



Contextual Meaning in Literary Translation: A Semantic–Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines contextual meaning in literary translation from a semantic-pragmatic perspective. Contextual meaning is understood as a dynamic construct emerging from the interaction between linguistic units and their textual, situational, and cultural environments. The study focuses on the translation of lexical and phraseological units, which are highly sensitive to contextual variation. Using qualitative methods, including semantic, pragmatic, and comparative analysis, the research demonstrates that successful literary translation depends not on literal word substitution but on the reconstruction of meaning through contextual interpretation. The findings highlight that translation is a cognitive and interpretative process requiring both linguistic and cultural competence.

Keywords: Contextual meaning, literary translation, semantics, pragmatics, equivalence, phraseological units, cultural transfer

Introduction

Literary translation is a complex intellectual activity that goes beyond linguistic substitution. It involves the transfer of meaning, style, and cultural values from the source language into the target language. One of the most important challenges in this process is the interpretation of **contextual meaning**, which plays a decisive role in determining how lexical and phraseological units should be translated.

Contextual meaning refers to the meaning that emerges from the interaction between a linguistic unit and its surrounding textual and cultural environment. Without context, many linguistic units remain ambiguous or semantically incomplete. Therefore, translation must be based on contextual interpretation rather than dictionary equivalence.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods:

- semantic analysis of lexical units
- pragmatic interpretation of implied meanings
- contextual analysis of literary discourse
- comparative analysis of source and target expressions

The material includes examples from Uzbek literary prose, including Dunyoning ishlari.

Analysis

The analysis of contextual meaning in literary translation reveals that meaning is not a fixed linguistic property but a dynamic, context-dependent phenomenon constructed through interaction between lexical units, discourse environment, and cultural cognition. In literary texts, especially in



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prose, lexical and phraseological units frequently acquire meanings that extend beyond their dictionary definitions. Therefore, translators must engage in deep semantic decoding and pragmatic inference to reconstruct intended meanings accurately. Context functions as a multi-layered mechanism that activates different semantic possibilities of a lexical unit. These layers include linguistic context (co-text), situational context, and cultural context. A single lexical item may generate multiple interpretations depending on its surrounding discourse. For example, the Uzbek sentence: “U jim turardi” may appear structurally simple, but its semantic interpretation varies significantly depending on context. It may indicate:

- physical silence (lack of speech),
- emotional suppression (hidden feelings),
- cognitive reflection (deep thinking),
- or psychological tension (internal conflict).

This demonstrates that meaning is not encoded solely in the lexical item “jim”, but emerges from contextual interaction. Therefore, translation requires inferential reasoning rather than direct substitution.

Phraseological units represent one of the most challenging aspects of literary translation due to their non-compositional semantic structure. Their global meaning cannot be derived from individual lexical components, which makes literal translation ineffective. For instance: “Onam meni ko‘z qorachig‘iday asrardi”

A word-for-word translation would be semantically misleading, as “pupil of the eye” does not function literally in English in this context. Instead, the correct equivalent is: “My mother protected me like the apple of her eye.”

This equivalence demonstrates that phraseological meaning is culturally encoded and must be translated at the idiomatic level rather than lexical level. As Baker (2018) emphasizes, idioms function as fixed semantic units that require holistic interpretation rather than compositional analysis.

Literary texts frequently contain emotionally charged expressions that require pragmatic interpretation. These expressions do not merely convey information but also encode emotional intensity, speaker attitude, and psychological states. Consider the expression: “Yuragim ezilib ketdi” From a literal perspective, this would translate as “my heart was crushed,” which is structurally possible but pragmatically inadequate in English literary discourse. The appropriate translations are: “My heart ached deeply.” “I felt intense emotional pain.”

The difference between literal and pragmatic translation lies in emotional equivalence rather than lexical equivalence. In this case, the translator must prioritize affective meaning over structural fidelity. This aligns with Nida’s (1964) concept of dynamic equivalence, where the emotional response of the target reader is considered more important than formal correspondence. Contextual meaning is deeply influenced by cultural frameworks that shape how reality is conceptualized in language. Literary texts often encode culturally specific values, beliefs, and worldviews that are not directly transferable into another language system. For example: “Onamning duosi meni asradi” This expression reflects a culturally embedded belief in the protective power of blessings. A literal translation would be: “My mother’s prayer protected me.”

However, beyond lexical meaning, this expression carries a cultural and spiritual dimension in Uzbek worldview. The translator must therefore reconstruct not only linguistic meaning but also



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cultural significance. This process requires cognitive mediation, where the translator interprets cultural symbols and reformulates them in a way that is understandable to the target audience.

The process of contextual meaning interpretation can be described through three cognitive stages:

1. Lexical Decoding Stage – identifying dictionary meaning of units
2. Inferential Stage – interpreting implied, hidden, or pragmatic meanings
3. Reconstruction Stage – producing an equivalent expression in the target language

These stages demonstrate that translation is a mental modeling process rather than a mechanical linguistic operation. The translator acts as an active meaning constructor, constantly negotiating between source-text intention and target-language readability.

Another crucial aspect of contextual translation is decision-making. Since many lexical units are polysemous, translators must select the most contextually appropriate meaning among several possible interpretations. This selection is influenced by:

- textual coherence
- genre conventions
- cultural expectations
- pragmatic intent

Therefore, translation is not only linguistic transfer but also interpretative judgment. As Toury (2012) suggests, translation behavior is governed by norms that shape how meaning is reconstructed in different cultural systems.

The analysis demonstrates that:

- contextual meaning is dynamic and multi-layered
- phraseological units require idiomatic rather than literal translation
- emotional meaning must be preserved through pragmatic equivalence
- cultural elements require cognitive and interpretative adaptation
- translation is a three-stage cognitive process involving decoding, inference, and reconstruction

Overall, contextual meaning emerges as a central organizing principle in literary translation, requiring an integration of semantic, pragmatic, and cognitive approaches.

Discussion

The findings confirm that contextual meaning is a multi-layered phenomenon involving semantic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions. As argued by Roman Jakobson (1959), meaning in translation is never fully transferable without transformation. Eugene Nida (1964) emphasizes dynamic equivalence, where the effect on the reader is more important than literal form. Peter Newmark (1988) highlights the balance between semantic accuracy and communicative clarity. Lawrence Venuti (1995) discusses cultural adaptation strategies such as domestication and foreignization. Thus, contextual meaning is not static but cognitively constructed by the translator.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that contextual meaning is central to literary translation. It is a dynamic and interpretative construct shaped by linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural factors. Successful translation requires not literal equivalence but contextual reconstruction of meaning. Lexical and



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phraseological units especially demand careful interpretation to preserve semantic and stylistic integrity.

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