

Theoretical Foundations for the Semantic-Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Fixed Expressions

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the theoretical foundations of the semantic-cognitive analysis of fixed expressions from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. The study focuses on the relationship between fixed expressions and human cognition, conceptualization, categorization, experience, and cultural knowledge. Particular attention is paid to the cognitive functions of phraseological and paremiological units, including their ability to encode and preserve knowledge, transform and enrich initial meanings, and represent abstract concepts through concrete mental images. The article also discusses the cognitive stages involved in the formation of the meaning of fixed expressions, including mental representation, activation of conceptual structures, formation of the cognitive-semantic basis, and transfer of discourse fragments from short-term to long-term memory. Examples from Uzbek and English fixed expressions are analyzed to demonstrate how historical, religious, cultural, emotional, and evaluative layers are reflected in their conceptual structures. The findings indicate that fixed expressions should be viewed not merely as linguistic units, but as cognitive and linguocultural phenomena that preserve collective experience and provide insight into the ways speakers conceptualize and categorize the world. The semantic-cognitive approach to fixed expressions therefore offers significant theoretical and practical implications for linguistics, language teaching, translation, discourse analysis, and intercultural communication.

Keywords: Fixed expressions, cognitive linguistics, semantic-cognitive analysis, phraseological units, paremiological units, conceptualization, categorization, conceptual structure, mental representation, cognitive model, linguocultural knowledge, cultural memory, semantic transformation, linguistic worldview.

INTRODUCTION

The significant expansion of cognitive research in recent years has led to the emergence of a new cognitive approach to the study of fixed expressions (FEs). The growing number of studies devoted to investigating FEs from this perspective indicates a shift in scholarly attention and a new approach to traditional linguistic problems. This is because, as noted, “paremiological units constitute a dynamic subsystem that is actively used in speech and forms a distinctive system of secondary signs; alongside linguistic features, they also preserve speech-related and textual characteristics. Paremiological units, in particular, most clearly demonstrate the possibilities of cognitive economy” [1: 13].

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Cognitive linguistics emerged in the 1970s on the basis of research conducted by a number of scholars who were interested in the relationship between language and thought. Among the most influential scholars who worked in this field and paid particular attention to cognitive principles and the cognitive organization of language are Wallace Chafe, Charles Fillmore, George Lakoff, Ronald Langacker, & Leonard Talmy. Each of these scholars developed their own theoretical approaches based on specific linguistic phenomena and scholarly problems. The key idea shared by these researchers was that meaning constitutes a central element of language and, therefore, should be regarded as a primary object of linguistic research [2].

The fundamental principles of cognitive linguistics, particularly the close relationship between linguistic units and human cognitive activity, conceptualization, categorization, and

experience, subsequently served as a theoretical basis for the cognitive study of fixed expressions and idiomatic units. In particular, the studies conducted by such linguists as V. A. Maslova [3], N. N. Budnikova [4], E. V. Novikova [5], E. V. Dolgova [6], T. G. Bochina [7], E. V. Markelova [8], and O. V. Akinzhelova [9] have examined the semantic structure, conceptual content, and figurative properties of fixed expressions and idiomatic units, as well as their relationship to human perception and conceptualization of reality, from various theoretical and methodological perspectives.

In Uzbek linguistics, linguocultural analyses of phraseological units have been carried out by A. A. Nasirov [10], L. E. Kholmurodova [11], S. P. Saidakbarova [12], O' A. Khudoynazarova [13], N. A. Turoпова [14], and B. K. Bekniyazov [15]. Linguocultural and cognitive analyses of conventional similes have also been conducted by F. F. Usmonov [16] and S. A. Babanazarova [17]. However, the cognitive properties of fixed expressions in the Uzbek language, the formation of the nominative field of concepts on the basis of paremiological units, and the development of their cognitive models have not yet been sufficiently studied as independent research objects.

