



Article

Equivalence and National Realities in Literary Translation: A Case Study of the Translations of the Novella “Eski Maktab”

Jamshed Norkulovich Mirzoyev¹

1. Lecturer, Department of Translation Theory and Practice, Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

* Correspondence: mirzoyev@samdchti.uz

Abstract: This article offers a comparative and analytical overview of the Russian translations of “Maktabi Kuhna” (“Eski Maktab”) – a novella written by Sadriiddin Ayni, one of the greatest representatives in Tajik and Uzbek literature. To be more specific, the paper focuses on three translations by O. Sukhareva, S. Borodin and G. Ptitsyn, examining them for language accuracy/particularity, style integrity/implementation of stylistic devices, lexico-semantic authenticity and preservation of national color. The paper helps elucidate not only the weaknesses inherent in the literal translation of texts, but also strategies for making cultural relevance manifest and deploying footnotes and other commentary to make this possible within a text, as well as the general problem of equivalence in translation. The results are meant to furnish both practical and theoretical know-how for future translations of Ayni’s literary corpus.

Keywords: Literary Translation, Translation Studies, Literal Translation, Equivalence, National Color, National Realia, Explanatory Translation, Comparative Analysis, Culture

1. Introduction

The works of Sadriiddin Ayni, one of the giants of both Tajik and Uzbek literature, are not only beloved treasures for readers in his native land but part of a common heritage to readers across a vast multinational audience. His literary corpus has been translated into a multitude of languages since 1929, including Russian, Uzbek, Ukrainian, Georgian, Azerbaijani, German, French, Czech and Polish languages in addition to Romanian and English. It is with these translations that Ayni’s prose has resonated with and familiarized thousands of readers in cultures as diverse from each other as possible [1].

In this view, a comparative study on the Russian translations of S. Ayni’s novella Maktabi Kuhna (Eski Maktab) opens fruitful research opportunities. The three main Russian translations of the literature are O. Sukhareva (1935), G. Ptitsyn (1937) and Sergej Borodin (1946). The appearance of three different versions indicates the excitement that such a realistic narrative has provoked in Russian readers. Additionally, this large number of texts facilitates a rigorous cross-comparative analysis that brings out their respective strengths and weaknesses. (Incidentally, O. Sukhareva and S. Borodin also went on to translate other works by S. Ayni after their collaboration on “Eski maktab”) [2, 3].

2. Materials and Methods

O. Sukhareva – historian, researcher, the author of several scientific works on the history of Bukhara. The depth of her understanding of the life and society portrayed by Ayni is powerfully evident throughout her translation. A notable aspect of her method is

Citation: Mirzoyev J. N. Equivalence and National Realities in Literary Translation: A Case Study of the Translations of the Novella “Eski Maktab”. American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research 2026, 7(4), 21-26.

Received: 11th Jan 2026

Revised: 7th Feb 2026

Accepted: 24th Mar 2026

Published: 6th Apr 2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

the choice to leave untranslated some words and phrases that refer directly to Central Asian life.

Indeed, for some of these units, translating them is either not possible or would cause the work to be excessive in its "Russification" through conservation at the expense of local color. But the question is: how to express such terms adequately to a Russian reader unfamiliar with Tajik and Central Asian life? This is precisely the problem which O. Sukhareva masterfully solves in her work, by using explanatory footnotes for untranslated terms.

This means that in the following sentence: "Fardo hamaaton hashtpulī puli būryo biyoreton, ki imrūz hamai būryoho daridast" (Maktabi Kuhna, s. 16) — Tomorrow each of you bring eight pul for the mats as today all mats are torn Sukhareva gives a much more definitive explanation of "pul." This matters because "pul" can lead to an unintended false connection with the Russian word for "bullet" (pulya), resulting in a serious misunderstanding. "Tomorrow, each has to bring eight pul for the mats; today you tore them all.

Similarly, in the passage: "Yak bor maddōhe omada ba dehai mo ma'raka girift. Uddhan kamdhi vuhemant tō aikhun rākot → Uddharṇ kāma akhāy dūrī gaṇṭhalūm. Ba ma'rakai maddōh ghayr az javōnon va bachagon digar kas jam' nashud".

"Once a maddoh came to our village, his presence drew a crowd and then he began telling stories. On that day, people who were older than the age of puberty had traveled to a tuy in a nearby village and only children and young people had sat around the maddoh. « Once, a maddoh appeared in our land and told stories, gathering a crowd around himself. All the adults had gone that day to a tuy in a neighboring settlement, and all that was left were children and youth who had gathered round the maddoh/".

