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Beyond Word-for-Word Equivalence: Translating English Political Terminology into Azerbaijani

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Abstract

Political translation does not merely transfer labels between languages; it mediates concepts formed within particular legal, institutional, and public contexts. This article examines how English socio-political terms are rendered in Azerbaijani, asking how translators can preserve conceptual accuracy while producing clear and idiomatic target-language text. It combines a small parallel-text comparison of selected provisions from the official English and Azerbaijani versions of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan with explicitly constructed examples of context-sensitive political vocabulary. The analysis distinguishes three problem types: variation in a term's referent, partial conceptual overlap, and political or evaluative framing. It then evaluates translation choices for semantic precision, institutional fit, and reader accessibility. The constitutional examples show that grammatical restructuring can preserve a political concept without mirroring the English form. Constructed examples involving constituency and accountability illustrate why an equivalent must be chosen from context rather than a dictionary entry alone. Drawing on translation theory, political discourse analysis, and terminology studies, the article proposes a decision procedure for translators and editors. Because the authentic sample is deliberately small and the additional examples are illustrative, the article offers analytical guidance rather than statistical claims about translation practice.

Keywords: *political translation; English–Azerbaijani translation; political terminology; lexical equivalence; institutional context; discourse framing; terminology management*

1. Introduction

Political texts travel across languages every day as laws, constitutional provisions, government statements, election materials, policy documents, news reports, and diplomatic communication. Their translation affects how readers identify public institutions, understand citizens' rights, and interpret political action. The translator therefore works at the intersection of language and public knowledge: a term may be lexically plausible yet misleading if it imports the wrong institution, narrows a broader concept, or changes the source text's evaluative force (Schäffner, 2004; Bánhegyi, 2015).

English and Azerbaijani differ not only in grammatical structure but also in the institutional histories and conventional vocabularies through which public life is described. A term may have a familiar dictionary equivalent and still pose a problem in a specific sentence. Conversely, a concept without a concise established equivalent may be rendered clearly through a descriptive phrase. Translation equivalence is thus a reasoned relationship among a source expression, its function in context, and the knowledge available to target readers, rather than a mechanical match between isolated words (Baker, 2018; Munday, 2016).

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This article asks: How can translators render English socio-political terminology into Azerbaijani so that the intended concept, institutional reference, and communicative force are preserved without sacrificing clarity? Three subsidiary questions guide the analysis: (1) How does context determine which sense of a politically significant word is intended? (2) What should a translator do when the target language has only partial or institutionally imperfect equivalents? (3) How can a translation preserve evaluative framing without intensifying or softening it?

The article's argument is that reliable political translation requires a staged decision process: establish the referent and function of the source expression; check the relevant institutional and textual context; compare established Azerbaijani terminology with descriptive alternatives; and test the selected form for accuracy, consistency, and readability. A limited comparison of official constitutional wording grounds the discussion in authentic parallel text. Separate, clearly labelled constructed examples are used to illustrate issues that the constitutional sample does not contain. This distinction prevents illustrative reasoning from being mistaken for corpus evidence.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Equivalence as a contextual decision

Equivalence is often treated too narrowly when translators search for a target-language word that resembles the source item. A word may have several senses, and a target expression may overlap with only one part of that semantic range. Baker (2018) describes lexical non-equivalence as a practical translation problem, while Newmark (1988) and Munday (2016) show that translation procedures must be selected in relation to textual purpose and context. The relevant question is not simply whether a dictionary lists an equivalent, but whether that equivalent preserves the meaning needed in this occurrence.

Functional approaches make purpose central to translation decisions. Nord (1997) emphasizes the relationship between the translation brief, intended audience, and communicative function. For political texts, these factors affect whether a concise term is sufficient, whether a first-use explanation is needed, and how closely the target text should track the source's institutional terminology. A legal translation may prioritize terminological stability, whereas a public information text may need a short explanation for non-specialist readers. Precision and accessibility are not opposites, but they may require different formulations.

Mammadova (2025) similarly treats translation as a process involving analytical decision-making, cultural sensitivity, and creative judgment, and connects these dimensions with translation pedagogy. This perspective supports the present study's central claim that a translator must interpret a term's function and cultural setting before selecting its Azerbaijani form. It also reinforces the value of making translation choices explicit and reviewable, especially when a term has no straightforward institutional equivalent.

2.2. Political discourse, framing, and terminology

Political language names institutions and processes, but it also frames them. A term can carry approval, criticism, legitimacy, or distance depending on who uses it and in what genre. Political discourse analysis therefore encourages attention to participants, audience, setting, and the distribution of agency (Fairclough, 1995; Schäffner, 2004). Translation may reproduce a source stance, but it can also unintentionally modify that stance through lexical choice, grammatical agency, or register.

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Terminology adds another dimension. Specialized terms are anchored in conceptual systems: consistent use is valuable when the same concept recurs, but consistency should not erase genuine differences in sense. Terminology work accordingly involves identifying the concept, its relations to neighboring concepts, and the contexts in which a term is used (Sager, 1990; Temmerman, 2000). In legal and institutional texts, translation choices can also affect interpretive fit across legal systems, as research on translated law demonstrates (Biel, 2014).

