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Where Does Cultural Specificity Reside? Material And Spiritual Concepts In The English And Uzbek Linguistic Worldviews

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Abstract. Comparative studies of concepts often assume that material concepts are largely shared across languages while spiritual concepts are where cultures part ways. This article tests that assumption on seven English and Uzbek concepts: three material (*uy* / *home*, *non* / *bread*, *pul* / *money*) and four spiritual (*ruh* / *soul*, *iymon* / *faith*, *vijdon* / *conscience*, *muhabbat* / *love*). The data come from explanatory, phraseological, etymological and paremiological dictionaries and from two comparable fiction collections compiled by the author (Uzbek 1,278,225 words, English 1,019,718 words). Each concept was placed in a nine-cell matrix (three components by three zones), and every feature was classified with a single lexicalization criterion as isomorphic, allomorphic, a lacuna candidate or open. The quantitative form of the hypothesis was not confirmed. Allomorphic features and lacuna candidates together make up 58.8% of the 51 features in the material group and 57.6% of the 85 features in the spiritual group. The qualitative form was confirmed. In material concepts the differences lie in the evaluative and figurative periphery, while in spiritual concepts the evaluative component belongs to the core, so the differences reach the core through the religious code and the evaluating authority. The article argues that the contrast between the two groups lies in where differences are located and what they consist of, not in how many there are.
Keywords: Linguistic worldview; concept; material and spiritual concepts; contrastive linguistics; conceptual metaphor; lexicalization; English; Uzbek

1. INTRODUCTION

Every language divides the world in its own way, and the study of how it does so has become one of the central tasks of anthropocentric linguistics. The notion of the linguistic worldview, developed in the Humboldtian tradition and later in Russian and Uzbek cognitive linguistics, rests on a simple observation. Speakers of different languages live in the same physical world, yet they name, group and evaluate its parts differently (Kubryakova, 2004; Maslova, 2001; Safarov, 2006). The concept, understood as a unit of knowledge that carries both content and evaluation, has become the main tool for describing these differences (Stepanov, 1997; Karasik, 2002).

A recent scoping review of linguistic worldview research shows that the field is large but methodologically uneven (Antonova et al., 2022). Many studies describe one concept in one or two languages, and their conclusions are hard to compare because each uses its own procedure and its own definition of what counts as a difference. One assumption, however, appears in many of them, usually without being stated. It holds that concepts with tangible referents, such as house or bread, are close to universal, while concepts of the inner world, such as soul or conscience, are where national specificity is concentrated. The assumption is intuitive. A house is a building everywhere, whereas conscience is a moral idea shaped by religion and social norms.

This article treats the assumption as a hypothesis and tests it on English and Uzbek. The two languages are genetically unrelated and belong to different religious and cultural traditions, which makes them a demanding test case. If the material–spiritual contrast is real, it should show up clearly in this pair. The research question is the following. Do material and spiritual concepts differ in the number of language-specific features, or in their location within the concept and their nature?

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical basis of the study combines two lines of research that are often kept apart. The cognitive line describes how a concept is structured. Conceptual metaphor theory shows that abstract domains are understood through more concrete ones, so that metaphors reveal the structure of thought rather than decorate speech (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Metonymy plays a similar role in linking parts of a domain (Kövecses & Radden, 1998). Frame semantics describes a concept as a set of slots filled by typical participants and situations (Fillmore, 1994), and prototype theory explains why some members of a category are felt to be better examples than others (Rosch, 1975). In the semantic-cognitive approach developed by Popova and Sternin (2007), these ideas are brought together in a field model with a core and a near and far periphery.

The cultural line describes what a concept means to its speakers. Stepanov (1997) defined the concept as a bundle of culture in the human mind, the form in which culture enters the mental world of a person. Karasik (2002) proposed a three-part structure with conceptual, figurative and value components, and stressed that evaluation is what distinguishes a cultural concept from a simple notion. Wierzbicka (1989) showed, on the material of English *mind* and Russian *dusha*, that the words for the inner person encode an ethnopsychology, a folk theory of what a human being is. Her later work on semantic primitives offers a language-neutral metalanguage for stating the shared core of such words (Wierzbicka, 2021).

