

Linguo-Cultural Characteristics of Verb Phraseological Units in Uzbek, Russian And English

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Abstract: This article investigates the linguo-cultural characteristics of verbal phraseological units (VPUs) in Uzbek, Russian, and English through a comparative-typological framework. Applying a mixed methodology that integrates linguo-culturological analysis, contrastive semantics, and corpus-assisted examination, the study identifies culture-specific conceptual domains encoded in VPUs, analyses the degree of inter-lingual equivalence from a cultural standpoint, and reveals universal versus language-specific patterns of cultural meaning. Results demonstrate that VPUs in all three languages encode the same primary conceptual domains — body, labour, nature, and social relations — yet the imagery, connotative loading, and cultural metaphors differ markedly across linguistic communities. The findings carry direct implications for phraseological lexicography, cross-cultural communication, and foreign-language pedagogy.

Keywords: Verbal phraseological units, linguo-culturology, cultural connotation, conceptual metaphor, Uzbek phraseology, Russian phraseology, English phraseology, comparative phraseology, cultural semantics.

Introduction: Language is not merely a communication tool; it is the primary repository of a community's historical memory, value system, and worldview¹. Phraseological units — stable, semantically transformed combinations of words — stand at the intersection of language and culture more conspicuously than any other lexical stratum. Verbal phraseological units (VPUs) in particular occupy a privileged position because they encode culturally salient actions, social rituals, and moral evaluations in compact, imagistic form. When a speaker of Uzbek says *yuragi shu-shu qilmoq* ('one's heart flutters'), or a Russian speaker says *вешать лапшу на уши* ('to hang noodles on someone's ears', meaning 'to deceive'), or an English speaker says *to bite the bullet*, the communicative act goes far beyond the propositional content: it activates a rich frame of cultural knowledge shared among community members².

Linguo-culturology, established as a discipline in the 1990s through the foundational work of V.N.Telia³ and further developed by V.A.Maslova⁴, holds that language units carry cultural information that cannot be separated from their semantic structure. For VPUs

this claim is especially well-founded: the inner form of a phraseological unit — the motivating image preserved in its components — functions as a cultural icon, a condensed cultural text⁵. Cross-linguistic comparison of VPUs therefore offers a uniquely powerful instrument for mapping both shared and divergent cultural conceptualisations across speech communities.

Despite the growing body of bilingual and multilingual phraseological research, studies that simultaneously examine VPUs in Uzbek, Russian, and English from a linguo-culturological angle remain scarce. Uzbek, a member of the Turkic family with a millennia-long written tradition shaped by Islamic culture, Persian literature, and the Silk Road civilisation, contrasts sharply with Russian, a Slavic language marked by Orthodox Christian heritage and Eurasian steppe culture, and with English, a Germanic language whose phraseological stock reflects maritime exploration, Protestant ethics, and global commercialism⁶. A three-way comparison thus illuminates both universal tendencies of human cognition and the depth of culturally specific conceptual organisation.

The present study pursues three objectives: (1) to identify and classify the major linguo-cultural domains encoded in VPUs of the three languages; (2) to examine the mechanisms — metaphor, metonymy, symbolism, and allusion — by which cultural meaning is embedded in VPUs; and (3) to assess the degree of cultural equivalence between VPUs across the three languages and to describe patterns of culturally-conditioned divergence.

METHODS

The study adopts the linguo-culturological paradigm as its overarching framework. Telia's model of cultural connotation³ is used to analyse the evaluative, emotional, and symbolic layers of VPU meaning. This is complemented by Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory⁷, which explains how embodied experience is systematically mapped onto abstract domains, and by Kövecses's cross-cultural extension of that theory⁸, which accounts for both universal and culture-specific metaphorical patterns. Additionally, Dobrovolskij and Piirainen's symbolic approach to idiom semantics⁹ informs the analysis of culture-bound symbolic components in VPUs — particularly those involving colour, number, animal, and body-part symbolism.

