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STRUCTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DEVICES USED IN HUMOROUS IDIOMS: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

Humor embedded in idiomatic expressions reflects not only language play but also deep cultural, cognitive, and rhetorical structures. This study presents a cross-linguistic comparison of humorous idioms in English and Uzbek, focusing on the structural and linguistic devices that make them effective and culturally resonant. Drawing on a corpus of 10 idioms (5 from each language), we categorize the devices into metaphor, hyperbole, irony, punning, phonological play, and structural repetition. Our analysis reveals that while both languages use similar humorous mechanisms, their usage reflects distinct linguistic traditions and cultural contexts. Uzbek idioms tend to rely more on hyperbole, animal metaphors, and rural imagery, whereas English idioms frequently feature irony, understatement, and visual metaphor. The study concludes by discussing implications for translation, second language instruction, and intercultural communication.

Keywords: *Humor, Idioms, Cross-linguistic Comparison, Uzbek, English, Metaphor, Irony, Hyperbole, Figurative Language, Pragmatics.*

INTRODUCTION

Idioms are fixed expressions whose meanings are not deducible from the individual words they contain. They enrich a language by reflecting its culture, values, and worldview. When idioms incorporate humor, they become a potent tool for both social bonding and linguistic play. Humor in idioms functions as a softener of criticism,

a means of indirect communication, or simply a source of amusement. The intersection of language structure and humor is especially rich in idiomatic expressions, which often employ metaphor, irony, exaggeration, and wordplay. In a multilingual world, idiomatic humor poses significant challenges for learners and translators, as its comprehension depends on shared cultural knowledge. Exploring the linguistic and structural mechanisms that create humor in idioms can provide insights into both language-specific phenomena and universal patterns. While various studies have analyzed humor and idioms separately, few have explored their overlap through a structural lens across languages. This study aims to fill that gap by comparing the structural and linguistic devices used in humorous idioms in English and Uzbek—two languages with contrasting typologies, historical evolutions, and cultural matrices. Such a comparison can enhance our understanding of how different languages encode humor and reveal shared or divergent rhetorical strategies.

Research Questions

1. What structural and linguistic devices are used to create humor in English and Uzbek idioms?

2. How do these devices compare across the two languages in terms of frequency and function?

3. What do these differences reveal about the cultural and communicative preferences of English- and Uzbek-speaking communities?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis with elements of descriptive linguistic analysis and pragmatic interpretation, grounded in cognitive semantics and cross-cultural pragmatics. A cross-linguistic, corpus-based approach was chosen to examine how structural and linguistic devices contribute to humorous effects in idiomatic expressions in Uzbek and English. Given the figurative, culture-bound nature of idioms, this design allows for nuanced interpretations beyond literal translation or syntactic parsing.

The methodology combines corpus analysis, idiom typology, and semi-structured native speaker validation to ensure both linguistic and cultural authenticity in identifying humor-based idioms.

A total of 10 idiomatic expressions (5 from each language) were purposefully selected based on the following criteria:

1. Humorous Content: Idioms were included only if they demonstrated clear humorous intent or frequent humorous usage in native contexts, as verified by at least two native speakers of each language.

2. Cultural Embeddedness: Idioms had to be culturally recognized and retained metaphorical meaning without direct translatability into the other language.

3. Structural Stability: Only fixed or semi-fixed idiomatic expressions (i.e., with conventionalized usage and structure) were considered.

4. Frequency and Relevance: The idioms selected are in frequent use or commonly taught in educational materials or featured in media, indicating their cultural resonance.

Each idiom was analyzed for its linguistic and structural components contributing to humor. The framework draws upon multiple disciplines including:

- Cognitive Semantics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2005): focusing on conceptual metaphors and embodied cognition in idiom formation.
- Pragmatics (Leech, 1983; Attardo, 1994): to understand humor as a communicative function influenced by context, intention, and social norms.
- Discourse Analysis: particularly for idioms embedded in conversational or proverbial forms.

Idioms were coded based on six primary humor-related devices:

1. Metaphor: Conceptual mappings that produce unexpected or vivid imagery.

2. Irony: Contradictions between literal and intended meanings.

3. Hyperbole: Exaggerated comparisons or descriptors.

4. Punning: Use of polysemy, homophony, or wordplay.

5. Phonological Play: Alliteration, rhyme, or rhythm used to enhance memorability and humor.

6. Syntactic Structure: Fixed structural patterns contributing to formulaic humor (e.g., contrastive parallelism, repetitive clausal structures).