3. Results and Discussion

Here, the words maddoh and tuy are not translated so as to better convey the local setting. Their meanings become clear through footnotes: "Maddoh — a professional storyteller," and "Tuy — a ceremony or feast organized for the occasion of wedding or circumcision [4]."

O. Sukhareva's notes are not just lexical explanations; they show the translator's deep absorption into the spirit of this work and an exhaustive knowledge of the life it depicts. For example, the play on the word "osh" is nearly untranslatable into Russian. Hence, the translator uses a technical footnote to explicate the word and its dual meaning [5].

The pun on which the father's advice to his son is based before he sends him off to the rice merchant, Sharifboy, makes up the entirety of this novella:

In the middle of burda deh, it was a board. Amma ṣarbirinṇ mepazem ma nagūy, kī birinṇi perus medihārd. "Chī mepazeton gufta pursad, osh gūy mon, ammo nagūg ki chī osh mepazem" [6].

Sukhareva renders this as:

"But do not just tell him we are going to cook milk porridge (shirbirinṇ), how can he then give you bad rice? If he asks: 'What will you prepare? just say 'pishcha' (food/meal), but as to what kind of osh — do not say" [7].

This episode is fundamentally dependent on the vagueness of the word "osh." Although its dictionary definition corresponds to "food" or "meal," it's most frequently used in everyday language to refer specifically to palov (pilaf) — a dish that requires quality rice. The father means to take advantage of this polysemy in order to obtain better rice from the merchant. To a Russian reader, such passages would either be opaque or potentially subject to serious misreadings without these sorts of cultural annotations [8].

In addition Sukhareva explicates elements of Islamic religious practice, school life and Eastern notions about manners. For instance, this sentence: “Fardo panshanbe ast, noni panshanbegiro faromūsh nakuned” – “Tomorrow is Thursday; do not forget the Thursday bread” – may be incomprehensible to a Russian audience. Tomorrow is Thursday, do not forget the Thursday bread, says the teacher to the students [9].

Sukhareva duly notes that in the old-style schools (maktab), it was compulsory for every student to bring a loaf of bread to the teacher every Thursday – know as “Thursday bread [10].”

However, Sukhareva’s use of this method is inconsistent. Words like “palas” (carpet), “hovuz” (pool), “khurjun” (saddlebag), “mazor” (shrine) and “imom” (imam)” are presented unexplained. Another major failing of the translation would be an occasional canting towards calcquing (literalism). Therefore some phrases do not sound natural in Russian. For example [11]:

Maktabdor boz ba puljam’kunii khud daromad.

In Sukhareva’s translation, this turns into: “The teacher resumed his pursuit of gathering money...”. A more idiomatic way to say this in Russian would have been a construction like *Opyat stal sobirat dengi* (i.e., started collecting money) or *sbrom deneg* (with the collection of money) [12].

Likewise, the teacher’s cry of “Khomūsh!” (Quiet!) is translated as “Molchaniye!” (Silence! /Stillness!) (Staraya Shkola, p. 15). In Russian, the imperative form – “Molchat!” or “Zamolchat!” – would be much more natural for a command. Moreover, the latter part of “taksirjon” is honorifics at best but translated as *sudar* (sir/mister) questionably [13]:

“Sudar, dear! Forgive me! I was not being mischievous!” Ahmad cried (Staraya Shkola, p.

The word *sudar* is Old Russian and signifies a social class that it would be nice to say does not exist anymore. It would have been preferable to use a more neutral equivalent that indicates either “excellency” or “sir” in the local context [14].

Sergey Borodin’s translation, published in 1940, was performed—as the translator himself remarked—on the basis of a literal interlinear translation (подстрочник). The translation was Borodin’s first attempt at Ayni’s work. As Borodin had also lived and travelled extensively in Central Asia, however his translation has many more quotations veering towards literalism and unedited insertions of the source text inter-linearly. Curiously, some errors in Sukhareva’s translation are also found in Borodin’s version.

Sergey Borodin’s translation is replete with examples of literalism (word-for-word translation). One example is the rendering of the sentence:

“Ba in tamosho dili man khela moil bud”.

Borodin translates: “My heart leaned much toward this sight” (Staraya Shkola, p. 16). From a stylistic standpoint, this is what in Tajik can be described as a calque and sounds non-native otherwise. More idiomatically and naturally, we would have minded: “Eto zrelishche prishlos mne po dushe” (This sight was to my liking) or “Eto zrelishche mne ponravilos” (I liked this sight).

In addition, Borodin’s translation slips into anachronisms—the use of modern terminology that goes against the historical tone of the novella—now and then. For example, he writes about the teachers putting his writings into a *papka* (folder/folder-case). This relation is out of step with the Historical climate a typical Bukhara School. For the term “juzgir”, a more culturally nuanced option would be for example “sumka” (bag/satchel) or even some equivalent phrase.

