Section 4 presents the results and detailed discussion of translation challenges. The final section offers conclusions and recommendations for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

The translation of culturally specific terminology has been a central concern in translation studies for several decades. Scholars such as Newmark (1988) distinguished between “cultural words” and universal terms, emphasizing the difficulty of transferring concepts that are deeply rooted in the source culture. Baker (2011) highlighted the problem of “non-equivalence” at various levels, including lexical, semantic, and pragmatic. Venuti (1995) introduced the concepts of domestication and foreignization, arguing that foreignization strategies can better preserve the cultural otherness of the source text.

In the field of music translation, several studies have addressed the challenges of transferring Western musical terms into non-Western languages (Apel, 1970; Zbikowski, 2002). However, research focusing on the translation of Eastern musical traditions into English remains limited. During (2005) and Levin (1996) examined the impact of Soviet cultural policies on Central Asian music and noted the introduction of Western musical concepts and terminology, yet they did not deeply analyze translation issues.

Within Uzbek scholarship, significant attention has been paid to the documentation and theoretical description of Shashmaqom. Matyoqubov (2000) and Karomatov (1987) provided comprehensive descriptions of the structure, repertoire, and terminology of Shashmaqom. More recent linguistic studies by Yusupova (2025) and Akhmedov (2026) analyzed the etymological layers and semantic features of Uzbek musical terms. Muxtorova and Abduquddusov (2025) conducted a preliminary contrastive study of English and Uzbek music-related vocabulary.

Despite these valuable contributions, a critical gap remains in the literature. Most Uzbek studies focus on the internal description of musical terminology and rarely address the practical and theoretical challenges of translating these terms into English. Conversely, Western translation studies have largely overlooked Central Asian musical traditions. Very few studies have systematically examined the translation difficulties of Shashmaqom terminology, particularly the concepts of *maqom*, *shobe*, *gushe*, *nasr*, and culturally loaded instrument names.

Furthermore, existing research has not sufficiently explored the application of modern translation strategies — such as explanatory translation, cultural annotation, borrowing with glosses, and hybrid approaches — to Uzbek musical terminology. The philosophical and Sufi dimensions embedded in Shashmaqom terms have also received insufficient attention in translation studies.

The present study seeks to bridge this gap by conducting a focused analysis of the translation challenges posed by culturally-bound Shashmaqom terminology. It combines insights from translation theory (Newmark, 1988; Baker, 2011; Venuti, 1995), ethnomusicology (Levin, 1996; During, 2005), and Uzbek musicology (Matyoqubov, 2000; Yusupova, 2025) to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the problems and potential solutions in translating this unique musical heritage into English.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach to investigate the challenges of translating culturally-bound musical terms from Uzbek into English, with a particular focus on Shashmaqom terminology. The research combines methods from translation studies, contrastive linguistics, and ethnomusicology.

### 3.1. Research Design

The study is primarily based on a **contrastive translational analysis**. It examines the source language (Uzbek) terms in their original cultural and musical context and compares them with existing English translations and proposed equivalents. The analysis incorporates both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors, including semantic, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions.

### 3.2. Corpus and Data Collection

A purposeful sample of **60 key Shashmaqom-related terms** was selected for detailed analysis. The corpus includes the following categories:

- Modal and melodic terms (*maqom, shobe, gushe, savt*)
- Rhythmic and structural terms (*usul, nasr, miyon*)
- Vocal and performance terms (*hofiz, yallachi, sozanda*)
- Instrument names (*tanbur, dutar, rubob, doira, surnay*)
- Poetic-musical concepts (*ghazal, murabba, tarkib*)

The terms were collected from the following primary sources:

- Classical Shashmaqom repertoire recordings and notations (Matyoqubov, 2000)
- Theoretical works on Uzbek traditional music (Karomatov, 1987; Yusupova, 2025)
- Audio-visual materials of authentic Shashmaqom performances
- Existing English translations and academic papers on Central Asian music

### 3.3. Data Analysis Procedures

The collected terms were analyzed using a multi-layered framework:

1. **Semantic Analysis** – Identification of core meaning, additional cultural and philosophical connotations, and semantic components that lack direct equivalents in English.
2. **Cultural Analysis** – Examination of the extra-linguistic (historical, religious, and philosophical) dimensions embedded in each term.
3. **Translational Analysis** – Comparison of existing English translations (if available) with the original Uzbek terms to identify types and degrees of translation loss.
4. **Classification of Challenges** – All identified problems were categorized into four main types: lexical gaps, semantic asymmetry, cultural loss, and pragmatic differences.

For each term, the following aspects were evaluated:

- Literal meaning vs. cultural meaning
- Presence or absence of conceptual equivalence in English
- Potential translation strategies (transference, translation couplet, cultural equivalent, explanatory translation, etc.)
- Degree of cultural loss when translated

### 3.4. Reliability and Ethical Considerations

To enhance reliability, the interpretations were cross-checked with two Uzbek ethnomusicologists and one professional translator specializing in Uzbek-English literary translation. All musical examples were taken from publicly available or academically documented sources. The study maintains a respectful approach toward the cultural heritage of Shashmaqom and avoids any misrepresentation of its spiritual and artistic value.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the main findings regarding the challenges of translating culturally-bound Shashmaqom terminology from Uzbek into English. The analysis of 60 selected terms revealed four

major categories of translation difficulties: **lexical gaps**, **semantic asymmetry**, **cultural loss**, and **pragmatic differences**.

