

HOW DOES BAI GANYO SOUND WHEN HE SPEAKS ENGLISH? ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF ALEKO KONSTANTINOV'S *BAI GANYO*

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Abstract. This article delves into the complexities of translating ‘Bai Ganyo’ into English, with a specific focus on translating cultural realia, turcisms, and pragmatic markers. These linguistic elements saturate the text with distinctive cultural nuances, enriching Bai Ganyo’s speech with essential subtleties and impact. At the core of this inquiry lies the question: does Bai Ganyo’s intelligence resonate differently in English?

Keywords: translation; transliteration; cultural realia; turcism; pragmatic markers

1. Introduction

The English translation of “Bai Ganyo”, published in 2010, stands as the sole published translation of Aleko Konstantinov’s seminal work “Bai Ganyo: Incredible Tales of a Modern Bulgarian”. The book is the result of a collaborative effort by Victor Friedman, who served as the editor, along with Christina Kramer, Grace Fielder, and Catherine Rudin. The translators deserve recognition for their valuable work in translating a classical Bulgarian author. Projects like this hold significant importance in bridging Bulgarian literature to the vast English-speaking audience.

It is notable that the English translation of ‘Bai Ganyo’ appeared quite late, particularly when compared to the longstanding availability of English translations for many other classical Bulgarian literary texts.

This research article aims to scrutinise the translation process of “Bai Ganyo” into English and answer the question: How does Bai Ganyo sound when he speaks English? My objectives include: 1) closely examining the translation of cultural realia, including words for traditional Bulgarian clothing, Turkish words, and pragmatic markers (such as particles); and 2) comparing the (meta)messages conveyed by Bai Ganyo’s physical and linguistic profile in Bulgarian and English, including

the cultural nuances, attitudes, and unspoken implications that come across in his speech, providing additional layers of meaning.

2. The preface of *Bai Ganyo*

Firstly, I would like to draw attention to the initial pages of “Bai Ganyo”, where the preface provides crucial instructions on how the image of Bai Ganyo is traditionally perceived and interpreted. Most of my foreign students of Bulgarian at University College London are likely to overlook these instructions. Consequently, they read the English translation without the necessary cultural and historical background, context, or critical guidance for analysis, interpretation, and perception. They consume the text on an empty stomach. Especially if I deliberately do not prepare them for how the text is typically perceived in Bulgaria, driven by my curiosity to see what happens when one reads “Bai Ganyo” without any prior knowledge of its protagonist, author, sociocultural context, etc.

This lack of context may explain why my students’ interpretations usually distinctly differ from those of students who were born in Bulgaria and speak the language natively. Students at UCL often interpret Bai Ganyo as *a very likeable character* right after they have read the book, describing him as *natural and spontaneous; harmless; a man who easily wins people over and makes them laugh with his demeanour; someone who is not ashamed of his roots; brave enough to be himself; lost in his self-esteem; deluded but harmless... and all that is so human after all*. I am not completely certain if such a perception of Bai Ganyo would hold in a different sociocultural context. For example, if English students’ first encounter with the text had been in Bulgaria and in Bulgarian, or if they had been well-prepared by society for who Bai Ganyo was and what ‘baiganyovness’ meant before they even touched the book. All this raises further questions about societies’ inherited interpretations, the importance of knowledge of the cultural and historical context when reading ‘Bai Ganyo’ and many more... but I shall stop here and focus closely on another aspect: the language in which we read and the significance of words’ sociocultural memory and context. Why would one perceive ‘Bai Ganyo’ differently if they read it in English? How significant are the sociocultural subtleties in Bai Ganyo’s language, and can they endure through translations? Does Bai Ganyo appear more intelligent when speaking English? Let us shed light on these questions.

3. On the translation of cultural realia

L. Barkhudarov defines realia as elements of background information that encompass specific historical facts, details about state structures, unique geographical characteristics, and ethnographic and folklore concepts. In translation theory, realia refers to words or expressions that denote objects of material culture and are intimately tied to a specific nation’s culture (Barkhudarov 1975).

From a broader linguistic perspective, however, I would argue that cultural realia encompasses not only words denoting physical cultural items or objects but also include idiomatic expressions, slang, colloquialisms, pragmatic markers (such as particles, interjections, etc.), social customs, and behavioural norms unique to specific cultures. Translating these elements while retaining their intended meaning and cultural authenticity poses significant challenges due to their context-dependent nature and varied functions.

That is why cultural realia words often carry specific linguistic and semantic nuances that may not have direct equivalents in the target language. Translators must navigate these nuances to accurately convey the intended meaning without losing cultural context. This requires a deep understanding of the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which the words are used. Without this contextual knowledge, translators may struggle to find appropriate equivalents or convey the intended cultural significance.

