

Emotional and Expressive Devices in The English Translations of the “Baburnama”: Equivalence and Translation Problems

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Received: 20 July 2026; **Accepted:** 04 August 2026; **Published:** 31 August 2026

Abstract: “The Baburnama” the sixteenth-century Chagatai Turkish memoirs of Babur is distinguished among pre-modern Central Asian prose narratives by the density and variety of its emotional and expressive means: exclamatory constructions, evaluative epithets, rhetorical questions, hyperbole, terms of endearment, religious invocations, and embedded verse. This article examines how English translations of the Baburnama by John Leyden and William Erskine (1826), Annette S. Beveridge (1921), and Wheeler M. Thackston (1996) render this emotive layer of the source text, and what translation strategies underlie the degree of equivalence achieved. Drawing on the equivalence frameworks of Nida, Koller, and Baker, and on Vinay and Darbelnet’s inventory of translation procedures, the study applies a qualitative comparative-contrastive discourse analysis to a purposive corpus of emotionally charged excerpts (bereavement, homesickness, illness, battle, and exile episodes). The findings show a diachronic shift from source-distancing, domesticating strategies in the nineteenth-century translation toward increasingly source-oriented, semantically dense strategies in Beveridge, and toward communicatively fluent, dynamic-equivalence-oriented strategies in Thackston. Devices such as interjections and rhetorical questions are the most resistant to full equivalence, while embedded poetry and religious forms are most often compensated for through footnoting or explicitation. The article argues that no single strategy secures both semantic and emotive equivalence simultaneously, and that a combination of compensation, modulation, and contextual explicitation offers the most reliable path to preserving the expressive force of the original for the modern reader.

Keywords: Equivalence, expressive devices, emotive language, translation problems, literary translation, embedded verse, dynamic equivalence.

Introduction: “The Baburnama” occupies a singular place in world literature as the autobiography of Zakhiriddin Muḥammad Babur. Unlike the formal and highly praising historical chronicles common in the medieval Islamic world, Babur’s memoir is personal and emotional. He writes about the deaths of his relatives, about his life in India, his longing for his homeland of Andijan and Fergana, physical pain, victories, and moments of despair. He expresses these feelings through interjections, rhetorical questions, evaluative epithets, hyperbole, terms of affection, religious

phrases, and inserted poems. Three major English translations have shaped how English speakers read the Baburnama the autobiography of the Mughal founder, Babur: the pioneering but incomplete rendering by John Leyden and William Erskine (1826), based on a Persian version rather than the Chagatai original; Annette S. Beveridge’s philologically rigorous translation from the Chagatai text (1921), heavily annotated and oriented toward source-text fidelity; and Wheeler M. Thackston’s translation (1996), which aims at a fluent, idiomatic register accessible to the

general educated reader. These three translations were produced under different theoretical assumptions about what translation should accomplish, in different periods of translation practice, and for different intended audiences factors that make them a productive comparative corpus for examining how expressive and emotional meaning is, or is not, carried across languages and centuries. Because each translation was created in a different era, for a different audience, and with different goals, comparing them shows how emotional and expressive language changes or gets lost when translated across centuries. Despite considerable scholarly attention to the “Baburnama” as a historical and literary source, comparatively little systematic work has addressed the translations themselves from the standpoint of translation studies, and in particular from the standpoint of emotive and expressive equivalence. Existing commentary tends to evaluate the translations for historical accuracy or completeness rather than for their handling of affective language. This gap is significant because emotive devices are precisely the textual features most vulnerable to loss, flattening, or unintended shift in translation, and because they are central to the reader's experience of Babur as a psychologically individuated narrator rather than a mere chronicler of events.

This study therefore addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What types of emotional and expressive devices are recurrent in the Baburnama, and how may they be classified for translation-analytic purposes?
- 2) What strategies do the three translations under review employ in rendering these devices?
- 3) To what extent, and by what means, is emotive equivalence achieved or compromised across the three translations

METHODS

The main material for this study comes from side-by-side passages taken from three English translations of the Baburnama: Leyden J. and Erskine W. “Memoirs of Zakhiriddin Muhammad Babur” (1826), Beveridge, A.S. “The Baburnama in English (1921) and Thackston W.M. “The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor (1996)”. Passages were purposively selected from episodes in which the Chagatai original is

recognized in Baburnama scholarship as emotionally marked: the death of Babur's father “Umar Shaykh Mirza, the loss of Samarkand and Andijan, episodes of illness and near death, homesickness during military campaigns in India, and passages containing embedded lyric verse (ghazal and rubai insertions). A total of thirty-two set passages sets (ninety-six parallel passages across the three translations) formed the analytic sample. The analysis uses three connected translation theories: First, Nida's distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence provides the basic axis along which translator orientation toward source-text form or toward target reader effect is assessed. Second, Koller's typology of denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic equivalence is used to isolate connotative and formal-aesthetic equivalence as the categories most directly relevant to emotive and expressive language. Third, Baker's framework of equivalence at word, above-word, grammatical, textual, and pragmatic levels informs the identification of the specific linguistic level at which loss or compensation occurs. Vinay and Darbelnet's inventory of translation procedures borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation supplies the descriptive vocabulary for classifying the strategies actually observed in the translations, and Newmark's distinction between semantic and communicative translation is used to characterize each translator's overall orientation.

