



## CULTURAL SYMBOLISM IN METAPHORS IN THE UZBEK AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES

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**Abstract.** This article examines how cultural symbolism is encoded in the conventional metaphors of Uzbek and English. Working within Conceptual Metaphor Theory [1] and its cultural-cognitive extension [2], it treats metaphor not as ornament but as a mechanism of thought through which abstract experience is structured by concrete, embodied, and culturally shaped source domains. A qualitative contrastive analysis of idioms, proverbs, and phraseological units—drawn from lexicographic, corpus, and literary sources—is organised around five conceptual fields: zoomorphic, chromatic (colour), somatic (body-part), natural-landscape, and religious–Sufi metaphors. The two languages share a substantial layer of embodiment-based mappings yet diverge systematically in the symbolic values attached to identical source domains: English foregrounds pragmatic, individualistic, and maritime-commercial experience, whereas Uzbek foregrounds collectivist, moral, pastoral-agrarian, and Islamic–Sufi experience. Interpreted through Kövecses's causes of metaphor variation, these divergences show that metaphorical systems act as compact repositories of cultural memory, with direct consequences for translation, language pedagogy, and intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor; cultural symbolism; Uzbek; English; cognitive linguistics; phraseology; cross-cultural variation; translation.

### 1. Introduction

Western rhetoric long treated metaphor as an ornamental deviation from literal language—a matter of words rather than thought. Lakoff and Johnson overturned



this view, arguing that metaphor pervades everyday thought and action and that the ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical [1, p. 3]. On their account, metaphor consists in grasping one kind of experience through another, so that an abstract target—argument, time, life—is understood by way of a more concrete, experientially grounded source such as war, money, or a journey [1, p. 5]. Their canonical example, ARGUMENT IS WAR, is no mere manner of speaking: speakers win and lose arguments, attack and defend positions, and abandon claims they judge indefensible, which shows that the mapping governs reasoning and behaviour and not vocabulary alone [1, p. 4]. The same cognitive view was later extended to categorisation and to the structure of abstract concepts more broadly [3].

This reorientation carries two consequences that together motivate the present study. First, because conceptual metaphors are grounded in recurrent bodily experience—later termed *embodiment*—a substantial proportion of metaphorical thought is expected to recur across genetically unrelated languages [4]. Second, and in apparent tension with the first, metaphor is a primary site of cultural difference: the source domains a community selects, and the values it attaches to them, are filtered through environment, social organisation, history, and religion. Lakoff and Johnson themselves held that a culture's most fundamental values cohere with the metaphorical structure of its most fundamental concepts [1, p. 22].

Kövecses systematised this tension, asking whether the cognitive-linguistic view can account at once for universality and diversity in metaphorical thought [2, p. 1]. He shows that certain primary metaphors, such as AFFECTION IS WARMTH, arise so naturally from embodied experience that they recur almost universally, while at more specific levels metaphors vary extensively both across and within cultures [2, p. 18]. He locates the principal causes of variation in the broader cultural context, the natural environment, and the *differential experiential focus* communities place on shared experience [2, p. 231]. Cultural Linguistics in



turn situates such conceptualisations within *cultural cognition*, the distributed conceptual system that emerges from the interactions of a group's members [5].

Against this background, a contrast of Uzbek and English metaphor is especially instructive, because the two languages represent maximally distinct linguistic and cultural matrices. Uzbek is a Turkic, agglutinative language whose figurative repertoire reflects a pastoral-agrarian Central Asian heritage, a rich oral tradition of proverb (*maqol*) and epic, and a deep stratum of Islamic and Sufi (*tasavvuf*) symbolism transmitted through classical poetry. English is a Germanic, largely analytic language whose idiomatic stock reflects a maritime, mercantile, and industrial history together with a Judeo-Christian, broadly secular-Western value system. Their juxtaposition clarifies how the universal cognitive machinery described by Lakoff and Johnson interacts with the culture-specific symbolism analysed by Kövecses and Sharifian.

The study pursues three questions. First, which conceptual metaphors are shared between Uzbek and English, and how far can that overlap be attributed to embodiment? Second, where the two languages share a source domain, do they assign it the same symbolic value, or does cultural conditioning produce divergent connotations? Third, which culture-specific source domains are productive in one language but absent in the other, and what cultural causes explain the difference? The article follows the IMRAD format.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative, contrastive design that combines Conceptual Metaphor Theory with the apparatus of Cultural Linguistics. Two complementary units of analysis are used. At the conceptual level, the object is the conceptual metaphor, written in the conventional TARGET IS SOURCE formula and reconstructed from the linguistic expressions that instantiate it [6]. At the linguistic level, the object is the phraseological unit—the idiom, proverb, simile, or fixed



collocation—understood as a culturally marked, conventionalised crystallisation of an underlying mapping [1, p. 7].

