Exploring the Translation of Colloquial Expressions: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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Keywords	Abstract
colloquial expressions sociolinguistics translation strategies cultural mediation	This study investigates the translation of colloquial expressions through a sociolinguistic lens, emphasizing the interplay between linguistic equivalence, cultural mediation, and social identity. Colloquial language—including slang, idioms, and informal speech—reflects speakers' cultural values, group membership, and evolving communication norms. Translating such expressions presents challenges due to their cultural embeddedness, contextual variability, and rapid evolution across digital platforms. Using examples from English and Azerbaijani, the paper analyzes how translators navigate these challenges through adaptive strategies such as borrowing, paraphrasing, domestication, and contextual adaptation. It argues that translators function as cultural mediators, preserving not only semantic meaning but also social and pragmatic nuances that define colloquial discourse. The study highlights the increasing influence of social media on the emergence and diffusion of slang, underscoring the need for translators to maintain cultural awareness and linguistic flexibility in the digital age.

1. Introduction

Language is not only a vehicle for propositional content; it is a social practice that encodes identity, group membership, and cultural value. The colloquial layer of language—slang, idioms, and other informal registers—makes these social and cultural functions most visible by indexing in-group solidarity, stance, and local knowledge (Crystal, 2003; Eble, 1996). Precisely because colloquial expressions are context-bound, culturally specific, and fast-moving, they resist one-to-one equivalence and pose distinctive problems for translators who must preserve not just referential meaning but also pragmatic force and social resonance (Newmark, 1988; Venuti, 1995). The velocity of change has increased in the platform era: social media accelerates the diffusion and

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obsolescence of slang and continually shifts meanings, demanding ongoing cultural attunement from translators (Sheralieva, 2025; Kulkarni & Wang, 2017; Liang, Meng, Wang, & Zhou, 2025).

In the English–Azerbaijani pairing, additional hurdles arise from structural differences, stylistic norms, and discourse conventions; translators frequently rely on paraphrase, adaptation, and hybrid strategies to balance intelligibility, tone, and cultural positioning (Babayev, 2023; Resulova & Abbasov, 2020; Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958). This paper therefore aims to examine how linguistic (semantic, pragmatic, stylistic) and socio-cultural (identity, age cohort, community norms) factors interact in the translation of colloquial expressions, with illustrative data from English and Azerbaijani.

Research question. *How do sociolinguistic factors shape the choice and effectiveness of translation strategies for colloquial expressions?*

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Colloquial Language and Sociolinguistics

Following Crystal (2003), we treat colloquial language as the everyday, informal register of a speech community, encompassing idioms, slang, and stylistic reductions that are sensitive to setting and audience. Eble's (1996) ethnography of campus slang shows how such expressions function as social badges—signaling affiliation, boundaries, and shared experience—while also serving playful and affective purposes. Recent work on youth discourse underscores that slang is not static: it is shaped by peer networks, trends, and media cycles, with forms and meanings turning over quickly (Sheralieva, 2025).

Because colloquial usage varies across social identities (age, gender, subculture) and cultural groups, the same surface form may carry divergent connotations across communities, and different forms may fulfill equivalent functions in different locales (Crystal, 2003; Eble, 1996). For translators, this implies that successful rendering depends on reading the social indexicality of an expression—who uses it, to whom, where, and why—and then selecting target-language resources that reproduce those social meanings, not merely the denotation.

2.2. Translation Theory and the Sociocultural Approach

Classical frameworks supply a repertoire of techniques but also different ideologies of reception. Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) catalogue procedures from borrowing and calque to modulation and adaptation; Newmark (1988) distinguishes methods according to the priority given to semantic vs. communicative effect. Venuti (1995) reframes these choices ethically as foreignization versus domestication: whether to preserve source-culture alterity or to accommodate target-culture norms.

In colloquial translation, these orientations directly bear on how much "foreignness" of social identity and register is retained.

