

A COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC, SEMANTIC, AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF IDIOMS EXPRESSING LUCK AND MISFORTUNE IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH

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Abstract

The idiomatic expressions related to luck and misfortune in any language serve as a mirror of cultural memory, collective psychology, and national identity. This paper explores the idioms representing these two universal yet culturally diverse concepts in Uzbek and English languages. Using a comparative and metaphorical-semantic approach, the study reveals how each language encodes luck and misfortune through culturally resonant metaphors, traditional symbols, and socially rooted expressions. While some idioms share universal conceptual metaphors, such as celestial imagery (e.g., stars, fate), others reflect unique cultural values and taboos, deeply tied to folk beliefs, religious ideas, and historical experience. The paper also discusses the pragmatic function of these idioms in real-life communication, their emotional connotation, and their significance in translation studies. Finally, it argues that understanding such phraseological units can promote more effective intercultural dialogue and foster linguistic sensitivity in both academic and applied contexts.

Keywords: Idioms, luck, misfortune, metaphor, semantics, culture, translation, national mentality.

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions form a vital part of any language's lexicon and represent the crystallized experience of a people over generations. As fixed linguistic units, idioms often express complex social, emotional, and cultural phenomena in a concise and vivid manner. One particularly rich area of idiomatic expression is found in how languages encode the abstract concepts of luck and misfortune — universal ideas that are experienced across cultures but articulated differently based on historical and cultural context.

In both Uzbek and English, idioms related to luck and misfortune provide valuable insight into how speakers conceptualize success, failure, fate, and divine will. These idioms are not just decorative language features; they serve important communicative functions. They express encouragement or sympathy, reflect social values, and transmit cultural heritage. For example, in Uzbek, “yulduzi yonmoq” (one's star shines) and “omadi chopmoq” (his luck runs) are idioms that relate good fortune to celestial and kinetic metaphors. In English, expressions like “born under a lucky star” or “break a leg” serve similar purposes, though their metaphorical bases often differ.

This paper seeks to conduct a comparative analysis of such idiomatic expressions in both languages from linguistic, semantic, and cultural perspectives. It will examine how shared

human experiences give rise to similar metaphors and yet how different cultural environments shape the form, usage, and emotional impact of these expressions. By analyzing these idioms, we gain not only a better understanding of phraseology but also a deeper appreciation for the cultural worldviews embedded in language.

Idiomatic Expressions: Structure and General Characteristics

Idioms are complex linguistic phenomena that defy literal interpretation. They are fixed expressions whose meanings often cannot be deduced by analyzing the individual lexical items that compose them. As such, idioms represent a form of figurative language that encapsulates culturally conditioned wisdom, collective memory, and pragmatic experience in compact verbal form (Moon, 1998). Their fixed structure and semantic opacity make them both a rich resource and a challenge for language learners and translators alike.

In both Uzbek and English, idioms related to luck and misfortune are characterized by their metaphorical nature, syntactic rigidity, and cultural specificity. These expressions often have a high degree of idiomaticity and are used in both spoken and written discourse to convey nuanced emotional and social meanings. For example, the Uzbek idiom “*omadi chopmoq*” (literally: “his luck runs”) uses kinetic imagery to represent someone whose endeavors are succeeding. In English, a comparable idiom might be “*to have a lucky break*”, which similarly suggests a sudden stroke of fortune.

The fixedness of idiomatic expressions is reflected in their resistance to grammatical variation or word substitution. Replacing or reordering the words within an idiom typically results in a loss of meaning or renders the phrase incomprehensible. For instance, the Uzbek phrase “*yulduzi yonmoq*” (one’s star is shining) would lose its metaphorical impact if reformulated as “*quyoshi yonmoq*” (the sun is shining), which holds a more literal meaning.

