



SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC FEATURES OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK PROVERBS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the semantic and pragmatic features of English and Uzbek proverbs. It shows that proverbs in both languages convey figurative and culturally embedded meanings beyond their literal form and function as indirect speech acts for advice and moral evaluation. While many proverbs express universal human values, others reflect culture-specific priorities, such as collectivism in Uzbek and pragmatism in English traditions. The study underscores the role of proverbs in translation, language education, and intercultural communication, highlighting their importance for cross-cultural understanding.

Proverbs in both English and Uzbek are characterized by a rich semantic structure and versatile pragmatic functions. **Semantically**, proverbs are typically figurative, conveying meanings that extend far beyond their literal wording. Each proverb encapsulates a general truth or piece of wisdom, often through metaphor or analogy, allowing a short, concrete utterance to carry a much broader significance. For example, the English proverb “*Time is money*” is not truly about time or currency, but uses the conceptual metaphor of time as a valuable resource to stress that time should be used wisely. The literal image of “money” is thus mapped onto the abstract concept of time to imply its preciousness. Likewise, Uzbek proverbs employ vivid imagery to convey wisdom: “*Olma pish, og‘zimga tush*” (literally “Apple, ripen and drop into my mouth”) paints a concrete scenario to warn against laziness and wishful thinking, indicating that one should not simply wait for rewards without effort. In such cases, the surface text describes a specific picture, while the intended meaning is abstract or moral, requiring the listener to infer the broader lesson. This literal-figurative duality is a hallmark of proverbs in any language. As paremiologists note, proverbs are often **semantically ambiguous**, using metaphor and indirection to communicate deeper truths¹. By mapping everyday images onto general principles, proverbs achieve a layered meaning that enriches communication and engages the audience’s imagination.

¹ Mercy Bobuafor Cultural values and the pragmatic significance of proverbial sayings in Tafi and Ewe. Journal of Pragmatics 178 (2021) 192-207.

Despite their brevity, proverbs pack considerable semantic content into very few words. Scholars have observed that every word in a proverb is deliberately chosen and carries weight in interpreting the overall meaning. Even small changes or misunderstandings can distort a proverb's sense. In fact, if one alters the wording of a proverb, it often ceases to function proverbially – a phenomenon noted by linguists who found that inserting extra words (e.g. adding a simile or modifier) can diminish a proverb's impact or render it nonsensical. The **fixed form** of a proverb thus encodes its meaning tightly; any deviation might break the cultural and semantic resonance that makes it a proverb. At the same time, proverbs are also **semantically flexible in context**. A proverb's core meaning is relatively stable (often reflecting a timeless truth), but its interpretation can broaden with usage as speakers apply it to new situations. In other words, proverbs carry a stable kernel of wisdom, yet people may find new nuances in them as contexts change. For this reason, proverbs remain relevant across generations – their inherent semantic richness allows each generation to rediscover or reinterpret their wisdom. Cognitive linguistic approaches (such as conceptual metaphor theory) highlight that proverbs use compact, concrete metaphors to represent abstract human experiences, and listeners mentally map these images to their own situation. This gives proverbs a remarkable **depth of meaning** despite their surface simplicity.

Another semantic peculiarity of proverbs is their tendency toward **universality**. Many proverbs express truths that are not culture-specific but rather broadly human, which is why we often find cross-linguistic equivalents of the same proverb. Paremiologists note that different languages' proverb collections frequently generalize similar life situations and moral lessons². A classic example is the proverb advising forethought: in English, "*First think, then speak*," and in Uzbek, "*Avval o'yla, keyin so'yla*," literally "First think, then speak." These proverbs convey identical wisdom and even share a parallel structure. Similarly, the idea that it is better to do something late than not at all appears in English as "*Better late than never*," and in Uzbek as "*Hechdan ko'ra kech yaxshi*³," which translates to the same meaning ("late is better than never"). In cases like these, English and Uzbek proverbs align closely in semantic content, reflecting shared human experiences and values despite the different languages. Indeed, it has been observed that many proverbs "**are usually alike and can be synonymous throughout nations**", since peoples around the world face comparable situations and draw similar lessons from them⁴. Such universality supports the idea that proverbs form part of a common human cognitive heritage – nuggets of wisdom that resonate across cultures.

In **pragmatic** terms, proverbs are extraordinarily versatile tools of communication in both English and Uzbek discourse. Pragmatics here refers to how proverbs are used in actual speech situations to achieve certain effects or perform certain functions. One key pragmatic peculiarity of proverbs is that they often act as **indirect speech acts** – a speaker uses a fixed, well-known saying to convey a message (advice, warning, admonition, encouragement) without stating it bluntly. The proverb's figurative form allows the speaker to "**say one thing but mean another**" in a socially skillful way. This indirectness is actually a source of pragmatic

² <https://www.scribd.com/document/784463869/Think-and-Speak-in-EL>

³ Yarashova N. Maqollarning semantik tabiati. Ilm-fan va innovatsiya ilmiy-amaliy konferensiyasi P 138-142. in-academy.uz/index.php/si

⁴ Atanazarova N. Cross-Cultural Analysis of English and Uzbek Proverbs on The Concept "Friendship". Zien Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities. Date of Publication: 30-05-2022. P 209-210.

