

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND COGNITIVE INTERPRETATION OF IDIOMATIC AND PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK

Pulatova Khilola G`ayrat kizi,
Jizzakh State Pedagogical University
Yodgorjonov Behzodjon Bahtiyor ugli,
Student of Specialized School No. 3 in Jizzakh

Abstract: This article examines the conceptualization and cognitive interpretation of idiomatic and phraseological units in English and Uzbek. The study explores how fixed figurative expressions are motivated not only by lexical convention but also by conceptual structure, image schemas, encyclopedic knowledge, and culturally embedded associations. The purpose of the article is to identify the principal cognitive mechanisms underlying idioms and phraseological units and to compare the ways these mechanisms are realized in English and Uzbek. The research is based on a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive analysis of representative phraseological material discussed in contemporary scholarship on cognitive semantics and English–Uzbek phraseology. The findings suggest that idiomatic meaning is often semantically motivated rather than fully arbitrary, and that the interpretation of phraseological units depends on metaphor, associative knowledge, conceptual categorization, and sociocultural background. The comparison of English and Uzbek shows both shared cognitive tendencies and language-specific patterns shaped by different cultural experiences. The article argues that a cognitive approach offers a more productive model for explaining phraseological meaning than a purely formal or dictionary-based approach, because it reveals how idioms function as conceptual products of collective experience. The results may be useful for comparative linguistics, phraseology, translation studies, and foreign language teaching.

Keywords: idiom, phraseological unit, cognitive semantics, conceptualization, interpretation, English, Uzbek, metaphor, encyclopedic knowledge, comparative linguistics

Introduction

Idiomatic and phraseological units occupy a central place in linguistic research because they stand at the intersection of semantics, culture, cognition, and communication. Recent English–Uzbek scholarship defines phraseological units as stable combinations of two or more words united by a single semantic meaning and typically characterized by figurative force. In that line of research, such units are treated not as accidental lexical combinations but as meaningful and culturally saturated structures. In contemporary Uzbek scholarship, interest in phraseological units from cognitive and linguocultural perspectives has been growing, especially in studies of anthroponymic and emotionally marked phraseology.

The relevance of a cognitive approach becomes clearer when idioms are viewed not merely as opaque expressions to be memorized, but as forms shaped by conceptual organization. Huo and Song argue that cognitive semantics explains idioms from a cognitive perspective rather than treating them as arbitrary language forms, emphasizing the role of metaphor in idiom comprehension. In a classic experimental study, Gibbs and O'Brien showed that speakers form highly consistent mental images for idioms with similar figurative meanings, and that these conventional images are constrained by conceptual metaphors rather than being randomly attached to expressions.

The English–Uzbek comparison is especially valuable because the two languages are unrelated genealogically and belong to different cultural traditions, yet both possess rich idiomatic and phraseological inventories. This allows the researcher to distinguish between cognitive tendencies that may be broadly shared and those that are language-specific or culturally conditioned. Wierzbicka's work on emotions across languages and cultures, though



broader than phraseology alone, is important here because it shows that language-specific ways of expressing meaning are deeply connected with cultural experience and socially shaped conceptualization.

The aim of this article is to analyze how idiomatic and phraseological units in English and Uzbek are conceptualized and cognitively interpreted. The article addresses four main questions: how phraseological meaning is motivated, how metaphor and associative knowledge structure idioms, how cultural and encyclopedic information participates in interpretation, and how English and Uzbek converge or diverge in these respects. The article adopts a comparative and interpretive perspective rather than a purely lexicographic one.

Theoretical Background

Within traditional semantics, idioms were often treated as fixed expressions whose meanings could not be predicted from the meanings of their parts. Cognitive semantics does not deny idiomaticity, but it reinterprets it. In Huo and Song's formulation, idioms are conceptual and systemic products related to human cognition, and their production is closely linked to history, folk customs, geoculture, and religious belief. This shift is important because it relocates idiom study from the level of isolated lexical anomaly to the level of conceptual organization.

A major contribution to this view comes from the idea that figurative expressions are motivated by conceptual mappings. Gibbs and O'Brien found that idioms with different surface forms but similar figurative meanings tend to evoke similarly structured mental images, which supports the claim that idioms are not simply "dead" metaphors with arbitrary meanings. Their results suggest that idiomatic meaning is often grounded in broader conceptual patterns, such as containment, release, motion, or force.

