



Faust and Nasreddin Hodja: Cultural Wisdom through Tragic, Humorous, and Ironic Structures

Faust ve Nasrettin Hoca: Trajik, Mizahi ve İronik Yapılar Yoluyla Kültürel Bilgelik

Gülfidan Aytaş*

Abstract

This study offers a comparative and interdisciplinary investigation into the ways proverbs and idioms operate as carriers of cultural wisdom in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* and in the well-known anecdotes of Nasrettin Hodja. Although these works emerge from distinct literary, historical, and cultural traditions—one rooted in Western canonical literature and the other in Eastern oral folklore—they reveal striking conceptual convergences. Both corpora articulate reflections on human fallibility, moral responsibility, experiential learning, and social criticism, suggesting that cultural wisdom often transcends geographical and generic boundaries. In *Faust*, such insights are expressed through a tragic-philosophical framework that foregrounds existential struggle, intellectual ambition, and ethical tension. By contrast, Nasrettin Hodja's anecdotes employ humour, irony, and

Geliş tarihi (Received): 09-06-2025 Kabul tarihi (Accepted): 17-01-2026

* Dr. Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Department of Foreign Languages, Giresun University. Giresun-Türkiye/Öğr.Gör.Dr., Giresun Üniversitesi Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu Yabancı Diller Bölümü. gülfidan.aytas@giresun.edu.tr. ORCID ID:0000-0003-1566-1592

paradox to convey comparable moral lessons in a more accessible and socially grounded manner. Methodologically, the study is based on a comparative literary and folkloric analysis of approximately thirty proverbs and idiomatic expressions selected from *Faust* (Goethe, 1997) and Nasrettin Hodja's narratives (Kayaerli, 2001). These expressions were examined in terms of their semantic content, pragmatic function, and embedded cultural contexts. Translation strategies constitute a central analytical lens, particularly with reference to the theoretical perspectives of Nida, Venuti, and Berman, allowing for an evaluation of how cultural wisdom is transferred, transformed, or negotiated across languages and traditions. The findings demonstrate strong intercultural parallels between tragic and comic modes of expression, highlighting that folkloric language functions as a cultural bridge between Eastern and Western traditions. Ultimately, the study shows that despite differing aesthetic forms, both traditions converge on similar ethical insights and shared human concerns.

Keywords: *Nasrettin Hodja, Faust, cultural wisdom, proverbs and idioms*

Öz

Bu çalışma, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe'nin *Faust* adlı eseri ile Nasrettin Hoca fıkralarında atasözleri ve deyimlerin kültürel bilgelik taşıyıcıları olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü karşılaştırmalı ve disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşımla incelemektedir. Farklı edebî, tarihsel ve kültürel geleneklere dayanan bu iki anlatı geleneği-biri Batı kanonik edebiyatının temel metinlerinden, diğeri ise Doğu'nun sözlü halk kültüründen beslenmesine rağmen-dikkate değer düşünsel keşifler sunmaktadır. Her iki metin grubunda da insanın yanılabilirliği, ahlaki sorumluluk, deneyime dayalı bilgi edinimi ve toplumsal eleştiri gibi temalar öne çıkmakta; bu durum kültürel bilgeliğin coğrafi ve türsel sınırları aşan evrensel bir niteliğe sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. *Faust*'ta bu temalar, varoluşsal sorgulamalar, entelektüel hırs ve etik gerilimler üzerinden ilerleyen trajik-felsefi bir anlatım içinde ele alınırken, Nasrettin Hoca fıkralarında benzer düşünceler mizah, ironi ve paradoks yoluyla daha gündelik ve erişilebilir bir biçimde aktarılmaktadır. Yöntemsel olarak çalışma, *Faust* (Goethe, 1997) ile Nasrettin Hoca fıkralarından (Kayaerli, 2001) seçilen yaklaşık otuz atasözü ve deyim karşılaştırmalı edebî ve folklorik çözümlemesine dayanmaktadır. Bu dilsel unsurlar; anlam, işlev ve içinde buldukları kültürel bağlam açısından değerlendirilmiştir. Kültürel bilgeliğin aktarım biçimlerini incelemek amacıyla çeviri stratejileri temel bir çözümleme çerçevesi olarak kullanılmış; özellikle Nida, Venuti ve Berman'ın kuramsal yaklaşımlarından yararlanılmıştır. Bulgular, trajik ve komik anlatım biçimleri arasında güçlü kültürlerarası paralellikler bulunduğunu ortaya koymakta; folklorik dilin Doğu ve Batı gelenekleri arasında bir kültürel köprü işlevi gördüğünü göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, farklı estetik anlatım biçimlerinin ortak insani deneyimlere dayanan benzer etik çıkarımlara ulaşabildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda atasözleri ve deyimlerin yalnızca dilsel kalıplar değil, tarihsel deneyimi, kolektif hafızayı ve etik düşünceyi kuşaklar arasında aktaran dinamik kültürel yapılar olduğu vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Nasrettin Hoca, Faust, kültürel bilgelik, atasözleri ve deyimler*

Introduction

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* is widely regarded as a foundational work of German literature that interrogates the limits of human knowledge, moral responsibility, and existential desire through the tragic figure of a striving individual. Rather than offering a universalised image of "Western man," the drama reflects the intellectual tensions of late Enlightenment and early Romantic thought, particularly the conflict between rational ambition and ethical constraint (Goethe, 1997). Through symbolic and folkloric elements, *Faust* functions not only as a literary tragedy but also as a cultural text that articulates philosophical reflection on modern subjectivity.

In a different yet comparable cultural register, the anecdotes of Nasreddin Hodja represent one of the most enduring traditions of Turkish folk culture. Rooted in oral transmission, these narratives employ humour, irony, and paradox to convey ethical insight and social criticism in accessible forms. Numerous Turkish proverbs and idioms either originate from or are reinforced by Nasreddin Hodja stories, which have historically functioned as vehicles of collective memory and practical wisdom (Aksoy, 1984; Türkmen, 2008). While *Faust* articulates cultural wisdom through tragic tension, Nasreddin Hodja achieves a similar function through comic inversion, demonstrating that distinct narrative modes can address shared human concerns such as fallibility, justice, and moral judgment.