“So, I folded what I’d written in the folder on my desk over a piece of paper..” (Then he placed what he had come up with in his folder on top of the sheets of paper...) [15].

We also encounter sentences in Borodin's work that are syntactically incorrect by Russian rules. The translator tends to repeat the same words in the same sequences as they appear in certain segments of the source text, resulting in double entendres. For example:

"Uro ni mookshir-la dar chübkehrda bo khalifa ba gov mi pas gīri dī shavand, ki an rohi havlii mo bud, bargashtand".

Borodin translates this as: "No izbityye vmeste s khalifoy povernuli v ulochku...". At the structural level, this expression leads to semantic ambiguity in the Russian language: it may mean either that the boys who were being beaten together with the caliph turned to the corner, or that the boys themselves turned to the corner with support from the caliph. This structural vagueness is a direct result of not translating Tajik into clear Russian syntax.

A survey of the publication history reveals that Borodin's translation was reprinted multiple times beginning in 1946 in 1949, 1951, 1952, and again in 1953. It was also incorporated into the definitive four-volume body of Sadriddin Ayni's works in Russian. In theory, the system of repeated publications granted a perfect opportunity for the translator to go over the text and revise it before each new edition.

While most translation theories up to date would assume that with each iteration, the quality should gradually increase." This reminds me of a Tajik proverb: "Naqqosh naqshi sonī behtar kashad zi avval" (The artist draws the second pattern better than the first), implying that more refined creative work leads to a higher-end end product.

Yet comparative textual analysis shows that Borodin did not experience such improvement. None of the errors, semantic inaccuracies and stylistic flaws in the original editions were corrected when it was reprinted. Especially the misinterpretation of some lexical units as well as not choosing adequate equivalents had been repeatedly presented there. This means that the translation has apparently never been significantly reworked, and the editorial process did not probe deep enough to resolve the most basic linguistic problems of the original version.

The case of Sergey Borodin shows that the frequency of republications doesn't correlate with translation quality. All of which augments the crucial need for scientific rigour and quality control in literary translation. The most successful Russian translation, however, of Maktabi Kuhna was Grigory Ptitsyn's *Saryy Maktab* (1937). Ptitsyn, who had learned Tajik at Leningrad University and later worked in Tajikistan, had an intuitive grasp of the "spirit" of the work that permitted him to achieve a high level of fidelity to the original.

Comparing both versions, Ptitsyn's original remains devoid of many semantic and stylistic inconsistencies found in Sukhareva's and Borodin's works. In particular, Ptitsyn recreates the genuine tone of the original text more accurately. I'm going to give you a passage that describes the chaos as it unfolds in the school:

"A smorrell arose immediately inside the school; slaps and smacks were heard, and the sound of robes (khalats) was heard."

Whereas Sukhareva interprets this as "tearing of clothes" Ptitsyn is able to convey the dynamics behind the scene, retaining both acoustic and visual implications of the motion. This makes the event sound a lot more vivid and realistic.

Ptitsyn's translation stands out for its faithfulness to the original spirit, lexical precision and descriptiveness. What sets him apart is his level of linguistic competence, as well as deep understanding of cultural context and deliberate observance of the functional equivalence principle. Ethno-linguistic preparation and contextual sensitivity are the deciding factors of literary translation, this confirms.

For a striking example of Ptitsyn's method, note the following quote:

"Oh kurra!... Chī az in qadar chizi zebost, agar ba gardani vay gulbandi surkhi pūpakdori zangūlanok bandam boz cī qadar zebo khohad shud.

Ptitsyn renders this as:

"Donkey foal! What a sight he will be if you tie a red band, with bells and pendants on his neck!"

In some cases, Ptitsyn makes things plain on purpose and uses less complex grammatical constructions. Yet, by doing so, no meaning is sacrificed — instead, it becomes more semantically clear. He clarifies the thought and “condenses” the text by removing unnecessary syntactic components. Thus, the text in translated form is less prolix, better understandable and easier for the reader to read.

This can be interpreted as a syntactic optimization method while being thematically sufficient. It is an example of the translator’s skill in restating and rewording the source material in a concise and accurate fashion. By contrast, Borodin’s version is more sentimental and wordy:

"Ah, donkey, dear animal! “And if I put a red collar with pompons and a bell in him, he will become more beautiful.”

At the same time, Ptitsyn’s translation conveys with greater subtlety and easiness the mind-set and inner thrill of a child waiting for an amazing present. He faithfully communicates the directness, wonder and longing in the child’s feelings by artful means of language.” Consequently, the psychological depth of the child’s character and emotional tone of the situation are kept with board true grace.