Another key notion is that of encyclopedic knowledge. In English-Uzbek phraseological studies, especially those devoted to anthroponymic components, the meaning of phraseological units is said to depend not only on formal composition but also on historical, literary, religious, folkloric, and geographical knowledge carried by their components. Goyibov's 2024 and 2025 studies explicitly connect phraseological interpretation with encyclopedic information, conceptualization, categorization, associative meaning, and frame analysis. This is particularly significant for comparative work because it shows that phraseological interpretation involves culturally stored knowledge, not just linguistic decoding.

Cross-linguistic idiom studies outside the English-Uzbek pair support the same general principle. Wu's study of culturally unique idioms in Mongolian shows that idiomatic interpretation can be explained through cognitive mechanisms together with sociocultural perspective and world knowledge. Although that research deals with eating and drinking metaphors rather than English or Uzbek specifically, it strengthens the broader claim that idioms are cognitively interpretable and culturally situated at the same time.

Taken together, these studies suggest that a cognitive interpretation of phraseological units must consider at least four interacting elements: semantic integrity, metaphorical or metonymic motivation, encyclopedic knowledge, and cultural experience. These elements form the theoretical foundation of the present article.

Materials and Methods

This article uses a qualitative and comparative method. The analysis is not corpus-statistical; instead, it focuses on representative examples and theoretical insights drawn from recent scholarship on cognitive semantics, phraseology, and English-Uzbek comparative linguistics. The materials include examples and observations discussed in studies by Huo and Song on English idiom interpretation, by Goyibov on English and Uzbek phraseological units with anthroponymic components, by Jurabekova on English and Uzbek phraseological expressions of emotional states, and by Muyinjonova on translation problems involving phraseological units from English into Uzbek.



The method of analysis consists of four stages. First, the phraseological material is examined in terms of semantic integrity: whether the whole meaning exceeds the sum of the parts. Second, the material is interpreted cognitively, with attention to metaphor, image schemas, and associative links. Third, the role of encyclopedic and cultural knowledge is considered. Fourth, English and Uzbek patterns are compared in order to identify convergences and divergences in conceptualization. Because the article is theoretical-interpretive rather than lexicographic, the examples are used illustratively rather than exhaustively.

Discussion and Analysis

1. Semantic integrity and the question of motivation

One of the most persistent difficulties in idiom studies is the apparent contradiction between semantic opacity and semantic motivation. On the one hand, idioms often cannot be understood compositionally in a fully literal way. Huo and Song note that this is exactly why idiom acquisition is difficult in language learning: the meaning of idioms cannot generally be inferred from their individual lexical items. On the other hand, cognitive semantics argues that idioms are still motivated, because their figurative meanings are linked to conceptual structures rather than to literal compositionality.

This distinction is crucial. A phraseological unit may be opaque at the surface level and yet conceptually interpretable at a deeper level. Gibbs and O'Brien's experiments are especially important here because they show that speakers do not imagine idioms in random ways. Instead, they generate strikingly similar mental imagery for idioms with related meanings. That finding supports the idea that idiomatic expressions preserve traces of the conceptual models that motivate them.

In English-Uzbek comparison, this means that phraseological interpretation should not stop at dictionary glosses. If an English idiom and an Uzbek phraseological unit serve similar communicative functions, they may still rely on different conceptual routes. Conversely, two expressions with different lexical composition may be conceptually close if they map similar source domains onto similar target meanings. This is an inference from the cognitive approach outlined in the sources above, and it provides a more flexible explanatory framework for comparison than a simple search for one-to-one equivalents.

2. Metaphor as a bridge between concrete experience and abstract meaning

A central claim of cognitive semantics is that metaphor helps speakers understand abstract meanings through more concrete domains. Huo and Song explain this directly when discussing idioms related to *fire*. In their analysis, expressions such as *play with fire* and *set on fire* reflect a conceptual field structured around the physical experience of fire, while related idiomatic meanings extend toward more abstract notions such as danger or interest. They explicitly describe metaphor as a bridge connecting conceptual domains.

