



# PHYTONYMIC PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH: A CONTRASTIVE SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

This article examines the semantic structure of phraseological units (PUs) with phytonymic components — that is, idioms built around plant names — in Uzbek and English from a contrastive perspective. Working with a corpus of 106 units (54 Uzbek, 52 English), the study identifies the semantic fields these expressions cluster around, traces the cultural motivations behind their figurative meanings, and maps the points where the two languages converge or diverge. The analysis shows that universal human experiences — the cycles of plant growth and decay, the sensory qualities of flowers and fruit — produce a recognisable zone of semantic overlap across the two languages. At the same time, the agricultural heritage of Uzbek culture and the cultural symbolism attached to specific plants pull the two phytonymic repertoires in noticeably different directions. These findings have implications for contrastive phraseology, cognitive linguistics, and the teaching of idioms in foreign-language classrooms.

**Keywords:** Phytonym, phraseological unit, semantic field, cultural motivation, contrastive analysis, cognitive linguistics, Uzbek, English, figurative meaning, idiom.

## Introduction

### Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada o'zbek va ingliz tillaridagi fitonimik komponentli frazeologik birliklarning semantik tuzilishi qiyosiy aspektida o'rganiladi. 106 ta birlikdan



iborat (54 ta o'zbekcha, 52 ta inglizcha) korpus asosida ushbu iboralar to'planadigan semantik maydonlar aniqlanadi, majoziy ma'nolarning madaniy motivatsiyasi tahlil qilinadi va ikki til o'rtasidagi umumiylik va farqlar belgilanadi. Tahlil shuni ko'rsatadiki, o'simliklarning o'sishi va so'lishi tsikllari, gul va mevalarga xos sensor xususiyatlar ikkala til uchun umumiy semantik chegara yaratadi. Shu bilan birga, o'zbek madaniyatidagi qishloq xo'jaligi an'analari va ma'lum o'simliklarga bog'liq ramziy ma'nolar ikki tilning fitonimik repertuarini sezilari darajada farqlantirib yuboradi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** fitonim, frazeologik birlik, semantik maydon, madaniy motivatsiya, qiyosiy tahlil, kognitiv tilshunoslik, o'zbek tili, ingliz tili, majoziy ma'no, idioma.

### Аннотация

В данной статье исследуется семантическая структура фразеологических единиц с фитонимическими компонентами в узбекском и английском языках в сопоставительном аспекте. На материале корпуса из 106 единиц (54 узбекских, 52 английских) определяются семантические поля, вокруг которых группируются данные выражения, прослеживается культурная мотивация их переносных значений, а также выявляются точки сближения и расхождения двух языков. Анализ показывает, что универсальный человеческий опыт — циклы роста и увядания растений, сенсорные качества цветов и плодов — создаёт узнаваемую зону семантического пересечения в обоих языках.

**Ключевые слова:** фитоним, фразеологическая единица, семантическое поле, культурная мотивация, сопоставительный анализ, когнитивная лингвистика, узбекский язык, английский язык, переносное значение, idioma.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

When you call someone a «shrinking violet» in English, you're doing something rather peculiar: you're borrowing the image of a small, shade-dwelling flower to say something about human personality. Nobody planned this. The expression



grew, the way idioms always do, through accumulated use across generations until the literal image and the figurative meaning fused into something inseparable. What's interesting from a linguistic standpoint is that Uzbek speakers did something structurally similar — they reached for plant imagery to talk about people, situations and emotions — but the specific plants they chose, and the meanings they assigned to them, often ended up quite different.

That difference is what this article is about. Phytonymic phraseological units — idioms whose figurative core depends on a plant name — offer an unusually clear window onto the relationship between a community's natural environment, its agricultural history, and the metaphorical patterns embedded in its language. Compare the semantic map of Uzbek plant idioms with that of English ones and you quickly notice both a substantial zone of overlap and some striking divergences. Explaining that pattern is harder than noticing it.

The study reported here is part of a broader doctoral investigation into the semantic, translational and lexicographic dimensions of phytonymic PUs in Uzbek and English. The present article focuses specifically on semantics: what conceptual domains do these expressions cover in each language, what cultural logic motivates their figurative meanings, and where do the two languages converge or go their separate ways? A corpus of 106 units — 54 Uzbek and 52 English — serves as the empirical base.

## **2. BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study of phraseological units has a long history in both Russian/Soviet and Anglo-American linguistic traditions, though the two traditions developed somewhat independently and use somewhat different terminology. In the Soviet tradition, Vinogradov's (1947) three-way classification — fusions, unities and collocations — set the agenda for decades of subsequent work. Phraseological units were understood primarily as units of the lexicological system, defined by their non-compositional semantics and reproducibility in discourse [Vinogradov, 1947].