For a contrastive study, the key methodological problem is the basis of comparison. Krzeszowski (1990) argued that no comparison is possible without an explicit *tertium comparationis*, and that its choice determines what will count as similar or different. Conceptual studies rarely make this basis explicit. The present study uses a two-level basis. The general basis is the conceptual core of each concept, stated in terms that do not depend on either language, and the immediate bases are the cells of a single matrix.

Religious concepts raise an additional problem. Slingerland (2004) proposed using conceptual metaphor theory as a method for comparative religion, and Richardson, Mueller and Pihlaja (2021) showed how cognitive linguistics can describe religious language without reducing it to doctrine. Both works suggest that the religious layer of a concept should be studied through its linguistic form, not through theology. This principle was adopted here.

Individual concepts of the present sample have been studied in English, Uzbek and related languages. The home concept was compared in Uzbek, English and Russian by Mirzayeva (2025). The paradigmatic structure of bread verbalizers in Uzbek and English was described by Buzurkhanova (2025). Vorkachev (2007) produced a detailed model of love as a linguocultural concept, Karandashev (2019) gave a cross-cultural psychological account of love, and Tadjiyeva (2024) analysed anthropomorphic metaphors of love in English and Uzbek. Veremchuk (2023) identified ontological metaphors of conscience in English aphorisms, and Mamnazarova (2025) proposed a cognitive approach to the Uzbek *vijdon*. These studies supply valuable material, but each uses its own categories. None of them compares material and spiritual concepts with a single procedure, which is the gap the present article addresses.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. The sample of concepts

Seven concepts were selected on five criteria. Each concept belongs clearly to the material or the spiritual group. Each has the status of a cultural constant, which is supported externally by the fact that all seven have separate entries as basic concepts in Stepanov's (1997) dictionary of constants. Each has a one-word name and a separate entry in the explanatory dictionaries of both languages, which provides a basis for comparison. Each is represented in phraseology and proverbs by enough material for analysis. Finally, the sample covers the field systematically. The material group represents three basic spheres of human life, shelter, food and exchange, and the spiritual group takes a concept from each of its three subgroups. The material group includes *uy* / *home*, *non* / *bread* and *pul* / *money*. The spiritual group includes *ruh* / *soul*, *iymon* / *faith*, *vijdon* / *conscience* and *muhabbat* / *love*.

Two criteria were used to assign a concept to a group. The first is whether the referent belongs to the world of objects or to the inner world. This criterion alone is not sufficient, because spiritual concepts are named and pictured in language as if they were objects. One can *pour out one's soul*, and in Uzbek *iymon* can be "brought" (*imon keltirmoq*). The second criterion therefore concerns the place of evaluation. In a material

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concept evaluation is peripheral, since bread is first of all food. In a spiritual concept evaluation is part of the core, since conscience cannot be described without saying that having it is good. Taken together, the two criteria divide the seven concepts into two groups. Within the spiritual group, a further distinction was drawn by the evaluating authority. In religious-mental concepts (*soul*, *faith*) evaluation comes from religious tradition, in moral-emotional concepts (*conscience* and its neighbours) it comes from the community or the individual, and in the emotional concept (*love*) the first question is not evaluation but the direction of attachment.

3.2. Sources

Three kinds of sources were used, each answering a different question. Dictionaries show the form in which a feature has become fixed in the language. The Uzbek side drew on the five-volume explanatory dictionary (*O‘zbek tilining izohli lug‘ati*, 2006–2008), the phraseological and etymological dictionaries of Rahmatullayev (1978, 2000) and two proverb collections (Berdiyorov & Rasulov, 1984; Mirzayev et al., 2005). The English side drew on Kunin’s (1984) English–Russian phraseological dictionary, the *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (Ayto, 2020), the *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Speake, 2015) and the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (Hornby, 2000).

