

A Cross-Cultural Semantic Analysis Of The Word “Black” In English And “Qora” In Uzbek: From Color To Connotation

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Abstract: The lexical item that denotes the basic chromatic category of “black” manifests a remarkable semantic mobility in many languages, migrating from a neutral designation of the darkest colour on the visible spectrum to a dense network of figurative, axiological and culture-specific meanings. Building on approaches from cognitive linguistics, ethnolinguistics and cultural semiotics, the research addresses two objectives: first, to trace the diachronic and synchronic trajectories of literal and figurative meanings of both lexemes; second, to reveal how culturally embedded value systems motivate convergences and divergences in their semantic extensions. A hybrid corpus consisting of the British National Corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the Uzbek National Corpus, complemented by a manually compiled sub-corpus of folklore, proverbs, media discourse and literary texts, was subjected to qualitative analysis supported by quantitative frequency measures. The findings demonstrate that although both lexemes share core symbolic associations with darkness, secrecy and moral negativity, the Uzbek qora displays a wider range of ambivalent or positive meanings linked to fertility, protection and social hierarchy, whereas English black is more rigidly polarised between negative and reclaimed positive values. The discussion interprets such asymmetries through the prism of cultural metaphor theory and historical contact influences. The study contributes to cross-cultural semantics by illuminating how identical perceptual stimuli generate distinct semantic constellations when refracted through different cultural lenses.

Keywords: Colour semantics; connotation; cognitive linguistics; cultural metaphor; lexical polysemy; corpus analysis.

Introduction: Colour terms occupy a privileged position in the linguistic world-view because they originate in universal perceptual experience while simultaneously absorbing culture-specific evaluations. Among them, the lexical item denoting “black” enjoys particular prominence, symbolising both the physical absence of light and a rich palette of ideological, emotional and social meanings. In Anglophone discourse the word black frequently indexes negativity, danger and mourning, yet it also performs identity-affirming functions in expressions such as Black Power or Black Lives Matter. The Uzbek word qora, etymologically cognate with Turkic roots signifying darkness, likewise operates beyond the literal chromatic sphere, permeating folklore expressions like qora non (“black

bread”, i.e., coarse but wholesome food) and socio-cultural labels such as qorachalik qilmoq (“to be devoted as a black servant”).

Previous scholarship on colour semantics has generally proceeded along two lines. A first line, exemplified by Berlin and Kay’s universalist model, proposes that basic colour categories emerge according to biologically determined stages, thereby implying cross-linguistic equivalence in semantic cores. A second line, advanced by Wierzbicka, Lakoff, Koptjevskaja-Tamm and others, foregrounds the role of cultural framing and metaphor in motivating divergent semantic developments. Studies devoted specifically to black in English establish its semantic dichotomy between darkness-evil metaphors and more recent empowerment re-

evaluations observable in African-American discourse. Uzbek linguistics, for its part, has documented the symbolic duality of qora, noting its association with both misfortune and power, yet systematic cross-lingual comparison remains scarce.

The present article addresses this lacuna by juxtaposing English black and Uzbek qora within a unified methodological design. The comparative vantage point promises to enrich theoretical models of lexical polysemy by scrutinising how a seemingly universal sensory category becomes differentially mapped onto moral, social and emotional domains. Furthermore, it bears practical relevance for translation studies, intercultural communication and language pedagogy, where unreflected literal transfers of colour terms often generate pragmatic misfires.

The introduction therefore sets out three research questions. First, what semantic patterns emerge from corpus evidence for black and qora, and to what extent do they overlap? Second, how are divergent cultural scripts reflected in figurative usages, idioms and collocations? Third, what historical, religious or socio-political processes catalysed semantic shifts in each language? By pursuing these questions the study aims to contribute to the growing body of cross-cultural semantics and to illustrate the dynamic interplay between universal perception and particularised value judgements.

The investigation adopted a mixed-methods design anchored in corpus linguistics and cognitive-semantic analysis. For English, tokens of black were extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), comprising fifteen million words drawn from fiction, press, academic and spoken registers. For Uzbek, the primary source was the Uzbek National Corpus (UzNC), supplemented by an original 1.2-million-word sub-corpus of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, proverb compilations, contemporary news portals and transcribed oral interviews collected by the author. All tokens were lemmatised to exclude homographs unrelated to colour (e.g., English surname Black).

Concordance lines were coded manually for semantic category following a modified version of Allan's colour semantics taxonomy, partitioning senses into literal chromatic reference, physical darkness, moral or emotional evaluation, social identity, symbolic ritual use and miscellaneous metaphorical extensions. Inter-coder reliability on a ten-percent random sample reached Cohen's $\kappa = 0.86$, indicating strong agreement. Frequencies were normalised per million words to control for corpus size discrepancies. Collocational

analysis employed log-likelihood statistics to identify significant lexical partners within a five-word window, thereby revealing entrenched idiomatic patterns.

To contextualise quantitative outputs, qualitative close readings of emblematic utterances were undertaken. In addition, diachronic semantic trajectories were reconstructed by consulting etymological dictionaries, historical texts dating back to Middle English and Chagatai Turkic sources, and secondary literature on religious symbolism in both cultural spheres. The combined procedure allowed a synthesis of empirical distributional evidence with culturally anchored interpretation, compatible with the cognitive-linguistic premise that meaning emerges from usage shaped by shared conceptual metaphors.

