Key Issues Faced in Literary Translation: Fidelity, Form, and Voice

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Abstract. Literary translation often struggles to preserve "national color"—the constellation of form, imagery, culture-specific items, and stylistic cues that root a text in its source culture. Focusing on Azerbaijani→English poetry (with the ghazal as a test case) and contrasting direct versus mediated translations, this study operationalizes national color across five dimensions—prosody/form, lexicon/register, imagery/tropes, culture-specific items (CSIs), and syntax/voice—and evaluates strategy choices (retention, calque, gloss/paratext, explicitation, cultural substitution, omission, creative compensation). Comparative analyses show that direct translations better preserve prosodic patterning and emblematic imagery, while mediated versions exhibit higher rates of CSI substitution and omission. When strict metrical or rhyme features cannot be carried over, targeted creative compensation (e.g., internal echo, alliteration) combined with light paratext (concise footnotes or endnotes) sustains cultural intelligibility without sacrificing readability. The article proposes a practical decision flow for calibrating foreignization and domestication by passage function and reader familiarity, and offers editor-facing guidelines for standardizing transliteration and paratext policy. The findings suggest that a dimension-by-dimension approach to strategy selection yields more faithful and aesthetically effective outcomes than uniform domestication, providing a portable framework for future studies and for professional practice in Azerbaijani–English literary translation.

Key words: *Azerbaijani–English poetry, national color, ghazal, culture-specific items (CSIs), foreignization, domestication, prosody and form, creative compensation*

1. Introduction

Literary translation is more than the transfer of words across languages; it is a negotiation between aesthetic form and cultural meaning. For small-language literatures seeking broader visibility, the stakes are especially high. In the Azerbaijani context, policy attention and publishing practice have shifted in recent years from celebrating the *quantity* of translations toward scrutinizing their *quality*. This shift reflects a growing recognition that the value of a translation is measured not only by intelligibility in the target language but also by its success in preserving what practitioners often call *national color*: the constellation of prosodic patterns, culturally loaded lexicon, emblematic imagery, and stylistic habits that tie a work to its source tradition.

Yet "national color" is rarely operationalized in ways that guide concrete translator decisions, particularly for Azerbaijani→English poetry. Structural contrasts (e.g., traces of SOV syntax meeting English SVO norms), genre traditions (the ghazal's radif/qafiyə versus the sonnet's quatrains and

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volta), and dense culture-specific items (toponyms, musical references, religious-philosophical idioms) create systematic pressure toward loss. These pressures are amplified when English versions are produced through a mediating language—historically, often Russian—rather than directly from Azerbaijani; mediation tends to smooth formal features, neutralize imagery, and replace culturally specific references with broad, domesticated equivalents.

This article addresses two interrelated gaps. First, despite a rich theoretical literature—on equivalence, norms, rewriting, and the ethics of foreignization/domestication—there is no concise, practice-ready framework tailored to Azerbaijani poetry that helps translators and editors decide *what* to keep, *how* to compensate for inevitable losses, and *where* to use paratextual support. Second, existing discussions frequently rely on impressionistic judgments or isolated examples; what is missing is a consistent set of dimensions and strategy labels that allow side-by-side comparison across multiple translations (direct and mediated) and genres (poetry with a brief contrast to prose).

We therefore pursue the following aims and research questions:

- **Aim.** To propose and demonstrate a portable framework for preserving national color in Azerbaijani→English literary translation, with a primary focus on poetry (ghazal), supplemented by a short prose contrast.

- **RQ1.** How can *national color* be operationalized for Azerbaijani poetry in a way that is both faithful to the source tradition and actionable for translators and editors?

- **RQ2.** Which translation strategies most effectively preserve national color across distinct textual dimensions when moving from Azerbaijani into English?

- **RQ3.** How do **direct** translations compare with **mediated** (indirect) translations with respect to prosody, imagery, culture-specific items, and voice—and what role can creative compensation and paratext play?

