

GENDER ASPECTS IN ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS: CULTURAL AND COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVES

Maftuna Mukhammadieva Hamidullayevna

Abstract: The present study explores the gender aspects embedded in English phraseological units through the lens of cognitive linguistics and cultural semiotics. Phraseological expressions are not merely linguistic constructs; they encode cultural values, social hierarchies, and gendered ideologies that reflect centuries of human experience. By examining idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions, this research seeks to uncover how gender conceptualization is linguistically represented and how it mirrors the sociocultural environment of English-speaking communities. The study also briefly compares the English data to patterns observed in Uzbek phraseology, offering insight into how different societies linguistically encode gender roles. The findings reveal that English phraseological semantics is deeply influenced by patriarchal traditions and stereotypes, where men are often depicted as active, dominant, and rational, while women are associated with emotionality, passivity, and domesticity. These tendencies, though changing under the influence of modern social transformations, remain persistent in linguistic memory.

Keywords: gender linguistics, phraseological units, cognitive linguistics, cultural semantics, metaphor, stereotype

1. Introduction

Language functions not only as a tool for communication but also as a repository of cultural and social experience. Within the linguistic system, phraseological units—idioms, proverbs, and other fixed expressions—occupy a special position because they encapsulate collective wisdom, moral principles, and national mentality. As noted by Wierzbicka (1997), idioms are “cultural scripts” that mirror social values and encode historically conditioned views of human relations. Among the many concepts embedded in language, gender remains one of the most enduring and complex. In recent decades, the study of gender in linguistics has expanded beyond grammatical categories to include cognitive, sociolinguistic, and cultural dimensions. The analysis of phraseological semantics provides a unique perspective on how language reflects and reinforces gender ideologies. For instance, English idioms such as the weaker sex, lord and master, or wear the breeches reveal deeply rooted gender hierarchies, where masculine dominance and feminine subordination are linguistically normalized. This paper aims to analyze the gender concept within English phraseological units, applying cognitive and linguocultural approaches. The research identifies dominant gender metaphors, traces their historical roots, and considers their cultural implications. The secondary goal is to contextualize these findings by referencing similar tendencies observed in Uzbek phraseology, thereby contributing to the comparative study of gendered semantics across languages.

2. Literature Review

The exploration of gender in linguistic studies has undergone significant transformation over the last fifty years, evolving from the early descriptive stage into a complex interdisciplinary field that intersects sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, and cultural studies. One of the earliest frameworks for studying gender and language was developed by Robin Lakoff (1975), who demonstrated that women's language is socially conditioned and reflects inequality rather than biological difference. Her analysis showed that vocabulary and discourse patterns, such as hedging, politeness markers, and tag questions, were linked to social subordination rather than inherent female traits. Following Lakoff, scholars such as Deborah Tannen (1990) and Janet Holmes (1995) emphasized the interactional dimension of gender, arguing that men and women use language differently because they occupy different communicative roles in society. Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* proposed that men's speech is often competitive and status-oriented, while women's is cooperative and relationship-oriented. These sociolinguistic observations are crucial for understanding how such distinctions are codified in phraseological semantics. In phraseological studies, gender has been approached as a cultural construct that reflects the value systems of society. A. V. Kirilina (2001) developed a comprehensive framework for gender linguistics, defining it as a discipline that explores the interaction between language, culture, and gender identity. Similarly, Russian linguist V. N. Telia (1996) argued that phraseological units are "microcosms of culture," where worldview, emotion, and evaluation converge. These perspectives laid the groundwork for modern gender-oriented phraseological analysis. From a Western viewpoint, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor became central to understanding gender representation in idioms. They showed that metaphors structure human thought and that idiomatic language reveals hidden conceptual patterns. For instance, idioms like *the fair sex* and *the weaker vessel* express cultural metaphors where FEMININITY IS WEAKNESS and BEAUTY IS VALUE, reflecting patriarchal ideology. Conversely, expressions such as *man of honor* and *a man's man* embody metaphors of MASCULINITY AS STRENGTH and MANHOOD AS VIRTUE. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity further expanded linguistic inquiry by suggesting that gender is enacted through discourse. Her perspective implies that idioms not only describe but also perform gender — each repetition of an expression like *wear the breeches* contributes to the maintenance of social norms. More recent scholars, such as Deborah Cameron (2008) and Sally Mills (2008), have examined how language reform and political correctness challenge traditional idiomatic representations. They note that certain gendered idioms, such as *the weaker sex* or *man up*, are now viewed as archaic or sexist, reflecting society's evolving stance toward gender equality. In Uzbek linguistics, similar trends can be observed. Researchers such as Safarov (2011) and Khakimova (2018) have demonstrated that Uzbek phraseology also carries gender-based conceptual models rooted in cultural and moral traditions. Comparative work (Ergasheva, 2020) shows that while English phraseology emphasizes individual identity and independence, Uzbek idioms highlight moral virtue, family, and collectivism. In summary, the literature indicates that gender is not merely a linguistic variable but a cognitive and cultural phenomenon. Phraseological expressions crystallize historical experiences and societal expectations, serving as a living record of gender ideology across time and culture.