From a sociolinguistic vantage point, the translator becomes a cultural mediator who must evaluate which strategy best recreates the original's pragmatic function and social indexicality for the target audience (Venuti, 1995). For culturally dense or group-specific slang, borrowing can preserve flavor but risks opacity; adaptation can secure accessibility but may flatten social nuance (Newmark, 1988; Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958). In English–Azerbaijani practice, translators often combine strategies—e.g., a borrow plus an explicitation on first mention, or a culturally analogous idiom where a direct equivalent is absent—guided by genre, audience, and evolving usage norms (Babayev, 2023; Resulova & Abbasov, 2020). The sociocultural approach thus situates technique within community expectations and identity work, aligning procedure with the social life of language as documented in colloquial discourse (Crystal, 2003; Eble, 1996; Sheralieva, 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative discourse-analytic design that triangulates linguistic form with sociolinguistic function. We analyze English–Azerbaijani pairs of colloquial expressions (slang, idioms, and other informal registers) to examine how translators balance semantic content with pragmatic effect and social indexicality (Crystal, 2003; Eble, 1996; Newmark, 1988; Venuti, 1995).

3.2. Materials and sampling

Data comprise naturally occurring colloquial items collected from:

- **Contemporary usage:** short-form social media posts and comments, subtitled audiovisual dialogs, and conversational transcripts in public online spaces;

- **Reference descriptions and case discussions** in the local literature on Azerbaijani usage and translation (Abbasova, 2023; Hasanova, 2023; Babayev, 2023; Resulova & Abbasov, 2020).

Sampling followed maximum variation principles: (a) balance across slang, idioms, and informal formulas; (b) balance across source directions (EN→AZ and AZ→EN); (c) inclusion of youth- and domain-specific slang (e.g., tech, campus), given its rapid turnover (Sheralieva, 2025). Each token was archived with its immediate cotext (preceding/following turns) and situational metadata (speaker role, presumed audience, platform/genre, date) to preserve interpretive context (Eble, 1996; Crystal, 2003).

3.3. Analytic dimensions and operationalization

We evaluate each translation (human-produced or proposed by our analysts) along three primary dimensions:

(a) Semantic equivalence. Denotational content preserved?

- 2 = fully preserved; 1 = partial shift (hyper-/hyponymy, metaphor dilution); 0 = major loss or change.
  Anchoring tests draw on sense relations and componential analysis (Newmark, 1988).

(b) Pragmatic function. Original illocution and stance preserved (humor, irony, solidarity, provocation, mitigation)?

- 2 = functionally isomorphic; 1 = broadly similar but attenuated; 0 = divergent function.
  Functional labels are adapted from discourse-pragmatic descriptions of slang as social action (Eble, 1996; Crystal, 2003).

(c) Social context preservation. Retention of register, in-group indexicality, and identity cues (age cohort, subculture, power/solidarity).

- 2 = social indexicality retained (e.g., youth-coded, informal); 1 = mixed; 0 = neutralized/formalized.
  This dimension foregrounds the sociolinguistic life of expressions (Sheralieva, 2025).

In parallel, each solution is coded for strategy using a consolidated taxonomy: borrowing, calque, literal translation, modulation, adaptation, paraphrase, explicitation, omission (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958; Newmark, 1988). We additionally tag orientation as domestication or foreignization to capture macro-level choices (Venuti, 1995) and note any hybrid sequencing (e.g., borrow + gloss at first mention) common in English–Azerbaijani practice (Babayev, 2023; Resulova & Abbasov, 2020).

3.4. Coding procedure and reliability

Two bilingual annotators independently coded all items after a calibration round using a shared guide with examples from the cited literature (Abbasova, 2023; Hasanova, 2023; Babayev, 2023). Disagreements were resolved by adjudication. Inter-rater reliability was assessed with Cohen's κ for categorical labels (strategy, orientation) and weighted κ for the 0–2 scales; target κ ≥ .75 for "substantial" agreement.

3.5. Analytic techniques

We combine:

- **Within-pair qualitative analysis** to explain why particular strategies succeed or fail on the three dimensions;

- **Cross-case patterning** to relate strategies to outcomes (e.g., whether adaptation more reliably preserves pragmatic function than borrowing in AZ→EN youth slang);

- **Temporal sensitivity** for fast-evolving items influenced by platform cycles (Kulkarni & Wang, 2017; Liang, Meng, Wang, & Zhou, 2025). Findings are interpreted against sociolinguistic accounts of colloquial usage and translator mediation (Crystal, 2003; Eble, 1996; Venuti, 1995).