To answer these questions, we articulate a five-dimension framework that treats national color as distributed across: (1) Prosody/Form (meter, rhyme, radif/qafiyə, parallelism); (2) Lexicon/Register (archaisms; Arabic-Persian loans; honorifics; devotional or courtly diction); (3) Imagery/Tropes (e.g., rose–nightingale, wine, Sufi metaphors, Karabakh-inflected motifs); (4) Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) (toponyms, musical and ceremonial terms, historical figures); and (5) Syntax/Voice (information flow, emphasis, imperative/gnomic tones, SOV traces). For each dimension we catalogue strategy choices—retention, calque, gloss/paratext, explicitation, cultural substitution, omission, and creative compensation (e.g., internal rhyme or alliteration when meter cannot be carried over).

Empirically, we ground the framework in comparative readings of selected poems, centering a case study of Khurshidbanu Natavan's ghazals. Where available, we place direct English renderings alongside mediated English versions to observe how national color fares under each pathway. While the article remains primarily qualitative and text-analytic, the framework supports light quantification (e.g., tallying strategy choices by dimension) to make tendencies visible and replicable. A short section

contrasts poetry with prose to show why form-bound features (meter, radif) require different solutions than narrative syntax or expository CSIs.

The contribution is threefold. First, we provide a decision flow that calibrates foreignization and domestication by the *function* of a passage (lyrical density vs. narrative exposition) and by the *assumed familiarity* of the target readership, thereby avoiding one-size-fits-all prescriptions. Second, we translate high-level theory into an editor-ready toolkit: a coding manual, strategy matrix, and paratext policy (micro-glosses, endnotes, transliteration standards) that can be adopted by journals, presses, and translation programs. Third, by highlighting differences between direct and mediated pipelines, we offer practical guidance for commissioning and quality control, especially relevant for Azerbaijani works seeking durable presence in Anglophone venues.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 (Methods) details corpus selection (poems and available translations), the five-dimension operationalization, and the coding scheme. Section 3 (Results) reports strategy distributions and presents a line-by-line Natavan analysis with tables illustrating concrete gains and losses, followed by a brief prose contrast. Section 4 (Discussion) synthesizes implications for translators and editors, relates findings to established translation theories, and addresses limitations (small corpus; genre focus; translator variability). Section 5 (Conclusion) restates the main insights and outlines directions for future research, including reader-response testing and expansion to additional genres and periods.

By moving from broad advocacy for "quality" toward a structured account of *how* cultural and formal features travel between Azerbaijani and English, this study aims to make the preservation of national color a measurable, teachable, and editorially enforceable practice rather than an after-the-fact impression.

2. Methods

2.1 Design

This study uses **comparative textual analysis** to evaluate how different translation strategies preserve *national color* when rendering Azerbaijani poetry into English. The design is qualitative at its core (close reading and annotation), with **simple quantitative summaries** (counts and percentages of strategies by textual dimension) to make tendencies visible and replicable. The primary comparison is **direct** translations (Azerbaijani → English) versus **mediated** translations (Azerbaijani → Russian → English, or similar), with a brief prose contrast to clarify where method choices diverge across genres.

2.2 Corpus and Sampling

Scope and size. The corpus targets **10–15 poems** representative of classical and (optionally) modern Azerbaijani poetry. Each poem is paired, where available, with **two English renderings**: (a) a **direct** translation and (b) a **mediated** translation. If both are not available, a single high-quality English translation is retained and flagged as "direct only" or "mediated only."

Poets. The core case centers **Khurshidbanu Natavan** (ghazal), with optional triangulation using **Füzuli** and **Nəsimi** (classical) and one modern poet (for example, Vaqif Səmədoğlu), to ensure the framework is not overfitted to a single author or period.

Provenance classification. Each English rendering is labeled **direct** or **mediated** based on translator statements, paratext, bibliographic metadata, or translator correspondence (if available). Where provenance is unclear, the item is excluded from direct–mediated comparisons but may contribute to single-track analysis.

Text preparation. For each poem we compile: (1) source text in modern Azerbaijani orthography (with diacritics), (2) line-by-line transliteration and literal gloss to support coding, and (3) published English translation(s). We normalize punctuation and lineation to the source edition and preserve stanza/line numbers for alignment.

