

Article

Semantic Connotations and Translation Challenges of Color-coded Phraseological Units in Uzbek and English

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Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the semantic connotations and translation challenges of color-coded phraseological units in Uzbek and English. Color symbolism represents a linguoculturally marked phenomenon reflecting national mentality, historical experience, and collective worldview. Phraseological units containing color components frequently exhibit metaphorical, evaluative, and emotional meanings that are deeply rooted in culture and are often resistant to direct translation. The study aims to identify universal and culture-specific semantic connotations of color terms, analyze the main difficulties encountered in translation, and propose effective translation strategies. The research is based on comparative, semantic, and contextual analysis of idiomatic expressions from both languages. The findings highlight the decisive role of cultural competence, pragmatic awareness, and functional equivalence in translating color-based phraseological units.

Keywords: Phraseology, Color Symbolism, Semantic Connotation, Translation Challenges, Intercultural Communication, Uzbek, English.

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1. Introduction

Language is more than just a tool for communication; it is a "living archive" of a nation's history and soul [1]. Among the most colorful parts of any language are phraseological units (idioms). These are fixed expressions where the meaning isn't found in the individual words, but in the cultural story behind them. Specifically, color-coded idioms (e.g., "out of the blue" or "oq yo'l") act as a bridge between what we see with our eyes and what we feel in our hearts. Every culture uses colors differently to describe emotions, historical experience, and social status [2].

The primary goal of this article is to analyze the linguistic and cultural differences between color-based idioms in English and Uzbek. Specifically, it aims to identify how specific colors (such as Black, White, Blue, and Red) carry different symbolic meanings in both languages [3]. It also seeks to examine the common mistakes made when these idioms are translated literally [4], and to provide a set of reliable strategies for translators to transfer these expressions from one culture to another without losing their "flavor."

In our globalized world, a "word-for-word" translation is no longer enough.

Cultural sensitivity is essential, as understanding color idioms helps prevent "pragmatic failure," a situation in which a translator produces a grammatically correct expression that is nevertheless culturally inappropriate, offensive, or confusing. Effective communication is particularly important for diplomats, businessmen, and students

moving between Uzbekistan and English-speaking countries, since recognizing that “green” may signify “nature” in Tashkent but “jealousy” in London is crucial for ensuring clear and accurate interaction [5, 6]. In addition, this research has academic value, as it contributes to the expanding field of cognitive linguistics by demonstrating that the way people perceive and interpret the world is strongly influenced by the language they speak. The main challenge lies in the fact that color idioms are rarely transparent. In English, for example, if someone is “feeling blue,” it means they are sad, whereas in Uzbek, if a person’s “eyes are blue” (ko’zi ko’k), it is typically a literal physical description or may suggest a particular ethnic appearance, and it does not convey the sense of sadness found in the English expression [7, 8]. Because of this “gap,” a literal translation often leads to a semantic distortion (a change in meaning). This article explores how to bridge that gap using professional translation techniques.

2. Materials and Methods

Linguistic Nature of Phraseological Units. Phraseological units are stable, reproducible combinations of words characterized by semantic integrity and idiomatic meaning. Unlike free word combinations, their overall meaning cannot be derived from the sum of individual lexical meanings.

Key features of phraseological units include:

Stability

Idiomaticity

Reproducibility

Expressiveness

Color terms enhance these features by intensifying expressiveness and evaluative meaning. When a color element enters a phraseological unit, it often loses its literal reference and acquires symbolic significance, making interpretation and translation more complex.

3. Results and Discussion

Theoretical Approaches to Color Symbolism. Color symbolism has been extensively studied in linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and cultural studies. While human perception of color is biologically universal, the symbolic interpretation of colors is culturally constructed [9]. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, colors act as a conceptual metaphor. From a cultural-linguistic perspective, colors encode traditions, beliefs, and collective experiences. In phraseology, these symbolic meanings become conventionalized and culturally fixed. As a result, identical colors may evoke different emotional or evaluative associations in different languages, which is a crucial issue for translators [10].

Color-coded Phraseological Units in English. English phraseology demonstrates a highly developed system of color symbolism. For instance, black is commonly associated with negative meanings such as illegality, secrecy, and depression, as reflected in expressions like “black market,” “black mood,” and “black list.” White, by contrast, generally conveys positive meanings, including purity, legality, and honesty, as seen in phrases such as “white lie” and “white-collar worker.” Red typically signals strong emotions, danger, or financial loss, which can be observed in expressions like “to see red” and “in the red.” Green is often linked to youth, inexperience, or ecological awareness, as illustrated by terms such as “greenhorn” and “green energy.” These connotations have been shaped by historical, social, and cultural factors in English-speaking societies and are deeply entrenched in collective consciousness [11, 12].