3.6. Data ethics and limitations

Only publicly accessible materials were consulted; usernames and platform-specific identifiers were anonymized in examples. Because colloquial meaning is highly context-bound and time-sensitive, results reflect usage at the time of sampling and may shift with evolving norms (Sheralieva, 2025). Machine translation outputs were not benchmarked systematically, given known weaknesses with informal registers, but are referenced to contextualize constraints (Kulkarni & Wang, 2017).

4. Findings

4.1. Linguistic Challenges

Colloquial items pose three recurrent difficulties: non-standard morphosyntax, idiomatic (non-compositional) meaning, and context-dependence. Forms such as *gonna, wanna, ain't* or slang verbs like *drag, flex, roast* carry stance and in-group cues that are often neutralized in target renderings if translated literally or normalized editorially (Crystal, 2003; Eble, 1996). Where no direct equivalent exists, translators resort to adaptation or paraphrase, which can preserve denotation but risk diluting tone and social indexicality if not carefully motivated (Newmark, 1988; Resulova & Abbasov, 2020). Preserving the pragmatic effect—humor, irony, solidarity, provocation—proved more decisive for reader reception than preserving surface form, especially for youth-coded slang (Resulova & Abbasov, 2020; Eble, 1996).

4.2. Cultural Context and Mediation

The translator's choices sit on a continuum between foreignization (retaining source-culture flavor) and domestication (aligning to target norms) (Venuti, 1995). Foreignizing borrowings keep subcultural color but can reduce accessibility; domesticating analogs increase readability but may

flatten group identity cues (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958; Newmark, 1988). Slang and humor are especially culture-bound: punchlines often rely on local references or platform memes. The pace of change in social-media discourse (new forms, shifting meanings, rapid obsolescence) further demands time-sensitive choices and continual updating by translators (Sheralieva, 2025). Audience factors (age cohort, genre, formality) consistently shaped strategy selection (Crystal, 2003; Eble, 1996).

4.3. Application of Translation Strategies

Across the dataset, we observed consistent use of borrowing, calque, literal translation, modulation, adaptation, paraphrase, explicitation, and occasional omission (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958; Newmark, 1988). Two patterns stood out:

- Adaptation/paraphrase most reliably preserved pragmatic function and tone.

- Borrowing + first-mention explicitation balanced flavor with clarity in youth and platform slang (Babayev, 2023; Venuti, 1995).

Illustrative micro-comparisons (0–2 scale for Semantic / Pragmatic / Social indexicality):

EN expression	Concise AZ rendering	Strategy	Why it works
spill the tea	"dedi-qodu var" / "sirri açmaq"	Adaptation / paraphrase	Preserves gossip/reveal function and informal tone without awkward literalism.
ghost (someone)	"yoxa çıxmaq" / "yazışmadan çəkilmək"	Paraphrase	Captures abrupt, silent withdrawal common in chat/dating contexts.
stan (a singer)	"stan" (+ first-mention "fanatik pərəstişkar")	Borrowing + brief gloss	Keeps subcultural flavor while ensuring initial comprehension; later uses can drop the gloss.

Overall, EN→AZ renderings favored adaptation/paraphrase to maintain tone; AZ→EN often combined paraphrase + explicitation to signal local nuance for global readers. Purely literal choices frequently neutralized register and lost social meaning (Newmark, 1988; Resulova & Abbasov, 2020; Venuti, 1995). Rapidly evolving, platform-driven slang benefited from hybrid sequencing (borrow → brief gloss → subsequent unglossed reuse) to foster both uptake and stylistic authenticity (Babayev, 2023; Sheralieva, 2025). Machine translation remained weak on these items due to poor handling of context-dependent informality (Kulkarni & Wang, 2017; Liang, Meng, Wang, & Zhou, 2025).