Cultural equivalence between VPUs is assessed using Chernysheva's tripartite taxonomy¹⁰: full equivalents (identical denotative meaning, connotation, and imagery), partial equivalents (identical denotative meaning but divergent imagery or connotation), and non-equivalents (language-specific units with no direct counterpart). This classification is particularly revealing of linguo-cultural distance between communities.

The corpus for this study comprises 1,240 VPUs drawn from authoritative phraseological dictionaries: for Uzbek — Rahmatullayev's 'O'zbek tilining frazeologik lug'ati'¹¹ and Mamatov's monograph on Uzbek verbal phraseology¹²; for Russian — Fedorov's 'Frazeologicheskii slovar' russkogo literaturnogo yazyka'¹³ and Mokienko's comparative-historical dictionary¹⁴; for English — the Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms¹⁵ and Cowie's phraseological reference work¹⁶. Only VPUs with a clearly identifiable cultural component — body-part imagery, historical allusion, ritual reference, or nature symbolism — were retained, yielding a working corpus of 847 units (Uzbek: 263; Russian: 298; English: 286).

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each VPU was assigned to a primary cultural domain using a taxonomy derived from Maslova's linguo-culturological categories⁴: Body and Health; Labour and Craft; Nature and Cosmos; Social Relations and Morality; and Religious and Mythological Belief. Second, the

motivating image of each unit was examined to identify the underlying cultural metaphor or metonymic pattern. Third, cross-linguistic alignments were established by mapping semantically equivalent VPUs across the three languages and classifying them as full, partial, or non-equivalent. Fourth, cases of culturally-conditioned semantic shift — where a shared image produces divergent cultural evaluations — were isolated for detailed discussion. Inter-rater reliability for domain assignment was calculated at $\kappa = 0.84$ (two independent coders), indicating strong agreement¹⁷.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarises the distribution of the 847 VPUs across the five cultural domains. In all three languages, the Body and Health domain is the most productive (Uzbek: 31%; Russian: 28%; English: 34%), confirming the universality of bodily experience as a source domain for phraseological conceptualisation — a finding consistent with embodied cognition research⁷. The Social Relations and Morality domain ranks second in Uzbek (26%) and Russian (24%), while Labour and Craft ranks second in English (23%). The Religious and Mythological domain is proportionally largest in Uzbek (17%), reflecting the deep integration of Islamic discourse into everyday Uzbek phraseological imagery¹⁸.

The Nature and Cosmos domain shows interesting divergences: Uzbek VPUs draw heavily on agricultural and steppe imagery (wind, harvest, water channels — ariq), whereas Russian VPUs favour forest and winter imagery (frost, bear, blizzard), and English VPUs foreground maritime imagery (tide, anchor, ship), which is a direct consequence of Britain's seafaring history¹⁹. These domain-internal differences, even within a shared broad category, represent one of the clearest manifestations of linguo-cultural specificity.

Body-part VPUs constitute the most cross-linguistically populated category and simultaneously exhibit some of the sharpest cultural divergences. The heart (yurak / сердце / heart) is the most frequent body-part component across all three languages. In Uzbek, heart VPUs predominantly encode sincerity and emotional authenticity: yurakdan gapirmoq ('to speak from the heart', i.e., to speak sincerely) and yuragi toshday qotmoq ('one's heart turned to stone', i.e., to become indifferent). In Russian, the same organ encodes both emotional depth and social obligation: принять близко к сердцу ('to take close to heart') and кривить душой/сердцем ('to bend one's soul', i.e., to be dishonest). English heart VPUs carry a comparatively broader spectrum — from courage (to have heart) to romantic love (to lose one's heart) to memory (to learn by heart) — suggesting a more polysemous cultural

coding of the organ²⁰.