The analysis of the above-mentioned studies demonstrates that Uzbek linguistics has achieved considerable progress in investigating the semantic, structural-grammatical, artistic-aesthetic, functional, linguopoetic, linguocultural, linguopragmatic, and axiological features of fixed expressions (FEs). Monographs, scholarly articles, and phraseological dictionaries have been published, and candidate and doctoral dissertations have been successfully defended. However, a number of cognitive aspects of fixed expressions remain insufficiently studied in Uzbek linguistics, which highlights the following research tasks that require further investigation:

1. To identify the conceptual foundations underlying fixed expressions;
2. To determine the cognitive functions performed by fixed expressions in speech, such as expressing emotions,

evaluation, categorization of reality, and generalization of experience, as well as to identify the mental processes involved in understanding fixed expressions during speech production and comprehension;

3. To conduct a conceptual comparison of Uzbek fixed expressions with corresponding expressions in other languages;
4. To analyze fixed expressions from a discourse-cognitive perspective;
5. To identify the cognitive models underlying fixed expressions;
6. To develop principles for teaching fixed expressions based on a cognitive approach;
7. To investigate polysemy in fixed expressions from a cognitive perspective.

Thus, these issues demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive study of fixed expressions in the Uzbek language from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. The meaning of fixed expressions should not be interpreted merely as a combination of lexical and grammatical units; rather, they should be viewed as cognitive units closely associated with the worldview, national mentality, and historical and cultural experience of a people. The cognitive approach makes it possible to identify the mechanisms of meaning formation in such units, their interaction with conceptual structures, and the mental processes activated during their use.

Consequently, the cognitive study of fixed expressions provides an important scholarly foundation not only for theoretical linguistics but also for practical fields such as translation, language teaching, text analysis, and discourse studies. In this regard, the systematic implementation of the research objectives outlined above will contribute to determining the cognitive status of fixed expressions, revealing their linguocultural essence, and achieving new scholarly findings in Uzbek linguistics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employs cognitive, semantic, and linguocultural approaches to analyze phraseological units and stable expressions in Uzbek and English. The descriptive method is used to identify their semantic and structural features, while cognitive-semantic and conceptual analysis is applied to reveal the mental images, conceptual layers, and mechanisms underlying their meanings. The linguocultural method helps identify cultural, historical, and religious information encoded in phraseological units. A comparative method is also used to determine similarities and differences in the conceptualization of reality in Uzbek and English. The research focuses on selected phraseological units, proverbs, and similes that reflect human cognition, cultural experience, and collective memory.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The cognitive approach makes it possible to consider stable linguistic units, such as phraseological units, proverbs, and sayings, as one of the stable fundamental structures of the human mind. Such units are regarded as reliable indicators of the acquisition of a concept within the cognitive system, since they have the ability to accurately transmit and preserve the knowledge, experience, and cultural characteristics of language speakers.

For example, the cognitive essence of phraseologization is manifested in the following:

1. the ability to encode and preserve knowledge;
2. the transformation and enrichment of initial information;
3. the conceptualization and categorization of language [18; 16].

The point here is that phraseologization performs important cognitive functions in human thinking. In other words, phraseological units “encode” knowledge in a concise, figurative, and memorable form, embedding complex experiences or social

knowledge into a single compact image. For example, the expression *qo'l qovushtirib o'tirmoq* ("to sit with one's arms folded") encodes social experience related to "inaction, indifference, and avoidance of responsibility." A whole evaluative attitude is preserved through a single expression. Thus, a phraseological unit can be regarded as a compressed model of knowledge.

Furthermore, in the process of phraseologization, the original (literal) meaning undergoes transformation, resulting in the emergence of a new and richer meaning. In other words, an ordinary action is transformed into a figurative, evaluative, and emotional meaning. For instance, the original literal meaning of the expression *ko'z yumdi* ("closed one's eyes") refers to the action of "closing one's eyes," whereas its subsequent phraseological meaning is "to die." Here, the meaning is softened (an euphemism is formed), emotional and cultural layers are added, and, most importantly, a certain delicacy of expression emerges. It can therefore be seen that the initial information is enriched and elevated to a new semantic level.