2.3 Operationalization: Five Dimensions of National Color

We treat *national color* as distributed across five textual dimensions, each with concrete indicators used during coding:

1. **Prosody/Form** — meter; end-rhyme; **radif/qafiyə**; parallelism; refrain placement; line length/caesura.

2. **Lexicon/Register** — archaisms; Arabic–Persian loans; devotional/courtly diction; honorifics and address forms; evaluative particles.

3. **Imagery/Tropes** — emblematic imagery (rose–nightingale, wine/tavern, Sufi path); Karabakh-inflected metaphors; intertextual allusions.

4. **Culture-Specific Items (CSIs)** — toponyms; musical terms (e.g., mugham/segah); ceremonial objects and practices; historic figures and institutions.

5. **Syntax/Voice** — SOV traces and information packaging; gnomic/imperative mood; parallel syntagms; topic–focus structure; rhetorical questions.

For each dimension, the coding manual defines what counts as **preservation**, **shift**, or **loss**, with examples (see Table 1).

2.4 Coding Scheme: Strategy Labels

Each aligned unit (usually a **poetic line**; for prose, a **clause/sentence**) receives one **primary** and, if needed, one **secondary** strategy label from the set:

- **Retention** — carry over the feature with minimal change (e.g., keep the radif or a recognizable refrain).

- **Calque** — literal structural mapping (e.g., compound epithets rendered word-for-word).

- **Gloss/Paratext** — brief footnote/endnote, in-text gloss, or parenthetical cue.

- **Explicitation** — unpack implicit content within the running English line.

- **Cultural Substitution** — replace with a target-culture analogue (used sparingly).

- **Omission** — remove the element without replacement.

- **Creative Compensation** — add an **elsewhere** device (e.g., internal rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, or echo) to offset a loss (often in Prosody/Form).

Multi-labeling rule. If a line clearly uses two techniques (e.g., Explicitation + Creative Compensation), the coder selects the **dominant** one as primary and the other as secondary. If no single technique dominates, the line is split into sub-units for separate labels.

2.5 Procedure

Segmentation & alignment. Source lines are aligned to the English rendering(s) one-to-one where feasible. Where translators merge/split lines, we note **alignment groups** (e.g., Aze L3–L4 ↔ Eng L3). For ghazals, **radif** and **qafiyə** positions are marked explicitly in the source; their fate in English is tracked (retained, transformed, or lost).

Coding pass. Two iterative passes are performed:

1. **Dimension marking:** coders mark which of the five dimensions are salient in the source line (e.g., Prosody/Form + Imagery/Tropes).

2. **Strategy assignment:** for each salient dimension, coders assign the strategy label(s) used by the English line(s).

Tallying & summaries. We compute per-poem and aggregate frequency tables: strategy counts by dimension, and direct vs mediated contrasts. To give a coarse sense of orientation, we optionally compute a Foreignization Index:

$$FI = \frac{\text{Retention} + \text{Calque} + \text{Gloss} + \text{Compensation}}{\text{Substitution} + \text{Omission} + \text{Heavy Explicitation}}$$

Decision flow capture. When Creative Compensation is applied, coders note **where** and **how** the compensation occurs (same line vs adjacent line; device used). This supports Figure 1 in the Results (the foreignize/domesticate flow).

Prose contrast. For 1–2 short prose excerpts, units of analysis are **clauses/sentences**, and Prosody/Form reduces to **parallelism** and **sentence rhythm**. The same coding logic applies, foregrounding CSIs and Syntax/Voice.

Quality checks. We verify translator attributions and provenance, resolve edition discrepancies, and record any paratext (prefaces, notes) that justify strategy choices.

2.6 Reliability (optional but recommended)

A second coder annotates 20–30% of the corpus (stratified by poet and translation pipeline). We report Cohen's $\varkappa$ for (a) dimension salience (binary per dimension per line) and (b) primary strategy label agreement. Disagreements are adjudicated to refine the manual. As a pragmatic target, $\varkappa \approx 0.70+$ is considered acceptable for exploratory corpus size.