When such culturally embedded expressions are translated into other languages, significant challenges emerge. Proverbs and idioms resist literal transfer because their meanings are inseparable from cultural context. Research on the translation of Nasreddin Hodja anecdotes consistently shows that word-for-word translation often leads to semantic loss or cultural distortion (Yaman, 2021). As a result, translators frequently adopt meaning-based or interpretive strategies that prioritise cultural resonance over formal symmetry.

Against this background, the present study analyses the use of proverbs and idioms in *Faust* (Goethe, 1997) and Nasreddin Hodja's anecdotes (Kayaerli, 2001) from the perspective of folkloric and cultural wisdom. Translation strategies are treated as an analytical background rather than the primary focus. Proverbs and idioms are approached as condensed expressions of collective consciousness that encode ethical reasoning, lived experience, and cultural memory. Viewed together, these texts demonstrate how different literary and folkloric traditions mobilise idiomatic language to engage with universal human dilemmas.

While previous studies have examined *Faust* and Nasreddin Hodja separately, the role of proverbs and idioms as shared vehicles of cultural wisdom across tragic and comic traditions has not yet been systematically explored.

1. Research questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do proverbs and idiomatic expressions in *Faust* function within the work's tragic and philosophical framework to articulate themes of human limitation, moral responsibility, and aspiration?
2. How do Nasreddin Hodja's anecdotes employ humour, irony, and proverbs to convey ethical and social insight within Turkish folk culture?

3. In what ways can the cultural wisdom embedded in tragic (*Faust*) and humorous (Nasreddin Hodja) folkloric expressions be preserved across languages without reducing idioms to purely lexical units?

Literature review

This chapter examines the interaction between classical literature and folk culture through a comparative analysis of two distinct yet conceptually intersecting traditions. Goethe's *Faust*, developed over several decades, exceeds the scope of an individual moral drama and reflects the intellectual tensions of late Enlightenment and early Romantic Europe. Rather than representing a universalised image of "Western man," the work portrays a historically situated modern subject confronted with the limits of rational knowledge, ethical responsibility, and human agency (Goethe, 1997: 29–34). Central to the drama are dilemmas such as the conflict between knowledge and morality and the coexistence of good and evil within the individual.

Comparative scholarship identifies Faust as an iteration of the cross-cultural archetype of the overreaching hero whose transgression leads to ethical reckoning (Eliade, 1963). This archetypal dimension situates the work within a broader field of cultural wisdom, in which tragedy functions as a mode of moral reflection.

By contrast, Nasreddin Hodja occupies a central position in Turkish folk literature as a figure whose wisdom is conveyed through humour, irony, and paradox. Known across the Turkic world and beyond, his anecdotes form part of a transnational joke tradition that combines entertainment with ethical instruction (Türkmen, 2008: 151–154). These narratives articulate communal critique by addressing injustice, hypocrisy, and social hierarchy through indirect yet effective strategies.

The transmission of Nasreddin Hodja's stories from oral to written forms highlights their role in sustaining cultural memory (Çek, 2016: 42–46). Through irony and paradox, they expose social contradictions while conveying ethical insight, a strategy that resonates with Kierkegaard's conception of irony as a mode that destabilises fixed meanings and invites self-reflection (Kierkegaard, 1989: 326–329). Unlike the tragic gravity of *Faust*, Hodja's humour renders cultural wisdom accessible without overt moralisation.

Despite their differing narrative registers, both traditions transcend their immediate cultural contexts. *Faust* articulates cultural wisdom through tragic-philosophical reflection on human limitation, while Nasreddin Hodja's anecdotes achieve a similar function through comic disruption of social norms. The literature thus suggests that tragedy and humour operate as complementary modes through which societies express shared human concerns.

2. Cultural and linguistic dimension of proverbs and idioms

Nasreddin Hodja's anecdotes have played a decisive role in the formation and preservation of proverbs and idioms that remain widely used in contemporary Turkish (Duman, 2008: 61–64). These expressions function not as mere stylistic embellishments but as condensed forms of cultural wisdom embedded in everyday language. The humour characteristic of

Hodja's narratives facilitates the internalisation of such expressions, ensuring their durability within collective memory and supporting the transmission of shared ethical values (Kara & Yıldırım, 2015: 118–121).

In Goethe's *Faust*, proverbs and idiomatic expressions serve a different yet equally significant function. Rather than reinforcing communal norms, they intensify the philosophical and tragic dimensions of the text by linking abstract moral inquiry to familiar patterns of folk wisdom. As scholars note, these expressions contribute to the symbolic density of the work, although their cultural specificity often leads to semantic and functional shifts in translation (Berman, 1992: 54–56).

Because proverbs and idioms rely on contextual and metaphorical meaning, literal translation frequently results in partial loss of ethical and pragmatic force. Translation studies therefore emphasise strategies that prioritise cultural resonance over structural fidelity (Nida, 1964; Venuti, 1995). This insight is particularly relevant for *Faust*, where idiomatic language shapes tragic meaning, and for Nasreddin Hodja's anecdotes, where humour depends on shared cultural assumptions.

Taken together, both traditions demonstrate that proverbs and idioms function as repositories of cultural wisdom. While *Faust* employs idiomatic language to reflect on human limitation and moral ambiguity, Nasreddin Hodja's stories use it to articulate social critique through humour, supporting a comparative approach that views folkloric language as a central mechanism of cultural knowledge.

3. Translation strategies and comparative analysis

The translation of proverbs and idioms cannot be reduced to literal transfer, as such expressions are deeply embedded in the cultural and pragmatic contexts of their source languages. In the case of Nasreddin Hodja's anecdotes, word-for-word translation frequently neutralises humour and obscures the underlying moral message, since Hodja's wit relies on shared cultural assumptions (Temizkan, 2011: 84–87). Translators therefore tend to prioritise cultural resonance over surface form, confirming that proverbs and idioms function as carriers of cultural wisdom rather than as isolated lexical units.

