

Word Choice and Translation Strategies in German Translations of The Baburnama

Dilrabokhon Abdurakhmonova

Acting Associate Professor, PhD, Faculty of World Languages, Namangan State University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: The Baburnama, written by Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur, is one of the most significant historical and literary works of Central Asian culture. As a memoir describing Babur's personal life, political activities, and observations about geography and society, the text has attracted the attention of scholars worldwide. Over the past two centuries, the Baburnama has been translated into many languages, including German. The process of translating this complex historical narrative raises important linguistic and cultural challenges, particularly in the selection of appropriate lexical equivalents. This article examines the strategies of word choice used in German translations of the Baburnama, focusing on how translators convey historical terminology, cultural concepts, and literary expressions from the original Chagatai Turkish text. Special attention is given to the translations by Wolfgang Stämmeler and the recent translation by the German scholar Helmut Dalow. The study analyzes linguistic, semantic, and cultural aspects of translation and demonstrates how careful lexical selection contributes to preserving the authenticity of Babur's narrative while adapting it for German readers.

Keywords: Baburnama, translation strategies, German translation, word choice, Babur literature, oriental studies.

Introduction: The Baburnama, the autobiographical memoir of Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur, represents one of the most valuable historical and literary sources of the Central Asian Renaissance period. Written in Chagatai Turkish, the work describes Babur's life experiences, political struggles, military campaigns, and reflections on nature and culture. Due to its rich narrative style and historical importance, the Baburnama has been widely studied and translated by scholars from different cultural backgrounds.

Translation of historical texts such as the Baburnama is not merely a linguistic process but also an intercultural dialogue. Translators must interpret cultural concepts, historical terminology, and literary expressions in a way that remains faithful to the original text while being understandable to modern readers. According to translation theory, lexical choice plays a crucial role in conveying the meaning and stylistic features of the original work (Newmark, 1988).

German orientalists were among the scholars who contributed significantly to introducing the Baburnama to European readers. German studies of the work focus

not only on its historical value but also on its literary characteristics and philosophical reflections. Scholars emphasize that Babur's memoirs represent a unique combination of historical documentation and personal narrative (Schimmel, 1982). The aim of this article is to analyze the word choice and translation strategies used in German translations of the Baburnama. The study focuses particularly on how translators deal with linguistic and cultural challenges when translating from Chagatai Turkish into German.

Historical Background of German Translations

The Baburnama has a long translation history in Europe. The earliest European translations were produced in English. John Leyden and William Erskine translated the memoirs into English in the early nineteenth century, which allowed Western scholars to access Babur's writings for the first time (Erskine, 1849).

The first German translations appeared soon afterward. One of the earliest translations was produced by Julius Klaproth in 1810, followed by another translation by Kaiser Amadeus in 1828. These

translations, however, were indirect translations based on English versions rather than the original Chagatai text.

A more significant German translation appeared later through the work of Wolfgang Stämmeler, who translated the memoirs under the title *Die Erinnerungen des ersten Grossmoguls von Indien* ("The Memoirs of the First Great Mughal of India"). Stämmeler's translation played an important role in introducing Babur's memoirs into the German academic world.

In recent years, the German historian and translator Helmut Dalow produced a new translation of the *Baburnama* directly from Uzbek. Dalow used the 1970 edition prepared by Hamid Sulaymon as the main source for his translation. This new translation represents a significant advancement because it relies on a version closer to the original linguistic structure of the text.

The German edition translated by Dalow was published in Berlin by the ProBusiness publishing house and includes historical maps and miniature illustrations related to Babur's period. These visual materials help readers better understand the historical context of the memoirs (Abdurakhmonova, 2025).

Word Choice in German Translation

Word choice represents one of the most critical aspects of translating historical and literary texts such as the *Baburnama*. The original work was written in Chagatai Turkish, a literary language that combines Turkic vocabulary with numerous Persian and Arabic elements. Because of this linguistic complexity, translators working on German versions of the *Baburnama* must carefully select lexical equivalents that preserve both the semantic meaning and stylistic nuance of the original text. According to Newmark (1988), lexical choice in translation is particularly important when dealing with culturally specific terms that may not have direct equivalents in the target language.

Many words in the *Baburnama* reflect the political, military, and cultural environment of Central Asia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, Babur frequently uses titles such as *bek*, *khan*, and *padishah*, which describe hierarchical positions within the Timurid and Mughal political systems. Translators must decide whether to replace these terms with German equivalents or to preserve the original terms through transliteration. In several German translations, the word *padishah* is rendered as "*Padischah*", maintaining the original title while adapting its spelling to German phonetics. Similarly, the title *khan* is often retained in its original form rather

than translated as *Herrscher* or *Fürst*, since the latter terms may not accurately reflect the cultural and historical meaning of the original word.

Another example concerns geographical and cultural vocabulary. The word *yurt*, which refers both to a nomadic dwelling and to a homeland or tribal territory, poses a challenge for translators. In some contexts, German translators use "*Heimat*", emphasizing the emotional connection to land, while in others they use "*Nomadenzelt*" to describe the physical structure of the dwelling. These variations demonstrate how the translator's lexical decisions influence readers' understanding of cultural concepts. As Bassnett (2014) notes, translation inevitably involves interpretation, and the translator's choice of vocabulary shapes how the source culture is perceived in the target language.

In addition to historical terminology, Babur's language also includes descriptive and poetic vocabulary used to portray landscapes, gardens, and cities. Babur often writes about nature using metaphorical expressions that convey emotional and aesthetic appreciation. For instance, Babur describes gardens filled with flowing water, blooming flowers, and fragrant trees. German translators attempt to preserve this imagery through carefully chosen descriptive phrases. A simplified example of such translation may appear as follows:

Original description (adapted example):

"The garden was full of running water and beautiful flowers."