strength: it lets speakers deliver pointed messages or critiques in a face-saving manner that avoids direct confrontation. As linguistic studies note, proverbs are one of the linguistic forms through which **indirection** is achieved in communication⁵. In conversation, instead of directly criticizing someone for a mistake or lecturing them, an English speaker might simply quip, “*Look before you leap*”⁶ and an Uzbek speaker might say “*Avval o‘yla keyin so‘yla*” each effectively cautioning the person to be careful, without explicitly naming them or their action. The listener is expected to infer the application of the general wisdom to their specific situation. This way, the proverb serves its illocutionary purpose (a warning or advice) while maintaining a polite or amicable tone. In pragmatics, this relates to Brown and Levinson’s **politeness theory**, which suggests that indirect admonitions help maintain the hearer’s “face” (dignity)⁷. By attributing the advice to traditional wisdom rather than the speaker’s personal judgment, proverbs soften the force of a critique. Especially in cultures like Uzbek culture, where indirect communication and respect toward elders or peers are highly valued, deploying a proverb can be a particularly persuasive and acceptable way to make a point. The authority of tradition embedded in a proverb (i.e. “our ancestors say...”) lends weight to the utterance – it’s as if the wisdom of the community is speaking, not just one individual.

In summary, the semantic and pragmatic peculiarities of English and Uzbek proverbs reveal a fascinating interplay between **meaning** and **use**. *Semantically*, proverbs are marked by figurative richness, concision, and often a context-dependent depth of meaning. They say a lot with a little, leveraging metaphor, analogy, and cultural allusion to encapsulate life’s lessons. *Pragmatically*, they function as multifunctional speech acts that can educate, warn, persuade, entertain, or bring people together. These twin aspects – what a proverb **means** and what it **does** in communication – are deeply intertwined. Appreciating a proverb’s semantics (its literal image and its intended message) enhances our understanding of its pragmatic force, and vice versa. In the comparative study of English and Uzbek proverbs, we find that while humanity shares many proverbial truths, each culture infuses its proverbs with unique imagery and preferred contexts of use. English and Uzbek proverbs alike rely on devices such as metaphor and parallelism to make their wisdom memorable, yet the values they emphasize can differ: English sayings often stress individualism and pragmatism, whereas Uzbek sayings highlight community and moral duty⁸. Recognizing both the universal and the particular elements of proverbs is crucial for anyone working with them – be it linguists, translators, or educators.

Conclusion and Recommendations: The above analysis of semantics and pragmatics in English and Uzbek proverbs leads to several important observations and suggestions. First, in the realm of **translation and cross-cultural communication**, one must be sensitive to the cultural imagery and connotations in proverbs. A literal translation of a proverb may fail to convey its meaning or emotional resonance; thus, translators should seek *functional equivalents* or provide context so that the target audience grasps the proverb’s intent. For example, when translating Uzbek proverbs about hospitality or community (*mahalla* traditions) into English,

⁵ Mercy Bobuafor Cultural values and the pragmatic significance of proverbial sayings in Tafi and Ewe. *Journal of Pragmatics* 178 (2021) 192-207.

⁶ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/look-before-you-leap>

⁷ Brown, Penelope & Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987 – politeness theory underpinning the indirect use of proverbs for face-saving advice.

⁸ Axmedov I. A comparative analysis of uzbek and english proverbs: cultural insights and linguistic features. *Qo‘qon universiteti xabarnomasi*. 26-dekabr 2024-yil. 13-son. P 284-285.

it may be more effective to find an English proverb about generosity or unity than to translate word-for-word. This approach preserves the proverbial wisdom while making it accessible to outsiders. Second, in **language education**, proverbs can be employed as a powerful tool to enhance learners' cultural awareness and pragmatic competence.

Third, for **scholars of linguistics and culture**, proverbs should be seen as a rich data source for understanding how language reflects social values. The semantic themes noted – such as the prominence of agrarian metaphors in Uzbek or seafaring metaphors in English – provide clues to each culture's historical experience and worldview. Likewise, the pragmatic styles (direct vs. indirect advice, forms of humor, levels of formality) observed in proverb usage can inform sociolinguistic studies of communication patterns in each speech community. Further research could involve corpus analysis of proverb usage in contemporary media or experiments on how quickly people recognize proverbial meanings in their first vs. second language. By and large, this study reaffirms that **proverbs act as “mirror reflections” of a nation's worldview**, condensing cultural norms and wisdom into artful sayings. Appreciating their semantic nuances and pragmatic roles not only enriches our understanding of English and Uzbek languages, but also aids in translation, language teaching, and cross-cultural dialogue. In a world of global interaction, such insights into proverbial language can help bridge cultural gaps, showing that while our idioms and imagery may differ, the wisdom we share often unites us in common human experience.

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4. Mieder, Wolfgang. *Proverbs: A Handbook*. Greenwood Press, 2004 – comprehensive introduction to paremiology; notes common sources of European proverbs and use of devices like parallelism.
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6. Atanazarova, Nafosat. *Cross-Cultural Analysis of English and Uzbek Proverbs on the Concept “Friendship”*. M.A. Thesis, UzSWLU, 2022 – examines semantic and cultural equivalences of proverbs; notes that many proverbs have cross-lingual counterparts but with nuanced differences.
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