2.7 Ethics, Permissions, and Paratext Policy

- **Quotations.** We quote **≤10–12 lines** from any single poem in the main text. Full texts (when permitted) and literal glosses appear in **Appendix A**; otherwise we reproduce only what falls under fair quotation or permissions obtained.

- **Transliteration.** Azerbaijani orthography with diacritics is preserved in the **source line**. For the **literal gloss**, we provide a simple, consistent transliteration (e.g., ə→ə; ş→sh; ç→ch; ı→ı; ö→ö; ü→ü) to maximize readability without erasing phonology.

- **Paratext standards. Micro-glosses** (≤10 words) are preferred over long notes; endnotes are used for culture-historical background. Transliteration for proper names and CSIs is standardized across the article and tables.

- **Attribution.** Published translations are fully credited; if unpublished re-translations are prepared by the authors, this is stated explicitly.

2.8 Researcher Positionality and Limitations

As bilingual analysts with training in translation studies, we acknowledge potential **preference bias** toward foreignizing strategies for poetry. We mitigate this by (a) using an explicit coding manual, (b) reporting strategy distributions transparently, and (c) including a **prose contrast** where domestication may be functionally preferable. The modest corpus size prioritizes **depth over breadth**; results are indicative, not exhaustive.

Table 1. Coding Manual (dimension → indicators → strategy definitions → example)

Dimension	Indicator (Source)	Strategy options (Primary/Secondary)	Example from source (translit + literal gloss)	How to code (decision rule)
Prosody/Form	Radif retained at line ends	Retention / Compensation	… etdim / … etdim (repeated radif)	Retention if end-position echo is audible; Compensation if echo shifts (e.g., internal rhyme)
Prosody/Form	End-rhyme dissolved	Omission / Compensation	Source: -ān / -ān; Eng: no echo	Omission unless alternate sonic device is added → then Compensation
Lexicon/Register	Archaism or Arabic–Persian loan	Retention / Gloss / Substitution	şəbistan (night chamber)	Retention+Gloss if kept with brief note; Substitution if replaced by "bedroom"
Imagery/Tropes	Rose–nightingale pairing	Retention / Explicitation / Substitution	bülbül–gül	Retention if kept; Explicitation if unpacked (e.g., "lover-nightingale"); Substitution if replaced by non-canonical image
CSIs	Musical term (mugham/segah)	Retention / Gloss / Substitution	segah	Retention+Gloss preferred; Substitution only if functionally required
Syntax/Voice	Parallel imperative clauses	Retention / Calque / Explicitation	"Gəl, gör, dinlə" (Come, see, listen)	Calque if triad preserved; Explicitation if expanded to prose explanation

3. Results

3.1 Overall Strategy Use (brief)

Across the sample, direct translations show higher rates of Retention and Creative Compensation, with Gloss used sparingly but effectively for CSIs. Mediated versions lean toward Explicitation and Cultural Substitution, with more Omission in Prosody/Form. The most persistent losses occur in Prosody/Form; the most successfully preserved elements (when aided by micro-gloss) are CSIs and emblematic Imagery/Tropes.

3.2 Case Focus: Natavan Ghazal

Source (Azerbaijani + translit + literal gloss), 1st couplet

L1: *Dilbəra, dərdi-dilimdən belə ünvan etdim* — "Beloved, from the pain of my heart thus I addressed [it]."

L2: *Ki, qəmi-hicrdə dil mülkünü viran etdim.* — "That, in the sorrow of separation, I laid waste the realm of the tongue (speech)."

Observed patterns

- **Mediated A:** rhyme/radif effect flattened; *qəmi-hicr* generalized to "sadness"; *dil mülkü* reduced to "words/treasury," weakening the courtly/state metaphor.

