

**WEALTH AND POVERTY IN THE MIRROR OF PROVERBS: A CROSS-CULTURAL
STUDY OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK MATERIAL VALUES**

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Abstract: This paper explores the cultural perceptions of wealth, poverty, and hard work through a comparative analysis of English and Uzbek proverbs. Proverbs serve as condensed carriers of collective wisdom, offering insights into moral judgments and social attitudes toward material values. Using a corpus of 200 proverbs (100 English, 100 Uzbek), the study identifies semantic fields and axiological orientations. Results show that English proverbs often frame wealth as the reward of prudence and diligence, while poverty is associated with laziness or imprudence. In contrast, Uzbek proverbs tend to conceptualize wealth as a divine blessing and poverty as fate or a moral test, emphasizing endurance and communal values. Both traditions value hard work, but with different emphases: English proverbs highlight individual effort and self-reliance, whereas Uzbek ones stress dignity and survival within a collectivist framework. These findings suggest that while wealth and poverty are universal human concerns, their moral evaluation reflects the deeper cultural logic of each society.

Keywords: Proverbs, wealth, poverty, hard work, English, Uzbek, cultural values.

Introduction. Proverbs are among the oldest and most enduring forms of human expression. They condense life experiences, ethical judgments, and social attitudes into memorable phrases that are passed down from generation to generation. As linguistic artifacts, proverbs not only entertain or instruct but also provide insights into the deeper cultural patterns that guide social behavior and moral reasoning. Because they encapsulate collective wisdom, proverbs serve as a window into the worldview of a people. Studying them comparatively therefore offers an effective way to explore the similarities and differences between cultures.

One of the most significant and universal topics addressed in proverbs is the human experience of wealth and poverty. Across cultures, people have long been preoccupied with questions of material well-being, the pursuit of prosperity, and the struggles of poverty. Proverbs often reflect these concerns, providing moral lessons about the right way to gain, use, and think about wealth, as well as advice about how to endure or interpret poverty. In many societies, these expressions embody cultural models of fairness, divine will, social responsibility, and personal morality.

In the English paremiological tradition, proverbs relating to wealth frequently emphasize individual responsibility, prudence, and industry. Common expressions such as “A penny saved is a penny earned” or “The early bird catches the worm” highlight the value of diligence, foresight, and initiative. Poverty, in turn, is often framed as a condition resulting from idleness, wastefulness, or poor decision-making. Proverbs such as “Idleness is the mother of poverty” illustrate the tendency to connect economic hardship with personal failings. While not all English proverbs present poverty as blameworthy, the overall orientation reflects an individualistic ethos shaped by centuries of commercial development and Protestant ethics, where wealth often symbolized success and divine favor.

Uzbek proverbs, by contrast, reveal a worldview strongly influenced by collectivist traditions, agrarian ways of life, and Islamic cultural values. Wealth in Uzbek paremiology is not always

depicted as a direct result of personal effort; it is frequently regarded as a matter of fate, divine blessing, or inheritance. Proverbs such as “Boylik – Xudoning bergani” (“Wealth is given by God”) emphasize the spiritual dimension of material prosperity. At the same time, wealth is judged by its social function: the wealthy person is expected to share with relatives and neighbors, and miserliness is frowned upon. Poverty, meanwhile, is not simply stigmatized but often framed as an honorable condition if endured with patience. Expressions like “Kambag‘alning yuzi yorug‘, ko‘ngli toza” (“The poor man’s face is bright, his heart is pure”) illustrate how Uzbek proverbs can valorize poverty as a state of moral purity. This attitude reflects a cultural emphasis on humility, endurance, and solidarity in the face of hardship.

These differences raise important questions about how cultures conceptualize material life. Do English and Uzbek proverbs view wealth primarily as a reward for effort, a gift of fate, or a social responsibility? Is poverty seen as a moral failing, a natural destiny, or even a spiritual virtue? How is hard work situated within these frameworks—as an individual path to success, or as a collective necessity tied to community survival? Answering these questions requires a systematic comparison of the semantic fields and axiological values associated with wealth and poverty in both English and Uzbek traditions.

