

THE SEMANTIC ROLES OF SOMATISMS IN THE ENGLISH AND UZBEK
PROVERBS

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Abstract. *This thesis explores semantic roles of somatisms in the English and Uzbek proverbs. Proverbs constitute one of the oldest and most condensed layers of folk wisdom, encapsulating the moral, ethical and pragmatic experiences of generations. Among the lexical means employed in proverbial expressions, somatisms – lexical units denoting parts of the human body – occupy a particularly prominent place. This thesis investigates the semantic roles of somatisms in English and Uzbek proverbs from a comparative-typological perspective. The study examines how body-part lexemes such as head / bosh, heart / yurak, eye / ko'z, hand / qo'l, tongue / til and foot / oyoq function as carriers of figurative meaning, conveying notions of intellect, emotion, action, perception and morality. Drawing on phraseological dictionaries and proverb collections of both languages, the paper identifies recurrent semantic patterns, demonstrates cases of conceptual overlap rooted in universal embodied experience, and highlights culture-specific manifestations conditioned by national worldviews. The findings suggest that, while somatic imagery in proverbs is largely shaped by shared cognitive mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy, each language develops its own paremiological signature reflective of its cultural mentality.*

Keywords: *somatism, proverb, paremiology, phraseology, semantic role, conceptual metaphor, English language, Uzbek language, comparative linguistics, linguocultural studies.*

Introduction. The human body has always served as one of the primary instruments through which speakers conceptualise the surrounding world. Long before scientific classifications of reality emerged, people measured, interpreted and narrated their experience through the prism of their own corporeality. This anthropocentric mode of cognition is reflected at every level of language and is particularly vivid in the realm of proverbs, where centuries of collective wisdom have crystallised into compact and emotionally charged formulae. Lexical units denoting parts of the human body – known in linguistics as *somatisms* – are among the most productive components of paremiological corpora across the world's languages.

The term *somatism* (from Greek *sōma* - "body") covers any linguistic unit that contains, as a meaningful component, the name of a body part, an internal organ, a bodily fluid or a physiological function. Within the structure of proverbs, such elements rarely retain a strictly literal value; rather, they undergo semantic transposition and acquire figurative readings rooted in conceptual metaphor and metonymy. According to G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, much of human abstract reasoning is grounded in bodily experience, and the so-called source domains of metaphorical mappings are predominantly somatic¹.

¹Lakoff G., Johnson M. *Metaphors We Live By*. – Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. – P. 14.

The relevance of comparing English and Uzbek somatic proverbs lies in the typological and cultural distance separating the two languages. English, as a representative of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family, and Uzbek, as a Turkic agglutinative language with a rich Eastern oral tradition, both demonstrate remarkable saturation of their proverbial stock with body-part imagery. Yet the inventory of meanings ascribed to particular somatisms, the frequency of their use and the moral lessons drawn through them often diverge in significant ways. As W. Mieder rightly observes, proverbs operate as repositories of folk philosophy in which language, culture and cognition meet².

The present paper aims to: determine the principal semantic roles played by somatisms in English and Uzbek proverbs; reveal the cognitive mechanisms underlying these roles; and outline the points of convergence and divergence between the two paremiological systems. The analysis is illustrated by examples drawn from authoritative dictionaries and proverb collections of both languages.

Modern phraseology and paremiology treat somatic units as a distinct subclass of figurative language. V.N. Telia stresses that somatic phraseologisms are among the most ancient layers of any language and are characterised by a high degree of cultural connotation³. Their stability over centuries is explained by the universality of their referent – the human body – which guarantees immediate intelligibility to speakers regardless of their level of education or social position.

In Uzbek linguistics, the systematic study of somatic phraseology is associated, above all, with Sh. Rakhmatullaev, who was the first to compile a thorough explanatory dictionary of Uzbek phraseological units and who repeatedly emphasised the leading role of body-part lexemes in proverb formation⁴. His observations were further developed by A. Mamatov, who demonstrated that somatic components serve as the primary image-bearing core around which the proverb's didactic message is built⁵. In English-language scholarship, the seminal works of A.V. Kunin⁶ and the Oxford tradition represented by W.G. Smith's authoritative dictionary of proverbs⁷ provide rich empirical material for analysis.

