

The “Tongue-head” phraseological model and linguoculturological aspects in “Kutadgu bilig”

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Abstract

The article offers a comparative analysis of the somatic phraseological model “the red tongue as the foe of the black head” in the Uzbek translation by Qayum Karimov and the English translations by Walter May and Robert Dankoff. Using idiom-translation strategies (calque, idiomatic substitution, explicitation, amplification) and the domestication-foreignization framework, the study evaluates semantic and pragmatic equivalence.

Keywords: Kutadgu bilig; Phraseological unit; Somatic metaphor; Translation strategy; Equivalence

1. Introduction

It is no coincidence that “Kutadgu bilig” by Yusuf Khas Hajib, as a pan-Turkic monument, has long attracted the close attention of scholars in world Turkology. The work is distinguished by its profound content, lofty philosophical ideas, didactic richness, and a refined mode of expression arranged like a string of pearls. In this regard, alongside numerous artistic elements, the author makes extensive use of phraseological units and other stylistic devices, which enhance the high artistic value and structural integrity of the work.

As noted above, “Kutadgu bilig” occupies a special place in the Turkic literary heritage due to its ideological and artistic perfection, as well as its richness in language and style. The phraseological units and other stylistic means employed in the work serve as important tools for expressing the author’s artistic thinking, poetic mastery, and philosophical ideas. Therefore, these aspects of the work have been studied by both international and local Turkologists within the framework of various scholarly approaches. In what follows, previous studies on “Kutadgu bilig” are reviewed, with particular attention paid to scholarly views on its linguistic features, means of artistic expression, and phraseological units.

2. Literature review

Since its creation, “Kutadgu bilig” by Yusuf Khas Hajib has been recognized as an important source for the study of the history of Turkic languages, literature, and culture. The ideological and artistic features of the work, its philosophical content, and its representation of statehood and ethical views have been extensively studied in world Turkology.

In particular, Russian turkologists such as V.V.Radlov, S.E.Malov, A.N.Samoylovich, and N.A.Baskakov paid special attention to the linguistic characteristics, lexical layers, and stylistic aspects of the work. They evaluated the language of “Kutadgu bilig” as one of the earliest examples of a pan-Turkic literary language and emphasized the role of its fixed expressions in the development of the language. In Turkish turkology, scholars such as R.R.Arat, M., and A. Dilachar conducted in-depth analyses of the textological features, semantic layers, and artistic means of expression of the work.

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In particular, R.R. Arat's studies based on the critical edition of the text have served as a solid foundation for the scholarly investigation of "Kutadgu bilig".

In Uzbek linguistics, scholars such as A.Fitrat, Q.Karimov, B.Tuxliyev, Q.Sodiqov, Z.Sadikov, A. Qayumov, N. Mallayev, T. Mirzayev, Sh. Shukurov, and H.Boltabayev examined the artistic-philosophical content, system of images, and linguistic features of the work. They emphasized that the figurative devices, didactic expressions, and stable combinations found in the text are closely connected with the national worldview.

At the same time, the issue of phraseological units has been comprehensively addressed in linguistic theory in the works of V.V.Vinogradov, A.V.Kunin, N.M.Shansky, V.N.Telia, and E.S.Kubryakova. Their theoretical approaches serve as a methodological basis for the analysis of phraseological units in "Kutadgu bilig".

Despite the existing studies, the comprehensive investigation of the poetic, semantic, and functional-stylistic features of phraseological units in "Kutadgu bilig" remains a relevant issue. In particular, the role of phraseological units in the artistic structure of the work and their function in conveying ideological content have not yet been sufficiently examined as a distinct object of research.

In this regard, the present study differs from previous research in that it aims to systematically analyze the phraseological units in "Kutadgu bilig" and to reveal their semantic fields, poetic functions, and stylistic significance.

3. Research methodology

In the philosophy of Yusuf Khas Hajib, the concept of "the tongue as the preserver (or destroyer) of the head" occupies a central place among the key ideas. In many passages of the work, the author offers moral admonitions concerning the tongue and its benefits and harms, repeatedly emphasizing the need for caution in its use.

In the didactic poetics of "Kutadgu bilig", the issue of speech culture is often expressed through somatic images such as the head and the tongue. Verses 952–953, through the opposition of "tongue–head," elevate the idea of "uncontrolled speech as a social danger" to the level of an aphorism. [2, p 254]

4. Results

In the present study, the analytical material consists of phraseological units containing the "tongue–head" phraseological model as used in quatrains, along with their Uzbek interpretation by Qayum Karimov and the English renderings by Walter May and Robert Dankoff. In comparing the translators' approaches, the following criteria were applied: the preservation of the phraseological core (e.g., sharp tongue; to eat one's head; to restrain the tongue), semantic proximity and pragmatic effect, the degree of domestication versus foreignization, as well as instances of addition (amplification) and (explication) [1, p 120] in translation.