To analyze how expressive language was translated, the researchers first examined the Chagatai original (using the transliterated texts and notes in Beveridge's and Thackston's editions) to identify recurring patterns of emotional expression. By reviewing the text, they identified seven types of emotional language: exclamations and outbursts (e.g., interjections), religious phrases and traditional sayings used to show strong feeling, rhetorical questions (questions asked for effect rather than answers), descriptive words and intensifiers used to judge or emphasize something, exaggerations (hyperbole) and repeated words for emphasis, embedded poetry used to express deep emotion, nicknames, fond terms, and direct forms of address.

Next, the researchers tracked how each of these 7 types was translated in all three English versions. They

categorized the translation methods using standard strategies such as leaving words out, making hidden meanings explicit, or adding emotional weight elsewhere in the sentence to balance a loss.

To ensure accuracy, two independent researchers checked a 20% sample of the data together and resolved any differences through discussion. This study focuses on comparing and describing these translation styles qualitatively; the numbers reported in the results show trends within this specific sample rather than broad statistics for the entire book. The study is limited by its reliance on published English translations of the Chagatai original rather than on independent retranslation, by the purposive nature of the passage sample, and by the fact that the L.Erskine translation is itself a translation of a Persian version rather than of the Chagatai text, which introduces an additional layer of mediation that is treated here as part of the object of analysis rather than as a confound to be eliminated.

RESULTS

This section presents the classification of emotive and expressive devices identified in the collection and summarizes the strategies used by each translator, organized by device type. Illustrative examples are given in paraphrase or back translated form rather than as long direct quote, in keeping with the comparative analytic aim of the study.

1. Interjections and Exclamatory Constructions

Exclamatory particles and constructions marking surprise, grief, or intensity repeat throughout emotionally charged passages, particularly in accounts of death and loss. Leyden and Erskine typically neutralize such constructions into declarative statements, a pattern consistent with the more formal, distancing register of early nineteenth-century historical translation. Beveridge frequently retains the exclamatory force through punctuation and lexical choice (e.g. translating an emotional outburst as an excited exclamation rather than a plain, flat statement), often supplementing this with an explanatory footnote on the source term. Thackston tends to normalize the syntax into idiomatic English exclamations, prioritizing naturalness of target-language expression over formal correspondence to the source construction.

2. Religious and invocalional phrases

Standard religious expressions expressing gratitude, resignation, or supplication to God are dense in passages concerning illness, danger, and bereavement. All three translations preserve these formulae to some degree, but with differing procedures: Leyden and Erskine most often substitute a general English devotional phrase (a form of cultural adaptation); Beveridge favors borrowing or calque, retaining the Perso-Arabic formula in transliteration with a glossing footnote; Thackston most often uses a semantically equivalent, idiomatic English devotional expression, sacrificing formal correspondence for readability.

3. Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions expressing disbelief, self-blame, or emotional intensity proved the device most resistant to equivalent rendering across all three translations. Leyden and Erskine frequently convert rhetorical questions into affirmative or exclamatory statements, effacing the interactive, self-address quality of the original. Beveridge more often preserves interrogative syntax but sometimes produces a construction that reads as a real rather than rhetorical question in English, altering the pragmatic force. Thackston shows the most consistent preservation of rhetorical-question form, but occasionally softens the emotional intensity through more neutral lexical choices.

4. Evaluative Epithets and Intensifiers

Epithets evaluating people, places, or events (as, for instance, memorably beautiful, wretched, or accursed) and intensifying modifiers are treated variably. Leyden and Erskine tend toward omission or generalization of intensifiers, consistent with a target-oriented, communicative approach that privileges narrative economy. Beveridge generally retains intensifiers through literal translation, occasionally producing constructions that read as stylistically archaic or dense in English. Thackston applies modulation, substituting a target-language intensifier that captures the connotative force without mirroring the source syntax.

5. Hyperbole and Emphatic Repetition

Hyperbolic expressions of degree of grief, distance, hardship and emphatic lexical repetition are moderately frequent in campaign and exile narratives. All three translations show a tendency to reduce repetition, in line with English stylistic norms disfavoring redundancy; this is most pronounced in

Leyden and Erskine, moderate in Beveridge, and also present, though partially offset by compensatory intensifiers, in Thackston.

6. Embedded Poetry

Babur's practice of interpolating his own or others' verse at moments of emotional culmination presents the most complex translation problem in the passage, combining formal-aesthetic, connotative, and pragmatic dimensions simultaneously. Leyden and Erskine at points omit or severely abridge embedded verse. Beveridge express the verse in English but typically shifts from verse to prose or semi-prose form, preserving semantic content while sacrificing much of the original's formal-aesthetic patterning; she compensates through footnotes explaining prosodic and generic conventions. Thackston likewise translate verse passages in English prose or unrhymed verse lines, prioritizing sense transfer over formal reproduction, with occasional explanatory bracketed insertions.

