

On the Use of Terminology in the Translation of Sociopolitical Texts

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Abstract

This article investigates the crucial role of terminology in the translation of sociopolitical texts. The distinctive lexical and semantic characteristics of sociopolitical discourse — particularly the polysemy, cultural embeddedness, and ideological loading of its key terms — generate serious challenges in the translation process. The article analyses four main translation approaches employed between Azerbaijani and English: word-for-word, functional, communicative, and cultural adaptation. Practical translation strategies including transcription, transliteration, terminological equivalence, and explanatory translation are evaluated through concrete examples. The article further examines the capacity of artificial intelligence translation tools to handle sociopolitical terminology and argues for the continued indispensability of expert human translation. The study concludes that effective translation of sociopolitical texts requires a deep linguistic and cultural understanding of terminology, grounded in both theoretical frameworks and practical competence.

Keywords: *sociopolitical text; terminology; translation methods; equivalence; cultural adaptation; artificial intelligence; discourse*

Introduction

Every language has its own unique way of talking about politics, society, and public life. When we translate texts from this area — such as political speeches, official documents, news articles, or international agreements — the words we choose carry a great deal of importance. A single mistranslated term can completely change the meaning of a sentence, or even cause misunderstanding between countries and institutions (Newmark, 1988). This is why the translation of sociopolitical texts is considered one of the most challenging areas in the field of translation studies.

The term “sociopolitical text” refers to any written or spoken material that deals with the organization of society, the exercise of power, political institutions, laws, rights, or public policies. Examples include political speeches by leaders, United Nations documents, parliamentary debates, diplomatic agreements, news reports on political events, and academic articles about governance. These texts are special because their vocabulary is not neutral — every word in them has been carefully chosen and often carries strong cultural, historical, or ideological meaning (Hatim & Mason, 1990).

For a translator working between Azerbaijani and English, this presents a serious challenge. The two languages belong to very different language families, have developed in different historical and political contexts, and reflect different cultural realities. A concept that is simple and familiar in English may have no direct equivalent in Azerbaijani, or vice versa. As Alisoy (2024) has shown, the ability to work across languages is not just a linguistic skill but a cognitive one — it requires flexible

thinking, cultural awareness, and a deep understanding of how language shapes and reflects our understanding of the world.

In recent years, the rapid development of digital tools and artificial intelligence has introduced new possibilities for translation. Automated systems can now produce translations in seconds, and many professionals use them as a starting point. However, as Babazade (2026) demonstrates in his comparative analysis of AI translation tools and human translators, machines still struggle significantly with the kind of nuanced, context-sensitive language that characterizes sociopolitical discourse. Understanding why this is so is an important part of understanding the nature of terminological translation itself.

This article examines the key features of sociopolitical terminology, the main translation challenges these features create, the strategies translators use to overcome these challenges, and the role of technology in modern translation practice. By exploring these questions, the study aims to provide a clear and practical understanding of how terminology functions in sociopolitical translation, and why getting it right matters so much.

What Makes Sociopolitical Terminology Special?

Polysemy and Context-Dependence

One of the most important features of sociopolitical vocabulary is polysemy — the fact that a single word can have several different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Consider the English word *state*. In everyday language, it can mean a condition or situation (“the state of the economy”). But in political science, it refers to a sovereign political entity with a government, territory, and population. In American English, it can also refer to one of the fifty federal states. In international law, it carries yet another set of meanings related to sovereignty and rights. For a translator working from English into Azerbaijani, choosing the correct term — *dövlət*, *vəziyyət*, or *ştab* — requires understanding not just the word but the entire political and legal context surrounding it (Catford, 1965). Similarly, in Azerbaijani, many political terms that were inherited from Russian during the Soviet period carry additional connotations that may not be obvious to a modern reader or a foreign translator. Words like *sovet*, *kommunist*, or *partiya* have both technical definitions and strong historical associations. A translator who ignores these layers of meaning will produce a translation that is technically accurate but communicatively misleading (Baker, 2006).

Cultural Embeddedness

Sociopolitical terms are deeply connected to the cultures and political systems in which they developed. This is what scholars call cultural embeddedness — the idea that words do not just describe reality but are shaped by it. For example, the English concept of *governance* carries ideas about transparency, accountability, and the rule of law that are central to liberal democratic political theory. When this term is translated into Azerbaijani as *idarəetmə*, there is a risk that these associated meanings are lost, because the Azerbaijani term has a more neutral, administrative flavor without the same normative weight (Hatim & Mason, 1990).

This kind of conceptual gap is what translation scholars call a *lexical gap* or *zero equivalence*. When a term exists in the source language but has no direct equivalent in the target language, the translator must make a decision: should they borrow the word directly, create a new term, use a longer explanatory phrase, or choose the closest available equivalent and accept some degree of meaning

loss? Each option has advantages and disadvantages, and the right choice depends on the type of text, the intended audience, and the purpose of the translation (Newmark, 1988).