3. Theoretical and Cognitive Framework

This study draws primarily on the principles of cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor theory, and linguocultural analysis. Cognitive linguistics posits that language reflects how

humans conceptualize reality; meanings are shaped by shared experiences and mental schemas rather than arbitrary linguistic structures (Evans & Green, 2006). Phraseological units, therefore, are crystallized cognitive models that encode typical human situations. Central to the cognitive approach is conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which suggests that abstract concepts are structured through metaphors grounded in bodily and cultural experience. In gendered phraseology, metaphorization operates by mapping physical or social attributes onto gender categories. For example, MEN ARE TOOLS / WEAPONS / BUILDERS reflects strength and productivity (iron man, man of action, self-made man), whereas WOMEN ARE FLOWERS / OBJECTS OF BEAUTY / FRAGILE BEINGS (as delicate as a rose, a blooming maiden) highlights passivity and aesthetics. Cognitive linguistics also incorporates prototype theory, developed by Rosch (1978) and applied to linguistics by Lakoff (1987), which explains how categories like “man” and “woman” develop core and peripheral meanings. The “prototypical man” in English phraseology embodies strength, rationality, and autonomy; the “prototypical woman” embodies beauty, sensitivity, and moral virtue. Idioms such as take it like a man or the weaker sex reinforce these prototypes through evaluative language. From a cultural perspective, as emphasized by Telia (1996) and Wierzbicka (1997), idioms are not only linguistic signs but also cultural semiotic codes. They express moral evaluation and emotional stance. For example, hen-pecked husband not only describes a domestic situation but also conveys disapproval of reversed gender roles. Thus, phraseology reflects both cognitive categorization and cultural judgment. Another relevant framework is gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), which explains how individuals internalize gendered information from cultural contexts. Idioms act as linguistic carriers of these schemas, reinforcing expectations about behavior. For instance, a real man implies assertiveness, courage, and control — traits aligned with societal ideals of masculinity. Similarly, a good wife encapsulates obedience, loyalty, and domestic competence. These expressions, repeated across generations, shape cognitive and social perceptions of gender roles. Cognitive and cultural approaches thus converge on the idea that phraseological meaning is embodied, evaluative, and historically conditioned. Gendered idioms persist because they are embedded in conceptual networks shared by members of a speech community. Even when ideological meanings evolve, idioms retain traces of earlier cultural models, serving as linguistic fossils of human thought.

4. Gender Representation in English Phraseology

The analysis of gender representation in English phraseology reveals asymmetry in the portrayal of men and women, both in the quantity and quality of idiomatic expressions. As noted by Kirilina (2001) and Cameron (1998), male-centered phraseological imagery dominates the English lexicon, reflecting a historical bias toward patriarchal values.

