



**MEANING BEYOND WORDS: THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF PROVERBS IN
ENGLISH AND UZBEK DISCOURSES**

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Abstract: This article explores the pragmatic functions of proverbs in English and Uzbek discourse, focusing on how these concise expressions convey meaning beyond their literal content. Taking a cross-cultural perspective, this study analyzes how proverbs are used in communication to advise, persuade, criticize, and reinforce social norms. The findings reveal that while English proverbs often reflect individualism, practicality, and efficiency, Uzbek proverbs emphasize collectivism, morality, and respect for tradition. Through this comparative analysis, the article highlights both universal pragmatic strategies and culturally specific features, demonstrating the essential role of proverbs in shaping discourse and cultural identity.

Key words: proverbs, pragmatics, discourse, culture, Uzbek language, English language.

Introduction

Proverbs are much more than just old sayings; they are powerful expressions of collective wisdom that are deeply embedded in the way we communicate. They don't just sit there as decorative phrases; they perform essential pragmatic functions, guiding our conversations and behavior while passing down core cultural values. In both English and Uzbek, proverbs are a vital part of everyday life, serving as tools for persuasion, advice, and even subtle criticism. It's fascinating how such short phrases can carry such complex meanings, making them a perfect subject for pragmatic analysis.

A pragmatic approach allows us to look beyond what is said and instead focus on how, why, and in what context something is expressed. This is the key to unlocking the true communicative power of proverbs, helping us uncover the intentions, social norms, and cultural assumptions behind them. In the English tradition, proverbs often reflect a focus on the individual, prioritizing values like self-reliance and efficiency. On the other hand, Uzbek proverbs tend to embody the importance of community, tradition, and moral guidance. By analyzing their use side-by-side, we can identify universal strategies for using proverbs while also appreciating their unique, culturally specific features.

This article aims to dive into the pragmatic functions of proverbs in both English and Uzbek, showing their role in shaping meaning, reinforcing cultural identity, and enriching human communication across diverse contexts.

Analysis of Literature

Proverbs are one of the oldest and most widely studied forms of verbal art, functioning not only as stylistic devices but also as pragmatic tools that carry collective wisdom across generations. Scholars from folklore, linguistics, and cultural studies have long emphasized their value in shaping discourse, guiding behavior, and encoding cultural values.

As Mieder (2004) famously put it, proverbs are "short, generally known sentences of the folk that contain wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views." He stresses their universality, arguing that although specific wording varies across languages, their themes are strikingly similar, addressing human concerns such as work, morality, family, and social relations. For instance, the English proverb, "Actions speak louder than words," has its counterpart in Uzbek as "Gap emas,



amal muhim” (“Not words, but actions matter”), showing how universal ideas take culturally specific forms.

From a pragmatic perspective, proverbs have been analyzed as discourse strategies. Norrick (1985) provides one of the earliest systematic studies of the pragmatic functions of proverbs, identifying their role in conversation as argumentative reinforcements, persuasive devices, and markers of shared cultural knowledge. He points out that when a speaker uses a proverb like “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch,” they are doing more than providing information; they are performing a speech act of warning. This insight connects proverbs with Austin’s (1962) Speech Act Theory, which distinguishes between the literal utterance and its illocutionary force. Similarly, Seitel (1994) conceptualizes proverbs as metaphorical speech acts, emphasizing that their effectiveness depends on context, the speaker’s intention, and the hearer’s recognition of cultural references. For example, in an Uzbek setting, the proverb “El bilan borgan – elda qoladi” (“One who goes with the people will remain among the people”) may serve to encourage conformity and community spirit, while in English, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” performs a similar pragmatic function.

The cognitive processes behind proverb interpretation have also attracted scholarly interest. Honeck (1997) analyzes how speakers and hearers draw on mental schemas to understand figurative language. He argues that proverbs are interpreted not in isolation but through cognitive models activated by context. This aligns with Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory of conceptual metaphors, where proverbs often encode abstract concepts (e.g., life as a journey, time as money). Beyond individual pragmatics, proverbs have been shown to reflect broader social values. Dundes (1981) highlights their role as “miniature models of culture,” while Arewa and Dundes (1964) argue that proverbs act as “strategies of communication” in traditional societies. In English-speaking contexts, proverbs often stress individual responsibility (“God helps those who help themselves”), while in Uzbek culture they highlight collective values (“Birlikda kuch – tosh ko’tarilar” / “In unity there is strength”).

In the Uzbek linguistic tradition, several scholars have documented the moral, didactic, and cultural functions of proverbs. Yo’ldoshev (2001) emphasizes that Uzbek paremiology reflects the national mentality, with proverbs serving as carriers of ethical codes, respect for elders, and collective wisdom. For example, “Otangga rahmat, onangga rahmat” (“Thanks to your father, thanks to your mother”) encapsulates values of gratitude and kinship. Similarly, Karimova (2015) explores how proverbs contribute to intergenerational communication, particularly in oral tradition, where they serve as tools of moral instruction and socialization. Recent scholarship also reflects growing interest in cross-cultural paremiology. Litovkina (2019) demonstrates how proverbs are reshaped in modern contexts, including “anti-proverbs” or humorous modifications. Lau (2019) further shows how Chinese proverbs reveal culturally embedded perspectives, offering useful comparative insights. These works highlight that while proverbs are globally widespread, their pragmatic applications remain culturally specific.

Taken together, this body of scholarship suggests that proverbs are not merely ornamental or stylistic devices but pragmatic instruments of communication. They regulate discourse by offering advice, warning, justification, or criticism, while simultaneously reinforcing cultural identity. By examining English and Uzbek proverbs side by side, it becomes possible to identify both universal pragmatic strategies and unique cultural values, making them an invaluable subject for comparative linguistic analysis.



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