A similar tendency is evident in German–Turkish translations of *Faust*, where translators often replace literal renderings with semantically or functionally equivalent expressions that resonate within the target culture (Koller, 2011: 201–204). This practice reflects an understanding of translation as cultural negotiation rather than mere linguistic substitution. As Venuti (1995: 18–21) argues, such negotiation inevitably involves interpretive choices shaped by domestication or foreignisation.

Within this framework, strategies such as dynamic equivalence (Nida, 1964), adaptation (Baker, 1992), and explicitation (Newmark, 1988) operate as flexible tools rather than prescriptive rules. Their effectiveness lies in preserving the ethical and symbolic force of the original expression. For example, the Turkish proverb "*At Üsküdar'ı geçti*" is commonly rendered in English as "*It is too late to change anything now,*" maintaining its moral implication despite the loss of metaphor.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that translation functions as a form of cultural mediation that sustains collective memory across languages. In both *Faust* and Nasreddin Hodja's anecdotes, proverbs and idioms serve not as linguistic problems to be solved but as vessels of cultural wisdom whose philosophical and ethical depth depends on careful contextual mediation.

5. Folkloric elements of *Faust*

Goethe's *Faust* is widely recognised as a canonical work that has exerted a lasting influence on German and world literature. While the drama foregrounds themes of human ambition, inner conflict, and spiritual striving, it also draws extensively on folkloric narrative structures. Central among these is the motif of the "pact with the devil," a recurring pattern in European folk tradition that functions as a cautionary tale against transgressive desire and unchecked aspiration (Thompson, 1955: 86–88). Faust's agreement with Mephistopheles exemplifies this motif by staging the tension between the human drive for transcendence and the ethical consequences of overreaching (Goethe, 1997: 62).

The folkloric dimension of *Faust* is particularly evident in the protagonist's narrative trajectory. Faust's inner conflict follows an archetypal pattern familiar from folk narratives, in which the hero is subjected to moral and supernatural trials that test the limits of human agency. The promise of knowledge and power offered through the pact ultimately leads not to fulfilment but to entrapment, reinforcing a core folkloric lesson about the dangers of hubris. Goethe's adaptation of this motif situates *Faust* within a universal narrative framework while transforming it into a philosophical exploration of modern subjectivity (Goethe, 1997: 72–74).

Mephistopheles represents a significant reconfiguration of folkloric demonology. Rather than appearing as a purely malevolent force, he is characterised by irony, wit, and psychological acuity, functioning as an externalisation of Faust's own desires and contradictions. This ambivalence deepens the tragic irony of the drama, as the demonic figure becomes both tempter and mirror, exposing the vulnerabilities inherent in human ambition. As Safranski (2010: 119–121) notes, this humanisation reflects Goethe's use of folk material not as static tradition but as a dynamic resource for ethical and philosophical inquiry.

The Gretchen episode further reinforces the folkloric foundations of the drama, albeit in a more compressed narrative form. Gretchen embodies the archetype of the innocent heroine whose moral integrity is destroyed through betrayal and misjudgment a familiar pattern in folk narratives. Her downfall extends the consequences of Faust's pact beyond individual guilt to social and communal suffering, thereby foregrounding the ethical costs of personal ambition (Goethe, 1997: 99–102).

Taken together, these folkloric elements enable *Faust* to operate simultaneously on individual and collective levels. By integrating traditional motifs into a complex philosophical structure, Goethe transforms folklore into a medium of cultural wisdom. *Faust* thus emerges not only as a meditation on individual striving but also as a broader reflection on human limitation, moral responsibility, and the interconnected nature of social life.

6. Folkloric themes of Nasrettin Hodja

Nasrettin Hodja occupies a central position in Turkish folk culture as a figure through whom humour, wisdom, and social critique converge. His anecdotes, deeply rooted in oral tradition, reflect everyday experiences, communal values, and social norms while simultaneously functioning as vehicles of moral reflection (Sakaoğlu & Alptekin, 2018: 41–45). Transmitted across generations through storytelling practices (Muallimoğlu, 1998: 22–27), these narratives illustrate how folklore operates as a collective archive of cultural wisdom rather than as a form of mere entertainment.

A defining feature of Nasrettin Hodja's anecdotes is the strategic use of humour to reveal truth indirectly. Rather than offering explicit moral instruction, Hodja employs irony, paradox, and exaggeration to destabilise habitual patterns of thought and to provoke reflection. His seemingly illogical or naïve responses to ordinary situations encourage audiences to question accepted social conventions. In this respect, Hodja's humour aligns with Bergson's conception of laughter as a social corrective mechanism that exposes rigidity in behaviour and invites intellectual flexibility (Bergson, 2005: 97–101). Humour thus functions not as an end in itself but as a means of re-evaluating social norms.

The satirical dimension of Nasrettin Hodja's humour further reinforces its critical potential. His anecdotes frequently address issues such as social hierarchy, economic inequality, and institutional authority, articulating the perspective of ordinary people through comic inversion (Tokmakçioğlu, 1991: 63–68). This narrative strategy resonates with Kierkegaard's understanding of irony as an existential tool that disrupts fixed meanings and reveals the gap between appearance and reality (Kierkegaard, 1989: 248–252). In Hodja's stories, the ostensibly foolish character often exposes deeper insight than figures of authority, thereby transforming irony into a form of cultural critique.

Nasrettin Hodja's anecdotes also play a significant role in the formation and circulation of proverbs and idiomatic expressions. Many widely used Turkish sayings, such as "*Kürkümü ye*" ("Eat my fur"), originate from these narratives and continue to shape collective consciousness (Aksoy, 1984: 56–58). Through such expressions, complex social observations are condensed into memorable linguistic forms, enabling cultural wisdom to circulate beyond the narrative context itself.