The empirical material consists of conventionalised metaphorical expressions in standard literary Uzbek and contemporary standard English, assembled from three source types so as to triangulate everyday, codified, and literary usage: authoritative monolingual and bilingual dictionaries and phraseological reference works; electronic corpora and large reference collections of attested usage; and the canonical literary and folkloric traditions, including the Uzbek proverb corpus and the imagery of classical poetry. Only conventional, lexicalised metaphors were admitted; novel poetic coinages and one-off creative metaphors were excluded, since the aim is to describe the stable, culturally transmitted layer of the two systems rather than individual invention.

The analytic procedure followed three stages. First, candidate expressions underwent a metaphor-identification step modelled on the Metaphor Identification Procedure, in which a lexical unit counts as metaphorical when its contextual meaning contrasts with, yet can be understood by comparison to, a more basic concrete meaning [7]; the refined MIPVU protocol served as a consistency check [8]. Second, each expression was classified by source domain into one of five conceptual fields of high cultural salience: zoomorphic, chromatic, somatic, natural-landscape, and religious–Sufi. Third, expressions sharing a source domain were compared along three parameters: whether the mapping is shared, partially shared, or language-specific; whether a shared source carries the same or a divergent symbolic value; and which cultural cause—environmental, social, historical, or religious—best accounts for any divergence [2, p. 231].

Two caveats apply. The study is qualitative and interpretive: it characterises patterns and motivations rather than reporting frequencies, so its generalisations are illustrative rather than statistical. In addition, the symbolic readings offered for Uzbek religious and Sufi imagery represent the dominant, conventionalised



interpretation within the classical tradition and do not exhaust the polysemy of these images.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Zoomorphic metaphors

The animal domain is the richest site of both convergence and divergence. A core of mappings is clearly shared and plausibly grounded in common observation: in both languages the fox encodes cunning (English *as sly as a fox*; Uzbek *tulki*), the lion encodes courage and leadership (English *brave as a lion*; Uzbek *sher*), and the donkey encodes stubbornness (English *stubborn as a mule*; Uzbek *eshak*). Such mappings support the cognitive-linguistic expectation that communities project a common stock of salient animal characteristics onto human character [1, p. 4].

A shared source animal does not, however, guarantee a shared symbolic value. The fox is frequently admired for clever resourcefulness in English, whereas Uzbek *tulki* leans more consistently toward negative trickery and untrustworthiness; the donkey is unambiguously pejorative in English, but in rural Uzbek usage it may also evoke endurance and uncomplaining usefulness, so that its valence is split rather than uniformly negative. These cases exemplify Kövecses's claim that the same source concept can receive a different experiential focus and evaluative loading across cultures [2, p. 234].

Cultural shaping is clearest in the language-specific animals. Drawing on a pastoral and caravan heritage, Uzbek conventionalises the camel (*tuya*) as an emblem of patience and endurance—a mapping with no established English counterpart, since the animal lies outside the everyday experiential world of English speakers. Conversely, English conventionalises the sheep in *black sheep*, denoting a member who departs from the conformity of the group, a charge that presupposes a particular cultural model of reputation. The wolf is productive in both languages but with differing emphases: English foregrounds deception (*a wolf in sheep's clothing*),



whereas Uzbek (*bo 'ri*) foregrounds ferocity and predatory strength. Conceptual gaps also occur: the English idiom *to cry wolf* has no fixed Uzbek equivalent and must be paraphrased, because the wolf does not occupy the narrative-symbolic niche it holds in the European fable tradition. The proverb *it hurar, karvon o 'tar* (“the dog barks, but the caravan moves on”) shows the animal domain recruited to encode an entire ethical stance—stoic perseverance in the face of detraction—compressing a social norm into a vivid scene that functions as a cognitive shortcut, exactly as conceptual metaphors do for abstract reasoning in general [1, p. 3].

### 3.2. Chromatic (colour) metaphors

Colour terms combine a partly universal substrate with marked culture-specific symbolism. Both languages share the broad mappings WHITE IS PURITY/GOODNESS and BLACK IS MISFORTUNE/EVIL, which are widely attested cross-culturally and are often traced to the universal experience of light and darkness [2, p. 18]. English shows this in *white lie* and in the predominantly negative series *blacklist*, *black market*, and *black sheep*; in Uzbek the positive charge of *oq* (“white”) and the negative charge of *qora* (“black”) are equally systematic.