Anglo-American phraseology, by contrast, tended to treat idioms as a problem of semantics and pragmatics rather than lexicology, asking questions about how non-literal meaning is computed in context [Gibbs, 1994]. These different starting points matter here because the Uzbek tradition sits closer to the Soviet framework



— Rahmatullayev's foundational work on Uzbek phraseology (1978, 2004) is explicitly indebted to it — while English-language work on idioms draws on a broader cognitive and pragmatic literature.

The cognitive turn in linguistics, which gathered pace through the 1980s and 1990s, proved enormously productive for phraseology. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory showed that idioms are not arbitrary linguistic fossils but reflect systematic conceptual mappings between source and target domains. From this perspective, «a bed of roses» is not merely an idiom one memorises; it instantiates a broader LIFE IS A JOURNEY / HARDSHIP IS TERRAIN metaphor that structures a great deal of ordinary English expression [Lakoff, Johnson, 1980].

For contrastive phraseology, the cognitive approach opens up productive questions. If idioms reflect conceptual metaphors, and if conceptual metaphors are partly universal and partly culture-specific, then we would expect languages to show both overlapping and diverging phytonymic patterns — which is exactly what we find. Dobrovol'sky and Piirainen (2005) argued that cross-linguistic comparison of idioms needs to attend to both the figurative meaning and the cultural model underlying it; their framework informs the analysis here [Dobrovol'sky, Piirainen, 2005].

On the Uzbek side, Mamatov (1990) examined figurative animal and plant expressions in Uzbek, noting the particular density of plant idioms related to agricultural life. His observation that Uzbek phytonymic expressions cluster heavily around fruit and flower imagery — reflecting the oasis-garden culture of Central Asia — is one that our corpus data broadly confirm.

### **3. DATA AND METHOD**

The corpus was assembled from four main sources: Rahmatullayev's Explanatory Phraseological Dictionary of Uzbek (2004), Kunin's four-volume English-Russian Phraseological Dictionary (1984), the Cambridge Idioms Dictionary (2006), and the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (3rd ed., 2010). Additionally, literary texts — mainly twentieth-century prose — were scanned for phytonymic idioms in authentic use, which helped to avoid the risk of working only with dictionary-attested, sometimes archaic expressions.



A phraseological unit was included in the corpus if (a) it contained a plant name as a core semantic component, (b) its overall meaning was non-compositional — that is, could not be straightforwardly derived from the literal meanings of its parts — and (c) it was attested in at least two independent sources. This last criterion was deliberately conservative: it excluded a number of interesting one-off expressions but helped to ensure we were dealing with stable, reproducible units rather than nonce coinages.

The resulting corpus of 106 units was coded along three dimensions: the semantic field of the idiomatic meaning (what conceptual domain does the PU address?), the plant category of the phytonymic component (tree/shrub, flower, fruit/vegetable, grass/herb), and the apparent motivational basis connecting the literal plant image to the figurative meaning. The semantic field coding used a scheme adapted from FrameNet, which proved more granular and theoretically grounded than ad hoc category labels.

A word about limitations. A corpus of 106 units is large enough to identify broad patterns but too small to support strong quantitative claims. The figures reported below should be read as indicative rather than definitive. The dictionary-based sampling also introduces a bias towards formally recognised idioms; colourful but sub-standard plant expressions that circulate in spoken Uzbek or colloquial English may be underrepresented.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 The semantic fields of phytonymic PUs: where the two languages agree**

Perhaps the most striking finding is how much semantic common ground the two languages share despite their very different histories and environments. Both Uzbek and English build phytonymic idioms around a core set of conceptual domains: the quality of life (ease and hardship), human character and appearance, processes of beginning and ending, and the experience of futile or misdirected effort. This is not coincidental.

The reason, we would argue, lies in the universal phenomenology of plant life. Growth, flowering, decay and death — these are experiences every agricultural community has watched and absorbed, and they map naturally onto the most fundamental human concerns. «A bed of roses» (comfortable life) and the Uzbek «gulshandek hayot» (a life like a flower garden) do not share a historical origin;

they arrived at similar figurative meanings independently, because the rose-bed / flower-garden image lends itself to the same conceptual extension in both cultures. The same holds for thorns as a metaphor for discomfort — both languages independently developed expressions built on this image.

This zone of overlap is mapped in Table 1.