The widespread translation and adaptation of Nasrettin Hodja's stories further demonstrate the universality of their themes. Rendered into numerous languages, these narratives often require interpretive and adaptive strategies to preserve both humour and ethical resonance (Beekman & Callow, 1974: 33–36; Baker, 1992: 68–71; Newmark, 1984: 94–97). Their sustained international reception confirms that, while culturally specific, Hodja's anecdotes address fundamental human concerns such as fallibility, justice, and common sense.

In sum, the folkloric themes in Nasrettin Hodja's anecdotes reveal humour as a sophisticated form of cultural wisdom. Through irony, satire, and proverbial condensation, these stories simultaneously entertain and instruct, demonstrating how folklore functions as a living tradition that preserves ethical insight while continually inviting critical reflection.

7. Cultural strategies in the translation of proverbs and idioms

Proverbs and idioms constitute core components of oral culture and occupy a central position in folklore and literary traditions grounded in collective memory. As condensed linguistic forms, proverbs encapsulate shared human experience while reflecting the values and worldviews of the societies in which they circulate, functioning as repositories of moral and practical knowledge transmitted across generations (Tanrıkulu, 2018; Taş, 2017). Idioms, by contrast, operate through figurative and indirect meaning, enriching communication by structuring ethical judgement and social reasoning through metaphor. While proverbs often articulate overt norms, idioms function as cultural signposts that reveal shared perceptions of justice, irony, and social order embedded in everyday interaction. Together, both forms encode cultural wisdom through distinct rhetorical mechanisms.

The translation of such expressions poses particular challenges due to their symbolic density and cultural embeddedness. Proverbs and idioms are not merely linguistic units but crystallisations of historical experience and collective memory, which makes literal translation frequently ineffective. Translation strategies therefore play a crucial role in mediating meaning between cultures by prioritising pragmatic function and cultural resonance over formal correspondence.

Within this context, dynamic equivalence foregrounds the reproduction of effect rather than lexical form, seeking to elicit a comparable response in the target audience. For example, the English proverb “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch” is effectively rendered in Turkish as “Dereyi görmeden paçaları sıvama,” preserving its cautionary function through cultural equivalence (Venuti, 1995; Yang, 2010). Closely related is adaptation, which replaces the source expression with an established idiom in the target culture, as in the Turkish rendering of the French idiom “Appeler un chat un chat” as “Eğri otur, doğru konuş,” thereby maintaining ethical emphasis while reshaping form (Yıldırım, 2015; Ünsal, 2019).

When no culturally equivalent expression exists, explicitation becomes necessary. The Turkish idiom “At Üsküdar’ı geçti,” for instance, is translated as “It is too late to change anything now,” preserving its moral implication despite the loss of metaphor (Yalçın, 2003; Yücel, 2007). Another key tension concerns the choice between domestication and foreignization. While foreignization foregrounds cultural difference, domestication prioritises accessibility by aligning expressions with target-culture norms, as in the translation of “Balık baştan kokar” as “A fish rots from the head down” (Yang, 2010; Yalçın & Pazarlıoğlu, 2014).

These strategies are particularly significant in the translation of Goethe’s *Faust* and the anecdotes of Nasrettin Hodja, where proverbs and idioms function as vehicles of cultural wisdom. In *Faust*, idiomatic expressions reinforce tragic-philosophical reflections on ambition and human limitation, whereas in Nasrettin Hodja’s anecdotes similar insights are conveyed through humour and irony. Despite their differing stylistic registers, both traditions rely on culturally embedded expressions to articulate universal concerns.

Overall, effective translation of proverbs and idioms requires a balance between fidelity to cultural symbolism and accessibility for the target audience. When employed consciously,

strategies such as dynamic equivalence, adaptation, explicitation, domestication, and foreignization enable folkloric expressions to retain their ethical and philosophical force across languages. Translation thus emerges not merely as a technical procedure but as an act of cultural mediation that sustains collective memory and shared human experience.

8. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design in order to analyse the folkloric and cultural dimensions of proverbs and idioms in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* and the anecdotes of Nasrettin Hodja. The primary objective is not to evaluate translation quality in a technical sense, but to examine how proverbs and idioms function as carriers of cultural wisdom, collective memory, and moral reflection across two distinct literary and folkloric traditions. For this reason, the study is grounded mainly in literary and folkloric analysis, while comparative translation studies are employed as a supportive and interpretive framework rather than as the central methodological focus.

The methodological approach is comparative in nature. It proceeds from the assumption that both *Faust* and Nasrettin Hodja's anecdotes articulate universal human concerns such as morality, ambition, error, and social responsibility through culturally specific narrative forms. Accordingly, the study first examines the major themes and character structures in both traditions, and then analyses how proverbs and idioms embedded in these narratives contribute to the transmission of cultural wisdom. Translation strategies are considered insofar as they illuminate how these culturally embedded expressions are preserved, reshaped, or transformed when transferred between languages and traditions.

From a cultural perspective, the study initially focuses on *Faust* as a representative of Western literary and folkloric imagination. Faust's journey is analysed in relation to debates on individuality, moral responsibility, human limitation, and the pursuit of knowledge, all of which are frequently articulated through idiomatic and proverbial language. Particular attention is paid to the cultural resonance of these expressions within the tragic structure of the work. In contrast, Nasrettin Hodja's anecdotes are examined as products of an oral folk tradition in which humour, irony, and paradox serve as primary vehicles of moral instruction and social critique. This dual focus allows the study to explore how similar forms of cultural wisdom are conveyed through divergent aesthetic registers tragic in *Faust* and comic in Hodja.

In methodological terms, the study employs descriptive and comparative literary analysis. This approach enables the identification of recurring themes, narrative functions, and symbolic patterns associated with proverbs and idioms in both corpora. To support this analysis, established models from translation studies and folklore research are used as analytical tools. These include Eugene Nida's concepts of dynamic and formal (stylistic) equivalence (1964), Lawrence Venuti's distinction between domestication and foreignization (1998), and Antoine Berman's theory of deformation tendencies in literary translation (1992). Importantly, these models are not treated as prescriptive frameworks; rather, they are used heuristically to trace how cultural meaning and wisdom are negotiated when idiomatic expressions cross linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The data set of the study consists of three main components: proverbs, idioms, and folkloric expressions identified in Goethe's *Faust* (1997); proverbs and idiomatic expressions with comparable thematic content in Nasrettin Hodja's anecdotes (Kayaerli, 2001); and the original German and Turkish formulations of these expressions. The selection of these texts is based on their canonical status within their respective traditions and their documented influence on cultural memory.