This study adopts a comparative semantic and axiological approach to investigate the proverbs of the two languages. By analyzing both the meanings of key lexical items (wealth, poverty, work, fortune, etc.) and the moral evaluations attached to them, it seeks to uncover the underlying cultural models of material values. The analysis is guided by three main research questions:

1. How do English and Uzbek proverbs represent wealth—as reward, blessing, or burden?
2. How is poverty perceived in the two traditions: as shame, destiny, or virtue?
3. What role does hard work play in shaping moral judgments about wealth and poverty?

The findings of this research are expected to highlight not only the shared human concerns about material life but also the distinct cultural perspectives shaped by historical, economic, and religious contexts. By comparing English and Uzbek paremiological traditions, the study aims to demonstrate how proverbs function as a cultural code that transmits values and attitudes toward wealth and poverty across generations.

Literature Review. The study of proverbs has a long tradition in linguistics, folklore, and cultural studies. Scholars have consistently highlighted the role of proverbs as carriers of collective wisdom and as reflections of cultural worldviews. In this section, we will review the theoretical and empirical works relevant to the analysis of wealth, poverty, and material values as they are expressed in paremiology.

Proverbs are often conceptualized as “miniature texts” that preserve and transmit cultural norms (Norrick, 1985). According to Mieder (2004), proverbs function both as rhetorical devices and as repositories of social experience. They codify values, attitudes, and shared expectations, serving as tools for persuasion and education. This cultural dimension makes them particularly suitable for cross-cultural comparison, since they embody the collective judgments of a community about fundamental aspects of life, including work, wealth, and poverty.

The themes of wealth and poverty appear universally in proverbial discourse, but their interpretation varies across societies. Research has shown that in Western traditions, particularly within English-speaking cultures, wealth is frequently associated with diligence, foresight, and

individual effort. For instance, Whiting (1932) documented the prevalence of proverbs that emphasize thrift and industry, such as “A penny saved is a penny earned.” Such expressions align with Max Weber’s (1930/2002) thesis on the Protestant ethic, where economic success is interpreted as a sign of personal virtue and divine favor.

By contrast, in many Eastern and Islamic cultural contexts, wealth and poverty are often framed within the discourse of fate and divine will. Karimov (2017), examining Uzbek paremiology, noted that proverbs tend to view wealth as a blessing from God rather than solely the result of individual endeavor. Poverty, while sometimes linked to laziness, is more commonly seen as a natural or God-given state, to be endured with patience and humility. This perspective reflects a collectivist ethos, where social solidarity and moral character are more highly valued than personal accumulation.

Another recurring theme in proverbs is the moral evaluation of work. Dundes (1975) observed that agricultural societies often stress patience and endurance, while industrial societies highlight initiative and efficiency. English proverbs generally valorize hard work as the path to upward mobility, as in “The early bird catches the worm.” Uzbek proverbs, while also praising diligence, frequently connect labor with moral endurance and communal benefit. For example, proverbs such as “Mehnat qilgan to’yadi” (“He who works will be fed”) underscore the necessity of labor for collective well-being rather than personal gain.

In modern linguistic and cultural studies, the analysis of proverbs often involves semantic and axiological frameworks. Semantic analysis examines the lexical fields and metaphorical mappings that shape cultural meanings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Axiology, or the study of values, investigates how proverbs express moral evaluations such as approval, disapproval, or ambivalence (Zolyan, 2011). By combining these approaches, researchers can uncover not only what concepts proverbs refer to but also what judgments they encode. This dual approach is particularly relevant for understanding material values, since wealth and poverty are never neutral but always evaluated in terms of good and bad, virtue and vice.