Fiction shows how a feature lives in discourse. Two collections of comparable size were compiled: 1,278,225 words of Uzbek prose and 1,019,718 words of English prose. Frequencies were calculated per million words (ppm) after duplicate pages and licence text had been removed. The collections differ in genre and period. The English collection is dominated by novels of the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, while the Uzbek one consists mainly of twentieth- and twenty-first-century prose, much of it short stories. Frequency ratios are therefore read as indications of direction, not as exact measurements.

Associative data show the place of a feature in the minds of speakers. For English, the Small World of Words norms were taken as the reference (De Deyne et al., 2019). The Uzbek association survey, built on the same protocol, has been prepared but not yet conducted, so its results are not reported here.

3.3. Procedure and the lexicalization criterion

Each concept was analysed in seven steps: the nominative field, the frame and its slots, metaphorical models, the degree of prototypicality, the phraseological and proverbial layer, axiological evaluation, and placement in a nine-cell matrix. The matrix crosses three components (conceptual, figurative, value) with three zones (core, near periphery, far periphery). Each cell is filled in parallel for both languages.

Every feature identified in the matrix, or in a table of metaphorical models or value axes, was classified with a single criterion based on lexicalization:

- **isomorphic**, if the feature is recorded at the level of dictionary or proverb in both languages;
- **allomorphic**, if it is recorded in a dictionary or proverb in one language and only in discourse in the other;
- **lacuna candidate**, if it is found in one language and not found in the other;
- **open**, if one side has not been checked or the evidence comes from a single author or a secondary source.

The term “lacuna candidate” was chosen deliberately. Absence from dictionaries and from a corpus of one million words does not prove absence from the language, and the status of each candidate is to be finalised after the associative survey. Because the same criterion was applied to all seven concepts, the counts can be compared across concepts and groups. Before a difference was interpreted as cultural, it was first checked for a typological or systemic cause, such as borrowing or polysemy. Only differences without such a cause were treated as culture-specific.

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4. RESULTS

4.1. The quantitative picture

Table 1 summarises the classification of features in the two groups.

Table 1. Distribution of features in material and spiritual concepts

Group	Isomorphic	Allomorphic	Lacuna candidate	Open	Total
Material (3 concepts)	15 (29.4%)	17 (33.3%)	13 (25.5%)	6 (11.8%)	51
Spiritual (4 concepts)	28 (32.9%)	33 (38.8%)	16 (18.8%)	8 (9.4%)	85

If the common assumption were correct, the share of isomorphic features would be clearly higher in the material group, and the share of allomorphic features and lacunae would be clearly higher in the spiritual group. Neither is the case. Allomorphic features and lacuna candidates together account for 58.8% of the material features and 57.6% of the spiritual ones, a difference of 1.2 percentage points. The share of isomorphic features is even slightly higher in the spiritual group. In terms of numbers, the two groups are practically indistinguishable.

Two reservations apply. First, the counting units are not identical across the table, since they include matrix cells, metaphorical models and value axes. Second, the result depends on how combined features are counted. In the matrices of *soul* and *faith*, features of the type "isomorphic model, allomorphic name" were counted as allomorphic. If they were counted as isomorphic, the distribution for these two concepts would change from 14 isomorphic and 22 allomorphic features to 26 and 10. The percentages are therefore indicators, not proof. They are, however, sufficient to show that the quantitative contrast expected by the hypothesis does not appear.

The frequency data point in the same direction for the material group. The order of the three concepts is the same in both collections. In Uzbek, *uy* occurs at 2,674.0 ppm, *pul* at 688.5 ppm and *non* at 509.3 ppm. In English, *home* and *house* together occur at 1,359.2 ppm, *money* at 275.6 ppm and *bread* at 89.2 ppm. The Uzbek figures are higher for all three concepts, by a factor of 2.0 for *uy*, 2.5 for *pul* and 5.7 for *non*. The last ratio is the most telling, and it matches what the qualitative analysis shows about the place of bread in Uzbek culture.