Data collection was carried out in three stages. First, approximately twenty to thirty proverbs, idioms, and folkloric expressions were identified in each corpus based on their thematic relevance and cultural prominence. Second, these expressions were analysed in their original linguistic and narrative contexts in order to determine their semantic, symbolic, and moral functions. Third, where translations were available, the expressions were examined comparatively to identify the translation strategies employed and to assess how cultural wisdom was preserved, modified, or explicated in the target language.

The analysis combines qualitative content analysis with comparative folkloric analysis. Through systematic classification and comparison, the study investigates how both traditions encode moral lessons, social criticism, and cultural identity through idiomatic language. Rather than quantifying translation strategies, the analysis prioritises interpretive depth, focusing on the cultural and philosophical implications of each expression.

For analytical clarity, the identified expressions were grouped into five thematic categories: expressions related to human nature and moral teaching; expressions of social criticism and humour; ironic and paradoxical formulations; sayings concerning consciousness, fate, and human agency; and expressions highlighting linguistic creativity through metaphor, wordplay, and figurative language. These categories function as interpretive lenses rather than rigid taxonomies, allowing the study to demonstrate how similar forms of cultural wisdom emerge across different narrative traditions.

Overall, this methodological framework enables a nuanced examination of proverbs and idioms as cultural artefacts rather than isolated linguistic units. By situating translation strategies within a broader folkloric and literary analysis, the study highlights how tragic and humorous traditions alike sustain cultural wisdom across time, languages, and cultures.

This methodological design allows the study to prioritise interpretive depth over quantitative generalisation, which is particularly suitable for the analysis of folkloric and literary texts.

Translation strategies analysis

Each proverb and idiom identified in *Faust* and Nasrettin Hodja's anecdotes was systematically coded according to the translation strategy employed. The purpose of this analysis is not to assess translation accuracy in a prescriptive sense, but to examine how different strategies mediate cultural wisdom when idiomatic expressions are transferred across languages and traditions. Table 1 presents representative examples from both corpora, illustrating the relationship between the source expression, its contextual meaning, and the strategy applied in translation.

Table 1. Examples from *Faust* and Nasrettin Hodja Works

Translation Strategy	Definition	<i>Faust</i> Example	Nasrettin Hodja Example
Meaning Matching	Translation using a culturally similar proverb or idiom in the target language	“ <i>Blut ist ein ganz besonderer Saft.</i> ” → “Blood attracts.”	“ <i>What goes around comes around.</i> ” → “ <i>Wie man in den Wald ruft, so schallt es heraus.</i> ”
Interpretive Translation	Explanatory translation used to preserve underlying meaning	“ <i>Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!</i> ” → “I want to stop time, because this moment is so precious.”	“ <i>Bring me the man from the roof!</i> ” → “Only someone with experience can truly understand suffering.”
Direct Translation	Word-for-word rendering of the source expression	“ <i>Es irrt der Mensch, solange er strebt.</i> ” → “Man makes mistakes as long as he strives.”	“ <i>A neighbour needs his neighbour’s ashes.</i> ” → “ <i>Der Nachbar braucht selbst die Asche des anderen.</i> ”
Cultural Adaptation	Translation adapted to the cultural norms of the target language	“ <i>Was glänzt, ist für den Augenblick geboren.</i> ” → “All that glitters is not gold.”	“ <i>Eat my fur!</i> ” → “ <i>Kleider machen Leute!</i> ”
Functional Equivalence	Use of an idiom with a similar pragmatic function	“ <i>Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamm.</i> ” → “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”	“ <i>Lead the way before the jug breaks.</i> ” → “ <i>Vorbeugen ist besser als heilen.</i> ”
Meaning Expansion	Translation through semantic elaboration	“ <i>Ein guter Mensch, in seinem dunklen Drange.</i> ” → “A good man sometimes remains in dark desires.”	“ <i>A neighbour needs his neighbour’s ashes.</i> ” → “Good neighbours are better than distant relatives.”
Figurative Translation	Transfer of figurative meaning rather than literal form	“ <i>Der Geist, der stets verneint.</i> ” → “The spirit that is always sceptical.”	“ <i>Even if you put a golden saddle on a donkey, it is still a donkey.</i> ” → “ <i>Auch ein goldener Sattel macht keinen Esel zum Pferd.</i> ”

As demonstrated in Table 1, a purely lexical or word-for-word approach is insufficient for the translation of proverbs and idioms. These expressions are deeply embedded in collective memory and carry multiple layers of meaning, including humour, irony, moral evaluation, and cultural worldview. Consequently, strategies such as meaning matching and functional equivalence emerge as particularly effective in reproducing the intended pragmatic and cultural effect in the target language.

For instance, the rendering of “*Es irrt der Mensch, solange er strebt*” through a meaning-matching strategy aligns with widely recognised formulations of human fallibility in the target culture. In such cases, cultural familiarity enhances intelligibility without compromising philosophical depth. Similarly, cultural adaptation allows idioms to be naturalised for the target audience, as seen in the transformation of “*Was glänzt, ist für den Augenblick geboren*”

into the proverb “*All that glitters is not gold,*” which preserves the moral lesson concerning appearances and transience.

Interpretive and figurative translation strategies are particularly significant in literary and folkloric contexts where symbolic and philosophical meaning outweighs formal equivalence. In *Faust*, expressions such as “*Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!*” cannot be fully conveyed through literal translation without losing their existential implication. Likewise, Nasrettin Hodja’s anecdotal expressions often rely on experiential wisdom that requires interpretive expansion in order to remain intelligible across cultures.