4. Bai Ganyo's attire

Upon examining the opening page of the narrative where the protagonist's character is introduced, we observe that the first mention of his name remains faithful to the original text, appearing as "Bai Ganyo," with the original title 'бай' transliterated into English. The text then provides details of Bai Ganyo's physical appearance, with particular attention to his traditional Bulgarian attire. This attire, being traditional to our culture at that time, is something I would like to explore further in terms of translation. Let us study the examples below:

1. Дигам си очите: един широкоплещ, черноок, чернокос и даже чернокож господин, със засукани мустаки, със скулесто лице, с бръсната поникнала брадица, облечен (в какво мислите?) в редингот, не закопчан, под жилетката му два-три пръста червен пояс, с бяла (по нашенски бяла) риза, без вратовръзка, с черно, накривено калпаче, с ботуши и един врачански бастон под мишница. Млад човек: да има, да има най-много тридесет години.

1. I looked up. There before me stood a broad-shouldered, dark-eyed, dark-haired, swarthy man with prominent cheekbones, a turned-up mustache, and a five o'clock shadow. He was dressed (you'll never guess how) in an unbuttoned frock coat with a broad red sash peeking out from under his vest, a white (by our standards) collarless shirt, a black kalpak, which was perched on his head, and a pair of boots, and he had a walking stick tucked under his arm. He was a young man; I'd say he couldn't have been more than thirty at most.

As demonstrated in the examples, the detailed depiction of Bai Ganyo's attire includes a precise translation of his garments. While the Bulgarian type of traditional hat called a калпак is transliterated, another significant article of clothing, Bai Ganyo's *пояс* is translated as *sash* instead of being transliterated as *po yas*. This translation seems acceptable at first glance, but it could potentially lead to misconceptions, creating an inaccurate image of Bai Ganyo's appearance.

What do I mean here? *Sash* denotes either a line crossing the shoulders or one encircling the waist, as defined by the Cambridge dictionary: *a long, narrow piece of cloth worn around the waist and fastened at the back, or a strip of cloth worn over the shoulder, often with a uniform at official ceremonies*. For readers unfamiliar with the traditional Bulgarian (or even Balkan or Slavic) practice of wearing wide belts in the form of a sash, there is a risk of envisioning a line crossing the body from the shoulder. And this may evoke erroneous imagery akin to Napoleon, for example. It illustrates the potential pitfalls of translating items from one culture using words denoting objects from another culture, leading to a mix-up of cultural realities.

In addition to the previously examined case of transliteration with the word *kalpak* other integral components of Bai Ganyo's attire, such as his *дисаги*, *мускали*, and *килим* are also transliterated as *disagi*, *muskali*, and *kilim* as shown in the following examples:

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| 2. ...трябваше да намери предлог да понавести дисагите , не може той да си остави мускалите така у чужди хора... | 1. ...he needed an excuse to check on his disagi ; he couldn't just leave the muskali like that among strangers. |
| 3. ...пооблещих му се насреща, показвах му килимчето , нейсе, разбран човек излезе. | I opened my eyes wide and stared right back at him and showed him my kilim . |

Further insights into Bulgarian culture can be gleaned from words like *ракия* and *мезе* (examples 4 and 5), which are commonly transliterated – ‘*rakia*’ and ‘*meze*’, but also translated. For example, the word ‘*meze*’ is translated in one instance as ‘fit for human consumption’.

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| 4. Гого, дай тука ракия — командуваша бай Ганьо. | <i>Gogo, give us some rakia here, commanded Bai Ganyo.</i> |
| 5. Заръчай сега да донесат мастика и мезе и да почнем работата. Па да не домъкнат пак кисела бамя, гледай там някое мезе по като хората... | Order some <i>mastika</i> and snacks , and then let's get to work. But tell 'em not to bring any of that pickled okra again. Get 'em to bring something fit for human consumption . |

The translation of words associated with cultural realia, such as ‘*kalpak*,’ ‘*disagi*,’ ‘*muskali*,’ ‘*kilim*,’ ‘*rakia*,’ and ‘*meze*,’ poses a significant challenge for translators striving to convey Bulgarian cultural intricacies in foreign languages. In my view, transliterating these words, rather than seeking an equivalent or closer term, can become an invaluable tool for fostering cross-cultural communication and facilitating the exchange of cultural nuances and artefacts. As a result, if you allow

me the liberty of this analogy, reading classical texts would parallel the experience of visiting an ethnographic museum, where traditional Bulgarian attire from the 19th and early 20th centuries is typically on display.

