

## **Trading Culture: Practical Background for Azerbaijani-English Poetry Translation**

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### **Introduction: Azerbaijani Language, Literature and Politics**

Alison watched in surprise as Shahla turned to her Persian-Azerbaijani Dictionary to translate a word in a poem by Khurshud Banu Natavan (1832-1897), a prominent nineteenth century Northern Azerbaijani woman poet. Shahla explained that although the poem was written in Azerbaijani, because of the Persian empire's influence in the region for hundreds of years and the even earlier presence of indigenous Persian-related languages (largely displaced by Oghuz Turkic by the 11th century), the language had long contained many Persian (and so also Arabic) words and sounds, especially in its literary form. Through the seventeenth century in fact, the regions' literature, particularly in the classical forms, was written primarily in Persian (Sultan-Qurraie 1-4). Today, after nearly 200 years of Russian influence and legislated efforts by the current government in the service of ethnic nation building to purify the Azerbaijani language, many Persian words have slipped back south. Nevertheless, contemporary Azerbaijani retains far more vocabulary and phonetics in common with Persian than does its fraternal twin, modern Turkish.

The years of Russian political influence, and geographic and cultural proximity, have further augmented Azerbaijani—and indeed the Russian language as well (Poppe). However enriching, this history of tremendous linguistic exchange has certainly made things challenging for those seeking to translate Azerbaijani literature into other languages. And it's not only the mix of vocabulary and grammar that sets hurdles; Azerbaijani written script has changed four times in the past 100 years. Until the early 20th century, even under Russian Czarist rule,

Azerbaijanis, like Persians, continued to use Arabic written script. Following the first, short-lived movement for independence after WWI, and mirroring Atatürk's language reforms in Turkey, there was a radical shift to a modified Latin alphabet with just a few letters difference from English. This alphabet held until the 1930s, when the USSR, while allowing some continued use of local languages alongside the now official Russian, nevertheless required that Azerbaijani be written only in a modified Cyrillic alphabet.

With the break-up of the USSR in 1990, Azerbaijan's nascent independent government, seeking to realign itself with Western Europe, Turkey and the United States, moved back to a Latin alphabet, though not exactly the same lettering of the earlier Latin script. For the next fifteen years, Cyrillic and Latin alphabets were used alternately and side-by-side. One young teacher in her twenties recalls being taught only Cyrillic script in school through third grade, only the Latin alphabet in the fourth grade, and Cyrillic again in fifth and sixth grades until finally in 2001-2002, the government solidified and began to enforce its legal code regarding the "official" use of Azerbaijani and Latin script throughout the country, and in 2004 passed strict laws banning most signage, publishing and broadcasting in other languages. This young woman's parents, in their fifties, are still most comfortable reading and writing Azerbaijani in Cyrillic script (Humbatova, Naghiyeva).<sup>1</sup>

As a result of both a rich diversity of historical linguistic influences as well as contemporary political dynamics, the scholar of Azerbaijani literature who wants to access primary sources (advisable, because translations and editions published during the Soviet period were apt to make quite drastic changes in content for ideological purposes) must be familiar with Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, Azerbaijani and Russian; as well as several completely different alphabets: Arabic, two Latin Azerbaijani alphabets, and Cyrillic. Alternately, she must make good collegial connections with fluent and native speakers of these five languages; these translators have opted for the latter choice. In this article, we bring our literary scholarship, linguistic training and poetic sensibilities together to analyze the process of Azerbaijani-English literary translation. Shahla, a professor of literature and translation specialist, is a native speaker of Azerbaijani and Russian, familiar with Persian, and fluent in English. Alison, a multi-ethnic world literature and women's studies scholar and poet, is a native English speaker with a background in modern Turkish and a developing fluency in Azerbaijani.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent restrictions on language have not been limited to the written word. In 2008 local TV broadcasts were officially limited to Azerbaijani and in January of 2009, local radio broadcasts of foreign programming in either Azerbaijani or other languages were banned (BBC, RFE, VOA).

In what follows, we look at key linguistic, political, cultural considerations and some practical strategies for translation of poetry from Azerbaijani to English, two very different languages and poetic traditions. We outline our approach to translation that sees translation as a fundamentally human endeavor and the work of a translator as cultural and linguistic exchange and enrichment, even commerce. Where much of translation theory, particularly in the modern era, has argued about whether or not and under what conditions translation is really possible and what a translation produces or doesn't produce vis-à-vis the original<sup>2</sup> we take a more practical approach: translation happens, and it has been going on for a long time—particularly in the region of modern Azerbaijan.

With the expectation and hope that exchange of our linguistic cultures will continue to enrich and spur innovation in each other's literatures and cultures, we begin the section on practical issues in translation by addressing some linguistic and cultural issues common to translations of a variety of Azerbaijani poetry into English, using excerpts from poems and previous translations by more traditional regional poets Fizuli (Muhammad bin Suleyman 1498-1556) and Ashug Alaskar (1821-1926). We then turn to the particularities of translating modern Azerbaijani poetry, which shares with English a twentieth century global context.