Sadigzadeh's (2024) discussion of linguistic relativism and universalism is relevant to this problem at a general level: languages provide different lexical and conceptual resources, while translators still seek to communicate concepts across them. The article does not treat that theoretical discussion as direct evidence about political translation. Rather, it supports a cautious premise: translators should neither assume that linguistic categories map perfectly nor conclude that cross-language equivalence is impossible.

Heyderova (2025), in her discussion of the competencies required of translators, emphasizes linguistic proficiency, cultural competence, and the ability to produce contextually appropriate translations. These competencies complement the present article's narrower focus on political terminology: before choosing an Azerbaijani equivalent, translators need both language knowledge and the contextual awareness to recognize institutional and cultural distinctions.

3. Method and Scope

This is a qualitative, example-based comparative study. Its authentic material is a small parallel-text sample drawn from Articles 1 and 2 of the official English and Azerbaijani versions of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The comparison focuses on the expressions "the sole source of state power" / "dövlət hakimiyyətinin yeganə mənbəyi" and "sovereignty of the people" / "xalqın suverenliyi," with surrounding clauses consulted to establish context. Official texts are treated as the reference for the wording examined, not as evidence that every political genre follows the same translation conventions.

Two further cases, constituency and accountability, are constructed examples. They are not quotations from a news corpus, a government publication, or a survey of translator practice. Their purpose is to demonstrate how a term's intended referent and conceptual components can alter the choice of Azerbaijani expression. No frequency counts, user responses, or claims of representativeness are reported.

Each case is examined against three criteria: (1) conceptual accuracy — whether the translation preserves the relevant sense; (2) contextual and institutional fit — whether it refers to the right actor, process, or institution; and (3) target-language clarity — whether the wording is natural and accessible for the intended readership. For evaluative expressions, the analysis also asks whether the translation preserves the source's stance. This framework adapts principles from translation studies, discourse analysis, and terminology research (Baker, 2018; Hatim & Mason, 1990; Schäffner, 2012).

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Context determines the referent

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The constructed example constituency illustrates how a single English form can refer either to an electoral district or to the people represented by an elected official. When the geographical unit is intended, “seçki dairəsi” may be appropriate. When the people are meant, “seçicilər” or a fuller phrase such as “təmsil etdiyi seçicilər” may better express the referent.

Consider the illustrative sentence “The representative met with her constituency before the vote.” If constituency denotes the represented people, translating it as “seçki dairəsi” shifts the meaning from a group of people to a geographic area. A clearer version would be “Nümayəndə səsvermədən əvvəl onu təmsil edən seçicilərlə görüşdü.” If the source instead describes redrawing electoral boundaries, “seçki dairəsi” would be the more accurate choice. The contrast shows why the translator must identify what the term denotes in its sentence before selecting a target form.

This issue is not solved by adding context indiscriminately. The surrounding paragraph, source genre, and political system may supply the necessary evidence. If ambiguity remains in the source, a translator should not silently decide what the author left open. Political translation requires disciplined interpretation: resolve what the text supports and preserve uncertainty when it does not (Baker, 2018; Romagnuolo, 2009).

4.2. Partial equivalence and explanatory translation

Accountability illustrates partial conceptual overlap. The term can refer to answerability, an obligation to explain decisions, and responsibility for conduct. Azerbaijani “hesabatlılıq” may be concise and suitable where the text foregrounds reporting and answerability. Where responsibility for decisions is central, a descriptive form — such as “qərarlar barədə hesabat vermək və məsuliyyət daşımaq” — may make the intended components clearer. These formulations are not interchangeable in every context.

In the constructed sentence “Public accountability is essential for transparent government,” “Şəffaf idarəçilik üçün dövlət qurumlarının hesabatlılığı vacibdir” offers a concise rendering when public institutions are the focus. If the surrounding text specifically emphasizes officials’ obligation to justify decisions and accept consequences, a longer formulation may be more precise. The translator should weigh the cost of added wording against the risk of leaving a central semantic component implicit.

These difficulties become more pronounced when translators rely on general-purpose machine translation for culture-bound or subject-specific terminology. Sadikhova and Babayev (2025) report that Google Translate may produce problems involving grammar, idiomatic expression, cultural nuance, and specialized terminology, and recommend using it as a supplement rather than a substitute for human translation. For political texts, this finding supports a cautious workflow: machine-generated candidates may help identify possible equivalents, but translators should verify the referent, institutional fit, and evaluative force against authoritative context before adopting them.

Explanatory translation is most useful when a target reader needs information to understand a concept that has no compact, conventional equivalent. It should clarify rather than editorialize. Adding an explanation that attributes blame, approval, or legal status absent from the source would alter the political message. House’s (2015) approach to translation quality assessment is useful here because it directs attention to the relationship between source function and target-text performance, not merely surface correspondence.

