

THE LEXICAL AND SEMANTIC FEATURES OF THE CONCEPT OF LABOR

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Abstract

This article explores the lexical, semantic, and cultural characteristics of the concept of labor in English and Uzbek languages. By examining dictionary definitions, metaphorical expressions, and culturally embedded idioms, the study highlights the complexity and richness of the concept. Comparative insights reveal both universal and culturally specific features associated with labor, reflecting societal values and worldviews encoded in language.

Keywords: labor, mehnat, lexical semantics, metaphor, cultural linguistics, polysemy, cognitive linguistics

Introduction

The concept of labor (mehnat in Uzbek) is fundamental to human life and society. It transcends simple physical effort, encompassing values such as diligence, purpose, morality, and economic productivity. In both English and Uzbek, the concept of labor is deeply embedded in linguistic expressions, idioms, and cultural codes, making it a rich subject of lexical-semantic analysis.

In English, labor is polysemous and encompasses several related meanings. It refers to physical or mental effort, work done for wages or economic output, the process of childbirth, and even a political movement or party representing the interests of workers. These meanings reflect how the concept of labor is understood both practically and ideologically in English-speaking contexts.

As defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, it can mean physical or mental effort, work for wages or economic output, the process of childbirth, the political movement or party representing workers' rights [3].

In Uzbek, the equivalent concept is expressed through the word mehnat, which also denotes physical and mental exertion but is often framed within moral, ethical, and cultural dimensions. The term is used in various expressions such as mehnatkash (a hard-working person), mehnat qilmoq (to work), og'ir mehnat (hard labor), and halol mehnat (honest work). These expressions highlight not only the physical aspect of labor but also its spiritual and ethical connotations in Uzbek culture.

Both English and Uzbek languages reveal a semantically rich field around the concept of labor, where synonyms and context-dependent meanings convey deeper cultural understandings and values.

The term labor often carries neutral or technical meanings, but also connotes:

Positive associations:

industry, dedication, value creation (e.g., “Labor builds the nation.”)

Negative associations:

exploitation, hardship (e.g., “child labor,” “forced labor”)

Idioms include:

- a labor of love – work done out of passion, not duty;
- to go into labor – entering childbirth;
- manual labor – physical work, often low-status.

The term mehnat carries a moral and philosophical weight:

Mehnat qilgan kam bo‘lmaydi – “One who works will not suffer.”

Mehnat – tagi rohat – “Labor is the key to comfort.”

Halol mehnat is highly respected, often linked with spiritual integrity.

The cultural connotation of mehnat often elevates it to a virtue, reflecting Eastern philosophies and communal values.

Conceptual metaphors offer insights into how abstract ideas are understood through concrete experiences. In English, labor is often conceptualized as a journey, as in “He is progressing in his career,” implying movement and development. It can also be viewed as a struggle, seen in expressions like “I’m battling through this project,” highlighting difficulty and resistance. Another common metaphor is labor as a burden, expressed in “She carries a heavy workload,” which suggests weight, pressure, and responsibility. These metaphors reflect an individualistic and performance-oriented perspective, where labor is tied to personal achievement and productivity.

In Uzbek, the conceptualization of labor takes on a more collective and ethical tone. Labor is seen as a source of dignity, as in “Mehnat insonni ulug‘laydi” (“Labor ennobles a person”), indicating moral and social value. Another metaphor compares labor to a seed and rest or reward to its fruit, as in “Mehnat tagi rohat” emphasizing long-term outcomes and patience. Labor is also personified as a parent, as in it, conveying generative and nurturing qualities. These metaphors underscore a cultural view of labor as a virtue closely linked to moral development, endurance, and communal benefit.

In English, the term labor has numerous synonyms and near-synonyms (e.g., work, job, toil, effort, employment), each carrying specific shades of meaning. Similarly, in Uzbek, the core term for labor is mehnat.

The word mehnat is lexically rich and appears in numerous derivatives and phraseologisms:

mehnatkash – a hardworking person

mehnat qilmoq – to work

mehnat faoliyati – labor activity

og‘ir mehnat – hard labor

mehnat bayrami – Labor Day (May 1)

Other related terms in Uzbek include:

ish (job, work)

kasb (profession)

faoliyat (activity)

tirikchilik (livelihood)

zahmat (effort or hardship with a poetic/stylistic nuance)

Each term expresses a different semantic nuance. For instance:

- ish refers more to a specific job or position;
- kasb indicates a profession or trade;
- zahmat implies physical or moral exertion, often with a respectful tone [2].

The word mehnat in Uzbek not only denotes physical or mental work, but also carries deep moral and cultural connotations.