4.2. Material concepts: a shared core and a culture-specific periphery

In all three material concepts the conceptual core is isomorphic. *Uy* and *home* both denote a dwelling and the space of a family. *Non* and *bread* both denote basic food and, by extension, livelihood, as in Uzbek *non topmoq* and English *earn one's bread* or *daily bread*. *Pul* and *money* both denote a means of payment and a substance that multiplies by itself, as in the near-identical proverbs *Pulni pul topar* and *money begets money*.

The differences lie in the periphery. For *uy* / *home*, the value component points in different directions. In Uzbek proverbs, the worth of a house is measured by who lives in it: *Qizli uy — bo'ston, qizsiz uy — zimiston* ("A house with a daughter is a flower garden, a house without one is darkness"), *Bolali uy — bozor, bolasiz uy — mozor* ("A house with children is a bazaar, a house without them is a grave"). Marriage itself is lexicalized through the word for house, since the second meaning of *uysiz* is "unmarried". In English the house is valued as one's own inviolable space and as a place of return, as in *East or West, home is best*. The Uzbek house is a social and family category, the English home an individual and territorial one.

Uy / *home* is also the only material concept with a nominative asymmetry. One Uzbek word, *uy*, covers a field that English divides among *house*, *home* and *room*. Here the language with several names is English, which is worth remembering when the spiritual group is considered below.

For *non* / *bread*, both languages also have a sacred layer, but it takes different forms. In Uzbek, bread is made sacred through ritual, custom and personification: the custom of breaking bread (*non sindirish*), the word *nonko'r* for an ungrateful person, and the proverb *Osh — avliyo, non — payg'ambar* ("Pilaf is a saint, bread is a prophet"). Even a crumb is protected: *Non ham non, ushog'i ham non* ("Bread is bread, and its crumb is bread too"). In English, the sacred meaning lives mainly in lexicalized biblical quotations whose source is

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known to the dictionary, such as *daily bread* (Matthew 6:11) and *man cannot live by bread alone* (Matthew 4:4). The model BREAD IS MONEY, together with the political image of *bread and circuses*, is found on the English side only.

For *pul* / *money*, the conceptual core and several metaphors are shared. MONEY IS SPEECH appears in *Pul tilni biyron, dastni daroz qilar* ("Money makes the tongue eloquent and the hand long") and *money talks*. MONEY IS WATER appears in *Pul bo'ldi — kul bo'ldi* and *spend money like water*. The difference concerns the criterion of evaluation. In Uzbek, money is judged on a religious-ethical axis of the permissible and the forbidden: *Haromdan ming tanga, haloldan bir tanga* ("A thousand coins from the forbidden, one coin from the lawful"). In English, moral evaluation of money comes from a biblical quotation (*the love of money is the root of all evil*) and from a pragmatic, moderate pole represented by *money is a good servant, but a bad master*. The model MONEY IS TIME (*time is money*) has no systemic equivalent in Uzbek proverbs, while the Uzbek personification of money as a parent (*Pulning onasi — tiyin*, "The mother of money is the small coin") has none in English. Both are lacuna candidates, and both lie in the figurative periphery.

The concept *pul* also turned out to sit on the border between the groups. Its value layer is directly opposed in Uzbek to *iymon* and *vijdon*, as in the collocation *vijdonni pulga sotmoq* ("to sell one's conscience for money"). Membership in a category is a matter of degree, and a border member of this kind is to be expected (Rosch, 1975).

4.3. Spiritual concepts: differences that reach the core

In the spiritual group the conceptual core is again largely shared. *Ruh* and *soul* both denote an essence that separates from the body, survives death and comes from a divine source. *Iymon* and *faith* both denote belief in God and trust in general. But because evaluation belongs to the core of these concepts, differences in evaluation also reach the core.

