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LINGUOCULTURAL AND SEMANTIC FEATURES OF ASTRONOMICAL IMAGES IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK FOLK RIDDLES

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Abstract

This article explores the linguocultural and semantic features of astronomical images in English and Uzbek folk riddles. Particular attention is paid to the representation of the sun, moon, stars, day, and night as central elements of the natural world and as culturally meaningful images in oral tradition. The study aims to identify the ways in which astronomical phenomena are encoded through metaphor, comparison, personification, and symbolic description in the two languages. A comparative-descriptive approach is applied to examine the relationship between the literal characteristics of celestial bodies and their figurative representation in riddles. The analysis demonstrates that astronomical images are based on universal human observations, while their verbal realization reflects language-specific imagery, cultural associations, and traditional ways of interpreting the natural environment. The article also highlights the educational value of astronomical riddles in developing vocabulary, figurative thinking, and intercultural awareness.

Keywords: folk riddles, astronomical phenomena, sun, moon, stars, linguoculturology, semantic analysis, metaphor, symbolism, English, Uzbek.

1. Introduction

Folk riddles are among the oldest forms of oral verbal creativity. They reflect people's observations of the surrounding world and their ability to interpret familiar objects and phenomena through indirect descriptions. In different linguistic traditions, riddles perform not only an entertaining function but also cognitive, educational, communicative, and cultural functions.

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Nature has always been an important source of imagery in folklore. Among natural phenomena, astronomical objects occupy a special position because the sun, moon, and stars have influenced human life, time measurement, agricultural activities, navigation, and traditional beliefs. Their regular appearance and distinctive visual characteristics have made them productive sources of metaphorical and symbolic representation.

In English and Uzbek folk traditions, celestial bodies can be described through images of light, brightness, movement, shape, and position. The sun may be associated with warmth and life, the moon with a changing shape and the night sky, while stars are frequently connected with small points of light. These associations provide a basis for constructing riddle descriptions.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the semantic and linguocultural features of astronomical images in English and Uzbek riddles. The research focuses on the following objectives:

identifying the main astronomical concepts represented in riddles;

examining metaphorical and symbolic descriptions of celestial bodies;

comparing universal and culture-specific semantic associations;

determining the role of astronomical riddles in language and cultural education.

2. Theoretical Background

Riddles are compact verbal texts in which the object to be identified is concealed through indirect description. Their semantic structure generally consists of an implicit referent, a set of descriptive clues, and a process of interpretation by the listener.

From a linguistic perspective, riddles are particularly interesting because they demonstrate how meaning can be constructed through metaphor, analogy, comparison, personification, and contextual inference. The listener must move beyond the literal meaning of the words and identify the hidden object through its characteristic features.

Conceptual metaphor theory provides a useful framework for understanding this process. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrate that metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but also a means of organizing human conceptual experience. In riddles, an astronomical object may be conceptualized through a familiar object, person, or activity.

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For example, the sun can be represented as a lamp, a golden object, or a source of warmth. The moon may be described as a plate, a sickle, or a shining face. Such descriptions are based on similarities in shape, colour, brightness, or function.

It is important to distinguish between the natural phenomenon itself and its figurative representation. The word sun names a celestial body, whereas expressions such as golden lamp or heavenly light may function as metaphorical descriptions of that body.

3. Astronomical Images in English Riddles

English riddles frequently use concise descriptions and visual clues. Astronomical phenomena can be represented through their appearance, movement, and relationship with other elements of the natural environment.

The sun is commonly associated with brightness, warmth, and the beginning of the day. Its circular shape and luminous appearance make it comparable to familiar objects such as a lamp, a golden ball, or a burning light.

The following is an illustrative riddle constructed for linguistic analysis:

I rise without a ladder,
I shine without a flame,
I wake the world each morning.
What am I?
Answer: The sun.

The riddle is based on personification and the contrast between ordinary human actions and natural processes. The verbs rise, shine, and wake describe the sun through actions associated with living beings. The expression without a flame emphasizes the difference between sunlight and an ordinary source of fire.

Another illustrative example is:

I change my face throughout the month,
Yet never leave the sky.
Sometimes round and sometimes thin,
I silently pass by.
Answer: The moon.

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The semantic clues refer to the changing visible phases of the moon. The expression change my face uses personification, while round and thin describes the visual differences between its phases.

Stars can also be represented through metaphorical descriptions:

Thousands of tiny lights appear,
When darkness covers the land.
Answer: Stars.

The image of small lights is based on the visual appearance of stars in the night sky. The riddle uses contrast between darkness and brightness to make the answer recognizable.

These examples demonstrate that English astronomical riddles can be organized around visual perception, temporal sequence, and metaphorical personification.

4. Astronomical Images in Uzbek Riddles

Uzbek folklore also contains rich imagery associated with the sun, moon, and stars. These phenomena are closely connected with everyday life, traditional time perception, agricultural practices, and cultural symbolism.

