FIGURATIVE EQUIVALENCE IN BILINGUAL LITERARY TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT

Figurative language – such as metaphors, idioms, and other tropes – is a defining feature of literary texts, yet it poses a fundamental challenge to translators because of differences in culture and language. Achieving figurative equivalence (the preservation of metaphorical meaning) requires careful strategy: translators must decide whether to find a target-language figurative expression or to paraphrase the sense. This paper reviews theories of translation equivalence (Nida's dynamic equivalence, Larson's figurative/non-figurative equivalence) and examines how translators handle figurative imagery across languages. We survey key concepts (e.g. conceptual metaphor) and analyze case studies (e.g. Chinese–English, English–Uzbek) to show that successful literary translation of figurative elements depends on recreating the source text's semantic space rather than producing a word-for-word match. Examples illustrate when translators retain, adapt, or omit metaphors and idioms. The article concludes that bilingual literary translation demands both linguistic competence and cultural sensitivity: translators must understand underlying conceptual metaphors and audience expectations. In sum, figurative equivalence is achievable but often requires creative adaptation and domain knowledge to maintain the original's aesthetic and cultural force

Introduction

Literary language is replete with figurative expressions (metaphors, idioms, similes, proverbs, etc.) that convey vivid imagery and emotional resonance. Translating literary texts thus inevitably involves rendering figurative meaning in another language and culture. However, different languages express concepts and images in diverse ways, so a phrase that is figurative in the source language may lack a straightforward analog in the target. This poses the problem of figurative equivalence: how can a translator preserve the original's figurative meaning or effect? On one hand, one could translate the words literally, risking loss of the intended imagery. On the other hand, one could seek an equivalent figure of speech in the target language, which may distort nuances or not exist. According to Larson (1984),

translators must choose between figurative equivalence (finding a similar image in the target) and non-figurative equivalence (paraphrasing literally) depending on the text's needs.

This paper examines the problem of figurative equivalence in bilingual literary translation (e.g. between English and Uzbek, or any two languages) by reviewing theoretical approaches and examples. We begin with a literature review of equivalence in translation theory, including Nida's dynamic equivalence, Mona Baker's idiom strategies, and cognitive approaches to metaphor. We then analyze how figurative language can be transferred: what strategies translators use and how cultural differences shape their choices. We draw on corpus studies of metaphor translation (e.g. Xiao and Xiao 2022 on a Chinese novel) and comparative analyses (e.g. Shukurova 2025 on English–Uzbek metaphors) to highlight real cases. The discussion considers implications for translator training and literary critique. We conclude that achieving figurative equivalence is a complex, context-dependent process requiring creative adaptation – it is not a "hard and fast" equivalence of words, but an alignment of meaning and effect across cultural frames.

Literature Review

Theories of Equivalence

The concept of equivalence has been central in translation studies. Nida (1964) distinguished formal vs. dynamic equivalence: dynamic equivalence prioritizes producing the same effect on the target audience as on the original audience. In practice, this often means that figurative and cultural meaning should be rendered adaptively. Nida himself noted that many figures of speech (like metaphors) cannot be translated word-for-word and must undergo transformation to be intelligible. Newmark (1988) similarly observes that figurative images "encompass a wider range of meaning than the literal language," so preserving that range is crucial for faithful translation. In short, foundational theory suggests translators should capture the source text's communicative function and imagery, not just its words.

Larson's meaning-based model (1984) introduces the specific notions of figurative equivalence and non-figurative equivalence when dealing with figurative expressions. If a source-language idiom or metaphor cannot find a parallel figure in the target culture, Larson suggests a non-figurative (literal) paraphrase to convey meaning. But if the target does have an analogous figurative expression, one should aim for figurative equivalence to retain the image. For example, translating the English idiom "kick the bucket" non-figuratively as "died" may lose the colloquial tone, whereas a culturally equivalent idiom (if it exists) could better match the effect. Larson cautions that the choice depends on "the needs of the text and the target readers": a translator must weigh fidelity to imagery versus readability and naturalness. Mona Baker (2018) also emphasizes the importance of effect: her idiom-translation strategies include substitution (finding a target-language idiom) or paraphrase, acknowledging that exact matches often do not exist.