#### 4.1. Lexical Gaps

Many Shashmaqom terms have no direct lexical equivalents in English. The most prominent example is the term "**Maqom**". While it is often translated as "mode" or "scale", these English terms fail to convey the full meaning. In Shashmaqom, *maqom* represents not only a modal scale but also a complex emotional-spiritual state, a cyclical musical form, and a philosophical concept deeply connected with Sufi ideas of ascent toward divine love.

Similarly, the term "**Shashmaqom**" (literally "six maqoms") cannot be adequately rendered by "suite" or "cycle" in English, as it carries a specific historical, structural, and cultural identity unique to Bukhara and Samarkand traditions.

Other examples include:

- **Gushe** – often translated as "branch" or "melodic segment", but it actually refers to a distinct melodic-rhythmic unit with its own emotional character.
- **Shobe** – a subsection of a maqom with specific poetic and musical rules.

#### 4.2. Semantic Asymmetry

Significant differences exist between the semantic fields of Uzbek and English musical terms. For instance:

- **Hofiz** – In Uzbek musical tradition, *hofiz* means much more than "singer". It refers to a highly skilled master performer who memorizes and transmits classical repertoire, often possessing deep knowledge of poetry and Sufi philosophy. The English word "singer" is too general and neutral.
- **Soz** – This term can mean both "music" and "musical instrument", creating ambiguity that is difficult to preserve in English.
- **Nasr** – A vocal section performed in free rhythm with highly emotional expression. Translating it simply as "vocal piece" results in considerable loss of meaning.

#### 4.3. Cultural and Philosophical Loss

The deepest challenge lies in the cultural and spiritual dimensions. Many Shashmaqom terms are closely linked to Sufism and Persian classical poetry. For example:

- **Tanbur** is not merely a musical instrument; it is considered a sacred instrument associated with spiritual contemplation and the transmission of classical knowledge through the *ustoz-shogird* system.
- **Doira** carries symbolic meaning related to the circle of life and spiritual unity.

When these terms are translated using purely technical English equivalents (e.g., "long-necked lute" or "frame drum"), a significant portion of their cultural and symbolic value is lost.

#### 4.4. Pragmatic Differences and Translation Strategies

The study found that literal translation often leads to misunderstanding, while complete domestication (adapting too much to English culture) results in cultural flattening.

**Proposed translation strategies:**

- **Transference + Gloss:** *Maqom* (modal-spiritual system)
- **Cultural Annotation:** Providing footnotes or explanations for key terms
- **Hybrid Translation:** Using *Hofiz* (master singer-performer)
- **Explanatory Translation:** "Gushe – a melodic unit with distinct emotional character within a maqom"

The analysis shows that a single universal strategy does not work. A flexible, context-sensitive approach combining foreignization and explanatory techniques yields the best results for preserving both accuracy and cultural depth.

### 5. Conclusion

This study has explored the complex challenges involved in translating culturally-bound musical terms from Uzbek into English, focusing specifically on the rich terminology of the Shashmaqom tradition. The analysis of 60 key terms has demonstrated that translation difficulties go far beyond simple lexical differences and touch upon deep cultural, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions.

The findings confirm that Shashmaqom terminology is highly culture-specific. Terms such as *maqom*, *shobe*, *gushe*, *hofiz*, *tanbur*, and *nasr* carry multiple layers of meaning — musical, poetic, historical, and Sufi-philosophical — that do not have direct equivalents in English. While English musical terminology is predominantly technical and structurally oriented, Shashmaqom terms are deeply embedded in Central Asian cultural identity, Persian-Arabic literary tradition, and mystical worldview.

The study identified four primary types of translation challenges: lexical gaps, semantic asymmetry, cultural loss, and pragmatic differences. These challenges often result in partial or significant loss of cultural nuance and emotional depth when Shashmaqom terms are rendered into English. The research also showed that literal translation frequently leads to misunderstanding, while excessive domestication risks cultural flattening.

The findings highlight the necessity of adopting a flexible, context-sensitive translation approach. A combination of strategies — including transference with glosses, explanatory translation, cultural annotation, and selective foreignization — appears to be the most effective way to preserve both the accuracy and the cultural richness of Shashmaqom terminology.

This study contributes to the fields of cultural translation studies, ethnomusicology, and Uzbek-English contrastive linguistics by providing a systematic analysis of translation problems in a previously underexplored domain. It also carries practical implications for music educators, translators, cultural institutions, and international performers who wish to present Uzbek traditional music to global audiences in a respectful and authentic manner.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The analysis was primarily qualitative and focused on classical Shashmaqom terminology. Future research could expand the scope to include contemporary Uzbek musical terms influenced by globalization, or conduct experimental studies measuring the effectiveness of different translation strategies among English-speaking audiences.

In conclusion, the successful translation of Shashmaqom terminology requires more than linguistic competence — it demands deep cultural understanding, ethnomusicological knowledge, and sensitivity toward the spiritual heritage of Uzbek music. As Shashmaqom continues to gain international recognition, developing culturally responsible translation practices becomes not only an academic necessity but also a vital means of preserving and promoting Uzbekistan's unique musical heritage on the global stage.

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