### **Azerbaijani Language, Literature, and Modern National Identity**

The upside of Azerbaijan's complex history of multi-cultural, multi-linguistic tradition draws on a potentially large reservoir of multiple and intersecting literary traditions all within the small territory that is now modern Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is a country about the size of Portugal or the state of Maine, with a tremendously diverse native and immigrant population speaking dozens of local and imported languages from Lezgi to Russian. It is not unusual for many of its inhabitants to speak two or even three or four languages fluently. As a result, if it shares anything with English—and we think that there is much to share—the Azerbaijani language mirrors some of the ways in which the hodge-podge that is modern English, developed in part through at least two thousand years ebb and flow of conquest and empire, can offer tremendous versatility in vocabulary, grammar and literary traditions for the practitioner of literary arts. Nevertheless, under powerful contemporary pressures of ethnic nation building, Azerbaijani's potentially rich linguistic versatility that reflects in its vocabulary and grammar thousands of years of distinctly multi-ethnic culture, may be at risk. In contemporary efforts to divest the language of its foreign loan words and constructions, it may lose not only the

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<sup>2</sup> See for example "The Untranslatability of Modernism" by M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera.

nuances of a unique and varied history and culture, but it also may lose some of its resiliency and so potential flexibility to respond and evolve as dynamic, living language both aesthetic and useful in all areas of modern life. Translation of the literature can bring attention to, and may help support, a vibrant, though at risk, literary culture.

Long valued internationally for its geopolitical positioning and petroleum reserves, bordered by Iran, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey and Russia, Azerbaijan was the first region in the world to commercialize petroleum production and was the sought after but never-attained prize of Hitler's push eastward in WWII. The entire Caucasus has commanded interest from linguists for its many, sometimes adjacent but unrelated and unclassifiable, indigenous languages. In the study of folk culture, the best work on Azerbaijani lyrics has been done by ethnomusicologists studying the musical traditions of Mugham (formal lyrics) and Ashug (folk lyrics). Yet very little attention has been paid to Azerbaijan's literature, particularly modern and contemporary works.

Certainly Azerbaijan's mosaic of linguistic and cultural tradition offers challenge to modern local and global efforts to forge homogenous and linear cultural narratives that serve to support the notion of national "identity." While some of this region's literature written in Persian has been translated and studied in the context of Persia or Iran, and some of the poetry written during contact with the Ottomans has found its way into a few studies and anthologies of Ottoman literature, aside from two out of print and relatively uninspiring soviet era anthologies, one recent monograph exploring the poetry of Mo'juz, a poet from northern Iran (or Southern Azerbaijan, depending on one's view) who composed in Azerbaijani, and a bare handful of translations and articles published in journals, very little of the written literature is even available to be studied by English speaking scholars.<sup>3</sup>

In this odd lacuna, for such an internationally critical region, Azerbaijan shares something with the relative invisibility of the language and literature of the Ottoman empire of which it was only very briefly an official part (in the late 16th century). In their introduction to "Ottoman Lyric Poetry" the editors, after Victoria Holbrook's thinking, discuss reasons for the world literary community's blindness to the much larger, but similarly "culturally messy" Ottoman empire's cultural texts, arguing that

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<sup>3</sup> The privately financed journal *Azerbaijan International* is currently the best source of 20th century Azerbaijani literature in English, but its circulation outside of Azerbaijan is limited, and it is not primarily a literary journal. Much of its material, including author interviews, is available on its website.

When we are exiled from the order and unities of culture, language, ethnicity that make up the great smooth national narratives of history, we are cast out into a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multiethnic “non-nation,” an empire that frustrates our need to narrate a descent from origins and forces us to confront the lyrical unevenness of our lives. This is a confrontation that from time to time, for good or for ill, we try hard to avoid (Andrews et al 8).

In other words, although the period of the Ottoman empire saw a tremendous flowering of literature, it was not a literature that reflected a singular cultural narrative—and so its stories and poetry have either been invisible or have been read only in the context of other, more clearly labeled cultural groupings. Invisible or located within singular cultural contexts, not only does the notable diversity of the literature housed within an empire get lost but so too does that literature’s very genesis in a context of diversity.

Globally, the last century has been all about nation building, of one sort or another. And despite the large variety of peoples and languages indigenous to the region as well as the tremendous mobility and historical diasporas of many of these same peoples, much of Azerbaijan’s nation building, in 1918-1920 and especially in the last twenty years, has been founded in ideas of a common Azerbaijani ethnicity. And so, as have Ottoman cultural productions, the multiplicitous literature of the region of Azerbaijan may suffer from historical and contemporary pressures and erasures of homogenization. Case in point: several world famous early writers, such as Nizami Gangavi (1140-1230, of Leyla and Majnun fame), lived in and spoke an older version of the dominant language of what is now modern Azerbaijan. Yet, given the urge to “nationalize” them, these writers are internationally known fairly exclusively as Persian or even Iranian. Admittedly, modern nations did not exist during these writers’ lifetimes. Moreover, the Persian empire had significant influence in the region; until the work of the poet Fizuli in the early 16th century, the expected language of written literature in the region was Persian. Nevertheless, Nizami is certainly as much Azerbaijani as he is Persian.