At the same time, through phraseological units, people organize and categorize the world. They express abstract concepts through concrete images. For example, the expression *bosh(i)ga balo bo'lmoq* ("to become a calamity for someone") combines concepts such as "problem," "danger," and "unpleasant consequences" into a single image. As a result, a person conceptualizes a problem as a "calamity." This is conceptualization, that is, understanding a problem through an image.

These examples demonstrate that phraseological units are not merely decorative elements of language, but constitute one of the active mechanisms of human cognition.

The same phenomenon can also be observed in proverbs. Linguist D. Khudoyberganova, emphasizing that every nation has its own distinctive way of thinking, draws attention to certain words that are realized as linguocultural codes in folk proverbs.

In Uzbek folk proverbs, words such as *ariq*, *daryo*, *irmoq*, *suv*, *tosh*, *bo'ron*, and *zilzila* are realized as linguocultural codes. For example: *Ariqqazimasang, otizgasuvchiqmas* (If you do not

dig the irrigation ditch, water will not reach your field); *O'zga yurtning boshi bo'lgancha, O'z yurtningningtoshibo'l* (Rather than being a leader in a foreign land, be a stone in your own country); *Birlashgandaryobo'lar, Tarqalganirmoqbo'lar* (United, they become a river; divided, they become a stream); *Xalq puflasa, bo'ronbo'lar, Xalq tepin sa – zilzilabo'lar* (If the people blow, it becomes a storm; if the people stamp their feet, it becomes an earthquake).

In the proverb *Xalq – tosh, amaldor – suv* ("The people are stone, the official is water"), the people are represented by "stone" (a solid substance), symbolizing an invincible force, whereas the official is represented by "water" (a liquid substance), symbolizing weakness and powerlessness. At the core of the proverb, unity and solidarity are glorified through the symbol of stone, while the symbol of water emphasizes that power and official position are transient (just as water is not permanent or fixed).

Secondly, through the symbolic image of "water," the people are able to express their aspiration to see officials as just and fair. It is well known that in Yusuf Khas Hajib's work *Kutadgu Bilig*, water is glorified as a symbol of justice: "Oppression is a blazing fire; justice is flowing water."

Thus, in this proverb, the image of water can be understood as a symbol of two different concepts: the first is *weakness*, while the second is "goodness" [19: 20-23].

Furthermore, the main aspect distinguishing contemporary studies in the field of phraseology from traditional approaches is the growing interest in examining the communicative function of idioms, that is, the diverse types of information conveyed through them. As a result, the focus of research has shifted from a system-centered approach to an anthropocentric one. The shift in scientific paradigms has also led to a change in perspectives on the definition of phraseological units [20; 22].

While "traditional" phraseology viewed phraseological units (PUs) solely as units of the language system, within the cognitive approach, phraseological units are interpreted as "micro-texts within a text" that are used as ready-made expressions in speech. Their nominative basis is situational in nature, and in the process

of conceptualization, all types of information characteristic of representing a situation in a text are incorporated into the structure of the phraseological unit in a condensed form [21; 8].

Since stable expressions (SEs), owing to their inherent characteristics, reflect phenomena that possess a certain degree of cultural significance, they are closely associated with the linguistic worldview, that is, with the complex of ideas and perceptions about the world formed within a particular ethnic culture. The study of these issues falls within the framework of the anthropocentric paradigm of linguistics [22; 17].

The human being is the central figure of language and of the worldview created through language. By studying linguistic units, linguists gain insight into the ways in which humans interpret and perceive the world; this interpretation is shaped in accordance with various manifestations of human activity and consciousness. The complex system of knowledge reflected in language constitutes the principal object of study in cognitive linguistics. It encompasses knowledge expressed through language, including representations of the real world, as well as the mechanisms of processing, categorizing, storing, recalling, representing, and manipulating knowledge [22; 17].