Yet Uzbek whiteness carries a culturally specific weight that English “white” does not. *Oq* is bound up with blessing, legitimacy, and parental approval: the farewell *oq yo 'l* (“white road”) wishes a traveller an auspicious journey, and *oq fotiha* (“white blessing”) denotes a parent's blessing upon a marriage. Whiteness here symbolises not merely purity but sanctioned passage through life's transitions, a value rooted in the family- and elder-centred structure of Uzbek society. Black correspondingly extends to grief and mourning (*qora kun*, “a black day”), while the same root paradoxically retains an aesthetically positive use in the classical-poetic image of *qaro ko 'z* (“dark eyes”) as a canon of beauty—an internal divergence that warns against assuming a single valence even within one language. The most instructive contrast concerns green: English maps it onto inexperience (*greenhorn*), envy (*green with envy*), and, through traffic regulation, onto permission and



environmental approval (*green light, green energy*), whereas in the Uzbek and broader Islamic sphere green (*ko 'k, yashil*) carries a sacred resonance tied to Islam, paradise, and spiritual flourishing—a textbook instance of the religious environment reshaping the value attached to a shared perceptual category [2, p. 232].

### 3.3. Somatic (body-part) metaphors

Somatic idioms form one of the most productive and most strongly embodiment-grounded layers of phraseology in both languages, precisely as Conceptual Metaphor Theory predicts, since the body is the most immediate source domain available to any speaker [1, p. 56]. Both languages locate cognition in the head and emotion in the heart, and both treat the eye, the hand, and the tongue as conventional vehicles for attention, agency, and speech. Their symbolic elaboration is nonetheless culturally inflected. The heart is the seat of courage and resolve in several English idioms (*to lose heart, to take heart*) but predominantly the seat of emotional and spiritual life in Uzbek, where *dil* and *qalb* anchor a dense network of expressions for love, sincerity, and inner pain. The eye is recruited in Uzbek for the evil-eye complex (*ko 'z tegmoq*, “to be struck by the eye”), with no exact lexicalised English parallel; conversely, English idioms such as *to pull someone's leg* and *to cost an arm and a leg* encode teasing and great expense through mappings not conventionalised in Uzbek. The field thus confirms the general pattern: a universal anthropocentric tendency to think with the body, overlaid by language-specific symbolic selection.

### 3.4. Natural-landscape metaphors

Metaphors drawn from the natural world reflect, more transparently than any other field, the differential physical environments of the two communities. English imagery is conspicuously maritime and meteorological—*to be at sea, to weather a storm, plain sailing, to know the ropes*—reflecting the historical centrality of seafaring to Anglophone life. Uzbek imagery, by contrast, is oriented toward the



steppe, the oasis, cultivated land, and water as a scarce and precious resource; the symbolic prestige of the garden (*bog'*) and of flowing water reflects an agrarian society in an arid environment, where irrigation and the cultivated garden are emblems of life and prosperity. The contrast directly instantiates the physical environment as a cause of metaphor variation: communities metaphorise most readily with the source domains their habitat makes salient [2, p. 232]. Where English speakers reach for the sea to express difficulty and navigation, Uzbek speakers reach for the road, the desert, and the garden.

### 3.5. Religious and Sufi metaphors

The most sharply distinctive layer of Uzbek metaphor, and the one with the thinnest English counterpart, is the religious and specifically Sufi (*tasavvuf*) symbolism transmitted through the classical poetic tradition. Several conventionalised images function as conceptual metaphors for spiritual states: the nightingale and the rose (*bulbul va gul*) encode the yearning of the lover, or soul, for the beloved, or the Divine; the moth and the candle (*parvona va sham*) encode the annihilation of the self in love, the moth's immolation standing for the mystic's self-extinction (*fana*) in union with God; and light (*nur*) is mapped onto divine presence and guidance. The spiritual path (*yo'l, tariqat*) instantiates the widely attested LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, inflected toward a mystical itinerary of stations leading toward the Divine.

English possesses religiously derived idioms of its own—*the patience of Job*, *the promised land*, *a good Samaritan*—rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The difference is one of density and contemporary vitality: in Uzbek, Sufi-derived imagery remains a living and culturally central resource, woven into ordinary aesthetic and emotional vocabulary, whereas the comparable English stratum is more circumscribed and, in secular contexts, largely fossilised. This asymmetry reflects the distinct religious histories of the two cultures and is the clearest single



illustration of the study's central claim that metaphor encodes cultural memory.

Table 1 summarises representative findings across the five fields.