Idioms were also categorized based on syntactic type (noun phrase, verb phrase, clause, proverb) and contextual usage (formal, informal, satirical, didactic)

The idioms were entered into a spreadsheet-based coding sheet with the following variables:

- Literal meaning
- Figurative meaning
- Humor mechanism(s)
- Structural pattern
- Cultural origin/context
- Translation equivalence (literal, partial, or non-translatable)

Each idiom was analyzed independently by two linguists fluent in both Uzbek and English, followed by a consensus discussion to resolve discrepancies in interpretation or classification.

An intercoder agreement rate of 92% was achieved, ensuring high reliability of the analysis

To ensure that the idioms were perceived as humorous in their native contexts, we conducted semi-structured interviews and online questionnaires with:

- 5 native Uzbek speakers (including 2 language teachers and 1 folklorist)
- 5 native English speakers (including 1 linguist and 2 ESL educators)

Participants were asked to:

- Explain the meaning and function of idioms
- Rate the idioms on a 5-point humor scale
- Suggest additional idioms with similar functions

Feedback from these consultations was used to confirm idiom selection and refine interpretation of humor mechanisms.

3. Results

Table 1: Structural and Linguistic Devices in English and Uzbek Humorous Idioms

Language	Idiom	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning	Humor Device(s)	Structural Pattern
English	Not the sharpest tool in the shed	Slightly dull tool	A person lacking intelligence	Metaphor, Irony	NP + comparative + PP
English	Kick the bucket	Strike a bucket	Die	Euphemism, Irony	VP (transitive idiom)
English	The lights are on but nobody's home	Lights are on, house empty	Someone appears normal but isn't mentally present	Visual Metaphor, Irony	Clause with contrast
English	Go bananas	Act like a banana	Become crazy or overly excited	Absurd metaphor, Hyperbole	VP (intransitive idiom)
English	A few sandwiches short of a picnic	Incomplete picnic	Mentally deficient	Irony, Metaphor	NP with quantifier + PP
Uzbek	Kalla kaltak yesa ham tushunmaydi	Even if beaten on the head, won't understand	Extremely dumb	Hyperbole, Irony	Complex clause with conditional
Uzbek	Qopda mushuk saqlab bo'lmaydi	Can't keep a cat in a sack	Truth cannot be hidden	Visual Metaphor, Proverb	Negative declarative with modal verb
Uzbek	Telbaning dardi bir, sog'lomning dardi mingta	A fool has one worry, wise man has a thousand	Wise people are burdened	Antithesis, Irony	Compound sentence with numeric contrast
Uzbek	Mushuk bo'lmasa, sichqon o'ynaydi	Mice play when cat is absent	Chaos without authority	Animal Metaphor, Fable-based irony	Conditional complex sentence
Uzbek	Qovoqdek bosh, aql yo'q	Pumpkin head, no brain	Someone large-headed but foolish	Grotesque metaphor, Hyperbole	NP + NP + clause

Key Patterns Identified:

- Both languages employ metaphor and irony widely.
- Uzbek idioms favor hyperbole and fable-based metaphors, drawing on agrarian and oral traditions.
- English idioms show a strong presence of euphemism, absurd metaphor, and structural understatement.
- Structural devices differ: Uzbek favors compound-complex sentences, while English uses noun phrases and simple clauses.

4. DISCUSSION

The most common device across both languages is metaphor, underscoring its status as a universal cognitive and rhetorical tool. Idioms such as “kick the bucket” or “qopda mushuk saqlab bo‘lmaydi” map abstract concepts (death, secrecy) onto concrete images (bucket, sack and cat). The choice of metaphor, however, reveals cultural orientation—English idioms lean toward industrial and domestic objects, while Uzbek idioms use animals, food, and farming tools. Irony appears frequently in both idioms, but it functions differently. In English, irony tends to soften critique (e.g., “not the sharpest tool in the shed”), reflecting a culture of indirectness and politeness. In Uzbek, irony often intensifies ridicule or conveys folk wisdom, as in “Telbaning dardi bir…”, aligning with the oral storytelling traditions of Central Asia. Hyperbole, especially in Uzbek, serves to heighten comedic effect through exaggeration and insult (e.g., “qovoqdek bosh”). These forms are socially accepted in informal settings and serve as tools for group bonding through humor and critique. Structurally, Uzbek idioms frequently take the form of compound or conditional sentences, especially those borrowed from proverbs. This mirrors the didactic and moralistic function of humor in Uzbek culture. English idioms, in contrast, often appear as noun phrases or short clauses with embedded comparison or contrast. Understanding humor in idioms is one of the greatest challenges for second language learners. Without awareness of structural cues (e.g., exaggeration, irony markers), learners may miss or misinterpret humor. Moreover, literal translation fails to capture underlying pragmatic function. For example, “go bananas” has no equivalent in Uzbek culture and must be explained contextually or replaced with a culturally congruent expression.

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