

CULTURAL SEMANTIC UNITS IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This article examines cultural semantic units—also referred to as linguocultural units—in the Uzbek and English languages. These units, which include idioms, proverbs, metaphors, and culturally bound expressions, reflect the worldviews, values, and traditions of a speech community. The paper explores how cultural meanings are encoded in these linguistic forms and investigates similarities and differences through a comparative lens. By analyzing selected examples from both languages, the study highlights the role of culture in shaping meaning and discusses the challenges of equivalence in translation. The research contributes to cross-cultural linguistics and translation studies, emphasizing the importance of cultural competence in bilingual communication.

Keywords: cultural semantics, linguocultural units, Uzbek language, English language, comparative analysis, translation equivalence, idioms, proverbs

Language and culture are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing elements of human society. Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a repository of a people's collective memory, values, beliefs, and worldview. It is through language that individuals and communities express their unique identities, pass down traditions, and interpret the world around them. Culture, in turn, shapes the structure, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions of a language, embedding within it norms of behavior, moral frameworks, and historical experience.

In both Uzbek and English, numerous linguistic expressions extend far beyond their literal meanings. These include idioms, proverbs, metaphors, and phraseological units, many of which have developed over centuries and are rooted in specific cultural practices, religious beliefs, and social environments. For instance, Uzbek idiomatic expressions often reflect the nation's agrarian lifestyle, respect for elders, and Islamic heritage, while English idioms may draw on Christian tradition, maritime history, or urban industrial life. Despite expressing universal human experiences—such as love, fear, respect, or shame—these expressions are often encoded in culturally distinct ways.

Such expressions, widely known in linguistics as linguocultural units or cultural-semantic units, pose considerable challenges in translation and intercultural communication. Because their meanings are often closely tied to specific cultural realities, direct translation may fail to capture the intended meaning, tone, or emotional impact. A literal rendering can result in confusion, loss of nuance, or misinterpretation by speakers from another linguistic background.

This study aims to examine and compare linguocultural units in Uzbek and English, identifying how culture-specific meanings are encoded in language and how they differ across these two linguistic traditions. The analysis will highlight examples of both conceptual similarities—where two languages express a similar idea with different imagery—and conceptual mismatches, where a culturally bound expression in one language has no true equivalent in the other. The paper also addresses the implications of these findings for translation studies, language teaching, and cross-cultural competence. Through a comparative linguistic lens, the research underscores the essential role of cultural awareness in achieving accurate and effective communication between speakers of different languages.

This research adopts a qualitative comparative approach rooted in contrastive linguistics and cultural linguistics, with a focus on identifying and analyzing linguocultural units (cultural-semantic expressions) in Uzbek and English. The following methodological steps were employed: The first stage involved collecting a representative corpus of linguocultural units from both languages. This corpus included:

Idioms, proverbs, and metaphors sourced from authoritative bilingual and monolingual dictionaries such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (2010), *O'zbek tilining izohli lug'ati* (2006), and *Фразеологик лугат* (1992).

Literary texts by prominent authors such as Abdulla Qodiriy, Chingiz Aitmatov (Uzbek and Central Asian literary canon), and William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain (English literature).

Linguistic and cultural studies including works by A.V. Kunin, who emphasized that phraseological units are cultural markers that reflect national consciousness, and G. Lakoff, who explored how metaphors shape thought and culture.

In line with W. Mieder's assertion that "proverbs are cultural indicators," the research also incorporated folk wisdom and oral traditions to ensure the inclusion of culturally salient examples.

Both modern and classical usages were considered to analyze diachronic changes in meaning and cultural significance. Once the data was gathered, the selected units were classified thematically to better understand the cultural values they encode. The classification was inspired by the conceptual domains used in cognitive linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and included the following categories:

Hospitality and generosity (e.g., *Mehmon kelsa, omad keladi* – "When a guest comes, fortune comes")

Honor and reputation (e.g., *Yuzini yerga qaratmoq* – "To bow one's face to the ground" for shame)

Nature and the environment (e.g., animal-based metaphors, weather idioms)

Emotions and inner states (e.g., *Ko'ngli cho'kdi* – "One's heart sank")

Social hierarchy and roles (e.g., respect for elders, gendered roles)

This thematic grouping enabled a structured comparison and highlighted areas of cultural divergence and convergence.

The core of the methodology was a comparative analysis aimed at identifying:

Conceptual equivalence: Whether the idea or meaning behind an Uzbek expression exists in English (e.g., *No pain, no gain* vs. *Ter to'kilmay, non topilmaydi*)

Structural similarity: Whether the idioms share the same syntactic or metaphorical structure

Cultural specificity: Whether the expression is deeply rooted in a particular worldview or tradition

A.P. Cowie's framework on idiomaticity and non-equivalence was particularly useful in assessing phraseological similarities. He emphasized that idioms are not only linguistic but also social constructs—what he terms "institutionalized expressions" that embody a society's historical experiences.