Furthermore, idioms function as markers of group identity and linguistic belonging. Their appropriate use signals native fluency, cultural awareness, and pragmatic competence. The mastery of idioms related to fortune and misfortune is especially important in culturally sensitive communication, as such phrases often convey social emotions like hope, sympathy, sarcasm, or irony.

Semantic Analysis and Metaphorical Mapping

From a semantic and cognitive perspective, idioms serve as linguistic containers of metaphor. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) posits that idiomatic expressions reflect the way humans structure abstract experiences through metaphorical mappings derived from physical and cultural experiences. In the domain of luck and misfortune, several conceptual metaphors recur across both Uzbek and English.

A predominant metaphor is **LUCK IS LIGHT / BRIGHTNESS**. In both languages, idioms associate good fortune with shining celestial bodies or light:

- Uzbek: “*yulduzi charaqlamoq*” (his star sparkles), “*yulduzi uchmoq*” (his star flies)
- English: “*born under a lucky star*”, “*your star is rising*”

These expressions suggest that luck is something visible, cosmic, and powerful — often perceived as externally determined or divinely ordained. The star metaphor aligns with ancient astrological beliefs that destiny is written in the skies, and this belief still permeates idiomatic usage today.

Another frequent metaphor is **LUCK IS MOTION / FORWARD MOVEMENT**. For example:

- Uzbek: “*omadi chopmoq*” (his luck runs) — where “running” denotes progress, speed, and momentum.
- English: “*to get a lucky break*” or “*on a roll*” — movement-based metaphors suggesting the continuous flow of good fortune.

In contrast, misfortune is often framed as **A LACK OF LIGHT, FALLING, or BLOCKAGE**:

- Uzbek: “*yulduzi o‘chmoq*” (his star dims), “*peshonasi sho‘r*” (his forehead is salted — a metaphor for bitter destiny)
- English: “*down on one’s luck*”, “*out of luck*”, “*a streak of bad luck*”

These idioms suggest that misfortune is associated with downward movement, darkness, or absence — symbolizing despair, struggle, or divine disfavor. In some cases, idioms encode cultural fatalism: for example, in Uzbek, “*taqdirida shunaqa yozilgan*” (it was written in his fate) reflects a strong belief in predestination, which contrasts with English idioms that often imply randomness or individual action (“*he made his own luck*”).

These metaphorical frameworks reveal shared human cognition but also expose cultural divergences. Uzbek idioms often reflect communal and theocentric worldviews, while English idioms may emphasize individuality or fate tempered by chance.

Cultural Values Embedded in Idioms

Idiomatic expressions are not simply linguistic constructs; they are also cultural artifacts. Each idiom carries with it a set of beliefs, traditions, and historical associations that reflect the worldview of the language community that uses it. As such, idioms offer valuable insights into the cultural values and social norms of a society (Dobrovol’skij & Piirainen, 2005). In the case of idioms relating to luck and misfortune, these expressions often reveal deeply embedded perceptions of fate, divine intervention, superstition, and moral order.

In **Uzbek culture**, the notion of *taqdir* (destiny) plays a central role in how luck is perceived. Many Uzbek idioms relating to luck and misfortune are rooted in Islamic values and pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs, where success and failure are often interpreted as part of a divine plan. For example, the idiom “*peshonasi sho‘r*” (literally “his forehead is salted”) refers to someone whose fate is bitter and unfortunate. Here, the “forehead” metaphorically represents fate — a common motif in many Islamic cultures where one’s destiny is believed to be written on the forehead by God. Another example, “*taqdirida shunaqa yozilgan*” (“it was written in his fate”), indicates a strong belief in predetermination, which serves as both an explanation and a justification for life’s outcomes.

Positive idioms in Uzbek also reflect communal optimism and blessings. Expressions such as “*yulduzing doim yonib tursin*” (may your star always shine) or “*omadingni bersin*” (may you be fortunate) not only wish success but also convey a sense of shared well-being and collective support — values that are central in collectivist cultures.