**Table 1.** *Selected source domains and their symbolic values in Uzbek and English.*

Source domain	English symbolic value	Uzbek symbolic value	Relationship
Fox	cunning (often admired)	cunning, trickery (negative)	shared mapping, divergent valence
Camel	not conventionalised	patience, endurance	Uzbek-specific (environment)
Sheep ( <i>black sheep</i> )	social deviant, outcast	not conventionalised	English-specific (social model)
White ( <i>oq</i> )	purity; harmless ( <i>white lie</i> )	purity, blessing, legitimacy ( <i>oq yo'l</i> )	shared base + culture-specific extension
Green	inexperience; envy; permission	sacred; Islam; paradise	shared base, divergent symbolism
Heart ( <i>dil / qalb</i> )	courage and emotion	emotional–spiritual centre	shared organ, divergent focus
Sea	confusion; difficulty; navigation	marginal	English-specific (environment)



Source domain	English symbolic value	Uzbek symbolic value	Relationship
Garden / water ( <i>bog</i> ')	limited	life; prosperity; the beloved	Uzbek-specific (environment)
Moth & candle ( <i>parvona</i> )	not conventionalised	self-annihilation in divine love ( <i>fana</i> )	Uzbek-specific (Sufi tradition)

#### 4. Discussion

The results bear directly on the three research questions and, taken together, vindicate the dual thesis with which cognitive-cultural metaphor theory operates: that metaphorical systems are simultaneously universal and culture-specific [2, p. 1].

On the first question, Uzbek and English share a substantial layer of conceptual metaphor, concentrated where the source domain is the human body or a directly observable physical regularity—somatic idioms, the light-and-dark basis of colour symbolism, and salient animal traits such as the fox's guile or the lion's courage. This is exactly what the embodiment thesis predicts: communities that share a body and a physical world converge on the same primary mappings, because those mappings are motivated by recurrent sensorimotor experience rather than by convention [4; 2, p. 18]. A growing body of psycholinguistic evidence has since accumulated for the cognitive reality of conceptual metaphor [9]. The shared layer is, in this sense, the cognitive constant against which cultural variation can be measured.

On the second question, a shared source domain very often carries a divergent symbolic value. The fox is cunning in both languages but admired in one and distrusted in the other; the donkey is uniformly pejorative in English but split in Uzbek; green rests on one perceptual category yet signifies inexperience and envy



in English and sanctity in Uzbek. These are not failures of translation but systematic effects of differential experiential focus and cultural context [2, p. 231]. The point is theoretically important, for it shows that universality at the level of source-domain selection does not entail universality at the level of symbolic value, and that the two must be analysed separately.

On the third question, each language possesses productive source domains absent or marginal in the other, and in every case a cultural cause is identifiable. The Uzbek camel and garden and the English sea follow from the differential physical environment [2, p. 232]; the Uzbek imagery of moth and candle, nightingale and rose, and the spiritual path follows from the deep sedimentation of Islamic and *tasavvuf* thought in the literary canon; and the English *black sheep* and many commercial idioms follow from a social model emphasising conformity, reputation, and market exchange. Recent formulations of the theory treat such factors as contextual pressures that shape metaphor production in discourse [10].

A higher-order generalisation follows. The two systems are organised around contrasting axiological centres. English figurative language gravitates toward the pragmatic, the individual, and the transactional—action, navigation, competition, commerce. Uzbek figurative language gravitates toward the moral, the collective, and the spiritual—patience, blessing, family sanction, devotion. This accords with the broader finding that idiomatic systems encode, in compressed form, the dominant orientations of their communities, and it illustrates the contention that a culture's most fundamental values cohere with the metaphorical structure of its most fundamental concepts [1, p. 22].

Three practical implications follow. For translation, culture-specific phraseological units resist literal rendering: the translator must seek functional rather than formal equivalence and remain alert to “false friends” in which a shared source domain conceals a divergent valence, as with the fox or with green. For language pedagogy, idioms are best taught not as arbitrary lists but as motivated, culturally



grounded mappings, since learners who grasp the source–target logic and its cultural rationale retain and deploy idioms more effectively. For intercultural communication, an awareness that metaphors carry culture-specific loads forestalls the misreadings that arise when a hearer projects the connotations of their own system onto an interlocutor.

The limitations should be restated. The method is qualitative and interpretive, and a corpus-based quantitative analysis of frequency and productivity would refine and test the patterns described here. The treatment of Uzbek Sufi imagery reports the dominant classical interpretation and does not capture its full historical and regional polysemy. Diachronic study of how the two systems have changed under modernisation and language contact is a further productive direction.

## 5. Conclusion

The metaphorical systems of Uzbek and English are at once deeply alike and systematically different. They converge on a shared, embodiment-grounded core of mappings—the legacy of a common body and physical world—exactly as Conceptual Metaphor Theory predicts [1, p. 3]. They diverge at the level of symbolic value and culture-specific source domains, and these divergences are motivated not randomly but by differences in physical environment, social organisation, and, above all, religious and literary tradition, in the manner systematised by Kövecses [2, p. 231]. English metaphor encodes a pragmatic, individualistic, maritime-commercial worldview; Uzbek metaphor encodes a moral, collectivist, pastoral-agrarian, and Islamic–Sufi worldview. Metaphor is therefore neither a purely universal cognitive reflex nor a purely arbitrary cultural code, but the precise point at which embodied cognition and cultural memory meet—a meeting-point indispensable to translation, language teaching, and mutual cultural understanding.



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