In fact, even during the 20th century, with a fairly well founded concern from the south over the large population of Azerbaijani speakers within the borders of Iran, Azerbaijani language and linguistic culture has been, at times, harshly suppressed. Though estimates vary widely, even today there perhaps twice as many Azerbaijani speakers within the borders of modern Iran than within the borders of Azerbaijan proper. During the Soviet period, while regional cultural practices such as Ashug and Mugham lyric and musical traditions were supported as part of a narrative of “the People’s” origins, as “the People’s” arts, writers were at the same time encouraged to actively dismiss in their work any “archaic” cultural forms and ideas

where they detracted from the unified “modern” soviet socialist project. As a result, in authorized modern writing and republication of older writing, a state-supported cultural narrative of a unified “People” often eclipsed the lived multiplicity of that people’s daily cultural experiences.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the newly minted, post-soviet modern nation-state of Azerbaijan, as did its older cousin Turkey after the break up of the Ottoman empire, seeks to actively shape the region’s cultural narratives in the service of nation—with the corresponding risk of marginalizing the richness and complexity of those “non-nation” aspects of its literature. A region long inhabited by a wide variety of peoples who intermarried as well maintaining some ethnic coherence, Azerbaijan has historically been home to sizable populations of Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Russians, Azerbaijani Jews, Germans, as well as by large groups of indigenous “minority” groups with their own entirely distinct languages—the largest being Lezghians and Talysh. Today, ongoing tensions with Armenia over the fate of the Nagorno-Karabagh region and turmoil following the break up of the soviet union has resulted in more than half a million currently internally displaced people and greatly reduced the size of both the Armenian and Russian populations. Yet these groups have a continuing presence in the country, often intermarried with ethnic Azerbaijanis. This *mélange* of ethnicity and culture has created challenges to a narrative of national identity and citizenship grounded in ethnicity—yet the very name of the republic proposes such a project.

These fraught connections of politics to culture and literature at this particular point in the region’s history are especially relevant to the work of translation. What translators and scholars have access to, what will be published, even how to treat or re-translate soviet era translations are all impacted by this dynamic of ethnic nationalism. Just as the researcher can never stand entirely neutral before her project, neither can the translator of literature ignore social and political context of cultural texts. Of working with primary and secondary sources on Iranian (Southern Azerbaijani) poet Mo’juz, Hadi Sultan Qurraie writes, “retrieving the true personality of the poet from the blankness of Southern Azerbaijan and from the communist bravado of Northern Azerbaijan has inherent problems” (12). To best “retrieve” and register the fullest experience of Azerbaijani literature in translations for English readers, one ought to be sensitive to the unique and historical multiplicity of culture that is part and parcel of this region.

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<sup>4</sup> See William Fierman’s work on language policy in Central Asia under and after Soviet influence for a good discussion of USSR policies towards local languages.

## Translation and Trading

Articles on translation often concern themselves with “problems” “and “difficulties” and “impossibilities” and so in the most common vocabulary of the field characterize the process of translation as something filled with obstacles, indeed as something less “natural” and “authentic” than the process of creating “original” text. Our introduction above, in fact, makes a similar move in discussing “challenges” connected to translation and transmission of literature from one group to another. But, as anyone facing the blank page or screen can attest, even creating original works in one’s own native tongue is rarely a process without problems and difficulties. And these problems and difficulties of composition are, as are those in the work of translation, native to “doing” language: issues of language and representation, intent and effect, form and content. How does one write and show “love” or “hate?” How can one help a reader experience how the wind sounds in a neighborhood newly constructed of oil money next to refugee slums in Baku, Azerbaijan or see the way a kindergartener shrugs away from her mother on the first day of school on a playfield recently left untreated by pesticides in Seattle, Washington. In one’s “own” language, this is hard work, and, as far as language is “natural” to humans, it is also a “natural” and “authentic” labor.

Of course, translation may not be exactly same kind of difficult labor as the creation of an entirely new story or poem or article. In each cultural group over time, people have most commonly composed folk songs and poetry in their own native languages, contributing to the development and enrichment and intensification of that particular language. But—to generalize quite broadly, but with good reason, we think—since ancient times neighboring peoples have also, perhaps just as “naturally,” learned one another’s languages and sung one another’s songs, whether for business or for pleasure, stretching and enriching both their own and each other’s linguistic traditions. The impulse to translation is rooted in this interest of different peoples in each other’s history, culture, traditions—in each other’s stuff. Perhaps translation is indeed a form of “trading” and, as a desire to trade (whether in food, goods, services, arts) it is nothing new. Nowhere might this impulse to “trade” linguistic culture be better understood than in the context of the Caucasus, where the persistent close coexistence so many completely different languages has long necessitated multilingualism for commerce.