In contrast, **English idioms** often reflect a mixture of Christian morality, folk superstition, and Enlightenment individualism. While luck may be seen as a random or divine force, English expressions frequently suggest that individuals can influence their fate through action, attitude, or even irony. A good example is the idiom “*break a leg*”, commonly used to wish actors good luck before a performance. This expression is believed to derive from a theatrical superstition that directly wishing someone “good luck” could tempt fate or bring about bad fortune. Thus, saying something that sounds negative — “break a leg” — paradoxically serves as a protective charm.

The English idiom “*thank your lucky stars*” reveals cultural remnants of astrology, reflecting a belief that cosmic alignment can impact earthly outcomes. This idiom is semantically similar to the Uzbek “*yulduzi yonmoq*”, yet culturally, it belongs to a more secular worldview shaped by Renaissance-era humanism and early scientific thought.

Another layer of cultural value is seen in the differing **attitudes toward expressing misfortune**. In Uzbek, speaking openly about someone’s bad luck is often softened with expressions of compassion or resignation, such as “*nasib qilmagan ekan*” (it wasn’t meant to be). In English, while idioms such as “*he had a rough patch*” or “*she’s down on her luck*” are used, they may be accompanied by narratives of resilience or personal responsibility, which reflect Western ideals of self-determination and overcoming adversity.

The symbolic imagery used in idioms further reflects cultural assumptions. For instance, in English-speaking cultures, symbols of good luck include the **four-leaf clover**, **horseshoe**, or **rabbit’s foot** — all rooted in Celtic or rural folklore. In Uzbek culture, however, good fortune is often associated with people rather than objects — for example, “*oyog’i yengil odam*” (a person whose arrival brings good fortune), emphasizing the social and interpersonal dimension of luck.

Thus, while the concept of luck may appear universal, the way it is encoded in idioms is shaped by centuries of cultural development, religious beliefs, and societal values. Understanding these idioms within their cultural frameworks allows for a more nuanced appreciation of how languages embody not just words, but entire worldviews.

Emotional and Communicative Function

Idioms serve not only as linguistic expressions but also as tools of emotional influence and social bonding (Baker, 1992). Idioms of good luck are often used to motivate, encourage, or offer support:

- Uzbek: “*Omadingni bersin*” (“May you be lucky”), “*Yulduzing yonib tursin*” (“May your star always shine”)
- English: “Good luck,” “Fingers crossed”

Conversely, idioms of misfortune can express sympathy, warning, or resignation:

- Uzbek: “peshonasi sho‘r” (“one with a bitter fate”)
- English: “down on one’s luck,” “tough break”

Such idioms help create rapport and emotional resonance in both spoken and written communication.

Challenges in Translation

Translating idioms related to luck and misfortune requires cultural as well as linguistic competence. Literal translations often lead to misunderstanding. For instance, translating “break a leg” into Uzbek as “oyog‘ing sinsin” would sound offensive or ironic rather than supportive.

Equivalence in idiom translation often involves replacing the source idiom with a culturally and semantically appropriate target idiom, rather than translating word-for-word (Newmark, 1988). For example:

- “Break a leg” → “Omadingni bersin”
- “Thank your lucky stars” → “Taqqdirga shukr qil” (though this is not idiomatic in Uzbek, it conveys the meaning)

Comparative idiom studies support translators in finding these functional equivalents and help bridge cultural differences in communication.

Conclusion

The idioms expressing luck and misfortune in Uzbek and English are rich linguistic resources that reflect the historical memory, metaphoric thinking, and emotional landscapes of their respective cultures. Though these idioms may differ in form, they often converge in meaning and communicative intent.

Understanding their semantic, metaphorical, and cultural underpinnings is crucial not only for linguistic theory but also for practical applications such as translation, cross-cultural communication, and language teaching. These idioms preserve national identity and collective experience, and studying them deepens our understanding of both language and human thought.

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