4.1. In origin

- Қара баш үағысы қызыл тил турур
- Нәчә баш үәди бу тақы ма үәйур (952)
- Башыңны тиләсә тилинүни көдәз
- Тилин тәкмә қундә башыңны үәйур (953) [9, B 73]

4.2. Translation by Q. Karimov

- Қора бошнинг ёви кизил тилдир,
- У қанчадан-қанча бошларни еди, яна ҳам ейди.(952)
- Бошим омон бўлсин десанг, тилингни эҳтиёт қил,
- Тилинг истаган бир қунда бошнингни ейди.(953)

4.3. Translation by Walter May

- His hair may be dark, but his tongue is blood-red,
- How often it swallows a thoughtless hot head!
- If you need your head, hold your tongue, do not shout —
- If not — they will cut your offending tongue out!

4.4. Translation by Robert Dankoff

The red tongue is black head's foe:

- *Many a head has it devoured.*
- *Hold your tongue if you would keep your head;*
- *Before the tongue the head's coward.*

It can be observed that in the original, the phraseological core consists of three elements: (1) “*black head*” (head = person/honor), (2) “*red tongue*” (dangerous speech, causing conflict), and (3) “*to eat one's head*” (leading to ruin). In the quatrain, this core culminates in an imperative conclusion: “*hold your tongue*”-that is, exercise self-restraint over your speech.

The phraseological units in the quatrain operate along four columns:

- **Somatic metonymy** (“*head*” = person/life),
- **Colored metaphor** (“*red tongue*” = dangerous speech),
- **Hyperbole and personification** (the tongue “*eats*,” “*attacks the enemy*”),
- **Imperative aphorism** (“*control your tongue / do not touch the tongue*”).

As a result, the didactic idea concerning the ethics of speech is conveyed not only in a way that is understandable to the reader, but also in a highly memorable and impactful form. It is precisely these phraseological units in the quatrain that enhance and aesthetically enrich its artistic quality.

In the quatrain, the human head-representing life is emphasized through the tongue as a potentially dangerous element, and its beneficial aspects are presented alongside its harmful effects in a remarkable aphoristic style. Although the tongue and the head are created as inseparable parts of the same body, at times one may pose a threat to the other. This form of aphorism is a distinctive discovery of Yusuf Khas Hajib [10, B 82].

Let us focus on the phraseological core and the semantic layers of this quatrain.

- **“Qara bash – black head”** functions as a somatic metonymy, where “*head*” does not refer to an ordinary anatomical part but signifies the person as a whole-his self, soul, honor, or life. This reflects the artistic mastery of the thinker Yusuf Khas Hajib. The component “*qara*” in Turkic thought generally conveys generalizing, even humble meanings such as “*ordinary person*”, “*mortal soul*”, or “*servant*”. For this reason, “*qara bash*” serves as a metaphor for the human being (life).
- **“Red tongue” (qızıl til)** functions as a colored metaphor, expressing the notion of danger and risk. The “*tongue*” symbolizes speech and words, while “*red*” evokes associations with blood, conflict, and punishment, highlighting the perilous nature of speech. Here, the color does not represent “biological realism” but serves as a pragmatic warning: careless words can lead to “*bloody consequences*”. Thus, the construction “*red tongue*” poetically transforms hearing (speech) through visual perception (color), generating a synesthetic effect. This, in turn, facilitates the blending of sensations and evokes stronger and more immediate impressions in the reader.
- **“Yağı» + “eats the head / has eaten the head”** functions as a phraseological hyperbole. The combination of “*yağı*” (enemy) and the verb “*eat*” exaggerates the harmful effects of speech, representing them in the form of physical destruction, and conveys the idea of the tongue “*consuming heads*.” This is the poetic expression of a somatic phraseologism of the type “*to eat the head*,” denoting meanings such as “*bringing misfortune to the head*” or “*causing ruin*.” Here, the tongue is personified, becoming an acting, “*devouring*” subject.
- **“Control your tongue / Do not touch the tongue”** serves as a formula for restraining speech. The term “*ködäz*” conveys the meaning “*be attentive, observe, control*,” and when combined with “*tongue*,” it forms a moral imperative: “*speak thoughtfully*” or “*watch your words*.”

A comparative analysis of the translation and recreation of the above phraseological units is also an important issue. The translators present the following translation variants:

- **In origin:** *qara bash, qızıl til, bosh(ni) yedi, tilingni ko'dez*
- **Translation by Q.Karimov:** *qora bosh, qızıl til, bosh(ni) yedi, tilingni ehtiyot qıl*
- **Translation by V.Mey:** *his hair may be dark, tongue is blood-red, swallows a hot head, hold your tongue*
- **Translation by R.Denkoff:** *black head, red tongue, has it devoured, hold your tongue*

In Q.Karimov's translation, it is evident that the core elements – “*red tongue*” and “*eats the head*”- are fully preserved, which is also connected to the familial relationship between Old Turkic and modern Uzbek. As is known, the tongue-head opposition is a familiar concept for the Uzbek people.