**Table 1. Shared semantic fields and cross-linguistic correspondences (selected examples)**

Semantic field	Uzbek PU (example)	English PU (example)	Shared core meaning
Beauty / appearance	lola yuzli (tulip-faced)	fresh as a daisy	Natural, attractive appearance
Suffering / hardship	tikan ustida o'tirmoq	on a bed of thorns	Painful, uncomfortable situation
Ease / comfort	gulshandek hayot	a bed of roses	Effortless, pleasant life
Futility / failure	ko'chma o't (tumbleweed)	barking up the wrong tree	Wasted effort, wrong direction
New beginning / renewal	yangi gul ochmoq	turn over a new leaf	Starting fresh, reform
Timidity / introversion	(lacuna in Uzbek)	shrinking violet	No Uzbek phytonymic equivalent
Envy / dissatisfaction	o'zga yurt — oltin yurt	the grass is always greener	Longing for what one doesn't have
Stagnation / rootlessness	yulg'un kabi (like tamarisk)	a rolling stone gathers no moss	Restlessness yields nothing

Table 1 reveals a pattern worth pausing over: the semantic domains where the two languages overlap most reliably — beauty, hardship, renewal — are precisely those domains tied to the visible, cyclical life of plants. Flowering as beauty, thorns as pain, new leaves as new beginnings: these mappings appear to be robust across cultures. The domains where convergence breaks down — cultural or national symbolism, for instance — are those where a specific plant carries meanings assigned by a particular community's history rather than by shared biological experience.

## 4.2 Agricultural heritage and the Uzbek phytonymic repertoire

Central Asian oasis civilisation was, for most of its history, built on irrigated agriculture — cotton, wheat, fruits, and above all the orchard and the kitchen garden. This is not merely historical background; it is encoded in the language. Uzbek phytonymic idioms draw heavily on fruit and vegetable imagery in a way that has no direct parallel in English.

Consider the idiom «olma yonoqli» (literally «apple-cheeked»), used to describe someone with a rosy, healthy complexion. The apple here is not just any fruit; it is the apple of the Ferghana Valley orchards, plump and sun-reddened, deeply embedded in local aesthetics. English has «apple-cheeked» too, but the expression feels slightly old-fashioned and is far less frequent than, say, «rosy-cheeked». The apple image has faded from everyday English idiom in a way it has not in Uzbek.

Similarly, the grape («uzum») — central to Central Asian viticulture — appears in Uzbek expressions of abundance, sweetness and the pleasures of hospitality. English has «sour grapes», of course, but that expression has a very different emotional valence: it is about envy and self-deception, not about richness and generosity. The same plant, opposite connotations — which illustrates just how misleading surface-level comparisons can be.

Table 2 sets out the motivational bases of phytonymic PUs in each language and the degree to which they overlap.

**Table 2. Motivational bases of phytonymic PUs in Uzbek and English**

Motivational basis	Uzbek PUs (n=54)	English PUs (n=52)	Cross-lingual overlap
Agricultural / subsistence	21 (38.9%)	9 (17.3%)	Low
Sensory (colour, smell, texture)	14 (25.9%)	17 (32.7%)	Moderate
Cyclical nature (growth/decay)	11 (20.4%)	15 (28.8%)	High
Cultural/national symbolism	8 (14.8%)	11 (21.2%)	Low



The figures in Table 2 point to a clear asymmetry: Uzbek phytonymic idioms are disproportionately motivated by agricultural and subsistence contexts (38.9% vs 17.3% in English), while English draws more heavily on cultural and national symbolism (21.2% vs 14.8% in Uzbek). The category of cyclical nature — growth, decay, renewal — shows the highest cross-lingual overlap, which is consistent with the argument that universal plant phenomenology underpins the most widely shared idiomatic patterns.

### **4.3 Flowers and what they mean: where the divergence is sharpest**

Flower-based idioms are, in some ways, the most interesting subgroup in the corpus — and the site of the most striking divergence between the two languages. In Uzbek, the tulip («lola») occupies a place of unique symbolic importance. It is the national flower, associated with beauty, sacrifice and the beloved; the Uzbek classical poetic tradition is saturated with tulip imagery, and that imagery has filtered into everyday phraseology. Expressions like «lola yuzli» (tulip-faced, meaning beautiful) are immediately recognisable to any Uzbek speaker.

English has no tulip idioms of comparable frequency or emotional weight. The tulip arrived in England from Ottoman Turkey in the sixteenth century and generated a famous speculative bubble in the Netherlands — «Tulipomania» — but it never acquired the deep cultural resonance in English that it has in Uzbek or Turkish. When English speakers want a flower to carry the weight of beauty or love, they reach for the rose; when they want to talk about shyness or self-effacement, they use the violet.

That last point is itself revealing. «Shrinking violet» is a genuinely productive English idiom — it generated «wallflower» as a near-synonym, and both are still current. But violet, as a symbol of retiring timidity, has no obvious counterpart in Uzbek. Our corpus search found no Uzbek phytonymic expression carrying that specific meaning. This is a clean case of lacunarity: not just a missing word, but a missing conceptual slot.