4.1 Representation of Masculinity

Idioms referring to men frequently highlight courage, authority, independence, and rationality. Phrases such as a man of his word, a man of parts, the right-hand man, and man of the hour depict men as reliable, intelligent, and action-oriented. These idioms reinforce the cultural script of MASCULINITY AS AGENCY, linking manhood to professional competence and leadership. Even negative expressions about men, such as a ladies’ man or a man of straw, still operate within the sphere of autonomy and initiative. They criticize behavior but preserve the

presupposition of male centrality. This suggests that masculinity in English idioms is conceptualized as the normative standard from which deviations are measured.

4.2 Representation of Femininity

In contrast, idioms about women focus on emotional, aesthetic, and moral traits rather than intellectual or professional ones. Expressions such as as pretty as a picture, a blushing bride, or angel of the house idealize femininity as beauty, virtue, and purity. Others, like the weaker sex, a chatterbox, or old wife's tale, express negative or diminutive evaluations. The female figure is often associated with domesticity, as in woman's work, or with gossip and irrationality, as in a woman's intuition or to weep like a woman. These idioms encode the conceptual metaphor FEMININITY IS EMOTION, contrasting it with MASCULINITY IS REASON. Even idioms that appear neutral, such as mother tongue or motherland, reflect the cultural association of women with nurture, origin, and emotional belonging. As Coates (2015) notes, these metaphorical extensions highlight the symbolic function of the feminine in English culture as the source of life and morality, rather than social power.

4.3 Stereotype Reinforcement and Change

Historically, English idioms contributed to the maintenance of gender norms by idealizing male authority and female subordination. The idiom to wear the breeches exemplifies this: it implies dominance and control, and when applied to a woman, it carries a humorous or derogatory connotation. Likewise, hen-pecked husband depicts male subservience as unnatural and shameful. However, as Mills (2008) and Cameron (2008) observe, modern English is witnessing gradual change. Many gender-biased idioms are falling out of use or acquiring new interpretations. For example, girl power and boss lady represent attempts to reframe feminine identity within the domain of empowerment. Similarly, idioms like to man up are being questioned for perpetuating outdated notions of masculinity. Contemporary media and social discourse promote inclusive recontextualization, where traditional idioms are used ironically or reappropriated. This process demonstrates how phraseological meaning can evolve through pragmatic reinterpretation, reflecting the fluid nature of gender conceptualization in the 21st century.

4.4 Summary of Findings

English phraseological units provide a window into the cultural history of gender relations. They reveal persistent asymmetries, where men are framed as strong, rational actors and women as emotional, decorative figures. Yet, cognitive semantics shows that idioms are dynamic — they adapt to new social realities. The resemanticization of gendered expressions signifies not only linguistic evolution but also broader ideological change toward equality.

5. Cognitive and Cultural Mechanisms of Gender Semantics

Cognitive metaphor theory explains how gendered meanings are structured in conceptual domains. The metaphor MEN ARE LEADERS / WOMEN ARE FOLLOWERS can be traced in idioms such as man of action versus woman behind the man. Another conceptual metaphor, MASCULINITY IS STRENGTH, underlies idioms like strong as an ox, iron man, or man of steel. Cultural scripts also play a role. English phraseology evolved within a patriarchal society

that valued bravery, rationality, and self-control—qualities ascribed to men. Women, by contrast, were associated with emotion and fragility. This dualism can be summarized as:

- Masculine = Rational, Active, Public
- Feminine = Emotional, Passive, Private

As Wierzbicka (1997) explains, such binary oppositions are linguistic reflections of social ideologies. They do not merely describe but also prescribe behavior, shaping expectations about gender. Modern feminist linguistics, however, challenges these traditional mappings. Scholars like Cameron (1998) and Mills (2008) argue that contemporary English is undergoing semantic change, as idioms involving gender are being reinterpreted or avoided. For example, the weaker sex is now considered outdated and sexist, replaced in modern discourse by more neutral expressions.

