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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ANTHROPOCENTRIC CONCEPTS OF "DEATH" AND "LIFE" IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH

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Abstract: This study presents a comparative analysis of the anthropocentric concepts of "death" (o'lim) and "life" (hayot) in Uzbek and English within the framework of anthropocentric linguistics. The research examines how these universal existential concepts are verbalized through lexical units, euphemisms, metaphors, and paremiological expressions, revealing the cultural and religious underpinnings that shape their linguistic representation. Drawing on semantic field theory, cognitive linguistics, and linguocultural analysis, the study demonstrates that while both languages share core denotative meanings, significant divergences emerge in connotative values, metaphorical conceptualizations, and pragmatic usage patterns. Uzbek conceptualizations are deeply rooted in Islamic theological frameworks emphasizing divine will, communal solidarity, and spiritual continuity, whereas English expressions reflect a broader spectrum ranging from Christian religious references to secularized and even humorous euphemisms. The findings contribute to cross-cultural understanding of how language encodes fundamental human experiences and reveal the intricate interplay between language, worldview, and cultural identity.

Key words: anthropocentric linguistics, concept, life, death, linguoculturology, euphemism, Uzbek language, English language, comparative analysis

Introduction

The relationship between language and human consciousness has emerged as a central concern of modern linguistics, particularly within the anthropocentric paradigm that places the language user at the heart of linguistic inquiry . Unlike traditional structuralist approaches that treated language as an autonomous system, anthropocentric linguistics recognizes that language cannot be fully understood without considering the cognitive, cultural, and social dimensions of its speakers. As Wilhelm von Humboldt profoundly observed, "language is the external manifestation of the soul of the people" and "every language contains the core of the people's worldview".

Among the myriad concepts that language encodes, those pertaining to life and death occupy a privileged position. These concepts represent existential universals that every human society must confront, yet their linguistic expression varies dramatically across cultures, revealing deep-seated beliefs, values, and worldviews . The concepts of "life" and "death" are not merely biological categories but are imbued with spiritual, emotional, and social significance that permeates everyday discourse, literary expression, and ritual practice.

The comparative study of these concepts in Uzbek and English offers a particularly rich field of inquiry. These languages represent distinct cultural and religious traditions—Uzbek, with its deep roots in Islamic civilization and Turkic cultural heritage, and English, shaped by Christian theology and Western secular thought. While the denotative meanings of "life" (hayot) and "death" (o'lim) in Uzbek and their English equivalents "life" and "death" share common biological referents, the connotative, metaphorical, and pragmatic dimensions of these concepts diverge in revealing ways.

This study is situated at the intersection of several theoretical frameworks that together provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing the concepts under investigation.

Anthropocentric linguistics constitutes the overarching paradigm. This approach recognizes that "a human defines the subject, tasks, goals, and values of modern Linguistics" and that "the language itself is anthropocentric" . Within this paradigm, the concept is understood as a "cognitive derivative organized by the field principle combining the concepts, knowledge, imaginations, associations, experiences associated with the structured core" . Concepts are mental formations that mediate between objective reality and linguistic expression, reflecting both universal cognitive processes and culturally specific ways of understanding the world.

Linguoculturology provides a complementary perspective by examining how language embodies cultural knowledge. As defined in the literature, linguoculturology deals with "language as a phenomenon of culture" and explores how "cultural knowledge" is verbalized in lexical units . This framework is particularly relevant for studying concepts like life and death, which are fundamentally shaped by religious beliefs, social norms, and cultural values.

Semantic field theory offers a methodological tool for mapping the lexical resources available in each language. The semantic fields of life and death extend far beyond the central lexical items to encompass synonyms, antonyms, euphemisms, metaphors, idioms, and proverbs that collectively construct a culture's conceptualization of existence and mortality.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis within the framework of anthropocentric and linguocultural research. The research design follows a descriptive-analytical approach, systematically examining lexical, phraseological, and paremiological units in both languages to identify patterns of conceptualization and their cultural underpinnings.