In Uzbek, the sun is commonly represented through concepts of light, heat, warmth, and life. The moon is associated with its changing shape and brightness, while stars are frequently imagined as scattered points of light.

The following examples are original illustrative constructions in Uzbek:

Ertalab chiqadi, olamni yoritadi,
Kechga borib ufqqa botadi.
Javob: Quyosh.

The description is based on the daily movement of the sun as perceived by an observer. The verbs chiqadi, yoritadi, and botadi create a sequential structure and represent the sun as an active participant in the natural world.

Another example:

Osmonda bir kosa,
Ba'zan to'la, ba'zan yarim kosa.
Javob: Oy.

The moon is compared to a bowl through its changing visible shape. The comparison relies on a familiar household object and illustrates the use of everyday experience in constructing metaphorical descriptions.

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A further example:
Qorong‘ida ko‘rinadi,
Sanab bo‘lmas donalari.
Javob: Yulduzlar.
The stars are represented through the image of countless small objects. The expression sanab bo‘lmas donalari emphasizes their number and visual distribution.
These illustrative examples show that Uzbek riddle imagery can rely on familiar objects, natural observations, and expressive parallel structures.

5. Comparative Semantic Analysis

The comparison of English and Uzbek astronomical riddles reveals several shared conceptual patterns.
First, both traditions use visual similarity as a major principle of riddle formation. The circular shape of the sun and the moon can be associated with familiar round objects. The small visible points of stars can be compared with scattered grains, lights, or decorative elements.
Second, personification is an important mechanism in both languages. The sun may be described as rising, waking the world, or illuminating the surroundings. The moon may be represented as changing its face or silently moving across the sky.
Third, temporal relations contribute to the semantic structure of astronomical riddles. The contrast between day and night provides a recognizable framework for describing the appearance and disappearance of celestial bodies.
Astronomical image
English semantic associations
Uzbek semantic associations
Sun
Light, warmth, golden colour, beginning of the day
Yorug‘lik, issiqlik, hayot, kunning boshlanishi
Moon
Changing shape, night, brightness, circular form
O‘zgaruvchan shakl, tun, nur, kosa yoki o‘roqqa o‘xshashlik
Stars

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Small lights, numerous points, darkness
Mayda chiroqlar, son-sanoqsizlik, qorong‘ilik
Day
Light, activity, awakening
Yorug‘lik, mehnat, uyg‘onish
Night
Darkness, silence, stars, rest
Qorong‘ilik, sokinlik, yulduzlar, dam olish

The table presents broad semantic associations rather than statistically established frequencies. A larger corpus of authenticated riddles would be necessary to determine which images are most frequent in each tradition.

6. Universal and Culture-Specific Features

Astronomical riddles are based on phenomena that are observable by people across different geographical and cultural environments. This shared experience explains why the sun, moon, and stars appear in the folklore of many nations.

However, the linguistic expression of these phenomena may differ. One language may emphasize the shape of the moon through an everyday object, while another may highlight its movement or changing appearance. Such differences are influenced by traditional occupations, material culture, the natural environment, and habitual ways of describing the world.

The Uzbek examples above employ familiar objects such as a kosa (bowl), which provides an accessible image for describing the moon. English illustrative examples use expressions such as a shining face and tiny lights, emphasizing visual qualities.

These observations should not be interpreted as absolute differences between the two cultures. Both languages have diverse riddle traditions, and individual examples may share similar metaphors.

7. Educational and Translation Implications

Astronomical riddles can be used as effective materials in English language teaching. They encourage learners to interpret figurative meaning, infer hidden information, and develop vocabulary related to nature and the universe.

Teachers may organize several activities:

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Riddle identification: students read a riddle and identify the astronomical object.
Metaphor recognition: learners identify words and expressions used figuratively.
Comparative translation: students translate an Uzbek riddle into English while preserving its imagery.
Creative writing: learners compose a short riddle about the sun, moon, or stars.
Cultural discussion: students compare how the same celestial object is represented in the two languages.
Translation requires particular attention to cultural and semantic equivalence. A literal translation may preserve the basic meaning but fail to reproduce the original rhythm, imagery, or wordplay. Therefore, translators should consider both the intended answer and the descriptive mechanism of the riddle.

8. Conclusion

Astronomical images constitute an important semantic and linguocultural component of English and Uzbek riddles. The sun, moon, stars, day, and night are represented through metaphor, comparison, personification, and visual description.
The comparative analysis indicates that both linguistic traditions rely on universal human observations of the natural world. At the same time, the choice of images and their verbal realization may reflect different cultural experiences and linguistic conventions.
Astronomical riddles are valuable not only as folklore texts but also as materials for comparative linguistics, cultural studies, translation, and language teaching. Further research based on a systematically collected corpus of authentic English and Uzbek riddles would make it possible to identify more precise patterns of semantic and cultural correspondence.

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