A useful theoretical lens for the present study is the conceptual-metaphor framework, supplemented by the notion of embodied cognition. From this perspective, the head represents the seat of reasoning, the heart – the locus of emotion and courage, the eye – the channel of perception and evaluation, the hand – the instrument of action, the tongue – the agent of speech, and the foot

²Mieder W. *Proverbs: A Handbook*. – Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004. – P. 1.

³Telia V.N. *Russian Phraseology: Semantic, Pragmatic and Linguocultural Aspects*. – Moscow: Yazyki Russkoy Kultury, 1996. – P. 84.

⁴Rakhmatullaev Sh. *Explanatory Phraseological Dictionary of the Uzbek Language*. – Tashkent: O'qituvchi, 1978. – P.17.

⁵Mamatov A.E. *The Formation of Phraseological Units in Modern Uzbek Literary Language*. – Tashkent: Fan, 2000. – P. 96.

⁶Kunin A.V. *English-Russian Phraseological Dictionary*. – Moscow: Russky Yazyk, 1984. – P. 5.

⁷Smith W.G. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. – P. xv.

– the means of movement and, by extension, of one’s social position. Each of these somatisms enters proverbs as a carrier of one or several semantic roles, and it is precisely these roles that the present study sets out to systematise.

The empirical material collected for this study allows us to distinguish at least six principal semantic roles fulfilled by somatisms in the proverbs of both languages. These roles are not mutually exclusive: a single somatism may simultaneously realise several functions depending on its propositional environment.

In both English and Uzbek the lexeme denoting *head* is consistently associated with intellect, judgement and decision-making. The English proverb *Two heads are better than one* foregrounds the cognitive advantage of cooperative reasoning, while *A wise head makes a closed mouth* connects intellect with verbal restraint. In Uzbek, the proverb *Aql yoshda emas, boshda* – “Wisdom lies not in age but in the head” similarly anchors the faculty of reasoning in the head as its bodily seat. Closely related is *Bosh omon bo’lsa, do’ppi topiladi* – “If the head is safe, a cap will always be found”, where *bosh* metonymically stands for life itself, and the priority of preserving life over possessions is asserted.

In both languages, therefore, the somatism *head* carries the dominant role of agent of cognition; in Uzbek, however, the same somatism additionally accumulates the meaning of “life” or “self,” which is less typical of English usage.

The heart functions as the universal symbol of emotion, sincerity and courage. The English maxim *Faint heart never won fair lady* portrays the heart as the centre of bravery, while *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh* presents it as the source of authentic speech. Uzbek paremiology treats *yurak* and *qalb* in similar though more elaborate fashion: *Yuragi botir ishidan qaytmas* – “A brave heart does not retreat from its work” emphasises courage; *Til – qalbning tilmochi* – “The tongue is the interpreter of the heart” presents the heart as the inner repository of thought and feeling.

A notable culture-specific tendency is the high frequency of *qalb* in Uzbek proverbs related to spirituality and moral purity, partly explained by the influence of the Islamic and Sufi tradition, in which the heart is conceived as the locus of the divine spark and the principal organ of inner cognition.

The hand is the prototypical instrument of action, labour, possession and generosity. English *Many hands make light work* and *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush* illustrate the hand as a symbol of cooperative effort and tangible possession respectively. Uzbek *Mehnat qilgan qo’l och qolmas* – “A working hand will not go hungry” and *Qo’l qo’lni yuvar, ikki qo’l birgalikda yuzni* – “One hand washes the other, and both together wash the face” present the hand as the chief agent of labour and mutual help.

It is worth noting that Uzbek paremiology applies a particularly strong moral evaluation to the hand: the conventional collocations *qo’li ochiq* (“open-handed,” generous), *qo’li uzun* (“long-handed,” thievish) and *qo’li qisq* (“tight-handed,” stingy) function as ready-made ethical labels embedded in numerous proverbs and folk sayings.