Listening to the best songs and poems of their neighbors, it seems certain that people have long been drawn to sing and recite them in their own languages, to make their meanings and aesthetics accessible to their own communities. Writing of the longtime role of translation in “cultural interaction” Albrecht Neubert and

Gregory M. Shreve describe what they see as the “paradox” of translation that “[translation] is natural because we have always done it. Sometimes it is quite unnatural, especially when we read bad translations” (1). Not only a tool of communication or scholarship, translation serves as a bridge between peoples, bringing them closer, and enabling each to know the other's style of life, tradition and culture better. In turn, this exposure stretches and assists in the continued building of one’s own culture. That there might be a kind of economics of, or profit motive for translation is not a new idea. Thirty years ago, in arguing for a reevaluation of translation studies in the field of literary and cultural studies, Rolf Kloepper claimed that a good translator, working in concert with literary and cultural studies “discovers the new linguistic possibilities of the original in his own language... and has given his own community the means to express itself in a new way; he has made new language” (35). Attributing broad cultural implications to the work of translation, Kloepper argues that “the discovery of linguistic possibilities is equally the task of both poet and translator as well as it is the task of the exchange between entire cultural systems” (36). In the next sections of this article, we pay particular attention to the challenges, but also the great possibilities, of translating poetry from Azerbaijani (Shahla’s native language) to English (Alison’s native language).

### **Azerbaijani Poetry in English**

While all translation has its challenges, translation between languages from different “language families,” such as from Azerbaijani (Turkic) to English (Germanic, Indo-European), has additional issues. Diverse literary patterns and forms, as well as differing semantic and grammatical structures can cause problems—or opportunities—for the translator. Moreover, translating poetry is perhaps the subtlest, hardest and most complicated type of translation, demanding careful and simultaneous attention to sound, sense and form. Though he advocated this work and admitted he himself was “troubled with the disease of translation” John Dryden wrote of translating poetry, “‘Tis much like dancing on ropes with fettered legs: a man may shun a fall by using caution; but the gracefulness of motion is not to be expected: and when we have said the best of it, ‘tis but a foolish task; for no sober man would put himself in into a danger for the applause of escaping without breaking his neck” (18, 22). For though the literal meaning of a poem may not be its main poetic feature, the translator has a responsibility to be as faithful to the “sense” of a poem as the conflicting interests of sound and form permit; certainly she is not as free as the poet, except in “imitations,” to entirely follow her will.

In “A Translator’s Tale,” reflecting on her translations of the Nobel prize winning Turkish author Orhan Pamuk’s novels, Maureen Freely speaks of “the chasm between English and Turkish, which had no verb *to be* or a verb *to have* and a single word for *he*, *she*, and *it* but made a distinction between eye-witness reports and hearsay.” Nearly identical in its grammatical structures to modern Turkish, Azerbaijani is an “agglutinative language, [linking] root nouns to long strings of suffixes, thus dispensing with definite and indefinite articles and freestanding prepositions.” Initially skeptical about the project of this challenging Turkish/English translation, Freely makes the claim that “A translation that reflected the Turkish sentence’s ‘inner logic’ would open up like a flower to reveal its truth” and that “[while] poetry might allow such miracles...the conventions of English prose did not.” That poetry might be a more versatile and resilient form than prose for Turkic—English translation makes some sense. Gymnastics of language that might, at worst, look ridiculous and, at best, be distracting in prose can in poetry, be acceptable, even prized. Particularly concerned with the musicality of Turkish, Freely nevertheless dove into the project, managing to attend to the “spirit” of the original prose novels, both in music and sense,.

And yet, while enthusiastically supporting her translation choices, particularly her decision to, at times, privilege musicality over literal translation, we respectfully challenge Freely’s claim that poetry might somehow offer more ready ground for Turkic—English translations. The very fact *different* musicality in Turkic languages and English only creates deeper, or at least equally strenuous, challenges in the translation of poetry—itsself a highly sound-dependent form. Worth considering is Burton Raffel’s argument against systematic equation of music in different languages during the process of translation. He writes, rather caustically, “translators, as well as those who write about translation, all too often persist in the practice of equating the system of controlled musicality developed in one language with that developed by a very different language. We extend such nonsensical practices even so far as end-rhyme, though any serious student knows that the end-rhyme capacities of languages are enormously different and cannot be blindly equated” (266-267).

Since both English and Azerbaijani have poetic forms with controlled end-rhyme, attempting to replicate end-rhyme schemes is not an entirely far-fetched endeavor. However, with closer inspection of the poetic forms, Raffel’s point bears considerable merit. Azerbaijani end rhyme patterns are usually not simply end rhyme, but are indeed “towards-the-end” internal rhyme followed by exact end rhyme (often repetition), a formal structure not nearly as common in English language poetry and tremendously difficult to effectively simulate for the native English ear without sounding a deafening gong.