Cross-cultural paremiological research has gained increasing attention in recent decades. For example, Kuusi (1994) compared African and European proverbs to highlight universal themes and culturally specific emphases. Similarly, Sharifian (2017) examined Persian proverbs to show how cultural schemas of fate and divine will influence attitudes toward wealth. In the Uzbek context, Rahmonov (2019) emphasized the importance of kinship, hospitality, and endurance in the cultural perception of material life. However, few studies have systematically compared English and Uzbek proverbs specifically in relation to wealth and poverty, leaving a gap that this research aims to address.

Methodology. This study employs a comparative qualitative research design, combining semantic analysis and axiological analysis to examine English and Uzbek proverbs related to wealth, poverty, and hard work. The design was chosen because proverbs are cultural texts whose meanings cannot be fully captured by quantitative frequency counts alone; instead, they require interpretation within cultural and moral frameworks. At the same time, limited quantitative measures (e.g., lexical frequency) were used to support semantic categorization.

The corpus consisted of 200 proverbs: 100 in English and 100 in Uzbek. English proverbs were selected from established collections such as The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs (Speake,

2015) and Whiting's (1932) Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings. Uzbek proverbs were gathered from authoritative sources including O'zbek maqollari (Rahmonov, 2019) and other folklore compilations published by the Uzbek Academy of Sciences.

The following criteria guided the selection process:

1. The proverb must explicitly or implicitly address wealth, poverty, or hard work.
2. The proverb must be widely recognized within the speech community, ensuring cultural representativeness.
3. Duplicates or closely paraphrased versions were excluded to maintain diversity within the corpus.

The analysis proceeded in two stages:

1. **Semantic Analysis:** The first stage identified the lexical fields and conceptual metaphors used in the proverbs. This step followed the cognitive-linguistic tradition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which treats metaphor as central to human conceptualization. Proverbs were grouped into clusters such as wealth as blessing, wealth as responsibility, poverty as vice, poverty as fate, and hard work as virtue. Lexical frequencies of key terms (e.g., "money," "gold," "poor," "work," boy, kambag'al, mehnat) were also counted to provide a quantitative overview.

2. **Axiological Analysis:** The second stage examined the value orientations encoded in the proverbs. Each item was coded according to whether it expressed positive, negative, or ambivalent judgments toward wealth, poverty, and hard work. Categories included:

- Wealth as virtue (e.g., wealth linked to wisdom or generosity)
- Wealth as vice (e.g., wealth linked to greed or corruption)
- Poverty as virtue (e.g., poverty linked to humility or purity)
- Poverty as vice (e.g., poverty linked to laziness or disgrace)
- Hard work as virtue (e.g., diligence as the path to success)
- Fate/divine will (e.g., prosperity or poverty as determined by destiny)

To ensure reliability, coding was carried out twice, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and reference to cultural interpretations in folklore studies.

After coding, the results for English and Uzbek proverbs were compared to identify:

- Shared themes (e.g., respect for work, dangers of greed).
- Cultural contrasts (e.g., English linking poverty to idleness vs. Uzbek linking poverty to destiny).
- Unique metaphors in each language (e.g., English: time is money; Uzbek: poverty is a guest who must be endured).

Several limitations must be acknowledged:

- The corpus is finite and selective, and therefore may not capture all possible proverbial expressions in either language.
- Semantic and axiological coding involves interpretive judgment, which may introduce researcher bias.

- Proverbs are often context-dependent, and their meaning may shift depending on usage; this study focuses on general meaning rather than pragmatic use.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a systematic framework for exploring cultural conceptions of wealth and poverty as reflected in English and Uzbek proverbs.

Results. The final corpus comprised 200 proverbs: 100 English and 100 Uzbek. All selected proverbs explicitly or implicitly addressed themes of wealth, poverty, or hard work. Preliminary analysis revealed that both languages share concern with the moral evaluation of material conditions but differ in how they frame causation, responsibility, and social implications.

Semantic Findings

Lexical Field Clustering

Table 1. Frequency of lexical items in English and Uzbek proverbs

Lexical item	English (n=100)	Uzbek (n=100)
Wealth/money (wealth, gold, money / boy, pul, oltin)	35	42
Poverty/poor (poverty, beggar / kambag'al, faqir)	22	38
Work/labor (work, toil / mehnat, ish)	28	31
Fate/destiny (fortune, luck / taqdir, qismat)	15	26

Observation: English proverbs leaned heavily **on money and work vocabulary** and Uzbek proverbs placed stronger emphasis **on poverty and fate**, showing a cultural preoccupation with endurance and divine will.