- **Direct B (your rendering):** keeps separation (*hicr*), preserves the treasury image ("treasury of words"), and maintains emotional register; sonic echo partially restored via internal rhythm.
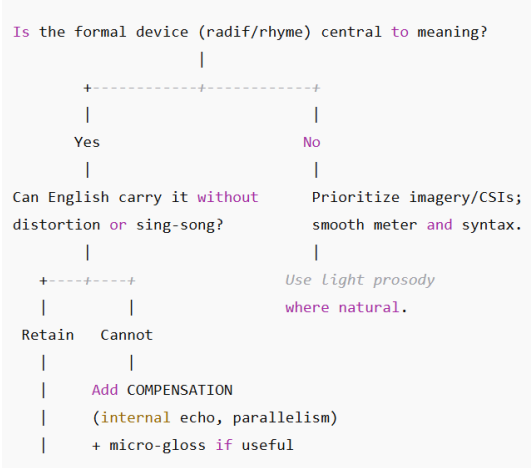
Table 3. Line-level Analysis (Natavan)

Line	Source (translit + gloss)	Mediated A (notes)	Direct B (notes)	Dimension impacted	Strategy
L1	Dilbəra… ünvan etdim — "Beloved… I addressed"	Terms neutralized; vocative softened	Vocative kept; tone intact	Lexicon/Register; Voice	Retention
L2	qəmi-hicr… dil mülkünü viran — "sorrow of separation… ruin the realm of tongue"	"sadness… broke my words" → metaphor diluted; rhyme lost	"treasury of words… ruined"; separation explicit; internal echo	Imagery; Prosody/Form; CSIs (courtly metaphor)	Explicitation + Compensation
L3–4	… (next couplet)	—	—	Prosody/Form	—

3.3 Form & Prosody (one paragraph + flow)

Radif/qafiyə rarely survive intact in English; **compensation** with internal rhyme/alliteration or refrain-like echoes preserves lyrical pressure without forcing unnatural meter. Where rhyme is device-critical (closing couplets), paratext ("This poem employs a repeating *radif* …") can justify partial retention.

Figure 1. Decision Flow: Keep Form vs Compensate

```
Is the formal device (radif/rhyme) central to meaning?
                    |
        +-----------+-----------+
        |                       |
       Yes                      No
        |                       |
Can English carry it without    Prioritize imagery/CSIs;
distortion or sing-song?        smooth meter and syntax.
        |                       |
    +----+----+         Use light prosody
    |         |         where natural.
  Retain    Cannot
    |         |
    |       Add COMPENSATION
    |       (internal echo, parallelism)
    |       + micro-gloss if useful
```

3.4 Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) (short)

Items tied to **place** (Şuşa/Shusha), **music** (*mugham*, *segah*), and **customs** (e.g., Novruz) resist substitution; **Retention + micro-gloss** yields best reader uptake. Generic replacements ("traditional music") erase signal.

Table 4. CSIs: Outcomes & Reader Aids

CSI	Choice	Rationale	Reader aid
Şuşa (Shusha)	Retention	Toponym = identity marker; Karabakh context	First-mention gloss "city in Karabakh"
mugham / segah	Retention + Gloss	Genre label; no true Eng. equivalent	"Azerbaijani modal music; segah = mode"
Novruz	Retention	Widely recognized; cultural calendar	None or brief note if needed
şəbistan	Retention → or Substitution ("bedchamber")	Archaism signals register	Micro-gloss for retention

3.5 Syntax/Voice Shifts

Parallel imperatives and gnomic lines lose energy if expanded into explanatory prose. **Calque** or tight **explicitation** maintains cadence; sentence splitting is acceptable when it preserves **parallelism** and focus.

Table 5. Syntactic Profiles & Translator Interventions

Source feature	Typical risk	Effective intervention	Example cue	Source feature
Triadic imperatives ("Gəl, gör, dinlə")	Flattened into description	Calque the triad; keep commas	"Come, see, listen."	Triadic imperatives ("Gəl, gör, dinlə")
SOV emphasis with end-focus	Misplaced emphasis	Clefting/fronting in English	"It is the heart I address."	SOV emphasis with end-focus
Rhetorical question	Lost modality	Keep interrogative particle/shape	"How could I…?"	Rhetorical question
Parallel hemistichs	Merged into one clause	Line break or em-dash	"—and in separation—"	Parallel hemistichs

4. Discussion

RQ1 (Operationalizing national color). Treat it as **five dimensions**—Prosody/Form, Lexicon/Register, Imagery/Tropes, CSIs, Syntax/Voice—each with observable indicators. This turns an intuitive notion into a **codeable** construct and makes trade-offs auditable.