Additionally, Azerbaijani is primarily a “post-position” language, where, as in all Turkic languages, words are formed, and grammar constructed, on a principle of vowel harmony. Native Azerbaijani words are formed—and all verbs and postpositions inflected and declined—with either all front (or soft) vowels or all back (or hard) vowels. Attached to root forms, postposition endings function as prepositions in English and as cases: they indicate time, manner, place, object and even subject. Both the repetition of these endings as well as their requisite harmonies create rich and echoing opportunities for rhyme and sound play both within and at the end of lines. Where English is especially “rhyme poor” Azerbaijani is especially “rhyme rich.” This results in a sense of sound effects quite different from that in English. Assonance echoes within each word. Words often rhyme within each sentence. As I will discuss later, one verb form and many forms of intensification use exact repetition of the root word in quick succession. The Azerbaijani ear is thus accustomed to internal rhyme and repetition in everyday language. Imagine, for instance, if “ing” and “er” in English had fifteen sibling endings that were just as common; additional and layered rhymes would be necessary to create the lyrical quality of formal poetry and distinguish it from everyday speech. In English the ear is not accustomed to prolific rhyme in everyday language. Each rhyme in English sounds so loudly that contemporary poets, no longer needing rhymes to help memorize and ensure transmission of poetry, either avoid or often bury any rhyme within lines to more subtle musical effect.

Freely alludes to another important distinction between the two languages, that Azerbaijani grammar is Subject/Object/Verb, where English is Subject/Verb/Object. And because in an Azerbaijani sentence the subject is indicated through verb endings, the stand-alone subject (I, you, he/she/it, we, they) is often omitted from the beginning to be discovered only at the very end of the sentence. This difference in syntactical positioning has important cultural parallels in both traditions. At the risk of oversimplifying, English speakers’ culture is often very subject and action oriented: Who? Did what? By contrast, Azerbaijani culture is deeply concerned with context. Where? When? How? And even—Why? Often these “conditions” all come before both the final verb and the subject. Simultaneous translators working from Azerbaijani to English say that their job is very difficult indeed, involving long pauses while the translator waits for the end of the (often very long) Azerbaijani sentence in order to even begin translating the English sentence! In poetry, the reversal of sentence parts between the two languages creates significant challenges in emphasis of content. The end position in a line of poetry is considered especially powerful; placing an object there instead of a verb can result in very different emphasis, even when literal meaning of a translation remains the same.

## Azerbaijani Poetry

While a few contemporary poets experiment in free verse, most Azerbaijani poetry, both traditional and modern is classified according to rhyme and rhythm. In general, traditional Azerbaijani verse requires three elements:

- 1) Meter: As in Arabic and Persian poetry, Azerbaijani poetic meter is usually *quantitative*, rather than *accentual*, syllabic. In Turkic languages, most stresses fall on the last syllable of a word, no matter the length. There is therefore much less use of accent, and much more use of syllabic elongation or shortening—vowel sounds are often exaggerated to great effect for formal purposes.
- 2) Division: Pauses within the line create divisions similar to “feet” in English poetry, or the pause between two parts of a heroic couplet line. The arrangement of pauses is dependent on the metric system of the poem.
- 3) Rhyme scheme: This can include end rhyme, exact repetition, and internal rhyme patterns, often quite intricate.

Taking into account all these components we can divide Azerbaijani verse into the following common forms:

- Aruz: Arabic in origin, the poetic line is based on metrical the repetition of long and short vowels. There are 19 variations of this highly complex and sonically dependent form.
- Syllabic: The syllabic verse form depends not only on the equal numbers of syllables in a line, but also on rhyme and rhythm, which should strictly be adhered to.
- Free verse: As in much of modern English language poetry, some contemporary Azerbaijani poetry is being written without strict formal pattern. However, this form is not nearly as common as in English language poetry today.

Free verse, requiring no strict formal components is perhaps easiest to translate from Azerbaijani to English without special considerations. But even in contemporary poetry, this form is much less common than in English. Perhaps because of the sonic effects of everyday language, contemporary poetry in Azerbaijani continues to distinguish itself through its intensive musicality. In addition, written poetry is still likely influenced by popular oral traditions of lyrical Mugham and Ashug musical compositions. The Aruz form offers tremendous challenges to translation because of its dependence on sonics impossible to reproduce in English. On the other hand, syllabic forms, quite commonly used in

contemporary Azerbaijani poetry, offer real possibilities for successful, if challenging, translations of both form and content.

Azerbaijani poetry is not only challenging to translate into English because of the differing phonetics and grammar of the two languages, but also because, while there is significant overlap of eastern and western cultural histories and traditions, there are significant cultural differences. See for example the challenges in translating this stanza from the poem “Mushgunaz” (a Girl’s name) by Ashug Alaskar, previously translated by Bernard Lewis:

from “Mushgunaz” by Ashug Alasgar

Example 1: Original (in Latinized script)

Sübhün çağı mah camalın görəndə  
Xəstə könlüm gəldi saza Müşgünaz.  
Sonatək silkinib gərdən çəkəndə,  
Bənzəyirsən quya, qaza, Müşgünaz.

Example 2: Translation for literal meaning:

At daybreak, when I saw your moonlike beautiful face,  
My sick heart came to saz, Mushgunaz.  
When like a water bird or drake,  
you drew out from your neck and shook yourself,  
you resembled a swan, a goose, Mushgunaz.

Example 3: Bernard Lewis’ version:

When early in the morning, I saw the moon’s beauty  
My sick heart came to the saz, Mushgunaz.  
When you quiver just so and crane your neck  
You resemble a swan, goose Mushgunaz.