Corpus interrogation yielded 24 376 relevant instances of black in the English data set and 9 814 instances of qora in the Uzbek data. Literal chromatic reference constituted the single largest category in both languages but displayed different proportional weights: forty-two percent for English versus thirty-one percent for Uzbek. In the English corpus, figurative moral evaluation expressing evil, illegality or misfortune accounted for twenty-four percent of tokens, marked by collocations such as black market, blackmail and black mood. Uzbek qora showed a comparable but slightly lower frequency of negative connotations at nineteen percent, manifested in expressions like qora kun ("dark day" meaning hardship) and qora bozor ("illegal market").

Striking divergence appeared in categories expressing ambivalent or positive valuations. English positive reclamations of black constituted only six percent and were largely confined to identity-political contexts, for example Black excellence or Black culture. In contrast, Uzbek positive or honorific uses of qora reached thirteen percent. Typical examples included qora yer ("rich black soil"), signalling fertility and prosperity, and qorabayir (literally "black bay", a prized horse coat colour), which in epic poetry symbolises nobility and strength. An additional noteworthy Uzbek-specific category involved protective and apotropaic uses, as in qora koshka (burnt onion) employed in folk medicine; these tokens represented five percent of the data set and had no direct English parallel.

Collocational analysis revealed that English black frequently clusters with nouns denoting illicit commerce (market, money), emotional states (humour, despair), and racial or identity markers (American, community). Its most salient adjectival modifiers were intensifiers such as pitch and jet, strengthening the effect of physical darkness. Uzbek qora, by contrast, co-occurred with agrarian nouns

(tuproq “soil”, non “bread”), kinship and social roles (bola “child”, xizmatkor “servant”), and climatic references (bo‘ron “storm”), reflecting the agrarian and communal orientation of Uzbek semantic space.

Diachronic inspection indicated that English negative moral/metaphorical senses were already entrenched in Middle English biblical translations where darkness symbolised sin, while racial identity usages crystallised only in the seventeenth century transatlantic context. Uzbek data traced positive agricultural connotations back to pre-Islamic Turkic cosmology, where black represented the northern cardinal direction associated with earth and life-giving rain. The protective symbolism appears to derive from Zoroastrian and animist practices, subsequently assimilated into Islamic folk belief.

The comparative findings suggest that shared perceptual grounding in the absence of light cannot by itself account for the rich diversity of symbolic meanings attached to black and qora. Conceptual metaphor theory helps explain some convergences: in both languages darkness is mapped onto ignorance, secrecy and danger via the universal metaphor UNKNOWN IS DARK, corroborating Kövecses’ claim of bodily-rooted image schemas. Nevertheless, the asymmetry observed in positive or ambivalent valuations highlights the decisive role of cultural-historical framing.

In Anglophone societies, Judeo-Christian dualism that equates light with divine goodness and darkness with evil has exerted a long-lasting influence on evaluative polarities. The racialisation of black in colonial discourse further reinforced negativity by associating the term with enslaved bodies and marginalised identities. Contemporary empowerment discourses seek to invert or at least neutralise these inherited biases, yet corpus evidence demonstrates that such reclamation, while culturally salient, remains quantitatively marginal.

Uzbek usage reflects an alternative semiotic ecology. The steppe-agrarian worldview prioritised the fertility of black soil, and early Turkic myth cycles depict black as an elemental force tied to chthonic deities and productive labour. Islamic textual traditions introduced the eschatological symbolism of black flags heralding the Mahdi, thereby granting the colour a complex mixture of fear and hope. The coexistence of these layers explains why qora can label both calamity and prosperity without the discontinuity that characterises the English dichotomy.

In translation practice these findings warn against simplistic equivalence. Rendering English black market as qora bozor is straightforward because of semantic

overlap, yet translating black humour literally into Uzbek yields unintuitive results, suggesting that explicitation (achchiq hazil) may be preferable. Conversely, the Uzbek phrase qora non loses its pragmatic implication of modest but wholesome sustenance if rendered merely as black bread.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study affirms the utility of corpus-driven semantics combined with cultural hermeneutics. It also invites refinement of cross-lingual cognitive models by recognising that metaphoric schemas are filtered through differing ecological and historical experiences. Such recognition can enrich language pedagogy, lexicography and intercultural mediation by foregrounding the cultural embeddedness of seemingly universal categories.

The word black in English and its Uzbek equivalent qora share a literal reference to the darkest hue yet diverge markedly in their connotative spectra owing to distinct cultural, religious and socio-historical trajectories. While both lexemes participate in negative moral metaphors, qora retains a robust stratum of positive and protective meanings rooted in agrarian symbolism, contrasting with the more polarised evaluative profile of English black. These disparities underscore the importance of cultural semantics for accurate translation and intercultural understanding. Future research could extend the comparative lens to additional Turkic languages or employ experimental psycholinguistic methods to gauge speaker intuition about colour-based metaphors.

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