In short, equivalence in literary translation is viewed functionally: the translator tries to evoke in the target language what the figurative expression evoked in the source. Denroche (2023) synthesizes recent work by proposing that "all language is characterized as figurative" and that translators should recreate the source's semantic space rather than the exact surface wording. The semantic space concept means maintaining conceptual meaning and emotional tone, even if the target wording differs. This view aligns with dynamic equivalence and suggests that translators should see every expression as imbued with figurative potential (not an exception to normal language). Hence, the aim is not literal word equivalence, but conceptual-cum-cultural equivalence.

Figurative Language and Culture

Figurative language is deeply tied to culture. Cognitive linguists like Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors reflect underlying conceptual structures; e.g. English speakers

commonly think of time as money ("Time is money") or life as a journey. In different cultures, metaphors may arise from different experiences. Shukurova (2025) provides a striking illustration: English metaphors often draw on commerce and journey imagery, whereas Uzbek metaphors commonly invoke nature or family life. She notes English examples like "Time is money" and "Life is a journey," while Uzbek equivalents include "Hayot daraxtdek" ("Life is like a tree") and "Vaqt olovdek" ("Time is like fire"). These differences underscore that metaphors are not universal abstractions but culturally motivated; thus, an English idiom about money may make no sense if translated literally into Uzbek. Translators must therefore identify the conceptual metaphor underlying each expression and see if it can be mapped to a similar concept in the target culture.

Translation scholars have long debated whether metaphors are translatable. Kloepfer (1967) optimistically claimed metaphors are universal, but others (e.g. Nida 1964; Snell-Hornby 1995) argue metaphorical meaning is often culture-specific. As Snell-Hornby (1995, p.56) puts it, the fundamental issue in metaphor translation is that "the meaning of metaphor is frequently culture-specific". Similarly, Dagut (1976) argues that translatability depends on how much cultural experience is shared between source and target audiences. In other words, some metaphors may transfer directly if cultures share the concept (e.g. natural imagery), but others require either adaptation or explanation.

Idioms and proverbs pose a parallel challenge: Baker (2018) identifies three core difficulties in idiom translation – recognizing an expression as idiomatic, interpreting its idiomatic (non-literal) meaning, and then rendering that unique meaning appropriately. Since idioms are "fixed expressions or a frozen pattern", their components rarely guide literal translation. Often a literal translation would confuse readers. As a result, translators rely on strategies like using an unrelated idiom in the target (if one with a similar meaning exists) or paraphrasing the idea. If no equivalent exists, the translator may simply explain the meaning in neutral language. Achieving figurative equivalence thus becomes a creative process of finding or inventing analogues.

Examples from Bilingual Studies

Several comparative studies illustrate these issues. The case of English–Uzbek translation is informative. As noted, Uzbek tends to visualize concepts differently (trees, fire, family roles). A translator encountering "Once in a blue moon" must decide how to convey the rare-event meaning. English uses a color metaphor; Uzbek might use something like "Har yili engilla oyning bir kunlari" ("On the bluish moon's day each year") or a different metaphor. Shukurova's analysis finds that while some tropes overlap (animals, natural features), many are culture-specific. This means the translator often chooses non-figurative equivalence (i.e. rephrasing) unless a local idiom matches. In practice, Uzbek translations of English novels sometimes drop or explain English idioms, using standard Uzbek phrases instead.

In literary corpora, researchers have quantitatively measured translation of metaphor. Xiao and Xiao (2022) studied the classic Chinese novel Jinpingmei and its English versions. They found that English translators used a mix of strategies: one translator preserved every metaphor (translating them literally or finding equivalents), while another omitted or altered many figurative images. Overall, most metaphors (64%) ended up with literal translation (though this often required creative phrasing), and about 14% were converted to similes in English. Their analysis confirms that translators do not uniformly apply one method: strategy choice varies by context and translator intentions. Crucially, Xiao and Xiao note that the chosen approach affects the literary "figurative senses" in the target. For instance, deletion of a metaphor simply removes its image, whereas paraphrasing may convey the basic idea but lose literary color. Thus they conclude that metaphor translation is influenced by the translator's priorities (their skopos or purpose) and judgments about which metaphors to

emphasize. This underscores the translator's active role: they weigh preservation of imagery against clarity or cultural relevance.