Color-coded Phraseological Units in Uzbek. In Uzbek linguistic culture, color symbolism is closely connected with folklore, traditions, and everyday life.

Oq (white) symbolizes purity, honesty, blessing, and moral integrity

Qora (black) often conveys hardship, grief, or misfortune

Ko'k traditionally covers both blue and green and symbolizes: the sky, youth and vitality, nature and life

This semantic breadth reflects the historical nomadic worldview and close connection with nature [13, 14]. Such meanings frequently lack direct equivalents in English, which creates additional translation difficulties.

Comparative Semantic Analysis. A comparative analysis reveals both universal and culture-specific features. There are both universal tendencies and culture-specific differences in the use of color idioms. On the one hand, a common universal pattern can be observed in the opposition of white and black as symbols of positive and negative meanings, as well as in the use of color to express evaluation and emotion [15]. On the other hand, there are important cultural distinctions: English strictly separates blue and green as distinct categories, whereas in Uzbek the term “ko'k” may encompass both [16]. Furthermore, the color red in English often implies danger or financial debt, while in Uzbek it may carry a more neutral or symbolic meaning. These differences show that semantic equivalence cannot be achieved through literal translation alone.

Translation Challenges. Translating color-coded phraseological units (idioms) is rarely a matter of swapping words; it's a matter of swapping worldviews.

One major challenge is the absence of direct equivalents, as some color metaphors are deeply rooted in local flora, fauna, or historical context [17]. For example, the Uzbek phrase “ko'zi o'ynash” (literally “eyes playing/dancing”) does not involve a color but conveys a sense of flirtatiousness or shifty behavior often associated with “dark-eyed” expression, which does not correspond directly to any English color idiom. Another difficulty arises from the mismatch of connotative meaning, since colors carry different emotional associations across languages. In English, for instance, the phrase “green with envy” is commonly used to describe jealousy; however, in Uzbek, the color “yashil” (green) is primarily associated with nature, youth, and Islam, and generally has strongly positive connotations [18]. As a result, using “green” to envy Uzbek translation may confuse the reader. Cultural asymmetry also presents a challenge, as certain colors play a dominant role in one culture but are less prominent in another. English makes extensive use of “blue” to express sadness, as in “feeling blue,” whereas Uzbek tends to associate sadness or mourning with “ko'k” (which can denote blue or a grayish-green shade) or with “qora” (black), particularly in the context of deep grief. Finally, pragmatic incompatibility can occur when a literal translation leads to “pragmatic failure,” meaning that the reader understands the words but not the intended meaning. For example, the English expression “white lie,” referring to a harmless or minor lie, can be translated literally as “oq yolg'on” in Uzbek; however, this rendering lacks the natural idiomatic force of the target language, since “oq” (white) is typically associated with purity and blessing, as in “oq yo'l” .

Translation Strategies. To bridge these gaps, translators must move beyond the literal and act as “cultural mediators”. Functional equivalence involves identifying a target-language idiom that performs the same communicative function, even if the original color element is altered or omitted. For example, the English expression “to be in the red,” meaning to be in debt, does not have a direct color-based equivalent in Uzbek; therefore, translators use functionally similar expressions such as “qarzga botmoq” (“to sink into debt”) or apply a different conceptual metaphor. Similarly, the Uzbek phrase “baxti qora” (literally “his/her happiness is black”) can be translated into English through functional equivalents such as “ill-fated” or “born under a bad sign”.

Descriptive translation is applied when a color idiom is so culturally specific that no direct or functional equivalent exists, requiring the translator to explicate its meaning. For instance, the Uzbek expression “yuzi yorug’bo’lmoq” (literally “to have a bright face”) does not correspond to an English idiom with a similar structure; therefore, it can be rendered descriptively as “to emerge with one’s honor intact” or “to be vindicated”. Adaptation is a strategy that involves modifying or “re-coloring” the metaphor to align with the cultural expectations of the target audience. For example, the English idiom “once in a blue moon,” which denotes a very rare event, lacks cultural relevance in Uzbek. As a result, it can be adapted as “tuyaning dumi yerga tekkanda” (literally “when the camel’s tail touches the ground”), since both expressions convey the idea of something that rarely occurs. Partial calque, or loan translation, is used when the metaphor is sufficiently transparent for a literal translation to remain meaningful in the target language. For instance, the English term “black list” is translated as “qora ro’yxat” in Uzbek. This works effectively because the association of black with something negative or forbidden is widely understood in modern administrative contexts, allowing the expression to be fully integrated into Uzbek usage. In all cases, translators prioritize meaning over form, focusing on preserving the underlying image and communicative intent rather than adhering strictly to the original wording. If a particular color in the source language conveys a specific emotional or symbolic meaning, but the target language uses a different color to express the same idea, the translator should adjust the color accordingly to maintain the intended effect.