Language itself provides researchers with access to numerous cognitive processes that cannot be directly observed, including the processes of categorization and conceptualization [23: 10-13]. In contemporary linguistics, particularly within the cognitive-discursive paradigm, an increasingly important area of research concerns the relationship between linguistic structures and structures of consciousness. The theoretical explanation of this relationship requires the identification of the patterns governing the interaction between language and mental culture, as well as between language and human cognitive activity [24; 14].

As linguistic units, stable expressions are closely connected with human experience, perception of the world, and its conceptual representation, and therefore occupy a distinctive place in language. This is because they reflect human emotional experiences, observations of life, and cultural perspectives. Consequently, such units function not merely as means of

conveying meaning, but also as representations of the human inner world.

The development of the cognitive approach has made it possible to examine contemporary problems in phraseology from a new perspective. Within the semantic structure of phraseological units, it is possible to distinguish a core – the most stable part of the meaning – and a “variable component,” a relatively dynamic element that may undergo changes at the morphemic, lexical, and other levels [25: 25].

The cognitive stage of meaning formation in phraseological units is a process of conceptualizing knowledge in which not merely a semantic enrichment of the existing conceptual structure or modifications at its periphery occur, but rather the emergence of an entirely new conceptual structure.

This process consists of several stages:

1. The stage of mental representation of the fragment;
2. The stage of abandoning the unchanged form of the active concept;
3. The stage of formation of the cognitive basis of the meaning of the phraseological unit;
4. The stage of transferring the fragment of the genetic discourse from short-term memory to long-term memory [25; 26].

The first stage– the stage of mental representation of the fragment– is the mental reflection of a segment of reality that gives rise to the need for indirect secondary naming. As a result, the conceptual formation possessing the nominative capacity of a linguistic unit is activated and subsequently serves to name similar situations. At this stage, a person encounters or experiences a particular situation in real life and mentally represents it as an image. In other words, a fragment of reality emerges in the human mind as a kind of “picture.”

For example, what kind of image may arise in a person's mind when they are extremely happy? They may feel as though they have risen into the sky and become lighter. This mental image subsequently forms the basis of the expression *boshi*

osmonga yetdi ("his/her head reached the sky"). Here, the real-life situation is intense joy, while the mental image is ascending into the sky.

The second stage is the stage of abandoning the unchanged form of the active concept. At this stage, since the use of the concept in its previous form and through its previous verbalization does not correspond to the communicative intention, the speaker begins to search for another form to express the situation. Consequently, the conceptual structure underlying the derivational basis of the phraseological unit becomes activated.

In other words, at this stage, the speaker realizes that expressing the idea through an ordinary word or expression is insufficient. *U xursand bo'ldi* ("He/she became happy") is a simple expression, but it is inadequate for conveying the intensity of the emotion. The person therefore searches for a new, more expressive formulation that corresponds to the mental image. Instead of simply saying *juda xursand bo'ldi* ("became very happy"), the speaker uses *uning boshi osmonga yetdi* ("his/her head reached the sky").

Thus, the previous verbal form (*xursand bo'ldi* – "became happy") does not fully convey the intended communicative meaning. Therefore, a new conceptual structure becomes activated.

The third stage is the stage of formation of the cognitive basis of the meaning of a phraseological unit. It emerges through the interaction of all activated components of the conceptual system. At this stage, the new meaning becomes established. The real situation – "joy" (happiness), the mental image – "ascending into the sky," and the linguistic means – *boshi osmonga yetmoq* ("his/her head reached the sky") – all come together and form a new stable meaning. At this point, when the expression *boshi osmonga yetmoq* is used, no one understands it as literally ascending into the sky. Instead, it conveys the figurative meaning of "to be extremely happy."

The final stage is a complex, multistage process of transferring a fragment of genetic discourse from short-term memory to long-term memory. This process involves the

formation of indirect reference, its association with previously existing contexts (the development of the asymmetric dualism of sign and meaning), and other related processes. It is a highly complex process in which a new expression gradually moves from a short-term speech experience into long-term memory and subsequently becomes a permanent component of the language system.