Direct translation, while occasionally viable when conceptual overlap exists, generally proves limited in its ability to transmit cultural resonance. As shown in Table 1, literal renderings tend to preserve surface meaning but risk flattening the idiomatic richness and cultural depth of the original expression. For this reason, direct translation functions primarily as a supplementary strategy rather than a dominant one.

Overall, the findings indicate that translation should be understood as an act of cultural mediation rather than linguistic substitution. In the case of *Faust*, translation strategies serve to preserve the tragic and philosophical reflection on ambition, error, and morality. In Nasrettin Hodja’s anecdotes, they safeguard the humorous, ironic, and didactic wisdom of folk tradition. The success of these strategies ultimately depends on recognising proverbs and idioms not merely as linguistic units, but as carriers of cultural identity and shared human insight.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in key theoretical approaches from translation studies and folklore, with particular emphasis on how culturally embedded expressions such as proverbs and idioms function as carriers of collective wisdom across languages. The analysis is structured around Eugene Nida’s Dynamic and Formal Equivalence model (1964), Lawrence Venuti’s strategies of domestication and foreignization (1998), and Antoine Berman’s theory of deformation in literary translation (1992). Rather than treating these frameworks as competing models, the study adopts them as complementary tools for analysing how folkloric meaning is preserved, reshaped, or partially transformed in translation.

Nida’s Dynamic and Formal Equivalence

Nida distinguishes between formal equivalence, which prioritises structural and grammatical correspondence with the source text, and dynamic equivalence, which focuses on producing a comparable effect on the target audience. In the translation of idioms and proverbs, formal equivalence often proves inadequate, as literal renderings risk obscuring or distorting culturally embedded meaning. For this reason, dynamic equivalence is particularly relevant for folkloric material.

These examples demonstrate that dynamic equivalence enables the preservation of cultural wisdom even when formal correspondence is sacrificed.

Venuti’s Domestication and Foreignization

Venuti’s framework foregrounds the ideological dimension of translation by emphasising

the translator's cultural positioning. Domestication adapts the source text to the norms of the target culture in order to enhance fluency and accessibility, whereas foreignization deliberately retains elements of cultural otherness to remind readers of the text's origin.

In this study, domestication is most frequently observed in the translation of Nasrettin Hodja's anecdotes, which rely heavily on shared cultural assumptions and humour. For example, the idiom "Kürkümü ye!" is effectively domesticated in German as "Kleider machen Leute!", allowing the social critique embedded in the original to be immediately recognisable to the target audience. A similar strategy is employed in the translation of Goethe's "Was glänzt, ist für den Augenblick geboren" as "All that glitters is not gold", which aligns the philosophical insight of the original with a well-established proverb in the target culture.

By contrast, foreignization is more frequently applied in passages involving philosophical or metaphysical reflection, particularly in *Faust*, where maintaining cultural and conceptual specificity may take precedence over readability. This selective use of domestication and foreignization underscores the need for a context-sensitive approach rather than a fixed translational norm.

Berman's Theory of Distortions

Berman identifies a series of "deforming tendencies" that commonly occur in literary translation, including rationalisation, clarification, and the flattening of ambiguity. His framework is especially relevant for analysing figurative and paradoxical expressions, which constitute a significant portion of both Goethe's and Nasrettin Hodja's proverbial language.

For instance, "Der Geist, der stets verneint" loses much of its philosophical nuance when translated literally as "the spirit that always negates", yet achieves conceptual clarity through functional equivalence as "the spirit that is always sceptical." Similarly, Nasrettin Hodja's saying "Komşu komşusunun külüne muhtaçtır" risks incomprehensibility if translated directly, but conveys a comparable moral insight when adapted as "Gute Nachbarn sind besser als entfernte Verwandte." These cases illustrate Berman's claim that strict literalism may undermine the ethical and symbolic depth of the source text.

Synthesis

The comparative application of these theoretical perspectives demonstrates that dynamic equivalence, domestication, and functional equivalence are the most effective strategies for transferring folkloric expressions across cultures. At the same time, foreignization remains indispensable when cultural specificity and philosophical depth are central to the meaning of the text. Consequently, the study adopts a balanced methodological approach that seeks to preserve both cultural resonance and interpretive integrity in the translation of idioms and proverbs from *Faust* and Nasrettin Hodja narratives.

Table 2. Proverbs and Idioms with Similar Meanings in *Faust* and Nasrettin Hodja Narratives

Quote from <i>Faust</i>	Meaning	Similar Proverb / Idiom from Nasrettin Hodja	Translation Strategy
“Das also war des Pudels Kern!”	Reaching the essence of something	“Learn the tricks of the trade.”	Meaning Matching
“Was glänzt, ist für den Augenblick geboren.”	Appearances are temporary	“All that glitters is not gold.”	Meaning Matching
“Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!”	Absolute happiness is impossible	“Happiness is fleeting.”	Interpretive Translation
“Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie.”	Knowledge comes from experience	“He who lives knows, not he who reads.”	Meaning Matching
“Der Geist, der stets verneint.”	Sceptical thinking	“It is not wise to oppose everything.”	Direct Translation
“Ein guter Mensch, in seinem dunklen Drange.”	Contradictions of human nature	“Man carries within him both good and evil.”	Interpretive Translation
“Es irrt der Mensch, solange er strebt.”	Human fallibility	“The human being is fallible.”	Meaning Matching
“Blut ist ein ganz besonderer Saft.”	Vital force of human nature	“Blood attracts.”	Meaning Matching
“Habe nun, ach! Philosophie, Juristerei und Medizin.”	Limits of knowledge	“Knowledge is infinite, man is limited.”	Interpretive Translation
“Die Botschaft hör ich wohl, allein mir fehlt der Glaube.”	Scepticism towards belief	“I’ll believe it when I see it.”	Direct Translation

Table 2 confirms that meaning matching and interpretive translation are the dominant strategies in the cross-cultural transfer of proverbial language, enabling translators to recreate cultural resonance beyond structural equivalence. By contrast, direct translation proves effective only in limited cases where conceptual overlap exists, while in most instances it risks flattening figurative meaning and weakening cultural impact, as noted by Nida and Berman. More broadly, the table reveals significant parallels between Goethe’s tragic-philosophical reflections and Nasreddin Hodja’s comic-ironic observations, demonstrating that proverbial language functions as a bridge between philosophical tragedy and folk humour through shared human concerns.