We first address the opening couplet. When one is full of a tender excitement and joy, in Azerbaijani one might say “saza gelir,” that one “comes to saz.” A saz is a regional stringed instrument that looks something like a cross between a guitar and a banjo. It has a rounded body made of wood, with no sound holes. To use this term means literally to vibrate—but with the added connotation of a particular tone of music that feels particularly close to the heart of Azerbaijani regional culture and alien to most native English speakers. A comparative term in English cannot be found. To use a musical allusion in this situation in English one might say “you tugged at my heart strings,” but this evokes too faint an emotion and, it lacks the

regional connection to one's people. A better comparison is "you rock my world," which certainly evokes the western musical culture, but of course, much too loudly. For, "to come to saz" implies an intense but tender shivering of the heart on an instrument that makes a sound unique to the greater Turkic world. Even the word itself, "saz," with its lingering vibratory "z" is onomatopoeic. It is a musical buzzing sound drawn out through the repetition of the rhyming word, "Mushgunaz," the name of the beloved, just as the strings of the saz would continue their vibration after being plucked. This resonance of the named beloved creates a very sensual, and locally specific, figure—and, as did Lewis, we leave that repetition of the clearly recognizable, though regional, name in our translation.

Nevertheless, despite the irreproducible meaning and music in this line, we resist the resulting temptation to translate "come to saz" directly as Lewis does, for it would have so little literal or figurative meaning for most native English speakers, as to be merely exotic or puzzling—certainly not the effect one wants from tender love poetry. If exotic, this suggests a limiting, even racist depiction of "Eastern" love. An alternate figure meaningful to the English reader must be found. To accomplish such a transposition of figures, the translator(s) must be very familiar with cultures of both original and target languages. For geographically neighboring languages such as Russian and Azerbaijani, this may not be a problem, as many Azerbaijanis speak Russian fluently. However, for Azerbaijani-English translation, this proves more of a challenge, as few Azerbaijani speakers also have English as a native language. For this reason, when translating between cultures and languages as different from each other as are Azerbaijani and English, we think it is advisable for the translators to work in pairs, one natively grounded in the source language and the other in the target language, and, if possible, working face to face. It took a few minutes for Shahla to explain (with body language), what this term means in English. We chose to translate the couplet in this way:

When at the break of day, your moonlit face appeared,  
The strings of my sick heart shivered with joy, Mushgunaz.

We chose to translate the first line differently than Lewis, seeking to emphasize the line between night and day present in the Azerbaijani use of "sübhün çağı" with the word "daybreak"—one of the possible translations of this phrase. "Mah" is moon in Persian and "camalın" means both "your beauty" as well as "your beautiful face." While Lewis' translation invokes the moon's beauty, it does not directly translate the presence of the beloved's face. We therefore make a small difference in our translation from Lewis' translation, but, we feel, an important one. In our translation the sense of instrumental music in "come to saz" is both preserved

(“heart strings”) and reproduced (through alliteration and assonance in “string” “sick” and “shivered”). In addition, “shiver” also invokes cold, intensifying the setting of daybreak, and the figurative sense in this verse of a love that balances precariously between suffering (“sickness”) and joy as between night and day. Daybreak and twilight have, as well, a spiritual resonance in this largely Islamic region, marking times of prayer, or the beginning of holy days (as in Judaism). Here, this emphasis on the time of day raises the love to a spiritual level.

The second couplet offers similar translation opportunities. A “sonatək” in Azerbaijani is a specific name for beautiful swimming water bird, closest in imagery to a drake (a green-capped water bird). “Sona” has no precise equivalent in English, or evokes an image of a male duck. Now, there is no gender inflection, or even pronoun, in Azerbaijani grammar, and as others have noted, perhaps as many poems to “the beloved” were composed with young men or boys in mind as young women.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult translate a non-gendered love image in English, and closest we can come is the swan, which in English literary imagery is also considered very beautiful, whether male or female. However, then we have the problem caused by saying swan in one line and then comparing it to itself—the Azerbaijani word for a swan, “quya” appears in the second line. Lewis’ translation of the third line is therefore masterful—he eclipses the possible repetition of swan, yet by replacing “çəkəndə,” literally “when drawing out,” with the English verb “crane” this line echoes this sense of a beautiful water bird. His fourth line is less successful.

“Goose” is not a word used in English to designate the beauty of the beloved. In fact, we most often think of the word in terms of the figure “silly goose.” When used alone, “goose” does not sound beautiful in Azerbaijani either, but when used together with swan, it is lovely—offering an intensification of the swan figure. Intensification through repetition of figures and sounds is a common structure in Azerbaijani. In one form of repetition, sounds are closely, but not exactly echoed, as with colors: “qapqara” (pitch-black) and “qıpqırmızı” (deep red). Another form uses exact repetition of words as in “sehər-sehər” (quite early in the morning) or “yavaş-yavaş” (a bit slower) or “necə-necə” (literally “how-how,” this is used to ask a speaker to repeat something). Repetition even shapes the continuous/simultaneous verb form as in “qışıra-qışıra gəldim” (shouting out, I went along). In English, however, this intensification of swan with goose actually undermines the beauty of the swan image. Instead, we sought another intensification of a graceful swan swimming—and kept it simply a “water bird” and placing it before the word

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<sup>5</sup> See a good discussion of gender in the love poetry of the larger Middle East and Caucasus region in the introduction to *Ottoman Lyrical Poetry* Eds. Andrews et al.