The hand (qo'l / рука / hand) is the second most frequent component and is particularly productive in the Labour domain. In Uzbek, qo'l VPUs frequently encode moral responsibility and purity: qo'li pok bo'lmoq ('to have clean hands', i.e., to be innocent) and qo'lini yuvmoq ('to wash one's hands of something'). The last of these represents a striking case of full cross-linguistic equivalence: Russian умыть руки and English to wash one's hands of something share not only the denotative meaning but also the cultural allusion to the Biblical narrative of Pontius Pilate²¹. This convergence across a Turkic and two Indo-European languages demonstrates that culture contact and shared textual heritage (here the Bible and the Quran's shared Abrahamic framework) can produce genuine phraseological universals.

Divergence appears, however, when we examine VPUs built on the eye (ko'z / глаз / eye). Uzbek eye VPUs overwhelmingly code social surveillance and envy — a reflection of the culturally prominent concept of ko'z tegishi ('the evil eye') rooted in pre-Islamic and Islamic folk belief²²: ko'z tegmoq ('the evil eye to strike'), ko'z qirini tashlash ('to cast a sidelong glance'). Russian eye VPUs more often code epistemic states: смотреть сквозь пальцы ('to look through one's fingers', i.e., to overlook) and не верить своим глазам ('not to believe one's own eyes'). English eye idioms foreground attention and awareness: to keep an eye on, to turn a blind eye, to open someone's eyes. The cultural weighting of 'eye' therefore shifts from social-superstitious (Uzbek) to epistemic-attentional (Russian and English) as we move across the three traditions.

Religious and mythological VPUs represent the zone of maximum linguo-cultural specificity. Uzbek VPUs in this domain draw on three layered traditions: pre-Islamic Zoroastrian and shamanistic belief, classical Islamic theology and Sufi poetry, and Soviet-era secularisation¹⁸. Expressions such as ruhini taslim qilmoq ('to surrender one's soul', i.e., to die) and tavba qilmoq ('to repent', lit. 'to do tawba') are transparently Islamic in origin. The Sufi conceptual system contributes metaphors of spiritual intoxication: may ichmoq ('to drink wine', meaning 'to attain spiritual ecstasy' in classical poetry), though in contemporary colloquial usage the spiritual dimension is often bleached²³.

Russian religious VPUs derive primarily from the Orthodox Christian tradition. Units such as отдать бору душу ('to give one's soul to God', i.e., to die), нести свой крест ('to carry one's cross', i.e., to endure one's burden), and воскреснуть из мёртвых ('to rise from the dead', figuratively 'to recover completely') anchor

everyday language to liturgical and Biblical imagery²⁴. A particularly productive Russian sub-group involves devil and folk-demonic imagery: чёрт возьми ('devil take it'), ни бору свечка, ни чёрту кочегра ('neither a candle for God nor a poker for the devil', i.e., good for nothing), reflecting the dual sacred-demonic cosmology of Slavic folk culture.

English religious VPUs predominantly reflect Protestant and Biblical heritage: to cast the first stone (John 8:7), to wash one's hands of (Matthew 27:24), to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), and to see the writing on the wall (Daniel 5). What distinguishes English from the other two languages is the coexistence of this Biblical stratum with a rich classical Greco-Roman layer: to have an Achilles heel, to open a Pandora's box, to be caught between Scylla and Charybdis. Neither Uzbek nor Russian draws as systematically on Greco-Roman mythology in its verbal phraseology, pointing to the specific role of Renaissance humanism in shaping English cultural-linguistic identity²⁵.

Labour-domain VPUs carry some of the most vivid socio-historical imprints. English is distinguished by an extensive set of maritime VPUs, a direct legacy of Britain's seafaring empire: to sail close to the wind (to take risks), to give a wide berth (to avoid), to show one's colours (to reveal one's true nature), to be in the same boat (to share a predicament)¹⁹. These expressions have undergone complete semantic bleaching in contemporary usage — speakers rarely consciously activate the maritime image — yet the cultural origin remains recoverable through etymological analysis.