Data for this study were collected from multiple sources to ensure comprehensive coverage of the linguistic phenomena under investigation:

Lexicographic sources provided the foundational lexical data. For Uzbek, etymological and explanatory dictionaries, including the "O'zbek tilining etimologik lug'ati" and standard explanatory dictionaries, were consulted . These sources provided information on the semantic structure, etymology, and usage patterns of key lexical items. For English, dictionaries including the Oxford English Dictionary and standard reference works were employed.

Corpora and textual sources were utilized to identify authentic usage patterns. These included literary works by Uzbek and English authors, news media, and other published texts. The inclusion of literary sources was motivated by the recognition that creative writing often captures cultural conceptualizations with particular richness and nuance.

Phraseological and paremiological collections were systematically examined. These included collections of Uzbek proverbs and sayings as well as English proverb collections. The proverb as a linguistic genre is particularly valuable for linguocultural analysis because it encapsulates collective wisdom and reflects "the mental features of ethnic groups' views on the fundamental values".

Results

In English, the core lexical items are "life" and "death." These terms function as neutral, unmarked references that serve as the foundational nodes around which more specific and connotative terms cluster . The term "life" encompasses both biological existence and the broader notion of living experience, while "death" denotes the termination of biological functions.

In Uzbek, the core items are "hayot" (life) and "o'lim" (death). Etymologically, "o'lim" derives from the Old Turkic verb "öl-" (to die) with the suffix "-üm," reflecting the Turkic heritage of the language . The term "hayot" is of Arabic origin, reflecting the significant influence of Islamic civilization on Uzbek culture and language. This etymological difference is itself significant: the Arabic origin of "hayot" connects the concept of life to Islamic theological and philosophical traditions, while the Turkic origin of "o'lim" grounds the concept of death in the indigenous linguistic heritage.

However, Uzbek possesses an additional term with distinct connotations: "umr," meaning "lifespan" or "allotted life." Unlike "hayot," which refers to life as a general phenomenon, "umr" emphasizes the finite, God-given duration of an individual's earthly existence . This distinction reflects the Islamic understanding of life as a divinely ordained period, as expressed in the phrase "Alloh taolo bergan umr" (the life granted by God).

Both languages possess extensive synonymic networks surrounding these core concepts.

In English, synonyms for "life" include "existence," "being," "survival," and "lifetime." Each carries slightly different nuances: "existence" often implies a more abstract or philosophical perspective, while "survival" emphasizes the challenges of continuing to live under difficult circumstances. The term "lifetime" parallels "umr" in highlighting the durational aspect .

Synonyms for "death" include "demise" (formal), "passing" (euphemistic), "decease" (formal/legal), and "end" (metaphorical). The variety of available terms allows speakers to select expressions appropriate to different registers and contexts .

In Uzbek, the synonymic network is equally rich. "Vafot" serves as a formal, respectful term for death, often used in official contexts . "Qazo" refers to death as divine decree, reflecting the Islamic belief that the time of death is predetermined by Allah . These terms are not simply synonymous with "o'lim" but encode specific cultural and religious meanings.

The semantic field extends to related concepts including "yashash" (living), "tiriklik" (being alive), and "janaza" (funeral) in Uzbek, and their English equivalents "living," "alive," and "funeral." These related terms indicate the broader conceptual networks within which life and death are embedded.

Euphemism represents one of the most revealing dimensions of how cultures conceptualize death. Across virtually all cultures, direct reference to death is often avoided, and speakers employ alternative expressions to mitigate the emotional impact or to show respect.

English Euphemisms

English possesses a remarkably extensive repertoire of euphemisms for death, reflecting both the cultural discomfort with mortality and the historical development of a sophisticated register of politeness. These can be categorized into several types:

Religious euphemisms draw on Christian theology: "passed away," "passed on," "gone to Heaven," "in a better place," "at peace," and "with the Lord" . These expressions reflect the belief in an afterlife and the continuation of the soul's existence beyond physical death. The phrase "passed away" is probably the most common and accepted euphemism in general usage, avoiding the perceived bluntness of "died" .