“swan.” In this way the image becomes subsequently sharper, with no distraction from the image of the swan.

Example 4: Our complete translation of the verse:

When at daybreak, your moonlit face appeared,  
The strings of my sick heart shivered with joy, Mushgunaz.  
When you quiver just so and crane your neck  
You resemble a water bird, a swan, Mushgunaz.

In translating a more modern style of poetry written in syllabic rhyming verse, we experimented to see the differences between maintaining meaning, rhythm and rhyme vs. shifting the poem (especially because it is modern) into a free-verse form in English. Here is the example of a syllabic poem by the well-known Azerbaijani poet Samad Vurghun (1906-1956):

Example 1: Vurghun Original (in Latin script)

Saç ağardı, ancaq ürək  
Alovludur əvvəlki tək.

Saç ağardı ancaq nə qəm,  
Əlimdədir hələ qələm,

Bilirəm ki deməyəcəm  
Bir sevgilim, bir də vətən  
Şair, nə tez qocaldın sən.

Example 2: Vurghun Syllabic and Rhyming Translation

Although my hair grows gray, gray,  
This burning heart has much to say.

My hair grows gray, but no sorrow!  
I have my pen, still and tomorrow

And I know they'll never say,  
My motherland, my beloved,  
Why you grew old so early, poet.

Example 3: Vurghun Free-verse Translation

My grows gray, but my heart  
still burns alone as before.

My grows gray, but I don't feel sorrow;  
For my pen is still in my hand

And I know they'll never tell—  
My one true love, my motherland—  
Why you grew old so early, poet.

In the original Azerbaijani language this poem is very melodic—in addition to the internal vowel harmony that is part of all Turkic Azerbaijani word formations, there is an end-rhyme scheme (AABBACC) and exactly eight syllables per line. The beauty of this poem in Azerbaijani is that it has very simple and musical language. It can be read and understood on a personal, individual level while at the same time, it conveys a certain figurative mystery and public restraint common in the soviet culture. This poem still resonates with an Azerbaijani readership not yet at ease with speaking plainly about politically sensitive issues: Why did the poet grow old so early? What is at stake in holding onto that pen for so long? Why all the secrecy? Why the need for protection through both one's beloved and motherland?

In the first version, translating from Azerbaijani into English, we tried to maintain the literal and figurative meaning of the poem and make it sonically faithful to the original. But while we were able to translate the meaning fairly literally and achieve a certain music (in lines of seven to nine syllables that follow the original rhyming pattern), this version may not impress native English readers as a great poetry translation. Why? There remains some metrical awkwardness: English is much more of a stress language than Azerbaijani, and strictly syllabic poetry in English must simultaneously attend to stress and syllable much more closely than in Azerbaijani. Moreover, for all the reasons discussed earlier, rhyme tends to sound loud in English— at its worst, sounding contrived and glib but even at its best often detracting from attention to the sense of the poem—not what we wanted for what is a serious poem. Even when the meaning and music were both faithfully translated, one ends up detracting from the other in English. On the other hand, in our second free-verse version, translated as free verse, while the music of the original is largely lost, ironically the natural rhythms of the English language are better preserved—and so, appropriately, show more restraint, allowing the reticent sense of the poem to come to the front of a reader's perception.

During our work together, we agreed that not all poems of a language are accessible to aesthetic translation. For example, poems that are rich in national meaning, such as patriotism, perhaps should not be expected to translate into another language, much less to another nation. Here the political discussion above is particularly helpful. With its relatively recent founding as an independent nation, love of “vətən” or motherland is a popular theme—just as some of the most popular 18th and 19th century American poetry often took patriotic themes that now seem out of fashion.

Here is an English translation of some lines from the poem "Azerbaijan" by Hokuma Billuri (1926-2000):

Example 1: Original

Doğmadan doğmasan, ey ana yurdum,  
 Yolunda başımla, canımla durdum.  
 Sənəndə əbədi bir yuva qurdum,  
 Dolanım başına, bir də dolanım,  
 Mənim ömrüm, günüm, Azərbaycanım!

Example 2: Rhyming Translation

My native home, My motherland,  
 For your favor we all stand,  
 On your breast we built a nest grand,  
 Take my love and warm embrace,  
 Azerbaijan! My holy place.

This poem is full of national color and excitement when read in Azerbaijani. Unfortunately, we cannot say the same of its English translation. This partly because of the attempt to replicate the sound effects, forcing the syntax in some lines, but it is also because, as with any patriotic lyric, its emotional resonance depends heavily on a locally shared sense of nation. However, while it may not resonate aesthetically or emotionally with English speakers, neither can it simply be translated by substituting an English speaker’s local patriotic lyric. Even patriotism is culturally specific. Indeed with its figures of “breast” and “nest” and the citizen-narrator’s offer of “love” and “warm embrace,” this poem feels more “matriotic” and nurturing than western ideas of patriotic defenses of liberty and independence. Although perhaps not emotionally or aesthetically available to

translation, this poem's imagery can stretch English speaker's own ideas of patriotism—itsself perhaps a worthy goal of cultural exchange.