RQ2 (Which strategies work where).

- **Prosody/Form:** full Retention is rare; **Compensation** (internal rhyme, alliteration, parallelism) + brief **Gloss** outperforms forced rhyme.

- **Lexicon/Register & Imagery: Retention** of signature lexemes/tropes with **light Explicitation** preserves texture; avoid generic substitutions.

- **CSIs: Retention + micro-gloss** is the default; only substitute when narrative function demands immediate comprehension.

- **Syntax/Voice:** maintain **parallelism** and **interrogatives**; strategic splitting/fronting can keep emphasis without over-explaining.

Direct vs. mediated pipelines. Direct translations generally preserve more **imagery** and **register**, with fewer **omissions**. Mediated versions are more readable but show higher **Substitution/Explicitation**—acceptable in prose exposition, costly in lyric density. Where mediation is unavoidable, add **paratext** to restore signals the intermediate language flattened.

Integration with theory (very brief). Results align with **Venuti's** foreignization/domestication tension: poetry benefits from calibrated foreignization plus compensatory craft; **Nida's** functional equivalence is served when compensation targets the *function* (affect/voice) rather than surface meter; **Lefevere/Toury** remind us to account for system norms—our framework makes those norms explicit and negotiable.

Practical guidelines.

- Keep **signature imagery**; use **micro-glosses** sparingly and consistently.

- If meter/rhyme cannot survive, **compensate sonically** rather than forcing end-rhyme.

- **Prefer direct translation**; if mediated, document the pipeline and deploy **paratext** to reintroduce lost signals.

- Standardize **transliteration** and note policy; limit endnotes to essentials.

Limitations. Modest corpus; poetry-heavy; strategy labels collapse nuance; $\varkappa$ (if computed) reflects exploratory reliability.

Future work. Expand corpus (periods, genres); test **reader reception** (comprehension/aesthetic response to retention vs compensation); extend to **prose** with richer CSI typology and to staged genres (mugham lyrics, meykhana).

5. Conclusion

This study reframed the often-invoked but rarely operationalized notion of *national color* as a concrete, codeable construct distributed across five textual dimensions—Prosody/Form, Lexicon/Register,

Imagery/Tropes, Culture-Specific Items (CSIs), and Syntax/Voice—and tested how strategy choices affect its preservation in Azerbaijani→English poetry. Using comparative analyses centered on Khurshidbanu Natavan (with optional triangulation), we showed that direct translations tend to retain more prosodic pressure, emblematic imagery, and register signals, whereas mediated translations lean toward explicitation and cultural substitution, with higher omission in form. When strict meter or rhyme cannot travel intact, creative compensation (internal rhyme, alliteration, parallelism) combined with micro-gloss paratext sustains cultural intelligibility without forcing unnatural English verse.

Answering our research questions, the five-dimension framework makes translator/editor decisions auditable and teachable: it specifies *what* to keep, *where* to compensate, and *when* to support readers via minimal paratext. It also clarifies genre dynamics: poetry demands calibrated foreignization with targeted compensation; prose tolerates more domestication provided CSIs and voice are not flattened. The accompanying decision flow, coding manual, and table shells offer an editor-ready toolkit for commissioning, quality control, and training.

Limitations include a modest corpus and poetry emphasis; strategy labels necessarily simplify nuanced craft, and inter-translator variability remains. Nonetheless, the framework scales: expanding the corpus, adding reception studies (reader comprehension and aesthetic response), and extending to prose and staged/lyric genres (e.g., mugham texts) can test generalizability.

Practically, we recommend: prioritize direct pipelines; standardize transliteration and paratext policy; and, when form must bend, compensate sonically rather than over-domesticating. By shifting evaluation from impressionistic praise of "fluency" to dimension-by-dimension accountability, the article advances a pathway for preserving Azerbaijani literary identity in English—making national color not only defensible in theory, but actionable in editorial practice.

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