Russian labour VPUs reflect an agrarian and artisan culture shaped by serfdom and collectivist social organisation: тянуть лямку ('to pull the strap', i.e., to do hard tedious work — from the barge-hauler's yoke), бить баклуши ('to split log ends', i.e., to idle — from a craft considered undemanding), and работать спустя рукава ('to work with sleeves down', i.e., to work carelessly — from peasant dress)²⁶. Soviet-era neologisms added another stratum: выполнять пятилетку ('to fulfil the five-year plan') entered fixed figurative usage meaning 'to accomplish a great deal quickly'.

Uzbek labour VPUs foreground silk-road craftsmanship, textile production, and agrarian irrigation culture: ip yigirib o'tirmoq ('to sit spinning thread', i.e., to gossip or waste time), suv quydek ('like poured water', i.e., with great ease — from canal irrigation), and yer haydamoq ('to plough the earth', i.e., to work very hard)¹². The prevalence of textile and water metaphors in Uzbek VPUs reflects the region's historical identity as both an agricultural oasis

civilisation and a centre of silk and carpet production.

Full equivalents — VPUs sharing denotative meaning, connotative loading, and motivating image — constitute 12% of the corpus (n=102). They cluster overwhelmingly in the Biblical and Abrahamic domain (e.g., to wash one's hands of / умыть руки / qo'lini yuvmoq) and in universal bodily experience (e.g., to turn one's back on / повернуться спиной к / orqasini o'girmoq). This small proportion confirms that genuine phraseological universality is the exception rather than the rule⁹.

Partial equivalents account for 54% of the corpus (n=457). These share denotative meaning but differ in imagery, connotation, or unarticulated cultural presuppositions. A representative trio: Uzbek o't yeb ketmoq ('to be eaten by grass', i.e., to be ruined), Russian запастись травой ('to be overgrown with grass', same meaning), and English to go to rack and ruin (no botanical imagery). The Uzbek and Russian units share a nature metaphor of neglect-as-vegetation, while the English equivalent deploys an architectural decay metaphor, encoding the same social evaluation through a different cultural lens²⁷.

Non-equivalents — culture-specific VPUs with no direct phraseological counterpart in the other two languages — constitute 34% of the corpus (n=288). Uzbek non-equivalents include units encoding concepts specific to Central Asian social life: gap o'tirmoq ('to sit for gap', i.e., to attend a regular social gathering of men or women — the gap being a culturally unique institution²⁸). Russian non-equivalents include авось да небось (reliance on chance — untranslatable because it encodes a culturally specific attitude to fate known as 'Russian avos'²⁴). English non-equivalents include to keep up with the Joneses (competitive consumption — reflecting a culturally specific Anglo-American preoccupation with social status display)¹⁹. These non-equivalents are the richest sites of linguistic-cultural information.

DISCUSSION

The results confirm the two-tier model of phraseological semantics proposed by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen⁹: a lower tier of embodied, experiential universals provides the cognitive raw material for VPU formation across all cultures, while an upper tier of culturally specific conceptualisations shapes the particular imagery, connotation, and social function of each language's phraseological system. The body-part domain demonstrates this architecture most clearly: the universality of bodily experience generates convergent source domains (heart, hand, eye, head), but the cultural meanings mapped onto those domains diverge systematically along the fault lines of each

community's history, religion, and social organisation.

Kövecses⁸ argues that cross-cultural variation in conceptual metaphor arises from two sources: differential salience of experiential sub-domains, and culturally imposed constraints on metaphorical elaboration. Our findings support this position. The 'eye = awareness/attention' mapping dominates in English and Russian because those cultures emphasise individual epistemic agency. In Uzbek, the additional 'eye = supernatural force' mapping reflects a collective-cultural belief system that assigns causal power to the gaze of others — a feature shared with many Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures and absent from mainstream Anglo-Saxon and Russian secular worldviews²².

Telia³ coined the notion of the 'inner form' (vnutrennyaya forma) as the motivating image underlying a phraseological unit. Our analysis reveals that the inner form functions as a compressed cultural narrative — a text within a word — that encodes historical events, social practices, and evaluative stances. The Russian unit бить баклуши encodes an entire micro-narrative about traditional woodcraft and the relative status of different manual occupations in pre-industrial Rus'²⁶. The English unit to show one's colours encodes a moment of naval battle — the raising of a warship's flag to identify national allegiance¹⁹. The Uzbek unit gap o'tirmoq encodes the distinctive social institution of the communal gathering, which has no equivalent social practice in British or Russian culture²⁸.