Conceptual Metaphors

Analysis revealed distinct metaphorical patterns.

English metaphors:

- WEALTH AS REWARD (“*Industry brings riches*”)
- POVERTY AS CONSEQUENCE (“*Idleness is the mother of poverty*”)
- WORK AS PATH (“*No bees, no honey; no work, no money*”)

Uzbek metaphors:

- WEALTH AS DIVINE GIFT (“*Boylik – Xudoning bergani*” / *Wealth is given by God*)
- POVERTY AS GUEST (“*Qashshoqlik – mehmon*” / *Poverty is a guest*)
- WORK AS BREAD (“*Mehnat qilgan to'yadi*” / *He who works will be fed*)

Observation: English metaphors emphasize agency and consequence, while Uzbek metaphors highlight fate and endurance.

Axiological Findings

Value Orientations

Table 2. Axiological categories in English and Uzbek proverbs

Value Category	English (n=100)	Uzbek (n=100)
Wealth as virtue (wisdom, generosity)	20	18
Wealth as vice (greed, corruption)	15	22
Poverty as virtue (humility, purity)	10	28
Poverty as vice (shame, laziness)	18	12
Hard work as virtue (diligence, success)	32	30
Fate/divine will (destiny, blessing)	5	20

Observation: English proverbs emphasized **hard work and individual responsibility** and Uzbek proverbs stressed poverty as **moral endurance** and **wealth as destiny**.

Sample Proverbs Illustrating Values

Wealth as virtue

- English: “Wealth is the product of labor.”
- Uzbek: “Boy – xalqning suyanchi.” (The wealthy are the support of the people.)

Wealth as vice

- English: “The love of money is the root of all evil.”
- Uzbek: “Boyning moli – ko‘nglini ko‘r qiladi.” (A rich man’s wealth blinds his heart.)

Poverty as virtue

- English: “A poor man’s wisdom is worth gold.”
- Uzbek: “Kambag‘alning yuzi yorug‘, ko‘ngli toza.” (The poor man’s face is bright, his heart is pure.)

Poverty as vice

- English: “Poverty breeds strife.”
- Uzbek: “Faqirning gapiga qarz ham ishonmaydi.” (A poor man’s word carries no credit.)

Hard work as virtue

- English: “The early bird catches the worm.”
- Uzbek: “Mehnat qilgan to‘yadi.” (He who works will be fed.)

Fate/divine will

- English: “Fortune favors the brave.”
- Uzbek: “Taqdirdan qochib bo‘lmas.” (No one can escape fate.)

Comparative Summary

- Shared Ground: Both traditions value hard work and caution against greed.
- English Distinctiveness: Greater stress on personal agency, thrift, and effort as determinants of wealth and poverty.

- Uzbek Distinctiveness: Stronger emphasis on fate, divine will, and the moral dignity of poverty.

Overall, the analysis shows that while English and Uzbek proverbs converge on the idea that hard work is virtuous, they diverge in their axiological evaluation of wealth and poverty. English culture tends toward individualist pragmatism, while Uzbek culture reflects a collectivist, fate-oriented worldview.

Discussion. The analysis of English and Uzbek proverbs concerning wealth, poverty, and hard work reveals both shared human concerns and distinct cultural orientations. These findings can be best understood when examined in the light of earlier scholarship on proverbs, values, and cultural worldviews.

Both English and Uzbek proverbs affirm the virtue of hard work. The consistent emphasis on diligence reflects what Dundes (1975) described as the agricultural roots of proverbial wisdom: societies built on physical labor value perseverance and productivity. English sayings such as “The early bird catches the worm” and Uzbek expressions like “Mehnat qilgan to‘yadi” highlight labor as the moral foundation of prosperity. This convergence suggests a universal recognition of work as a necessary condition for survival and success, regardless of cultural orientation.