Formal/Institutional euphemisms include "deceased," "departed," and "expired." The term "deceased" is frequently used in legal and official contexts, providing a neutral, respectful alternative. "Expired," derived from the Latin "expirare" (to breathe out), extends the primary meaning of breathing out to include the final breath . These Latinate terms, with their greater formality, tend to soften the emotional impact through linguistic distancing.

Informal/Humorous euphemisms represent a distinctly different attitude toward death: "kick the bucket," "bite the dust," "croak," "buy the farm," "push up daisies" . These expressions often employ humor or irony as a coping mechanism, reflecting a pragmatic acceptance of mortality or even a defiant attitude toward the taboo surrounding death. The existence of these expressions alongside the more solemn euphemisms reveals the range of attitudes toward death within English-speaking cultures.

Metaphorical euphemisms such as "the final chapter," "the great divide," and "meet one's end" conceptualize death through various metaphorical frameworks—as a journey's end, a crossing, or a departure.

Uzbek Euphemisms

Uzbek euphemisms for death are equally rich and revealing, though they reflect different cultural and religious influences. Research has documented approximately 330 euphemisms for death in the Uzbek language, indicating the depth of this phenomenon .

Religious euphemisms predominate in Uzbek, reflecting the strong influence of Islamic beliefs on attitudes toward death. Expressions include "vafot etdi" (he/she passed away), "olamdan ko'z yumdi" (literally "closed eyes to the world"), "joni uzildi" (his/her soul separated), and "Allohga ketdi" (went to Allah) . These expressions emphasize the separation of the soul from the body and the soul's journey to the afterlife, reflecting the Islamic theological framework that distinguishes between physical death and spiritual continuity.

Formal/Respectful expressions include "bizni tark etdi" (left us), which emphasizes the sense of loss felt by the community, and "qazo qildi" (met his/her fate), which references the Islamic concept of divine decree . The formal register in Uzbek tends to be more explicitly respectful and communal than its English counterpart.

Verbal constructions rather than nouns are common in Uzbek euphemism, reflecting a preference for describing the process of passing rather than naming the event statically. Examples include "ko'z yumdi" (closed eyes), "dunyo bo'lmadi" (the world ended for him/her), and "o'lim topdi" (found death) .

A notable difference between the two languages is the relative prominence of religious euphemisms in Uzbek compared to the broader range of secular and even humorous expressions in English. While English also possesses religious euphemisms, these coexist with a rich repertoire of secular alternatives, reflecting the more secularized character of contemporary English-speaking societies.

Paremiological Expressions: Life and Death in Proverbs

Proverbs and sayings represent a particularly valuable source of linguocultural information because they encapsulate collective wisdom, moral values, and cultural attitudes transmitted across generations.

English Proverbs

English proverbs concerning life and death reflect a range of attitudes, from fatalistic acceptance to pragmatic resilience:

"Life begins at forty" reflects the cultural emphasis on achievement and self-realization, particularly in middle age. According to linguocultural analysis, this proverb reveals that "English people consider themselves well-prepared for life and marriage at this age" .

"Death leaves a heartache no one can heal" emphasizes the emotional impact of loss on the community, while "life goes on" expresses resilience and the necessity of continuing after loss .

"Where there's life, there's hope" reflects an optimistic, forward-looking orientation, while "two deaths cannot befall a man, and one cannot be avoided" expresses fatalistic acceptance.

Uzbek Proverbs

Uzbek proverbs concerning life and death show distinctive cultural patterns:

"Otning o'limi — itning bayrami" (The death of a horse is a feast for the dog) is a realist proverb acknowledging that loss for one may be gain for another. This reflects a pragmatic worldview that does not romanticize death .