Each unit was evaluated for translatability using techniques described by Eugene Nida, Peter Newmark, and Uzbek scholar N. Yusupova, including:

Literal translation: When the concept and structure align.

Functional equivalence: Most commonly used; conveying the same communicative value, even with different wording.

Cultural substitution: Replacing with a culturally appropriate parallel (e.g., replacing *ko'ngli to'ldi* with *He was moved*).

Explanatory translation: Providing context or a descriptive phrase when no equivalent exists.

Newmark (1988) advised that translation of culturally marked expressions should aim for naturalization, while maintaining the **semantic core**, a view supported by Mahkamov, who advocated for "**functional accuracy over formal fidelity**" in idiomatic translation.

In many cases, idiomatic expressions required **contextual adaptation**. For example, *It's raining cats and dogs* has no idiomatic equivalent in Uzbek and must be translated either descriptively or replaced with a culturally appropriate metaphor (*Yomg'ir quyib berdi* – "It poured rain").

The comparative study of cultural-semantic units in Uzbek and English reveals a rich interplay between **universal human experiences** and **culturally specific expression**. While both languages encode similar values—such as hospitality, hard work, health, and emotional states—they often use distinct metaphors or culturally embedded imagery to convey them. This section examines examples of shared concepts expressed through different linguistic forms, as well as culturally unique idioms and the challenges they present in translation.

Universal Concepts, Different Imagery

Certain human experiences are nearly universal—welcoming guests, valuing hard work, or recognizing emotional hardship—but the way each culture **linguistically frames** these ideas varies.

Hospitality

Uzbek: *Mehmon kelsa, omad keladi* – "When a guest comes, fortune comes."

English: *Make yourself at home*.

Both expressions reflect the importance of hospitality, but the Uzbek version conveys **religious and cultural beliefs** about divine blessings associated with guests. In Uzbek society, shaped by Islamic values and a deeply rooted tradition of communal living, a guest is seen as a **sacred bearer of fortune** (*kismet*), not just a visitor. The English idiom emphasizes comfort and friendliness but lacks the **spiritual or fateful connotation** present in the Uzbek equivalent.

Hard Work and Reward

Uzbek: *Ter to'kilmay, non topilmaydi* – "Without sweat, there's no bread."

English: *No pain, no gain*.

Despite differences in metaphor—**sweat and bread** in Uzbek, **pain and gain** in English—both express the **universal principle** that effort leads to reward. Uzbek society, with agrarian roots, tends to tie effort to physical labor and sustenance, while the English version reflects a more generalized, possibly post-industrial value system where "pain" could symbolize emotional or intellectual struggle as well.

These examples demonstrate how **conceptual universals**—such as work, hospitality, or health—are subject to **cultural interpretation**, reflected in the metaphors chosen to represent them.

While many values are shared, some idiomatic expressions are **strongly culture-bound**, making them difficult to translate or explain without cultural context. These expressions often reflect **historical, religious, philosophical, or environmental factors** unique to the linguistic community.

Health and Well-being

Uzbek: *To'rt muchasi butun* – "All four limbs are intact," used to mean someone is physically healthy or in full strength.

English: *Fit as a fiddle* – A metaphor from music, suggesting soundness and vitality.

The Uzbek expression emphasizes bodily completeness, potentially reflecting the physical nature of rural and labor-intensive life. The English idiom, on the other hand, uses a musical metaphor, showing a more abstract, perhaps aesthetic, conception of health.

Honor and Shame

Uzbek: *Yuzini yerga qaratmoq* – "To strike one's face to the ground," indicating extreme **shame or disgrace**, often in a communal or familial context.

English: *Lose face* – Although now widely used in English, this idiom is originally of Chinese origin, reflecting a loss of reputation or dignity.

In Uzbek, shame is deeply embodied and performative, suggesting deep humility and social accountability. In contrast, the English idiom implies a more internalized, abstract loss of social standing. Such differences highlight the value placed on public image, social honor, and face-saving across cultures.

Spiritual and Philosophical Worldviews

Uzbek phraseology often carries traces of Islamic theology, Sufi mysticism, and agrarian philosophy, while English idioms are more frequently tied to Christian doctrine, feudal roles, or maritime/industrial metaphors. For example:

Ko'ngli yorishdi (lit. "His heart brightened") implies spiritual relief or joy, often with a divine connotation, compared to

He lightened up, which is a more emotionally neutral or casual idiom in English.