All knowledge about the surrounding world is stored in the human mind in the form of a vast number of concepts. Many scholars recognize phraseological units as one of the principal means of expressing concepts. For example, N. F. Alefirenko states:

The principal means of objectifying a concept in language may include a word, a phraseological unit, a word combination, the structural scheme of a sentence, and even a text, provided that it reveals the essence of a particular concept. In contemporary cognitive linguistics research, words and phraseological units are most frequently considered as means of verbalizing concepts. [26: 62]

Indeed, stable linguistic units are among the most vivid means of manifesting concepts that have developed in the collective consciousness of a people over many years. For example, the Uzbek language contains the expressions *daqyunusdan qolgan* and *almisoqdan qolgan*. These are not merely descriptive expressions; rather, they are stable combinations that embody a multilayered conceptual structure.

The conceptual layers of the expression *daqyunusdan qolgan* include:

- **Extremely ancient times:** the concept of historical distance. Since the image of Daqyunus is associated with the distant past, the expression conveys the notion of an “extremely ancient period.”
- **Obsolescence and being outdated:** As a result of temporal-metaphorical extension, the feature of historical remoteness is metaphorically used to express the fact that an object, idea,

or phenomenon is not modern and is far removed from novelty.

- **The religious-mythological layer:** A religious narrative context is embedded in the expression, connecting antiquity not only with the dimension of time but also with the sacred traditions of Islam. The expression was formed on the basis of a historical-religious image, with its roots tracing back to narratives associated with the name Daqyunus. In Islamic sources, Daqyunus is mentioned as a tyrannical ruler in the story of the ‘Companions of the Cave’ (*Ashab al-Kahf*).
- **Cultural memory and collective consciousness:** The use of the expression demonstrates the vitality of historical narratives within the oral tradition of the people. It functions as a product of collective memory.
- **Ironical and evaluative meaning:** In speech, the expression is often used with a negative or ironic connotation to describe something outdated, unchanged, or no longer corresponding to the requirements of the modern era.

The conceptual layers of the expression *almisoqdan qolgan* include:

- **Ancient times:** the concept of time. The concept of *Almisog* refers to the spiritual-ontological realm that existed prior to the creation of humankind. Therefore, the expression conveys the notion of “extreme antiquity.”
- **Endless antiquity:** The original religious meaning is intensified in everyday speech and takes the form of hyperbole, conveying the meaning of “very old” or “extremely outdated.”
- **The religious-ontological layer:** The expression implicitly preserves the idea of an eternal connection between human beings and the Creator.
- **The concept of traditionality and invariability:** By describing something as *almisoqdan qolgan*, speakers emphasize that a particular object or phenomenon has remained unchanged and has not been renewed since ancient times.

- **The evaluative-emotional layer:** In speech, the expression is often used with a critical or humorous tone to indicate obsolescence or outdatedness.

Thus, the expression *daqyunusdan qolgan* is not merely a simple linguistic unit denoting antiquity. Rather, it embodies several conceptual layers, including religious-historical memory associated with the image of Daqyunus, the concept of the distant past, a hyperbolic perception of time, and ironic evaluation. In contrast, *almisoqdan qolgan* reflects a multilayered conceptual structure that combines a perception of time rooted in Islamic beliefs, primordial or eternal memory, the idea of invariability, as well as linguistic hyperbole and emotional evaluation.

A similar example can be found in English in the simile “as flat as a pancake.” The emergence of this simile has a very long history, and over the centuries it has served to encode and preserve knowledge associated with particular communities and their cultural experience. The simile has been used for approximately 1,500 years. Although the word “pancake” was first recorded in writing in 1430, pancakes themselves were prepared and consumed as early as the Stone Age.

