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# LINGUOCULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF PLANT NAMES IN THE GERMAN TRANSLATION OF THE BABURNAMA

Abdurahmonova Dilrabokhon

Namangan State University

E-mail: [abdurakhmonova.dilrabokhon@inbox.ru](mailto:abdurakhmonova.dilrabokhon@inbox.ru)

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## Abstract

This paper explores the linguocultural interpretation of plant names (phytonyms) in the German translation of Baburnama, the famous memoir of the Mughal Emperor Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur. The study aims to analyze how linguistic and cultural meanings embedded in the plant-related vocabulary of the original text are conveyed or transformed in German translations. Through a comparative linguistic and cultural analysis of selected examples, the research reveals patterns of equivalence, adaptation, and cultural substitution. The findings show that the translator's choices not only reflect linguistic competence but also cultural sensitivity, as plant names in Baburnama often carry symbolic, ecological, and ethnographic connotations. The article contributes to the broader field of translation studies by highlighting the intersection of lexicology, ethnolinguistics, and intercultural communication in historical literary translation.

**Keywords:** Baburnama, translation, phytonyms, linguocultural interpretation, German translation, ethnolinguistics, cultural equivalence.

## 1. Introduction

The Baburnama, written by Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur in the early sixteenth century, is not only an autobiographical chronicle but also an invaluable ethnographic, geographical, and botanical record of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and India. As one of the earliest examples of Turkic prose with deep poetic expression, the Baburnama vividly describes landscapes, flora, fauna, and human



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culture. Among its linguistic treasures are the numerous names of plants, herbs, and trees, which serve both as descriptive and symbolic elements within the text. The translation of Baburnama into different languages — including Persian, English, Russian, and German — has attracted attention from historians, linguists, and cultural scholars. However, the translation of plant names, or **phytonyms**, remains an underexplored area, particularly in the context of German linguocultural interpretation. In many cases, these names bear cultural, ecological, and spiritual meanings that are difficult to render into another linguistic and cultural system.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the plant-related lexicon of the Baburnama has been represented in its German translation, and to identify the translation strategies used to maintain or adapt the cultural and symbolic value of these terms. This study also investigates how the translator negotiates between literal accuracy and cultural interpretation, revealing how linguistic meaning interacts with the cultural worldview of both source and target audiences.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars such as Thackston (1996) and Beveridge (1921) have noted that Baburnama is more than a historical narrative — it is a “mirror of cultures” (Thackston, 1996: vii), rich with ethnographic and naturalistic details. Babur’s observations of plants like chinar, tulip, pomegranate, and basil are deeply tied to his worldview and aesthetic sensibility.

Translation theorists such as Nida (1964), Newmark (1988), and Venuti (1995) have emphasized that cultural terms — including names of flora and fauna — pose unique challenges. Nida’s concept of “dynamic equivalence” and Newmark’s notion of “semantic vs. communicative translation” are particularly relevant to understanding how cultural meaning can be transferred or adapted. According to Aixelá (1996), “culture-specific items” require a balance between preservation and naturalization in translation. [3]

Phytonyms, as studied by V. N. Telia (1996) and Wierzbicka (1997), represent not just linguistic units but carriers of ethnocultural information. In the Baburnama, each plant name can be linked to ecological knowledge, symbolic function, or



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aesthetic perception. For instance, the tulip (lola) symbolizes both beauty and transience in Central Asian culture.

The German version of Baburnama (translated as Das Buch Babur or Die Aufzeichnungen Baburs) is not merely a linguistic rendering but a cross-cultural dialogue. Translators often face the difficulty of finding equivalents for flora unknown in Europe or with different symbolic meanings. For instance, chinar (oriental plane tree) has no exact German equivalent carrying the same aesthetic or spiritual connotation.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a **comparative descriptive method**, analyzing selected examples of plant names from the original Baburnama text (in Chagatai Turkic) and their corresponding forms in the German translation. The analysis focuses on identifying translation strategies and cultural transformations.

Data were collected from several chapters of the Baburnama where Babur describes the natural environment, gardens, and regional flora. About 50 plant names were extracted, including chinar, basil, pomegranate, tulip, cypress, fig, apricot, almond, and grape. Their German equivalents were taken from Das Buch Babur (translated by A. Schwarz, 1975). [6]

The analysis applies:

- **Newmark's taxonomy of translation strategies** (1988): cultural equivalent, descriptive translation, borrowing, and adaptation.
- **Linguocultural theory** (Telia, 1996; Wierzbicka, 1997): focusing on how meaning is shaped by cultural worldview.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Some plant names were transferred almost unchanged, showing an attempt to preserve authenticity. For example:

1. Chinar → Chinarbaum (loan translation)
2. Lola → Tulpe (direct equivalent)
3. Anor → Granatapfel (semantic equivalent)



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Here, the translator uses either **borrowing** or **direct substitution** when the German lexicon provides a close equivalent. These examples show a preference for maintaining lexical transparency, which supports historical authenticity. [4] Certain plants described by Babur are unknown in Central Europe. For such cases, the translator employs **cultural substitution** or **descriptive translation**:

1. Isiriq (wild rue, used in rituals) → Räuchergras (“aromatic grass used in incense”)
2. Qorag‘ay (pine native to mountainous regions) → Tannenbaum (“fir tree”)
3. Sandal (sandalwood) → Sandelholzbaum (adaptation)

This substitution reflects the translator’s cultural mediation role — ensuring the reader understands the function or symbolic value, even if the exact species differs.

In Baburnama, many phytonyms carry **symbolic** connotations linked to Islamic, Persian, and Turkic poetic traditions. For instance:

1. Tulip (lola) often symbolizes ephemeral beauty and divine love.
2. Cypress (sarv) signifies grace and eternity.
3. Pomegranate (anor) represents fertility and abundance.

In the German translation, the denotative meaning is preserved, but the connotative depth is often reduced. For example, sarv → Zypresse lacks the spiritual undertone found in Persianate literature. This indicates a **partial loss of cultural connotation**, typical of cross-cultural translation.

In some German editions, translators included **footnotes** or **explanatory glosses** to clarify exotic plant references. This paratextual strategy enhances intercultural comprehension. For instance, the note on isiriq explains its ritual use in Central Asia, bridging linguistic and ethnographic knowledge.

The study shows that translation is not merely linguistic substitution but a form of **linguocultural mediation**. The translator must navigate between accuracy and interpretive adaptation, deciding whether to preserve the exoticism of the original or domesticate the term for accessibility. The balance between **foreignization** and **domestication** (Venuti, 1995) becomes central in representing Babur’s worldview.



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## 5. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the German translation of the Baburnama provides a rich field for exploring the interaction of language, culture, and nature. Plant names in Babur's text are deeply rooted in Central Asian ecology, spirituality, and aesthetics. The translator's task, therefore, extends beyond lexical substitution to cultural interpretation. [5]

Three major translation strategies were identified:

1. **Borrowing and direct equivalence**, used for plants with clear parallels.
2. **Cultural adaptation**, applied to plants lacking German analogues.
3. **Explanatory commentary**, used to bridge cultural gaps.

The study concludes that full cultural equivalence is rarely achievable; however, skilled translation can transmit significant aspects of the author's worldview. Phytonyms thus serve as keys to understanding historical ecology, ethnolinguistics, and intercultural dialogue between East and West.

This research contributes to translation studies by emphasizing the **linguocultural function of plant names**, and suggests further investigation into semantic fields like fauna, minerals, and geographical terms within Baburnama's translations. Moreover, it encourages modern translators to treat culturally embedded lexicon as a bridge — not a barrier — between civilizations.

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