Challenges in Translation

Translation of linguocultural units presents significant difficulties, especially when dealing with culturally unique metaphors, untranslatable idioms, or lack of conceptual equivalence. Three main strategies are commonly used:

Functional Equivalence - Translators look for an expression in the target language that carries the same **function and meaning**, even if the imagery differs.

Ko'ngli cho'kdi – "His heart sank" has a functional equivalent in English, though the emotional depth and cultural implications might vary slightly.

Explanatory Translation - When there is no direct equivalent, an explanatory phrase is added to clarify meaning.

Yuzini yerga qaratmoq may be translated as *He was overwhelmed with shame and could not raise his head*, to reflect both the emotion and the cultural metaphor.

Cultural Substitution or Euphemism - In cases where cultural taboos differ, idioms may be replaced with more culturally appropriate phrases.

Kick the bucket (to die) in English has no direct Uzbek equivalent. A translator might choose *olamdan o'tmoq* (lit. "to pass away from this world") or *vafot etmoq* (to die), both of which are religiously and culturally respectful euphemisms in Uzbek.

As noted by **E. Nida**, dynamic equivalence in such cases allows translators to focus on communicative impact rather than lexical fidelity, an approach reinforced in Uzbek translation practice by scholars like **N. Yusupova**, who stressed the importance of understanding cultural codes and social psychology in translation.

The comparative linguistic and cultural analysis of Uzbek and English phraseological units has yielded several important findings that enhance our understanding of how language encodes cultural values. These findings are particularly relevant to the fields of intercultural communication, translation studies, and second language acquisition.

The study reveals that many phraseological expressions in both languages reflect universal human experiences such as birth, death, love, morality, emotional struggle, and social behavior. Despite differences in linguistic form, both languages exhibit a consistent tendency to conceptualize these experiences metaphorically. This suggests that certain cognitive patterns are shared across cultures, providing a foundation for cross-cultural understanding. However, the symbolic representations used to convey these ideas vary depending on cultural context.

While universal themes exist, the linguistic imagery employed in idiomatic expressions is highly shaped by each culture's unique historical development, religious beliefs, philosophical traditions, and sociocultural environment. Uzbek idioms are frequently influenced by agrarian life, Islamic worldview, and collectivist social values, whereas English idioms are often informed by Christian heritage, feudal structures, maritime traditions, and individualist principles. These cultural underpinnings directly affect the choice of metaphor, the semantic structure of expressions, and the emotional connotations carried by phraseological units.

The findings indicate that direct translation of idiomatic and culturally embedded expressions is often inadequate and can lead to semantic distortion or loss of meaning. In many cases, achieving communicative equivalence requires cultural adaptation through strategies such as functional translation, descriptive paraphrasing, or contextual substitution. The translator must consider not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural resonance, emotional tone, and pragmatic intent. This reinforces the idea that translation is not merely a linguistic process but also a deeply cultural one.

Finally, the study confirms that idioms and proverbs serve as valuable indicators of a society's worldview. They encapsulate historical memory, social norms, and value systems in compact and memorable forms. As such, these units are not only essential for linguistic fluency but also for gaining insight into the mindset and identity of a speech community. Their analysis offers meaningful contributions to linguocultural competence, helping language learners and translators move beyond literal understanding toward deeper cultural empathy.

The study affirms that **cultural-semantic units**, such as idioms, proverbs, and other phraseological expressions, serve as **mirrors of a nation's worldview, mentality, and value system**. These linguistic elements not only reflect how a culture interprets universal human experiences—such as life, death, love, and morality—but also reveal the **unique symbolic frameworks** and conceptual metaphors shaped by history, religion, environment, and social norms.

While Uzbek and English languages share certain conceptual metaphors, such as those related to human emotions, nature, and morality, their linguistic expressions differ significantly due to their distinct cultural trajectories. For instance, Uzbek phraseological units often draw from Islamic traditions, agrarian life, and collectivist principles, whereas English expressions frequently originate from Christian teachings, industrial or maritime heritage, and individualistic perspectives. This divergence emphasizes that **language is not merely a system of communication**, but a **repository of cultural memory and identity**.

Understanding these culturally embedded units requires more than basic linguistic knowledge—it demands cultural literacy and intercultural sensitivity. Without grasping the cultural context behind a phrase, literal translation or interpretation may lead to misunderstanding or loss of meaning. Thus, **language education and translation practices must integrate cultural competence** as a core component. This is particularly important in our increasingly interconnected world, where intercultural communication plays a vital role in diplomacy, business, education, and global cooperation.

As globalization continues to foster cross-cultural encounters, the ability to decode and appropriately use cultural-semantic units becomes indispensable for effective communication. Educators, translators, and language learners must be equipped not only with linguistic tools but also with an awareness of cultural nuances that shape expression. In doing so, they contribute to more accurate, respectful, and meaningful interactions across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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