Solely in Sergey Borodin’s translation, the use of such individual lexical units as "osheyunik" (collar) and "pomponlar" (pompons/tassels) also add to the integrity of the descriptive image. The terms you used here synergize with the contextual setting of the text and consequently improve the image drawn in the mind of the reader.

From this point of view, the translation by Grigory Ptitsyn has kept its rank thanks to successfully delivering emotional-expressive diversity and figurative descriptions. It shows the translator’s ability to understand the “spirit” of his source work and convey this with a high degree of functional adequacy.

4. Conclusion

The recent analysis of the Russian translations of Sadriddin Ayni’s novella *Naktabi Kuhna* (The Old School) reveals that literary translation is so much more than lexical correspondence; it is all about stylistic naturalness, cultural background, and preservation of national color. The translation by O. Sukhareva, albeit rooted in profound scholarly familiarity with the historical material, is highly literalist and overly swarmed with formal-stylistic units that deaden the lively tone of the original story line. Sergey Borodin’s translation is tainted by the ghost of interlinear word-for-word drafts, which resulted in quite a few lexical and semantic mistakes as well as "modernization" (anacronisms) that do not match to the historical era represented. Among translations by...primarily Grigory Ptitsyn, the most successful one was characterized by lexical precision, precise descriptive tools and a successful preservation of oral-stylistic features of author’s voice. These findings underline the importance of reflecting upon existing translational practices in order to improve future renditions of works by Ayni. Another reason for its importance is that, as is well known, the Russian version often serves as an intermediary text (a bridge) for other languages, and therefore it must be as accurate and refined as possible. This task is not only incumbent solely on translators but also translation scholars to uphold the sanctity of Central Asian literary identity from the world stage. IEEE Style that referencing sources in research articles in numerical order and enclosed by square brackets (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) This style is widely used in technical and engineering subject areas, as well as many contemporary international publications.

REFERENCES

- [1] S. Ayni, *Maktabi Kuhna (The Old School)*. Dushanbe, Tajikistan: Istiqbol, 2010. (in Tajik).
- [2] S. Ayni, *Eski Maktab (The Old School)*. Tashkent, Uzbekistan: Yosh Gvardiya, 1982. (in Uzbek).
- [3] S. Ayni, *Old School*, J. Smith, Ed. and Trans., Nov. 19, 2020.
- [4] S. Ayni, *Staraya Shkola (The Old School)*. Dushanbe, Tajikistan: NPO Istiqbol, 2010. (in Russian).
- [5] Y. Asror, "The role and importance of lexicography in the translation of linguoculturological and phraseological units," *IQRO Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 311–316, 2023.
- [6] M. Fozilov, *Farhangi iborahoi rekhtai zaboni hozirai Tojik (Dictionary of Idioms of the Modern Tajik Language)*, vol. 1. Dushanbe, Tajikistan: Tajikistan State Publishing House, 1963.
- [7] J. Mirzoyev, "Rendering the nuances of Hafiz Sherozi's ghazals in translation (Based on Persian-English languages)," *Uchenyy XXI veka*, no. 5-1 (86), pp. 83–85, 2022.
- [8] J. Mirzoev, "Lexico-semantic features of technical term translation," in *Translation Studies and Linguistics in the Era of Digital Technology*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 137–139, 2024.
- [9] J. N. Mirzoyev, "Translation of Tajik phraseological units into English: Theory and practical analysis," *Spanish Journal of Innovation and Integration*, vol. 50, pp. 121–124, 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://sjii.es/index.php/journal/article/view/975>
- [10] J. N. Mirzoev, "Classification and semantic features of phraseological units containing the concept of 'Family' (Based on S. Ayni's story 'The Death of the Usurer')," *Spanish Journal of Innovation and Integration*, vol. 42, pp. 433–436, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sjii.es/index.php/journal/article/view/605>
- [11] Kh. Majidov, *Frazeologiyai zaboni hozirai Tojik (Phraseology of the Modern Tajik Language)*. Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 1982.
- [12] Q. Musaev, *Tarjima nazariyasi asoslari (Foundations of Translation Theory)*. Tashkent, Uzbekistan: Fan, 2005.
- [13] G. Salomov, *Tarjima nazariyasi asoslari (Foundations of Translation Theory)*. Tashkent, Uzbekistan: O'qituvchi, 1983.
- [14] M. S. Qodirova, "The process of studying phraseologisms in Uzbek linguistics," *Scientific Innovation*, pp. 1617–1620, 2022.
- [15] S. E. Shodiyev, A. T. Amanov, and N. M. Suleymanova, *Manual on Lexicology*. Samarkand, Uzbekistan, 2022.