Negative or emotionally loaded connotations:

Majburiy mehnat – Forced labor, often associated with injustice.

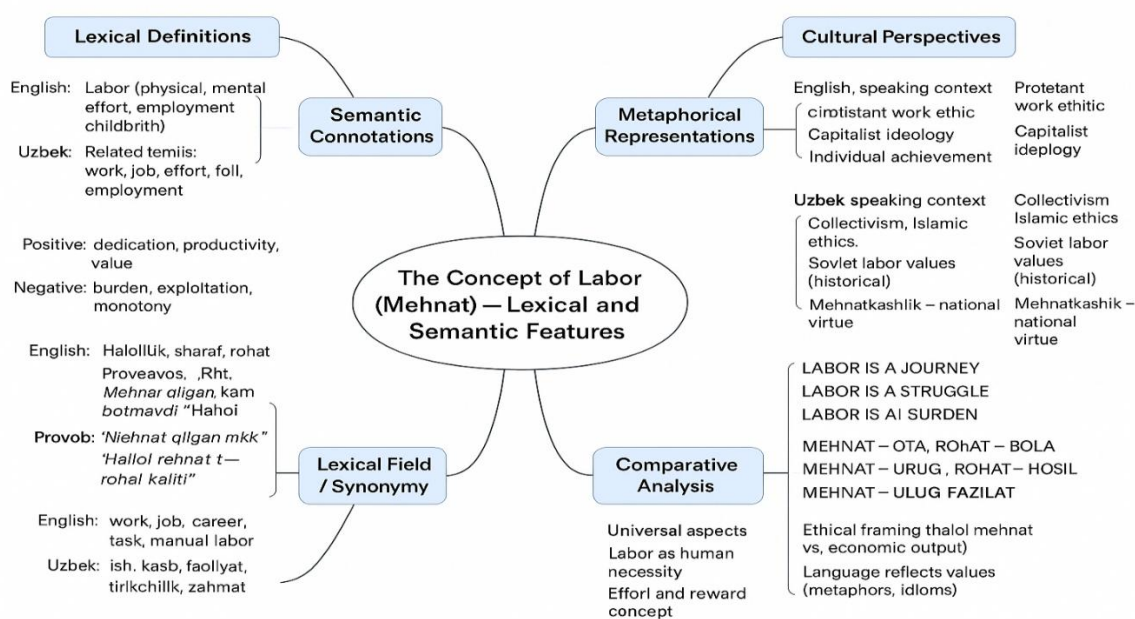
Og‘ir mehnat – Grueling work, emphasizing physical strain.

Bo‘ysunuvchi mehnat – Submissive or exploited labor (in socio-political discourse) [2].

In Uzbek literature and folklore, mehnat is often glorified as a source of dignity and self-worth, reflecting traditional values. Many proverbs, poems, and idioms emphasize the virtue of being mehnatkash (hardworking).

In English-speaking cultures, especially influenced by Protestant work ethic, labor is often linked with individual success and economic rationality.

In Uzbek-speaking contexts, influenced by Islamic ethics, collectivist traditions, and even Soviet labor ideology, labor is associated with community contribution, honor, and moral purification.



This mind map centers on the concept of “Labor / Mehnat”, illustrating its core semantic, lexical, and cultural dimensions in both English and Uzbek languages. It outlines dictionary-based meanings of labor and mehnat, which include physical or mental work, profession, and effort. The map shows how the term carries both positive (e.g., dedication, productivity, honesty) and negative (e.g., burden, exploitation) associations depending on context and culture. Labor is expressed metaphorically in both languages. For example, English uses metaphors like “Labor is a journey” or “a struggle,” while Uzbek uses expressions like “Mehnat – ota, rohat – bola” (“Labor is the father, comfort is the child”) to reflect cultural values. It compares how English-speaking societies often link labor with individual success and economic output, whereas Uzbek culture frames labor as a moral and spiritual duty tied to collective well-being. The map highlights related terms such as work, job, effort in English, and ish, kasb, zahmat in Uzbek—showing a wide semantic network. It concludes with the contrast between universal elements of labor (as human effort) and culture-specific values (like honor, community, or productivity).

The concept of labor (mehnat) serves as a rich site of linguistic, cultural, and cognitive significance. Its lexical-semantic features reveal not only how languages encode work but also how societies value it. While English tends to conceptualize labor within frameworks of performance and individualism, Uzbek emphasizes the ethical, communal, and even spiritual dimensions of work.

Understanding such contrasts and convergences enhances cross-cultural communication and contributes to the broader study of cultural linguistics.

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