German translation example:

"Der Garten war von fließendem Wasser und herrlichen Blumen erfüllt."

In this example, the adjective "*herrlich*" (magnificent) is used to convey the aesthetic admiration expressed in the original text. Such lexical decisions demonstrate how translators strive to maintain both the semantic content and literary style of Babur's narrative.

Another important issue involves historical place names and personal names. Translators must decide whether to modernize geographical references or preserve their historical form. In most German translations of the *Baburnama*, original place names such as Samarkand, Andijan, and Kabul are preserved in their historical form. This practice helps maintain the authenticity of the narrative while allowing readers to recognize the geographical context of Babur's life.

Semantic and Cultural Challenges

Beyond lexical choices, translators of the *Baburnama* must also address deeper semantic and cultural challenges. Babur's memoir is not only a historical chronicle but also a personal narrative reflecting the author's emotions, philosophical reflections, and

cultural identity. The translator must therefore interpret the semantic layers of the text while maintaining the original tone and meaning. One major difficulty lies in translating expressions related to Central Asian social structure and traditions. Babur often refers to political alliances, family relationships, and military hierarchies that were specific to the Timurid and early Mughal periods. These concepts may not have exact equivalents in European political terminology. As a result, translators sometimes employ descriptive phrases or explanatory notes to clarify the meaning. For instance, Babur frequently refers to loyalty among tribal leaders and military commanders. The original terms describing these relationships often carry connotations of honor, kinship, and political obligation. Translating such concepts into German requires careful semantic interpretation, as direct equivalents may not capture the full meaning of the original expression.

Another challenge arises from Babur's personal narrative style. Unlike many historical chronicles, the Baburnama includes vivid descriptions of emotions and personal reflections. Babur writes openly about his victories, failures, disappointments, and admiration for natural beauty. Translators must therefore convey not only the factual content of the text but also the emotional tone. For example, Babur describes the beauty of certain landscapes with a sense of nostalgia and admiration. When translating such passages, German translators must choose vocabulary that reflects both the descriptive and emotional aspects of the text. According to translation scholars, preserving the emotional register of literary texts is essential for maintaining the author's voice (Bassnett, 2014).

Cultural references also create semantic challenges. The Baburnama includes descriptions of festivals, court ceremonies, and everyday customs in Central Asia and India. German readers may not be familiar with these traditions, so translators sometimes provide contextual explanations. Such explanatory strategies help readers understand the cultural environment in which Babur lived. Furthermore, the memoir contains numerous references to Islamic culture and Persian literary traditions. These references include quotations from poetry, historical anecdotes, and religious expressions. Translators must decide whether to translate these elements literally or adapt them to the cultural expectations of German readers. In many cases, translators preserve the original expressions while adding explanatory commentary to clarify their meaning.

Translation Strategies

To address the linguistic and cultural complexities of

the Baburnama, translators employ several translation strategies. These strategies help bridge the gap between the original text and the target audience while preserving the historical and literary integrity of the work.

One common strategy is semantic equivalence, in which translators select German words that closely approximate the meaning of the original term. This method allows the translator to convey the general meaning of the text while maintaining readability for the target audience. For example, the term *darbar*, referring to a royal court, may be translated as "*Hof*" in German, although the cultural implications of the original word may be broader.

Another strategy is transliteration, where the original word is preserved in the translation. This method is often used for titles, personal names, and culturally specific concepts. For example:

Padishah → **Padischah**

Khan → **Khan**

Timur → **Timur**

By retaining these terms, translators allow readers to encounter the cultural vocabulary of the original text directly. This approach is particularly common in historical translations, where preserving cultural authenticity is considered important.

A third strategy involves explanatory translation, where translators provide additional information to clarify the meaning of unfamiliar terms. This may appear in the form of footnotes or parenthetical explanations. For example:

"bek (regional noble leader in Central Asian society)"

Such explanations help readers understand the historical significance of the term while maintaining the original vocabulary.

Another strategy is stylistic adaptation, which involves adjusting the sentence structure and rhetorical style to fit the conventions of the target language. Babur's writing style often combines short narrative statements with poetic descriptions. German translators sometimes reorganize sentence structures to match German syntactic patterns while preserving the overall narrative flow.

Finally, translators may employ cultural mediation, which involves adapting certain references so that they are more easily understood by readers unfamiliar with Central Asian culture. However, excessive adaptation can risk altering the historical authenticity of the text. Therefore, most translators attempt to balance cultural explanation with preservation of the original context.

As translation scholars emphasize, the translator's role

is not simply to replace words from one language with another but to interpret and recreate meaning across cultural boundaries (Newmark, 1988). In the case of the Baburnama, translation becomes an act of cultural transmission that introduces readers to the historical and literary heritage of Central Asia. German orientalist have emphasized the importance of the Baburnama not only as a historical document but also as a literary masterpiece. The memoir combines historical narrative with personal reflection, making it unique among historical sources. The translation of the Baburnama also contributed to comparative literary studies. Scholars were able to compare narrative techniques used in Eastern autobiographical literature with those found in European memoir traditions.

CONCLUSION

The German translations of the Baburnama represent an important contribution to the study of Central Asian literature and history. Translators such as Wolfgang Stammeler and Helmut Dalow have played significant roles in making Babur's memoirs accessible to German readers. This study demonstrates that word choice is a critical factor in translating historical texts. Translators must carefully balance linguistic accuracy, cultural authenticity, and readability. Through appropriate translation strategies, it is possible to preserve the literary richness and historical value of the original text. The continued translation and study of the Baburnama contributes to intercultural dialogue and helps preserve the cultural heritage of Central Asia in global scholarship.

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