In Walter May's rendition, an intensification of pragmatic effect is observed, with particular attention paid to poetic rhythm, rhyme, and artistry, thereby enhancing the aesthetic impact. In the translation, “*qara bash*” becomes “*his hair may be dark*”, taking the form of a metonym and shifting from the meaning of “*person*” to an external feature (hair). This allows English readers to comprehend the image logically. However, it does not fully convey the generalized socio-semantic meaning of “*qara bash*” in the original. Through the phrase “*They will cut your offending tongue out*,” the translator introduces a punishment that is not explicitly stated in the source text. This is an instance of amplification/explication, increasing the impact on the reader and extending the semantic boundaries of the original. It is noteworthy that W. May, in pursuing functional equivalence (preserving the effect), added supplementary content to the meaning.

In Robert Dankoff's translation, there is an effort to preserve the metaphor, maintain the source imagery, and convey its “*foreignness*.” The structure “*red tongue / black head*” closely follows the original, and the verb “*devoured*” clearly conveys the force of the original “*eats*.” However, the syntax “*before the tongue the head's coward*” is quite unfamiliar to English readers, which is a natural consequence of foreignization in translation. As a result, the reader perceives the text as coming from “*another culture*”. [7, p 231] At the same time, the translator renders the didactic philosophy of the original into a fully meaningful aphorism in the form of “*the head is powerless before the tongue*.” It is evident that in R. Dankoff's rendition, semantic proximity to the original and the preservation of the cultural characteristics of ancient Turkic peoples are prioritized, which, in turn, demonstrates the translator's fidelity to the artistic quality of the source text.

R. Dankoff rendered “*tiling tegme künde başıngnı yanur*” as “*the head is cowardly before the tongue*.” In this translation, the aphoristic meaning of the original does not seem fully conveyed, making it difficult for an English-speaking reader to grasp. The head in the translation suddenly becomes a cowardly entity.

To gain a clearer understanding of the text's content, we refer to the “13th Century Turkic Etymological Dictionary.” The author, G. Clauson, regarding the sources used in compiling the dictionary and the analysis of the words contained therein, states: “*The second main text is the oldest monument of the Turkic peoples, namely Yusuf Khas Hajib's “Kutadgu bilig”, written in the third quarter of the 11th century. The excerpts I present are taken from R.R. Arat's 1947 critical edition. In certain contested cases, I referred to the facsimiles of the three manuscripts of the work*». [6, P 17]

In this dictionary, the above verse is cited exactly, and it also refers to the facsimile: Yan – KB (*keep a guard on your tongue* – “*Tilingga qo'riqchi qo'y*”) tiling tegme künde başıngnı yanur – “*your tongue threatens your head (i.e., your life) every day*” (967). Qutb facsimile 52 r. 9 (“*Kutadgu bilig*” facsimile).

The same meaning is recorded in the Old Turkic dictionary: **Jan – III to threaten (taħdid solmoq), to frighten (qo'rqtmoq).**

The Turkish translation of the verse: ***başını kurtarmak istersen, dilini gözet: dilin her gün senin başını tehdit eder*** [11, S 80] – “*If you want to protect your head, guard your tongue; your tongue threatens your head every day.*”

It can be said that R.R.Arat also succeeded in reflecting the meaning of the aphorism in his translation. In our view, if the final line of the verse had been rendered with the verb *yejur* transcribed as *yanur* and translated into Uzbek as “*bu til har kuni boshingga taħdid qiladi*” (“*this tongue threatens your head every day*”), the artistic value and profound meaning of Yusuf Khas Hajib's aphorisms would have been conveyed to the modern Uzbek reader in an even more compelling way. Although R. Dankoff made extensive use of the “*13th Century Turkic Etymological Dictionary*” in the translation process, it appears that he did not refer to it for the translation of this particular verse.

Regarding the achievement of a “*phraseological equivalent*” it can be concluded that Q.Karimov succeeds in preserving the spirit and artistic quality of the original.

In W.May's translation, he employs a ready-made English idiomatic expression and approximates the original, but he modifies the “*qara bash*” metonymy and introduces an additional judgment – a punitive scenario into the text.

Formal means are an important tool for conveying meaning to the reader. When discussing poetry, it is not appropriate to separate content from form. Form and content exist as unified phenomena, in a dialectical relationship.[12, B 57]

Since such requirements are imposed on poetic translation, the translator must always pay attention to the unity of form and content. Indeed, a translation should not be merely a collection of formally structured verses; rather, it should be a work that provides aesthetic pleasure to speakers of another language in their own tongue.

In Dankoff's translation, fidelity to the original is quite strong, and the true meaning is conveyed in translation through imperatives such as "*hold your tongue*".

5. Conclusion

It can be stated that while Q.Karimov's and R.Dankoff's renditions excel in preserving the figurative structure of the original, W.May demonstrates an advantage in enabling the English reader to grasp the content quickly and easily.

The translation experiments of the verses analyzed here show that the main challenge in translating phraseological units is not a literal rendering, but the ability to recreate the figurative and moral mechanism (metaphor + imperative) in the target language.

From the analyses above, it is evident that the quatrains of "Kutadgu bilig" stand out due to their profound artistry, well-developed composition, and semantic depth in imagery. These quatrains serve as the logical continuation of the masnavi that forms the basis of the work and provide evidence for its philosophical ideas. With their rhyme and scope of meaning, the quatrains of "Kutadgu bilig" are closely related to the rubai form.

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