4.3. What the constitutional comparison shows

The official English version of Article 1 states that the sole source of state power in the Republic of Azerbaijan is vested in the people. The Azerbaijani version expresses the central phrase as “dövlət

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hakimiyyətinin yeganə mənbəyi Azərbaycan xalqıdır.” The English construction “is vested in” is not reproduced word for word; the Azerbaijani sentence uses a direct predicate structure. Yet the relationship between state power and the people remains explicit. This is a case in which syntactic restructuring supports a natural target-language formulation while retaining the constitutional proposition.

Article 2 provides a second example. The English heading “Sovereignty of the people” corresponds to “Xalqın suverenliyi.” This concise rendering preserves the central concept and the possessive relation. In the operative clause, however, the English text develops the people’s right through a longer sentence about determining their destiny and establishing a form of governance. The Azerbaijani version likewise uses a full clause rather than relying on the heading alone. The conceptual equivalence therefore depends on the provision as a whole, not only on matching the heading.

These examples demonstrate that formal similarity is not the sole measure of fidelity. A translation may reorganize syntax while preserving the concept and its legal force. At the same time, the sample consists of two related provisions from one constitutional document. It cannot establish how translators handle campaign slogans, news language, diplomatic statements, or policy papers. It offers a focused illustration of institutional translation, not a general law of English–Azerbaijani political discourse.

4.4. Preserving political framing

Words such as reform, regime, movement, and activist may appear descriptive but can acquire approving or critical force in context. Before selecting an Azerbaijani equivalent, the translator should ask who uses the term, whether it appears in the author’s own voice or in a quotation, and whether the surrounding text signals evaluation. This is especially important in news and political commentary, where the same event may be described through competing vocabularies.

Jalilzada’s (2022) study of abbreviations in English-language media discourse highlights the importance of context in interpreting compressed forms. Although abbreviations are not the main focus of the present article, the methodological lesson is applicable: a media term or shortened form should be interpreted in its textual environment rather than expanded by guesswork. The translation should preserve the source’s level of formality and evaluation, while making the target text intelligible.

A practical sequence is to identify the speaker and genre; read beyond the isolated word; determine the referent and any evaluative force; check established Azerbaijani usage in reliable sources; compare alternatives against the intended audience; and record the chosen term for consistent use. If a term is ambiguous or contested, the translator should document the decision and, where appropriate, retain the ambiguity rather than create false certainty. Schäffner (2012) and Hatim and Mason (1990) both support treating translation as recontextualized discourse rather than a word-substitution exercise.

5. A Decision Procedure for Translators

The analysis supports a concise, repeatable procedure. First, define the concept in the source context: who or what does the term refer to, and what role does it play in the argument? Second, identify the genre, institutional setting, speaker, and intended reader. Third, consult authoritative bilingual and specialist resources, including parallel official texts where available. Fourth, compare candidate Azerbaijani forms for semantic coverage, institutional fit, register, and readability. Fifth, select the least intrusive strategy that preserves the source function: established equivalent, context-sensitive

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lexical choice, or concise descriptive explanation. Finally, record the decision and review repeated instances for consistency.

This sequence does not require translators to choose the same strategy for every term. A stable legal term may call for a consistent equivalent; a polysemous word may require different renderings in different contexts; a culture-specific institution may need a short explanation at first mention. Translation quality depends on the fit between problem and solution. A glossary can help maintain consistency, but it should record definitions and contextual examples rather than impose one fixed translation across unrelated uses.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined how context, institutional reference, and political framing shape the translation of English socio-political terms into Azerbaijani. Its central finding is analytical rather than statistical: word-level matching can distort meaning when the source term is polysemous, institution-specific, or evaluative. The constitutional examples show that syntactic restructuring can preserve a political concept, while the constructed cases of constituency and accountability demonstrate why translators must identify the intended referent and the semantic components at issue.

The research question can therefore be answered with a practical principle: preserve the concept and communicative force of the source by choosing an Azerbaijani form that fits the specific institution, context, and reader. Established terminology should be used when it accurately covers the intended sense; a descriptive explanation is warranted when a concise equivalent would mislead or omit an important component. Neither literalism nor free paraphrase is a sufficient general rule.

The scope of the evidence remains limited. Only two constitutional provisions were examined as authentic parallel text, and the other examples were constructed for analysis. Future research should assemble a documented parallel corpus of English socio-political texts and published Azerbaijani translations across legal, governmental, media, and diplomatic genres. It could compare recurrent terms, record alternative renderings, and involve expert review to test the proposed criteria. Such work would show where the decision procedure holds across genres and where specialized conventions require adjustment.

Declarations

Ethical Approval: This study is a qualitative, example-based comparative analysis of publicly available official texts and published scholarly sources. No human participants were involved. All sources are appropriately cited.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability: The official constitutional texts analysed are publicly available at the cited URLs. All other sources are listed in the references.

Author Contributions: This study was solely conducted by the single author, who is responsible for conceptualization, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

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