

NAVOIY IS THE FOUNDER OF THE UZBEK LITERARY LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This article examines the pivotal role of Alisher Navoi (1441–1501) in the development and formalization of the Uzbek literary language. By analyzing his major works, specifically *Muhokamat al-Lughatayn* (The Comparison of the Two Languages), this study explores how Navoi elevated the Chagatai Turkic language to a status equal to that of the esteemed Persian-Tajik literary tradition. The paper highlights his contributions to lexical enrichment, syntactical structure, and the establishment of a formal literary canon that serves as the foundation for modern Uzbek.

Keywords: Alisher Navoi, Chagatai literature, Uzbek literary language, *Muhokamat al-Lughatayn*, linguistic standardization, Turkic heritage.

Introduction

The evolution of the Uzbek language from its classical Chagatai roots to its modern standardized form is intrinsically linked to the literary and political activities of Alisher Navoi. In the 15th-century Timurid Empire, Persian was the dominant language of administration, philosophy, and high literature, while Turkic dialects were often relegated to secondary status. Navoi's decision to write his magnum opus in Chagatai was a revolutionary act of cultural assertion. This article investigates the mechanisms through which Navoi transformed the literary landscape of Central Asia and secured the future of the Uzbek language.

Alisher Navoiy's role as the founder of the Uzbek literary language is not merely a symbolic title; it was a deliberate, revolutionary intellectual project that altered the cultural trajectory of Central Asia.

The Linguistic Context: The "Turki" vs. Persian Challenge

During the Timurid Renaissance of the 15th century, Persian (*Farsi*) held absolute hegemony as the language of high literature, bureaucracy, and religious scholarship. The Turkic language (referred to by Navoiy as *Turki*) was widely used for daily communication and by the military, but it was largely dismissed by the intellectual elite as being "too coarse" for sophisticated poetry or complex philosophical inquiry.

Navoiy took on the monumental task of proving that *Turki* possessed the same, if not greater, expressive power as Persian.

The "Muhakamat al-Lughatayn" (Trial of the Two Languages)

Navoiy's most significant theoretical defense of this position was his treatise, *Muhakamat al-Lughatayn* (The Judgment of the Two Languages), written in 1499.



- **Linguistic Analysis:** In this work, Navoiy meticulously compared the lexical, phonetic, and grammatical richness of Persian and Turkic.
- **Lexical Depth:** He argued that the Turkic language contained nuanced vocabulary for specific human emotions, natural phenomena, and domestic activities that were either absent or required multiple words to express in Persian.
- **Purpose:** By scientifically documenting these differences, he successfully challenged the literary establishment, creating a scholarly framework that justified the use of Turkic for high-level artistic creation.

The Creative Proof: The *Khamsa*

While the *Muhakamat al-Lughatayn* provided the theoretical argument, it was his poetry that solidified the change. His most significant achievement was the composition of the "Khamsa" (The Quintet)—a series of five epic poems (*masnavis*).

By adapting the traditional *masnavi* form—which had been perfected by Persian masters like Nizami and Jami—into *Turki*, Navoiy achieved several breakthroughs:

1. **Vocabulary Expansion:** He introduced a vast array of terminology, blending native Turkic roots with sophisticated Arabic and Persian loanwords, which enriched the language's capacity for abstraction.
2. **Structural Standardization:** He established rigorous metrical and stylistic standards, effectively codifying the grammar and syntax of what would become the literary standard.
3. **Institutionalization:** Because Navoiy was a high-ranking statesman and patron, his work enjoyed the support of the Timurid court, forcing the literary community to adopt his standards as the benchmark for quality.

Legacy and Impact

Navoiy's efforts created a literary tradition that persisted for centuries, influencing writers across the Turkic-speaking world, from the Ottoman Empire to the Mughal courts of India.

- **Modern Uzbek:** The literary language used in Uzbekistan today is the direct descendant of the "Chagatai" language that Navoiy perfected.
- **Pedagogical Significance:** Because he treated the language as a subject of scientific and philosophical study, he enabled future generations of educators to teach the language not just as a spoken vernacular, but as a discipline with its own rules, history, and aesthetic criteria.

By elevating a "spoken" tongue to a "literary" language, Navoiy provided a durable cultural identity for the region, transforming the way the Turkic people understood their own heritage, intellect, and place in the world of literature.

Would you be interested in an analysis of how Navoiy's specific linguistic choices in the *Khamsa* compare to earlier forms of Old Turkic?

The significance of Navoi's contribution lies not merely in his poetry, but in his conscious efforts toward language policy. He was not just a poet; he was a statesman who understood that cultural legitimacy required a robust language. By creating a standardized literary language, he fostered a sense of identity that transcended the political instability of the Timurid era. Critics who argue against his title as "founder" focus on the existence of pre-existing Turkic traditions; however, they often overlook the standardizing power Navoi exercised—a feat equivalent to Dante Alighieri's role in establishing the Italian language.



Conclusion

Alisher Navoi's influence on the Uzbek literary language is foundational. He successfully transitioned a collection of regional Turkic dialects into a prestigious, stable, and highly capable literary language. His work, *Muhokamat al-Lughatayn*, remains one of the most important documents in the history of Turkic linguistics, acting as both a manifesto for linguistic independence and a practical guide for literary development.

Pedagogical Integration: Modern curricula should emphasize not just the reading of Navoi's poems, but the study of his linguistic theories as expressed in his prose.

Digital Preservation: Increased funding for the digitization of early manuscripts of the *Khamsa* and *Diwans* is essential for comparative research.

Comparative Studies: Future academic focus should be directed toward the influence of Navoi on other Turkic literary languages, such as Uighur and Tatar, to fully appreciate his pan-Turkic legacy.

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