Table 3. Proverbs in Nasrettin Hodja Jokes and Their Relationship with the Themes of *Faust*

Nasrettin Hodja Quote	Meaning	Similar Theme or Quote from <i>Faust</i>	Translation Strategy
“Eat my fur!”	Emphasises the importance people attach to appearance	“Was glänzt, ist für den Augenblick geboren.”	Meaning Matching
“If you believe in the birth of an accident, you must believe in its death.”	Criticism of contradictory reasoning	“Es irrt der Mensch, solange er strebt.”	Meaning Matching
“Lead the way before the jug breaks.”	Emphasises the importance of precaution	“Der Geist, der stets verneint.”	Meaning Matching
“Bring me the one who fell off the roof!”	Experience is superior to theory	“Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie.”	Meaning Matching
“A silver lining is for a rainy day.”	Necessity of saving for difficult times	“Habe nun, ach! Philosophie, Juristerei und Medizin.”	Interpretive Translation
“Put your feet up.”	Acting according to one’s means	“Des Menschen Wille ist sein Himmelreich.”	Meaning Matching
“A neighbour needs his neighbour’s ashes.”	Social solidarity and mutual dependence	“Ein guter Mensch, in seinem dunklen Drange.”	Interpretive Translation
“Even if you put a golden saddle on a donkey, it is still a donkey.”	Nature does not change	“Die Botschaft hör ich wohl, allein mir fehlt der Glaube.”	Direct Translation
“What goes around comes around.”	Actions have consequences	“Blut ist ein ganz besonderer Saft.”	Meaning Matching
“Hand is better than hand.”	Everyone has abilities	“Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!”	Interpretive Translation

Table 3 compares Nasrettin Hodja’s sayings with selected thematic expressions from Goethe’s *Faust* and analyses the translation strategies applied. The findings clearly indicate that meaning matching is the most frequently employed strategy. This dominance suggests that, despite cultural and stylistic differences, both traditions articulate comparable forms of wisdom grounded in shared human experience.

A clear example is the pairing of “Eat my fur!” with “*Was glänzt, ist für den Augenblick geboren.*” Both expressions critique the superficial valuation of appearance, although they operate in different registers: Hodja’s saying employs satirical humour, while Goethe’s line conveys philosophical reflection. Likewise, the proverb concerning the “birth and death of an accident” parallels “*Es irrt der Mensch, solange er strebt,*” illustrating how both humour and tragedy address the inevitability of human error and contradiction.

In addition to meaning matching, interpretive translation plays a crucial role where abstract or culturally dense meanings are involved. For instance, “A silver lining is for a rainy day” is associated with Faust’s lament over the limits of knowledge, foregrounding preparedness and existential uncertainty. Similarly, “A neighbour needs his neighbour’s ashes” resonates with Faust’s

reflection on human ambivalence, reinforcing the theme of solidarity amid moral complexity.

Although less frequent, direct translation is applied when sufficient conceptual overlap exists. The pairing of “Even if you put a golden saddle on a donkey...” with “*Die Botschaft hör ich wohl, allein mir fehlt der Glaube*” demonstrates scepticism toward surface change in both traditions. However, such cases remain secondary to strategies that prioritise cultural resonance.

Overall, Table 3 confirms that the most effective approach to translating folkloric expressions is a flexible combination of meaning matching and interpretive translation, with direct translation functioning only when cultural overlap allows. These findings demonstrate that Nasrettin Hodja and Goethe, despite their differing stylistic modes-comic irony versus philosophical tragedy-arrive at parallel reflections on human existence.

Table 4. Numerical Distribution of Translation Strategies

Translation Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Meaning Matching	12	40.0
Interpretive Translation	8	26.7
Direct Translation	4	13.3
Cultural Adaptation	3	10.0
Functional Equivalence	2	6.7
Meaning Expansion	1	3.3
Total	30	100

The numerical distribution confirms that meaning matching (40%) is the dominant translation strategy, indicating a strong preference for culturally recognisable equivalents in the target language. Interpretive translation (26.7%) follows, particularly in cases where literal transfer would obscure symbolic or moral depth. Less frequent strategies such as direct translation and cultural adaptation appear only when conceptual overlap permits or when clarification is necessary.

Taken together, the quantitative findings reinforce the qualitative analysis presented in Tables 2 and 3: translators prioritise strategies that balance fidelity with cultural intelligibility, treating proverbs and idioms not as isolated linguistic units but as carriers of cultural memory and wisdom.

Conclusion and evaluation

This study has examined how proverbs and idioms function as carriers of cultural wisdom in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* and in the anecdotes of Nasrettin Hodja, two works rooted in distinct literary and cultural traditions. Despite their different narrative registers tragic-philosophical in *Faust* and comic-ironic in Nasrettin Hodja both traditions articulate parallel reflections on human fallibility, moral responsibility, experiential knowledge, and social critique. The findings demonstrate that folkloric language operates as a shared cultural mechanism through which universal human concerns are expressed and transmitted.

The comparative analysis shows that proverbs and idioms are not merely decorative linguistic elements but condensed forms of collective memory and ethical reflection. In *Faust*, such expressions contribute to a tragic meditation on the limits of knowledge and the contradictions of human ambition, whereas in Nasrettin Hodja’s anecdotes they facilitate the internalisation

of wisdom through humour, paradox, and irony. This contrast reveals that tragedy and humour function as complementary narrative strategies for conveying similar cultural insights.

From a translational perspective, the study confirms that meaning-based strategies particularly meaning matching and interpretive translation are more effective than literal transfer in preserving the cultural resonance of folkloric expressions. Direct translation proves functional only in cases where conceptual overlap already exists between source and target cultures. These findings align with established translation theories while demonstrating that, in folkloric contexts, cultural equivalence must take precedence over structural fidelity.