This narrative density makes VPUs particularly resistant to translation. Translators face a dilemma: a denotatively adequate translation necessarily discards the cultural text encoded in the inner form, while a culturally faithful translation risks denotative distortion. The high proportion of partial and non-equivalents in our corpus (88%) quantifies this challenge and underscores the need for cultural commentary in bilingual phraseological dictionaries.

An unexpected finding of the study is the extent to which shared textual heritage produces genuine cross-linguistic equivalents even across typologically distant languages. Biblical phraseologisms constitute the largest group of full equivalents in our corpus, present in all three languages because the Bible — in Uzbek mediated through the Quran's parallel narratives — has shaped the phraseological imagination of all three speech communities²¹. This demonstrates that cultural borrowing via sacred text is a powerful mechanism for phraseological universalisation, capable of transcending typological and genealogical language boundaries.

By contrast, Soviet-era borrowing produced a stratum of Uzbek-Russian phraseological convergence that is absent in English: both Uzbek and Russian share expressions related to Soviet institutional life (Uzbek: *rejani bajarmoq* — Russian: *выполнять план*, 'to fulfil the plan') that have no English equivalent and that are now receding from active use in both languages as Soviet institutional memory fades²³. This demonstrates the time-bound nature of politically driven phraseological convergence.

The findings carry specific implications for the teaching of phraseological competence in foreign language education. Research by Liontas²⁹ demonstrates that learners systematically underestimate the cultural loading of VPUs, treating them as lexical puzzles to be decoded compositionally. Our taxonomy of cultural domains and equivalence types provides a principled basis for sequencing VPU instruction: full equivalents can be introduced early with cross-linguistic transfer support, partial equivalents require explicit contrastive cultural commentary, and non-equivalents demand ethnographic contextualization before meaningful acquisition can occur.

For phraseological lexicography, the study endorses the proposal by Moon³⁰ for 'culturally annotated' dictionary entries that supplement the standard information (definition, example, register) with a brief cultural-historical note on the inner form. Our corpus analysis shows that such annotations are most urgently needed for the 34% of non-equivalent VPUs, which are simultaneously the most culturally informative and the most pedagogically challenging.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that verbal phraseological units in Uzbek, Russian, and English encode culture in a systematic, domain-organised manner that reflects each community's history, religion, geography, and social structure. The five cultural domains identified — Body and Health, Labour and Craft, Nature and Cosmos, Social Relations and Morality, and Religious and Mythological Belief — are present in all three languages, confirming the universality of human experience as the cognitive foundation of phraseological creativity. However, the specific imagery, connotative loading, and cultural presuppositions encoded within each domain differ substantially, as evidenced by the finding that only 12% of the corpus yields full cross-linguistic equivalents.

The analysis of the body-part, religious, and labour domains has illustrated the mechanisms by which cultural meaning is embedded in VPUs: through the inner form, which functions as a compressed cultural narrative; through conceptual metaphors shaped by

culturally salient experience; and through symbolic systems rooted in each community's sacred and folk traditions. The tripartite comparison has yielded three culturally distinctive profiles: Uzbek VPUs are shaped by Islamic theology, Sufi imagery, and Central Asian social institutions; Russian VPUs by Orthodox Christianity, Slavic folk cosmology, and agrarian-artisan life; English VPUs by Protestant Biblical heritage, classical Greco-Roman allusion, and maritime imperial experience.

The practical upshot of the research is clear: because VPUs are cultural texts as much as linguistic units, their adequate teaching, translation, and lexicographic description requires an integrated linguo-culturological approach that places imagery, cultural allusion, and community-specific knowledge at the centre of analysis alongside formal-semantic description. The tripartite framework developed in this study offers a replicable template for such analysis across other language combinations.

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