Why the violet? The answer probably lies in the plant's physical characteristics — it is small, easily overlooked, tends to grow in shaded corners — and in the English Romantic tradition's tendency to read personality into landscape. It is a culturally specific reading of a plant's appearance that did not take hold in Uzbek



poetics and phraseology, presumably because the violet was not a salient part of the Central Asian botanical landscape in the same way.

#### **4.4 Trees, shrubs and the grammar of endurance**

Tree idioms present yet another pattern. Both languages use trees as symbols of strength, rootedness and endurance — but the specific trees they choose, and the aspects of tree life they foreground, differ considerably. English bush and tree idioms are often about concealment, indirection and the difficulty of navigating an environment: «beat around the bush», «can't see the wood for the trees», «barking up the wrong tree». There is something almost adversarial about the relationship between the English idiom-speaker and the vegetation; the bush is something to be got through, seen past or tracked through.

Uzbek tree idioms tend toward a different emotional register. The willow («tol») is associated with weeping and mourning — a widespread Eurasian metaphor — but Uzbek expressions involving the poplar («terak») often emphasise upright dignity, and those involving fruit trees carry the warmth of shade and abundance. The tree as a source of shelter and nourishment appears more prominently in Uzbek than in English, which again reflects the oasis-garden environment in which Uzbek phraseology developed.

The contrast in how the two languages handle the rolling-stone proverb is instructive here. «A rolling stone gathers no moss» maps almost directly onto the Uzbek «ko'chib yurgan tosh o't o'stirmaydi». The match is so close — same image, same logic, same meaning — that one might suspect borrowing. But comparative phraseologists have documented this proverb across dozens of unrelated languages, suggesting it is one of those rare cases where the same metaphorical reasoning leads independently to the same figurative expression. Even here, though, the Uzbek version uses the word for grass («o't») rather than moss, which is a small but telling environmental adjustment: moss is not a salient feature of Central Asian landscapes.

#### **4.5 A note on methodology: the risk of false friends**

A persistent hazard in contrastive phraseology is what we might call the false friends problem at the level of idioms. Two expressions look like equivalents because they share a plant name and a broadly similar meaning; closer inspection



reveals that their connotations, register and typical contexts of use are quite different.

The English «wallflower» and the Uzbek «devor guli» (literally «wall flower») illustrate this well. A wallflower in English is someone who stands alone at a party, overlooked and socially awkward — a meaning with a specific social-situational context. «Devor guli» in Uzbek, by contrast, carries more of the literal sense of a plant growing in a neglected or marginal place, and when used figuratively it tends to emphasise neglect or marginality rather than shyness per se. The surface similarity — both use a flower-near-wall image — masks a meaningful difference in the figurative meaning. Treating them as equivalents in a translation or in a pedagogical dictionary would be misleading.

This kind of mismatch — where the plant image is shared but the figurative loading is different — is actually more common in the corpus than outright lacunarity. It is, we would argue, the harder pedagogical problem: it is relatively easy to flag a genuine gap; it is much harder to notice and explain a partial overlap where the student may feel confident they understand when in fact they have only half the picture.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The contrastive semantic analysis presented here confirms a picture that is more nuanced than either full convergence or wholesale divergence. Uzbek and English phytonymic phraseology share a genuine common core, built on the universal human experience of living alongside plants — watching them grow, flower, bear fruit and die. Expressions organised around the cycles of plant life, or around the most immediately perceivable sensory qualities of flowers and vegetation, tend to produce the closest cross-lingual correspondences.

Beyond that core, however, the two languages follow the logic of their own environments and cultural histories. Uzbek reaches for the orchard and the irrigated garden; English reaches for the hedgerow, the lawn and the woodland. The tulip and the rose carry entirely different cultural weights. The violet does something in English — encoding shyness and self-concealment — that no flower does in Uzbek phytonymic idiom. And the bush in English is something to navigate, not to shelter under.



These findings have practical implications in at least two areas. For translation, they suggest that phytonymic idioms require much more attention than a surface reading of their literal components might imply. The shared plant image can mask significant semantic divergence — the false friends problem — that may be more damaging than outright lacunarity, precisely because it goes unnoticed. For language teaching, the data suggest that contrastive presentation of plant idioms — rather than treating each language in isolation — can illuminate the cultural logic behind figurative meanings in ways that purely monolingual approaches cannot.

One area this study has not addressed is diachronic change: how the phytonymic repertoire of each language has shifted as the ecological and agricultural contexts of its speakers have changed. As Uzbek society urbanises rapidly, and as English speakers in many parts of the world become more distant from agricultural life, it seems reasonable to expect that some plant idioms will become archaic while new ones — perhaps built on the plants of urban green spaces — may emerge. Tracking those changes would be a worthwhile project for future research.

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