This principle is not limited to English. Jurabekova's discussion of English and Uzbek phraseological expressions for emotional states shows that Uzbek also makes wide use of bodily and sensory concepts in phraseological meaning. Her examples with *asab*, *jig'*, *jin*, *g'ash*, and *zahr* show that negative emotional states in Uzbek phraseology are frequently conceptualized through nerves, irritation, poison, and embodied disturbance. In other words, the abstract state is understood through concrete affective and bodily imagery.

From a comparative viewpoint, the important point is not that English and Uzbek always use the same images, but that both languages organize phraseological meaning through conceptual transfer. English may foreground one source domain while Uzbek foregrounds another, yet the cognitive process is parallel: a concrete, familiar domain becomes the basis for interpreting a less directly observable state or relation. This suggests that conceptualization is shared as a process, even when the linguistic results differ.

3. Encyclopedic knowledge and associative meaning



A purely lexical approach cannot adequately explain phraseological units whose meanings depend on literary, religious, historical, or folkloric background. Goyibov's studies are particularly useful here. In the 2024 article, phraseological units with anthroponymic components are described as precise manifestations of a nation's cultural background and as directly connected with knowledge about history, literature, culture, religion, folklore, legends, and geography. The same line of argument is developed further in the 2025 article, where phraseological units are linked to concept formation, conceptualization, categorization, frame analysis, and encyclopedic meaning.

The examples cited by Goyibov are revealing. In English, he includes *as patient as Job* and *a silver lining*; in Uzbek, he mentions expressions such as *Har kim o'z aybini bilsa Vali bo'ladi*, *bo'zchining mokisidek*, and *teshik munchoq yerda qolmas*. These examples are not important merely as idiomatic forms; they matter because they show how phraseological meaning activates background knowledge. Without awareness of Job as a biblical figure, the English simile loses much of its force. Without familiarity with the social and cultural resonance of names and objects in Uzbek phraseology, the Uzbek examples lose their associative richness.

This is why cognitive interpretation must include encyclopedic knowledge. Phraseological meaning is not stored only as a lexical equivalent; it is embedded in what speakers know about people, objects, narratives, values, and traditions. In the material reviewed here, Uzbek phraseological units appear especially rich in explicit social and moral associations, while English examples often crystallize literary or biblical reference into compact idiomatic form. That comparison is an inference from the cited English-Uzbek studies and should be understood as a tendency in the material analyzed, not as an absolute rule for the two languages.

4. Categorization and conceptual grouping

Another important cognitive issue is categorization. Goyibov's 2025 article explicitly treats phraseological units as participating in concept formation, conceptualization, and categorization. This means that phraseological units do not simply label already finished meanings; they help speakers group experience into culturally meaningful categories.

The same tendency is visible in Jurabekova's treatment of phraseological expressions of emotion, where examples are divided into positive and negative emotional groupings. Her article does not merely list expressions; it classifies them according to psycho-emotional states, showing that phraseology organizes experience in an anthropocentric way. Such classification is important because it reveals the cognitive basis of phraseological systems: idioms and fixed expressions cluster around conceptual domains rather than existing as isolated lexical artifacts.

From a comparative standpoint, categorization helps explain why exact equivalence is often difficult. Languages do not always divide conceptual space in the same way. A group of English expressions may fall into one semantic-cognitive field, while Uzbek distributes similar meanings across a somewhat different set of categories, with different evaluative shades or stronger connections to social interaction. This does not indicate deficiency in either language; it indicates that phraseological categorization is shaped by each language community's conceptual habits.

5. Cultural specificity and partial equivalence

The cognitive interpretation of idioms becomes especially important in translation and cross-linguistic comparison because direct equivalence is often impossible. Muyinjonova's article on translating phraseological units from English to Uzbek identifies three recurring problems: lack of direct equivalents, cultural specificity, and structural mismatches. The study also notes that many phraseological units require substitution, paraphrase, or descriptive explanation rather than literal transfer.

This problem is closely connected with semantic opacity. Muyinjonova points out that literal translation may distort meaning or destroy idiomatic force, and her examples show how English imagery may need to be replaced with a different Uzbek image in order to preserve



communicative effect. Even when two expressions point to the same general meaning, the underlying metaphor, connotation, or register may differ.

A cognitive perspective clarifies why this happens. If idioms are conceptual products tied to source domains, world knowledge, and cultural memory, then translation is not just substitution of words but reconstruction of conceptual effect. The translator must decide whether to preserve image, preserve function, or preserve pragmatic force. This is why phraseological translation requires cultural competence as much as linguistic competence. That conclusion is directly supported by Muyinjonova's discussion, and it also follows from the broader cognitive view developed by Huo and Song and by Goyibov.