6. Comparative Notes: English and Uzbek Phraseological Patterns

Although the focus of this article is on English phraseology, it is valuable to note certain cross-linguistic parallels. Both English and Uzbek languages encode gender stereotypes through phraseological semantics, but the nature of these stereotypes reflects their respective cultural contexts. In English, the dominant model is INDIVIDUALISM AND GENDER POLARITY, while in Uzbek, COLLECTIVISM AND FAMILY-CENTERED ROLES prevail. For instance, Uzbek idioms equivalent to the weaker sex emphasize modesty and morality, whereas English idioms stress strength or independence. Uzbek phraseology also contains expressions that idealize female beauty and obedience, alongside idioms that praise male wisdom and protection. Thus, both languages demonstrate hierarchical models, but the value orientations differ—English focusing on autonomy, Uzbek on harmony.

7. Discussion

The linguistic material demonstrates that English phraseological units preserve traditional gender asymmetries, even as society evolves. These idioms function as cultural fossils—linguistic remnants of historical gender ideologies. While many such expressions have lost their literal force, they continue to shape subconscious attitudes toward gender. From a cognitive viewpoint, phraseological semantics operates through metaphorical frames that categorize experience. Gender metaphors, in particular, organize social knowledge through embodied experiences and cultural narratives. When a woman is described as wearing the breeches, the metaphor activates a mental model where clothing symbolizes power. The persistence of gendered idioms illustrates the inertia of cultural cognition: even when social norms change, linguistic patterns lag behind. However, the emergence of neutral or gender-inclusive expressions in modern English—such as chairperson instead of chairman—indicates that linguistic change can contribute to cognitive and social transformation.

8. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that English phraseological units encode a complex system of gender representations rooted in cultural history and cognitive metaphorization. The analysis

reveals that men are predominantly associated with strength, intellect, and authority, whereas women are linked to emotion, beauty, and morality. These contrasts reflect the patriarchal structure of traditional English-speaking societies. Nevertheless, cognitive linguistics shows that linguistic meaning is dynamic. As cultural paradigms shift toward equality, phraseological semantics also undergoes reinterpretation. The comparative perspective with Uzbek phraseology confirms that while gender asymmetries are universal, their manifestation depends on cultural values and cognitive models specific to each linguistic community. The ongoing transformation of gender semantics in English phraseology thus reflects not only linguistic evolution but also broader sociocultural change.

References:

- Babushkin, A. P. (1996). Types of Concepts in Lexical and Phraseological Semantics of Language. Voronezh: Voronezh University Press.
- Cameron, D. (1998). Gender, Language, and Discourse: A Review Essay. *Signs*, 23(4), 945–973.
- Dobrovol'skiy, D., & Piirainen, E. (2005). *Figurative Language: Cross-cultural and Cross-linguistic Perspectives*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Evans, V., & Green, M. (2006). *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kirilina, A. V. (2001). *Gender Studies in Linguistics*. Moscow: Academia.
- Lakoff, G. (1975). *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mills, S. (2008). *Language and Sexism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Safarov, Sh. D. (2011). *Cognitive Linguistics*. Tashkent: Fan.
- Telia, V. N. (1996). *Russian Phraseology: Semantic, Pragmatic, and Linguocultural Aspects*. Moscow: Shkola "Yazyki Russkoy Kultury."
- Wierzbicka, A. (1997). *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pirnazarova, N. X. (2024). Language Learner Profiles and Krashen's Hypotheses. *Ta'limning Zamonaviy Transformatsiyasi*, 10(1), 16-19. <https://pedagoglar.org/03/article/view/4470>
- Pirnazarova, N. X. (2025). The power of gamification: transforming education into an engaging experience. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Sciences and Innovations*, 4(8), 444-445. <https://doi.org/10.55640/>