The mental basis of this simile is the visual characteristic of a pancake’s surface, namely its smooth and flat shape. Initially, it was used to express the concept of flatness. For example, it was used to describe the state of Kansas because of its flat landscape, as well as objects such as a flat board or a flat geographical area. Later, the expression came to be used to describe boring and monotonous phenomena, for example, in reference to a dull film. At the same time, pancakes have functioned as a religious symbol for centuries. The ingredients used in pancakes have been closely associated with four symbolic meanings in Christianity: eggs represent “creation,” flour represents “the essential nourishment of humanity,” salt symbolizes “wholeness,” and milk represents “purity.” In fact, there are also hypotheses that pancakes played a role in the emergence of Shrove Tuesday, one of the most sacred days in the Christian calendar.

This demonstrates that the simile “as flat as a pancake” is not merely a descriptive linguistic unit but a stable expression embodying a multilayered conceptual structure.

- **Flatness:** a flat surface. This represents the physical concept of flatness formed on the basis of the visual characteristics of a pancake’s surface.
- **Boredom and monotony:** This emotional-conceptual meaning emerged as a result of the metaphorical extension of the image of flatness.
- **Religious ritual:** This layer is associated with the symbolic significance of pancakes in Christianity and the tradition of Shrove Tuesday.
- **Piety and purification:** This religious concept is associated with self-restraint and repentance before the beginning of Lent, as well as abstaining from certain animal products.
- **Competition and communality:** This cultural-social concept developed through the tradition of pancake races.

Thus, a single stable expression can encode historical, religious, and cultural experience. Through this stable linguistic unit, aspects of a people’s way of life, religious beliefs, rituals, and geographical perceptions have been preserved.

From a cognitive perspective, although “as flat as a pancake” originated from a primary visual image – namely, a flat surface – it has undergone a process of conceptual expansion over time. As a result, it has evolved from a linguistic unit expressing a concrete physical characteristic into a polysemous stable expression that carries cultural memory.

Thus, this simile manifests itself as a stable linguistic unit capable of encoding and preserving knowledge, enriching meaning, and integrating different conceptual categories.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that phraseological units and stable expressions should not be regarded merely as fixed combinations of words or decorative elements of language. From a cognitive

perspective, they represent complex linguistic and conceptual structures that encode, preserve, and transmit knowledge, experience, cultural values, and collective memory. Their meanings are formed through the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, cultural, historical, and situational factors.

The development of the cognitive approach has shifted the focus of phraseological studies from a purely system-centered perspective toward an anthropocentric and cognitive-discursive paradigm. Within this framework, phraseological units are viewed as “micro-texts within a text” that are capable of conveying a considerable amount of information in a condensed and figurative form. Their semantic structure contains both relatively stable and dynamic components, while the process of phraseological meaning formation involves mental representation, conceptual transformation, the formation of a cognitive basis, and the consolidation of the newly formed meaning in long-term memory.

The examples analyzed in this study, including the Uzbek expressions *boshi osmonga yetmoq*, *daqyunusdan qolgan*, and *almisoqdan qolgan*, as well as the English simile *as flat as a pancake*, demonstrate that stable expressions possess multilayered conceptual structures. Their meanings may incorporate temporal, historical, religious, cultural, emotional, evaluative, and social dimensions. Consequently, a single phraseological unit can function as a condensed representation of an entire fragment of collective experience.

The comparative analysis also shows that phraseological units reflect the specific ways in which different speech communities conceptualize reality. They provide valuable evidence of cultural identity, collective memory, religious beliefs, traditional practices, and attitudes toward the surrounding world. In this sense, phraseology serves as an important interface between language, cognition, and culture.

Therefore, the cognitive study of phraseological units makes it possible to reveal not only their semantic organization but also the underlying conceptual structures and cultural knowledge represented in them. Phraseological units can consequently be regarded as important cognitive and linguocultural mechanisms

through which knowledge is conceptualized, categorized, enriched, preserved, and transmitted from one generation to another. Further comparative research in this field may contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, human cognition, and the cultural worldview of different peoples.

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