6. Cognitive interpretation in language teaching

The pedagogical value of cognitive interpretation should also be emphasized. Huo and Song argue that cognitive semantics helps learners understand, memorize, and use English idioms more effectively because it reveals the rationale behind idioms rather than forcing learners into mechanical memorization. Their article repeatedly presents idioms as conceptual products whose meanings become easier to grasp when learners understand the underlying metaphorical logic.

For English and Uzbek specifically, this pedagogical implication is highly relevant. If learners are taught idioms only as fixed equivalents, they may remember isolated meanings but fail to develop phraseological intuition. If, however, they are shown how idioms are structured by metaphor, associative fields, and cultural background, they can form more durable and transferable knowledge. In comparative teaching contexts, this also helps students recognize why some English and Uzbek phraseological units feel similar in meaning yet different in imagery. That inference follows from the cognitive and comparative studies cited above.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that idiomatic and phraseological units in English and Uzbek can be explained more adequately through a cognitive approach than through a purely formal or dictionary-centered one. The reviewed scholarship consistently suggests that idioms are not wholly arbitrary expressions. Instead, they are motivated by conceptual structure, metaphorical mapping, associative meaning, encyclopedic knowledge, and culturally shaped categorization.

The English–Uzbek comparison demonstrates both commonality and divergence. The commonality lies in the fact that both languages interpret abstract meanings through concrete experiential domains and encode phraseological meaning through stable conceptual patterns. The divergence lies in the particular images, references, and cultural knowledge each language activates. English idioms often condense literary, biblical, or metaphorically compact source material, while Uzbek phraseological units in the reviewed studies frequently display socially marked, morally evaluative, and culturally associative dimensions. This comparison should be treated as an interpretive tendency within the analyzed material, but it is well supported by recent English–Uzbek scholarship.

The main conclusion of the article is that conceptualization and cognitive interpretation are essential for understanding phraseology in both English and Uzbek. They help explain semantic integrity, clarify partial equivalence across languages, improve translation, and strengthen phraseological teaching. Further research would benefit from a larger corpus-based comparison of thematic groups such as somatic, zoonymic, anthroponymic, and emotional phraseology in the two languages.

References

1. Pulatova, Khilola G'ayrat qizi. (2025). *Phraseological units expressing emotions in English and Uzbek: A contrastive study*. International Journal of Artificial Intelligence, 5(12), 88–91.



2. Gibbs, R. W., Jr., & O'Brien, J. E. (1990). *Idioms and mental imagery: The metaphorical motivation for idiomatic meaning*. *Cognition*, 36(1), 35–68. doi:10.1016/0010-0277(90)90053-M.
3. Goyibov, U. (2024). *The semantic analysis of phraseological units with anthroponymic components in the English and Uzbek languages*. *O'zbekistonda xorijiy tillar*, 10(5), 92–105. doi:10.36078/1732782647.
4. Goyibov, U. (2025). *The analysis of phraseological units with anthroponymic components in the cognitive semantics theory*. *O'zbekistonda xorijiy tillar*, 11(3), 84–113. doi:10.36078/1751020336.
5. Jurabekova, M. (2024). *English and Uzbek phraseological expressions conveying the emotional state of a person*. *Foreign Linguistics and Linguodidactics*, 2(2), 145–150. doi:10.47689/2181-3701-vol2-iss2-pp145-150.
6. Muyinjonova, S. (2025). *Problems of translating phraseological units: From English to Uzbek*. *Foreign Linguistics and Linguodidactics*, Special Issue 6, 263–267. doi:10.47689/2181-3701-vol3-iss6/S-pp263-267.
7. Wierzbicka, A. (1999). *Emotions across languages and cultures: Diversity and universals*. Cambridge University Press.
8. Wu, T. (2023). *Metaphors and culturally unique idioms of eating and drinking in Mongolian*. *Language and Cognition*, 15(1), 173–214. doi:10.1017/langcog.2022.31.
9. Pulatova, Khilola G'ayrat qizi. (2025). *Phrasiological units: A comparative study of Uzbek and English expressions in global communication*. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence*, 5(05), 362–364.