5. Social Media and Technology

Digital platforms have accelerated the creation, diffusion, and obsolescence of colloquial forms, globalizing local slang while continually shifting meanings across communities and contexts. This velocity heightens the translator's burden: items can become opaque or re-indexed within weeks, and platform-specific memes travel with culture-bound presuppositions (Crystal, 2003; Eble, 1996; Sheralieva, 2025). In such environments, translators must track time-sensitive usage and "glocal" adaptations (imported forms naturalized to local norms), often deciding between preserving subcultural flavor and securing readability through minimal explanation.

Current machine translation (MT) and large language models (LLMs) remain brittle on informal, context-dependent language. They struggle with non-literal meaning, stance, and social indexicality, and they frequently normalize nonstandard forms or misread irony, in-group cues, and platform humor (Kulkarni & Wang, 2017). Even as slang-aware benchmarks emerge, performance lags because items are rapidly evolving, polysemous, and community-specific (Liang, Meng, Wang, & Zhou, 2025). Consequently, MT outputs for slang are best treated as first-pass scaffolds requiring human mediation to restore pragmatic force.

These pressures make ongoing technological and social attunement part of the translator's craft: maintaining rolling glossaries, monitoring platform communities, and deploying hybrid techniques—e.g., borrowing with a brief first-mention gloss, then streamlined reuse; or adaptive paraphrase calibrated to audience age and genre (Newmark, 1988; Venuti, 1995; Babayev, 2023; Resulova & Abbasov, 2020).

6. Discussion

Sociolinguistic motivation of strategies. Choices such as borrowing, adaptation, paraphrase, or explicitation are not merely technical—they are sociolinguistically motivated by audience, register, and the identity work an expression performs (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958; Newmark, 1988). For youth-coded slang, preserving stance (teasing, solidarity, provocation) often outweighs preserving surface form; hence adaptation/paraphrase that recreates function can be preferable to literalism (Crystal, 2003; Eble, 1996).

Preventing loss of social context. When domestication increases accessibility, it can flatten indexical cues (e.g., age, subculture). Mitigations include first-mention glosses, paratextual notes, or culturally analogous idioms that restore social positioning without overburdening the text. In dialogic or subtitle formats, brief on-the-fly explicitation and consistent register marking help retain tone and in-group signals (Resulova & Abbasov, 2020; Babayev, 2023; Venuti, 1995).

Human translators and ethical responsibility. Because colloquial items encode group identities and boundaries, human translators act as cultural mediators with ethical obligations: avoid

stereotyping, refrain from over-domesticating minority voices, and signal otherness where it is semantically and socially constitutive (Venuti, 1995). Editorial normalization should not erase the speaker's social positioning or silence subcultural varieties that carry meaning beyond denotation (Eble, 1996).

Translation as a linguistic bridge. Done well, translating colloquial expressions bridges communities—carrying humor, affect, and solidarity across languages while respecting local norms. A practical workflow is human-in-the-loop: use MT/LLM output to surface candidates, then human post-edit to restore pragmatic function, stance, and indexicality, especially for fast-moving, platform-borne items (Kulkarni & Wang, 2017; Liang et al., 2025). In the English–Azerbaijani pairing, our analysis supports hybrid strategies (borrowing + brief gloss; adaptation tuned to genre and audience) as the most reliable path to preserve meaning, tone, and social resonance (Newmark, 1988; Venuti, 1995; Resulova & Abbasov, 2020; Babayev, 2023).

7. Conclusion

Translating colloquial expressions is a cultural act, not a word-for-word exercise. Effective renderings preserve pragmatic force (humor, stance, solidarity) and social indexicality (age, subculture) alongside meaning, with the translator acting as a mediator between communities. In English–Azerbaijani work, hybrid strategies—adaptation/paraphrase for tone, borrowing with a first-mention gloss for flavor, and selective explicitation—consistently outperform literalism. Given the speed of platform-driven change, a human-in-the-loop workflow remains essential.

Future directions (brief):

- Tune MT/LLMs to social variation; evaluate on pragmatic adequacy, not just lexical overlap.

- Build bilingual, diachronic corpora of colloquial usage to map strategy–outcome patterns.

- Advance multimodal translation (text + prosody/gesture/visuals) for discourse where meaning is not purely verbal.

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