Table 1. Semantic Comparison of English "Blue" with Uzbek "Ko’k”.

Concept	English "Blue"	Uzbek "Ko’k”	Cultural"Bridge"
Sadness	"Feeling blue" (Deeply associated with melancholy).	Traditionally associated with "Qora" (Black) or "Ko’k" (in context of mourning/bruises).	English uses color for mood; Uzbek often uses color for the <i>physicality</i> of grief. [5, 19-pages]
Nature	Distinct from Green. Blue is only sky/water.	Can refer to both sky and green plants/grass (e.g., <i>ko’kalamzor</i>).	The nomadic history of Uzbekistan views the sky and the earth's growth as a single continuum of life. [1, 42-pages]
Rarity	"Once in a blue moon" (Very rare).	"Tuyaning dumi yerga tekkanda" (When the camel's tail touches the ground).	English uses a celestial anomaly; Uzbek uses a humorous biological impossibility. [3, 55-pages]
Physicality	Blue eyes (Physical trait).	"Ko’zi ko’k" (Can mean blue eyes or describe an ethnic appearance).	Generally, a literal description in both, though Uzbek "Ko’k" has a broader tonal range.
Vitality	Rarely associated with youth/growth.	Strongly linked to youth and spring (<i>Ko’klam</i>).	Ko’k is the color of "becoming" and "thriving" in the Uzbek worldview. [5, 88-pages]

As shown in the first table, the English translator must decide whether a mention of *ko'k* in an Uzbek poem refers to the "Azure" of the Samarkand sky or the "Vibrant Green" of a spring pasture. If they choose "Blue" for a description of a field, they create a "pragmatic failure" where the English reader imagines a surreal, dying landscape instead of a lush, living one. Conversely, translating "I'm feeling blue" into Uzbek as "*Men o'zimni ko'k his qilyapman*" would likely leave an Uzbek speaker wondering if you are feeling particularly "green" and full of life—the exact opposite of your intended meaning.

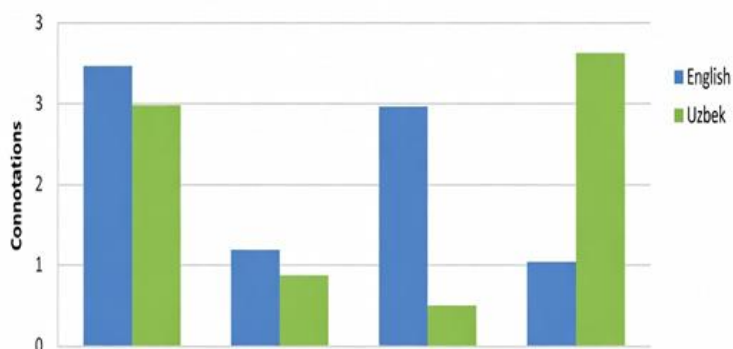


Figure 1. Comparative Semantic Connotation of Colors.

White: English- purity, legality, honesty; Uzbek-purity, honesty, blessing. *Black:* English-illegality, depression; Uzbek- hardship, grief. *Red:* English- danger, anger, loss; Uzbek- context-dependent. *Green/Blue:* English- youth, environment; Uzbek- nature, youth, sky

The first diagram systematizes semantic similarities and differences. While white and black show relatively stable universal meanings, other colors demonstrate strong cultural specificity. This visual comparison highlights why translators must prioritize cultural and functional equivalence over literal rendering.

4. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that color-coded phraseological units constitute a complex and multilayered interaction between language, culture, and cognition. In both Uzbek and English, color symbolism reflects not only universal patterns of human perception but also culturally specific values shaped by historical experience, social norms, and collective worldview. As a result, color terms in phraseological units function as culturally loaded semiotic markers rather than simple lexical descriptors. The analysis confirms that direct or literal translation of color-based idioms frequently leads to semantic distortion or pragmatic failure, as identical color components may evoke divergent emotional, evaluative, or symbolic meanings in the two languages. Therefore, effective translation requires more than linguistic competence; it demands deep semantic analysis, cultural awareness, and pragmatic sensitivity on the part of the translator. The translator must operate as a cultural mediator, prioritizing functional equivalence and communicative intent over formal correspondence. Furthermore, the comparative approach adopted in this research highlights the pedagogical value of studying color-coded phraseological units in translator training and foreign language education. Awareness of color symbolism enhances intercultural communicative competence and helps learners avoid culturally inappropriate interpretations. From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to cognitive and cultural linguistics by illustrating how metaphorical conceptualization is shaped by language-specific and culture-bound models. Finally, the results of this study may serve as a foundation for further research into color symbolism across other language pairs, as well as for applied studies in lexicography,

discourse analysis, and intercultural communication. A deeper understanding of color-based phraseology will facilitate more accurate translation practices and promote effective communication in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural world.

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