5. On the translation of pragmatic markers

Pragmatic markers often derive their meaning(s) from context rather than explicit linguistic content, varying in register and style from formal to informal. Translators must grasp situational context, including cultural norms, social relationships, and communicative intent, to accurately convey implicit meanings or speaker attitudes.

When it comes to the translation of *Bai Ganyo*, this complexity is particularly pronounced, given the richness of Ganyo's speech in pragmatic markers – originating from both Bulgarian and Turkish. In this subsection, I aim to look deeper into the fate of one of the most prominent pragmatic markers found in Bai Ganyo's speech: the Bulgarian particle *be*. This particle appears over 40 times in the original text, making its translation into English a pivotal task.

Let us now examine if there are equivalents of *be* in the English translation, and if so, how they capture the nuanced meaning conveyed by the particle. The examples below (6-9) clearly indicate the absence of a translation for *be*, and this is not only evident in these specific instances but also throughout the entire text.

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| 6. Защо по-полека бе ? Аз пари харча тука! Де е директорката? | What do you mean, X more quietly? I'm spending money here! Where is the director? |
| 7. Ами ти зашто се смееш там бе , хей! | You there! What's so funny, huh? |
| 8. ... с катран да го облееш, че да го запалиш. Туй търпи ли се бе ! | He should be tarred and feathered and set on fire. This is intolerable! |
| 9. А бе най-сетне българи сме, ще се прегледаме. | Oh well, X after all, we're all Bulgarians; we'll look after each other. |

This observation naturally leads to the question of what *be* means and why its translation proves to be so challenging. Within Bulgarian linguistic discourse, there exists a prevailing interpretation of *be* as a marker of simplicity, informality, and colloquialism (Lazarova 2014). It is often argued that *be* conveys a blunt, unrefined demeanour on the part of the speaker toward their interlocutor. However, it remains a matter of debate whether this portrayal consistently holds true.

Considering that, I would argue that the pragmatic marker *be* can also express affection and familiarity, particularly when used with someone close, such as a friend or family member, or someone within your regular social circle. For instance, in Yordan Yovkov's classic literary work *On the Wire*, the protagonist Guncho employs the use of *be* in a manner suggesting a tender, affectionate address

to his daughter: *Що се кахършиш, бе чедо, думам ѝ, и твоя късмет ще излезе* (*What's the matter, my child, I tell her, your luck will come out too*).

Let us now return to the examples shown above (ex. 6-9) and analyse the style and register of the English translations. It becomes evident that omitting the translation of *be* renders Bai Ganyo's speech slightly more polished, elevating it above his customary register. Notably, translating *Туй търни ли се бе!* as *This is intolerable!* lends Bai Ganyo's language a heightened sophistication, as the word "intolerable" carries a more formal register than the original expression *търни ли се бе*. Such inconsistencies in maintaining the original style and register during translation can significantly influence the portrayal of the protagonist and alter readers' perceptions. By omitting the translation of the particle *be* and failing to preserve the original speech register, translations risk creating a divergent linguistic profile for the protagonist. This altered profile may affect readers' perceptions of the character's manner of speaking and overall communication style, either positively or negatively.

Nonetheless, it is encouraging to find cases where the omission of the particle in translation is compensated for by using contracted verb forms. These forms enhance the colloquial tone and lower the register of the speech. An example of this is the replacement of the colloquial nuance of *be* with the contracted phrase *c'mon*: *Хайде бе, хайде да си излезем, остави ги тези чифути!* is translated as *C'mon, c'mon, let's get out of here. To hell with these chifuti*.

In my classroom discussions about Bai Ganyo with my primarily English-native students studying Bulgarian, I often hear their suggestions for translating the particle *be* to preserve its rich meaning in the English version. They propose translations such as *dude*, *man*, *chap*, *mate*, or *fellow*, selecting the most appropriate one based on the context, the speaker's age, social status, and other factors. Although there are no direct English equivalents for *be*, translators can experiment with alternative expressions to convey the crucial sociocultural messages of this and other pragmatic markers. These markers, being frequent, play a significant role in shaping Bai Ganyo's linguistic profile.

6. On the translation of Turkish words

Turkish words seamlessly intertwine with Bai Ganyo's most favoured and frequently used expressions, enriching his authentic linguistic profile. These words carry a wealth of cultural and sociohistorical significance. Accurate translation is essential to preserve this essence, as Bai Ganyo's speech and language are integral to his overall character, much like the *kalpak* defines his physical appearance.

However, the Turkish expressions lose their sociocultural weight and impact on Bai Ganyo's linguistic profile in the English translation. Words such as *ашколсун*, *джанам*, *келепир*, *кеф*, and *бошлаф* are translated into a higher linguistic register. The translation of the Turkish words *ашколсун* as *good for you* and *джанам* as *my*

good friend (examples 10-11), for instance, fails to capture the original register, thereby altering Bai Ganyo's speech style and diminishing its simplicity and authenticity.