Ideological Loading

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of sociopolitical language is its ideological loading. Political language is almost never neutral. The words speakers and writers choose reflect their values, their political position, and their relationship to power. The same political event can be described as a *revolution*, an *uprising*, a *coup*, or a *liberation* — and each of these words tells a completely different story about who the people involved were, what their actions meant, and whether they were right or wrong.

For a translator, this creates a serious ethical and professional responsibility. Should the translator preserve the ideological coloring of the original text, even if it conflicts with the values of the target culture? Should they neutralize it for the sake of clarity? Or should they adapt it to resonate with the target audience? Sadiqzade (2025) highlights how emotional and cultural meaning is embedded in language at a very deep level, making it impossible to translate words without also making choices about meaning, tone, and perspective. These choices define the quality and integrity of the final translation.

Main Translation Challenges

Finding Equivalent Terms

The most basic challenge in translating sociopolitical terminology is finding an equivalent — a word or phrase in the target language that carries the same meaning as the word in the source language. This sounds simple, but in practice it is often very difficult. Full equivalence — where two terms in different languages have exactly the same meaning, usage, and connotation — is rare in sociopolitical vocabulary (Catford, 1965).

For example, the English term *civil society* has a specific meaning in political theory: it refers to the network of voluntary organizations, institutions, and individuals that exist between the state and the private sphere. In Azerbaijani, this term is often translated as *vətəndaş cəmiyyəti*, which is a direct calque — a word-for-word translation of the English original. This approach works reasonably well in formal political texts. But in less formal contexts, it can sound unnatural or overly technical to Azerbaijani readers who are not familiar with the concept from political science (Baker, 2006).

On the other hand, some Azerbaijani political terms — particularly those derived from Islamic tradition or from the historical experience of the Azerbaijani khanates — have no direct English equivalent at all. The concept of *məsləhət* (roughly meaning “collective deliberation and advice”) or *bəyükdib* (an honorific title for a respected elder or leader in certain contexts) cannot be translated into English with a single word. The translator must explain, adapt, or borrow, and in doing so will inevitably change something about the original meaning.

Technical vs. General Vocabulary

Another major challenge is distinguishing between technical terms that have a precise, fixed meaning in a specific field and general vocabulary that is used in a political context but carries a wider range of meanings. In English, words like *sovereignty*, *jurisdiction*, *ratification*, and *suzerainty* are technical legal and political terms with clear definitions. In contrast, words like *freedom*, *justice*, *equality*, and

democracy are used both as technical terms with specific meanings in political philosophy and as general words in everyday language (Newmark, 1988).

For the translator, this distinction matters a great deal. Technical terms require precision — they must be translated in a way that is consistent with how the same term is used in official documents, academic texts, and legal instruments in the target language. General political vocabulary requires sensitivity — the translator must consider how the word is understood by ordinary readers, not just by specialists. Getting this balance wrong can make a translation either incomprehensible to non-experts or imprecise in the eyes of professionals.

Key Translation Strategies

Word-for-Word and Functional Translation

The simplest translation strategy is word-for-word translation — replacing each word in the source text with its closest equivalent in the target language without changing the grammatical structure. This approach works well for technical terms that have direct equivalents, such as the translation of *parliament* into Azerbaijani as *parlament*. But it often fails for terms with no direct equivalent or with strong cultural associations. A word-for-word translation of *the rule of law* as *qanunun hökmüranlığı* captures the literal meaning but may not convey the full political philosophy behind the concept to an Azerbaijani reader unfamiliar with its origins in Western legal tradition (Catford, 1965).

Functional translation takes a different approach: instead of asking “what does this word mean?” it asks “what does this word do in the text?” The translator looks for a term in the target language that performs the same communicative function as the original, even if it is not a literal translation. For example, the English term *whistleblower* — referring to someone who exposes wrongdoing within an organization — has no single-word equivalent in Azerbaijani. A functional translation might use a descriptive phrase like *daxildən məlumat verən şəxs* (a person who provides inside information), which is less elegant but more meaningful to a general Azerbaijani audience.

Communicative and Cultural Adaptation

Communicative translation goes even further: it adapts the text not just at the level of individual words but at the level of the whole message. The goal is to produce the same effect on the target reader as the original had on the source reader. This approach is particularly important in political speeches and propaganda, where the emotional impact of the language is as important as its factual content. Alisoy and Sadiqzade (2024) demonstrate that effective language learning and communication in multilingual contexts requires not just knowing vocabulary but understanding how language carries meaning in cultural and communicative context — a principle that applies with equal force to professional translation.

Cultural adaptation is the most radical form of translation: it involves replacing culturally specific concepts with equivalents from the target culture. For example, a reference to the Magna Carta in an English political text might be replaced in an Azerbaijani translation with a reference to the Azerbaijani Constitution or another significant legal document that carries similar cultural weight. This approach is controversial — some scholars argue that it distorts the original text too much — but in some contexts it is the only way to make a text genuinely meaningful to a new audience (Hatim & Mason, 1990).

