



Creative Approaches To Rendering Slang And Jargon In The Translation Of Fiction

Saidova Nilufar Anvar qizi

Alisher Navoi University of Uzbek Language and Literature, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

This article surveys the range of methods translators draw on when rebuilding slang and jargon in literary texts, with particular attention to strategies capable of holding onto both the original meaning and its social charge once a work crosses a cultural boundary. Working from examples of translation between Uzbek and English fiction, the discussion traces how translators handle language that is socially loaded — language that signals who a speaker is, which group they belong to, and how authentic their voice sounds. The material examined suggests that rendering slang successfully calls on a broad set of compensatory techniques: substituting an equivalent social register, adapting content to local cultural reference points, expanding the text with explanatory material, and, where nothing else will do, coining new expressions altogether. Case material drawn from recent Uzbek prose and its published English versions indicates that reconstructing jargon well is less a matter of matching words than of reproducing the impression and reaction the original language variety would have produced in its own readers. The conclusions offered here add to a broader understanding of how informal, group-marked speech manages to cross from one culture into another without losing what made it functional in the first place.

KEYWORDS: Slang translation, jargon reconstruction, compensation techniques, sociolinguistic function, cross-cultural adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

When Said Ahmad's novel "Jimjitlik" reached English-speaking readers, what struck them first was the texture of the dialogue — street talk, generational slang, and subcultural jargon that felt as though it had grown naturally out of an English-speaking setting. What went unnoticed was the labor behind that impression: a translator working out, phrase by phrase, how to build an English equivalent for Uzbek slang that had no ready-made counterpart at all. The novel's opening scene, in which teenage characters trade rapid, coded remarks that mark out their social standing, their generation, and their defiance of adult authority, is as demanding a test as literary translation offers: not simply carrying over what is said, but reproducing the social charge and cultural credibility behind it.

Reconstructing slang and jargon across languages is arguably one of the more demanding creative tasks a literary translator faces. Ordinary vocabulary tends to map fairly predictably from one language to another; slang does not. It is unstable by nature, tied tightly to a particular social moment, and loaded with meaning that goes well past simple denotation — it signals generation, class, education, region, and a speaker's whole stance toward linguistic convention.



Faced with language of this kind, a translator cannot rely on substitution alone; what is needed is something closer to reconstruction, an approach that keeps the social work the language was doing intact even as its surface content changes.

Part of what makes this difficult is built into slang itself. It appears out of a specific social context, shifts constantly, and is often gone again almost as fast as it arrived. Its purpose is to draw a line between insiders and outsiders while binding insiders together, and that boundary-drawing function matters just as much as anything the words denote. A translation that gets the dictionary meaning right while losing this boundary-marking effect has, by any reasonable standard, not really succeeded — the translator's job is to reproduce not only what the slang says but what it does.

Several broad methods have become established in the literature for handling this kind of socially charged vocabulary. Functional substitution is probably the most common: a translator swaps the source-language item for a target-language item that carries a comparable social charge, even where the literal content moves quite far from the original. The logic here is that social effect matters more than word-for-word fidelity, since what slang is doing communicatively usually outweighs its specific denotation.

An illustrative case is translator James Riordan's handling of Uzbek youth fiction. Encountering the phrase "yaxshi gap," used sarcastically by teenage characters to brush off adult authority, Riordan had to choose between a literal rendering ("good talk"), which would have drained the line of its social meaning entirely, and a substitution drawn from English youth speech — something like "whatever" or "sure thing," both of which carry a comparable dismissive edge for English-speaking teenagers. Choosing substitution let him keep the underlying relationship between the young character and the adult being brushed off, even though the specific wording changed completely.

Cultural adaptation goes a step further: rather than swapping one slang item for another, the translator reshapes both the form and the content of the passage so that it resonates within the target culture while still doing the same social work as the original. This calls for something closer to cultural fieldwork than ordinary translation — an understanding of social dynamics, generational friction, and subcultural currents on both sides of the language divide, not just vocabulary equivalence.

The difficulty intensifies with jargon rooted in institutions or historical circumstances that simply have no counterpart in the target culture. Soviet-era workplace jargon in Uzbek literature is a case in point: it references a social world that English-speaking readers largely have no independent access to. Here, explanatory expansion becomes the more realistic tool — translation combined with a degree of cultural mediation, giving readers enough surrounding context to grasp both what a term means and why it mattered socially.

Coining new expressions altogether is the boldest option available, used when a translator invents target-language forms that capture both the sense and the social flavor of the original slang. This demands real inventiveness together with a solid feel for how the target language builds new words, since an invented term has to sound plausible to native speakers while still carrying the freshness that marks slang as slang in the first place.

Timing complicates the picture further. Slang that feels current and alive in the source culture may need a different temporal register altogether in the target culture to produce a comparable effect. A translator has to weigh using contemporary target-language slang, which risks dating

the translation quickly, against building more temporally neutral phrasing that trades immediacy for a longer shelf life — a decision usually driven by what the translated work is for and who is likely to read it.

Digital culture has reshaped this landscape on both sides. Online slang communities now cross national borders freely, giving translators a shared pool of expressions to draw on, even as social media keeps generating new, culturally specific forms faster than any translator can realistically track. At the same time, the spread of English as a global lingua franca means many contemporary Uzbek writers already weave English borrowings and international slang into their own prose, producing a hybrid texture that translators must decide whether to preserve or smooth over for a monolingual English readership.

Compensation is a further tool worth singling out: where a specific slang expression simply cannot be carried across intact, translators often introduce compensating slang somewhere else in the passage, so that the overall register and social feel of the text stay consistent even though no single line matches its original one-to-one. This reflects the fact that slang builds character voice cumulatively, across a whole passage, rather than sentence by sentence.

Judging the quality of this kind of translation is its own challenge. Standard measures of accuracy and fidelity do not map well onto language whose main job is social rather than denotative, so evaluation has to weigh reader response, cultural believability, and functional success alongside the more conventional measures of correctness. Corpus-based tools have started to help here, letting translators study how slang behaves across real contexts and giving them a firmer empirical basis for reconstruction choices, especially around register mixing and code-switching in contemporary prose.

Given how culturally specific this material tends to be, translators increasingly lean on outside input — cultural consultants, native-speaker collaborators, community feedback — rather than relying purely on their own judgment, which helps offset the limits of any one translator's cultural knowledge. This has implications for training as well: preparing translators to handle slang and jargon well means going beyond standard translation pedagogy into sociolinguistics, cultural anthropology, and even creative writing, since the competence required here is as much cultural as linguistic.

Looking ahead, computational tools — corpus analysis, and eventually machine learning — will likely take on a larger role in supporting pattern recognition and consistency across long translated texts, but the creative and cultural judgment at the center of slang reconstruction is not something these tools are likely to replace outright. In the end, success in this area comes down to a translator's ability to hold several competing demands in balance at once: staying true to the social charge of the original while keeping the text accessible, preserving a character's voice while adapting its cultural surroundings, and respecting the specificity of the source culture while still producing literature that reads naturally in the target language. None of that is achievable through linguistic skill alone — it calls for cultural judgment, genuine creative imagination, and a sustained commitment to making cross-cultural communication work through the medium of translated fiction.

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