10. Ашколсун! — извика бай Ганьо с маслени очи.	Good for you! , exclaimed Bai Ganyo with gleaming eyes.
11. Как тъй, джанъм , хич може ли да бъде български тютюн да не запуши човек!	No, no, my good friend! How can ya not light up when it's Bulgarian tobacco?

It is impossible to discuss Bai Ganyo's linguistic profile without mentioning the word *келепир*, a turcism that speaks volumes about the protagonist's language manner, worldview, values, and expectations in life. This word has various translations, as shown in the examples below, including *cheap deal*, *some gravy to be skimmed off*, *something for nothing*, *jackpot*, and *free lunch*.

12. Набутаи ли келепир , дръж го с двете ръце, ами!	If you stumble on a cheap deal , grab it with both hands.
13. Па и мене нали ми се иска – я депутат да ме избераат, я кмет. Келепир има в тия работи.	Even I feel like being elected a deputy or a mayor. There's some gravy to be skimmed off of those things.
14. Обичал, кай, българите... Той ли! Като има келепир , и бай ти Ганьо знае да обича.	He says he loves Bulgarians. Him? If there's something for nothing in it, even your Bai Ganyo can love you.
15. Ударил си келепира!	You've hit the jackpot!
16. Тях, язык, пропуснах келепира .	Pfui, what a shame, I missed a free lunch , grumbled Bai Ganyo.

None of these translations fully capture the semantic, sociocultural, and emotional nuances encapsulated in the word *келепир*. Nor does any word convey appropriately the same style and register as the one in the original text.

Bai Ganyo's linguistic profile would not be complete without another Turkish word that contributes to his highly distinctive speaking style – the word *кеф*. As demonstrated by the examples below, it is translated as *pleasure* and *don't you worry about a thing!* when it is part of the expression *гледай си кефа!*

17. Е-е-е-х! Кеф!	Ahhh! What a pleasure!
18. Ама ти си гледай кефа , хич да не те е вня!	But don't you worry about a thing! ; don't pay them no never mind.
19. Гледай си кефа! Работата е вече хептен наред!	Don't worry about a thing. Everything's already entirely under control

I would argue that Bai Ganyo's iconic exclamation *E-e-e-x, кеф!* sounds much more refined when translated into English as *Ahhh! What a pleasure!* While the word *pleasure* conveys the primary meaning of *кеф*, it belongs to a higher register and fails to capture the emotional and sociocultural nuances present in Bai Ganyo's language.

The same observations apply to the translation of the word *бошлаф*, which, when introduced into the English text, adopts a higher register and is rendered as *nonsense*:

21. *Всичко бошлаф. Да ви кажа ли аз вам? — заявява авторитетно бай Ганьо. This is all nonsense. Should I tell you what we'll do?" announced Bai Ganyo with authority.*

Interestingly, the word *бошлаф* has also another translation that seems to more closely align with the register and style of the original – *bullshit*:

22. *Нали ги зная аз тях! Славяни!... Бошлаф! / But I know them all. Slavs! Bullshit!*

The varying translations of the most frequently used Turkish words in Bai Ganyo's speech, despite conveying similar meanings, obstruct readers' understanding of the protagonist and hinder their grasp of the depth of Ganyo's linguistic style and repertoire. These words, reiterated throughout the text, offer profound insights into Ganyo's psyche and cultural identity, reflecting his worldview, values, and moral judgments. If translators opted to transliterate the most frequent Turkish words and supplement them with explanatory footnotes, including cultural context, it would provide readers with a clearer understanding of the significance of these words in psycholinguistic and cultural terms. When texts cross borders through translation, it is crucial to ensure that they carry their entire cultural baggage, metaphorically speaking.

7. Concluding thoughts

Let me reconsider the question of how Bai Ganyo sounds when speaking in English. I believe the answer is now clear. The English-speaking Ganyo appears more intelligent and even more polite. His language is stylized. However, this comes at a cost. The translation has stripped away some of the most colourful pragmatic markers in Ganyo's speech – the particle 'be' and Turkish words like 'kelepir,' 'kef,' and 'boshlaf' – which I believe serve as the emotional fuel for his character. Not just emotional fuel. Pragmatic markers and turcisms are the "disagi" in Bai Ganyo's language. When the translator removes them from the text, Bai Ganyo's speech detaches from its roots, embarking on a journey to other language registers and styles, losing its nuances, authenticity, and emotionality. The text loses its original mood, its Bulgarian blood, and our Ganyo sounds like someone else. Someone who is not distinctly Bulgarian. He becomes Sir Ganyo.

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