The first difference is nominative, and it runs in the opposite direction to the one seen in *uy* / *home*. In the spiritual group, one English name regularly corresponds to several Uzbek names. *Soul* corresponds to Arabic *ruh* and Persian-Tajik *jon*, which divide the religious core between them. The field of *love* is shared in Uzbek by *muhabbat*, *sevgi*, *ishq* and *mehr*, and the seat of love has four Uzbek names (*ko'ngil*, *yurak*, *dil*, *qalb*) against one English *heart*. The Uzbek dictionary gives *vijdon* in one chain with *insof* ("fairness"), *diyonat* ("integrity"), *or-nomus* ("honour"), *hayo* ("modesty") and *iymon*, while English phraseology keeps the neighbouring notions in separate entries. This asymmetry has a typological cause. Uzbek retained Arabic and Persian borrowings alongside Turkic words and distributed meanings among them, while English kept a single name.

The second difference concerns the religious code. In English, religious content is preserved in biblical idioms and quotations whose source dictionaries record, while the phraseology of *faith* itself is largely secular, expressing loyalty, honesty and guarantee (*good faith*, *bad faith*, *on the faith of*). In Uzbek, concepts of Islamic belief have entered moral and everyday proverbs without any marked source: *Chin boylik — imon boyligi* ("True wealth is the wealth of faith"). The explanatory dictionary itself records the secular meanings of *imonli* ("honest, conscientious") and *imonsiz* ("without conscience").

The third difference concerns the evaluating authority, and it is clearest in *vijdon* / *conscience*. Of the fourteen metaphorical models of inner control, four are isomorphic. Conscience as a gnawing creature (*Vijdonning tishi yo'q, lekin u qajib o'ldiradi*, "Conscience has no teeth, but it gnaws one to death", and *the worm of conscience*), as pain (*vijdon azobi*, *the pangs of conscience*), as purity (*sof vijdonli kishilar*, *a clear conscience*) and as possession are lexicalized in both languages. Four models are allomorphic. Conscience as a judge (*A guilty conscience needs no accuser*), as a voice (*still small voice*), as a burden (*lie heavy on one's conscience*) and as a pillow (*A clean conscience is a good pillow*) are fixed in English dictionaries and proverbs, but in Uzbek they appear only in discourse, for instance *vijdon ovozi* ("the voice of conscience") in fiction. Two models are Uzbek lacuna candidates. One presents conscience as a person or a word ("Шоирнинг виждони эса сўз", "The poet's conscience is the word"), the other presents it as a being that may outlive its owner ("Одам ўлса виждони ҳам қўшилиб ўлади, деб ўйлайсанми?", "Do you think that when a man dies his conscience dies with him?"). The remaining four models (scale, ship, compass, mirror) are open.

The pattern is clear. In English, conscience is metaphorized systematically as an inner authority that judges, speaks and lets one sleep. In Uzbek, it is expressed mainly as a felt state of torment and pain. The

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neighbouring notions confirm this. In Uzbek the authority is the eye of the community. Honour (*nomus*) belongs to the family and the people, shame comes in the impersonal form *uyat bo'ladi* ("it will be shameful"), and fairness is asked of God. In English the authority is the individual and the contract, honour is pledged by one's word, and shame is an inner discomfort. Frequencies support this picture: *vijdon* occurs at 25.0 ppm in the Uzbek collection and *conscience* at 58.8 ppm in the English one, while Uzbek *uyat* (79.8 ppm) and *insof* (75.1 ppm) are both more frequent than *vijdon*.

Muhabbat / *love* shows how the direction of attachment, not evaluation, shapes an emotional concept. In both languages love arises by "falling", but the direction differs. In Uzbek, love falls upon a person (*ishqi tushdi*) and the person gives away his heart (*ko'ngil bermoq*). In English, the person falls into love (*fall in love*, *over head and ears in love*) and stays inside it, so that love works as a container. Of nine metaphorical models, four are isomorphic. They include LOVE IS BLINDNESS (*Muhabbatning ko'zi — ko'r*, *Love is blind*) and LOVE IS A LIVING BEING (*love begets love*). Four are allomorphic, among them LOVE IS FIRE, which Uzbek lexicalizes with the word for love itself (*Ishqsiz ko'ngil — o'tsiz o'choq*, "A heart without love is a hearth without fire"), while English idioms express it without the word *love* (*carry a torch for*, *an old flame*). One model remains open. All nine cultural codes are present in the proverbs of both languages, but the leading code differs. In English proverbs the somatic code dominates (25.0%), while in Uzbek proverbs the code of everyday objects (19.0%) and the somatic code (18.4%) are nearly equal.