The comparative material shows that English and Uzbek proverbs share a substantial common ground in the use of somatisms. This commonality stems from the universality of the human body and from cognitive mechanisms of metaphorisation that operate in similar ways

across typologically distant languages⁸. Yet the divergences are equally telling. Uzbek paremiology, shaped by Eastern oral tradition, Islamic ethics and a pastoral-agricultural way of life, tends to assign a stronger ethical and spiritual loading to somatisms, particularly to *qalb*, *til* and *qo'l*. English proverbs, formed within a Christian-Protestant cultural background and a more individualist worldview, more frequently highlight pragmatic and rationalistic implications.

Another observable difference concerns the inventory of productive somatisms. While both languages exploit *head*, *heart*, *eye*, *hand*, *tongue* and *foot* extensively, Uzbek paremiology additionally develops a rich symbolic layer around *jigar* (“liver,” metaphorically “dear one”), *bag'ir* (“bosom, inner self”) and *jon* (“soul, life”), which find no direct English counterparts in proverbs. Conversely, English uses certain somatisms – for example, *back* (*to stab someone in the back*) – with a frequency and conventionality not matched in Uzbek.

The phenomenon described above corresponds to what D. Dobrovol'skij and E. Piirainen have termed cultural specificity at the level of symbolic conventionality⁹. Within the same general cognitive frame, languages select different body parts as preferred image-bearers and assign them distinct evaluative shades, producing the kaleidoscopic diversity observable in cross-linguistic paremiology.

The collection of material for the present study revealed several methodological challenges. The boundary between *proverb* and *phraseological unit* is fluid, especially in Uzbek, where many didactic sayings (*hikmatlar*, *naqlar*) blend gnomic and idiomatic features; modern bilingual dictionaries do not always preserve the somatic component in translation, often substituting it with a functional equivalent, which obscures the original imagery¹⁰. Moreover, the sociolinguistic dynamics of contemporary speech show that some traditional somatic proverbs are gradually losing currency, while new figurative formations enter the lexicon through media discourse. These observations indicate the necessity of an integrated approach combining lexicographic, corpus-based and ethnolinguistic methods, long advocated within paremiological scholarship¹¹.

Conclusion. In conclusion, the analysis of somatisms in English and Uzbek proverbs demonstrates that body-part lexemes serve as one of the central pillars of proverbial imagery in both linguistic traditions. They are not mere lexical items but compressed cognitive models through which speakers articulate fundamental human experiences – thinking, feeling, perceiving, acting, speaking and moving. The principal semantic roles identified in the present study – the intellectual role of *head* / *bosh*, the emotional-ethical role of *heart* / *yurak*, the perceptual-evaluative role of *eye* / *ko'z*, the active role of *hand* / *qo'l*, the verbal role of *tongue* / *til* and the locomotive-social role of *foot* / *oyoq* — are remarkably stable across the two languages, which testifies to the universality of embodied cognition.

⁸Arsentyeva E.F. *Phraseology and Phraseography in Comparative Aspect*. – Kazan: Kazan University Press, 2006. – P. 42.

⁹Dobrovol'skij D., Piirainen E. *Figurative Language: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Linguistic Perspectives*. – Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005. – P. 215.

¹⁰Sadykova M. *Brief Uzbek-Russian Phraseological Dictionary*. – Tashkent: Glavnaya Redaktsiya UzSE, 1989. – P.8.

¹¹Permyakov G.L. *From Proverb to Folk-tale*. – Moscow: Nauka, 1979. – P. 11.

At the same time, English and Uzbek paremiology develop distinct culture-specific elaborations of these universal patterns. Uzbek proverbs display a heightened ethical, spiritual and communal dimension, often anchored in Islamic and Eastern oral traditions, while English proverbs incline towards the pragmatic rationalism characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon cultural model¹². The contrast between the two systems thus illustrates an essential principle of linguistic anthropology: language universals and cultural particulars are not opposed, but interwoven within the figurative fabric of every nation's proverbial heritage – a fabric whose body-centred imagery continues to nourish moral education and intercultural dialogue in the modern world.

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