More broadly, the study contributes to comparative literature and folklore research by illustrating how culturally distant traditions converge on shared ethical and existential concerns through proverbial language. By situating *Faust* and Nasrettin Hodja within a common framework of cultural wisdom, the research highlights the role of folklore as a mediating force between Eastern and Western literary traditions. Ultimately, the findings suggest that proverbs and idioms function as enduring cultural bridges, enabling philosophical tragedy and humorous folk narrative to articulate a universal human experience across languages and cultures through distinct aesthetic modes.

Research and publication ethics statement: This is a research article, containing original data, and it has not been previously published or submitted to any other outlet for publication. This study does not require ethical committee approval.

Contribution rates of authors to the article: The only author in this article contributed to the 100% level of preparation of the study, data collection, and interpretation of the results and writing of the article.

Financial support: The study received no financial support from any institution or project.

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

Araştırma ve yayın etiği beyanı: Bu makale tamamıyla özgün bir araştırma olarak planlanmış, yürütülmüş ve sonuçları ile raporlaştırıldıktan sonra ilgili dergiye gönderilmiştir. Araştırma herhangi bir sempozyum, kongre vb. sunulmamış ya da başka bir dergiye değerlendirilmek üzere gönderilmemiştir. Bu çalışma etik kurul izni gerektirmemektedir.

Yazarların makaleye katkı oranları: Bu makaledeki tek yazar, çalışmanın hazırlanmasına, veri toplanmasına ve sonuçların yorumlanmasına ve makalenin yazılmasına % 100 oranında katkıda bulunmuştur.

Etik komite onayı: Çalışmada etik kurul iznine gerek yoktur.

Finansal destek: Çalışmada finansal destek alınmamıştır.

Çıkar çatışması: Çalışmada potansiyel çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

References

- Aksoy, Ö. A. (1984). *Dictionary of proverbs and idioms* (Vol. 2: *Dictionary of idioms*, 4th Ed.) Turkish Language Institution.
- Baker, M. (1992). *In other words: A coursebook on translation*. Routledge.
- Beekman, J., & Callow, J. (1974). *Translating the Word of God*. Zondervan.
- Bergson, H. (2005). *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic* (C. Brereton & F. Rothwell, Trans.) Dover Publications. (Original work published 1900)
- Berman, A. (1992). *The experience of the foreign: Culture and translation in Romantic Germany*. State University of New York Press.
- Çek, S. (2016). The opposition function of humour and *Yeni Nasreddin Hoca* newspaper. *Black Sea International Scientific Journal*, (32), 99-106.

- Duman, M. (2008). *Nasreddin Hodja and 1555 jokes*. Academy Publishing.
- Eliade, M. (1963). *Myth and reality*. Harper & Row.
- Goethe, J. W. (1997). *Faust I & II*. Könenmann.
- Kara, M., & Yıldırım, B. (2015). Mould words in Nasreddin Hodja jokes. *International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching*, 3(4), 12-28.
- Kayaerli, M. (2001). *Turkish Nasreddin Hodja who made the world laugh -Der Türke, die Welt zum Lachen bringt*. Ministry of Culture.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1989). *The concept of irony*. Princeton University Press.
- Koller, W. (2011). *Einführung in die Übersetzungswissenschaft*. A. Francke.
- Muallimoğlu, N. (1998). *The wit and wisdom of Nasraddin Hodja*. Ministry of National Education Publications.
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. Prentice Hall.
- Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a science of translating*. E. J. Brill.
- Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (1982). *The theory and practice of translation*. E. J. Brill.
- Safranski, R. (2010). *Goethe: Life as a work of art*. Liveright.
- Sakaoğlu, S., & Alptekin, A. B. (2018). *Nasreddin Hodja* (3rd Ed.) Akşehir Municipality.
- Tanrıkuş, L. (2018). Analysing the transfer of cultural elements in literary texts within descriptive translation studies. *Atatürk University Journal of Institute of Social Sciences*, 22(3), 1547-1557.
- Taş, S. (2017). Translation of cultural elements and translation strategies. *Humanitas*, 5(10), 1-14.
- Temizkan, M. (2011). Nasreddin Hodja jokes in terms of developing creative thinking in Turkish teaching. *Mustafa Kemal University Journal of Institute of Social Sciences*, 8(16), 89-108.
- Thompson, S. (1955). *Motif-index of folk-literature*. Indiana University Press.
- Tokmakçioğlu, E. (1991). *Nasreddin Hodja in all aspects* (3rd ed.). Yılmaz Publications.
- Türkmen, S. (2008). The place of Nasreddin Hodja in the vocabulary of Turkish. *Black Sea Studies*, (17), 153-159.
- Ünsal, G. (2019). An analysis of the translation of cultural elements in prose: The example of *Eugénie Grandet*. *International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching*, 7(3), 158-169. doi.org/10.29228/ijlet.23374
- Venuti, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge.
- Venuti, L. (1998). *The scandals of translation: Towards an ethics of difference*. Routledge.
- Yalçın, P. (2003). The problem of cultural elements in translation with examples from Jean-Louis Mattei. *Gazi University Journal of Gazi Education Faculty*, 23(1), 47-58.
- Yalçın, P., & Pazarlıoğlu, S. (2014). A comparative analysis of *Three Stories* and its Turkish translations. *International Journal of Social Science*, 24, 139-159.
- Yaman, B. (2021). Problems and solution suggestions in the transfer of proverbs and idioms in the translation of Nasreddin Hodja jokes from Turkish into English. *International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching*, 9(2), 35-44.
- Yang, W. (2010). Brief study on domestication and foreignisation in translation. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 1(1), 77-80. doi.org/10.4304/jltr.1.1.77-80
- Yıldırım, C. (2015). A study on the translation of cultural elements in Amin Maalouf's novels *African Leo* and *Samarkand*. *The Journal of International Social Research*, 8(39), 222-232.
- Yücel, F. (2007). What does translation criticism criticise? *Uludağ University Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(12), 39-58.



Bu eser Creative Commons Atıf 4.0 Uluslararası Lisansı ile lisanslanmıştır.

(This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License).