4.4. The nature of the lacunae

The lacunae themselves differ between the groups. In the material group, lacuna candidates are mainly metaphorical models, such as MONEY IS TIME or HOME IS LIGHT (*Xotin — uyning chirog'i*, "The wife is the lamp of the house"). In the spiritual group they are whole names and whole ideas. They include the unitary name *mehr* for warm, caring love, the notion of *andisha* (considerate restraint), the idea of *insof* as a gift from God, and the blessing of parents and the spirits of ancestors. On the English side the spiritual lacunae include the eyes as the window of the soul, the contract model of faith and the competition model of shame. On both sides, the lacunae cluster around particular values. On the Uzbek side these are religious and communal, on the English side contractual and competitive.

5. DISCUSSION

The main finding is that the material–spiritual contrast is real but is not a matter of quantity. If one counts features, material and spiritual concepts look the same, with a little over half of their features language-specific in both groups. The contrast becomes visible only when one asks where these features are located and what they are. In material concepts, specificity stays outside the core, in the evaluative and figurative periphery. In spiritual concepts, evaluation is part of the core, so specificity reaches it through the religious code and the evaluating authority.

This result supports Karasik's (2002) view that the value component is what makes a concept cultural, and adds a structural specification. The decisive question is not whether a concept has a value component, since all seven do, but whether that component sits in the core or in the periphery. The two criteria used for grouping the concepts thus have an empirical correlate. The place of evaluation decides where cultural specificity will appear.

The finding also bears on Wierzbicka's (1989) argument about the ethnopsychology encoded in words for the inner person. The English material confirms that *soul*, *conscience* and *love* are conceptualized through spatial and agentive models: a container, an inner judge, a state one falls into. The Uzbek material shows a different strategy. Inner states are named directly and in several synonyms, and they are evaluated with reference to God and the community. Both strategies are coherent. The comparison describes them without ranking them, and this restraint is an ethical condition of contrastive work on worldviews.

Methodologically, the results show why a single criterion matters. Many earlier studies call any difference "national specificity", which makes it impossible to tell whether a difference is cultural, typological or simply an artefact of the sources. The lexicalization criterion makes such decisions explicit and repeatable. The fiction collections refined several of them. A metaphorical model that had been classified from dictionaries as a lacuna candidate turned out to occur in discourse and was moved to the allomorphic class. Dictionaries, fiction and associative data answer different questions, and none of them can replace the others.

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The study has limitations. The counting units are heterogeneous, and the totals depend on the rule for combined features, which is why the percentages are presented as indicators. The two fiction collections differ in period and genre, so frequency ratios show direction only. The far periphery of the matrices and the final status of the lacuna candidates depend on the Uzbek associative survey, which has not yet been carried out. The survey will collect free associations, definitions, prototype choices, acceptability ratings of metaphorical expressions and familiarity with proverbs from at least one hundred native speakers. It will make it possible to check whether calques of English models, such as “time is money”, are accepted by speakers. It will also test whether the material–spiritual boundary is reflected in speakers’ own ratings.

6. CONCLUSION

The study compared seven English and Uzbek concepts with one procedure and one criterion for classifying features. The expected quantitative contrast did not appear, since allomorphic features and lacuna candidates make up 58.8% of features in material concepts and 57.6% in spiritual ones. The qualitative contrast was confirmed. In material concepts the conceptual core is shared and specificity lies in the periphery. In spiritual concepts evaluation belongs to the core, and specificity reaches it through the religious code and the evaluating authority. The lacunae also differ in kind, being mainly metaphorical models in the material group and whole names and ideas in the spiritual group. The proposed matrix and criterion can be applied to other concepts and other language pairs, and the planned associative survey will complete the description of the far periphery.

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