"O'limga davo yo'q" (There is no cure for death) expresses fatalistic acceptance of the inevitability of death . Unlike the English "two deaths cannot befall a man," which carries a tone of practical resignation, this Uzbek proverb has a more definite and somber tone, reinforcing the finality and inescapability of death.

"Birovga o'lim tilaguncha, o'zingga umr tila" (Rather than wishing death on another, wish life for yourself) reflects Islamic ethics that discourage ill-wishing and emphasize positive action. This proverb carries a moral dimension that is less common in English sayings on the same topic .

"O'lim — to'y emas, borning pulini sochadi, yo'qning sirini ochadi" (Death is not a wedding; it spends the rich's money and exposes the poor's secrets) reflects the communal nature of death in Uzbek culture—death is not merely a personal event but has social and economic implications for the community. The proverb highlights the leveling effect of death and the importance of communal support during times of loss.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal both universal patterns and culture-specific variations in how Uzbek and English conceptualize life and death. Both languages share common biological referents and employ similar cognitive mechanisms—metaphor, euphemism, semantic extension—to construct their conceptualizations. However, the specific content and distribution of these mechanisms differ significantly.

The results demonstrate that life and death are not merely linguistic or biological categories but are fundamentally "anthropocentric" in the sense that they are shaped by human experience, cultural values, and social needs . The "concept" as a mental formation integrates "knowledge, ideas, associations, and experiences" , and these components differ across linguistic communities.

The findings carry significant implications for several theoretical domains:

For linguocultural theory, this study demonstrates that fundamental human concepts like life and death are not simply universal categories that happen to have different language-specific labels. Rather, they are culturally constructed, with different cultures emphasizing different aspects, employing different metaphorical frames, and expressing different values. The "linguistic picture of the world" is not a neutral reflection of objective reality but an interpretive lens shaped by history, religion, and culture.

For cognitive linguistics, this study confirms the centrality of metaphor in conceptualizing abstract domains. Both languages employ systematic metaphorical mappings—journey, transition, cycle, divine gift—to make the abstract concepts of life and death cognitively accessible. However, the specific metaphor sets differ, indicating that metaphorical reasoning is not purely cognitive but is also culturally shaped.

For anthropological linguistics, the study demonstrates how linguistic analysis can illuminate cultural values and beliefs. The contrast between Uzbek emphasis on divine will and communal solidarity and English emphasis on individual resilience and pragmatic adaptation reflects broader cultural orientations.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of the anthropocentric concepts of life and death in Uzbek and English has revealed both universal patterns of human conceptualization and culture-specific variations that reflect distinct religious, cultural, and social contexts.

The central finding is that while both languages employ similar cognitive and linguistic mechanisms to conceptualize these fundamental existential categories, the specific content and distribution of these mechanisms differ significantly. Uzbek conceptualizations are pervasively shaped by Islamic theology, emphasizing divine will, predestination, communal solidarity, and spiritual continuity. English conceptualizations reflect a broader and more diverse landscape, combining Christian religious references with secular and pragmatic orientations, including a notable repertoire of humorous euphemisms that would be unthinkable in the Uzbek context.

The lexical resources of each language reveal these cultural orientations: Uzbek "umr" carries theological connotations absent from English "life," while English's extensive repertoire of death euphemisms—ranging from the solemn to the sardonic—reflects a more varied set of cultural attitudes toward mortality. The metaphorical systems employed in each language, from seasonal imagery in Uzbek to journey metaphors in both, further reflect the interplay of universal cognitive processes and culture-specific conceptualizations.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that "life" and "death" are not simply biological categories but are profoundly linguistic and cultural constructs. The language we use to speak of life and death reveals not only how we conceptualize these phenomena but also who we are as a culture, what we value, and how we make sense of our finite existence. The anthropocentric perspective, which places the language user at the center of linguistic inquiry, enables us to see how language both reflects and shapes our understanding of the human condition across cultural boundaries.

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