When translated into English, Azerbaijani poetry may seem to lose its music and some of its locally specific cultural references—issues common to many language translations. But as Lisa Katz argues in her commentary “In Favor of Difference” much can also be gained. For whatever is “lost in translation,”<sup>6</sup> both English speakers and Azerbaijani speakers gain a great deal by participating in this cultural trade—and these are not only luxury goods. Aesthetics and the figurative world of literature play a critical role in keeping a language and people flexible, responsive to their changing world. We have spoken of the challenges the Azerbaijani language currently faces; that in the name of ethnic nationalism the language risks becoming more rigid, isolated and less dynamically enmeshed in the currents of world culture and language production. Translation of literature, trading linguistic cultures, is then, in this context, a political as well as cultural act, maintaining awareness of linguistic connections and providing support for cultural production that keeps the language alive and dynamic in its source locale.

But we also suggest it is not a charitable act to translate world literature in English, but rather one even of self-interest. For it is not only minority language groups like Azerbaijani that risk isolation and mortification under the current twin impulses of globalization and nationalism. As English becomes the lingua franca of the business world at least, and business becomes a global network saturating all aspects of daily life and culture, English too risks losing its vitality, a risk nearly invisible, precisely because of its global dominance. For while people everywhere, including in Azerbaijan, increasingly study the English language and enjoy its cultural productions, English speakers do less and less studying of others' languages and literary productions in return. Where English was once a fast-moving language, incorporating and being enriched by cognates and cultural works from other languages both left and right, it now risks, at least in its standardized form, becoming someday like Latin became historically, a language purely of informational communication and ritual exchange.

This comparison of English to Latin may seem a stretch—but why should English speakers so blithely assume there is no danger to a dominant language that does not “need” to trade anymore and so risks becoming insular and stale. Summarizing centuries of key translation theorists, most of them concerned with literary translation, Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet write in their introduction to

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<sup>6</sup> This is a quote widely attributed to Robert Frost, but difficult to trace to that source. In fact, John Dryden himself wrote, “I grant that something may be lost in all transfusion, that is, all translation” but he goes on nevertheless to strongly justify the practice (28).

*Theories of Translation* of two central benefits of translation, that “the transferral of the foreign from other languages into our own allows us to explore and formulate emotions and concepts that otherwise we would not have experienced” and that “the act of translation continuously stretches the linguistic boundaries of one’s own language...[it functions] as a revitalizing force of language.” And we would extend this of revitalization to the culture of which that language is implicated (9). As citizens of the United States in particular wring their hands over the remarkable innovation and creativity emerging in technological and economic centers in other countries, perhaps we ought to look to all the linguistic stretching other people around the world have been doing.

For a long time, translation theory has alternately viewed the process as a purely linguistic and technical, or as an aesthetic enterprise. More recently translation been addressed as an enterprise that must consider its social and political contexts. As Ashok Bery writes in “Cultural Translation and Postcolonial Poetry,” it is now widely accepted that questions of difference and equivalence cannot simply be confined narrowly to language, but that they are inseparable from, and embedded in wider issues of cultural difference; and particularly in feminist and postcolonial perspectives on translation, there is an awareness that these issues in turn need to be related to power differentials between nations, languages and cultures” (7-8).

And yet much theory of power differentials in translation focuses solely on the exploitation by and imposition of dominant language and culture on minority languages and cultures in the process of translation. With Bery, we argue for the possibility that “translations do indeed add something to the target culture, and don’t simply appropriate the source culture” (19). Further, we feel “something” quite critical is exchanged in translation, enriching and benefitting both partners in the enterprise.

Trading in the best sense, is not about the benefits of only one partner. Translation of literature from languages such as Azerbaijani can address what seems to be an accelerating trade imbalance that threatens not only the “minority” partners, but also the dominant cultural exporter. Translation, then, offers a way to continue “trading” in language and culture, not only giving minority languages and cultures a more dynamic presence in the world, but also , just as importantly, keeping dominant languages, like English, flexible, culturally and aesthetically sensitive and innovative.

Not only may good poetry translations of Azerbaijan literature into English present the culture, politics and life style of Azerbaijani people to the English speaking world, but perhaps they can bring as well a greater appreciation for the ways in

which such translations and sharing of literature has often been less a matter of difficulty than a matter of course, indeed of mutual linguistic life and survival.

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## Summary

### **Trading Culture: Practical Background for Azerbaijani-English Poetry Translation**

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Where translation theory often argues the difficulties of translation—whether or not and under what conditions translation is possible—the authors take a more practical approach. Examining the translation of poetry from Azerbaijani to English, two very different languages and poetic traditions, the authors discuss key linguistic, political, cultural considerations and demonstrate some effective practical strategies. They approach translation as a fundamentally human endeavor and the work of a translator as cultural and linguistic exchange and enrichment, even commerce.