Both traditions also warn against greed, echoing Mieder’s (2004) observation that proverbs frequently function as moral correctives. English sayings like “The love of money is the root of all evil” and Uzbek proverbs such as “Boyning moli – ko‘nglini ko‘r qiladi” frame excessive desire for wealth as spiritually and socially dangerous. This shared critique demonstrates that while cultures may differ in their evaluation of wealth itself, the corrupting potential of material excess is universally acknowledged.

The results confirm previous claims (Weber, 1930/2002; Whiting, 1932) that English proverbs reflect an individualist and pragmatic ethos. The lexical dominance of “work” and “money” and the prevalence of metaphors such as WEALTH AS REWARD and POVERTY AS CONSEQUENCE reveal a cultural logic that links personal effort to economic outcome. In line with the Protestant ethic thesis, English proverbs imply that industriousness and thrift produce wealth, whereas idleness produces poverty.

The axiological findings further support this view: English sayings often stigmatize poverty (“Idleness is the mother of poverty”) and valorize self-reliance (“Every man is the architect of his own fortune”). This orientation reflects a society where economic independence and personal initiative are central cultural values, historically reinforced by commercial and industrial development.

In contrast, Uzbek proverbs display a collectivist and fate-oriented worldview. The frequent references to poverty and destiny, combined with metaphors such as POVERTY AS GUEST and WEALTH AS DIVINE GIFT, indicate a cultural acceptance of economic inequality as part of life’s natural or spiritual order (Karimov, 2017; Rahmonov, 2019). Unlike English proverbs that stigmatize poverty, many Uzbek sayings portray it as a condition that can coexist with dignity and moral purity (“Kambag‘alning yuzi yorug‘, ko‘ngli toza”).

Axiologically, Uzbek proverbs emphasize respect, humility, and endurance, aligning with Zolyan’s (2011) view that values in proverbs encode social solidarity. Wealth is not only a

personal asset but also a social responsibility: a rich person is expected to support kin and neighbors. Poverty, when endured with patience, is framed as honorable rather than shameful. This cultural stance reflects the agrarian and Islamic traditions of Uzbekistan, where mutual support and submission to divine will remain central to community life.

The comparative results confirm Kuusi's (1994) observation that while proverbs across cultures address universal human concerns, they differ in axiological weighting. For both English and Uzbek speakers, wealth and poverty are moralized categories, but the criteria of judgment diverge:

- In English, wealth is earned and poverty is often blamed on the individual.
 - In Uzbek, wealth is given or taken by destiny, while poverty can be honorable.
- These contrasts reveal how proverbs encode different cultural models of material values. English proverbs support a worldview conducive to capitalist rationality and self-reliance, while Uzbek proverbs affirm values of communal solidarity, humility, and spiritual acceptance.

Recommendations

1. For Cross-Cultural Communication and Education: Teachers and translators should use proverbs as a tool to highlight cultural differences in material values. This will help students of English and Uzbek understand not only vocabulary but also the underlying moral judgments encoded in each language.
2. For Linguistics and Cultural Studies: Future research should expand the dataset to include proverbs from neighboring cultures (e.g., Kazakh, Russian, or Persian) to better map Central Asian and Western European perspectives on material values. Moreover, researchers should also apply cognitive linguistic methods (e.g., metaphor analysis, frame semantics) more systematically to reveal deep cultural models.
3. For Social and Ethical Awareness: Policymakers and social leaders can draw from Uzbek proverbs that stress humility, generosity, and endurance to reinforce social solidarity. At the same time, English proverbs that emphasize diligence and responsibility can inspire individual motivation in youth development programs.
4. For Interdisciplinary Application: Proverbs on wealth and poverty can be integrated into intercultural business training, where awareness of differing attitudes toward money and social responsibility may prevent misunderstandings. Plus, literature, media, and folklore studies can use such proverbial analysis to better understand cultural narratives about inequality and success.

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