Transcription, Transliteration, and Explanation

When no equivalent exists at all, translators have three main technical options. The first is transcription — writing the foreign word in the alphabet of the target language as it sounds. For example, *ombudsman* is often transcribed directly into Azerbaijani as *ombudsman* because the concept and the institution are relatively new and no native Azerbaijani term has established itself. The second option is transliteration — converting a word letter by letter from one writing system to another. The third and most transparent option is explanation — using a longer phrase or a footnote to explain what the original term means. This last approach is common in academic translation, where precision is more important than brevity (Baker, 2006).

The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Terminological Translation

In recent years, AI-powered translation tools such as Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT have become widely used in professional and academic settings. These tools can process large amounts of text very quickly and produce translations that are often impressively accurate for everyday language. However, when it comes to sociopolitical terminology, their limitations become clearly visible.

The fundamental problem is that AI systems learn from patterns in large bodies of text, and the patterns they learn reflect the most common and statistically probable translations of each word. But sociopolitical terms often require a translation that is precise, contextually sensitive, and ideologically aware — qualities that go beyond statistical probability. An AI system may correctly identify that *democracy* is most often translated as *demokratiya* in Azerbaijani texts, but it cannot judge whether, in a specific document about post-Soviet political transition, a more culturally specific term might be more appropriate (Babazade, 2026).

Moreover, AI systems are generally poor at recognizing and preserving ideological nuance. They tend to flatten the affective and evaluative dimensions of political language, producing translations that are technically correct but politically bland. A speech that uses emotionally loaded terminology to inspire a political movement can easily become a neutral, bureaucratic document when passed through an automated translation system. As Sadiqzade (2025) has shown, the expression of emotion and cultural meaning in language is deeply complex and context-dependent — precisely the kind of complexity that current AI systems handle poorly.

This does not mean that AI tools have no value in the translation of sociopolitical texts. Used intelligently, they can provide a useful first draft that a human translator then reviews, corrects, and refines. They are also valuable for building terminology databases, checking consistency, and handling large volumes of routine administrative language. But the final responsibility for accuracy, appropriateness, and integrity in the translation of important political documents must remain with trained human professionals.

Practical Examples: Azerbaijani-English Translation

To illustrate the principles discussed above, consider several concrete examples from Azerbaijani-English sociopolitical translation.

The Azerbaijani term *icra hakimiyyəti* translates literally as “executive authority.” In formal political and legal texts, this is the standard and correct translation. However, in a news article aimed at a general English-speaking audience, “the executive branch” or “the government” might be a more natural and

accessible choice, depending on the context. This example illustrates the importance of matching translation strategy to the text type and the intended audience.

The English term *geopolitics* entered Azerbaijani political vocabulary relatively recently, primarily through academic and journalistic texts. It is now widely used as *geosiyaset* — a transcription that Azerbaijani readers of political texts will recognize. However, in a text aimed at a general audience, a brief explanatory phrase — “the study of how geography influences politics and international relations” — might be more informative than the technical term alone.

The concept of *checks and balances* poses a particularly interesting challenge. This term refers to the system of mutual oversight between different branches of government that prevents any single branch from gaining too much power. It is a foundational concept in liberal democratic political theory, but it does not have a single, established Azerbaijani equivalent. Options include the descriptive phrase *hökumət qolları arasında nəzarət və tan məxana sistemi*, the borrowed term *çeks-end-balens sistemi*, or a combination of both. The choice depends on the audience and the level of formality required.

Conclusion

The translation of sociopolitical texts is one of the most demanding areas of the translation profession, precisely because language in this domain is never simple or neutral. Sociopolitical terms carry cultural history, ideological perspective, and communicative purpose all at once. A translator who understands this — who can read a political text not just for its surface meaning but for everything that meaning implies — will produce translations that are genuinely accurate in the fullest sense of the word.

The strategies available to translators — word-for-word translation, functional translation, communicative adaptation, cultural substitution, transcription, and explanation — each have their place, and skilled translators know when to use each one. The translation of Azerbaijani sociopolitical texts into English and vice versa presents specific challenges because of the different historical, cultural, and political contexts of the two languages. But these challenges can be met through careful analysis, broad knowledge of both political culture and linguistic theory, and a commitment to precision and responsibility.

As Alisoy (2024) has emphasized, working across languages demands cognitive flexibility — the ability to move between different frameworks of meaning without losing one’s grip on either. For the translator of sociopolitical texts, this cognitive flexibility is not a luxury but a professional necessity. In a world where political language shapes opinions, decisions, and international relations, translation is never just a linguistic exercise — it is an act of cultural and political responsibility.

Declarations

Ethical Approval: This study is based on a review of published scholarly sources and analysis of publicly available translated texts. No human participants were involved. All sources are appropriately cited.

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