Main Analysis

Strategies for Figurative Equivalence

Drawing on the literature, we can classify the main strategies translators use for figurative language in literary texts:

Literal Retention (Maintain the Figure): The translator tries to render the expression in a similar figurative form. This requires the target language to have a similar metaphor or idiom. For example, translating "He was a rock for her" might become an equivalent simile in Uzbek. This strategy preserves the source text's imagery and tone, but is only possible when conceptual overlap exists. Baker (2018) notes that substitution (using a target-language idiom of similar meaning) is ideal if available. Xiao and Xiao (2022) refer to this as retaining metaphors completely, which in their case occurred when the translator found or maintained an image in the English version. Newmark's taxonomy would call this reproducing the same metaphorical image or using a standard TL metaphor.

Conversion to Alternative Figurative Form: If an exact match is impossible, the translator may choose a different figure that conveys the gist. For instance, an English metaphor might become an Uzbek simile, or an idiom might be replaced by a different idiom. In Jinpingmei, about 14% of metaphors were rendered as similes. Newmark suggests strategies like translation by simile or metaphor plus sense. This strategy aims for figurative equivalence in a loose sense: the target text still uses imagery, but it may not mirror the source image exactly. The key is to keep a similar function. For example, if English says "winter wrapped the world in white" one could translate into Uzbek as "qor hammayoqni muzlatgan edi" ("snow had frozen everything" – here the metaphor is lost but a dramatic image remains) or maybe a different poetic image.

Paraphrase / Non-Figurative Equivalence: The translator abandons any figurative wording and explains the meaning directly. Larson calls this non-figurative equivalence. It is often used when the source metaphor would confuse the target reader or when no analogous image is available. In Xiao and Xiao's study, some metaphors were effectively lost in Egerton's translation (the translator either explicated or omitted them). Baker (2018) also identifies omission or literalizing as common fallbacks when no target idiom exists. This strategy guarantees that the listener/reader understands the content, but at the cost of literary style: the text becomes more prosaic. For example, an Uzbek translator might render "He's under the weather" simply as "u kasal edi" ("he was ill"), losing the playful image.

Creative Compensation or Explanation: Sometimes translators add explanatory glosses or additional context to preserve the effect. Newmark mentions transference with a gloss (keeping the source metaphor with an explanation) or compensation elsewhere in the text. In literary translation, footnotes or in-text explanations may be used for culturally bound imagery. For instance, an Uzbek edition might retain an English cultural reference and add a brief note. Denroche's concept of "semantic space" implies translators could also recapture metaphor through more general language that evokes similar feelings. E.g. a target sentence might expand or alter clauses to re-create the atmosphere.

These strategies are not mutually exclusive: a single text often uses a mix. The choice depends on several factors: textual function (poetic vs narrative), audience (general vs specialist), genre conventions, and translator's style. Literary translation often allows more liberty than technical translation, so figurative equivalence may be weighted more heavily. In English–Uzbek literary translation, for example, translators frequently adapt figurative expressions into culturally resonant imagery or otherwise simplify them, since the readership

may not share the same idiomatic conventions. In contrast, for closely related languages or cultures, more retention may be possible.

The Role of Bilingual Competence and Creativity

Achieving figurative equivalence is ultimately a skill that requires deep bilingual and bicultural understanding. As Tawfik (2014) remarks, literary translation is highly demanding because it requires "literary sense" and cultural knowledge on both sides. Recognizing figurative language (rather than translating word-for-word) is the first hurdle. Baker (2018) points out that students often fail to identify idioms as single units. Translators must think metaphorically: e.g. realizing that "spill the beans" means "reveal a secret", not literally tossing legumes. This cognitive step is crucial; once the figurative intent is known, the translator must then render an equivalent effect. Denroche (2023) suggests viewing metaphor and metonymy as "master tropes" that saturate language, so translators should expect and welcome figurativeness in any text. This mindset – that all expressions potentially carry indirect meaning – helps translators avoid the trap of translating only surface text.

In practice, competent translators often rely on creativity and intuition. Given two dissimilar languages (for example, English and Uzbek), a direct idiom-to-idiom mapping is rare. Successful translators create new images or find loose analogues. They use context to guide choices: if a metaphor serves a dramatic or emotional purpose, they might preserve it even at the expense of literal accuracy; if it's incidental, they might simplify it. As Xiao and Xiao (2022) illustrate, two English translations of a Chinese novel diverged in this respect: one translator retained imagery to preserve "literariness", while the other favored simpler expression to suit presumed Western readers.