7. Diminutives and Terms of Endearment

Terms of address expressing affection or familiarity used, for example, in reference to Babur's family members are comparatively rare but emotionally notable. Leyden and Erskine tend to translate these with generic English family relationship terms, losing the connotative warmth of the original. Beveridge frequently keeps a transliterated form of the term with a glossing note. Thackston substitutes an English term of comparable affective register, favoring communicative equivalence.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the way translators approached the text changed over time, reflecting broader shifts in translation practices across the two centuries between the three versions. Leyden and Erskine's 1826 translation shaped by early Orientalist historical writing and based on a Persian intermediary rather than the original tends to favor clear, easy-to-read prose and efficient storytelling over strict accuracy to the original's wording or tone (Newmark, 1988). Emotional expressions are regularly reduced or adapted to fit 19th century English historical prose, which favored calm, objective storytelling over the subjective tone of the Chagatai original. This reflects what Venuti terms a domesticating approach.

Beveridge's 1921 translation, by contrast, exemplifies a source-oriented, formal-equivalence-driven approach (Nida, 1964). She uses extensive footnotes to make up for this: whenever a literal translation of an emotional or expressive phrase might confuse English readers or fail to carry the right meaning, the footnote steps in to explain the cultural or emotional context that the main text alone can't convey. This approach does a good job of preserving the original meaning and stylistic form, but it comes at a cost Baker would say the overall reading experience suffers, since readers must keep breaking away from the story to check footnotes. The emotional impact gets pushed into the notes instead of being felt directly within the narrative itself.

Thackston's 1996 translation is the closest to what's called "dynamic" or "communicative" equivalence meaning it focuses on conveying the same effect and meaning rather than sticking to the exact original wording. He often replaces intensifiers, descriptive terms, and endearments with natural English equivalents, which makes the text read smoothly and keeps much of the emotional force of the original for modern English readers. The trade-off is that it sometimes sacrifices closeness to the original wording, and occasionally loses precise meaning in religious or poetic phrases. Interestingly, this translation keeps rhetorical questions well-preserved which challenges the common idea that this freer style always loses structural features. It seems that this approach can actually preserve certain meaningful structures well, as long as the target language has an equivalent way to express the same effect. Looking across all three translations, poetry embedded in the text loses the most in translation overall. Both Beveridge and Thackston consistently deal with this by translating the poetry as prose and adding explanatory notes, rather than trying to recreate the poetic form in English. This shows that "compensating" elsewhere in the text rather than matching the poetic form directly is the standard solution to this problem.

More broadly, the findings point to a general principle: when translating emotionally rich historical narrative, it's rarely possible to fully preserve meaning, tone, style, and emotional effect all at once. Each translator makes different trade-offs, and a translation's overall "emotional feel" is really the sum of many small decisions rather than one single strategy. This has a

practical takeaway for anyone translating the Baburnama or similar Central Asian memoirs in the future: a mixed approach may work best staying close to the original wording for culturally loaded phrases like religious expressions and terms of endearment, while translating more freely for things like rhetorical questions and intensifiers. This kind of hybrid strategy may achieve better overall balance than sticking rigidly to either a literal or a free-translation approach.

Finally, since this study is based on a qualitative, selectively chosen sample, its findings should be seen as informed observations rather than exhaustive statistical conclusions about the full texts of the three translations. A future study using computational analysis of the complete parallel texts could test these patterns more rigorously.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how the emotional and expressive texture of the Baburnama realized through interjections, religious invocations, rhetorical questions, evaluative epithets, hyperbole, embedded poetry, and terms of endearment has been rendered across three major English translations spanning nearly two centuries. The analysis shows a clear shift from Leyden and Erskine's reader-friendly, meaning-focused approach, to Beveridge's close, heavily annotated translation that stays true to the original form, to Thackston's smooth, natural-sounding approach focused on capturing the same effect for modern readers. No single translation achieves full equivalence across all levels and device types simultaneously. Poetry and rhetorical questions are the hardest things to translate well, while religious phrases and terms of endearment are easier to handle through borrowed words, direct translation, or explanatory notes. For translators, these findings suggest that a mixed strategy works best rather than picking one single approach: stay close to the original wording (with notes) for culturally rich and translate more freely for structural elements like rhetorical questions and intensifiers. For the broader field of translation studies, the Baburnama offers a valuable test case, since its emotional and expressive language isn't just decoration it's central to the author's voice. Future research could build on this by analyzing the complete texts more systematically, including newer 20th and 21st century translations and adaptations and by studying how real

readers actually experience the emotional tone of these different English versions. Gratitude is an expression of appreciation for a committed or planned action, kindness, attention, service.[14] The study of acquired words has its own tradition.[15]

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