Finally, figurative equivalence is also shaped by linguistic constraints. Sometimes grammatical or stylistic differences between languages force a choice. For instance, Uzbek tends to use more flexible word order and extensive use of simile (-dek suffix), so translating an English metaphor into Uzbek might naturally turn it into a simile or comparative form. Conversely, some structures (like English phrasal verbs or verb-based metaphors) may have no direct Uzbek counterpart. Translators often use corpora and dictionaries of proverbs/idioms, or consult native speakers, to find workable solutions. Advances in corpora or AI now offer tools for detecting figurative patterns and suggesting analogues, but human judgment remains key: as Denroche warns, no machine can fully capture the semantic depth of creative language.

Discussion

Our analysis indicates that figurative equivalence is not an absolute match but a functional correspondence. When translating literature bilingually, the translator's goal is to achieve similar emotional and aesthetic impact rather than word-for-word fidelity. This typically means reproducing the effect of figurative language, whether by finding a target metaphor or by explicating it in a vivid way. As Newmark (1988) suggested, the translator must consider what the metaphor means beyond the surface: its connotations, tone, and cultural subtext.

One implication is that translator training should emphasize cultural literacy and creativity. Studies show students often attempt literal renderings and only later learn to paraphrase or adapt idioms. Thus, courses on literary translation should include analysis of figurative usage in both source and target language contexts. For example, a translator working English-to-Uzbek should learn typical Uzbek metaphorical themes (nature, family, agriculture) so they can identify analogues. Likewise, awareness of the conceptual metaphors a culture uses (as per Lakoff & Johnson) can guide decisions. Shukurova's work suggests

compiling bilingual lists of common tropes; translators could then consult or adapt from this resource when facing unfamiliar images.

Another point is the balance between fidelity and readability. Literary publishers often have style preferences: some encourage footnotes for exotic phrases, others avoid them and prefer fluency. In practice, many translators try to be target-culture friendly, smoothing over foreignness. For instance, in an Uzbek translation, an English reference to "Freedom Trail" may become simply "erkinlik yuli" ("path of liberty") to convey meaning without footnotes. These choices reflect the translator's orientation: a "foreignizing" translator might preserve more of the source flavor; a "domesticating" one might adapt heavily.

Finally, translation is increasingly collaborative and aided by technology. Databases of parallel texts can reveal how others have translated similar figurative expressions. For instance, a translator could search previous English–Uzbek translations for how they handled "Life is a journey". AI tools are emerging to highlight metaphors in source text and suggest target analogues (as in research by Ray and Wadden 2023). However, such tools are still limited in literary nuance. Human oversight is essential because metaphors often carry multiple layers (cultural, historical, emotional).

Conclusion

Figurative equivalence in bilingual literary translation is a nuanced, context-sensitive goal. It requires understanding that language is inherently figurative (Denroche 2023) and that translators must aim to recreate meaning and effect, not just literal form. Theory (Larson 1984; Baker 2018) and empirical studies (Xiao & Xiao 2022; Shukurova 2025) agree that translators use a variety of strategies – literal retention, substitution, paraphrase, or omission – depending on cultural fit and text function. Effective equivalence often means adopting a different metaphor or explicating an image to maintain the source's semantic and emotional impact.

The practical implication is that translators must be flexible and creative. They need strong cross-cultural competence and genre awareness. In many cases (especially with language pairs as distinct as English and Uzbek), there is no one "correct" translation of a metaphor; rather, the translator must prioritize which aspects to preserve. When done skillfully, readers in the target language will experience an effect analogous to the original – the hallmark of dynamic equivalence (Nida 1964) – even if the wording differs.

In summary, achieving figurative equivalence in bilingual literary translation is challenging but feasible. It depends on capturing the underlying conceptual metaphor and contextual meaning, and then expressing it in a culturally appropriate form. Future work might explore how machine translation and AI can assist with identifying figurative units and suggesting idiomatic equivalents. For now, the human translator's deep understanding of both languages and creative insight remain irreplaceable in conveying the figurative soul of literature.

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